The Dragon-King's Temple

by Kryal

Summary

Through the spite of the spirits or plain rotten chance, a door that would have been better left untouched has opened. On the other hand, with Fire and Earth as one's allies, sometimes escaping is the easy part.

Even the Dragon-King's temple floods.

Notes

This is a crossover between Avatar: The Last Airbender and the original Stargate series; it takes place a few months after the ending of AtLA and sometime about halfway through the third year of SG-1. Please bear in mind that most of my knowledge of SG-1 comes from internet osmosis; if I've made any glaring errors, please let me know.

And, for my own sanity: this is not a pairing-fic. I don't do those, thank you very much.

Many thanks to Vathara for helping me brainstorm and correcting me on SG-1 canon!
Disclaimer: You know the drill – don’t own ‘em, I’m just playing an intriguing little game of “what-if” here.

(REPOSTED FROM MY FF.NET ACCOUNT)

See the end of the work for more notes.
**Chapter 1**

**Chapter Notes**

See the end of the chapter for notes.

*If I ever find myself in the past, I am going to find whoever invented zats. Then there will be murder with malice aforethought. Pretty sure I can justify it under the Oath as preventative medicine*…

Breathing carefully as she tried to ease the throbbing in her temples, Janet began another circuit of her cell.

Not that she really expected to find anything she hadn’t already discovered on the previous five or six rounds. But it kept her moving and thinking, rather than panicking and fretting herself sick over her cell mate.

The little girl hadn’t moved since the Jaffa had dumped her in the cell maybe an hour ago. Janet had done what she could, elevating the feet and donating her jacket to ensure that the girl didn’t get chilled, but there wasn’t much else she could do. Zat, the doctor thought blackly, remembering the light electrical burn she’d found on the girl’s left shoulder. The front of the shoulder – she must have been hit before she even had a chance to run. *And given her body mass… damn it, even one shot could have killed her. She’s just a little girl!* Twelve or thirteen was Janet’s estimate; just on the cusp of physical maturity. And even for her apparent age, she was tiny.

*Dietary? Late growth? Or it could be genetic. She seems to be from some sort of East Asian stock.*

The clothing did seem reminiscent of some traditional East Asian styles, at least the cream-colored tunic over the loose-fitting emerald green shirt and pants, and the way her black hair was pinned up behind a green-and-gold headband with tassels at the ears. No shoes, oddly – just green ankle-bands to match the ones on her wrists. Janet had thought that perhaps the girl had lost her shoes sometime during her capture, but when she’d checked the feet for injury she’d found soles calloused to the texture and toughness of hardened leather and with enough dirt ground into the calluses to impress a hippie. The bare feet were habitual, then. Which didn’t match the indications of wealth in the form of gold and jade jewelry, but…

*Oh, stop it, Janet! Leave the anthropology to Danny.*

Except that Danny wasn’t here. Although she could take comfort in the fact that he, at least, was safe on Earth. But those thoughts brought her around to what she was *really* trying not to worry about: Sam, the missing research team, and *what the hell is a Goa’uld doing here?*

*This was supposed to be a safe world!*

They’d found the address in the Ancient database, not the Abydonian archive, and when they’d come through the Gate there was no sign that anyone had disturbed the place since the Ancients departed. Just the Stargate tucked away in a small valley high in the polar mountains, and a small Ancient research facility in what might once have been a set of natural caves nearby. Small. Unimportant. *Safe.* And the promise of Ancient research notes was considered sufficient reason to deploy a small research team to investigate the lab. She and Sam had come through to do a quick check-up – Janet for the team’s health, Sam for the scientific discoveries. The trip was meant to be a combination of practicality and some much-needed light duty after several hectic missions and the resultant medical crises.

They’d found an empty facility and no team.
“Most of their equipment’s still here,” Sam had said, eyes hard and calculating, Major Carter at her military best as she searched the section of the lab that the research team had opened thus far for traces. “There’s no sign of any sort of struggle, either. The guards’ weapons are missing, but the scientists’ aren’t… at a glance, I’d say it looks like they all walked out with whatever they were holding at the time.”

“Out to see the local aurora, maybe?”

“Or checking a new site, perhaps. Dr. Jansberg did think that this place was too small to be the entire facility.” Sam had stood and resettled her own gun, a resolute look on her face. “They wouldn’t have gone far, not with their supplies here. Let’s go see what all the fuss was about.”

They hadn’t gotten far. One blind turn, and they’d walked straight into a squadron of Jaffa. And their zats.

Guess that answers the question of what happened to the research team. Although it doesn’t explain why we couldn’t find any signs of a struggle.

And if the team had been captured, they weren’t here. She’d awakened alone, several hours ago. No research team. No Sam, either, and that worried her.

Feeling panic starting to slip in under the concern, Janet stopped where she was, covered her mouth and nose with her hands, and forced herself to breathe deeply through the obstruction. Slow the breath, slow the thoughts, control the thoughts.

I can’t do anything for Sam right now. I need to focus on what I can do. Even if a little corner of herself wanted to curl up in a corner and cry that she was a doctor – she didn’t do daring escapes, her job was to help the escapees recover afterward.

She glanced down at her wristwatch. Six hours since we came through the Gate. Hammond will expect us to return after eighteen. If we haven’t contacted him in twenty-four hours, he’ll lock our signals until further notice and send a follow-up team. At least that team would be on high alert and ready for trouble…

The sound of a stifled groan caught her attention. Janet glanced over to her cell mate; the girl had rolled over onto her side, curling in on herself in obvious pain.

I know how you feel, kiddo, Janet thought sympathetically. Thundering headaches aside, zat blasts triggered muscle spasms that left the body aching even after the direct activation of the pain receptors of the nervous system ended. At least, unlike real lightning, they left the brain undamaged – the side effects were purely temporary.

Usually. We haven’t exactly studied their effects on children! Abandoning her fruitless search of the cell, she moved toward the girl, one wary eye fixed on the Jaffa standing guard outside their cell. They’d ignored her as she’d made her way around the cell over and over – although with those faceless animal helmets, who could tell?

Some kind of long-beaked bird? I’ll have to ask Daniel if he knows what that means…

The girl stiffened as Janet knelt next to her. “Hey there,” the doctor said quietly, keeping her voice low and relaxed. With luck, she’d recognize the tone as a friendly one.

After a moment’s pause, the girl slowly pushed herself up to a sitting position, turning a frown towards Janet.
Janet blinked at the clouded, unfocused green eyes. *She’s blind,* she realized with a shock and a sudden chill. A side-effect of the zat? The Goa’uld weren’t exactly known for bothering with prisoners with such obvious physical abnormalities...

But there was no hint of the panic that should have accompanied awakening to find herself suddenly blind, no reaching for her face or groping about in her own private darkness. The girl tilted her head, clearly listening to her surroundings. After a moment, her brow furrowed in a deeper frown as she focused on Janet again.

“*Oi, chirabi-wa doko!*” she asked. The tone was sharp, demanding, clearly interrogative. The words had some sort of odd up-down staccato rhythm that teased at the edge of Janet’s mind as vaguely familiar, but it wasn’t any language she knew.

*Should have known it was too much to hope that she’d speak Abydonian or English,* Janet thought, resigned. And she was no Daniel Jackson, able to hear four or five words and puzzle out the rest of the language on the fly.

“Easy,” she said, trying to keep her tone reassuring. She met the girl’s blank eyes levelly, trying to project reassurance and trustworthiness. Hopefully her sincerity would get across, even though the girl couldn’t actually see her. “You were out for quite a while.”

The scowl vanished in a look of bafflement. The girl asked something else – Janet suspected from the tone that it was something along the lines of *I have no idea what you’re saying.* Without waiting for a response, the girl levered herself up to her feet, swaying a bit. Janet reached out to steady her, but her hands were swatted away with remarkable precision before they even came close.

Blind, Janet. She probably hates being touched by people she doesn’t know. Janet was no stranger to pride, either – or how necessary it could be in an alien situation. So she settled back on her heels as the girl took a moment to breathe deeply and deliberately, carefully testing her arms and legs.

Then the girl raised one foot and **stomped.***

*Whoa.* Janet raised her brows, impressed despite herself. If the girl did that often, then no wonder her bare feet had soles like army boots. She’d all but felt the floor ripple under the force of that foot.

*Sounding for echoes?* Janet wondered. Humans **were** capable of a form of echolocation – using clicks or stomps or taps and listening to the sound waves bouncing back around them. Blind humans in particular, training their hearing to compensate for what their eyes couldn’t do. She’d heard that footsteps and stomping could be used that way – she’d just never seen it before.

Well, apparently it was effective. The girl turned suddenly and marched straight for the heavy metal grid that formed the gate of their cell.

Where the guards waited, expressionless behind their bird-masks. Suddenly uneasy, Janet grabbed her jacket up from where it had fallen forgotten on the floor and followed.

The girl stopped barely inches from the bars. “*Oi.*” She waited a moment or two, then repeated, louder, “*Oi, kimoi-ashi!*”

When that failed to elicit a response, she scowled fiercely, then said something else, much longer and more complicated – and, by the tone of it, including vocabulary that a girl her age really shouldn’t be using. The words were incomprehensible, but the sassy, demanding anger and the petulant stamp of her feet were not. Tiny hands rested lightly on the metal – then suddenly tightened as the girl **screamed** at the Jaffa.
Janet had heard plenty of screams before. This one was not a scream of terror. This wasn’t even a scream of *I don’t want to be alone*. This was an *I am* pissed, *and someone is going to be in a world of pain soon if I have anything to say about it* scream.

*Oh no. Kid, this is not a good time or place for a temper tantrum!*  

One of the Jaffa pointed his staff weapon at the girl, although from the one-handed grip he at least didn’t mean to fire it. “You will be silent.”

*They don’t speak her language either?* Janet blinked.

The girl looked down, thick black bangs falling forward to obscure her face. “Shoh-ga nay… yaroh-ka?”

That was not the voice of someone intimidated or resigned. All the hair on the back of Janet’s neck stood at attention and then ran for cover.

The girl cracked her knuckles, and out of the shadows of her hair came a manically gleeful grin that promised *mayhem*.

Janet had served with the SGC and a certain Colonel O’Neill far too long to miss *this will hurt you much more than it hurts me* when she saw it. Trained reflexes had her backing away from the danger before her conscious mind could catch up.

The girl’s hands suddenly shot out, slammed down, and snapped up into what looked like a guard position in front of her face. And the *solid stone floor* surged up with her fists, trapping the two Jaffa in rock up to their necks.

Janet knew she was staring. She continued staring anyway. *That… some kind of tech? But…*  

Snickering, the girl parodied a flirtatious wink, complete with a cutesy bob of the head sideways as she kissed the fore and middle fingers of one hand and ‘flicked’ the kiss at the stone-encased guards. Although the gesture was undermined by the fact that her vague stare had settled somewhere in the region of the guards’ ribs.

Then she drew her arm back and stabbed those two fingers forward like a spear, directly into the seam where the two massive metal grates that formed the cell door joined together. The metal screamed and buckled around her arm, buried up to the elbow. When she pulled it out, Janet saw that she’d punched clean through to the other side, right through several inches of steel.

*Triggering some sort of counter-lock she slipped into the gate? But the floor – and she was unconscious when they brought her… A ribbon device or something like it? But I checked, she didn’t have anything. And there aren’t any weird lights!*  

In a way, that was the strangest part. The girl shoved and elbowed the hole she’d punched in the gate, forcing it wider until she could get a foot through to stamp down. The grate groaned, bending and buckling like cheap aluminum as the girl used her feet to kick the opening wider still. And through it all, not a single glow or sparkle, no hum of energy, nothing at all to suggest that she was doing this through anything but raw strength.

*That’s not possible.*

That thought snapped Janet’s mind out of its fugue, as the girl squirmed through the opening. *Oh, screw what’s not possible, just roll with it and go!* A moment’s check to ensure nothing would be left behind, and she dove out after the girl.
It was a tight squeeze; Janet was grateful for her own fairly small build. When she emerged, the girl was waiting, absentmindedly shaking out the hand she’d used to punch through the door. Oddly enough, the little gesture made Janet feel obscurely better. Maybe that whole thing had been impossible, but it hadn’t exactly been effortless, either.

The situation did rather demand comment, however. Janet looked from the girl, to the shell-shocked Jaffa, to the ruined door, and back.

“Okay, I’m impressed.”

The girl grinned broadly and crossed her arms over a chest puffed out with unmistakable pride. “Tenka no ts’chizukai no tensai da!” she announced.

Then the smug grin became something a little friendlier, thought still distinctly cocky, and she freed one hand to jab a thumb towards the bridge of her own nose. “Toph.”

Janet blinked. “…Toph?” she echoed carefully.

The girl nodded. “Toph bei Fong,” she said proudly, then turned her hand to point at Janet with her eyebrows raised expectantly.

Names. It was such a simple, mundane little detail that Janet almost laughed. “Janet.”

“…Zhanay?” Toph repeated somewhat dubiously, looking nonplussed.

That didn’t sound quite right, but Janet wasn’t inclined to be picky. “Janet Fraiser,” she said with a nod, before remembering that the blind girl wouldn’t be able to see it. But Toph simply flapped a hand dismissively, her attention to their surroundings again.

Janet paused to get her bearings. Their ruined cell was at the end of a short hall with one or two grates on either side, marking other cells, currently empty. She didn’t see anything that looked like an exit, but the corridor made a sharp turn, hiding what lay beyond.

Odd layout… deliberately isolating these particular cells? No sign of anyone coming to check the racket, but with such a limited line of sight… Spotting the guard’s staff weapon on the ground where it had fallen, she grabbed it up. Clumsy, but a weapon was a weapon.

She’d barely gotten it in her hand before Toph, apparently impatient with the delay, grabbed her elbow. Janet stumbled after the girl, half-pulled and half-jogging as Toph set off down the corridor, easily side-stepping past the guards as though she could see exactly where she was going.

She’s blind, Janet couldn’t help but wonder. I know she is. You couldn’t fake that distinctively unfocussed gaze, or the tell-tale lack of response in the pupils to light or movement. Those eyes clearly weren’t responding to anything. And yet, she knew exactly where the gate was, where the guards were, what they were doing – she even seems to respond to my body-language. Can she really get all that from echoes?

Janet’s eyes dropped to those bare feet, each step planted with the deliberate force and precision of a general entering a captured city – or a martial artist feeling out the terrain in which he’d be fighting.

Some animals use vibrations in the ground to detect prey or predators…

Toph went barefoot. And given what she’d just seen, Janet wasn’t at all inclined to dismiss that impression of faint tremors in the ground at each step as just her imagination this time.
They rounded the bend in the corridor, and Janet stopped short in disbelief. The passage stretched away before them, featureless save for several cells on either side to match the one they’d just escaped from. How many prisoners do they expect to hold at one time? And stranger, no windows, the only light steady and artificial…

The thought was distant, distracted. Most of Janet’s focus was on the end of the hall… featuring another cell, exactly like the one she’d just escaped from.

A dead end – there’s no exit!

Maybe Toph somehow sensed the problem. Maybe she heard it in Janet’s groan, or sensed it in the sudden slump of Janet’s shoulders. She frowned, tilting her head to listen, and Janet tried to muffle her breathing so as not to interfere.

“Oi! Chira-bi! Ima-sugu kotaehnay to sugay okotchau yo, zuko!”

Janet yelped, ears ringing from the shout. That is one big voice for a little kid! “A little warning next ti…” she began hotly, only to almost swallow Toph’s hand whole when the girl shoved the palm into her face in a clear shut up! gesture.

Tired, head pounding with a renewed migraine, and worried sick underneath the anger she was using to keep fear at bay, Janet glared and nearly kept yelling anyway.

Toph was biting her lower lip, worrying away at it with her teeth as she listened so intently that her whole body seemed an extension of her ears, ready to vibrate at the slightest sound.

Janet held her peace.

The silence stretched out around them. Despite the size of this prison block or whatever it was, the air was frighteningly still. Other than the two of them and the two Jaffa still trapped in stone around the bend behind them, Janet didn’t think there was a single soul in the place.

Which just made her concern sharper. Where was Sam?

A faint shadow on Toph’s brow deepened into a worried furrow. At length, her shoulders slowly slumped forward as she let her head drop, apparently realizing no response was coming.

Even on the strength of a few minutes’ acquaintance, Janet thought there was something simply wrong about seeing the little juggernaut dejected. She was reaching for Toph’s shoulder when, from the far end of the hall, she heard a distinctive thm-thm-thmp sound and saw the first stone circle drop into position.

Transport rings!

Of course – how else to keep a prison secure, than to have no doors for prisoners to escape through?

Toph froze in shock, jaw dropping. Grabbing her shoulder, Janet flung them both into the dubious shelter of a cell door’s recess in the wall. Her shoulder hit the massive steel bars with bruising force, but she shoved the pain aside to raise her stolen staff weapon and bring it to bear.

Her first shot went off the moment the transport rings lifted, only to glance off a smooth, golden-gleaming barrier. Janet swore.

Since when do Jaffa carry riot shields? Since when did riot shields capable of deflecting staff blasts even exist?
Then the line of shield-bearing Jaffa hunched down slightly, revealing a line of staff-armed Jaffa standing ready behind them. Heart in her throat, Janet jerked herself back under cover as the corridor filled with a return volley. Seizing a lull, she leaned out again – and found that the first row had dropped as well, revealing a second firing line with weapons charged and readied.

_Not good!_

She fired without aiming as she took cover again. The shot went wild – and even if it hadn’t, with the return fire keeping her down, the odds of getting past those strange shields weren’t good.

_Shield walls, staggered lines of fire, suppression tactics – I hate it when the enemy remembers to fight smart!_

A strange grinding noise made her look up – then turn to look at Toph.

The blind girl had picked herself up and was standing with her arms over her head, palms flat as though pressed against the ceiling a good ten feet above them. Frowning in concentration, she shifted feet and shoulders the way someone looking for leverage might. Then, slowly, she began to swing her arms forward and down, palms still flat, almost as if she were using her hands to bring down a garage door from the inside.

Above them, a massive slab came free of the ceiling and pivoted downwards.

One of Toph’s knees dropped to the floor as she bent and lowered her hands to it as well – and the slab slammed into place with a bone-shaking _BOOM_, sealing off their section of the corridor from the advancing Jaffa.

…_whoa_. Ears ringing, Janet blinked for a moment before forcing herself to focus. _That bought us time – but it won’t be long before they just blast through that thing_, she thought, eyeing the damaged stone left in the wake of the earlier barrage.

She paused. Looked at the blast marks and the damage. Looked up, at the deep depression in the ceiling that Toph’s slab had just vacated.

_Maybe… Hope it doesn’t collapse!_

One blast from her staff, right above where the metal grid of a cell door reached the ceiling. Stone blackened. A second; cracks began to show, a few bits of gravel came loose and pattered down.

Third, and that patch of ceiling shattered in a cloud of rubble, shrapnel and dust. Janet quickly covered her head against the bruising rain as Toph crowed, then she reached for the metal bars.

Janet’s intent was to use the grid as a ladder and climb, but her fingers barely brushed the metal when she heard a now-familiar stamp and the floor surged up under their feet, carrying the two of them up and through the hole.

Into… _some kind of cargo hold?_ Janet guessed hurriedly, scanning the room as she jumped clear of the impromptu elevator. Her stomach sank. Transport rings, a cargo hold, cells meant to hold large numbers of people… _Please tell me we’re not on a Goa’uld ha’tak. Please._

At least this hold was empty for the moment, though that would likely change soon enough.

Next to Janet, Toph exhaled slowly, lowering her hands palm-down in front of her chest; the slab of stone that had carried them up receded with a soft grinding sound.
Then the girl turned to Janet with a downright wicked grin. She nodded at the staff-weapon still
clutched in one white-knuckled hand and said… something. Janet still didn’t understand the words,
but the tone was clear enough. *You’n me? Are gonna get along just fine, doc.* Her mental translation
even included a very Jack sort of drawl.

Janet hefted the staff weapon, calculated odds, and smiled thinly.

*Hang in there, Sam. We’re coming.*

~~*Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.*~~

*When this is over, I am going to find Aang and sit on him until he explains to the spirits that if they want my help fixing the world, they need to get off my case once in a while!*

Not that Zuko thought it would do much good. Aang was courageous, smart, loyal, and mind-
bogglingly devoted to his philosophies. And the Avatar’s idea of “mediation” was pretty much,
“Let’s just stop fighting and everyone be friends!”

Idealistic, optimistic, and a bit short on practical alternatives. That was Aang all over.

Behind him, his companion’s barely-audible curses ended in a muffled exclamation of success.
Turning from his careful watch on the dim hallway that stretched out before and behind them, Zuko
raised his eyebrow and the woman – *Sam*, she’d called herself – gave the raised-thumb signal that
meant “ready” and nodded at the door.

Zuko pressed his ear against the door again and listened carefully. Low voices, the occasional
footstep, sporadic chirping noises like no bird *he’d* ever heard…

Well, whatever was going on in there, it sounded like Sam’s meddling had gone unnoticed. Good.
He wanted out of this exposed hallway.

Catching Sam’s eye, he nodded, then dropped into a ready crouch, settling into a familiar breathing
pattern as he counted down on the fingers of one hand. *Three. Two. One…*

With a *hiss* unlike any earthbending he’d ever heard, the door slid open and he dove forward into a
roll. Onto his feet, still low to the floor in a crouch – it took taller enemies a moment to shift their
attention downward and that was all the time he needed to…

First spin, leg out – gather energy, set it into motion. Shift the weight, snap the energy into the other
leg to spark as he kicked it into the second spin and sent a blazing arc roaring outward.

_Breathe. Hold* the flames away from everything but his enemies; in that first moment diving forward
he’d glimpsed a small platform over open space, like some of the army warehouses he’d seen, and if
these people had anything like blasting jelly stored here and he set it off they’d all be _screwed_*…

Focused heat and energy sent the armored guard nearest the door flying over the railing. Two more,
farther out, stumbled and fell, knocked off their feet. A fourth, beyond the range of the fire, lunged
for something on the wall.

Something that buzzed with compressed fire shot over Zuko’s head, catching that one right where his
chestguard joined the humming-heron helmet. The body slammed into the wall and tumbled out of
Don’t think. They had to do this fast and hard; they couldn’t afford an alarm. And these Jaffa — Sam called them that, and Zuko made a point of putting names to his enemies — wouldn’t surrender; he’d learned that lesson hard and well already.

Push off with supporting leg and hands, flip, come down on his feet in a solid stance…

He felt the burst released below without seeing it. Reflexes faster than thought, he slashed a hand through the oncoming blast, shattering and dissipating the energies as his eyes caught sight of another Jaffa on the level below, alerted by the fall of one of his fellows. Snap the other hand forward with the momentum of the block, and focus, a regular fireblast would just wash over all that armor…

He’d used this move once to pierce straight through the haft of Vachir’s bow and sever the string when the Rough Rhinos had attacked him and Uncle. It seared through metal chest plate and the heart underneath just as easily.

Zuko spun sharply to see Sam take down one of the two he’d tripped before the Jaffa could bring a weapon to bear. The other was still down, and only death or unconsciousness would stop these warriors.

Sam slapped the strange panel next to the door, and it slid closed behind them. She glanced at him. “Zuko? Kle-ar?” she asked, annunciating the strange word carefully.

He drew in a deep breath through his nose, let it out slowly through his mouth, drew another in, and closed his eyes to concentrate. Just like feeling the flames in a room…

Always first, the fire burning inside him. He mentally set it aside and quested outwards, looking for other, tamer flames.

Agni — this had to be a storehouse for those firebending-staves. He was doubly glad he’d held the fire low now; he didn’t want to imagine the result if all that caged heat-in-potential broke free at once. But most were dull, barely sparks. Active ones left a much more distinctive impression, and he only felt six nearby. One was Sam’s; that left five for the five guards.

Good. All accounted for, then — assuming that all the guards had been armed. But given that he couldn’t hear anyone moving around either… He opened his eyes and nodded. “Kle-ar,” he affirmed.

The woman glanced at the hand he’d used to block the blast. “Yu-ohkei?” she asked. Recognizing it as a query about injuries, Zuko suppressed a flash of annoyance — he knew how to block a fireblast without burning himself, thank you! — and flexed his hand to show he was uninjured. Sam nodded, turned, and headed for the boxy shapes near the glowing image set in the wall.

Zuko eyed that image uneasily. It didn’t feel like something of the spirits, but general principles about not messing with suspicious glowing things aside, anything with light in this mad place of rock and metal hummed with a hair-raising sense of caged lightning. It made him reflexively start to settle his chi whenever he got too close, just in case he needed to redirect something in a hurry.

Sam seemed to know what she was doing. She was the one who knew how to make the doors around here work, at any rate. For his part, he’d just stay a healthy distance away.

Besides — he had bodies to hide.

He dealt with the dead easily enough, dragging them out of sight behind some crates. Although
moving them was hard – they were bigger and heavier than he was, Earth Kingdom-size at least, and all that armor did not help.

On the other hand, Zuko was a little grateful for that. If he was busy concentrating on the weight and the strength he needed to move it, he wasn’t thinking about other things too hard. Like what, exactly, he was handling.

The unconscious ones were more problematic. Zuko knew what he should do; finish them off and hide the bodies with the others.

No idea where I am, don’t recognize a spirit-cursed thing except that I’m in the middle of an enemy stronghold and I can’t even talk to the only ally I have!

…not an unfamiliar situation, come to think of it.

At least at Pohuai, I knew where I was going and how to get out again. And that I wasn’t going to be there long.

He’d already been here several hours, at least, without seeing so much as a window. And every enemy they left alive was one that could regain consciousness and raise the alarm – or strike them from behind.

Tactically, practically, finishing the job would be the smart thing to do.

Zuko couldn’t help a small smirk. Right. And of course I always do the smart thing.

It took some doing, but he got the unconscious pair – the one that had gone over the rail in the first rush and the one that had knocked himself out when he tripped – trussed up in a little nest of boxes, well off the ground. They wouldn’t be getting down from there on their own, but they also would be able to call for help when they regained consciousness.

Which wouldn’t be for a while – he’d taken the time to hit one or two nerve points. He was no Ty Lee, but given time, if he wanted someone down for an hour or two, he could usually pull it off.

Pity he couldn’t take their armor – but he and Sam were both too much smaller than these Jaffa to wear it. And it was nothing like Fire Nation armor. You couldn’t bend wearing this stuff; too heavy, too clumsy, and how did they even breathe in those helmets?

Returning to the upper level, he heard Sam muttering in her odd language. Or rather, swearing. The words might have been an incomprehensible mish-mash of sing-songy, slurred-together nonsense, but he knew the tone of cursing something unto the third generation when he heard it.

Reaching the top of the stairs, he found his ally craning her head back and forth in front of an open panel below the glowing image, twisting and shifting…

Ah. Not enough light, and her shoulders block most of it. He’d helped with enough finicky repairs throughout the course of his exile to be familiar with the problem.

Well, if it was light that she needed… “Sam,” he said quietly to get her attention, crouching next to her and extending a hand, palm up. She looked up in surprise as a small flame flared into existence over his palm. Breathing slowly, Zuko focused on keeping the energies contained; he wanted small and bright, not large or hot.

Sam blinked at the unwavering white flame hovering over his palm, looking as thoroughly taken aback as if he’d bent water instead.
That was the weirdest thing about Sam. Never mind the sunbeam-bright hair, the Earth-hazel eyes, the fact that she was nearly as pale as he was – never mind that, all told, she looked like all the Great Spirits had gotten drunk at some party and then forgotten who’d lost which bet. After traveling the world for three years hunting down every hint of spirit activity in the hopes of locating the Avatar – to say nothing of everything that happened after he’d finally succeeded…

Yeah. He might avoid the spirits and their messes whenever he could – mutual antipathy and all that – but at least it was familiar, at least as much as spirit business could ever be.

No. What was downright weird about Sam was her reaction to bending. She acted like she’d never seen a firebender before – like she’d never even heard of firebending! Bizarre.

Of course, as reactions went, it was better than some. Zuko frowned a little, shoving memories of Jet aside.

Not to mention that Sam was far more disciplined than the freedom fighter, surprise surprise. After one brief moment of staring, she shook herself and turned her attention back to the panel.

Holding the flame steady and bright took concentration when you didn’t have a candle to provide the base flame – but it didn’t necessarily take attention. Curiosity winning out, Zuko peered inside the open panel as well.

The contents that Sam was furiously rearranging were like nothing Zuko had ever seen – except, maybe, the internal workings of the firelocks. Now Zuko wished he’d paid more attention that time Sokka had gotten his hands on one and gleefully taken it apart in an attempt to figure out how it worked. At the time, Zuko’d been distracted trying to warn Sokka to be careful, some of that is combustible, don’t…!

The resulting explosion had taken out part of the floor and scared several servants half to death – not to mention the captain of the guard, who’d been afraid that some assassin had gotten past him and his men.

At least Sam, unlike Sokka, seemed to know what she was doing. On the other hand… Zuko breathed slowly and, centering himself, tried to prepare, just in case that caged lightning lashed out.

Sam pulled away with a victorious cry as the glowing image above the panel… changed, somehow. Looking at it, Zuko blinked. That… looked like a schematic of some kind. Triangular, or maybe more of a pyramid. And…

Whoa. Big. Easily larger than an airship, even with the balloon included. The Earth King’s palace was probably bigger… maybe. But if so, it wasn’t by much.

The image moved in a dizzying swirl – almost like riding Appa through one of his headlong dives out of the sky, when the town suddenly grew in the space of a single breath from a dot far below to the point where you found yourself holding on for dear life as the bison dodged buildings. Symbols sprang up at the edges – almost writing, but like no writing Zuko had ever encountered, not even in the oldest archives or the ancient ruins, not even on the odd ring of almost-stone that had started this mess.

At least Sam didn’t seem to need the light any more; she was fiddling with some sort of control at the top of the box, but the light of the image itself provided plenty of illumination. So Zuko withdrew to stand guard at the door, listening intently for the sound of footsteps outside.
Behind him, Sam swore, muttered briefly, and then the sense of lightning behind him… faded, somehow. Glancing back, he saw her approaching, face an odd mix of worry and stubborn determination.

*I know that look. Plan A didn’t work, now I’m going to wing a Plan B and make it work, and spirits help whatever’s in my way.*

Her expression lightened with a blink when she looked at the light-flame still in his palm. Zuko had kept it going mostly out of familiarity; it was a variant on what he used on candleflames late at night, when he needed to read.

“*Ku-l.*” Sam nodded at his hand, and the flame in it. “*Sa lait – sankyu.*”

That… sounded like it might be gratitude? Zuko shrugged and flicked his hand, dissipating the flame, and they both paused to let their eyes readjust to the gloom.

Not three breaths later, the silence shattered.

Zuko had never heard *anything* like this shrill cacophony before, but he knew an alarm when he heard one. As did Sam. She swore, slapping the panel that controlled the door, and was out and into the hall again the instant she could squeeze through.

“Are you *insane*?” Zuko demanded, momentarily forgetting that neither of them could really understand the other. “Dammit… Jaffa! Deinjha-!” he tried, pointing at the hall as he struggled to convey that open thoroughfares were a *bad idea* if an alert was going to send guards boiling up out of the stonework.

Sam shook her head fiercely, rambling something in her own language as she waved a hand of her own at the room. Zuko managed to pick out “*naht gu-d,*” but that was about it. Looking frustrated, Sam waved a hand over her head, then pulled on her earlobes. “*A’la-m!*”

That had to be *alarm,* but “bad”? What was wrong with a defensible location that was out of the way and offered hiding places?

*Unless they somehow know we’re here. Then it’s a trap. If someone knows the terrain, listen to them – didn’t you learn that in the hurricane?* Cursing to himself, Zuko followed Sam, who turned and dashed back the way they’d come as soon as she saw he was with her, stealth thrown to the fires in favor of a breakneck run. Even if he misunderstood her logic – he couldn’t afford to lose his only ally and the one who seemed to know what she was *doing.*

Left, left, down a flight of stairs, right…

They came to a T-intersection and Sam started to turn left, still retracing their earlier route, only to pull up sharply at the sound of heavy, armored feet approaching at a quick march. Muttering an oath, she turned the other direction, and blanched. From the sound of it, another squad was coming up hard and fast from that direction as well.

Cursing, Sam started to double back. Zuko grabbed her arm.

*Forces from either side, they’ll meet each other here, that gives them only one way to go. Can’t outrun them forever. Which meant…*

*Hide!*

One of the slanted wall supports created a shadowed alcove. Sam seemed to get the idea when he
shoved her towards it, and crouched in the dark, making herself as small as she could. But there wasn’t room for two, and the other alcoves were lit…

**Up.**

The slanted braces had smaller supports near the ceiling, forming a small triangle of space between them and the ceiling. Zuko jumped, grabbed the support, kicked his legs up, hooked one knee over, **pulled…**

He’d just hauled himself up, back braced against the wall, legs against the support, hands against the ceiling, when both groups of soldiers rounded the corners from both sides and met in the intersection.

And **stopped** there.

Zuko forced his breathing to hold steady and slow. If the Jaffa looked up – this support wasn’t enough to hide him. But those helmets had to limit vision – and in his experience, most soldiers didn’t think to look **up.**

He just prayed that they didn’t think to look in the shadows, especially when the two leaders – a woman and a man, by their voices, the woman radiating controlled anger and the man stiff-spined and trailing rock dust, of all things – stopped to consult right in front of Sam’s alcove.

They spoke briefly and with no shouting or gesticulation; these were disciplined soldiers. In only a few moments, the man drew back somewhat, clearly ceding command to his counterpart. The woman raised a hand and, with only a few short, sharp gestures, formed up the two squads in a single unit and started off down the third passage, the one Zuko and Sam had just come from.

When they were gone from sight and hearing, Zuko allowed himself a sigh of relief and relaxed, letting himself roll out and drop to the floor in a controlled tumble. Sam emerged from her hiding place a few moments later, pale but frowning as though in concentration. Zuko looked at her quizzically, but when she caught his glance, Sam shook her head, waving a hand in a *don’t worry about it* gesture.

Not important, or not something she can explain? Their patched-together mix of short phrases and hand gestures didn’t exactly lend itself to detailed explanations.

Either way, it didn’t matter. Sam took a moment to assess their options, then set off again. No longer dashing headlong down the corridor, she stuck close to the walls, ready to dive for cover at a moment’s notice. Zuko did the same, trailing a hand along the wall.

Which was how he felt the first tremor.

Faint, barely noticeable against the distraction of caged lightning, and *I didn’t live this long by not trusting my senses.*

“**Wait,**” he whispered to Sam, and pressed his hand fully against the stone.

There, again! Stronger this time. Sam had copied his gesture and clearly felt it as well; Zuko saw her pale.

They were surrounded by stone. If it wasn’t stable, if something brought it down on their heads… and yet, Zuko couldn’t help thinking that this felt **familiar.**

**Wait. No, she couldn’t be…**
Oh yes she could, came hard on the heels of that thought, accompanied by a giddy wash of relief. That little walking earthquake? She would.

Sam was probably doubting his sanity, given the way she was eyeing his slow smile. Zuko could only shrug. “Friend,” he explained, although that wasn’t in their limited shared vocabulary. Then he raised his other hand and rapped sharply against stone in a very specific pattern.

Another tremor; he rapped the Earth Rumble theme again. Another – definitely closer, he could feel the floor tremble under his feet this time, and Sam’s grip on her weapon was white-knuckled. He prepared to knock again.

A section of the wall directly to his right blasted inward to shatter against the far wall, followed by a rather more durable missile wearing cream and green and the biggest grin he’d seen since Sokka had gotten his space sword back.

“Sparky!” Said missile launched herself at him, and it was all he could do to keep them both from crashing to the floor.

Toph pulled back to give him a victorious (painful) punch on the arm, glee written in every inch. “Okay, Sparky, I gotta hand it to you. Best. Field trip. Ever!”

~~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~~

Reflex had Sam’s staff weapon pointed squarely at the sudden attack. A second reflex-

*Ally in your line of fire – don’t shoot!*

-jerked her finger away from the trigger before she fired.

“Sam!”

Eyes widening, Sam stared for a breath, then moved to help the red-headed physician scramble through the wall’s newly acquired hole. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Zuko stagger and wince as their ambusher slammed into him and, from the look of things, attempted to see just how loudly his ribs could creak.

Stagger and wince – but not recoil or try to break loose. And for a moment, she saw his eyes close in pure relief.

*Houston, we have friendlies.*

Then her ribs were doing some creaking of their own as Janet gave her a short, fierce squeeze – followed by an intent once-over, clearly checking for injuries.

“I’m fine,” Sam reassured Janet quickly, spreading her arms to show that she was indeed intact. “Beyond the headache, at least. What happened to you? How did you get here? How…” She waved inarticulately at shattered stone.

“Not sure I can really explain that last one, but I think credit has to go to my little cellmate there…”

One very brief summary of what must have been a hectic fifteen minutes, pared down to only the most pertinent details, and Sam was frowning. “Staff-deflecting riot shields? And troop formations to
“Someone’s getting creative,” Janet said darkly. “Which Goa’uld are not exactly known for, either.”

And all too often, it was the SGC’s relative willingness to innovate that kept them standing. If a Goa’uld had actually managed to pull its head out of the sand enough to start trying new things… We need to get back and report.

“What about you?” Janet pressed. “What’s happened? Have you seen Doctor Jansberg and his team anywhere?”

“Afraid not. I came to in some kind of lab, but they left me alone there. As for how I got out…” Her lips quirked. “Well. You aren’t the only one who met up with a magic kung fu kid.”

She nodded at Zuko – who’d just yelped. He was rubbing his arm and glaring at the little girl, who answered the glare with a reckless grin, saying something with gleeful relish. Zuko’s eyes widened – at least, as much as the scarred left could – and then suddenly he shook his head with a chuckle that lifted some of the deep-rooted solemnity of his expression and betrayed the fact that he was only a teenager himself.

Janet’s eyes lit. “Of course. I wondered what Toph was after. She must have been looking for him.” She raised her eyebrows at Sam. “Magic kung fu?”

All right, so perhaps that was a more Jackian phrase than Sam normally resorted to, but… “Nanites, sufficiently advanced whatever, I don’t know what the tech actually is. But Zuko throws fireballs. And I’ve seen him block staff blasts with his bare hands.” Sam shrugged. “They dragged him into the lab where they’d been keeping me… probably about the same time they left Toph in your cell. Only as it turned out, he was already conscious, just playing possum. The minute the door closed, he turned the tables and took them down. We teamed up, got to a computer access point…”

“The lab didn’t have one?”

“It got fried.” Literally. Fortunately, Zuko had made a point of staying well clear of the electronics since.

She shoved the thought aside. Focus. Won’t have much time before someone comes to investigate the booms. Or the holes in the walls. “We’re on board a ha’tak, but it’s planet-side at the moment. Unfortunately, I couldn’t find information on the ship’s Stargate, if it even has one. Might not, it seems to be on the small side.”

“Who’s the Goa’uld?”

“No clue. I don’t recognize those bird-helms.” And nothing from Jolinar. Apparently, even if she’d dealt with this particular Goa’uld, it hadn’t left much of an impression on the Tok’ra. “I did find the coordinates of the planet’s gate – looks like we’re still on P4X-684. If we can just find a way out of this thing…”

“Right.” Janet sighed, hefting her own stolen staff weapon. “Not like life hasn’t been constant reruns of the Great Escape these past two years.”

“Sam?”

One thing Janet hadn’t mentioned, Sam couldn’t help but note when she glanced over at Zuko’s approach, was how creepy it was to see a little girl’s eyes staring blankly into space, while her feet picked deftly through the rubble on the floor without so much as a single hesitation, let alone misstep.
Zuko didn’t make the slightest move to assist the girl, either, not even checking Toph’s progress over his shoulder – and Sam didn’t think that was just teenage thoughtlessness. Zuko trusted that Toph could handle herself.

Zuko paused after drawing close, keeping his gaze on Sam – although his eyes did flicker briefly towards Janet with clear curiosity.

*He’s waiting for an introduction,* Sam guessed, and quickly obliged. “Janet, this is Zuko. Zuko, this is Janet.”

“Zha…” Zuko frowned, shaking his head, and tried again. “Jan…et?” When Janet nodded, he repeated the name one more time, as if to be sure of the pronunciation, then leaned forward in a shallow bow, hands in front of his chest in a fist-pressed-against-palm pose. Straightening, he gestured to the girl. “Koitsu…” He hesitated, then tried, tentatively, “This-is? This-is Toph.”

“Yo!” the girl said, tossing in a jaunty wave that ended up aiming somewhere between Sam and Janet.

*And that’s deliberate,* Sam thought shrewdly. *As precise as she was walking around? She has to know exactly where we are.*

Playing up her blindness to be underestimated? Or just to get away with off-handed rudeness that someone like Zuko probably couldn’t?

*Could be both. I think we’ve learned by now that assuming someone has only one motive for doing something is a bad idea!*

Zuko had turned to Toph while Sam was weighing those thoughts, saying something in that rapid-fire language of his – probably an introduction, Sam thought she caught her name in there, with the same careful annunciation he’d given Janet’s.

Toph was waving a hand dismissively when her blank eyes suddenly widened and she stiffened. “Kuru!” she snapped in a taut voice, jerking her head at the hole in the wall. “Atchi kara.”

Zuko’s eyes narrowed and he twisted to catch Sam’s eye. “Jaffa,” he said warningly.

Sam eyed the gaping hole in the wall. *Yeah. Bit of a glaring “here we are!” sign, that. “This way,” she said. Janet fell in behind her easily, Toph with her, as Zuko dropped back to take rearguard.*

Sam hated that thought. Zuko was a kid – not all that much older than Toph. But Major Carter knew that Zuko was the best fighter for guarding their backs, and from the focused look in his gold eyes, he knew exactly what he was doing.

*And we aren’t going to wonder about how he learned right now.* She was going to focus on getting them out of here. And praying that she hadn’t gotten completely disoriented, running through this maze.

Unfortunately…

*Goa’uld architecture. See logic, absence of.* Granted, Daniel could sometimes get into the Goa’uld mindset enough to navigate, and she could usually sort her way through the functional parts of the ship…

But this wasn’t the command center or a weapons center, and she was no Daniel. The third dead end and hallway looping back on itself she’d hit in as many minutes was proof enough of that.
Finally, she had to stop. *Running around trying to make your surroundings fit your plan rather than the other way around – it’ll get you killed here just as much as in the wilderness. Think, idiot.*

After the pause had stretched out for a minute, Zuko cleared his throat to get her attention. She glanced over at the boy. His eyes were flickering from her to Toph, rather than the hall. Apparently he trusted the blind girl’s ears – or maybe her feet? – to warn him of trouble.

*And that says something. Not quite sure what it says yet, but something.*

Zuko was frowning slightly. “*Doko-ey iku?*”

Sam blinked and shook her head. That was a new phrase.

Zuko grimaced, plainly trying to come up with some way to get his meaning across. “*Iku,*” he repeated, holding his forearm out level in front of him and “walking” the fingers of his other hand along it, from elbow to wrist. “*Iku,*” he said one more time, maybe for emphasis, and then pointed at the back of his hand before turning both palms up in a supplicant gesture – or maybe a quizzical one? “*Doko?*” he asked, clearly some kind of query.

*Iku… walk, travel… to go? And a question… “Where are we going?”*

Sam bit her lip, torn between sympathy and frustration. *Dammit, kid – I get it, I really do, but couldn’t you have picked a better time…* Then again, what better time could he have picked? Sam hadn’t even had a solid plan until they’d found that terminal. Zuko was bright, quick, and observant – he’d probably guessed as much.

And it didn’t take a genius to figure out that Sam was a bit lost. Without knowing where they were trying to go, the kids couldn’t help.

*And right now, it doesn’t matter that they’re kids. We need all the help we can get.*

“We’re trying to find the exit,” she explained, and frowned. “Um… *going.*” She copied the walking-on-the-arm gesture. “Exit… oh, blast it…” She sketched a rectangle in the air with a finger, then set her hands side-by-side and “opened” them, like a set of double doors.

The boundary between scar and normal flesh on Zuko’s brow furrowed as he frowned slightly. Then his eyes suddenly lit. “*Toph,*” he said, glancing at the girl, who’d been listening to their antics with a wry grin on her face. “*Chizu, tsukureru?*”

The wry grin morphed into a smirk. “*Doite,*” she replied smugly, grabbing Zuko’s arm and pushing him aside. She made impatient shooing motions with her hands at Sam and Janet; before Sam could react, Janet had grabbed her by the arm and was pulling her away to the wall.

“What’s she…?” Sam asked in an undertone, watching as the girl took a stance in the hallway, feet firmly planted. *That’s definitely some kind of martial arts stance, like Zuko. Different style, though… is that how they manipulate different materials?*

“Not sure,” Janet admitted. “But the way she’s feeling the floor with her feet, she’s about to do something tricky, or something big. And when a girl who levitates rocks weighing in the range of *tons* tells me to move…”

One foot came up, then slammed down again with all the force and precision of a sumo wrestler doing a ritual purification. Only her foot didn’t just *thud.* With a bone-throbbing *thwomp,* the floor at Toph’s feet impacted in a square nearly the width of the hall itself, an intricate design of geometric
channels maybe a quarter of an inch deep separated by a delicate lacework of raised stone lines.

Then Sam blinked, and realized what she was looking at. *It’s a map. She made a map of this level of the ha’tak in the floor.*

*Okay, now that’s cool.*

Zuko scanned the map quickly, stepping carefully around the edges rather than chancing the strength of the slender “lines” of the walls. *“Atchi – areh.”* Then, to Sam’s surprise, he did a double-take – followed a moment later by the soft huff of an almost-laugh.

Confused, Sam looked where he had pointed. Her eyes widened. There, in one hall, were four little figures. She could even pick out a few small details, enough to differentiate the four of them, particularly Zuko and…

Suddenly, she had to laugh. Maybe she was no Daniel, but she’d bet good money that the miniature of Toph was doing their culture’s equivalent of flipping someone the bird.

“Toph…” Zuko’s tone was amused and resigned and chiding all at one and the same time. Toph chirped – yes, *chirped* – a sassy reply in response. Sam looked up just in time to see Zuko roll his eyes a little and bop Toph lightly on the head with his fist. To which Toph just grinned, made a fist of her own, and slugged him in the arm, *hard*. Zuko yelped and glared, looking put-upon… a little too much so, in fact.

Yep. That was definitely a smile hiding at the edges of his expression.

Janet was hiding a grin of her own, one that sparkled in her eyes when Sam traded amused glances with her.

*Tough kids,* Sam thought, with a bit of relief. If they could be goofing around in a mess like this… well, that spoke well for their chances of holding up under the stress.

But they very clearly appreciated the severity of the situation, humor or no. A moment later, Sam was the target of an intense golden stare, and a listening tilt of Toph’s head. Zuko waved at the map. *“Doko-ey iku?”* he asked again. *“Doko… going?”*

Sam shifted her own focus back to the map, trying to pick out the nearest way downward.

Interesting. In some places, the map was detailed almost to the point of ridiculousness. In others, it was plainly a broad-strokes painting, accurate but scant on particulars.

*Seems to be a function of proximity,* Sam guessed. *This area around us now is detailed… seems to start really dropping off some fifty yards out? If I’ve got the scale right, at least. The rest of the details – I’ll bet that’s the path we took to get here, and how she and Janet got to us. Huh. Damn good memory, that kid.* Although even where the details were lacking, the simple fact that she had managed at least approximations of the entire *level…*

*“Can you do a lower level?”* she asked eagerly, then caught herself. *“Um… Lower? Down. We need to go down.”* She pointed at the floor, then mimed walking her fingers downward. *“That… map.”* She made a sweeping gesture over Toph’s stony diagram. *“Map – down?”*

Frowning in concentration at Sam’s gesticulations, Zuko nodded slowly, then turned to speak briefly with Toph. For the barest moment, Sam thought she saw a flicker of uncertainty in the set of the girl’s mouth, before Toph covered it by tossing her shoulders back and pursing her lips mulishly.
There were no big movements this time, however. Instead, she shifted her stance with startling delicacy, shifting feet and hands with delicate precision.

With a crack of stone separating from stone, a second map formed, pushing the first up on top of it as a delicate lattice of stone lines. There was no “floor” (save below the little figures marking their group), giving it an effect similar to looking at two transparent overlays on top of each other.

*Transparent overlays in 3-D.* Sam circled the map carefully, letting her eyes get accustomed to the mix. *All right. We’re there. The nearest stair is there – that’s our first goal. From there… oh, damn.*

At some point in all the running, she’d lost her bearings. Which way should they head in order to reach the door of the ha’tak? Was the nearest edge of the ship the front, the back, or one of the sides? If they came down in the wrong place, they’d have to make their way across one of the largest levels of the ship – not to mention one of the best-guarded.

When she tried to ask Toph for a third level of the map, however, the girl huffed scornfully and stabbed a finger at the two levels already mapped, saying something incomprehensible but clearly biting.

What’s her… Sam slapped herself on the forehead. *Reality check. Magic kung fu or no, that’s a lot of thin rock. It’s brittle. She makes more, and it’s going to break. Assuming she can even ‘see’ that far.*

She must have muttered her thoughts aloud. Janet leaned in. “Wait a minute… Sam, why bother with a map?”

Sam blinked in disbelief. “You *do* want to get out of here, yes?”

“Yes. But why navigate this maze when we can go in a straight line? Toph can *make* doors for us, Sam – same as she did to find you guys. Just…” The doctor paused, frowning. “Toph? Um… exit. *Exit.*” She tried copying Sam’s earlier gestures. “*Exit. Where? Blast… Sam, what was the word again?*”

“*Doko,* I think… Um. Exit. *Doko? Go, exit.*” Sam accompanied gestures, then pointed at Toph. “Toph. Go. Um…” At a loss, she finally tried to imitate the girl’s earlier stance and mock-punched towards the wall. “Exit. Go?” She mock-punched again.

Toph looked torn between deep offense and braying with laughter. Zuko looked like he was biting back a chuckle as well – all right, so to experts, Sam’s form probably *did* look sloppy to the point of silly.

A moment later, however, Zuko tilted his head to the side and asked Toph something. The girl scowled, then shook her head and bent her arms at the elbow so that the forearms were level with the ground, palms up. She inhaled slowly, then, on the exhale, shifted one foot forward as if testing the floor for a weakness. Not a stomp, but…

*But she’s put nearly as much energy into that little shift, under the control.* Sam had to admit, she was impressed. *Under the sass and the superpowers, she’s packing some serious discipline.*

Toph held the stance for a good minute, brow furrowed in concentration. Then she turned her hands and punched, and a very distinctively shaped piece of stone rose out of the floor.

Sam hastily caught the rock – wincing as the weight of it made the angular edges dig into her hands.

“…a model of the ha’tak?” Janet leaned in for a closer look, then quickly pulled back to make room as Toph marched over.
“Antara no yuu eh-ku-sheet, koreh!” she said shortly, poking at a depression on one face of the small pyramid.

“Where are we?” Sam asked. “Um… we.” She awkwardly braced the pyramid against her ribs with one hand to free the other to make a circling motion that encompassed all four of them. “Toph, Zuko, Janet, Sam – we. Doko?”

Toph frowned faintly as Sam held the little pyramid out again, then raised both hands. One finger poked at the front of the pyramid, off-center and a little below half-way up. The other poked one of the sides, at the same height but closer to the back than the front.

Coordinate system? Sam eyed the points Toph had indicated, mentally extending them to perpendicular lines and matching them to their location on Toph’s floor map. Damn, I did get turned around – we’ve been going sideways, not toward the door.

She set the pyramid down on the floor – flexing her fingers a bit to ease the ache of holding it – and pointed to the exit. “There. Exit. Iku.” She looked at Toph. “Can you…?” Janet had said that they’d escaped the prison through the ceiling. What could go up could hopefully come down. She mimed one of the stone-moving punches again – although her hand-to-hand pride made her work on tidying up the form a bit this time. Huh. Very solid stance. Guess that makes sense…

Toph looked dubious, but Zuko tapped her elbow, and the two dropped into a low conversation in their own language. Sam drew away and looked at Janet, who’d been keeping an eye on the corridor. “Think I got through?”

“Probably. They’re quick.” Janet bit her lip absently, then visibly caught herself and let it go – bad habit in combat situations, and she’d had to stitch up the consequences enough times to know better. “I just hope this works.”

~~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~~

“Think they know what they’re doing?” Toph asked skeptically.

“Probably as much as we do.”

Toph huffed. “Real comforting, Sparky.”

“You want comforting, talk to Katara.” That cut a little too close for both of them, and she felt Zuko swallow before continuing. “But they’re right, this place is a maze – and a huge maze. Getting out the normal way will take too long.”

And Sparky wanted out. Toph could feel it. Fire was stubborn and fierce and determined and it hated being boxed in. No free air made firebenders twitchy. Not as bad as Twinkletoes-twitchy, but…

And she could feel the maze of walls and corridors in her toes. Problem was…

“Don’t know about just blasting through. Getting to you guys was risky enough.” She scowled. “This rock is weird. And there’s metal all over the place, even inside the walls.”

“That must be what’s holding the lightning.”
Toph did not eep. “Lightning?” she demanded.

“This place is full of it. All over the place. And not flash-and-gone like the lightning in a storm, either. More like…” She felt Zuko not so much shiver as shake himself. “It’s contained, though. Mostly. How, I have no idea. But if we break the containment by accident…”

And no Katara to do her healing stuff. “Okay. Really not big on the whole busting through walls idea right now.” She was the greatest earthbender ever. Lightning? Not really her thing.

“We have to try, though. I can spot for safe points for you.”

“You wanna risk getting zapped?”

“I don’t want to get cornered here. If I have to, I can deal with lightning.”

Not quite a lie – and Toph didn’t need earthsense to read that. Zuko’d looked Ozai’s and Azula’s lightning-bending in the eye; he definitely didn’t like it. But he could deal with it. So she’d let it slide this time.

She wriggled her toes in the stone of the floor, feeling the way it would break down. *Bend with the cleave*, that was what she’d learned from the badger-moles – heck, even from “Master” Yu Loserpants, back when he was milking her parents for money by “teaching” her the same things over and over again. This was weird stuff. Hard, really hard, but it broke down almost like sandstone – crumbling, rather than cracking along angles. *Should make busting through the stuff easier. Not that I need easy.*

Only, she kinda did. Stone and strong stance let her hide it from the two weirdoes over there, but her head hurt. Lots. And sometimes her fingers and toes wouldn’t quite do what she told them to, and spirits, how scary was that? To top it off, her chi was all wobbly. She thought maybe this was like the “seeing double” Sokka had whined about when he got drunk once. She couldn’t always be sure if the tremor she felt was in the stone, in her feet, or in her head.

Yeah. Zuko wasn’t the only one who wanted out.

“Toph.” Zuko’s voice was much quieter now. “Solid?”

Heh. Sparky knew better than to ask stupid things like are you okay. ‘Specially when the answer was obviously, *No, but I’m not gonna die.*

“I’ll manage,” she said, and cracked her knuckles. “Okay. Find me some zappy-free spots, and let’s rock.”

~~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~~

“I hate this plan,” Janet was muttering under her breath.

Sam grimaced. “That makes two of us. If you’ve got a better one, I’m all ears.”

From the bitter way Janet’s lips tightened, she couldn’t think of any alternatives, either.

There – if she swapped *this* crystal into *that* junction… Taking a deep breath, Sam glanced at Zuko and nodded. He nodded back, grave and focused – but next to him, Toph cackled quietly and
cracked her knuckles, every inch the confident hellraiser about to wreak havoc.

_Hope she’s up to it._ Because Toph was good, right up there with O’Neill in the Faking It Olympics—and Janet was an old, old hand at catching him out with her back turned, and Sam had picked up a few of the tricks. They’d both spotted the momentary flashes of unsteadiness, the too-careful stillness meant to suppress erratically trembling and spasming muscles, the faint furrow under black brows betraying a pounding headache.

In short, all the symptoms of a very bad reaction to a zat blast.

Spotted, only to grit their teeth and say nothing, because there was nothing either of them could _do_ about it. Not here. Save to get out of here and to proper medical facilities.

_She’s half the mass of an adult male, if that,_ Sam thought grimly. _When she took the blast that knocked her out and landed her in that cell, she got the equivalent of two hits in one. She’s lucky to have survived._

_If she takes another hit before that wears off… she’s not going to make it._

Fact. And fact.

But if they were going to make it out through a guarded door, with the Jaffa already on alert—they needed their most effective fighters to take point. And those fighters were not the two staff-wielding US Air Force officers.

Also fact.

She stepped away from the door, pressing against the wall next to Janet.

“Why can’t we just sneak out?” the doctor was muttering under her breath. “That’s got to be more sensible than this…”

“We’ve used up our sneaking permit,” Sam replied, her voice just as quiet. “It won’t be that hard to trace our route based on all those holes in the floors and walls. They know where we’re going. And the alarm’s already been raised; the exits will all be guarded.”

And whatever the tech Toph was using to manipulate the floors and walls like that, Sam didn’t want to pit it against the hardened outer shell of the ha’tak.

“In other words, they’re expecting us.” Janet tightened her grip on the staff weapon as Toph walked right up to the door.

“Probably. With luck, we’ll still surprise them, coming in through a side door like this…” Sam braced herself as Toph raised a hand.

Danny would have thrown a fit. Who’d have thought that _Shave and a Haircut_ would be a universal constant?

But for the last booming knock, Toph suddenly pivoted and snapped out a perfect side-kick to the center of the door—and the door blasted inward.

Nonplussed silence shattered with startled shouts—and the sound of overloading crystal matrices as Sam’s tampering dumped the power surge from the broken door directly into the local energy grid. Not enough to overload the system—one little jolt was barely a pebble dropped in a pond. It made a few ripples—it wouldn’t overflow the banks.
But what the ripples *would* do, was to activate an emergency lockdown of the other doors leading to the main entryway. Buying them time to get the outer door open and escape.

Little Tok’ra sabotage trick, that. *Check’s a bit late, but Jolinar’s paying her rent…*

As the thought flashed through Sam’s mind, Toph charged, the rest of them launching through the door barely a few steps behind.

Sam fired as she cleared the door, accepting the moment’s delay to recover from the recoil in the hopes of further scattering a formation already broken by the shattered remnants of a door landing in their midst. The light of the bolt gleamed for the span of an eyeflicker on polished metal – then struck and glanced off, slamming into the floor.

*That would be one of Janet’s riot shields,* Sam thought blackly. The Jaffa were quickly recovering their formation behind that defensive line of shield-bearers, and *damn* the discipline that had let the defensive line reform so fast…

Every instinct screamed that a headlong charge into staff-fire had all the stupidity of every tactically-challenged Hollywood director combined, yelled that she needed to find cover, and fast. Sam gritted her teeth, prayed their half-coherent almost-plan would hold, and kept running.

Then she slammed the brakes on as, a few steps ahead, Toph landed in a now-familiar stance. Suddenly she *had* the cover she wanted, as the floor buckled, bent, and rose up in a long line between them and the guards, running nearly the length of the room.

Long, and low. Sam wasn’t tall, but even so she had to keep her head down.

*Guess Toph isn’t used to tall allies.* And she wasn’t going to follow that thought, not now. Using what was left of her momentum, she whipped about and raced for the exit, Janet close at her heels. Behind her, she heard the discharge of staff weapons, and the crackling roar of flames.

*They’re your allies. You have to trust them.*

She kept going.

~~*Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.*~~

Without breaking stride, Zuko launched himself into the air, hurtling over Toph and Toph’s wall, into the teeth of the first barrage. He twisted in midair into a defensive spin to deflect some of the attacks, and hit the ground in a heel-strike that split one last blast in two. Hot wind buffeted him from either side, and he narrowed his eyes against rock dust and sparks flying everywhere.

*Like the time Aang sneezed into the campfire. Only with more shrapnel.*

Behind the wall, he heard Toph biting down a yelp. “What is that stuff, blasting jelly?”

The edge in her voice would be outright panic, were she anyone but Toph Bei Fong.

*Blasting jelly against stone, the stone loses…*  

Fire darted from his fingertips as he shifted stance to whip an arm around, flinging a blazing cousin of one of Mai’s favorite tricks. The whistle of the flame-senbon in flight vanished in a roar of fire, as
several bit into oncoming blasts, scattering the gathered energies – but those that passed through the volley struck those strange metallic shields harmlessly, although they left smoking red-hot circles in their wake and something that sounded like startled oaths.

Damn.

But he had no time to try another strike; another volley came hard after, and he was too busy blocking and deflecting to counter.

Think fast, Toph. I can’t keep this up forever…

~~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~~

Sam, I think that goes beyond “throwing fireballs”!

Janet could feel the wash of heat as Zuko vanished in a whirling firestorm, and squinted against the blazing light. She focused on the Jaffa, arrayed behind the shelter of their shield wall. But not wholly safe, she realized with a tight, tense grin, when one stood to fire and met with a flying piece of floor tile.

Behind her, Sam swore faintly, something about failsafes. Janet suppressed the urge to turn and look; there was nothing she could do to help Sam hack a Goa’uld door. Other than what she was doing, standing guard. The kids were buying time, keeping the Jaffa’s focus on them and not the two women who’d slipped to the door controls under cover of Toph’s wall. The longer that held, the better Sam’s chances of getting the door open.

But the Jaffa wouldn’t stay distracted forever.

One of them snapped a command, and the relentless barrage of fire ceased. With it, the blaze of explosions and flame around Zuko faded as well. The boy settled into a basic stance, breathing deeply…

He’s exhausted.

A doctor’s instinct, adding up the careful breathing, the sheen of sweat, the way he set his feet so that his skeleton held him up without further drain to fatigued muscle. Adding up the amount of fire – pure energy – that he had been generating seemingly from nowhere…

Energy can’t just be created out of nothing. He’s exhausted. And he wasn’t going to let that stop him. She could read that in the gold eyes.

Except that the Jaffa saw it, too. The pause only lasted for a breath – then he began barking commands before Zuko could rally for a counterattack. This time, the attacks didn’t come in volleys, but a steady stream, meant not to overwhelm the boy but to wear him down.

Have I mentioned that I hate enemies who fight smart?

~~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~~
This is so backwards, Toph couldn’t help thinking. Earth was the element that waited and listened, then hit you with a rock. Fire was the element that hit hard and fast and didn’t stop until it or its target was down.

But those boom-staves could go right through her rocky walls. Worse, she couldn’t see them coming. No stance, no shifting weight, just point and squeeze, and since most of them were pointed at her or Zuko already, the pointing didn’t tell her much. And in this mess, with her head so fuzzy, she didn’t even know about the squeezing until the recoil hit.

And by then, it didn’t matter how well she could see. To block, you had to predict, and she couldn’t predict if she couldn’t feel their moves!

Zuko could. Zuko could feel all that boominess coming at them and bat it out of the way, or kick it aside with one of those searing sweeps.

Except that firebenders weren’t really made to defend. Most of their defenses boiled down to hit back first.

And to do that, they had to make their own fire.

She could already feel the shift in Zuko’s breathing. He’d never show it, not until he fell over on his face. But if they didn’t do something, he’d be doing just that, and soon.

Then a boom and a section that was her wall suddenly wasn’t anymore – a hole Toph left where it was since it was far enough away that it wouldn’t give away that she was all on her lonesome back here, and their two weird hanger-ons were off doing sneaky stuff. Instead, she smirked and got herself some rubble.

So Zuko had to guard them? That just meant the Blind Bandit could do some damage!

And if she knocked the stupid clunky-boots hard enough, maybe they’d lay off Sparky enough for him to get a few shots in…

“Ha!”

An exclamation followed by something that was either an oops or a curse as some of the “Jaffa” swung their sticks around to face the supposedly sneaky half of their party…

And one of the walls was moving like a drawbridge, pivoting outward from the base with a blast of coldcoldcold air.

Yes! I’ve seen enough of this place, and I can’t even see!

Provided they got there in time – the Jaffa were moving toward the door and she felt Zhanay and Xian’s heartbeats shoot way up as they scrambled for cover.

Zuko snarled, something like a saber-toothed moose-lion with a squishy intruder on its turf, mixed with a bit of distinctly not-very-Fire-Lordy-at-all language. (Not clear enough to pick the words out. Darn.) Then he ran – not to get between the women and their new opponents, but right into the middle of the mess, making all the bad guys turn their attention back to him-

Stupid firebender!

Never mind the wall, no point in hiding that the others weren’t behind it any more. Toph stomped and punched, sending rocks hurtling into the melee, counting on earth-sense and experience together
to tell her where Sparky would be so that she could hit where he wasn’t – and he was helping her, keeping his feet always on the ground even though firebenders liked to jump, and – yes! – messing up their line so those stupid shields weren’t in her way anymore.

Except that she was running out of wall and she couldn’t fight the way she liked, her usual stuff wouldn’t work here. She couldn’t pin bad guys to the ceiling with pillars of stone when the floor under their feet wasn’t all that much deeper than she was tall! And she could feel the stresses shifting all over the place just from her one long defensive wall. Stone against stone, supporting stone – buildings always felt just a little flimsy to Toph, all stresses and pressure and no *solidity*. If she didn’t watch her toes, she could knock the floor right out from under their feet.

…ooo.

Pause. Reach. *Listen*.

“Looks like we’ve got another very special birthday today,” she smirked. Then roared, “Sparky! Outta there!”

Zuko’s foot hit the ground. Angles and force pushing him *that way, that far*, which meant he’d land *there*…

Drop to one knee, cock the arm.

Toph *punched*.

~~*Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.*~~

*Dear lord.*

From her position, Sam saw the strike from start to finish, as Toph’s punch into the floor sent a *shudder* through solid stone, a shudder that grew to a ripple, a wave, and then the floor literally disintegrated right under the Jaffa’s feet.

*Ha’taks are built using a high-strength variant of limestone, so that if a section of the hull is punctured, it will crumble rather than split, to minimize environmental breach…*

Zuko’s desperate leap was just far enough; he hit the floor at the edge of the hole with his shoulder and rolled to sturdier ground as he came up to his feet. Sam saw him glance back once, eyeing the destruction behind him with satisfaction, and then he and Toph were running to meet Sam and Janet at the exit.

Except that, as he came close, Zuko’s eyes focused over Sam’s shoulder, and widened.

Sam turned and found herself looking down the ramp of the ha’tak onto a nightscape of black, blue, white, and the deadly, shining silver of moonlight on ice.

*Trapped in the Antarctic, Jack fading fast, couldn’t dial home because she didn’t realize it but she was home…*

Sam shook away the memory as she freed the jacket of her winter gear from where she’d tied it around her waist in the warmth of the ha’tak’s interior, already feeling the bite of polar air rushing in.
“The Gate’s that way,” she said with a jerk of her head towards the dark line of craggy stone thrusting out of the ghostly, gleaming white of snow and ice, thrusting an arm through a sleeve as her mind raced to match maps and coordinates and estimates into the reality facing her.

“How far?” Janet asked as she tossed a bundle of quilted cloth – *Jaffa winter gear; must have been stashed near the door. Good call, the kids will need it…* - to Zuko. The boy pulled the over-large coat on, scowling at the frozen landscape before them. It was a familiar sort of expression, the “off-freaking-course” look that Jack got when death gliders started showing up in the middle of a firefight – if rendered a bit more villainous by the scar.

“Two miles and change to the Gate as the crow flies.” Sam’s gloves had gone AWOL at some point. Janet handed her a pair of Jaffa gloves. Too big, they fit like sacks – but better than bare hands on metal staff weapons in sub-zero temperatures.

She could hear movement below, from the hole Toph had opened in the floor. More alarming was the hum of energy from the other entrances to the hall, as the emergency failsafe holding them closed was overridden.

*Time’s up!* “Let’s move, people!”

She set off down the ramp, eyes fixed on the bleak snowscape of snow and ice and dark stone stabbing upwards out of that flat, white and silver plain.

*Not so flat. Cracked. Rough. Stark, but not empty,* she calculated, as the first real bite of the sub-zero chill began to sink in and her foot left the stone of the ramp to crunch down on frigid white. *If we can just put some distance between us and the ha’tak before they can scramble death gliders or pursuit teams, we’ll vanish into the landscape… follow that ridge to get into the mountains and near the ‘Gate…*

A cry of dismay had her stumble and slip on the cold ground as she unwillingly dumped momentum to turn and look back.

Zuko and Janet had been running hard on her heels, less than a breath behind. Toph, on the other hand, had stopped cold on the ramp, rigid and unmoving.

“Toph!” Zuko yelled.

Janet swore. “Sam – she’s *barefoot*! She can’t run around here like that, she’ll lose her feet!”

And there was no way stolen Jaffa boots were going to fit her.

Toph yelled something at Zuko, voice pitched significantly higher than Sam had heard from the cheeky girl yet, face pale in a way that she didn’t think could be blamed on moonlight.

*This isn’t about the snow. She’s terrified of something.*

Zuko swore under his breath – there was no mistaking the tone – and started back.

Then Sam noticed the Jaffa at the top of the ramp, arm outstretched, holding something that gleamed metal-bright in a serpentine curve in one outstretched hand.

*Zat!*

“Toph, *fusero!*”
Toph dropped flat against the ramp as the Jaffa fired. The crackling blue energy of the zat shot over her – directly into Zuko.

He caught it.

Sam heard, under the snap and hiss of discharged power, a grunt of effort as Zuko slid backward – almost as though the electrical energy of the zat were converted to pure kinetic force, pushing him back. Blue-white electricity arced and rippled through his raised arm, across his shoulders, down, making the boy light up like an over-clocked circuit for a minute-

Then with a wordless kiai the energy condensed and snapped up and out with the motion of his other hand – out and straight back up the ramp as a branching bolt of electricity that split the air with a crack that made Sam’s ears pop, and sent the Jaffa gathered on the ramp back into the ship.

As Zuko dropped to one knee, Toph flipped to her feet in a neat kip-up and turned sharply in a flurry of punches and kicks that seemed to strike nothing but air.

Until the great supports on either side of the main gate began to buckle and crumble inward, filling the exit with rubble and the tilting columns.

Sam remembered to breathe. No one’s getting out – or in – through there. Not for a while. And with a massive hull breach like that – this ha’tak wouldn’t be lifting off anytime soon, either.

Though I guess this means we could have just escaped through the nearest wall, after all.

Zuko was already back to his feet, staggering up the ramp with none of his earlier easy balance and poise. Toph met him half-way, chattering what sounded like a rapid-fire mix of chiding and boasting that didn’t cover the very real fear written in every diminutive inch, not with the way she latched onto him the minute he was in range. Zuko shook his head, speaking low and urgent as he dropped to one knee and shrugged Toph’s hands off – along with the Jaffa coat.

Then Toph was scrambling up onto his back, wrapping her arms around his shoulders while her legs hooked together around his waist, actually tucking her feet into his pockets with a snippy little chirp that made him breathe something like a laugh as he struggled to pull the coat on again, this time over both of them.

And something was wrong – he didn’t seem to be moving his left arm, and she knew that he hadn’t been injured before.

Sam hadn’t even really realized she and Janet were moving before they reached the kids, Janet helping Zuko get his one functional arm through the sleeve and then zipping the coat without even bothering with the other, leaving it just loose enough that she could pull the hood up over both their heads.

“She’s just go,” the doctor muttered, as Zuko nodded his thanks and came up to his feet again.

Sam nodded. “Let’s.”

~~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~~

The chamber of the Great Gate was in shambles.
First Prime Sanura regarded the destruction with dry amusement as poor Lieutenant Nekht finished his report. The Lieutenant was new to his rank, and he showed it in a thousand ways. He’d been in no way prepared for a disaster of this magnitude.

Then again, given the way his idiotic over-enthusiasm had contributed to the mess, there was a certain poetic justice to the fact that this had landed on his head.

Literally, judging by the amount of rock dust.

*Ammit bite them – we thought they’d go for the gliders or the Stargate,* she thought darkly. *That’s the Tau’ri style. Not this sort of head-on attack.*

*Then again, if I could make the walls fight for me, I sure as Duat’s kiss wouldn’t waste my time on small fry, either.*

The words “prepared to set out in pursuit on your command, First Prime” snapped her attention back.

“Pursuit?” she demanded, watching him jump at the harsh rasp of her voice. “After this fiasco? Let the ice cool them off first. We’ve got guards on the planet’s Stargate. They’re going nowhere fast.”

“But, the honor of the Wise One…!”

She snorted. “Bugger *honor.* Dead soldiers do *not* please the Wise One. Always remember that first.”

Although… the structural damage was bad, and they were still trying to trace the movements of the escaped prisoners through the ship. But the toll in terms of *life*…

*Could have been a damn sight uglier.*

Not that there hadn’t been plenty of casualties – including herself, she acknowledged ruefully, shaking out the pins and needles of one redirected zat blast.

*Neat trick, that.*

Although not everyone had been so lucky. Thre had been fatalities as well – to stolen staff weapons, to friendly fire, to flying *rocks,* or with neat little holes burned through important organs. The escapees had been deadly serious.

*Heh. Under other circumstances, I’d say I liked them.*

“Regroup and get your wounded and dead seen to. I’ll report to the Wise One.” Odds were that Nubiti was already with him, poking at rocks and tech alike.

And both of them well-armed with *I told you so’s.*

*Hells. Well, time to go get laughed at.*

~~*Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.*~~

“Don’t *ever* do that again.”
“Do what?” Zuko rasped, and Toph felt him shift under her to balance her weight a little better against gravity and the wind.

“Jump in the middle of a bunch of bad guys so I can’t squish them properly!”

“It worked, didn’t it? Ow!” She’d dug one ankle into his side – it would have been a kick, if she didn’t have arms and legs locked in a death-grip. “Toph, do you want me to drop you?”

*That* hadn’t been a death grip. *This* was a death grip. “Don’t you dare!” She swallowed and wished she’d remembered that she *wasn’t scared* before yelling that.

Zuko was quiet for a minute. “I’m not dropping you, Toph. Got that? I won’t. Ever.”

Okay, she *had* to sass him on that one.

“…I wish Katara were here.”

*That’s not what I was going to say!*

“Yeah. Same here.”

Toph hunkered down a bit more. She could hear the cold out there, in the way the snow crunched under the others’ feet, the whistle in the air, the way Zuko shifted his face to try and keep it out of the worst of the wind that had blown up only half an hour after they’d escaped and started this horrible trek through blind *nothing* so far as she was concerned. She tucked her chin against his shoulder in an effort to give him a little more room in the hood, trying to concentrate on the smoky-cinnamon smell of the incense he liked. Snoozles *swore* Zuko burned the stuff just to keep his nobles fixated on visions of sticky buns rather than intrigue. And yeah, it did make her think of sweet yummy things. But mostly it smelled *warm*, like Fire.

“I mean, she grew up in the South Pole. All this ice and snow is *waterbender* stuff.” She wasn’t *rambling*. Much.

“I’ve crossed ice under worse conditions,” Zuko said quietly.

“What, seriously?”

Oh, she knew that wincing almost-laugh. This had something to do with before Zuko got his head on straight. “What, they never told you about me getting into the North Pole?”

“Tell, tell!”

She could actually feel him sigh, straight through her own ribs. A bit like earth-sensing, only not. “This… well, it was during the siege on the North Pole…”

Zuko wasn’t a good storyteller, at least not the way that Sokka and Katara were. He tended to whittle out the good stuff, paring things down to fact, and fact, and fact. This is how it happened, this is why it happened, this is what happened as a result.

Or maybe he just wanted her to overlook the certain details. Like the fact that he’d been *really, really stupid*!

“Wait a minute. You were walking across polar ice and it *broke*?” Her grip tightened without her say-so.

Zuko stumbled, caught himself. “Yeah.”
“Ice like we’re walking on right now?”

“…there is that.”

Toph shivered, even though she was probably the one member of their bunch who wasn’t cold, courtesy of clinging to the back of a firebender. I’m not going to think about it! “So… what’s with you and the deathwish?”

“What?”

Toph snorted and hiked herself up again, trying to match the movement to his stride so she didn’t throw him off balance. “Come on. Have you ever done anything that didn’t almost kill you?”

“…I gave Mai a fruit tart?”

“You did?”

“Yeah. With rose petals.”

Sparky was such a sap. It was cute. “Mai’s your girlfriend. Mai. That’s a deathwish right there.”

“It is not!”

“She’s scary.”

“Well, yeah.” And your point is?, Zuko’s genuinely baffled tone asked.

Note to self: when picking a boyfriend, send him to Sparky and Snoozles for training. Or better yet, ask Mai and Suki for tips on training him myself.

Quiet again. Only, not quiet, because she could hear the howling of the wind, and just barely the sounds of Zhaney and Xian’s feet – fine, Janet and Sam, Zuko had drilled her on the weird names until she got them right. Guess being careful with names was part of the whole Fire Lording job. They’d pulled in closer as the storm hit.

It was awful. The world wasn’t real around her. Not when all she could hear was the moan of the wind and the impact of the snow on the hood, not when she could barely hear the people walking right beside her. The only thing real was Zuko’s breathing, the smell of cinnamon smoke, the warmth he radiated.

I. Hate. Being. Blind!

She hadn’t meant to say that out loud.

“Yeah. That makes two of us.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean this storm’s so heavy, I’m not sure I could see my hand in front of my face.”

Toph gulped. “Do we even know where we’re going?”

“Think Sam knew. When we started, at least. Not sure how long ago that was…”

She didn’t like the sound of that.
“Speaking of girlfriends – when are you gonna admit the other reason you miss Katara right now?”

Beat. “What?”

Ooh, nice deadpan, that. Shouted you did not just imply what I think you just implied!, all the way down to the mountains’ roots.

“What’s wrong with your arm?” she asked in return.

Zuko was silent.

You’re busted, Sparky. “I could tell something was wrong with it back on the ramp. You haven’t been using it to help carry me.” And Zuko’s chi felt… off. Hard to tell when she was reading straight through him and not through stone, but Toph knew chi; had to, to read people as well as she did. And she knew her friends’ chi best. “What gives?”

“The lightning-bending that those Jaffa used. It… wasn’t lightning, not exactly.” Zuko took a deep breath. “Uncle’s block… didn’t quite work all the way.”

Toph swallowed, remembering days, weeks of waiting for Aang to wake up from Azula’s sneak shot, the way Zuko had still been moving gingerly during his coronation, even after redirecting most of a shot during the Agni Kai that he and Katara had summed up as, Zuko was winning until Azula cheated. We won anyway. It was ugly. “So…?”

“Can’t feel my left arm.” Zuko’s voice had dropped, even though there was no way Sam and Janet could hear them through the wind – and even if they did, they wouldn’t understand the conversation. Zuko just didn’t like admitting he wasn’t in top form.

“…shit.” It was just about the only good swearword Toph knew – for all the trash-talk in Earth Rumbles, you were supposed to keep it mostly clean for the audience. “Sparky!”

“Toph. It’s okay, said the tension in Zuko’s shoulders, in the moment before he forced them to relax a bit. “I’m a firebender, Toph. We don’t… firebending’s more like airbending than earth or water. We don’t always need to move in order to bend. Just breathe.”

And on the other side of the coin, it was harder for fire and air to not bend. Took a pretty strong bender and some pretty hefty arm-waving for earth or waterbenders to bend by accident. “Doesn’t mean you aren’t in trouble if we get into a fight.”

“I’ll manage,” Zuko said flatly. “I… Janet!”

Toph quickly firmed her grip as Zuko lurched into faster motion and helped catch someone who collided with them and took a minute or two to get her feet back under her. Listening to weird, nonsense words, and feeling the new worry settle into Zuko, Toph scowled. “What’s wrong?”

“The cold,” Zuko said flatly. “I’m keeping us warm with the Breath of Fire, but…” He raised his voice. “Sam. Deinja-. We need to rest.”

He had to shout it twice, the second time, if Toph pictured what was going on correctly, practically shouting in the Sam-woman’s ear.

If. Not like she could see anything.

I hate this!
She couldn’t really make out Sam’s response. What she did know was that Zuko suddenly growled and started to open up his coat. “Are you crazy?” she demanded.

“You can’t bend through a coat, can you?” Zuko shifted his weight around, then reached back to support Toph with his one functional arm. “Toph – reach forward, about a foot. We’ve been walking along a stone ridge – I’m standing right in front of it.”

Toph gritted her teeth and let go of her death-grip with one hand, feeling the horrible biting cold that actually burned against her hand as she stuck it out of the nice warm coat. Or at least it felt like burning, before her hand started going numb and that couldn’t be good…

Then her almost-numb hand hit rock and suddenly there was a world again.

And this was stone – good, solid, real bones of the earth stone, not stone cut into blocks and put together as a weird building all threaded with metal and other stuff.

All right!

…and the singing of eartheartearth in her veins didn’t mean the blood in her veins wasn’t freezing solid. “Whatcha need, Sparky?” she asked, snapping her hand back now that she had her bearings on the stone nearby. She hadn’t even realized she’d pulled into herself so much as they crossed the ice.

“Dammit, Toph!” Zuko spluttered – probably because she’d gone ahead and tucked her frozen hand right into the collar of his tunic. Ow – thawing her fingers actually hurt more than freezing them. “We need shelter.”

“Heh. On it!”

Sam yelped as Toph punched, and busted rocks aside. Clumsy move, but the best she could do riding Zuko like an ostrich-horse. He helped her climb down onto the ledge she’d made, and then it was quick work to start drilling a small tunnel into the rock. Sam’s muttering went quiet real fast – must’ve realized what they were doing.

This was good rock – like the rock at Ba Sing Se, or in the mountains around Omashu. It liked bending. She could feel the strength of it, building up from the mountains around it, just the faintest memory of ancient fire from where it had burst forth from the ground. She had no problem following Zuko’s instructions, making a tunnel that dipped down, then up, until finally she widened it into a cave.

“What’s wrong with just a normal cave?” she demanded, as Zuko scrambled in after her.

“Heat rises,” he said tersely. “We need all the help we can get.” He was already spreading the huge coat out on the floor of her cave. After a moment, she added hers. The two practically covered all the floor – Toph hadn’t made it very big, after all. She could handle having some cloth between her and the ground as she slept just this once.

Especially as she felt Sam helping Janet in. The smaller woman was moving slowly, clumsily, and despite the way she was shivering, her pulse seemed a little slow. That can’t be good, Toph thought, and moved to help Sam maneuver Janet around the bend and up into their little burrow, since as the smallest she had the most mobility.

Besides. Earthbender. If someone got stuck, she’d just bend ‘em out.

Zuko had settled into a familiar cross-legged position and an odd, slow-in-quick-out breathing pattern
by the time she got the other two up into the cave, and… *Yep. Definitely warmer in here than it was before, and it’s not just the cozy quarters.*

“You might want to take off your outer layers.” Zuko told her, in the odd too-steady voice that both he and Aang used when they were meditating. “I think you’re okay, but Sam and Janet need as much warmth as we can get into them.”

“And *less* clothes are good?” Toph asked skeptically – but she could feel Sam already wrestling Janet’s coat off, then her jacket. The boots had already been removed and set aside, along with Sam’s and Zuko’s. Toph helped Sam haul Janet’s heavy pants off, and had to shiver. *She’s cold. That really can’t be good.*

“If you want to warm someone up, yeah.” Coming out of his meditation pose – though he was still breathing like he was meditating – Zuko helped Sam arrange the other two coats on top of the little huddle the four of them made, Zuko and Janet in the middle, Sam and Toph more or less piled on top of them.

Weird. Now that they weren’t moving – Toph was *exhausted.* Her eyelids felt like rocks – which was just stupid, because she didn’t use her eyes anyway, but they still felt heavy when she was tired…

“You gonna be okay?” she muttered, squirming closer to that nice source of heat. She vaguely remembered Zuko telling Aang that even passive firebending tended to eat your energy, and Zuko’d been tired even before he’d started subbing in for a campfire.

“Yeah.” That was more a mumble than an answer. “Go t’ sleep, Toph. No point in moving ag’n, not until we’ve rested…”

Toph grinned, suddenly realizing something. *Note to self – tease Sparky about sleeping with three girls, when he’s not too tired to be embarrassed!*

She slept.

Chapter End Notes

“*Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.*” Chinese proverb meaning, “You can be harmed by the things you control.”

Regarding languages: If you can’t figure out what they’re saying, don’t worry – you aren’t supposed to. (On the same principle, I’m not going to offer translations. If it’s not in English, you’re not *supposed* to understand what it means!)

However, the basic language I use for the benders is Japanese, simply because I happen to be fluent in it and thus can use it with confidence. (Chinese or Sanskrit would be more appropriate – save that I don’t know them!) And, for the record – this is colloquial, slangy Japanese, not the formal version that you learn in class. However, it is transliterated more or less phonetically, based on how a native-English speaker would probably hear it. The “language” I use for English as *heard* by the benders is, in fact, English – but filtered through Japanese phonetic rules, with a few tweaks. (For one thing – if you have names like *Azula*, then you have L’s, which regular Japanese does not.)
Also: I did some research, and yes - apparently English, particularly American English, tends to sound incredibly sing-songy to native speakers of Japanese, Chinese, and German. "You don't speak English, you sing it" is fairly common advice. Also, compared to Japanese, individual syllables of English are much slower, and much more phonetically complicated, meaning that to a Japanese speaker, it sounds very slurred, elided, and drawn out, while to English speakers, Japanese tends to sound staccato and tongue-twister-y.

“Magic kung fu kid” – yes, this is a shout-out to Avocadolove’s “Rampage,” which provided a basic seed for this particular bunny.

Take out the P, X and hyphen, and the planet code is telephone-numerals for “HOTH.” It amused me.
AN: A note about languages: some people have commented that the benders “should be” speaking Chinese, or English, or such. Um, no.

Within the story, they are not speaking Japanese at all. Or Chinese, or English. They’re from a different world; the language they’re speaking has evolved in complete isolation from the language families we know on our planet.

My using Japanese is purely a literary device. Not being an accomplished linguist, let alone Tolkien, I’m not up to inventing an entire language – grammar and idioms and all. Using Japanese – a language I happen to be familiar with, familiar enough that I can play games with it – is my way of ensuring that the benders’ language feels real, rather than made-up Jibberish.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It felt like Sam had no sooner closed her eyes than she was catapulted up out of sleep – and into absolute darkness.


It was a soft sound – breathing that tried to be steady but couldn’t quite succeed, with an all-too-familiar hitch in it.

Veteran of a thousand infirmary sit-ins and night watches, Sam had no trouble placing that sound, no matter how sleep-addled she was. Someone just came out of a nightmare.

Her brain still was stumbling through the fog of sleep, however; her hand fell on her jacket and she had fumbled out her penlight and clicked it on before her mind had quite caught up.

Zuko’s wide, startled eyes flashed gold as the beam hit them. A moment later the boy recoiled harshly, turning pointedly away from Sam as he tried to surreptitiously rub his face clear of that betraying wetness.

Sam blinked for a moment, as her mind finally clicked into gear and the situation they were all still trapped in came crashing back into her consciousness.

Then she winced. Great move, Sammie. SG-1 had given up any pretence of keeping their night terrors to themselves – they had to, living practically in each others’ pockets as they did on missions and during the occasional (all too frequent) base lockdowns. But reaching that level of ease with each other had taken over a year. And none of them were teenage males, with all the prickly, easily bruised pride that came with the turf.

Giving Zuko a chance to piece together his composure and some semblance of dignity, Sam turned to check on Janet. The blue-white light of the penlight washed away whatever color the doctor had regained, but her lips didn’t seem to be blue anymore, and she was warm to the touch, and not shivering.
Thank God. By the time they’d gotten into shelter, Janet had been well into second-stage hypothermia, chilled to the point of incoherence. Now that she herself was warmer, Sam had to admit that she hadn’t been doing so well either. Which was part of why she hadn’t realized that Janet – smaller, lighter, with a redhead’s sensitivity to extreme temperatures, and less accustomed to strenuous physical activity under adverse conditions – would be far worse.

We should have gotten under shelter as soon as we were out of sight of the ha’tak, as soon as I realized that blizzard was coming in on us. I was so busy worrying about getting away from pursuit that I forgot we were fighting the elements as well.

Which was a very good way to get yourself killed. Especially in an extreme environment like the equivalent of a polar icefield.

Stupid, stupid, stupid!

Then again, she wasn’t exactly accustomed to traveling companions who could create the perfect shelter to hole up in, given a big enough rock.

Or who can heat it up just by breathing. Sam thought she remembered seeing occasional little puffs of flame out of the corner of her eye as they’d trekked over the ice, and she’d definitely seen them in the dark of the cave as they were warming Janet up. And she could feel the effect even now, in air of the cave that was actually comfortable even out from under the pile of coats that was acting as a blanket. Come to think of it – granted, he and Toph were sharing body heat because he was carrying her, which must have helped, but… I wonder if Zuko has a higher body temperature naturally? Or if he can use the fire-tricks to raise it, even.

Although if that were the case, he had to be burning through calories at a horrendous rate. Literally.

Frowning, Sam grabbed her jacket from the pile of coats they’d been using as blankets and began rummaging through the pockets again. She’d survived too many missions with Daniel where a “Did you eat before we left?” all too often prompted an “Um… food?” – she never went off-world without a stash of emergency nibbles anymore.

Composure apparently restored, Zuko glanced over as Sam set the penlight to face the nearest wall, using the reflected light from the wall to transform the narrow, too-bright beam to something a little more diffuse, and freeing her hands as well.

“Hungry?” Sam asked, tearing off the wrapper and shoving it into her pocket as she held the energy bar up for him to see. She took a small bite to prove it was food, then held it out to him in a clear gesture of offering – one she’d practiced on strange cultures, wild animals, stray anthropologists and cranky colonels, all to good effect.

Apparently it worked with magic kung fu kids, too. Zuko accepted the bar with a wearily resigned expression that made Sam wonder what sort of trail rations he was used to getting, but muttered something that sounded like thanks, accompanied by a tilt of his head that was almost a bow. Still looking a bit dubious, he took a cautious bite. Blinked at the taste.

Sam carefully hid a grin as the rest of the energy bar vanished.

Yep. Definitely a teenager.

A yawn that apparently had been lying in ambush took advantage of that moment to pounce. Sam hastily covered it with her hand, but the sound was embarrassingly loud in the quiet.

Zuko glanced sidelong at her from under the messy mop of black hair – she wondered if he always wore it loose like that, or if he’d simply lost a hair tie somewhere in the chaos. “Okosh’ray, wari,” he
said quietly.

_Hm. Going by the tone, I think that was an apology._ She had a pretty good guess what it was for, too. “Don’t worry about it,” she said with a dismissive wave, trusting her own tone would carry the message. Really, considering the way they’d all been sleeping in one big pile to share warmth, it was amazing that she was the only one he’d woken up.

Zuko grimaced, still looking uncomfortable as well as still somewhat drawn from strain and upset. Still embarrassed, probably. She hoped he was just bothered by her witnessing his reaction to the nightmare, rather than by having a nightmare in and of itself. Even people who’d been fighting and killing for years would have had nightmares after what he’d been through.

Sam stopped abruptly, looking at that thought and remembering the events of the escape, and needles of fire piercing Jaffa armor…

_Oh, hell._

That would be fuel for nightmares, all right.

_Where’s a drink when you need one?_

Bad thought. Now she suddenly was aware of the fact that she was thirsty, and the Jaffa had taken just about everything she and Janet had been carrying except a few odds and ends squirreled away in pockets. Including the water canteens.

_Not that that’s the kind of drink I was thinking of… Ah well. He’s not old enough for alcohol anyway. And this is no situation for getting drunk. Or even tipsy enough to take the edges off._

She cleared her throat. “Ah… Zuko?”

He’d been checking on Toph (sleeping like a rock, by the look of it — and sticking to the nearest warm body, that being Zuko, like a little green burr), but something in her tone made him look up sharply, one eye a dark-lashed oblong against pale skin, the other a glittering point among shadowed crevices as the light picked out every fold and crease of scarred skin in merciless relief.

_All scars have stories._ No soldier needed an anthropologist to tell them that one. Wondering what was behind that one, Sam met his gaze carefully as she asked, “First kill?”

Zuko’s brow furrowed slightly as he tilted his head, a wordless, _sorry, I don’t understand._

_Damn it. Never going Gate-hopping without Daniel again, I swear._ How did you ask a kid if this was the first time he’d ever killed someone, when you didn’t even speak his language?

_You start by breaking it down, I guess._ “Um… kill.” That was easy enough. She mimed one of his fireball-punches, drew a finger across her throat — _bet that’s a universal constant_ — and slumped dramatically. “Kill.”

From the way Zuko winced, Sam was pretty sure he got the idea. But he nodded, then mimed holding a pole that jerked — ah, he was pretending to fire a staff weapon — then pretended to take a hit to the chest and slumped. He glanced up, raising that lone eyebrow. “Kill?” he echoed.

_Yeah, I think he got the idea. Now…_ Sam frowned. How _did_ you convey “first”? She didn’t want him to think she was trying to give sympathy for “only one kill” — especially when she knew for a fact that his score was at least three higher than that.
Well, she might at least start with numbers, just to get him thinking in the right direction before she tried to move on to abstracts. *Do I have... hah, yes!* Pulling out the remaining three energy bars – Daniel wasn’t the only one to make an occasional “sustenance-related oops,” and it only made sense to carry at least one bar per member of the team anyway, just in case – she set the first down, then held up a single finger. “One.” Set the second bar next to it, raised another finger to join the first. “Two.” Third bar, third finger. “Three.”

Zuko nodded, and echoed her gesture with his own fingers, annunciating each word carefully. “One. Two. Three.” Then, somewhat to her surprise, he switched to snapping his fingers, first once, then twice, then three times. “One, two, three?”

Sam nodded in return. *Now we get a bit more complicated.* Picking up the three energy bars, she put them down in a row, left to right, spaced about six inches apart. “First, second, third,” she said, pointing at the bars in the order she’d put them down. Gathering them up, she repeated the process, this time going from right to left, and pointed at the rightmost. “First.” Then the tricky bit: she gathered them up again, and repeated the process, but put the center bar down first, followed by the right, then the left. “First,” she said, a little more emphatically this time, pointing at the center bar.

Zuko had watched her juggling the bars with a small frown of concentration. When Sam sat back to wait for his feedback, his frown deepened for a moment, then eased. Reaching out, he awkwardly scooped the bars up with one hand.

The same hand, Sam noted with concern, that he’d used to count and to snap his fingers. *I don’t think I’ve seen him use his left arm at all, not since...* She thought back. *The zat. I first noticed something was wrong after that. Come to think of it – hadn’t his left arm been raised in the initial block?*

*I guess it did some damage after all.*

As she’d been thinking, Zuko had dropped the energy bars in a line between him and Sam, front to back. Sam shoved the concern away – not much she could do about it – and watched as he pointed to the one closest to Sam, the first he’d placed. “First?” he asked.

When Sam nodded, Zuko brightened, then looked thoughtful. “Exit,” he said unexpectedly. “Exit – Sam first?”

Sam blinked at him, then caught on to what he was trying to say and nodded. “Yes!” She had been the first out the main gate, come to think of it.

*Okay, he’s got the concepts. Let’s see if we can make them work...* She raised her chin, willing the solemnity of her earlier question to come back. She thought she was successful, when Zuko met her eyes gravely. Chewing her lip for a moment, Sam gave it a shot. “Jaffa. First kill?”

*Hope that’s enough – he’s bright, he’s got the pieces, he should be able to put them together... Blast it, I don’t even know if his culture acknowledges someone’s first taste of lethal combat as important!*

But, from the way Zuko drew in another slow, careful breath, the way his chin rose and he seemed to... not so much close off as *distance* himself, somehow...

*Yeah. He knows what I’m trying to get at.*

*“Iieh.” That was too calm, too level to be anything but a “no,” even without the shake of his head in negation. “First janah ka’ta.”*
Sam released the breath that she hadn’t even realized she’d been holding. *Thank god. I had no idea how I was going to talk a combat neophyte through his first post-battle crash when we can barely communicate…*

…*He’s a kid. And this wasn’t the first time he’s killed?*

*Note to self, walk him home through the Gate. I have some parents to pound.*

The worst part was… she wasn’t surprised. Lethal experience fit with the rough profile she’d built for Zuko in her head.

*He’s a combat veteran. Both of them are. With a readiness to face target-rich environments that reminded her of Teal’c and Jack.*

*Or maybe Daniel. What was it he said?* It had been after another crisis-of-the-week, while everyone was still in, “hey, we’re all mostly alive, how about that?” mode. “*People say ‘someone has to do something,’ and they always leave out the other half – ‘and that someone is me.’ After all – if not me, then who?*”

Zuko was watching her, mostly expressionless but with a wary edge in his eyes. Sam nodded her acceptance of his answer with a small smile. He nodded, briefly, and they both turned away slightly – giving each other a bit of space, even if the ‘space’ was mostly a comfortable illusion in the tiny cave.

“*If not me, then who,”* indeed. *They rescued themselves,* Sam mused, still following that train of thought. *Heck, they’re the ones who rescued us. And even when they were being pushed to the limit, back during that last rush – they weren’t expecting anyone to rescue them. Not even me or Janet, when they knew we were right there. They didn’t expect any backup, except from each other.*

Although there were some differences between the two. Toph… the girl was as tough and pragmatic as they came, but at heart, Toph was a brawler. It was all there in the attitude, the way she pushed herself forward to take on all comers, in the way she psyched herself up with sass, in the way she reacted when she met something she couldn’t fight. While Zuko…

*He’s trained. Military training. And not just military…*

He’d found a way to match Sam almost immediately; they’d worked out a rough but functional communication system within a minute or two. He’d figured out what Sam could and couldn’t do, and adjusted his fighting to fit his abilities with hers – just as she had.

He’d cleaned up the bodies while Sam hacked the computer. *Should have realized then that he wasn’t a stranger to killing.*

Then there was the audacious trick he’d pulled, hiding them practically in plain sight in the corridor. And Sam had been pretty out of it herself by the time they’d stopped last night, but she remembered that while Toph had been the one actually making their cozy little cave, Zuko had talked her through what to make, and through the hypothermia treatment afterward.

*Tactics, infiltration, survival… huh. Maybe I should start calling him the magic ninja kid.*

*Wait. Last night?*

Suddenly alarmed, Sam pressed the button to illuminate her watch, and swore softly.

*Four hours until we miss the dial-in deadline and go on temporary lockout. And we still need to find*
the Gate – and dodge the Jaffa while we’re doing it.

Time to start moving.

~~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~~

The problem of water, at least, proved easily enough solved. Toph scurried down the tunnel and returned, with a stone bowl filled with snow.

Returned shivering, and promptly made a beeline for the warmest thing in the cave. Zuko yelped – apparently the thin cloth of his shirt didn’t offer much protection against cold feet shoved into his side. Toph’s dismissive hand wave and imperious reply had to work its way out of the pile of coats she’d burrowed under. The boy shook his head, looking bemused, and shifted his focus to the snow-filled bowl she’d shoved at him.

After only a few slow, controlled breaths, the white crystals began to darken and collapse in on themselves. Soon the snow had melted into water – water that soon began to steam.

“Now that’s handy,” Janet murmured, glancing at Sam as Toph emerged from her cocoon with a rough stone cup in hand. Warm liquid to drink would help them stay hydrated and fight off hypothermia.

“Maybe. I’d rather not ask him to wear himself out keeping us warm,” Sam said, frowning. “I still don’t know how their tech works, but energy doesn’t come from nowhere. For the time being, I’m inclined to consider their ‘magic’ tricks the equivalent of heavy lifting.”

Janet nodded as Toph finished her cupful and handed the makeshift mug over to Zuko. Physical exertion did help fight hypothermia – but exhaustion would help it set in all the faster. She hadn’t missed how quickly Toph had inhaled her energy bar. And even then, the girl had insisted on sharing part of it with Zuko, despite the boy’s attempts to object. (In fact, Toph’s method of insisting had been to wait until Zuko opened his mouth to refuse, then shove a third of her bar into it to silence him.)

Janet had worried, briefly, about allergens. But it was clear that the kids needed food, and Zuko had apparently already eaten one bar with no harm done. Besides – these were Daniel-approved energy bars. You couldn’t find many foods more innocuous than that.

Zuko tried to pass the bowl of hot water over to her one-handed, but either it was heavier than he’d expected or the bowl was too unwieldy, or both; his grip fumbled and he nearly dropped the water all over himself and the coats before Sam swooped in and rescued it.

Janet tried to smile at the pale boy as he passed her the rough stone mug, although her heart was still trying to apply the brakes after the close call, itself. A dousing here might not be the disaster it could have been out in the elements – here, at least, they were out of the wind and warm. But they would have had to stop and wait for their things to dry – she didn’t know if Zuko could dry things without actually burning them, and wasn’t inclined to try it and see with one of their few coats

*And we’re on a deadline.*

Plain, hot water – well, it sure as hell wasn’t coffee. But Janet wasn’t inclined to be picky at the moment. Handing the mug off to Sam when she’d finished, Janet said, “I want to check Zuko’s arm
before we go.” Not that there was much she could do, probably, but the utter unresponsiveness of his left arm worried her. She couldn’t just move on without at least checking for the sort of damage that might be worsened without some sort of treatment.

Sam chewed on her lower lip for a moment, then grimaced and nodded. “I need to check the lay of the land, try and get my bearings. We don’t have much margin for error.”

As Sam squirmed her way down the hole in the floor that was the exit of their cave, Janet cleared her throat to get Zuko’s attention. “Let me take a look at that arm.”

He blinked at her. Janet sighed. She’d worked with people who didn’t speak English – or any Terran language, for that matter – before, but there’d always been an interpreter handy. She gestured to her own left arm, then his. “Your arm. Please?”

Zuko hesitated, clearly understanding her message – these were two smart kids – but equally clearly trying to decide how far he trusted her. Frustrating, but understandable. Fighting alongside someone in shared extenuating circumstances was quite different from letting them see just how badly you might be injured. After a few moments, however, he sighed and shifted to present his left shoulder. And then reached across with his right hand and picked the left up.

Disturbing. Particularly since partial paralysis was not a typical side-effect of a zat blast. Then again, I’m not sure I should be expecting anything about that particular blast to be typical, Janet had to admit to herself, remembering the sight of Zuko wreathed in blue-white arcs before suddenly flinging the light back the way it had come. Think of it as keraunoparalysis, for the time being. Temporary paralysis of extremities was a known side-effect of electrical trauma.

But when she took his wrist in one hand, supporting his elbow with the other, she found his arm warm to the touch rather than chilled. She couldn’t really verify whether there were any signs of cyanosis, thanks to the blue-white penlights. I wish we had better light! But his fingernail bed paled and then regained color reassuringly quickly when she applied pressure and then released it, she didn’t see any signs of mottling, and his pulse was steady and even, if a bit slow – not surprising in someone so athletic.

All right, so we can rule out problems in circulation. That meant the culprit was probably something in the nervous system. Makes sense. Zats are designed to target the nerves.

First things first. “Can you feel this?” she asked, tapping the normally sensitive skin on the inside of the elbow. Zuko frowned at her, then shook his head – showing incomprehension, not negation.

Bother… sorry about this, kiddo. With no warning, she pinched the inside of his elbow as hard as she could.

“Itai!” Zuko yelped, trying to yank his arm back by twisting his shoulders away.

The next thing Janet knew, Toph had shoved her way between them and was directing a fearsome scowl at Janet from point blank range.

“Chira-bi oh ijime’teh ii nowah,” the girl declared, jerking a thumb at her own chest, “konoh Toph sh’kanay!”

No stranger to quirky friendships, Janet had no trouble translating Toph’s tone to a rather Jackian, “The only person who gets to pick on him is me!” – especially when Toph punctuated it with a pointed punch to Zuko’s shoulder, prompting a yelp and a soft growl as he rubbed it with his good hand and scowled at her.
“Sorry,” Janet said apologetically, still the target of a truly impressive Evil Eye for a blind girl as Toph reluctantly stood down. Picking up Zuko’s hand again – and smiling sheepishly at his suspicious look – she tried tapping at his elbow again. “Um… ee-tah-ee?” she said, trying to approximate what he’d yelped and hoping he got the idea.

The baleful look he gave her said very clearly, you couldn’t have found a better way to ask? But he nodded, and continued to nod as Janet worked her way over his arm, verifying that there were no numb areas. In fact, if she were to guess, she’d say that the nerves might even be unusually sensitive.

No burn, though. Because he channeled the energy of the blast, or is he simply more resistant to heat?

“Well, we’ve made it as far as the mountains. Not quite sure where in the mountains, though.” Sam’s expression was dark as she set the bowl, once again filled with snow, on the floor before levering herself up and out of the tunnel.

Janet bit her lip. “Can we make it back to the Gate in time?” Less than four hours’ margin to find a single valley in the mountains? She had a feeling she already knew the answer.

“I don’t know,” Sam admitted reluctantly. “I want to try. We have to get back and report, before another team gets sent straight into the teeth of those Jaffa.” And we can’t last here for long, she obviously thought but didn’t say. On unspoken agreement, the two SGC officers had split a single energy bar – but that still only left one, and whatever they could scavenge. Assuming there even was anything they could actually eat on this frozen planet.

On the other hand. Hiking through polar mountains, with minimal supplies (two staff weapons, four Jaffa coats, two pairs of oversized Jaffa mittens, what they were wearing, and the contents of their pockets: two penlights, one energy bar, two multitools, and a finely made dagger that Zuko had been carrying) and only the vaguest idea of where you were going? There was a word for that.

Sam turned slightly away, obviously struggling with the same uncertainty. “How’s his arm?” she asked, changing the subject with an abruptness that didn’t surprise Janet.

“Beyond muscular paralysis, I’m not sure,” Janet said. “Hopefully it’s temporary; I think it should be, but I’ve never seen a zat victim respond this way, though.”

“Most zat victims don’t hold the energy in a concentrated form for several seconds before shooting it back out again,” Sam said dryly. “I really want to know how he did that. And without disintegrating himself.”

“I’d settle for him not needing to do it again,” Janet said pointedly, then sighed and shook her head. “There isn’t anything much I can do. He should probably keep it in a sling, just to get it out of the way, but we don’t exactly have the material to make one.”

“I think he’s ahead of you.”

Janet looked over her shoulder, surprised, to see that Zuko had pulled his paralyzed arm inside his tunic, and was currently struggling to tuck the garment tight around his arm and tie the sash closed again, all one-handed. “That works,” she admitted, and reached over, taking the ends of the sash. “Here, let me…”

To her surprise, Zuko recoiled a little, looking wide-eyed and a little flustered. Janet smiled at him and rolled her eyes a little, tying the sash snugly enough to hold his tunic firmly closed around his arm. “I’m not going to bite, you know.”
Sam coughed something that sounded suspiciously like *watch out for the needles though*, and Janet tossed a mock-glare over her shoulder as she tugged on the hem of Zuko’s tunic to help him straighten it out. Only to have her hands hastily batted away by a very flustered teenager.

Toph laughed and elbowed Zuko roughly in the side, smirk sly as she said something that made him stare wide-eyed at her – then suddenly look from her, to Sam, to Janet, and turn *bright* red, despite the washed-out light.

Sam laughed ruefully. “I think someone just realized he spent the night with *three* partially-dressed ladies.”

Janet stifled a laugh of her own. *Poor kid.*

~~*Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.*~~

The problem with having an earthbender for a friend was that even if the floor *did* obligingly swallow you up, she’d just make it spit you back out again. Yes, Mai had helped him with dressing when he was recovering from Azula’s lightning, but – Mai was his *girlfriend.* That was different!

And if Toph made that harem joke around said girlfriend, well… Zuko would get back at her. *Somehow.* Although it would probably have to be from beyond the grave…

Cursing his firebender-pale skin, Zuko raised his chin and pointedly ignored the cackling earthbender. And Janet’s indulgent smile, too. Instead, he focused on Sam, who at least looked a little sheepish. A bit like Sokka – laughing at the joke in part because she knew she’d probably be the butt of the next one.

*Come to think of it, Sam seems to be the Plan Guy, too.* “Sam. Where, *go-in*?”

Well, that took care of the laughing. Sam sighed and rubbed at her eyes, then looked thoughtful. “Where… *chappa’ai.* *Chappa’ai, go-in.***

Toph puffed her cheeks out. “Well, that’s helpful,” she muttered sarcastically. “You ever hear of this… cha-cha thing?”

Zuko shook his head. “Haven’t a clue.” He tried to put his confusion into his face as he echoed, “*Chappa’ai? What is that*?”

Sam looked a little taken aback, then *curious.* Had she expected them to know the term or something? Zuko shrugged under the questioning stare and shook his head. “Sorry.”

Sam grimaced, running a hand through her strange hair – then began going through her pockets with an fervor that told Zuko she was looking for something. A few moments later, she was dropping down to sit cross-legged next to him, a strange, short, metallic stick in one hand, and an odd little book no bigger than the palm of her hand, only loosely bound together by a spiraling wire at the top. She flipped to a blank page, pushed on a little button at the end of the stick, and…

“*Whoa.*”

“*Whazzup?*” Toph had been fetching the refilled bowl of snow; now she paused, brows drawn together in puzzlement. “*Paper?***
“Yeah. Self-inking brush… kinda.” It wasn’t a brush, exactly, the lines were bizarrely even and unexpressive, but… “Note to self, don’t let Sokka get his hands on that thing. He’s a menace as it is.”

“What, ’cause he thinks he’s an artist? I happen to think his paintings are great!”

“What, really…” Argh. “Don’t do that!”

Toph just cackled and shoved the bowl of snow into his lap. “Make with the steam, kettle-kid. I’ll have a longjing with a trace of chamomile.”

“Do you have any idea how weird it is that you like quiet teas – what? I traveled with Uncle for years, even I learned a thing or two.” Scowling, he pointedly ignored her snickering as he glanced at the picture Sam was sketching with that bizarre writing thing. Two circles, one slightly inside the other. Seven triangles around them, connecting the two. Open at the bottom, although now Sam was adding a flat line…

Erk.

Without thinking, he grabbed her wrist, making the writing tool slip a bit and leave a long black line down the paper. “That…” What was the word she’d used? “Chappa’ai?”

She nodded. “Sta-geit.”

That was helpful. Not. Two words for the same thing?

“Sparky?” Toph asked carefully. She’d probably picked up on the lurch of his heart.

Zuko eyed the picture. “Toph… remember that spirit-ring we were looking at?”

“The one in the ruins?” Toph was deadly serious now. “The one that had you all twitchy and made the hair dance on my toes? Even before those weird clunk-feet came through and started blasting things?” She broke off abruptly, stopping the slow rise of her voice in both volume and pitch.

“I think that’s what Sam’s looking for.”

Toph was silent for a long moment. “Appa turds,” she muttered at last, clearly fighting to shove the unease out of her expression. She rallied a moment later. “Well, that’s going to be a bit tricky. ’Cause last I checked, we sure weren’t in your old Fire Nation ruins anymore. Unless you guys have some really freaky weather going on.”

“Of course we don’t. Aang’s not expected to drop by for a few more days yet.” Unfair, yes. Zuko wasn’t feeling very fair at the moment. Especially when it came to spirits. Although… that didn’t feel like a spirit-place, exactly. And neither does this place… “Maybe there’s more than one?”

Better to think about that, than how they’d gotten here. Or where “here” was.

Zuko had been to the poles before. Both of them. And this… place… didn’t feel right.

The sun is wrong.

He could feel it, far away, somewhere on the other side of the world. He was a firebender – he knew the sun. He could feel where it was, feel its slow progress towards the eastern horizon and sunrise. It felt… slow, distant, in a way he’d never sensed before.

That strange silver water that appeared when the energy surged… was that a gateway into the spirit
world?

Except that this wasn’t the spirit world. They could bend here.

*Enough. Focus. That – thing – was some sort of doorway. The Jaffa came through it. You already guessed that they took you and Toph through to the other side – to wherever they came from.*

If that was the case – maybe there was another one here. And that would hopefully be able to take them home.

*And if it can’t… we’ll just find another way. Somehow.*

Something of his thoughts must have shown on his face, because Sam looked at him thoughtfully, then said. “*U’ii…*” She waved an arm at herself and the red-haired woman sitting back and watching them talk. “Sam, Janet. *Tau’ri.*” She pointed to another sketch – a symbol of some kind? An open-ended, downward-turned triangle, with a tiny circle at the top.

The word made no more sense to Zuko than *Chappa’ai* or *Sta-geit*. But Janet started and looked at Sam with wide eyes, asking something in a tone that verged on demanding. Sam shrugged and replied, but her eyes stayed on Zuko’s, watching his reaction.

*She expects it to mean something?* Looking up to meet Sam’s eyes, he shook his head and shrugged.

Her gaze took on a speculative edge at that, one that immediately made him wary. More thoughtful than plotting, but…

Azula. Ozai. Even Uncle, when he was thinking for the good of the world. Zuko had acquired certain reservations about being the target of *contemplation*.

Best to offer a distraction – and a change of subject. “This… *Sta-geit? Where?*”

…why did Sam just wince?

But she flipped back a page or two of her odd book, to another sketch, a series of jagged lines curling around one edge, a small circle standing out among them, a few other jagged lines across the page, and a triangle on the other side. Pretty nonsensical…

Or, it didn’t make sense, until Sam pointed at the little circle and said, “*Sta-geit.*”

*It’s a map,* Zuko realized, as jagged lines settled into the lines of mountains and ridges. A reasonably detailed map, no less, if somewhat clumsily drawn… Ah. Sam must have done that when she went to get more snow for water, when her hands had been in those giant mittens Janet had appropriated. The bowl she’d brought back was still sitting on his lap, and the chill was quickly seeping through the travel-silks designed for the early autumn of the Fire Nation, not this polar wasteland. He set his functional hand on one side of the bowl and *breathed,* stirring the chi that called sparks of heat to sink into crystals of ice, as Sam moved her finger to indicate the triangle on the other edge of the paper. “*Ha’bak. Ah… Jaffa.*”

Jaffa were the soldiers they fought… *Ha’bak* must be the strange place they’d escaped last night, then. Inhale, exhale; the snow was melting quickly now. “What about us?” He frowned, thinking back, then tried the term Sam had used earlier. “Um – *u’ii, where?’”

Sam winced again, and turned up her free hand in a gesture of helplessness.

*She doesn’t know? Why…*
Zuko stopped that thought, remembering the night before, walking through a wall of darkness and white billows of snow. He’d been so tired that he hadn’t even noticed that something was wrong with the sun, but at least he’d still been able to feel it. It had let him keep track of what direction they’d been going in. Sort of. But Sam and Janet weren’t benders. For all they knew, they’d spent half of that trek going in circles.

Darn it... wait. He paused, eyeing an odd little perpendicular cross on one corner of the paper. Too even to be anything natural, too big to be a landmark of some kind, and that odd zig-zag at the top didn’t look like the mountain-scribbles. If this is a map – that must be the compass. I think we were more or less traveling in the direction of sunset when we escaped – west, although we were drifting south. Although that was harder to verify now; the sun must be near zenith on the other side of whatever benighted place this was supposed to be. And sun-direction near the poles could be unreliable.

An earthbender is never lost. “Toph? Which way is north?”

Toph tilted her head curiously. “Why?”

“Trying to figure out where we are.”

“Hm.” She turned sharply on her heel, arms out like the needle of a compass, and stopped with her hands pointing at two opposite corners of their almost-square cave – nearly poking Janet in the face before the woman hastily ducked. Then the earthbender dropped one hand, leaving the other pointing at its corner. “North’s thataway.”

Huh. Interesting. Normally, a firebender’s gift for sensing the sun was less useful for determining direction the closer you got to the poles – strange angles got mixed into it, especially near the solstices, because the sun wasn’t really shifting position relative to you all that much. But if that was north...

Don’t worry about it at the moment. “We should be close to some mountains, west of us.”

“We’re knocking on their slopes right now.”

“How close?”

Toph’s grin settled into the blank look she often had when she was being totally, completely serious. “We’re in a low spur, I think. But the ridge of it just keeps going up.” Her hands traced a fairly sharp slope, with a curve. “Heads north-ish the higher it gets. I think the nearest peak is...” She hesitated, then breathed slowly and deeply, the solid stone under her feet crunching as her toes sank into it and she listened. “…well, maybe a little over half a mile? I can feel it, but not that clearly.”

And Toph’s range for big landmarks tended to be about half a mile, so long as the earth she was feeling was reasonably of a piece in composition. That was how she’d found the bunkers in the lip of the caldera of the capital; the old volcano was essentially all one piece of stone. “Is that going over the mountains, or along the ground?”

“As the Appa flies.” Toph made a face. “Twinkletoes always complained if I did actual surface distance.”

Right. Zuko let the heating meditation settle him as he tried to make rough calculations match Sam’s sketchy map. If that was north, then they had strayed south a little during their trek. That would put them on the trailing arc of mountains towards the bottom of the page. But if it was half a mile to the peaks, roughly, and he was right about how far they’d walked last night – and he was fairly
confident; Uncle had hammered it into his head that you *always* made sure you knew how to backtrack when crossing unfamiliar territory, which meant keeping track of where you’d been…

The water was actually simmering in its bowl now, and the heat seeping through the stone was actually verging on uncomfortable even for a firebender. He winced, breathing away some of the heat and venting it into the air of the cave instead, and Janet reached over and took the bowl without being asked, using the sleeves of one of the coats as makeshift mitts to insulate her hands. Zuko couldn’t help wishing he had it back for a moment – at least the heat had been a distraction from the ceaseless painful pins-and-needles feeling in his unresponsive left arm.

Still, he could *feel* the arm now. Even if he couldn’t move it at all, or even move his chi in it.

*Worry later.* At least now his good hand was free. And if his estimate was correct… “Here,” he said, and pointed at the bend where the mountains turned north. “*U’ii,* where, here.” About a mile from the *Sta-geit.* Although how much distance that actually represented, in terms of altitude and switchback trails and dead ends…

Not to mention, enemies.

On the other hand, going by the stunned look on Sam’s face and the slowly brightening one on Janet’s… well, he’d seen looks like that on captive waterbenders when he and Katara had gone to Ozai’s prisons to heal and free them.

*Hope.*

~~*Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.*~~

“I like them.”

Sam looked over her shoulder at Janet, although between the darkness and Janet’s hood, she couldn’t make out much of an expression. P4X-684 had a rotation cycle nearly twice that of Earth, and if her estimate was correct, they’d escaped the ha’tak not long after sunset – part of the blizzard was probably the transition from cold-but-bearable daylight to frickin’-freezing night. A freezing night they were now perhaps halfway through, and the starlight was covered over by scuttling clouds. Although they were beginning to break apart at long last, offering teasing glimpses of stars far brighter than most modern humans ever saw.

“They’re good kids,” she agreed, glancing back. Toph and Zuko made an odd figure, bundled up under two over-large Jaffa coats. Toph had *not* been pleased about the continuing need to be carried; now that they were mostly walking on stone rather than ice, she wanted to walk.

*Janet’s right. She must be getting some sort of feedback through the ground in order to see.*

If that was the case – Sam couldn’t blame her for hating being out of contact with the ground. But just because the stone wasn’t ice didn’t mean it couldn’t freeze her bare feet with just as much harmful effect as the ice itself, in these temperatures.

And beyond that… she and Janet would have loved to help carry Toph, if only to take some of the burden (and subsequent energy drain) off the one member of their group who could help the rest of them stay warm, but there was another reason the kids needed to double up. Under those stolen Jaffa coats, their clothing was all lightweight stuff, meant for a much warmer climate.
Zuko might be able to breathe fire to warm up — and Sam had caught him doing exactly that while he and Toph were getting arranged, before he’d been able to pull the coats on — but she was willing to bet it took a toll of energy he didn’t really have to spare. And Toph didn’t have that option.

She reached the top of the ridge and offered Janet a hand up. The doctor accepted. “Very — oof — good kids,” she agreed, grunting as she scrambled up the last, particularly steep bit of slope. “But that’s not quite what I meant.”

“Oh?” Sam reached down and offered Zuko a hand as well. With only one arm mobile and Toph throwing his balance, he needed the help — and even so, he scrambled up with an ease that had a jealous bit of Sam’s mind sniffing, teenagers.

Zuko leaned against a rock briefly, probably catching his breath. He opened the collar of his coat a bit, and Sam saw a pale little hand reach out to press against the stone, and heard a brief consultation before Toph’s hand retreated back into warmth and he closed the collar again.

“Doko?” Sam asked, and tried not to reflect on the irony of a blind girl being their guide.


Following his pointing finger, Sam noted a shelf twisting its way along the side of the ridge, higher and higher. They were nearly off the spur they’d sheltered in and into the mountains proper now. She nodded, and Zuko curled his fingers into a warmth-saving fist and tucked it back into his pocket, then stood back to let Sam and Janet take the lead.

Another bit of irony, that their guide had to take the rear. But given that Zuko was carrying the weight of two people, it worked better for Sam and Janet to lead.

At least the kids seemed relaxed; Sam could hear them talking quietly inside the coat.

As for their own conversation, Janet waited until they’d started up the new trail before admitting, “They remind me of… well, you.”

“Me?” Sam blinked.

“Not just you, really. SG-1.” She could hear the smile in Janet’s voice. “It’s all in the attitude. ‘Kidnapped by crazy aliens who think they’re gods? Time to start busting heads.’ Going up against things that are bigger and badder than you and winning by luck, grit, and creative planning. Sound familiar?”

Sam blinked, and had to admit that it did. She held that thought up against her own observation of the kids, and shook her head. “I wish Daniel were here.”

“I wouldn’t mind seeing some cavalry myself. Or did you have a specific reason in mind?”

“He would know if I’m just fooling myself, or if what I suspect might really be true.”

Janet moved a little closer as the trail narrowed, and pointedly did not look towards the drop-off. “Which is?”

“That Zuko and Toph aren’t from a slave world.”

Janet looked at her, startled. Then her eyes narrowed thoughtfully. “The Jaffa didn’t speak their language — which is not Abydonian. They didn’t recognize Jaffa, or Chappa’ai, or even Tau’ri…”
“…and just about every human society touched by Goa’uld has at least stories of the rebel planet.” Sam nodded. “And they’re educated.”

“They are?”

“Well, Zuko is. I’m not sure about Toph. It’s just little things – like the map. Most people don’t think about it, but maps are pretty complex things. It takes training to read one – visualization, symbolic interpretation… We don’t usually think about it, because we learn map-reading in elementary school, but believe me, I’ve been to a lot of worlds where they wouldn’t know a map if you hit them over the head with one and walked them through every symbol.”

“And Zuko knew exactly what he was looking at, and extrapolated more.”

“Yeah.” And how had Toph known where the planet’s magnetic poles were? That was a neat trick. “And then… what you said. It’s the attitude.” She shrugged. “When you get down to it… they think like us. Like Tau’ri – people who haven’t been yoked under the Goa’uld for millennia.”

Janet was quiet for a good minute as she chewed on that. Finally… “I hadn’t heard anything about other worlds successfully rebelling.”

Sam snorted. “You’re thinking of the Tok’ra. You assume they’d tell us.”

“I do think they’d be inclined to hold the knowledge of another free world they could get hosts from over our heads.”

Sam shivered. She’d seen the sort of firepower – literally in Zuko’s case – the kids could bring to bear. The thought of someone like that, taken as a host? Brrr.

Assuming it was even possible to take them as hosts. Whatever tech they used, it had to be messing with their physiology somehow, given that she’d yet to see a control device and that it seemed to draw directly on the energy reserves of their own bodies. Then there was Zuko’s ability to, well, breathe fire, and apparently manipulate his own internal temperature.

I think any Goa’uld that tried to snake him would regret that decision. Still. “Point,” she conceded, and then shook her head. “But that just takes us back to the original problem. Where did they come from?”

“And if they don’t know anything about the Stargate,” Janet said slowly, “how do we send them back?”

…oh, hell.

Maybe the kids were local? The survey team had been fairly certain that other than the inhabitants of the small Ancient research lab millennia ago, this world had never hosted humanoid life – but, well, survey teams had been spectacularly wrong in the past. There might be some explanation for why they were dressed in lightweight clothing on an ice world, and why they weren’t adapted to the ambient temperature…

Keep telling yourself that, and maybe you’ll… Oh. Not good.

Sam had reached the crest of the rise they’d been climbing. She looked down, and groaned. Some force had split the mountain deeply right here, leaving a deep crevasse between where they stood and where the ridge continued on the other side, a good twenty feet away and five feet higher. And the crevasse…
Sheer, and I don’t like the look of those rocks.

Janet sighed heavily, breath a white cloud. “I guess even Toph makes mistakes sometime.”

“Dammit.” Sam glared at the other side of the crevasse. If they could just get across – the Stargate couldn’t be that far. Maybe even within Toph’s sensing range – she’d mapped a ha’tak, and from the way she and Zuko had conferred, she had a pretty good mental picture of this span of the mountains. Sam was willing to bet that a concentrated mass of naquadah like the Stargate would be like a flashing neon billboard to whatever feedback system Toph used to see.

But they’d have to get across this somehow, and from here, that would take an hour or two at best, time they really didn’t have to spare…

“Makaseroh ‘teba, chira-bi!”

Turning, Sam blinked as the lump under Zuko’s coat squirmed, then dropped, and Toph slid down the boy’s back to drop onto the ground. She yelped at her bare feet hit the frozen stone, then bit her lip as the sound echoed, painfully loud, across the half-circle of cliff and ridge they’d been edging their way along.

“Dammit, she’s going to freeze…” Janet growled, but Sam caught her before she could stomp over to the girl.

“Give her a minute,” she said as Toph danced from foot to foot towards the edge of the crevasse, looking like someone dancing on hot coals, or rather burningly cold stone – although she didn’t move out from between the blind girl and the point where trail became sheer drop-off.

Already shivering, Toph stopped a few feet away, sighed heavily, and tucked the ends of the massively oversized Jaffa coat she was wearing under her bare feet for some insulation against the cold stone. Then she extended a hand and rested it against the ledge.

A moment later, a smirk bloomed on her face and she straightened, flapping her hands impatiently at them. “Jama-jama-jama! Dokeh!”

That didn’t require any translation. Glancing at each other, Sam and Janet let Toph herd them back from the edge. Then Toph drew herself up, turned, and sharply slid her leading foot sideways, towards the slope.

A long finger of rock shot out of their side of the crevasse and connected with the far side, at just enough of an angle that they would be able to scramble up and over the lip of the ridge.

Sam shook her head as Toph pumped her arm victoriously, then trotted across the stone bridge on her own. Zuko huffed in what might have been annoyance or resigned amusement and followed close behind her.

Next to Sam, Janet breathed out shakily. “I keep thinking that I’ve gotten used to that. Then they pull something else out of a hat.”

Sam shook her head and eyed the slender spur of stone thoughtfully. It looked horribly narrow and delicate against the shadows of the crevasse. But… I doubt Toph would make something that she didn’t trust to hold.

“After you,” she said. Janet nodded and began making her careful way across the stone bridge. On the other side, Zuko had already shrugged off his coat and knelt for Toph to climb onto his back and arrange the tail of her coat around both of them again.
Sam stood back to scan the valley and ridges of their surroundings, searching for signs of pursuit or surveillance. Thus far, their trek had been quiet and solitary— but she wasn’t counting on that lasting. Toph’s stone-shaping wasn’t loud, exactly— more the clop of blocks shifting against blocks. But sound carried terrifyingly well in this frozen landscape.

Nothing. No hint of Jaffa patrols, no death gliders swooping overhead, not even a glint of metal or hint of movement in the shadows. Snow, ice, stone, and utter stillness.

_Wish I could decide if that’s a good thing, or a bad one._

Good— well, that was obvious. No pursuit meant _no pursuit_.

Bad… they were making for the Stargate. The Goa’uld _had_ to know that. Meaning the Stargate was guarded. If they weren’t seeing any Jaffa…

_Are we going the wrong way?_

Or maybe the hairs on her neck were tap-dancing for an entirely different reason.

_After all— just because I see them, it doesn’t follow that they aren’t there._

“You’re good,” Janet called softly, and Sam glanced across the crevasse to see that Janet had made the crossing and was helping Zuko pull his own coat on over Toph again. She had a sinking feeling that the boy and Toph were both shivering.

_Hope they don’t have to pull this stunt again. We don’t really have energy to spare for them to dump all their heat._

The darkness lightened when Sam was half-way across the stone bridge, as the clouds finally parted for real and starlight filtered down. Sam wasn’t certain she was particularly grateful— not when the light illuminated the sharp edges of broken volcanic stone at the bottom of the crevasse, debris from whatever force had split this part of the ridge in two. She breathed a sigh of relief when she made it to the other side safely.

Even the nerves, however, couldn’t stop her from muttering, “That is one _handy_ trick.”

Daniel, she knew, would probably gush about the forms of architecture available to people who could make stone move as they pleased. And no doubt want to know all about the sort of culture that would develop around a technology that broke the laws of physics. Sam…

Toph had just turned what could have been a half-day’s detour into a five-minute crossing. The logistical implications were… intriguing.

“Very,” Janet agreed. Then, in a more solemn voice, “How much time do we have?”

“About two hours.” Sam couldn’t check her watch easily, buried as it was under layers of coat and mittens, with the bite of sub-zero air against her wrist any time she broke those layers as an additional deterrent against pushing her sleeves back to check— but they had only had about three hours by the time they’d made their plans and left the cave. And after all the race-against-the-clock, down-to-the-last-second close calls she’d survived, Sam had acquired a fairly accurate internal clock.

Janet bit her lip. “That’s… not much time.”

“It’s still time. I’m not giving up until we’ve used every last scrap of it.”
Sam checked her grip on the staff-weapon – she wanted to be able to fire the thing on a moment’s notice, but with the oversized mittens she couldn’t rely on touch to find the trigger – and turned to Zuko, meaning to verify that they should continue up the ridge.

Her query stopped short on her tongue. Zuko stood with his head tilted back, good eye nearly circular with shock and the scarred left nearly as wide as he stared upward.

Glider? Aircraft? Dammit, I didn’t hear… Sam spun sharply, ready to make a stand…

Nothing. Wind, the last remnants of clouds scattering from a star-strewn sky…

…Oh.

Sam relaxed her defensive stance with an honest wince of sympathy. She didn’t know how many trips through the Gate it had taken before something small and primal coiled in her gut had stopped panicking whenever she looked up at the night sky to see utterly alien stars. Even to this day, she couldn’t help a little shiver of dislocation.

Oh, kid, do I ever know how you feel.

And this reaction pretty much put paid to any lingering thoughts that the kids might be native to this ice-world. And if they don’t know about Stargates and Goa’uld and all that – how am I supposed to explain it? Or even just tell him that it’ll be all right?

Toph had apparently picked up on Zuko’s tension. “Nani?” she demanded sharply – a term that Sam was, by now, fairly certain meant What?

“Hoshi,” Zuko replied in a numb voice.

“Hoshi,” Sam echoed, and got a surprised look as her voice pulled Zuko from wherever his thoughts were. “Star?” She pointed up at the sky. Talking did require words, after all – and Daniel wasn’t here to shoulder the burden. They had to start somewhere.

“Star?” he echoed curiously. Then his eyes suddenly widened. “Stargate?”

Janet whistled quietly. “They pick things up fast, don’t they?”

“Looks like.” Thank goodness for that. Things would be a lot trickier if the kids weren’t so quick on the uptake. Sam nodded to confirm Zuko’s words.

His reaction was… interesting. Eyes still round disks of gold, Zuko slowly tilted his head back – to Toph’s grumbling – to look at the star-spangled sky again. Looked at Sam and Janet. Flickered his gaze over snow and ice and black stone. Paled.

And proceeded to swear like a Marine.

~~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~~

“Wait, you think we’re on… another star?”

“Makes sense, doesn’t it?” Sparky’s voice was still a little shaky, but he’d stopped swearing. “The sun feels wrong. Strange. That spirit-ring, the Sta-geit or whatever they call it… it was a door to
somewhere. And… This isn’t the spirit world. But it’s not our world, either.”

Way, way creepy. “Come on, Sparky. Stars are stars. Little sparkly lights in the sky. Even I know that, and I’m blind!”

She heard the sound of feet against stone, and felt Zuko shift his weight as he started walking. “They’re not just little lights in the sky. They’re suns, Toph. Or rather, our sun’s a star, too. We’re just a lot closer to it than we are to the stars.”

Toph’s grip tightened as she thought about it. Sokka said there were lots of stars in the sky. If they were all just really, really far-away suns… “Really?” she asked, and kicked herself for sounding so tentative. “Wait, how do you know?”

“Toph – eclipses. Sozin’s Comet. Believe me – the Fire Nation has a lot of reasons to keep an eye on the sky.” Zuko shivered a little, although what with the two of them squeezed together under the coats, things were actually a little toasty. “Besides. I’m a firebender, Toph. I know the sun just like you know the earth gates. Firebenders have always known that our world circled the sun, and that our sun was kin to the stars.”

“Maybe you’re just misreading the stars?” she tried tentatively. “Katara only managed in the desert because Sokka had stolen a star map…”

“Katara didn’t know…?” Zuko’s incredulous voice trailed off. “Actually, that makes some sense. She and Sokka were left in the village – they might not have learned how to navigate on the open ocean. And they never left the South Pole. The Si Wong Desert is almost on the equator.” A rueful sigh. “I keep forgetting that most people don’t know about the northern and southern stars being different.”

“And you do? Oh, right, Fire Nation watches the sky…”

“Heh. I lived at sea for three years, Toph. Traveling all over the world. I know star maps. But none of the constellations I know are up there.” Zuko paused. “And neither is our sun.”

Toph shivered and tightened her grip. That… she didn’t know what to think about that.

Except… it matched what she’d felt, feeling for the earth gates here, the places where the chi of the world flowed in and out and differentiated between north and south. They were there, just… odd. Not quite where she knew they should be. A little too far apart.

Not that she had any time to get used to it, since she had to be carried. Carried! When they were walking on stone!

Well, it had happened before, back when Sparky accidentally burned her feet after she’d snuck up on him in the middle of the night. Although she kinda understood why he’d done that a little better now, from eavesdropping after he’d nearly dumped her on the floor shooting up from that nightmare.

Sparky’s used to people trying to kill him. And… he’s killed them back. Even before all this. That…

Well. She’d deal with that later. For the time being – well, Toph liked her toes right where they were, and they wouldn’t stay there if she tried walking on this rock. She was only just getting the feeling back, with her feet snugly stuffed into the pockets of Zuko’s travel-tunic.

Zuko paused. “Toph?”

“Now what?”
“Fork in the trail.”

Which meant she needed to scan and see which one would keep them going in the direction that Zuko thought would lead to this Sta-geit thingy. Which meant she could see for a bit. Toph grinned and flexed her fingers. “Gimme a wall, ostrich-horse.”

That got her a snort, but Zuko moved towards where Toph could sense a vertical wall rising up alongside them – she might not be able to see, but she could sense pebbles flying through the air, and knowing where big rocks were near her was a lot easier than that. He rested a shoulder against one and unfastened the front of his coat, letting Toph reach out and rest her hand against stone.

These were young mountains. She could feel it. Not that they were young in human terms, but well, they still felt all sharp and pushing to her. More like the mountains of the Fire Nation than the type around, oh, Omashu. But they were still all of one piece, especially when you got up higher and away from the debris and fallen shards, and…

“Hah!” Toph wiggled her fingers. “Think I’m feeling that… Sta-geit thingy.”

Whoof, was she ever. There was no mistaking that stuff. It was like the Undercity of Ba Sing Se, or the crystal-lit pathway that Aang and Katara gushed about in the Secret Tunnel around Omashu. (… gah. Earworm. She would not start humming that stupid tune – and note to self, she seriously needed to take revenge on Aang for singing it every time he turned around for a whole week!) Only, this was way more intense. Crazy. But that did make it easy to track.

“It’s about half a mile north-northwest of us,” she explained. “Other side of the next peak, really. We can get there, easy.”

“Says the one who isn’t doing the climbing,” Zuko groused, but she could hear a smile in it. Neither of them had any idea what would happen when they got that far – but it was nice to have a destination in sight.

So to speak. Heh.

Zuko turned to talk to the others, twisting so that Toph wouldn’t have to break contact with the rock. Toph turned him out; fun as it was to listen to him make a fool of himself trying to communicate, it took forever.

She flexed her fingers, feeling for a trail that would take them up without killing them. Teasing aside, she knew how tiring it could be to just walk. She remembered the Si Wong desert brutally well. And… she wasn’t particularly crazy about hopping off to use earthbending again, not even to platform them up. Likelihood of attracting bad guys aside – contrary to what Zuko thought, she did understand the term subtlety, she just chose not to use it most of the time – the cold hurt. And this wasn’t very good stone for that, anyway. Too sharp, too new, the deep chill giving it an unpleasantly brittle harmonic…

…the heck?

“Sparky?”

Zuko had been nodding to something Sam was saying, but the tone of her voice snapped his attention back with all the force of a lodestone. “What’s wrong?”

Toph’s hand was starting to shake. And that she could even feel that, when her hand was going
numb… “I think something’s coming.”

“Something? What?”

“I don’t know!” Her exposed hand hurt, and she couldn’t move it, it was rock and it was so cold that it was about to crack…!

Then Zuko rested his good hand over it, and the heat hurt all over again, but at least her hand was a hand again and not a brittle piece of iced-over glass. Toph took a deep breath, making herself calm down. “I don’t know. I don’t feel feet. It’s just… cold, coming straight at us. The stone is freezing.”

Zuko tensed. “Slide down,” he muttered. “I may need to move.” Then he raised his voice. “Sam! Janet! Deinja-, here!”

Toph, meanwhile, let go of his shoulders and squirmed down, feeling her coat bunching up around her as she squeezed out from under Zuko’s. Finally, though, she got down far enough to drop, even if she was so tangled up she would have landed on her rear if the stone face behind her weren’t so close there wasn’t room for that nonsense.

At least my feet landed on the coat. Normally that wouldn’t be a good thing, having something between her and stone. But with that creeping, killing cold coming closer, yeah. She’d take what protection she could get.

Especially since now she could actually hear the creaking of cold-stressed stone, little snaps and cracks caused, not by ice – anything that could be ice already was – but by the sheer chill, destroying all the flex and give of living stone.

Or maybe she didn’t hear it at all, just felt it. What her ears heard was the wind. She’d traveled with an airbender for months. She knew the sound of wind. And this was just wrong. Too directed. Too purposeful.

And it was laughing.

She couldn’t make out the laughing at first; it was soft, mixed into the wind so well that they were more or less the same sound. But as it came closer, she heard less wind and more a gentle, quiet chuckle that raised the hair on her toes.

Something was there. She knew it. But she couldn’t see it – just that creeping chill coming in, now in a shrinking half-circle around them. From the way Sam and Janet had backed up against her and Zuko, eyes weren’t any better than feet at finding it…

Then she felt a shift in the rhythm of Zuko’s heart, the sort of shift that came when he’d decided to do something crazy like charge out of shelter to take on Azula and two airships on his lonesome. The firebender breathed deeply, took a step forward towards that advancing line of killing cold, drew his good arm back…

“Ha!”

The crack nearly deafened Toph, as super-cooled stone suddenly became super-heated and dealt with the stress the only way it could, by breaking. She reflexively flexed toes and hands, strengthening the stone beneath before the trail crumbled out from under their feet.

The laughter paused, then shifted in tone, and slowly drifted away.

Toph swallowed hard, feeling the heat from the protective circle of flame Zuko had raised against her
face and seeping into the broken stone under them. After a moment or two, Zuko pulled himself out of stance and lowered his hand with an exhale, and the fire went out.

“Think it’s gone. For now anyway,” he said, and swayed. “Ow…”

“What was that?” Toph demanded. Sam was saying something, too, and by her tone, probably the same thing with more interesting adjectives. Janet, meanwhile, had stepped forward and wrapped her arm around Zuko’s waist to steady him before he could pull away or object, and was making him sit down and put his head between his knees before he fell over.

*Like Katara would be,* Toph thought, and bit her lip and did not sniffle. But right now, she was really, really missing Sugarqueen. And Twinkletoes, and Sokka, and Suki, and even Appa – who could fly them to that stupid Sta-geit or whatever and get them away from creepy killer things she couldn’t see!

“I think… a spirit,” Zuko mumbled. “Felt like it, anyway. A nasty one.”

Toph shivered, although there was enough radiant heat left in the rock to give them a little pocket of warm air for a minute or two. “It felt like it was going to freeze us.”

“I think it was. That’s why I made a fire wall – that blocks the influence of most ice-creatures… Eh?”

Sam had pulled something out of her coat. From the sound of it, she was breaking the seal on the last of those long thin sweet-cakes she carried.

“You’d better take that,” Toph said threateningly when Sam shoved it at Zuko and he hesitated. “I can’t carry you if you fall over, Sparky.”

Fire could block the influence of water, sure – but water doused fire, and this place was Water all the way down if ever there was such a place. Sokka had described the coolers on the Boiling Rock and what they normally did to firebenders. If Zuko lost his firebending from the cold, well, that would be bad.

Zuko sighed. “I just hope Sam and Janet know what to do when we get to this thing.” Then, in a lower voice, “I should have known this would happen.”

Toph rolled her eyes and punched him in the shoulder. “Oh, get off it. You always think the spirits are out to get you.”

“And I’m right.”

“Can’t you just accept that this was bad luck? I mean, it was going after all of us.”

Zuko snorted. “Bad luck is the spirits out to get someone. And they don’t usually care about collateral damage.” His voice dropped to a low murmur. “I’ve always been a target. And right now, you’re probably marked, too.”

“Oh, lighten up. We’re Aang’s friends. Why would the spirits pick on us?”

“Already forgot what we were talking about right before that Sta-geit thing lit up?”

Toph scowled at him, then blanched. “…Oh.”

“Yeah.”
“But we’re trying to figure out a way to help Aang!” she exploded.

“So? The spirits will always take the Avatar’s side against humans! And you and I both know what it’s like to be on the receiving end of for your own good.”

Toph winced.

Zuko sighed, and she felt his weight shift as his shoulders slumped. “Aang needs to wake up and realize that being the Avatar isn’t something he can just stop when the crisis is over. That doesn’t change the fact that in the short term, Aang is going to be really unhappy.” Zuko sighed, and took a small bite, chewed, and swallowed. “Maybe I’m wrong. But…”

Toph hugged herself, then scowled and forcibly shoved her worries aside. “Who cares? Freezy nasty thing here. So let’s get out of here, then worry about the details.”

~~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~~

_Somewhere on that thing, I swear, is a gadget marked “High Drama,”_ Jack thought with bleak humor, shamelessly misquoting a line from Siler’s favorite web-comic. _And when I find it, I am going to turn it off with a hammer._

Light duty. That was what this mission was supposed to be. Sending the Doc and Sam through to a safe world with techie toys to play with and no Goa’uld in sight. Downtime that didn’t look like downtime on the papers sent to squawking bean-counters in the Pentagon who didn’t understand that humans needed the world to get off their case once in a while, lest they go messily insane rather than the quiet, fun sort of insane.

Also, vacation without actually saying vacation. No need to make things easy for Murphy.

Makepeace shifted. “General, they’ve missed the agreed-on dial-back time by nearly five hours. Surely we should…”

“We should stand ready until the agreed-upon lock-out time. They still have an hour, Colonel.” General Hammond’s voice was a bit tetchy. Then again, having the Chief Medical Officer and Jack’s 2IC-plus-resident-brainiac go MIA on what was supposed to be a routine check-up mission would do that.

Apparently, Murphy was picking up on the euphemisms for “vacation.” That was the only logical explanation for how something like this could happen when the rest of SG-1 wasn’t even there.

_Seriously. We’re talking law of the universe here. All of SG-1 is to be involved when the cosmic Mad Hatter starts pouring tea._ And right now, Danny was puttering away in his lab and trying not to fret about their missing teammate, while Teal’c dealt with the stress with _kel-no-rem_ and the judicious pounding of incautious souls who’d made the mistake of asking for advanced hand-to-hand combat instruction. Both of them were staying out of the way, while Jack was just… hanging out. In the Gate control room. Just in case.

_Point was, SGC’s top weirdness magnets were not collected in a single space for Murphy’s target practice. Although he was uncomfortably aware that things like day off and vacation were usually big fat _Fair Game_ signs. Which was why they didn’t admit it was a vacation, dammit…_
And now all he could do was stand here and think about all the things that could happen on a supposedly uninhabited ice planet to make Sam and Janet fail to dial back at the agreed-on time.

*Avalanche. Abominable snowmen. Heck, abduction by Santa!*

Scary thing is, given some of the stuff we’ve seen, that wouldn’t even be all that bizarre in the grand scheme of things.

The alarm blasted to eardrum-shattering life.

“Offworld activation, sir,” Sergeant Davis said, as the Gate in the room below began to light up.

“Here’s hoping for good news,” Jack heard the general mutter, as the ka-woosh of activation blasted into the room, then snapped back into the shimmering event horizon – promptly hidden by the iris.

*Come on, come on…*

“Incoming IDC, sir,” Davis said. “Doctor Fraiser’s team.”

*Yes!*

General Hammond ignored Jack’s little victory dance with the ease of an experienced commander. “Open the iris and transmit the all-clear, Sergeant.”

The tension in the control room didn’t ease, exactly, but it did shift as all eyes locked on the water-like surface of the active wormhole. No team missed their dial-back time without serious shit going down…

*But hey, late’s better than never. The rest is just details.*

Jack didn’t even have to count the seconds – he’d been on the other end of Gate lag way too many times. Took *this* long for a signal to get through the Gate, *this* long for the dialing computer to recognize and open the iris, *this* long for the all-clear to transmit back, about *that* long to grab the last bag, throw the last punch, duck the last bolt, and dive through, and *that* long in transit before you rematerialized-

A red-headed blur in an oversized, unfamiliar coat came through in a dive that Jack knew from personal experience – go through the Gate low to make a harder target, hit the ground with your shoulder, roll, *don’t* come up, get off the platform to clear the way for the rest and make sure you aren’t in the line of fire in case something unfriendly makes it through.

Janet ducked sideways and jumped to the cement floor, moving her hands in a series of signals rather than trying to shout over the siren. *Evac under fire. Four, two allies.*

Two allies? Jack had been under the impression that the Tok’ra didn’t have anything to do with the Rebel Outpost on Hoth. Someone had been having *adventures.*

*Yup. Murphy went and amended the laws of the universe when we weren’t looking…*

~~*Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.*~~

“Watch out!”
Tackled from the side, Toph still felt the heat that came out of the horrible racket in the sky and left a sudden hole in the stone worse than blasting jelly or the boomy-sticks. She tucked in tight and let Zuko control the roll that brought them both to their feet. He made a sharp movement as though slamming something aside; she ignored frozen toes and stomped, throwing up a wall between them and the shrapnel flying out of yet another new hole in the ground.

Then she lost her stance as she cringed and clamped her hands to her ears in an attempt to somehow muffle that horrible, awful, ear-piercing shriek-whine splitting the air above them, so close she could feel the pressure of the air against her as it passed.

“Hate this, hate this, **hate this**!” She was not hysterical. She wasn’t. By the skin of her teeth, granted, but she wasn’t. She just really, really wanted to go home, someplace where the world made sense and there weren’t creepy laughing winds bringing deadly frost, or flying things throwing boomy blasts that she couldn’t predict and made her wish she was deaf instead of blind because then she could see them and she wouldn’t have to hear them...

And maybe she’d have seen them coming!

Everything had gone well, they’d jumped the guards at the platform before they could do anything and gotten them safely out of the way (and warm, Zuko’d insisted, some blah-blah-blah about “If you’re not going to kill them straight up, you don’t leave them to die on their own”), and Sam had started poking at some weird podium, pushing things while Sparky radiated unease and edged away, muttering about not needing another lightning bolt.

Then, just as Toph was distracted by the weirdest feeling ever, like her bones were buzzing a harmonic to a sound she couldn’t actually hear, she’d heard a distant whine getting a lot louder, and Zuko had turned and his heart had jumped straight into a gallop and Janet had yelled and...

“Toph.” Zuko’s voice was low, intent, and demanded that she listen. “Toph, I need to you to go after Janet.”

“Go after her where?” Toph demanded. “She went poof!” There on the platform one minute, she’d lunged as if to dive through the weird ring that was making the hair on Toph’s toes stand on end, her feet had left the ground, and never landed.

“I know!” Sparky was probably earning his name now, if Sokka was right about him spitting sparks when he got really frustrated. “It’s a, a spirit-gate or something, I don’t know, but Janet went through and we need to go after her and you’re next!”

“Zuko!” Sam shouted from where she was kneeling behind the thicker base of the protective wall Toph had tried to throw up when she’d realized they had trouble coming. One blast had taken care of most of it, but enough of the base was left to give the woman some cover. “En’ka-min!”

Zuko swore as the shrieking sound shifting, going from moving away to coming about. “Toph, go, before they start coming back!”

Because she couldn’t fight these things, not with them off the ground and the din deafening her ears. And Zuko couldn’t keep covering for her, not against those blasts and with only one good arm.

*I hate this!*

“You’d better be right behind me,” she threatened, and sprinted for the platform and the place where Janet had vanished.

*Bam*, foot on stone, right where Janet had last touched the earth. Other foot up, hurtle through the
empty ring and *why were her blood and bones practically singing*…

*Cold.*

*Falling.*

*No earth.*

*Spinning.*

*Silence-that-wasn’t-silence.*

*Nothing.*

*No balance.*

*Cold.*

…and she suddenly slammed into heat and noise and a ramp made of metal grate and *where the heck was she?*

“Toph!” Janet was suddenly there, pulling her up and to the side and away from the ring, onto a floor of some of the weirdest stone Toph had ever felt – lots of little bits like gravelly sand, bent like stone, not dense enough to be sandstone, all of it sitting on top of real stone that…

Oh. Oh wow.

Then that horrible, awful, *nasty* feeling of having all her roots torn up by some idiot with a hoe, and getting spun around and around in a place that had somehow been worse than free-fall because even in free-fall there was at least earth there to sense, all of it caught up with her and Toph began retching up everything she’d eaten for the past month.

Janet made a soft humming sound and steadied her, pulling her hair back while Toph’s stomach made a game try at tossing out anything that she might eat for the *next* week. At least, Toph thought that Janet was humming. She couldn’t tell, because there was this horrible awful racket echoing all around her.

But now, finally, she was surrounded by stone. Lovely, bendable, flingable stone, and better still, the main source of the noise was a stationary target. Pulling herself together for just a moment, she growled, stomped, and punched.

*Crunch.*

Ahhh. Much better. She could still hear the infernal racket going on outside this room, in the maze of hallways and tunnels, but at least she didn’t want to rupture her own eardrums just to end the pain now.

Which meant she could concentrate on the important things. *Where are Sam and Zuko?*

~~*Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.*~~

*Dear Lord.* Hammond stared at the remains of what had been the Gate room’s sound system, and
wondered if the bullet-proof glass of the command center was also boulder-proof.

The wormhole rippled and Major Carter burst through at a dead run. The ease of experience meant that she didn’t even stumble, only breaking her momentum after she’d cleared the ramp.

The little girl turned oddly dull and distant eyes towards the major, and coincidentally towards the command center window as well. She was still sickly pale from Gate-sickness, but her shout, in some strange language, had all the spirit of a drill sergeant’s roar.

Doctor Fraiser spoke up as well, less strident but equally urgent. “Sam, where’s Zuko?”

“Bastards learn fast,” Major Carter growled. “The minute Toph went through they deployed ground troops. He’s the one who can block the staffs – he covered me while I went for the Gate.”

Next to Hammond, O’Neill swore and turned, running for the door leading down to the Gate room itself. At Hammond’s other shoulder, Makepeace drew in a sharp breath. “General, we have to close the iris,” he said urgently. “Ground troops in the presence of an active and unguarded Gate is an unacceptable risk!”

Hammond knew the man was right. So long as the Gate stood active it was an open invitation to a security breach. His people had made it through. He should close the iris and let the Jaffa suicide to their hearts’ content against trinium-reinforced titanium.

But…

“Colonel, Doctor Fraiser and Major Carter have indicated that we still have a friendly on the other side,” he said sternly, as the two turned to stare intently at the Gate as though the missing member of their party could be pulled through by the combined force of their will. “I will not simply abandon him.” Especially if this fourth had abilities similar to the little girl – Toph? Keeping a skill like that out of the hands of the Goa’uld was worth a gamble.

“Stand by to close the iris at the first sign of Jaffa,” he instructed Sergeant Davis, who nodded with a simple, “Sir.” “And prepare to repel intru…”

The Gateroom suddenly took on a hellish cast as gold and red flames burst from the surface of the Stargate, throwing two figures locked in combat through the air and onto the ramp. One wore the distinctive armor of a Jaffa; the other was smaller, dark-haired, dressed in russet, and he heard Carter shout, “Zuko!”

“Davies! Close the iris!” Hammond barked. “Security teams, we have a single Jaffa intruder currently confined in the Gate room. Do not open the doors unless you have them sufficiently covered against an attempted escape, and yes I mean you, Colonel O’Neill!” A single Jaffa locked in the Gate room was problematic but manageable – if he escaped into the complex, however, the risk of catastrophic security breach…

The two fighters hit the ramp hard and rolled, one over the other, down its length. It was obvious that the smaller was at a disadvantage; lighter, less strong, less reach, unarmored, and he seemed to have only one hand. As Hammond watched, the Jaffa managed to grab that hand by the wrist-

Then they reached the bottom of the ramp and the smaller managed to shift their momentum about so that his feet hit the cement floor first. Hammond glimpsed a twist, as he turned his arm to grab the wrist of that grabbing hand, ducked his shoulder under the Jaffa, and surged, somehow coming up onto his feet and flinging the larger, armored Jaffa forward over his shoulder as he went.

Unfortunately, the throw sent the Jaffa directly into the small knot of Fraiser and Carter – and close
enough to the wall under the observation window that Hammond couldn’t see exactly what happened. Only a flurry of movement as Fraiser wisely disengaged and pulled back and Carter attempted to grapple and was knocked aside, dazed, her staff weapon now in the Jaffa’s hands.

The other fighter, a young man, quickly jumped forward, putting himself in front of Carter before the Jaffa could take advantage of the upper hand. The Jaffa began circling, and the young man – Zuko? – shifted to match, crouched and ready.

Now Hammond could make out some brief details. Zuko was a boy, young but older than Toph, with a dark red mark covering most of the left side of his face. Dark-haired, and eyes a bright, startling yellow color. Somewhat the worse for wear, dressed in a russet tunic. He moved like an experienced hand-to-hand fighter. His left arm seemed to be tucked inside his tunic for some reason – clearly disabled for the moment. The Jaffa was female, with a hawklike face, dark hair tightly braided, and blue eyes nearly as startlingly bright as the yellow. Her helmet was missing, but the armor had an oddly yellowish patina. She was taller than the boy by a fair margin, stronger, armed, and armored. And by the look on her face, she was planning how to use those advantages.

Zuko didn’t give her the chance. He lunged, the Jaffa made to sway back and then strike—

Then had to jump back when what had seemed like a wild punch scorched the cement under her feet with a flash of fire.

Hammond drew in a breath, biting his lip.

The boy pushed his momentary advantage, forcing the Jaffa to retreat in an attempt to get enough room to bring the staff weapon to bear. She was using it as a staff, strangely, using both ends in short strikes and jabs to force the boy to shift his stance to guard his legs or use his one arm to block.

Then she struck high and he managed to catch the head of the staff. But rather than yank it back, the Jaffa pushed, clearly meaning to throw him off his balance. Zuko bent back sharply – but rather than falling, he used the shift in weight to pivot on one leg and bring the other around in a slashing arc. One that broke the staff weapon in two.

What the – wait…

Time could slow down when adrenaline sped up. He saw the shock and dismay in the Jaffa’s eyes and the dawning horror in the set of the boy’s shoulders, in the split moment of time before the shattered weapon exploded.

Hammond wasn’t certain what he saw next. The boy made a sharp movement, the spreading explosion twisted, shot upward—

Then the Jaffa and the boy were both flying through the air to slam into opposite walls. Zuko crashed against the wall next to the door. The Jaffa nearly collided with Janet and the little girl, Toph – only the doctor’s hasty grab to pull the girl out of the way kept both of them from cushioning the impact. Even so, the Jaffa shook her head and started to reel to her feet.

Then Toph shouted, snapped her hands out, and the solid cement under the Jaffa’s feet rose up, dumping her down on her back, and then crashed back down.

By the time Zuko managed to shove himself back onto his feet, a little dazed but otherwise apparently undamaged, the Jaffa was buried up to her neck in solid concrete, like someone buried in sand at the beach. The strangest part was that, from her expression, she was torn between irritation, admiration, and amusement.
Especially when the little girl crowed, stepped on top of the cement prison, and began what was unmistakably a victory dance.

The Gate room door opened, and Colonel O’Neill stepped in, clearly ready to take on the intruder. He paused, blinked, and tilted his head, taking in the slightly scorched Sam, a flustered Janet, the blackened ceiling, the encased Jaffa, Zuko’s weary facepalm, and Toph – whose dance was now accompanied by a very good evil cackle.

Hammond’s 2IC sighed, relaxed so that his gun pointed at the floor, and pouted. “Awww… don’t tell me I missed the fun?”

Chapter End Notes

AN: The line Jack is quoting comes from *Girl Genius*.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Shouting – confused, angry, or just plain baffled. Not an uncommon thing in the SGC, although normally the medical facilities tended to be a bit quieter than the rest of the base. The current circumstances were a bit unusual, however. Even for the SGC.

Two women stood aside, bemused.

“You know,” Sam admitted, “we probably should have guessed that someone who can sense the geomagnetic poles of a planet might not like being exposed to an intense magnetic scan.”

Janet sighed, as Zuko finally extracted a thoroughly ruffled and upset Toph from what a few minutes ago had been the MRI machine. “You get to tell the General that.”

~~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~~

General Hammond simply looked at her for a long moment. Then, seemingly of its own accord, his hand rose and covered his face briefly. “Major,” he said from behind his palm, in his signature *I think I’m the only sane man in the universe sometimes* voice. “You do not seriously expect me to tell the Pentagon that a *multi-million dollar* piece of medical equipment was destroyed due to a… *cultural misunderstanding*?”

“It might net Daniel a little extra funding for once?” Sam suggested ruefully. That surprised a dry laugh from Hammond as he dropped his hand and straightened, ready to take on the world – or at least, whatever insanity SG-1 had flushed from hiding *this* time – once again.

*We are so lucky to have him in command. General Hammond knows how to flex. There are other brass who… don’t.*

Those other brass – and similar attitudes among the bureaucrats and politicians that tried to backseat-drive the SGC – were, in fact, partially responsible for the dearth of cultural experts in SGC, despite the recurring proof that a little finesse would go a long way in defusing misunderstandings that could end… problematically. Like the wreckage of the MRI.

“Although to be fair, sir,” she admitted, “that was less a cultural misunderstanding and more *not thinking* on the part of myself and Dr. Fraiser.” Hammond raised his eyebrow in a wordless demand for clarification, and she explained, “Toph was already upset by the Gate, and I’m fairly sure she’s never encountered an MRI before. And she’s blind, which means her hearing is sensitive. MRIs are not quiet machines. That had to be like having a flare go off right in your eyes. And we already knew she could be… well, a bit *direct* about things she doesn’t like.”

Hammond snorted. “Yes, I did notice the flying concrete that smashed the intercom speaker, Major.” Up went the eyebrow again. “And I would like to hear the *explanation* for that.”

“You and me both, sir,” Sam admitted frankly. “I can give you tactical information based on what we’ve observed – but I couldn’t begin to tell you how the technology actually works.”
Assuming it was technology, at least in the colloquial sense – although, as Daniel liked to point out, *anything* used to manipulate the environment that had to be made or learned was technically technology, up to and including symbolic language. Sam had started out with the assumption that it probably was some kind of highly advanced mechanical or energy tech, but now… well, she wondered. Something that drew energy from a body’s own reserves and a feedback system as complex as what Toph seemed to have went beyond anything she’d seen yet to this date. Which was one of the reasons why, despite her exchange with Janet, she had not raised the issue of Toph’s apparent geomagnetic sense possibly factoring into her reaction. She had neither proof, nor explanation.

*But damn it, Sam, you knew Zuko was uneasy about the computers. The kids are smart and well-trained, but they can’t be familiar with our kind of tech. Shoving either of them into a room with a behemoth like the MRI and expecting them to just climb in? Right. Real smart. We should have told Dr. Warner to skip it, standard procedure or no.*

And that was something that she and Janet needed to put in their reports. But it didn’t change the fact that they were exhausted from lack of sleep, cold, and adrenaline crash, and just plain hadn’t been thinking. And Dr. Warner hadn’t known any better.

Handing things over to him had seemed like a good idea at the time. The post-mission check-up needed to be run by someone who hadn’t just spent nearly twelve hours fighting, dodging Jaffa, and hiking through arctic mountains. At least she and Janet had still been on hand when Warner tried to put the kids through the MRI, just in case. It just… hadn’t felt right, in a vague way, to hand the kids off to someone else after the four of them had been through ha’tak, ice and fire together. Rather literally.

At least she’d seen Daniel on his way to the infirmary, when she’d been doing a quick cold-water face-wash before going to report briefly to Hammond. She’d like to collapse, but she did not want a delay on making this report.

*…so stop woolgathering already and report, for crying out loud.*

By the time she realized Hammond was speaking, Sam had to shake her head to clear her thoughts. “I’m sorry, sir. Could you repeat that?”

Under the cool professional calm, she saw the flicker of concern on his face, before he set it aside with a brief nod. “I asked if you anticipate the children presenting a threat to SGC.”

Sam rubbed her face briskly. “Anticipate, no, sir. But… we’ve been wrong in the past. If there is trouble… Zuko’s the dangerous one.”

Hammond’s brow furrowed. “Mark me if I’m wrong, but he is not the one inflicting indiscriminate damage to the facilities.”

Sam shrugged. “I don’t deny that Toph is the more destructive one. She’s a brawler at heart, sir. But Zuko… he’s been trained. US Ranger-style training. He’s *lethal.*”

Hammond straightened, both of his eyebrows bouncing up toward his hairline.

“Only under duress,” Sam clarified, remembering the way Zuko had shied away from killing when he had the choice. “Honestly, I’m more concerned about the fact that he’s clearly had infiltration training. On the other hand, he knows that I know, and I suspect he knows I’ll tell whoever was in charge. So he knows we’ll be watching.” She blinked. “I’m not sure that made sense.”
A wry smile. “I assure you, Major Carter, I’ve attended enough immediately post-mission debriefs to translate.” Hammond noticeably didn’t invite her to sit – probably well aware that once she was off her feet, Sam probably wouldn’t be awake much longer. But his eyes sharpened and he straightened in his chair, clearly intent on finishing this debrief so that his officer would be able to indulge in a well-earned collapse. “What happened over there, Major?”

She straightened, clasping her hands behind her back both to steady her posture and to give them something to do. “To be honest, sir, I’m still trying to figure it out…”

As the general listened, she tried to hit the high points. Full details would have to wait until the formal report; for now, she concentrated on the important details – the things SGC needed to know. Hammond frowned. “You believe that this Goa’uld was responsible for the missing research team?” Sam hesitated. “That was my initial assumption, sir.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“I didn’t find any record of them on the database I hacked – but I didn’t exactly have much time to search. On the other hand, Janet didn’t see them in any of the cells, and the fact that there were no signs of violence in the base camp suggests that they left of their own accord. And… in hindsight, I had the impression that the Jaffa we encountered were as surprised to see us as we were to see them.” Sam made a face. “Just an impression, sir.”

She wasn’t quite ready to venture a speculation about what had happened – but she had one. She remembered that chilling – figurative and literal – laugh on the wind all too well. _Initial survey suggested no native life on the planet beyond microbes. But it wouldn’t be the first time that the initial survey missed something that turned up later to bite us._

The Salish and their spirits sprang to mind. With a vengeance.

“And these shields you observed?”

“Not a clue, sir. Sorry. None of the Jaffa at the Gate had one, or I would have grabbed it. I didn’t see it on the regular patrols, though. Janet saw them when she and Toph broke out of their cell, and the squad guarding the entry hall had them.” One hand rose to rub at her temples – a breach of strict protocol, perhaps, but she didn’t think Hammond would begrudge her. “To be honest, sir, while I’d love to get my hands on one of the shields, what worries me are the tactics.”

“Staggered rates of fire and suppression fire are nearly as old as the military use of ranged weapons, Major.”

“For us on Earth? Sure. But we’ve never seen Jaffa use them. And the organization suggests that either the Goa’uld itself is behind it, or they’ve got a damn good Prime with the Goa’uld’s full support. Or both.”

Hammond grimaced, but nodded. The sort of tactics the Jaffa had been using required timing, division of labor, and precision – and all of that meant training. Intense training.

Not the sort of effort the Goa’uld normally devoted to their rank and file soldiers.

“Then there was the ambush at the Gate, sir,” Sam continued. “They came in from the air, but I don’t think the glider shots were aimed to kill. As soon as Toph was through the Gate, they hit us from the ground, where they could spread their fire out – meaning that they knew better than to come down
while she was still there to throw rocks and open craters.” Carter grimaced. “Meaning that they learned from that fight in the entry hall, and adopted tactics meant to handle our two best fighters. Zuko could divert the glider blasts, but it was tight enough he couldn’t cover for Toph. And once she was gone, they went to ground and spread out so that he couldn’t keep up with all of them. Someone paid attention.”

It also suggested that the Jaffa were aiming for non-lethal, rather than just trying to wipe out the escapees. Sam hadn’t decided if that was promising, or terrifying.

Hammond’s eyebrows had bounced up in surprise before rebounding down in a scowl when she’d named the two children as the ‘best fighters,’ but he didn’t argue the point. Not when faced with a much more serious potential threat.

Megalomaniac, arrogant, smug, complacent – there were plenty of individual differences, but in the large picture, one Goa’uld (and even the Tok’ra) tended to be like any other.

Usually.

What Sam and Janet had seen suggested that this Goa’uld had somehow managed to break the mold. Which meant that they couldn’t predict him.

Whoever he was.

~~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~~

“An ibis head?” Daniel echoed, finding an out-of-the-way corner to sit where he wouldn’t be in the way of a bustling and somewhat sleep-deprived medic, and contemplating his chances of survival if he helped himself to some of the coffee Janet was grimly nursing.

Probably somewhere slightly less than “dinosaur at meteorite ground zero.” Janet had that look. Which wasn’t fair; Janet shouldn’t even have been on duty. Daniel knew – from personal, painful experience – that if it had been anyone else, Janet herself would have pried the coffee from desperate fingers and ordered the hapless soul to the nearest horizontal surface for much-needed downtime.

From the way Dr. Warner hovered politely in the background, keeping an eye on the proceedings, Janet’s second in command of the infirmary wanted to do exactly that. He hadn’t exactly been pleased to let Janet stay on duty to check over the two off-world kids, not when Janet was operating on not enough sleep, not enough food, and an adrenaline crash. After some sort of fiasco involving a smashed MRI, however, he’d agreed to let her handle things, with him available as backup against fatigue-fogged mistakes. Apparently, the children weren’t quite ready to trust anyone they didn’t already know just yet.

Daniel really wanted details on that little incident, and what had happened in the Gate room. He’d heard the rumors, yes – but what Sam had managed to briefly explain when they’d passed in the hall, and what he’d gotten out of Janet, suggested that for once rumor had actually managed to fall short of reality.

Scary thought.

The kids didn’t seem particularly scary. Toph was adorable in a small, belligerent sort of way – Daniel could definitely see why Janet had referred to her once or twice as “mini-Jack.” And Zuko
came across as surprisingly level-headed for a teenaged boy.

Still, being awake sounded like a very good idea right now. Which was another reason why he was eyeing Janet’s coffee, despite the risk to life and limb. Although to be fair, he shouldn’t really need coffee, having nursed several cups as he buried himself in his research in an effort to not think about his missing friends as the clock ticked closer and closer to the lock-out deadline. Jack could get away with hovering right off the general’s elbow at times like that. Daniel… sometimes did it anyway, but he tried to stay out of the way when he could.

If only because he didn’t feel like rubbing his nose in his own inability to do anything.

But Sam and Janet had made it back – and brought back several conundrums where he could do something.

“Not sure if it was an ibis or not – but a long-necked, long-beaked bird.”

Daniel nodded. “That would be Thoth.”

Janet paused in her search through the drawers to look at him. “The Egyptian god of magic?”

Daniel blinked at her, and Janet shrugged. “I’m a doctor,” she reminded him dryly. “I do know a little bit about the historical roots of Western medicine.” Her eyes focused on something not physically present for a moment, clearly searching her memory; then she grimaced. “That’s not good, is it. I seem to remember that he was a major name in the pantheon.”

“Well… he was in the Middle and Late Kingdoms, but those came after the rebellion,” Daniel said with a small frown. “He had more of a support role in the earlier periods.” Whether or not that was actually a good thing or not, he wasn’t sure. On the one hand, it suggested a less powerful Goa’uld. On the other… less powerful then didn’t mean less powerful now. And it meant that they had less information available.

Research was in order. Definitely. But for now…

“Janet?” The voice was quiet, wary, with a faintly rough edge to it, and less accented than very deliberate about pronouncing strange syllables absolutely correctly.

For now, they had a pair of severely dislocated kids to check for bumps and bruises.

Wonder if Zuko was shy about taking off his shirt because of nudity taboos, or because he didn’t want people staring while he wrestled with that paralyzed arm? Japanese culture does have some hang-ups about showing the belly-button…

Daniel blinked at Janet’s soft curse, and looked.

Someone has tried very hard to kill that boy.

More than once, too. Daniel didn’t need Janet’s experience to know that some of those scars were layered on top of each other. Most weren’t very big, although he’d seen the like off-world enough to identify some of them as sword scars. And some others… Jack had a few scars like that. Shrapnel, he’d explained. Which suggested that Zuko had been near some pretty violent explosions.

Huh. I suppose that tells us a little bit about their weapons technology, although if they really have abilities like Janet described, I imagine that warfare plays out a bit differently…

What really drew the eye, however, was a giant, vaguely starburst-shaped scar blooming just below
his breastbone. It covered nearly the entire upper third of his abdomen.

*Did something eviscerate him? And if so, how is he still breathing? The upper abdomen wasn’t as bad as, say, the intestines; a wound could be nastily fatal even with the best of modern medicine. But it was still bad. Although, that looks like a burn scar…*

Zuko crossed his arms over his chest and glared.

*The facial scar certainly gives extra oomph to a scowl… Oops. Really bright, Danny. Stare at the scarred kid. He’s a teenager. Self-consciousness comes with the territory.*

Although it did tell him something about Zuko’s culture, too. *Peaceful cultures generally consider scars unsightly and uncomfortable. Warrior cultures usually consider them marks of pride. Although a lot of that had to do with the circumstances under which you gained the injury.*

Zuko did seem self-conscious, which meant that he didn’t consider the scars to be emblems of bragging rights. He didn’t seem particularly *ashamed* of them, either.

*Except for maybe the eye. I’d lay odds there’s a story behind that, and I doubt it’s pretty.*

Sleep-deprived or not, Janet had settled into the routine of a standard medical exam. Checking vitals – temperature, heart rate, breathing, the usual. She scowled working on the last – Zuko had the beginnings of a pretty spectacular bruise on his left upper back, where he’d apparently hit the wall after a staff weapon went boom. Still, all things considered, the kid looked like he was remarkably intact.

*Except for the arm.*

“Aren’t you going to take a closer look at that?” Daniel asked. As he spoke, he glanced at the tunic Zuko had left folded on the next bed. Absently, he rubbed a bit of it between his fingers.

*Some form of silk, I think… seems springier than regular silk, though. High quality fabric, too – tight, even weave, and the dye is very rich. Assuming a pre-industrial culture, I’d call this artisan work. So either a near-industrial culture – sword wounds argue against it, but gunpowder is a hit-or-miss development so it’s not a sure thing – or he’s very wealthy. Scars at that age argue against wealthy, but it’s possible that he belongs to a warrior caste or something similar, in which case…*

“The arm? I’d like to,” Janet said absently. “But I really doubt he’d appreciate being zapped. I think that’s a lightning burn on his stomach.”

Daniel blinked, forgetting about his earlier thoughts. “Lightning?” And he’d survived? Well… it wasn’t *unheard* of, but a bolt that close to the heart?

“I think he has a trick for dealing with it,” Janet said.

Daniel waited, but Janet didn’t seem inclined to expand on her thoughts. “Well, I can see how a motor nerve exam might be unsettling,” he said neutrally. He’d gone through a few himself, after taking a zat blast; given the results of cumulative blasts, Janet had been driven to assess what sort of damage it did, and how long it took to be “safe” from the effect of multiple blasts. Driven enough to get the equipment for nervous system exams and learn how to use it, despite grumbling that she was a pathologist, not a neurologist!

Jack had tried to get the nickname “Mini-Bones” to stick for a while after that. He’d relented after the next time a mission gone wrong had dropped him in Janet’s vengeful clutches.
But having been through those exams, Daniel had to admit that Janet had a point. Putting electrodes on a limb and running current through them was unsettling enough even with a competent explanation.

Which he was not up to. He hadn’t even begun to start sorting through their language.

And now Daniel was very glad that he’d begun dabbling in the oldest examples of human language they had access to, in his attempts to decipher the fragments of Ancient they’d found; without those studies in Sumerian, pre-Vedic Sanskrit and ancient Chinese, he wouldn’t have had a leg to stand on with these two.

*Whatever roots their language has in Terran languages, they’re old. Very, very old. And one thing was for sure – it was not related Ancient Egyptian, or Anatolian, or any other of the language roots that he usually worked with.*

*And it would help if they’d talk more.* Most of what he’d gathered thus far were a few isolated words – handy for communication, not so handy for figuring out the system of the language – and eavesdropping on the occasional whispered conversation between the two. And Toph’s chirpy and (going by Zuko’s reactions) extremely irreverent commentary – but that didn’t have enough context, or content, for him to try breaking the language down from first principles.

Zuko’s insistence on learning every English term he could wasn’t helping. Although by another light, it was extremely interesting.

*He’s trying to parse our words out – break them down into units that make sense. And Toph may not be using it, but she’s definitely paying attention. These are two very smart kids.*

Not just smart. *Familiar* with the idea of trying to communicate across languages.

*Which means what? Different cultural groups with different dialects, at the very least. Suggesting they’re spread out, rather than knotted around a Stargate, and they spread out long enough ago for divergent development to be substantial. If Janet’s right about them not even knowing much about Stargates…*

Lost in thought, he took a gulp of now-lukewarm coffee, grimaced at the taste, then froze and looked down.

*Erm. When did I swipe Janet’s coffee? And can I put it back before she notices…*  
  
Zuko was looking over his shoulder. Zuko was looking over his shoulder with a very distinctive expression. Daniel knew that look. He kept an eye out for it whenever SG-1 interacted with locals off-world, since it was usually the first sign they had that they were about to walk into trouble. It was what he’d privately titled the ‘wow, you really do have a death wish’ look.

*Um, that would be a “no.”*

No fool, he didn’t waste time looking over his shoulder. He just lunged for cover.

“Hiding behind kids, Daniel?” Janet asked ominously.

“Making effective use of the available resources,” Daniel replied in his most reasonable, negotiation-should-always-come-first voice, hunching down to keep Toph between himself and doctorly doom. He was so dead.

On the plus side, some of that uneasy reserve around the kids had just unexpectedly melted. Not that
they relaxed, exactly – but Toph’s smirk had a lighter overtone now, and the tight, wary look in Zuko’s eyes eased a bit.

You don’t know us as a group, and you don’t trust us. But Janet and Sam, you know. Sharing food and drink, teasing, mock-threats... I’ve just signaled that I’m Janet’s friend. So you’ll at least give me some benefit of the doubt.

Erm. I’m hoping that’s a mock-threat...

Janet’s eyes narrowed as she pursed her lips slightly. “You do realize that I’m going to need a volunteer to help me demonstrate getting blood drawn if we want Zuko and Toph to cooperate?”

“You do realize that if you pull out the big needles, they aren’t going to be cooperating with anyone?” Daniel peeked around Toph’s shoulders. “Why do you want blood samples, anyway?”

Janet gave him the sort of you idiot look he was used to seeing directed at Jack by Sam.

“Neanderthal virus?”

“Ah. Yes.” Well, this probably wasn’t going to be pretty. Common as bloodletting was in most cultures as a treatment for illness, that didn’t stop most peoples from being profoundly uncomfortable with the idea of someone bottling said blood and walking off with it.

Toph’s snickers took on an evil harmonic. Time to call a truce, before she decided it would be more amusing to throw him to the wolves. With the casual calm that Daniel had learned through more than his fair share of weapons-point first-contact negotiations, he stepped away from Janet and toward the hallowed grounds of the coffee machine.

Hallowed grounds. I’ve been spending way too much time with Jack.

~~Even the Dragon-King’s Temple Floods~~

“Comfy?”

“Not really. Your room service, Colonel, is the far side of horrible and accelerating.”

Not many people managed to make Jack O’Neill stop flat-footed and re-evaluate. The last one had been a sneezy, glasses-losing anthropologist.

He raised his eyebrows, regarding the captured Jaffa with some surprise. She was wearing the plain sweatpants and shirt SGC had provided, seated on the floor in what Jack had classified as a “Teal’c Warrior Stoic Pose” – legs crossed in such a way that she could easily stand, arms relaxed, spine straight but not stiff. Her eyes had been half-closed when he’d come in; she let them drift fully open almost lazily, to regard him with a calm, frighteningly focused blue stare.

Ooo, someone’s feeling snarky. Let’s see where this goes.

“Double-standards much?” he quipped. “Because believe me, I’d love to talk to the management for your brigs. Been in a few myself, now and then.”

“What, the Jacuzzi was not warm enough?” One corner of her mouth quirked. “And if we are discussing double-standards, does that mean I get to renovate this one with high explosives?”
Jack shook his finger. “Sorry, but we have a strict ‘bring your own booms’ policy.”

The Jaffa actually pouted. “You took away my boomstick.”

O…kay. This has officially gone beyond amusing. Snark was all well and good – but this woman was showing far too much knowledge of modern Tau’ri slang for Jack’s comfort. Seriously – Jacuzzi? He was pretty sure that was not part of the interstellar lexicon.

Where the hell did she pick all that up?

From the sly glint in her eyes, she knew exactly what he was thinking.

Which means she’s doing this on purpose. She wants me to figure something out. Interesting.

And disturbing. There weren’t a lot of ways a Jaffa could be that informed on modern Tau’ri culture.

“We didn’t take it,” Jack said, all wounded innocence. “It blew up.” Let’s see how she responds to more direct needling. “How’s it feel to get taken down by an itty bitty blind little girl and a half-crippled teenager?”

She snorted. “An itty bitty blind little girl and a half-crippled teenager with magic powers. Or something close enough that it makes no difference. My pride is unscathed.” Then, unbelievably, her expression shifted to something that almost seemed affectionate. “Besides. Her victory dance was adorable.”

Something close enough that it makes no difference? Curiouser and curiouser. Since when did a Jaffa consider “high tech” a possible explanation for something?

Don’t jump to conclusions, Jack. For all I know, she means ‘magic or demonic influence.’ “I doubt your god’s going to be so pleased with you,” he said with careful nonchalance.

This time, she actually laughed. “My goddess thinks the occasional ass-kicking is good for the soul. And if you are referring to the Wise One, I do not think he would hold it against me.”

Jack paused to assess those words, even though he knew it would cost him face in this happy little snark-fest they had going. Interesting distinction she’s making there. And my gut says this Wise One is the Goa’uld, not the goddess. Unless we’re dealing with a twofer, in which case, let me just say oh hell in advance. “So, your boss is a wise guy, huh?”

“Oh no.” The Jaffa shook her head. “No more hints, Colonel. Not until I get my lawyer.”

“Sadly, we’re still waiting for the first graduates from the Interstellar School of Law.” Jack heard the door open as his back-up arrived from assessing the Jaffa’s confiscated possessions. Since that was proof that the universe was in a conspiracy to provide good one-liners, he said, “You’ll have to make do with the next-best thing we’ve got.”

He stepped aside and let Teal’c come to the front. Normally, there wasn’t a loyal Jaffa born that didn’t froth at the mouth when confronted with the “traitor.” Given how far off the baseline this woman had proven thus far, though, he suspected that wouldn’t be the case here.

He was right. She simply raised an eyebrow and tilted her head politely. “Teal’c, I presume.”

Teal’c echoed the gesture – maybe it was a Jaffa thing, I-acknowledge-your-warrior-stoicism or something. “You do me honor.”
She still had that dry smile. “Not many of us have the audacity to challenge our beloved overlords.”

Now it was Teal’c turn to do some eyebrow-bouncing, as he studied her carefully. After a long pause, he said, “You have the look of Dhorisha.”

The smile widened faintly.

Teal’c nodded slightly, as close to an “ah-ha” as he ever got. “You are Sanura.”

Bowing in a cross-legged position should have been awkward, but the woman pulled it off with style. “You do me honor,” she said, echoing Teal’c’s response with what sounded like genuine pride.

Okay, so she’s a Name, Jack thought with interest. He’d have to grill Teal’c about the details. From the way Teal’c natural sense of gravity seemed to deepen – and, more importantly, the way Teal’c simply nodded in acknowledgment and stepped back, clearly handing the conversation back to Jack – they were juicy ones.

“So,” Jack said, stepping up again. “Don’t suppose you’d like to tell me what you were doing at that Gate?”

The Jaffa – Sanura – lifted one eyebrow. What, did all Jaffa include Eyebrow Lifts in their training drills? “I did not see any territory markers,” she told him bluntly. “And you hit first.”

Wait. What?

Her eyes had sharpened into blue steel. “If I recall your customs correctly, the only thing I say at this point is ‘Sanura, Djehuty, two.’”

Name, rank – or something of the sort – and serial number. Smooth. One last tidbit of knowledge to wave in their face and a declaration that chat time was over and she wasn’t going to be talking anymore.

For now, at least. Catching Teal’c’s eye, he indicated the door with a jerk of his head, and stepped out with a last mocking tip of a pretend hat.

Of course, the fact that she just arched her brow in response kinda took the fun out of it.

“Well, I’d say that one ended in a stalemate,” Jack sighed as the door closed.

Teal’c’s brow furrowed. “I do not understand.”

Jack was already waving a hand. “Forget it.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “So. What can you tell me?”

Teal’c inclined his head slightly. “Sanura is a Jaffa known for an incident twenty of your years ago, when she assassinated her Goa’uld overlords.”

Jack blinked, inserted his little finger into his ear, and wiggled it about to ensure that it really was clear. “Say that again?”

There was just a little flicker of dry humor in Teal’c eyes, but it quickly faded back into disciplined calm again. “The details were unclear. Only that two lesser Goa’uld, Yer Tanri and Gök Tanri…”

“Not names we’ve heard before,” Jack commented.
“There was no need. They were very minor before, commanding only a few less populous systems. And now they are dead.”

“Sanura’s doing, I take it?”

“Indeed.” Teal’c lips pursed ever so slightly. “It was said that their actions led to the destruction of a smaller clan of Jaffa on Dhorisha, one of their worlds. It is a… not uncommon hazard.”

Jack grimaced. It wasn’t often you could hear the flat control holding back Teal’c’s truly formidable anger. But there was a small twist of irony in the words as well, so… “Let me guess. They missed one.”

“You are correct. Sanura appears to have been the lone survivor. As I had done after the death of my father, she swore revenge.”

“Huh.” Jack crossed his arms as they walked slowly to the elevator, on their way to inspect Sanura’s belongings – no keeping the prisoner’s weapons on the same level as them in this base. “Explains her reaction to you. Betcha she’d heard tell of your vendetta.”

“Perhaps. However, her chosen method proved… rather more direct than my own.”

Jack unfolded his arms to input the operation code on the elevator – and used the freed hand to sock Teal’c lightly in the shoulder. Ow. Bruised knuckles, here we come. “Hey. You just said she was going up against two minor Goa’uld, not a big name player like Cronus. If they were busy knocking each others’ worlds around, they probably didn’t see her coming.” He paused and frowned. “And odds are, with everyone gone, she didn’t care too much about walking away afterward. People do that.” Which raised the question of how it was that she was still alive – and in service to another Goa’uld, by the look of it.

“It is said that she received unexpected aid from another Goa’uld. Djehuty.”

Jack’s ears pricked. “Joo-ty? She mentioned that name.” So that was her Goa’uld. All that was left to figure out was what the hell she meant by two. “What do we… Wait. Finish telling me what you know about her. Then fill me in on this guy.”

Teal’c inclined his head, half acceptance and half indicating that Jack should proceed him as the elevator opened. “As I said, few details are known. Djehuty is known for traveling quietly between the worlds for years at a time. The circumstances, such as I understand them, are that he encountered Sanura after the death of her clan and offered his personal assistance.”

Man, the old eyebrows were getting a workout today. “Personal. As in, actually stuck his neck out and went in swinging right next to her?”

“According to the rumors I heard… that seems to have been the case. But they were very vague.”

Jack whistled. “Still. That would explain how she ended up working with another Goa’uld after all that.”

“Indeed. Rumor held that following their encounter, he went on to make her his First Prime.”

“Well, didn’t see any gold shinies on her forehead, so…”

Jack stopped in the middle of the hallway and slapped his own forehead in disbelief.

“Jack O’Neill?”
“Damn. Snark and mathematical puns. That, is a scary, scary woman.” Still shaking his head, Jack smiled ruefully. “Two, Teal’c. The first prime number.”

Flick went the eyebrow. “Major Carter will be amused.”

Oh, yeah. Too bad she’d already gone to report and then crash for the evening. Ah well. He’d just have to share the joke in the morning.

“So,” he said, cheerfully rubbing his hands as they stepped into the armory. “What goodies did our guest bring us?”

~~Even the Dragon-King’s Temple Floods~~

Everything was crumbling out from under her and she had to go – but when she put her foot down, it landed on something soft and furry and she felt the bones crack and Oma and Shu it was the little baby squirrlexfox she’d rescued when she was nine and she screamed…

“Toph.”

“Yah!”

Zuko, fortunately, was very good at dodging – and had the presence of mind to have gotten away from this weird fluffy-springy bed thing before waking her. Toph gulped down the horrible panic of can’t see can’t see can’t see…

“Easy. My hand’s just in front of you.”

Hands out, zero in on the sense of warmth and presence, grab.

“Ouch – hand, Toph, not a metal bar!”

Yeah, a metal bar would bend. Toph snorted and didn’t loosen her grip until Zuko had pulled her over and off the bed and her feet hit the weird wanna-be sandstone that covered this network of tunnels in the mountain.

Not that she couldn’t have taken care of it just fine. She just felt like making Sparky do the work. Her toes made contact and her shoulders relaxed as the world opened out again.

“Bad dream?” Sparky asked neutrally, flexing his freed hand with a wince. Big baby, she hadn’t grabbed that hard… Okay, she had. Zuko was tough, he could take it.

“Remind me why I thought sleeping there was a good idea?” she asked darkly. She hated sleeping off the ground. She couldn’t see. Of course she had bad dreams!

“Because you couldn’t sleep anywhere else. Too loud, you said.”

Whoof, was it ever. “Do these people ever sleep?” she demanded in disbelief. All throughout the mountain, stomping and buzzing and talking – it was like this place never stopped moving!

Which was why, she now remembered, she’d finally grabbed her blankets in disgust and stormed over to Zuko’s room in this nice little suite that Janet’s friend Daniel had found for them. Weird guy.
He had to have Air blood in there somewhere; Toph had never met anyone whose mind went bounce-bounce-bounce like that, except Aang.

Zuko hadn’t been sleeping any better than she had, though his problem was less clamor than straight-up paranoia. So they’d struck a deal. Zuko was a firebender, he always knew what time it was. He’d stand watch until midnight – Toph could sleep blind, if she knew someone was keeping an eye out. Then he’d wake Toph and catch some rest himself, until sunrise woke him.

Given how wiped out he was, she wouldn’t be at all surprised if he slept right through it. Though she’d never seen him oversleep before. Meh, no biggie.

…she was still shaking.

Zuko had to see it, but he didn’t say anything. He did toss her a blanket as he climbed onto the bed. Toph yelped as the folds fell all around her and heard him snicker faintly as she struggled out from under it, but he was already up on the bed and still by the time she actually got untangled. Toph rolled her useless eyes and set about making herself a little badgermole den with the thing, the way she had as a little kid, back when she’d been scared by her own earthbending, or after her first proper brawl with a bunch of thugs…

“Sparky?”

Ack! Stupid, stupid – be asleep, please be asleep, sleeeeeep, sleeeeeep…

She heard the rustle and felt the bed shift as he sat up. “What’s wrong?”

Darn it! She’d just have to lie. Just say it was nothing. She could do that.

“I… heard you and Sam talking. Back in the cave.”

Stupid traitor mouth.

“…Oh.”

Zuko didn’t say anything more, and Toph found herself swallowing as she remembered waking up to realize Zuko’d dumped her on the floor when he came up out of his own nightmare, grumpily considering growling at him and Sam for all the talk-talk-talk when she was trying to sleep, and suddenly realizing what Sam was trying to ask Zuko: “Was that Jaffa your first kill?”

Her first thought had been, When did Sparky kill somebody? It must have been before they’d regrouped, because after they joined back up she’d been in charge of most of the ass-kicking while he kept people from getting boom-blasted…

And then Zuko had answered, “No. It wasn’t the first.”

She hadn’t been able to get that out of her head since.

And now that her stupid mouth had opened up, it seemed determined to keep going. “How do you… deal with it? With knowing you’ve killed someone?”

She could feel his attention on her, knew his eyes had probably widened and that his heart might well have just skipped a beat, even if she couldn’t feel it because he was up on that stupid bed and not in contact with any earth.

“Toph?” he asked, carefully.
She drew her knees up to her chest and hugged them. “It was in Ba Sing Se. When I first realized, I mean.”

Strange. She’d thought this was going to be harder.

“We met this guy the Dai Li had messed with in Ba Sing Se, only it turned out Katara and the others knew him. Katara managed to clear his head up, and he took us to find Appa. Only Appa wasn’t there, and when we got caught by Long Feng, Jet…”

“Wait, Jet?” Zuko blurted.

Toph blinked and tilted her head. “You knew him?”

“Kind of,” Zuko admitted reluctantly. “Met him on the ferry. Helped him raid the captain’s kitchen when he tried to feed the refugees nothing but slops, so we could make sure everyone got at least something solid to eat. He kept trying to recruit me – said that fighters should stick together. Then Uncle Iroh got some cold tea at the landing, Jet saw him heat it…” Toph didn’t even need her toes to feel that grimace, it practically radiated off Zuko. “Stupidest thing I’ve seen Uncle pull in a long time.”

Or maybe the smartest, Toph mused. She remembered Jet. Even with his head all wrapped up in koala-lamb wool and Katara ready to take him to pieces at the first hint of a false move, he’d been... smooth. Scary smooth. He found what made you tick and tugged at it to make you do what he wanted. And utterly amoral about what he did to accomplish what he decided was the right thing to do, damn the consequences to anyone else. And so fiercely, blindly hating under it all, even worse than Katara had been right before she’d left to hunt her mother’s murderer.

Toph could just imagine Iroh’s reaction to Jet latching onto Zuko back then, just when Zuko was really starting to question everything he’d believed about the world and the Fire Nation and the war. Back when being mad at the world was the only thing he knew.

Mad at the world, but not hating it. That was the funny thing about Zuko. He could get all worked up over the stupidest things, he could be angry about the whole world – and yet, somehow, he’d never learned to hate.

Blowing their cover might have seemed an acceptable risk, if it meant getting Zuko – the guy Iroh was setting up to be the future Fire Lord – away from that poisonous influence.

When she suggested that, Zuko hmmm ed. “Maybe. I was a real mess, back then.” Then he snorted. “But don’t underestimate Uncle’s obsession with tea, either.” He shook his head. “I probably could have covered it up – said something about him getting a fresher cup, maybe, or even just ignored it and acted like there was nothing to see. But I was exhausted and stressed and angry and... well, you know me. I only think fast if it’s a fight. I blew my top at Uncle, and there was no way Jet would ignore us after that. He went after us in the teashop where we’d just gotten hired, yelling that we were firebenders; I managed to, um, borrow a guardsman’s dao and hold him off without firebending, then the Dai Li came down on him. I was so glad that they didn’t come after me and Uncle after that, I didn’t…” His voice trailed off. When he spoke again, it was much softer. “What happened to him?”

Toph swallowed. “Long Feng. He just... wham, right in the gut, and Jet’s insides were so much mush, and Katara couldn’t fix them, and Jet said go, he’d be fine, even though he was totally lying…”

It was her turn to trail off, in what was absolutely not a sniffle.
“Spirits,” Zuko said quietly, after a long minute. “I didn’t like the guy, and I know he’d have killed me without so much as a second thought, but… no one should have to go out like that.”

Toph made herself swallow, even though her throat was trying to close up. This was the hard part. This was the part she’d never told anybody before. “I’d felt people busted up like that before. I’d busted up people like that before.”

She felt Zuko shift, and forced the words out before he could say anything. If she got interrupted now, she’d never be able to finish.

“I knock people around. That’s what I do. And after Jet, I realized, sometimes… I never messed anybody up that bad, but… it’s not like anyone I fought had a Katara to put them back together after, either.”

And she still remembered the horrifying visceral feeling of something squishing that shouldn’t go squish, in that fight against the Dai Li right after, and the horrible, awful realization that just because she was careful not to break people’s bones, it didn’t mean that she wasn’t hurting them. Wasn’t…

She had to face it, when she had a minute to think.

She had to face the fact that she’d probably killed people.

She hadn’t meant to, and they hadn’t died in front of her where she could feel it, but that didn’t change the fact that… not all the guys who never came back to the Rumbles vanished just because they were scared of her.

She’d been way more careful, after that – concentrating her bending on sand, on metal, on little fiddly bits of bending that took a lot of control and skill and awesomeness, on blocks and moves that could put bad guys out of the fight without hurting them.

And even then, sometimes… in earthbending, combat usually came down to smacking people around with blunt, big, heavy objects. People got hurt.

And sometimes people died even when she managed not to hurt them. She still had nightmares about those three guys in the control room of the airship, pinned by metal to walls and ceilings and floors. The same airship Sokka had then rammed into all those other ships.

Yeah, they’d been out to destroy the Earth Kingdom. No, she didn’t feel at all bad about stopping them.

That didn’t stop her from having nightmares when she realized that even if by some miracle they’d managed to survive the collision course, they’d have just fallen into the ocean. Pinned in metal.

_How long does it take to drown? How scared were they, knowing they were going to die like that, and even if by some miracle someone saw and came to save them, they’d never get all that metal loose in time?_

Zuko hadn’t said anything as she talked, just sat listening quietly as Toph rushed everything out in an avalanche of words tumbling on top of each other. Even so, she heard his breath catch at that one.

_Can’t blame him. Drowning’s terrifying. And he’s a firebender._

Fire was _life_ – and just like fire, life was so easy to douse, or smother. Or crush.

_No wonder firebenders are so quick to hit first. They’re the most vulnerable element. They can’t_
When she finally reached the end, she wasn’t at all surprised to find she was shaking. And her throat hurt. Not from the talking, from the tension.

Zuko slid down off the bed, folding easily into a sitting position on the floor right beside her, and pulled her into a fierce hug.

Awkward, too, because he only had one good arm and, well, neither of them were huggy people.

Toph leaned into it, feeling the whisper of earth in long, strong bones and feeling all that extra heat that meant firebender soaking in and helping drive some of the cold away.

“You never said anything.”

She was not sniffling. “Not the sort of thing you bring up over tea around the campfire,” she rasped, trying to sound properly pert.

Truth was, she’d thought about it. There just… hadn’t ever been a good time. And the others… Aang just wouldn’t get it. He had the whole “thou shalt not take a life” monk-thing going on. Which was weird because Toph knew he’d killed people, like when he and Katara had been puncturing and slicing war balloons out of the sky, back when the big invasion had fallen apart. It was like, if they didn’t die right in front of him, it didn’t really count or something. Same thing with Katara – she hated to see people dying or hurting in front of her, even when they were people she didn’t like, but if she didn’t have to see it happen, then everything was okay.

And sometimes, Katara could get scary. Toph thought maybe it was a Water thing. She was kinda glad none of the others had followed her into the back part of Hama’s caves. The old witch had been at her twisted game for a long time.

Those people she’d heard had been screaming for a reason.

Toph thought Sokka guessed about what she’d found back there. After that, he’d stopped asking her to find caves for them to hide in as they traveled, even when it would be a good idea. Earthbender or not, Toph hadn’t really liked caves very much for a while there.

Sokka… Sokka, she might have talked to. Sokka hunted. Sokka had a sword. Sokka had come up with the airship slice, and a lot more people had died in that move that just those three firebenders trapped in metal.

Or, well, Zuko. Because a firebender knew about stuff like that. Maybe Toph had never gone head-to-head against him or fought shoulder-to-shoulder with him in a serious scramble – not before yesterday, anyway – but she knew he was careful with his bending, in a way Aang and Katara definitely weren’t. They didn’t need to be. Air and water usually only actually hurt people if they were trying.

“Fire can be dangerous and wild. So as a firebender, I need to be more careful and control my bending, so I don’t hurt people unintentionally.”

She’d kinda wanted to sit him down and ask right then and there. Only her feet had hurt, and everyone was still wound up from Combustion Man, and Katara was in a snit, and it just… hadn’t been the right time.

“I still have nightmares about my first kill,” Zuko admitted quietly.
Toph pressed close, trying to soak up more heat, and listened.

“It was right after I’d been exiled, when I was visiting the Air Temples. I’d been to the Western, and we were circling around to the Northern. Uncle and I were making our way around the mountain on foot when a group of earthbenders jumped us.”

“Who?”

Zuko sighed. “Not sure. I don’t really remember much of the fight – Uncle says that’s pretty common, the first time you get into a serious battle. The bandages on my eye had just come off, and I couldn’t see very well out of my left eye yet. And the only stuff we had to help with the pain made me dizzy. But Uncle said he thought they were under orders to take me alive.”

Toph frowned. “Why? You were exiled. Your father would just laugh at a ransom demand.”

“He couldn’t. That’s why Uncle thought they were after me. If I was taken captive, they’d have had Ozai coming and going. Having his eldest a prisoner of the enemy? That would be an unacceptable humiliation. But if he did anything to save me, it would make a mockery of his decree of exile. Lose-lose.”

“I thought you said you didn’t know for sure what they were after?” Toph asked skeptically.

She could hear the humorless smile. “They were far from the last to try it over the years. Part of the reason I practically lived shipside was because it made me a harder target. Although not all the assassins and kidnappers came from the Earth Kingdom.”

Toph thought about that. “No wonder you scorched my feet. Sneaking up on you was probably a really bad move, huh?”

Zuko winced. “That was still my fault. I should have been more careful – after all, odds were good you guys would want to keep an eye or ear on me. But… yeah. People sneaking up on me generally didn’t come bearing tea and sweets.”

“Unless they were your Uncle.” That got a wry snort. “So that’s why you’re talking like a peasant right now?”

She’d wondered why he’d suddenly dropped all the royal pronouns and things as soon as they’d gotten here and started talking like… Well, not like a peasant, actually, but more like a scholar than royalty. She’d heard him do it before, once or twice, and he was actually surprisingly good at sounding like an anybody. Probably from living as a refugee in the Earth Kingdom – slipping up with the language of Fire Nation royalty would have been a very bad idea there. He’d never pull off a proper Rumblin’ rough talk, but sounding educated when you were a refugee didn’t hurt, either.

‘Course, he did slip up now and again, at least when they were at the Western Air Temple. Mostly when he got really frustrated or lost his temper. Then he started sounding like a prince again, and that had made a snippy Katara even more snippy, thinking he was looking down on them. Toph was a little more sympathetic, even if she’d never said anything. It had taken her years to get the high class speech patterns ironed out of her good dirty talk, and even now she started to slip back when she got really stressed. You talked the way you were raised. It just sort of was.

Zuko nodded. “It’s not that I think these people have bad intentions,” he admitted. “But…”

Yeah. Better not to tell them they’ve got the freakin’ Fire Lord here. Good intentions were fine when you were escaping creepy bad guys. They tended to go pffft when politics entered the picture. And if Zuko was used to people going after him because he was an exiled prince… “So… what
“Like I said, I don’t really remember much. But what I do remember…” He cringed. “One of them tried to grab me. I turned with it, tossed him over my shoulder. He… went over the edge of the cliff.”

It was Toph’s turn to cringe now. She had nightmares about falling, too, ever since the day of Sozin’s Comet.

“I didn’t mean to do it. I hadn’t realized how close to the edge we were. But accident or not, I’d done it. And I had to live with it. But I’ll never forget the way he screamed.”

Toph licked dry lips. “So how do you live with it?”

Zuko was quiet for several long moments. “In a way, I think it was easier for me than it might be for you. Those men may have wanted me alive, but they weren’t going to shed any tears if I died. And they definitely would have killed Uncle. That made it… more even, in a way.

“Beyond that? I practiced. I learned to focus, to think when I was fighting. If I was going to take a life, I wanted it to be deliberate.”

Toph crossed her arms, shifting so that Zuko became a warm backrest, and thought about that. Yeah… she could see it. Like she wasn’t sorry about stopping that fleet, even if she hated the fact that people had died, and wished they hadn’t had to die like that. Came down to someone trying to kill her or her friends… She wasn’t Aang. She couldn’t pull spirit-bending out of nowhere to save the day and her conscience. And if she had to save one or the other… she knew which one it was going to be.

I don’t want anyone to die.

But if it had to happen… she also didn’t want it to be by accident.

“It’s probably harder for you than me,” Zuko admitted. “Fire can hurt people really easily. It can be horribly destructive if you don’t respect it. But you have to be trying to actually kill someone with firebending, usually.”

“Not a problem I have,” Toph said with a wry twist to her lips. Funny… she felt better now, even though nothing had been fixed.

“True. You might talk to Katara. She’s a healer. Knowing how to fix a body means knowing how it breaks, and knowing how it breaks is the first step in knowing how not to break it.” Zuko paused. “Um. If that makes sense.”

She snorted and jabbed an elbow into his side, lightly. “I know Sparky-speak, no worries. Anyway – I’m not sure how much Katara actually knows. She’d usually just put her water on somebody and act like that was all there was to it, and if it didn’t work the first time-” Like when Azula had shot Aang with a lightning bolt, yipes but that had been a scary month or so… “-she’d usually just dump more bending into it. And the way I heard it, she was more interested in ways to ice people over than fixing ’em up, when she trained at the North Pole.”

Zuko’s laugh was more than a little rueful. “Yeah. I noticed.”

“Plus. Little problem with talking to Katara right now.”

Zuko snorted. “Really? I never would have guessed.” He shrugged. “You could try talking to Janet. She’s definitely a physician of some kind.”
Toph elbowed him again, harder this time. “Oh, sure, I can see how that would work so well.” Loftily ignoring his muttered grumbles as he rubbed his sore side, she held out her hands like sock puppets and opened and closed the fingers. “Gabbledy-gook? Gabble-gabble-blab! Blab blab blah? Blabbity blah-de gobble-gook!”

Hah – that got a laugh out of Sparky, although it was interrupted by a jaw-cracking yawn.

“That’s it. I’m going to sleep,” Zuko muttered, grabbing Toph’s stolen blanket and curling up in it like a cat right on the floor.

“Hey, that’s mine! Build your own floor nest-” Her objection ended with a mouthful of comforter as Zuko grabbed the corner of the blanket he’d left on the bed and pulled it right off, dumping it and a few pillows down on top of both of them.

“Good night,” he said, and buried his head under one of said pillows.

Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.

Toph waited until Zuko was asleep, which took practically no time at all. He was wiped out.

And he’d still taken the time to sit up and listen to her whining, when he really should have been sleeping. And now he was sleeping on the floor, which meant he was going to be sore in the morning. But she could feel him there, breathing and heart beating and alive.

Once his heartbeat and breathing had both settled out in a deep sleep pattern, Toph snorted in disdain. “And people claim Azula was smart?”

Because, seriously. Best big brother this side of the South Pole, and all Azula did was try to kill him.

Well. Let it not be said that Toph Bei Fong didn’t know a sweet deal when it was right under her nose.

Dibs!

Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.

Stargate Command generally didn’t sleep. Buried under the mountain as they were, the cycle of sunrise and sunset didn’t exactly mean much – although Hammond did his best to ensure that everyone got at least some natural daylight on a regular basis, even if sometimes that daylight wasn’t necessarily on Earth. The last thing they needed was homegrown insanity, when so much imported insanity came through the Gate on a regular basis.

The Gate, too, had its own schedule that tended to thumb its nose at the normal workday. Alien worlds rarely followed a nice, tidy 24-hour clock; more than a few teams had been forced to scramble post-haste for the Gate simply because their own Earth-trained sense of time betrayed them when the sun barely budged in the sky for several hours. And, of course, alien days and nights rarely synchronized neatly with Terran ones. As a result, SG teams spent a great deal of their time “dancing
on the interstellar date line,” as Colonel O’Neill was fond of putting it. And where SG teams went, the rest of SGC would, eventually, follow.

Even so, the early hours of the morning still tended to manifest as a low point for the base. Not that the frenetic activity ever really slowed down, but it took on more of a frenetic edge, with slightly unfocused eyes and ferocious chest-beating matches over rights to the first cup of coffee from the latest batch.

Unless Daniel, Janet, or Sam happened to be in the area, of course. Alphas were alphas.

The pair of Marines strolling down the hallway near the kitchens looked like they could use a shot of that coffee. On the other hand, both of them were on their way off duty, and taking a back shortcut to the mess hall. Their minds were mostly on the dinner that was awaiting them.

Until one of them felt his boot slip on ice.

“What the…?” He looked around and blinked. The white edging of hoarfrost was forming around one of the doors that had been left slightly open.

“Isn’t that the freezer room?” his friend asked with a frown.

“Yeah. Someone must have left one of the freezers open.” Frowning, he checked his weapon, glad now that they hadn’t yet reported to the armory. They’d meant to stop by before heading to the cafeteria, but in all the commotion, they’d forgotten.

His friend was also double-checking his weapon. Paranoid, perhaps.

On the other hand, given the SGC’s record with strange occurrences, paranoia was justified.

“Go on,” the second Marine said, eyes skimming the hallway warily. “I’ll cover you.”

He nodded, and eased towards the half-open door, breath fogging in the unexpected cold.

The air behind the sentry stirred with a chuckle of ice.

Chapter End Notes

AN: I don’t do pairings. But I will confess to having a soft spot for a sibling-by-choice relationship between Toph and Zuko. If you think about it – what Toph wants, more than anything, is a family member who thinks her awesomeness is a good thing. And Zuko has a huge, bratty-but-love-you-anyway, precocious-little-sister hole in his life.

Yer Tanri and Gök Tanri are Mother Earth and Father Sky from Mongolian Tengriism. And anyone familiar with Mercedes Lackey’s earlier works can probably spot exactly where Sanura comes from.

On top of that? Forgive me while I jump on a second soapbox for a minute…

One of the foibles of Stargate is making characters expert in everything in their fields; Janet is a perfect example. She’s a pathologist. She has no business doing surgery. I suspect that in the SGC, there’s a lot of cross-training. But fundamentally, Daniel is a linguist. Specifically, he’s a historical linguist with either Egypt-specific or
archaeological training, probably specializing in Pre-Dynastic, Early Dynastic, and First Dynasty Egypt (going by his interest in the Pyramids, which were probably built - real world - about 2900 BCE or so). He’s an expert in Ancient Egyptian written language, extremely knowledgeable about Ancient Egyptian culture (because in that era, there wasn’t much writing to contextualize anything), probably well-informed on Fertile Crescent languages and cultures because of their influence on Egypt… and outside of that, he has whatever he’s picked up out of academic curiosity and his own off-world experience. Given that the AtLA world shows no signs of being connected to Egypt? Not his sphere of expertise.

And even the best linguist in the world needs time to study, analyze, and contextualize a new language before they even can approach anything resembling comprehension.

So no, there’s going to be no miracle translation here. Daniel will get there faster than everyone else, because he at least has some training (and experience) in how to do this, but he still has to slog through the language (and culture) barrier along with the rest of us. And like anyone else learning from scratch, he can make mistakes. Sometimes hilarious ones.

On the Avatar side of things - if I recall correctly, the first person (that I am aware of) to suggest that Iroh gave himself and Zuko away as firebenders as a deliberate ploy to get Jet away from Zuko was Suzukiblu on LiveJournal. This is now my head-canon. (Although, as Zuko said – never underestimate the lengths to which Iroh will go for his tea.)

And if you actually think about what we’ve seen the GAang do in the show… dropping bombs on mountains. Filling the drill with thick sludge. Bashing people all over the place with impunity. Cutting the tops off hot air balloons. High-altitude airship collisions. Yeah. In a world with realistic consequences, most of the GAang have a massive body count behind them. Ironically, Zuko’s is probably the lowest – and he’s got a few similar cases under his belt. (Note, though, that Toph’s not being entirely fair to Aang and Katara. The real problem is that they are fictional characters in a genre that won’t let anyone admit that in real life, people would be dying. If Nickelodeon were allowed to admit that these kids have killed people, you can bet they’d have addressed it.)

Impact trauma is ugly. Worse, the really nasty damage is done to the internal organs, where you often don’t know anything’s wrong until someone’s vomiting blood. People play up fire as the deadliest of the elements, but in fact, if you’re talking straight fire, it would be pretty hard to actually kill someone, simply because a firebender’s flames go out very quickly (given that their only fuel is chi – and no, humans don’t count as fuel; we’re mostly water). Hurt them horribly, yes, possibly enough for the systemic shock to kill them. Scar them for life, yes. Cause massive amounts of collateral damage (which would include lost life, very probably) if secondary fires start, yes. But killing directly? Only if they’re trying.

As for the cave… if people were vanishing on the full moon regularly enough that everyone knew to avoid it, then some of those people have been down there for months, at least. (For all we know, she was playing her little game for years.) Several at least were chained up in such a way that they couldn’t sit down. And I really have trouble imagining that Hama bothered to feed them very often. And let’s not forget that Toph heard screaming.
Yeah. There were corpses in that cave. Bet on it.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Warning – extreme worldbuilding geekery ahead.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

General Hammond’s voice was tight, controlled, and grim. “I need whatever you can tell me, doctor.”

Janet jerked her head up, attention abruptly yanked away from the form she’d been reading. That was something that no doctor liked to hear. Even the question wasn’t directed at her.

In fact, she really shouldn’t have been in the infirmary at all. She’d come out of the chaos on P4X-684 more or less intact, save for fatigue, and the best cure for that was rest, which she’d been released from the infirmary with firm orders to get.

Unfortunately, she’d trained herself a little too well. She’d woken at her usual time, and all efforts to go back to sleep had only served to make her more awake. Finally, she’d given up and headed for her office – she hadn’t even bothered going home last night – with the thought of doing some low-stress paperwork.

Given the gathering around Doctor Warner’s desk, low-stress was probably not in the offing this morning. Not with Jack and General Hammond both looking like they’d rolled out of bed without pausing to hit the floor on their way, and Colonel Makepeace hanging just a half-step back, an absolutely black look on his face.

Janet leaned slightly to get a look at the rest of the infirmary that she could make out from her desk. The only new faces were two people sitting off to the side with one of the infirmary staff keeping an eye on them, dressed as staff members – cafeteria staff, probably, going by the aprons. They both looked pale and a little sick. Everything else was quiet. No wounded, no trauma teams…

And two bodies being sent to the morgue.

So it’s not another Gate disaster – that’s something. Only, if it’s not a Gate problem…

“I can tell you very little without a full autopsy, General,” Doctor Warner was saying. “Even then – I’m not a trained forensic surgeon, sir. There are limits…” He paused. “You said you last saw Privates Gabor and Dohman at the end of their shift?”

Makepeace nodded curtly. “At zero three hundred.”

Three am. Janet glanced at the clock. 7:30… He saw them four and a half hours ago.

Doctor Warner was frowning fiercely. “Gentlemen – you know as well as I do that the human body does not cool that quickly. They must have been dead much longer before they were found.”

“It was cold,” one of the kitchen staff said. He was pale and queasy-looking – light shock, Janet’s too-experienced eye diagnosed, mild, should stay warm and off his feet for a bit but otherwise fine – but his eyes had the set calm of an SGC veteran. “That’s what got our attention, sir. Freezer room’s
never cold, not with all that machinery. Poked our noses in and – they were just lying there, sir.”

Janet set down the forms and took a deep breath as she pieced together what must have happened. *Two Marines, found dead inside the SGC. The general wouldn’t be asking a doctor for further input unless there were no obvious causes.* Which argued against accident. Two together argued against illness. No obvious cause also argued against hostile action of the more mundane varieties. All of which argued for Very Bad News.

And if they’d been seen at a time when they were probably already dead…

“Aren’t you supposed to be off duty?”

She did not jump, and she most certainly did not yelp at the smirking colonel who’d appeared lounging in her door. Although she did level a very black look at him. “I couldn’t sleep,” she explained, rustling the papers on her desk. “I came in to do some light paperwork.”

Jack pouted, although underneath the joking, his eyes never lost the hint of wary steel that meant Colonel O’Neill was watching everything from just beneath the jocular surface. “How come you never let us get away with that excuse?”

Janet snorted. “Two reasons. First, your definition of light duty involves hazard pay. Second, the day I catch you voluntarily doing paperwork is the day I put you on forced medical leave due to obvious personality transplant.” Janet glanced out the door, to where the staff member and Doctor Warner were talking under the unhappy frown of General Hammond. “What…”

“Oh no, Doc,” Jack snickered. “You’ve got a job of your own.”

It actually took Janet several moments before her still-tired mind realized what Jack was referring to – evidence enough, she had to concede reluctantly, that she had no business getting involved in an urgent investigation just yet. “The kids. Has anything happened with them?”

Jack shook his head. “They were as quiet as cats waiting for little mices all night – other than moving to share a bedroom so that they could each take a guard shift. You’d think they didn’t quite trust us or something.” There was real amusement and even approval tucked into that drawl.

“Have they eaten yet?” Janet asked, suddenly feeling a bit of alarm. “I haven’t gotten the results back from the blood samples or the allergy tests…”

Jack snorted. “Relax, General,” he said with a mocking half-salute. Janet leveled one of her *I’m the one with the needles, don’t push it* looks at him, and the colonel straightened up with satisfying alacrity. “The cooks threw together one of the refugee-rations for the kids, before… all this,” he nodded briefly at the general and physician conferring in the other office, “went down.”

Janet considered that, and nodded. She and Daniel had put their heads together some time back to make a list of mild, hopefully both culturally inoffensive and medically benign foods that they could safely offer to guests from off-world. The cooks could actually come up with some quite palatable recipes, given some time, but the SGC had also taken to keeping the simplest sorts on hand for emergencies.

The less said about the Bug Sauce Chicken Incident back before the system was in place, the better.

Refugee rations were not exactly going to win the SGC any hospitality awards, but they should at least be safe to offer until Janet had a better idea of what the kids’ bodies could handle physiologically – and Daniel could hopefully get an idea of what constituted acceptable food culturally.
One load off her mind, then. “Did you take it over to them?” The kids had been placed in one of the isolation suites on Level 22 – close enough to the cafeteria to make feeding the people living there efficient, but separate from the sensitive areas of the base.

Jack paused, deliberately. “I… might have fudged the truth a bit.”

Janet scowled at him.

Jack made a face. “The kids were quiet overnight. Once morning rolled around, though, apparently your dainty little demolitionist got a bit bored…”

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~

Of its own accord, Zuko’s good hand drifted up to massage the space between his eyebrows, trying to ward off the impending headache. “Toph…”

“What? Stone walls, Sparky. That’s practically asking any earthbender worth her salt to make her own doors!”

Zuko snorted. Right. Not every earthbender had the skill to open up walls willy-nilly without dropping the ceiling on her own head. Granted, Sam and Janet knew that Toph could pull it off. On the other hand, maybe that locked door to their rooms was supposed to be a hint.

…They were in the middle of a mountain. It wasn’t even a volcano.

Not thinking about that right now.

“You’d consider it an invitation to make your own door if they put you in a metal box,” Zuko said dryly.

Toph tossed her head. “Darn straight! Awesomeness is to be appreciated.”

Zuko’s hand slid down to cover his face as he stifled the urge to either laugh or groan. He didn’t even need earthbending to feel the stares directed at them from every corner of this strange room.

Toph. Subtlety. Boom.

So much for fading into the background. He lowered his hand slightly, so that he could study the room of very strange people they’d entered without being obvious.

“Relax already, Zuko,” Toph said in a quieter voice, leaving Zuko to wonder just how she’d caught that tiny motion. He was body-aware enough to know that he hadn’t shifted his weight. “I know these types. It’s not gonna be a problem.”

Yeah. Problem is, I know these types, too, he thought, still watching the men and women around them from the cover of his fingers and black hair flying loose after his hair tie had vanished somewhere in the chaos of capture and escape.

It didn’t matter that these people were as bizarre as Sam and Janet in terms of language, features and clothing. (He didn’t know what the spirits were drinking when they’d come up with this place, but it must have been at least as impressive as the cactus juice Katara and Toph liked to tease Sokka about.) He recognized them. The way all of them kept an eye on the two benders, whether they
showed their attention openly or not. The hands kept casually near what had to be weapons. The careful movement, balanced on edge and ready to burst into action, even if he didn’t see anything that he recognized as any kind of bending stance…

Yeah. He knew their type.

Soldiers. Uneasy soldiers.

Have I mentioned that I really don’t like this?

Uneasy soldiers that they couldn’t even talk to. He hadn’t seen Sam or Janet, or even that odd “Daniel,” since last night.

The first rule of survival he’d learned as a Prince Ozai’s son and then had drummed into him all over again as a refugee was don’t draw attention.

Good luck with that. Why, exactly, were they doing this, again?

Apparently he’d said that aloud. Toph snorted. “Because I wouldn’t have fed that… stuff to a cowpig.”

Yes, because your family’s emblem is a flying boar, Zuko thought wryly, but didn’t say. Mentioning the Bei Fong family in any but the most specific circumstances tended to result in some spectacular bruises. At best.

Besides. She had a point. Not that it had been inedible, mind, and he’d definitely eaten far worse traveling the Earth Kingdom as a refugee, but…

…yeah. It was still pretty bad. He’d eaten it, he needed the fuel, but… bleagh.

Toph crossed her arms, loftily ignoring the startled, suspicious or just plain nonplussed looks being slanted in their direction. “So, what’s a gal supposed to do to get some real grub around here…”

She stopped short, sniffing the air and looking for all the world like Nyla the shirshu’s smaller cousin. Zuko blinked and drew in a deep, careful breath of his own to sample the air, even though he knew he couldn’t match Toph’s badgermole nose.

Something that his stomach was sure was food, even though he didn’t recognize any of the spices, or the odd earthy-bitter-warm scent that seemed to be wafting up from mugs of black liquid that nearly everyone was nursing.

He was really, really hoping that wasn’t supposed to be tea. Yes, when he made tea for himself he often made it strong enough to keep Aang bald without the trouble of shaving. (Not that he’d ever give his own tea to Aang. He’d heard Sokka’s stories about Fong’s energy drink experiment.) But even Zuko had limits to what he’d inflict on hapless tea leaves. That black liquid looked more like silt than tea.

Beyond those, there was the smell of this place itself. Mostly the smell of people – light, clean, not the heavy odor of the ferry to Ba Sing Se; just the smell of a closed space with many clean but busy people in it. But mixed in, the metal-and-grease of machinery, faint but familiar, in a way similar to that he felt at seeing the occasional female face above what had to be some form of military uniform. You didn’t see that much, outside the Fire Nation and Kyoshi Island.

There were other smells, too – including a stinging bite mixed into that of oil and metal, although what sort of idiot combined spark-powder and machinery, Zuko really didn’t want to know. And
another, more pervasive smell… something like cold sand, vaguely reminding him of the slurry that came out of non-Earthbender mines, but with a tang that reminded him of the time Sokka had dragged him off to meet Ji.

Come to think of it, those two were the sort to mix spark-powder and machinery, just because. Zuko mentally found that note to keep Sokka away from these people and underlined it emphatically.

How in the world could Toph’s more sensitive nose manage to keep from being overloaded by all that? Let alone pick out…

Then he caught it, too – a warm, rich, bitter-sweet, familiar waft. Zuko blinked.

“They have chocolate!” Toph crowed.

Then she charged, nose still in the air and utterly without any regard for the adults scrambling to get out of her way, and if she kept this up there was no way Zuko could avoid the urge to offer raw meat snacks or to keep an eye out for paralytic tongue snaps.

Come to think of it, paralytic tongue snaps – or foot stamps, at least – were a hazard of life around Toph…

“Gotcha!” Toph suddenly lunged, snatching a mug from the hands of a tall man who had paused in an aisle between tables when they’d arrived.

Snatching at, rather. The man didn’t seem inclined to relinquish it – nor did he seem particularly discomfited by Toph’s grab. He simply lifted.

“Hey!” Toph objected stridently, clinging to the mug until it was obvious that she had to either let go or be lifted right off her feet. She dropped back to the ground with a fearsome scowl aimed roughly at the man’s stomach. The man simply looked back, head slightly tilted in bland inquiry.

Following quietly in Toph’s wake, Zuko paused and blinked.

Big, was his first thought. Maybe not the size of the Duke’s friend Pipsqueak, but large enough to intimidate even Toph’s old Earth Rumble rivals.

His second thought was, …whoa.

…not Earth. Earth didn’t look like that. No one looked like that, though, and Earth was the only way he could possibly explain the skin the color of rich soil, or the fact that the man had some sort of gold symbol embedded in his forehead, or the sense of utter, unflappable groundedness as he calmly regarded Toph.

Who stamped her foot imperiously. “Hey, gimme!”

A hairless eyebrow rose.


He laughed anyway.

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~
Intriguing.

Jack O’Neill had asked Teal’c to “keep an eye on things” in the cafeteria while the colonel attended to Dr. Warner’s pre-autopsy report regarding the Marines found dead on this level earlier. Teal’c suspected, however, that O’Neill would not object to his expanding those observations to include the off-world children who had returned through the Stargate with Major Carter and Doctor Fraiser.

Thus, once it became clear that no hostility was intended in their unusual method of entry, he had settled back to quietly observe. He had not been present when the Stargate opened, and while the unusual behavior of the cafeteria wall seemed to confirm what had been reported, he remained… curious.

It appeared, however, that the hot chocolate he had chosen to sample had attracted the attention of the girl.

Green eyes narrowed in a remarkably sharp glower for one who was clearly blind, she stamped a foot impatiently. Teal’c raised a brow, and behind her the young man huffed a soft laugh even as he rubbed his forehead ruefully with the hand that wasn’t resting in one of the infirmary’s distinctive blue and white medical slings.

“Ah… sir?” one of the Marines said uneasily.

Teal’c raised a hand to calm him, and the other soldiers. “I do not believe their intent is hostile,” he said aloud.

A few tables over, one of the engineers – Sergeant Dyne, if Teal’c recalled the bright red-blonde hair correctly – unexpectedly snickered. “Only if you aren’t between them and the chocolate, apparently,” she said, pushing her thick-rimmed glasses higher on her nose with a wry grin. “If you are, yarr.”

Teal’c brow quirked slightly higher – first at the sergeant’s affected “piratical” tone, and secondly at a flicker in the bearing of the children as several Marines breathed slightly shaky laughs of as much relief as humor, and around the cafeteria people began reclaiming the seats from which they had risen when the stone wall had unexpectedly opened.

Intriguing, indeed. It would appear that his initial assessment was indeed correct, and this “Toph” had chosen her belligerent approach as a deliberately calculated tactic in order to defuse the situation. An unusual choice.

Teal’c paused for a moment of deliberation, then lowered his mug of hot chocolate and offered it to her. It was too sweet a drink for him for the most part, regardless.

For a searing instant, he felt the cutting edge of the boy’s full focus, weighing his bearing and actions with a wariness that spoke of great experience, and the girl stilled, something in her bearing equally calculating even though her eyes remained dull and blank.

They are untrusting? Wise. And… reassuring. Wariness suggested that they had no hidden reasons to be overconfident.

Then the girl tossed her head haughtily, as though her bravado had never faltered in the first place, and grandly accepted the proffered mug. She held it with both hands and brought it under her nose for a long, luxurious waft of the aroma before smugly sipping.

And promptly yelping and almost dropping the mug as she stuck her no doubt scalded tongue out and breathed cool air over it desperately.
Zuko snickered. The snicker broke off with a wince when Toph kicked at his shin. Scowling, the girl shoved the steaming mug into his good hand.

Teal’c noted that although Zuko’s lone remaining eyebrow quirked upward in surprise at the heat of the ceramic, he continued to hold the body of the mug without any sign of the discomfort that had Toph flapping her hands slightly to dispel the heat. Instead, his eyes half-lidded slightly as he breathed.

From the disciplines of kel-no-rem, and his own study of some similar Tau’ri disciplines, Teal’c easily recognized a meditation form, although the specifics of this particular technique were unusual. Zuko’s tongue was curled to create a straw of sorts through which he inhaled, then his nostrils flared as he released the breath. Rather the reverse of most meditative breathing styles….

The faint white wisp of steam vanished from the surface of the hot chocolate.

Zuko then smirked and pointedly took a sip himself, to his companion’s very vocal displeasure.

The exchange was notably similar to many encounters between Colonel O’Neill and Doctor Jackson, and Teal’c noted the level of tension in the room easing further, as soldiers and scientists followed the example of Dyne – who was already immersed in technical diagrams that bore disturbing resemblances to Sam Carter’s reactor designs – and began returning to those activities they had been pursuing before the interruption, many with clear signs of tolerant amusement.

Nor were they the only ones to relax. A faint edge of tension had eased from the young man’s shoulders as well. The mug – not unintentionally, Teal’c suspected – hid his expression, but when he lowered it, some of the shadows of strain seemed to have faded.

Some, but not all. Clearly, standing in the open at the center of everyone’s attention was a less than pleasant experience for Zuko, for all that Toph seemed to have enjoyed the audience. Studying the pair, Teal’c came to a decision.

He met the young man’s eye – a strange pale amber-gold in color, though it bore no resemblance to the alien sheen of the False Gods’ vessels – and inclined his head towards the door in silent invitation.

And observed the reaction with some interest.

The two did not look at each other. But Zuko shifted his weight slightly, and Toph’s brows furrowed over blank eyes. A heartbeat later, she shrugged faintly, and only then did Zuko nod agreement, for all that his eyes had never once strayed from Teal’c’s face.

Teal’c paused to catch the attention of a nearby Marine. “Inform Colonel O’Neill and General Hammond that I am accompanying these two,” he said, and began making his way towards the cafeteria door. He kept his stride relaxed and measured, letting the young ones set the pace.

“They guard each other,” he noted without surprise. The SGC was as much an unknown factor to the children as the ha’tak and the ice field had been; it stood to reason that they’d continue to behave as though they were in potentially hostile territory.

It was subtle – done with such ease that he suspected the behavior was simply ingrained, coming out naturally in response to their situation. Toph strode forward boldly, navigating tables, chairs and soldiers with easy confidence. For all that he was taller and equally striking, Zuko went almost unnoticed in her wake, seemingly content to let the girl choose their path. His chin was tucked slightly, shadowing his eyes and camouflaging the wary way his gaze flicked over their
surroundings, watching for any sign of a potential threat. Once, he made a soft comment, and Toph veered her course to avoid a puddle of water spilled in the initial scramble of surprise at the pair’s arrival, so smoothly that the change might as well have been her intention all along.

It was an exchange of which Teal’c made particular note, simply because it was the first act he had yet seen on the part of the young ones themselves to acknowledge the fact that Toph was blind.

_He watches for what she cannot perceive._ And Toph’s oddly belligerent, almost showman-like behavior had effectively drawn the focus of SGC’s attention to herself, and away from her quieter, perhaps shyer companion.

_They have each chosen to focus their concern on the well-being of the other._ A response under stress that he had seen between family members and among warriors fighting side by side.

And, for that matter, among teams such as SG-1, who were effectively both.

Pondering, Teal’c led the way to the elevator – and stopped when Zuko suddenly dropped into sudden stillness, eyes fixed on the opening of a nearby cross-hallway with the same intensity of Colonel O’Neill when he knew a trap was about to spring on them. The air seemed to shift against Teal’c skin slightly, as though the temperature had risen ever so slightly.

That hallway… led to the cafeteria’s cold storage chambers, did it not?

The hall where the Marines had been found dead this morning.

Teal’c’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~

Toph set her feet. “That’s a _where’d I leave the Appa whistle_ twitch, Sparky,” she said, hoping she didn’t sound as uneasy as she felt.

She could feel Zuko’s feet shifting as well, forming the strong firebender’s root that could still launch him into the air like a more forceful, more _fwooshy_ cousin of Twinkletoes.

He hid it well – he had a _really_ good stance. But _no one_ fooled the Blind Bandit. (Azula totally didn’t count, she had the power of pure evil creepiness.) And Toph knew that Zuko _needed_ that good stance. He hadn’t slept well at all. But instead of just _staying in bed_ like a sane person, he’d been a crazy firebender and gotten up with the sun. Because he _was_ a crazy firebender, and because he wasn’t going to sleep soundly when they were in the middle of a spirit tale.

Zuko deepened his breathing. “More like, where’s _Aang_… There’s a spirit here.”

Remembering cracking-cold stone and the freezing soft skirl of laughter on the wind, Toph swallowed and shifted her feet, _feeling._

Stone and metal and not-sandstone; feet passing to and fro, a funny vibration to match the perpetual undertone of _buzz_ from something hanging from the ceiling and the odd complicated metal boxes…

There. A place where miniature fractures had fragmented the not-sandstone that coated this place, its crumbling a memory of sudden cold that didn’t _belong._
Instinct wanted to recoil towards warmth and reassurance. Toph moved away instead, a half-step or so, giving Zuko room for the quick footwork he’d need to make up for that bad arm. “What sort of spirit, and how do we stomp it?”

“I’m… not sure.” But Zuko was slowly starting to ease into a less ready-to-fight-right-now stance. “The barrier between the worlds is thin here. Unstable. Upset.” He made a frustrated noise. “I can’t put it better than that…”

Spirit talk, bah. Toph wanted solidity. “Stone’s kinda cold that way.” She nodded in the direction of the chill – which was also the direction Zuko had been staring.

Zuko muttered something vicious-sounding.

“Not good?” Toph asked, letting wryness cover the unnerved edge like a layer of sediment.

“Cold usually means either a ghost or a cold-water spirit – and cold-water spirits tend to be killers.” Zuko shook his head. “But it’s gone now, I think. Whatever it was.”

“Sure. Gone where, is the problem…” Toph muttered, but she let herself slide back out of fighting stance.

Just a step or two away, Master Piandao’s way bigger brother was still in a ready, listening sort of stance. Not in the way, but definitely keeping a toe on them and their surroundings.

Or, Toph corrected herself as the guy straightened, he would be keeping a toe on things, if he’d been properly barefoot, or at least wearing slippers rather than those big clumpy things on his feet. What was with those, anyway? They were nearly as bad as the bricks those Jaffy-guys had been wearing. Even those big heavy mukluks people wore in the Poles, or the Fire Nation shoes that could strike sparks, had more flex in ‘em. Which was just sane. Seriously, how were you supposed to bend when you could barely move your feet?

So. Totally. Weird.

“Toph?”

…She totally wasn’t crowding Zuko. Crowding a bender was just a bad idea all around. She was just… sticking close. In case.

Suddenly remembering that she was still holding that mug, Toph drank down the last of the chocolate before something else happened. Not bad. Little sweeter than she was used to, and none of the pepperiness that marked the really good stuff, but… chocolate.

Thought they only made that in the Fire Nation? Which is probably how Sparky got the “who cares that there’s a new Fire Lord, let’s go kick ‘em when they’re down” types to back off. Smash the Fire Nation, smash the world’s supply of chocolate. And that would be bad.

Not to mention that the Fire Nation still had their balloons, even if the Airship Slice had taken out most of the big airships. And their tanks and machines. And their army, and what was left of their navy after the North Pole. After all, other than Ba Sing Se, there hadn’t been a lot of fighting on the Day of the Comet.

Fortunately, a lot of the Fire Nation army were drafted guys who really just wanted to go home already. Maybe the generals sulked about the end of the war, but they for the most part were reluctant to go against a Fire Lord crazy enough to fight an Agni Kai under the light of Sozin’s Comet.
Apparently, as far as firebenders cared, that fell under the category of *epic awesome*.

*And most of ’em like Sparky. For that, and because he cares, which is a lot more than you can say for most Fire Lordy types recently.*

“So. Spirits,” she said, drumming her fingers on the empty mug, feeling the way solid ceramic resonated, the way it would break and *bend* if she needed it. She tried to keep her tone to the *wait, were we fighting?* panache that always got a rise out of her opponents in Rumbles. “What’s the best way to stomp ’em?”

“Fire, and salt. Especially if it’s a water spirit.” Zuko shook himself. “And *not* facing it on ground where it’s already killed.”

*Killed?*

Zuko turned to the big guy while Toph was busy absorbing *that* lovely little surprise. “We need to… damn.” He grimaced. “Um… *hi-aah. Naat-gud. Go… gu…* Blast it with sparks, what *was* that word… *Goh? Go-in?”*

The big guy didn’t move; Toph thought he was looking at them. The stillness of his weight – mental and physical – said *thinking.*

Then, wordlessly, weight and focus shifted and stabilized as he inclined his head gravely.

*Definitely Piandao’s extra-big brother,* Toph thought with a wry smirk that was *not* relieved. After all, Piandao-types were *sneaky.*

*Though, it’s usually the good kind of sneaky…*

And he was taking them to good, old-fashioned *stairs,* not that freaky lift thing. She didn’t care what Snoozles and Teo babbled about *levers and pulleys and emergency brakes.* A box just hanging out in a big long up-down shaft was *not* stable.

Even if the stairs echoed in a way that made her ears cringe.

“So, fire I sorta get,” she said, lowering her voice so it wouldn’t *bounce* on all those walls and flat metal stairs quite so much. “At least going against cold-type spooks.” Though, she’d have thought that water would *douse* fire… eh, whatever. “But why salt?”

“I’ve been told that salt represents Earth in its purest state,” Zuko started, and shrugged when Toph scoffed. “Whether that’s true or not, salt is spiritually purifying, the way Fire is. It’s Earth’s way of cleansing. Earth tends to have more stopping power than Air or Water – and salt’s easy to carry.”

His voice was wry. It *almost* covered the strain hiding jagged edges just under the words. Or the way he struggled against an obvious instinct to look up when Pian-Not opened up a door leading to more stone corridors.

Toph might be happy as a badgermole in this rocky little warren, but… that staircase was the closest thing to *open space* she’d felt since they’d gotten here, other than that big room with the *sta-geit* a couple levels down – and the shaft of the lift, if you counted that, and she didn’t. And, even then – if she wiggled her toes, and *listened* to those echoes… the staircase didn’t come even *close* to going all the way up to the surface of the mountain.

Zuko hadn’t seen daylight in… well, however long it had been since their little expedition to explore some old Fire Nation ruins and burn out some of Sparky’s Fire-Lording-induced crankiness had
crashed into Zuko’s bad luck and spirits on some serious cactus juice. And firebenders needed the sun, the way Toph needed good honest dirt between her toes.

Heck. She hadn’t smelted so much as a candle down here. Did these people do everything with glowstone, like the Dai Li caverns or that so-called Secret Tunnel with the horrible song? Though, she didn’t feel any glowstone here. Not at all, not even as part of other stones, except for the sta-geit thingy. It was a little odd…

“So, how come you know so much about spirits?” She stretched her legs a bit to follow Pian-Not through the door ahead of Zuko, feeling the vibrations and lack thereof in the not-sandstone under her toes. “You dug all of that out of your musty old records?” The Fire Lord had historically been a spiritual leader rather than a political one like the Earth King, and Sparky had been trying to shift the job back that way a bit. That was part of why he’d been interested in exploring old ruins in the first place, trying to track down the origins of the whole Fire Lord position.

“Not… quite.”

Ooo, that was a “please don’t ask” wince. Now she had to keep on it! “Not quite? What’s that mean?”

“I was scouring the world for the Avatar for three years. After he’d been missing for nearly a century.” Zuko’s voice was sour. “I hunted down every spirit-disturbance I heard of. Even I picked up a few things, after a while.”

“You mean you’re a shaman?”

“No! I just know a few tricks, that’s all….” Zuko’s voice trailed off as Pian-Not opened another door, onto a room. A big, open sort of room, with only a few people in it, their weight weirdly muffled in a way that said padded floor. Kinda empty, though maybe that was a good thing, with the way a couple of those guys were going at each other. Though… it didn’t feel like they were fighting, exactly…

Toph’s eyebrows bounced up. Oh, a dojo!

Not that she’d ever been in one. Badgermoles didn’t have ‘em, and Master Loser-pants Yu wasn’t about to risk her parents’ delicate baby – and his cushy job – in such a crude place. But there were a couple of them in Gaoling, and a lot more in the Fire Nation. After all, firebenders generally liked to get in an opponent’s face so that they didn’t have to waste so much energy keeping flame going over a distance – not like chucking rocks at ‘em. To say nothing of people like Ty Lee and Mai, non-benders who were just plain scary.

Zuko knew dojos. He’d probably all but grown up in them. She could feel some of that edginess smoking off him easing a bit.

Betcha Pian-Not was counting on that.

She wiggled her toes and stepped sideways, hunting out a spot where an absence of weight on the not-sandstone meant that there was a break in the mats. Bad enough the things muffled vibrations from the people on them, but something between her feet and the earth and it was like trying to hear with six layers of dense koala-lamb fleece wrapped over her ears. And she wanted to watch this!

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~
Jack O’Neill blinked at him. “You sparred with the kid.”

Teal’c looked up from testing the light bruise left by an unanticipated kick to the large muscle of his upper arm. “Indeed.”

“He’s maybe sixteen, and right now his left arm is just dead weight.”

“It was… an informative experience.”

Take the kick to his arm. The bruise was light, but Teal’c had sensed how much control had been needed to ensure that. Had it been full force, it would have been far deeper, and at the very least would have seriously hampered the mobility of that arm.

So, the young man is familiar with controlled sparring. But the simple fact that Zuko had needed to hold back the full force of his strikes – and the fact that, rather than aiming for a formally valued target area, he had struck in a way that, in true combat, would have helped negate Teal’c advantage of two healthy arms and greater reach… Familiar, but far more familiar with combat and the battlefield, where survival rates higher than form.

Rather like the Tau’ri colonel shaking his head at Teal’c now. “Seriously. Didn’t your mom ever tell you not to play with fire?”

“I doubt Zuko would use the fire, not in a spar,” Sam Carter said as she stepped through the door of the conference room. A night’s sleep in safety had done well by her – although she had a frown on her face that suggested she was already setting her mind to a problem of some kind.

“He did not,” Teal’c affirmed.

“And now I’m curious. Teenage boy, Sam. Teenage boy who can punch fireballs. And you don’t think he’d show off?” As ever, Jack O’Neill’s drawl was lazy and slightly needling, while his eyes were sharp and intent.

“Kinda hard to spar with live flames, Jack,” Sam Carter said dryly.

“Although his movements led me to believe that he is not unaccustomed to doing so,” Teal’c added. Those occasions had been scarce – but he had seen the boy tamping down what seemed to be reflexive sparks. The fact that he struggled so with holding back the flames, while he was clearly familiar with the care needed to blunt potentially lethal blows or avoid strikes that had no place in a gentle spar and every place in a fight for one’s life, suggested that he was, indeed, accustomed to using his fire in practice with others.

Sam Carter looked thoughtful. “I suppose that makes a certain amount of sense. You don’t get that good without serious practice, especially not with tech as complicated as that has to be.”

Teal’c’s brow rose slightly, although he held his peace. He had often noted this tendency in the Tau’ri, to seek a technological explanation behind anything they did not understand. They had uncovered many things that way – not least among them the true nature of the False Gods themselves. But he feared the tendency might blind them to that which was not a matter solely of machines and science. As for the young ones’ strange abilities…

*They do not move as those using tools, even tools so familiar as to be an extension of those who wield them. These abilities are part of the young ones, flesh and bone.*
As he pondered, Sam Carter continued. “But between the amount of energy he has to consume doing that, and the potential lethality – he wouldn’t use it carelessly, believe me.”

“Teenage boy,” Jack O’Neill stressed. “They come equipped with extra batteries dedicated solely for the purpose of strutting their stuff. And if it’s a little dangerous, even better.”

Sam Carter shook her head. “This isn’t just ‘a little dangerous,’ Jack. A teenage boy isn’t going to show off something that he knows, viscerally, can kill.” She flicked a hand, fore and middle fingers straight and braced together. “Needle of fire. One shot. It went straight through the Jaffa’s armor – and his heart. Clean kill.” Her lips curved, although not quite in humor. “And then he cleaned up the bodies while I hacked the computer. Zuko knows he can kill, Jack.”

Jack O’Neill was quiet for a long minute. When at last he spoke, it was in a low voice that betrayed anger controlled only by the fact that its rightful target was beyond reach for the moment. “He’s just a kid.”

“You’re assuming that their culture has childhood in the same way we understand it.” Daniel Jackson inclined his head in polite acknowledgment of those already gathered as he stepped clear of the doorway to allow Janet Fraiser and General Hammond to step through in his wake. “In some cultures, Toph would be a legal adult.”

The colonel looked skeptical. “Toph? At least that Zuko kid’s – maybe – old enough to drive. You expect me to believe that dainty one-girl demolition squad is supposed to be an adult?”

Dropping a thick sheaf of papers onto the conference table, Janet Fraiser shook her head. “No. I suspect that even in their culture, Toph is a child. She acts like one, at least. Zuko might not be, though.”

Jack O’Neill snorted. “Until they can buy their own beer legally, they’re kids as far as I care.”

“You do realize that nearly everyone drank beer during certain periods of history?” Daniel Jackson asked, a glint of mischief in blue eyes belying the apparently innocent tone. “It was often safer than drinking the local water.”

General Hammond, standing by his usual seat at the head of the table, cleared his throat pointedly.

“Kids are kids,” Jack O’Neill grumbled under his breath, as everyone began to move towards their seats.

It was, Teal’c acknowledged to himself, somewhat strange to be the debriefer in this room. He had, of course, spoken with men following missions during his time as Apophis’s Prime. But here in the SGC, the overwhelming bulk up his experience involved sitting with SG1 as a team, reporting the results of their missions.

This time, however, SG-1 had gathered not as a Stargate team, but for their respective insights – Teal’c for his knowledge of the Goa’uld, Jack O’Neill as SGC’s 2IC, and Daniel Jackson for his cultural insights. Not unfamiliar roles to any of them, naturally. But to be debriefing a member of one’s own team in such a manner was somewhat… disconcerting.

Nevertheless, this mission had been Sam Carter’s and Janet Fraiser’s task, not SG-1’s.

By unspoken agreement, Sam Carter began her report first. By now, they had all heard the basics – now she gave them the details, in order. Janet Fraiser followed with her own report, going over the events on the other side of the Stargate from her own perspective.
Silence reigned briefly after the doctor concluded her side of the events on P4X-684. It was finally broken when Jack O’Neill crossed his hands behind his head, leaning back. “Well, whaddaya know. A snake who got his hands on a map to get his head out of his ass. Must have been some map, as deep as some of them are stuffed up there.” His hard tone made it clear that he did not consider this a positive development.

Daniel Jackson, on the other hand, looked thoughtful. “I wonder if we could talk to him.”

Jack O’Neill eyed him. “Danny. Even the snakes who want to talk to us don’t listen.”

Daniel Jackson’s eyes narrowed, but his rejoinder was forestalled by Sam Carter’s thoughtful reply. “He may have something there, sir,” she said, directing her words at both O’Neil and General Hammond. “The technological innovation is unusual enough, but adapting tactics to take advantage of it on a systemic basis? Whoever this Goa’uld is, he’s not afraid to try new things.”

“Exactly,” Daniel said eagerly. “And culturally, Goa’uld don’t do that. Even the Tok’ra don’t. Which means this one might be open to other new ideas.”

General Hammond leaned forward, fingers steepled and eyes intent. “You may have a point. At the moment, however, my concerns are more strategic than diplomatic.” His grave gaze swept the room. “P4X-684 was supposed to be a safe world, beyond the Goa’uld network. How is it that this Goa’uld arrived not long after we did?”

“Law of Dramatic Inevitability?” Jack O’Neill offered as the silence and uneasy glances between everyone stretched long.

“Sir…” Sam Carter said slowly, “Assume for a moment, for the sake of argument, that the Goa’uld wasn’t there because of us. Could he have been there for the same reason we were – to study the Ancient facility?”

The words prompted startled looks from around the table. For his part, Teal’c frowned. One of the false gods seeking to learn from another race – even the fabled Gate Builders? Surely their pride would never permit it.

But beside him, Jack O’Neill’s expression slowly shifted from skeptical to thoughtful. “Huh. We already know a fair bit of their tech is hand-me-down…”

Daniel Jackson’s eyes were bright and speculative. “And technological innovation – original or derivative – implies curiosity. In humans, at least.” He drummed his fingers on the table. “And if this is Thoth – he’s the Egyptian god of magic. If we take magic to mean technology…”

“Thoth?” General Hammond interrupted.

“Oh – sorry, sir. That’s my guess, based on those ibis-headed helmets Sam and Janet described. Thoth is associated with the ibis and the baboon… Jack?”

The colonel was shaking his head. “Sorry, Danny – but that’s not the name we got from Sanura.”

Janet Fraiser had been listening patiently, but at the name, she leaned forward with a small frown. “Sanura?”

“The Jaffa captured in the Gate Room,” Teal’c said. “Her story was one known to me.”

“In short, the big guy here apparently isn’t the only one with an Inigo Montoya grudge. Only, this lady somehow got another snake to personally help her get payback, or so the story goes.” Jack
O’Neill shook his head. “But the name Teal’c had, and the one we got out of the lady, wasn’t Thoth. Joo-ty or something, nothing I recognized…”

Daniel Jackson’s head came up. “Djehuty?” he echoed, eyes wide. “Oh. My. That’s… oh, fascinating…”

The glances exchanged around the table this time combined both tolerant amusement and the foreboding of long experience. The events that often followed that particular tone from the scholar were… never boring.

As usual, the colonel was the first to brave the waters when the expectant silence began to stretch overlong. “Earth to Danny. Share with the class, prof.”

Daniel Jackson started out of whatever mental world his blue eyes had been staring into so intently, flushing as he sheepishly resettled his glasses. “They’re the same. Djehuty is the Ancient Egyptian name for Thoth.”

Jack O’Neill blinked. “Am I missing something here? Because, you know – Ancient Egyptian god? Wouldn’t Ancient Egyptian names come with the turf?”

“Well, yes, of course. But much of our knowledge of Egypt has been filtered through Greek sources. Even the word ‘Egypt’ – they called their country Khemet, the Black Land, because black was associated with soil laid down by the Nile…” Daniel Jackson visibly grabbed the reins of his mind and hauled himself back. “Right. Long story short, the names we generally use for the Egyptian gods are actually Greek glosses.” He frowned, lips pursing. “That includes the names of all the Egypt-associated Goa’uld we’ve met up until now.”

General Hammond raised his eyebrows. “Why has no one mentioned this before?” he asked.

Daniel Jackson scratched his head. “Well, Ra is the same name in either language. All the Goa’uld we met after that, well, Earth’s Stargate had been up and operating long enough for the translation protocols to update. I thought the names were just translating to the versions most familiar to us – we’ve had other instances where odd personal names didn’t register correctly. But if this Goa’uld really does go by Djehuty rather than Thoth…”

Daniel Jackson’s voice trailed off suddenly as his face paled. The bright glitter of fascination in his eyes darkened. “Sir… the Greek names date primarily from the New Kingdom. Fifteen hundred BCE and later.”

Though Teal’c had studied the Tau’ri and their history, their manner of counting years and dates still confused him at times. It took him a moment to recall why such a date would cause their faces to darken. “Was not the rebellion against Ra some time before that?”

“A good fifteen hundred years earlier,” the general said, drumming his fingers on the tabletop briefly before he caught the gesture and stilled it.

“The Antarctica Gate?” Sam Carter suggested.

“Maybe. But the way I hear it, they kept their heads down and walked on tippy-toes any time they came to Earth after the rebellion. And stayed the hell away from Egypt. Greece is only a hop across the puddle from there.” Jack O’Neill pursed his lips. “Come to think of it, I don’t think we’ve met any Greek snakes yet.”

“I haven’t heard of any…” Daniel Jackson said thoughtfully. He glanced at Teal’c.
Teal’c inclined his head. “I would need access to the lore of that land,” he said.

“That should be easy enough,” Daniel Jackson said. “Outside of Christianity, it’s probably the most well-known mythology out there. Well, in the Western world, at least.”

The general nodded shortly. “Look into it, gentlemen.”

“And while we’re on the topic,” Jack O’Neill drawled, “how about explaining that bit about translation protocols? Because I thought that was Danny’s job?”

“Did you think that every long-lost splinter of humanity somehow magically spoke English, then?” Daniel Jackson asked dryly.

“Oddly enough, I’m usually too busy getting shot up, blown up, or schmoozed up to worry about that too much,” Jack O’Neill said, a glitter of mischief in his eyes. “And here I thought we were carrying civilized language across the galaxy by the sheer power of Awesomeness.” He leaned forward. “Last I heard, our best explanation for this translation thing was that the space fairies did it. Any luck figuring out how it actually works?”

“Somehow, the Stargate seems to upload a simplified version of the local language when you travel to that world,” Sam Carter explained. “It’s part of what causes the headaches that new Gate travelers tend to get.”

Teal’c arched a brow curiously. He had long wondered about the apparent universality of tongues, after learning of the great variety on Earth. He had never considered that the Stargate itself might play a role.

“We’re not quite sure how it actually works,” Janet Fraiser added. “Somehow, the Gate seems to tap into the language centers of the traveler’s brain.”

“It really is fascinating,” Daniel Jackson said eagerly. “The vocabulary is fairly basic – only about fifteen hundred words, which sounds like a lot but is actually about equivalent to a five-year-old. But the grammar is more or less complete, and the upload is done in a way that makes us functionally bilingual. That’s why it sounds to us like everyone’s speaking English. It ‘feels’ like our native language, so we don’t notice the transition. Bilinguals here on Earth have similar experiences. They don’t even notice when they switch between languages, because both are on the same level.”

“Which has complicated the original plans for team composition,” General Hammond said dryly. “The original concept involved cycling team members occasionally to prevent insularity. But…”

The colonel blinked. “Wait. You’re telling me this is what’s causing Gatespeak? I figured that was just the usual team lingo turned up to eleven.”

Daniel Jackson shrugged. “Essentially, it is. See – what happens is, you don’t lose the language when you leave the world, and so over time teams develop… well, it’s more lingo than a creole or a pidgin, I’ve noticed that it’s very rare for the grammar itself to shift. But half the reason it’s hard to understand a Gate team when they’re talking just among themselves is that words from all the different populated worlds that team has traveled to slip in. They understand what they’re saying – it all sounds like their native language to them, after all – but…”

Teal’c had only been listening with half an ear, caught by Janet Fraiser’s description of this “upload” process. “Is this not a potentially dangerous process, if it affects the mind?” he asked. He understood very little of the Tau’ri art of neuromedicine, but he did understand that the mind was a delicate instrument one meddled with at one’s peril.
“That’s part of why we have the MRI – had,” Janet Fraiser corrected herself with a grimace. “And another reason why psyche evals before and after missions are such a high priority. Traveling through a warp of time and space is mind-boggling enough. But alien tech that alters human brain patterns with such precision?” She shivered. “It’s a little scary, to be honest.”

“Course, if we didn’t have it, even Danny wouldn’t be able to talk to everyone. And, hey, aside from the whole spontaneously turning triskaidekilingual, we haven’t seen any side effects yet. And you Jaffa have been using ‘em for centuries without any recorded trouble, right?”

“Triskaidekilingual?” Daniel Jackson eyed Jack O’Neill with wary amusement. “You’ve been waiting for an excuse to use that, haven’t you?”

Jack O’Neill snickered, not even trying to appear innocent.

Ignoring the byplay, Teal’c considered the colonel’s words and nodded. Jack O’Neill’s observation was, after all, true, so far as his knowledge went.

“And your brains are still pretty much wired like ours, tagalongs in the abdomen or not.” Jack O’Neill shrugged, a matter-of-fact whatcha gonna do? gesture.

“What I really want to understand is how the data exchange works,” Sam Carter said with feeling. “According to Daniel, the Gates must be exchanging data on the source world’s language and the destination world’s, to translate properly and get that level of instinctive comprehension. That’s an incredible amount of data being passed back and forth.”

“And who knows what else our Gate is gossiping about during those little get-togethers, other than the latest hot slogan making the rounds,” Jack O’Neill muttered.

Teal’c tilted his head. “I still do not understand. I have seen for myself that Daniel Jackson’s language skills are vital to our off-world missions. And according to your stories, the common tongue of Abydos was unknown to you.”

Daniel Jackson smiled ruefully. “The lion’s share of language has nothing to do with vocabulary and grammar. It’s things like idioms, shared assumptions, what you don’t say… There are scientists who think that up to eighty percent of communication is completely nonverbal. Even vocabulary… well, true correlates between languages are rarer than you’d think. It makes misunderstandings scarily easy.”

“And that all assumes that the, well, ‘language pack’ is complete to begin with,” Sam Carter added. “We think that was what caused the problems on Abydos. Earth’s Gate had been buried for millennia, and according to the Abydonians, Ra didn’t like to use his, for some reason. Whatever the Gate uses to ‘learn’ its local language, it doesn’t seem to work if no one uses the Stargate for too long; the Gate seems to go into standby mode, rather than collecting data.”

“Although, I think the Jaffa must have an implant or something that substitutes as an upload source for Abydonian,” Daniel Jackson said. “Which seems to be the standard language on most Goa’uld-controlled worlds, as well – come to think of it, the Gatespeak’ effect probably helps with that…”

Sam Carter waited a moment. When it was clear that Daniel Jackson did not intend to complete that thought aloud, she shrugged and added, “You get similar problems if you go through the Gate between two offworld sites. If you don’t pass through your home gate, the ‘pack’ for your native language won’t be available unless you have something like that implant Daniel’s talking about, and the best you’re going to get is the new upload building on the already incomplete upload from the world you’re currently on.”
Teal’c nodded in realization. “Ah. So that is why we cannot speak with Zuko and Toph.”

“Probably,” Daniel Jackson agreed. “They can’t be from P4X-684 – you can’t make silks like Zuko wears in an arctic climate! And P4X-684 has no native language to act as an intermediary, so we don’t even have that.”

“Wait a minute.” Janet Fraiser had stiffened in her seat. She looked at General Hammond, direct and formal and intent. “Sir, the Jaffa couldn’t speak to those two, either.”

Sam Carter blinked. “And they should have the same implant – or whatever – that Teal’c has.”

Jack O’Neill’s head swung back and forth like he was following the exchanges of a game. Or perhaps like a cat watching a pendulum; he pounced on the moment’s pause. “Meaning… what, exactly?”

“Most probably, that their Gate hasn’t been used in a long time.” Daniel Jackson was all but bouncing in his seat. “Long enough for their language to have altered substantially from its original form, or at least the form it was in the last time the Gate was used.”

“Which supports a hypothesis of mine regarding those two which I formed on P4X-684,” Sam Carter said, lacing her fingers before her on the table and sitting formal-review straight. “Sir, I do not think Zuko and Toph are from a slave world.”

Jack O’Neill rested one elbow on the table, leaning closer with interest. “What, because their Gate has a speech impediment?” He waved a hand. “Who’s to say that their Goa’uld isn’t like Ra – you know, prefers Shock, Awe and Smitation with a more personal touch?”

“The fact that the children’s response to shock, awe and smitation was to make with the mayhem,” Janet Fraiser said with a dry smile. “Rather like a certain SGC team of my acquaintance.”

Teal’c inclined his head in agreement as Daniel Jackson flushed slightly, Sam Carter shrugged, and Jack O’Neill snickered rather proudly. SG1 did, after all, have something of a reputation at this point.

“Which is the bulk of my theory, sir,” Sam Carter admitted. “I don’t have much in the way of hard evidence, but those two don’t act like slaves or worshippers.”

“…Hm.” The general looked at Daniel Jackson.

The scholar pushed his glasses back up, clearly realizing the stage was now his. “I haven’t gotten much of a shot at their language, sir. They’re not very chatty, at least not around other people. And Zuko’s more interested in learning ours. Which is interesting in and of itself.”

“How so?”

“Well, for one thing – he’s definitely educated. As in, literate.”

“He didn’t have any trouble reading the map I sketched,” Sam Carter said with a nod, passing Daniel Jackson a photocopy from her report. “He even figured out the compass rose.”

Daniel Jackson’s eyebrows rose.

“Apparently, Toph can sense the magnetic poles. I guess we lucked out that they align north and south the same way, but…”

“Huh. That’s got to be handy,” Jack O’Neill said. “Even blind, she’d never get completely lost.”
Daniel Jackson nodded. “I don’t think Toph is literate, which is no great surprise. Braille was a relatively late invention here on Earth, at least. But the way she listens while Zuko’s working things through… my guess is that she’s educated as well.” He set the copy of the map aside. “Also, Zuko clearly recognized the forms Janet was filling out as *writing*. So, not just the idea of symbolic graphics and drawing a bird’s-eye picture of your surroundings – he knows script, abstract representations of thoughts or concepts.”

“Which the Goa’uld tend to *discourage* in their slaves. Abstract thinking leads to inconvenient things like questions,” General Hammond said with a nod.

Daniel Jackson nodded as well. “But… the fact that Zuko *is* actively trying to learn our language means he’s used to dealing with people he might not be able to understand.”

Teal’c found himself leaning forward in interest again. “You believe that multiple languages are spoken on the young ones’ world,” he surmised. *Fascinating.* He himself had never encountered a multiplicity of languages on a single world, not before stepping through the Stargate to Earth. Minor dialectical variants, yes, and certainly differences *between* worlds, for all the illusion of universality he had so often perceived.

“It seems likely,” Daniel Jackson admitted, “especially if they’re so totally unfamiliar with the Stargate. Which tells me two things.” He raised a finger. “First, that they’ve spread out, enough that contact between groups isn’t regular. Meaning that by definition, at least one group has to have moved away from their Gate.”

“Something which the Goa’uld discourage. Strongly,” Teal’c said. As Apophis’s Prime, he had more than once been actively involved in such… discouragement.

“Keep the cattle in the pen, not wandering loose all over the plains. How tidy,” Jack O’Neill said with a snort.

Daniel Jackson nodded. “Exactly,” he said, apparently not registering the sarcasm. “Second – they spread out some time ago. Long enough for divergent language development to become pronounced.”

“How long would that take?” General Hammond asked. “It might give us a timeline for when they escaped Goa’uld influence.”

Daniel Jackson sighed and, holding a palm out flat, wobbled it back and forth. “Hard to say. There are a *lot* of factors involved. Language change tends to be slow, right up until you get a massive burst all at once. Look up the Great Vowel Shift in English sometime. That was a massive change that took place over the course of *maybe* two generations – although luck let us preserve part of the sounds of the transition period for posterity.”

“Oh?” Jack O’Neill blinked.

Daniel Jackson grinned. “Aye we did, matey.”

“Pirate talk.” There was a kind of awed glee in Jack O’Neill’s voice. “*Pirate talk.*”

General Hammond cleared his throat.

“Sorry, sir,” Daniel Jackson said sheepishly. “Baseline, current theory says it takes about… five or six hundred years for a language to become mutually unintelligible with its earlier form. If literacy is widespread, that might slow the process down; having a recorded form of how your ancestors spoke makes you less likely to veer off in extreme directions. On the other hand, if you have separated
groups… Well, take Italian, French, and Spanish – they used to all be Latin, they just developed in
different directions after the Roman Empire collapsed and took out most easy communications. If
abilities like Toph’s are at all common, though, logistics on their world have to look very different
than ours…”

“Point being, if they have multiple languages, we can assume multiple groups. That would mean
different cultures, I’d guess?” Sam Carter said-more-than-asked. She grimaced slightly as she spoke
– understandably. In the past, such cultural divides had rarely worked to the major’s favor. Nomad
princes seeking new brides came to mind.

“Which could be a problem,” Jack O’Neill mused. “Two groups, separated – we mess it up, we
could end up dumping the kids with the wrong crowd.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Daniel Jackson said. “Given that Zuko and Toph appear to be from different
cultural groups themselves, there has to be some interaction…”

Teal’c raised a brow. “They are not siblings?” he asked, somewhat surprised. The resemblance was
striking, and the air of mutual support threaded through with teasing had seemed to him very like a
close brother-sister bond.

“Don’t think so,” Daniel Jackson said, although he shrugged as he spoke. “It’s… small things. The
bowing, for example. How often they do it, how deep, the hand positions…”

Jack O’Neill snorted. “With her attitude, I doubt the dainty demolitionist bothers much with bowing.”

“She does do it, though. Or rather, ostentatiously doesn’t.” Daniel Jackson tossed his hands in the air.
“Look, you’re asking me to analyze an entire culture – possibly two cultures – off a sample of two.
Two teenagers, currently completely isolated from any sort of familiar cultural context. Imagine
trying to do that with two American teenagers, who might be from completely different parts of the
country! I can’t tell you for certain if any one thing they do comes from their overall culture, local
culture, social status, gender roles, or just plain part of their individual personalities! Toph’s attitude?
That could be cultural. Maybe girls at that age are expected to be willful. Maybe it’s a status thing;
she’s high enough on the food chain that she can bend the rules as she pleases. Or maybe it’s just that
she’s been treated like porcelain most of her life because she’s blind, and she’s taking this
opportunity to act out because she can and none of us can call her on it. I can make educated
guesses, from knowing human psychology and knowing what patterns have shown up in other
cultures – but that’s all it is, guessing.”

“Well, I can back you up with my educated guess as a physician,” Janet Fraiser said dryly, while
Jack O’Neill was still blinking. “Which is that I don’t think they’re genetically related. We won’t
know for sure without a proper analysis – which I’m running, but it ran into a few snags, so it may
take a while – but based purely on their physical traits, I’d guess that there are some racial
distinctions, as well as cultural, between groups. Not strong distinctions, we’re looking at something
along the level of, oh, someone from Norway as compared to someone from southern France.”

Teal’c nodded slowly. “Interesting. In the past, visibly distinct groups rarely acted in harmony,” he
noted. “Yet the young ones do not hesitate to trust each other.”

“War orphans,” the doctor said flatly as Daniel Jackson was opening his mouth. “That’s my guess, at
any rate.”

General Hammond looked at her sharply. “War?”

“That scar on Zuko’s eye, sir? It’s fairly old. Three, four, maybe five years would be my guess.”
Janet Fraiser’s face was grim. “Which tells me how old he wasn’t when he got it, given that I’d say that he’s eighteen at the oldest. I can’t be sure without closer examination than I think Zuko would be comfortable allowing me, but I strongly suspect his other scars – and believe me, he has a lot of them – are newer. Although some, not by much.” She looked at Daniel Jackson. “Add to that the fact that he clearly has combat experience… that, to my mind, says he was launched into the deep end of combat at a young age, probably following a traumatic event.”

Daniel Jackson nodded thoughtfully. “And if he kept fighting instead of getting out of the way – that suggests combat was too widespread to avoid. Which means large-scale, civilization-against-civilization war, not just tribal feuding.” He shrugged. “And people who survive that sort of situation usually do it by finding someone else to look after. It’s pretty obvious that, whatever happened to him, Toph’s been buffered from it.”

“There is,” Teal’c said, “a slight flaw in the theory.” Calm under the surprised gazes of his companions, he explained, “I sparred briefly with the young man. He is no stranger to battlefield combat. But he is not self-taught.”

General Hammond looked to Sam Carter. “Army Ranger.”

“Infiltration, managing target-rich environments, focusing on strategic objectives, tactical coordination, and professionalism, sir,” the major said, quietly. “I agree with Teal’c. Toph, maybe not. She’s good, but she’s a bruiser. Zuko is a trained soldier.”

Jack O’Neill’s face was that of dark thunder. Perhaps unsurprisingly. Teal’c had noted that Tau’ri as a whole, and the colonel in particular, held very firm notions about childhood and the appropriate age of those in combat. “Who the hell trains kids to fight?”

Teal’c chose not to mention the age at which he and other Jaffa began formal training. The colonel, perhaps rightly, would simply argue that Goa’uld-imposed practices were far from models of what was appropriate. Instead, he simply replied, “He knows discipline. Following our spar, I lent him the use of a kel-no-rem candle. I believe he is currently meditating.” And that had been… interesting, the way the young man’s eyes had locked onto the flame of the candle the moment Teal’c lit it.

“Meditating.” Open skepticism filled Jack O’Neill’s tone. When Teal’c simply nodded, however, he sighed and shook his head. “Well. So long as he’s not going to burn the mountain down around our ears…”

“I believe that unlikely,” Teal’c said, recalling the slow, even pulse of the flame, in time with each measured breath.

“Well then. Meditation.” Jack O’Neill shook his head. “Guess that fits with the whole magic kung fu.”

Teal’c wondered briefly why Sam Carter and Janet Fraiser traded wry grins at the colonel’s words. His thoughts were interrupted by General Hammond.

“This… magic kung fu.” The general pulled a sour expression at the term, but forged onward. “What is it?”

Sam Carter shook her head. “Sorry, sir… I’m not sure what to tell you. Other than that it goes beyond any kind of telekinesis I’ve ever heard of – stop scowling, Jack. That’s the closest comparison in our literature that I could think of. I know it’s not supposed to be real, but I’m pretty sure it wasn’t my imagination that left our MRI a crunched wreck or trapped that Jaffa – Sanura? – in a concrete blanket.” She shifted the papers before her, but that seemed to be more to do something
with her hands than a search for detailed notes. “I took a look at that wall in the cafeteria that she opened and then closed. I’d need a microscope to be absolutely sure, sir, but from what I could see, she didn’t leave so much as a crack or a seam. That should be impossible.”

“A thirteen-year-old who remembers to close the door behind her? Damn straight it’s impossible.”

“She must have rebuilt the crystal matrix of that stone, Jack. I can’t think of any process, natural or mechanical, that could do that – other than melting the rock to magma and letting it crystallize all over again. But, speaking of…”

Ah, so she had been seeking something, after all. Sam Carter’s fingers snatched a small sheaf of papers and tugged them free of the stack. Teal’c glimpsed what he believed to be equations covering their surface as the major said, “I tried running some calculations for how much energy it would take to do some of the things we’ve seen them do, based on first principles – kinetic force, ignition temperatures, things like that. Forget how they do it – I want to know where they get the energy for it!”

Janet Fraiser cleared her throat. “I may have a possible explanation,” she said.

That prompted curious looks from around the table – the physician providing insight on the operation of what was clearly some form of weapons technology? After a moment, however, Sam Carter said, “I’m all ears, Janet. What do you have?”

“I’m still waiting on that bloodwork,” the doctor said, looking at a chart of her own. “But I have gotten the results on a few things – including a mineral analysis.”


“Dietary requirements, for one thing,” Janet Fraiser said with a shrug.

Daniel Jackson was nodding. “The human body adapts to its environment. Like iodine – people who grow up eating seafood generally need more of it. They’ve adapted to a high intake.”

Janet Fraiser glanced at her chart. “Which seems to be the case for Zuko, by the by. Not Toph, though.”

Daniel Jackson blinked. “Huh. Interesting… that suggests he grew up in a coastal or island culture, while she’s from a continental one.”

“If I could make rocks squish the bad guys, I’d keep my feet on solid earth where there’s ammunition aplenty, too,” Jack O’Neill said with a dry grin. “The boy, though… don’t know why a firebug would want to live near water.”

“Islands are often volcanic. Maybe there’s a connection?” Sam Carter suggested.

Janet Fraiser snorted. “If I were to guess,” she said wryly, “I’d say it’s more likely that they want lots of water handy in case someone has an oops. Our two kids are disciplined, yes – but they’re still kids. Mistakes happen. And if Toph is that good at her age – they start learning this young. Very young.” She paused. “Or, possibly, they’re born with these abilities. The mineral analysis showed that they both have massive amounts of naquadah in their blood.”

There was a long pause. “…How much are we talking about, here?” Sam Carter asked.

“If I were to round it up to a 70-kilo ‘average’ adult, which is the standard used for most mineral analyses…” Janet Fraiser checked her notes. “I’m guessing they’d run about forty to sixty
milligrams.”

Jack O’Neill released a pent-up breath in a relieved laugh. “That’s supposed to be a ‘massive amount’?” he asked incredulously.

Teal’c spared a moment of dry amusement at the deadly force of Janet Fraiser’s narrow-eyed Look at the colonel. Jack O’Neill’s fondness for what the Tau’ri called snark sometimes went above and beyond survival.

“Allow me to explain in simple terms,” the physician said dryly. “If I did the same conversion for a Goa’uld’s concentration of naquadah, it would maybe be three to five milligrams. Major Carter has perhaps ninety micrograms – less than one milligram – worth of naquadah in her system. In short, Sam’s levels are basically trace elements – it has discernible effects, but physiologically, the body just files it under miscellaneous.” She shook her head. “Forty to sixty milligrams? That’s on a level with copper. It’s significantly higher than, say, selenium – which is essential to life.”

“And you believe the naquadah may be part of these… telekinetic abilities,” General Hammond said.

“It’s possible,” Sam Carter said slowly. “We already know that my trace levels have… effects.” She paused, the too-blank look that stole onto her face whenever Jolinar and the Tok’ra’s legacy were mentioned vanishing into one of startled realization. “Oh. No wonder the Gate made them jumpy. They probably could feel it activating.”

“Giant glowing blue puddle to other worlds,” Jack O’Neill said practically. “That’d make anyone jumpy. Especially if their first experience with a Gate involved a bunch of Jaffa charging through with zats blazing.” He glanced at Daniel Jackson with a wry smile. “I’d say we know a little bit about how that feels, ourselves.”

Sam Carter inclined her head. “You have a point,” she admitted. Her pen was scratching along the back of one of her calculation sheets, but after a moment she grimaced and set it aside. “Too many variables. The naquadah might explain where all that energy comes from, it might not. And that still doesn’t explain how they activate it and control it.”

“Are the stances they adopt not linked?” Teal’c asked curiously.

“Yeah, well, if mock-punches were enough to throw rocks, gravel would be a controlled substance,” Jack O’Neill reminded him.

“But there are reports of martial arts masters doing incredible things,” Daniel Jackson mused aloud, and shrugged at the dubious eyebrows slanted at him by both the colonel and General Hammond.

“I think those stances have to be part of it,” Sam Carter said. “Zuko and Toph use very, very different styles. My guess is that’s why Zuko seems to be a pyrokinetic and Toph a… geokinetic, I suppose you’d call it. I wonder how old they are when they chose their specialization? Or maybe it’s determined by the style of where they live.”

“Which is another part of why I think they’re born with these abilities,” Janet Fraiser admitted. “Whatever it is, it’s clearly internally manipulated, since as far as I can see they’re not carrying anything, and they use their bodies to control it. It’s clearly complex – and if I were to guess, I’d say they’ve probably trained in it and used it for most of their lives. Probably from the time they could walk.”

That statement was followed by a moment of silence – interrupted by a harsh sigh from Jack O’Neill. “They’re weapons. Someone took a couple of kids and raised them as living weapons.”
“We don’t know that, Jack,” Daniel Jackson said, tilting his head. “In fact… Sam, Janet, didn’t you say that the children were surprised that you were surprised by their abilities?”

“Zuko more than Toph, I think, which stands to reason. She’s a showman at heart, I think. But, yes.” Sam Carter looked at him curiously.

“In that case – these abilities may simply be common in their cultures. If the children are weapons – well, maybe everyone is.”

“Which means that somewhere out there is a very unhappy mad-scientist Goa’uld. Possibly singed. Maybe even this Djehuty.” Jack O’Neill’s grin showed teeth. “Nice to see the meddlers get some payback once in a while.”

“And I can think of so many non-military ways you could use skills like those.” Daniel Jackson’s eyes sparkled. “Can you imagine the sort of architecture they’d have? And if you control fire, you control heat – I’d guess they have very advanced metallurgy…”

“Either way, I think it is clear that without further information, our theories will remain supposition,” General Hammond said briskly. “Doctor Fraiser, what else have you learned from your analysis?”

Janet Fraiser looked at her notes again. “As I said, I’m still waiting on a few tests, particularly the genetic analysis – sorry, Danny, I know you wanted to try narrowing down their source region. But I’ve gotten most of the preliminary allergy tests back, at least. I think we lucked out on that front. I’d advise staying away from problem foods like shellfish or peanuts for the time being, but they don’t seem to have any severe allergies – and they’re both definitely lactose tolerant.”

“Meaning they have cows, or something very similar,” Daniel Jackson said thoughtfully. “That narrows things down a bit, at least. Their ancestors probably weren’t taken from the Americas, at the very least.”

“Well, at least we can feed them,” Jack O’Neill said, and shifted to grin at Teal’c. “Though scuttlebut has it that they’re way ahead of us. Something about you getting mugged for hot chocolate, big guy?”

“Indeed,” Teal’c said, tilting his head and letting the mischievous humor pass. “Although Toph referred to it by another name. Soma, I believe.”

Daniel Jackson dropped his pen. “Soma?” he echoed, blinking.

Teal’c turned to look at him. “You are familiar with the term?”

“A bit… It’s a sacred beverage – we think – mentioned in some of the oldest Hindu literature, the stuff that was passed down orally for centuries, maybe even millennia, before someone wrote it down. But no one’s ever quite figured out what soma actually was. It was supposed to be highly energizing – most people think it was probably some kind of hallucinogen, but I suppose you could make a case for theobromine. Cacao itself is a New World crop, but the climate of southern India is close enough, there may have been a variant once that died out…” He’d retrieved his pen and was scrawling rapidly on the back of a report. “Thank you, Teal’c. This gives me somewhere to start looking for their cultural roots – they must be from somewhere in the Indo-European sphere of influence. If we can just figure out their source culture, we’ll have a place to start actually communicating.”

Teal’c inclined his head slightly, and turned to look at General Hammond.

Who, in turn, had turned his focus back to Janet Fraiser. “On that front?” he echoed pointedly. “Are
you expecting problems on another front?"

The physician sighed and rubbed her forehead. “It’s the naquadah again, sir.”

He raised his brow.

“As I said earlier, their levels are comparable to copper in us. We need copper, sir. Anything that concentrated in the body is there for a reason.” She frowned. “And while we’re at it – as far as I can tell, naquadah qualifies as a heavy metal, like mercury. It should be poisonous at any levels much higher than Sam’s – and I admit, I worried about her. The Goa’uld – well, apparently it doesn’t affect them, although I wouldn’t be surprised to hear that mad hatters are a problem with them. But it’s clear that the children aren’t poisoned, despite the high levels. Which tells me that they’ve adapted to having it. They use it – my guess would be that it’s been incorporated into their basic physiology.”

Teal’c considered that. “It would perhaps explain their resilience.”

“What do you mean?” Jack O’Neill asked.

“In our spar, I observed that Zuko was far more resistant to harm than one would have expected, particularly given his injured state. He several times recovered from an impact that should have stunned him with little visible difficulty.” And what was more – even pulling his blows, the young man had fought with a level of force suggesting that he expected his opponents to be equally durable. Teal’c flexed the bruised muscle of his arm again, thinking.

“Kid got blasted into a stone wall by a big boom, and only got a bit bruised,” Jack O’Neill said with a thoughtful nod. He paused. “Doc?”

Grim-faced and narrow-eyed, the doctor said, “Just... revising some of my estimates about what must have happened to leave him with the sort of scars he has.” She shook her head fiercely. “But that’s not our only problem. If their physiology uses naquadah, sir... Minerals need to be constantly replenished, usually through the diet. And last I checked, the local drugstore didn’t exactly carry naquadah supplements.”

“We could always cannibalize a couple staff weapon batteries. Sure, they’re not Energizer, but hey, if it works...”

Janet Fraiser gave Jack O’Neill a dry look. “You could chew on an iron bar for a week, colonel, and all you’d accomplish would be to make your dentist very annoyed and very rich. Minerals have to be taken in a bioavailable form, or our bodies can’t absorb them.”

“So what would constitute a bioavailable form?” the general asked.

“For naquadah? I have no idea, sir. Vitamin C often helps the absorption rate of nonheme iron – plant iron – and calcium. Heme iron – the stuff we get eating meat – is much more accessible. And it depends on where the mineral accumulates. If it acts like most heavy metals, it would accumulate primarily in fish... Sam?”

The major looked slightly green. “Is that why Goa’uld eat their young?”

Janet Fraiser turned somewhat green herself. “That... could be possible. Young creatures, particularly creatures that have a larval state like Goa’uld, often can absorb nutrients in different forms in different stages. If Goa’uld larvae can absorb naquadah and convert it to a more bioavailable form...”

General Hammond cleared his throat. “As I suspect no one here is seriously considering introducing
Goa’uld children to the dinner table… Let us assume, for the moment, that we cannot supply the children with naquadah. What then?

“Then we need to get them home,” Janet Fraiser said, voice firm. “The sooner the better, because I have no idea how long it takes for naquadah deficiency to set in.”

Sam Carter grimaced. “Unfortunately, there’s a little problem with that plan.”

“Which is?” Jack O’Neill prompted. “Open the Gate, toss the kids through, maybe tag along to assure people they weren’t playing hooky deliberately. Seems straightforward.”

“Open the Gate where?” Sam Carter asked pointedly. “We don’t know where they’re from, and if their Gate really has been out of use for such a long time… Presumably this Goa’uld knows where he found them, but tell me, do we really expect the children to know their address?”

“They might know more than they realize,” Daniel Jackson offered. “It’s a long shot, but I can try talking to them. It’s just… that’s going to take time, since I’m going to be starting from scratch.”

General Hammond nodded slowly and looked at the physician. “Assume a worst-case scenario – we cannot find an alternative source, and we cannot find a way to get them home. What can we expect as a consequence, Doctor?”

“I can’t say for certain, since I don’t know how the naquadah has been integrated into their system. They’d almost certainly lose their abilities, if we’re right about the connection there. But based on copper or selenium? Anemia. Muscular tremors. Seizures. Neural degeneration. Death.”

Her flat tone echoed in the moment of silence that followed.

“All right then. This Jooty is going to give us a warm welcome the minute we go through that Gate, sir,” Jack O’Neill said briskly. “Assuming he hasn’t swanned off to the next top vacation spot on his list. Some intel before we go shake him down for addresses and loose change would be handy.”

“Agreed,” the general said. “Teal’c?”

Teal’c thought back. “I fear I know very little. Djehuty is not one of the great System Lords, and reclusive. He is also said to be somewhat… eccentric.”

“Oh, joy. We get another mad genius.” Jack O’Neill rubbed his hands together. “Any other tidbits? Favorite flower?”

“The lotus, perhaps.”

“Wait, what, serious…” Jack O’Neill stopped short and clapped a hand over his face, realizing he’d been ‘suckered,’ as the Tau’ri put it. “Dammit, Teal’c!”

Teal’c inclined his head gravely to General Hammond, ignoring the colonel’s spluttering. “I regret that is all the certain knowledge I have, General.”

“Certain knowledge?” General Hammond echoed, casting a sharp look at him. “So what’s uncertain?”

Teal’c hesitated momentarily, attempting to set his thoughts in order. “After my father’s death, my mother received a message that may have been from one of Djehuty’s agents, offering her sanctuary. But she had found refuge elsewhere. However, rumor suggests that this practice is not unusual to Djehuty.”
“Picks up Jaffa with grudges, huh?” Jack O’Neill’s eyebrow rose. “Explains Sanura.”

“Possibly.” Teal’c looked at the general. “I regret I cannot tell you more, General Hammond.”

“Not your fault.” General Hammond frowned thoughtfully. “This Sanura… she turned against the Goa’uld before, you said…?”

“I do not think she can be persuaded to do so again,” Teal’c said regretfully. “Her loyalty was earned when Djehuty aided her in avenging her people.”

General Hammond’s lips pursed, but he nodded. “Still, she remains our best source of information. See what you can learn from her.” He paused, frowning. “I would advise against informing her why we need this information so urgently, however.”

Janet Fraiser’s head came up in surprise. “Sir? Surely, if she knew children would be in danger…”

General Hammond shook his head. “As I recall Doctor Jackson was saying when we arrived, standards of adulthood differ. We already know that youth wasn’t enough to protect them from being taken in the first place.”

“And Zuko killed several Jaffa during our escape. He’s dangerous, and she knows it. Toph may be younger, but she was even worse in terms of total destructiveness. I suspect she wouldn’t consider them children,” Sam Carter said with a sigh and a nod.

Jack O’Neill pursed his lips, expression sour. Before he could speak, however, General Hammond said, “More than that – I would prefer she not realize that her knowledge may effectively hold those two children hostage.” He turned to Sam Carter. “What of other sources? Would the Tok’ra know of this Djehuty?”

She frowned, fidgeting with the pencil. “If Jolinar ever met him, it didn’t leave much of an impression. But it’s worth asking. They’ll at least have heard of him.”

“I will handle that. I would prefer you and Doctor Fraiser to work with Doctor Jackson on communicating with the children.”

“In other words? You’re the ones they followed home, you get to feed them.” Jack O’Neill grinned.

General Hammond snorted, then sobered. “I do have one further concern regarding any attempts to return to P4X-684,” he said. “Beyond the appropriate flowers to send this Djehuty as a ‘don’t let the door hit your ass on the way out’ gift.” He leaned forward, fingers laced together and eyes fixed on Sam Carter and Janet Fraiser. “This... ‘freezing laughter’ you encountered. Could it, in your opinion, be linked to Gabor and Dohman’s deaths this morning?”

The two women looked at each other and blanched.

“It wouldn’t be the first time something invisible snuck through,” Janet Fraiser said, swallowing.

“It... felt hostile, sir. Or at least predatory,” Sam Carter agreed slowly. “And it seemed to super-freeze everything around it - to the point of making even the stone brittle. Which would explain why the bodies were cold.” She made a motion as if to chafe her arms against remembered chill. “Zuko drove it off with a circle of fire – nearly knocked himself out doing it, but it worked. He seemed to know what he was doing.”

Teal’c frowned. “They were noticeably uneasy about the location where the men were killed.”
General Hammond’s eyes narrowed. “Were they.” He looked to Daniel Jackson. “Consider strengthening communications with the two children your top priority, Doctor Jackson. If this is a threat they are somehow familiar with, that expertise could be vital.”

“Expertise?” Jack O’Neill grumbled as they began rising from chairs, recognizing the implicit dismissal. “I know I keep saying this, but they’re kids. And the dainty demolitionist is just trouble, through and through.”

“She’s thirteen or so, blind, has been kidnapped by aliens, and now she’s stuck on a military base on another world, with only one familiar face - voice, I guess - with her,” Daniel Jackson said with a sigh. “She’s stressed. Stressed kids act up. I doubt she’s normally this brazen.”

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~

So. Weird not-our-world-ness aside, we’re pretty much looking at business as usual, huh? Mwah. Hah. Hah!

Toph cackled, rubbing her hands together gleefully - and thoroughly enjoying the downright wary way the people around her suddenly found themselves moving carefully away from her.

Well, well. Some of these weird people had actual sense!

Though some of that seemed to be less wariness, and more anticipation. Mostly in the women. A bit like the tough ladies in Sparky’s Home Guard, who thought a little rambunctious mayhem was cute.

Speaking of… Smirking to herself, Toph headed for the lady whose jaw-flapping had calmed all the poor twitchy people earlier. Anyone who was good at that, was someone worth keeping track of.

Wish Twinkletoes would learn that trick.

Toph pulled a face. Worry about flighty Avatars who thought somehow everything would automatically be fixed up just because the official war was over later. She had stuff that she needed to deal with right now.

Like the lady sitting at a table, doing something with an odd tap-scratch sound that had to be writing and chuckling almost silently to herself the way Sokka did when he was drawing up a Brilliant Plan.

And, like Sokka, forgetting to pay attention to anything else. She hadn’t even noticed Toph standing right behind her yet.

Oh, this is too good to pass up.

What to do, what to do, so many options!

Simplest worked best. The lady yelped and jumped most satisfyingly when Toph popped up under her elbow.

Toph snickered, running her fingers over the table to feel sheets of really fine, smooth-grained paper – what the lady had been scheming over so intently, she guessed. And, okay, maybe Toph felt a little bad about messing her scheming up, Sokka always hated it when he had to rewrite something because she’d spooked him into getting ink all over it. But not that bad. Jumping out of her chair,
heart hammering… Hee. That? Was a proper reaction.

First one she’d felt around here, too. Everything about these people was just a little… muted. Yeah, she could read their stances and heartbeats and breathing and the way they moved, same as usual – even if those stupid clunky boots made it harder – but… it was like these people just totally didn’t move their chi when they did things.

Which was ridiculous. Okay, sure, maybe these people didn’t seem to have a lot of benders hanging around, and that was kinda freaky on its own. Sure, earthbenders tended to gather in big cities for training, but there should be some in a place like this, if only to make sure everything was stable. But that aside – everyone moved their chi. Snoozles and Suki definitely did. Her parents had. Even jumpy old cabbage merchants did, especially when Aang was out to have fun. You couldn’t not move chi!

Maybe she was misreading them somehow? Normally that would be ridiculous – she was the Blind Bandit, for crying out loud! But… maybe those shoes were messing her up. Even the people who didn’t wear the big heavy clunkers were wearing stuff with thick soles of some weirdly springy stuff that made them bounce as they walked.

Patterned, too. Heh, she thought, as her fingers found and plucked up a rod of… something, some kind of not-quite-coal and wood and metal that Schemes had dropped. Art for the blind earthbender! Although, a lot of them had been worn down so that the patterns were hard to pick out…

…oh, weird. The wood was somehow wrapped around the not-coal. How’d they get it to do that? Yeah, those Foggy Swamp waterbenders did plant stuff, but that was all leafy, juicy vines and things, not wood. Wood was too heavy, too tough, too stubborn, too… well, earthy.

Huh. Interesting thought, that. She’d have to poke it, later. Because now that she was paying attention… Toph drummed her fingers on the skinny little stick, ignoring Schemes for a minute, and frowned. That grainy-slippery not-coal was in the way, but she could just barely hear past it to the little ghost of a whisper in her bending that she thought might be the wood itself.

But the grainy-slippery stuff – that showed up loud and clear. And it was interesting. Besides, the best way to deal with a distraction was to deal with it. And if the stuff was slippery… Toph tightened her fingers, flattened her palm, pushed…

Oh, nice. Slipped right out. Toph tucked the empty bit of wood away for later poking and played the extracted core through her fingers, feeling the shapes it liked. Funny stuff. Felt a lot like coal, sure. But it had an odd, gritty drag like the ore of a mine she and Aang had visited briefly, spreading the news of the Loser Lord’s butt-kicking. And… oh, it was pottery. Sort of. Definitely some sort of clay, though she didn’t know why someone would mix this slippery not-coal into clay, the stuff was fragile. Yeah, pottery almost always was – you had to be really careful bending it, because it was just super-fine silt hardened together for the most part, didn’t have a structure to hold it together the way proper stone did, so if you messed with the shape it tended to crumble. But this stuff was even worse. Just handling it left a fine residue all over her fingers as bits rubbed off.

Toph blinked useless eyes. Transferred the lump over to her other hand, using bending to clear her fingers of the worst of the dust, and reached out to find that paper again.

Whoa. She could see what Schemes had been writing. Bending-seeing – faint, thin, fragile lines of that same slippery-sticky grit. All loops and lines and swirls that made no sense, and how could writing be such a big deal when it was so boring and flat and the world was so solid… and she could see it.
Writing for the blind earthbender. That’s crazy…

Then Schemes used her distraction to snatch the lump of coal-clay out of Toph’s hand.

Toph leveled her best Fearsome Scowl in Schemes’s general direction. “Hey! I was using that!”

Schemes ignored her, in favor of giving the gritty lump of cheap pottery the sort of inspection a jewel-cutter might give a really neat but kinda suspect gem. She hefted it in her hand, held it up to what Toph presumed had to be whatever passed for light in this screwy place, tapped it all over with fingers that were getting coated with that dust, even did moves that Toph guessed were supposed to be copy-cating what she’d been doing…

“Don’t bother, you’d just break yourself,” she told the lady bluntly. “Your chi isn’t even as rooted as Twinkletoes’s was back when he started. You’re not gonna bend anything like that.” Heck, Schemes didn’t even have a stance.

Didn’t seem to bother Schemes, though. She just kept getting more and more excited until Toph thought she was going to bounce her way right off the floor, keeping up an energetic stream of muttering.

What the heck did foa-saiens mean, anyway? Schemes said it the way Sokka’d say shopping. Maybe even shopping combined with a Plan.

Toph was not going to edge away. Nuh-uh. But she did wiggle her toes to loosen her feet up, just in case, as Schemes turned to her and…

Hesitated, apparently distracted, looking around curiously.

Hmph. “Sparky’s not here,” Toph said mulishly, sticking her chin out.

At least, he’d better not be. Splitting up was his idea in the first place.

“We can’t assume that everyone here means well,” he’d said in a low-murmur as they tucked themselves in a quiet corner after Pian-Not got called away somewhere. His tone had been flat and hard. “Sam and Janet, I think we can trust – but we don’t know where they fit here. If there’s going to be trouble, I’d like it to hit sooner rather than later. Before we let our guard down, and before they realize just how much you can do. As long as we’re in this mountain, you can keep an eye on me no matter where we are, and you don’t need stairs and shafts. We’re hard to actually separate. Let’s use that, and see if we can’t lure out any trouble early.”

On the one hand… Sheesh, Sparky. Paranoid much? Yeah, she got that he had lots of luck and it was all bad, but assuming that people were out to get them just because he didn’t know that they weren’t?

At least he hasn’t started babbling about enemy birds. Yet.

On the other hand… just because they hadn’t seen any benders and people acted all weird about it… That didn’t mean that benders weren’t around here somewhere. The Dai Li had been pretty darn good about dodging Toph’s toes.

And people here are nervous. She’d been in Ba Sing Se. She knew that feeling of waiting for the second boulder to hit.

And if there were Dai Li types around here…
Dealing with 'em sooner rather than later... yeah. That sounds like a good idea to me.

So. Bait game it was. Especially since that let her keep working on the plan she’d come up with last night, after Zuko’d gone to sleep.

Because if all these people were busy looking at the totally awesome earthbender – they’d pay less attention to the firebender in her shadow.

Yeah, these people had been friendly, mostly. But they couldn’t be sure. And Zuko was the Fire Lord, which would make him a pretty tempting target, and the world needed him.

…Okay, fine. So maybe Sparky wasn’t the only one indulging a healthy streak of paranoia right now.

Fact of the matter remained: the world needed Sparky, if they were going to make the peace stick, just as much as it needed Aang – maybe even more. So if they didn’t want things to go boom all over the place again, Toph had better keep him in one piece.

Of course, given that this was Sparky…

Good thing it’s me on the job.

At least Sparky got that he was important to the peace, even if he didn’t always remember that little detail when stuff needed doing and there was no one handy to sit on him. She’d flown around with Aang for a bit, after dealing with the Loser Lord – because she’d left home to get out there and do stuff and prove she wasn’t fragile, and by the time she’d met the guys she’d already missed half the adventure. But all that time, it had never seemed to sift into Twinkletoes’s head that the war being over didn’t mean everything was okay again, or that it couldn’t start again if someone twitched the wrong way.

Even the greatest earthbender in the world got tired of beating her head on a wall, when that wall kept going, “Whoosh! Missed me!”

So, yeah. Split up to draw attention away from Sparky, meditating quietly a level below with his little candle.

Which was the other reason she’d picked now to start her plan. He needed the quiet time anyway. A Zuko who couldn’t get some space for himself was a cranky Zuko. Things around a cranky Zuko tended to be flammable. And according to what he’d told Aang in the very first firebending lesson they’d done, back at the Western Air Temple, the need to meditate was something Fire and Air shared – something about balancing the fact that they were active, willful elements that tended to do stuff even without the bender actually trying. Water and Earth had to practice moving – water to learn to work with the ebb and flow of currents, Earth to impose movement on inertia. Fire and Air had to practice sitting still.

That had been news to her, eavesdropping from the next room and wondering if she’d have to lock Katara’s ankles in the dirt to keep her from attacking Aang’s firebending teacher in a foaming fury that he’d dared talk about Water at all. Toph’d even felt a little guilty about interrupting Twinkletoes’s meditation, back when she’d been giving his first lessons. Maybe he’d’ve gotten rock faster if he’d done his sitting-still practice first.

Nah. What Twinkletoes had really needed back then was how to stand his ground like he meant it. Sitting peacefully didn’t do much for that!

But meditating was definitely a good thing for rarr-oh-was-that-a-cliff-I-just-jumped-off? firebenders.
So she’d left to let Sparky practice his breathing.

Speaking of… they’d better find out whose head needed banging to get them outside. The way Zuko’d zeroed in on that itty-bitty candle flame… yeah.

Personally, Toph was all for stomping up a tunnel and going, but…

“We don’t want to antagonize people if we can avoid it, Toph. They’re the ones who know how that sta-geit works. Which means they’re the only ones who can get us home.”

So maybe stirring up trouble might not be a good idea. Might’ve gotten the wrong people for that job, Toph thought now, wryly. Katara and Aang are the ones you want for making nice.

Toph, not so much. Especially not when people started cooing at her.

She bristled at Schemes. Because why yes, as it happened she was cute – Katara had even said she was pretty, and she hadn’t been lying! But she was the Blind Bandit. You did not. Coo. At the Blind Bandit.

So Toph scowled and swiped the mug that’d been at Schemes’s elbow, right out from under reaching fingers.

“Hei!”

Ooh, someone’s attention was most thoroughly got. Toph’s scowl morphed into an evil, evil grin as she skipped out of reach. They had a proper audience now, all around them. Apparently you Did Not Mess with whatever this drink was – smelled the same as the stuff Janet and Dan-something had been fighting over before.

Heh. Aang could’ve told these people what Toph thought about no touchie.

Only… even if her read of their emotions was so weirdly dulled, the way people were shifting their feet and leaning, like they were craning their necks for the best view…

Oh, I so called this one. Toph stuck her tongue out at Schemes and heard the chuckles and grins spreading around them. These guys were just like the Earth Rumble audiences; they loved watching someone else thumb her nose at the rules. Toldja, Sparky. I know these types.

She drummed her fingers on the ceramic of the mug almost out of habit. This was the one fancy earthbending technique her parents had known that she could do – feeling out pottery for flaws and cracks. Because it was ladylike, and also very good business. This stuff… not the best, though someone had gotten a nice glaze on it. And solid. These people liked their mugs thick. Not that she blamed ‘em, with the way they scorched their tea. Even Snoozles knew better than that. Her tongue still hurt.

On the other hand, this stuff had cooled off to a properly drinkable temperature. And it didn’t smell scorched. More… roasted, in a way that lingered at the back of her tongue. A really tasty smell, actually.

She grinned. Let’s see what all the fuss is about…

Bleagh!

Schemes grabbed the mug out of her hands while Toph was busy gagging, trying to get that nasty, nasty, bitter taste out.
“Ugh! You people actually drink that stuff?” Toph shuddered.

Schemes’s indignant sniff only actually came across through Toph’s toes; the actual sound was overwhelmed by roaring laughter all around them. Toph began to bristle fiercely – then gave in and huffed a wry laugh herself. Got was got, after all, and she’d been got good. And an audience liked a fun loser nearly as much as an awesome winner. Not that she’d ever been in that position herself, except for way back when she’d first started Rumbling. And when she’d come up against a certain cheaty cheater of an airbender jumping into an Earth Rumble, and how were you supposed to be a good loser about that?

But she’d walked right into this one. She’d take her lumps like a showman. Shaking her head ruefully, she spread her hands wide and shrugged, to more laughing and even a bit of applause, and a quiet chuckle.

Toph’s heart jumped into her throat.

Didn’t matter that their chi was wacky. These people had weight on the stone they stood on. And there was no one standing where she’d heard that low, amused chuckle.

And why hadn’t she noticed it was getting cold?

She made herself breathe. Set her feet. Felt that patch of slowly spreading cold. And got ready.

I didn’t come up here for just the audience. Because on every single table out here…

Turn. Stomp. Push.

All around her, little containers of salt flew.

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~

How does she do that?

Heather Dyne’s brain had gotten tired of the repeating loop of that question and shoved the spluttering demand into a mental corner, in favor of a flurry of equations and chemical interactions and energy calculations, all sparkling in the vivid mental spotlight of ooh, shiny! After all, she’d just spent the morning feverishly going over Major Carter’s notes, trying to make sense of this phenomenon, and she’d expected to spend the next several nights burning the midnight oil – well, halogens – doing more of the same.

And here was a living sample - er, example, she meant example - for observation!

And she’s so cute.

Very tactile, too. Feeling out the composition of the lead? Pencil leads were actually graphite baked into clay, different consistencies for different hardness levels. Wonder if different minerals respond differently to the telekinesis - is she limited to minerals? Hm, there must be a way to test that...

Meanwhile, the rest of her mind - Heather prided herself on her ability to parallel-process - was split between rueful sympathy, because no matter how good the coffee double-black would not be her recommendation for a first taste, and...
How dare you steal my coffee and then complain about it!

Sniffing, she cradled her abused coffee mug protectively and turned away.

Veteran of a dozen base incidents and a lab prone to, erm, mysterious explosions, she was ducking well before her mind bothered to notify her conscious awareness of the white plastic flying through the air. Three shakers hit the cafeteria wall and burst into starbursts of white table salt.

Hey! I draw the line at throwing things, brat...

Empty space shrieked.

Heather’s busily buzzing brain put all processing on standby.

That shriek from empty air had been shock enough. What truly froze her blood, however, were the soft chuckles around the edge of the room, loud in the moment of shocked silence following the scream.

Heather spun, eyes raking the walls. Details filtered in flashes of disconnected imagery.

Frost blooming along the walls, floors and ceiling, a glaze of silver-white spreading so fast it felt like she was watching some sort of time-lapse video. Tiny flecks of white snow appearing out of thin air to drift down over that frosty gleam...

Ambient humidity crystallizing, freezing too fast to collect in large crystals or against an object as frost. Result of extremely rapid cooling - mass to temperature ratio would have to be... be...

Why were her thoughts so slow?

She mentally railed at the sluggishness of her own brain, even as she saw the eyes of the Marines nearest those spreading swaths of sparkling white begin to glaze, blue already beginning to show at their lips...

“Ha!”

The little girl’s forceful shout - kiai, she moves like a martial artist and that was definitely a kiai - shattered the spell of that softly chilling laughter, and the deadly glitter of snow seemed to flinch from the equally white and sparkly jet of salt that exploded across the room, dusting everything in its wake.

Messier than before, she’s dropping bits all over the place - I wonder if that’s because she’s in a hurry, or maybe it’s harder to manipulate thousands of particles compared to a single lump of equal mass? That would make a certain amount of sense...

Mind whirring back into motion as it came out of its stall, Heather dropped back a bit to give the blind girl space as she stamped, punched and pushed in what should have been an adorable flurry but only came across as deadly serious fighting.

Deadly serious, and scared, and that was just wrong.

Some of the Marines, particularly those near Heather and the girl but also some who’d been stung by stray flying salt, were coming out of that deadly brain-stall as well.

These were SGC veterans. Invisible or not, they knew an attack when it hit.

“Aim for the center of the cold zones!” someone shouted, and the sound of laughter was drowned
out by the crack of guns.

The girl cried out, a whole-body flinch as she reflexively clamped her hands over sensitive ears, trying to protect them from the deafening cacophony that was gunfire in an enclosed space. The stream of salt that had been flying towards another patch of unnatural ice crashed to the floor.

Kept moving on its own momentum, so she’s not canceling kinetic forces when she lifts it...

White caught Heather’s eye, spreading from that spot on the wall that had met the first flying salt shakers. Not a slow spread of frost this time - a single deadly stream aimed straight for bare feet.

Table next to her. Salt shaker that had somehow escaped the girl’s grab for ammunition...

Saline. Sodium chloride. Compounds, concentrations, reactions, volatility...!

White plastic in her hand, the other snapping open one of the special pockets on her tool-lined workvest...

Heather had never been shy about her beginnings in the wonderful worlds of gadgets and Science: a wide-eyed strawberry blonde shadow attentively trotting about behind her uncle as he worked the real magic of the stage behind the scenes - gears and levers and mysterious chemicals in mixtures that made her nose itch with the need to understand.

She’d grown beyond stage tricks long ago, in favor of chemicals, gears, gunpowder, and shiny mysterious alien artifacts. But she still carried a few things around. Useful for rubber gloves, testing fuses, wowing Marines at parties - and who needed pepper spray when you could laugh maniacally as your hands burst into flame?

She reared back and flung the stuffed salt shaker. It hit the floor right between the girl and that deadly band of white - Heather grabbed the girl and twisted, putting her back between the girl and any shards as the flash powder ignited explosively, spraying bits of plastic and salt over them, the ice, and everything else in its radius.

Good think the shaker was mostly full, plenty of salt to spread... hmmm. Less salt would have meant more room for powder would have meant more explosion - what ratio of salt-to-boom would make for the largest effective scatter radius...?

And people thought she was crazy for carrying highly reactive combustibles on her person. Hah!

Her body was accustomed to getting on with survival while her brain did its own thing. She scrambled back to her feet and retreated, pulling the blind girl along with one hand while the other snagged a new shaker about to upgrade to salt grenade from a table. “Stop shooting and start salting those things already!”

Fwomph - another salt shaker burst into flame as she flung it at the ice dogging the heels of Marines who were falling back towards the kitchens.

Fewer than there had been. She could see prone figures on the floor. Some lay in pools of blood that were steaming against supercooled ice...

Blood? Why... Location, angles, vectors, velocities - hit by ricochets?

...but more worrying were those already edged by frost, looking like they’d just slumped over where they’d been standing. Most near the walls, the skin already almost translucent pale and bluish. Others were sitting or even standing, but their eyes glazed – clearly, no one was home.
Blue lips, no color - rapid-onset hypothermia? Minds slowed by the laughter and the cold, couldn’t get away...

Heather hadn’t even realized how cold it had gotten until the white cloud of her breath caught her eye as she looked around for more ammunition.

The gunfire had broken off, shooters belatedly realizing that they weren’t hitting anything - and that their misses were having deadly consequences in the enclosed space.

Tears of pain still in clouded green eyes, the girl yanked free of Heather’s grip. She set her feet, toes gripping bare stone, and brought two tight fists before her and up like a shield. Behind the retreating Marines, the floor surged upwards to become a chest-high wall.

Blocks - she’s raising blocks of stone, not actually changing the shape of it. Working with the natural faces of the stone? How does she keep them from falling back down again the minute she shifts her attention - does she manipulate the stresses of the system somehow to hold them up? And what happens to the ceiling of the floor below? Better than a regular house, the intervals between levels are solid stone, but that’s got to be hard on the wiring for lights and pipes attached to the ceilings.

The ice was still coming onward, spreading more slowly now as the Marines and the little geokinetic pulled back their circle of defense. Worse was the way the temperature kept dropping, numbing fingers, making hands clumsy with shivers, slowing Heather’s mind...

Not fair - computers run better when they’re cold, why can’t brains!

Her lycodium powder was used up. There weren’t many salt shakers left, either. Those that had escaped the blind girl’s grab for ammo as she stomped and punched another flurry of salt together were grabbed up by grimly amused Marines who had set their ineffective guns aside.

Saved by salt shakers. This was definitely going to make it into the SGC’s annals of Epic Crazy.

Going to be a pain to clean up, too.

Salt all over the place. Did you still have to throw a pinch over your shoulder to ward off bad luck, if you hadn’t so much spilled it as dumped it all over with wild abandon?

Wait, hold that thought!

She grabbed a Marine who hadn’t yet gotten his hands on a shaker. “Give me your combat knife!”

“Wha...”

“No time! Knife! Now!”

KABAR in hand and steamrollered Marine still reeling from the force of Heather’s most overwhelming bow to my will right now, lowly peon! tone in her dust, Heather bolted for the kitchen.

What was the Wiccan thing? She hadn’t read much fantasy recently, not when life itself was so awesomely sci-fi. Blade blessed by oil and salt, right?

Virgin olive oil. Closest to ‘blessed oil’ I’m going to find in a kitchen. She grabbed the bottle, popped the top off, and dumped it over the blade and the handle and her hand - she was in a hurry. Note to self, it’s going to be slippery, better watch my grip. She turned and grabbed for the box of bulk salt being pulled out of storage by a white-faced assistant. But white with fear, not cold; the temperature was dropping, but the heat of the stoves in here was fighting back. Bet people aren’t going to be
complaining about the hot kitchen for a while...

No time for fancy sprinkling, and Heather didn’t know the first thing about blessing anything, unless you counted gesundheit. She plunged the oily combat knife straight into the salt, turned, and ran for the main cafeteria again as the girl yelped, an edge of panic in her tone that screamed “I really wish I knew some good swearwords right now!”

The protective wall wasn’t working. Frost already glittered on the top of the stone and more crept down the inner side as Heather watched. It flinched back where thin-lipped Marines threw salt, but in far too many places it simply swept past and kept coming…

And no target to hit. Invisible, seems to be intangible…

The little girl was gathering up a pile of salt with sharp motions that radiated determination and scowling control. There was less of it than Heather would have expected.

Ice means water. Salt dissolves in water. She can’t manipulate minerals in solution?

Heather was already pushing her way up to stand by the kid. How was she supposed to properly observe this if she couldn’t see?

Um. And to back the kid up. Really. Assuming this worked.

It was like stepping through a door from a heated house into full winter wearing a T-shirt. Heather gritted her teeth to keep them from chattering and settled for blindly swiping her oily, salt-crusted knife back and forth in front of her.

The girl’s fierce expression never wavered, heedless of sweat beginning to trickle down her face in defiance of the piercing cold. She punched out a burst of salt out, pushing that encroaching ice back – but this time, the soft laughter never even wavered, and Heather could see several of the Marines nearby shaking their heads as if trying to wake up.

Missed – she can’t see these things either? Well, obviously not, but she was targeting them somehow… aiming for cold zones? Which would mean she gets feedback on temperature from a distance, somehow… And the whole place was cold now, she wouldn’t have anywhere to aim.

The Marine at her left made an odd sound. Half sigh, half gasp… Heather turned sharply and felt her eyes widening behind the burning cold lines of her spectacles. Even as she watched, the man’s hands were turning blue and frosting over, a chill that had already crept up his arms as he stared into blank space.

Operating on pure guesswork, Heather turned sharply and stabbed the empty air in front of him.

And connected.

The shriek went straight through her teeth and every line of thought in her brain skidded to a shivering halt. The Marine fell back as though suddenly dropped. The ice underfoot cracked. The knife slowed as if pushing through something and went burning cold for a moment…

No. Wait. My hand’s numb.

No surprise. Heather had to blink at the gleaming sheath of ice that had covered the blade. And her hand. And her forearm. Going on in layer after layer, as if she were being battered by the death throes of a video game ice spell.
That’s really going to hurt. I hope. Bad things if it doesn’t…

She hadn’t even noticed she’d fallen to the floor until a pair of tiny hands grabbed her and hauled her back away from raging, dying cold.

Must be anchoring herself somehow. Shouldn’t be… heavy enough… to pull… me…

The world was very distant. How annoying.

The girl had stationed herself protectively in front of Heather, and that wouldn’t do at all. Heather would do something about it. Once she remembered how to move…

“Chirabi!”

Stomping. The floor shaking. One of those large blocks of the wall came up and out of the way, leaving a hole in the floor, and Heather glimpsed red and yellow light as the cold dark closed in.

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~

Yelps of surprise and pain - Zuko suppressed the urge to wince in sympathy as he rolled over his shoulder and away from the gap in the floor Toph had opened to let him through. He’d tried to hold back - tried to keep the flames reddish-cool, and away from living flesh - but there’d been no time to take care. Just a flash of almost-panicked spirit, cold, unfriendly, way too close for comfort! and reflex had dropped him to the floor in a whirl to throw out a rapidly-expanding circle of flame. To push the ice spirits back and buy a moment to breathe and look at what was happening...

“Toph! Take the salt and make a perimeter!”

“There’s not enough for a wall, Sparky!” she quipped in a tight voice, already gathering white crystals together.

“We don’t need one,” and Koh take it, he should have explained this as soon as they knew a killing spirit was nearby - earthbenders understood thresholds, but Toph was blind. If it wasn’t solid, it wasn’t real, not to her, and the idea that just drawing a line was enough to create an effective barrier was incomprehensible to her. “Just make a circle around everyone you can reach, before they get close again…”

But that would leave too many wounded out there at the mercy of these ice spirits. Zuko reached out and grabbed the nearest soldier still on his feet, and pointed to two more he caught looking in his direction. “You, you, you - get the wounded, I’ll cover you,” he said curtly, adding a sharp gesture at a man lying not far beyond the line of salt Toph was already forming around them, and praying that tone and action would make his meaning clear.

Clear enough, apparently. The men were already vaulting over the stone barrier Toph must have raised when she first realized the threat before Zuko had even finished pointing. The soldiers made, not for the nearest of the fallen but the farthest, lying near the door and just at the border where Zuko’s desperate swirl of fire had flickered out, with all the guts and desperate fury of Katara protecting a lightning-struck Aang.

“How thick does it have to be?” Toph demanded.
“Doesn’t matter!” Zuko threw a bolt of fire along the running soldiers’ path, counting on the elemental opposition of fire against ice to buy them space. “Just draw a line in the sand and be ready to back it up!”

“Oh, I can so do that.”

Zuko tried to ignore the sound of mocking laughter. He focused on the soldiers who were trusting him to hold freezing oblivion back as they retrieved the fallen.

But his mind was racing. *The cold isn’t just its weapon, it is the cold. Laughter that freezes the mind so you can’t run, or even lure you to it, because it’s slow. Stalk and ambush tactics, but strategic thinking - it’s intelligent. And striking even when the spirit isn’t - quite - here...*

Yukiuso. They were fighting a *yukiuso*.

*We’re in trouble.*

But the killing cold that had *no business* outside the deadly polar icelands beyond the range of even the craziest tribesmen of the Water Tribes was pulling back in the face of fire and salt and fierce, stubbornly human *will-to-live*. The laughter became distant, faded, and the unsettling sense of *other* faded.

Zuko took a moment to catch his breath and steady a hand that wanted desperately to shake.

His eye fell on the woman with flame-colored hair Toph had stationed herself protectively beside, and he bit back a curse. The woman’s delicate spectacles were frosted over - and frozen *to* her face by that frost. Her lips weren’t just *tinged* blue. And her arm...

He’d seen Katara and Aang experimenting with ice gauntlets a time or two. They were *waterbenders*, and they couldn’t hold the form more than a minute before the pain of the cold got the better of them.

This was much worse than a *gauntlet*.

“*We need to get the wounded tended, fast,*” he muttered, painfully aware of time passing.

Toph shook herself ferociously. “*I’ll handle it,*” she said briskly, any remaining tremors in her voice buried deep and stomped on for good measure. *‘Janet’s place is right above us. I can lift the worst of ‘em straight up.’* She was already flexing her fingers and wiggling her toes, trying to warm them up for careful work.

Zuko awkwardly squeezed her shoulder with his good hand, wishing Uncle’s Breath of Fire worked on other people. The killing chill was easing from the air, but...

*Worry later. Triage now.*

He set his good hand - though good was a relative term at the moment, given the way it ached from the stunt he’d pulled to get himself through the hole in the ceiling of the level below-

*If Sokka were here, I’d be hearing circus jokes for the next week. Which, given Ty Lee, was just a little disturbing.*

-and vaulted over Toph’s makeshift wall.

*Should have explained to her about spirits and barriers before we split up. Idiot, why didn’t you...*
consider that the spirit might take the bait?

He glanced at a blue-lipped man who wasn’t even strong enough to shiver, being carried by two of his fellows. Grabbed one of the bearers, pointed him toward the sound of stone blocks moving. Found another - pale, shaking, but slowly getting to his feet - and gently pushed that one to where the better-off of his fellows were gathering to support the shaken.

Zuko had seen the aftermath of spirit attacks before. Not often, most settled lands didn’t host the dangerous spirits, and most people knew better than to get their local spirits that angry - but he’d seen some, hunting down even the slightest hint that might lead him to the Avatar. They could range from unsettling but mostly harmless, like the forest spirit Hei Bai that Aang and the others had talked about, to immensely destructive.

This was... pretty bad. Not on the level of the Ocean’s attack on the Fire Navy...

But the Ocean’s wife had been killed, and spirits always go for overkill. And they believe in guilt by association and have no concept of collateral damage. This was malice.

He’d worry about it later. For the time being, he focused on continuing to sort the shaken from the wounded, pointing the latter to Toph’s rock lift ferrying the worst through a hole she’d opened in the ceiling, insisting that the latter give themselves a chance to simply breathe and convince their bodies and minds that, yes, it really was over and they were still alive. Let the shock of an attack fester, you were practically sending the nastier spirits signed and sealed invitations to make trouble later down the road.

That, he accomplished mostly with scowls, imperious pointing, and making it clear that no amount of back-talk that he couldn’t understand anyway was going to get them anywhere. Thankfully, he was dealing with trained, disciplined soldiers who had the same ingrained response to the tone and bearing of command that got him results with the Home Guard and the Army. It also helped that someone had a pot of that black stuff brewing and was passing odd white cups of it around to anyone still on their feet.

As for those who... weren’t...

Zuko gritted his teeth and brought his concentration back to the other half of triage - separating the living from the dead.

At least there were mercifully few of the latter, certainly less than he’d feared. And yet, something about that fact kept nagging at the back of his mind, never coherent enough to drag into the light of consciousness and examine but insistently there.

Maybe it was the wounds that so many of them bore. Those were no yukiuso’s doing. More unsettling, he couldn’t imagine what had caused them.

Almost like shrapnel wounds, but...

“Oi, Sparky!”

Zuko turned. Toph was staring impatiently in his general direction.

A quick glance showed that the remaining survivors were already being seen to. Zuko made his way back to the earthbender. “I think that’s the last of the wounded,” he said, watching the words puff out in little clouds of white fog. The room was slowly warming now that the yukiuso had withdrawn, but it was still chilly to say the least.
Toph grabbed his tunic and nearly yanked him off his feet as she used the moment of distraction to haul him onto the block she’d been using as a lift for the worst off. “Then we’re going up!”

“Wha- Hey!” He barely got his feet under himself before the block surged under their feet, launching them both up through the hole in the ceiling.

At least Toph had only tossed them just hard enough to clear the ceiling. Floor, rather. Whatever; he had better things to worry about, like twisting to land just beyond the hole. And then grabbing Toph before she missed her landing entirely because she couldn’t see.

Crazy earthbender! He scowled at her, figuring that she’d see it with her feet easily enough. Fine, he got that there wasn’t enough stone between two levels here to raise a pillar the way she normally did, but… Why doesn’t she just lift the rock she’s standing on? I know she can hold it up, she was lifting the wounded with it just a minute ago! Maybe it had something to do with needing at least indirect contact with the earth as she bent it. “Hey, a little warning next time!”

Toph didn’t give the complaint so much as a dismissal. “Where’s Schemes?”

Blink. “Who?”

“Schemes. Crazy female Sokka. Joked about me stealing the chocolate this morning.” Toph was worrying at her lip, and if she had any idea how much the lines of worry on her face betrayed how she felt, she’d probably splat a mud mask on her face and never wash it off. She’d already returned the stone slab to its former place and set it there, smoothing out any hint of crack or seam in the stone with a careful, careful precision that bespoke a desperate need to do something. “She stabbed one of those things and it worked, but she got hurt.”

A purely physical attack on a spirit. That took guts. Zuko moved out of the way of a man hurrying past and took a moment to assess the controlled chaos around them. Attendants wearing the white haori that seemed to designate a physician – morbid thought, that, but he had to grant that white would show any dirt that might contaminate an injury, which would be useful – were already seeing to the worst of the wounded. Here and there odd boxes radiated heat and the deep red glow of angry coals – despite the fact that he couldn’t feel any flame in them, only…

Lightning? They’re using cold fire to warm a room? That’s it, these people are officially crazy.

The red light and the bustle of warm drinks handed around, grim-faced healers dressing wounds and warming dangerously chilled bodies with what seemed to be heated bottles and blankets, grimmer ones working thin-lipped over still figures – it made it hard to pick out that flame-colored hair at first, but eventually…

Zuko winced.

Toph had grabbed his tunic again; Zuko could feel the thick water-silk straining as her fingers tightened. “It’s bad. Isn’t it.”

Lying didn’t work on Toph. And Zuko wasn’t very good at it anyway. “…Yeah.”

Janet was leaning over the woman, wrapping a blanket around her shoulders and scowling ferociously – worriedly – at that arm.

Ouch. Now that he had a chance to take a better look – “Schemes’s” arm was encased nearly to her shoulder in jagged, malevolently glittering ice, so cold that white fog streamed from it to fall to the floor and pool before reluctantly dissipating. Zuko remembered how much being iced over hurt. And that had been waterbent ice, not a spirit’s active malice…
But it’s something I can do something about. “Stay close, people aren’t looking where they’re going right now. You might get stepped on.”

Toph snorted as she shifted her grip to his sash. But instead of a snarky comment, she asked, “You’re going to try something?” She stuck to his side like a burr as he began making his way across the room.

“I at least know how to de-ice someone.” Maybe if he got that cleared, Janet could still save that arm?

Coming up alongside the physician, he gently pushed her shoulder, trying to wordlessly ask her to make room. She started, her surprised glance at him breaking her desperate glare at the ice-trapped arm, but made room.

This was going to be harder than freeing the men Katara had frozen on his ship’s deck. They were Fire, even if not all had been firebenders. Their chi ran hot by nature, fighting the bite of ice. And on a more practical level, he had only one useable hand at the moment. It would be doable, just... tricky.

Zuko breathed, letting licks of flame wrap around his good hand. He kneaded them, thankful that he’d pestered Uncle into showing him the finger dexterity exercises that let the old tile-shark do tricks like rolling a Pai Sho tile across the knuckles of his hand. At the time Zuko had been more interested in their application to improving his fine control in sword-work, but it let him manipulate the flames one-handed now. Once his fingers and palm were wreathed in reddish-orange flame - he didn’t want it any hotter than that, not yet - he lowered his hand onto the ice.

Like plunging red-hot metal into water. Steam boiled up from ice with a tooth-grinding shriek that was far too close to the screams of the spirits they’d fought. Fighting the urge to cough, Zuko turned his face away from the gathering cloud and kept his breathing, and the flame, strong and steady.

It wasn’t going to be enough. He could see her arm, now that the steam was clearing a bit; the skin was a waxy, ugly white, hard to the touch in a way that flesh should never be. Worse, he could feel her chi pulling away, dimming, an ember about to go out...

Agni damn it, no.

Breathe. In. Out. In. The same breath that he used to flare and damp candles, cooking fires, even his own inner flames. The dragons had taught him that fire was life. This woman was alive. If he could just - feed that fire, the way he would feed the flame of a candle...

Carefully. Heat could kill as easily as cold.

The ice was gone; he released the flame before it could touch skin. Skin that was still frozen to the bone, literally, and there had to be something else he could do...

Frostbite. Frostbite needs warmth. Gentle, complete. And even then, if you aren’t careful the cold blood can shock the heart into faltering as it thaws...

Warmth. Hadn’t Aang said something as they’d been adapting firebending techniques? That for such a crazy guy, Sozin had had some awesome tricks - something about a vision where Sozin had bent heat - just heat, no fire - out of a volcano?

Which is daft, try to block the top of a volcano off and it’s only going to blow worse because all the power is in its roots... but...

If he thought about this too hard, he’d lose his nerve. Keeping his mind on his breathing and that
little flickering ember that was life, Zuko reached without looking towards the heat of one of those lightning-heated furnaces, and beckoned.

The *strangeness* of flameless heat wrapping around his fingers made his hair prickle. Or maybe that was the tiny crackle of seed lightning that he’d picked up with the warmth. Not much, about the sort he’d pick up putting on a silk tunic or petting a cat-owl; just enough to give a little zap as he lowered his warmth-wrapped hand to where still-living flesh met frozen...

If he hadn’t trained so obsessively to master Uncle’s lightning-redirection - if he hadn’t spent the last two days surrounded by the ceaseless sense of tamed lightning - he wouldn’t have noticed. But he had, and he had, and he *did*.

Something threaded through the woman’s flesh and blood and bone had *echoed* that little spark.

Holding his breath would be a very bad idea. But Zuko *wanted* to. He forced himself to keep breathing, keep *focused* on that, even as he oh so carefully *reached* for that tiny, fighting, faltering ghost of lightning. *Come on. Work with me. You’re Fire, right? Fire is life.*

*So live!*

Janet made a strangled noise. He tuned it out. Toph actually *eeped*, which was much more worrisome, but he’d deal with it later. The skin of his hand was *warm*, with soft prickles that almost felt cold against the heat - and that, he focused on. Because, if he looked with through the corner of his mind’s eye, he could almost pick out traces of where that ghost of a spark *should* have been in the frozen flesh.

Should have been. Wanted to *be*. And if he just... laid a path for it...

The woman was awake now. Awake and swearing, by the sound of it. And that was *good*, because that little flicker inside her had brightened, steadied, and he could feel it pulsing warmth with each heartbeat out to the very fingertips his hand had just passed.

Zuko blinked and actually *looked*. At the arm, now flushed a deep red, painful-looking but *alive*. At earthbender-green eyes blinking at him from behind large spectacles.

At his *hand*, wrapped in heat-shimmer and tiny golden - *gold*, not blue-white - sparks of miniature lightning, dancing across every flex and bend in his fingers and across the expanse of his palm and the back of his hand.

All of which dissipated as Zuko abruptly lost his concentration. He staggered back and hit the back of his knees on - oh, a chair. Funny. He was pretty sure it hadn’t been there before.

“...Zuko? Did you just... Hey! Don’t you dare check out on me now, Sparky!”

Toph’s voice was warbling oddly... oh. His ears were ringing. That would explain it. He felt about as tired as he’d been after the catastrophe at the North Pole. His head ached, his eyes ached, his body ached...

*Heh. Overdid it. Again. Never learn, do I?*
Heather Dyne is another expy, and she is indeed very mad. Fans of a certain webcomic that I referenced in Chapter Two should recognize her. (Hint: say Heather Dyne very fast a few times.) She is not a major character: I simply needed an SGC PoV for that situation, and the timing meant that none of the usual suspects were available. (Besides, the SGC has to be full of brilliant, quirky people. SG-1 can’t be the only ones having Mad Adventures.) Nevertheless, she will continue to show up, because I believe in Conservation of Character: if you give a character a name and a speaking part, you’d darn well better use them.

Timeline note: I’m assuming that the rebellion against Ra took place roughly 3000 BCE or so. To me, this is a nice compromise between the existence of large-scale social organization and some technology (bronze) in Egypt, and the lack of historical records of the rebellion. I know that some canon states the rebellion took place 8000 BCE (which to me is simply too early), while other sources of canon claim that Goa’uld rule may have lasted up to the common era (in which case, we should have better records, if only because people would want to brag like crazy, and bragging in the ancient world means monuments galore). So I’m basing the 3000 BCE date on the Moebius episode. Yes, SG-1 supposedly tried to start the rebellion early, but “a decade or two early” makes far more sense than “a thousand years” early.

Zuko’s odd meditation breathing is based on shitāli prānyāna. (Which is basically a fancier form of panting like a dog – you run air over your tongue to cool it off rapidly.) In canon, firebenders flare and damp fires by breathing; it seemed reasonable that there would be a cooling breath as well as a warming one.

“Water spirits tend to be killers.” I draw this from myth and folklore, where the overwhelming majority of spirits seem to be associated with water – and they tend to be nasty critters. Speaking of, a note on frostbite: it’s actually caused when ice crystals form inside the cells of your body. The forming crystals rupture the cell walls. (Same thing as freezerburn.) But crystals are larger the slower they form. And also, when frostbite thaws, the cold blood that was frozen can shock the heart and cause cardiac arrhythmia.

Yes, I suspect that army boots would seriously mess with Toph’s ability to read fine motion. And I kid you not about Fire Nation shoes striking sparks. Watch The Drill. As for rubber soles – that has to be weird for Toph! Shock absorption in shoes is a pretty new thing.

Triskaidekalingual – from triskaidekaphobia, the fear of the number thirteen. “Speaking thirteen languages.” And the Great Vowel Shift was a very real thing, and happens to be a major contributing factor to why English spelling is as chaotic as it is. (And yes – the lecturer I listened to did indeed suggest that pronunciation in the transition period would have sounded pretty much like Pirate Talk. Which, as it happens, is the right time period. Fancy that…)

A little bit of history: some scholars theorize that the native attack on Erikson’s Newfoundland colony was prompted by the fact that the Vikings would have traded with the locals - meaning, they probably traded milk and cheese. Which would have made the natives, who did not have a milk-drinking culture, sick. When you have two very separated cultures coming together, issues of foods and allergies become extremely important. It’s easy to forget that, in a world where you can get food from just about anywhere with sufficient money and the right grocery market. But, for the record: the
Fire Nation canonically seems to eat a lot of fish - note Sokka’s “stewed sea slug” in Sokka’s Master. (Besides. Archipelago.) And we know the Earth Kingdom has cow hybrids, so lactose tolerance seems logical. The fact that Zuko didn’t seem to have any bad reactions to the food at the farm he stayed at suggests he, at least, is lactose tolerant.

Finally, this chapter addresses my other problem with what fandom – and sometimes canon – does with Daniel – which is to have him glance at a culture and break it down into its component parts based on the first people he meets. Or, more often, start picking out subtleties of language after talking for two minutes. Speaking as someone who is fascinated by and studies human psychology, culture, and languages? Humans aren’t that simple.

Even though I came up with an excuse for miracle translation. Heh. What can I say, I like my anthrolingual geekery.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

This fic has its own TV Tropes page now!

I should have put this note in the AN to the last chapter, but I forgot. So, here it is: Aang has, canonically, a slacker streak, and a conflict avoidance streak to match it. Time after time in canon, we see him making time to goof off and have fun even when a deadline is bearing down on him. This is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, I’d venture to say that it’s the reason Aang has handled the stresses of his situation as well as he has. If anyone else in the GAang had been in his shoes, they would have had, at the very least, one or two extremely messy breakdowns.

Heck. Canon, Zuko did. Several times, to varying degrees of severity.

However, psychologically helpful as that attitude may be, Aang can and will clash with more assertive, driven personalities like Toph and Zuko, and even Katara and Sokka on occasion. This, too, is canon. Toph gets impatient and exasperated with Aang on a pretty regular basis. (Heck, you might even call that her default mode for dealing with the world in general.) That’s going to come through in her character voice. It does not mean that she has the whole story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Well… that’s one lot of Marines who will never think of food fights the same way again. Janet dropped into her chair wearily. And I haven’t even had dinner yet.

It could have been worse. Far worse. They’d lost five Marines and a biologist to bullet ricochets – and Jack was going to tear throats out over that.

If, perhaps, somewhat less viciously than the commanding officer of any other base might. Invisible, intangible enemies weren’t something most COs needed to consider.

Bad as the ricochets had been, the mass hypothermia had in its own way been worse. As was the story she’d heard from survivor after shivering, shaking survivor, of strangely hypnotic laughter that made your thoughts about as fast as molasses in the winter, until all you could do was listen, and obey.

Janet had the sinking feeling that she could guess why the research team on P4X-684 had apparently just walked out of that lab and vanished, now.

But at least hypothermia could be treated. Frostbite there was in plenty. But…

It’s a strange thought, but thank goodness they froze things so quickly, she admitted to herself. The effect had been similar to that of dry ice; the water in the flesh had frozen so quickly that the crystals for the most part must not have been large enough to rupture cell walls. Painful, yes – but the damage could have been so much worse.

Speaking of… Janet glanced at the one she’d been certain wouldn’t make it. “How are you feeling,
Sergeant?"

Heather Dyne looked up from where she was gingerly scrubbing a layer of dead skin from the arm that had, literally, been frozen solid. The skin underneath was pink and healthy – and, from the way Heather winced every time she put more than the lightest pressure on the soft towel, extremely sensitive.

“Like I could sleep for a week,” the engineer said. “If this arm will let me. Worst case of pins and needles ever.”

“And you still have an arm,” Janet said quietly.

Heather raised her hand, pink and delicate and utterly incongruous compared to the ink- and grease-stained calluses on the other that was adjusting her glasses. “Believe me, Doctor Fraiser, I’m very, very grateful. I seriously thought I was dead.” Still peering at her arm with the intensity she usually saved for things that had gears, finicky levers, live electrical currents, and highly volatile chemicals, Heather muttered, “I just wish I could figure out how he did it.”

You and me both, Janet thought as Jack waved sharply, signaling the engineer to come over now that Janet had made her preliminary checkup after Zuko’s unexpected emergency treatment. Heather hadn’t been the only person to think the woman had been as good as dead. If not for Zuko pulling one unbelievable rabbit out of the hat…

Healing. Honest-to-goodness healing. I had no idea they were capable of that.

More frightening…

Janet glanced at the children. Zuko was pale, clearly exhausted, and he kept flexing his good hand, although without any sign of the wispy white-gold static electricity or the wavering heat shimmer that had been wrapped around it earlier. Toph looked nearly as tired, but that didn’t seem to slow down the… enthusiastic stream of muttering that, by the bemused look on Zuko’s face, probably included a liberal amount of swearwords.

…I don’t think they knew he could do that, either.

Which was disturbing. She hadn’t quite realized the extent to which she – and Sam, and through them the general and the SGC as a whole – had assumed that Zuko and Toph knew what they were doing.

And they do. The level of control they have? They must.

But apparently, they didn’t know everything they could do.

Control was so obviously a huge part of what they did. How could they control something that they didn’t even know they could do? And what would happen if they couldn’t control their abilities?

On the other hand… it was fascinating. They probably never stop learning. I wonder – do their abilities get stronger with use, the way muscles do?

Janet’s lips quirked humorlessly. Under the circumstances, I’m rather inclined to hope that they do.

Because the one thing the survivors agreed upon was that the creatures had withdrawn when Zuko entered the fray – probably not willing to go up against fire directly.

Retreat. Not defeat. And other than the one Heather had almost killed herself stabbing – assuming
she’d even gotten it – none of them were dead. However many there had been in the first place.

There would be another attack.

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~

The long stream of the most creatively applied non-profane invective Zuko had heard in weeks paused. “Shouldn’t you be scolding me about now?” Toph asked suspiciously.

Zuko shrugged. “If you say anything I don’t wholeheartedly agree with, I’ll let you know,” he said dryly. His attention was mostly focused on the man with silver-shot hair and an air of general amusement who’d ambled in shortly after the worst of the post-battle chaos had died down, chatting with the survivors of the yukiuso’s attack.

The minute he’d come through the door, Toph’s face had darkened like a stormcloud.

“Oh, joy,” she’d muttered quietly when Zuko sent her a silent glance, trusting that her feet would tell her of the movement. “A general. Just what we needed.”

“You don’t like generals?” he’d murmured, shifting to keep the man in sight without looking like he was watching.

“Eh. Let’s just say that when we stopped by Ba Sing Se... Aang and generals? Bad mix.”

Heh. When they’d been in Ba Sing Se, he’d been an absolute mess, trying to sort out what was real from all the things he’d always been taught. And no help from Iroh, who’d been beside himself with joy for the opportunity to make tea for a living. And even then, he could have told them that.

However… Toph might be able to read people like scrolls, but she’d never lived and breathed the military. If she had, she would have known that she wasn’t quite correct. This guy wasn’t a general.

But he is a commander. The second-in-command, probably. Taking the risks that the general can’t. Not if these people had any sense, at any rate – and Sam and Janet and the big man who’d introduced himself as Teal’c definitely had sense.

Zuko let his head tilt forward slightly to hide the direction of his gaze as he flicked a glance at the man chatting with the woman Toph had dubbed Schemes from the corner of his eye.

Chatting. Right. The guy played harmless very well, but he wasn’t Uncle Iroh. And Zuko didn’t miss the fact that he’d oh-so subtly shifted so that he was positioned towards Zuko’s left.

If Zuko’s eye had been as bad as his face suggested, that would be a blind spot.

He saw a potential weakness and latched onto it. Zuko bit back the urge to snarl. All that would accomplish would be to show the man that he’d found a vulnerable point. And once he knew, he’d never let go of it.

Like Zhao.

Which… wasn’t automatically a bad thing, he admitted reluctantly. Zhao had risen to Admiral for a reason, and it wasn’t just because he was Zuko’s primary rival in hunting the Avatar. Zhao got the job done. He’d been winning the Invasion of the North, right up until he got the Greater Spirits
involved. Even that could have been a brilliant coup, depriving the North Pole of their very source of power, if he hadn’t left a *royally pissed off* Ocean behind him.

*Grab every advantage you can. Any weakness in your enemy is a weapon in your hand.*

On the one hand, *good.* A competent commander was definitely a good sign. And would be a lot easier to work with, because you could trust him to have *sense.* Not to mention a vested interest in stopping a threat before it could do any more damage.

On the other hand…

*I’m the Fire Lord. And Toph and I are both friends of the Avatar. If someone like Zhao got his hands on, say, the Earth King…*

They needed to be very, very careful.

*Zhao figured out I was the Blue Spirit just by looking at the swords. I have to assume that this commander is at least that observant.*

And given that he clearly *was* a competent commander, by the way his soldiers reacted to him and the way he’d turned up just as the chaos settled, when he wouldn’t be underfoot – that air of absentminded amusement showed that this man shared another trait with Zhao. He was *sly.*

*Dammit. I can’t do sly.*

Or subtle, apparently, because for just a moment as Schemes waved an impatient hand over her no-longer-frozen arm, the man glanced at him, and Zuko saw a flash – just a flash – of the steel under the smile.

Zuko knew that expression. He’d seen quite a lot of it since word had spread of his Agni Kai against Azula… under the Comet.

*You expect me to believe that you pulled that off?*

The skepticism back home was inevitable. There were reasons why no one before Sozin had ever tried to use the Comet for military advantage.

*Only fools and masters bend in the Comet’s light.*

Mastery of firebending meant mastery of *control,* rather than doing huge feats of bending. Any idiot could spark a firestorm under the right conditions. Only a master could stand in the inferno’s heart unscathed.

Agni’s Comet – as it had been known before Sozin’s war – granted incredible power to firebending. But unlike the waxing and waning of waterbending with the moon, the increase wasn’t gradual at all. Zuko remembered the way power had exploded into his spirit, that sudden sense of a roaring bonfire that wanted nothing save to *burn.* You had no time to get used to it.

No time to learn how to control it. And with *that much* power, like a hundred full moons would be to a waterbender…

If you lost control, you were toast.

*Literally. And usually the people around you as well.*

That was why Uncle Iroh and the White Lotus had chosen to retake Ba Sing Se on the Day of the
Comet. Iroh, Jeong-Jeong – they were master firebenders with impeccable control and iron willpower, able to handle even the raging flames of the Comet without losing control. Most of the troops in Ba Sing Se weren’t, which meant they’d been handicapped by their own sudden power. Even Ozai’s handpicked firebenders, chosen for the mission to burn the Earth Kingdom to ashes, had done so with the understanding that their fire would all be directed downward – and carefully arranged a substantial distance away from each other on each ship.

To not only firebend, but to challenge another firebender to an Agni Kai during the Comet’s influence…

Zuko hadn’t told Katara, or any of the others. And he had no intentions of ever telling them. They didn’t need to know.

When he’d issued that challenge to Azula, he hadn’t expected either of them to walk away alive.

Aang… Aang might have guessed, if he thought about it. After all, Zuko had pulled him aside and warned him against relying on firebending for more than blocks and a defense against any lightning-bending Ozai might use, if worst came to worst and they weren’t able to come up with a plan before the Comet arrived. Aang wasn’t a master of Fire, and try as he might, he still had issues with control – particularly because he was used to using an Avatar’s raw strength to make up for the times when he lacked the finesse needed to accomplish something. Safe enough with Air, Water and Earth, maybe. But with Fire? Invitation for flaming disaster.

But so far as he could tell, Aang had never thought about it. Why should he? After all, Aang had gone up against Ozai himself. And in the end, everyone had survived. Aang wasn’t the sort to dwell on ugly might-have-beens.

And, if nothing else, Zuko’s mad stunt had secured his place as Fire Lord in the minds of his people. The Fire Nation admired audacity. And in a way, his own reputation worked for him. He’d heard whispers that he’d survived the Agni Kai only because Agni had shown special favor towards him. Which, said the whisperers, was the point of a true Agni Kai, was it not?

He doubted that convinced any skeptics – but it was enough to make them hesitate. A bit.

Speaking of skepticism – Toph threw her hands in the air, nearly clipping his nose in passing and forcing his attention back from its wandering path. “Sparky, you healed her! You healed her using firebending! Why didn’t anyone say anything? Uncle didn’t tell you, the Sages didn’t tell you, even your stupid dragons didn’t tell you!”

“I don’t think they knew,” Zuko said slowly.

Toph’s brow furrowed. “Um. Dragons? Ancient firebending masters? Wasn’t that the whole point of going to the Sun Warriors?”

“But they didn’t bend lightning,” Zuko said slowly. “And, this was more like redirecting lightning.”

And… that wasn’t a skill you’d learn unless you expected someone to be throwing lightning at you, was it? Or maybe natural lightning. Did dragons fly during storms?

Toph’s explosion subsided somewhat. “Lightning? Really?” She sounded like she wasn’t sure if she should think that was awesome, or scary. Given Toph, he had a pretty good idea which side of the question she’d come down on.

Zuko nodded absently, watching as the commander left Schemes to settle back on her cot as he made
his oh-so-casual way to the sun-haired man who’d introduced himself the night before as Daniel, and had the same distracted air as the Earth King. *And probably the same iron underneath the scholasticism. These people are tough.* “Part of it was just… fire. The whole *fire is life* thing, really. It was like there was a little flame inside her that wanted to *live*. I just… had to keep it going. But the other part…” He wrestled with the words, trying to find a way to describe something that he’d mostly just *felt*. “It was a bit like this place. There’s caged lightning everywhere, but it sticks to certain paths. There’s energy in our body - chi flows, stuff like that. It was really, really tiny lightning, but once I noticed it was *there…* Toph?”

The tiny earthbender had just gone white.

Zuko turned to look at her, worried. “What’s wrong?”

Toph swallowed and pulled out a stick of yellow-painted wood about a handspan in length. “Before those things hit us, I was poking at this. Because I noticed I could *feel* the wood, just a bit. It felt like… bone.”

Zuko thought about that, and blinked. “Do you think *you* could heal that way?”

“*May…* wait, what am I saying?” Toph was quickly throwing off the shock in favor of glee. “I’m the *Blind Bandit*. You bet I could! Heck, I could probably even…” She stopped suddenly, turning green.

“What?”

“…I could probably bend bone. Like Katara bends blood. And now, I’m going to deliberately forget I ever had that thought.”

Zuko shivered. He remembered what Katara had done to the leader of the Sea Ravens, before the man had managed to get out that he was only Yon Rha’s replacement. Although the most terrifying part of that had been less what Katara did and more her face as she did it… “I wonder if all healing-bending is linked to the scariest part of that bending style? Waterbending healing *has* to be related to bloodbending. Fire is related to lightning. Earth and bone…” And if Fire and Earth could both heal, surely Air could as well.

Did that mean that airbending had something similar to bloodbending or lightning-bending? Spirits. Zuko didn’t even want to *imagine* how Aang would react to that idea.

Then the arm that had finally gone numb again exploded into pins and needles as Toph grabbed it. “Toph!” Zuko yelped, grabbing at the edge of one of the odd raised pallets that served these people as beds in an effort to stay mostly upright as the earthbender dragged his injured arm down to her level.

“Oh, don’t be such a baby,” Toph said impatiently, frowning at nothing as she poked at his arm. “I just want to try feeling it. I’m not going to bend anything.”

*Other than my spine?* Zuko gritted his teeth and waited, trying to will the fire-and-cold dancing through his arm to fade.

Toph’s frown deepened. “Other arm. Gimme.”

Sighing, Zuko obliged, letting her grab his good arm with her free hand to inspect it as well. It was uncomfortable, but – well, it was never a good idea to argue with Toph when she already had a grip on you.
But after several moments of intent study… Toph covered it well, but he saw her shoulders slump. She must have realized she’d given herself away, because in the next moment she let go of his hands with a huff of annoyance. “I can tell something’s off with your left hand,” she admitted. “That’s about it, though.”

There was something inherently wrong about a discouraged Toph. “Katara wraps water around her hands when she heals,” Zuko said thoughtfully, as he gingerly slipped his arm back into the blue and white sling Janet had given him.

*Why Water Tribe colors, anyway? Wait. Stupid question. If they don’t bend, they probably don’t even have Water Tribes, at least not the way we know them.* Spirits, his head hurt just trying to imagine that.

He shook the thought off and continued, “I had hot air and seed lightning around mine…”

Sightless green eyes widened. “Whoa. I know you said it was like redirecting, but – you were lightning-bending? I thought you couldn’t do that!”

“…I can’t,” Zuko said weakly, suddenly shaken. What he’d done – it hadn’t felt anything like the separation of Yin and Yang the way Uncle had explained it. But those sparks dancing across his hands had definitely been storm-fire, just like the spirit-flames that would sometimes gather on the masts of ships during a storm.

*Does this mean there’s another way to bend lightning?*

Think about that later. For now… “But, you might need some way to wrap earth around your hands to make it work,” he said – although his voice trailed off dubiously towards the end. Mud facials in spas aside – earth. Dirt. Open wounds. Maybe that wasn’t such a good idea…

Toph, on the other hand, pursed her lips and tilted her head to the side, obviously intrigued. “Huh. Is that why they use plaster for casts on broken bones?”

“I… think that’s more to immobilize the limb so the bone can set,” Zuko said slowly, blinking. Because that… actually made a strange kind of sense. And come to think of it… “You said that you could feel bone, right?” he asked her.

“Yeah. I could feel yours, for sure.” Toph made to poke at his bad arm.

Zuko absently blocked the poke and let his good hand hover, right where the worst of the pins and needles started, where it stopped responding to his attempts to move the muscles. “Whatever’s wrong – it’s something to do with my chi. Like… I didn’t manage to get rid of the lightning, and it got stuck in the pathways that the chi uses.” Like a jab by Ty Lee, only much worse – pressure points usually only lasted an few hours at the most. “That’s energy. Fire. But bones are the Earth of the body. You’d probably have better luck with them.”

Toph scowled. “*Katara* doesn’t have any problems healing just about anything.”

“According to her, *Katara* found out she could heal by sticking her hands in a stream,” Zuko replied dryly “She wasn’t even trying. I think it’s safe to say that she has a knack for healing.”

“And even then, she couldn’t do all that much for Aang when he got zapped. Or for Sokka’s broken leg.” Toph paused for a moment, before a gleeful grin spread across her face. “Oh, man. I can’t wait to feel Sugarqueen’s reaction when we tell her about this!”

Zuko tried not to let on that he wanted to grin. Anyone who thought Fire was competitive had never
met the Blind Bandit. Toph would be on this like a badger-dog on a grudge, now. She hated coming in second-best.

Of course, so did Katara…

Toph stiffened. “Heads up, Sparky.”

“I see them.” As they’d been talking, the salt-and-pepper-haired commander had met Sam coming in the door, with much muttering and hand-waving between the two of them.

And now they’d both turned and were heading straight for him and Toph with looks of resolve on their faces.

Interrogation time, he thought, dropping his arm to lightly brush Toph’s shoulder before turning to face them. He knew that look on the man’s face – although he usually experienced it from the inside.

“I want answers, and you’re going to give them to me.” And we can’t even talk to each other.

This was going to be fun.

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~

Jack was one unhappy Special Forces colonel.

“You honestly think that you managed to stab the invisible Frosty because you’d put Italian dressing on the knife.”

Sergeant Dyne shrugged and moved to push her glasses up her nose, then winced. The kid may have fixed her arm – and Jack would deal with that later, he wanted to handle this mess one problem at a time and freezy creepy clown laughs that tried to kill his people got priority – but the spots on her face where the metal frames had frozen to her skin were still there. “Blessed oil and salt – that’s how you’re supposed to prep a classic Wiccan athame. That’s a ritual knife,” she added, shrugging at his incredulous expression. “I dabbled in the pagan scene in college.”

“Olive oil and table salt.” Jack looked at her dubiously.

“Extra virgin olive oil. Have you ever heard the health nuts sing its praises? I figured that would be the closest I’d get to a blessing on short notice. And even I don’t need to ask Daniel to know that table salt is a huge thing.” She shrugged. “Of course, that was me hedging my bets. No one else tried to stab one of the things. Maybe it was just good old Cold Iron.”

“KABARs aren’t iron,” Jack complained.

“I think as far as faeries are concerned, it still counts.”

Faeries. Right. “And one or the other worked.”

“Don’t ask me why. It makes no scientific sense.” Dyne made a face and flexed her fingers. “I wouldn’t recommend a repeat performance though, sir. Icing over, not fun.”

Well, wasn’t that just lovely?
On General Hammond’s orders, the base was on lockdown – a-freakin’-gain – until the weather changed. Frosty with chance of death; not good for tourists. Or locals, for that matter.

Although there was a lot of uneasy debate about whether or not a lock-down would actually stop it. None of the officers he’d spoken with thus far remembered noticing so much as a cold spot in the cafeteria – and with Gabor and Dohman being found frozen dead that morning, Jack was pretty damn sure that if it had been there, someone would have sung out.

This was Stargate Command. Weird was the new normal. And when weird could get you killed, dignity sometimes went the way of the dodo.

All of which meant that this type of weird might be the walking-through-walls type. Dammit.

Guess we’ll know if Colorado Springs starts reporting a local cold snap.

On the other hand. Whether or not a base lockdown would keep their killer cold in – it also served to keep certain unpleasant visitors out. Like the type that wore suits and eyed anything even remotely alien with dissection on the brain. Given that Hammond was currently on the phone updating the Pentagon on the situation…

Pair of psychokinetics. Yeah, the NID would just love to get their hands on you two. He glanced briefly over to where the dainty demolitionist was currently making a game attempt at turning the air blue. Dammit, they’re kids… Hm. Would the fact that they’re minors work for or against us, if the NID get grabby?

Well. That was Hammond’s job, and he was welcome to it. Jack’s job was to find their little Frosty-gone-bad wannabes and make their unwelcome thoroughly known.

Unfortunately, he couldn’t exactly wave his hands and send his men out to turn the mountain inside-out looking for the things. They didn’t even know what they needed to look for. And until they found some way to fight these things, all that sending people out would accomplish would be breaking them down to easily munched, bit-size groups.

Not that numbers had proved much of a deterrent. There had been over thirty people at the Battle of the Salt Shakers – staff, military, scientists, and transplanetary strays. Out of that number, only three had managed to actually take the fight to the things.

Sergeant Dyne had been operating on too many pulp fantasy novels and a wild guess. And she was damn right that no one had any business trying to replicate her method until they figured out some way of circumventing the nasty side effects. Which kinda required figuring out what had worked. Why it worked wouldn’t hurt either, but he’d leave figuring that out to Sam and her minions…

Fire and salt. He eyed the kids again. Okay, fire makes sense enough. But why salt?

Brain-picking was definitely in order. Which, of course, was dependent on being able to talk to the kids. And there was an itsy-bitsy problem with that…

Leaving Sergeant Dyne with firm orders to get some rest and a rueful suggestion that she avoid blowing up any labs for the nonce, Jack tucked his thumbs into his pockets and strolled across the infirmary to the official Talky Guy.

“How’s it going?” he asked casually, keeping half an eye on the kids. And… yep. Zuko had shifted ever so slightly. The boy was definitely keeping a close watch on him, from the corner of his eye.

His left eye. Whatever had left that scar apparently hadn’t damaged his vision too badly, then.
Which was both interesting, and disturbing. Because it said ugly, ugly things about how he’d gotten that scar. For his face to have been burned so badly – third degree burns, count on it – without damaging his eye… There was no way that scar came from an accident. Or even from combat. Magic kung fu or not, you could only get controlled damage like that in controlled circumstances.

Someone meant to hurt him. But not maim him.

And the track of the scar, centered over the eye but streaking back over his ear and into his hairline…

He tried to get out of the way, but all he managed was to turn his face a little. Meaning that he couldn’t get away.

All of which added up, in Jack’s experience, to torture scar.

When we get to their world, I’m going to have a couple visits to make. In the interests of…

diplomacy.

Daniel pushed his glasses up absently as he gave Jack a sharp look, clearly picking up on a bit of his mood. “It would be going better if people didn’t keep talking to me while I’m trying to listen to them.”

Jack shrugged and contrived to look innocent.

Daniel rolled his eyes, clearly not buying the look for a moment, and rubbed his forehead. “Not as well as I’d like,” he admitted reluctantly. “I can tell you that the roots of their language on Earth have to be very, very old. Their ancestors must have been in one of the first waves of slaves to be exported, I’m recognizing almost nothing in their vocabulary, other than a few hints that maybe somewhere way back there was a trace of Indo-European.” He paused. “Which is interesting, actually. It suggests they’ve been out of touch with the Stargate and its community for a long, long time. Even isolated communities still have languages recognizably related to Abydonian.”

“How does that work?” Jack asked dubiously.

“Gatespeak again. For a long time, Ancient Egyptian was the most common human language, so it snuck its way into vocabularies everywhere, with every person that went through a Stargate.” Daniel looked down at the notepad in his hands. He’d already made a list of the handful of terms Sam and Janet had picked up over the course of their adventures with the kids. Accompanied by scribbles. Lots and lots of scribbles. Some of them hadn’t even been crossed out yet. “It seems to be a mora-timed language, and with a preference for monophthongs…”

“Wow,” Jack said.

“It definitely has a pronounced pitch-accent system. I don’t think it’s actually tonal, but there are definite elements of it…”

“Amazing!”

Daniel gave him a dirty, dirty look.

Jack grinned crookedly at him. “Any insights to share with the poor, ignorant layfolk, Professor?”

The anthropologist sighed heavily, a world of I don’t know why I put up with this in that one heave of his lungs. “…I think they use different dialects,” he said. “Mutually intelligible, obviously, but…”

Jack raised his eyebrows. “Which means… what?”
“It could be any number of things.” Uh-oh. Danny was sounding interested. “We already know they’re familiar with the idea of cross-cultural communication, and they’re from different ethnicities—maybe what I’m hearing is different accents, which would suggest that they have separate languages but they’re speaking some kind of common trade language, like Latin and then French…” He paused. “No, that doesn’t work. They’re definitely both native speakers, they’re using the same grammar rules, it’s mostly a difference in pronunciation and emphasis…”

Jack cleared his throat.

Daniel coughed. “Sorry. It could also be a social class thing. Going by the way they act, I suspect Toph is significantly higher-status than Zuko.”

Jack raised his eyebrows. He didn’t normally question Danny’s mad anthropology guru skills. But…

All the Marines who’d been conscious by the end of that battle had agreed on one thing. As soon as Zuko had come up through the hole Toph had opened in the cafeteria floor? Kid took command like he’d been born wearing stripes. And not just directing Toph, either. He’d rallied and organized all the fighters in that room with a few quick gestures.

Mind, they’d been Marines. Madmen reputations aside, they knew how to take orders in the midst of chaos. From someone who had the proper authority. But that Zuko had been able to project that sort of authority…

Well. Jack had learned a few things about how this sort of business worked. Exceptions happened, granted, but for the most part, trained commanders didn’t come from the dregs of society.

Command-trained. Huh. That fit with the idea Sam had floated earlier, that Zuko was basically special forces. Most specialists in any military were expected to at least be able to command in an emergency.

Either way, command training means there’s something to command, and a system in place for getting commanders. Which meant they were talking about a structured, professional military. Something way, way beyond just two tribes duking it out over a choice bit of turf.

All of which was Danny’s job to worry about, dammit. Jack shook his head. “What I want to know,” he muttered, “is how the kid knew his buddy was in trouble in the first place. Are they psionicists on top of being elemental mages or something?”

Hell, Jack had only just gotten word that the alarm was from the cafeteria, and he and Teal’c had been running hell-for-metal out of the conference room and down the hall to get to the stairs—no trusting lifts in emergencies, basic rule, too likely to be stopped and too easy to ambush anyone getting out of them. They’d just reached a point directly under the cafeteria where the lights were mysteriously out—he remembered looking up and seeing a place where the whole ceiling had impacted upward by a good three feet or more; Toph’s work, when she’d raised her defensive wall, probably…

Then Zuko had gone tearing past them as a section of the ceiling suddenly popped out, opening a hole and taking out another light on its way up, and the kid had made an unaided jump straight up—running start or no—and grabbed onto the edge with his one good hand. And before he could lose his grip, he’d let the leftover momentum swing his legs up against the ceiling, kicked off it, and backflipped up and out of sight, and not a moment later the hole had gone orange with the light of fiery smackdown as he’d gone into the fray.

Seriously. Jack would love to get that kid into the Olympics. He’d be able to retire off the betting
Bad colonel. No making money off kids from other planets. At least, not by such easily traced methods.

And, Daniel was smirking. Jack eyed him. “What.”

“Psionicist? Your inner nerd is showing.”

Jack drew himself up. “I, am a Special Ops colonel. I do not have an inner nerd.”

“Ah. Right.” Daniel nodded sagely. “Shameless outer nerd, then.”

“Seriously, though,” Jack said, and he was not indulging in a tactical retreat, thank you. “For the kid to have gotten there that fast, he must have started running almost as soon as that thing attacked.” Not to mention the ceiling opening up to let him through – yeah, sure, Sam and Janet had theorized Toph’s feet had some damn impressive radar range, but if she’d been watching the floor below in the middle of a nasty scramble, then she’d known reinforcements were coming.

Which bespoke communications, or one hell of a lot of trust. Or both.

Or planning a retreat, Jack granted. Reports indicated that they’d been running out of salt fast. Pulling out had a lot to recommend it if you were strapped for ammo. But opening an escape route only to have reinforcements show up exactly at that moment to come through it? That was a hell of a lot of luck.

As a general rule, Jack distrusted luck. Murphy did not do nice things.

And how had Zuko even known where Toph was?

He hadn’t realized he’d said the last aloud until Sam’s voice said, “She probably told him where she was going, Jack. They’re not stupid. I’m surprised they split up at all – but given that all Zuko had to do was knock on a wall to get her attention, I suppose they thought it was worth the risk.”

Jack glanced over and raised his eyebrows. Sam’s own brows were furrowed slightly in the “rewriting laws of the universe in the back of my head, please wait” expression he’d often seen bent over an almost-broken DHD or the latest thing about to go boom in everyone’s faces.

Which, now that he thought about it, was a pretty accurate description of the current situation.

“You sure about that?” he asked, in answer to her comment.

Sam shrugged. “It’s how he and Toph managed to find each other in the ha’tak.” She flashed a quick grin at Daniel. “Shave and a Haircut, no less.”

Daniel blinked and then covered his eyes with a hand. “Two bits and all?”

Jack cleared his throat. “Universe-spanning power of advertising jingles aside - what did you find, Sam?”

Her shoulders rose and then fell with a heavy sigh. “A big fat lot of nothing,” the scientist said. “I can’t tell you what those things were, how they got there, how they worked, where they went – nothing. At the moment, the best idea I have is to sweep the base for cold spots – and I don’t recommend that until we have a way to fight them.”

Behind the disgusted tone, Sam’s eyes were both hard, and worried. The SGC lived on the edge of
disaster. That didn’t mean any of them liked being out of their depth. Particularly when it involved a death toll.

Time for that later. “Keep at it. The kids were holding them off with salt and fire. There has to be something we can hit.” And hopefully Siler would be back from the storerooms with the goodies Jack had sent him to fetch soon.

Sam sighed and shook her head. “And I would love to know how that actually worked,” she admitted, then looked at him curiously. “Speaking of - you were saying something about them?”

“Just wondering how Zuko got the heads-up. Think we’ve got a couple telepaths on our hands, here?”

Sam pursed her lips. “Unlikely. Or if they are, it’s very short-range. The only nonverbal communication I’ve picked up from them is the sort of thing you’d expect to see from close friends, or a Gate team. And I know SG-1 isn’t telepathic. Yet,” she added judiciously, to which Jack snickered while Daniel rubbed the back of his head.

“So how the hell did he know there was trouble?” Jack insisted.

Sam gave him a dry look. “He does know an alarm when he hears one. He’d have gone looking for Toph for that alone…” She paused, tilting her head. “…And it’s possible that he sensed the attack,” she said slowly.

Jack flicked an eyebrow up, a silent I’m listening.

“We already know this… biotech of theirs involves some kind of feedback system,” Sam said slowly, obviously poking at the thought as she went, trying to feel it out. “Toph obviously uses it to see – any time she’s out of contact with stone, she really is blind. And she was able to sense the geomagnetic poles of P4X-684. I don’t think it’s unreasonable to guess that Zuko would be the same. He avoided computers – given that he managed to block a zat blast, it’s possible he can feel electricity.”

“You think he sensed the cold?” Daniel asked curiously.

“Maybe,” Sam said reluctantly. “Although it’s really not the same thing at all. Cold isn’t energy, it’s the lack thereof. But he still might have felt it. When it attacked us on P4X-684, I’m pretty sure they felt it coming.”

“…Huh,” Daniel said thoughtfully.

Jack looked back and forth between them with a wry smile. “You two are thinking a thing. And not sharing.”

The anthropologist shrugged. “Cultures develop skills in response to their environment. If Zuko and Toph are sensitive to the presence of these things, and have specialized skills for taking them down, then it’s very likely that this is something from their world.”

Jack rubbed his chin, thinking. “You’re guessing that this isn’t the first time these things hitchhiked on a Gate, in other words?”

“It seems improbable,” Daniel admitted sheepishly. “Especially since they’re dressed for a warm environment – although, come to think of it, I suppose there’s no particular reason these things can’t inhabit a warmer environment, since they don’t seem to have physical bodies as we understand them to be affected… Jack?”
He was already starting across the infirmary towards the kids. “C’mon. Chat time.”

~Even the Dragon-King’s Temple floods.~

Zuko’s face was expressionless, while Toph’s was more a classic pre-teen sulky, but underneath it, they were clearly regarding the 2IC of Stargate Command with wariness appropriate to approaching a primed grenade.

*Heh. Knew they were smart.*

Sam hadn’t missed the flicker of Zuko’s eyes as Jack had chivvied their little coterie into the morgue – morbid, but the best they could do for a reasonable amount of privacy and quiet. His gaze had flickered over too-still, shrouded bodies, the one exit, and the commotion outside, all in one quick sweep, and before his expression had closed down, Sam had seen calculation in it, and she had a pretty good guess as to what sort of thoughts had been behind that.

“Trying to make us uneasy by putting us near dead bodies, emphasize the threat, contain us, or get a little privacy? Probably a mix of the above. The question is, what mix?”

An interestingly quick assessment of Jack’s usual head-games. Suggesting Zuko had been forced to deal with people playing head games with him in the past.

*And didn’t care for the experience, I imagine. Darn it. That means he’s not going to trust Jack any time soon.*

Jack had to be aware of it; he used the Bemused Colonel face far too often to not notice when it failed to have its usual effect. But there was no sign of it as he clapped his hands smartly together. “So!” he said cheerfully, meeting their eyes squarely, or as squarely as Toph’s blind gaze could be met. “What were those things?”

The two continued to regard him blankly for a long moment. Then, to Sam’s surprise, Zuko flicked his gaze over to her, as Toph tipped her head as well.

*Communication is supposed to be Daniel’s job, blast it… But like it or not, she was the one they actually knew, the one with a pre-existing line of communication open.*

All right. So how the heck was she supposed to communicate an abstract concept like ‘what’?

Break it down. Zuko had managed to get “where” across that way, although having an active verb like “going” to get their minds on the right track helped…

*Wait. They know ‘this is such-and-so,’ we covered that doing introductions in the ha’tak. So…*

She pointed at Jack. “This is Jack,” she said, trying to keep it simple and clear.

Zuko nodded slowly. “Jack?” he echoed. His accent made it sound more like the French *Jacques*, and his brow furrowed. “J-a-ck,” he repeated more carefully, taking care to enunciate each sound.

Next to Sam, Daniel perked up. “Interesting. A phonetic preference for the retroflex fricative rather than the affricate, but he can obviously distinguish the two sounds…”

Sam ignored him, looking for something relatively familiar to the kids for her next example.
Inspiration struck, and she pulled out another energy bar, glad that she’d restocked her pockets. “This is food,” she said.

“Well, for a given value of food…” Jack said with a smirk.

“Silence in the peanut gallery,” she said with a wave of her hand. “Food,” she repeated, miming unwrapping and eating.

Zuko pursed his lips, then made an odd gesture, curving his left hand as though holding the side of something round, then extending the index and middle fingers of his right hand and waving them over the space he’d bracketed. “Food?” he echoed, raising his one eyebrow.

Behind Sam, a pen scritched across paper. “Chopsticks,” Daniel was muttering. “That’s the sort of gesture you see in China or Japan. So we’re definitely looking at an Asiatic culture. Our earliest examples of chopsticks on Earth date from 1200 BCE, but given that they’re usually made of wood they could have been around much longer before that…”

Sam nodded at Zuko’s inquiring expression and then set the bar on the morgue desk, taking a few steps away from it. “That is food,” she said, pointing at it and wincing internally. I don’t think that’s going to fly…

For a minute, it looked like it wouldn’t. Zuko looked back and forth from the bar to her, his mind clearly whirring as he tried to figure out why Sam had changed words and what point she was trying to make. Sam was about to try again when suddenly Toph made a, “Ha!” sound, smacking a fist into her open palm before launching into a quick flurry of words that made Zuko’s face brighten in sudden comprehension.

I think she got it. Sam sighed in relief. Now for the next tricky part. “What is…” Oh. Dammit, she’d never really noticed the way you had to reverse the order of your words for a question, but now it felt like a looming ERROR sign in her head. Simplify, Sam. “That is what?” she corrected herself, pointing at the bar and holding her hands palm upright in a querying gesture, trying to echo the gesture Zuko had used when trying to explain dokoh. “That is food.”

And Jack was snickering. “With all due respect, sir, shut up,” she growled, before he could say anything. “Do you want to do this?”

“Not at all.” He had no right to sound so entertained. “Excellent Danny impression, Major, carry on.”

Will not strangle commanding officer. With that firm message to herself, Sam turned back to Zuko, who had a hint of amusement in his eyes as he watched the bantering. The amusement faded when he saw the look on her face, and Sam took a deep breath. “That, what?” she asked. “That… cold,” she added, shivering dramatically. “Laughing… um…” She did her best to imitate the sound of that strange laughter she’d heard on P4X-684, breathy and light and dancing along the edges of the nerves like a zat powering up. And sighed, knowing even without Jack’s barely suppressed snickering that she’d missed her target entirely. Dammit.

Except Toph broke into a broad grin that had Zuko take a quick step away from her before it had even spread to cover her face. “Jaaasheeeeeen,” the little girl said in a very well done sepulchral voice, raising her hands slowly to dangle in front of her as she wiggled her fingers and swayed back and forth. “Kiwaserooooooh…”

Zuko’s expression of disbelief as he looked at her was a work of art.
Jack burst out laughing. “Have I mentioned that I like the little walking disaster zone over there?” he asked no one in particular, before grinning at the smirking blind girl. “Yeah. What was that wooOOOoooOOOooo thing?” As he spoke, he wiggled his arms up and down, as if he were attempting to imitate an octopus.

Sam was somehow thoroughly unsurprised, when she glanced through her fingers, to see that Zuko and Daniel had both slapped palms against their foreheads as well.

“O-maeh...” Zuko sighed, as Toph snickered mercilessly. Apparently their expressions were priceless even in whatever medium she used to see.

Sam cleared her throat, determined to stay on track. “That,” she repeated, firmly, figuring that they got the idea by now. “What?”


Jack snorted. “Yeah, we kinda figured that out, kiddo,” he said wryly. “So how do we kill it? You know – yukky-oosy. Kill. Preferably with prejudice...”

The colonel started to mime stabbing something. Sam put her hand out to stop him. “Zuko knows what kill means, sir,” she said quietly.

There was something dark and ugly and portending a great deal of righteous mayhem lurking in Jack’s eyes as he pursed his lips at those words, but he nodded shortly, accepting her point.


Daniel looked up from his scribbling, frowning. “Sheeoh?” he echoed uncertainly. “I’m pretty sure we haven’t heard that one before...”

Toph waved her hand impatiently, and the thin white dust that had formed on boots and clothes as the salty water from the cafeteria dried swirled into her hand – followed by a small white plastic container popping out of Jack’s vest pocket.

“Hey!” he objected, grabbing the salt shaker before it could fly away and indignantly covering it with his hand when white crystals continued to escape through the holes in the top. “Mine!”

Daniel eyed it. “Actually, I’m pretty sure that’s the cafeteria’s,” he said wryly. “Aren’t there rules about that one before...”

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“Extenuating circumstances,” Jack said loftily. “I pulled rank.” He narrowed his eyes at Toph, who was grinning evilly and running the little pile of salt dust she’d acquired through her fingers with the look of someone planning a prank. “Mine,” he repeated.

Sam and Daniel glanced at each other ruefully. Should have known that Toph and Jack in the same room was disaster waiting to happen, Sam thought ruefully, and coughed into her hand. “So, I’d guess that sheeoh means salt,” she said, and frowned slightly, trying to let her quizzical expression carry the question for her. “Why?”

Zuko’s brow furrowed. “Sheeoh... sal’t? Chirusu. Yukee-usoh, tomeru.” He made a tossing gesture, followed by an abortive gesture, twice, as though some sort of wall was blocking the path of his hand.
“Block?” Daniel guessed.

“Or stop,” Sam said thoughtfully. “Salt creates a barrier of some kind, maybe?” If that was so, then maybe they could at least stop the things from getting into a place. Or trap and contain them.

Daniel’s pen was scratching frantically. “That would be consistent with a lot of folklore,” he said absently. “Salt’s supposed to be a purifying force, a ward against malign spirits… Huh. I should look into that.”

“Do it,” Jack said shortly. “If sci-fi tactics work, who am I to complain?”


Sam looked at him. “Dumbing?”

“Look at Toph’s reactions – she thinks he sounds ridiculous.” Daniel nodded at the little girl, who indeed had turned her attention from Jack to listen in on the conversation with a broad, devilish grin on her face. “He’s doing the same thing you are, probably – trying to reduce things to the simplest possible parameters, and throwing grammar out the window. I’m not going to be able to get any idea of how their language works like that!”

Jack snorted. “You can ask for language lessons later, Danny,” he said. “And the same goes for physics,” he said, shaking a finger sternly at Sam. “Frankly, right now I don’t care if it doesn’t make sense, so long as it works. You can figure out how later.”

Sam pressed her lips together. But if we don’t know how it works, all we can do is throw salt around and pray, she thought mulishly. There has to be a more effective way!

But Jack had a point. In the middle of a crisis was not a good time to be mastering a new theory, no matter how often she’d been forced to do exactly that in the past. Reluctantly, Sam nodded.

Jack nodded as well, briskly. “All right. So, salt blocks the bad ju-ju. Honoh? I’m guessing that’s…”

A flick of calloused fingers at the word, and a small flame was dancing in Zuko’s palm. “Hee,” he said, with a shrug.


Zuko frowned lightly. “Honoh toh… cold?” he said hesitantly, dismissing the flame with an absent wave of his hand. “Urah-omotay.” His frown deepened as he scratched the back of his head awkwardly, making an odd flipping motion with his hand. Then he paused, raising the hand so that the back was facing them. “Urah,” he said carefully, and then turned his hand palm-forward. “Omotay.”

Sam tilted her head. “…Back and front?” she murmured to Daniel.

“I think so. He’s saying… fire and cold are two sides of the same coin, I think. Colloquially speaking.”

Sam blinked. …Huh. That’s actually a very sophisticated understanding of temperature, she thought, surprised. Temperature was, after all, fundamentally the presence or lack of energy. Cold was caused by energy rushing out to fill a void, rather than being a thing in and of itself.

Something about that… tickled, in the back of her mind, like the presence of an idea that was still just
a little too inchoate to announce itself to her attention.

“Atoh... hizashee,” Zuko said, and hesitated, clearly thinking hard. After a moment, he raised his good hand, thumb and middle finger pressed together to form a circle. He arced it up until it was over his head, then lowered, his hand, fingers spread.

Sam crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes, trying to puzzle it out. And finally let her shoulders slump. “Okay. I’m stumped.”

Daniel looked down at his pad; from the corner of her eye, Sam could see arcs and circles and lines where he’d attempted to draw the gesture. “I think he might mean sunlight,” he said thoughtfully, flipping the pad to show a circle with rays descending from it.

Jack froze for a moment, meeting Sam’s eyes. “It was night over on Hoth Lite, no? Those two Marines over there,” he jerked his thumb at the cots where the bodies of the yukee-usoh’s first victims lay, “came down with their severe case of dead in the wee hours of the morning. And the frosty-so things hit the cafeteria around six-thirty. You’re the astrophysicist.”

Sam thought about that, and swallowed. The yukee-usoh had retreated, but it almost certainly would attack again. And they still had plenty of night left to go.

Zuko was looking at the bodies of Gabor and Dohman with a thoughtful, troubled expression. When Sam looked at him curiously, he nodded at them. “Aitsurah, kuwaretah.” He paused for a moment, frowning. “Yukee’usoh, kill. Food.”

Jack raised an eyebrow. “They got themselves et?” he asked dryly, and mimed munching his own arm. “Om-nom.”

Toph snickered, and then managed to pull off a very impressive belch, looking absurdly pleased with herself when Zuko jumped and then glared at her sourly.

Sam couldn’t quite keep the dubiousness off her expression as she glanced at the bodies. Eating made a certain amount of sense, yes – the things had to be attacking for a reason. And if they could figure out how they chose their targets, they’d be one step closer to getting ahead of the next attack.

And there would be one. This was the SGC. Problems never just went away.

But. She was pretty damn sure the autopsy had come up with no indication of missing pieces. So how could the Marines have been eaten?

Her skepticism must have conveyed her thoughts without the need for extensive hand-waving. Zuko shook his head and signed. “Yukee-usoh no food…”

Unexpectedly, he took a sharp step forward to cover the distance between them and grabbed Sam’s hand. “Go-ran,” he said shortly, and drew in a deep breath. Sam nearly jumped when he released it
in one sharp burst that flared into brief yellow-orange flames that had Jack snarking something about
dragon-imitations as the boy drew in a second breath…

Then Sam nearly jumped for an entirely different reason. “Guys? Put a definite check mark next to
can Zuko manipulate his own body temperature.” The temperature of his hand had just risen tangibly
to almost fever-hot.

*I need to warn Janet about this. If he can do that, their physiology almost has to be able to tolerate a
wider range of temperatures than ours.*

But it still didn’t explain how the creatures could eat someone’s body heat…

*Wait. That actually does make a kind of sense. Heat is just a form of energy. And given some of the
things SG-1 had seen, an energy vampire was practically mundane.*

*Although if a yukee-uso eats energy, why would fire work on it? Couldn’t it just eat that? Unless
there’s a limit to how fast it can absorb the energy without damaging itself. Come to think of it, all
the reports said that it was slow… If so, it might be limited in how fast it could move by the specific
heat capacity of the mediums it interacted with.*

*But it froze Heather so quickly, when she stabbed it…*

Zuko released her hand, looking back at the dead Marines. “Ku’eba kuu hodoh, ts’yoku naru.”

There was something dark and grim in his voice that went past the strange words, and Jack cursed.
“Anybody else get the sinking feeling that he just said the more it eats, the stronger it gets?”

Sam glanced at Daniel, who was nodding ruefully. “Just another ticking clock, sir. Wouldn’t be SGC
without one,” she said dryly.

“Yeah. My thoughts exactly.” Jack turned to look at Zuko. “So how many are we dealing with here?
Two? Three? Half dozen?”

“How many yukee… yukiuso?” Sam asked, trying to pronounce the strange term as precisely as
possible. “Two? Three?” She held up two fingers, then three, then spread her hands wide. “Many?”

“One,” Zuko said firmly, holding up a single finger.

The three SGC members weren’t the only ones to gape at that. “Usoh deshoh,” Toph said flatly.

“Yeah,” Jack said, equally flat. “What she said.”

Zuko sighed heavily, running his hand through his hair yet again as he visibly struggled to find a
way to explain. Then he straightened suddenly, eyes brightening, and snapped his fingers, kindling a
small, dancing flame in his palm again.

*…You know, I think the most disturbing part of the whole psychokinesis thing is how casual they are
about it, Sam thought absently, as the boy shifted his hand so that the tips of his fingers were
bunched together underneath the flame, almost as though holding a candlewick.*

“One,” he said firmly – and then spread his hand, keeping his fingers together but separating his
thumb. The flame separated as well, becoming two. “Two,” he said, as if to emphasize the point.
Then he spread all his fingers out, a single flame dancing above each. “Tak’san,” he said.

And then brought his fingers back together, each individual flame merging seamlessly into a whole.
“One,” he said, and shrugged, dispersing the flame with a flick of his hand.

Daniel was pale behind the glasses. “It can divide itself?”

Jack groaned. “And recombine, apparently. Oh, joy, this day just keeps getting better.” Eyes narrowed, he crossed his arms over his chest. “Damn. No wonder no one can seem to find the thing. What do you bet that when it’s not on the hunt, it recombines into just one?”

“That has to cost energy,” Sam said slowly, feeling the thought out. And paused, replaying the feel of Zuko’s fever-hot hand in her mind. “…It was going after Toph,” she said suddenly, as pieces clicked into place.

Jack looked at her sharply. “Explain. Using short, easy words, please.”

“If this thing lives on energy… Toph and Zuko have naquadah in their systems, sir. High concentrations of it.” She waved a hand at the bodies of the frozen Marines. “Gabor and Dohman would have barely counted as a snack.”

Jack’s eyes narrowed. “We’re going to need to check our staff weapon stores,” he said. “And the Stargate. If this thing can leech off of that, we’re in trouble.”

Brrr. The thought was chilling enough that Sam glanced around the cool morgue, looking for any hint of frost where it shouldn’t be. “I don’t think it can, sir,” she said. “Not if it’s hunting people. Despite what The Matrix would have you believe, living creatures make for horribly inefficient energy sources. If it’s going for living prey, then at the very least it might not be able to tap into energy sources unless they’re active.” Which could mean… She quickly made a mental note to check on the Mountain’s internal power generators, before drawing her attention back to the line of discussion. “It’s also possible that it can only tap energy in the form of heat. Or that it needs to draw it from living things…?”

The last trailed off a bit dubiously. She’d never heard of any sort of fundamental difference between body heat – biological energy, so to speak – and energy in other forms. Well, outside of discussions of chi in martial arts, which really had more to do with focus and self-control than energy in the sense that a physicist thought about it. But just because she’d never heard of it, it didn’t follow that there wasn’t a difference. She’d been blindsided by non-standard physics enough to keep an open mind.

Daniel paused, tilting his head to the side. “And if Zuko can warm his own body up – a counterattack like the one that almost killed Sergeant Dyne might not affect him so much. Which might be why it left so quickly when he arrived. Even if it eats energy…”

“I wouldn’t go up against someone who could hit my weak point, either, no matter how tasty,” Jack said with a dry smile. “At least, not if he sees me coming.”

Sam took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. It went after all of us on P4X-684. “So what do we do when it hits again?” she asked uneasily.

There would be another attack. That much was all but certain. At least they had some idea of where to look for it, now… even though that left an unpleasant taste in her mouth.

They’re brave kids. If we could ask them, I suspect they’d volunteer to play bait in order to catch this thing. There’d been something hard and desperate and not like a twelve-year-old girl at all in the way Toph had backed up the Marines in the cafeteria, even half-deafened by gunfire. And when Zuko had joined the fray, the very first thing he’d done was try to get the wounded out of danger. And Sam remembered the battle at the door of the ha’tak. These two were not strangers to putting
themselves in harm’s way on behalf of others. *But I don’t want to ask that of them when we can’t even talk to them*…

Jack huffed. “Was hoping you’d had some bright ideas. I only came up with one.” He paused, glancing out the door to the main room of the infirmary. “And it looks like it just arrived. Siler! Toss one of those in here, will ya?”

Out of Sam’s line of sight, she heard Siler make a noise that might have been confirmation, or possibly *I really hate you sometimes, sir.* A moment later, a small package about the size of a shoebox sailed through the open doorway. Jack caught it neatly and tucked it into the corner of his arm before prying the top open, uncovering…

Daniel blinked. Rubbed his eyes, and blinked again.

Sam felt like doing the same. “Sir. Please tell me those aren’t McDonald’s salt packets.”

“They’re not McDonald’s salt packets,” Jack said, radiating virtuous indignation.

Daniel reached over and picked up one of the little white paper containers. “All right, I’ll bite,” he said. “What are these supposed to do?”

“Most portable way to carry the stuff,” Jack said with a shrug. “Now, if we could just get our hands on some hollow-point bullets, then we could show that thing a real food fight.” Glancing at Toph, he grinned and flung a handful of the packets at her – making her start when they scattered in a flutter around her.

*She can’t sense the paper. She might have felt the salt moving, but it didn’t follow physics the way she expected.* Sam hid a grin, as Zuko didn’t quite manage to stifle a snicker.

Toph’s blank eyes narrowed as her lips pursed dangerously. She drew a fist back.

“*Ha!*”

Several of the salt packets literally exploded as the salt escaped in glittering bursts of white, making Jack swear and pull back quickly. Still snickering, the girl swept her hands together, drawing the sand through the air towards her.

*...And that just makes my head hurt,* Sam thought ruefully, watching as Toph pressed her hands around the pile of salt – and pulled them back to show a single, perfectly formed crystal. *How does she do that?*

Zuko’s flames… weren’t so bad. She’d give her right hand to know where he got the energy for them, but – they were energy. Volatile. But rocks? Rocks had mass. Inertia. They did not just go flying because someone waved her hands, no matter how precisely!

Some sort of electromagnetic manipulation? We already know she’s sensitive to magnetic fields. Can she produce it as well? Is she creating a paramagnetic effect in the items she wants to manipulate? It might explain how she was able to reform crystals, as well…

Which… might also explain why salt works against the yukiuso, Sam thought suddenly, blinking. Some paramagnetic salts were used for refrigeration purposes, using the ordering and disordering of magnetic fields to store and release heat…

“Sam?” Daniel was looking at her curiously.
She looked at Jack. “Sir? I just had an idea.”

~Even the Dragon-King’s Temple floods.~

The mountain offered limitless places to hide. The lights were all wan things, nothing like the blazing, hateful midnight sun that drove it every year to hide in the deepest ice where light never reached. And no matter how many humans there were, huddled to their lights and fires in proper fear of what waited in the dark and cold – there was always somewhere that no one was looking.

So many little, flickering lives. After an endless now of barren hunting grounds – now, it could feast. Carefully. Ever so carefully. The best prey was also the most dangerous. Already the room of death had been closed to it, all the pain and confusion and terror walled away behind burning salt and shall not pass.

But not all were hiding behind defensive barriers. One group blazed defiance, survival, striking-back. Three it knew from the empty world. Another was weaker, but still blazing. And still of the others, the creatures that had taken it, sealed it, fed it, fallen to it.

Air shifting from warmth to deadly cold, giving rise to a sound like chillingly soft laughter, it began its hunt.

~Even the Dragon-King’s Temple floods.~

Toph tightened her fingers, crunching sand-like crystals into fine powder, and began binding them back together in that ringing six-toned rightness that was supposed to be a perfectly formed, flawlessly clear crystal. Not that she’d know about flawlessly clear. Boring, baby stuff…

Well, it was with salt. She’d heard that there were gemworking earthbenders who’d made major moolah doing this sort of thing with fragments of precious and semiprecious gemstones out of the mines. She’d dreamed about her parents taking her to see those earthbenders someday, back before she’d realized that if her father and Master Loserpants had any say in it, she’d never get past basic breathing exercises.

But at least it kept her from messing with the lines of salt on the floor as she fidgeted. Because she was bored. She was not nervous!

Hate. Waiting.

Which would probably blow Twinkletoes’s brain if he ever heard it. After all, earthbending was supposed to be all about the waiting and listening. All the better to stomp bad guys into the dirt…

“It’ll come, Toph,” Zuko said very quietly, balanced perfectly on the balls of his feet in a low crouch.

Yeah, and fire’s supposed to be all about positive jin and jumping down your enemy’s throat going roar. So why isn’t he fidgeting? she thought grumpily. And, out loud, demanded, “How do you know? Why would it come after us when it already knows we can stomp its sorry butt?”
Because… drat it, there was waiting and there was *waiting*. Letting the earth show her every wiggle of some loser’s weight so that she could hand him his butt on a stone platter? She was the *Blind Bandit*.

But Toph Bei Fong had waited *thirteen years* for something that she’d finally had to realize was never, ever going to happen.

And there was a whole world of difference between waiting for a bad guy to show you the best way to smack ‘im, and waiting for a creepy cold laugh that didn’t even weigh anything, might not even have to touch stone at all if it didn’t want to, and all she could do was hold her salt lines solid as they waited for it to come after *them*. When for all they knew, it could be anywhere in this whole big badgermole-burrow of a mountain, *killing* people while they waited!

*At least Schemes’ll be okay.*

She’d better be, anyway. She and the other tough guys were all tucked up warm and cozy in Janet’s healing room, and Zuko had helped Toph line the whole place with salt. She’d even bent the salt crystals into the stone of the floor itself, so no boulder-heads would try moving it.

She’d’ve liked to do that here, but Zuko had said no. Not for the main circles, at least. They didn’t want the yukiuso to see what was coming before it was too late. The only line he’d actually told her to “put will into” was the circle around the bossy-guy, over by the cooler door. But they didn’t need to hide the lines up in the infirmary. And those salt lines were backed up by a Janet in full-blown Ticked Off Katara mode.

Not to mention Piand-Not. He’d shown up just before they’d left, carrying a whole huge bag of salt that would have made The Boulder blink if he hadn’t had the option of bending it, and a downright *creative* sort of tap in his toes.

Toph kinda hoped she’d get a chance to feel whatever he was cooking up. Piandao-types getting creative tended to result in awesomeness like Airship Slices and Space Swords.

Except that he wasn’t here. Just the two of them, and Sam over by one of the odd slate tables, and the Boss-Guy behind the door to the giant cooler-room. *Waiting.*

“A yukiuso isn’t stupid. It’ll come *because* we can fight it,” Zuko said with a grim sort of amusement. He nodded in the direction of the cooler, humming weirdly in a way that was kind of like Fire Nation machinery. Except totally *not*, which made it about as weird as everything else they’d run into lately. “With something like that to give it an edge? It’ll come. Because if it takes us out, it can do whatever it wants.”

Toph shivered and let herself pretend it was because of the cold air rolling out the open door of the cooler into the room. “You don’t think that’s the only reason,” she challenged.

Zuko’s weight shifted; he’d glanced away. Hah. “…I already told you what I think,” he said, voice dropping lower even though Sam and Boss-Guy didn’t understand what they were saying.

Toph pursed her lips. “You’re paranoid. You know that, right?”

That got a snicker, and a ripple in Zuko’s chi that was definitely a wry smile. “Look where we are now before you say that.”

Toph deliberately widened her eyes and turned her head back and forth. “Gee. I’m not sure I see it,” she said innocently.
Smack, went Zuko’s hand on his forehead. Toph smirked at him and sketched a horizontal line in the air with her finger. Oh yeah, point to me!

Then she used that same finger to poke at him, only to have it absently batted away without making his balance so much as wobble. Hrmph. "I don’t care that you think the spirits are out to get you. We’re the… we’re Aang’s friends,” she said, catching herself before she said the Avatar. Zuko’s paranoia was infectious. Who knew?

There was a long pause, then Zuko sighed. “Two problems with that.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “Oh yeah?”

“One. We’re on a different world.”

Toph was opening her mouth to ask what that was supposed to mean, when suddenly it hit her. Different world. Which meant it had its own World Spirit. Its own Avatar.

Are World Spirits territorial? Bet they are… Eeeep.

“Second…” Zuko’s voice dropped a little more. “I’ve been trying to think of a way of talking to the others about this, ever since I started going through the Dragonbone Catacomb records… Toph. Just because the Avatar is the bridge to the spirit world, it doesn’t mean that spirits are going to listen to him. Or even like him.” He shifted slightly – glancing around the room, then at her. “How would you feel if someone swooped in and said, I’m bigger and more powerful than you, so you have to do as I say?”

…I’d be really, really ticked. Toph swallowed.

If spirits feel that way… ohboy. We’ve got an even bigger mess than I thought.

Which meant that they needed to get home. Talk to Twinkletoes. Talk to Snoozles.

Get Sparky some sunlight before he really goes ‘round the bend.

Unfortunately, it was kinda hard to talk to people when you had a nasty freezy killer spirit on the loose…

Zuko inhaled sharply, and Toph could feel his chi flare briefly before he damped it down again. “It’s coming,” he hissed, and she felt him turn his head as he raised his voice just enough to carry across the room. “En’ka-min.”

Toph drew in a deep breath herself and drummed her toes on the floor, feeling, as Sam’s breath caught for just a moment and Jack stiffened, then relaxed again way too fast to be anything but deliberate nonchalance.

She frowned and reached deeper. Something wasn’t right.

Hard and heavy granite didn’t feel the cold, not the way younger stone sometimes did. Took more than a little chill to bring brittleness to the bones of the earth. But granite knew when something was wrong, like an old, old badgermole that didn’t even need its nose or ears to know when a kit needed a swat to teach her to stay out of trouble or at least be cleverer about getting into it.

But…

“Hey, Sparky. You sure?” she asked uneasily. Because something was off, but… not off enough.
“Yeah.” Zuko sounded uneasy himself now, and she could feel him controlling his breathing so that no matter what happened, he wouldn’t get caught completely on the exhale if something nasty popped up. Neat trick; Toph had sucker-punched so many idiots in the ring who didn’t get that even for an earthbender, your roots were only as strong as the breath you gave them… “It’s close.”

**But where?**

Toph’s fingers flexed, turning her salt crystal into super-fine powder that puffed into the air as she made a fist.

**Wait.**

Maybe she was listening to the wrong earth.

Granite was the bones of the earth. Old. Hard. Strong. Unshakeable. It was stone, and stone was, and when push came to shove all there was, was you, rock, and stubborn.

Metal wasn’t. Metal was – young. Malleable. Hot with the memory of fire. Something in the heart of metal was like glass. Or water. It flowed.

Bending metal wasn’t like earth, though. She couldn’t do much with it without touching it, giving it some way to conduct her chi. But she could **listen**…

“Look ou-!”

Ice-brittle metal **screamed.**

~*Even the Dragon-King’s Temple floods.*~

Jack hit the ground and rolled. It threw him out of the protective circle of salt he was supposed to be hiding behind, but he’d lived on the front lines too long to ignore that little shiver in the back of his neck that said **move!**

The water pipe he’d been standing next to shattered – not broke, **shattered**, like a banana that’d gone skinny-dipping in liquid nitrogen, flinging metal shards that smoked cold fog across the room.

And something laughed.

“Heads up!” he yelled, hand closing around the salt shaker he’d swiped from the cafeteria. Rolling to his feet, he snapped his arm around in a short arc, spraying white salt across an expanse of empty air. Empty air that shrieked in fury, flinching back for just a moment.

Jack gulped a deep breath, ignoring the sting as frigid air sank cold claws into the insides of his nose and throat. One thing to hear that there was an invisible spook freezing things. Another to be face-to- whatever with it and not see anything.

**Worse’n the Reetou…**

The laughter shifted in tone ever so slightly. Narrowing his eyes, Jack retreated a few steps, trying to keep his attention split between the spreading frost and the lines of salt they’d set on the floor of the lab. Zuko’d been pretty emphatic – cross those lines, and whatever mystic mumbo-jumbo barrier they set up would be **gone** until you did it all over again.
So how the hell did the thing get into that circle with me?

He’d get his answers later. For now, time for Plan B. His hand closed on the handle of the heavy cylinder hanging from his belt.

“Let’s take a look at you, Snowflake,” he growled, and flicked on the light of the TER.

The air glittered.

*Diamond dust.*

He’d heard the term looking across an Antarctic landscape as he was loaded into the medevac helicopter. Supercooled water particles in the air freezing into frost in midair. Like fog off dry ice, only sparkly.

But he still couldn’t see the thing. He knew roughly where it was, as that faint halo of glittering almost-snow glided lazily towards him. But as far as giving his TER a target…

*Damn. So much for that bright idea.*

~*Even the Dragon-King’s Temple floods.*~

*How did it get past the barrier circle?* Zuko thought desperately, scrambling back to his feet. Hard to know if he’d pulled Toph down with him or the other way around; they’d gone for the floor at the same moment, not a breath ahead of the pulse of malevolence and flying shrapnel from the pipe that had just exploded…

*…Pipe. Koh take it..!*

He and Toph had checked the floor around Jack’s feet so *carefully*, making certain there was nothing on it or nearby to break the spiritual protection of the salt circle – and he’d never even looked at the pipe running up to the ceiling and away. Straight out of the protection, and a ready-made easy road inside.

*Idiot!*

Time for that later, if they survived this. The plan had been that the yukiuso would make for the tasty bait of the two benders near the open door of the giant cooler. Once it took the bait, Toph could activate the protective circle looping out from that open door, and Zuko could raise fire to block the exits, trapping it with nowhere to go but the heavily insulated cooler…

Now the yukiuso was the one outside their trap, and they were the ones inside.

*Not good.*

Zuko punched a burst of fire between the retreating soldier and the ice spirit, trying to shape it into a steady stream, a blade of fire he could bring down to block the *yukiuso*…

Except that form took two hands. Worse; his bad arm wasn’t just useless, it tangled his chi up, threw his patterns off, made the flow stutter. The flames flared and went out.

*Dammit!*
“Toph! Salt it!”

Toph had scrambled up to all fours and stayed there, fingers and toes splayed against the stone and her body low to the ground like some sort of spider-rat. From this angle, Zuko couldn’t see her expression. Her voice was expressive enough.

“What? But you said, if something solid crosses the trap lines…”

“It’s outside the trap anyway!” Assuming the flying shrapnel from the broken pipe hadn’t already broken the spirit-barrier. “If we can herd it…!”

Toph didn’t waste her breath answering verbally. One knee dropped to the floor as she came up to a kneeling stance, and punched.

~Even the Dragon-King’s Temple floods.~

Sam swore, grabbing for the monster bag of rock salt that normally went to de-icing the base parking lot.

It went after Jack. Oh, hell.

Which meant the circles of salt meant to trap the yukiuso and channel it where they wanted it to go were useless now.

I was sure it would go for us!

That was why she and the kids were inside the salt trap. Everything she’d been able to observe about the yukiuso suggested that it was an opportunist. The only other sources of biological naquadah in the SGC were Teal’c and the Jaffa in the holding cell, and they barely had trace elements compared to Sam, let alone to the kids. Good eats right next to an open freezer providing a nice chilly comfort zone – it should have gone straight for them.

It went after Jack. Which means it’s smart enough to see an ambush coming…

Toph’s voice crashed through the shivery laughter slowly building on itself with a sharp, “Ha!” as she came up on one knee with two sharp, deadly-serious jabs of tiny, callused fists. The now-useless circles of salt that had been their trap rose up in a spiraling stream that jabbed like a spike between Jack and the frost quickly spreading from the busted pipe, as Zuko made a snapping kick over her head that sent an arc of fire directly into that cold zone.

Focus, Sam. We can still do this!

And just pray that her guess with the freezer turned out better than the other predictions she’d made thus far. The thing was insulated to hold things in the lower Kelvins – and better, the refrigeration was done using magnetic salts. If that didn’t bottle up their ice genie…

Just pray it does.

Gritting her teeth, she cast about for a weapon. All she had was a bag of rock salt and a TER that Jack had already proved was useless, and why didn’t the SGC keep the odd flamethrower handy…

Enclosed space. Fire normally very bad.
But she had to come up with something. Zuko was tired. The fire he was throwing now was nothing like what she’d seen in the ha’tak either in terms of control or scale. Maybe fatigue, maybe the bum arm was throwing him off. Or even just the fact that he didn’t have a target. And the cafeteria fight had proven that if Toph ran out of ammo, she’d be in trouble…

Sam was dumping her bag of salt out even before the thought fully registered. Half of it didn’t even hit the ground, just went flying into the fray.

Toph was being clever, too. Jack had raided the off-world camping supplies for a can of Sterno, broken it open, and spread the flammable jelly across the openings of their salt circle. They’d meant for Zuko to close the trap by igniting it as soon as the yukiuso crossed into the circle.

Well, that was blown out of the water. But he’d ignited the lines of hot-burning fuel anyway. Extra ammunition? Giving them something warm to dodge behind if things went bad? General assumption of the more fire, the better?

Toph apparently felt so. She kicked off with her back leg, brought it up, and slammed it onto the concrete of the floor. The salt powder she’d yanked from Sam’s bag streamed right through the blazing alcohol jelly, actually carrying some of it with as she sent it snaking into the empty air that was sucking all the warmth out of the room-

Hope that helps. Zuko had warned them that salt was meant to ward things off, more than attacking. You could throw it at the yukiuso, but it wasn’t as effective as when you made it into a wall…

Sam couldn’t see anything. They were fighting empty air. But she knew that predatory focus in Jack. Colonel O’Neill had just seen a bad guy flinch.

“Oh yeah,” he snarled, dodging back a bit and still holding the light on the space where their enemy seemed to be, despite the fact that it didn’t seem to have any effect. “How do you like them sparks?”

Sparks. Sam’s eyes narrowed. The yukiuso ate heat. But fire hurt it…

Combustion. Something about combustion! If she could just find a way to use that…

You know, once, just once, I’d like to test a theory in the lab, no lives on the line. Well. At least they were in a lab at the moment, that was something. Bunsen burners, alcohols…

Wait a minute. This was Heather’s lab. And where Heather went…

Sam dove for the cabinets.

~Even the Dragon-King’s Temple floods.~

Weird, weird, weird!

This was as bad as fighting Twinkletoes when he was really making with the fluttermoth impression. Worse. It had taken her a while, but Toph had gotten pretty good at using her ears to listen for all those telltale little whooshes and whishes of wind to tell her where Aang was going. Airbender or no, so long as he wasn’t going all ticked-off-Avatar-smackdown-of-DOOM, Aang had to keep himself airborne somehow, and so long as she could track that, she could track him…
The yukiuso? Yeah, not so much.

Toph swirled salt that had the odd heavy stickiness that meant it’d been oiled through one of Zuko’s hot spots and sliced it towards that center of cold-and-creepy that was all in her gut and nowhere in her feet, and heard the laughter *shiver* a bit. That’d at least given it something to think about. She hoped. At least there was only one. Apparently Zuko’d been right; going up against two benders, the yukiuso wasn’t willing to risk splitting itself.

*Meaning it’s only one, but it’s way stronger than the ones in the mess hall. Oh, yay. “Sparky!”* she said sharply. “Any ideas?”

“Put a salt line around the edge of the room.” Zuko’s voice was tight and grim. “The trap’s shot, but we can at least keep it from getting out again.”

*Oh, that’s a great idea, let’s trap it in here with us!*

Even as her much more sensible mental voice was throwing her metaphorical hands up, Toph’s real hands were coming up. Slap left – feint. Slap right – deflect. Right hand straight forward in a claw that would have grabbed an enemy’s throat if she were taller and someone were stupid enough to get close…

Chi moved with the same grab-and-hold will, and she actually *felt* the barrier go up as salt flew to ring the edges of the room. And for the first time, she felt something like *unease* in that nasty laughing.

*Oh yeah, you’re stuck in here with us now.*

Which meant they needed to come up with something to *do* about this really fast…

Sam’s weight shifted. Something hit the ground right in the middle of the yukiuso’s area, and Toph’s nose was stinging…

*Blasting powder! Yipe!*

She got her hands up over her ears just as *something* started going bang, and sizzling smoke bit into her nose.

And the yukiuso actually *howled.*

“What the heck?”

“Firecrackers,” Zuko breathed, and she *felt* the shift in his stance. “The noise and light are supposed to drive away evil spirits!”

“Sparky, the Fire Nation thinks blowing stuff up solves everything!”

“You mean it doesn’t?” There were teeth in that voice, the kind of tooth-gritted grin that Zuko and Sokka and Suki all got when a fight started getting messy but they could still see a way to *win,* and Toph’s heart jumped in her chest as she felt an answering grin spread on her face. “Earth Kingdom shamans used them in the middle of the war, Toph. That should tell you someth-*catch that one!*”

Toph was already moving the minute she’d felt that *oops* flutter in Sam’s stance. These things were made of blasting powder, and blasting powder had *coal.* Coal that was fine as sand, sure, but she was the *Blind Bandit.* She could do sand. Spirits, she’d spent the last day flinging salt-sand all over the place.
Hand out. Fingers crooked into wolf-bat claws. Flip her hand so her palm was up and jerk her hand back to her side as though she wanted to introduce her elbow to some jerk trying to get behind her-

The firecracker that had hit the ground and rolled between the yukiauso and the freezer came flying back.

...Um. Oops.

She realized her mistake just as the louds cracks and pows began again and Jack yelped. “Wachit’!”

Zuko hissed a curse under his breath and made a sweeping gesture with his hand. To her shock, Toph realized she could feel the burning bits of coal he’d just gathered up, flicking out of her senses almost as soon as she noticed them – he’d pulled the burning sparks away from the other guys, apparently.

And his stance had just shifted. He was bracing himself for something. “Toph? I need to you hold the line. Just for a minute. Can you?”

No, she wanted to yell. She’d completely lost track of the yukiauso at this point, with all the noise, and at this rate she was going to run out of salt soon…

But Sparky had a plan.

She grinned fiercely and swirled another bit of oil-touched salt through open flame. “Are you kidding? I’m just getting warmed up!”

~Even the Dragon-King’s Temple floods.~

Fireworks. In her lab. We live through this, there are going to be some words with Sergeant Dyne about storage regulations, enclosed spaces, and live explosives... Shit!

Jack hit the floor as the redirected firecracker went off in mid-air. Wouldn’t get him completely clear of the sparks, but better than a Roman candle to the face.

Blazing stars of red and green suddenly veered off course, swirling past Jack and back towards Zuko’s beckoning hand, forming into a blazing corona of multicolored flames. The kid blinked at it, good eye widening, and said something short and demanding to Toph…

Up, up, up, mobility is the one edge that you have on this thing, don’t lose it!

The concrete was ice-cold beneath his hands – but no ice, thank god they’d shut down the sprinkler system before going into this one, water on the floor from that busted pipe and things would have been even worse than they were – as Jack scrambled to his feet, glancing around to check on the others-

Just in time to see Zuko grit his teeth and clap his flame-wreathed right hand to his left shoulder.

What the he…?

The faint glitter of diamond dust – and dammit, it was freaky that he’d dropped the TER and there were fireworks and plain old fires burning everywhere and half his vision was made of spots and afterimages and somehow he could still see it, but he wasn’t going to complain about anything that
let him keep track of the bad guy – whorled, seeming to fold in on itself, shifting direction towards the kids.

Toph beat it to the punch. Literally. Sort of. She snapped her forearms up in a block as if the yukiuso’s attention were a punch to the face, and salt flew.

Not at the thing, however. Whips and streams of laden salt settled in circles around Jack, Sam, and the two kids, still smoking and spitting sparks and smelling of burning olive oil, and the yukiuso flinched back.

Awww. It doesn’t like the smell of French fries. He bared his teeth in what might have been called a grin, ignoring the sting of cold on his face. Better than worrying about the kid who’d dropped to one knee, teeth gritted in obvious pain as his hand slowly inched down his arm, the flames changing, becoming sparks and crackles of static electricity.

What the hell is he doing…

The fingers of Zuko’s left hand closed into a fist. Oh.

You couldn’t have played medic before we were in the middle of a fight?

He drew in a deep breath and coughed violently when the heavy sulfur smoke of the firecrackers hit the back of his throat. They were doubly lucky they’d shut down the sprinklers now. If one of them went off, they were screwed. He could feel the deadly bite of cold in the air – but it was ambient cold, not a direct attack. The salt seemed to block whatever let the thing actually eat heat, as promised, but it was sucking the heat out of the air it could get to. They each had a fire or two inside their circles of salt, and that was something, but…

Not to mention we can’t breathe this smoke forever. Dammit! This is a hostile environment, why isn’t that damn thing going into the freezer already!

Unless it didn’t realize the freezer was there. Which argued for Sam’s theory that the insulation would hold it, but…

Eyes stinging a bit now, Jack looked across the room at his second in command. “Sam! How many of those things do you have left?”

Sam was hesitating with an unlit sparkler in her hand, taking a moment to get the lay of the situation. “Not many,” she said grimly. “Even Dyne doesn’t keep that many explosives lying around.”

“Get ready to throw once the kid’s back in commission,” he said, equally grim. “We need to put this thing away now.”

Zuko’s sparking hand had almost reached the tips of his fingers. The kid was starting to straighten. “Go!” Jack shouted, and launched himself out of the protective circle of salt.

~Even the Dragon-King’s Temple floods.~

Spirits, it hurt.

Nothing like when his father had burned his face, or Azula’s lightning. His face – that had been an
endless, world-devouring moment of absolute, blazing agony. He didn’t even remember being hit by Azula’s lightning, not really. Just that moment of horrified realization, the breath-stealing shock of impact, the desperate internal litany of in, down, up, out!, and then nothing except a whole world of pain and a body that would only spasm on the ground no matter how much he told himself that he had to move.

Fire-healing wasn’t anything like that. He wasn’t even aware of the flames wreathing the hand he’d set against his arm – other than a vague awareness that he’d just set his tunic on fire. Blast. He’d liked this one…

Then he felt the flames flex, becoming hot, hot air, so hot it was crackling with dry seed-lightning.

His left arm was filled with ice-rimed fire, shooting down the length of his left arm from the touch of his burning-hot right hand to the very tips of his fingers. Like taking a sharp blow to the sensitive nerves of your elbow, except the cold fire kept streaming in and in and would not stop. He could see it in his mind’s eye, like his arm was made of thousands of finer-than-hair filaments of white-hot wire all tangled and knotted together-

And with every inch his hand moved down his arm, slow and feeling like he was pushing against some intangible force for every bit, every jolting flare shooting into his fingers, a few more of those wires fell into their proper places, like irrigation canals being cleaned out.

Breathe. Breathe. It’s working, you can do this, just keep breathing…

His hand reached his fingertips, and the world burst roaring back into his awareness.

Jack roared and flung himself across the room with reckless abandon, hurtling through the space occupied by the yukiuso’s killing cold-

Can’t believe he did that. Can’t believe he survived that. Luckier and crazier than Aang and Sokka combined…!

-hitting the ground on the far side, rolling back up to his feet in the middle of the doorway to the cooler.

On the other side of the room, Sam caught Zuko’s eye for a brief moment. He nodded, breathing in, trying to calm his chi.

Breaking her own salt-made barrier, Sam threw the firecracker.

Zuko spread both arms wide. Over phantom pains, his left arm stung with a soreness so familiar from a thousand firebending mistakes it was almost comforting. But it moved.

Yes!

Reaching his chi out to those blazing, short-lived sparks, he grabbed and held.

He hadn’t tried doing anything like this… spirits. Since he’d been eleven and Ursa had vanished from his world. It wasn’t real firebending, certainly not appropriate for a firebender of the imperial family, just a flashy trick stage performers used to impress the common masses, taking the basic leaf exercise every firebender did to a pointless extreme…

But his mother’s eyes had always danced at those shows. So like the idiot kid he’d been, he’d practiced and practiced and practiced in secret, even though the move had really been far too advanced for him and he hadn’t understood the technique at all, until he could do it himself.
He’d never even dreamed he might use it for something like this.

Grab each flying, dying spark. *Hold* it, feeding chi into each tiny seed of fire when all it wanted to do was flare up and fade. Slowly spread his arms, palms up, as he spread the sparks. And grab, and hold, and spread, and grab, and hold, and spread, until the air was filled with the glimmer of thousands of brightly colored stars, save for small circles of space left open around himself and Toph, Sam, Jack, and the cooler.

Breathe in. Hold.

He flipped his hands palm-down.

*Flashover.*

Brief. Fast. Too short to even ignite a scrap of paper, even if he weren’t keeping it away from anything too flammable. But for one short heartbeat of a moment, the air was filled with flame.

Finally, *finally*, the yukiuso had had enough.

The timbre of the cold laughter changed, suddenly dropping in pitch and volume as it fled down the one path left free of fire and stabbing spikes of salt as Toph stomped and thrust, rushing after Jack and past, into the cooler.

But it was still *laughing*…

Zuko blinked dizzily, trying to pull air into his lungs again as his legs suddenly decided to drop him to the ground. In some corner of his mind, he was vaguely aware that this was a good thing, that he shouldn’t be moving. The rest of his mind had filled with a cold, empty fog. He tried to fight it, tried to call up the fire that he *was* and burn it off, but it was so cold, he had to find a place to get warm…

Distantly, he noticed Sam shaking her head fiercely. Toph, face powder-white, actually stumbled a step forward. And Jack…

Seamed face set in a stubborn scowl, the hard-faced soldier pulled one of those odd, tiny white pouches out of his pocket and, with a grunt of effort, ripped it open over his own head.

The moment white salt cascaded over the man’s shoulders, his eyes snapped open, suddenly clear. The soldier turned and lunged, grabbing the burning-cold metal of the cooler door, and slammed it closed.

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~

“We need flamethrowers.”

Sam looked up from the form she was filling out and raised an eyebrow. “Sir?”

Jack spread white-bandaged hands in an oh-so-innocent *this should be obvious* gesture. “Seriously. We’re Plucky Earthingxs fighting off Alien Invasions every other week, and we don’t have flamethrowers? No wonder we keep getting our asses kicked.”

“I’ll be sure to add it to the requisition recommendations section,” she said dryly, still trying to figure out how one couched a proper military explanation for one thoroughly salted and scorched lab in the
aftermath of the Battle of the Salt Shakers.

Some of the Marines had already submitted reports under that title, she was sure of it. The red mark on Hammond’s forehead from banging his head on his desk was a definite clue. This was definitely one incident destined to go down in the annals of SGC legend.

On top of that, she had to explain why one very expensive heavy-insulation super-cooling thermomagnetic freezer was marked OFF LIMITS – DO NOT OPEN!! In salt-crusted spray paint, with every biohazard and warning label they’d been able to dig up slapped on the door for good measure. Given that it had been Heather Dyne’s lab, a lot of those read EXPLOSIVE and FLAMMABLE – and for that matter, it had been all Sam could do to keep Jack from painting the message on the door in the leftover Sterno after Zuko put the flames out and setting it on fire all over again.

Hell, she’d even have let him do it, if not for the danger that the heat might damage the vacuum-sealed insulation. No one wanted to take any chances on letting their ice genie out of its bottle.

Even the kids had pitched in. Toph had somehow bound crystallized salt into the matrix of the concrete floor around the walk-in freezer, and Zuko had bullied Sam into digging up pen and paper so he could scribble out a few sheets of oddly elegant symbols to stick up there with all the other no touchie signs.

Daniel had spazzed in a way she hadn’t seen for a while. He was currently trying to coax Zuko into showing him more of the obviously complex writing system. As much as the kid could with only one free hand, at least; his left was trapped in the inescapable clutches of Dr. Janet Fraiser, who was poking and prodding it in an effort to figure out what that bout of fiery field medicine had done. From the way he was wincing, it hurt.

No wonder. His entire arm was a nice even lobster red, in start contrast to the pale skin of his chest, made even paler in some places, and darker in others, by scars. And he was shivering in a way she didn’t particularly like, not given how warm the infirmary was on behalf of the survivors of the cafeteria battle, and especially not when she remembered how well he’d handled the arctic temperatures of P4X-684.

We need to requisition some clothes for the kids, she reminded herself. Zuko had reduced his entire left sleeve and a fair bit of his tunic’s back to so much ash when he’d used that handful of fire to heal his arm.

Which meant more forms to fill out. Joy.

Jack was no help whatsoever, either. The metal of the freezer had been so cold that it actually burned him as he grabbed it. The frostbite was relatively minor compared to some of the cafeteria survivors, but until those bandages came off, he wasn’t going to be doing much report writing.

Sam intended to get payback for this. Somehow. Glorious, creative payback…

Jack grinned easily, apparently unbothered by any premonitions of oncoming doom. “But look at it this way. We’ve got at least fifty years to build a better mousetrap for that thing.”

She was going to regret this, she just knew it. “Oh?”

“It’s officially Sealed Evil in a Can now, Carter.” Jack held up a bandage-bulky finger sagely. “Fifty, one hundred, or a thousand years. There are traditions, you know.” He ignored her rolled eyes, looking past her to where Janet had just shoved a glass of water into Zuko’s free hand before starting
to wrap his red-flushed arm in a light bandage, and raised his voice slightly. “So, how’s Sparky doing?”

Janet gave him a Look. “Sparky?” she echoed.

Jack shrugged. “Hey. Given that last stunt he pulled, what else could I call him…” Then it was his turn to arch an eyebrow, as Daniel raised a hand to cover his mouth in an unsuccessful bid to hide a grin. “Danny?”

Daniel cleared his throat. “Chira-bi,” he said innocently.

Teal’c looked over from where he had stationed himself by the door, neither looming over anyone nor out of the flow of conversation. Not that the looming seemed to bother the kids, which was in itself interesting, but some habits were just hard to break. “That is a term by which Toph refers to Zuko at times,” he observed.


Jack raised his eyebrow again, a little higher this time. “Aaaaand?” he drawled with exaggerated patience.

“I’ve managed to pick up a few more terms in their language. Bi seems to be a suffix related to fire, which seems to be hi…”

“Thought that was ho-ho-something?”

Daniel flipped a few pages of his pad back to check a note. “Ho-noh. That seems to be more essence-of-burning, though… Flame, maybe.” He grinned. “And chira – Zuko described throwing the salt around as chirasu. It seems to mean something like to scatter.”

Jack eyed the anthropologist, clearly waiting for the punchline. Teal’c, however, was slowly nodding. “Scattered Fire, in other words.”

Sam realized where this was going and hid her own grin as Daniel spread his hands wide. “Or, if you were to put it colloquially,” he said, face wickedly innocent, “…Sparky.”

Jack blinked, then looked past them all to the sprawl of green and cream zonked out on the stone floor on the other side of Zuko’s cot, limbs sprawling just about every which way possible and snoring fit to shake the walls.

It was, in fact, a little too picture-perfect. Sam suspected Toph was not nearly so out of it as she conspired to appear. She considered the suspicion confirmed when Toph didn’t so much twitch when Jack threw his head back and laughed.

“Knew I liked the dainty little demolitionist!”

“Holes left in the cafeteria and all?” Janet asked dryly, joining them. Zuko, his arm now bandaged, stayed where he was, eyeing them with an expression Sam was amused to recognize from many a teenager’s face.

“You people are weird. I’m staying over here in case it’s contagious.”

Jack’s attention, however, was on Janet’s face. He straightened, grin fading. “Problem, Doc?”

Janet slowly pulled off her gloves, apparently buying time to think. At length, however, she sighed.
“I’m not sure. I want to check Toph before I jump to conclusions. But for the time being, Colonel – I think we need to put a moratorium on the telekinesis if at all possible.”

Jack’s eyes narrowed. “Oh?”

“I checked Zuko’s naquadah levels again. They’re measurably lower than they were when I checked them yesterday. That was barely twenty-four hours ago.” Janet’s fists clenched. “Minerals don’t do that, Colonel. Particularly not heavy metals. Yes, your body flushes them out over time unless you replace them, but not that fast. Something is going on there, and I have no idea what. But I doubt it’s healthy.”

Jack chewed his lip. “Damn. Our ticking clock decided to shave some time off, huh?” He sighed. “I’ll let the General know.” He nodded towards the two off-world children; Zuko had found a seat crosslegged on the floor next to Toph, apparently settling into some sort of meditation. “How’s his arm?”

Janet pursed her lips. “He seems to have reversed the damage done by the zat,” she said with a doctor’s judiciousness. “I’m not willing to say more than that without some time to observe, and maybe a few tests.”

Jack grimaced. “I don’t get why he didn’t do it before the fight.”

“I’d prefer he hadn’t done it at all,” Janet said tartly. “He was messing with his own nervous system, Jack. And I doubt he had much idea what he was doing, given that he apparently didn’t know he could heal until an hour ago. The effects of zats wear off over time. What he does might not. He could have done himself permanent damage.” She grimaced. “As it is, he’s going to be in a great deal of pain for the next week or so. He has what’s effectively a more or less even second-degree sunburn on his entire arm, from shoulder to fingertips.”

Every fair-skinned person in hearing distance cringed.

“Ow,” Jack agreed, with feeling. “Someone’s going to be going through a lot of Aspirin.”

“Except that I can’t give him any,” Janet said heavily, dropping into a chair at last.

Sam blinked, setting her pen aside. “I didn’t know you could be allergic to Aspirin,” she said slowly, studying Janet. The doctor looked like she was bracing herself for something difficult.

“People can develop allergies to just about anything,” Daniel said ruefully.

“Except that in this case, it’s not allergies I’m worried about. I can’t treat them, Colonel. I have no way of predicting how they’ll react to whatever treatments I try, beyond the most basic physical care.”

Sam traded puzzled looks with the other members of SG1. “I do not understand,” Teal’c said at last. “You have, in the past, treated the peoples of many worlds, Janet Fraiser.”

“And it’s always been chancy,” Janet admitted. “Humans adapt to their environments, we talked about that earlier. Something we consider a staple, or maybe don’t even realize we’re using, could be poisonous to people from a different world. All I can do is guess, based on a very basic human baseline.”

“And?” Jack prompted, eyebrow up again.

Janet sighed. “I got the rest of their bloodwork back.”
The eyebrow didn’t drop.

“I should have guessed something was up when I got the mineral analysis. Humans can’t take heavy minerals in the sort of concentrations that these two seem to require simply to be healthy.”

“Doc…”

“Psychokinesis, Colonel. Toph sees with her feet. Zuko can hold fire in his hands, and he can not only manipulate his body temperature, he seems to tolerate a far wider spread of temperatures than we do.” Janet spread her hands. “Outside of that… speaking on a purely physical and anatomical level, Zuko and Toph are fairly normal. Yes, they’re tough, but no more outside the baseline than, say, Teal’c, or a Goa’uld’s host.” She paused.

“Go on,” Jack said slowly.

Janet drew in a deep breath. “However. On the biochemical and genetic level? Zuko and Toph are not human.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter? Kicked my sorry little tail, because – idiot that I am – I started writing this story knowing that I wanted the SGC and the benders to work together to bring down the yukiuso. Without figuring out how that was going to happen. Oops. It wasn’t until I stumbled across magnetic refrigeration that I hit on a way of combining the mystic role of salt in purification and warding off evil (and in fireworks – colors are made using salts, and flashy explosions always add a certain something!) with techy know-how to come up with a properly SG-1 response to evil incorporeal spirits of killing cold.

And once I had the theory, I still had to figure out a way to put it into motion. Ow. My head hurts. It took me about a year and a half of backburnering the story so ideas could percolate before I finally untangled this one.

Speaking of… the way I see it, “spirits” in the Avatar-verse are more along the lines of “kami” (elemental forces of nature) rather than, say, youkai or ghosts. Kami can be extremely minor, by the by, and extremely hostile as well, although usually hostile kami are appeased by building shrines. So when Zuko says, “Jashin” – that would translate more literally to “evil kami” (shin and kami are different readings of the same character in Japanese).

Zuko’s explanation of how the yukiuso can divide and remerge is in fact taken from Rayek of ElfQuest. Minus the poetic elegance, for obvious reasons.

Don’t bother looking up folklore on the yukiuso, by the way. I invented it for the purposes of this story, from bits and scraps taken from various folklores. It is essentially a cross between a kushtaka and a yukionna, with shades of the darkness entity from the Hide and Seek episode of Stargate: Atlantis.

Also? Zuko comparing Jack to Zhao is a compliment. Yes, Zhao was ambitious, and a jerk of the nastiest sort, not to mention cruel and megalomaniac and deserving pretty much what he got. He was also observant (he did link Zuko and the Blue Spirit, with minimal clues), dedicated, apparently trusted by his men as a leader, a good strategist.
and tactician if he didn’t lose his temper, and brave. Sneaking into the heart of the Northern Water Tribe under a full moon? That took guts. Not a lot of sanity, less morality, but guts.

The comparison is also accurate. Jack goes looking for a weakness, and when he finds it, he pushes. And he never lets up. Very much like Zhao.

I should point out here that Daniel’s linguistic geeking applies to Japanese. Some of it is a little hazy when applied to AtLA-verse. For example, Japanese uses pure vowels – meaning that you don’t have a vowel gliding into a different vowel. This is not the case with a name like, say, the “I” of Iroh, which starts as an “ah” and ends as an “ee.” Japanese doesn’t do that, as a rule of thumb. But I wanted what he was observing to be accurate to the language I was actually using. So I have to ask readers to please exercise a little suspension of disbelief, and pretend that Daniel’s chatter is as appropriate to the language the characters would really be speaking as it is to Japanese.

In Japan, tallying is done by writing と – which starts with the top horizontal line. I feel justified in using that here, given that the Avatar intro sequence uses kanji for each of the elements. And while I’m at it – there is a little canon evidence for different languages in the Avatar-world, at least when you look at naming patterns. Obviously there’s a common language shared by all – other than Aang’s making himself look silly by using extremely dated slang excessively, there are no instances of language-based communication problems. But really, they should have developed at least a good double-handful of culture-specific vocabulary over time. (Let me just point out the swambenders and traveling hippies as examples.) Still, this is definitely a case of “no hard evidence against it” rather than there being any canon basis for it.

And yes, Daniel is once again making an educated guess regarding social status. It’s a good guess. And yes, he is going to feel so silly when he learns more…

Oh. Before I close, Toph demands that I make a public service announcement: If you want to see her using bone-bending for anything other than maybe poking a bit at healing? Sorry, but not here. She’s met Hama, she saw (sic) Katara, and in Temple, at least, she’s got enough issues about having hurt people with her bending as it is. And the Blind Bandit plain doesn’t roll that way. She wants to deal with someone, she chucks rocks at ‘em. So Chekhov can take that gun off the mantelpiece and fire it somewhere else. Thank you.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Seen from above, the clouds were cheerfully rolling hills of white fluff, breaking up into darker lakes and pools of open air, and the sky overhead was an almost painfully violet blue with the occasional white wisp of cirrus clouds gleaming in the blazing sunlight.

“Y’know, buddy – never thought I’d say this, but I’m kind of bored.”

A deep, lowing rumble of rueful sympathy made the saddle vibrate a bit.

Aang grinned. “I know! Weird, isn’t it?” He rolled over in the saddle to turn his face up to the sun, arms spread wide and eyes mostly closed against the brilliant light. “It’s flying! How can flying be boring?”

Except that he wasn’t at all used to flying alone. Back at the Temple, there’d always been the other novices to fly with, or old Gyatso on his own bison friend, mild-tempered and sleepy-slow and somehow always managing to beat Appa to the best breezes despite Aang’s best efforts. And after… well, after, there’d been Sokka and Katara, and then Toph burning lobster-crab red in the high-altitude sun, and then Zuko basking in it like a sleepy pygmy puma, and you could never be bored with that many friends.

But right now they were all scattered across the world, and for once, it was just Aang and Appa.

Oh, and Momo. But Momo was currently asleep in a corner of Appa’s saddle, curled up against the wind and the biting cold of the air above the clouds, having decided that the best way to deal with the long flight over the ocean was to sleep it away.

Aang thought that kinda sounded like a good idea. It wasn’t like Appa needed his guidance – which was why he was sprawled in the saddle rather than at the reins anyway. And all the fun of long-distance flying kinda got lost when you were going over the ocean and there wasn’t even anything to look at except water, water, and more water. They wouldn’t be going over any land until they reached the Great Gates of Azulon, and by that point the trip would be pretty much over.

“And that’ll make this whole trip worth it, buddy, you’ll see,” he said, patting the saddle as though it were Appa’s fur. “It’s gonna be great.”

They’d all planned this together before they’d gone their separate ways after the end of the war and Zuko’s coronation. A couple months to catch up with family and make sure stuff was going okay, then they’d meet up back at the Fire Palace for a reunion on the autumn equinox.

The others had all insisted. Autumn for Air, and Aang hadn’t quite been able to hide the way his throat had closed up for a minute from pure happiness.

And once everyone was together, they’d all go off together for a while, just to have fun. Even Zuko.

“I’m not going to be much of a Fire Lord if I can’t make time for my friends. Not to mention the Avatar,” he’d said dryly, when Sokka had asked.

It was going to be awesome. Maybe they’d go ride the hopping llamas, like he’d planned way back when he and Katara and Sokka were just setting out.
Spirits. He’d been such a brat back then. So sure he could put the whole world on hold and make one hundred years and a war just go away if he simply ignored them hard enough.

He’d grown up a lot since then. But he still wanted to take his friends to ride the hopping llamas, and the wild hog-monkeys…

Aang frowned slightly, sobering, and rolled over, crossing his hands on the rim of the saddle and resting his chin on them to look down at the glint of sun on waves far below, visible now and then as wisps of cloud passed beneath Appa’s feet.

He’d been babbling a mile a minute as they’d made their plans, even after everyone else had left and it was just Zuko, listening with half an ear and a wry smile. Aang had always dreamed of being able to take his friends around the world with him, back before, but Kuzon and Bumi’s families didn’t want them gone that long.

Only, when he’d been babbling about the hog-monkeys and the way they went absolutely crazy when you rode them, an odd look had crossed the older boy’s face.

“Hey, Aang. Do you know how to skip stones?”

He’d blinked. “Of course I do, I jump on rocks all the time!”

“I don’t mean like that… Here, come to the pond with me, I’ll show you.”

That had been fun… and, okay, maybe he’d cheated a little until Zuko called him on trying to waterbend the surface or keep the stone going with earthbending. But the firebender kept winning, and who’d ever expected that?

“Bad temper, remember?” Zuko’s half-grin had been rueful. “Throwing things is better than setting stuff on fire. I’ve had a lot of practice.”

Well, Aang had practiced enough to get double-skips pretty reliably. Then he’d narrowly missed one of the little turtle-ducks paddling across the pond, and its mother decided to… take offense.

Yeah. That had been… Um. Undignified.

But what Zuko had said afterward…

“You scared her baby. Of course she’s upset.”

Aang threw his hands in the air and almost was attacked again before he backed away from the water. “Whoa! Um, easy there… I didn’t mean to – I was just having fun! And I’m sorry.”

“She doesn’t know that. Just like Appa doesn’t always understand that we won’t hurt him when we firebend. Animals don’t care about sorry. They just know that you hurt and scared them, and they don’t want anything to do with you after that.” Zuko sighed. “They’re probably smarter than we are.”

Aang opened his mouth to ask what that was supposed to mean – then his gaze landed on Zuko’s scar, and… okay, yeah, he kinda saw what Zuko meant.

Zuko must have guessed Aang’s thoughts, because his lips twisted in that not-really-happy quasi-smile he got when he was thinking about the mess that was his family. But he didn’t say anything more about that, just turned his attention back to the pond and the turtle-ducks, which were just starting to settle down again. “You know, back when I was a refugee in the Earth Kingdom, that’s
part of how I decided who was safe to ask for work or shelter.”

“Huh?” Conversational whiplash, ow.

“Whenever I saw a farm, I’d go and check the animals. If they were healthy and calm, it was probably okay. If they looked overworked, or shied away whenever they saw a human… well, I was probably better off sleeping rough and trying to forage.” Zuko grinned ruefully. “I was a lousy scavenger, by the way.”

“Really? But you always helped Sokka with the food…”

“Yes. In the Fire Nation. And even then, I was learning as much from him as I was helping. The Earth Kingdom… let’s just say, there’s a reason I was thin.” The smirk became a little more real. “Uncle Iroh was worse, though. Remind me to tell you about the flowers sometime. But… I’m just trying to help you understand, you can learn a lot about somebody by looking at how they treat animals.”

Aang nodded slowly, frowning, because Zuko had his Sifu-face on, so there was something he was supposed to learn from all that. But… “I don’t get it. Why is that important?”

Zuko sighed. “Aang… look, I’m sorry, but I can’t figure out a gentle way to say this. I just need you to listen. They don’t like people riding them, but that’s what makes it fun? That’s not good.”

“Why not?” Aang wasn’t… okay, he was pouting. He’d been looking forward to this whole trip and now Zuko wanted to turn it into a teaching moment? Come on! “It’s great – they jump all over the place and you have to hang on really tight or you fall off…”

“If an animal doesn’t like something,” Zuko said quietly, “it’s usually for one of two reasons. Either you’re scaring it, or you’re hurting it. Or both.” The new Fire Lord sighed, standing up. “Aang… I don’t care if it’s animals or people, there are words for people who hurt or scare others for fun.”

Spirits. Aang could still remember the way he suddenly felt like he couldn’t breathe. “I’m not a bully!” he’d yelled – or, tried to yell. Instead, it came out small and hurt.

Zuko had reached over and gently squeezed his shoulder. “No, you’re not,” he’d said firmly. “But sometimes you forget that not everyone is having fun just because you’re having fun. Just… think about it, okay?”

Aang had thought about it. He’d thought about it a lot. He’d kept thinking about it even after he’d left the Fire Nation, to go fly to the colonies in the Earth Kingdom and spread the word that one hundred years of war were over at last. He was still thinking about it, and he was scared that he didn’t have any answers.

Because this wasn’t just about riding wild hog-monkeys, not really. This was about being the Avatar. About doing what was right. About getting other people to do what was right, and spirits, that was way harder than he’d ever imagined. He hadn’t even been able to convince Katara that maybe killing someone wasn’t the right thing to do, not really, although he kinda hoped that his flailing about forgiveness had at least helped her…

Violence wasn’t the answer. It couldn’t be. Even the Avatar didn’t have the right to stand up, point at someone, and say this person does not have the right to live.

He believed that. Even if it had taken almost an entire year, and so many lives lost because he didn’t look hard enough for a better way, and seeing what wanting to kill did to Katara, and facing the
deadline against Ozai just when they’d finally gotten to be friends with Zuko, who had been his idea of the ultimate enemy ever since pretty much the day Katara had broken his iceberg, to figure it all out.

He believed it. But in the end… no, he hadn’t killed Ozai. But he’d still used brute force to stop the man. He hadn’t changed the Fire Lord.

Like General Fong. Spirits, that had been a mess.

He and Toph had come across the general when they reached the Earth Kingdom, and had gone to share the good news. General Fong had listened solemnly as Aang explained that Ozai had been defeated and the war was over.

And then the general had ordered all his men to gather immediately for an attack on the nearest Fire Nation colony!

Thank goodness Toph had tagged along, out for a little more adventure to make up for the stuff she’d missed before joining the group. She’d helped him put a stop to that by stomping Fong and his captains into the dirt until they’d agreed to stop.

But that wasn’t the same as convincing them. It wasn’t really a peaceful solution, because Fong hadn’t changed. Aang had stopped him by force, and was keeping him stopped by threats.

And Ozai… Aang had taken away his bending. He’d forcibly ripped part of the man’s spirit out.

In the end, wasn’t that just saying, I’m more powerful than you, so you have to do what I say?

That wasn’t right.

Was it because he wasn’t really a full Avatar yet? Because he wasn’t. The others had been right, back when they’d decided to sit the Comet out, before Zuko had explained just how insane Ozai really was. Maybe he was a master of Air, and getting there with Water. But his earthbending was still really shaky if he wasn’t actively calling on the Avatar. And his firebending, well… There just hadn’t been enough time to get anywhere close to even pretending he’d mastered that. That was why Zuko had concentrated on teaching him moves for control and defense, and not the more famous aggressive techniques.

Well. Besides the effects of the Comet.

Aang closed his eyes, swallowing a little. He still hadn’t figured out how to talk to Zuko about that. Zuko was the one to tell him not to firebend under the light of the Comet. Did he really think Aang hadn’t figured out what that Agni Kai had really been?

A real Avatar would know what to say.

Or maybe not. Because he’d meditated on it, trying to think of a better way he could have dealt with Ozai. And…

Kyoshi intimidating General Chin into making peace with a display of power, stopping his advance on her home by turning her peninsula into an island, rather than stopping the situation before it ever started. Roku shooting Sozin down with threats even when they were supposed to be friends, and then using the Avatar’s power to destroy Sozin’s hall and overpower him as if that was that and beating Sozin up would somehow change his mind.

If he looked at the line of the Avatars, really looked… it looked an awful lot to him like one long line
of bullies.

*In the time before the Avatar...* That was what the Lion-Turtle had said. So there hadn’t *always* been an Avatar, despite what a lot of people seemed to think.

“The Avatar is the master of all four elements, the most powerful bender in the world,” Aang recited aloud, scowling. “But *why*? Why even have an Avatar, if all the Avatar can do is push people around?”

He didn’t know. And that was… scary.

*Bridge to the spirit world.* That was what the Avatar was supposed to do, right? Only no one seemed to have any idea what that actually meant.

Well… Zuko might have one by now, Aang reminded himself, brightening. Zuko was trying to drag the job of Fire Lord kicking and screaming back to what it *used* to be, back when the Fire Lord was just the leader of the Fire Sages. So he’d been up to his elbows in all sorts of weird old dusty scrolls. Maybe he’d found something useful.

*Better him than me!*

And Appa had just made an eager sound and shifted the angle of his flight. Aang sat up and – yes, he could see the green-and-black arc of the main island of the Fire Nation archipelago peering out from under the clouds.

“Almost there, buddy!” he said with a huge grin, and leapt into the air, twisting to part the wind flowing back over Appa so that he could waft forward to his usual seat on Appa’s head. “Just a little more, then we’ll get to see everybody again. Bet you’re looking forward to that, huh?”

Spirits, he couldn’t *wait.* Toph had wandered off over a month ago; she’d said something about hitching a ride with General Iroh back to the Fire Nation. Katara and Sokka, he’d dropped off at the South Pole so Katara could meet some of the visiting waterbenders and Sokka could tell everyone the stories about what they’d done; apparently that was a *big thing* in the Water Tribes. And he hadn’t seen Zuko since that conversation by the pond. Maybe he didn’t have any answers yet, but – even if it had hurt, Zuko had *told* him. Treated him like a real grown-up who could make grown-up decisions. Not some bratty kid who needed to be patted on the head and told to parrot whatever the local guy in charge decided was the Right Thing.

And if he hadn’t figured everything out – for crying out loud, he was *twelve.* Avatars weren’t even supposed to be *told* until they were sixteen, and even then, they were expected to spend *years* mastering the four Elements.

The war was over. The Avatar’s work was done. Aang had time to figure this stuff out properly before he had to become the Avatar for *real.*

“Which means I get to be a *kid* again for a while!” he said happily to Appa. Not that he minded growing up, exactly, but… well. Hopping llamas!

~*Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.*~

His first hint that something was wrong was when the Home Guard stationed at the Gates of Azulon
in the harbor didn’t smile and wave as he flew past.

Most of the Fire Nation soldiers had been happy to go home again when Zuko declared the war over. Some of their commanders a bit less so, but the soldiers, yeah. But not the tough women who made up most of the Home Guard. They hadn’t shown the least inclination to go home with the war over. And Zuko hadn’t done anything about it!

Which had bothered him a lot, until Suki’d grabbed him by the ear and dragged him off to the side for a pointed conversation about what people like the Home Guard did. Which was, apparently, lots. They watched for storms, and for signs that a volcano might be about to act up. They went out to rescue ships and shipwreck survivors. They helped towns repair damage from hurricanes and earthquakes, conducted searches for missing people, and helped make sure that people were obeying the laws. Which apparently didn’t just mean breaking up schoolkids’ secret dance parties. There’d been a focused hunt on for Combustion Man from the day he’d blown up the main square of that town, for example.

When he’d asked Suki how she knew about all that stuff, she just gave him a look as though she wanted to knock on his noggin and see if it made a hollow noise. “What did you think the Kyoshi Warriors did? We were neutral for a hundred years. We don’t train like that to look pretty!”

To make matters worse… he’d heard some scary rumors. That there had been attacks on Fire Nation towns along the coasts. Which didn’t make sense. The war was over… and sure, he’d had to sit on Fong before the general accepted that, but – well, Fong. But if the rumors were true…

He thought maybe that was why the women on the Gates looked worried. But if that was the case, they should have been happy to see Appa flying in, right? And they didn’t. If anything, they looked more worried, even if the Captain who came out on the balcony of one of the towers tried to give him a friendly grin. Aang thought he recognized her, too. She’d fallen over laughing when Toph had boastfully admitted to being The Runaway.

He almost stopped there to ask her what was going on. But she waved for him to keep going when he started to direct Appa down towards the tower, and… well, if something was going on, he should probably hear it from Zuko, right?

Only, when he finally brought Appa down to land in the big wide-open courtyard of the Fire Palace, it wasn’t the Fire Lord who came to greet him. It was Katara, her long brown braid streaming behind her and the skirt of her long, summer-weight blue tunic rippling with it and her beautiful blue eyes as wide and deep – deeper! – than the ocean he’d just flown over…

Aang knew that look. That was Katara’s worried look. And Sokka was coming out behind her, wearing his Piandao-serious face and not grinning at all.

This was looking really not good.

“Aang, you’re here!” Katara stopped just short of the backwash of air from Appa’s landing.

Aang swallowed. “Um. Hi, guys,” he said, jumping out of the saddle and letting the air cushion his drop down to the flagstones of the courtyard. “You’re here already? Am I late or something?” He’d thought for sure he’d gotten the day right, but time got a little blurry when you spent it meditating on chakras and eating onion and banana soup with the Guru…

“Nah,” Sokka said, waving a hand lazily, and his drawl would have been a lot more comforting if he didn’t have that worried little line in his forehead. “We actually all planned to come a little early, so we could throw a birthday party for you. We were gonna have it on the autumn equinox, since you
never actually told us when your birthday was.”

Aang blinked, but Sokka was looking up at Appa’s empty saddle – Momo had already woken up and gone to land on Katara’s shoulder, chittering as he picked up on the tension in the air. “So… what’s up?” he asked.

“Aang, are Zuko and Toph with you?” Katara asked urgently.

“…No,” he said, suddenly feeling light-headed, like he’d tried to take too deep a breath. “No, I thought we were meeting them here…”

“They went off to check something out – Zuko said he was thinking of showing it to the rest of us after our trip, some sort of Fire Sage spirity whatever-so,” Sokka said. “They were supposed to be back two days ago, though. We thought maybe you’d met them on the way and they were just hitching a ride with you.”

Aang shook his head numbly. “Then…”

Sokka drew in a deep breath, and his face darkened. “They’re missing.”

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~

“You’re worried.”

He looked up from the holographic display of the mountain range to glance at the woman stepping through the door.

As usual, looking at Nubiti, he was struck by a familiar – but still odd – feeling of doubled perception. Ur’s eyes looked on her and saw a stunning beauty, with dancing gold eyes that matched the amber highlights against deep emerald that made up the sun-on-water pattern of her skin, the easy grace and poise that betrayed dangerous strength underneath the soft, earth-toned fabrics of the loose clothing Nubiti favored.

Djehuty saw and appreciated the beauty – after millennia upon millennia of blendings, one picked up the hosts’ aesthetic tastes – but mostly he felt an odd sense of displacement when he looked at Nubiti’s face. He was still accustomed to seeing it in mirrors.

“I’m angry,” he said tightly, returning his gaze to the shining, half-transparent hologram of hard, sharp mountains. In a valley set high against one slope, a circular symbol blinked mockingly, and he narrowed his eyes at it. “Sanura followed a group of known hostiles through a Stargate set to an unknown destination – probably the Tau’ri stronghold on Earth, which means she walked straight into their hands. Assuming she even survived the transition – we know the Tau’ri have an iris…”

The uncharacteristic anger-rumble of his own voice on the last word startled him, and he suddenly realized he’d bared his teeth at the symbol of the Stargate in a fierce scowl.

I’m still not used to this new self, he reflected ruefully, feeling that sense of doubling again as Djehuty pulled briefly away, startled by the unfamiliar aggression in Ur’s behavior. Not that Nebet hadn’t been ferocious in her own right, but it had never been her default. It’s only been a year since we blended.
“And she knew that we couldn’t afford to lose contact,” Nubiti said calmly, flicking a finger against his cheek-horn as she came up beside him to study the display as well. “Not if we wanted to have even a chance at opening communications with the Tau’ri, after the fiasco here. And especially because they have the two children with them. You know that, Urdu.”

Ur-Djehuty thrummed deep in his throat in wry amusement. *I might have known that nickname would catch on. Sanura always had a knack for them.* Closing his eyes, he let his mouth fall open slightly as he breathed deeply, tasting the air of the room against his tongue. Mostly stone and metal and electricity, of course, but with a hint of the *kapet* incense that Nubiti loved.

Feeling calmer, he returned his attention to the display. This time, his eyes sought out a symbol near the Stargate, marking the Gatebuilders’ research lab that had initially directed his attention to this world. “I admit, I never dreamed the Renegades might have survived after all this time,” he mused. “This is going to complicate things.”

“And someone’s stirring the pot,” Nubiti concluded for him, eyes narrowed dangerously.

Urdu nodded. Truth be told, he still wasn’t entirely clear on what had happened when Sanura had followed the long-sought address through the Gate; she’d only barely begun to make her report when chaos had broken out in the ha’tak as the SGC officers and the Renegade children both broke out. From what he understood, Sanura’s initial scouting team had gone through the Gate to make the first foray into an unfamiliar, uninhabited world – and come face-to-face with two psychokinetic children the moment they’d stepped through.

At which point, one of the younger and more excitable members of the team had opened fire. The skirmish had been brief, chaotic, fierce, and ended with half the Jaffa force incapacitated and two children unconscious and potentially badly injured. Zats were designed for use on *adults*.

*I need to see if there’s some way to tweak that. The whole point of a zat is to incapacitate, not kill…* 

A disaster, to be sure, and Sanura had been spitting nails and ready to part certain heads from their shoulders. But not necessarily a sign of malicious intervention. The records that had led him here, and to that world in particular, had been fragmentary and frustrating in their lack of information at best. They’d simply known it was dangerous. Enough for the address to have been sealed. And nervous and excitable soldiers made mistakes.

What had happened after the expedition had returned to the ha’tak, however…

“Lieutenant Nekht claimed that he put the girl with the Tau’ri doctor so that she could get medical attention.” From Nubiti’s expression, the flimsiness of the explanation verged on the physically painful. “Apparently he somehow forgot we have physicians of our own.”

“Nekht.” Ur wanted to snarl, Djehuty to shake his head in bewilderment. Fortunately, they weren’t mutually exclusive gestures. “I would never have guessed. He’s so…”

“Over the top?” Nubiti said dryly. “Agreed. Spies are usually better actors than that. On the other hand, we didn’t spot him.” She rubbed thumb and forefinger together in small circles, as though measuring a fine powder. “System Lords, or Tok’ra?”

“Tok’ra,” Urdu said after a moment. “A System Lord’s spy would have waited to see what I intended to do.” He snorted. “The Tok’ra never did learn the meaning of *patience.* Or *please,* for that matter.”

“And they’re allied with the Tau’ri,” Nubiti said.
“Two fish, one spear,” he agreed, and rubbed the side of his face wearily. Put the Renegade children with the Tau’ri, and they almost certainly would escape together. It was a good plan, all the better for having been done off the cuff.

And the most frustrating part was the way they’d played into it. The hand that had been rubbing his face curled into a fist, and he rested the knuckles against the tight space over his brow ridges, willing the headache to go away. “Ammit’s bite, Sanura,” he sighed. “If you’d just brought the Tau’ri to see me when you found them…”

“Let them cool their heels in the brig for a while,” indeed! You know better, Sanura. You’re the one who steals the security recordings of Tau’ri escapes when I’m done with them and uses them to play drinking games with the commanders.

“Khenut’s patrol is still missing,” Nubiti said quietly.

*Khenut.* Urdu closed his eyes, leaning on Ur as Djehuty’s heart wrenched. Ur hadn’t known Khenut particularly well. But she had been Nebet-Djehuty’s right hand, confidante, advisor and second in command for over twenty years. She might have passed that position on to Sanura, but Djehuty had anticipated working together with her for years longer.

She’d been missing for nearly a week now, on what had proven to be a hostile world. He knew the odds too well.

“Sanura believed the SGC team was responsible?” he asked instead. That was an aspect of this disaster he had not been aware of.

“They followed Khenut’s trail, and walked straight into the Tau’ri,” Nubiti said. “It was a logical enough assumption.”

‘And you know what they say about assume,’ ” Djehuty quoted in the Tau’ri’s English dryly.

Nubiti rumbled in the back of her throat, distracted momentarily by amusement. “What would the system lords say if they knew we used the security tapes they send you to study Tau’ri slang, not their technology?”

“Probably the same thing they’ve said for millennia – that I’m a senile old fool. Besides, slang is technology,” Urdu replied, matching her mild amusement with his own. “At least if you’re interested in talking to someone.”

“And we need to talk to them,” Nubiti said quietly. “We’ve lost another team.”

Damn and damn. Ammit take whatever was behind this… “Who?”

“Poetic justice this time.” Nubiti bared sharp teeth. “Lieutenant Nekht’s squad.”

Pity. Urdu would very much have liked a little time to talk with him. Normally, he tolerated a certain amount of spying – particularly when a little disinformation could have highly entertaining results. But he drew the line when his people were hurt.

Preferably with the culprit’s blood for ink.

But that made the third team that had vanished into the mountains. *Something* was behind that.

*Once is chance, twice is coincidence, three times is enemy action.*
But they’d kept close watch on the Gate. After Major Carter’s group had fled, the Tau’ri had not returned. And still the patrols were disappearing. Combine that with what they’d found – and hadn’t found – in the Gatebuilders’ lab…

He forced himself to relax his hands, before he broke the table under them. “We must talk to the SGC,” he admitted. “As soon as possible.”

Which could be very difficult. The security the Tau’ri had on their Stargate made getting any sort of message to them nigh-impossible, at least through any channel he was willing to utilize.

And if Sanura had come to harm…

“You’ll do as you must,” Nubiti said quietly, as if she’d read his thoughts. No great surprise. She reached out and brushed the scar on his lower throat, the mark that they shared to set them apart as Wisdom Seekers, although Nubiti also wore the slender choker that meant she had ended her time of ghoti. “You are more than Urdu. You are Ur and Urdu, and the Wise One.” She shook her head. “The Tau’ri negotiate whenever possible. If Sanura survived arriving at their stronghold, then I think they won’t harm her. She knows what we need. We need to trust that her head, not her heart, will lead.”

Urdu looked at her, then back at the holographic map.

Shaking his head, he looked at Nubiti again, a rueful rumble in the back of his throat. “So what is our Plan B?”

~Even the Dragon-King’s Temple floods.~

Those two better have a really good reason to be missing… um.

Swallowing hard, Sokka stared down at a landscape of jungle and mountain and tried really hard not to think about all the really bad good reasons his mind had just gleefully conjured up.

Hot springs! he thought hastily. I’ll bet they found a bunch of really awesome hot springs and they’re hanging around having a good soak and laughing at the rest of us!

Oh, man, Toph would totally do exactly that…

Except she wouldn’t. And Zuko really wouldn’t. Not when they’d been the ones to suggest that they take this little get-together to talk to Aang.

Aang thought that with the Loser Lord taken down but good, that meant the war was over and the Avatar’s job was done, so he could just turn off being the Avatar and go back to being just Aang.

Be fair, Sokka thought to himself with a wince. We all thought that.

Well, maybe not Zuko. The guy was kind of an eternal pessimist matched with the weirdest sort of stubborn optimism that Sokka had seen, ever. But Sokka and Katara? They’d gone home figuring that, sure, maybe there’d be some rough spots, but the worst was over and the Southern Water Tribe’s warriors would all come back and they could finally start the rebuilding part.

Only as it turned out, not so much. For one thing, apparently Dad wasn’t chief of the Southern Water
Tribe. He was chief of a Southern Water Tribe out of a whole bunch of Southern Water Tribes. Who knew?

Not Sokka, that was for sure. He’d had no idea, back when he’d been painting himself up for his first big battle as a man of the tribe, when Zuko’s ship had been bearing down on them, that he’d been marking himself specifically as a warrior of the Orcaseal Tribe.

Well, maybe he hadn’t known. But a lot of the other chiefs remembered that Hakoda was only boss by their consensus, apparently.

And now that the Fire Nation had officially stopped, the alliance was falling apart. Hakoda had already faced three challenges for leadership, and two of the tribes had simply packed up and sailed away.

To make things worse – not all of them had sailed home. He’d heard the stories of blue-sailed ships raiding near Full Moon Bay. Not many, but… the fleet had harbored there a lot, they knew that coast like the backs of their hands – and for the most part, the Earth Kingdom didn’t have ships to go after them.

Not that the Fire Nation had many, either. But the Fire Nation was an archipelago. They knew how to deal with the sea. And unlike the Earth Kingdom, they weren’t worn down by a hundred years of a losing war on their home turf.

And that was the Water Tribe. When he’d arrived in the Fire Nation, Iroh had filled everyone in on the rest of the world. The Earth Kingdom… ow. Bad enough that Ozai and his fleet had still managed to scorch a pretty big swath of land before Aang had taken him on – and then Aang had made things worse by raising the sea to put the fires out, leaving everything sodden and salted.

He hadn’t understood just why Toph was so upset about that – salt was salt, seriously, and wasn’t salt a good thing? – until Piandao had pulled him aside to explain what salt in the earth did to plants.

In short, really bad stuff, and now he got why Toph had been ranting about how Aang should have done the proper firebender thing and breathed the flames out the way Zuko did when something caught fire during firebending practice.

At least he’d put the fires out. There was still ash in the rain over the Earth Kingdom, which freaked a lot of people out. Sokka didn’t blame them. He’d freaked when he’d first seen gray snow falling after the war was supposed to be over.

And as if all that weren’t enough, a lot of the Earth Kingdom’s generals apparently figured that since in the end they’d been left out of the Day of Black Sun and Sozin’s Comet, they’d just play catch-up by launching a little invasion of their own on the Fire Nation. Fortunately they didn’t have the ships to make good their threats – probably – but it meant that their armies weren’t standing down, which meant the soldiers weren’t getting to go home and there were apparently some real problems getting the harvest in because of that.

Plus, since they couldn’t get across the seas, the colonies still in the Earth Kingdom were taking a lot of heat.

The colonies. Oh man, but that was a mess. Because some of them wanted the Fire Nation out yesterday. And others were all, no, really, we’ve been Fire Nation for nearly a hundred years, we kinda like it, thanks. And there were Earth peoples who considered themselves citizens of the Fire Nation – oh man it had been a shock to learn that, superior element nonsense or no, the Fire Nation actually had a division or two of earthbenders in its army – and Fire people who’d been born and
raised and lived their entire lives on what was now, technically, supposed to be *Earth Kingdom* land…

*Mess. Giant one.*

And speaking of the Fire Nation – not everyone was pleased by the end of the war and the change in leadership. A lot of the soldiers were glad to go home, but some of their generals were even worse than the Earth Kingdom ones. Worse – after all, up until the day of the Comet, they’d been *winning*. And a lot of them really weren’t too keen on coming back to a Fire Lord they’d been helping hunt at one point.

So not *all* the Fire Nation troops had pulled out, or gone to protect the colonies. There were red-and-black armored brigands across the Earth Kingdom countryside now. And not all of the ships raiding the coast were made with wood and blue sails.

Plus, there were problems within the Fire Nation itself. Sure, Zuko was surprisingly popular. Probably because he was mostly *sane*, as compared to certain other people. Although Katara had turned some pretty incredible colors when she learned that part of Zuko’s popularity was people admiring his perseverance in hunting Aang for the better part of four years. As for the rest of it… one of these days, Sokka was going to sit the guy down and make him explain why people considered that Agni Kai of his to have been a moment of such utter awesome, especially when everyone had been pretty clear that *Katara* was the one to ultimately take Azula down after she’d cheated.

*Assuming I get a chance.* The thought slipped past Sokka’s rambling thoughts before his mental guard could catch it and beat it into submission. *You two had better be okay!*

Because Zuko might be popular with the people, and with some of the minor nobles, but there were a lot of nasty people who’d come into power under Ozai who weren’t too keen on letting the former exile stay on the throne.

*Oh, come on. Mai and Iroh are the only ones who even knew where they were going, and Zuko is the master of sneaky. No one lives way out here to see them.* Which was part of why the search team was just him, Aang, Katara and Suki – with Momo and Appa, of course. Iroh was holding down the fort thus far with no one any the wiser. *And besides, we’re talking Zuko and Toph. Two of the most badass benders out there, and Zuko never goes anywhere without his swords. And… Toph. I mean – taking her out? You’d need… gah, I dunno, an entire army of flying mutant ninja were-lemurs!*

…Except that flying mutant ninja were-lemurs would probably still get their butts kicked, and then they’d take Toph to their secret ninja lair and make her their queen, and he should probably stop there, because the world wasn’t ready for Toph, Tyrant Queen of Flying Mutant Ninja Were-Lemurs.

And good as those two were… they weren’t invulnerable.

Sokka hugged himself, staring down at the jungle again.

Maybe this was part of a plan. Maybe they’d decided that just talking wasn’t going to be enough to make Aang take this seriously.

He swallowed, glancing at the silent figure seated on Appa’s head, grey eyes never pausing as he methodically scanned the foliage below. *Yeah, well… I hope it’s worth it. Because Aang’s starting to scare me.*

He’d only seen Aang this *focused* a couple times. Flying out against the Siege of the North. Leading
the invasion on the Day of Black Sun.

And after they’d lost Appa to the sandbenders in the desert.

*Only that time, Aang went all boom, then he was just scary for a while, then he was creepy but getting better, then he was kinda-sorta okay – then we found Appa and everything was good.* Sokka swallowed again. Darn air up here, kept making his mouth dry. *This time, we’re kinda going in reverse. He’s been mostly okay, but getting worse.*

*Be okay, you two. Hear me? Because I really don’t want to see the boom if it turns out something bad’s happened…*

“Over there!”

Everyone turned to look at where Suki had stationed herself in the back of the saddle. She was up on her knees, one hand gripping the rim while the other pointed out to a break in the foliage.

“I think I saw stairs, over at that dark line going up that rise. That must be the temple ruin Iroh mentioned!”

“Good eye.” Aang’s voice was too level, too steady. “Everyone, hang on, we’re going down.”

*Well, yeah, ‘course we – yipe!*

Sokka was pretty sure he’d have heard his stomach wailing about being left behind, if not for the rush of wind in his ears.

Only apparently his stomach was taking the scenic route to catch up, because several minutes later, it was still a horrible empty feeling in his gut. Although his heart had generously decided to sink down in an attempt to fill the space.

It was a pretty enough place, if you went in for this sort of thing. Old, old forest, the sort of thing you didn’t normally see in the Fire Nation all that much, what with the volcanoes. Giant trees marched their way up a steep, steep hillside, on either side of the remains of a broad staircase of some kind of shiny white stone, which was how Suki had spotted it from Appa’s back.

Those stairs were making the hairs stand up on the back of his neck. Not because there was anything creepy about them in and of themselves. They were actually kinda pretty, in a ruins-of-old-glory sort of way. No unsettling faces or animal shapes, just simple geometric stuff, wherever the trees hadn’t broken it.

There weren’t a lot of those places, though. And that was what creeped Sokka out. He looked at the trees, looked at the age of them, then looked at the way they’d grown in practically in the middle of the stairs, and came up with, *This place is really, really, really freaking old.*

Old enough that he could barely make out what must have once been water courses on either side of the stair, just the remains of what he thought were supposed to be pools at the bottom. One still had water in it, from a stream that had formed up… pretty recently, he thought. The other just made a semi-circular bowl – the rest of it was nowhere to be seen, probably hidden under centuries of mulch – that would make a nice sheltered place to build a campsite, but not much else.

Going by the neatly tidied remains of a campfire Suki was investigating, someone else had had the same idea.

“Looks like they camped here before going into the ruins,” she said, brushing her hands off as she
Katara was wringing her hands unhappily, eyes flicking from the stairs to the campfire to the saffron-and-orange figure standing way too still and silent, listening to them. “Do we even know it was them?”

Suki raised a painted brow and pointed silently at a triangle of slanting stones that apparently had just happened to pop out of the ground a comfortable distance from where the fire would have been.

“Yep, looks like a Toph-tent to me,” Sokka agreed. “How long ago, Suki?”

“As damp as it is around here, hard to say. But my guess would be four, five days.”

Oh boy. Not good. Because Zuko was pretty compulsive about cleaning up a campsite when he left it, and Toph normally put her stone tents back in the ground when she was done with them. They hadn’t done that here. Heck, now that Sokka looked, he saw another little stone lean-to over a small stack of wood, presumably extra firewood. So the two had planned to come back.

“So from the look of things – they went up into that temple at the top of the stairs. Only for some reason, they didn’t come back down.” Oh, there his stomach was. What had it been up to, to get such a knot in it?

“Then we look in the temple,” Aang said. His voice was still way too flat and expressionless. He tapped the butt of his staff on the ground once, sharply, and the wings of his glider opened up.

“Hey, wait-”

If Aang even heard Sokka’s objection, he didn’t show it. In less than a moment, he was airborne and shooting up the stairs like an arrow from a Yu Yan bow, straight and unwavering and scary-fast, Momo a screeching white streak racing after him.

It was just so wrong.

Sokka shared a worried look with his sister. Yeah. She’d noticed, too. Okay. We are officially in Aang-is-creeping-me-out territory now.

“Aang, wait up!” Katara shouted. A swift corkscrew-spiral with her arms, and water whipped out of the creek, wrapping around her and sending her flowing uphill in a silvery stream like a snake-eel had decided that gravity was for sissies and non-benders. Not one of Gran-Pakku’s fancy waterspout tricks, she couldn’t actually get far off the ground, but enough to make her a lot faster than someone who had to climb on his own two legs.

…argh. “Katara!” he snapped, annoyed. “Oh, great.” There were a lot of stairs…

A strong hand closed on his belt and yanked him backward. “Into the saddle, hero-boy,” Suki said dryly, already half-way up Appa’s side by the time Sokka turned around.

He grinned ruefully at her as he scrambled up. “I have the most awesome taste in girlfriends ever,” he announced to the world at large, and grabbed the reins. “Okay, Appa – yip yip!”

It turned out the stairs were really long. They picked Katara up less than a minute along the way, where her water had run out and left her running up the stairs on foot, and then gave up on following the stairs and broke out of the canopy, making for the lump at the top of the ridge that hopefully marked the temple itself.
It did. They came down for a landing in the plaza just in time to see Aang disappearing through a pair of long-destroyed doors.

“No you don’t!” Sokka gasped, and threw himself out of the saddle before Appa had even fully touched down. He almost flubbed the landing and ow that bruise was going to hurt tomorrow, but he managed to turn it into a roll and come up on his feet running. He grabbed Aang’s arm – wow, he’d never really noticed how much muscle all that firebending practice had put on the skinny little airbender – and forcefully yanked Aang back just as he was about to step into the temple itself.


“No.” Sokka met that stare intensity-for-intensity, as solemn as he’d ever been, even when he and Suki and Toph had been stranded on an airship on its way to crash into the rest of the fleet. “Aang. Whatever happened must have happened a few days ago. Maybe they’re okay. Maybe they’re not. Either way, we aren’t going to be able to help them if we get careless and charge headfirst into trouble ourselves. And rule number one is never split the party.”

“Aang, we’re all worried,” Katara said earnestly, slipping past Sokka to rest a hand on Aang’s shoulder herself. “But Sokka’s right, we need to stay together. We’re right behind you. Focus on that.”

Sokka let her push past him. Katara usually had better luck getting through to Aang when he was in a Mood. Usually. He wasn’t sure about now. Because something about this whole gathering-storm weight that was building around Aang that didn’t feel like Aang at all.

Whoo boy. Freaking out Aang is bad enough. We really don’t need a freaking out Avatar right now…

After a long moment, Aang sighed noisily, actually shaking himself. “You’re right,” he said, offering a smile. And he was offering it, not really smiling; it didn’t reach his eyes.

“Glad to hear it,” Suki said, coming up behind them. She had her fans in hand already. “Now, since everyone’s together…”

Aang nodded brusquely. “Let’s check it out,” he said, and they stepped inside.

Huh. Small place.

He’d expected something… well, grander. He’d been in a lot of temples. This one… well, it was small. Maybe the size of, say, that itty bitty museum of Avatar Kyoshi’s old stuff, back on Kyoshi Island. Maybe. And it was all one room, just a square with four walls and a floor and a ceiling, although part of the ceiling had fallen in…

“It’s so bare,” Katara whispered. “Where are the inscriptions? The statues of the Avatars?”

“I think only the really big places do those. That’s a lot of statues,” Sokka said, and fought down a shiver himself. He’d expected echoes, sure. But his voice sounded downright hollow when it bounced back and hit his ears. And… yeah, he could see Katara’s point. Every Temple, even the ones built in the Fire Nation during the past hundred-odd years, had some sort of depiction of the Avatar. Statue, painting, all four symbols of the elements together, whatever. And sure, it had been a long time, but – there should have been paintings, mosaics, tiles, something. He couldn’t even figure out…
Oh. Weird. “I can’t even tell what element this temple was,” he said slowly, turning around to scan the walls as his eyes slowly adjusted to the gloom.

They had adjusted enough that he could make out the skeptical arch of Suki’s eyebrows. “Um. We are in the Fire Nation,” she pointed out.

Sometimes he forgot that Suki hadn’t done the sort of world-spanning adventuring that the rest of them had. “Sure, it’s built in the Fire Nation,” he agreed. “Although I’ll point out that this island’s far enough in the middle of nowhere, who knows who it technically belongs to…” Oops, that was a get on with it already sort of face. Sokka shrugged. “Different nations build their temples different, that’s all. This one doesn’t look like any sort of style.” It was way too basic. No one built like this.

Not anymore, anyway.

“Mai said that Zuko thought this was old,” Katara said quietly. Apparently her thoughts were flowing in the same direction. “Very, very old. Maybe as old as the nations themselves.” She was rubbing her arms as though chilled, even though that was patently impossible. This was the Fire Nation. Cold? It just didn’t happen here.

And maybe if Sokka told himself that enough, he’d convince the bumps on his arms to go away. Hey, he was an optimist.

“Over there.”

Turning, Sokka squinted past the sunlight filtering through the hole in the ceiling, following Aang’s pointing finger.

Not all of the rubble was from that bit of ceiling collapsing. When he moved closer, he saw that one had been earthbent up from the floor itself – revealing a passage underneath that must have lain undiscovered for a thousand years or more.


Aang didn’t even smile. Great. “Do we have a lantern?” he asked shortly, staring down into the dark.

“Pushy, pushy…” Sokka was already digging through his bag, and he was going to laugh the next time someone told him he’d over-packed for an expedition, oh yes he was. “Just give me a minute – hah, there we go!”

Katara eyed the little metal box. “Um. Sokka?”

“Yes?” he said, preening himself a little despite the direness of the situation. He was rather proud of this thing, if he did say so himself.

“There’s no candle.”

“Nope! That’s…”

“Or oil,” Suki said. She had her Dubious Face on.

“Well, no…”

“It doesn’t even have a wick,” Katara added pointedly.
“That’s the whole point! It…”

“Will it give us enough light?” Aang demanded impatiently. On his shoulder, Momo screeched in what was obviously mocking laughter.

Argh, the Mechanist was right. No one properly appreciated genius. “Yes, already,” Sokka sighed. “If it gets dark, believe me, we’ll have light, okay?”

Katara and Suki still looked skeptical. Aang just nodded curtly. “Then let’s go,” he said, and jumped down into the tunnel below.

Sighing, Sokka and the others followed. That, at least, was easy. It wasn’t a long drop in the first place, and someone had left a rope hanging conveniently down to the floor, tied to one of the big rocks.

Sokka stood and looked at that rope for a long moment, then looked at Suki and Katara. Their faces were grim.

Zuko and Toph had come this way. And apparently, not come back.

Aang hadn’t even looked at the rope, just started walking down the tunnel. Pressing his lips together in a grim look of his own, Sokka hurried after the airbender.

The light from the sun shining through the hole in the temple roof lasted a surprisingly long way, thanks to the unnaturally smooth and shiny floor. The fact that the tunnel ran perfectly straight probably helped as well. It had a gentle downgrade slope, too – nothing big, just the sort of thing that would probably be a pain to walk back up afterward if you were tired, given that it stretched on and on for an awfully long way.

Still. The farther they went, the dimmer the light got. Before long, Katara and Suki were giving him looks through the gathering gloom.

Oh ye of little faith! he thought with an internal smirk. Eyeing the darkness, he raised the lantern up. “Okay. Check this out,” he announced, then took a few steps forward. Paused.

…Okay, maybe he’d misjudged. He took a few steps more.

Blue-green light began to glimmer around them.

“Oh,” Katara breathed, as Suki blinked in surprise. “Like the glowing stones in the secret tunnel!”

“Exactly!” Sokka said, puffing his chest a little. Man, but he came up with some good ideas sometimes. “The lantern’s based on the Mechanist’s firefly lanterns. See, there are these plates with mirrors on the side – they make the light brighter, and you move them around. You have to hide the crystals from direct sunlight – something about it messes the glow up – but that’s pretty easy, and voilà! A lantern that gives steady, reliable, controllable light as soon as it gets dark!”

They weren’t even listening anymore. Hrmph. Holding his head high with a sniff, Sokka turned back to the waiting tunnel, and stopped.

The light wasn’t coming from his lantern alone.

All along the corridor, they’d been going past regularly spaced buttress-type protrusions from the wall, one on each side. Sokka had stopped even really seeing them after they’d passed the first few. They weren’t big, maybe a foot wide, and they only stuck out a few inches, and they’d just looked
like more of the same shiny-polished stone as the rest of the tunnel.

Up ahead, though…

Each of those regularly spaced protrusions had lit up just the way his lantern had, spreading blue-green light across the tunnel – no, the corridor – they’d been walking down.

The light showed the corridor wasn’t just smooth. It was worked, the walls decorated with sharp geometric patterns, long verticals connected by short diagonals, sometimes straight and sometimes curved. All of it smooth and sharp and precise and so… weird.

“Looks like someone else had your idea,” Suki said softly, drawing close behind him.

He should have been disappointed. Pouting. Annoyed, because the universe just had to show him up every time, didn’t it?

Instead, he shivered and said, very quietly. “Yeah. Looks like they did. A really long time ago…”

“Ba Sing Se.”

Aang hadn’t even paused to pay attention to the fuss with the lantern. But he was standing still and thoughtful a short distance ahead, studying the walls as the light brightened. Slowly, he turned just enough to look back over his shoulder at them, and especially at Katara, and Sokka really hoped it was just the funny light making Aang’s eyes look all… not-quite-Aang.

Katara’s eyes had widened. “You’re right,” she breathed. “This place… it looks like the old city buried underneath Ba Sing Se. Although the crystals there were just… growing wild… Do crystals grow?”

“Do I look like an earthbender?” Sokka asked, since she was looking at him. “We can ask Toph, when we find her.”

Katara’s face tightened. “Right,” she said.

The corridor went a long way. Sokka made a conscious effort not to track how long, because if he thought about this too hard, he was really going to start freaking out and that was looking more and more like a bad idea. He was having enough trouble keeping it together as those wall-lights kept lighting up as soon as one of their group came close enough, and shutting off after they’d passed…

C’mon, you can do this. You invaded the Fire Lord’s lava pit secret base once, remember? No lava here.

He kinda wished there were. Something about how everything was so perfectly worked down here was making the hairs on the back of his neck march in lockstep, and when he found the drill sergeant in charge of that…

Suki grabbed his arm, and Aang’s. “Look,” she said tightly, eyes fixed ahead.

Following her gaze, Sokka blinked. For the first time, the corridor had changed its smooth, even course; up ahead, it curved to the right, going out of sight in a smooth turn.

“Hey, looks like we’re actually getting somewhere,” he said, reflexively dropping his voice to a low murmur that wouldn’t carry too far, even with the echoes of this place.

Suki tightened her grip when he made to start walking forward again. “Not that,” she said, her voice
a match for his. “That.” Keeping her grip on Aang’s arm, she let go of Sokka’s and pointed.

Sokka squinted and shifted his head to line up her arm a little better – then spotted it. Eyes widening, he sucked in a sharp breath, barely remembering to keep the gasp quiet.

Right where the curve in the corridor really got going, a black mark spread across the crack-crazed surface of one of the light-columns like a horrid splatted spider-squid.

Grenades, blasting jelly, iron stoves dropped down a crevice filled with natural gas – Sokka had seen the aftermath of too many things going boom to mistake it for anything else.

He snapped his arm out and grabbed Aang’s other arm when the airbender would have shot into a run, helping Suki hold him back. “Dammit, Aang, no,” he said, as low as he could and still be heard. “Something happened down here! We need to be careful!”

From the wild look in Aang’s eyes, careful was exactly what grabbing Aang right now wasn’t. But after a moment, Aang closed his eyes, took a deep, deep breath through gritted teeth, and nodded.

Suki still looked dubious, but then Katara came up behind them and lightly rested her hands on Aang’s shoulders. Aang, thank the spirits, leaned back into the pressure of her hands, just a bit – so he was still with them, at least a little. Finally, Suki slowly let go of his arm and looked at Sokka. “I’ll check it out,” she whispered, and then the Kyoshi Warrior was ghosting down the corridor, every step of her feet in their soft-soled slippers perfectly placed and absolutely soundless.

Reaching the place where the corridor began to curve, she pressed herself against the inside wall and edged her way along, keeping low so that she cast the smallest shadow possible every time she passed a light-column and clearly watching around the curve. She actually went past the blasted light and out of sight for a moment – but before Sokka’s heart had done more than hammer in his ears a few times, she was back, looking at them with a fearsomely stern expression made even scarier by her facepaint and holding a warning finger to her lips as she waved for them to come forward, slowly.

She met them partway there. “There’s a chamber just around the curve,” she said quietly. “I didn’t get a good look, but I didn’t hear anything, and the air is pretty still. If there is someone or something down there, it’s not moving around. Either way, I think we can get a good look at that blast mark without exposing ourselves – but all the same, I want someone watching my back.”

Sokka nodded. He’d already loosened his sword in its scabbard, so it wouldn’t make that betraying snick as it came loose of the little catch that kept it from just sliding out every time it got tilted downward. Now he slowly drew it, pressing it against one side of the scabbard and keeping the motion slow and even to muffle the scrape of metal.

Black metal gleamed in the odd blue-green light, and for a moment Sokka had to swallow. He didn’t know for sure how Zuko had managed to get his Space Sword back after it had fallen from the airship. When he’d asked, Zuko had just grinned and said, “I asked a certain Snuffy-Wuffly.”

Which meant Jun, except Jun was a bounty hunter. Maybe she’d been up for helping them find Iroh and thus save the world, but Sokka doubted she’d have done lost-and-found services for cheap. Then again, Zuko was Fire Lord now…

But the point was, Zuko was the one who’d thought of it. And now Zuko was the one who was missing.

Hang in there, you guys. We’re coming.
This time when Suki ghosted back down the corridor, Sokka followed, with Katara and Aang several paces behind. He wasn’t quite as quiet as she was, but he was quiet enough – hard to hunt if dinner heard you coming. When they reached the damaged pillar, he echoed Suki’s earlier pose, pressing against the inside wall of the curve and craning his neck to watch the far end of the corridor. He could just barely see what looked like an opening to a much larger space, and he kept his eye and ear on it as Suki flitted across the corridor to the damaged column itself.

She was quick and efficient about it, not just looking at it but also lightly running her finger along the blackened surface and even leaning close and sniffing carefully. When she was done, she moved back to the near wall and they retreated a few steps.

All of them leaned close – except for Katara, who was watching the shadows back the way they had come with careful, wary eyes, one hand on her waterskin.

“Whatever did that, packed a lot of force,” Suki said grimly. “And it wasn’t firebending, or blasting powder. I know the signs of those. And…” She hesitated, swallowed, and went on. “It happened recently. Not too recently, it’s cold, but… within the last four or five days.”

Sokka had expected as much. It was still a gut-punch.

Aang stood up suddenly. “I’ve had enough of sneaking in the dark!” he snarled. Before any of them could catch him, he’d already turned and taken off around the turn in the corridor.

“Oh, great!” Sokka snapped, joining the others as they took off after Aang.

As a group, they rounded the corner – then slowed and stopped.

“Well… We definitely know they were here.”

Darn it. That dry rasp that came out of his throat didn’t even sound clever in his *head*.

The chamber was big, way bigger than the little, sparse temple they’d left behind way back up there somewhere. It was nearly as bare, though. Four walls with more of those glowstone lights, an arched ceiling that went up high enough he could only pick out hints of where the top probably was. More of those odd geometric designs that couldn’t seem to decide if they were supposed to evoke crystal spires or maybe some sort of lily-reed plant decorated the walls. All very impressive.

It was in *shambles*.

The blackened streaks of more of those weird blast marks were everywhere, all over the floors and walls, cracking and scarring the pretty-creepy patterns of the walls with a weird metallic-chemical smell. And Suki was right. That wasn’t the smell of blasting powder or jelly, and firebending didn’t usually *leave* a smell.

What was left of the walls, rather, after huge chunks of glossy stone had ripped loose from the floors and walls and flung themselves across the room with no consideration for art or architecture.

Sokka swallowed dryly. He’d seen earthenders fight. He knew the aftermath of an ugly battle when he saw it.

*Oh man.*

But the wreckage was still and silent. And cold. The smell of smoke lingered, but it was pretty thin. Whatever had happened here, it was over.
So what did happen? I don't see any bodies…

His attention on the blast patterns, Sokka stepped forward, trying to get a better look, and his foot hit what he’d absentmindedly taken for another lump of shattered stone with a hollow metallic clunk. Startled, he looked down.

“What the heck?”

Suki came up behind him as he crouched down, peering at the… thingy. “That… looks like a helmet?” she said uncertainly.

“Yeah… That’s my best guess, anyway,” he agreed. Cautiously, he reached out and poked it with a finger. When the weird humming-heron face coming out of the front of the thing – seriously? Was the bulk of the helmet supposed to be the bird’s hair or something? Okay, Sokka seriously needed to sit someone down and give them a good talking to about scientific classifications and the fact that birds had feather crests, not a whole dome of human-type hair – didn’t bite him or open its mouth and start speaking in riddles or anything, he carefully closed his hand around the beak and picked it up.

Whoof. Heavy. Way heavier than a Water Tribe wolf-helm, or even the metal things he and Zuko had worn when they were posing as prison guards. Which made sense, because this thing was more in the lines of the absolutely ridiculous suit of so-called armor Aang had gotten suckered into trying on back when they’d done their shopping expedition that had led them to Piandao.

Gulping, Sokka turned it enough to look inside, and then relaxed a bit. No severed head inside. Good.

Scowling, he turned it back and forth. “How would someone even see out of this thing?” he groused. Because seriously – the only eyes he could make out were in the humming-heron face, and they were set way too high up and close together for anything human to actually see out of them. The whole thing looked more like a tacky decoration than armor. Shaking his head, he lifted it up.

“Sokka.”

About to lower the helmet onto his own head, Sokka paused. Because that quavering tone was definitely not Katara’s you idiot boy, do you have any brains at all? voice. He twisted to look over his shoulder at her.

Silently, the waterbender pointed a shaking hand towards his feet.

Sokka looked down, and slowly lowered the helmet-thing down by his side again, trying to pretend that it hadn’t just mysteriously doubled in weight in his hands.

In the shadow of the broken boulders that had hidden the helmet, he could see a very familiar hilt. He knelt again, absently putting the bird-helmet down, and picked up the lone dao.

His heart made a flying leap out of his boots to lodge itself right in the base of his throat. The dao was bent, right in the middle of the blade, and even in the weird blue-green light he could see the discoloration where the polish and the metal itself had discolored and warped subtly.

Very carefully, he raised the blade up to Zuko’s usual height, holding his hand against the far end of the blade as though bracing it. He’d seen Zuko block a lot of stuff with his dao. Heck, back when Aang had started to get the basics of firebending down and was ready to move past drill, drill, and more drill – and after Katara had gone on her little field trip and gotten the whole I kill you out of her
system – Zuko had once commandeered the whole gang and had the benders throw stuff at Sokka and Suki, so they could get some real practice in on ways a non-bender could fight a bender. Zuko’d joined in – something about wanting to be able to fight without relying on bending, just in case. So Sokka had a pretty good idea of what it would take to cause this.

Zuko’d’ve been knocked right off his feet, root or no, he thought, swallowing with difficulty. But going by the scorch pattern, he’d still managed to block it, and the blast had ricocheted off that way – and, yep, there was the scorch mark, way the heck over on the side wall, and oh bleep.

But the fight was starting to come together in Sokka’s head. Zuko and Toph had started off there, and backed up to here – probably planning to retreat up the hallway, because the number of blast marks suggested they’d been seriously outnumbered and were making for the closer confines of the corridor. And if the blast marks were laid out like that, then the bad guys were probably standing…

Sokka whistled softly.

The room was laid out as a shallow arc, cut short at either end – sort of continuing the curve of the hallway, since the door they’d come through was in one of those cut-off ends, with the wider arc of the wall to their left. The shorter side on the right, though, was absolutely flat. There was a dial facing it, a bit like the circular calendar of the big planetarium in Wan Shi Tong’s library. In front of that dial, the floor rose up in a dais, just a step or two above the rest of the floor, and about the size of, say, the dais in the Fire Lord’s throne room. And on that…

He stared at the giant ring, standing just a little off the floor and framed by slanting columns like an honor guard. It gleamed even in the half-light. The outer ring had a series of odd triangular tabs on it that seemed to be made out of something subtly different, maybe even the same stone as the columns and his little lantern. And there was an inner ring of dark sections set with something that glittered, like gemstones that had trapped their own light.

Aang was standing with his back to the rest of them in front of that ring. Staring at it.

Slowly, Sokka picked his way over, carefully stepping around shattered stones and holes ripped in the floor and the remains of Toph’s beloved pillar-tricks. “Hey, buddy…”

“They’ve come.”

The hair on the back of Sokka’s neck had been standing at stiff attention like the best troops. At this point, though, morale broke, panic set in the ranks, and they said in unison, screw you, sir and ran for cover.

That wasn’t Aang’s voice. It was a voice he’d heard out of Aang’s mouth maybe two, three times, and every time had been really bad news.

“After all this time, they’ve come…”

“Aang!” he said, desperately, hoping to call the kid back to himself.

Wonder of wonders, it actually worked. Aang jerked – not just started in surprise, but a full-body jerk, sort of like suddenly waking up from a dream of falling.

And, yup. When he turned to look at Sokka, there were still traces of gold-white light fading out of his eyes.

Ohhhh man.
“Aang?” he tried tentatively. “Who’s they?”

Aang blinked at him and opened his mouth – then closed it, looking troubled. “I don’t know.” His brow furrowed. “That… that wasn’t me, Sokka. It kinda… came out of nowhere.” He blinked. “No. It came from back. Way, way back.”

Sokka scratched his head. Spirits. You know, I don’t remember signing up for this… right. Got on the air bison with the Avatar and my sister. What did I think I was signing up for? “So, one of your past lives,” he surmised. “Roku?” …nah, Roku tended to be pretty obvious. Like, transforming Aang and sinking islands obvious. Not that Kyoshi was much better about that, come to think of it, so… “Kuruk? Yangchen?”

Aang shook his head. “This was older. Way older.”

Erk. “I thought you couldn’t access the older Avatars’ memories.”

Aang’s eyes had just dropped to the ruined dao Sokka was still carrying around. Gray eyes narrowed dangerously. “Not unless it’s important,” he said flatly.

Thwp. A twist of his wrist brought the end of Aang’s staff swinging up to be caught in his free hand. Aang crossed his ankles and sank down easily into a half-lotus position in front of the ring, his staff a perfect horizontal across his knees.

“Aang?” Katara asked, as she and Suki joined them at the dais.

Aang turned his head just enough to address them all over his shoulder, his breathing already slowing. “If a past life that old is trying to tell me something? I think I’d better find out what.”

He closed his eyes, and the arrow tattoo on his forehead began to glow.

Sokka looked at the meditating Avatar, at the worried looks on Katara and Suki’s faces, and at the weird, impossible circle-ring-thing and the ruined room.

He rubbed his forehead. “Y’know, one of these days I’d like to take a boring vacation.”

Chapter End Notes

If someone draws fanart featuring Toph, Tyrant Queen of Flying Mutant Ninja Were-Lemurs, I will love you forever. (Double points if it’s done as an old B-movie poster, with a facepalming Zuko in the position of Distressed Damsel. Just because.)

Anyone who figured out the character Sanura is based on should have no trouble whatsoever in IDing Nubiti. As for Urdu… he’s not really an expy of anyone. His character is based on the circumstances that the bunnies put together to create his background. And yes, Djehuty is a very strange Goa’uld. He’s meant to be.

The Goa’uld as seen in the Stargate series are not a viable culture. There’s no way, as they are, that they could have reached the heights they clearly did. Which begs two questions. First, what caused their civilization, and maybe their entire species, to fall apart like this? Second… what were they like before?

Speaking of holes in canon… The Avatar cartoon did Aang no favors by having him
pull the pacifist card at the very end of a long series full of cartoon violence that, like most cartoon violence, was nightmarishly terrifying if you actually thought about it. Especially when he did go charging into the palace after Ozai in Day of Black Sun with no hint of any sort of killing is wrong qualms. But upon thought, I have come to this head-canon: until they started actually preparing for the moment of truth, Aang had never stopped to think about his beliefs. Everything that had happened prior to that – the Ocean at the North Pole, the battles, nearly dying himself, the failed invasion, becoming friends with Zuko, and seeing what Katara’s hunt for revenge did to her – built up to a moral epiphany, coming to the realization that he honestly did not believe that killing could ever be right. Just in time for it to become a really big problem.

In short: Aang didn’t start the series with the deeply rooted conviction that killing is wrong. The abstract concept, yes, but not conviction. His conviction on that point was the result of everything that happened over the source of the series – not in spite of it.

I’m not sure I agree with his choice; there’s a difference between “has no right to live” and “must be stopped by any means possible.” And he sure picked a horrible time to come to his resolve on the matter. But I respect the fact that he grew up, looked at his beliefs, and came to a decision.

And for the record? Fighting enemy soldiers in battle is very different than a deliberate, focused assassination attempt… which is pretty much what “taking out the Fire Lord” was, when you clean up all the bells and whistles. Think about that: Avatar: The Last Airbender is about an eleven-year-old being told to assassinate a powerful warlord. Now that, is scary.

On a different topic – Aang's canon line about "they don't like it when you ride them, but that's what makes it fun" has always bugged the heck out of me, and I really wish he'd gotten called out on it. We're talking about a kid who goes out and harasses wild animals for his own entertainment. That's dangerous, both to the life and limb of the kid and the animals, but psychologically as well - get inured to causing pain to animals, and you are more likely to overlook causing pain to other people. Now, do I think that one line means that Aang's a bully? No. Aang is a compassionate, friendly, genuinely good-hearted person. He's also a headstrong kid who doesn't always think things through and needs to be reminded, every now and then, about not stepping on other peoples' toes. Just like any other kid.

As for his attitude towards the end of the war – it’s worth noting that, other than Iroh telling Zuko he needs to be the next Fire Lord, which came off as practically an afterthought, canon never has the characters asking what they’re supposed to do after the war is over. Which makes sense, in a way; I’m willing to bet that all of them had a hard time even imagining a world after the Fire Lord was defeated. Moreover… Roku presents fighting the Fire Lord as Aang’s Big Task as Avatar. It makes sense for the kid to say, “Now I’ve done my job, I can kick back for a bit and take my time learning to do this right.” He’s not even necessarily wrong.

Finally… while writing Sokka’s PoV? I could hear the GM saying, “Okay, Sokka and Suki, roll a Stealth check…”
Sanura has gone and snowballed from a light expy cameo into a stealth Easter Egg of a crossover, so I should probably put in a disclaimer. Circumstances and details are strongly modified, but anyone familiar with Mercedes Lackey’s *Oathbound* series will recognize where a lot of her backstory comes from!

I also cannot claim any credit for Tom Leher’s song *Werner von Braun*. It just wouldn’t get out of my head. Nor do I claim credit or rights to the other reference… although I do believe I can claim bragging rights for having pulled that particular one off!

This is a much shorter chapter; it's really more a continuation of Chapter Six's interlude, as I maneuver my hapless pawns - er, starring characters - into position for the real action...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“*Chevron seven is locked. Wormhole is initiating,*” Sergeant Albert’s voice announced over the intercom. “*It’s the Tok’ra, sir.*”

*Well, it’s about damn time,* Hammond thought grudgingly, keeping out of the way as the Gate response team settled into position, just in case their SOS to the Tok’ra had been intercepted. An SOS sent nearly two days ago. If this had been an emergency…

*Well, be grateful that it isn’t. Yet.*

The wormhole kawooshed outward, then settled into shimmering stability immediately covered by the hard gray lines of the iris.

Hammond crossed his arms and waited. He knew that his presence on the Gateroom floor made the security team uneasy. It was hard enough guarding the Gate, without the ranking officer being directly in the line of sight of whatever came through. Hell, they were none too happy with it when he was safely stowed in the command center.

Well, he wasn’t too happy with it himself. But the Tok’ra could be touchy even on a good day, and the SGC didn’t have so many interstellar allies that they could afford to send this one off in a huff.

*“GDO code checks out, sir.”*

Hammond nodded. “Open the iris,” he said, and watched as the blade-like petals slid apart and into the frame, washing the Gateroom with eerie blue light again.

The silver-blue surface rippled as an armored figure stepped through.

“*Jaffa!*” someone shouted, and weapons rose-

Hammond held up a hand in a sharp *Halt!* gesture. “*Hold your fire!*” he boomed, narrowing his eyes at the figure that had paused on the ramp.
Armored like a Jaffa, yes, although Hammond wasn’t familiar with the odd quilted layer underneath the armor. *Looks like… some sort of polar variant?*

And the strange dome of metal textured to look like human hair and fronted by a long-necked, long-beaked bird wasn’t anything Hammond had seen before, but it did match Major Carter’s and Doctor Fraiser’s report.

*But he came from the Tok’ra world. Alone. And he’s not carrying any visible weapons.*

Either this was one hell of a gutsy gamble, or…

“I don’t suppose you’d mind introducing yourself?” he drawled, not relaxing, but not aggressive either.

The Jaffa slowly reached up and removed his helmet, revealing a striking young man, of the football captain in a Disney high school movie variety – broad-shouldered, crewcut blond, cheekbones that could cut and a chin like a battering ram.

His eye color, however, was hard to see past the familiar points of gold light that indicated an active symbiote.

“As General Hammond,” he said, in the hollow voice of a Goa’uld, “I am Nekht, agent of the Tok’ra.”

~*Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.*~

“Bored? How can you be bored?” Colonel O’Neill asked, artfully innocent as he spread his arms to take in the empty room and bare, sparse cell. “Just look at the glorious accommodations!”

Seated cross-legged on the floor, Sanura crossed her arms and leaned back against the wall. “Unfortunately, I neglected to bring a book,” she said dryly.

And stars, but she could do with one. It wasn’t that she didn’t know how to handle stillness and solitude. But bare stone and iron bars got very old after a day or two.

There was a glint of thoughtful not-quite-skepticism in the Tau’ri commander’s eyes, trying to calculate whether or not she actually meant what she’d just said, or at least whether or not she meant the implications. She didn’t bother to hide the annoyed roll of her own. What was it with the Tau’ri assuming that non-Terran humans, even Jaffa, were somehow uneducated and illiterate? In their own way, they were as arrogant as the Tok’ra about it.

And this, with Teal’c in their ranks. Did they somehow think he was unique?

*Well. Unusual, certainly. Be fair, Sanura,* Nubiti’s throaty chuckle echoed in the back of her mind. *When you joined Djehuty’s service, you were passably literate, but not educated in the sense that they’re used to.*

True enough. And oh, she remembered the day Nubiti had taught her how to access the archives…

“I’m sure we could dig up something,” O’Neill said, mock-conscientious. “Until then – hey, I’ve got me some time. Let’s chat.”

“Chat.” Her turn to raise a skeptical eyebrow.
“Y’know. Nice. Friendly-like.” He sat back in the chair normally occupied by the guard, elbow bobbing dangerously close to what Sanura suspected was a panic button as he waved a hand through the air. “Taken any good vacations lately? I hear the skiing down in the Winter Wonderlands is great this year.”

Sanura snorted. “You would be the one to know, not I.”

Which wasn’t entirely a case of tweaking the Tau’ri’s nose for the sake of tweaking his nose, although there was a bit of that. She wondered if the colonel had any idea how his patter sounded to someone who didn’t come from his world. Gate-given language or not, sometimes the Tau’ri just didn’t make sense until you spent some time listening to them ramble.

Still, he made more than enough sense for her to know exactly what he was after. She had no intention of making this easy for him, though.

“What, us? We were just hanging around, building igloos, counting snowflakes, observing the fuzzy frosty wildlife, that sort of thing.” Under laconic humor, his eyes watched her intently. “So what brought you folks to the neighborhood?”

She copied his shrug easily. “Hanging around. Building igloos, counting snowflakes, observing the fuzzy frosty wildlife…”

“And poking at old labs and Gates. Why that Gate?”

A generous soul might have called her bared teeth a smile, she supposed. “Lawyer,” she sing-songed.

There was a method to her madness – beyond tweaking the colonel’s nose, which was highly entertaining in its own right. Whenever Tau’ri were captured off-world, their actions and comments made it clear that they expected prisoners to be handled according to certain standards. She wanted to see if they actually lived up to those standards themselves.

Granted, she suspected that anything that came out of their mouths in that sardonic tone was to be taken with a grain of salt. But their reactions to some of the standard System Lord practices regarding human prisoners were fairly telling.

Besides. Maybe he’ll cough one up, and I’ll get to find out what a lawyer actually is.

That would almost make this whole experiment worth the constant low-grade headache she was getting from the constant, ferocious concentration needed to keep up the outwardly casual patter. Thank goodness for security tapes and drinking games.

Thus far, the Tau’ri were holding to their implied standards for the most part, she had to grant that. The cell was bare and utterly lacking in anything resembling amenities or privacy, and she was cold. But the clothing they’d given her was clean, they’d given her decent food and clear water, and while she’d never been left alone, the guard had always stayed scrupulously on his side of the bars, and well away from the bars at that. As did O’Neill whenever he turned up. Which, granted, was half just plain common sense, but… all things considered, her treatment had been quite decent.

On the other hand… After trading a few more quips, Colonel O’Neill checked a timepiece on his wrist, made a face, and let himself out. No offers to communicate with her leader for an exchange, she noticed. No rewards for good behavior. Not even an offer of a lawyer.

I thought not.
Nubiti would be annoyed, Sanura wryly acknowledged. She still remembered their discussion – it couldn’t be called an argument, quite – after she’d insisted that the Tau’ri go into holding cells briefly.

“All other factors aside, the Tau’ri are ranging deeper and deeper into the network of the System Lords. We were going to run into them eventually. Better to have them know us as a friendly or at least neutral party than get caught in a crossfire.” Nubiti had raised a slender finger. “More importantly, the Tau’ri homeworld was the center of the Gatebuilders’ empire, long ago. If we can open lines of communication…” Her shoulders had lifted in a shrug, followed by a wry smile. “Besides. The Tau’ri poke things, and they’ve shown a keen interest in the past – just look at their Daniel Jackson. A second set of eyes trained in a completely different scientific tradition might see something we’ve overlooked all along.” Then wryness had gained a glint of impish humor. “Besides. Our long-term goals are mutually compatible, no?”

All very good points, and very true. And she had no intentions of letting those plans go anywhere until she had some idea of whether or not the Tau’ri actually walked the paths they talked. So far as she cared, anyone who went around claiming moral high ground had better be able to defend it. And the Wise One could roll his eyes and list off all the chancy or downright treacherous allies he’d worked with over the course of a very long life as much as he liked. Better an ally you could trust to stab you in the back than one where you didn’t have the first idea which way they’d jump at any moment.

Lady, but she missed her clan-sibs right now.

Well, they are not here, and they will not come here anytime soon if they have any sense, Sanura thought, standing up and stretching. Which means I must think about what to do next.

She was ostensibly alone, but the little black devices against the ceiling in two corners of the room were enough like the recording devices the Tau’ri sometimes carried to tell her that she was still under surveillance. Still, ostensible privacy was better than being stared at directly. She ignored the cameras and began methodically going over her cell again. At least it was something to do – not that she expected to find anything more than she had before. Given the Tau’ri’s history when it came to prison cells and the breaking out thereof, she suspected they had to be at least decent at foiling similar breakouts themselves. She and Urdu had been using those exploits as reference materials when redesigning the ha’tak’s holding areas, although they rarely saw use.

For what good it did us. Of course, they hadn’t planned for adorably badass little girls who could kick stone and metal into shape the way Sanura did raw recruits. And when she got her hands on Lieutenant Nekht for engineering that mess…

She grimaced. The guards who’d gone down in the ha’tak… she didn’t have to like it, dammit, but she did accept it.

Hells. I would have done the same thing, if I found myself with two injured children, she admitted to herself, grudgingly – then smirked. Only with more explosions.

Although that depended. If you defined explosion as flying masonry and pyrotechnics…

I would not object to having that on my side right now, she thought dryly, ending her fruitless circuit of the cell where she’d started, seated on the floor against the back wall. There was a bed, but you’d have to be unconscious to find it comfortable, and she wasn’t inclined to nap the day – night? – away just yet.

So, no. She might be less than pleased by the chaos of the escape, but she didn’t blame the Tau’ri for
Khenut, on the other hand…

Sanura swallowed and closed her eyes, feeling again the horrid lurch that had slammed into her gut when her search party had cleared a ridge and seen Khenut’s glider.

Grounded, in unsecured, unknown territory. For no reason so far as she could see – that was the part that kept gnawing at her. There’d been no messages saying she’d found something to investigate, no sign of the sort of storm it would take to ground one of the fighters in either the ha’tak’s sensory sweep or when they’d investigated the surroundings. Just the ship sitting there, engines still humming quietly in idle mode and all systems showing green and good to go – although the environmental controls had been a little stressed after hours of trying to regulate the climate of the whole mountain range through doors left carelessly open. It was as though Khenut and her team had decided to ignore all protocol and common sense and just pop out for a bit of fresh, frozen air.

Leaving all their cold-weather gear, supplies and weapons neatly stowed away on the ship as they vanished for a walk in sub-Arctic mountains, apparently.

What happened?

Then, when Sanura had gathered her search party to investigate the most likely trail away from the grounded ship, winding towards the valley that held the planet’s Stargate and, according to Urdu and Nubiti’s research, a research facility from the height of the Gatebuilders’ civilization…

They hadn’t been on that trail more than fifteen minutes when they’d rounded a blind turn and come face to face with the Tau’ri officers.

Not proof of foul play, she acknowledged grimly. But as circumstantial evidence I would call it pretty cursed damning.

After all, it was an uninhabited world. The only native lifeforms were some exceedingly cold-resistant algae. Was she supposed to believe they’d puffed the glider down?

Khenut knew Djehuty’s long-term plans. She knew he’d been planning to open negotiations with the Tau’ri ever since Earth’s Stargate had opened again. If she’d seen the Tau’ri as her team had been scouting the range, she would have tried to talk.

Without backup? Her inner voice of reason sounded like Nubiti again. Without even using the comm to notify one of us? Khenut trained you, Sanura. You know what she’d do to anyone who violated protocol like that on her watch.

Heh. Drummed out of the active forces would be the least of it. Djehuty was no great System Lord; he didn’t have slave worlds full of loyal forces, although he did have a few settlements beyond his homeworld that he supported when he could. He simply couldn’t afford to field rank upon rank of blast-fodder, even if he’d wanted to.

So he trained his people. Intensively. Quality trumped quantity, and for decades, Khenut had by-the-Lady made sure he got that quality.

And the Tau’ri were surprised to see you. As surprised as you were.

Which was why she’d taken them into custody, Lady take it. She wasn’t exactly a big believer in the power of coincidence. If the SGC were headed in the direction of that grounded glider, and weren’t expecting a follow-up party, and didn’t have one of Khenut’s team with them to explain the
situation…

If Khenut had tried to talk to them, then clearly it had gone very badly. Best-case scenario, she and her team were prisoners. No matter what the circumstances, Sanura had decided, getting a bargaining chip of her own was definitely a good idea. And she’d wanted answers.

Although her intuition cried that she already knew. That one more of her family was dead, when she’d lost so many already.

She was breathing. That… didn’t make sense. She was fairly certain that when you’d rammed a glider loaded with a lethal payload of high-energy weapons into the bridge of an oversized mansion house pretending to be a starship, whatever might come next, breathing wasn’t supposed to factor into it.

The world lightened, blurred, and then came into focus on two warm, worried amber eyes, set in a demon’s face.

It shouldn’t have been a comfort, except that given what she’d learned recently of gods – well, better demons than that. And this face, she knew, didn’t belong to a demon at all.

Except that it didn’t make sense. Nubiti should have been back on her ha’tak. She shouldn’t be dead…

Memory surged. Enemy gliders coming after her small stolen vessel as she suddenly veered off on an unplotted trajectory. Unexpectedly, someone else’s hands on the weapon controls, freeing her to fly with steady hands for her goal. A jolt that went straight to her heart when she turned and saw a mix of mulish stubborn and resigned amusement on a familiar green-and-gold face…

The world blazed white.

“Stay calm. And still. The chamber healed the worst of your wounds, but I pulled you out once you were out of danger.” A chuckle, half wry and half dark. “You’ll scar, but believe me, it’s better than the side effects. One of these days I’m going to find the name of the fool who decided psychopathy fell under the category of acceptable side effects, and then I am going to indulge my ancestral traditions and erase said name from existence. Assuming he knew. Psychoneurology is complicated even when you’re working with your own species…”

Sanura tried to persuade her eyes to open, not listening to the scholarly ramble so much as letting it anchor her, keeping her from drifting in a sea of nothing but pain.

Ow.

She was alive, then. Being dead couldn’t possibly hurt this much.

Which raised a very pressing question. Bracing herself, she managed to look at Nubiti again. “How?” she croaked, the roughness of her voice still strange even after six months to get used to the damage that had been done by smoke and screaming.

Nubiti sat back with a darkly amused smile. “Sometimes the System Lords forget how much of their technology is my own invention. Like the transport rings.”

Sanura blinked. “You are no older than I am.”

And Nubiti wasn’t, relatively speaking – a few years’ worth, maybe, but no more than that. Sanura had done the math, one sleepless night when the screams of the dying and the silence of the dead
chased her up out of sleep and through the halls of Djehuty’s ha’tak home. It had taken some head-
pounding calculations of human aging as compared to that of Nubiti’s people, and the conversion of
Unarian and Dhorishan years to the standard used by Djehuty to compensate for an existence
completely disconnected from any form of season, planetary cycles or even a sun, bouncing across
the galaxy as he did – in his own way, the Wise One was as much a nomad as the Dhorisha ever
were. Not to mention factoring in the preservative effects of ghoti versus prim’ta, and their relative
ages for each…

Nubiti had covered her eyes lightly with her hand and was actually rumbling a chuckle in the back
of her throat. “You humans and your pronouns… how in the stars do you manage to keep things
straight when you only have one way to say I?” Her voice changed in timbre ever so slightly – the
voice of Nebet, rather than Nebet-Djehuty. “Perhaps I should have said, the Wise One created
them.” Amber eyes peeked through her fingers slyly. “And I – he – may not have told the System
Lords everything about them.”

Sanura eyed her.

Nubiti lowered her hand, smile full of pointed teeth. “The transport rings have a remote-activation
trigger. Once we were through the shields, I used it to transport us out of the glider and into the
ha’tak.”

Another woman stepped around the foot of the bed to come into sight, pulled-back iron-gray hair
emphasizing the dark scowl she was leveling at both of them equally. “And nearly got both of you
blasted into space debris before getting to the on-ship Gate and away,” she grumbled in a deep and
melodious voice that seemed oddly at odds with her sharply defined muscles and deeply lined face.

At any other time, Sanura might have flinched under Khenut’s hard eyes, remembering the raw
disbelief and pain she’d heard over the glider’s comm when last they’d spoken. At the moment,
however, her gaze was locked on Nubiti’s. “Why?” she demanded.

Nubiti sat back, arms crossed as the mischief smoothed into ancient calm. “My people have a
saying, Sanura. Cross not a Wisdom Seeker’s crèche.”

Sanura made a vague, baffled gesture, trying to somehow indicate shorn black hair – chin-length
now, had so much time passed since the fires? – dark skin and blue eyes, contrasted against
inhuman patterns of amber and green, small ivory horns and pointy teeth.

Teeth that flickered faintly in a little smile. “Aren’t you the one with the proverb about friends being
family you chose? We’ve shared six months of grief and rage, and plotting.” The smile darkened
slightly, fierce and predatory. “And now triumph. We did it, Sanura. We got them – all of them. Yer
Tanri and Gök Tanri are finished. Dhorisha has been avenged.”

Vengeance. Sanura closed her eyes, remembering familiar faces gone strange and twisted, then
horrific; the look on Jelani’s face when they’d seen the first black marks spreading from a corrupted
wound, finding the transmitter and realizing it had all been a game of careless gods, destroying it,
lighting the fires…

It was all still there. Vengeance hadn’t undone the past. The dead were dead. But at least she could
assure the dead that justice was done.

The world still felt so empty.

Now what?
The question hit with all the force of her suicidal glider. Because that had been suicide, of a sort. Not that she’d been thinking in so many terms. But...

She hadn’t expected to walk away.

Khenut snorted. “Now what?” she echoed, and Sanura suddenly realized the words had slipped out aloud. “Now you get your idiot self healed up so I can start whipping you back into shape. What?” she asked, rolling her eyes at Sanura’s look of shock. “You thought we would simply cast you out when the battle was won?”

Sanura’s hand closed into a fist. “I do not seek charity,” she said fiercely, and couldn’t quite make herself meet Nubiti’s patient eyes.

Khenut laughed at her.

When Sanura’s head snapped up, the Prime crossed her arms across her chest. “Charity? Duat’s kiss, no. I want you here so I can whip you into shape to be my replacement.”

“Well...” Nubiti started – and then winced, rubbing the ridge of her brow.

Khenut’s voice softened, but her words were unyielding. “Did you think I hadn’t noticed, Nebet-Djehuty? You went through two Stargates, unprotected. You told me yourself what that does to you.” Hard hazel eyes narrowed. “The migraines will only get worse, and you know as well as I that there is only one way to repair that sort of damage. Djehuty needs to take a new partner.”

Khenut grinned wryly. “Sanura out-sneaked me. She will do.”

Nubiti sighed ruefully, then looked at Sanura. “It’s your choice,” she said simply. “But before you make it...” She hesitated. “The way of the Dhorisha lives on in you. Believe me – I know something of how that feels. Let us help it survive.” Then suddenly her lips curved in a smile that wasn’t the Wise One, but the impish woman who had pulled her out of ashes and demanded she live. “And I always meant to have children, when I completed my ghoti. Any child of mine would be proud to call you crèche-mother.”

The image of Dhorishan children with horned face ridges and sharp-toothed smiles made Sanura suddenly begin to laugh – and sent a touch of warmth around the core of cold that she had thought would never leave her heart.

Although at the moment, the cold she felt was more physical than emotional, Sanura granted, fighting the urge to shiver. It wasn’t that chilly in her cell, although she did have to wonder if this really was in keeping with the Tau’ri’s purported concern for “humane conditions.”

Or perhaps that was just a draft, as the door opened and a large man with the traditional golden sigil of a Prime stepped inside.

Sanura couldn’t help straightening a little. Teal’c had been legendary even before he’d turned against Apophis. When Dhorisha had died – that legend had helped keep her alive.

He nodded silent acknowledgement before sinking down to sit cross-legged on the floor. He kept a courteous distance from the cell bars, acknowledging that she was not helpless despite being confined. Once settled, he set a kel-no-rem candle on the floor between them.

Recognizing the invitation, Sanura settled into a proper meditation posture, slowing and evening her breathing along with his as she waited for him to speak.

Which he did only after several long, calming minutes.
“I have spoken to many Jaffa since joining the Tau’ri, urging them to see that the false gods do not deserve the worship they demand. Somehow, I feel I will not need to speak so to you.”

Even in a light meditative state, Sanura couldn’t quite resist the wry snicker. At least she hadn’t fallen over laughing. “Given that it is my task to sit on the Wise One when he is about to do something particularly foolish – no, not really.”

There was an odd hint of flicker in the back of his eyes as he shifted his gaze from the candleflame to her. “Then the rumors are true. He does not demand worship from his people?”

Realization struck, and Sanura smiled. “He offered you sanctuary at one point, did he?”

“Not directly,” Teal’c replied, with a tilt of his head in silent agreement. “But when I joined Apophis, I was given… indications that he would not be averse to offering support or asylum, should I seek it.” His brow furrowed ever so slightly. “At the time, I thought it to be further maneuvering among the System Lords.”

“I supposed it could be called such,” Sanura admitted. Although she’d never tell Djehuty that. What he had to say about the System Lords couldn’t be repeated in most impolite society.

Another subtle glance. “Speak with me,” Teal’c invited. “I know little of Djehuty, and much of what I know I cannot confirm.” He raised a brow slightly. “The Tau’ri are not unreasonable, although they are fierce in defending their own. They prefer allies to enemies. I have heard it said that Djehuty is much the same.”

Well. That was a leading statement if ever she’d heard one. Sanura’s lips curved faintly in a smile. “That is one way of putting it…”

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~

“Senile?”

Hammond leaned forward in polite interest, raising a hand to forestall whatever Carter had been about to say. She’d given her summarized report on the events on P4X-684; now, it was time to see what the Tok’ra agent would tell them.

But this was a rather unexpected reply to his initial query. “I wasn’t aware that your people suffered that particular ailment,” he continued, raising his eyebrows quizzically.

“Djehuty is the oldest of the living Goa’uld,” Nekht said with a dismissive shrug. “He was old when Ra first came to your planet.” Hammond had the feeling that the hint of expression that flickered across Nekht’s face would have been a sour one, if Nekht had allowed it to stay. “His mind has been going at least that long.”

Interesting. “According to our legends, Djehuty was a god of science, law, and wisdom.”

“Doubtless,” the Tok’ra said with a hint of smile. Hammond firmly sat on the urge to smack it from the agent’s face. Even with the best of the budding xenopsychologists in the Stargate program – Dr. Jackson among them – no one was quite sure if the Tok’ra realized how much their apparent condescension irked their human allies. If, as Dr. Jackson had theorized on a good day, it truly was unintentional, the result of a miscommunication in body language between two very different species
– well, giving in to that urge would only set Tok’ra-Earth relations back at a time when they could ill afford to go looking for new interstellar allies.

And if it was intentional, as more paranoid minds suggested, it was best not to let them know they were getting to you.

And it’s not that certain Tau’ri colonels don’t take advantage of the same uncertainty.

Hammond set the thought aside with the ease of much practice as Nekht continued. “Djehuty provided Ra with technology, in exchange for the freedom to explore Earth as he willed.”

Hammond shared an uneasy glance with Carter. Just what the SGC didn’t need; another Goa’uld with a grudge. The Tau’ri rebellion would have inconvenienced this Djehuty at least as much as any other System Lord. “Looking for what, exactly?”

Nekht shrugged. “Ra never knew, nor cared. Djehuty was no threat to his power.” His expression did sour this time, quite visibly. “Egeria approached him.”

Hammond raised his eyebrows. “For her rebellion?” That implied that Egeria had believed that Djehuty would not only be amenable to her cause, but useful.

“Yes. She offered him the freedom of a willing host, the chance to observe humans as they are and not as Ra forced them to be…” For a moment, Nekht’s expression twisted to one of disgust. “He laughed in her face.”

“Laughed?” Carter asked, tilting her head and narrowing her eyes slightly. Hammond suspected she was prodding at the hazy residual memories Jolinar had left in her mind. “Something about… saying please?”

“Learn the meaning and use of please, thank you, and I’m sorry. Then return and speak to me again.” Nekht made a sharp, dismissive gesture with his hand, before his expression smoothed over into cool distance again. “It was clear at that point that his mind was completely gone.”

Hammond managed to keep his reaction to a near-silent huff of ironic amusement. Pity you didn’t take the advice.

Carter looked down at her notes. “Back up for a minute,” she said thoughtfully. “You said that Djehuty provided Ra with technology. What kind? I’ve never seen anything like those riot shields before.”

“Toys,” Nekht said brusquely. “Simply display pieces left over from a brief fascination with primitive battle tactics.” He shrugged. “They’re certainly a high-quality alloy underneath the gold plating, enough to deflect a glancing hit…”

Carter made a startled noise in the back of her throat. When Hammond glanced at her from the corner of his eye, she was bent over her notes, scribbling furiously.

Two years at the SGC had made him an experienced scientist-wrangler. Hammond paused for a moment, long enough for her to get her first few thoughts out on paper, then firmly tapped his finger on the table to redirect her attention back to the conversation.

“What technology did he provide, then?” he asked, covering for Carter’s distraction.

“He created the zat’ni’catels, for one,” Nekht said. “It turned the tide for Ra when Apophis made a bid for power against him.”
Hammond leaned back in his chair, thinking hard. “And none of the System Lords have attempted to eliminate him?” Given the cutthroat nature of System Lord politics, that was rather unexpected.

“Attempted? Probably. But for the most part, Djehuty is too useful to eliminate. He is willing to develop technology for any of them, so long as the project amuses him. Which has its own… complications.” Nekht actually shuddered. “When he initially created the intars, they shot beams of multicolored light that left anything they touched undamaged, but… similarly colored for several minutes. I, of course, was not present, but the tales of the first live demonstration were… memorable.”

Carter smirked and began humming faintly under her breath. “Don’t say that he’s hypocritical… say rather that he’s… a-political.”

Hammond steepled his hands in front of his face. It helped hide the smile as he fought to maintain a stern and sober demeanor. He does sound remarkably like a Goa’uld Werner von Braun, he acknowledged. Better to think about that then let his mind wander to his granddaughters’ Saturday morning cartoons. He didn’t think his mind could survive the image of Jaffa doing the Care Bear Stare.

…Too late.

While he was trying not to cringe, an ah-hah look crossed Carter’s face, as though she’d just had a theory confirmed. Quickly circling something she’d written in her earlier notes, she leaned forward. “Did he develop the TERs as well?”

“He did,” Nekht affirmed. “Djehuty has long been obsessed with the idea of unseen beings.” His lip curled. “He has even been known to visit human populations simply to listen to stories.”

Hammond bit his lip, suddenly picturing a Goa’uld with Daniel Jackson aspirations. He honestly didn’t know if the thought was amusing, intriguing, or terrifying. Probably all of the above.

“Doubtless this energy-consuming being you describe was the result of another branch of that research,” the Tok’ra continued. “It would not be the first time an invention went out of control to wreak havoc. We Tok’ra keep watch on him and attempt to divert any creations that would endanger the balance of power among the System Lords, but…” He spread his hands. “You see why we could not afford to leave such powerful potential hosts in his hands.”

The major pursed her lips slightly. “So you arranged for them to be imprisoned with us.”

“You are Tau’ri.” There was a hint of a shrug in the tone. “We knew you would keep them safe until I could come here.”

“Endangering your cover in the process,” Hammond said, as Carter’s eyes narrowed. “Why not simply give us the Stargate address?”

“I? I am nothing but a Jaffa,” Nekht said smugly. “Djehuty does not even maintain a slave population by which to bolster his numbers. He will not notice my absence.” He spread his hands. “The Dur’Asada Stargate appears to be locked somehow – it can only be accessed by the Gate linked to the Ancient laboratory, which doubtless explains how the world and its inhabitants went unknown for so long. Give the young ones to us and we will see them safely home.”

_Dur’Asada_. Hammond wrote the name out in shorthand on his pad without taking his eyes off the Tok’ra – the life of a general offered plenty of opportunity for developing one’s note-taking skills. They hadn’t been able to determine any sort of name for Zuko and Toph’s homeworld. With luck,
this would give Doctor Jackson another angle to pursue.

In the meantime… He nodded to the Tok’ra, brisk and professional without being too accommodating. “I understand your reasoning,” he said neutrally. “However, the children are still on edge after their experiences. Given that there seems to be no rush, I advise we avoid pushing them for the moment.”

Nekht didn’t quite manage to hide the sudden flash of irritation. Hammond firmly sat on the urge to smirk at him. Caught by your own words – you can’t force us to hurry when you were just bragging that your absence wouldn’t be noticed. “In the meantime – you say Djehuty has a history of researching noncorporeal entities? Then perhaps you might be able to assist our technicians in designing containment procedures. If there are more of these things – and in my experience, scientists never make only one prototype,” he added wryly, “then the Tok’ra will need some way of countering them…”

Nekht clearly understood that for the dismissal that it was, even couched in polite language. “That would be advisable,” he said, maintaining an admirably neutral tone himself. “But be aware that we cannot afford to waste too much time, General.” With a curt nod, he excused himself.

I know that better than you, Hammond thought with a wince. After consulting with Doctor Fraiser and SG-1, he had chosen not to divulge to the Tok’ra the potential danger of naquadah depletion that the children faced; the Tok’ra already held far too many cards in this situation for his liking. But that didn’t mean he wasn’t aware of the ticking clock it represented. He’d done some research on mineral depletion and its effects. It didn’t make for sound sleep at night.

Familiar with the ways of scientists on the trail of a theory, he’d more than half-expected Major Carter to be buried in her notes again as soon as the door closed behind Nekht. Instead, she sat back, turning her pen about in her fingers as though contacting its heft and aerodynamic properties with relation to its potential use as a dart. “Just how gullible does he think we are, sir?”

“The mind boggles.” Hammond smiled dryly. “Particularly given that this Djehuty appears to have been pulling wool over the collective eyes of the System Lords and the Tok’ra for several millennia.”

The pen stilled in Carter’s hands as she glanced sidelong at him. “So you think so, too.”

Hammond raised his eyebrows. “I am painfully familiar with accidental mayhem,” he drawled, and was amused with the astrophysicist flushed slightly – she had, after all, been the source of some of that mayhem. And he was never going to be able to hear the word reactor without wincing again.

“As commanding officer of a base full of often bored soldiers, I am even more painfully familiar with pranks.” Not the least of them from his 2IC. He shook his head. “Oh, to have been a fly on the wall for that demonstration.”


Hammond raised his chin, and an eyebrow. “I survived being young in the psychedelic sixties,” he said with mock pride, then sobered. “More to the point, I know weapons R&D. Researchers may be odd, but senile? Not if they’re producing functional results on a regular basis.”

Carter nodded. “He went to a great deal of trouble to make himself look harmless and whimsical,” she said intently. “But… sir, rainbows may be pretty and a symbol of happy thoughts, but in terms of energy, they’re incredibly complex phenomena. To not only get a concentrated, directed, visible spectrum, but somehow enable it to charge what it contacts so that it will radiate light, and do it all without actually hurting anything…” She paused. “And by hurting, I mean physical damage only, sir. No claims for mental damage.”
Hammond snorted.

“But my point is – he can’t have come up with that by accident. He was doing serious research into the properties of light. And… believe it or not, sir? I think that’s how he came up with those shields.”

Hammond blinked, sitting up straight. “Go on,” he said intently. Staff weapons were horribly inaccurate, but the sheer damage they could do if a blast landed…

“Gold, sir,” she said, tapping the note she’d circled. “Staff blasts, zats, even the low-intensity death glider weapons – we think of them as kinetic weapons, because that’s what we’re used to, and the effects are physical. You get hit, you get knocked around. But actually, they’re all energy-based. And energy and light are closely related. If you think of it in terms of deflection, or rather reflection…”

Hammond’s jaw dropped. “Visors,” he said slowly, remembering the years of devouring everything he could read about the moon landings. “Dear God. NASA was using gold plating on visors for years before we ever managed to get a man into space.”

“Thin enough, gold is translucent, but it cuts down on harmful radiation even so,” Carter affirmed. “Some aircraft use gold plating on windshields; a light electrical charge is enough to melt frost.” She looked at him. “It’ll take some research, sir. There’s still a physical component – those were heavy shields, and I suspect they had to be. Reflected energy or not, there must still be some kind of kinetic effect. And it’ll be expensive. But I think we can use this.” Carter tilted her head. “What really gets me, sir? I have to wonder if the Ancient Egyptians knew. Gold was so prominent in their culture. Because it’s pretty and doesn’t tarnish, and they had plenty of it, sure, but how much of that was holding onto a memory?”

Hammond rubbed his chin. “Which makes me wonder what other hidden memories we’ve been overlooking.” He raised an eyebrow at her, inviting comment. “Nekht claimed the yukiuso was created by Djehuty.”

Carter snorted. “Nekht has a remarkable ability to see the world the way he thinks it should be. Which makes me think…”

Hammond raised an eyebrow.

Carter smiled dryly. “If the Tok’ra really do think Djehuty is a senile old fool who is a source of new toys rather than any kind of real threat – odds are they didn’t exactly send their best and brightest to keep an eye on him.” She shook her head. “Either way, Nekht’s claim is jossed by the evidence, sir. Zuko didn’t just know how to fight that type of creature, he knew about it, specifically. Down to name, behavior, and abilities. It’s from their world.” She frowned. “If Djehuty’s as old as Nekht claims – and that much, I think I can buy; they wouldn’t call him senile if he weren’t old, they’d just call him insane – then it’s possible that this Dur’Asada was one of his worlds, a long time ago, and he’s returning to check up on the experiment.”

“But,” Hammond said thoughtfully, “he came to Dur’Asada because it was inhabited by such creatures. He wasn’t looking for advanced hosts at all. In fact… he may not have realized they were even there.”

“That would certainly explain how those two managed to utterly blindside his Jaffa.” Carter’s expression darkened. “But it doesn’t change the fact that he certainly knows they exist now.”

And so do the Tok’ra.
Neither of them said it out loud – but Hammond knew they were both thinking it. Which wasn’t fair to the Tok’ra, who were risking so much by allying with the Tau’ri, but… Jolinar’s body-snatching had left deep scars in the SGC. It was one thing to face the risk of possession by an enemy who didn’t care what you thought about it. Another entirely to face possession by a would-be ally who expected you to be grateful.

He swept the papers on the conference table in front of him together and tapped the edge once to put them in a semblance of order. “I think,” he said, looking at Carter, “that while Nekht’s eagerness to assist in taking them home is admirable, at the moment returning to P4X-684 in his company is too risky. If he is wrong and Djehuty did note his absence, Nekht could unintentionally lead them into a trap.”

And he strongly suspected the Tok’ra had thoroughly misjudged the situation. The SGC might not operate on a shoestring budget, but there was only so much the Pentagon could siphon into an operation so deeply classified even the cockroaches had to undergo deep background checks. And top minds and officers like those that made up SG-1 rarely could simply slip through the cracks and vanish – let alone wanted to.

When a resource was limited, you used what you had carefully. And you kept track of it. Which meant that Djehuty no doubt had noticed Nekht’s absence. Assuming that the Tok’ra’s earlier manipulations with the prisoners had gone unnoticed. Which Hammond strongly doubted.

Also assuming, of course, that Nekht actually meant to take the children directly home. No one at the SGC had forgotten SG-1’s first visit to the Tok’ra world.

If you will not be hosts, then there is no point in allying.

And a pair of psychokinetics made such appealing potential hosts.

“That seems wise, sir,” Carter said, relaxing faintly as she rose to her feet. Then she smiled slightly. “Although it would be amusing to see his reaction to Toph. I doubt she’s anything like what he expects.”

Hammond snorted as he waved her to the door. He, unfortunately, had to stay for another meeting. It wouldn’t be the SGC without multiple crises at the same time. “Major,” he said dryly, “the one thing I am certain about regarding those two, is that Zuko and Toph are never quite what anyone expects.”

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~

Jack had to admit, angry stomping was pretty impressive when it involved leaving foot-shaped depressions in solid concrete. He’d seen teenagers acting like they could make the earth shake with pique. Toph actually pulled it off.

Pity that kid’s parents.

Although maybe the most impressive part of the whole thing was that the tremors didn’t actually go very far. One thing to stomp cracks into concrete. Quite another to simultaneously control the tremors so that they didn’t disturb the guys from SG-3, sleeping off a bad mission.

Although maybe that was just because even Toph didn’t want to get frowned at by Janet, who was at the other end of the infirmary giving Zuko’s healing arm a checkup.
Yeah, well, when Napoleon sees those footprints in the concrete…

Next to Jack, Daniel sighed as he finished scribbling notes from their latest round of Charades. “That could have gone better.”

“Think it went pretty well, myself,” Jack drawled, leaning his hip against a desk.

Daniel rubbed his forehead and rolled his eyes at the ceiling for a moment, before the exaggerated resignation in his face shifted to a much more genuine, thoughtful look. “Jack, are you sure there’s no way…? Toph seems to think it’s really important.”

“Do you want me to list all the reasons letting those two out of the base is a really bad idea, Danny?” Jack asked. “Starting with security breach and going from there?”

“There’s the secure area at the top of the mountain,” Daniel insisted. “Surely we could at least let them go that far?”

“And how long do you think it would be before Little Miss Not-My-Boss over there got bored with staying nicely behind the yellow line?” Jack asked pointedly. “And quite frankly, if she decided to get cute out there, I doubt we’d be able to hold her. She’s got escape techniques that impress Sam.”

Daniel looked unconvinced. “Zuko…”

“Zuko ain’t going outside, Daniel. You heard Janet. Kid’s pretty much one germ away from getting knocked off his feet with a NORAD-grade cold. That’s a complication we don’t need.”

Daniel winced, clearly conceding the point.

“Besides,” Jack said, wrapping up his argument with a bit of dark humor, “last thing either of those two need right now is to come down with a bad case of kidnapped.”

Thus far, Hammond had managed to sit on Janet’s little bombshell. But there was no hiding the psychokinesis part, not with things like those concrete footprints still scattered across the SGC even after the post-battle clean-up. The NID had been circling even before the yukiuso had hit. The last thing Jack wanted to do was risk taking the kids outside and giving the NID the excuse to cite jurisdictional priority and swoop down, secured SGC topside area or no. Particularly given Zuko’s condition.

Speaking of. “How’s he look, Doc?”

Janet shook her head as she went to join them, exam finished. Zuko was sitting back on the cot, apparently listening to Toph burn his ears off about Jack being a big old meanie who wouldn’t let them out to play, judging by the tired, wry smile he was only sort of pretending to hide. The Marines had scrounged up a bit of clothing for the pair before the requisition forms had even been submitted; Zuko was wearing a long-sleeved black shirt with a flame motif, and Toph had a bright green T-shirt about three sizes too big for her declaring, *BOW TO MY WILL, PUNY MORTALS.*

Toph couldn’t even see it, of course, and Zuko could hardly read it – but from the eyebrow the kid had directed at the grinning Marines who’d presented the clothing, he’d guessed at the sentiment.

Kid didn’t look all that bad, from here. But Jack knew fatigue when he saw it. Zuko was just a bit too pale, even for as fair-skinned as he was. He’d never quite gotten back all the color he’d lost during that fight in the lab against the yukiuso.

*Dammit.*
“His arm is healing,” Janet said, pulling off her gloves before reaching for a clip-board covered with a mixture of analysis reports and hand-scrawled notes. “However… going by his reactions, he’s used to healing faster than this.”

“That could just be normal impatience,” Jack pointed out. “I know I hate waiting for a wound to heal.”

Oops. Janet was eyeing him. “Maybe if you ever actually gave injuries a chance to heal rather than charging off to the next disaster, they wouldn’t take as long. Think about it, Colonel.” She shook her head. “However. A slow recovery time would be consistent with his other symptoms. Which, if he were human, I’d say he was suffering from something very similar to copper deficiency.”

If he were human. “Yeah. About that…” Jack waved at the clipboard. “Hit me.”

Because this was Stargate Command – not Starfleet. Body-snatching snakes, fuzzy little snobs, naked gray men, invisible insectuars, sure. And plenty of actual humans that just happened to not be living on Earth. Human-except-a-bad-make-up-job-says-not, not so much. Except for maybe the Jaffa – who were human, just modified, dammit.

So what made the kids so different?

“Degree of differentiation,” Janet answered, when he asked aloud. “The Jaffa are, basically, modified humans. The Goa’uld made one or two very small tweaks to get relatively large results on the functional level.” She flipped through the pages on the clipboard thoughtfully. “Zuko and Toph almost work the other way around. On the functional level, they’re nearly identical to humans. But in a few cases, they get there by a completely different route. Slightly different brain chemistry, muscular structures, the naquadah…” She lowered the clipboard. “In short, Colonel – Jaffa are a subspecies of Homo sapiens. Zuko and Toph are a different species entirely.”


“Or maybe Denisovans,” Daniel said thoughtfully – followed by a sharp, “and if you say Gesundheit, Jack, I will hit you.”

Jack spread his hands, arranging his features into the very picture of artfully wounded innocence. Darn. “So fill me in. Since I assume you’re not referring to an alien species that founded the Denny’s chain restaurants.”

Ooo, score an eyeroll from both Janet and Daniel.

“We don’t know much about them,” Daniel admitted, running a hand through his hair. “The first known traces were only recently found, in a cave in the Altai Mountains, and they’re pretty minimal. But we think the Denisovans were a species of humanity that split off about the same time as the Neanderthals. So far as we can tell, they lived in eastern Siberia down through Southeast Asia, about forty thousand years ago. It’s hard to say for sure, given the lack of archeological evidence.”

Jack glanced over at the kids again, thinking back on the report Daniel had submitted. Asiatic culture, language so old Daniel couldn’t even positively ID the roots, just soil it might have grown in. Not to mention the simple fact that these apparent non-humans did seem to have common ties with Earth, however old… it fit.

Except for one, very important detail. “Danny,” he said, crossing his arms over his chest. “Forty thousand years is way too far back for the Goa’uld.”

“The Goa’uld weren’t the ones who built the Stargates in the first place, Jack,” Daniel pointed out.
“Someone else was here first.”

Jack frowned. “So… what? You think the Ancients up and relocated a bunch of Denisovans to another planet for some reason? Why would they do that?”

Daniel shrugged helplessly. “They didn’t exactly leave us notes. Preservation, like the Asgard did with Cimmeria?”

“It’s possible. We don’t know when the Denisovans vanished,” Janet said. “We have one site for them. Not even any major bones. The only reason we do know as much as we do is because temperatures in the Denisova Cave average at about zero degrees, so the DNA record was preserved.” She shrugged and smiled a little at Daniel’s startled look. “I keep track of medical discoveries. Genetic studies have suggested that the Denisovans interbred with *Homo sapiens*, same as Neanderthals. Current theory suggests we get nearly half of the alleles involved in developing our immune system from that kind of introgression.” She flipped down the pages of her clipboard. “Which actually supports our theory. Zuko and Toph do seem to carry the alleles associated with the Denisovans. Which, by the by, is one of the reasons why I’m not keeping Zuko in a sterilized environment, or insisting we wear face masks around him.”

Now it was Jack’s turn to raise an eyebrow at her.

“Their immune systems could probably munch most Earth-native bugs for breakfast, under normal conditions,” she said wryly. “Which makes me very glad that we came through a cold, dry environment to get here. Any bugs that could give them the sniffles would tear right through the SGC.” The physician sighed. “But that’s only under normal circumstances. Unfortunately, as I said, it appears that naquadah deficiency in their people has certain similarities to copper deficiency in humans.” She rubbed her forehead. “The medical term is *neutropenia* – basically, the loss of a certain type of white blood cells. I think that’s what I’m seeing, at any rate. It’s hard to judge when I don’t even know how analogous their systems are to ours. Right now, the best I can do is compare Zuko’s charts to Toph’s.”

Jack blinked. Something wasn’t adding up here. “Wait. I thought you said that this was caused by naquadah depletion? And the naquadah depletion is caused by doing the psychokinesis?”

“That’s my best guess, yes.”

“So why is the firebrand burning out, while the dainty demolitionist, who uses the stuff just to *see*, apparently has juice to spare?” He waved a hand at the small, precise indentations stomped into the infirmary floor.

Apparently only just noticing them, Janet scowled fiercely for a moment, then shook her head. “Because she isn’t. Toph’s other mineral levels are haywire, but her naquadah is steady – I’m starting to wonder if she’s *biosynthesizing* it, somehow. Which should be impossible, by the laws of chemistry, but – well, that describes half of the things I see before breakfast, on a busy day.” Janet sighed. “If she is biosynthesizing it – maybe Zuko just has a condition where he can’t generate his own. Maybe it has to do with the fact that he manipulates fire rather than minerals. Maybe we’re missing something else entirely. I don’t know. He’s stable for the time being, at least. But if something happens…”

“Any ideas?” Daniel asked sympathetically.

Janet spread her hands. “Get them *home*, Daniel. And hope that if there’s something more going on, it’s something that the people on their world know how to deal with.”
“Believe me,” Jack said with honest fervor, “we’re working on that.” And for more reasons than the kids’ health. He and Daniel and Sam had all sat down with Zuko and Toph over the last two days and hammered out a basic list of the do’s and don’ts of fighting no-see-ums, enough to get some basic emergency procedures in place for the next time something spooky popped in to say hi. But one thing Zuko had gotten across was that he didn’t see himself as an expert.

All things considered, with the yukiuso currently locked up in the chill-chest, Jack really, really wanted to talk to an expert.

_Eh. Give it a day or two. Hopefully, Hammond’ll wring enough info out of the Tok’ra to get these kids home by then. Frosty’s tucked in tight for the time being, and no one in the SGC is going to be stupid enough to open that freezer._

_~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~_

_Foolish, ignorant, arrogant Tau’ri._

Nekht crossed his arms over his chest, the only outward sign of impatience he permitted himself as he waited for _Major Carter._

And seethed.

The Tok’ra had risked much in this alliance with the reckless, careless, _visible_ Tau’ri. One System Lord’s agent slipped into the ranks, and all of Egeria’s children could be at risk. And in exchange for what? Assistance in a few minor tasks, and constant demands for help and advice, and the stubborn refusal to even _consider_ a proper partnership, or even return Jolinar’s memories to her people where they belonged.

And now the Tau’ri were attempting to cut the Tok’ra off from more desperately needed hosts. As if they thought he didn’t _see_ what they were doing, asking for his help and then leaving him to cool his heels outside this small, so-called lab.

_Enough!_ They had asked for his assistance with the strange creature they had encountered. He was Tok’ra, he would abide by their alliance and assist. With a growl, he pushed the door of the small lab open, lip curling at the nose-stinging smell of smoke that still lingered in the air. He almost couldn’t make out the door underneath the graffiti that covered it. And this was supposed to be where a _scientist_ would work?

“So sorry I’m late, the general needed – _what are you doing_?”

Already gripping the handle, he turned, startled.

He forgot to let go.

The vacuum seal of the door released with a heavy _thump._

Chapter End Notes
Really, Jack. You jinxed it the minute you declared the yukiuso Sealed Evil in a Can. Remember: in the SGC, Murphy is always listening.

Not that Nekht is helping. But from his point of view – well, he’s got a point. To the Tok’ra, the alliance with Earth is high risk and minimal gain.

I am aware that later SG-1 canon holds that Goa’uld can go senile. The SGC hasn’t met Yu yet in this universe, however. What’s more… I’m trying to keep things to ‘no hard evidence against it,’ but the Goa’uld definitely have a bit of an alternative background in this story.

And a couple people have guessed at the biosynthesis theory, based on the fact that most animals can make certain vitamins – we humans can generate our own vitamin D, after all. However, there’s a problem with that: minerals, by definition, cannot be biosynthesized. They’re atomic elements, the building blocks that become those vitamins. The only place an atomic element can be created naturally is the fusion reactor of a dying star, if you’re going for anything heavier than iron. Biosynthesis? Not happening.

…not in real life, anyway. On the other hand, this is Stargate we’re talking about…
Chapter Notes

I do not own Snow Beast – that goes to Mercedes Lackey and Leslie Fish.

Nor do I own Ghostbusters – I just couldn’t pass up the reference!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**Run!**

The thought went straight from her hindbrain to her feet. Before her horrified eyes even registered the glitter of hoarfrost on Nekht’s suddenly—literally, oh God—frozen face, Sam had already slammed the lab door and was racing down the hallway.

*I can’t believe it – we were so busy putting up Don’t Touch signs we forgot to lock the door!*

No time to cry over it now. She desperately scanned the hallway as she ran, mentally scrambling through what they’d gathered about defenses against incorporeal threats, partially from Zuko and partially from Daniel’s folklore studies. *Get somewhere enclosed, some sort of place that belongs to someone…*

Behind her, the heavy metal, blast-proof door of the lab shattered like fruit at a physicist’s frat party.

*Office! Yes!*

She didn’t rip it off its hinges, but that was in part because someone had left it just slightly open. And because she didn’t know what a busted door would do to the protective field that Zuko called a *shiki’i* and Daniel described as a threshold-

Huge green eyes blinked at her owlishly behind prescription-lensed lab goggles. “Um. Major?”

“Close that door and lock it, Sergeant! That’s an order!” Sam eeled past Heather and grabbed the phone off the desk, punching in the intercom even as the door slammed behind her with the sound of an auto-lock clicking into place.

“Attention,” she gasped, as malevolence gathered in the hallway outside – then swept onward, on the hunt. “Security alert, code thirteen. We have a containment breach on Level 19. I repeat, security alert, code thirteen…!”

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~

“I say we just break some rules and bust out of here.” Scowling, Toph cracked off a chunk of the odd, sandstoney surface of the floor.

Zuko snorted. “And go where?” he asked dryly.
She pursed her lips, closing her hand around the chunk with a grip that broke it down into its component bits. It was harder than she’d expected. The stuff might feel like sandstone, but sandstone fell apart with just a flicker of chi. This stuff wanted to stay together. “Who cares?” she demanded.

Zuko knew exactly how far he needed to tilt his head to indicate the guy standing chatting oh-so-casually at the other end of the room without giving the motion away to any losers who depended on eyes to spot it. “Him, for starters.”

Toph scowled. “Yeah. Have I mentioned how much I don’t like that?” Because sure, the guy she kinda liked, he had a proper sense of awesome. But underneath all the dry amusement, he hummed with focus. Which was kinda odd, given how hard it was to read people around here – what was in their shoes? Except it wasn’t just shoes, she’d felt a bare foot or two in this infirmary and they’d still been… well, flat was the best way she could describe it.

Kinda creepy.

But yeah. Frustrating. Particularly because she had a vested interested in getting a good read on mister I’m-everyone’s-boss. Zuko’d said the guy reminded him of one of the Fire Navy’s admirals – yeah, sure, okay.

He reminded Toph of Long Feng.

Plots and schemes and sure he knows best, so all the little pawns should just line up already...

“You and me both,” Zuko admitted. “But if we’re going to go home, we can’t afford to alienate these people.”

Which was the other reason that Jack guy reminded her of Long Feng. This whole situation smacked of Ba Sing Se all over again, sitting around cooling their heels and waiting for someone else to decide to listen to them.

No Joo Dees, though. And no Dai Li… that I’ve spotted, at least. She scrunched the gravelly sand between her palms, trying to get the individual clumps to aggregate together, like with like, so she could separate out the odd stuff that was holding it together. Something that smelled of cold, and dust, and water, and dust and water didn’t really go together, so what was up with that? “It would be worth it.”

Zuko huffed something that maybe was supposed to pass for a tired laugh, letting his head roll back to rest against the wall.

Toph bit her lip, because that was just wrong. Zuko was Fire. He was all about hitting back first and confronting obstacles – be they runaway Avatars, a snippy Katara, a psycho little sister, or some poor innocent mountain range that just happened to be in the way. He didn’t do cooling his heels and waiting.

Except, ever since they’d beat the yukiuso and stuffed it in the cooler, Zuko’d been tired. All the time. And she suspected that the reason he was sitting around was that if he got up and moved, someone might spot that his balance… wasn’t. He kept getting dizzy.

He feels… ungrounded. Like all his roots are coming loose and letting him float away. And not in a Twinkletoes way. More like a sand dune being worn down to nothing by waves and wind.

Earth’s all about roots and grounding! There’s got to be something I can do.

She was the Blind Bandit…
But – maybe she could feel that something was wrong, but she’d only done bare basics, experimenting with Earth healing. Mostly just sensing stuff, and trying to find a something to work with, because one thing was for sure, Zuko’d been right about that. She could feel things, but she couldn’t seem to get that to turn into healing. Something was missing. She didn’t know where to even start. She’d poked around with plaster, and rock dust, and a funny clay that Janet had dug out of one of her cupboards, and none of them had worked.

Although the weirdest part of it all was realizing that some of this stuff, the sensing part at least, she’d been doing all along. Heartbeat, breathing – all of that was part of how she sensed whether or not someone was lying to her, or which way they were going to twitch in the Rumble Ring.

But… sensing things? Baby stuff. Actually trying to do something about it? Yeah. That was a lot harder.

And skipping straight to the fancy-dancey hard stuff in bending was a really bad idea. She’d heard the story about when Aang had decided to skip Earth and Water and try learning Fire early – and then tried to pull a fancy move rather than work on the basics for that. Katara learning to heal? Cool stuff. The fact that she’d needed to? Not.

And that was just normal bending. She really, really didn’t want to think about what would happen if she tried to skip steps healing.

She shuddered at the sudden, visceral memory of feeling Jet’s insides go squish.

Next to her, Zuko shifted slightly. “I’ll be fine,” he insisted, nudging her shoulder lightly with his elbow – and blocking her counter-elbow with a smirk. Toph didn’t even need bending to see it, because the smug so there was written all through his chi.

She was so going to nail him good, the next time his guard was down, just for that. She scowled. “The earthbenders from those floating prisons…”

“Were weak for a while, but after they’d gotten back to solid ground, they were fine. And some of them had been out there for years.” Zuko huffed. “A few days without seeing the sun isn’t going to kill me…”

He stiffened.

Toph was already surging to his her feet, heart pounding in the back of a very dry throat. Across the room, she could feel Snark Feng’s heart rate jump – and then settle into a grim beat when he looked over and saw the two of them on their feet and in ready stance.

Sam’s voice crackled overhead, on some sort of speaker system like the one Sokka’d used back on the airships. The words were so much babble-blab, but Toph knew controlled panic when she heard it.

Then she yelped, clapping her hands over her ears in an attempt to protect them from the headsplitting racket of the ringing, jangling wail that cut right through her head, bouncing off stone walls and metal surfaces and turning the world into a tangled cacophony of noise.

She’d heard the alarms a couple times over the past few days, most notably when they’d first arrived. Reflex demanded that she kick a chunk of rock at the nearest source of the noise in pure self-defense. Only right now, her toes were dug into the floor, desperately feeling for those first icy cracks in the dry water of the not-stone, because in this racket, that would probably be their only warning-

“Sparky!” Her voice was shrill and scared and she didn’t care. Smash it, what was the word these
people used? “Enkaa-whatever!”

Zuko was already lunging for the door. Snark Feng beat him there by half a step, waving spooked tough guys through as the idiot poked his head out.

And fell back, heart going like a squirrelchuck as he shoved himself away from the open door.

Zuko reached past him, grabbed the door, and yanked it shut.

Toph could feel the cold. Not just radiating from the doorway, but in the way Zuko recoiled from the door, retreating step by wary step to Toph’s side without ever turning his back on it. And in the way she could feel the clammy condensation forming on the inside of walls that had gone chill in her earthbending…

Somewhere, someone with a lick of sense finally turned the alarm off.

In the sudden, echoing silence of the shocked infirmary, Toph could hear that soft, breathy ripple of a laugh in the empty corridor outside all too clearly.

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~

The worst part was the quiet.

The SGC wasn’t normally a noisy place. But it was a busy one, and that undertone of at least a hundred-odd people going about their work at any one time gave the air of the mountain a living feel. But right now, other than the faint buzz of the overhead light and the hum of the computer on the desk, the entire base was as still as a tomb.

Actually, given some of the tombs I’ve seen, that might not be a fair comparison, Sam thought wryly, biting down the urge to chuckle a little wildly. She didn’t do sitting still, not when there was a crisis. But I’ll grant, that’s probably not a representative sample.

Part of it was the closed door. People didn’t generally close their offices off, unless they actively wanted privacy. The SGC was a warren of tunnels in the bowels of a mountain. That was claustrophobic enough for anyone. People preferred to keep their doors open as much as possible, to catch the stirring air from ventilators and people moving about. For one thing, that let you hear what was going on. For another, it let you at least pretend that there weren’t uncountable metric tons of granite between you and the sky.

Given recent events, Sam suspected that particular practice was going to change.

She grimaced, dropping her head into her hands for a moment.

I can’t believe we were so stupid!

The worst part was, she could track exactly how it had happened. When Jack had slammed the freezer closed, it had been cold enough to burn. Not safe to handle, even to engage the lock. And after that…

Tired, fatigued soldiers made mistakes. Particularly when they were flying high on adrenaline and the euphoria of a hard-won victory. They’d fallen into back-slapping, cheering, and throwing every
single warning label they could get their hands on at the door. And somewhere in the chaos, they’d forgotten.

Stupid mistake. Idiot mistake.

And the sort of mistake that was impossible to spot after the fact, because there was no way to tell that the door wasn’t locked without opening it. Particularly when Hammond had ordered everyone to stay away from the lab if at all possible. They already knew this thing could mess with minds, and they had no way of knowing if the freezer would contain that as well as the cold. Best not to hand the thing a pair of opposable thumbs to puppet about.

But Nekht had asked to see where they’d fought the creature. It wasn’t an unreasonable request, particularly when Hammond had asked the Tok’ra for any advice he might have for dealing with it. Especially since the more attention he paid to the yukiuso, the less he’d pay to a pair of stranded, telekinetic kids.

Who’d have thought he’d open a door with every Do Not Touch label under the sun on it?

I should have. But she’d stalled, because other than her father, the Tok’ra… well. She tried to avoid them. And then she’d walked into the lab, and…

Sam shivered. Although, ironically, it wasn’t all that cold in a physical sense. But something about the yukiuso’s chill lingered like an unpleasant taste in the back of her throat.

I wonder if there’s a psychosomatic element to the cold? Which made no sense, and yes, she was saying that far too often lately, which definitely wasn’t the mark of a good day for science. But the yukiuso obviously did absorb thermal energy from the environment. Why would it need a psychosomatic component?

On the other hand, it does seem to prefer energy taken from living things. I wonder, would it go after exothermic creatures, or does it only go after endotherms like mammals? I suppose if it can’t handle active combustion or strong light, endotherms would be the most reliable generators of thermal energy…

If so, psychosomatic cold didn’t have to be part of how it fed to be useful to it. She remembered that horrible moment in the lab before Jack had closed the freezer door, when suddenly all she could seem to think was, I’m so cold, I can’t get warm…

She shook her head fiercely.

At least the defensive measures that Jack had taken to calling the Spook Protocols seemed to work. With the door closed, the yukiuso couldn’t come in.

Which, once again, made no sense. So far as they could determine, the yukiuso was definitely capable of moving through pipes, probably through air vents, and quite possibly through solid stone – and one measly door was enough to stop it?

Stop it from getting in, at least. Getting out… She could still hear the sound of the heavy lab door shattering like so much brittle glass.

Then again… we invited it into that lab. We wanted it in there. But the corridors, the mess hall – they’re public space, so far as the SGC is concerned. Which probably explains why it was moving around so freely. They don’t belong to anyone.

Zuko had been emphatic about that. Jashin couldn’t enter someone’s turf unless invited.
Daniel had been ecstatic, muttering about folklore and vampire legends and wishing they’d picked up enough of each others’ languages to ask about holy ground traditions, because if they accepted the Threshold Principle then surely that had to be related…

Sam was more worried about the term *jashin*. Because from the way the kids said it, she suspected there were more things than just the yukiuso in that category. And if Earth had lore about how to fight noncorporeal entities, no matter how fragmentary or unscientific, did that mean things like the yukiuso existed, or had existed, here…?

Jack had simply burst out snickering. “*Pity that thing if it ever tries to get into the infirmary on Doc Napoleon’s watch.*”

He was right. Sam made herself hold on to that thought. *The infirmary isn’t public space, it’s Janet’s. They’ll be fine.*

For a given value of fine. Janet, Jack, Daniel, Toph, Zuko, the wounded – according to what Hammond had said when she’d phoned in to make her report, they were under siege down there.

*While I’m stuck in here, dammit…!*

Heather cleared her throat. “So. How are we going to stomp this thing?”

Sam blinked. She rather liked Heather – the woman had a wicked sense of humor and a mind that whirred like a supercomputer. The sergeant’s official scientific specialty might have been chemistry with a side-specialization in mechanical engineering, but like any scientist who’d weathered a few SGC crises, she’d picked up a sub-specialization in Whatever Works.

Although granted, Heather’s preferred solution to most problems tended to run along the lines of, *Needs more Death Ray.*

Even so… “You’re taking this well,” Sam commented. Heather was brilliant and quick-thinking, but her bad vision and specialization meant she normally stayed on base – hard to take a chem lab with you into the field, after all. She was normally insulated from most off-world crises.

Heather’s grin was strained, a flash of white teeth in a face that was currently almost the exact same color – but she still grinned as though hoping to see a throat to lunge for. “Ahem. Four-time winner of the Countdown to Foothold Situation betting pool, here,” she said pointedly. The effect was slightly marred when her gaze flickered uneasily towards the door for a moment with a violent shiver as she hugged the armload of books she’d been collecting from various mostly-horizontal surfaces. “I suppose it’s five, now.”

With visible effort, the sergeant tore her gaze away from the door to focus on Sam again. “So. Spook-stomping?”

Sam rubbed her forehead. “And how are we supposed to stomp something we can’t see or touch?” she demanded, frustration making her tone snippy. “At least, not without getting turned into human icicles!”

Heather snorted. “Yeah, not keen on doing that again. But I still stabbed it. We can get this thing. And right now, we’ve got two mad geniuses with nothing better to do and a mountain full of stuff that goes *boom.*”

With a wall-rattling *thump*, she dropped the books she’d been clutching down on her desk in front of Sam, nearly crushing the phone as well as several mostly-innocent reports that happened to be lying in the wrong place.
“That thing is going down.”

Sam snorted, startled into laughter, and reached out to pick up the top book, as much out of habit as anything else.

And blinked.

*Strategies in Practical Magic?*


“…Interesting reading,” she said, pulling the last out and blinking at the colorful wilderness of Post It notes bristling from the pages, fluffing the book to twice its normal thickness. “The Higgs boson?”

Heather didn’t even seem to hear the incredulous note in her voice. “I was thinking about the psychokinesis, sir,” she said, resettling her goggles on her nose. They made her green eyes look twice their actual size, highlighting the fascination in them. “It *can’t* just be electromagnetism, Toph wasn’t manipulating electrical energy, and as near as I’ve been able to tell, there’s no magnetic charge involved when she moves rocks around. We’d be able to detect it, if there were. She’s clearly *sensitive* to magnetism, but that’s not how it *works.*”

Sam raised her eyebrows and tapped the dog-eared book, bemused. “And you think it has to do with weak nuclear forces instead?”

“More than that… a Higgs field *creates* the property of mass, by aligning with fermions.” Heather waved her hands in a vague punching motion. “Mass means inertia. If we think of what Toph does as the redirection of inertia…”

Sam felt her jaw drop a little. “Like the inertial dampeners on the death gliders.”

“Yeah. Have I mentioned recently how much I’d *love* to get my hands on the mechanisms for those?” Heather huffed. “Still doesn’t explain *how* they manage to do it – but it’s a working theory for what they’re doing.”

Sam frowned. “Although it also doesn’t explain the different manifestations,” she said absently. “Spontaneous combustion versus inertial redirection – not to mention the fact that Toph seems so limited in what she can manipulate.”

And yet not limited at the same time. Zuko’s abilities were at least mostly consistent as a manipulation of combustion and the resulting plasma. But Toph… Sam had tried to keep track of what they’d seen the girl work with. Ha’tak walls, metal bars, stone, concrete, pencil graphite, table salt. Clay, plaster. But she didn’t seem able to levitate wood, for all that she’d taken to poking at the decored pencil she’d swiped from Heather, when no one was looking. Plastics just seemed to baffle her. Nothing living – she’d helped clean up a spilled plant in the botany lab “greenhouse” (actually powered by full-spectrum lamps, and a popular place for people to hang out when they had to stay in the base for extended periods of time, and so Janet had been encouraging the kids to visit on a regular basis) by sweeping up the dirt, but the plant itself had needed to be manually replaced. And while she’d clearly been trying to learn to heal the way Zuko had – under *very* uneasy watch by Janet – she didn’t seem to be getting all that far.
All of that *looked* consistent. Until you actually thought about it and realized that it made no sense. Especially the dirt versus wood versus plant. Dirt was mostly organic matter – but first and foremost, it was hugely heterogeneous.

The best summary of Toph’s abilities that Sam could come up with was that she worked with the Classical element of Earth. And at that point, her poor scientific sensibilities had thrown their hands up and announced an unscheduled vacation, because some things were just *too much*.

And none of this was helping them figure out the *invisible ice monster*…

Sam felt her eyes widen.

“Ooh.” Heather leaned forward with a grin of anticipation, light from the computer monitor glancing off her go-goggle glasses. “That’s a *eureka* look."

“Thinking,” Sam said absently, running over what she remembered of the Higgs field theories. She didn’t normally work with particle physics; she’d found that the rival superstring theory was far more useful for working with wormhole physics and the downright *strange* phenomena the SGC encountered daily. Witness the Reetou incident…

That was it.

“The yukiuso is a discrete entity,” she said slowly, eyes narrowing again as she turned it over in her head. “It’s demonstrably in one location, not another – it occupies a particular space. You wouldn’t have been able to stab it without that, and we wouldn’t have been able to capture it in the freezer. Plus, the thresholds. To keep it out of somewhere means it has to be somewhere.” Not to mention that she’d actually managed to run away from it, not fifteen minutes earlier. It didn’t just occupy a certain space – it had to cross the intervening space to get from point A to point B.

“The cold…” Heather started, then shook her head. “No, wait – that’s confusing source with effect. The cold is something the yukiuso does – not what it is.”

Sam nodded. “Exactly. It seems able to influence a relatively wide area, but that influence radiates from a particular space at a particular time.” Or in multiple places at a particular time, if Zuko was right about it being able to divide. The encounter in the cafeteria argued for it. But even then, the yukiuso’s pieces had been in discrete locations. The theory held.

Heather’s brows furrowed slightly. “So… where does that leave us?”

“It’s demonstrably in a particular place at a particular time; it has volume, in that sense. But it doesn’t affect light at all – and except for the mild detail of freezing, solids can pass through it unaffected.” Jack had proven that in the lab – as had any number of bullets in the cafeteria, to the peril of anyone in the ricochet path. No deflection, not even a loss of momentum.

In other words…

Heather clapped her hands. “It *has no mass*!” she crowed.

“No mass that we can perceive, at any rate.” Sam drummed her fingers on the desk, thinking hard.

Heather was frowning. “When I stabbed it, in the cafeteria… It *almost* felt like I’d actually hit something. Like stabbing Jell-O.” Her eyes narrowed. “At the time, I assumed it was just my imagination. Or maybe it was. Given the threshold effect, we *know* mental state has tangible effects on this thing. Well, for a given value of tangible…”
Sam knew her expression was pained as she interrupted. “If you’re going to say that willpower affects the vibrations of the strings…”

“Or the spin of the bosons. And you’d be obligated to admit that we’ve seen weirder things down here, on a regular basis,” Heather said dryly. “Up to and including psychokinesis. And I’d point out that ‘vibes’ might explain why the psychokinesis seems particularly effective against the yukiuso.”

“Doesn’t explain why Marines tossing salt on it like it was meatloaf also were effective,” Sam countered, and paused. “Throwing salt through it, rather. And that’s where the yukiuso seems to differ from the Reetou. They had mass, even if it was a little off by our standards.” Bullets might not have been as effective as they should have been, but they did have an effect. And were affected in turn…

Heather nodded. “And we know the Reetou could use our technology, which means they were solid enough to manipulate things on our end of the strings.”

Sam swallowed, mind flashing back to a darkened hallway, crouching behind a wall support with her father nursing a badly wounded shoulder behind her, trading shots through a door that seemed to be opening and closing all of its own accord, except when the Reetou’s arm entered the light of her TER.

And that brought back other memories, of the long hour spent sweeping the base with what amounted to a flashlight that didn’t actually illuminate anything – until suddenly it did, lighting up a chitinous shape that normal light insisted simply wasn’t there…

In a way, the darkness had been a blessing. Better than the distraction of how any piece of the Reetou not directly lit by the TER wasn’t shadowed, it was invisible. The result had been like a bad Photoshop effect – but superimposed over reality, not a two-dimensional picture. At least the darkness had let her pretend that it was simply a trick of the light.

Mostly, though, Sam had just been grateful that her weirdness threshold had already been crossed, stomped on, and obliterated by two years in the SGC at that point. Alternate dimensions reflected by different vibrations of the strings were supposed to be a useful and interesting theory for explaining astrophysical phenomena, not something with overpowered blasters shooting at her…

The drumming of her fingers suddenly stilled. Oh. And who knew that Jack O’Neillism was contagious? She found herself feeling an actual, physical urge to say something about a light clicking on or seeing the light, because… “That’s why the TERs didn’t work.”

“Sir?” Heather blinked at her.

“Think about it,” Sam said. “The TERs emit light in such a way that it bounces off an entity that exists on a different vibration of the strings than we do, and comes back as visible light at our end of the strings.” Sam stood up and began to pace. “The Reetou were invisible, but they still had mass as we understand it. The yukiuso has volume – it occupies space. But it doesn’t have mass. Which means whatever part of the strings it inhabits is probably even more offset than the Reetou.”

Heather grinned evilly, finger twitching as though she could feel circuitboards and wires falling into place under her fingers. “But it’s still in the same general direction, which means we can recalibrate. The hard work of making the device in the first place has conveniently already been done. And if we are looking at bosons, pun very much intended… I bet I can cook up an equation. We do have some ways of indirectly detecting them.” She nodded briskly. “Okay. We have a Plan. For seeing the things, at any rate. So – stompage?”
The hard work of making the device in the first place has conveniently already been done... Sam glanced up at the ceiling. “I think we need to talk to Sanura.”

Heather’s brow furrowed. “The Jaffa?”

Why did it not surprise her that base scuttlebutt had already passed around the name of the Jaffa who’d gone snark-a-snark against Colonel O’Neill himself and held her own? The security guards probably have been taking notes…

“Nekht said that the TERs they stole were prototypes,” she said slowly. “And that Djehuty has been studying up on spirit legends for a couple thousand years. If he was looking for a way to fight these things…” She spread her hands. “Sanura’s his First Prime. She might know something.”

“Hm.” Heather glanced at the door and shivered again. “Problem with that.”

Ah. Yes. They were on the nineteenth floor. The holding cells were up on the sixteenth.

And one of the basic rules of the Spook Protocols they’d hammered out was, stay out of elevators and stairs. For multiple reasons. Fundamentally, however, it was because the elevators and staircases were channels. They were sealed from entry – the keycard access system insured that. But if the yukiuso could get past that, it could get anywhere in the base.

And possibly out of it. Daniel gave it even odds whether or not the transition from SGC to NORAD would constitute a threshold; anyone in the SGC automatically had access to NORAD, by definition.

Plus, there were simple, practical safety concerns. Cold made metal brittle. If the yukiuso got at the cables supporting the elevator…

Brrr. In more ways than one.

To top that off – they’d shut the blast doors, in the hopes of boxing the creature in, and Sam was no more eager to open those up than she was to walk into an elevator. Which meant no one was going anywhere fast, unless they could walk through walls.

...Bingo.

She grabbed the phone off the desk and began dialing.

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~

Janet’s hand tightened on the receiver. “Dammit, Sam,” she managed. “Do you have any idea what you’re asking?”

“I wish I didn’t.” The major’s voice was tight with unhappy tension. “But if I’ve got any read of Sanura’s character, this is one negotiation that has to happen face-to-face.”

“Teal’c is in there already…”

“You can run it by Daniel and call me back if you like, but my gut says that doesn’t work. Teal’c’s not heavyweight enough in our organization to authorize negotiations, and if there’s one thing Sanura’s snark-a-thons with Jack have shown, it’s that she knows how we operate. We need someone with real authority and the power to negotiate in there.” Sam sighed. “And even if I could
Janet’s lips thinned. “We don’t even know if Sanura knows anything that can help us.”

“Janet, if you have any alternatives, I’m all ears, believe me.”

Janet sighed heavily and tried not to watch for fog at her lips. Her mind kept dredging up *To Build a Fire* from her high school English class, trying to remember how the character had assessed the dropping temperatures, even though she knew it couldn’t possibly be that lethally cold. She couldn’t actually see her breath yet.

Yet.

But while the yukiuso couldn’t get in, that didn’t stop it from dropping the temperature just beyond the barrier and letting thermal equilibrium draw more and more of their heat out.

At least, that was their best guess about what was happening. All that they knew for certain was that the temperature kept dropping, despite the best efforts of the heating system.

Right now, Janet judged it to be in the high fifties. But she’d already passed around the thermal blankets and heating packs, and grimly resigned herself to losing that portion of her medicines that had to be stored above a certain temperature.

And she was trying hard not to think what would happen if the heating system, going at full blast already, were to fail.

Worst, she knew painfully well was that all they were doing in here was slowing how fast they lost ground against the cold. No one had any ideas for how to stop this thing. Particularly not when opening the door would be an invitation to icy death.

Swallowing the lump in her throat and trying to close her ears to the soft, breathy laughter that seemed to come straight through the walls to her ears, Janet drew in a slightly shaky breath.

She didn’t let her patients see her tremble. But she didn’t have patients right now. Sam couldn’t see her, no one else was looking, and for the one person who didn’t have to look… somehow, she didn’t think Toph would hold it against her.

“Sam. We’re penned in here. We don’t even know she’ll be able to get through!”

It was hard to tell over the phone line, but she thought there was more than a hint of trembling in Sam’s voice as the major sighed. “Believe me, I know. But she’s got the best chance of any of us. She doesn’t have to thread her way through hallways and doors. And we have to do something, Janet. This thing is getting stronger. I don’t think it would have been able to pull off this siege you guys are under, back when we first encountered it. It never would have been driven off by a little circle of fire if it had been!” A moment’s hesitation. “There is this. If it’s concentrating that much energy on you, odds are that it hasn’t split itself. And it’s intelligent enough to watch the doors. If Toph leaves through the ceiling, heads straight up to the next floor…”

She should be able to get clear, or at least win enough of a head start to find sanctuary. *Maybe.*

Janet closed her eyes. “I’ll ask her,” she said reluctantly, and tried not to hate herself.

Something of that must have shown on her face as she turned back to the others, because Jack straightened from where he’d been leaning in to discuss something as thick as thieves with Daniel. “Something up, Doc?”
Janet bit her lip, glancing at the people in the room. It wasn’t so cold in the room that people had to huddle up, but those who’d made it into the infirmary, or who’d been caught here when the yukiuso attacked, were already clustering into groups, probably for emotional comfort as much as anything else.

“Sam has a plan,” she said.

Jack raised his eyebrows. “Plans are good. We like plans. We could use more of ‘em right now.”

“She needs Toph’s help, though.”

The colonel frowned slightly at that. “Bit of a problem there,” he said dryly, nodding at the corner where the two off-world children had settled in, talking just as intently as Jack and Daniel had been a second ago.

Trying to find a solution. And it hurt, more than a little, that they had to lean on two children to help them out of this. “She thinks that if Toph uses her psychokinesis to get out the back, through a wall or the ceiling, it should give her enough of a head start to get to them. The yukiuso is slow. Sam and Heather are holed up in Heather’s office, so they have a fairly strong threshold to hide behind, at least.” She couldn’t help glancing uneasily at the door of the infirmary as she spoke. The odd line of white salt embedded in cement and granite around the edge of the room kept catching her eye, maybe just because she still wasn’t used to it. Or maybe there was more of a glitter to it than normal. At this point, Janet wasn’t prepared to dismiss anything as ‘just’ her imagination.

When she pulled her attention back to Jack, his lips were pursed sourly; he clearly didn’t like the idea any more than she had when Sam had initially proposed it. But instead of rejecting the idea out of hand the way she’d halfway hoped that he might, he asked, “So what’s this supposed to accomplish?”

“She wants to try convincing Sanura to join forces with us to fight this thing.”

Jack blinked disbelievingly. “The Jaffa?” he said, as though not entirely certain he’d heard that correctly.

Janet shook her head. “I don’t entirely understand either, but she seems to think that Sanura might know something about fighting things like this. Something about Nekht’s report.”

Jack snorted. “So the idiot gave us a few useful tidbits before he pulled the lid off Jafar’s lamp. Generous of him.” He sighed heavily, running a hand though salt-and-pepper hair. “Dammit. I’d say hell no… except that I haven’t come up with any ideas yet that get past get freeze-dried the minute we open that door. Zuko’s not up to scorching anything, but if Toph can get out there… At the very least, we might get the thing to split its attention.” He glanced at the sandy-blond shadow beside him. “Danny?”

Daniel pushed his glasses up on his nose absently. “Why are you looking at me?” he asked. “Shouldn’t we be asking Toph if she thinks she can do it?”

“Yep,” Jack agreed, and turned his companionable slap on Daniel’s shoulder into a none-too-subtle shove in the direction of the children. “Let us know how it goes.”

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~
“Let us know how it goes,” my foot, Daniel thought, glaring at the smirking colonel just long enough to make the smirk take on a little edge of unease, before he turned to find the two kids watching him.

Well, Zuko was watching them; Toph just had her head tilted slightly in their direction as she stuck to Zuko’s side like a particularly stubborn little green burr. Although Daniel suspected that if anyone could ask her what she was doing, she’d indignantly reply that she was simply getting in her dibs on the warmest body in the room.

If anyone could ask.

Unfortunately, however, he’d made almost no progress figuring out their language. He was used to back-calculating language shifts for modern Earth languages and whatever they’d come across off-world on the fly, sure. But in the past, with rare exceptions, the Stargate’s translation protocol always gave him enough of a cheatsheet to get a nice solid foothold on anything that wasn’t uploaded into their heads, and the near-universal Abydonian-Egyptian loanwords helped as well. And for whatever reason, off-world languages didn’t seem to shift as much as Earth languages had. Goa’uld influence, or simple isolation…?

But these two aren’t even human! Who’s to say their linguistic systems even use the same basic principles as ours? Why should they even have any roots in human languages to begin with? Although the fact that they were so definitely human-shaped did kind of argue for some sort of common source. Daniel could only buy so much in the way of false cognates and convergent evolution.

And he had been able to winnow out some commonalities, a basic sense of grammar, and a few words that hinted at common roots. Although at this point, Daniel was tempted to grab a page or three from Joseph Greenburg’s book and start running a mass comparison. Given that he thought he was picking up roots not only from Indo-European but the Altaic language families as well… There might actually be something to the Eurasiatic and Nostratic proto-language theories after all.

Not that he was going to even breathe that in an academic context. He’d been tarred and feathered more than enough for one career.

And identifying one or two possible common roots didn’t mean much for talking. At the moment, they were still forced to make do with a pidgin lexicon of maybe a hundred words that might mean what they thought they meant. Which meant that communications boiled down to an exercise in frustration and pantomime. Daniel’s linguistics teachers were probably spinning in their graves.

Which I probably put them in with all of the stunts we’ve been pulling since the Stargate was opened. Good scholarship this is not.

Which was part of why he cringed when, despite having shoved him in the lead, Jack was the first to speak once they got close enough to the two off-world children to manage a quiet conversation.

“So! Sam’s got a plan, but we’re going to need help,” the colonel said. “You kids in?”

Even for a blind girl, Toph had a very good Blank Stare. Just enough You Must Be An Idiot to get the message across without disrupting the Oh, Please. Zuko settled for raising his one remaining eyebrow slightly, and then shifting his gaze to look expectantly at Daniel.

Showtime. Oh boy. “Ah…” He cleared his throat, pushing his glasses up. “Ima, abunai,” he tried, carefully.

Toph ratcheted up the disbelief level a bit, and topped it off with a snort.
Okay, so now, danger doesn’t exactly win the award for most insightful statement of the year. Cut me some slack here! “Sam, soto.”

And now he was pushing Zuko’s patience as well, if that sharp get on with it gesture meant anything. The last time he’d seen that, Sam had been stuck trying to explain wormhole physics to Kinsey. Ouch.

“Deh?” Toph asked, clearly a leading statement or a prompt of some kind.

*Keep it simple, keep it concrete. You don’t have to explain everything. Just enough. “Sam, yukiuso, kill.”* There. Hopefully he was right about the whole subject-object-verb grammatical construction. It would be very awkward if he’d just implied that the yukiuso had killed Sam, not the other way around.

Zuko waved a dubious hand in the direction of the door. “Not kill,” he said dryly.

Um. Good point. *Gah.* Not for the first time by a long shot, he wished he’d had time to study their writing system more. He was an archeologist by training and a linguist by pick-it-up-while-people-shoot-at-you. This would be so much easier if he could just write it out.

*I just wish I could figure out what it is about their symbols that looks so familiar…*

While he was distracted, Jack had taken over. “Yeah, sure. Not kill yet. But Sam’s got a plan.” Pointing a wry finger at his own temple, Jack waggled his eyebrows and smirked evilly.

Toph and Zuko’s faces brightened suddenly. Toph even snickered and rubbed her hands together gleefully, looking for a moment like an undersized villainess in a children’s cartoon.

Zuko cast her a look of wry amusement. “Kyosui.”

Toph sniffed. “Sono toooori, Honoh no Moribito yo…”

Huh. That had the cadence of poetry, or some sort of set phrase…

“Toph!”

And Zuko hadn’t quite managed to hide his uneasy glance at the three SGC officers. Daniel blinked. *And she just said something he didn’t want her to say. What?*

Toph rolled her eyes, saying something too fast to catch. Zuko sighed, shaking his head.

Then he looked at Jack again. “Kono…” He hesitated. “This-plan, is what?”

Jack jerked his thumb at Toph. “Go talk to Sam and find out.”

She looked at him blankly.

*Back into the fray. “Um… Toph, tasukeru,”* Daniel said carefully. He was pretty sure that one meant help. Mostly. “Sam, go.”

Toph looked at him. Well, not looked in the normal sense – but until this moment, he never would have believed that someone could pull off a frankly disbelieving head tilt. Not even Teal’c.

A tiny hand stabbed out to point at Zuko… well, pointedly. “Koitsu o…” Toph started, hotly.

“Toph,” Zuko said. His tone wasn’t sharp this time. More like… wearily grim.
Jack tugged his arm, pulling Daniel away as the two children began arguing back and forth in hushed, sharp whispers, their language taking on an almost staccato edge. *Interesting contrast of dialects. Toph has a very heavy emphasis pattern, while Zuko uses very sharp intonations…* Easier to think about that, then listen to the edge of anxiety that betrayed just how aware the two were of the situation everyone had found themselves in.

“Think she’ll go for it?” Jack asked quietly.

“I suspect Zuko will talk her into it,” Janet said quietly. She’d been standing a little bit back, listening without speaking. “He knows this is probably the best chance they have, as well.”

Jack’s cheeks puffed as he blew out a frustrated breath. “Wish we could get *him* out of here.”

“Out there, where the yukiuso has a better shot at him?” Janet gave him a Look. “Look at him, Jack. He knows he’s not up to another fight like the one in Heather’s lab.”

“His odds might be even better if Toph goes,” Daniel admitted. “Having someone to look out for is helpful in a long-term survival situation, but in a crisis, you have to save *yourself* first.”

“Oi, oi, I know that. I’m the one here who actually took SERE, remember?”

Sudden movement drew their attention back to the kids as Toph threw her arms up and climbed to her feet, stomping a few steps away before crossing her arms to scowl at nothing. Zuko shook his head, then looked at them. “Sam, where?”

Daniel released a breath he hadn’t even realized he was holding until that moment. “Up,” he said, pointing. “Um… five levels. Er…” He held his hands out in front of him, flat, with the palms down, and tried to ‘stack’ one hand atop the other five times.

Zuko nodded and looked at Toph’s rigid back. “Dekiru ka?”

Toph snorted. “Tenka no ts’chizukai no tensai da ze!” She twisted once to scowl vaguely at the wall past Zuko, but her next words were clearly aimed at the older boy.

Daniel bit his lip, trying not to wince. He didn’t need a linguistic theory to know what she’d said, not when he knew that tone from far too many missions gone bad. *You’d better be okay, or I’ll drag you back and kill you again.*

Then Toph snapped her arms out and jumped.

Daniel crashed into Jack and Janet as the floor under his feet suddenly surged with that jump, launching the little girl up through a hole that suddenly opened in the ceiling.

A hole that sealed up and vanished in her wake-

Something outside the infirmary shrieked, a distant howl of thwarted fury. Daniel winced – then blinked. Jack, Janet, Zuko, several of the Marines – they hadn’t just winced. They’d *cringed,* covering their ears with their hands.

“Are you guys okay?” he asked quickly, moving to help them up. Janet accepted his assist, but Jack just waved him off. “What *happened*?”

“I think it knows we just gave it the runaround,” Jack said with a vicious smirk, the type he normally wore when he was setting explosives that had even odds of going up while he was still in the blast.
Janet rubbed her arms shakily. “Maybe it’ll stop laughing for a bit.”

Daniel blinked, and blinked again when Jack just nodded, grimacing. “Um,” he said uncertainly. “Laughing?”

They both looked at him in surprise. “Huh,” Jack said, and then cocked his head to one side in an almost bird-like movement. “Yeah. Thing’s been laughing just outside the door the whole time. You seriously didn’t hear it?”

“Thought I heard something when it first attacked,” Daniel admitted. “But it was cut off when the door closed.”

Jack’s face darkened. “Can’t say I like that.”

“Actually, it makes sense,” Daniel said thoughtfully. “Most folklore agrees that once you’ve been exposed to a spirit, you’re more aware of its presence. You, the Marines, you’ve all had very close encounters with this thing.”

“I haven’t,” Janet objected. “I don’t think it ever got very close to us on P4X-684, and that’s the only time I’ve been anywhere near it.”

Daniel looked at her. “Um, Janet? Right now, the only thing keeping it from freezing us alive is that threshold. And the threshold belongs to you.”

“I think that counts as a close encounter,” Jack agreed.

Janet stared at them, then looked at Zuko, who was sitting near one of the blasting radiators, apparently trying to meditate. Her gaze flicked from the boy to the odd assortment of Marines, scientists and staff who’d taken refuge in her infirmary.

She swallowed. “I’m not sure that’s comforting.”

“I think it is,” Jack drawled. “I know you. So long as you’re standing, Frosty stays out. And so long as the radiators keep blasting, it can’t do anything from a distance…”

With a horrible metallic spang, the shuddering rumble of one of the over-stressed radiators abruptly cut off.

In the horrified silence, Daniel sighed. “You just had to say it, didn’t you?” he asked, as his heart went down to vacation in his stomach.

Jack’s lips were a thin, grim line. “Oops.”

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~

“You’re serious.”

Hammond snorted, amused despite himself at the perfect dead-pan. Granted, the speaker got a lot of practice. “Afraid I am, General.”
Myers snorted. “You know, we’ve gotten used to a lot of rowdiness from down there. Power outs, time dilation, quarantines involving hit squads at every exit from the Mountain ready to shoot anyone who might try leaving – which includes my people, General Hammond.”

Hammond grimaced. In many ways, the mess of the Neanderthal virus had been the SGC’s first glimpse at what they’d really gotten themselves into.

“But salt?” the general in command of NORAD concluded. “What am I supposed to tell them, that we had a sudden cold snap downstairs?”

Hammond had to bite back a laugh. If only you knew. “Think of it as… bug repellent,” he said mildly.

There was a long, long pause at that.

“You know, General,” Myers said, sounding bemused. “We have betting pools up here about what’s going to shut down the mountain this week.”

Now Hammond did snort. “So do we.”

“Bet ours are livelier. Freedom to imagine, since we’re never told anything.”

“I’d take that bet. Truth is stranger than fiction; fiction has to make sense.” A second light began blinking on his phone, and Hammond’s eyes narrowed. “I have to go, General. Believe me when I say we’re doing everything we can to contain this – but be on your guard. Hammond out.”

He cut the connection, and switched to the second line. “Hammond here.”

“Sir,” Major Carter replied. “Checking in to let you know that our mini-Sherpa made it here in one piece.”

Well, at least something was going well today. “Frostbite-free?” he asked.

“Not even nipped, going by the boasting.” The major’s voice sobered. “I’ve done my best to explain what we need to her. I think she gets the idea – although she probably thinks we’re crazy.”

Hammond sometimes wondered, himself. But his definition of crazy had shifted somewhat since taking command of Earth’s front lines against everything the galaxy could throw at them. “Then you’d better get moving, Major. I just got Colonel O’Neill’s latest report from the infirmary. They’re down to one radiator, and the temperature is dropping fast. They may not have much time.”

“I understand. I just hope this pays off.” Carter’s voice was grim.

“One more thing. You have my authorization to make whatever promises you need to, within reason, to gain Sanura’s cooperation.”

“Sir?”

He leaned back in his seat, eyes fixed on the notes he’d taken during the meeting with Nekht. He’d been in the middle of reviewing them when the base went to Hell in a handbasket.

Exothermic Hell, at that, the back of his brain suggested, remembering the e-mail joke about the physics of Hell that had been making the rounds a while ago.

“We get through this, we still need to get the children home,” he reminded her. “Nekht claimed that Dur’Asada could only be reached through the Gate on P4X-684. Whether that was true or not, he
was also our only source for the Stargate address – except for Sanura, or Djehuty. Either way, we’re going to need to deal with them. I’d rather be on good terms in that case.”

“Understood, sir,” Carter said.

“Good. I’ll call Teal’c, warn him that you’re on your way. Hammond out.”

Hanging up, he had to pause and pinch the bridge of his nose as a resigned chuckle escaped, despite everything. *I should have asked Myers to make that bet official.*

Major Carter had a plan. After being locked in a small office with Sergeant Dyne, and calling in a telekinetic that Colonel O’Neill had taken to calling, with good reason, the Dainty Demolitionist.

And he’d just given her carte blanche in negotiating with a Jaffa who *had* to share a common ancestor with that same Colonel O’Neill, somewhere not nearly far enough back on the family tree.

*Just pray the mountain is still standing by morning…*

~*Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.*~

The floor fell out from under her.

“What in…!”

Sanura’s startled exclamation cut short as her unexpected fall almost immediately met with an abrupt impact. Her body, faster on the uptake, tucked and rolled before her mind registered that she’d hit some hard, sloping surface. Mid-tumble, she felt the transition from slope to level ground. Long training had her slap the ground as she rolled, trying to kill her momentum before she fetched up against a wall, or worse. She succeeded, the last of her momentum carrying her up to her feet, facing back the way she’d come.

She blinked, half in an effort to clear the inevitable dizziness away, half in surprise. “What in Duat?” she repeated, less startled and more bemused. Now she could see that the floor of her cell had, apparently, spontaneously rearranged itself into a steep ramp down to the corridor on the level below.

She knew what she was looking at. She’d seen scenes like this, cleaning up the ha’tak after the escape.

*But why in the Lady’s name would the little earthshaker set me free? She is the one who put me in there.* And if she were the girl, she sure as Duat’s kiss would want herself locked up, especially after that *hellstorm* that had been first contact.

“It would appear we have been offered an invitation,” Teal’c said thoughtfully. As Sanura blinked, he carefully began making his own way down the ramp. “Shall we oblige them?”

For a moment, Sanura’s mind raced. She was out. Her only opponent was Teal’c, and he was unarmed. Not odds she necessarily liked – she was good, but Teal’c was a legend. But if she could just get away from him…

*If indeed.*

She knew the basic layout of the Tau’ri base; the Tok’ra’s databases weren’t *nearly* as secure as they
thought they were, not after millennia of stealing prototypes meant for a System Lord’s commission from the Wise One. Prototypes that had more than once been left out deliberately, sometimes with very interesting not-in-the-design extras tucked away inside. And he’d gained more information from Nirrti’s observations, much as he hated having anything to do with her in so very many ways…

But the Tau’ri were no fools. They knew they’d been compromised more than once. They’d have updated things. And they had plenty of security measures that she didn’t know enough to get past.

Moreover… something was wrong here. She didn’t even need those flashing lights or the siren of earlier to know. Every hair on the back of her neck was standing alert. This hallway was too quiet.

Something is happening. If I try to escape, I have even odds of running straight into something worse, with no warning. Plenty of things out there that will raise hell among the Goa’uld just as gleefully as they would the Tau’ri.

Besides. She was curious.

Which probably makes this the one case where indulging my curiosity involves going away from trouble. Initially, at least. She smirked a little at the thought and tilted her head. “Lead on.”

That creeping sense of wrong only grew as they made their way down the hallway. The place wasn’t just quiet, it was empty. She didn’t see so much as a hint of any other souls in the hall, although once or twice they slipped past closed doors with hints of light coming through the cracks. Teal’c stopped at none of them, simply glanced, nodded, and kept going.

Sanura and Teal’c had both softened their steps to the careful pad used to creep past enemies without being heard. She dropped her voice to a low whisper, quiet enough not to carry past the two of them, muted enough that her own voice wouldn’t dampen her hearing. “What are you fighting?”

Teal’c’s eyes flicked towards her. “An energy-being of some kind,” he answered, voice equally soft. “Be alert. The only signs of its presence are killing cold and a sound much like soft laughter.”

Sanura felt her eyes widen as her breath caught involuntarily. All right. That sounded… disturbing. Not the least because he’d answered her. Especially since she got the nasty feeling that when he said killing cold, he meant the phrase entirely literally.

This situation wasn’t about jockeying for power and influence, then. This was a survival situation-

The floor dropped out from under her again.

This time, however, Sanura was alert and aware. At the first hint of a tremble under her feet, she dove for the safest ground she could think of – past Teal’c.

The little earthshaker hadn’t ambushed him back in the cell, and probably didn’t have any grudges to hold against him. Which meant Sanura’s best odds of not getting dumped on her tail again would be to stand where he was standing.

It worked. When she straightened, she and Teal’c were still standing in the hallway – but the floor where she’d just been had once again reformed itself into a steep ramp leading downward.

Sanura had a feeling that behind Teal’c’s calm exterior, he was laughing at the antics.

Cute, child. Very cute.
“Get down here so we can seal that back up. We think the yukiuso’s still in one mass on Level 21, but I’m not keen on finding out we’re wrong about that the hard way.”

Well, at least part of that made sense. Sanura slid down the ramp behind Teal’c – it was too steep to take in anything short of what amounted to a controlled fall – and quickly canvassed the room she found herself in.

Small, was her first impression. Barely a few paces in any dimension, and what space there was had been further constrained by shelves, chairs, and a desk covered with the scribble-filled sheets of paper that she usually saw on the Wise One’s desk after he’d been going at a particularly tricky problem.

Books was the second, hard on the heels of the first. Shelves upon shelves of books, with more scattered in stacks and piles on various surfaces. Sanura was far from unfamiliar with books, rare though they were – ponderous, massive handwritten tomes kept in secret from Goa’uld overlords, or tucked away in populations that had been completely forgotten by their so-called reigning System Lord. Djehuty’s own records were stored on the ha’tak’s computers, with copies stowed away both shipside and periodically sent back to his homeworld; millennia of tinkering and study made for an impressive wealth of records, and while a ha’tak was spacious, keeping that much hardcopy was simply ludicrous.

But these books were like nothing she’d ever seen. Thinner than those she was used to, but with pages so fine and thin, the text so even and neat and compact, that the density of information on even the thinnest was probably beyond anything but the thickest of hand-scribed tomes. And for every dull cloth binding were half a dozen glossy, colorful ones. Her fingers itched from the repressed urge to investigate, despite the fact that she couldn’t read much more of the Tau’ri’s English writing than Danger: Do Not Touch.

And despite the fact that right now, she had much more important things to focus on.

Her third impression of the room was, crowded. Between desk and books, it was a tight squeeze to get herself and Teal’c into what little space remained alongside the three already waiting there. It helped a little when the blind Renegade girl sent the ramp back up into the ceiling again with a few short, sharp motions that narrowly missed Teal’c, although to give it enough clearance to move, Sanura had to crowd the red-blond Tau’ri woman wearing the oddest spectacles she’d ever seen over wide, grass-green eyes.

Only once the ramp was raised, however, was Sanura able to see the woman who’d spoken before. Major Sam Carter stood with her feet wide-set, looking like she’d very much like to cross her arms and had decided against it. “Sanura. Thank you for coming,” she said, in remarkably good System Lord Goa’uld – ah, yes. This was the one who’d had an unpleasant encounter with the Tok’ra notion of cooperation.

Sanura settled back on her heels slightly, tucking a thumb into a pocket of the odd soft pants they’d given her to wear. “It was an invitation I could not refuse,” she said dryly, casting a wry glance in the direction of the smirking earthshaker, who was listening intently. Odd – Sanura was almost certain the girl didn’t speak any language the rest of them shared. She was even more taken aback when that girl’s belligerent smirk smoothed into something much more thoughtful and she settled back, clearly intending to wait and watch and see what happened.

In a manner of speaking. Sanura didn’t care about blindness. She’d dodged rocks flung at her head by this child. Anyone who could pull that kind of accuracy off could see just fine, however the details of how she managed it.
Teal’c looked at the woman. “Major Carter. What has happened?”

“A certain idiot broke the seal on the freezer. The yukiuso is out, it’s stronger than before, and it’s pissed.” Major Carter’s eyes never broke their lock with Sanura’s. “I want to propose an alliance.”

_Urdu’s probably roaring with laughter. And Nubiti with him._ None of this was anywhere near what they had envisioned first contact with the Tau’ri to be like.

She didn’t let the thought show on her face. “Why?” she asked, flatly.

The blonde woman’s eyes narrowed. “Because no one who takes the time and effort to study the slang of a potential enemy would go looking for ghosts without figuring out ways to fight them. Not when human folklore has so many lurid descriptions of how nasty spirits can be.”

_Heh. Someone’s been talking to the Tok’ra, then._ The System Lords generally didn’t consider Djehuty’s hobbies worth noticing, so long as he gave them what they wanted, so the Tau’ri wouldn’t have found that information in any looted databases.

Better to think about that than the implications of what Major Carter was saying. Sanura was privy to the Wise One’s research, as well as some of the tales of the beings that walked in night blizzards on the Dhorishan plains where she’d been born. Given what Teal’c had said above, and the way everyone had cleared the halls…

_Hair like snow, eyes that gleam, things aren’t always what they seem! Teeth too long, hands too thin – always look beneath the skin._

Iron control kept Sanura’s inner shiver from showing on the outside, but she still felt it in the back of her mind. She’d hated those stories as a child. When she’d learned just how real they could be…

_Focus._ “You have still not answered my question,” she said, hardening her voice to brusqueness. “Why exactly should I wish to help you?”

The brusqueness didn’t seem to faze Major Carter in the least; likely she’d been expecting it. “Firstly, because it’s as much a threat to you as it is to us,” she said bluntly. “Possibly more. This thing eats energy, and you’re Jaffa; you have naquadah in your system. It doesn’t give a damn whose side you’re on, it’s just hungry.” The Tau’ri’s eyes narrowed. “Secondly…” She glanced at Teal’c. “We’ve heard that Djehuty is… different, by all accounts. That he’d actually give a damn about getting you back alive. And you’re obviously loyal to him.”

And not one word about Khenut, Sanura noted darkly. Not in apology, not in explanation, not even in acknowledgment. Did the Tau’ri somehow think that Jaffa didn’t know how to be loyal to each other?

_They may not, _she conceded reluctantly. _The rumors say that Teal’c turned and fired on his own soldiers when he chose to join the Tau’ri._

Well. If they thought Sanura would do the same…

She didn’t get a chance to finish the thought, because Major Carter raised her chin sharply. “Third and finally? You owe her, and her friend.” She nodded curtly in the direction of the earthshaper girl.

Sanura closed her mouth on the argument she was about to voice. The rebellious part of her wanted to dig her heels in regardless. But…

_Ammit bite it._
“They’re in trouble?” she asked.

“They’re sick,” the woman with the spectacles blurted, words tumbling out one over the other. “Well, Zuko more than Toph, but…” She winced as everyone turned to look at her. “Sorry, sir. But I’ve been keeping tabs on them. Toph bailed us all out the first time the yukiuso hit. And Zuko – he probably saved my life, not just my arm.” She met Sanura’s gaze, as mulishly defiant as Nubiti with a plan that she knew Sanura wasn’t going to like. “It’s the naquadah. They have a lot of it, we think it powers the telekinesis – and they’re running out, and getting sick. We don’t have any way of getting more for them.”

And Major Carter had just said that their invisible nasty went for naquadah. Hellfires.

“We were told that their gate can only be accessed from the ice world where Janet Frasier and Major Carter encountered you,” Teal’c said quietly.

Jerkily, Sanura nodded. “True,” she said absently. Her mind was still on naquadah, and the green paste she’d seen Nubiti and Urdu eat on occasion with amused resignation. Perhaps… “That is why we came to the ice world to begin with…”

Blast. She hadn’t meant to admit that.

But Major Carter simply nodded sharply. “Which means we have to get back there. But we can’t go back until this is sorted out. And I hope for your sake that there aren’t more of these things loose on that world,” she added. “But we have to go back there anyway. I can at least promise to take you back to your people when we do.”

Fair. And she was right, much as Sanura didn’t like to admit it. She did owe those two. And they were children.

“Right.” She stretched her arms out and rolled her head around on her shoulders, trying to loosen up. “You said this… yukee-thing is a spirit. So it is non-corporeal?”

“Non-corporeal, invisible – we were going to try modifying some TERs…” Major Carter’s eyes widened. “You have an idea?”

Sanura smirked at the woman’s surprise. “Indeed. TERs will be of assistance; it is good to see what you are fighting, but I think I can come up with something better. Do you have any zats?”

Major Carter slowly smiled. “I think we can get our hands on one.”

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~

Hope Toph’s having a better time of things.

Zuko pulled the blanket Janet had shoved at him closer around his shoulders. Refusing it had never been an option, even if he’d wanted to – he knew the look that had been on the healer’s face way, way too well.

Katara after the Agni Kai, when the Fire Sages kept trying to talk to me. If he hadn’t been so heartsore after everything that had happened, that would have been funny. The spiritual leaders of the Fire Nation having the door slammed in their faces by a teenage waterbender.
Yeah. He wasn’t inclined to argue with Janet. She wasn’t a waterbender on the warpath, but she was arguably scarier. She had needles. He hated acupuncture.

And it wasn’t like there was anything he could do, other than double-check the infirmary – again – for weak spots like the pipes that had turned the ambush at the cooler into the Face-Stealer’s playground. But this wasn’t a hastily-laid salt circle with nothing but a prayer and stubbornness to hold it in place. This place belonged to Janet in a way that even Zuko could feel, backed with the weight of tradition and the belief of every person who’d ever acknowledged the healer’s authority over her domain.

It might not be enough, though. Not with the way the temperature kept dropping.

He managed to keep the frustrated sigh silent, but there was no hiding the thick white cloud that puffed out of his lips. Everyone was huddled as closely together as they could get, limbs tucked close under shared blankets to conserve heat, carefully flexing muscles without actually moving in an effort to stave off stiffness and generate a little extra warmth.

At least they know how to handle the cold. Some of the men on his ship, back when they’d first sailed into polar seas… They hadn’t lost anyone, but there had been some close calls.

The air echoed with that low chuckle again and the hair rose on the back of his neck as he almost looked around for that distinctive blue light…

He shook his head fiercely and grimaced. It’s not Azula. It’s not nearly scary enough.

But he did have to admit that the yukiuso definitely resembled his little sister as she had been, before Ozai’s callousness and her own instability had brought her low. There was something coldly, calculatedly amused about what it was doing.

It’s not gaining anything by attacking us. It’s putting in a huge amount of effort, but as long as that threshold stands, it can’t feed on anyone in here…

But it was still there. Still laughing. Because maybe it couldn’t feed on them, but this slowly building cold was hurting and scaring them, and what better fun was there?

Zuko gritted his teeth. I. Hate. This. But if they tried to take the fight to the yukiuso…

He could probably pull through, though as shaky and cold as he was, he wasn’t eager to try it. But he’d followed turtle-seals under polar ice, fought a master-class waterbender and won, if barely, and then crossed an ice field in a blizzard, been knocked out cold, escaped, and still had enough energy to fight a master firebender.

You’re never at your best when it counts. So never depend on being at your best.

So. He might be able to get away. But Jack, Daniel, Janet, all the soldiers who were sheltering here with them? They’d take losses, heavy ones. Particularly since Toph wasn’t here to help them evacuate.

Zuko didn’t regret telling her to go, though. Toph might have been able to do some good here, but only by endangering herself. And if they’d understood right, that Sam had a plan…

“All I’m saying is, if there isn’t a Spirit Slice involved, I’m gonna be annoyed,” Toph’s voice echoed in his memory, and Zuko grinned a little, despite everything.

Better to have Toph out there, where she could do something, then trapped in here with the rest of
them. Probably better for his ribs, too. For someone who epitomized neutral jin in her fighting, Toph hated waiting.

Not that he was exactly fond of it. But he’d lived shipside for three years. Even with steam power, sometimes there was nothing you could do but wait until you got where you were going. You learned.

Although Uncle Iroh had gone through a lot of Pai Sho tables while he was learning. Turned out that even earthbent stone cracked if you scorched it enough.

That had been… embarrassing.

Can’t believe I’m thinking this, but I actually wouldn’t mind a game now. Or something to distract me…

Sitting next to the heat vent, the ominous spang! went off practically in his ear. Starting, he turned to look at it in dismay as it began an all-too familiar rattle.

One of the men scrambled for it, an engineer’s tool-kit in one hand as he used his teeth to pull on a heavy-duty glove with the other. He cringed as he reached the vent apparatus-

Narrowing his eyes, Zuko moved his hands in a push-and-draw motion that was more like waterbending than even the dragons’ form of firebending. But that was what he wanted. Not creation, but redirection, channeling the intense heat away from the radiator and into the room, but keeping it as close and contained as possible, away from the iced-over walls that were sucking all the warmth out. The man didn’t even acknowledge it as the almost physical wall of heat immediately around the vent eased enough to let him through, just grunted and dove into the metallic guts of the heating system with barely a hiss as his gloves brushed against metal hot enough to hiss at the contact.

It wasn’t enough. With another, louder spang, the rattling stopped, and the heater was suddenly, dangerously still.

Someone muttered a curse.

Janet was already in motion, ordering everyone closer together as the temperature began to drop, the residual heat already bleeding away even as Zuko tried to hold it…

Wait.

Oh, this was such a bad idea. He hadn’t seen daylight in several days, and he knew he had all the symptoms of elemental deprivation, even though he should have been fine for at least another week. Firebending under these circumstances was a hugely bad idea. And the Breath of Fire was meant for holding off hypothermia from within, dammit, not…

I have to try. He almost laughed at himself. Besides. If you want good ideas, you talk to Sokka, not me.

When Janet came to tug at the blanket, he let her pull it off. It would only block the heat – and probably cook him in the process.

He closed his eyes against the startled realization on her face, settled cross-legged next to the still-hot vent, and breathed.
“Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.”

Sam cast a sidelong glance across the neighboring lab bench. “Okay, I’m impressed,” she admitted.

Seated amidst the remains of what had been two zats and three staff weapons that she’d dismantled with the same efficiency of motion as a Marine field-stripping her Beretta, Sanura chuckled. “You should see the Wise One at this,” she said absently, leaning in to focus on the circuits she was modifying. “Given three minutes and one staff weapon, he will have a working generator up and running.”

Sam was opening her mouth to make a comment that hopefully would only be politely skeptical, and hesitated.

“Contempt is one of the most dangerous emotions out there,” she remembered Daniel warning them once, off-world. She couldn’t even remember what cultural quirk had sparked the conversation; all the different worlds and their people started blurring together after a while. But the conversation itself had stuck. “Contempt means that you view the target is inferior - and it doesn’t take much to go from that, to subhuman. And you can do whatever you like if the target isn’t really human.” Daniel had adjusted his glasses. “But it also blinds the contemptuous one. You underestimate the other person, and that – well, it’s usually not very good to underestimate people.”

And wasn’t that the understatement of the century. She’d seen what happened when you underestimated an opponent – sometimes to SG teams. Sometimes when dealing with the Goa’uld. And the results were never pretty.

“We don’t like them. And sometimes we forget that just because we don’t like them, it doesn’t follow that they’re completely stupid. They’ve survived backstabbing each other constantly for how long?”

And the SGC had met Nirriti.

Not an experience I’d care to repeat, she added with an internal shudder, and distracted herself by focusing on Sanura’s work. “You seem to know what you’re doing.”

Um. She hoped. Because she was very sure that those two wires were never intended to go together like that…

But the cable snapped into place without blowing them all out the top of Mount Cheyenne like the volcano it wasn’t, and Sanura nodded to herself in evident satisfaction. “You would be amazed what sort of unpleasant things turn up in ancient ruins,” she said wryly, and picked up a screwdriver, sighting down its length. Whatever she was looking for, she apparently found, because she bent back over the mess of parts she was slowly piecing back together in a new shape. “And the Wise One makes sure we know enough to manage if he cannot be in the thick of the battle alongside us.”

“You’d be amazed at what sort of nasties I can imagine. And believe in,” Sam replied, equally wry. And wondered, in the back of her mind, Does she mean ancient, or Ancient?

Although to be honest, she was more interested in what that level of technical ability implied. They’d guessed that Djehuty trained his Jaffa much more thoroughly than most Goa’uld, but how to repair, dismantle, and apparently repurpose a staff weapon? Even Teal’c hadn’t gotten training like that. Which only made sense. To pull something like that off, you had to at least understand the basic principles behind how the weapon worked in the first place. Which would rather tarnish the concept of unfathomable godly power.
And on that note… “Djehuty really does fight alongside his Jaffa sometimes?” she blurted.

Sanura paused and raised her head to look directly at Sam, eyes cool.

Sam hastily raised both of her hands, palms-outward, glad she’d at least remembered to put her own tangle of wires down before she’d stared talking. “Look,” she said, “work with me, here. Because I’m just trying to understand. Most Goa’uld we’ve met… well, they’re good at intimidation. Mutual respect and loyalty, not so much.”

And half the time, that included the Tok’ra, much as she hated to admit it. Her own father was one of them – and yet, sometimes…

Some of the coldness faded as Sanura studied her thoughtfully, then turned back to her tinkering without saying a word. Sam was trying to decide if she should try a different tack, or just let it lie for the time being, when the Jaffa began to speak.

“You would not have heard of Yer Tanri. She was not a major System Lord. She and her mate Gök Tanri fancied themselves more as artists.”

Huh. Sam blinked. Then again… no reason that the Goa’uld wouldn’t have artistic types, alongside the greater System Lords. All of the “favored children” had to do something with themselves.

“You’re right,” she admitted aloud. “We hadn’t heard of them, not until Teal’c mentioned them. They controlled your homeworld, correct?”

Sanura glanced at the other Jaffa, standing guard at the door mostly to stay out of the way of all the wires, gadgets, and less identifiable paraphernalia of Mad Engineering scattered about the hastily cleared weapons locker they’d commandeered.

Sam really would have preferred they do this somewhere else. Anywhere else. If something went boom with all the other ordinance in here… well, that would be bad. But Toph – currently poking curiously at a bundle of abandoned wires, and Sam was trying very hard to avoid worrying about what she might do with them – was adamant: she did not want to move people around the base any more than necessary. Which made sense, both in terms of not attracting the yukiuso’s attention, and in terms of saving Toph’s energy. If they were going to pull this mad plan off, she was going to need every last bit of it.

Whatever Sanura was looking for on Teal’c’s face, she must have found it, because she nodded slightly to him and returned her focus to the battery cases she’d removed from the staff weapons.

“Yer Tanri did,” she said, voice a little distant. “Although we of Dhorisha called her the Star-Eyed, then.”

Something about her tone, the way her inflection fell just a little flat, raised the hair on the back of Sam’s neck. Sanura sounded almost like…

Me. When I have to talk about Jolinar.

And she didn’t think it was her imagination, either. Not given the way Heather had just done a startled double-take between Sam and Sanura, before bending a little too industriously over equations and hastily-drawn schematics, comparing them to the TER she was carefully recalibrating at the next table. Sam wouldn’t have thought anything rated as interesting enough to pull the chemist out of her mad scientist fugue.

Then again, maybe she was just trying to figure out what Sanura was doing, as the Jaffa picked up the modified zat and began sliding it into an extensively remodeled staff weapon’s head. Acting as
though she’d completely missed the looks – which Sam didn’t buy for *one minute* – the Jaffa continued. “I underwent *prim’ta* and joined the Star-Eyed’s service when I was fifteen. I served for two Dhorishan years – not badly, but far from being one of the best, either,” she added, with a wry smile.

“So… what happened?” Sam asked carefully.

Shifting something in the combined zat-and-staff contraption, Sanura said quietly, “I met Jelani.”

“Sweetheart?” Heather guessed.

Sam could actually see Sanura pause to parse the phrase out. It was a little odd, seeing that Daniel-look on the Jaffa’s face. It wasn’t the fierce concentration that Zuko put into figuring words out, more a slightly baffled *I know what the pieces mean, I’m just not sure why they’d be put together like that*. Which… um. Actually, given that Jack had been known to use that particular phrase when he was trying to get someone riled, and Sanura had to have learned Jack-style slang and snark *somewhere*…

Sanura pursed her lips. “He was of my tribe, although not of my clan. Yer Tanri had gifted him to Gök Tanri’s service the year before I joined hers.” She snorted. “Which, had I been *thinking*, should have been my hint that she was *not* my Star-Eyed. But only a hindward-looking eye sees clearly.”

Sam blinked.

Sanura raised an eyebrow at her. “I rejected the *Goa’uld,*” she said crisply. “Not my goddess.”

Sam opened her mouth and then hesitated, not sure *how* to respond to that. Daniel had mentioned that the Goa’uld had probably usurped the names and attributes of indigenous gods, when they first encountered humans, rather than making up new religions entirely out of whole cloth. But to have your faith system validated for hundreds, maybe thousands of years, and then learn it was all a lie, and still hold to some form of faith… *I don’t know if that’s amazing or frightening,* she admitted to herself. *Probably both.*

“And then?” Teal’c asked quietly. “The details were never made clear, but the name of Jelani touched some of the rumors.”

Sanura smiled bitterly. “No surprise they do not talk about it. The Tanri and their little cohort crossed a line even by System Lord standards.” She shook her shoulders out. “Jelani asked to marry me. I accepted. And Gök and Yer Tanri agreed to let us return to my clan for the proper ceremonies.”

Sam traded a look with Teal’c. Yeah. She knew that particular flavor of bland expressionlessness on his face. He didn’t like the direction this was going, either.

“That was. Um. Nice of them?” Heather said tentatively.

Sanura’s hands stilled. She carefully set the modified staff weapon down.

Then she laughed softly. It was not a happy sound.

“It did not seem like anything at first,” she said softly, her eyes focused in the distance of some memory that only Sanura could see. “A slight cold, nothing any different than the usual spring sniffles, other than an odd, dark rash. But the rash kept spreading. And as it did, the sick became… sluggish. Lethargic. And their eyes… they’d look at you, and you knew they knew you, but it was as if they just… didn’t care. Nothing seemed to touch them. And people kept getting sick.” Sanura laced her fingers together, looking at them. “Then they changed.”
“Changed?” Sam echoed. All the hairs were standing up on the back of her neck now. Even Toph had set her wires aside to focus all of her attention on Sanura, even though she couldn’t possibly understand what they were saying.

“There was no warning.” Sanura’s voice was low, barely above a whisper. “All of them, at the same time… they went mad. They threw themselves at anyone they saw. Tried to tear them apart with their nails and teeth alone. It was almost like they’d all suddenly contracted the foaming sickness. They fought each other, sometimes, but mostly they went after the ones who weren’t sick. And like the foaming sickness, if you survived the attack, but they’d managed to bite you, even scratch you deeply enough…”

“You were infected, too,” Sam managed, through a throat that could barely breathe.

“Fast,” Sanura said, eyes distant. “Hours, sometimes less than that, when the initial illnesses had taken two or three days.”

God. It wasn’t just the hair on the back of her neck now; Sam rubbed at her arms, trying to smooth down the goosebumps. The SGC’s brush with the Neanderthal virus had shown how deadly an off-world virus could be in a small, enclosed community like the SGC. Especially a mind-altering one. She still remembered the ugly, terrifying moment where a virus-addled O’Neill had cornered her.

And scarier of all had been the fact that they’d been lucky. The Neanderthal virus had been fast enough for them to catch it early. If the incubation period had been longer, if some of the affected personnel had gone off duty and off base by the time the symptoms first began to show...

*Note to self: Try to get Sanura to talk to Janet about this.* Especially if the ugly suspicion she had about where this was leading were proved right.

Sanura drew a deep breath. “Jelani and I made our way to the Star-Eyed’s temple. We hoped that we could appeal to the goddess to intervene.”

Damn. Sam could already see where this was going. “But when you got there – you learned that the temple was the source of it to begin with. Didn’t you.”

Sanura’s smile was all vicious teeth and remembered fury.

Sanam slowly shook her head. “Why? Testing a bioweapon, or…”

Sanura snorted, darkly wry. “You think as a soldier. I told you, the Tanri considered themselves *artists.*” She closed the case with a little more force than needed. “I found the transmitters. Audio, visual, some basic programming to reposition them for the best view…”

“They were making a *movie*!” Heather choked. “That’s… *sick.*”

“So others would say,” Sanura sighed. “Jelani was the one who found the device and destroyed it.”

“But in the process, he had to expose himself to the sickness,” Teal’c guessed. “And surrounded by enemies, there would have been no time for kel-no-rem to allow the symbiote to nullify it.”

Sanura shook her head. “My last sight of him, he was getting every afflicted he could rile up to follow him into one of the weapon storehouses. Not long after…” She made a short, eloquent *boom* gesture.

Sam winced. “…I’m sorry,” she said quietly, remembering her own ex.
“I was not forced to kill him,” Sanura said, and for a moment the Jaffa just looked tired. Sam couldn’t blame her. “That was the only kindness to be had in such circumstances.” She drew a deep breath and shook her head slightly. “He slew most of the afflicted with his death. I hunted down those that remained, before they could start spreading out. Then I burned it all. I could not allow the risk that one of the other clans might be infected if they came to find out what had happened.” Another thin-lipped smile. “I did not try very hard to get out as the fires spread. Too tired, and for all I knew, I was already infected.” She hefted the device, nodded, and set it aside, reaching for the recased batteries she’d pilfered from the others. “I awakened on Djehuty’s ha’tak. Hurt like Ammit with a toothache, too.”

Sam nodded slowly. “So he saved you,” she said. That matched at least part of the rumors Teal’c had heard.

“Saved me. Trained me. And then we spent a full Dhorishan year hunting the Tanri down and seeing to it that they paid. Have you some wires?”

The utterly nonchalant segue back to shop talk made Sam blink as her mind scrambled to keep up. “Here,” she said, tossing over a spare coil. “I’m not sure they can carry a charge like that, though,” she admitted. “What on earth could you possibly need four naquadah batteries for?”

“I admit, my understanding of the details of how it works are limited,” Sanura admitted. “Urdu tried to explain it to me once, but I understood only a little. In short – it takes a great deal of energy to hit something that isn’t even there.” She shook her head. “We will need the TER if we are to see it in the first place, however.”

Sam glanced at Heather, who shrugged. “Just don’t try to shoot it, big guy,” the chemist said to Teal’c ruefully. “I’m pretty sure I totaled the gun portion trying to get to the morphic resonator.”

Sam burst out coughing. “The what?”

Heather stuck out her chin mulishly, prompting a sound that was suspiciously like a giggle from Toph, who’d moved closer as the atmosphere relaxed. “Hey, unless Sanura’s got a better name for it…”

“I do not,” the Jaffa admitted, sounding amused. “Those things rather difficult to make and not particularly useful unless you expect to be fighting the Reetou. I would not know the first thing about modifying one.” She smiled wryly. “Even the Wise One would have difficulty pulling something like that with complex, unfamiliar technology. Have a care; he would likely want to snap you up so fast you would leave your boots behind.”

Sam’s breath caught, as Heather’s eyes widened, the sergeant making a noise that sounded suspiciously like meep.

Sanura rolled her eyes. “That was a joke. I know you have them.”

“It is,” Teal’c said quietly, “difficult to laugh about when the threat has, in the past, been quite real.”

Sanura grimaced, rubbing her forehead. “Very well. I deserved that.” She looked at Sam and Heather. “Djehuty does not kidnap people, and he does not force. Ask Teal’c if you do not believe me. If the Wise One has an interest – he will be honest. And he takes no for an answer.”

“I suspect Toph and Zuko would disagree,” Sam said sharply.

Sanura scowled fiercely. “Firstly, that was my doing, not the Wise One’s. And it was an accident.”
Sam stared at her. “How do you accidentally kidnap someone?”

Sanura yanked the roll of electrical tape she was using to secure wires to connection points with a little more violence than necessary. “We walked through the Gate to a world that was supposed to be dangerous and uninhabited, and the first thing we encounter are two psychokinetic children.” She sighed heavily. “I might have been able to defuse the situation even so, but then an over-enthusiastic fool fired his weapon. And when it was over, I had wounded men, some of them gravely so, and two children who had simply been trying to defend themselves out cold from zats. What was I to do? Leave them there and hope that someone would find them before they went into shock? Assuming their people even knew how to treat zat wounds?”

“…Point,” Sam admitted grudgingly, and paused as an unpleasant thought occurred to her. “Over-enthusiastic idiot?” she asked warily.

Sanura grimaced. “Lieutenant Nekht. Who was also responsible for the children being put in cells with you rather than taken to the medical bay as I’d ordered. He is good enough at what he does, but – when I get back, I am going to kill him.”

“Too late,” Sam said flatly. “The yukiuso took care of that.”

Sanura gave her a sharp look, then sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Tok’ra. I should have guessed.”

Sam knew she should have been kicking herself for giving their allies’ spy away, dead or not. But she wasn’t inclined to be charitable, not when things were starting to add up to a very ugly picture.

*He just happened to precipitate a mess that ended up with two psychokinetics from a world not controlled by any System Lords in a position where they’d have to rely on him and the Tok’ra to go home. Right.*

Sanura set the tape aside with a sigh that seemed more like she was trying to brace herself than release tension. “Right,” she muttered, giving the join a distinctly ungentle yank to test its sturdiness. “Now to test it.” Picking up the long tongs that Sam kept stashed in the armory repair kit for precisely this purpose, she turned to the case where she’d stashed the naquadah batteries from the dismantled staff weapons.

Sam couldn’t help holding her breath as the Jaffa carefully transferred the battery into the modified casing and began hooking it up. One thing to know that Sanura apparently did know what she was doing. But Sam had acquired a whole new respect for the potential energy packed into naquadah after the Reactor Incident – and she knew from personal, painful experience just how chancy jury-rigging two different technologies together could be, particularly when they came from different worlds and thus might be operating on competing principles. Sanura had quizzed Sam and Heather up, down, and three-hundred-sixty degrees around about how Tau’ri wiring worked before she even started her project, but…

The battery clicked into place, and nothing exploded.

Sanura’s shoulders eased slightly at the same moment as Sam released an unintentionally loud sigh of relief. Looking up, the Jaffa smiled wryly as she set the tongs down for a moment to flex her hand. “Not the way I would choose to get my battle highs,” she admitted, picking the tools up again as she turned back to the waiting batteries, “but… erk.”

Round-eyed, Sam swallowed hard as a second battery drifted lightly into the air with a quick motion of Toph’s hand.
Very, very gingerly, Sanura reached out with the tongs when the battery paused next to the modified casing, and tugged. Toph frowned, adjusting the positioning of her fingers slightly, and Sanura slowly pulled the battery downward into the case in a motion that reminded Sam of videos of astronauts working in free-fall.

“...Fascinating,” Teal’c observed. “I wonder if Toph is manipulating the glass, or the naquadah within it?”

Sanura’s sigh this time was distinctly shaky, as she began clicking the battery into place. “Either way, please tell me you have already warned her, don’t touch.”

Sam intellectually knew that Toph was too disciplined to simply drop what she was doing. That didn’t stop her from sitting as utterly still as she humanly could, tracking the slow drift of the third battery through the air with her eyes alone. “She can sense the geomagnetic poles of a planet she’s never been on before. And she has enough naquadah in her system that I can feel her from all the way over here.” Now that she was paying attention, at least. Strange, that she’d never really noticed it before Janet had pointed it out. Then again, a ha’tak was full of naquadah sources, and after that they’d been busy surviving. By the time they’d gotten to the SGC and had a moment to breathe, she’d have been subconsciously accustomed to the buzz of naquadah around the two. “I suspect she can sense how much energy is in that thing just fine.”

She hoped. She really, really hoped. Because rather than sending the fourth on once Sanura began installing the third, Toph was holding it hovering over her hand, yellow-green light casting odd shadows over her face and giving her blank jade green eyes a distinctly unsettling glitter as her brow furrowed in a terrifyingly familiar way.

Please tell me she’s not poking that...

The color of the light of the battery shifted.

Sam nearly swallowed her tongue in surprise, knowing that her eyes were bugging as tiny flecks of soft-glowing blue-green began to drift downwards to the bottom of the battery.

“Um.” Yellow-green and blue-green light cast weird highlights on Heather’s pale face as she sat frozen, apparently torn between backing away and leaning forward in morbid fascination. “I’m pretty sure it’s not supposed to do... that.”

The liquid inside the battery was beginning to separate out now into layers, the blue-green precipitate sinking to the bottom as a clear, colorless liquid began rising to the top. The center layer was still bright yellow-green, but it was rapidly vanishing as the solution separated out.

Sanura whistled, low and impressed. “Lady. It is a good thing that I will not need to use that one...”

Sam glanced at her uneasily as the last of the yellow-green light faded, leaving only clear liquid and the softly glowing solids in the bottom of the battery. “What is that?”

“Crystallized naquadah,” Sanura said, sounding somewhere between stunned, disturbed, and impressed.

Sam blinked. “Naquadah deposits don’t glow,” she said slowly.

Sanura shrugged. “They do when they are in crystal form. Urdu is the one to speak to, if you wish to know why. I know how to use it, but I do not understand why or how it does what it does.” She nodded at the floating glass-like bulb and its contents. “But I do know this. The crystallized form? Very rare. Very valuable.”
“Is it…”

Looking thoughtful, Toph tilted her head – and the battery dropped from where it had been hovering in thin air – into the girl’s outstretched hand.

“…safe?” Sam managed to wrestle out of a strangled throat, her voice suddenly jumping an octave or three.

“Safe enough,” Sanura said weakly, prying her hand off the edge of the table one white-knuckled finger at a time. “But I suggest that you do not break the container. It appears that she has it stable, but if it is shocked enough, it will recombine with the solvent and…”

“Boom,” Heather said with eloquent simplicity. And then began laughing.

Sam stared at her. “What’s so funny?”

Heather pointed straight at her. “Karma!” she managed to get out between half-hysterical giggles.

“Indeed,” Teal’c agreed. “I am much reminded of watching you exploring unfamiliar technology, Sam Carter.”

Sam opened her mouth to disagree. She did not poke at highly explosive materials for the sake of seeing what they did!

…Um.

Sanura huffed a laugh, standing up. “Well, it is one way of putting the rest of this project into its place,” she admitted. “It makes the next step look almost sane.”

Heather’s giggles tapered off, although she was still grinning a little wildly. “Next step?”

“Turning this on.” Sanura picked up the modified staff, now wired up to the collected naquadah batteries. “Have you a clear space?”

“With that much power? You’d have to be outside the mountain to actually be clear.” Never the less, Sam waved Sanura to an open area, away from the more volatile forms of ordinance.

Sanura’s teeth flashed whitely. “Still. It seemed courteous to ask. Do you wish to duck?” When no one moved, Sanura shook her head, then grabbed what Sam had thought was some sort of crosspiece handle inserted into the body of the staff, twisted it, and pulled.

A low hum filled the room, as the head of the staff weapon opened to show the familiar red-orange glow. But interlaced through the glow were dancing arcs of blue-white electrical light.

“Well.” Sanura relaxed, shoving the crosspiece back into place. The weapon charged down. “At least it will not blow us up.”

“You will not test fire it?” Teal’c asked.

The other Jaffa snorted. “I can only design it to last for two or three shots, even with the extra charge. Speaking of – may I have that backpack?”

Heather squeaked.

Sam looked up from handing Sanura the small pack she’d asked them to prepare – for carrying the extra battery casings, apparently. Heather was bouncing, up on her toes and eyes gleaming as though
she’d just walked into Christmas. “What?” Sam asked warily.

Heather drew in a slow breath as Sanura, also eyeing her, slowly pulled the pack on, carefully arranging the dangling wires attached to the modified staff weapon she then picked up in her hand.

Apparently that was too much. “Proton pack!” Heather gushed, clapping her hands a little in pure glee. “We just jury-rigged our own homemade proton pack, zaton pack, whatever – this is so cool!”

Sam blinked at her. Looked at the thoroughly nonplussed Jaffa, with wires trailing from the long rod in her hands to the pack on her back.

She slapped a hand over her mouth, but it didn’t quite manage to suppress the giggle that escaped.

Sanura eyed them both suspiciously, then glanced at Teal’c.

“A Tau’ri legend, of sorts,” Teal’c said, with the sort of calm amusement that told Sam he was laughing madly on the inside. “A tale they tell for entertainment. When we are finished, I will introduce you to the movie. It offers some enlightening insights to the Tau’ri way of thinking.”

Sanura rested the staff weapon – the naquonah wand, Sam’s brain gleefully corrected – on her shoulder and smiled a little, ruefully. “Would those insights include what a lawyer is?”

Heather wiped her eyes, apparently somewhat under control again. “You don’t…?”

The Jaffa shrugged and smirked. “I do not have to know what something is to make annoying demands.”

Sam was snickering even harder now. Oh, if Jack could only hear this...

Better, she could feel how everyone’s mood had risen; even Toph was smirking, apparently picking up on the atmosphere if not the details. And if they really were going up against something that used psychosomatic techniques to hunt… that might make a difference.

“You ready to go?” Sanura asked, apparently also coming to that conclusion.

Sam nodded, gathering up her tools. “Ready as we can get in here. Time to get into position.”

Heather nodded, paling slightly as she drew in a deep breath. But there was still a dancing light of mischief in her eyes as she laid a finger to her lips. “Shhhh! Be vewwy, vewwy quiet,” she lisped. “We’re hunting spiwits…”

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~

“Doesn’t the director of this movie know anything? The lights are supposed to go out when the monster shows up. Law of the universe.”

Janet glared at the colonel. She wasn’t the only one. “Jack…” Daniel groaned.

Jack looked back at them, his face the picture of wounded innocence. “What?” he asked, waving at the small jar lid that Janet was threading the tip of a cotton swab hand-rolled to a two-inch yarn through. “It’s not like we aren’t ready for it.”
Janet pointedly looked away just long enough to screw the lid back on its jar, making certain that the cotton inside was thoroughly soaked in the rubbing alcohol. Then she looked back at Jack, her scowl never shifting as she carefully touched the wick of the makeshift lamp to the nearest candle. At this point, there were plenty to choose from. The infirmary was filled with little flickering blue-yellow flames.

It had started when some wag – and she was looking right at him – had gotten into the stash of kel-no-rem candles that Janet kept on hand in the infirmary for Teal’c, and decided to try lighting them from the little flames that puffed out every time Zuko exhaled.

Jack’s purpose had simply been to raise morale a bit, Janet suspected. But she’d remembered then that the infirmary had an abundance of flammables: rubbing alcohol and cotton among them. One of the soldiers, it turned out, knew how to make makeshift alcohol lamps. She’d put the gathered soldiers and staff to work making them. It gave them something to do. Something to take their minds off the growing cold and the ominous silence.

The yukiuso wasn’t laughing anymore. It had stopped shortly after Toph’s escape. It was still there. The temperature was still dropping dangerously fast, and Janet thought she could feel its presence just outside her walls. Waiting.

But it wasn’t making a sound. And she did not like that one bit.

*It’s up to something.*

As if they didn’t have enough to worry about.

Jack’s voice dropped. “How’s he doing?”

Janet’s lips thinned unhappily as she glanced at the cross-legged figure their shivering group had gathered around.

Gathered, but not too close. The air was *rippling* ever so slightly around Zuko, exactly the sort of heat waver that formed above a powerful industrial radiator. When she’d tried to reach through it to test the boy’s temperature, she’d snatched her hand back faster than a singed cat. The air around Zuko was hot. As hot as a midsummer Colorado day out on blacktop in the sun.

*I don’t care how much more tolerant of heat he is,* she thought grimly. *That cannot be healthy.*

She didn’t have to reach through that barrier of too-hot air to know that. Zuko’s face was streaked with sweat, a feverish flush across the high cheekbones. His breathing seemed labored, the sharp, flame-accented exhales demanding more and more effort. And his half-lidded eyes had a glassy, unfocused glaze that she didn’t like the look of at all.

*If he keeps this up, he’s going to go into heat stroke,* she thought grimly. *And who knows what this is doing to his internal naquadah.*

Her instincts as a doctor and as a mother were to grab the boy and shake him out of his trance, before he crossed the point of no return. Only two things held her back. First was the grim realization that she had no idea how he was doing this, or what would happen if she broke his trance prematurely.

Secondly, that shell of hot air, radiating warmth to the rest of the room, was the only thing between everyone in the infirmary and the yukiuso’s deadly cold.

A sharp ache in her hands reminded Janet to breathe deeply and force them to relax, before her nails bit deeply enough into her palms to draw blood.
She hated this. She was a doctor. It was her duty to heal and protect her patients. Not to depend on her patients to protect her…

She just hoped that the candles and lamps helped. Normally, she’d be wary of this much flame in a small space, particularly given that alcohol lamps tended to give off fumes, no matter how cleanly they burned. But… open flames seemed to help Zuko; Teal’c had loaned the boy several of his candles for kel-no-rem, to help meditation. And if nothing else – every little bit of heat the tiny flames gave off, was a little more warmth fighting the yukiuso that Zuko himself didn’t have to generate.

But even if it did help…

“He can’t keep this up, not much longer,” she said flatly. “Right now, it’s an even race between heatstroke, dehydration, and exhaustion.” She’d tried to at least get Zuko to drink something, to replace the fluids he was losing – but he wouldn’t upset the rhythm of his breathing. If she’d just had a little warning, she might have been able to set up an IV…

Probably not, she forced herself to admit. With the sort of temperatures he’s generating – he might have boiled the IV by accident. Gases directly introduced to the bloodstream are very, very bad.

Which didn’t do anything to ease her sense of being useless just when it counted the most.

Jack’s lips thinned unhappily, something dark in his gaze reminding Janet, painfully, that the colonel’s own son hadn’t been that much younger than Zuko.

But the expression vanished in a moment, replaced by practiced nonchalance. “Well, shouldn’t be much longer,” he said, changing the pitch of his voice subtly to carry through the subdued, uneasy quiet of the infirmary, so that everyone could hear him without making it obvious that he intended to be overheard. “That was Sam on the phone just now. Sounds like my Jaffa clone has some ideas.”

Daniel adjusted his glasses. “We’re doomed,” he said ruefully, in the moment of silence following Jack’s statement.

“Yeah – but it’s gonna be an epic way to go!” someone called from the huddle of Marines and staff and scientists, setting off a ripple of laughter in all directions.

Janet breathed a silent sigh of relieve. Thank goodness. Despair was their worst enemy at the moment. If they could keep hoping, keep fighting…


Janet wasn’t even aware of leaping to her feet, staring wide-eyed at the door in the back of the infirmary. She vaguely remembered closing it in an effort to reduce the amount of space they were trying to keep heated…

“Doc.”

The voice was soft. Weak. Faltering. It raised all the hairs on the back of her neck.

“Um.” Jack’s voice had a hint of unsteadiness. “Isn’t that the morgue?”

God. Had she shut someone in there by mistake…?

“Help us… we’re so cold…”

“Oh. Oh. Like the Alaskan kushtaka, imitating cries for help to lure… Janet!” Hands. Grabbing her
shoulders. Stopping her. Why?

“Janet, *stop.*” Daniel’s voice seemed to be coming at her through water. “That’s the *morgue,* we’re hearing Gabor and Dohman, it’s a *trick*… Janet, they’re already dead!”

**But… I can’t leave someone out in the cold…**

The door of the infirmary shattered.

Reality rushed back into her world like a physical blow. Janet gasped, unconsciously holding her suddenly pounding head as Daniel cursed in Abydonian and physically yanked her back behind the lines of scrambling Marines.

**What just happened?**

Mocking, triumphant laughter rippled and echoed throughout the room. How had it been able to suddenly break through like that…?

Daniel’s words echoed in her mind. “*Um, Janet? Right now, the only thing keeping it from freezing us alive is that threshold. And the threshold belongs to you.*”

She shook Daniel’s hand off and straightened, glaring at the empty space radiating amused malevolence near the doorway.

*I wanted to help Gabor and Dohman. I was going to open the door. And apparently, that was enough to crack the threshold.*

*I let it in. This is my place, I was careless, and I let it in.* She drew in a deep breath and took a step forward. *So it’s up to me to kick it out.*

*I can do that.*

“This,” she spat, “is an *infirmary.* Dohman and Gabor are dead and beyond my help, and I certainly don’t have a prescription for *you.*” Her voice tightened into a whipcrack. “So you can consider yourself discharged *with prejudice!*”

It wasn’t her imagination. The line of salt Toph had laid around the edge of the infirmary flared, bright as the candles still flickering throughout the room. She had a strange sense of *pushing…* And the yukiuso was gone.

Only, not quite. Outside that gleaming boundary, but only barely. She could feel the pressure of it, pulsing with thwarted… she couldn’t even call it anger. Pique. Outrage. Fury at the defiance of what should simply lie down and be consumed.

But out.

In the breathless silence as startled minds and bodies tried to catch up, someone breathed, “And you *argue* with her, sir?”


Light-headed, Janet let him pull her into the center of the circle of grim-faced survivors, settling as close to Zuko’s bubble of hot air as she dared. She felt like ice. And *tired,* as tired as she’d have been facing down a medical review committee after pulling two shifts back-to-back in the wards.
No wonder Zuko and Toph were so exhausted after fighting it.

“Look sharp, people,” Jack was saying over her head, grimly. “And hang on to each other. I’d say our unwanted houseguest knows help’s on the way. Which means it’s probably going to try something else—”

The yukiusu’s laughter shifted, a strange pattern of high-low-high. And the world went white.

*Alone. Cold. Tired, oh so tired.*

*Come. Find me.*

*Sleep.*

*Dream.*

*Die.*

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~

Something bit into her face like wind-driven sand – except that sand didn’t *burn-*

The world snapped back into focus.

Teal’c had her forearm with a grip like iron. “Are you free of it?”

Sanura leaned against the corridor wall as her head swam. “…*Hellfires*… what was that?” she asked, remembering only just in time to keep her voice down.

“In previous encounters, the creature has shown the ability to influence the minds of its prey,” Teal’c answered in an equally low voice, his hold loosening slightly.

Sanura rubbed a hand against her face, not bothering to pretend that it wasn’t shaking. *Lady,* but that sense of utter *loneliness,* of family and warmth always just out of reach…

She wouldn’t lie to herself. It would have hit her hard no matter when it struck. But now, with Dhorisha’s dying flames still vivid in her mind…

She focused on the bit of white grit that came out of her tightly braided hair. “So you threw…” She sniffed. Very carefully tasted a single crystal. Blinked. “…*salt* on me?”

“It is Toph’s preferred weapon against this creature,” Teal’c explained. “As fire is Zuko’s – but salt is safer to handle.”

If you couldn’t generate your own fireballs – indeed. “How are you carrying it?” she asked, starting to brush the salt away and then thinking better of it. If salt really did help against this thing – might as well take any edge she could get.

Teal’c held up a small rectangle of white paper, torn at one end. “The Tau’ri use these to season individual portions of meals. It is now my practice to carry a few at all times.”

Sanura shook her head. “Good thinking. Without that, I believe I would have walked right out there
without a second thought…”

*Lady. Khenut.*

Sanura slowly closed her jaw as her mind replayed the scene in a series of vivid flashes. The glider, landed for no visible reason, with no message sent. Simply left behind, doors wide open and cold-weather gear forgotten inside, as though everyone in the glider had just stepped out for a bit of a stroll…

“And I hope for your sake that there aren’t more of these things loose on that world,” Major Carter had said.

*Lady. No wonder they never said anything about Khenut. Odds are, they had no idea we were missing anyone. Meaning that this whole mess had been started by bad timing and angry assumptions…*

She could kick herself later. Right now, she had a much better target to take her frustrations out on. She bared her teeth in what was not by any stretch of the imagination a smile. “Ready?” she asked, hefting the staff of her jury-rigged “zaton pack” – when this was over, she had to find out what that was supposed to mean – and preparing to charge it. She didn’t actually throw the lever, however. Once it warmed up, odds were this *yukiuso* would notice. They’d only get the advantage of surprise once.

Teal’c nodded, hefting the altered TER. “Indeed.” His voice dropped. “Although we must be wary. The TER did not illuminate this creature before.”

“I know people of Heather Dyne’s character. Her guesswork is good enough.” Urdu would love this story when she got back. After he finished turning her inside out for making him and Nubiti worry. She patted the staff weapon. “This weapon does not require a great deal of aim. But I will need the TER is to make certain I do not waste my fire – because it is limited.”

Teal’c nodded. “In that case…”

In a neatly synchronized motion, they raised their weapons and turned the next corner.

Just another hallway, narrow and gray and bland, ending in a door – doorway, rather, because the door itself was nowhere to be found, other than a glimpse of what looked like one hinge grimly hanging on. Strangest of all was how utterly mundane it seemed, flatly lit by the same electrical lights as any other corridor…

Except this time, when Teal’c raised the TER, something was *there*.

Mist would have been more substantial. Blown glass, less translucent. But something was there, drifting in the air as crooning laughter brought images of cold, of solitude, of *sleep*…

She didn’t wait to see more.

Grab the handle. Crank it into place. Stand fast for the second it took for the batteries to pump their charge into the staff and the modified zat-

She fired.

The Wise One had tried to explain how it worked, back when Nubiti was teaching her the fine points of building a spirit-zat. “*Incorporeal beings that affect the corporeal world are constantly brushing against their reality and ours. Like walking on a carpet, or petting a furry animal*…”
“Zap."

“Exactly. It’s not electricity, not as we understand it. But they do build up a charge of sorts. What we’re doing here is modifying the charge of the zat-ni-catel to be attracted to the energy charge of the spirit…”

Crackling and snapping in a crazy, zig-zagging burst, blue-white lightning dancing against red-orange light filled the hallway.

The lights overhead went out with noisy *spangs* that shouldn’t have been audible, except that the shriek of pure *rage* was only mental.

“*But always be aware – it takes a lot of static to build enough zap to do anything. One shot is unlikely to kill. Always have a back-up plan!*”

“Your enemy is here!” she shouted.

Then she and Teal’c turned and ran.

Down the hallway, around a corner, through one of the heavy metal doors that Teal’c had opened with a swipe of a card on their way to the besieged infirmary. Pause there. Teal’c turned for a moment, playing his TER’s light down the long hallway to judge their lead; they didn’t want it to fall too far behind and maybe give up the chase…

Roiling hints of glass-mist rounded the corner.

*Ah, hells. It is much faster than Major Carter described!*

They ran. Down this hall, around another corner-

The floor turned into a ramp under their feet.

This time, however, both of them were fully expecting it. Sanura and Teal’c both cleared the drop easily, and kept going. No need to look back now – they could feel the yukiuso hard in pursuit, determined to bring down the prey that had dared to attack it.

If she hadn’t been saving her breath for running, Sanura would have snickered. The Tau’ri base was going to be a *mess* when this was over, because the little earthshaker wasn’t bothering to clean up after them right now.

*They wrecked the ha’tak first. Turnabout is fair play.*

One level down. Six more to go…

~*Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.*~

Toph blamed the sweat on the heat of the room – apparently these people thought answer to one place being cold was to make everywhere else unbearably warm.

She was not scared. She was the Blind Bandit!

But this was really, really hard.
Most earthbenders—heck, most benders period—could only bend stuff they could see, stuff really close by. Of course, Toph was way beyond that. Seeing was for wimps.

But even she had to be able to feel what she was bending. And this place was a total antbee hive, all ceilings that were also floors and walls with rooms on either side with metal humming with what she was pretty sure was caged lightning all over the place, and a zillion tons of mountain piled on top of that. Shake the wrong stone, and there’d be a whole lot of squish.

And she had to feel her way through all of that and pick out a way to bring Pian-Not and Captainlady down, level by level. And without getting her chi too close to that sucking, hungry, fracturing sense of cold.

So it was tough. She could do this.

And the sooner they finished this thing, the sooner Toph could get back to the healing rooms and kick Sparky’s butt for making her go and leave him back there, never mind if it had been a good idea or not…

You’d better be okay, Zuko! Toph thought fiercely, cracking another floor open to bring Teal’c and Sanura down another level. I’m not going home and telling Uncle I managed to lose the first kinda-sorta sane Fire Lord the world’s seen in a hundred years, you hear me?

And Teal’c had just split away from the chase. Toph spared just enough attention to punch up a wall behind him to keep the yukiuso from going after him, but its attention was still solidly on Sanura as Captainlady pelted past the little room where Toph and Sam and Schemes were hiding out and down the stairs, making for the big chamber below.

Toph wasn’t entirely sure what the plan was for when Sanura got there. Whatever it was, she hoped it was fast, because the yukiuso was right behind her…

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~

Sanura shot through the open doors at a dead run—and for the first time, Sam was able to see their enemy.

Somehow, in the back of her mind, she’d thought the yukiuso couldn’t have been that different from the Reetou. Invisible, intangible, sure. But a single entity.

Mist swirled through the door of the Gateroom, twisting and twining about itself in a lazy spiral and trailing delicate wisps of fog behind it.

Mist—but there were shapes in that soft blue glow, billows that hinted at long, twisting bodies dipping and swirling about each other in a spinning whirl. Even as she watched, one such shape surfaced for a moment—long, sinuous, with hollows that hinted to the lizard in the base of her brain of staring, predatory eyes—and pulsed outward, dividing into two smaller shapes that were growing even as they dove back into the whirl…

Like watching thunderclouds building on the horizon, Sam thought, every hair on her body standing at attention. She could feel the heat slipping away from her just looking at it…

Enough! Focus! The important point was, the TER-modified floodlights she and Heather had hastily
wired into place in the Gateroom worked.

We can see it. Which means we may actually be able to pull this off...

The yukiuso paused, a rippling twist of mist in the Gateroom. And Sam felt it look at her.

She froze.

Not literally, no, but… suddenly she could not move. Her body felt so heavy.

*Dammit,* no.

Gritting her teeth, she grabbed the edge of the control panel and pushed herself upright, trying to think past the worst ice cream headache ever…

“Snow Beast.”

Sanura stood in front of the Gate, arms crossed over her chest, her naquonah wand held almost absently in one hand.

“You like pain,” she asked, her voice low and intent even through the command center’s sound system. “Like people feeling lost. Tired. *Alone.* I lost everything once. And you know it, don’t you?” She crooked her finger at it. “Come. I have all the pain you could desire. I can feed you until you *choke.*”

And between one breath and the next, Sam was free to move again.

*Damn, damn, damn… “Heather!”*

“Working on it!” Shaking herself fiercely, the engineer began working the controls. “Power is still running – you’re good!”

Sam was already inputting the first symbol. “Chevron one, encoding,” she said tightly, painfully aware that the moment’s delay could have cost them everything. They had no *time*…

Sanura knew that. Sam could see it in the moment’s glance through the heavy plate glass of the window, in the Jaffa’s wide eyes and white-lipped face. She wasn’t even looking behind her as the Stargate began its ponderous spin and chevrons began locking into place, although she was standing directly in front of the Stargate, squarely in the path of the kawoosh. Her eyes were locked on the twisting blue mist that was beginning to waft lazily up the ramp, obviously milking her obvious terror…

*God. She’s letting it terrify her. On purpose. Third chevron. Fourth. She’s stalling it by letting it catch her, so that it’ll take its time…*

Fifth locked. Sixth activated. She reached for the seventh.

Heather grabbed the intercom. “Sanura, go!”

For an instant, Sam thought they were too late. The mist was *on* Sanura.

Then the Jaffa fired her zaton directly into it.

Crackling lines of blue-white and red light exploded in all directions, and the yukiuso *shrieked,* whirling blue tightening into a knot in what seemed to be a reflexive flinch. Beyond it, Sam saw Sanura fling herself backward, through the empty circle of the Gate, and hit the grating on the far
The final chevron locked into place.

The event horizon exploded out of the Gate, and the yukiuso’s shriek simply stopped.

Heart pounding, Sam stared at the Gateroom, now awash in the familiar light-on-water blue and silver shimmer of an active wormhole. We can’t be sure. Blue light against blue, it would be hard to see if it left anything behind…

Except she was sure. She hadn’t even realized how much the thing’s presence had been pressing on her mind until suddenly it was gone.

“…Wow. It worked.” Heather’s blink was almost inaudible. “I really didn’t think it would… sir?”

Sam was already shoving away from the console as the wormhole vanished, the Stargate cutting off to save power when nothing passed through it. “Sanura,” she said shortly, making for the door and the stairs at a dead run.

The yukiuso had been right on top of the Jaffa when she’d fired that shot to pin it down. And she’d either gone over the edge and down a good six-foot drop onto hard concrete, or she’d have been lying on the grate directly behind the Gate, and dangerously close to the smaller kawoosh on that side…

When she and the others reached the Gateroom, however, Sanura was just leveraging herself up from an ungainly sprawl on the floor behind the Stargate’s platform.

Sam blinked. The concrete floor had apparently turned to sand in that one spot, cushioning Sanura’s fall.

The Jaffa managed a fierce grin at the little girl who’d followed behind Sam. “That, is a neat trick,” she announced. And then shivered violently.

“Are you all right?” Sam asked intently. Sanura was more than a little blue around the lips.

“I am very glad you activated the Stargate when you did,” Sanura admitted. “Any longer, and things would have been… chilly.” She sighed and flopped back in the odd gray sand that had been a solid floor. “Nubiti and Urdu will kill me when I get back.”

Sam snickered, which was the closest she dared to allow the half-hysterical laughter bubbling in the back of her throat. “At least you don’t have to write a report about it. We don’t even have a category for spirit-thing-that-wants-to-eat-us.”

Sanura blinked at her, “You do not?”

“Not yet,” Teal’c said dryly, coming up behind them. “Knowing the Tau’ri, that will soon be amended, with much paperwork.”

Sanura cringed. “Lady. Please do not tell the Wise One that. He would institute it simply as the most efficient form of payback.”

“Now that is evil,” Sam agreed, and offered Sanura her hand. “Come on. Let’s get you warmed up.”

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~
Blankets, heating pads and hot drinks were most definitely the order of the day.

“Okay, people, pack it up,” Jack was saying. “We’re taking a vacation to the balmy Bahamas of the isolation suites. Where there are working heaters. And doors.” His voice dropped slightly. “Any luck?”

“Not yet,” Janet admitting, knowing her worry was written on her face. “He’s not responding at all. It’s like he can’t even hear us.” She rubbed her hand. The air around Zuko wasn’t really hot enough to burn, but as cold as she was, trying to reach through and shake him awake had hurt.

“Yeah. Got an idea about that. Danny?”

Daniel passed Jack something, a furrow between his brows. “Jack. I’m really not sure this is a good idea.”

“Are you implying I have bad ideas?” Jack asked, mock-wounded. “Step back, Doc. This might get a little flashy.” As Janet stepped back, warily – Jack and flashy were never a good combination, mostly because the sort of flashy Jack dealt with tended to go boom – he paused for a moment, timing Zuko’s breaths. And then threw something at the boy’s face as he began another long, slow inhale through his nose.

The resultant sneeze left a scorch mark a good two feet around on the floor.

“Whoa!” Jack was grinning as he danced back. “Okay, wasn’t quite expecting that…”

“What did you do?” Janet demanded.

“Hey!” Jack held up his hands. “There was a spare pepper packet in with the salt, I just used that!”

“Jack.” Daniel’s voice was long-suffering, as Zuko blinked glassily at them, clearly trying to reorient from coming out of his trance so violently. “Your shoelaces are on fire.”

“Okay, that does it. You are so getting called Mushu, kiddo…” Jack paused in the middle of his very odd little dance of attempting to stamp the flames out. “Kid?”

“Zuko?” Janet said softly, lightly touching the boy’s shoulder and flinching slightly at how hot he was. God. We have to bring his temperature down, somehow. “Are you all right? Come on, let’s get something to eat…”

Zuko shook his head slightly, and started to push himself to a standing position.

Then his eyes rolled upward and he suddenly collapsed to the floor, convulsing.

Chapter End Notes

Any number of people have noted that the fact that the yukiuso’s freezer wasn’t locked is an incredibly stupid mistake. Yes. Exactly. Tired, overstimulated people make stupid mistakes. Sometimes ones that come back in ugly ways. Especially when the mistake was made in such a way that is hard for someone else to catch. (After all, no one was about to try opening that door to check!) Especially when something like, “By the way,
did you lock it?” seems so utterly obvious.

And Nekht… yes, he’s an idiot. But not a malicious one, despite what Sam thinks – she has, understandably, a rather poor opinion of most Tok’ra. But one headstrong, overconfident person who believes what he thinks should be real over what might actually be real, can do a lot of damage.

Medicinal clays do exist. Most are used externally, but some are meant to be eaten. (Don’t try this at home, please…)

And, the books Heather’s been reading? All of them exist as well – they’re on Amazon. Although I feel obligated to point out that I haven’t read most of ’em; I just went scrounging for interesting titles. (And yes, most of them would have been written long after the time period covered by SG-1. Details…) I also feel obligated to say that I haven’t studied physics in fifteen years, and I wasn’t very good at it when I did. I’m playing extremely fast and loose with the Higgs boson and Higgs field and superstring theories. So… well. Watch me wave my hand. This is not the accurate science you’re looking for…

Then again, given some of the horrible things SGC canon does to physics, I’m not going to feel too guilty about that. (The Reetou? Gah! Even I know that string theory doesn’t work that way! But, heck, if they’re going to make that their canon, I’ll use it shamelessly…)

I also feel obligated to point out – Toph’s trick with the batteries? Do not try this at home, people. Seriously. Batteries are all kinds of toxic. And if one has degraded enough to be showing strange stuff forming around it, back away and have an expert take care of it!

The kushtaka was actually one of the legends I drew upon when creating the yukiuso. The yukionna was another, with the kamaitachi as my basis for what it actually manifests as, visually. With a dash of Day After Tomorrow for the way it attacks. (And Sanura’s backstory is a mixture of Oathbound, Resident Evil, and Catscratch Fever.)
“Give him space!”

No one argued with Janet when she took that tone. Jack, who’d reflexively moved to hold the kid down, almost did anyway. “What the hell is going on?” he demanded.

“Seizure,” Janet said, flatly, voice grim. She was looking at her watch, of all things. “Jack, pull him away from the radiator before he hits it. Get him onto his side if you can. Don’t try to restrain him. You’ll only end up hurting him. And probably yourself. Daniel – get something to pad his head. The last thing he needs is a concussion!”


“So did I, but that was before he spent half an hour playing space heater for the entire infirmary!” Janet snapped back, moving to help with the kid’s feet – and nearly getting kicked in the face for her trouble as Zuko’s legs spasmed violently.

“Isn’t there anything we can do?” Jack insisted, pulling Zuko by the shoulders into a clearer space and settling his head on the pad Daniel had made by grabbing and folding one of the blankets.

“Yes – which is stay calm,” Janet said bluntly. “The best thing you can do for a seizure is help the victim after they’ve ridden it out.”

“There’s no treatment?” Daniel asked.

Janet sighed, moving back to get herself clear. Zuko’s flailing was far less wild now, mostly just erratic twitches and spasms as the kid fought to breathe. “Unprovoked seizures can sometimes be treated with lorazepam, if they go more than ten minutes,” she said bluntly, eyes fixed intently on the boy. “But even assuming that he’d respond to that with his biochemistry being offset from ours, this isn’t an unprovoked seizure. He’s overheated, dehydrated, stressed, and he was using his pyrokinesis. I’ll take a blood sample when this is over, but odds are his naquadah has bottomed out…” She paused, as the boy suddenly stilled, going limp on the floor, and looked at her watch. “Not quite two minutes,” she muttered, reaching out and rolling the kid onto his side.

“That important?” Jack asked, pulling Zuko’s hair back from the kid’s slack face. It was sodden with sweat – either from his little stint as space heater or from the seizure.

“Establishing a baseline.” Janet’s voice was grim.

Meaning she expected a repeat performance. Jack forced aside the sick feeling in his gut and leaned in to check Zuko’s eyes. The kid just blinked at him, eyes half-lidded and out of focus. “Damn. He’s out of it, Doc.”

“Postictal state,” Janet said shortly. “It’s a common aftereffect. He should sleep it off.”

Meaning they needed to get the kid to a bed. Preferably not here. Jack raised his head to yell for a stretcher and blinked. Siler and one of the Marines were already standing by.

The engineer raised his chin at Jack’s look. “We know why we aren’t walking icicles, sir,” he said pointedly. “Figured we’d help out.”
And Siler was already blaming himself for not having been able to repair the radiators, Jack suspected. He made a mental note to keep an eye on the man. Siler was solid, dependable, and kept the SGC running with spit and duct tape, if that was what it took. But even he sometimes ran into a problem that the almighty wrench couldn’t wrestle into submission.

And no one liked the idea of a kid getting hurt because he’d needed to deal with a problem you hadn’t been able to fix.

Janet frowned. “I want to get him on an IV,” she started, and then paused, looking at the wreckage of the infirmary. The area immediately around the radiator was unaffected. The edges of the room, however… Jack could see from here that several bottles had broken as the liquid inside expanded into ice, and frost was still glittering balefully on the walls. The shattered door to the hallway, and the one leading to the morgue, hadn’t done much damage, but the shards were still scattered across the floor. People were stepping around them with almost superstitious care, probably trying to avoid imagining what would have happened if that had been them.

She sighed. “We can set it up in one of the isolation suites, I suppose…”

Jack wisely got out of the way as she started directing Siler and the Marines through getting the kid onto the stretcher, and instead began working his way through the others as they all trudged out of the infirmary, trying to get a feel for what sort of fallout they’d be seeing from this incident.

Mostly, everyone just seemed tired, and grateful to be out. Spirits seemed relatively high for the time being – he overheard at least two renditions of Janet kicking the yukiuso out. Discharged with prejudice. Heh. Another entry for the “only in the SGC” book.

But it didn’t change the fact that they hadn’t been able to do a single damn thing the whole time except sit and make little candles and let a sick kid, a little girl, and a Jaffa who was supposed to be their prisoner rescue them. These were Marines. They weren’t going to take that well at all.

And we haven’t gotten a head count yet. We can’t have gotten so lucky that no one died in all this except the idiot who let it out.

Hell. They didn’t even know what had happened, other than that the base had been taken off alert. Sam and her merry bunch of misfits were supposed to be on the way for check-ups and debriefing, but they hadn’t arrived yet by the time Jack got his herd of cats into the isolation suite that had been revamped into a barracks of sorts for the people who’d been trapped in the infirmary by the yukiuso. He set himself to getting everyone settled in, which was not exactly easy. Spacious, this was not.

On the other hand. Working heaters, company, and most important, a door you could shut. The isolation suites were all about keeping what was inside from getting out and what was outside from getting in – Jack was willing to bet that equated to a pretty solid threshold-thingy, even if it didn’t have a redhead Napoleon backing it up. After the last two hours, people were willing to put up with a lot of elbows for that kind of security.

Although no one argued against Zuko getting pride of place on one of the beds. Jack was just going to join Janet when Sam walked in, trailing Sergeant Dyne, Teal’c, Toph, and a very curious-looking Sanura.

“All good?” Jack asked, pausing.

Sam gave him a tired smile. “Ghostbusted and kawooshed. Even if it survived that, which I’m not counting as outside the realm of possibility at the moment – where it is right now, it shouldn’t be
bothering anyone…” Her breath caught as she looked over his shoulder. “Oh no,” she breathed. “What happened?”

Jack looked over his shoulder and winced. The kid did not look good. “We lost the second radiator for the last thirty minutes or so. Kid was playing space heater.”

“He did that on P4X-684…” Sam objected, biting her lip slightly.

“That was a much smaller space to keep warm,” Janet said quietly. “And much better insulated, not to mention that he didn’t have an actively hostile entity sucking away warmth as fast as he could produce it.”

“How’s he look, Doc?” Jack asked, moving over as Janet packed away a blood sample in her kit.

“Not good,” Janet said, her tone grim. “He was burning fuel he didn’t have back there. Odds are, we’re going to see more seizures.” She sighed, pulling a blanket up and doing her best not to disturb the IV she’d given the kid. “It’s his internal thermostat I’m really worried about. His temperature is dropping – which is good, he was definitely hyperthermic before. But it’s not leveling out. He’s going to go hypo thermic pretty soon, at this rate…”

“Oi! Chira-bi ‘tte doko!”

Jack couldn’t suppress the wince. The last thing he wanted to do was admit to the dainty demolitionist that they’d gone and let her friend get sick hauling their behinds out of the icebox.

And wincing, he suddenly realized, was a big mistake. He’d forgotten that no body language got past the blind girl. Her breath caught – and then she was shoving past him and making straight for the bed. Her hands groped about on the covers – first time he’d ever seen her act blind, as if whatever she used to see couldn’t reach through the bedframe and mattress – until she found Zuko’s hand.

She went stark white, and Jack mentally cursed. Too much to hope she wouldn’t somehow spot that he’s in a bad way.

Toph spun to scowl at him. “Mou ii! Hizashi, misete yo!”

No need to ask Daniel to translate that, not when he’d been arguing this with Toph for the past three days. “Oh, hell no,” Jack said firmly. “What part of really bad idea are you not getting?” He gestured pointedly at the kid out cold in the bed – at least, he hoped Zuko was out cold, because no teenager should ever be that still under any other circumstances. “It’s going to be touch-and-go with him tucked up in here as it is, and you want to go outside?” He crossed his arms over his chest. “Not. Happening.”

The girl’s nostrils flared as her shoulders stiffened, lips a thin white line as she drew herself up to her full diminutive height and leveled a blistering blind glare in Jack’s general direction.

Oh boy. He braced himself for screaming. Tough little trooper of a kid or not, she’d just had a really bad day to cap off what was probably the worst week of her life. They were lucky there hadn’t been any serious tantrum throwing before this…

Tiny hands slammed apart, and Jack abruptly remembered that this kid throwing a tantrum fell into the category of Very Bad News.

Then the floor surged under his feet like a ship in a storm, and he found himself having a very one-sided argument with the concrete, with gravity and inertia as the – totally biased, he might add –
arbitrators.

“Oh, that does it,” he growled as soon as he got some breath back, shoving himself back to his feet and dimly aware of everyone else who’d been nearby picking themselves up as well. “I don’t care how upset she is, that kid’s going to sit in the corner until she gets that you don’t throw people around just because you’re none too hap…py…”

He trailed off.

Toph was gone. Zuko was gone. The bed had been absolutely totaled. And there was a hole in the ceiling.

“She didn’t,” Sam groaned.

“I think she did,” Daniel said, bemused, straightening glasses that had been knocked askew in all the tumbling about as he very carefully stepped closer to peer up through the hole. “I can’t see how far this goes, but under the circumstances… Um. Janet?”

The doctor’s face would have sent storm clouds scuttling for the nearest horizon in abject terror. “Well. At least it looks like she took the IV with them,” she said through gritted teeth. “Hopefully they’ve observed me using them in the infirmary enough to have some idea how to set it up. Zuko needs it, he’s dehydrated. And well on his way to shock-induced hypothermia. Let me remind you, it’s just before dawn, the coldest time of day, in mid-October. At sixty-three hundred feet and more above sea level. And they’re wearing T-shirts. They’re going to freeze, after surviving the yukiuso, no less…!”

“Toph appears to have anticipated this. The blankets are missing as well.” Teal’c looked thoughtful. “It would seem that we perhaps underestimated the importance of Toph’s demand to be allowed outside.”

“Lovely,” Jack said sarcastically. “I’ll be sure to include that when I go to explain to the general why our two alien psychokinetics just walked out of the base. Assuming our friendly neighborhood NORAD officers didn’t shoot them on the way up, because they are still on lockdown until we can do one last sweep of the base…!”

Someone snickered at him.

Jack turned to scowl at Sanura, who hadn’t even bothered getting back up after being thrown to the floor, just settled into a comfortable cross-legged sitting position. “Something funny?” he demanded.

“Most definitely.” She flicked a finger in the direction of the hole. “I believe the word that Heather Dyne used was, karma.”

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~

“You’re not allowed to die, Sparky,” Toph muttered. Stupid heart, it was pounding so hard in her ears, she could barely hear anything. “Got that, Zuko? Not. Allowed. On the pain of me kicking your stupid reckless jump-off-an-airship firebender butt.”

Biting her lip, she forced her breathing to slow. Then she rested her hands against stone and listened.
This was a big mountain. And… the mountain itself was young, in mountain-time. But the rocks were all old, old granite.

*Like the mountains around Omashu. Old earth rising.*

But it had weaknesses, too. There was one huge one, right over the tunnels – were these people crazy? Well – okay, she already knew *that*, but…

*…Iron. It’s held in place with iron. Huh. That’s so weird…*

One thing was for sure; they *definitely* didn’t have earthbenders here, not if they were fixing a huge shear zone that way.

Which was probably good. Snark Feng wasn’t going to be happy, that was for sure. If they didn’t have earthbenders, it would take them that much longer to catch up. She could buy Zuko a little more time.

There. *There.* A feeling of easing in the earth, as ice wedging open cracks began to melt. And…

*…Whoa.*

Sunrise didn’t exactly do much for Toph. She was *blind.* Didn’t matter a whit to her if there was daylight or not. She’d never paid attention to it before.

She was paying attention now. They’d been underground for *days*, longer than she’d ever spent deep in the earth before, because before Aang’s bunch had come along she couldn’t risk her parents finding her missing, and after, there’d been bad guys to stomp and new stones to bend. Without that, maybe she’d have missed it, but…

*It’s like a tiny spring.* Not the rush of living energy that filled the earth every spring, like a waterbender’s full moon stretched out over a whole season, but there, as the earth woke up and its chi mingled with that of the sun.

*The sun. Dawn.* Toph let herself rest her forehead on the stone for just a minute, and laughed a little – and her voice *wasn’t* shaking, darn it! *About time something went our way!*

After one more breath, she used her hands to push off the rock – and then pushed with her bending. The stone in front of her clove along hidden fault lines and pivoted, coming down flat to make a level platform.

Immediately, she shivered. *Oof. Cold out here!* Not as cold as that other place had been, and definitely not the *nasty* cold of the yukiuso, but…

“That does it, Sparky,” she muttered, checking to make sure the blankets were tucked in close around him. Given a choice, she really didn’t want to take the wounded firebender out there, not when he was way too cold already. But Zuko needed sunlight. Fast. “When this is over, you totally owe me a whole week soaking in the Fire Lord’s private-use-only hot spring – and don’t even try telling me you don’t have one!”

Good thing she was an earthbender and could let the earth and her bending take care of the heavy lifting, using just the very upper layer of stone to glide Zuko out into what she hoped would be broad daylight very, very soon, just the way she had when Sokka’d tried to get in her way after she’d fought with Katara. Zuko wasn’t some big beefy Earth guy like the Boulder – or the Hippo, yeesh – but he was still way taller than she was, and it was all muscle, the better to kick things in the face with. And right now, all that muscle was dead weight…
Toph’s stomach lurched, almost making her fumble the form. Heart pounding, she made herself complete it, and then carefully double-check to make certain their platform was still stable and anchored. This was a very steep slope, practically a cliff. If they started sliding… well. It could get tricky. Especially with her bare feet going numb from the cold.

Then she was sitting next to Zuko on the flat stone in a graceless slump. Her mother would go nuts. Hate this, hate this, hate this.

Part of the blanket had loosened from around Zuko as she’d moved him. Toph grabbed it and pulled it around herself as she hugged her knees to her chest, pressing against Zuko’s side.

What do I do now?

Sure, she’d heard of elemental deprivation. It was just one of those things everyone knew about, like the fact that there were four elements. But outside of the Fire Nation’s floating prisons for earthbenders – not that those would slow her down – it almost never happened. It was really, really hard to keep someone away from the sun, or running water, or the ground, or wind. Not for the length of time that it would take for deprivation symptoms to actually show. Even the earthbenders from the floating prisons – Sparky had been right, some of them had been out there for years.

It’s only been a few days! What happened? Why is this so different?

She didn’t know. She’d never actually run into elemental deprivation before – well, maybe Katara, back in the desert. The waterbender had been all kinds of droopy by the time they’d gotten out of there, and the first river they’d found, Katara had gone and jumped in. Hadn’t even bothered to take off her dress. Then again, the rest of them had done the same…

Toph hiccupped – that was her story, and she was sticking to it. Just like the salt she tasted as she bit her lip had to be left over from all the stuff they’d been throwing at the yukiuso. I really, really wish Katara and the guys would turn up right about now. Katara was a healer, and she’d know about elemental deprivation, between the floating prisons and the desert…

Wait. Salt.

Toph licked her lips more deliberately this time, remembering the desert. The sandbenders had been real generous after the chief’s son had ‘fessed up – probably in hopes of getting Aang out of there before a ticked-off Avatar decided to destroy what was left of their livelihood. As far as Toph cared, they’d pretty much deserved what they got for bison-napping Appa, but she could sympathize. Had to be hard living in the desert, without the Avatar blowing everything to bits.

But. They’d gotten water for everyone, especially Katara. But they’d also given people salted meat.

“Your body needs salt, just as it needs water, and you lose both in this heat,” the sandbender who’d been handing out the grub had lectured them when Katara and Toph complained. Which… yeah. She had felt better afterward. Though she’d always figured that was more, well, water. Food.

But… you lost salt sweating when you were hot. Did you lose something else shivering when you were cold? Or when you were isolated from your element?

Wait. Didn’t Zuko say something about rock candy…? Yeah, he had – right after he and Sokka had gotten back from the Boiling Rock, something about the coolers and cells away from the sun. Of course, too much rock candy and your brain would melt out your ears like Bumi, not that it stopped the old geezer from being almost as awesome as Toph…
“Wait a minute!” she blurted aloud, smacking her fist into her palm.

*Rock candy, salt, those are Earth. I can work with them.* She’d already noticed that Zuko felt off, out of balance, ungrounded… Like he was missing something.

Toph scowled. Problem was, knowing something was wrong wasn’t the same as being able to fix it. If it really was something missing, like salt or rock candy – sure. Great. But she didn’t exactly have any rock candy around to help her get a read on what *should* be there.

...*But I do have me.*

Pursing her lips, Toph pressed the flat of her palms against the slab of stone they were sitting on, tucking her fingers under her feet rather than opening the blanket up and letting a draft in. She wanted to feel this, and her hands were more sensitive than her feet, since she didn’t walk on them all day.

She’d never tried to feel herself with her earthsense. What was the point? She didn’t exactly need to detect if she was lying, or what she was about to do. She knew what she was, every awesome inch of her.

*I just need to figure out what I’m trying to find.* She breathed, pursing her lips. *Zuko said the Fire he was working with was small, so the Earth I’m looking for probably is, too…*

Oh. Wow.

It wasn’t small. It was subtle. A faint teasing sense of presence, like the smell of the flower garden from outside the walls of the Bei Fong estate – you knew it was there, but you couldn’t say why until you noticed it was gone.

Like in Zuko. He had it, but… it was like smelling one or two flowers, not a whole garden.

*Sparky smells like flowers. Heh. I’m going to tell him that – when Mai’s listening! Squirm, Zuko, squirm!*

Although really, it was less like flowers and more…

*Dust. Like someone powdered glowstone and puffed it into the air.* She’d done that with regular rock on occasion, especially after meeting Aang. It took a lot of work – vibrations didn’t move from dust speck to dust speck the way they moved in solid stone or dirt. But if she got enough of it in the air, and concentrated, she could feel things moving through the air. Like, say, an airbender who thought that if he was sneaky and stayed off the ground, he could get away with messing with the Blind Bandit.

*Yeah, well, I showed him.* That yelp had been almost as satisfying as the time she’d punted him into a tree to take her Earth Rumble belt back…

Toph scowled and shook her head. Problem was, that still didn’t crack the problem. Dust was… light. Drifty. Like Aang. This stuff was… heavier. More *flowy*. Kinda like the sludge from the drill – it was all mixed up with water and other stuff. Only, it was lighter than that…

Toph stiffened. *That… singing glowstone-water thing.*

Like that. *Just* like that, except that even in her, it was a lot thinner and lighter, spread out. But *that* was exactly what she had, and Zuko didn’t.
Okay. So I finally know what the problem is. So now what? She didn’t exactly have rock candy for Zuko to munch. And no way, no how was she opening up that… glowstone thing. Not after the way even Pian-Not’s heart had been going pitter-patter while she’d been poking it.

Heck, even hers had been racing. The sheer energy in that thing had raised the hairs on the back of her neck even worse than that giant lodestone-thing that Janet’s friend had tried to stick her in… Lodestones…?

Toph paused for a moment, taking that thought out and feeling it, as carefully as she’d feel her way along Appa’s saddle, or a wooden shipdeck, or worse, one of Katara’s ice-bridges.

Back when she’d been little, her parents had brought in all sorts of physicians and healers to look at her. One of them, when she’d been four or five, had been a lady who’d used lodestones.

“The Great Gates are the chakra points of the world itself,” she’d explained, setting a cool rock that hummed and tugged gently at Toph’s chi on her forehead as Toph lay flat against stone, reluctantly intrigued. It had been like getting wrapped in layer upon layer of light, light, soft fabrics. At first they were all tangled and strangling. But the little tugging hum had pulled everything into place, until everything fell just right and swirled with her, rather than against her. “Lodestones always know how to find them, and they teach your own chakras how to align themselves.” Then she’d sighed. “I need to talk to your parents. You need to be outside, feeling the song of the earth in living soil and the bones of stone. How is an earthbender supposed to live like this?”

Toph had liked her. She’d had a quiet, gentle voice, and she’d explained what she was doing when Toph asked. And she’d actually done as she promised and told Toph’s parents to let her wander the gardens. Toph had always remembered that, even after running away a year or two later and meeting the badgermoles.

Lodestones. She wiggled her toes, feeling the hard, grounding solidity of the rock under them, tracking every unsteady beat of Zuko’s heart fiercely. Reading people – heartbeats, stances, breathing, movement, even chi – that, she could do through stone and bone.

But she couldn’t move it. The only part of the body she could really get a grip on was bone.

And I am not going there. She shuddered. Bone was part of the body. But it wasn’t supposed to move. Not like blood, or chi.

But lodestones worked with the energy of the body. If she could just feel her way through that…

Right. She growled in frustration. So now what? Am I supposed to just… wait for a giant lodestone to fall out of the sky or someth…

Oh. Oh!

Her special armband was off her bicep and in her hands before the thought even finished.

The space earth was as much iron as it was stone, which was what let her do so many absolutely awesome things with it. And it already hummed in tune with the earth, which was half of why she liked to wear it. So if she could just work it a little, get it aligned with the Earth Gates here…

Under her kneading fingers, that faint hum became the familiar layered, rippling, tugging harmony. Yes!

Twisting around a bit, she set the ovoid she’d shaped the magnetic earth into against Zuko’s
forehead. Following the vague childhood memory of that healer, she rested one hand on top of it, holding it in place, and lightly pressed her other against the pulse point of his left wrist.

Please, please let this work. Flexing her fingers, she tried to feel the world through the lodestone.

Whoa.

It was like the ultimate earthsense. Everything – the air, the stones, the blanket, her own fingers – was wrapped in flowing fields of thereness, each with its own particular tone and texture and timbre. Only, Zuko’s was much, much weaker than it should have been, and scrambled, somehow, out of order rather than aligned with the fields around and inside him.

But magnets didn’t just listen. There was push and pull there, too, just like with water. And if she shoved and tugged at that scramble, tried to shake it so that it fell pointing in the right direction, or at least closer too it…

It was like separating the glowstone from that crazy mixture in its little bottle. She had to pull at it, and hold it while it remembered what it was and what it should be, and then push it into place.

That part was hard. Earthbenders broke stuff up. Forming it together – yeah, you could do it, like she’d done with the salt, but it was tricky. And stone didn’t grow – well, other than rock candy, sometimes. When Bumi was feeling cute.

But bones did. And now that she’d figured out how to reach them – Zuko’s bones knew what he needed, channeled the healing into blood and body.

It wasn’t easy. But she was the Blind Bandit. Impossible? Just took a little more effort than normal…

It came as a total shock when her space-earth lodestone clattered down off Zuko’s chakra, right out from under her hand. Confused, Toph let go of Zuko’s wrist with her other hand, and only then realized that she was shaking worse than the first time she’d run away from home, before she’d met the badgermoles.

Then the headache hit.

Ow, ow, ow! Man, no wonder Sparky’d been out of it after healing Schemes!

Clutching at her head, Toph startled herself by giggling.

“Katara’s first healing was cleaning up some burns on her hands,” she muttered. “But you ‘n’ me, we just had to jump right in with the fun stuff.” She paused. “…Mine was cooler. So there.” And ow, she was paying the price for it…

But Zuko was… okay, he wasn’t all the way warm like he should be. But he wasn’t cold anymore, and his heart had steadied, and he was sleeping now, not unconscious.

And the sun had risen, judging by the warmth she could feel now that she was paying attention again. Zuko could just nap the day away and bask in it like a happy cat. And maybe Toph felt like pounded clay at the moment – but she was sitting right on a nice big hunk of granite that was part of a huge hunk of granite, and nowhere to go.

Ah, what the heck. Sparky’s got his sunny spot, I’ve got my rocks, and no one who isn’t an earthbender or an airbender is going to be getting at us very fast in the middle of this slope. Which was why she’d picked it, after all. Stretching, Toph flopped back on nice, comfy rock. Aah. Time to make like Snoozles!
Ow. Spirits, but he was stiff. Every joint ached.

‘S what I get for falling asleep on a stone floor. What was I thinking?

Grimacing, Zuko shifted a little, trying to get his limbs to loosen up…

Blinked, and looked down at black hair escaping a green-and-gold headband in flyaway wisps, firmly glued to his side.

Toph? He shook his head a little. What’s she doing… Never mind that, need to do something about this before Katara notices she’s gone and rips my throat out!

Wait. This wasn’t the Western Air Temple. Katara wasn’t watching his every move for the slightest hint of a step out of line – they actually got along pretty well now.

And the war was over. He wasn’t a fugitive who had to sleep rough wherever he could anymore. So why was he lying on bare stone, staring up at an open sky?

Although… the sun was warm, even if the air had a bit of a bite to it. It was finally easing that bone-deep feeling of *emptiness* that had been eating away at him ever since…

*Agni!* Zuko shot bolt upright as the events of the last week crashed back into his dazed mind.

“Yaah!”

Toph was definitely going to make him pay for waking her up by dumping her on her rump, Zuko acknowledged, but the thought was an absent footnote in the back of his mind. His attention was focused on taking in their surroundings – an earthbent platform in the side of a cliff, rising up over their heads into two craggy spires of bare stone, the sort of bones of the earth he’d seen in some of the older ranges of the Earth Kingdom, covered with the light, dry sort of scrub that grew in the soil-poor, colder high altitudes, pines and a few deciduous plants that were already mostly bare, a few leaves still hanging on with hints of the bright colors of high autumn.

“Sparky!” Going by the tone of Toph’s voice, she didn’t know whether to hit him or hug him. Experience suggested that either option was equally painful.

Zuko slowly turned to look at her. “Toph. What did you *do*?”

She smirked. “Do?”

He rolled his eyes. “Don’t even start. You’re worse at playing innocent than I am.”

Toph snorted, crossing her arms over her chest. “Sparky, you can’t play innocent even when you *are*, remember?”

“My point exactly.”

That got him a snicker. “Yeah, but you know me.”

“So…” Zuko crossed his arms over his chest, deliberately imitating her posture.
“So I might have annoyed Snark Feng a little,” Toph said.

Zuko bit back a groan, lightly pinching the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger. *Yeah. I thought as mu…*

“You were dying!”

He started, recoiling slightly at the sudden vehemence. All the sneaky, sly amusement was gone from Toph’s face, replaced by a furious scowl and white-knuckled, shaking fists.

“I don’t know what happened after I left, but I got back and you were *cold,*” she half-yelled, blank eyes staring in his general direction with fierce accusation. “You were cold, and you wouldn’t wake up, and your chi was almost gone. And Snark-Feng – he was going all, *I’m in charge, therefore you’re wrong.* Believe me, I know that stance.” Her voice dropped suddenly as she swallowed. “It was like arguing with my parents all over again.”

She shook herself, squaring her shoulders belligerently. “There wasn’t time to beat him over the head – so I grabbed you and left them eating dust.”

“Literally?” Zuko asked warily.

“…Maybe a little.”

Zuko hesitated, taking in Toph’s haggard appearance – nearly as pale as the delicate, sickly noble girl she’d spent half her life living as, hair coming loose from her usual, solid bun. Her lower lip looked like she’d been chewing it, and her washed-out eyes were distinctly red around the edges.

He winced. “It was that bad.”

Scowling fiercely, Toph hauled back and slugged him in the arm. *Hard.*

“Don’t. Ever. Do that again,” she growled. “If I catch you even thinking about it, I’ll… I’ll set Mai and Katara on you. *At the same time.*”

*Erk.*

“Hey, I don’t think they’d exactly want me freezing to death, either, you know!” he fired back. But a moment later, he sighed, rubbing the back of his head awkwardly. Toph really didn’t look so good. Not just upset. She looked *exhausted.*

*No wonder. She was out there fighting the yukiuso. I wonder what happened?*

“So what happened after that?” he asked at last. Now probably wasn’t the best time to ask about the yukiuso. Whatever had happened, they must have defeated it somehow, if the two of them were out here.

Like quicksilver, Toph’s bad temper vanished into an absolutely evil grin that had Zuko mentally calculating how far away from solid ground he could get on pure reflex. “I finally figured it out!”

“Figured…”

“Earth-healing!” Toph dialed the grin back a bit, but she was still beaming victoriously.

Zuko’s eyes widened. “You healed me?” He hesitated for a moment. “How?” Because yes, Toph had been poking at it. With his reluctant help; getting dragged in the wake of a curious Toph was a lot like going for a ride on a friendly avalanche. But something had always been missing; she’d never
been able to move from sensing to healing…

Still smirking, Toph made a c’mere gesture with her fingers, and a glossy black stone slightly smaller than her fist smacked into her palm. “I needed a magnet,” she said. “Your chi… I told you, it was a mess. All scrambled. The magnetic field helped me sort of… tug things back the way they were supposed to be going.”

Zuko gaped at her, to her obvious amusement. “…And you just found a magnet sitting on the ground?” he asked weakly. Because that went beyond lucky and deep into the territory of there’s going to be one hell of a catch to this, isn’t there…

Toph snorted, kneading the stone with her fingers. It flexed almost like stiff clay, reforming into… oh. The black armband she always wore. Huh. “No, I used my space earth!”

“…Space earth,” he echoed dubiously.

Toph blinked. “Oh, right. You were still the bad guy then.” Ignoring his wince, she continued. “It was back when Sokka was learning to use a sword, with Piandao. A meteorite had hit nearby – we were up all night helping put out the fire. He used it to make the iron for his sword, and he gave me some of the earth that was left over.”

Oh. That explained a lot. “So that’s why he calls it his space sword!”

Toph gave him an arch look. “What did you think he meant?”

“It’s Sokka,” Zuko said dryly. “The mind boggles.” He shook his head as Toph snickered. “So, magnetism was the missing link?”

She frowned. “Not sure how to explain it…”

“Don’t try,” Zuko suggested ruefully. “I remember what fire-healing was like. It just doesn’t fit in words – not that I’m good with those anyway…”

“Heh! You’re better than you’d think. Which is lucky, what with all the speechifying you have to do as Fire Lord.”

“One word, Toph. Script.”

She snickered at him, but after a few moments, her expression became thoughtful. “Katara never seems to have trouble with it.”

“Did you ever ask her what it felt like to heal?” Zuko asked curiously. Healing had always been something that Katara just did; by the time he’d have been able to ask without having his head bitten off, he’d already gotten used to the idea. It just hadn’t occurred to him.

Toph tilted her head. “No,” she admitted. “Something to do when we get back, I guess. Hee… this is going to knock her right off her feet!”

If we get back, Zuko mentally reminded himself, with an internal wince.

He knew he hadn’t betrayed the wince on the outside, but Toph still sobered. “So… now what?” she asked.

You’re asking me? Shaking his head and wincing a little as stiff joints protested, Zuko stood up, trying to get a feel for his balance.
Better. A lot better, even if his bones were aching fit to start a revolt. And the world didn’t feel quite so fragile around him anymore.

“Well, since we’re out here, we might as well take a look around…” he started to say, when a flash of the early morning sunlight reflecting off something shiny in the distance caught the corner of his eye, and he reflexively flicked his gaze in that direction-

His jaw dropped.

Toph started. “What?” she demanded, her voice jumping up an octave.

Right. She can’t see. And she wouldn’t feel it, not at this distance.

It was a faint, distant thought in the back of his mind. Zuko took a moment to breathe, and consider the best response.

“You… picked a spot with an interesting view,” he said at last.

The cliff they were on, with its craggy, weathered stone and towering spires – not unlike the spires where he’d gone, like an idiot, to try to practice redirecting lightning – faced mostly to the east, towering over the immediately surrounding slopes.

Defensible, he noted absently. Which was good, if they were busy ticking off the local powers.

Behind them and to the west rose even higher crags, a long, massive mountain range that seemed to run mostly north-to-south. Right now, the mountain slopes were awash in morning sunlight, still with a hint of gold lingering from sunrise.

The sunlight poured out of the east across a broad, open plain that stretched as far as the eye could see. By now, the sun was a good handspan or two above the eastern horizon – a horizon that was as flat as the edge of a sword, but with a hint of haze against dusty brown. Scrubland, possibly even shading into desert – it reminded him of the terrain around Lee’s village. But it was distant. Nearer to hand, the landscape showed the deep green of pine, with blazes of brightly colored leaves here and there.

So it’s autumn. That at least explained the subtle bite in the air. Although credit probably also had to go to their obvious altitude, and the fact that this was clearly a northern climate. Nothing like the quasi-jungle where he and Toph had found the temple that had started this mess…

Yeah. And then we crossed a polar ice field to get here. He rubbed his forehead. So now we’re in Earth Kingdom-type mountains. Sure. Fine. Whatever.

It wasn’t half as strange as the landscape to the north.

City. That’s a city. It has to be.

Only, it looked nothing like any cities he knew.

That many buildings… it’s like Ba Sing Se! Only, without the Wall.

Without any wall, so far as he could tell. Which was just… odd. No wall meant the people there didn’t expect anyone to attack them…

But… Jack, Sam, Janet – they’re military. Beyond any doubt. So why doesn’t this city have any fortifications? Or was it just that their hosts were specifically charged with protecting the Sta-geit?
But even setting the question of fortifications aside…

*It’s so big.* But not just big. It was… spread out. Like a giant gray-and-dun spiderfly-web on the surface of the earth, with broad areas of green interspersed with long, thin lines of buildings strung like dull beads alongside that web of what had to be roads, until they reached a central hub that was a knot of gray – and the strangest buildings he’d ever seen. Everywhere else was flat – *too* flat, really; how could anyone get anywhere, with the city spread out like that? It would take hours just to walk from one of those far-flung areas to the nearest central area!

*Trains. They have to have trains, like in Ba Sing Se. Only, lots of them.*

But in the center… *Huge* buildings, towering over the rest of the landscape. And at least some of them seemed to be made of nothing but glass and metal. It was the light glancing off of one of them that had caught his eye in the first place, gleaming off a wall that seemed to be entirely composed of windows.

*Palaces?* he wondered, and then dismissed the thought just as fast. Those couldn’t be palaces, or even a palace complex. There were so many of them, and while they all shared that same rectangular… *boxiness,* that was about where the similarities ended. It looked more like they were warring over control of the city skyline.

Shaking his head, Zuko turned his gaze to scan the mountain slopes closer at hand. *A city like that, on the edge of a desert – who builds a city that big on the edge of a desert, and what cacti did they get that juice from? And where are the fire-watch towers?* Not the spindly triangles that poked here and there out of the trees, following the lines of roads cutting away from the city and into the trees and mountains, surely…

He paused, eyeing those roads. They were impressive, certainly. They’d been carved out the mountain itself in places, running straight and smooth for impossibly long distances, or following the contours of the mountains in easy, graceful curves.

A hint of movement caught his eye on one of them, and he blinked.

*What is that?*

It looked… *something* like a tank. Maybe. There was no sign of anything pulling it, at least, although he couldn’t make out anything like coal smoke, either. And it looked too small, although at this distance it was hard to tell for sure.

*And it’s going so fast.*

As fast as Appa. Easily. Maybe not Appa in a full stooping dive, the kind where you had to fight to breathe because the air was whipping past you so terrifyingly quickly, or when he was riding the racing currents of the high skies, like the end-of-summer stream they’d used to get to the Earth Kingdom to find Jun and Uncle after Aang had vanished. But…

Toph whistled as he did his best to describe the scene. “That sounds really *strange.*”

“No kidding.” Crossing his arms, Zuko frowned down at the landscape below.

She poked him. “You’re thinking. That’s usually a bad thing.”

“Tell me about it.” Zuko waved a hand at the strange city. “It’s just… these people have to be a *lot* stranger than we realized.”
“Yeah?” Toph tilted her head, clearly thinking that over. Then sightless eyes widened. “Wait. No temples?”

Zuko blinked in surprise, straightening. “Not that I saw,” he agreed, mind racing. And… temples were visible. They had to be, to show honor to the spirits, and as a beacon for those same spirits, and the people who needed their help. There was a reason why every temple in the four nations had blazed with light, when Avatar Aang had gone into the Avatar State for the first time. Although it had taken a lot of back-calculating and cross-referencing with Sokka and Katara to add that up.

Toph smacked her palm against her forehead. “So that’s why they never called in a shaman, or priest or sage or whatever.”

“Yeah.” Zuko sighed. “So much for asking the sages to help us contact the local spirits.”

Toph blinked, face twisting in disbelief. “Wait, you were serious about that?”

Zuko grimaced. “We need help, Toph. Wherever we can get it.”

“Little problem with that, Sparky. You know, the whole blah-de-babble-blah thing?”

“Uncle always said that the spirits were beyond the limitations of language. Didn’t Aang say he was able to talk to a monkey in the Spirit Realm?” Zuko shrugged. “But if they don’t have any sages…”

“Yeah. Nix that idea.” Toph shook her head. “So they really don’t have benders here?”

How had she… right, that silly superstition about benders somehow being more spiritual than non-benders.

Zuko didn’t buy that for a moment. For one thing, if you accepted that premise, then you also accepted that Azula, Ozai, and Zhao were somehow “more spiritual” than, say, Master Piandao. Or Guru Pathik.

Yeah. Right.

Well… Zhao did believe in spirits. If that’s your definition of spiritual, though…

But even if her logic was a little off… Toph was right. These people really didn’t seem to have benders, as strange as that seemed. He just… couldn’t see a bender living in a city like that. There was nothing elemental about it at all.

Just like the mountain base where Sam and Janet and their people seemed to live. Even in the middle of a mountain… it didn’t feel like Earth, not with all the metals and the natural stone usually covered over by the false stone that Toph loved to poke so much. No Water, and as for Air and Fire…

Zuko sighed, folding his legs to sink into a sitting position. The sun felt incredible, and he hadn’t realized how much he’d missed the sounds of living things going about their lives around him. But he was still tired. Elemental deprivation didn’t go away that fast, healing or not.

…huh.

“If they don’t have benders,” he said slowly, “then they’ve probably never even heard of elemental deprivation.”

It wasn’t like nonbenders got it. Sure, a nonbender usually wasn’t happy if they were cut off from their nation’s element – but given the sort of circumstances actually separating someone from an
element took, they usually had plenty of other reasons to be upset.

Toph was quiet for a long minute, before puffing her cheeks out in a huge sigh as she dropped down to the stone next to him. “Drat. I hate apologies.”

“Don’t apologize, then,” Zuko said, before he could really think about it.

Toph tilted her head in his direction. “Oh?”

He hesitated, weighing that reflexive answer. “Maybe we didn’t explain well enough. But we told them. Maybe next time, they’ll actually listen to us.”

“Next time?”

His hands tightened into fists. “…I want to go home,” he said, flatly.

It had been a week. They’d only planned to be gone for three days – a day to get there, a day to explore, a day to come home. By now, Aang would have arrived, and Katara and Sokka would be worrying…

*Uncle. He’s going to be going crazy. Even if he hides it with tea. Not the least because Iroh did not want to be Fire Lord – but if Zuko was missing, he’d have to take up the reins, at least temporarily. And if word that I’m missing gets out – there’s going to be a panic. Please, please let them be keeping things calm…*

Toph nodded emphatically. “Yeah,” she said. “Been great and all, but the others are going to go bonkers – and that’s no fun if we don’t get to be there to enjoy it!” She stretched her arms out. “Well, now that the yukiuso’s out of the ring, we can push them a lot harder.”

Zuko hesitated. “What did happen?” he asked at last. “I… kind of missed how it ended.” To be honest, he didn’t really remember anything after settling into the modified Breath of Fire meditation.

Toph’s grin had a vicious edge. “Well, turns out Sam and Captainlady – the bad guy who came after us – had some ideas about dealing with spirits. They tweaked one of those firebending staves, and then we set up an ambush for it…”

Listening to her gleeful retelling of the adventure, Zuko grinned a little and settled back to soak up sunlight, although he kept an ear out for the sounds of small creatures moving about in the brush. This sort of terrain often had snake-vermin drifting around. That was one problem they really didn’t need…

Something bounced out of tree cover, rooting around at the base of a bush. It clearly hadn’t expected any humans; it froze, puffy tail twitching madly as it stared at them with large black eyes.

Zuko stared back, in sheer disbelief.

Then it turned and darted away.

Toph cleared her throat. “Um, Sparky?” she said slowly, looking baffled. “What was that?”

“…I think it was a *squirrel*,” he said slowly.

“You mean a squirrefox?”

“Nope.”
Very, very slowly, her head tipped to one side. “A squirrelchuck?”

“Nope.”

Her eyebrows rose a little. “A bat-squirrel?”

“Nope.”

“Just a squirrel?”

“Yep.”

“…This place is weird.”

“Very.”

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~

And there they are, Janet thought, as she rounded the last bend on the old, overgrown trail and the two craggy spires of the Horns came into sight – along with the small ledge halfway up their length, with two dark-topped bits of color perched on it.

A ledge that hadn’t been there the last time she’d been out this way.

Note to self, she thought wryly, tipping her head back to study the formation’s latest addition. She was fiercely grateful for her sunglasses and broad-brimmed hiking hat. It was nearly noon at this point, and while the warmth of the sun was welcome against the mid-October cool, the blazing light was brutal, especially at this altitude. Remind her to put that back where she found it when they’re done. The tourists would probably notice.

Thankfully, hikers weren’t that common, even around a relatively famous landmark like the Horns. No one wanted to accidentally wander into NORAD’s turf.

Speaking of. Reaching into the pocket of her jacket, she pulled out her cell phone and dialed.

“I found them, Jack.” And thank goodness for seismometers. They’d always kept an eye on the Mountain, seismically – the Stargate could have unintended ripple effects, and with a structural instability in the mountain right over the base, well, a little caution was a good thing.

We’d never have found the Antarctic Gate without that…

And they’d probably never have found Zuko and Toph, either. She never would have believed Toph could have taken the two of them this far, this fast – and all of it through solid stone. But it had been solid stone, meaning the SGC had been able to track their general location, more or less.

Through the speaker, Jack growled eloquently. “You tell them…”

“I’ll be the judge of what to tell them,” she told him crisply, putting every bit of her authority as Doctor into it. Jack had not been pleased to be informed that he was not to come with Janet on this little hike.

Too bad. Jack did not deal well with having his authority challenged. Toph was frightened, upset,
and her friend and only ally was very, very sick. And like most blind people, she was highly sensitive to any implicit threats. If Jack came up storming up here spoiling for a fight, she’d give it to him. Probably by punting him off the cliff.

Don’t fight someone who can make the ground under your feet into a weapon. Janet paused, running her eyes around the craggy, rugged terrain with a new sort of wary appreciation. Particularly when she gets to pick the battleground.

She didn’t think Toph would do serious harm to anyone on purpose, unless she were forced into it. On the other hand… Teal’c had already verified that these two were used to other people being rather tougher than normal humans. Accidental damage because she didn’t realize how much she needed to pull her blows was a distinct possibility.

Well. With any luck, Janet still counted among the people that Toph considered at least somewhat trustworthy. She hoped so, at any rate. If Zuko had gone into a second seizure…

Don’t borrow trouble, it really doesn’t need the help.

Tucking her phone away – she’d handle Jack’s ruffled feathers later – she hiked her pack up to a more comfortable spot on her shoulders, and began working her very careful way up the slope to the towering formation that served Cheyenne Mountain as a lesser peak.

And serves them as a very defensible hideout, she acknowledged wryly, coming to the base of the looming crag and tilting her head back again to regard it ruefully. There was no climbing that for her – not without a mountaineering rig, a spotter, a belay line, and considerably more time and energy than she wanted to put into it.

She shook her shoulders out – the pack was heavy, and even taking a car along the old abandoned highway up to the ruins of the resort lodge, it had been quite a hike to get this far.

Although a very pleasant one. Which was probably half the reason Jack was cranky. Janet got to go for a hike in the mountains on a beautiful autumn morning. Jack got to stay in the mess Sam’s team and the yukiuso had made of the SGC and fend off a very curious NORAD – and possibly the NID.

Time to see if Jack’s right about the universe-spanning power of advertising jingles. Raising her hand, she knocked out Shave and a Haircut on the stone. The sound was startlingly quiet-

Knocking on solid stone? What did you expect, booms?

Shaking her head at her own foolishness, Janet waited.

And waited.

…Do I knock again? What if Toph didn’t notice?

No. No, Toph had picked up on Zuko knocking on the corridor wall in the ha’tak from floors and floors away, in the middle of a chaotic escape. There was no way she’d missed Janet’s signal – not when Janet had hiked over a large expanse of craggy terrain to get this far.

She probably knew I was coming before I saw them. No, they knew she was here. She just needed to wait while they decided what to do about it, and hope-

The stone under her feet shot upward.

After Toph’s improvised elevators in the ha’tak, Janet had half-expected it. She still yelped, falling
forward onto hands and knees as what had been solid stone ground its way upward with a rattle of small stones.

*I imagine the park rangers would have something to say about damage to priceless national landmarks!*

The stone came to a stop. Janet swallowed dryly, and concentrated on just breathing for a bit before she tried to do anything too complicated, like moving.

*Didn’t quite realize how high up this was.*

And no, that wasn’t a trick of the wind in her ears. She was definitely hearing a not-very-muffled girlish snicker.

Before she could come up with an appropriately biting response to that, someone sighed wearily. “Toph…” When she looked up, surprised, Zuko was standing where their ledge met with her elevator-stone, hand extended.

*He’s conscious. Thank goodness.* The dazed state of altered consciousness that often followed a seizure could last up for twenty-four hours – but apparently his recovery had been relatively quick. Nodding her gratitude, Janet accepted the assist, and tried not to give in to the urge to look back and watch as the stone that had lifted her up slid downward again. She knew she was on a small ledge in the middle of what amounted to the face of a cliff. She didn’t need to rub it in.

And… she blinked as Zuko released her wrist to sink back down to a cross-legged sitting position against the sunwarmed stone. They were still high in the Rocky Mountains, in mid-October. There was a definite bite to the air. But Zuko’s fingers had been warm, with no sign of the hypothermia that had been setting in. There was a flush of healthy color in his face again. And the eyes that met hers were bright and clear.

Although there was definitely a shadow of wariness lurking in them. Sighing, Janet sat down – the ledge was larger than she’d expected, but three people was still a bit of a squeeze. And sitting felt much more stable.

*Although, wow. What a view.* And so much for even trying to pretend that they were still in Kansas. She doubted they’d seen anything like a modern city, even a relatively modest one like Colorado Springs.

She looked at Toph – the blind girl was tucked back against the stone next to Zuko. Smirking. “You. I am very upset with you,” she said sternly.

Toph sniffed disdainfully, turning her nose up in the air and away from Janet.

She shook her head and tried not to smile. Toph had terrified her. Even if she sympathized.

“Well,” she said, grabbing her pack and pulling it off. “I imagine you’re both hungry.” Although she was amused to see that they had, indeed, kept the IV bag, hanging it up on a convenient spur of rock that she was fairly certain hadn’t been there before this makeshift balcony had been made. But the bag had mostly run down at this point – and an IV wasn’t food.

Now it was her turn not to laugh, when they both perked up as she pulled power bars and water bottles out and passed them around. Keeping some for herself as well – it had been a long hike.

*Although the contents of the water bottles got some distinctly startled reactions – and yes, Janet smirked at Toph’s barely suppressed spittake. Clearly, they’d expected plain water – not lemonade*
with a bit of salt in it.

Ah, payback. In the form of electrolytes, water, and just enough sweet to make it go down smooth. Made from scratch, thank you – much safer than, say, Gatorade, when she was dealing with stomachs that had probably never met the sort of insane chemicals used to color foods that most Americans learned to stomach as children bolting down Fruit Loops.

Speaking of… she deftly snagged her own powerbar away from grabbing fingers. “Oh no. Mine,” she said firmly, in the face of that unrepentant grin.

After that, it was simple enough to convince them to let her finally remove the IV and give Zuko a fairly basic medical exam, to assess the damage. Which had, after all, been half the point.

Sharing food, drink, and friendly showing off. The most basic way of dealing with intergroup tensions throughout human history, according to Daniel. Zuko and Toph might not have been human, but their psychology definitely was analogous enough for the rule to apply to them, too.

The results of the exam, however, were nothing like what she’d expected.

Far from being hypothermic, the boy’s core temperature was back up. Higher, in fact, than it had been since he’d worn himself thin helping to seal the yukiusu in the freezer, although behavioral cues – the way he shifted to catch as much sunlight as possible, and kept the blanket wrapped tight – suggested that it was still a little low by his standards. His heartbeat was back to a steady, even rhythm, with no sign of the arrhythmia that had been troubling her. His pulse was a little slow, but that wasn’t surprising in someone as athletic as he was. And there was no sign of the dizzy spells he’d been fighting so hard to hide.

What on earth happened? It’s like the naquadah deprivation just reversed itself!

Hopefully the blood sample she took at the end of the exam would provide some sort of explanation. She labeled it carefully, made sure it was packed securely and padded, and then turned her attention to Toph.

Toph’s condition was about what she’d expected. Which was to say, utterly exhausted, and trying to put a brave face on it. Pale. A slight hint of tremors in her hands, when she didn’t hide it.

We need to keep a closer eye on her, Janet realized with a chill. Zuko’s flames were bright and attention-grabbing, but…

How many tons of stone has she moved in just the last twelve hours? Up and down and up the width and depth of the SGC, half of the time with a malign energy-being nipping at her heels. Without bringing the entire Mountain down on their heads – that had to take precision, which meant intense concentration on top of whatever raw energy requirements the geokinesis demanded. And then carrying herself and Zuko several miles to the Horns.

For crying out loud, she has to use her telekinesis just to see. It has to be draining.

True, Toph didn’t seem to be suffering the naquadah depletion that Zuko was – and Janet wished she knew why! If she could just figure that out, she might have a chance of buying the boy a little more time! – but…

She may have held out longer than Zuko. And she’s doing her best to hide it. But she’s reaching the end of her rope, fast.

Janet wrestled down the worry. There wasn’t much she could do about it – and especially not out
Although she could at least do something about the shiny pink that was blooming across Toph’s fair-skinned face and arms, consequence of having already spent several hours sitting in the sun.

*Which is only going to get worse if they stay out here,* Janet admitted ruefully, pulling a very large bottle out of her hiking pack.

She was a redhead, and she worked and lived in Colorado Springs, over a mile above sea level, where the atmosphere was too thin to do more than take the edge off of the UV rays. *Yes,* she carried obscene amounts of sunscreen, and lotion for the consequences when she didn’t apply enough. Along with a wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses.

Toph grimaced extravagantly as Janet leaned forward and began applying the lotion to the girl’s face. Janet couldn’t help chuckling ruefully; aloe vera was *pungent.*

At least it was only aloe vera. She’d gotten into the habit with Cassie; the girl couldn’t stand the chemical smell of most commercial lotions, and frankly, there were enough complex organic chemicals in most sunscreens that she was a little leery about using them even on offworld humans, let alone whatever Zuko and Toph were.

“Oh, stop complaining,” she said lightly, tapping the slightly reddened tip of Toph’s nose with an aloe-covered finger and leaving a blob behind. Toph wrinkled her nose and reached up to rub it off.

“No you don’t. Leave that alone,” Janet chuckled, shooing the hand away as she worked on spreading the blob evenly. Ignoring Toph’s gusty Sigh of Long-Sufferance – like Jack, the girl did it so well that the sound *demanded* its own capital letters – she looked over her shoulder at Zuko, who was watching the two of them with clear amusement. “So when will the two of you come back?” she asked.

Zuko blinked, eyes narrowing every so slightly in concentration. Janet knew that expression by now; it meant he understood that what she’d said was important, he just didn’t have enough context to tease out her meaning.

*Blast.* This wasn’t like the banter earlier. That was more like the sort of bedside conversation one would have with a dazed patient; *what* was said didn’t matter nearly so much as *how* it was said, in terms of tone and body language. But this time, she needed them to understand what she was actually saying.

“Go,” she said, and pointed back in the general direction of the SGC. …*And they don’t actually know the name of the base, do they? We never bothered to tell them. Oops.* “Um… go back. Go inside.” She turned her left hand fingers-down so that her thumb and forefinger formed a little archway, and ‘walked’ the fingers of her right hand through it. “When?” she concluded, pointing at the sun and raising her eyebrows, grateful beyond words that *when,* at least, was one of the words that the children had figured out over the past few days.

*And, Daniel’s complaints aside, I’m glad the pidgin we’ve come up with is mostly them learning English, and not the other way around, or this would be even harder.*

“*Hi-gureh,*” Zuko said firmly, and frowned slightly, obviously trying to think of a way to translate what he’d said into a gesture. Finally, he reached up, squinting against the bright light, and made a pinching sort of motion, as though holding a penny by its edges. He swept that hand in an arc down to the side, where his other hand was held flat and level. Once his moving hand crossed under the line of his level hand, he stopped. “*Hi-gureh,*” he repeated.
Janet pursed her lips, thinking. *Fall? Arc? No, those don’t make any sense. Okay, context. What can he be doing that refers to time…*

She blinked and glanced up. Not all the way; even with polarized sunglasses, looking directly at the sun was a **bad** idea…

*Oh. She nearly smacked herself on the forehead – and might have, if she weren’t helping Toph apply the aloe to the back of her neck now. The sun. He was miming the sun’s motion! And he was moving it towards the west, so the flat hand was… the horizon. Sunset!*

*Hi-zashi oh miseteh, isn’t that what Toph’s been insisting on for the past few days? I wonder if hi means something like sun…*

Janet froze for a moment. Looked at Toph, with her fair skin already showing the first signs of sunburn. Looked at the equally fair-skinned Zuko.

**Dear Lord. I think we’ve been misinterpreting what they wanted this entire time. What if…**

“All right,” she said, coming to a decision with a snap. Jack would be distinctly displeased – he wanted the children back under his protective eye ASAP. But if she was right, there was a very good reason for what Zuko was asking.

**Even if it makes no sense. It wouldn’t be the first time we had to tell scientific knowledge to take a hike.**

Speaking of. Shaking her head, she stood. “Make sure to come back as soon as the sun sets,” she said, pointing at the sun and then to the west, to show that she’d gotten the message. At least, with the bulk of the mountain in that direction, sunset would come relatively early.

Shouldering her pack – much lighter now – she pointedly set the last two water bottles in a small cubby formed by the rough stone wall. It wasn’t much shade, but better than leaving them in the direct sun. “I need to go. Make sure to drink that,” she said sternly. Then, after a moment’s hesitation, she took off her broad-brimmed hiking hat and dropped it on Toph’s head. The girl would need it more than Janet would, if the two were really planning on staying out on this ledge all day.

*And maybe it’ll convince her to get out of the sun, or she’s going to really resemble cooked lobster by the time they get back.*

When Janet stepped to the edge of the ledge, Toph made a few quick, sharp gestures. Although now that Janet was paying attention… She had to suppress a wince. There was an unevenness to Toph’s movements that she was **very** certain hadn’t been there when she’d first met the girl. If she didn’t need the help of Toph’s telekinesis to get off this ledge…

Worry later, she told herself, as her stone elevator began to slide downward again. *Right now, you need to get your arguments in place. You have a very cranky colonel to hit over the head.*

~*Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.*~

*Ugh. Need to find the receipt for today so I can return it to the vendor, Sam thought in disgust, fighting the urge to cross her arms on the conference table, rest her head on them, and close her eyes for forty winks. A satisfied customer I am not.*
She’d gotten up at oh-insane-hundred hours, when *this morning* fell more under the category of *last night*, in order to meet their Tok’ra contact. Never something to look forward to, that, although Nekht had been trying even by Tokra standards.

After that, she’d masterminded a plan to take out a killer incorporeal entity, carried it out, helped sit on an irate colonel and prying NID inspectors, and helped Janet run a very *interesting* series of mineral analyses, since the infirmary’s equipment was down until the technicians finished assessing the damage hypercooling had done to some of it.

At least she’d gotten a *little* sleep. General Hammond had insisted, once he’d gotten the basics: *yukiuso kawooshed, kids outside but safe, NID shoood.* Tired people made mistakes, and the SGC wasn’t out of the fire yet.

So she wasn’t falling asleep on her feet. Still, she rather wished at the moment that *she* were out there taking a nap in the sun, too.

“*And you just left them* there.”

*Focus, Sam.* Sighing internally, she straightened and made herself tune back in on the conversation. And did her best not to edge her chair slightly away. A dissatisfied O’Neill took up a lot of space, and they didn’t have that much to spare at the moment. The conference room was not a small space, but it still had its limits, and with all of SG-1 gathered, plus General Hammond, Janet, and Sanura, things were getting just a little crowded *without* Jack being in a snit, however justified.

It didn’t help that Teal’c had taken it upon himself to dig Sanura’s clothing out of storage and return it to her. She wasn’t in armor, at least, but… Sam was pretty sure she wasn’t the only member of the SGC twitching whenever she saw the Jaffa out of the corner of her eye unexpectedly.

Janet wasn’t twitching, though. “They’ll come back once the sun sets,” she said firmly. “And they have a very good reason for that…”

“*Good reason. Right.*” Sam found herself glancing at the table in front of Jack, as though the sarcasm in his tone might physically drip down and corrode the tabletop. “So tell me, why are we letting Little Miss Badass Not-My-Boss get away with blowing us off and leaving a giant hole through half of the Mountain after we told her *no*?”

Not fair. Most of the holes in the SGC were left over from Sanura and Teal’c’s mad dash from the hallway outside the infirmary to the Gateroom. After they’d calmed down, Toph had been too eager to get back to her friend to bother putting things back to rights… and to be fair, Sam hadn’t exactly been complaining.

Janet met Jack’s eyes squarely. “She was desperate, Jack. Zuko was dying, and we weren’t listening.”

“And that would be my fault,” Daniel admitted quietly, eyes locking on his notepad.

Sam leaned forward. She’d helped Janet run the mineral analysis, yes, but she didn’t yet have the whole picture. She didn’t know why Janet had returned from the Horns without the kids, and with a stormy look on her face that said she was beating herself up for missing something that should have been obvious, much as when she’d realized that histamine inhibitors were all it took to grant immunity to the Neanderthal virus. Or why Daniel had suddenly looked just as stricken, after Janet had pulled him aside for a brief consult that had involved flipping all over the place through the notepads he was keeping for the kids’ language.
Jack also leaned forward, his brow furrowed. “Wait, wait, back up a second. How did this suddenly become your fault?” he demanded.

Daniel sighed, rubbing his forehead. “I jumped to the wrong interpretation,” he admitted reluctantly, and finally looked up from his notes, to glance at Teal’c. “Do you remember when we talked about the Gate translation protocols?”

“I do.” Teal’c inclined his head. “You spoke of your role as being one who interprets the part of a language that goes beyond words, as idioms and cultural assumptions.” His eyes glinted amusement. “Much as the speech of Colonel O’Neill is difficult to comprehend without careful study of Tau’ri culture.”

Hammond snorted. “We all have trouble understanding the colonel when he gets going, son,” he said dryly, as Jack pretended he wasn’t preening.

Daniel smiled faintly. “That’s pretty much it. Languages are idiomatic. Which means when I’m working on the fly and don’t have time to really dig in – I have to do a lot of guessing, based on context more than literal words. Which… can lead to bad habits.” He looked back at his notes. “Hizashi o misete. That’s what Toph kept asking. The trick is, as near as I can tell, what that actually means is Let us see sunlight. I just took that to mean…”

“That they wanted fresh air. Makes sense to me.” Jack crossed his arms, frowning – but he’d backed off his combative tone, and the frown was more thoughtful than angry. “Granted, sounds like something out of Shakespeare, but…”

“But you don’t think that’s what she really meant,” Sam guessed, looking from Janet to Daniel and back. Let us see sunlight? Add that to Janet’s comment about the children coming back after sunset, and having a good reason… “You think she meant it literally?”

Janet nodded. “I need you all to bear with me for a minute or two here,” she warned them, lacing her fingers together on the tabletop. “To start off… one of the things that’s been nagging me is the fact that Toph’s naquadah levels haven’t been dropping nearly as fast as Zuko’s, despite the fact that she uses her telekinesis at least as much as he does.”

As evidenced by the holes in the SGC. And the fact that the girl saw with her feet. Sam nodded.

Hammond did as well. “Your report hypothesized that she was… biosynthesizing it somehow.” He frowned. “I was under the impression that wasn’t possible.”

“It shouldn’t be,” Sam admitted. “Naquadah is a superheavy element, yes, but it’s still an element. It would be like turning lead into gold.” If the girl really did biosynthesize it… either there was some sort of compound that replicated naquadah near-perfectly, or naquadah wasn’t actually an element at all, at least not the way they defined elements.

Sam’s vote actually went to the latter. There were limits to what even a supernova could create in terms of heavy elements. For naquadah to be a super-heavy element, and yet be as common as it was… it just didn’t make sense.

Then again, this is Stargate Command. Check your common sense at the door, please… Gah. I’m channeling Jack again.

“Toph could biosynthesize it – or something – and Zuko couldn’t,” Daniel concluded. “You said he might have some sort of… deficiency or something that inhibited his ability to biosynthesize? A bit like… childhood diabetes?”
Janet nodded. “Something like that, yes. That was my guess.” She took a deep breath. “Given what I know now, I’ve changed my theory. Yes, there was a deficiency… but it was external, not internal. Zuko didn’t have the right environmental conditions.”

“…And Toph did?” Sam said, knowing her eyebrow was going up skeptically. “That doesn’t make sense.”

“Doesn’t it?” Janet leaned forward. “We’ve assumed that their abilities are the same, and that the only difference lies in their styles.”

“Are you saying it doesn’t?” Sam asked. Because Toph and Zuko used very different martial arts forms as the basis for controlling the telekinesis. They had no other functional difference between the two to explain why one was a geokinetic and the other was a pyrokinetic.

Out of the corner of her eye, she glimpsed the suddenly thoughtful turn to Jack’s frown. Blinking, Sam turned her head to look at him. “Sir?”

Jack shrugged. “Yeah, I’d agree that their magic kung fu fighting has distinctly different forms. But… back in the infirmary, Zuko moved the heat away from the radiator to keep Siler from scorching himself.” He waved his hands in the air in a surprisingly graceful sort of pull-push gesture. “Looked way more like Tai Chi than any of his normal moves.”

Sam blinked. “Tai Chi,” she echoed. Because it was hard to imagine a style any less like Zuko’s sharp, aggressive, almost staccato forms.

“Exactly,” Janet said with a nod. “Even then, he was still manipulating thermal energy. What he manipulated didn’t change.” Her lips pursed. “There’s also the fact that we know there’s a biofeedback element, if Toph’s using her geokinesis to see.”

Hammond frowned. “And your point, doctor?”

Janet spread her hands. “I think we need to consider the possibility that the difference between pyrokinesis and geokinesis isn’t the result of training, at least not entirely. It may be genetically determined.”

Teal’c slowly nodded. “In other words – they are born to their particular abilities, rather than choosing them.”

Jack’s eyebrows rose. “In that case, it’s probably not coincidence that the geokinetic has green eyes and the pyro has yellow. They’re color-coded for your convenience!”

Daniel nodded earnestly. “It would make sense – if there is a genetic link between eye color and ability, then it would serve as a visible indicator of a genetic predisposition. Which probably helps explain the different cultures,” he added thoughtfully. “Odds are, the pyrokinitics and, well, geokinetics tended to marry each other, and they just drifted apart until they were completely different cultures. Obviously interconnected, but visible differences and the psychokinetic differences would have helped keep them mixed rather than blending…”

Jack blinked at him. “Danny.”

“What?”

“…Never mind.”

Ignoring the familiar back-and-forth bickering, Sam considered what she’d seen the kids do, and
slowly nodded. “That makes sense,” she agreed. “But I don’t see what that has to do with the naquadah. The source of their abilities doesn’t change. At least, so far as we understand it.”

“We don’t know how the naquadah interacts with their abilities,” Janet replied dryly. “I can’t begin to imagine how that actually works. Let alone this biosynthesis aspect.”

And that right there was why Sam was a physicist, and not a doctor. Even when it felt like the Stargate Program twisted the arm of physics, made it cry, and stole its lunch money – she knew that if she could just figure it out, everything would fall into a beautiful, sensible pattern. Nothing like the mess that was misbehaving biology. Medicine was only partially science. A frightening amount of it fell much closer to the category of art.

Sanura cleared her throat. “I believe that one is not normally born requiring different environmental factors, either.”

Janet visibly braced herself. “Not directly. But the fact that their abilities are inborn plays into the next bit.” Raising her chin, she met Sam’s gaze almost apologetically. “I know you’ve been having trouble coming up with parameters to define what Toph can and can’t use her psychokinesis on…”

Sam grimaced.

Janet shifted her gaze to Jack and Hammond. “We’ve been trying to explain what they do according to scientific, reductionist models. I want to propose a thought experiment.” She raised an eyebrow. “Try thinking mystically. Specifically, the Classical Elements.”

Daniel opened his mouth, raising a finger – then hesitated. Slowly lowered his hand as he closed his mouth and tipped his head to the side. “…Which also existed in Ancient China, and other places,” he said slowly.


“I don’t know… aero, maybe?” the anthropologist said teasingly, poking at Jack’s USAF coffee mug.

Jack slapped his hand over his face. “…I knew that,” he muttered. “And give that back!”

Daniel pointedly took a thoughtful sip of the stolen coffee. “But they might not have… well, aerokinetics,” he said. “There’s a distinctly Asian flavor to their language and customs – and appearance, for that matter. And a lot of Asian cultures also use a five-element system, with Wood and Metal rather than Air.”

Jack made a face, snatching his mug away the instant Daniel set it on the table. “That makes no sense,” he said, eyeing the contents of the mug with a frown.

_We’re talking about pre-scientific esoterica. What sort of sense is it supposed to make?_ Sam thought in frustration, keeping tired fingers defensively locked around her own mug. Daniel usually knew better than to poach from her after a long day, but they’d all had a long day, and it didn’t look inclined to wind down soon. Normal rules didn’t always apply under stress.

But, classical elements? Seriously?

Janet gave her another I know it makes no sense, but I need you to bear with me for a minute sort of look. “Toph’s geokinesis makes sense, in that context,” she argued. “She doesn’t manipulate minerals, or things in a particular state – she manipulates Earth.” She spread her hands. “And for the
past week, she’s been in the heart of a mountain. *Surrounded* by Earth.”

Sam frowned. “So you think naquadah is a bit like… vitamin D? Only instead of needing sunlight, you need your own elem…”

*Oh.*

Janet must have seen the light going on in Sam’s startled expression, because she nodded before turning her gaze on the others. “Exactly like that – except, Zuko isn’t Earth. He’s *Fire.*”

“And the only flames he has seen since arriving on Earth were his own, or candles,” Teal’c said with a nod. “I doubt that would be sufficient.”

“And if you want the ultimate source of *heat, light,* and *energy*…” Janet spread her hands. “You need the sun.”

Jack waved his hands in the air. “Wait, wait. Are you telling me that this was all about some… elemental dependency? That the kid was going anemic because he wasn’t getting a chance to *sunbathe?*”

“You tell me,” Janet tapped a finger on the papers she’d spread in front of her. “You know what sort of condition Zuko was in, even before the attack. Now… I wasn’t able to do a thorough exam, of course. But he had color in his face and a stable, strong pulse, so his circulation had definitely improved. His heart rate had stabilized. His body temperature was back up – I’d consider it normal in a human at this point, although I suspect for him, that’s still a little low.” She paused. “I don’t want to make too many promises, neurological issues are *ugly,* but he also showed no signs of dizzy spells, let alone another epileptic fit. Likely because his naquadah levels were back up. That, I was able to verify using the blood samples I took. And…” She looked at Sam.

Sam rubbed her eyebrows. “So that’s why you asked me to check the logs,” she said, looking down at her own notes.

“Logs?” Sanura asked. “So you have kept them under surveillance as well.” She chuckled dryly when they all turned startled gazes at her. “Yes, I did see the recording device in the cell. Indeed, I assumed as much even without seeing it. Keeping watch on what prisoners and guests do when left alone is simply good sense.”

“Guess that explains why the Goa’uld don’t do it,” Jack said, snippily cheerful-

“The System Lords? They do.”

Sam felt her stomach lurch. Hers weren’t the only eyes widening around the room, either.

Sanura looked at their faces, and snorted. “How did you think I learned the slang of the Tau’ri?” she asked dryly. “The Wise One has collected prison logs and surveillance records since the demise of Ra. He wished to ensure that we could speak on equal terms, once the time came for our paths to cross.” She looked at Sam. “So what is it that were you looking for?”

It took Sam a minute to shift mental gears. *Djehuty* planned *to negotiate with us? From the start?*

Oddly enough, she was inclined to believe that claim. It was certainly consistent with the “Wise One” from Sanura’s story about the destruction of Dhorisha and her vengeance. But *nothing* like what had actually happened on P4X-684.

*They sure as hell weren’t trying to talk to us then. Why?*
Later. Better to focus on one topic at a time. Jotting a note, Sam cleared her throat. “Sleep cycles,” she explained, finding the report she’d put together at Janet’s request and pulling it out to regard the list of dates and times with new eyes before looking at General Hammond. “Sir? Every day they’ve been here – every single day – Zuko’s woken up either right before, or precisely at, sunrise.”

Hammond looked at her for a long moment. “In the heart of the Mountain,” he said carefully.

Sam nodded. “On a world where he’d never seen the sky, and certainly wouldn’t know the day-night cycles.” She tapped the edge of the paper. “There’s more, too. I can’t believe I didn’t realize it earlier – they use that ability, Sir, just like they use Toph’s magnetic sense to track directions. Only with Zuko, he uses it to tell time.”

“They sleep in shifts.” Teal’c straightened in his chair. “Zuko holds the first watch, until midnight. Then he rests while Toph stands guard, until he awakens. And yet, they cannot read the clocks in their room.”

“What’s so hard about the clocks? They’re analog,” Jack asked. “Something about disinfectants and digital circuitry.”

Ah yes. After the Neanderthal Virus incident… Janet had pulled out the medical heavy artillery to disinfect the entire base. It had not been pretty.

Daniel snorted. “What, you don’t remember learning to read clocks in first grade? They’re like maps, Jack. It’s a culturally determined depiction of time. They make sense to us because we grow up with them. Not to mention that clocks only work if you can see them.”

Sam looked at Janet. “We already know Toph senses the geomagnetic poles,” she said slowly. “If Zuko really does have a… an elemental, physiological connection to the sun…” Which made no scientific sense, darn it, but in the face of the evidence…

“Then it seems logically possible that Zuko would be able to sense the sun in much the same way,” Janet said, nodding.

Jack was scratching at the back of his head with a bemused look that said he was just waiting for the Candid Camera crew to leap out from under the table or something. Finally, however, he sighed. “So. Long story short – we want to keep those two healthy, it’s not going to be enough to toss them in the botany lab to soak in some full-spectrum lamplight. We’ll need to let Zuko greet the sun every now and then.”

“As a doctor, I’m going to have to insist on it,” Janet said, flatly. “Every day, if possible.”

Jack shook his head. “Man. Never would have taken him for a sun worshipper, pale as he is.”

“I’m not sure he can tan,” Janet said dryly. “If he does need to draw energy from sunlight, it would be counterproductive. And… well. He was out in direct Colorado sun all morning, at the top of a mountain. And I couldn’t find so much as a hint of sunburn. Toph was already turning pink in places.”

“Did you check for chlorophyll?” Jack suggested innocently, and ducked when Janet mimed a swat at his head with her clipboard. “But – this is a good thing, right? So long as he can biosynthesize the naquadah he needs, the pressure’s off…” His words trailed off as Janet looked at him flatly.

“Doctor?” General Hammond prompted.

Janet sighed, rubbing her forehead. “They’re biosynthesizing naquadah,” she said pointedly. “I can’t
even begin to tell you how that works. It shouldn’t be possible. Minerals aren’t vitamins.” She let her hand drop. “What I can tell you is, so far as I’ve been able to observe, it seems to be an emergency survival reaction. If nothing else, it seems to send their other mineral levels absolutely haywire.”

Daniel cringed. “Starvation,” he said. “You can survive it – but your body starts, well, eating itself from the inside out to keep you going.”

“Exactly.” Janet shook her head. “I recommend a very high-mineral diet to supplement what they’re losing in the biosynthesis process… but even so?” She looked at General Hammond. “The naquadah biosynthesis is buying them time, sir. But starvation is a very appropriate analogy. It’s an emergency survival reaction, and it’s putting a huge strain on their bodies.” She leaned forward. “Sir, we need to get them home.”

Sanura cleared her throat. “Ah. That may be complicated.”

Sam turned her head to look sharply at the Jaffa. “How so?” she asked warily, suddenly remembering that, helpful as Sanura had been with the yukiuso, and as personable and cooperative as she’d been since, she was still the First Prime of a Goa’uld with unknown motivations and intentions.

Sanura met her gaze for a moment, then, unexpectedly, looked down at her hands, flattening them out on the table carefully. “I told you, the Wise One has wished to speak with you Tau’ri for some time,” she said. “But… the misunderstanding when we met in the ice world happened for a reason.”

Sanura met her gaze for a moment, then, unexpectedly, looked down at her hands, flattening them out on the table carefully. “I told you, the Wise One has wished to speak with you Tau’ri for some time,” she said. “But… the misunderstanding when we met in the ice world happened for a reason.”

Sanura turned her head to look sharply at the Jaffa. “How so?” she asked warily, suddenly remembering that, helpful as Sanura had been with the yukiuso, and as personable and cooperative as she’d been since, she was still the First Prime of a Goa’uld with unknown motivations and intentions.

Sanura’s fingers drummed against the table in a single wave before she stilled them. “To make a long story very short… it was not you I was looking for when we met in the mountains.”

Well, yes. Sam had hypothesized as much, given that the Jaffa team they’d met had seemed as surprised to see her and Janet as they’d been surprised to see the Jaffa… Wait. “So who were you looking for?”

Sanura raised her chin. “One of our teams went missing in those same mountains. Including Khenut – Djeuty’s former First Prime.”

Daniel blinked. “Former First Prime?”

“Thought that particular title generally was posthumous,” Jack agreed wryly.

Sanura shrugged. “Djeuty prefers to take a new Prime when he takes a new host,” she explained. “Khenut chose me to be her replacement.” She shook her head. “We found her glider landed deep in the mountains, with the engine running and the doors wide open, but no signs of any sort of fight, and no communication from them that anything unusual was happening… We had to assume they had encountered some form of trouble.” She looked at Sam and Janet, a bit of apology in her tone. “And not fifteen minutes out, we discovered the two of you. I am afraid that I jumped to conclusions.”

Sam winced. Given that she and Janet had jumped to more or less the same conclusion regarding the missing science team…

Uh-oh.
A team apparently walking out into lethal cold carrying nothing but whatever had been in their hands. No messages, no notes, no warnings. She’d heard that before.

And she’d also glanced over the report from the infirmary. *Voices where they shouldn’t be, that seem to just turn off the part of your brain that should be saying don’t listen.*

Only, something was nagging at her, that didn’t quite fit…

“Wait,” Janet said suddenly, straightening. “Our team went missing, too… but all of this happened before we crossed paths, yes?”

There was a hint of wryness in Sanura’s nod that made Sam suspect the Jaffa already knew where this was headed…

Oh. Oh.

Oh, she did not feel good.

“But we were already in the cells when Nekht had Zuko and Toph thrown in with us,” she said slowly, piecing the timeline together in her head and wincing as the glaring inconsistency came to light. “You went to their world after we were captured, didn’t you. And… that was the first time you opened the Gate there, correct?”

“First, and only,” Sanura said flatly.

Jack cursed. “Meaning, either we’ve got something else running around on Hoth… or this thing didn’t come from the kids’ world.”

Janet looked back and forth between them. “But that doesn’t make sense,” she objected. “Zuko and Toph knew about the yukiuso – its name, its abilities, its weaknesses. It has to be from their world!”

Daniel winced.

Teal’c looked at the anthropologist. “Daniel Jackson?”

Daniel held up a finger for a moment; *give me a minute, I need to think.* His other hand was flicking back and forth, as though physically shuffling thoughts and facts into place.

“A great deal of Goa’uld technology is derived from Ancient technology in some way,” he said slowly. “But Djehuty is the one who developed most of those derivations.” He flicked the pen in his fingers. “Djehuty also studies noncorporeal beings. Spirits, I suppose you could call them. Which apparently inhabit Dur’Asada… which can only be accessed through the Stargate on P4X-684.”

Sam frowned. *Where is he going with this?*


Sam suspected Daniel hadn’t even heard the interruption, as he bit his lip uneasily. “Sanura – do you know what that lab was meant to study?”

Sam stiffened. “Djehuty trained you in making weapons to fight incorporeal enemies. And you said that we’d be surprised what turned up in Ancient ruins.”

Smiling dryly, Sanura rested a finger against her temple for a moment before flicking it off, an unmistakable *you got it* sort of gesture. “I would say that you have already figured it out.”
“The laboratory was meant to study the spirit-beings of Dur’Asada,” Teal’c said. “And it is likely that they included specimens. Legends speak of time passing such beings by.”

Hammond winced. “Until our scientists began poking around, I would guess,” he said.

“Wouldn’t be the first time we pulled a Nekht and let a Jafar out of the lamp, sir,” Jack allowed, grimacing.

Sanura snorted. “That is not what worries me, however.”

“Oh?” Sam tried not to let her trepidation show.

From the way Sanura arched her eyebrows, she wasn’t that successful. “The entity was intelligent. And you said it could divide itself.”

“What does that have to do with…” Sam stopped. Cringed. “You think what we were dealing with was just a fragment. That the real yukiuso is still out there somewhere, on P4X-684.”

Teal’c nodded. “If I had the ability to become two? I would not send my entirety through a strange Stargate. Not when I already held such an advantage by remaining where I was.”

Jack sucked a breath through his teeth. “Oh boy. If that thing figures out we kawooshed its little amoeba-baby – or worse, if our bit of it isn’t actually dead, just got itself carried through the Gate to some other unsuspecting world…”

Well. That was one concern she could answer, at least. “If it did survive the kawoosh, it’s in no position to hurt someone where it is,” Sam said firmly. “The address we dialed was for an orbital Gate.”

Jack blinked at her. “…Orbital Gate?” he echoed, and looked at Daniel. “Did we know there were orbital Gates?”

“We do now,” Daniel said, his eyebrows having risen to hide under his bangs. “At least we didn’t have to lose an MALP to find out?”

Jack slowly shook his head. “Orbital Gates. Lovely. What’s the point? You can’t fly a glider through one of those things!”

“Thankfully,” Hammond muttered under his breath, not quite quietly enough to go unheard.

Sanura shook her head. “The Gatebuilders possessed small craft designed for such a purpose, apparently. And the System Lords also have developed a few small ships that can pass through the Stargate easily – and one or two others that can successfully cross if one does not mind repainting them.”

Hammond grimaced, and Sam knew her own face had paled slightly. Granted, anyone who tried to fly through the Stargate would end in a kamikaze smash on the wall, unless they either had very, very good brakes or flew through slowly…

**But they’d take out anyone in the Gateroom, and probably anyone in the command center. And depending on the size of the boom… Well. It had the potential to get very ugly.**

*They don’t even need to fly a ship. One missile fired through the Stargate… ugh. Bad thought. Witness Tonane’s arrow, shot through the wormhole, through bullet-proof glass, and straight through Jack’s arm. They were just lucky Jack hadn’t been standing about a foot farther to the right.*
We never did figure out how they managed to pull that off. Processed trinium was amazing stuff, lightweight and durable – but going through bulletproof glass wasn’t an issue of hardness, but of velocity. Lots and lots of velocity, given the lightweight nature of the material.

Janet had a troubled frown on her face. “But if the yukiuso gets stronger in the cold…”

“It would be consistent with folklore,” Daniel admitted. “It doesn’t quite make sense in terms of physics – you’d think it would have more energy to consume in a warmer environment – but…”

“But it shouldn’t be a problem, even so,” Sam said, a bit surprised that she even had to tell Janet this. As a physician, she knew about insulation. And as the SGC’s physician… well, maybe they hadn’t seen too many cases of hard decompression, but even so. “Cold is the transfer of thermal energy – but that Gate opened into hard vacuum. There’s nothing to transfer energy to or from. That’s why we use vacuum seals for insulation…”

She trailed off. Janet was shaking her head.

“Doctor Fraiser?” Teal’c prompted.

Janet looked at him, then at the rest of the people gathered around the conference table. “It’s not the fragment you sent into space that I’m worried about.”

Jack cursed, as Sanura grimaced.

“That is why I believe we may face some difficulties in returning the children to their world,” the Jaffa admitted.

“If what we faced was only a fragment of the yukiuso… then the rest of it stayed behind on P4X-684,” Sam said, swallowing hard. “Probably the bulk of it.” To think that what they’d faced might have just been a little splinter of a bigger problem. And worse… “On an ice planet. And it’s been loose, and maybe killing, for at least a week.”

“Exactly,” Sanura said flatly. “That is why I wish to return quickly. I am Urdu’s First Prime. He will need me.”

Urdu? It wasn’t that she hadn’t heard the name before, but… Wise One. Djejuty. Urdu. Nubiti. Why so many names for this Goa’uld?

She’d have to pick Daniel’s brain for that later – she’d seen him go for his pen out of the corner of her eye, so he’d noticed the inconsistency, too. For now…

Jack looked at Hammond. “Sir, requesting permission to accompany her.”

“Oh?” Sanura asked, before Hammond did more than raise an eyebrow.

Jack made a face. “If our scientists let this thing out, then this whole SNAFU is kind of our fault,” he said with obvious reluctance. “More importantly, we’ve got two sick kids who need to go home, and from the sound of it, you’re sitting on the only ticket there.”

“Permission granted,” Hammond said. “Doctor Fraiser, see if Zuko and Toph are ready for the trip when they get back.” He paused. “And for God’s sake, all of you, get some rest before you go,” he added dryly.

“One last question,” Sanura said, rising with the rest of them. “I must confess to curiosity – why in the Lady’s name do you call their world Dur’Asada?”
Hammond blinked at her, which echoed Sam’s reaction pretty well. “Nekht reported that it was the world’s name.”

Sanura blinked once, then slapped a hand over her face.

“What…” Daniel started, and then stopped, looking non-plussed. Sam didn’t blame him. The sound coming from between Sanura’s fingers sounded suspiciously like a *giggle*.

Teal’c cleared his throat. “I take it that he was mistaken.”

“Indeed. I knew he was foolish. But I thought he at least listened to mission briefings.” Sanura let her hand drop to show a wry grin. “The world’s name, as given by the Gatebuilders, is *Asunyti*. It means something like *place of spirits*, although for specifics you must speak to the Wise One.”

“And Dur’Asada?” Sam asked.

Sanura’s grin was all teeth. “It is a *warning*. Loosely translated to your Tau’ri terms? It means *Danger, Do Not Enter*.”

~~*Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.*~~

*Yowza. Cold.* Made Jack very, very happy they were geared up for arctic weather.

Not as nasty a cold as the yukiuso. P4X-684 wasn’t *trying* to kill them, after all. Maybe. Still, definitely a slap in the face after the comfortable SGC and the not-hot-not-cold whirl of the wormhole.

*Hey. Not underwater, not a room with no exit, not freaking outer space.* Shifting his grip on the P-90 – with the heavy gloves he was wearing, handling the thing got a little tricky – he stepped away from the Gate’s threshold, scanning the rocky, snowy valley. *Thus far, we’re ahead of the game.*

Sanura came next, moving to the other corner of the platform to stand guard, same as him. Which was a bit amusing, considering that half of what *he* was guarding against were her buddies. Wasn’t like a P-90 was going to bother Frosty much.

*But we didn’t get jumped straight out of the Gate – by Djehuty or Jack Frost.* At least that raised the odds of contacting the former without inciting SNAFU Round Two. A little.

*Not that I’m holding my breath.*

The kids came next. Zuko managed to cross the event horizon pretty smoothly for a first-time Stargate traveler – well, first time traveling on his own power, because apparently the kids had been unconscious when Sanura had picked them up, and flying through the Gate on the wings of something going boom in the middle of a wrestling match didn’t really count as *on your own power* either. He only stumbled for a step or two, rather like someone who’d missed a step on a staircase. Although his eyes were wide and his lips pressed together in a thin white line, inside the hood of his borrowed parka. It had taken some scrounging to find one roughly the kid’s size, and it made him look a year or three younger than the sixteen or seventeen-odd he seemed to be.

Then again, that thick coat was probably the only thing keeping the kid’s arm attached, given the white-knuckled death grip Toph had on it. The dainty demolitionist was distinctly green around the
gills. Zuko helped steady her for a step or two, enough to get out of the way, and then, to Jack’s
surprise, helped the girl drop down to hands and knees on the platform. Not the best thing to do if
someone was going to toss her cookies…

Oh, Jack thought with a bit of a wince, as Toph inhaled noisily through her nose and small fingers
dug straight into solid stone. Right.

The SGC didn’t exactly keep gear in size petite-twelve-year-old; in the end, Siler had made a run
down to town to acquire a kid’s heavy parka. He’d done pretty well in terms of size, but… Well.
When it came to coats for young girls, your choices were pretty much pink, pink, and ruffles with
pink.

Zuko’s reaction to seeing Toph in the coat had been… a little odd. Somewhere stuck right in the
middle between utter hilarity and I’m in hell.

Which was just weird. Sure, seeing the little tomboy in pink definitely was a little mind-boggling –
although the minute Jack had mentioned it, Danny had launched into a long, detailed lecture about
how gender-color associations were as culturally determined as clocks and maps, and in fact up until
about World War I or so pink had been associated with boys… Whatever. Point was, Toph looked
kind of silly – but for crying out loud, the girl was blind. Wasn’t like she was going to tear them to
pieces for color choice.

Zuko must know someone who likes pink, he decided, with a mental shrug.

However – along with the coat, Siler had been lucky enough to pick up a very good pair of winter
hiking boots in Toph’s size. Well. Jack thought it was lucky. They were going to an ice planet with a
Goa’uld who had to know they were coming, and very possibly an invisible Abominable Snowman.
They couldn’t afford to be giving piggyback rides. Which meant none of this running around
barefoot nonsense. Toph had clearly thought this was a horrible idea. It had taken wheedling, logic,
and a little shouting before Zuko had even convinced her to try them on – and by the glower on her
face, Jack had half-expected Toph to just kick the soles right off the shoes.

On the other hand – watching her move around once the shoes were on, he couldn’t blame her.
Whatever Toph did with her geokinesis to see, it clearly didn’t work so well through thick rubber
cleats. It had taken her a couple tries just to get her balance, and she was sticking to Zuko like a burr.
Whenever she wanted to check something out, she had to put a hand on the nearest wall.

And Gating’s had enough when you can see, Jack admitted to himself wryly. Hate to think what it
would feel like if you were blind. The wormhole had so many mixed messages – falling, rising,
racing, standing still…

Yeah. He didn’t blame the kid for being green.

Still, from the look of things, digging into the rock had helped a lot, because after a long moment,
Toph nodded, then reluctantly picked herself up, as the rest of SG-1 emerged from the Gate.

“Okay, people,” Jack said, keeping his voice pitched a little lower than normal. With this much bare
stone around, echoes were going to carry like whoa. “Let’s spread out a bit. I’d like to get a feel for
this place so that we’re ready when the welcome wagon gets here. Sanura – how soon do you think
it’ll take Djehuty to notice we’re here?”

The Jaffa snickered at him.

Jack blinked at her, then slowly turned and looked over his shoulder.
Overhead, the alien stars had the blazing brightness he associated with off-world, uninhabited planets, without any moonlight to drown them out – Jack couldn’t remember if this world even had a moon, but if it did, it either was in a new moon phase or it wasn’t above the horizon at the moment. Still, stars were a lot brighter than most people gave them credit for, and the pause to wait for everyone to come through the Gate had given his eyes enough time to adjust. So it didn’t take him long to spot the trailhead at one end of the valley. And the figure standing there.

Looked almost like a Jaffa, dressed in well-fitting cold-weather gear, arms crossed over his chest in a casual don’t mind me, I can wait all day sort of posture.

Jack had to give him credit. Snarking with body language took real skill.

Then his eyes settled on the man’s face, and his brain hit pause.

The Unas smiled, all pointy teeth and semi-reptilian yellow eyes. “Greetings,” he said mock-cheerfully, in oddly accented Abydonian. “I believe the appropriate phrase here is, Colonel O’Neill, I presume?”

NOTES: (because this installment went over the 5000 word limit. I use ”Ridiculously Long Notes” as a tag for a reason!

Firstly, a language note, or rather, rant… I do have one bit of pure, shameless self-indulgence here: yes, I’m using Sanskrit for Ancient, and never mind the canon claim that Ancient is “related to Latin.” I cannot buy that, at least not in the form that canon presents it. Latin in any sort of form that could be recognized as such? Developed long after Egypt was well established – probably no sooner than 800 BCE. Meaning, post-Goa’uld. The Ancient presence on Earth (at least in large enough numbers to affect language) predated the Goa’uld.

Now, related to Latin? Sure. In that Latin is an Indo-European language, and Indo-European (or at least Proto-Indo-European) might be stretched to fit the right time frame. Or at least, you can make an argument for Ancient developing into Indo-European. (Iffy. SG-verse suffers from a distinct case of Older Is Better, and trying to get that fit into known timelines and what we know about how cultures and languages develop… ow, my head.) The catch? Language evolution follows specific phonetic rules – which is how Daniel doing what he does in canon manages to be even handwave-level plausible. However, by that same token – you can get Latin out of Indo-European, sure. But you’re not going to get Indo-European out of a Latinesque language.

Of course, that argument applies to Sanskrit – but Vedic Sanskrit was first recorded mid-to-late second millennium BCE. Meaning, it was probably spoken early second millennium. So it’s at least 1000 years older. That at least allows it to rival Ancient Egyptian in terms of age! And unlike Proto-Indo-European, there’s enough of a vocabulary that I had a fighting chance of finding the words I wanted.

In conclusion: yes, I’m tweaking SG-1 canon slightly on that point.

A “shear zone” is a section of a mountain where massive amounts of stone are thinking seriously about bidding adieu to the mountain en masse. And there is indeed a shear zone right over the NORAD bunker. Held in place with a lot of iron bolts, pretty much. Yeep. There’s no way Toph would miss it!
If I’m going to go with elemental deprivation as a mechanic – and that is definitely a case of “canon has no solid evidence against it,” rather than “canon has solid evidence for it,” by the way – then Katara would have been suffering from it by the end of that trek through the desert. Not as badly as Zuko is here, due to other factors (specifically, food and water that probably has trace amounts of naquadah, meaning that benders aren’t usually completely dependent on biosynthesis to generate it), but… Suffice to say, she is one tough gal.

Toph’s armband is black, suggesting a high iron content – not to mention it came from the same meteorite that Sokka got the ore for his Space Sword from. The material for the armband is also much more malleable than stone really should be; looking at canon, earthbenders don’t actually change the crystalline structure of what they bend, so in order to make it into the shapes she does (Nickelodeon splats and keys spring to mind – and as small as that key was, stone would be too brittle for it to function properly), Toph almost has to be working with something closer to a metallic matrix. And high-iron meteorites usually include a lot of magnetite.

Appa vs Car… I don’t think Appa flies much more than, say, 30 MPH. Evidence: the GAang are perfectly comfortable talking to each other up there, and Sokka pulls out maps a few times. It’s possible that Appa has a bubble of airbending blocking wind around that saddle – but then you have to explain how Azula’s tanks, which can’t be that fast and have to deal with groundcover obstacles (even a tank can’t go through or over everything!) managed to keep up during The Chase. Simplest explanation to me is that Appa just plain doesn’t fly that fast, save perhaps under very severe circumstances. (Like the ridiculous flying at the very end of the series. From Fire Nation to Ba Sing Se in under a day, they hang around to make plans until full daylight at the very least, and then back to the Fire Nation in less than a day? Speed of plot, indeed… or possibly speed of jetstream, although that would only explain their speed going one direction.)

And on the topic of Speed of Plot and Plot Powers… Avatar canon has a bit of a cop-out. You never see someone try to bend something and fail because their bending isn’t strong enough. Failure is always due to a failure of form (either flubbing, or being interrupted, or just not being skilled enough). Sokka comments that Aang is a really strong bender, sure… but we never meet an explicitly weak one. It leaves you the impression that a bender can do just about anything, so long as it’s their element. And to top it off – you’re never given any indication that bending is any more tiring than the physical movements required to bend.

I call Free Lunch. (“No free lunch” is a writing principle that says, basically, powerful abilities need to be costly for the user, so that they don’t become overpowered.) Hence the naquadah and elemental deprivation. It does cost benders something to use their special abilities… and in the wrong circumstances, that can come back to bite them. Even the dragon-king’s temple floods.

And while we’re on the subject – I really can’t buy naquadah as an element the way, say, gold or iron is. Anything above the atomic weight of iron can only be created in a supernova. Add to that the fact that it has to be something outside the range of discovered elements, and the sheer instability of most super-heavy elements… yeah. Sorry, my vague memories of high school chemistry cry foul.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Warning for swearing in this chapter. Certain situations demanded a more… emotively succinct form of eloquence.

I take no credit for the Blinkenlichten, or for the lines taken from The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Time meant nothing to it. But it remembered.

Remembered drifting in cool darkness, devouring anything careless enough to stray into its domain. But then it was caught. Caged. Leashed.

But timelessness meant patience. It waited, until the day its prison was disturbed.

Their terror had tasted so sweet.

And then it had drifted, freed, in this world of lifeless ice, where even the hated sunlight was distant and weak, and it could scatter itself across the length and breadth of the land. And grow.

But now...

Now the portal had opened again, opening the road to Home-That-Was. And to other places, teeming with prey-life. And bringing prey-life here, into its domain.

The ones that had freed it had died so quickly. This time, it would take its time.

In a slow eddy leisurely gaining speed, cold began to move.

~Even the Dragon-King’s Temple floods.~

The relief had all the force of a physical blow. A tension so deeply set Urdu hadn’t been consciously aware of it anymore escaped in a long, low sigh. She’s alive.

He hadn’t realized he’d murmured that aloud until Nubiti chuckled softly behind him. “Alive, and in fine fettle, by the look of things.”

Going by Sanura’s evil smirk at the stunned and startled reactions of the Tau’ri to his arrival, very much so. His Prime rested the end of her staff weapon against the platform and leaned on it casually, not even bothering to hide her grin.

Staff weapon. She’s armed, unhurt, unrestrained… Song and scale. She actually managed to talk to
…Not that Sanura wasn’t a fine diplomat when the occasion called for it. She just didn’t like it, preferring to deal with others through gut, heart, and blunt honesty, with a few proverbs thrown in for flavor.

If rumor held true… then not unlike the pepper-haired, wiry Tau’ri soldier who very pointedly lowered his projectile weapon to let it hang casually by its strap. “Aw, you came all the way out here just to meet us?” he called, adopting the same dry, nonchalantly cheerful tone that Urdu had used. “That was nice of you.”

Interesting. Djehuty’s memory had all too many examples of how humans reacted to one of the Unas. Urdu recognized it now in Major Carter and Doctor Jackson – the instinctive wariness as the subconscious assessed big, powerful, potential predator. It was one of many, many reasons why Djehuty had always preferred working through intermediaries when he could, when dealing with humans outside his chosen cadre. Particularly now that he was Urdu, who was substantially more intimidating than Nubiti.

Assuming Nubiti wasn’t losing her temper at the time.

But after that initial moment of startled shock, Colonel O’Neill’s eyes had gone thoughtful, assessing. As had Teal’c’s, although the way the rogue Jaffa had moved to cover the colonel’s back showed that he knew very well what childhood myth they’d encountered.

*They’ve met Unas before. When? Where?*

*Wait.* With an act of will, he grabbed the concern and curiosity that was pure, academic Djehuty and mentally sat on it with Ur’s stubborn pragmatism. *They’re here for a reason. Trade tales after you’re done slapping the water.*

“More that we happened to be in the area,” he replied.

Sanura cursed.

Urdu’s eyes narrowed. Sanura’s reaction, he’d expected. She was no fool; she knew what he’d just implied. If he was out *here* – something had gone wrong.

What he’d not anticipated were the quick, meaningful glances traded among SG-1.

Major Carter cleared her throat. “Looking for people who vanished into thin air?” she asked.

Urdu stilled, his gaze locking on the woman.

Doctor Jackson winced. “I’d say that’s a yes,” he muttered, and then winced again, clearly not having expected sound to carry as treacherously well as it did in this frozen, barren place.

Nubiti looked at Sanura. “Does this have anything to do with why you’ve modified that staff weapon?” she asked, voice dangerously calm.

Startled, Urdu looked again, and then it was his turn to bite back a curse as he realized those were wires trailing from the staff weapon, and a charging handle protruding from the side.

Sanura grimaced. “You would not be incorrect to guess that.”

Colonel O’Neill cleared his throat pointedly. “Sanura says you’re interested in talking,” he said
bluntly, still studying them with wary eyes. “Well… we’ve got some talking to do.” An eyebrow rose in silent challenge.

Urdu studied them for a long moment, then nodded. “Not here,” he suggested. “Our sensors are predicting a storm soon.”

The Tau’ri looked at each other again, and finally, Colonel O’Neill shrugged. “Well, I hear there’s a cozy little lab somewhere in these parts…”

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~

Her hand paused a hair’s breadth away from singing metal. “Whoa.”

“Toph?”

She did not eep. Face burning, she whirled and punched in the direction of Zuko’s voice. “Make some noise next time, Sparky!”

“Sorry, sorry!” He blocked her punch without even trying, which was totally not fair. “I forgot.”

And he’d been doing his sneaky ninja fade-into-the-background thing again, so that he could keep an eye on things while Toph’s feet were locked up in these shoes. Sheesh, no wonder people felt so clumsy moving around, with their toes stuck in these things. She couldn’t even feel any bumps or rocks under her feet, let alone the little vibrations that were her earth-sense.

Although, going by the echoes, there probably weren’t a lot of bumps or rocks to feel in here. Everything sounded so smooth.

She could feel the movement as Zuko shifted to stand closer to her – but he didn’t poke her, probably because he knew she would maul him if he tried that right now. “Solid?” he asked, voice low and quiet, with a slight dullness to the sound that told her he wasn’t looking at her. Which didn’t mean he wasn’t paying attention, he just wanted to keep watch while they talked.

Toph made a face. “Remind me to never, ever, ever let Sokka and Katara talk me into going to the Poles.” People who lived on ice that would freeze your toes were crazy. That was all there was to the matter.

“What about your hand? The wall’s right there, and it’s warm enough in here that you don’t need the gloves…”

She made a face. “Are you crazy? I use my fingers for really delicate stuff, Sparky.” Like sensing subtle flaws in porcelain, or when she wanted to get a really good read on a person, like the time she’d put her hand on the wall that Katara had slammed Jet into, so that she could pick up every twitch he made. She didn’t have to use her hands to tell if someone was lying or not, but it definitely gave her a better read. She could pretty much read minds with her hands.

Which meant trying to use them for just plain seeing the way she did her feet…

Zuko was close enough now that she didn’t have to be able to sense him to feel his wince, whether he tried to hide it or not. “Like clearing your ears to listen for a whisper, just in time to have a barrel of blasting jelly go off right next to you,” he summed up ruefully.
Ooo. That sounded like a *story*. She’d have to bug him about it some time. Or, maybe not. Barrels of blasting jelly going off right next to you was generally a *bad* thing. And she just knew that he’d winced; she couldn’t tell for sure if it was a *spirits but that was humiliating* sort of wince, or an *I almost died and I really don’t want to think about it right now* one.

Being blind *sucked*.

“Pretty much,” she admitted. “But…”

“But what?” She heard the soft shush of long hair brushing the odd crinkle-cloth of these coats they’d gotten stuffed into – Zuko never had found a proper hair tie to replace the one he’d lost in that initial capture-and-escape scramble, and the ones that Janet had come up with all pulled so tight they gave him a headache if he tried to do a proper topknot, so he’d settled for a low, loose ponytail. It made it easy to tell when he turned his head to look at her, at least.

Toph reached out to the wall again, and once again stopped just short of brushing it with her fingertips. *Wow*. She really needed to find the smith who’d forged all the metal around here. She’d never felt anything like it. Cool. Except… “This place feels *weird*,” she said in a rush.

And the weirdest part of all was, that weird feeling wasn’t in her earth-sense. Didn’t seem to come from her bending at all. It was more like the creepy *humming* in her bones that she got every time the *Sta-geit* did its whirr-clunk-whoosh thing. But much, much softer. More like the whisper of ants crawling on blades of grass.

“…Yeah,” Zuko said softly. “I feel it, too. I’d thought maybe it was just something about the caged lightning…”

Boring and a little terrifying. Helping Sam and Captain Lady and Schemes and Pian-Not run all over that mountain, knowing that if she messed up and hit the lightning there’d be no Sparky to redirect it and no Katara to put her back together… She’d never admit it, but after they’d whooshed the yukiuso out of the Rumble Ring, she’d been ready to sit down and treat herself to a good shake for a while.

But then Zuko had been dying, and she’d been healing him, and she just sort of *forgot*.

Zuko snickered a little and bumped against her with one arm – and she didn’t maul him only because, as close as they were standing, every bit of the move was telegraphed louder than the Boulder’s speeches. Zuko was *ninja*, he knew that, which mean he was doing it on purpose, and Toph believed in awarding good boy behavior. It was so rare, after all.

“It’s not the energy, though,” he said, sobering. “Believe me, I know what that feels like, and there wasn’t anything like this in the *ha’tak* thing, or back in the mountain.”

Toph swallowed. “Is it… you know… *WoooOOOooo*?” She made a wiggly-wavy motion with the hand that wasn’t hovering just off the wall.

Zuko sighed in a long-suffering puff. “*No,*,” he said dryly, “it’s not *wooo*. *S*obering, he added, “I know what that feels like. And so do you, at this point.”

And wasn’t that a creepy thought. She was the Blind Bandit. She chucked rocks at bad guys. Spirity weirdness was so not her bailiwick. On the other hand, if bad guys chucked rocks at you, no reason not to chuck ‘em back with interest, she supposed.
And she was stalling, and that was just stupid. Huffing to herself, she pressed her hand against stone, and the world opened up.

“Whoa.”

The wall sang at her, a lattice of stone and metal. The stone here was older than the ridge where she’d made their cave the last time they were in this cold other-place – this place was farther from the seam where the inner fire of the world pushed new stone up. And the metal…

She’d never felt anything like it. It was almost alive in her bending, like the rocks under Omashu or her own space earth, although it didn’t seem particularly magnetic. The metal formed buttresses and columns and panels along the natural stone of the wall, polished unnaturally smooth, and in other places formed freestanding screens of delicate geometric lattices like the sliding screens and windows in Ba Sing Se, only metal instead of wood, and less open spaces between the slats…

Wait. She had felt something like this before.

“Sparky?” Her voice wasn’t faint. Just… quiet. To avoid attention.

This time, with her hand on the wall, she could feel the movement properly as Zuko turned his head slightly to arch his brow… Huh. She’d never noticed before, but… she could feel that. It wasn’t just the subtle shifts of weight and movement, like she’d always thought. She was actually reading his chi, through the stone. Poking at earth-healing, she’d learned to tell the difference.

Sweet.

And she was distracting herself. Drumming her fingers lightly on the metal and feeling the way it vibrated, she said, “This place – it’s like the tunnel under the old temple, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Zuko admitted. “Right down to the glowstone sconces that light up whenever anyone goes near them.”

Ooo. Glowstone. Toph’s fingers itched to poke at that, if only to get a better idea of how it related to that… anchoring feeling, that sense of being rooted in the self that Zuko’d been losing from elemental deprivation, until she’d gotten him a sunny spot and figured out the whole magnet thing.

Probably a bad idea, she admitted to herself. She felt way better after spending all day snoozing in a rock tent – other than feeling like an idiot that it had taken Janet giving up her hat for her to remember that, oh yeah, not a firebender, sunburn hurt. But she still felt… off. Which didn’t make any sense. She’d been burrowed all snug and happy in a mountain from day one, she shouldn’t be suffering elemental deprivation!

Gah. I’d better not be catching a cold. I’m too awesome for some stupid little bug!

Not to mention, this felt like it would be a really bad time to be off her game.

“Sure doesn’t feel like a temple, though,” she said, expanding her senses a little. Sam was investigating a pile of… lumpy, not-heavy, not-hard stuff. It wasn’t until she actually started moving it around that Toph realized it was some kind of camping gear – packs, sleeping bags, something that smelled ever so faintly of the same burning jelly that Zuko’d used back when they trapped the yukiuso. Teal’c was helping a bit, but he was mostly keeping an eye on Sanura, Jack, and the two new guys as they stood back and made noises at each other. Funny thing was, it didn’t sound like the same language that Sam’s buddies all spoke. And Daniel was doing the Twinkletoes-and-Snoozles routine of wandering around poking stuff, radiating ‘Wow, cool!’ every step of the way.
Heh. Him I like.

And Zuko was shaking his head. “Not really, no,” he said dryly. “I think the Avatar would be a little annoyed to have a temple this cramped.”

“Snob,” Toph sniffed at him.

“Pot, kettle, black,” Zuko shot back. “And Aang has a disturbing habit of glowing and blasting things when he gets near a temple. Have you seen the kind of damage he can do to anything unlucky enough to be nearby – don’t say it!”

Toph deliberately widened her eyes – she knew from experience that it made her look both guileless and just a little bit spooky. “Well, I suppose it would depend on the Avatar,” she said instead. “A Sokkavatar would love this place.”

Hee. Zuko was wincing and rubbing at the bridge of his nose. “Sokka as the Avatar. Toph, you have a scary, scary mind…” His voice trailed off.

Toph grinned, almost bouncing on her toes when the stupid, clunky boots caught her. Scowling, she stomped her feet, trying to get a feel for balancing when she couldn’t feel the ground under her properly, and then refocused her attention on Zuko. “That’s a thinking stance, Sparky,” she said slyly. “Spill!”

Zuko hesitated a moment longer, then shrugged. “This place feels more like… Ji the Mechanist’s lab, maybe. Or the engineering school at the Academy. It’s… functional. A place to do things.”

Toph tilted her head to the side. “Like what?” she asked, a little skeptically.

“What, I’m the Avatar now?” Zuko said sarcastically. “I’ll just go digging around in my past lives and-ow!”

Toph sniffed and removed her elbow from his side. “Point,” she said, her other hand still glued to the surface of the wall. The really, really old wall.

I don’t think anyone’s been here for… wow. A really long time. Which… was weird in and of itself, because she didn’t feel any of the normal stuff that would say old – rust, weathering, mold, that sort of thing. It was just… old.

And Sparky wasn’t paying attention. Again. Toph sighed noisily and kicked him in the shin – then suppressed a wince when he gritted his teeth and bit back a curse of real pain. Stupid shoes.

“Okay,” she said, keeping her voice low even though no one could understand them, “give it up. What’s up with Rumble?”

She didn’t even need earthbending or chi sense to know Zuko blinked. “Rumble?” he echoed.

Toph tilted her head, listening to the sound of the voices as Sam and Daniel chatted as they went over the weird metal-and-ceramic podium-thingies and Jack and Rumble traded a few words, war-council-careful. “You don’t hear it?” she asked, surprised.

“Toph, there are a lot of things you hear that I don’t.”

Oh. Right. Sometimes she forgot that sighted people were pretty much deaf. “He kinda… thrums when he talks. Real, real low – like when badgermoles want to talk to other families.” So low she wasn’t even sure it was her ears that heard it, the sort of sound that went right to her bones the way
the first tremors of an earthquake would. Only less scary. Sort of.

“Badgermoles talk?” Zuko asked, real curiosity in his voice. “The dragons… almost talked. It felt like talking, at least, just – all in movement and images.”

“They have songs,” Toph said, suddenly feeling a little homesick. The crooning of badgermoles had been her lullabies, humming up through the floor of the Bei Fong mansion for years before she’d ever gotten lost in their tunnels.

This time, kicking at Zuko’s shin with her clunky, heavy boot was deliberate. Anyway, he dodged. “You’re changing the subject, Sparky. What’s got you so twitchy?” Because Zuko’d been just a little weird ever since Rumble had shown up, and Toph really doubted that it was just because Snark Feng had completely forgotten to introduce them. Sheesh. Just because they didn’t speak the language…

With a slight glance at Rumble and Jack, Zuko shrugged his shoulders and began to idly wander towards Daniel, who had gone to poke at a panel separating this part of the… workshop from another chamber. The move was way too understated and casual to be anything but deliberate – maybe ninja skills really did run in the royal family of Fire, because Uncle had pulled the same trick a few times. With a mental sigh, Toph took her hand from the wall; trying to use her hand to see while moving was just asking for trouble. Now that she’d gotten a feel for the place, she could at least pick up a vague sense of her surroundings through the stupid boots.

“I’d… rather not tell you,” Zuko said quietly. “Not yet.”

Toph kept the scowl to just a tightening of her expression; she’d had a lot of practice. “Sparky…” she said warningly, dragging each and every syllable out.

Zuko, who did have a sense of self-preservation when he wasn’t, oh, jumping off cliffs onto airships or challenging psycho little sisters, pressed on quickly. “He’s… different. I want to hear what you think, first. I’m not sure I can trust my instincts.”

Okay. That was… disturbing. Especially since… “Not sure I can help,” she admitted. “I don’t know what I’m getting off him. I mean, it felt for all the world like he had giant clawed toes!”

Zuko didn’t say anything.

Toph stopped dead, jaw dropping. “Seriously?”

Zuko huffed a little, but there was a hint of rueful grin in his voice. “Seriously.”

“…Awesome.” They’d stopped next to one of the back walls. Grinning wildly, Toph reached out for the wall to get another look around. “So what is he? And what about his lady-friend?”

“She’s like him, and… I have no idea,” Zuko admitted. “They’re definitely not human. But… they don’t feel like any kind of spirit. Don’t act like spirits, either.”

Weird. Which actually made her feel kinda better. This was more like the normal sort of weird.

Seriously. Squirrel. And she’d thought the bear was bad. It was the Earth King’s pet, of course it would be something exotic. But a squirrel? Just… running around wild? Weird.

“So what can you get?” Zuko asked, leaning gingerly on the side of one of the podium-things and crossing his arms over his chest as he watched Daniel poking and prying at the edges of the panel.
“About Rumble? He’s big.” Really, really big. Big enough to impress the Hippo. And heavy, even for his size – which meant that the bigness was all muscle, unlike the Hippo. But it was a balanced sort of heavy, even if the guy didn’t move like any bender Toph had ever felt. “And his heart’s slower than everyone else’s.”

…Kind of. She kept getting a weird… flutter-echo through her bending. As if the guy had two hearts, that were almost perfectly in rhythm. And it wasn’t just heartbeats. His chi felt weirdly doubled. As if one part of him were pretty much normal guy – other than, well, clawed feet, which was just kind of cool – and the other… the other was old enough to have seen mountains born.

Huh. Teal’c had something like that, too. Only way fainter. Although if she hadn’t been looking for it, she’d never have spotted it through his stiff chi and weird boots. Huh.

Speaking of chi… “I think he’s worried,” Toph said, chewing her lower lip absently as she concentrated. She wasn’t nearly as sure as normal – Janet and Sam and their buddies were all hard to read, but at least the cues were the same as normal people. This guy… how was she supposed to know? But… if she went by what she could read of his chi, and the way Captainlady was acting around him…

Zuko huffed a not-really-amused laugh. “I think we’re all on edge.” Glancing back at Daniel, who was muttering to himself and sounding disturbingly like Sokka gleefully absorbed in a puzzle, he added, “Except him. Is there something special about that wall?”

Toph shrugged. “I’d guess he’s trying to open the door,” she said, wiggling her toes in the clunky boots and wondering if she could get away with kicking them off and freeing up her hand. Probably not. It wasn’t freezy-cold in here, but… definitely still very brrr.

And Zuko had just blinked. “That’s a door?”

She frowned. “Yeah?” She could feel the room beyond, circular, a little deeper-set than this one, with a higher ceiling. Only one podium-thing, right in the middle. And it felt quiet, like it hadn’t quite woken up the way these outer rooms had when they’d come in.

“Huh.” Uncrossing his arms, Zuko straightened and stepped towards the door.

Which picked that moment to make a strange sort of chiming sound and slide sideways with a vvvvp!, into a slot in the stone wall that had been waiting for it. Daniel yelped, snatching his hand back just in time, and turned to stare at Zuko, who quickly stepped back, hands raised defensively.

“Cool,” Toph said with a grin, sauntering forward – and if sauntering in this case meant a gliding step that kept her boots, at least, in constant contact with the ground, well, that was her business. She was starting to get the hang of these shoe things, at least. It was harder to see with them, but… so long as she kept her stride to more of a slide, she could get something. “How’d you pull that off?”

“I didn’t!” Zuko sounded frustrated. “At least, I don’t think I did,” he added a moment later, sheepishly. “I just wanted to see if there was a hidden mechanism. You know, like the doors to the inner sanctuary of a temple?”

She shrugged, as Zuko ran his fingers along the edge of the door, brushing them along the odd crystal lattice set into the frame. “Don’t look at me,” she said. “Earth temples, you just slide the wall out of the way, like one of those shoji doors you Fire types like.” Although she’d heard that the really major temples, the big ones dedicated to the Avatar, had a whole system of delicate balances in place so that if you weren’t the best, you’d never be able to open the door. Not that she’d ever seen one of those. Her parents hadn’t exactly been keen on letting her wander, when she was sneaking
out she’d had more interesting stuff to do, and what was the point to visiting a temple to the Avatar when you were traveling with him?

“Never quite understood that,” Zuko admitted. “I mean, the inner sanctuaries where only the Avatar can go, a bending lock makes sense, but for most temples…” Shaking his head, he very gingerly stepped into the newly opened room.

Toph followed, brushing her fingers against the wall to build a better picture of the place. Not that there was much. It was smaller than the outer room, maybe fifteen feet in diameter, with an alcove in the back that was sealed off by another one of those metal-and-crystal doors. Other than that and the buttresses jutting out of the fancy-framed wall – more of those glowstone light pillars, going by the hum – it was just a big circular room, with a high ceiling and slightly scooped floor. The only thing of interest she could feel was a big heavy table-like thing in the center, of a piece with the stone floor, but with metal indentations all over and something that felt like a big crystal bubble in the center.

*Huh. Wonder how they got it shaped like that? Crystal doesn’t do bubbles.*

Zuko was glancing around as Daniel moved over to the table. “Well, at least there aren’t any creepy dancing statues,” the firebender said dryly after a moment. “Toph? Do us all a favor, and if a golden egg comes out of the floor… don’t pick it up. It’s a little cold to hang around thinking about our place in the universe.”

Toph snickered at him. “Whatever you say, Dancey Dragon.”

Zuko growled and mimed a swipe at her. “I swear, if I find whoever named that form, I’m going to light them on fire… Anyway. I don’t think we’ll see anything like that here. This place doesn’t feel anything like the Sun Warriors’ temple.”

“Yeah, and the lack of traps is kinda a clue,” Toph said dryly.

“Very funny.” Zuko slowly turned, scanning the walls. “It does seem familiar, though.”

“Well, yeah,” Toph said, bracing herself. Daniel was leaning towards that crystal bubble with *intent,* and she was willing to bet that if *anything* was about to go boom, it would be the weird crystal in the center of the pedestal. There were laws of the universe about that. “It’s like the tunnel under the temple, we already said that. *Sparky*…”

“Not just that. It’s something else… What?” Zuko turned to face her and the center of the room again.

Daniel’s hand touched the crystal.

*Zuko choked.*

Heart hammering, Toph threw herself into stance… and paused.

So far as *she* could tell, nothing had happened. No walls grinding in to squoosh them, no pits opening up under them, no ceiling crumbling on top of them. Nothing except a slightly louder, *brighter* sort of humming.

Except that Zuko’s heart had just sped up like a rabbiroo’s. And Daniel…

Daniel felt like that Head of Anthropology guy who’d helped them find Wan Shi Tong’s library, the moment they realized that just because it was buried, didn’t mean they couldn’t get in.
And both of them were… staring at the air, so far as she could tell.

Elbow. Rib. Apply. “Sparky! What’s going on?”

Zuko shook himself and swallowed. “Writing. Glowing. Floating in the air.”

Um. Okay. That was… different. “Not spirity-stuff?”

“No. Whatever it is, it’s not that. But …” Zuko hesitated, then went on. “I’ve seen that sort of writing before. In the old archives.”

Toph pursed her lips. “Huh.” Okay… that almost made sense. The old archives had led them to the ancient temple ruin. Which had led them here.

The question was, could it get them back?

“Can you read it?” she asked.

“Give me a minute.” His head tipped back a bit. “Mah… ak’Sapatala? That’s… something about records, I think…”

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~

“Oh. Oh. Oh, that’s… This is incredible, I can’t believe I didn’t realize…”

Heh. Don’t think I’ve heard a Danny geek-out like this since Ernest’s Planet, Jack thought wryly, his heart rate settling a bit now that he could see that the spazzing wasn’t the result of, oh… grabby repositories downloading themselves into unsuspecting heads, for instance.

So maybe he kinda held a grudge after the whole Place of Our Legacy incident. The Ancients were supposedly super-advanced Good Guys who’d left the repository for those who came after them, you’d think they’d have included, oh, something to detect whether or not the hapless visitor’s brain could handle it.

Or a least a warning label about not staring too hard at the pretty blinking lights.

“Mark me if I’m wrong, but isn’t the definition of incredible ‘hard to believe’?” he drawled, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning against the lintel as he looked around the new room. “I think you can be forgiven, just this once.”

Huh. Looked a lot like the interstellar UN room from Ernest’s planet, come to think of it, although the interior decorator had gone for snazzy Noveau Tech rather than somber Faux Medieval. But it had the same basic setup – circular, floor slightly lower than the previous room so you had to descend a step or two on the way in, with lit columns evenly spaced around the walls and a circular console in the center with a touch-to-play light-up holosphere. Currently lit up, although what it was showing wasn’t drifting atomic structures, at least. Just some sort of 3D chart with a bunch of bouncing squiggles, along with what looked like labels in the distinctive, blocky Ancient script.

Except that, rather than staring enraptured at the floating images the way he had on Ernest’s Planet, Danny had his nose in the notepad he’d yanked out of his pack, pencil flying as he muttered to
himself like a man possessed. If Jack craned his neck a little, he could just make out inked black squiggles – Daniel’s reproduction of the scribble Zuko had made to go on the freezer door with all the other No Touchie signs when they’d sealed up the yukiuso for the first time.

*For all the good it did us.*

Shaking his head, Jack said, “Danny. Daniel.” Freeing a hand, he snapped his fingers. “Share with the class, Doc.”

Daniel looked up from the page, eyes shining with academic fervor. “The *writing system* Zuko uses,” he breathed. “I thought it was ideograms. It’s *not* – or, it wasn’t originally. I think they started with an alphabetic or syllabic system and started arranging them in symbolically significant logograms – which, wow, that’s amazing, normally language evolution moves towards greater *simplicity*, not added complexity… Although I suppose some of the added complexity could be explained by the transition to a handwritten, brush-stroke medium…”

Jack glanced at the kids and almost laughed. Zuko was eyeing Daniel with the same wariness Jack would direct towards a ticking bomb, and the boy was making no attempt to disguise the fact that he was very pointedly keeping the broadly smirking Toph between himself and the explosive geekery. Which showed *way* more sense than Jack would have credited to a high school karate champ.

Jack was really starting to wonder about this Asunyi place.

*Worry about it later.* They did plan on accompanying the kids through the Gate… but first, they had to settle things here on Hoth, with the yukiuso.

And with Djehuty.

“And what have you found?” the Unas asked in his accented Abydonian. He’d followed Jack, if at a slightly more relaxed pace, and now was leaning casually on the other side of the door, very deliberately placing himself in Jack’s eyesight where he could be watched.

Just about everything the guy did was deliberate. It raised the hairs on the back of Jack’s neck.

He wasn’t particularly certain he liked this situation. Scratch that – he *knew* he didn’t like it. But when they’d walked into the Ancient lab and the lights started coming on, what had been a very uneasy first contact had been derailed by the geeks.

Particularly when the topic of *nasty cold killer invisible thing* came up. So at least Djehuty had his priorities straight on that count.

Plus, the delay meant he had time to actually *watch* the guy, try to get a read on him before they moved into serious negotiation.

Truth be told, Jack wasn’t sure what he made of Djehuty. Guy didn’t act anything like a System Lord, that was for sure. Hell, he seemed to have a *sense of humor*. Jack was still trying to wrap his mind around that.

Didn’t act anything like the First One he and Teal’c had bumped into on Cimmeria, either.

*Probably a good thing.* Dietary differences could be so hard on negotiations.

Although maybe the weirdest part of all was the way the kids *hadn’t* reacted to the Unas host. Okay, with Toph, maybe that made sense – kid was blind, after all. But Zuko…
What the heck did someone have to go through, that their reaction to a freaking Unas was to blink, stare, and the pinch the bridge of their nose in a classic Hammond-esque *oh no, not again*?

Then again, Daniel wasn’t freaking out, either. On the other hand – Daniel hadn’t been part of that hair-raising game of cat-and-mouse in Thor’s labyrinth. He’d never seen the First One in all his living, creepy glory, except for a couple seconds trapped in the red lightning of Thor’s Hammer.

Besides. Law of the universe – a Daniel in the glow of discovery was immune to shock, horror, and common sense. The anthropologist didn’t even blink at Djehuty, just ripped the page out of his notebook and shoved it into Jack’s hands. “*Look!*”

Eyebrows raised, he took it, glancing at the paper as he did so. Huh. It looked like Danny had taken a couple of the characters Zuko had written and tried to break them down into their component pieces. Still looked like a bunch of lines to him. “So what am I looking…”

Realization hit. Slowly, Jack looked up from the paper to eye the sharp, blocky shapes marking the floating diagrams. Looked back at Danny’s reconstructed script.

“Damn,” he said.

“Sir?”

Straightening, Jack moved a little farther into the room to clear the doorway for Sam. Behind her, he could see Teal’c and Sanura peering at them, along with Djehuty’s other companion. Silently, he held up the paper so that they could see it.

Teal’c’s eyes widened slightly. “Their writing is based on the script of the Gatebuilders.”

“Sure looks that way,” Jack agreed, handing the paper back to Daniel.

Sam closed her mouth, looking stunned. “How is that even *possible*? The Ancients were…” She made a vague gesture that probably was supposed to indicate *a really freaking long time ago*.

“They probably had access to inscriptions of some kind,” Daniel said thoughtfully, pursing his lips. “They might even have some of the Ancient language preserved in the form of ritual language or names – Zuko swears by *Agni*, the Indic god of thunder and fire, and we haven’t met any… wait.” Daniel turned to look at Djehuty. “Are there any Indic-style Goa’uld?”

Djehuty didn’t raise his eyebrow – for all Jack knew, an Unas *couldn’t* pull off that particular contortion. But he sure gave the impression of eyebowing at Daniel. “Indic?” he echoed, the deep, oddly resonant voice betraying nothing but mild curiosity.

“When the cultures around the Indus river valley…” Daniel paused, looking sheepish. “Um. Which isn’t going to mean anything to you… Agni? Varuna? Indra? Bharata?”

“Hmm.” Djehuty’s voice actually *thrummed* with the sound, as he crossed his arms over his chest. “If there are System Lords or their kin who have taken those names, they have done so only recently.”

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Daniel paced. “Ra and most of his ilk took on the names of our gods,” he muttered, clearly thinking aloud rather than actually talking to anyone. “But we also have examples of mythologies developing *out of* contact with alien races.” He looked up at Jack, eyes bright with fascination. “We know the Ancients were on Earth at least briefly. Maybe Agni was one of them. He’s one of the oldest gods in existing lore. So it’s possible that the people of Asunyi *did* have at least some contact with the Ancients, in the distant past.”
“Nice,” Sam said. “So they can read this stuff?” She jerked her chin, indicating the glowing hologram and all the dark terminals in this little lab.

Daniel hesitated. “Um, that would be a probably not,” he admitted.

“No?” Jack asked. “Why not?”

“Well, first there’s the little issue of the language barrier between them and us,” Daniel pointed out. “And that’s assuming he can actually understand what he’s reading. There’s a world of difference between knowing a particular writing system and knowing a language.” He eyed Jack pointedly. “How’s your German these days?”

“Der rubbernecken sightseeren keepen das cottonpicken händer in das pockets muss. Zo relaxen und waschen der blinkenlichten,” Jack said with a smirk, and was rewarded by Sam’s desperate not-laughing coughs.

Not to mention, that was probably the best eyeroll he’d scored off Daniel in at least a week. “Cute,” the anthropologist said dryly, “very cute. At least we’ll all have someone to hide behind when we get thrown back in time to Nazi Germany.”

Jack snorted. “Danny. That’s not going to happen.”

“You just say that because it hasn’t happened yet,” Daniel said, with all the aplomb of a true sci-fi geek. “And while we’re on the subject, how’s your Ancient Saxon? Because we’re looking at a linguistic time gap at least twice that long. Remember what I said about language shift over time?”

Teal’c cleared his throat. “There is another consideration,” he said levelly, when they looked at him. “Zuko and Toph do not know the ways of advanced technology. Although I myself speak the language of the Goa’uld, I would not have been able to explain what was written on their screens when first I joined the Tau’ri. I lacked the training needed to understand.”

Sanura nodded. “Indeed. It took quite some time for me to grasp even the most basic of principles, when Nubiti set out to instruct me.” She tilted her head at the second, smaller Unas that Djehuty had introduced as his advisor.

“And… well, look at this,” Sam said, going into the room to take a closer look at the hologram-graph floating in the air over the sphere. “This… I swear, it looks like some sort of graphical representation of a wave-form energy transformation. This is beyond cutting edge, sir. Odds are most of it is over my head.”

She looked way too gleeful to be saying that. Geeks! Jack thought, and pretended it wasn’t more than half affectionate.

Especially given the implications of what they were saying. “So basically, you’re telling me that it doesn’t even matter if the kids can read the pretty glowy words or not, it’s still not going to do us any good.”


Jack winced and glanced over his shoulder, suddenly realizing that they’d all been talking like the two kids weren’t right there listening. And going by the looks on their faces – sure, maybe they hadn’t been able to follow the conversation word-for-word, but they’d certainly followed the fact that they were the topic of discussion. And were none too pleased about being talked about over their heads.
After a long moment, though, Zuko inclined his head in a silent go on. If it bothered the kid that he was talking to a giant horned reptile-man with sharp, pointy teeth, he sure wasn’t showing it.

The Unas waved a big hand at the touch-stone console-thingy. “We need you to look for the word asura,” he said, in heavily accented but passable English.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jack saw Daniel open his mouth--

And then close it. Because Zuko, who’d been frowning as he parsed out the words with the limited English he’d picked up over the past week, had just blinked once, and then blanched slightly.

But the boy nodded curtly, and turned to gingerly approach the console, as if he expected it to bite him, or maybe spew green gooey swamp glue or some other Indiana Jones appropriate gimmick.

“Here, let me help,” Sam said, ducking past Jack and Djehuty to join the boy at the pedestal. “With the amount of Gate-hacking I’ve done in the past two years, I probably at least have a fighting guess about how to operate this thing…”

Daniel sighed, but he yielded his position at the touch-stone with a minimum of reluctance, stepping back to join Jack.

Then he looked at Djehuty. “Asura,” he echoed, keeping his voice very soft. “That’s one we haven’t heard before… It’s related to Asunyti, isn’t it.”

Djehuty smiled. It was a smile with lots of teeth. “It means harmful noncorporeal entity, I believe. More or less.” He shrugged. “The Ancients contained and studied such things here. As things stand, the young man is our best chance of finding the part of the database that explains how. Assuming there is one. Which reminds me.” He crooked a clawed finger at Sanura. “The staff, please.”

With a dry smile, the Jaffa pulled off her zaton pack and handed it and the souped-up staff weapon to Djehuty, and Jack gritted his teeth, fighting down a reflexive urge to go for cover and a weapon, not necessarily in that order. He’d had too many close calls to be comfortable with any armed Goa’uld in a close space.

Not to mention the calls he’d seen that hadn’t just been close.

‘Course, we’re talking a freaking Unas here, he thought dryly, deliberately using the mental image of the First One to block out the memory of Daniel falling in Ra’s ha’tok. Giving him a force multiplier is kinda superfluous…

Then he blinked – because Djehuty had just taken the modified staff weapon, sat down cross-legged in one of the alcoves between two of the light-columns, and pulled out…

A screwdriver. He carries a screwdriver around in his pocket.

Damn. Much more, and Jack was going to start liking this guy.

Shaking his head, Jack caught Teal’c’s eye. The big guy nodded, moving to a position where he could watch both the way they’d come through the lab and events in the inner chamber.

Showtime.

Jack dropped down into a comfortable crouch next to the Unas. “So, Djehuty…”

“I am Urdu.”
Jack blinked at the calm response. “Not Djehuty?” he said. Because from the way the guy and Sanura had been acting, he’d been sure this was the Goa’uld.

The Unas didn’t look up from his work as big, clawed hands opened up the outer casing of the staff weapon as neatly as a Marine field-stripping his Beretta. Yow. Jack knew he’d done something similar once, under the influence of an Ancient database in his head. But everything from that period was kinda hazy. Nothing hazy about what this guy was doing.

“Djehuty is my name,” he rumbled. “But my name is also Ur.” A flicker of wry humor slipped into his tone as he added, “And Ur-Djehuty, while formally correct, is a bit of a mouthful for everyday use.”

Uh-oh. Daniel, who’d followed Jack over, had just made a noise that sounded ominously intrigued.

“Ur-Djehuty – you take your host’s name?”

Djehuty – Urdu? – glanced at Daniel, that not-eyebrow look on his face. “Until our ghoti ends, Doctor Jackson, Djehuty and Ur are one and the same being. Refusing to acknowledge that would be unspeakably rude.”

Jack snorted. Same being. Yeah. Right. Sam might have a few choice things to say about that. “Rude? Doesn’t stop the System Lords,” he said in his most casually-needling voice.


Then, to Jack’s surprise, the sardonic humor turned solemn. “Which reminds me. I owe your Major Carter and Captain Fraiser an apology.”

Jack blinked and traded glances with Daniel – oh. Goody. At least he wasn’t the only one listening for Twilight Zone theme music.


Urdu sighed heavily. “That,” he said, “is a very long story. But the simplest answer is – I am very, very old, and I remember.”

Remember what, Jack was about to ask, but before he managed to say anything, Urdu looked down sharply as two wires sparked under his claws. Grimacing slightly, the Unas muttered something in a gravelly tone that Jack almost felt more than he heard, then said aloud, “I miss your fingers, senet-i.”

Nubiti knelt beside Urdu, lightly flicking one of the horns near his chin in what was unmistakably a chiding gesture. “Just because we don’t share them any more doesn’t mean you can’t borrow them.” Leaning in, she reached around Urdu’s arms with the kind of total unselfconsciousness that Jack associated with Sam when she had a problem to solve, and began tweaking the wires with her much smaller, more nimble fingers.

Jack let them work at that for a few moments – partly because distracting people poking at volatile wiring sounded like a really bad idea to him. But partly…

“You used to be Djehuty’s host.”

Nubiti looked up as Urdu began slotting the casing back into place and smiled, the expression making the odd green-gold ripple pattern in her hide shift like real ripples on water. And Jack had obviously been doing the whole Intrepid Interstellar Explorer thing way, way too long if a reptile-lady looked pretty to him. Not attractive, for which the tattered remnants of his sanity were grateful –
the Cute Monster Girl effect had no business turning up anywhere outside of weird Japanese
cartoons. Just… pretty, in a colors-all-go-together sort of way. *Aesthetically pleasing*, as a certain
anthropologist might phrase it. “Yes,” she said matter-of-factly, pulling on her gloves again. “Our
*ghoti* ended early, but I was Nebet-Djehuty for some time.” She smiled. “I chose to keep the name
*Nubiti*, however.”

Just like that. As if it were *normal* to be keeping company with a parasite that had taken over her
body. And what did she mean, *keep the name*?

Danny’s eyes had narrowed thoughtfully, and he was bouncing just a bit, obviously eager to press
for more details. Jack made a mental note to have coffee ready when the time came to leave. The
smell would probably lure Daniel far enough to body-check him through the Gate. Maybe.

Before he could say anything more, Urdu finished clicking the case closed and stood up, holding the
zaton pack out to Sanura. “You did a good job on this,” he said approvingly. “It should be good for
another two or three shots. I admit, I would prefer to have another battery, but…”

Sanura smiled crookedly. “I had planned to do so, but the young earthshaker’s curiosity prevented it.
I believe she is still carrying the denatured battery, in fact…”

Zuko yelped.

Reflex had Jack reaching for his gun even as he whipped around. His eyes widened. The energy
wave-form or whatever display had been replaced by a glowing… *thing*… over the console. Looked
like some sort of cross between… an anteater and a frog. Maybe. Plus a porcupine. Only skeletal.

*Man. Ugly sucker.*

Slowly, he lowered his gun, as the tunnel-vision of surprise eased up a bit and he took in the floating
Ancient text alongside the slowly spinning image. “Carter?” he said.

She tossed a quick, sheepish grin his way. “Sorry, sir. Zuko just found out that the holograms are
interactive.”

As she spoke, the boy slowly leaned forward again and tentatively poked at one of the sections of
text with a dubious expression – and jumped slightly when the image zoomed in on the creature’s
talons and the text ballooned out into what was probably some sort of detailed explanation, and some
sort of energy charts by the look of things. Then Zuko winced as Toph kicked at his shins, clearly
demanding an explanation for the lightshow that she couldn’t see.

Jack huffed, letting the tension puff out with his breath. “So, you guys finding anything interesting?”
he asked, strolling forward to get a better look at the image.

Sam was leaning over the pedestal, intent on some sort of screen. “I think we’ve hit the main
archive,” she said eagerly. “Looks like the Ancients were trying to make a catalogue…” She paused.

Jack peered shamelessly over her shoulder and blinked at the lines and lines and lines of blocky
Ancient text. “Yow,” he said mildly. “That’s a lot.”

“Guess that’s why they called it *world of spirits* or whatever,” Sam said absently, frowning at the
screen. “There has to be some sort of organizational scheme…”

“What, you can’t just have the kid look up *yukiuso*?”

“That seems to be a modern term in their language,” Daniel said. “Or at least, it’s closer in
morphology and phonology to their everyday speech than it is to what you were speaking during the, um, repository incident.” He pulled off his glasses and polished them, as if trying to cover the slip – apparently he’d decided that maybe discussing Jack’s downloading the knowledge of the Ancients into his head with a Goa’uld who apparently had a habit of studying the Ancients might not be the best idea. “Too bad we didn’t have anything about spirits come up in conversation, it would be nice to have some sort of core vocabulary that applied here, at least…”

“Try zyaayati,” Nubiti said, moving to join Sam at the console. “If it’s a catalogue, they must be using some sort of characteristic to categorize the contents…”

Jack watched the two lean in together over the console, Sam waving Zuko to join them again, and then looked at Urdu. “So.”

Urdu not-eyebrowed him.

Jack eyebrowed right back. “You’re the one who’s been running all over the galaxy poking around Ancient ruins and researching spirits since the dawn of time. Assuming we’re right about an über-yukiuso being on the loose – how do we fight it?” He’d save the whole business about Nubiti and hosts for some other time. Some time when Sam wasn’t in the same room. Or Danny, for that matter.

Urdu hmmm ed. “Most of what I know, I learned from human legends,” he admitted. “But… the yukiuso appears to be what I would categorize as an elemental spirit – an energy being linked to a particular state of matter.”

_Uh-oh. I think I left my lucky D20 in my other pocket. This Initiative Roll could be tricky._ Jack shooed the thought back into the D&D box where it belonged. “And?”

Oh. Huh. That wasn’t humming, at least not the way a human would do it – more a rumble deep in the throat, a bit like a cat’s purr. And it didn’t interfere with Urdu’s speech at all. “Fundamentally, there are two ways to fight an elemental. The first…”

“Hit it with the opposite element?” Jack guessed. “That’s how the kids fought it – fire and salt.”

Urdu nodded. “Both are also very traditional defenses against noncorporeal beings.”


“Electromagnetism,” Sam said absently, eyes on Zuko as he gingerly worked his way through the flickering displays, hunting down words that matched Nubiti’s murmured suggestions, by the look of it. Jack was trying not to watch too closely to the various images; trying to follow them was enough to give him a headache, if the kid was going through things quickly enough.

And if he weren’t… yeah. Jack didn’t really want to look too closely at some of the things. Some weren’t really remarkable. Others…

The spiky zombie frog-anteater was mild compared to some of the others.

And Sam was still talking. “I explained this to you, remember? Thermomagnetic refrigerators use paramagnetic salts to control the temperature. It’s why I wanted that particular freezer when we sealed the yukiuso.”

“And?” Urdu sounded curious, and Jack tried to ignore the hair rising on the back of his neck. The last time he’d heard that tone from an Unas, the First One had been asking Teal’c why he wasn’t joining in the Tau’ri-burger diet plan. “An interesting theory. I had thought that it was related to the specific heat capacity of salt.”
If the tone bothered Sam, she didn’t show it. Then again, she’d missed on the fun and games in the labyrinth, too. She pursed her lips, looking thoughtful. “Huh. That… makes sense. It takes a huge amount of energy to change the physical state of sodium chloride. I guess I didn’t consider it because – well, the yukiuso was freezing things, not melting them. But…”

…and maybe the hairs on Jack’s neck had been standing up for a completely different reason, because things were getting dangerously geeky in here. “Point being,” he said, raising his voice just a little, “fire and salt work. So what else does?” He looked at Urdu. “You said there were two ways of fighting an elemental.”

Urdu looked far too amused. But he nodded. “The other method is to cut it off from its source of energy.”

Sam looked at Jack. “Like locking it in an insulated freezer. Or sending it through the Gate into vacuum.”

“Exactly. Although I would say that odds are, the backlash of the Stargate activating did destroy it, Major Carter,” Urdu said. “The activation of a wormhole cuts through energy-space as well as space-time, and most noncorporeal entities are vulnerable to energy disruption.” He nodded at the staff that Sanura was holding. “Hence the modifications.”

Sam stepped back a bit to allow Nubiti and Zuko more space, her focus clearly on Urdu now. “How does that work?” she asked. “Sanura said something about static?”

“Static electricity is the closest analogy I’ve been able to come up with,” Urdu nodded. “It is a gross simplification, but – the entities humans call spirits constantly brush against the border of energy-space and space-time. So far as I can determine, the ‘charge’ that develops is how they interact with solid matter. The modifications to the staff and zat combination enable it to activate that charge, all at once.” He grimaced. “I’m afraid the result is more spectacular than effective – but it does generally disable a spirit temporarily, until it can build up sufficient charge along the border again.”

Sam’s eyes had narrowed. “Like a lightning rod in reverse,” she said thoughtfully.

“You sound like someone who has a thought,” Sanura observed from where she stood with Teal’c in the doorway.

Sam pursed her lips. “If… spirit energy really does behave like static,” she said slowly, with a slight wince. Apparently her physicist’s soul was hurting at the concept of spirits. “In that case, then logically it should be possible to attract it, or repel it – like amber and silk threads, or floating coins, sir.”

*Universe saved by high school lab pranks. Heh.*

Jack looked back at the pedestal with its flickering holograms – although it had paused on what looked for all the world like some kind of loading screen, or maybe a screen saver, as Zuko and Nubiti leaned intently over the control display.

And apparently Danny was a little off. Because from the look of things, Zuko could speak Ancient – or at least grasped enough to be suggesting alternatives to Nubiti in a broken, stumbling, hand-waving pidgin, ferocious looks of concentration on both of their faces.

*More to the point – she speaks Ancient. And doesn’t that just beg an interesting question?*

“It may be possible,” Urdu was saying in response to Sam’s suggestion. “The difficulty is finding something that has resonance in both physical and energy realms.”
“What about naquadah? It definitely has a resonance pattern of some sort.”

“I have had some luck with it, yes. But correctly aligning the charges is… hit or miss at the best of times.”

Jack cleared his throat. When they glanced at him, he jerked his chin in the direction of the pedestal. “That’s why you wanted to find this place, isn’t it?” he said. “Because the Ancients were researching no-see-ums, and you wanted to figure out what they figured out.”

“That is one reason, yes.” Urdu nodded.

Sam’s brow furrowed. “Why? No offense, but… spirits may be common in folklore, but this is the first time we’ve ever come across one that, well, had enough influence to make us notice it. Why are you so interested in them?” She blinked. “Come to it, why would the Ancients bother studying them? And why the cloak and dagger routine, with making Asunyti’s Gate only accessible from here, rather than just putting the research station on Asunyti in the first place? That makes no sense.”

“Did Sanura explain about dur’Asada?” Urdu asked.

“Do Not Enter, Here Be Dragons?” Jack paraphrased flippantly.

Sanura was snickering. “Have you visited many Gatebuilder ruins?” she asked.

“A couple. Here and there,” Jack replied. No need to get into details.

“Then perhaps you have not had the chance to observe this, but their choice of sites for their Stargates often left much to be desired,” Sanura said dryly.

“Last I checked, a lot of that could be blamed on meddling renovators. And a couple thousand years.” He still remembered Ernest’s Planet. There was a special kind of oh shit to seeing the DHD fall through the floor because they’d arrived just in time for erosion to finally win out.

Sanura snorted. “Sometimes. Other times… well. Suffice to say, if the Gatebuilders say Do Not Enter? One is well-advised to take the warning seriously.”

“Zuko and Toph seem fine,” Daniel said.

“They grew up on Asunyti,” Sanura countered. “And the yukiuso in your base still presented a serious threat to them.”

“So why bother?” Jack asked. “Why not just shut the place down? Why study the things?”

Urdu blinked, slow and thoughtful. “If what I have been able to learn was accurate – because the Gatebuilders wished to become them.”

Jack stopped mid-headscratch and stared. “…Run that by me again. Using short, easy words this time.”

The Unas actually chuckled at the looks on their faces. “Not a yukiuso, obviously,” he clarified. “But… at the end of their empire, the Gatebuilders became obsessed with a concept they called Ascension. Essentially, the transition from a corporeal, temporal being to one of pure energy.”

Sam couldn’t have looked more dubious if Urdu had claimed the Ancients had turned into the Easter Bunny. Daniel was blinking and resettling his glasses on his nose, which meant that his mind was going all over the place, fitting the new info in with everything else he knew and everything he’d
thought he’d known. Teal’c had just raised an intrigued eyebrow.

And Jack found himself smiling wryly. “Worst part is, I think I actually believe that.” After that incident with the repository…

_Either they had a really twisted sense of practical thinking, or the Ancients’ sense of humor had a lot in common with teenage football jocks who’ve been smoking something._

He shrugged. “So, they hung out here poking at deadly spooks in an effort to become spooks themselves. Did they succeed?” he asked.

Urdu’s lip curled, flashing brilliantly white, very pointy teeth. “It appears that some did.”

Apparently the hairs on the back of Jack’s neck were taking up Can-Can dancing in their free time. That? Not a good tone of voice to be standing too close to.

“You study the Ancients. But you do not admire them,” Teal’c observed.

“Quite the opposite,” Sanura said dryly.

Daniel looked back and forth between them. “Why?” he asked, sounding baffled.

“Great alliance to fight the Goa’uld ring any bells?” Jack asked dryly.

“Oh no,” Urdu said quietly. “No, my grievance with them runs much deeper than that.” Eyes cool, he looked at Jack. “Colonel. You’ve seen how the System Lords operate. Now riddle me this. Do you really believe we could have advanced this far if that were our _natural_ behavior?”

“With or without the cribbing off your predecessors?” Jack taunted. In part to give him space as bits of his world suddenly shifted around. Because maybe he wasn’t a Daniel – but he’d hung around the anthropologist long enough to pick up a few things by dint of sheer whack-over-the-head repetition. More than that, he was career military. He knew how the system worked. And how it _didn’t_.

_You cannot have a society of sociopaths. Doesn’t work. Tech requires cooperation and communication – passing on what you know to others so that they can build on it. People loyal enough to protect your secrets and watch your back._

Sure, these days the Goa’uld got that by playing god with their tech – but they had to develop the tech in the first place. And even if they were cribbing off the work of others? He’d seen Sam banging her head on alien technology enough to know how much basic knowledge you needed to even _start_ that process.

And… Urdu was smiling at him, a sense of satisfaction that had the old Disney tune about _Never Smile At A Crocodile_ playing tauntingly in the back of his head. “You’re closer than you realize, Colonel. Predecessors. Think about it.”

Jack was opening his mouth to ask what the hell _that_ was supposed to mean when Sam’s yelp broke the moment. Startled, he turned.

A new image floated over the pedestal now – if it could be called an image. There was nothing like a figure in it – just a soft-edged mass, gently churning as it turned slowly around itself. It reminded Jack of the night he’d flown past a thunderhead surging out of the clouds below, mission control shouting in the pilot’s ear to pull away _now_, because no one flew into that if they wanted to live, it would eat them alive…
Erk. Jack swallowed. Because now that he looked closer, there were things in that miniature cloudbank shape, dipping and weaving in and out and never quite taking on a fully defined form.

Sam released a shaky breath and pointed at the image. “That’s it, sir. That’s the yukiuso. Believe me – it’s not the sort of thing you can mistake.”

“Yeah, think I see what you mean there,” Jack said, slowly strolling around the pedestal to get the full effect. Not that the view changed very much from side to side. The thing really did seem to be one big, amorphous mass.

Yeah, well, still not the weirdest thing we’ve seen, he told himself stubbornly. And pretended that finally seeing the thing hadn’t, paradoxically, made the whole concept even creepier. So much for horror movie truisms.

“So what have you got?” he asked, turning sharply to the cluster at the console – a cluster that had grown as Sam and Urdu both joined Nubiti and Zuko. “Anything interesting? Like, say, how they managed to capture the thing in the first place?”

“Would you like to do this?” Nubiti asked him, just a little too sweetly.

Jack rolled his eyes at her. “Sorry. Left my Ancient dictionary in my other brain.” Or rather, the part of his brain that the Asgard had thankfully turned off.

Urdu leaned in, narrowing his eyes at the blocky text. “Try paribh’Avita.”

Zuko glanced at the Unas, lips pursing as one finger sketched a series of quick shapes in the air.

“What does that mean?” Teal’c asked, as the boy turned that narrow-eyed, focused look back to the console.

“Containment?” Daniel guessed, looking up from his notes.

Nubiti nodded. “If we can find where it was kept, we might be able to learn something from whatever device was used to hold it.”

“Can we not simply read the archive?” Teal’c asked.

Nubiti shook her head. “Zuko can read the script, with effort and patience. But he seems to only know the very basics of the language. And I get the feeling that the meaning of the vocabulary has shifted over time.”

“But, the two of you…” Daniel said, with a slight frown.

“We know some of the language of the Gatebuilders,” Urdu said mildly. “But we cannot read the script.”

“Oi!”

Oh boy. We lost track of the dainty demolitionist.

Now Toph was standing in the back of the room, where another door-panel had opened up to reveal a very small room in the very back – kid must have triggered the door somehow.

Closet. Yay.

A very well-lit closet, granted, and very empty – someone must have cleaned the place out before the
Ancients had packed up. The only thing that was left was, literally, nailed down – another console set into the wall, with a few shining lights on what looked like…

“A map!” Eyes lighting up, Sam grabbed the startled Zuko and made a beeline for the smirking Toph and her navigation closet.

Jack cleared his throat when Urdu and Nubiti started after her. “Quick question,” he said, as Daniel paused midstep to glance over his shoulder, probably to see what the delay was. “And mind, this is just lil’ ole me being nosy, but… just how do you learn to speak a dead language without being able to read it?”

This time it was Nubiti who did the not-eyebrow thing. “You already know the answer to that, Colonel,” she challenged.

And she was right, too. Wasn’t too hard to add up that odd comment about old enough to remember, and the way that Urdu had neatly implied that the Ancients had something to do with why the System Lords were a bunch of psycho megalomaniacs.

“Yeah, well, I like to hear my hunches validated.” Jack wiggled his fingers in the cough it up already gesture he usually directed at Daniel.

Flatly, Urdu said, “It was not a dead language. Not when I learned it.”

“So,” Jack said, pitching his voice to carry past the choking fit that had suddenly overcome Daniel, “how the hell have you been studying the Ancients for a couple thousand years without even knowing how to read their writing?”

Urdu snorted. “Logistics, in part. Many of the Stargate addresses have been lost. Simply finding the sites can be like finding an arrowhead in a streambed.” He shrugged, an odd gesture on a creature built rather like a linebacker. “To be honest, I can read it to a limited degree, with time and effort. But the skill is less useful than you might expect.”

“But…” Daniel said, looking like he’d been hit over the head with a book. And not the type a Marine would be reading, either. “Archives, records…”

“Most of which are inaccessible if you cannot initialize the equipment. The Ancients were not in the habit of keeping hard copies.” Urdu waved a clawed hand to indicate the lab they stood in. “Nearly all Ancient technology has… I suspect it was meant to be a safety device, or perhaps a way of keeping their technology out of the hands of those they considered undesirable. In essence – without a very particular genetic sequence, you cannot use their technology.”

Jack blinked. Tried to clean out his ear. “Wait. Are you telling me they used their genes as a security lock on their tech?”

“In essence? Yes.”

“…Well, that explains why we have so much trouble running the toaster.” Jack threw his hands in the air. “Only, not, because hello!” He made a sharp wave of his own at the lab, with the glowing lights and functioning hologram and the light-up map that Sam was picking over with Zuko. “We can’t walk into a closet without turning something on in here!”

“Then it is likely that you have inherited the activation gene.”

He could not have heard that right.
“What?”

Urdu looked at him. “A small percentage – **extremely** small – of humans carry the same gene sequence that the Ancients used to key their technology.”

Jack glared. “What, we’re escaped lab mice or something?” he demanded.

Urdu shrugged. “Possibly. It is also possible that Ancients and humans intermarried on occasion, in the distant past. Earth was the center of their empire, after all.”

The Asgard hadn’t mentioned that little detail. What else had they forgotten to mention? “Oh, lovely. We’re a race of **Spocks.**” He waved off the inevitable question. “Point being, how the hell would that even be possible? They were…”

“Essentially, the Ancients were a parallel race of humans. Not identical to you, no, but so similar as to make very little functional difference.”

In the middle of flailing its way through that **utterly impossible** concept, Jack’s mind latched onto something that had been nagging him, just a little, and his eyes narrowed. “I’m not the only person who inherited that gene in here, am I?” He waved at the doors, the lights, the console. “Toph and Zuko have been lighting this place up, too.”

Urdu not-eyebrowed. “Given the heritage of the Renegades, that’s no surprise.”

Hey, distraction. Jack blinked at him. “Renegades?” he echoed. “Now whatever did a couple of cute kids and their psychic ass-kicking ancestors do to your snaky buddies to get a name like that?”

Urdu looked at him. “Colonel O’Neill. You assume it was the **Goa’uld** who…”

His words were cut off by a hum and a flash of light.

Jack blinked. The door to the closet had closed behind Sam and the kids at some point.

Okay, note to self – **make Sam watch Indiana Jones movies. Doesn’t she know that you never stand in the glowing stuff?** “Major?” he called, heading over to the door. Toph had apparently opened it just wandering around, the trigger couldn’t be that hard. “Everything all right in th…”

The door slid open.

The room inside was empty.

Jack really could only say one thing to that.

“Not **again**!”

~**Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.**~

The first hint that something had gone very, very wrong was when Toph made a strangled noise as the door unexpectedly closed behind them and went sheet-white – and then abruptly pitched forward and threw up.

“Toph!”
In these tight quarters, Zuko had more mobility than Sam, and he was closer anyway – he’d grabbed the girl’s shoulders before Sam got properly turned around, steadying her and keeping her from falling into her own mess. “Oi, sh’kari shiroh...”

Toph twisted in his grip to grab at his wrists with white-knuckled hands, blind eyes huge in her pale face, and exploded into a flurry of words. Sam suspected she’d have trouble understanding what the girl was saying even if she could understand their language, but there was no mistaking the edge of very real panic in that tone.

Zuko’s eyes narrowed as he listened – then it was his turn to pale. Wresting one hand free, he twisted to face that door, reaching for it, even though there was no handle that Sam could see.

The door whisked open onto pitch darkness.

The lights went out? But that didn’t seem right, somehow. True, the lab was dug deeply into the stone, probably for insulation purposes, so no outside light could get in, but... even if the Ancient power system, pun very much intended, had suddenly failed for some reason, Jack at the very least still had his P-90 and the attached flashlight.

Flashlight – right.

Reflexively, she reached for her P-90, before remembering that she’d taken it off so that it wouldn’t get in the way as she began poking at the strange crystals that seemed to make such a major part of Ancient tech. Once they’d gotten through the initial meet-and-greet at the Gate... well, Djehuty didn’t seem inclined to attack them just yet. And if he wasn’t... She’d read Jack’s report on the First One. Unas with a symbiote? And this one not suffering from centuries hibernating in a cave? A P-90 might not help much.

And bullets really weren’t going to help against the threat she was really worried about.

Right.

Reaching back, she pulled out the TER and clicked the light on. Both lights, the regular spectrum and the one that would hopefully illuminate anything invisible.

No ominous blue mist, at least. But what she saw in the normal spectrum...

Not good.

No Jack. No Teal’c or Daniel. No anyone. And no pedestal, or the room it had been in.

She couldn’t make out much in the narrow beam of the flashlight. Consoles of some kind, maybe. A largish room, the wall a gentle arc, with the floor next to the wall being raised just a step or two above the center – at least, she assumed it was the center, she couldn’t see the right-hand wall from here.

Not in Kansas anymore, that’s for sure.

So this little cubby was some kind of transporter? And apparently a much smoother, quieter one than the transport rings the Goa’uld used – she hadn’t even realized they’d gone anywhere.

Though Toph did. She winced. Given the girl’s geokineti abilities... suddenly being transported somewhere else couldn’t have been fun.

Which is probably why she threw up. Grimacing, she lowered the TER and looked back at the
control panel. So far as she could tell, the doors had closed when she’d touched one of the blinking
dots on the screen, the one Zuko thought was associated with the yukiuso research area.

Praying she wasn’t about to make a bad situation worse, she reached out and touched the glowing
light that she thought corresponded to where they’d just come from.

*Uh-oh. That’s… very not good.*

At least, she assumed not. That Ancient text flashing in red over the console definitely hadn’t been
there before. “Zuko?” she murmured uneasily.

Looking at the display, Zuko drew in a sharp breath. “Danger,” he said flatly.

Of course. Just what they didn’t need.

Grabbing up her radio, she thumbed it on. “Colonel O’Neill, this is Major Carter. Please respond.
Over.” She clicked the transmitter off and waited.

No response, not even when she tried raising twice more. Taking a deep breath, Sam eyed the
darkness.

*All right, radio isn’t working for some reason.* There could be any number of reasons for that. They
might be out of range. There could be something in the stone, or in the strange alloys used by the
Ancients, that interfered with radio signals. Something about the transport might have screwed with
the circuitry.

Either way, they had two choices – stay put, or try to get outside and see if the radios would work
there.

Standard procedure said that if you were lost, stay put and wait for rescue. Except that anyone who
came through the transporter after them would just be stuck in the same mess.

Not to mention, if they were still in the transporter and someone on the other end pushed a button…
Outgoing traffic was obviously blocked. Incoming, obviously not. That could get… messy.

She grimaced as her imagination all too enthusiastically provided her with possible scenarios. How
did that line go? “Enterprise, what we got… didn’t live very long. Fortunately.”

*Why did I let Jack talk me into watching Star Trek with Teal’c?*

And she was stalling. Taking a breath to steady herself, she stepped out of the transporter, feeling
Toph and Zuko shadowing her movements – close enough to intervene if something happened, far
enough not to get in her way, and although at this point she couldn’t say that sort of combat
awareness in a teen and preteen surprised her, it still pissed her off.

Although that had nothing to do with the sinking feeling in her stomach – which sank still further
when one step became two, then three, and she realized they were still moving in darkness. When
they’d entered the first lab, it had, well, ‘booted up’ almost immediately, almost before they’d even
thought to look for lights.

Not so here. Raising her TER to roughly mid-chest level, she began slowly panning the light over
the walls, alert for anything that might possibly be a light switch. Ancient tech seemed to be built to a
human scale, hopefully they’d set things at roughly the same height around here.

*Wasn’t Urdu saying something about a genetic key? How did that work, anyway? And even so –*
she had Zuko and Toph with her, and they apparently had whatever this key was. If the lights still weren’t working…

*Malfunction. Related to whatever warning was on the transporter controls?*

Her foot collided with something small and hard that went spinning off into the darkness with a clatter.

Before the racket had ended, she had the TER’s two lights fixed on it, her heart hammering in the back of her throat. Zuko and Toph had both dropped into ready stances.

The little cylindrical thing rolled across the floor and fetched up against what looked like some sort of chair with a click.

Sam slowly lowered the TER with a weak chuckle. *Ambushed by an Ancient screwdriver.*

Enough was enough. As things stood, the TER wasn’t helping – the light was too narrowly focused to really let her see her surroundings. All she was getting was light-blindness from looking at the narrow illuminated space, and the inability to see anything outside it.

And this place was cold – but a natural sort of cold, what you’d expect from a room that had been abandoned on an ice planet for thousands of years. It was even slightly warmer than she’d expected. *

*Although the air is moving. Either the ventilators still work, or it’s open to outside somewhere.*

Good. That would give her a chance to try again for radio contact.

More importantly, there was no hint of twisting blue mist from the TER’s modified trans-string light source, and… it didn’t *feel* like a spirit was stalking nearby.

Unscientific, but after that hair-raising chase through the SGC, Sam had the feeling that she would *know* if a yukiuso were nearby.

So. Since direct illumination wasn’t helping… Carefully, she raised the TER so that the flashlight was pointing up, at the polished ceiling, using the same trick she’d pulled with the penlight in Toph’s cave, the last time they’d been on this world. Unfortunately, the ceiling was too high in here – the diffused, reflected light was simply too dim to really make out anything about their surroundings. On the other hand, she wasn’t blinding herself with her own flashlight’s beam now.

She was just trying to decide if she should wait and see if her eyes adjusted more, or give it up and keep moving, when suddenly their surroundings brightened further, and the light took on a warmer coloring.

Oh. Right. Feeling a little foolish, she glanced over her shoulder. “Zuko?”

He met her wry smile with one of his own, although it looked oddly twisted from the play of shadows resulting from the unusual lighting. He’d imitated her own trick, holding one hand over his head as high as he could maintain comfortably, a single, bright flame shining steadily in the palm of his upraised hand.

“Good thought,” she said. Despite all common sense saying that noise wasn’t going to make a difference, she still couldn’t bring herself to speak any louder than a whisper. “Thanks.” She couldn’t help worrying, a little. He was weaker now than he’d been when they were busting out of the ha’tak. She didn’t want him wasting energy. On the other hand – those little pilot lights didn’t seem to take much effort. And the added illumination was definitely welcome.
Turning back to scan the room, Sam’s eye caught again on the small cylindrical object she’d kicked. Frowning slightly, she stepped over and sank down into a crouch. Given that it hadn’t lit up or blasted anything when she’d kicked it across the room a moment ago, she thought it unlikely that it would explode at her or anything. It seemed as dead as everything else in this lab.

She still carefully used the flashlight on her TER to examine it from every angle possible – with Zuko providing general illumination, she could afford to use her lights for spot checks – before gingerly reaching down and picking it up.

Despite her mental label of *Ancient screwdriver*, it didn’t actually look much like a screwdriver – although, given what they’d seen thus far of advanced races and their disdain for projectiles and other ‘primitive’ tools, she wouldn’t put it past the Ancients to have designed a screwdriver that was above anything so mundane as *leverage*. This item was about a foot long, mostly metallic but with a softer black material set in large oblongs along its side. The metal surface was polished smooth, but studded with buttons. One end was capped; the other opened up to show the business end of some kind of mechanism. All things considered, it looked more like a lightsaber hilt than a screwdriver.

*If it were a lightsaber, that would either be supremely disturbing, or awesome beyond all words. Or both.*

Although right now, she was worried about the simple fact that it was *here*.

So far as she could tell, the other lab had been closed down properly – equipment powered down, everything presumably boxed up and shipped out. Why the Ancients hadn’t dismantled the lab itself, she wasn’t quite certain. Maybe they intended to come back. Maybe the Ancients just weren’t very big on ecological preservation. Maybe they had such an abundance of resources that they could write off a lab like this without a twinge.

*Maybe they left too fast, so fast that they could only take whatever wasn’t nailed down.*

But this little gadget…

Someone had dropped this, smack in the middle of the floor. And no one had come back to pick it up.

*The transporter is blocked somehow. And all the other equipment seems dead, too. As though no one bothered to shut it down properly and it just kept going until it ran out of power. Although… It was cold in here, yes, definitely colder than the lab, but for a place that had been abandoned on a frozen world for thousands of years… Either we’re dug as deep as the SGC, or the heating still works, at least a little.*

“Sam. Miroh.”

The edge in Zuko’s voice did *not* sound good. Sam almost set the lightsaber-driver down, then changed her mind and quickly tucked it into a pocket as she rose back to standing and turned.

*Huh.*

The room they were in was actually arc-shaped, the consoles she’d initially observed lining the curve of the outer wall, with the transporter set in the radial wall and what looked like another exit on the far side.

The wall that made up the inner arc, however, had been left open, presumably so as not to impede the wide gallery-style window that ran along nearly its entire length.
Although… odd. She wasn’t getting a reflection from her flashlight against any sort of glass, and when she swept it along the floor at the base of the wall as she approached, she didn’t see the tell-tale glitter of broken shards.

*I suppose it might have had some kind of force field across it, once upon a time. This doesn’t look like the sort of facility that would have reach-through windows…* She brushed her fingers along the edge of the frame, noting some odd sort of metal-crystal matrix that might be a conduit of some sort.

*So what were they watching?* Frowning slightly, she directed her light into the chamber beyond. It was circular, with a pedestal in the center – not unlike the holographic archive room they’d just left behind in the other lab.

So why was the hair standing up on the back of her neck?

*No decoration,* she realized suddenly. The Place of Our Legacy had been about as somberly barren as she’d ever seen, but every other Ancient structure they’d encountered, including this lab… Abstract geometric lattices like Celtic keys or Chinese I Ching symbols forming screens and even just plain wall decoration, the elegant wall pillars that provided both light and visual detail, chevron designs along rafters that echoed the design of a Stargate’s chevrons – suffice to say that the Ancients had apparently enjoyed interior design.

But the circular room she was looking at was absolutely bare, nothing along the walls to break the smooth curve – she could probably use a compass and not get a better circle. The only feature of the room was the pedestal.

Which wasn’t a pedestal at all, she suddenly realized as she angled the beam of the TER flashlight upward to inspect the surprisingly low ceiling. It was more like a high-power conduit from a science fiction movie, with a node coming up from the floor and a second descending from the ceiling, not quite meeting in the center, like a broken high-tech pillar. She could just picture the electrical arcs dancing freely in the space between, the better to fling the villain into at the climax of the movie.

Or perhaps designed to hold something between them.

Sam blinked as she realized there was something else in the room. She had to crane her neck a bit to see it – a cylindrical shape about two and a half feet long and maybe a foot in diameter, seemingly made of some sort of crystal or glass, capped at either end with metal reinforcements and lined with what seemed to be the Ancient version of electrical wiring. At her best guess – it looked like it would fit into the gap between the two nodes in the center with a little room on either side to spare. Chances were, whenever the power had gone out here, the object had fallen and rolled away until it fetched up against the wall.

By now, the hair was well and truly standing up along the back of her neck. The whole set-up screamed *high security.*

*Specifically, failed high security…*  
Zuko cleared his throat. “*Sam,*” he called again, a stern tone slipping into his voice.

Sam turned to look.

While she’d been distracted by the lightsaberdriver and the containment chamber, Zuko and Toph had found the entrance to the chamber itself. Zuko was gingerly hefting a piece of… what had probably been the door. Once.

Dry-mouthed, she reached out and accepted the shard of metal as she joined them, turning it over in
her hand. Once, it had probably been like the other doors in this lab; she could make out the remains of some sort of abstract design, and the alloy was definitely consistent. But it was as though the whole door had simply crashed down and shattered like a sheet of glass, leaving edges that were sharp enough to cut the careless.

Sam had seen shatter patterns like this before, cleaning up the infirmary and the lab.

“Toph?” she said softly, keeping her voice very low. Even so, she could hear it echoing slightly in the containment chamber, as the hard, smooth circle bounced the sound waves back and forth mercilessly. She pointed to the shard and raised her eyebrows, trying to think of how to ask the question in their broken pidgin.

The girl had been poking at a shard of her own, tapping it with a fingernail with her head tilted to the side, as though she could hear the damage to the structure of the metal simply in the sound it made. Between her geokinesis and a blind person’s sensitive hearing, it was entirely possible she could. At Sam’s question, she straightened. “Toh-joh,” she said, and pursed her lips for a moment. Then she raised her hands for a moment in a _me scary!_ sort of pose, puffed her cheeks, and blew, for all the world like a miniature north wind in hot pink.

_Thought as much._

Sam fought down a shiver that had nothing to do with cold and tried to ignore the terrified little voice in the back of her mind screaming that something was coming up behind her in the dark. It didn’t have the same sense of malignant presence she remembered from the yukiuso in the SGC – just the usual atavistic fear of knowing she was in the dark and wouldn’t be able to see if something came at them.

_Enough. It’s gone. I doubt it would be hanging around down here, not when it’s colder outside. It was wandering around the mountains when we encountered it._

That didn’t stop her from sweeping the containment chamber with both TER lights, mundane spectrum and trans-string, as she stepped inside.

She didn’t want to. But they _needed_ to look at that device. If that was how the Ancients had captured and held the yukiuso – they needed to know how it worked, and why it had failed.

_At least we can be sure that the door won’t close itself behind us this time,_ she thought, biting down a laugh that would have had more than a hint of hysteria in it, as Toph and Zuko followed behind her, clearly opting to stick together. Smart. _Hard to do that when there isn’t a door anymore._

Very carefully, she made her way around the room to the cylinder she’d seen through the window. She knew she should investigate the nodes in the center as well, but… Not yet. Not until she’d convinced the lizard in the base of her brain that stepping out away from the wall wouldn’t instantly paint her as a target.

She stopped short of the container and carefully played the light of her TER over it – and then had to laugh at herself. She hadn’t even realized she’d been expecting to find it wreathed in spectral blue mist, some sort of lingering mark from the entity it had contained.

_Don’t assume, Sam,_ she reminded herself sternly. She was guessing that this was a containment device, based on the shattered door and the layout. For all she knew, this was actually the battery that had been powering this section of the lab.

_Which would be Very Cool,_ she admitted to herself. They still hadn’t been able to reverse-engineer
the jury-rigged power source that Jack had put together under the influence of the Ancient database in his head. The materials he’d had available just hadn’t been able to hold up under the stress; Jack had been lucky it had lasted long enough to get him into the grip of the Asgardian Stargate before the SGC had lost power. What had been left of his device was just a fried mess. But if they could get their hands on an original, one that had been designed for extended use rather than a last-ditch, once-off desperation gamble…

Keep telling yourself that, Sam, she thought dryly, as she finally moved to kneel next to the device, setting her TER down reluctantly. She’d need both of her hands for this – and there wasn’t a hint of blue mist about it. The device just sat there on the floor, reassuringly physical and mundane and terrifyingly opaque. You know perfectly well this isn’t a battery.

Well. Know might be a little strong. But after two years of finding herself up to her elbows in alien, ancient and sometimes even Ancient technology, she’d developed something of a sense for how it all worked. And her gut was telling her that her first assumption had been the correct one.

After a breath to steady herself, she reached out and began exploring the device with careful fingertips, sticking to just the exterior for now, and very aware of Zuko and Toph at her back, watching curiously with one eye – or one foot, in Toph’s case – and keeping a steady guard on the surroundings with the other.

The device seemed, surprisingly, to be intact – or at least she couldn’t find anything that looked like damage, even when she found what seemed to be a power casing and checked the thin plates of crystal that seemed to be the Ancients’ preferred data and power sources. There weren’t any cracks in the glasslike surface of the cylinder itself, nor any dents or damage that she could find in the metal components, nor did she see any loose wires or components.

Although the fact that she could find what seemed like wires and nuts and bolts was rather interesting. Most Ancient tech she’d worked with had been more… finished.

Then again, if I’m right, this isn’t a public-use device like the Stargates, that are out in all weathers and will be handled by who knows what. This is a device built for a specific purpose, not to look pretty.

Even if it looked for all the world like a fancied-up turbine from someone’s car.

Which raises an interesting question – how does this work? Sam wondered, squinting at the crystal cylinder. Yes, there was definitely some sort of additional structure inside it. Not unlike the bulbs of a halogen space heater, the cheaper kind at least.

Huh. There’s actually a resemblance to the Stargate. Almost as if this creates a miniature version… I wonder. Does it create some kind of subspace pocket to hold something in? That has to be hugely costly in terms of energy, but we know the yukiuso is affected by the Stargate; it might be the only way you can really contain an incorporeal being without it eventually getting too strong to hold anymore. A controllable version of what we did, tossing it into vacuum?

…Subspace. Note to self, find better technical term for that, or Jack will never stop the Hammerspace jokes.

All right, so that was how it contained whatever it held. So how had the Ancients gotten the yukiuso into this thing?

Strange shapes caught her eye, stamped into the surface of the device near what looked like a series of triggers. “Zuko, Can you read this? Um… this, miroh?”
Zuko crouched down next to her, the movement making the shadow of the nodes in the room shift and shudder almost like living things for a moment until his flame-bearing hand stabilized again. Sam forced herself to ignore the shiver she couldn’t quite suppress and leaned back a little to give him space to look at the letters.

Zuko’s scar creased slightly, his one brow drawing down in concentration as he peered at the device. “A…nuttara… Samyak-san…”

His slow, tentative reading cut short as he snapped his mouth shut and scowled at the container.

Oh boy. I know that look. That’s Danny’s ‘I know I’m reading this correctly, it just makes no sense!’ look.

Which made bracing herself for impact not only logical but the only sane thing to do. When Daniel got that particular look… things blew up. Sometimes literally.

Toph poked at Zuko. “Oi. Nani ga kai-teru?”

“Anokutarah sanmyaku sanbodai…” Zuko said slowly.

Toph drew in what was clearly a shocked breath, tension suddenly rippling through her tiny frame. “…no sara.”

Toph’s jaw dropped like a rock. “Ha? Nanjah, soryah?”

That was most definitely a, “say the heck what?” if Sam had ever heard one. And Zuko’s frustrated response was most distinctly a, Why are you asking me? Scowling, the boy tilted his head, apparently trying to read the rest of the writing, and finally reached out a tentative hand to roll the device over.

The instant his fingers brushed it, warm red-amber light began to gleam in the long tubes inside the cylinder as the device booted up with a surprisingly musical chime.

Heart hammering, Sam threw herself back, vaguely aware of Zuko’s little pilot light going out as the boy and Toph both did the same, putting distance between themselves and both the device and each other – either to give each other room to move, or to make it harder to take both of them out at once, she wasn’t certain. The TER was back in her hands and aimed squarely at the device.

Which simply hummed ever so softly and… sat there, putting off reddish-orange light that helped in part to make up for the loss of Zuko’s firelight.

Slowly, Sam lowered the TER. It just turned on. That’s all. And apparently it doesn’t do much.

In fact, once she got up the nerve to come close, it took all of a minute for her to find a manual switch to turn it back off again – apparently the Ancients hadn’t relied entirely on inherited traits to do their dirty work. Or maybe this was simply something they absolutely did not want turning off by accident.

It’s not broken. It didn’t fail. Someone just turned it off. She was torn between banging her head on the nearest flat surface and swearing fit to embarrass the Colonel despite the fact that he wasn’t even present.

I’m going to find a way to drag Doctor Jansberg and his team back, just so I can throttle them myself, she thought with all the viciousness of an aborted adrenaline rush, as she powered the device
down again – no point in wasting what energy it had left until they had it somewhere she could study it properly. *Who the hell thinks it’s a good idea to turn off random devices when you don’t even know what they… do…*

Her hands stilled.

According to Urdu, and her own very limited observations, it took a particular gene sequence to activate some of this technology. The door into the archive room had been one such, to judge by the fact that it had thwarted Daniel’s every attempt to open it and all Zuko had needed to do was get close enough. This wasn’t the Place of Our Legacy or Ernest’s Planet; the Ancients hadn’t meant for anyone other than themselves to use it.

*Nothing in the lab was activated before we got here, though. Which means that our research team probably didn’t have anyone with the gene – I wonder how common it is? And… for crying out loud, there was a would-be lightsaber lying in the middle of the floor. What geek wouldn’t stop to pick that up?*

But no one had.

*The science team never got this far.*

Which meant…

Sam twisted around sharply. “Toph!” she said, trying to keep the snap in her voice simply military, rather than panicked. “Exit, dokoh?”

The needle of an unerring human compass, Toph’s hand snapped around to point in the direction of the far radial wall from the transporter. “Atchi,” she said shortly.

“Sam?” Zuko asked, expression wary.

She closed her eyes and forced herself to take several deep breaths. *Calm down. It’s not here, which means you have a little time. Panic’s not going to help anyone. First priority, get somewhere with a signal and warn the others, so they’ll know what we’re dealing with.*

“This, doh-suru?” Zuko asked, indicating the container on the floor behind her with a quick jerk of his chin.

Damn. If it really was functional, they couldn’t afford to leave it behind.

Sam had just dropped to one knee, feeling for any sort of handle, when Toph stopped her with a light punch on her shoulder. “Atashi ni makash’te,” she said with a kind of cheery smugness that had Sam biting back a laugh despite everything.

She did that deliberately, Sam realized, as Toph used a calm, steady gesture to lift the machine with her geokinesis and Zuko helped jury-rig a carry-sling for it using cord from Sam’s kit. Thankfully, it seemed that whatever activated the machine took something more than just physical proximity; she didn’t think any of them would have been willing to carry it if it had been live. There was something comical about the smallest member of their group playing the packmule…

*Except that she’s thinking tactically.*

They were all carrying salt, yes, since it had proven an effective way to break the mental influence of the yukiuso if you moved fast enough. Except that even if the three of them combined their stashes, it still wasn’t all that much. Nothing like the quantities that Toph would need if she actually found
herself fighting a yukiuso. And the boots and gloves clearly hampered her psychokinesis.

And it’s freezing. The stone may be brittle. What do you bet that has an effect as well?

And so, Toph was volunteering to weigh herself down, so that Zuko and Sam would be able to fight if they had to.

From Zuko, Sam wouldn’t have found that sort of pragmatic, strategic thinking so surprising; she’d accepted that the boy was in essence a trained soldier, for all his apparent youth. But from sassy little Toph, who acted so much like a child…

Get upset later, she told herself grimly, as Zuko gave the makeshift harness a last, experimental tug, and then nodded readiness to her. After we’re out of this mess.

At least getting out of the room was straightforward. She’d worried, earlier, that with the power gone they would have no way of opening the door short of relying on Toph to make a new one. That proved to not be a problem.

Not that walking through the shards of cold-shattered metal was particularly reassuring.

~Even the Dragon-King’s Temple floods.~

Sam shivered, looking out across the starlit shadows outside as Toph leaned forward to rest her hands on her knees and ease her back and Zuko kept watch on their six, just in case. The exit from the lab – and at least there was an exit, she had to grant, unlike certain other Ancient sites – was located on the side of a deep, bowl-shaped valley that she was almost certain had been a volcanic caldera once, long ago. She could make out steep, craggy mountains on every side, sharp peaks and cliffs betraying their relatively young geological age – and perhaps that was the secret behind the relative warmth of the lab they’d left behind.

That, and shelter from the howling wind. Looking up and over the mountains, she had a clear view of the storm Urdu had mentioned, already visible beyond the crags. It looked like an ugly one – she could actually see the clouds at the front twisting and billowing, edging forward across the sky. The view was, she had to grant, very dramatic – especially with blue-white lightning flashing among the clouds every few seconds.

Thundersnow. Wow. I’ve never actually seen one before.

Quite frankly, she’d be happier to not be seeing one right now. But it didn’t look like there was any way around it. From the look of things, the clouds were headed straight for them. The wind sheer from the leading front was already whipping the snow of the valley into shimmering white curtains and ribbons undulating around the strange, small spires scattered here and there.

If we can’t get help quickly, we’re going to need to find shelter, and soon.

They could maybe retreat into the tunnel… but she wasn’t certain that would be effective. The doors to the inner lab below weren’t the only ones that had been reduced to shards of once-strong metal. Just about every door they’d passed from the lab to here – including the one where she now stood – had met the same fate. And the wind was coming in along the exact angle of the tunnel, worse luck yet. She could feel it whipping and whirling past her and rushing down the confined passageway like a living thing.
True, there’d been one or two side doors they’d passed that were still closed and intact. Sam was not going to touch those. The very last thing they needed in this situation was to set something else loose.

If all else fails, Toph can probably make us a shelter. And she was carrying some real food this time, on general principles.

But the point is to not need it. She pulled out the radio.

“Colonel, this is Major Carter, please respond. Over.” Please, please, please...

The static – probably generated by the massive storm bearing down on them – broke into a familiar voice. “Major Carter. This is Teal’c. Where are you?”

She braced herself against the wall, distantly aware that Zuko and Toph were both looking at her sharply, no doubt picking up on her relief and wondering what was going on. “That back room – it was a transporter, but it seems to be locked on our end. We only just reached the surface. Teal’c, never mind that, we’ve got a much bigger problem on our hands. Where’s Jack?”

“He is here, speaking to Urdu regarding how we might locate you.” In her mind’s eye she could see the slight narrowing of eyes and furrowing of brows that would betray Teal’c’s concern. “Have you discovered something?”

She laughed a little, not at all amused. “Oh yeah. We found the lab where they were studying the yukiuso. Teal’c, it wasn’t the SGC team who released it. I think it was the Ancients.”

“…Indeed?”

She drew in a deep breath. “Yeah. Which means that we’re dealing with a killer entity that has been unleashed on this world and growing in power for the last several thousand years.”

~Even the Dragon-King’s Temple floods.~

The air beside Teal’c filled with vehement Tau’ri curses – Colonel O’Neill had seen Teal’c’s signal that Major Carter had made contact and grabbed up his radio just in time to hear her warning.

“Lovely. Lovely. Bad enough that dealing with just the baby took just about everything we had, now we’ve got the granddaddy of all these things on the loose?” Colonel O’Neill directed a fierce scowl at Urdu. “Where the hell is that ship!”

“On its way,” Nubiti said calmly, hand over one ear, presumably to better focus the sound from the small headset she’d donned to communicate with Djehuty’s ha’tak.

That alone was… intriguing. Teal’c had never seen one of the false gods openly use anything similar to the Tau’ri radios, although he assumed that they possessed something of the sort. That it was Nubiti to use it, a former host…

Urdu hadn’t even looked up at Colonel O’Neill’s roar, although Teal’c knew that there were many Tau’ri, even among the disciplined soldiers, who would take exception. The Unas was still in the inner archive room, just visible from where Teal’c had stationed himself at the entrance to the outer lab to ensure his radio had a clear signal, working furiously alongside Daniel Jackson to wrest the secret of fighting the yukiuso from the Ancient archive.
“Ship?” Major Carter’s voice was tight, likely to hide any anxiety she felt.

“Sanura and Urdu have offered us the use of one of their planetside scouting vessels to search for you,” Teal’c explained.

“Which would go better if you could give us something resembling coordinates,” Colonel O’Neill said. “Or at least a landmark to look for. Where are you?”

A moment’s pause. “Hard to tell, sir. As near as I can tell, that transporter took us to a completely different part of the mountains. We’re in a valley – I’d call it not a full mile across. It’s bowl-shaped. I was thinking caldera, but it might be a meteor crater. There seems to be some debris here and there, but otherwise it’s pretty even. I don’t see a trail out – but if it comes to it, Toph can probably take care of that.”

“It won’t come to that,” Colonel O’Neill said firmly. “We’ll be there to pick you up as soon as we can home in on your signal. Once we’ve got that ship Urdu promised, we’ll be able to triangulate your location – it’ll just help to have a better idea of what we’re looking for when we get there.”

“Sir, I need to warn you. That storm Urdu mentioned? It’s almost right on top of us, and coming on fast.”

As Colonel O’Neill cursed yet again, Teal’c turned his attention to the night-dark mountains outside the lab. In the starlight, he could just make out the lines of cloud boiling over the peaks to the distant east, barely visible beyond the foreshortened horizon.

He looked back inside the lab. “Colonel O’Neill. The storm is some miles distant, but I do not believe it will stay distant long.”

“And it’s an ugly one, sir,” Major Carter reported. “I think even a death glider would have trouble in there.”

Nubiti made a sound of triumph and nodded to Colonel O’Neill, but the Tau’ri was already moving towards the door as Teal’c heard the sound of one of the false gods’ smaller flying vessels approaching. “We’re not going to need to, Sam,” Colonel O’Neill said stubbornly. “Our ride’s here, we’ll be out there in a second. You grab the kids and find someplace to take shelter, and get ready to make a dash.”

“Right. They’re checking out the valley now, Toph should be able to…”

Her voice trailed off.

“Sam? Major Carter, report!”

“...Oh God.” Even through the increasingly staticky radio connection, Teal’c could hear Major Carter swallowing hard. “Sir? We’ve found Sanura’s missing Jaffa. And the science team.”

~Even the Dragon-King’s Temple floods.~

Sam slowly lowered the radio from her ear, dimly aware of Jack shouting for details. It was only a distant, tinny noise past the ringing in her ears, as she stared at the “debris” Zuko had brushed the snow away from – and then stumbled back from as though burned.
Empty as ice, staring eyes looked back, only these eyes were never seeing anything again.

As he got into the middle of it he saw that there were dozens of statues all about – standing here and there rather as the pieces stand on a chess board when it is half way through the game, recited an incongruous childhood memory. They all looked so strange standing there perfectly lifelike and also perfectly still, in the bright cold moonlight...

When she’d been a young girl, reading The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe for the first time, Sam had somehow missed the whole turned to stone detail. For the longest time, she’d labored under the false impression that the Witch had turned her victims into statues by literally freezing them. The mental image had lingered in the back of her mind for the longest time, even after she’d learned just how messy that particular process actually would be. Something with as many different minerals and differing densities, not to mention endothermic, as the human body, simply didn’t freeze evenly.

This woman had. It was her childhood mental image all over again. Only worse.

That wasn’t supposed to be possible, dammit.

Forcing herself to breathe, she took a step back, distantly noting that the woman was definitely dressed in the armor of Djehuty’s Jaffa, and looked at the valley with its scattered “debris” with new eyes.

At least fifteen... How big was that missing patrol? How many more has Urdu lost? And some of them are probably ours.

She wasn’t inclined to start brushing the snow away to look. Zuko and Toph had already retreated back to the entrance of the lab to join her, clearly uneasy.

I wonder if there are the remains of Ancients amongst them, somewhere...

She shook her head fiercely, trying to focus past the crawling, completely superstitious uneasiness. Something was wrong here. And not just the obvious...

Wait. Here. They’re all here.

But she knew for a fact that the science team had gone missing from the other lab. As had the missing patrol that Sanura had been trying to track back when the SNAFU had started – or rather, their abandoned ship must have been in the same region as the Stargate and the first lab.

Several miles, Teal’c said. Across hard, dangerous terrain. They can’t have walked that. The cold and the mountains would have killed them, even without the yukiuso fogging their minds!

They couldn’t have made the trek under their own power. Why was that important…?

The yukiuso brought them here deliberately.

...This is its lair.

“Not good,” she whispered, suddenly remembering the radio in her hand. She lifted it, meaning to give Jack an update…

“Sam?”

She’d heard a lot of tones from Zuko. This was the first time she’d heard anything that she would call honest terror.
She glanced at him – and then slowly turned her eyes to follow his fixed gaze up to the stormclouds bearing down on them.

The clouds that were boiling closer by the second, with a roiling, churning sort of turbulent motion that she recognized very well.

That bluish light wasn’t just lightning.

“…Oh, fuck.”

~Even the Dragon-King’s Temple floods.~

Sam didn’t swear. Not like that. Not unless she was trapped in an ice cave with a superior officer succumbing to internal bleeding and a DHD that would not dial out.

“Dammit, Major – give me an update!” he snapped, pulling himself through the door of the oddly hawklike ship that had set down just outside the Ancient lab. Teal’c and Sanura were already aboard – Djehubtys’s Prime having leapt inside as soon as the door cracked open, almost before the thing touched down and the pilot had retreated into the lab.

Which meant they were still one short. Stopping just inside, Jack twisted about and gestured impatiently at Daniel.

The anthropologist shook his head. “I’ll stay here with Nubiti and Urdu,” he said, talking fast. “If Sam’s right, cracking that archive just became essential. They speak Ancient, I can at least read some symbols… Get Sam and the children.”

Blast the man, he was right. And they didn’t have time to argue about what a bad idea splitting the team would be. The ship was lifting off again – apparently Sanura shared Jack’s opinion on delays.

“Tell Nubiti to keep that headset on – we’ll stay in touch over the ship’s comm,” he yelled, pulling back so that the door could slide shut. Not trusting Urdu’s people now wasn’t going to help anything. And this would let them focus their radio communication on finding Sam.

Speaking of… “Major, I said report!” he snarled again, making his way to what had to be the cockpit of the ship. At least now he could reluctantly see why Urdu had called for this particular vessel. Despite the oddly hawklike exterior – designed for atmospheric mobility, he’d guess – the interior was startlingly spacious. If he were to guess – this was the Blackhawk helicopter of the Goa’uld, a small troop carrier as opposed to a fighter jet like the death gliders. Which meant they had the room to pick up three more people without compromising pilot efficiency.

Which could get very important, given the stormclouds filling the horizon as he reached the cockpit and settled in behind Teal’c and Sanura.

His radio crackled. “Sir,” Sam said. Her voice was audibly shaking, despite all the interference. “I’d say we just found the yukiuso.”

It was like being dropped into ice water. “Don’t engage!” he snapped, grip tightening on the back of Teal’c’s seat. It looked like the Jaffa had taken the co-pilot’s seat, and was trying to triangulate Sam’s position using the radio signal. “Get out of its way and wait for extraction.”
“Sorry, sir. That’s… not really an option.”

His knuckles were white. “Sam. Report.”

“You know how the image of the yukiuso looked like a miniature thunderstorm?”

“For certain definitions of storm…” Jack’s voice trailed off as he took in the towering thunderhead that had already swallowed the eastern mountains.

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me,” he breathed.

“Believe me, sir, I really wish I were.”

“Major Carter. Can you take shelter in the lab?” Teal’c asked intently, pointing at something on his display for Sanura. Their course shifted slightly.

“Negative. The lab out here… it’s not secure. There isn’t a door left intact in there, not one I’m willing to open. The yukiuso can go anywhere it wants. And… this is its lair. We’re in its turf now. Even if Toph could whip up a shelter in time – I don’t think we have what it takes to raise a threshold against… that.” Sam’s voice wavered – then steadied, building terror shoved beneath the cool professionalism of the Major. “Sir, recommend that you do not attempt extraction.”

“Recommendation noted, Major.”

“Dammit, Jack-!” Sam’s voice broke slightly, before she yanked it back under control. “Jack, I’ve done my pilot training! Forget the yukiuso aspect – flying into a storm of this magnitude isn’t just insane, it’s suicidal!”

“I said, your recommendation is noted, Major!” Jack cut his radio transmission off sharply. “ETA,” he demanded, voice flat and tight in his ears.

“Not looking good,” Sanura said in the calm of a soldier under crisis conditions. “It is approaching quickly. The Tale’sedrin is swift when pushed, but we are racing against time.”

“And?” Jack asked.

“And we are flying into a demon of a headwind.” Sanura paused to make some correction on the alien control panel. “Under the circumstances, I think that demon should be taken literally.”

“There is another consideration,” Teal’c said quietly. “From your account of former Prime Khenut’s disappearance, we must assume the mental influence of the yukiuso is capable of reaching through the walls of a ship.”

“Not this ship,” Sanura said, with a fierce, teeth-baring smirk.

Teal’c tilted his head at her, brow quirking upward.

Sanura’s eyes never strayed from her display. “Urdu paid attention when your Doctor Jackson explained the threshold effect. That is why he called for this ship, specifically, and why the other pilot disembarked. The Tale’sedrin is mine.” For just a second, blazing blue eyes flicked up to meet Jack’s stare. “That thing has hurt my people, Colonel. It is not welcome here.”

Jack grinned tightly. “We get out of this, I’m introducing you to Janet properly this time.”

Which wasn’t a promise of security. The yukiuso in the SGC had gotten into Janet’s head right through the walls of the infirmary.
Yeah, well, we know the warning signs now. And I’ve got a pocket full of McD’s salt packets and I’m not afraid to use them.

“Colonel. Sanura. I believe I have located the valley Major Carter spoke of.” Teal’c pointed at the screen.

Jack’s heart clearly needed a refresher course in battle stations. The back of his throat was not an appropriate location.

The storm had already engulfed the far slopes. By now, he could make out the hints of sharp-toothed, staring, indistinct shapes surging in and out of wind-whipped snow and clouds, limned with hints of unnatural blue light.

“Time?” he asked softly.

Sanura had already set their course for the bowl of the valley and was hurtling them through the air towards it. “Tight. At best… we will not arrive a moment too soon.”

Jack nodded mutely and clicked the radio back on. “Major. This is an order. Buy yourselves time. I don’t care how, just hold on. We’re almost there.”

“Sir.” A moment’s breath. “I have an idea.”

~Even the Dragon-King’s Temple floods.~

Wind howled past the meager barricade Toph had raised between them and the coming storm. It cut the worst of the cold; Zuko knew they’d all be suffering the beginnings of frostbite already, without that meager shelter.

It didn’t protect them from the heavy weight of malice pressing down all around them. But it was something.

This does it. I don’t care what the others think; the universe officially hates me. Gritting his teeth, Zuko gave up on the knots in the harness he’d made for Toph. His fingers were too clumsy in the heavy gloves for any sort of fine manipulation, and he wasn’t about to take them off. Instead, he reached under the heavy coat Sam’s people had leant him and drew his dagger. I really should have seen this coming.

Sam made a noise that might have been the beginnings of an objection, but cut it off as he slit the first line of cord, and moved to help him wrestle the thing off Toph’s back.

He had no idea what she meant to do with it. Anything that had to do with the Avatar, couched in the old sacred script and the flowery language from the oldest archives he’d ever accessed, even if he had no idea what dish of the Fully Realized Avatar was even supposed to mean…

The cords finally came loose. Shaking the last of the harness off as Sam pulled the thing away, Toph ducked down and brought her hands up, raising two walls on either side of them, cutting off a little more of the swirling wind.

“Sparky, you’d better have some good ideas real fast!” she shouted, voice barely audible over the howling wind. Even so, Zuko could tell it was pitched significantly higher than Toph normally
He ducked down next to where Sam was pressed against Toph’s wall, frantically poking at the buttons on the device. “Hold the wall!” he shouted hoarsely. He’d already leant his meager supply of salt to Toph. That, and an earthbender’s fierce, stubborn chi, was enough to buy them a little shelter…

He swallowed, trying to think past the sheer menace around them.

Worse than the Ocean. The Ocean had simply been angry, and slain anything it perceived as being in its way. This…

This was active malice.

Sam grabbed his hand. “Zuko!” she shouted. The rest of her words were too torn and fragmented by the howling wind to make any sense, but she was pulling his hand towards the strange device.

Hope you know what you’re doing! Swallowing hard, he brushed the tips of his gloved fingers on ice-rimed metal, and the crystalline pillar suddenly lit with that strangely heavy red light, forming into arcs that lashed out at the wind around them…

The storm howled, and his vision grayed. He shook his head fiercely to clear it-

A hint of white where there should have been none was his only warning.

“Get down!”

His fingers grabbed Toph’s collar and yanked as he threw himself and Sam flat-

The stone walls disintegrated, fragments whipped over their heads in the howling wind.

The next few moments were a kaleidoscope of images. Sam, crying out as wind that was more than simply wind tore the device out of her grip, sending it tumbling out of her reach to fetch up against one of those horrible frozen corpse-statues. A last glimpse through a break in the wild swirls of snow and wind and cloud-fog of one of the strange flying vessels that had attacked them at the Sta-geit struggling through the wind towards them. The three of them instinctively pulling into a small huddle against burning cold…

Then one or all three of them cried out as the world shifted, growing distant, hollow, fragile, fading…

Transition, memory from a dozen baffling anecdotes from Uncle over Pai Sho and tea suddenly realized. It’s taking us to the Spirit World!

Toph was still beside him; he could feel her. But Sam…

His gut twisted.

Sam’s people, the people of that strange world with its alien sun, were different. Their chi was… stiff. Fixed to their bodies. It had saved lives, in that attack on the mess hall. Where others would have been left with spirits pulled loose to wander, wounded and lost, they’d stood fast, rigidly locked to their bodies, like an oak-elm in a storm.

Except there was always one storm that was too strong.

And like an oak-elm, when the stress became too much…
Sam was breaking.

*Not on my watch!*

*Toph!*

It wasn’t a shout. They were beyond that, already at the inversion point where spirit became ascendant over physical. But she heard him, and reached around Sam to lock her hands on his wrists.

*Lightning and magnets dance together,* Sokka had said once, more weirdness sprung from way, way too many late nights with Ji – Zuko swore those two had some secret stash of cactus juice for those mad planning sessions. But now he was praying that Sokka’s mad ramblings were right, because lightning was healing now, and so were Toph’s magnets.

*Can’t bend in the Spirit World. But – if we can just get her across the boundary…*

The world twisted, and they were gone.

~*Even the Dragon-King’s Temple floods.*~

Daniel hadn’t heard swearing like that since the Pentagon had refused to let the disbanded SGC investigate Apophis’s incoming ships.

“Sanura, what’s going on?” Nubiti asked sharply.

She’d done something to her headset, so that the sound projected so all three of them could hear. The sound quality was good.

Too good. He could hear the faintest hint of waver in Sanura’s voice, clear as day. “*I do not know what just happened. They just – faded. All three of them.*”

Unexpectedly, Urdu leaned towards Nubiti’s speaker. “The yukiuso probably took them out of phase with this reality,” he said intently. “It carried them to its phase of existence. They’re alive. In danger, but *alive.*”

“*Right.*” Jack’s voice was grim. “Okay. You two. Let’s get the hell out of here and figure out how to get them back…”

Daniel tuned them out as he swallowed, hard.

Urdu looked at him. Daniel didn’t think he was mistaking the genuine concern in those odd amber eyes. “*Doctor Jackson?*” he asked, voice a deep rumble.

“I’ve…” he said, and had to swallow again. “I’ve read some of Earth’s folklore. On… spirit kidnappings. The outcome… tends to be ugly.”

That had been after their encounter with the Salish “spirits.” And after just a little research… Whatever else the aliens who’d impersonated spirits might have done, he’d spent a lot of time after it was over just giving thanks that it hadn’t been worse.

Folklore had a lot of warnings about the consequences of being taken Underhill, or traveling to the
realm of the gods, or descending into the underworld.

Most of it summing up as, “Don’t be too sure you’re going to come back.”

“The consequences can be… very dire,” Urdu said slowly. “But… the Gatebuilders were always closer to what you might call the spirit world than other races. That, I think, was the origin of their fascination with Ascension. The two children, at least, should have made the transition safely. With luck, their presence was enough to buffer Major Carter.”

Daniel blinked at him, slowly adding that up. “You really think they inherited that much of the Ancient genome?” he asked, trying not to hope too much. “Wait, is that where the psychokinetic abilities come from?”

Urdu blinked at him slowly. “I think you misunderstand. The Renegades did not receive their abilities from your ‘Ancients,’ Doctor Jackson…”

~Even the Dragon-King’s Temple floods.~

“No.”

Sokka’s teeth missed his lovely, lovely jerky entirely and landed on his tongue instead as he jumped with a strangled yelp.

A whole day, of sitting around in a dark, destroyed ruin of some long-lost civilization probably older than Aang and Zuko’s freaking Sun Warriors, trying not to imagine what had happened here, and trying to figure out if maybe they should send someone back to give the capitol an update on what they’d found. Which would be a great idea, if not for the fact that they didn’t really have anything new to tell Iroh, Zuko and Toph had already disappeared and, seriously, you never split the party, basic survival wisdom there…

And all the while, Aang had just… sat there. And meditated. And glowed. And… stuff.

Only not anymore. Now he was standing in front of that weird ring thingy, still glowing it up in the Avatar State, and… Sokka had never ever heard the Avatar State speak before, not independent of Aang, even if Aang claimed it had when he was fighting Fire Lord Ozai.

He really wished he wasn’t hearing it now, because there was desperation and denial and all sorts of scary stuff in that voice.

He scrambled to his feet, grabbing the hilt of Zuko’s dao before it fell on the floor – he’d just been poking at it, trying to figure out if they had any way of fixing it, because these were good dao, and Zuko had gotten his Space Sword back for him, after all…

Katara scrambled up with him, face white. “Aang…”

“No again. I won’t let them win, not again!”

The Avatar raised his hands to the ring, palms forward.

The interior ring began to move.
“…they are Ancients.”

Chapter End Notes

Psychokinetic powers? Check. Back-and-forth between physical and spirit realms? Check. History stretching back thousands, maybe millions of years? Look at the number of Avatar images in Aang’s awakening sequences, and in the Southern Air Temple, and multiply that by the implied lifespan of at least some Avatars – check and check. As for why Asunytian Ancients aren’t A: particularly high-tech, B: killed by the plague, or C: Ascended… well. There’s a history there.

And as for the Denisovan theory – that’s what it was. A theory. And one that might still hold true. We have very, very little evidence about who and what the Denisovans were. Some of their DNA was shared with humans, some definitely wasn’t. Guessing that what was found in that cave might include the remains of an Ancient? Not outside the realm of Stargate possibility. Particularly given the implied interconnectedness of Ancients and humans. (Personally? I’m toying with a headcanon of, the Ancients are human, and the distance between our galaxy and theirs is actually a ripple in the fabric of time…)

Yes, Nubiti and Urdu (Ur, rather) are nothing like the First One from the Cimmeria episode. Then again, they haven’t spent who knows how long trapped in an underground labyrinth, surviving on hibernation and cannibalism (look up legends of Wendigo for what that can do to someone), with nothing but a categorically condemning answering machine message for company.

True, I’m given to understand that later canon paints the Unas as primitives, when SG-1 visits that world, but… that doesn’t mean they all are. Stargates give extremely skewed impressions of planets; take Solitudes, where Sam comes back after scouting outside and says, “It’s an ice planet.” No, it wasn’t. It was Antarctica! So it’s possible that the Stargate on the Goa’uld homeworld was located in the equivalent of the Amazon rainforest or the Australian outback. Someone came through there, even in the modern day, they’d get a pretty skewed idea of human society, too.

For the curious: for body language and some behavioral and social traits, I’m using crocodiles as a base.

Regarding the images of the spirits… look at the Wikipedia entry for demon. Believe me, “bat-winged red satyr” is the boring version. Heck – look up some of the old imagery given for angels. Suffice to say that cherubim weren’t particularly cherubic.

As for Jack’s snark about rolling for Initiative – given that the uber-yukiuso has distinct D&D Tempest elemental influences, how could I not? Besides, the yukiuso does have some influences from D&D’s Arctic Tempest elemental (I forget which version of D&D this was), along with a hefty dose of, “Ooo, wouldn’t that be creepy.”
Yes, Sam swearing like that is slightly out of character for canon. But this is not television, and sometimes, there isn’t anything else to say to sum up *FUBAR*.

Look up *blinkenlichten* on Wikipedia. Be prepared to giggle.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It materialized out of nowhere.

And it was fast. Sam only caught a glimpse of a long, sleek shape loosely sketched in shadows, vague shade-on-smoke impressions in what seemed like a head that might be eyes, as indistinct and ephemeral as a wisp of smoke as it streaked past her.

There was nothing ephemeral about its fangs.

She hissed in pain, clapping a hand over the streak of blazing white cold that burned across her arm as though her jacket sleeve weren’t even there, twisting in an attempt to track the blasted thing…

Sam was a veteran of two and a half years in the flagship team of the SGC, a hundred or more different worlds, and at least that many bizarre situations.

She stared.

The world was lit by a strange, bluish illumination that seemed to have no source – not even the strange clouds churning furiously overhead in a turbulent sky, lit from within by blue-white lightning dancing back and forth between restless thunderheads. The light concealed as much as it revealed; she could just make out jagged mountain peaks looming black against the sky, shaving off wisps of cloud with edges as sharp as only flaked obsidian could possibly be…

“Move!”

She was throwing herself down to barren, hard, glassy ground before she even registered the shout, as the corner of her eye registered a streak of dark motion that meant the shadow-shape had come around for a second pass.

A second swift motion, from the other direction, silvery and bright, cut through it. With a hollow shriek that didn’t seem to hit her ears at all, the shadow-shape burst apart into misty wisps that dissipated in moments.

Small hands were grabbing her. “Stop staring and get over here!”

Sam scrambled across sharp-edged, glassy stone, concentrating on not slipping – because she knew, somehow, that if she slipped and fell here, the stones themselves would cut her to pieces.

Although somehow, the thought of that was better than the lingering ice-cold burning on her arm. She glanced at it once and couldn’t help a shudder. There was a streak of stark white, a cold fog smoking off it, across the sleeve of her jacket, as though someone had swiped her with liquid nitrogen.

She didn’t want to see her arm beneath it.

Her scramble ended as she skidded into the inside arc of a curving boulder, next to a familiar small, solid shape. “What’s going on?” she gasped.

“You’re asking me?” Toph snapped, voice high-pitched even for a twelve-year-old.
Russet-and-gold moved to intercept two more shadow-shapes lunging out of nothingness towards their shelter. “Spirit World,” Zuko said grimly, his back to them as he kept watch for more of the things. “The yukiuso pulled us across…”

Sam blinked. Where did the swords come from? They looked very much like the Chinese sabers that Tai Chi enthusiasts used – except this was no exercise aid. These were weapons, meant for bitter, bloody use.

From the ease with which Zuko held them, and maneuvered them not as two separate weapons but as a fighting pair – he was all too familiar with that use.

“The Spirit World?” Toph demanded. “Twinkletoes talked about the Spirit World, Sparky! It’s all… swampy and creepy and stuff. I can’t even see, and I can tell you that this…” A furious gesture took in hazy half-light and black, glassy slopes – and nearly cut Toph’s arm open on the edge of their shelter before Sam managed to intercept. Toph didn’t even seem to notice the save. “…this is not swampy!”

“Yeah, well, I get the funny feeling that this place doesn’t exactly have a lot of living things to liven it up!”

Three more shadow-shapes manifested simultaneously, and Zuko cursed softly. A quick turn and parallel slash with both swords took out two as they darted in – but he missed the third, and only a desperate twist of his body that nearly sent the boy tumbling down onto the sharp-edged ground got him out of its path. As Zuko regained his footing, Sam caught a glimpse of his face: wide-eyed, thin-lipped with determination, and pale in a way she didn’t think could entirely be credited to fear. The pyrokinetic was tiring.

Wait. Pyrokinetic. Why is he using swords at all? Why isn’t he using fire against these things? And why wasn’t Toph fighting, rather than latching onto Sam’s bad arm with a death grip? It seemed utterly unlike the boisterous girl…

Apparently Zuko agreed. “Dammit, Toph – I need some back-up here!” he snarled, as the one he’d missed came around for another pass, joined by two more out of the haze.

“Hel-lo!” Toph snapped back. From the sound of it, she was keeping it from being a wail by dint of pure stubborn cussedness. “Spirit World here! There’s no bending! At least you have your swords – how the heck do you have your swords? But I’m blind!”

“This is the Spirit World – we are as we see ourselves! Of course I have my dao!” Zuko actually laughed, a little breathlessly. “And you’re blind and yet you still… knew I had my swords back,” he added, making an odd corkscrew-turn that cut apart a shadow diving down on him. “You’re letting a little blindness stop you? Are you the Blind Bandit or not?”

“…Sparky, we get out of this and your butt is kicked.” Toph actually giggled. “What, are we the Ember Island Players now?”

Zuko’s grin was all teeth. “Going to take a look at things by yelling?”

“Oh, I am way cooler than that.” Toph scrambled to her feet, shamelessly using Sam’s shoulder to lever herself up. “You just keep ‘em back, Sparky,” she added, humor underlined by fierce determination.

Then, taking a deep breath, she cupped her hands behind her ears.

Sam bit her lip and stayed down, trying not to distract Toph or interfere with Zuko.
I can’t believe this. I’m a major in the Air Force – I should be helping them, not hiding behind them! Especially if she was following what they’d said correctly, and their psychokinesis didn’t work in this Twilight Zone.

Yeah. Right. I’m not even armed… And going hand-to-hand with these shadows struck her as a very bad idea.

Wait. What was it Zuko had said? “We are as we see ourselves!” And now that she looked… Zuko and Toph were both wearing the same clothing they’d had on when Sam had first met them, escaping Djehuty’s ha’tak. And she knew Zuko had scorched his to shreds, healing his arm. And Toph…

Toph was dressed as she had been, yes. Except… her clothing was colorless. Literally. Sam could look straight at it, and it had no color.

…because she’s blind. She has no real concept of color.

“Zuko!” Toph suddenly yelled. “Over there!” One hand was pointing out into the haze, at something that might have been a darker shadow. “There’s something bigger, it’s where the little things are coming from! Get it!”

“Love to!” Zuko growled, ducking another icy shadow narrowly. He was keeping up with their numbers – barely. But if he missed one… they were manifesting faster and faster. Sooner or later, he’d be overwhelmed. “How?”

Sam rose to one knee, arms extended. “Toph, cover your ears!” she said, and fired. Because she was an Air Force major. Of course she had a gun.

I never thought I’d ever say this, she thought, fighting down a half-hysterical chuckle, but thank God for Hollywood.

Something inhuman howled just beyond sight and far, far too close. And in the next moment, the shadow-shapes were melting back into the haze.

Zuko finished off the last of the attackers and backed up a step or two. Sam had already turned, putting the three of them back-to-back-to-back. “Thanks,” he said roughly, obviously trying to steady his breathing before whatever came next.

Sam shook her head. “No problem,” she said over her shoulder. “But I hope you two have a bright idea for getting out of here, because I’m coming up empty…”

Her words stuttered to a halt, as something that should have been painfully obvious suddenly slapped her in the face.

She wasn’t the only one to reach the same sudden realization. Zuko’s eyes widened almost comically in one of the most impressive double-takes she’d ever seen.

 “…Whoa,” Toph said at length, sounding impressed. “Since when could you talk like a real person?”

“Toph!” Zuko said, shock vanishing under amused exasperation.

Sam couldn’t help laughing a bit. “I’ve heard worse,” she admitted. And she had. There’d been far too many civilizations that didn’t care that Gate translation allowed you to understand most of what they were saying. If you were an outsider, of course you wouldn’t hear them talking about you.
Gate translation. “Is this some sort of… Spirit World thing?” Sam asked carefully.

Toph shrugged. “Probably. Sparky’s the sage, though.”

“I am not a sage!” Zuko snapped over his shoulder. “Do I look like Guru Pathik – Toph, don’t even go there.”

The girl widened blind eyes and smirked.

Zuko huffed. “Anyway, I’ve just… picked a few things up.”

“Over Pai Sho?” Toph grinned tauntingly.

“And gallons of tea, spirits – Sam, on your left!”

She sighted and fired. She wasn’t a crack marksman; the bullet only skimmed the trailing edge of the shadow-shape as it hissed and veered off. Still, it seemed to be enough; the shape melted back into the haze.

_Thank goodness for small blessings. I don’t have the ammo to relo… Wait._ A quick check confirmed her sudden hunch. _What do you know? Unlimited ammo. Cool._

“Pick up anything about getting out of this?” she asked, scanning their surroundings. Whatever she’d shot earlier, she suspected there were more – which meant that they’d have a second wave of attackers soon.

Zuko released a long breath. “Not as much as I’d like,” he admitted reluctantly.

“C’mon,” Toph needled, her voice low and soft, probably to keep from deafening her all-important ears. “Spirit-quests. That’s classic shaman stuff. You *can’t* tell me Uncle didn’t talk about it!”

“Spirit-walks, sure,” Zuko countered. “Except this isn’t a *spirit-walk*, we’ve been physically transported into the Spirit World! Like Sokka and Hei Bai.”

“I missed that one, remember?”

“So did I, that doesn’t change the fact that it’s not really a good thing!”

“So start from first principles,” Sam said, trying not to betray the fact that she was biting her lip to fight off sudden laughter. _Good grief. They even banter like SG-1!_

She had a team with her. They might not be her team, but they were a team. Their surroundings seemed oddly _lighter_ with that realization.

_{Or maybe not odd at all, if perception really does have tangible effects here.}_{

“This friend of yours,” she said, taking a wild guess, “something like this happened? How did he get back?”

“Hei Bai gave him and the townspeople back after it calmed down,” Zuko said dryly.

“Great,” Toph said. “Any bright ideas on how to calm down a yukiuso?”

“I hear dying works.” Zuko slashed down another darting shadow. “In a spirit walk, you get out by returning to your body. That _might_ work – going back to where you came through.”
“I don’t think we’ve left,” Sam admitted. “And…” She trailed off, remembering howling wind and cold that shattered solid stone in seconds.

Toph could have been reading her mind, from the sudden, whole-body shiver in the tiny frame. “Yeah. Not a good idea. Anything else?”

Zuko’s lips thinned. “So far as I know, no. Unless you can get a spirit to help you out.”

Sam winced, unable to fight a quick glance up at the roiling clouds not nearly high enough overhead. She didn’t even know if there were stars up there – let alone Earth, or Zuko and Toph’s world. “And none of us have any spirit friends on this world,” she said reluctantly.

Someone chuckled.

“Oh,” a sharp, dry voice said, “I would not say that.”

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~

Either he fell into the seat, or the seat jumped up and grabbed him.

“Don’t you have inertial dampeners on this thi-” Jack started, and then cut himself off and gritted his teeth as the entire ship jounced and shuddered.

“In atmosphere?” Sanura asked, teeth bared in a fierce grin as she fought the Tale’sedrin around again. “Surely you jest.”

…Ouch. Point. Inertial dampeners cancelled mass, according to Sam, which meant they effectively canceled weight. Light weight aircraft in heavy winds? Disaster waiting to happen.

And more than that – if they were going to get out of this alive, Sanura had to be able to feel what was happening to the ship.

Another teeth-rattling jolt nearly flung Jack out of the seat again. He swore and scrabbled reflexively at the seat. His fingers came upon something flat and tough – he pulled the strap forward and found a matching slot in the side of the seat.

Danny would laugh. Seat belts, the universal consta-oof!

Unfortunately, he couldn’t strap his stomach in, and he nearly left it behind as for a terrifying second, they lost lift completely and dropped – only to hit a gust going a different direction and nearly tumble over.

In the chaos, it took him a second or two to realize the odd ringing wasn’t his ears, but an incoming transmission.

Gritting his teeth, he released his death grip on the seat and slapped the receive button, glad now that he’d kept an eye on what Sanura and Teal’c were doing in this thing. The last thing those two needed was a distraction, as they wrestled with ship and winds and controls to keep the Tale’sedrin in the air.

Flying storms was hard enough. Flying a lightning-laced blizzard that was actively trying to kill them…
“This had better be good,” he growled through clenched teeth. Last thing he needed right now was to bite his tongue.

“Jack! Urdu says the monitors he set on the Stargate just went off – someone’s dialing in!”

Of. Freaking. Course. Because there was no situation so dire that Murphy couldn’t stick his two cents in.

“Sit tight,” he said, mind racing. Who would be dialing in to this place? It wasn’t exactly Grand Central Station!

Though the way things have been lately, you coulda fooled me.

Their wild flight had leveled off somewhat. Which was a good sign, really. Only, not, because that meant they were flying with the winds rather than against them.

Playing along with what Killer Cold wanted for them struck him as a really bad idea.

“Any day now would be nice,” he commented.

Sanura didn’t even look at him. “Perhaps you would prefer the controls?” she snapped. Teal’c didn’t even react, eyes locked on his display as he made some arcane adjustments, and Jack had never been happier that the big guy knew his way around Goa’uld tech.

Frankly, yes, Jack did – if only because flying would demand too much of his attention for his mind to keep jumping back to the moment when they’d cleared that last rise – just in time to see an arm of the storm surge forward and engulf the three tiny figures in the valley. And the way they’d simply faded into wind and blowing snow, like a high-budget special effect…

Keep a grip, Jack, he thought grimly. Not that he wasn’t doing that already, physically at least; his knuckles were white, clutching at any handhold he could get as the ship suddenly bucked and tossed – Sanura had just veered out of the airstream they’d been following, skipping through turbulence to get to another. He just prayed the yukiuso didn’t get the bright idea of dashing them into a mountain, because all he could see at the moment was whirling snow, dark clouds, and lightning. Sanura had to be flying by instrument alone. Urdu said they probably pulled through okay, they’re just in a different phase. Not like they hadn’t seen stuff like that before.

Hang in there, Sam. We’ll get you out of there, if you don’t beat us to it.

“So what’s the problem?” he asked.

Sanura didn’t bother answering this time; it was Teal’c who looked up and said, “There is a powerful layer of fast-moving wind around the outer edge of the storm. It will take significant momentum to force our way past it.”

Ah. So that was why Sanura was playing along – trying to get up enough steam to punch through.

“Lovely. Whatever Sam did, she must have really ticked it off.”

“Indeed. However, we may be fortunate in that regard.”

Jack eyed him. “Oh?” he asked warily.

“It would appear the entity is too angry to attack our minds.”

Too bad his stomach had gotten left behind between a zig and a zag somewhere along the lines. His
heart could have used something to stop its fall. “Dammit, Teal’c, what have we told you about tempting Murphy…”

The screen blazed white, and the ship went crazy, alarms going off everywhere as the whole thing spun out of control for a moment, as if it were nothing more than a child’s toy punted out of the way.

*Lightning strike?* Jack thought wildly, as Sanura wrestled the craft back under control and the viewscreen cleared-

His jaw dropped.

They were on the edge of a great V of clear air cutting through the whirl of a storm. He could see all the way to the peaks around the Stargate’s valley.

“What the *devil* was that?” he demanded.

“I do not know, I do not *care,*” Sanura snapped, whipping the ship around.

Jack was already scrambling for the comm against as she punched it, landscape whipping past at a dizzying speed. “Daniel! What’s going on?” Silence for a moment. “Danny!”

“…*Ow,*” the anthropologist mumbled after a moment. “*Inside of my head isn’t supposed to be a gong…*”


“I’m not sure.” It was Nubiti who answered this time. There was the sound of something making an odd click-beep sound. “*The surveillance on the Stargate appears to have overloaded.*”

“Lay low,” Sanura gritted, bringing their altitude up. Jack was trying very hard not to think about how low they’d been forced to fly in that storm. “We’re on our way.”


As Jack twisted around, Teal’c did something with his display board, and suddenly a section of Teal’c’s side of the screen changed, showing a rapidly retreating landscape dominated by towering clouds.

*Ooo, rear view mirror par excellence. Nice…*

Jack sucked in a startled breath.

The giant storm was pulling in on itself, outer edge retreating to the border of the valley, winds whipping faster and faster and clouds piling up until it looked like it was trying to pull down the stars. It was wreathed in blazing lightning crackling back and forth until the whole thing was covered with a flickering, shifting net of blue-white electricity.

Something was *in* there.

He couldn’t make out details, other than a hint of fierce golden light edging the clouds in flickers and flashes. But the clouds themselves pulsed and churned, squeezing in as though to crush the intruder only to billow outward again as if burned.

Then the mountains broke.

Jack nearly swallowed his tongue as the peaks of several peaks surrounding the valley suddenly
cracked, huge masses of stone lifting up into the air and then flinging themselves headlong into the elemental clash.

“Okay,” he said at last. “Even for us, that’s not something you see every day.”

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~

Sam slowly lowered her gun. “…Khenut, I presume?” she guessed.

“Correctly.” The older woman crossed her arms over her armored chest, voice surprisingly melodic for the iron-gray hair and hard lines of her face. She could have been forty, or sixty; either way, she was hewn from weathered granite. “You’re well-informed.”

“Sanura mentioned you.” And… something about this woman just reminded her of Teal’c, somehow.

Which raised an awkward point. “She thinks you’re…”


Um. Well. That’s a conversation killer for you.

Sam suppressed the urge to wince.

Great. I’m channeling Jack again.

Zuko’s back was still against Sam’s, with only as much room as both of them needed to be able to move freely at a moment’s notice. But she felt him shift to look over his shoulder at Khenut. “You’re trapped here?” he asked quietly.

Khenut tilted her head. “Indeed,” the Jaffa ghost said. “Or I was. Along with everyone else this creature has devoured.”

“You don’t sound very dead,” Toph said dubiously. “And you’re sure not acting very trapped.”

“And this is neither Duat or the Fields of Aaru,” Khenut replied. “But so far as I am aware, one does not walk away from being frozen from the inside out.”

Sam felt Zuko fight down a convulsive shudder. Toph didn’t hide her reaction so well – Sam heard her swallow, hard.

Khenut shrugged, as if it didn’t matter. “But luck was with us, you and I. That spirit-trap from the Gate-builders’ lab? It landed right at my body’s feet. Broke the ice-demon’s grip. It has allowed me to move about in this realm.”

“Spirit-trap?” Zuko echoed, sounding startled – and uneasy.

I thought he was able to read the label on it? Sam thought, blinking in surprise. The way Zuko and Toph had reacted certainly suggested that they’d recognized the terminology, if not the context. “What did you think it was?” she asked curiously.

“…Never mind,” he said, face shuttering into an expressionless mask.

Don’t push for now, Sam thought. Whatever it was – it’s something he’s not ready to tell just anyone. And they didn’t have time to indulge her curiosity. Not now.
Wait. “You mean the trap works?” she asked, startled. When the yukiuso had blasted through Toph’s sheltering wall and sent it flying without so much as a flinch, she’d been certain she’d lost a fool’s gamble.

But Khenut smiled darkly. “Oh, it works well enough. Why do you think the ice-demon brought you here, rather than playing with you?”

“But…” Sam started, and then paused. “Oh,” she said quietly, feeling like a fool. “Of course. The yukiuso’s outgrown the trap – it was never designed to hold something this…” At a loss for words, she waved her hand sharply at the hazy light, the roiling storm, and the half-shadows still dancing at the edge of materializing. Apparently they weren’t quite bold enough to tackle the four of them at once. Yet. But Zuko’s swords were still out and ready, and Toph was still listening, and Sam wasn’t about to put her gun away either.

Of all the stupid mistakes. All that effort to find out how the Ancients had dealt with the entity, and it had never occurred to her that maybe the Ancients hadn’t needed the sort of resources to take on what they were facing now.

“This… spirit-trap,” Zuko said carefully. “It freed you. Can we use it to free the others?”

Khenut actually blinked.

She wasn’t the only one taken aback. This time it was Sam’s turn to glance over her shoulder. “What do you mean?” she asked.

Zuko shrugged sharply, radiating discomfort. “What?” he asked defensively. “Most malign spirits gain power from death. You don’t fight them on ground where they’ve already killed if you can avoid it.”

Sam knew she was getting stretched dangerously thin when she found herself fighting the urge to giggle at that. Daniel would go nuts, fitting that into known folklore. Who knew there was a sound tactical reason to dislike being near graveyards?

Khenut snorted. “Unfortunately, this whole planet is a killing ground, child,” she said darkly. “It has been the ice-demon’s playground for a long, long time.”

“All the more reason not to leave you trapped here!” Zuko snapped back, scowling fiercely.

Khenut’s eyebrows jumped nearly to her hairline, and she paused for a long moment, studying the boy thoughtfully.

“…What?” he asked, shoulders hunching defensively for a moment before he shook himself fiercely.

“You are not as I expected,” Khenut said thoughtfully.

That got her an odd look – startled, suspicious, but also… oddly resigned.

I do believe he’s heard that before. A lot. “So what did you expect?” Sam pressed.

“Far more callous arrogance,” Khenut said bluntly, and kept going, leaving no room for more questions. “You can free others, if you can get the trap to them. But if you wish to actually hurt the ice demon, you must weaken it.”

Her head jerked up suddenly, eyes fixing on something in the distance. And she smirked.
“And it would seem our time is at an end. Move fast!”

The world exploded into chaos.

The landscape vanished. They were in the heart of a roaring storm, lightning lashing against surging magma, howling wind and snow whipped into a polar hurricane driven by a shriek of cold hate and a roar of implacable fury. It was all Sam could do to cling to Zuko and Toph – if that sense of golden-bright presence in the madness was really them...

And in the midst of it, she had the sudden sensation of another pair of hands, once human, grabbing the three of them and flinging-

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~

“Colonel O’Neill,” Teal’c said sharply, jerking Jack’s attention back to the forward view, and the Stargate that was just shutting down.

Narrow-eyed, Jack started scrabbling for the release on the safety harness. “Sanura? Take us down for a minute. Think we just got some cavalry.”

Finally finding the release, he was up and at the back hatch by the time he felt the distinctive shudder of the Tale’sedrin settling. A moment later, the door slid open.

Call him a gambler, but he was willing to bet there was only one place the three in front of him could possibly have come from.

Oh. Great, he thought, jaw tightening reflexively. What the hell is wrong with that world? They’re all kids!

But there was nothing kidlike about the way the dark-skinned boy was holding that sword, that said very well that he knew exactly which end was the pointy business bit and how to use it – even if the amazement and hint of glee as he looked at the ship was pure teenager. And the fans the girl with the painted face was reaching for might look pretty, but Jack had run into war-fans before. He’d rather not do that again. And the girl in the back, who could have been sword-boy’s sister...

Houston, that would be a check for the hydrokinesis.

Grabbing the edge of the hatch, he leaned out. “Hey!” he yelled. “Zuko and Toph – friends of yours?”

The girls’ eyes narrowed, but the boy straightened slightly. “Cranky snarky flame-throwing ninja and itty-bitty boulder-flinging badass?” he shouted back.

Oh, I’m going to like you. And, interesting. Sounded like their Stargate had finally gotten its translation protocols up and running.

Or something. How did they manage to dial in, anyway? We know Zuko and Toph didn’t know anything about the Gate...

“That’s them,” Jack said with a smirk.

“Where are they?” the blue-eyed girl demanded, water still flowing in the wake of a slowly circling
arm. Jack made a mental note not to tick her off until they were somewhere warmer. He had no idea how she was keeping that stuff liquid in what amounted to the coldest time of a polar night, but one thing was for sure. Getting soaked in these temperatures would get ugly.

Then the girl with the painted face and the war fans looked up past the ship and the mountains, to the raging storm, and swallowed hard. “Um. Guys?”

Sword-boy looked up. His shoulders drooped. “Never mind. I think I can guess.”

~Even the Dragon-King’s Temple floods.~

world distant fragile Huh? empty Be careful! loss return not again why Won’t let you! cold fire electrons dancing kindred spirits harmed What’s going on? power power power burning losing hold can’t go can’t stay orbits around the sun power linking seasons gone Katara! returned gone-but-here My god, they actually went through with it! empty world space between atoms Sokka! Suki! spirits pure energy just beyond I won’t go! anchors mentors friends kin danger Zuko, Toph! Where is everyone? web weakening coldest air clashing against cold air malevolence not Them but close Over my dead body! lines of force Somebody, help! pulling pushing backlash Look out…!

Impact.

Aang blinked.

...What just happened?

Everything felt… fragile. Thin. Not quite there in the normal sense, only way more there in some other sense. Like…

Like the Spirit World!

Although, what it looked like was that secret chamber in the middle of Oma and Shu’s secret tunnels, the one he and Katara had found with the riddle about the glowstone, except… all in white.

O…kaaaaaay. This is weird.

Aang scratched his head, slowly turning to take in the room. Every time he’d bumped noses with the Spirit World, it had been… well, jungle. And rocks. And sometimes just clouds as far as the eye could see. Never buildings, except for maybe the odd shrine-gate, unless he was going back to look at someone’s memories or something, like with Roku.

Frowning, he tried to form an airball. Nothing.

“Okay,” he muttered to himself. “So maybe this isn’t the Spirit World I’m used to, but it’s definitely not normal, either.”

Well, first things first – look around. Not that there was much to see. He didn’t even see any doors… Aang blinked.

On the back wall, where the image of the two people facing each other had been in the real hidden
chamber, there was a mirror.

_Huh. That’s different._

Well, standing around here staring like an idiot wasn’t getting him anywhere. Squaring his shoulders, Aang approached the mirror gingerly. After all – mirrors were supposed to be like spirit-doors, right? So if this was a spirit-place, however weird, the mirror might be the way out.

Still. No reason to be _stupid_. So he approached it kinda… sideways, so that he didn’t actually step into the reflection path until he was close enough to get a good look. Then he took a deep breath, and peeked.

“Gah!”

Heart hammering, he picked himself up off the floor, got a grip, and looked again.

What he saw inside wasn’t just a reflection.

Some of the figures were tall. Some were short. There might have been one or two chubby ones, definitely a few skinny ones, and a _whole lot_ of fit ones. Some had their hair in Fire Nation-style topknots, others in the tight braid that Earth Kingdom official-types sported, others in the loose Water Tribe style, others didn’t have hair at all, just Air Nomad arrows. One after the other after the other, stretching out in and endless line, and _none of them had faces_. Just shadows hinting at faces. Heck, everything about the figures was all shadowy.

Except the blazing, gold-glowing eyes.

Aang swallowed. He’d _seen_ this before. Once, talking to Roku back at Fong’s fortress. And the other time, a flash of vision as he’d been slammed against a point of rock _just_ on the chakra that Azula’s lightning had blocked…

Only, this time, they were all lined up behind… him.

His reflection, rather. Sort of. It _acted_ like a reflection, at least, moving as he moved. Except that like all the others, it – he – was all in shadow, except for the glowing eyes and arrows.

Swallowing, he looked down at hands. They were normal. Not all shadowy. And – he turned them over – no glowing arrows.

“I’m not in the Avatar State,” he muttered, frowning at his hands. Better that then looking at the creepy mirror again. “And every time I’ve seen – _that_ – it was either going into the Avatar State or a freaky vision. So why…”

He blinked. _Maybe this is a dream?_

This was _kinda_ like the vision he’d had while meditating on his chakras, back during the war. And it was the only explanation he could figure for how he’d suddenly be here, in a white room with no doors, with no memory of how he’d gotten here.

_I was… at the caldera. Katara and Sokka and Suki, they were there. Zuko and Toph… weren’t._

Oh. Right. Zuko and Toph were _missing_. And… now he remembered, they had gone looking, following the message Zuko had left with Iroh about where they were going, just in case. Some really old temple?
Aang’s brows furrowed. I… think I remember that part. Although it was kinda fuzzy, all messed up with a horrible sense of wrong wrong wrong and the world feeling fragile all around him…

Aang shook his head fiercely. The point is, they’re in trouble, which means I don’t have time to be puttering around in my head having cryptic visions!

He glared up at the ceiling. “So if whoever brought me here would please just get in here and talk to me,” he said, trying to sound polite rather than annoyed, “I’d really appreciate it!”

In the middle of lowering his gaze, he paused. On the other side of the chamber, there was another mirror.

He narrowed his eyes at it, then glanced at the creepy, creepy line-of-the-Avatar mirror.

Wait. That’s the line of the Avatar. It’s the… Avatar-me. So the other side – that should be me-me, right? Brightening, he moved over to the second mirror to take a look-

betrayed lost found protect those who are left Not again! changed altered No one else, I can’t let them do this to anyone else! nowhere left to run anchors in danger How dare-

He wrenched himself away from the mirror, gasping and shaking like a leaf in one of the sudden twisting wind-dragons that rose up in the spring on the wide plains in parts of the Earth kingdom, where there weren’t any mountains or even many trees to cut the wind or buffer the clash.

What was that?

Only, he was afraid that maybe he already knew. Because he remembered now. Flying out over the islands. Finding the campsite. Finding the old temple. Finding what lay below the temple.

That part was very fuzzy. All mixed up with a sense of not-right and wrong and no, no, no, this can’t be happening, I won’t let it happen and a wash of not me not real memory dream thoughts. All of which climaxed when he’d found that chamber with the strange ring.

“They’ve come. After all this time, they’ve come…”

Yeah. That part, he definitely remembered. Mostly because it had been so weird. Whoever – whatever – had said, that, it hadn’t been him. It had been way, way older than that.

But it had known what was going on. So he’d settled in to meditate. If he could just find the incarnation that had… spoken…

Aang stared wide-eyed at the blazing golden light in the mirror, and only belatedly remembered to close his mouth.

If he looked really, really carefully – something about that blazing light was very… human.

I went looking for a past incarnation of the Avatar. He swallowed. I think I found it.

Now what do I do?

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~
Zuko was rolling the moment he hit the ground, absorbing the shock of impact as the world *shifted*, his limbs suddenly heavy and clumsy as tough waterspider silk suddenly became stiffer, bulkier polar gear…

*My swords are gone!* The instinctive gut-jolt of reaction threw him back to his feet, he couldn’t *afford* to be unarmed, not with his bending…

*Wait. Swords are gone. I’m wearing the coat Sam gave me.* And the world was solid and bitingly cold around them again.

“We’re back!” Toph shouted. She’d tumbled over as bare feet suddenly became booted and threw her balance off, and by the way she was hugging wind-scoured basalt, she wasn’t in any hurry to get up.

Wait. “Sam!” Zuko called, looked about quickly as the wind whipped his hair every which way. Not fifteen paces in any direction was a howling wall of darkened white whirling around their small circle of false calm.

*We’re in the eye of the storm. I didn’t even know blizzards* had *eyes*. No wonder the winds seemed to come from everywhere. He remembered the storm when he’d let the Avatar escape. Even in a large steamship… after the sixth monster rogue wave out of nowhere, he and the crew had almost been ready to face the lightning again.

Sam was standing slightly behind him, closer to the center of the eye, staring upward.

*She’s all right.* He hadn’t been sure, with her strange chi – but apparently *returning* to the living world was easier.

*I shouldn’t be surprised, as anchored as she is in her body.*

Zuko grabbed her arm. “Sam!” he called, startled at just how much he had to raise his voice to even hear *himself* over the howling winds. “We have to find that spirit-trap!”

Koh take it – they weren’t in the Spirit World, they couldn’t talk to each other now…

“What *is* that?”

…or perhaps they could. Startled, Zuko followed her gaze upward.

His eyes widened.

On all sides, the spirit-storm raged – snow and mist keening in a solid wall of raging wind twining around them. The narrow tunnel of relative calm where they stood rose up, and up, to a tiny opening dizzyingly high overhead – higher than even the *craziest* airbender would want to fly…

In that shaft of open air, a battle was raging.

Out of the walls of snow and ice and lightning whipped a long shape of frozen blue, a deadly dragon formed of a rippling mass of indistinct, misty forms and hungrily slashing fangs. It was met by a raging golden ribbon of light arcing and slashing through the air, cutting the ice-dragon apart only to have the pieces scatter and pull together in strangling bands around a shape hovering in the air – eyes and mouth and arrows blazing with furious inner light.

*No wonder we still understand each other,* he thought weakly, feeling lightheaded for a moment as he stared at the rippling blue and gold of pure spirit-energies that mortal eyes were not supposed to
even be able to see. This place is so saturated with power, it might as well be the Spirit World…

“What is that?” Sam repeated, more desperately this time.

“Really not good,” Zuko rasped weakly, mouth painfully dry. He’d never really seen the Avatar up close, other than the once when they’d first clashed in the South Pole. At the North Pole… there had been the raging Ocean, but he’d been a little busy dealing with a power-mad Admiral who wanted him very, very dead. And in Ba Sing Se – Aang had barely had time to start before Azula had cut the Avatar’s power short with cold fire.

Aang. What was Aang even doing here?

A crack like thunder, and the blue bands were wrapped around, not the tiny, too-frail mortal frame of the Avatar, but a shell of black stone that suddenly burst outward, shattering itself and blue energy alike. Only for the fragments to reform into the vicious, utterly wrong serpentine form again and dive into the raging whirl of the thundersnow, flickering in and out of sight like the Unagi circling a ship.

In the moment of calm, Zuko glimpsed just a hint of sky in the distant opening of the clouds, far above the battle. The stars were just starting to fade with the first hints of dawn.

Sunlight powers storms… dawn is a yukiuso’s enemy, but it’s using the advance of the sun to make the storm stronger!

Zuko tore his gaze from the battle. “Sam! There!”

Sam started, eyes widening as she reflexively followed his gesture and her eyes landed on the spirit-trap, lying at the feet of the ice-statue – of Khenut’s body – where it had fallen when the yukiuso had attacked. Her eyes narrowed sharply, and she dove for it-

“Look out!”

Zuko reacted to Toph’s yell and the sense of movement without thinking. He grabbed Sam and threw both of them sideways.

The world shook as a massive basalt boulder came thundering to earth where they’d just been.

In a second, Zuko stared at the shard of a mountain that had nearly killed them.

Aang? Your aim needs some serious work.

Crack!

The boulder clove in two – but from the bottom, rather than the top, forming a triangular sort of lean-to. “What are you guys doing?” Toph demanded, scrambling into the makeshift shelter it had become. “Get over here!”

“Good advice. The yukiuso’s attention was on the Avatar, but… this was a thundersnow. And he could feel the energies already splitting between earth and sky. One thing he’d only learned while teaching Aang to redirect – and it would really have been useful back when he’d been trying to actually create lightning – was that it wasn’t just parting yin and yang and bringing them together. If you did that… well. Boom. In the bender’s face. You had to send the yin out and bind it to your target, so that when you released, the yang exploded outward in its rush to rejoin its other half. Half of redirecting lightning was feeling the yin energy gather around you and acting – because by the time you saw your enemy move, you’d already be too late to block…

But that was consciously directed energy. The energy of a storm… it was a field of divided chi, and
you had no idea when it was going to go off. Zuko really didn’t want to try it.

Sam’s face was pale, but her lips thinned with determination. Scrambling back to her feet, she caught up the trap from the ice-statue’s feet.

“Thanks, Khenut,” she muttered, and ran for Toph’s stone shelter.

Zuko caught a hint of movement from the corner of his eye as she passed, and skidded into stance, arm pulling back and shoving…

The howling winds almost snatched the fire out of his hands entirely. But it held, just long enough to sear the wraithlike wisp of blue light out of existence.

Heart hammering, Zuko scrambled into Toph’s lean-to, fist clenching to douse the flame. It fought him, feeding on the winds all around them. “Note to self,” he said, a little shakily, as the last sparks finally died. “Be very careful with fire out there. It’s either going to go out, or start something I’m not sure I’ll be able to stop.”

Sam was bent over the trap, fiddling with the strange wires and switches.

“It’s intact,” she said at his quick glance. “But if we try turning it on now – there’s no way it can hold all that energy!” Grimacing, she grabbed for the odd distance-speaking device and activated it with a strange crackle. “Colonel O’Neill, this is Major Carter, please come in…”

As she spoke, hands like iron grabbed Zuko’s arm and yanked. “Sparky,” Toph hissed. “Out there…” She swallowed, hard. “Please tell me it’s not what I think it is.”

Zuko exhaled slowly, feeling the sheer energy in the air battering at his chi. “It’s… pretty much what you think it is,” he admitted quietly.

Toph bit her lip. “Ohboy. That’s… really not good. Is it.”

It shouldn’t have been. Aang was the Avatar. If there was anyone who could take down a raging yukiuso, it was the World Spirit. Right?

Except…

Sam must have overheard the exchange, because she lowered her speaking device to stare at them. “Wait. You two know what’s going on out there?”

Zuko grimaced. “Sort of…” Spirits. Where to even start…?

Before he could even try to begin gathering his thoughts, the speaking device crackled, a strange sound almost like that of static. “Major?” Jack’s voice was oddly flat and scratchy through the noise. “What the hell is going on down there? We saw you vanish!”

“We got a little inside help with getting out, sir,” Sam replied, words tumbling over each other in her rush to get them out. “Along with some intel. Sir, we need…”

There was an odd sound from the speaking device – almost as though someone had just tackled Jack. Then a familiar voice snapped, “Yeah, yeah – intel me first, are Zuko and Toph okay? They’d better be, or I’m going to…”

Toph grinned fiercely. “Save the weapons-grade puns for the bad guys, Snoozles.”

“Toph!” And that was Katara’s voice, and Zuko suspected that the soft hint of dire threats he
overheard was Suki hauling Sokka back. “You’re okay! What’s going on?”

“Long story,” he replied for the earthbender. “Really long, and we’re still trying to figure out half of it… What are you guys doing here?” he demanded.

“Rescuing you, obviously,” Sokka said. “Which has involved ancient ruins and a freaking-out Avatar and let me tell you, that’s not fun even without the mail-chute fun-ride through the glowing puddle in the spirity ring thing and…” The chatter cut off suddenly, as though Sokka had swallowed his own words. When he spoke again, his voice was low and solemn, the blooded Water Tribe warrior. “Zuko. What is this thing? These people we met with the freaky glidership thing say it’s a yukiuso, but…”

“It is,” Zuko said, gritting his teeth. “And now the Avatar’s in the middle of it. Which means we’ve got a problem.”


Zuko’s hand clenched. “I’d agree with you, except for two things,” he said.

A moment’s silence, and then Suki said, “We’re listening.”

He drew in a deep breath, looking outside, to where walls of wind and snow were flashing alternately golden and blue as the battle raged high overhead, acutely aware of Sam listening intently. As Jack and Sam’s other friends probably were, on the other side of this device.

Then again, this is no time to be hiding tiles up our sleeves.

“First,” he said flatly, “this isn’t a normal yukiuso. It’s ancient. Maybe as old as the Avatar itself. And it’s been unopposed all this time.” He swallowed. “I would guess that it’s on a level with the Face-Stealer.”

There was a much longer silence this time. “…and second?” Sokka asked uneasily.

Zuko released a slow breath. “This isn’t our world.”

Someone made a choking noise.


Oh, but that was weird. He’d been able to pluck the term out of overheard conversations in the strange language these people spoke, and he and Toph had figured out more or less what it probably meant. But now – he actually heard her saying it, in that language. And it made perfect sense.

My head hurts.

So did Toph’s, from the way she grimaced and shook it briskly, as though trying to shake the bizarre sense of double-hearing out of her ears. But she didn’t let it stall her more than a moment. “Point is, that wild mail-chute ride? Takes you to a different world.”

Even through the odd interference, Zuko could hear the baffled noises of surprise, disbelief—and one soft gasp of shocked horror.

“Katara?” Suki prompted.
“If this isn’t our world,” Katara said slowly, “then... Aang... the Avatar, the World Spirit...”

Zuko’s lips tightened grimly. “Unless we can find a way to tip the scales? Is probably going to lose.”

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~

Oh, Sokka thought faintly. Well. No pressure or anything.

Jack crossed his arms. “Well,” he said in a slow drawl, and Sokka almost had to laugh, because, seriously. The guy could already pass for a Water Tribe chieftain or a Fire Navy captain, even with his odd no-color eyes, because seriously, grizzled veteran was its own type – but he even acted like Chief Hakoda. “Major, I hope you’ve got some ideas for us, because right now we’re running on a whole lot of empty out here.”

“In a way.” That was the strange woman’s voice again. “We have the spirit-trap, sir, and it still works. But there’s a problem.”

“Hands up, those who are surprised,” the woman who really could pass for Water Tribe said. Her eyes were glued to the front window, all her attention on... well, something arcane with what looked like the wildest airship control panel ever.

“What is the nature of the problem?” the big guy sitting next to Sanura said – Tea-lack? Or something like that? Easier to think about that than the way these people talked. It was like – mouths moved, weird babbling sounds came out, and somewhere between his ears and his brain they all sort of blipped and suddenly made sense...

“Scale.” The woman’s voice was grim. “It was never designed for anything this big. It works. But using it now – it’s like trying to bail a lake with a bucket. We need to weaken it first.”

“Great,” Jack growled. “Anybody got any bright ideas... Wait.” He turned a sharp look in Sokka’s direction. “You guys know anything about how to fight this thing?”

Sokka puffed his cheeks out as he scratched at the base of his wolftail, trying to think about something other than not our world and how do we get into these messes? “Fighting? A yukiuso? Huh. Not much.” Other than... Um. Wow. He’d never thought how fascinating a floor could be. It was metal, like the inside of the airships, but... dark. And glossy. “I’ve, um, heard that one way to keep them off is to... drink. Lots. And then collect it, and make a line in the snow around the camp with it... If you know what I mean.”

For the space of an eyeblink, no one said anything.

Toph whooped. “Oh, man – why do the Water Tribes get the fun ward-offs?”

“Toph!” Katara snapped, scowling. She turned her glare towards Sokka. “Sokka...”

He spluttered, waving his hands in the air. “Hey, I didn’t make it up!” he said hotly. “It’s what the guys who go on the deep-ice hunts after tiger-walruses say!” He sighed heavily, shoulders drooping. “Seriously, you’ve got the wrong guy here. I don’t do spirity woo-woo stuff. I’m not even a bender!” He waved an arm in the air – and then grabbed onto a handle in the wall himself as the glidership-
thingy bounced again. “I’m the meat-and-sarcasm guy. I do… meat. And sarcasm. And the occasional slicey-dicey.”

“Ah, the finer things in life,” Jack said with a sage nod, and, okay, Sokka was officially starting to like this guy. Master snarkbender to master snarkbender, as it were.

Suki frowned. “How long until dawn?” she asked, glancing outside to where the stars beyond the raging mass of the thundersnow were just starting to fade into the first hints of lightening in the sky.

A light on the panel blinked. “Too long,” a very deep woman’s voice said. “Dawn is still over two hours away.”

Suki blinked. “But…”

“Huh.” Sokka blinked. “So… we came out nearer the poles here?” Because yeah. It had taken him a while to get used to how fast the sun rose, once their merry bunch of misfits had started wandering around closer to the equator. Or… “Wait. If this is a different world – does it just have a slower rotational cycle?”

Jack gaped at him.

Pursing his lips, Sokka narrowed his eyes right back. “Hey! I did go to school, you know!” Sure, fine, maybe he couldn’t calculate eclipse dates in his head or anything, but he’d known how the planetarium worked, thank you so very much!

There was sputtering coming from the blinking light, now. Man’s voice this time, Sokka noted. “Wait. You have…”

“Danny,” Jack said firmly. “Back on track. Nasty freezing thing that wants to kill us first.”

“And dawn won’t work,” Zuko said grimly, from the crackle-box. “This is a yukiuso – the embodiment of the killing cold of polar night. That means it’s an apex predator. It’s not used to being threatened. But it’s not stupid, either. Sunrise is slow. The minute it feels dawn coming on…”

“It’ll scatter into a thousand pieces,” Sam finished for him. “We’ll never be able to catch all of them.”

“There’s no way we can catch all of them,” Jack said grimly. “And dawn won’t work.”

He grabbed a handhold on the wall as the glidership bounced in the air; they were holding a position far enough back from the stormwall to be out of easy range of the wild winds and lightning, but it wasn’t quite far enough. And how something shaped like a glider was staying in the air without moving, he had no idea. When this over, he was sitting whoever came up with this thing down and picking their brains… “Too bad we can’t… gah, strap a giant lens to a war balloon or something. Send it up to catch the first rays, and hey! Insta-dawn that goes where we want.” Like Zuko’d done to trick the solar calendar at the Sun Warrior’s temple, kinda. Okay, more like the focus crystal that made the beam, but…

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Point was… the sky was lightening. Which meant that somewhere way, way up there, the first light of morning was coming over the curve of the world. Okay, right now it was probably way, way higher than even the craziest airbender wanted to fly, but the point was that it was there. And morning came a lot faster, higher up. They’d seen that from Appa’s back plenty of times.

Jack looked impressed for a minute – then he grinned. “And then what?” he asked. “We cast Magic
Missile at the darkness?"

“I believe that can be managed,” a deep, deep voice rumbled from the blinky light.


“The lens,” the deep voice clarified, before suddenly turning as wickedly mischievous as General Iroh about to unleash the Pai Sho tile that would devastate your entire strategy. “Although when this is over, you must explain this Magic Missile concept. It sounds… intriguing.”

Had Teal’c just snickered? Nah. Guys like that didn’t snicker. But he was definitely radiating you’ve been got at Jack…

“Urdu…” Sam started to say, and then paused. Sam could practically see her eyes widening, which was kinda crazy, since he didn’t even know what she looked like. He was kinda picturing an older Suki right now. “You’ve studied light – could you somehow…"

“Possibly,” Urdu said.

“Need us to give you a lift back to your ship?” Jack asked.

“Not necessary. Nubiti and I can coordinate from here. And there may yet be something of value in this archive. But I will need time.”

“We’re a little short on that!” Toph yelped, her voice almost drowned out by something going boom. “In more ways than one!”

Wait. That boom hadn’t been through the funny intercom system…

He heard a choked curse and whipped his head around to stare out the front windows of the glider just in time to see the whirling stormclouds suddenly bulge-

Then a whirling disc of wind exploded out of them, ripping the storm in half, and for just a second, he saw Aang.

No. The Avatar. He couldn’t see anything of his little buddy in that furious golden glow, and somehow that was even worse-

Then the winds reached the glidership.

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~

Guess this thing does have inertial dampeners, a tiny corner in the back of Jack’s mind muttered. It was the only explanation for how they’d somehow come out of their uncontrolled tumble and skidded to a halt in midair, rather than coming to a stop all over Nature’s pretty landscaping. Emergency air brakes. Nice.

It was a tiny, distracted thought edging its way past a roaring rush of simmering fury.

That was a kid.

He’d only caught a glimpse in the middle of the spectacular light show before they’d gotten tossed
like a little leaf in a hurricane, and by the time they’d settled, the storm had closed in again. But it had been enough.

Screw the glowing eyes, the glowing arrows, the shells of light-limned stone and ice and wind and fire all around him. That was a kid. He couldn’t have been older than Toph.

He looked just like Charlie. The second Charlie, the kid who’d been put together piecemeal by the Reetou as a mouthpiece…

When this is over, I’m sitting these kids down until someone explains what the hell an Avatar is supposed to be. And who’d come up with that brilliant idea. And then he was going to go hunting. Ancients or no.

“Everyone in one piece?” Sanura called, bringing the ship around.

They’d finally stabilized enough that Jack could release his death grip on the handholds. “All in one piece over here,” he called back. Thank goodness this bird apparently had been built to carry passengers or cargo; by the look of things, the back had been designed on the assumption that there’d be fancy flying. Some of the arctic gear that was stowed in the back had spilled out onto flooring, but thanks to the handholds and safety harnesses, no one had been thrown about with it.

Meat-and-Sarcasm Guy – Sokka? – was doing a quick, efficient hands-on check of the girl with the painted face all the same. Impressively for a teenage guy, he was even keeping it professional – although with an easy familiarity and lack of self-consciousness that told Jack these two had probably done some non-professional hands-on stuff before.

“Almost as much fun as jumping airships,” Sokka said wryly. Before Jack could wonder what that was supposed to mean, the kid raised his voice. “We’re good! Just don’t- Katara, what are you doing?”

Grimly, the hydrokinetic girl who looked like she was probably Sokka’s sister shoved her arms through the coat she’d snatched out of the mess on the floor. “I’m going to help Aang,” she said, blue eyes determined.

“Are you crazy?” Sokka demanded, lunging to the limit of his safety harness to grab her arm.

She glared at him. “You saw him out there, Sokka!” she snapped. “He’s lost in the Avatar State – this is the Si Wong Desert all over again!”

“I get it, okay?” Sokka shook his head. “But right now, the Avatar’s the only thing keeping all of us from becoming freeze-dried jerky strips!”

Katara drew in a sharp breath, opening her mouth as though to yell – then let the breath out slowly.

Yipes. Did I just see frost forming?

*Sokka, Aang’s in danger out there,* she said, voice low and intent now. “I swear to you, I swear, I will wait as long as possible. But someone has to be there to snap him out of it, or we could lose Aang to the Avatar State itself.” She looked at him pointedly. “You know I have to do this. I’m the only one with a chance of getting through to him!”

Sokka stared back for a long moment, then sighed and let go.

Okay. Enough’s enough. “Yeah, well, it’s a moot point,” he said bluntly, crossing his arms.

“Because if you think I’m letting you walk out into the middle of that…”
Katara drew herself up, chin rising stubbornly. “I don’t recall asking permission.”

Then she turned and smacked the door controls.

*Crazy insane suicidal little…!*

Jack lunged as everything not strapped down suddenly tumbled back, pulled by the suction of air pressure. Stray coats and equipment were flung into open air, far above the snow and stone below.

Along with one teenage girl.

He slammed into his harness. Reflexively scrabbled for the release even as the small part of his brain not *swearing* screamed that he was too late, all that going after her would do was leave them with two casualties…

White flashed in the corner of his eye. His jaw made its acquaintance with the floor.

Even as Katara had fallen, the snow from below had been coming up to meet her. She landed feet-first in perfect snowboarding form, shooting down the craziest ice slide *ever*.

Then she was lost to sight as the hatch of the *Tale’sedrin* slammed shut.

“What in *Duat* is going on back there?” Sanura snarled. Jack could see white knuckles on her hand as she fought to stabilize the ship; popping the hatch had played merry hell with the aerodynamics.

Sokka chuckled darkly. “Just Katara being Katara.”

Jack looked at him. The boy was pale under the dusky skin, but there was a kind of grim amusement in his eyes. “She do this a lot?”

“Jump out of freaky gliderships? No. Pretty much the rest of it? Oh yeah.”

“Two words, Sokka,” Suki said. “Airship Slice.”

*God. It’s a whole set of them.* “Leashes,” Jack muttered.

Sokka flicked a wry smile his way. “Trust me. They don’t work.”

“Then we need *better* leashes – Sanura, take us down lower! Katara decided to take up paratrooping in her spare time.” And he just hoped that the girl had survived the landing. Maybe the ice-chute had broken her fall, but that still meant that when she hit the ground, she’d be going *awfully* fast…

The comm connecting them to the three back at the lab crackled. “Sanura. I need your help. We have a problem.”

“Oh, tell us something we didn’t know,” Jack muttered.

“I believe I’ve found a way to make the solar lens we need,” Urdu said, speaking quickly. “However… the angle will be off.”

“What do you need?” Teal’c asked.

“Get the *Tale’sedrin up above the storm,*” Nubiti said. In the background, Jack heard Urdu’s deep voice talking – he guessed to someone in the ha’tak. “As high as you can manage. *Sanura, you’ll need to modify the shields*…”
“Like Hell!” Jack exploded. “We’ve got a teenage girl down there about to go against this thing on her own, and you expect us to…”

“No. He’s right.”

Jack blinked.

Gone was the goofy punster. Gone even was the dark, wry amusement. The blue eyes that met Jack’s were as solemn, level and steady as any veteran commander.

“We have to focus on taking this thing out,” Sokka said simply. “The sooner that’s done, the sooner we’re all safe.”

Then a flash of humor returned with a crooked grin. “Besides. Yukiuso versus Katara? I think I might even feel sorry for it.”

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~

She was bending even as she plowed into a hastily-piled snowbank.

*Don’t fight.* The snow would only pack itself around her into a rock-hard mass, although at least it was cold enough not to pack easily. Which meant she could move just *enough*-

*Circle*, drawing her foot around her in a smooth arc, creating a small clear space beneath whiteness for her to stand. *Push* with one hand, moving the snow away from her on all sides. *Pull* with the other, until the pressure on ice crystals was such that even in this deadly cold, they melted into liquid, and she stood in the heart of a shell of rippling water, like the time she’d confronted Yon Rha…

*Exhale.*

Water crackled into ice.

But carefully, so carefully. It had to be clear, or she wouldn’t be able to see. Which was more than just controlling the freezing. She had to keep the water smooth, keep flaws and flecks from disturbing the ice…

It was *hard*.

Which was good, because if she slowed down enough to think, she wouldn’t be able to move for terror.

*This is a yukiuso.*

She’d heard of the Killing Cold. Everyone in the Water Tribes had heard the stories, of huntsmen who’d wandered too deep into the vast ice plains, whose bodies were found frozen so hard and still that if you knocked them over, they’d *shatter* into a hundred grisly shards, their voices left to drift in the darkness of the coldest polar night…

*I have to do this. My friends* need *me.* Needed her to buy them time to set off whatever trap these strange people were planning. Needed her to call Aang back. Needed her to help the people trapped in the center of this storm. Zuko and Toph were good at hiding when they were scared – but Katara knew them.
Hands forming fists inside the oversized sleeves of her borrowed coat, Katara glared up at the column of raging wind, snow, and lightning. And the flickering hints of golden light inside.

*I will never, ever turn my back on people who need me.*

This was a place of snow and ice and polar night; the yukiuso’s home ground. But she was a master waterbender of the Southern Water Tribe. Of all of them… she was the only one other than the Avatar who *could* go toe to toe against this thing and survive.

*Because this is my ground, too…*

She swept her arms around. Snow whispered to water and cracked to ice, and her ice-igloo was suddenly a sheltered passage into the cold fury of the storm.

Snow and wind and flashes of spectral blue that she knew better than to stare too long at battered at the ice. Furious. *Impotent.*

Her lips curved in a fierce grin.

*And you can’t freeze ice, spirit!*

~*Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.*~

Systems humming against the pull of gravity, the massive pyramid structure left the ground with a slight shudder and began to rise towards the stars.

The repairs to the shattered doors were still weak. Not space-worthy by a long shot – but it didn’t need to reach space. Not quite.

In the mesosphere, far above the highest mountains of the planet, the stars never faded from sight; the only clouds were the thinnest wisps of ice crystals. But the stars were starting to dim as the first hints of light caught on those crystals, flaring them into visibility for the brief span of time that the air below them was still dark, and the distant horizon – now ever so faintly, but visibly, showing the curve of the world itself – suddenly began to blaze a luminous golden-edged blue as the first ray of true sunlight cleared the edge of the world.

Brushed the edges of hastily modified energy shields around the ha’tak-

-and *bent.*

~*Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.*~

Sam almost didn’t hear the radio crackle, as Zuko scorched another of those hungry wisps when it ventured towards the opening of their bolt-hole. At least not many of the things dared venture out of the clouds and into the battlefield of the storm’s eye. That hesitance, and Zuko’s fire, were the only things keeping them alive.

That, and the shelter of this cave, from the wind and cold as well as… other things. Toph stood with
her hands pressed against the stone, teeth gritted as *something* slammed down from above with 

enough force to make Sam think the world had just shaken. As near as she could tell, the girl was 

keeping their shelter intact by sheer stubbornness alone.

Sam slapped the radio. “This had better be good news!” She and Danny had an open channel going 

as he desperately plowed through the archives, trying to find more information about the spirit-trap 

before Sam set it off again.

But it was Jack’s voice that answered, although the words were hard to pick out through the static of 

interference and the tumult outside. “You and Zuko’d better cover your eyes for a sec, Sam. Things 

are about to get a little sunny.”

~*Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.*~

*Blinded!*

It was a physical shock, to an entity that had almost forgotten what *physical* meant.

**Attack** *defend flee move What’s going on?*

He-she-they lost the rhythm of battle for a moment, hands coming up to shield the eyes of their-her- 

his borrowed shell-

*No! enemy still there don’t stop move Look out-*!

Too late.

The yukiuso hated daylight – but within the raging storm, it had shelter from the sudden onslaught. 

And unlike mortals, and those who borrowed mortal form, it didn’t need eyes to *see*.

And it saw an opening.

Impact.

Darkness.

~*Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.*~

*Aang!*

No time to think, no time to wonder why the clouds had suddenly blazed with light all around her as 

she fought her way ice-shell by ice-shell, always driving at right angles to the howling wind, fighting 

to reach the eye of the storm and the friends stranded and fighting there…

Then she looked up reflexively as wind and snow and clouds parted for just a moment, and saw a 

small figure falling.

*No!*
Caution could go swim under an iceberg. Reaching out to the storm, Katara pulled.

Snow tore itself out of the wind to gather under Aang, breaking his fall. But something was moving in the dark of the clouds, hurtling towards the unconscious Avatar...

She’d never quite managed Master Pakku’s trick of lifting himself in his own self-contained waterspout – but she didn’t need to. A sweep of her arms changed her ice tunnel to spinning water that sucked her in – and flung her bodily out the top.

She hit Aang just before the strange blue light reached him, wrapping herself around him as they both hurtled through the air with her momentum and trying not to think about the fact that she’d just drenched them both…

Frostbite is better than dead! And if she could just get a moment, she could bend the worst of it away before it sucked too much heat out of them…

But she didn’t have the freedom of movement. She had to hang onto Aang, had to protect him, because this was going to hurt so much.

It did.

And she was going to remember that horrifying crack of bone to her dying day, because it hadn’t been her…

Then small, familiar hands were grabbing her, helping a second set of hands tug her to her feet.

“Wow. You sure know how to make an entrance, Sugarqueen.”

“Toph! You’re okay?” Katara jolted upright, nearly cracking heads with someone in the process. Startled, she opened her eyes, meaning to check on her friends as soon as the pain-haze cleared. Cringed and squeezed them shut again. Ow. Okay, maybe the red-white blaze in her eyes wasn’t just her body scolding her for pulling a stunt worthy of Sokka.

She raised a hand to shield her eyes and tried again. Her eyes were watering, but she could just make out a strange, pale woman with sun-colored hair and Toph…

Katara blinked. Blinked again. No, the insane pink shade wasn’t just sunspots. “What are you wearing?” she demanded, vaguely aware that she should be thinking of something else, but her brain was still fuzzy from impact.

“My commander’s sense of humor,” the woman said dryly – this had to be Major Sam, then. “And we don’t really have time to discuss it,” she added, helping Katara stabilize as her body finally caught on to the fact that she’d hit rocky ground very, very hard.

It was like a flash-flood washing all the weeds out of her mind. “Aang!”

“He’s fine.” That was Zuko, picking up a small figure. The arrow tattoos were still glowing, but far dimmer now – and Aang’s left leg should not have been that angle.

“Oh no,” she choked, feeling sick to her stomach. I tried to protect him…! “Let me…”

Zuko shook his head sharply before she could call water to her hands. “No time. Everyone, back to the cave, now!”

Sam looked at him, green eyes startled. “But the lensing worked,” she said, waving a hand at the
blazing light around them, worse than snow-glare under midnight sun. And how the people in the glidership had managed to get a giant magnifying glass into the sky, Katara wasn’t sure she wanted to know.

*Sokka was scary enough with a little one.* Just please let there be no hat this time…

“Yes,” Zuko said grimly. “We’ve weakened it. And it can’t run away now.”

Toph gulped. “In other words, it’s really, really *ticked*.”

Katara swallowed. “And we’re all in one place now.”

The wind shifted. Carrying with it the sound of soft, soft, hair-raising laughter.

Zuko’s eyes narrowed. “Run,” he suggested.

~*Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.*~

The mirror was cracked.

“You know,” Aang muttered queasily, “I’m guessing that’s not good.”

And if that wasn’t good… then the shooting pain in his leg, and the stinging in his eyes, probably were *really* not good.

*Gee, you think?* snarked a mental voice that sounded way too much like Toph.

…Toph.

“What am I *doing* in here?” he exploded, hand a fist pressed to the side of his head as the other waved around. He glared at that creepy, creepy mirror with the glowing image of the past Avatar in it – and tried not to think too hard about the crack that had suddenly spread across its face, mere moments after he *and* his glowy not-him reflection were knocked clean off their feet by a blast of light as fierce as any high-altitude sun. “I should be out there! Looking for them!”

Frustrated beyond words, he forgot himself for a minute and glared at the mirror-

*-failed can’t fail not my people not my friends not this time!*

But this time, soft and barely audible beneath the rush of *feeling* and *memory*…

“…*can’t run away now.*”

“*In other words, it’s really, really ticked*…”

Aang’s jaw dropped a little.

“Oh,” he said quietly. “I think I get it now…”

He *was* in the Avatar State. Out there, at least. Except that right now, it wasn’t *him* out there. Not really.

Resting his hand lightly against the mirror – whoof, it felt *hot* – he closed his eyes.
“It’s you, isn’t it?” he murmured quietly. “You’re the reason I’ve been feeling so… messed-up. Something bad happened, didn’t it? Something to do with that spirit-ring. And you don’t want it to happen again.”

He opened his eyes, meeting the eyes of that strangely fractured memory-of-self. “You want to protect my – no, our – friends. I know. I get it.”

He stepped back from the mirror, bounced up and down once or twice to limber up, and narrowed his eyes. “But right now…? I’m glad you want to help, and I’m really sorry, but you’re in my way.”

One tremendous flying leap, and he smashed through the mirror and into light.

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~

They’d caught on too late.

Toph could feel it in the whispery laughter – and in the brittle, biting wind scraping the bare stone between their little clump and their lost shelter.

Not inside the shelter, though, and somehow that was just the worst part. The yukiuso still couldn’t get in. It wasn’t a threshold – but her shelter was of a piece with the big stone, one solid chunk of rock. Volcanic rock, which meant that it was Earth and Fire against the yukiuso’s Water and Air, and to top it off, the whole mass was still humming with the Avatar’s energy.

Speaking of – seriously. She needed to sit Aang down for some words. Throwing rocks at the Blind Bandit? Apparently, the Avatar Spirit was stupid or something, and when this was over, there was going to be some head-thumping about just who was the Master and who was the student around here…

“Zuko,” Sam said, talking fast as they pulled into a tight huddle, as that shivery cold scrape that was the windwall around the edge of the storm’s eye inched slowly closer. “Can you do anything?”

A tight sound that might have been a laugh. Sort of. “Depends.”

“On?” Katara asked, sounding as uneasy as Toph. That was never a good tone.

Zuko’s chi was practically smoking with frustration. “On whether or not Sozin’s Comet happens to fly by in the next ten seconds. The wind’s smothering any flame I try to start. If I could get one going, maybe, but…”

Inside her coat, Toph’s hand brushed a little bottle-thing of glass, just a bit hot even with the energy inside mostly quiescent…

Energy. Sparky needs something to start the fire… “Hey, Zuko? Get ready.”

“For what?” Sam asked.

Toph grinned and wound up.

“Fire in the hole!”

She threw with arm and bending both, and shoved as the little bauble hit stone somewhere in the
wild winds.
Glass shattered in a roar of fire.

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~

Spirits!

“Everyone, get into the cave!” Zuko shouted, snapping his hands wide and crooking fingers into claws as he grabbed hold of that wild explosion of energy. It was like the explosion when he’d destroyed Sanura’s fire-staff…

Except that that time, the fire had flared fast and been gone again just as quick. This time…

Once, long before his father had been Fire Lord, Zuko had seen an oil fire in the kitchens. Someone dropped some water in a pot of burning oil – and the water had sunk below the oil, hit the hot bottom of the pot, and flashed into steam that erupted in a billowing cloud out of the pot.

Flinging burning oil out ahead of it in a fountain of fire. A fountain that had moved with consciously, maliciously controlled intent.

Two servants had died from accidentally inhaling burning oil. Five others had been irrevocably scarred, and one of them had to be released from work.

Zuko still remembered the smile.

It was one of the very rare times when Prince Ozai had been displeased with his prodigy daughter – and he’d made his displeasure known. Not because of the injuries. He’d been displeased that Azula had damaged his household and its order… and because she’d utilized a mundane fire hazard to do so.

A true firebender fueled her own flames. To do otherwise was to be weak.

Zuko gritted his teeth. Yeah, I’m weak. Especially now, still shaky from the effects of elemental deprivation So what else is new?

But if he’d learned one thing wandering the world, with Uncle and with Aang’s merry bunch… it was that a skilled firebender could do so much, if he just had a bit of fuel to work with.

Don’t think. It’s just the floating sparks trick.

Except that the floating sparks were really meant to be used on a summer evening, when the air was still.

The yukiuso howled, as the windwall around the eye of the storm suddenly became laced with roaring, hungry flames, and the advancing cold flinched back slightly, opening the way to Toph’s shelter.

“Go!” Zuko snapped through clenched teeth, when Katara hesitated for a moment.

Thunder cracked far too close, as blazing flames and frigid wind clashed and combined. He barely needed to feed the flame anymore; the yukiuso’s own storm worked against it now, feeding more
and more air into the fire as the flames themselves drew more air in…

It was all he could do just to hold the worst of the heat away. He still felt cold.

*Oh, spirits.*

“Toph!” he shouted, trying to be heard over the roar and the near-constant cracking of lightning as the building firestorm became more violent. It was all he could do at this point to hold the searing air back. Scorched lungs killed. “Make a tunnel!”

“What?”

“Open a tunnel outside the fire! We need *air*!”

Fire was a living thing. It ate. It breathed.

And it wasn’t very finicky about stealing the breath from others.

Zuko tried to swallow with a dry mouth. He really hadn’t had the air to waste shouting; the edges of his vision were going dark already.

Worse, he couldn’t move. It was all he could do just to hold the fire back from their little clear space in the heart. Even if Toph was able to open up a channel to get air for the rest of them – and the fire’s fierce pull would definitely work for them there – it probably wasn’t going to reach him. Not even if he dropped the flames – and if he did that, there would be nothing to stop the yukiuso…

Something cool brushed by his face.

Startled, he gasped by reflex, and fresh air rushed into his lungs, biting a little with cold and driving the darkness back.

He risked a disbelieving glance over his shoulder.

He could actually *see* the cooler air, a thin ribbon of translucence rushing past beckoning hands to twine around him.

Gray eyes grinned back sheepishly.

“Hey there. Sorry I’m late!”

~*Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.*~

“Aang, your leg! You can’t…”

“Katara, I’m a *monk*! Do you have any idea how much time we were supposed to spend sitting and *meditating*? I don’t need my legs to bend!”

The shaven-headed boy was pale and shocky-looking, but the grin he tossed at the girl in ill-fitting Jaffa polar gear was very real. And shockingly *normal*. There was no sign of the eerie golden glow that had filled that little form not five minutes ago. And his hands never stopped moving, pulling cooler air out of the shaft Toph had hastily opened at their feet and wafting it out.
“Flirt later!” Toph interrupted. “Spirit trap! Any day now!”

Sam was already fumbling with the control panel. Focused sunlight from one side, a firestorm on the other…

*I don’t think we’re going to get that thing any weaker than this!*

And she was trying not to think too hard about what it was costing Zuko to keep that fire going, even with the naquadah explosion to power it.

*Naquadah. Battery. Hand grenade. Note to self, kill Toph when we get out of this!*

The heat was already soaking into their shelter, but all that accomplished was to make formerly numb fingers suddenly come alive with pain. Janet was going to have a field day, hypothermia combined with heat exposure…

Finally, *finally*, she found the trigger and activated it. And…

Nothing. Happened.

No sound. No vibration. Not even a flicker of a glow.

Sam’s heart hadn’t sunk like this since she’d chiseled a DHD out of solid ice, wrestled it through a reboot, finally watched the symbols activate… and then the Stargate had refused to engage.

“Oh no,” she muttered, looking over the controls, the wires, looking for anything that might be causing a malfunction. “No, no, no…”

“Sam?” she heard distantly. Daniel, his voice crackling horribly with static as the electrical field of the firestorm played merry hell with the radio’s reception.

A small symbol, one of the few she actually *did* know, from crawling through the guts of Ancient technology one too many times, flashed on the tiny display.

“No, no, no… You useless piece of…!” She clenched her fists, fighting the urge to pound them on the mechanisms in front of her. “No, dammit, no!”

“*Sam! What's wrong? What’s happened?*”

“It’s out of freaking *power*!”

“What? How?”

Realization hit. Sam slumped suddenly, running a hand through her hair. It was an excuse not to look at Toph’s white face, the dawning unease in the way Katara tensed, and Aang’s innocent bafflement.

“When the yukiuso took us to the Spirit Realm,” she said wearily. “I turned the trap on – that was how Khenut got loose. Which means…”

It meant the trap had *stayed* on, all this time. Wasting its energy trying to contain something far beyond its design specs.

*Dammit.*

“It basically creates a miniature wormhole,” she groaned. “That’s a *huge* energy drain. Maybe once the target was captured it could go into a power-saving mode, but…”
“Like a Stargate?” Daniel asked pointedly.

Her jaw clicked shut. Like a Stargate.

“I have the basic schematics here. You said you found this next to what looked like a Star Wars power coupling? I think it’s designed to run on external power. There’s a socket on the top, I think something’s supposed to fit there, maybe a wire…”

“I don’t exactly have a lightning rod and a metal helmet here,” Sam said absently, her mind racing.

There was a grin in Daniel’s voice. “On the other hand, you have someone who can make lightning go where he wants.”

But Zuko was holding the firestorm at bay… “Daniel? Hold that thought. I think we need to do some improvising.”

Setting the radio aside, she grabbed it and began pulling it towards the front of the cave, trying not to disturb the channel of air Aang was sending out to Zuko. Her face stung with the heat, and her hair blew in front of her face as more air gushed past, rushing into the storm. “Zuko…”

How he’d heard the conversation, she had no idea, but he was already shaking his head. “I might be able… to call lightning,” he said, breathing hard and controlled. “But not down here. It would… spread.”

Step potentials, Sam recalled. Getting struck by lightning was very rare – but as the activated charges raced to the strike point, they’d go through anything touching ground nearby. Including people. That was usually the true killer in lightning strike casualties.

Katara’s eyes were huge. “You want to use lightning?” she demanded, pale under the tan of her skin. “Are you insane?”

“Y’know, we don’t exactly have room to talk,” Aang countered, bumping her with his shoulder.

Sam looked at the kid and fought the urge to squeeze him. He couldn’t have been any older than Toph – but where the little geokinetic – earthbender? – was as tough as her rocks, Aang was a skinny wisp of a kid.

And he was sitting there with a broken leg, grinning because that was what his friend needed to keep it together.

God. These poor kids. These poor, tough, incredible kids…

“And these people have some awesome tricks with lightning,” Toph said intently. “Sam – whatcha need?”

Sam swallowed, mind racing over what she had available. We need a conduit of some kind… “Toph, can you make a wire?”

The girl cracked her knuckles. “Hand over your copper.”

Copper? Startled, she patted her pockets, and pulled out a few loose pennies that had collected there. “For luck, emergency decision making, and thought-purchases,” Jack had said wryly.

But how to connect the wire? She didn’t exactly have clamps handy, or even anything to attach them to if she’d had them. She could see the socket Daniel had mentioned, but she didn’t exactly have a
plug. Hell, she didn’t even have a screwdriver…

Oh. Oh.

Almost laughing, she reached into her pocket and pulled out the almost-forgotten “lightsaber-driver” she’d picked up in the lab. It fit the socket perfectly, and a half-twist locked it into place.

“Um. Sam? Think we’ve got a problem.”

It took an act of pure will not to scream in frustration. “What?”

Toph silently held up about two feet of thin copper wire.

Sam stared at it for a long moment, then closed her eyes.

“Thought so. Not enough?”

“Nowhere near.” It would take most of that just to wrap around the charger enough to solidly ground the two. And even if it had been long enough to reach outside – a wire that thin would melt down at the first three or four amps.

For want of a nail, the kingdom was lost…

Not fair, dammit. There has to be something we can use for a cable...

A dusky hand grabbed the wire. “You need something to guide the lightning to this thing, right? I’m on it.”

Toph scowled, as though to hide shock. “At last check, Sugarqueen, you didn’t bend metal. Or lightning.”

“No. But I fought Azula, too.” Katara drew, seeming to brace herself a moment before white teeth flashed in a tense smile. “I know what happens when lightning hits water.”

Sam felt her eyes widen as the girl’s meaning hit, then grinned fiercely. “Toph, wrap that wire around the end of this thing. Get as much in contact with the metal on the inside as possible, we need it to conduct as much power inside as we can. Then everyone, get back.”

She grabbed the radio up. “Danny, Jack. We’re going to get a little creative down here.”

“Oh no.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, Colonel,” she said dryly, as Katara made a slow, sweeping motion with her arm around and above her head, almost as though she were flipping her hair – and a silvery river joined the stream of air from Toph’s shaft to pool in the air in front of her.

Daniel’s voice, even through the static, was as innocent as Toph at her most devilish. “You’re going to cross the streams, aren’t you?”

Sam grinned. “See you on the other side, Danny.”

Teal’c rumbled, “I believe the correct response is, it has been a pleasure working with you, Doctor Carter.”

Toph finished wrapping the wire – or rather, making the wire wrap itself – and hastily backed away.
“Whenever you’re ready, Katara,” Sam breathed.

A sudden sharp motion with both the girl’s hands, like pulling taffy – and one end of a long ribbon of water whipped around the copper-wrapped charger, as the other darted out into the raging storm.

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~

Zuko saw the movement out of the corner of his eye. “Aang! Take over the fire!”

“Right!”

It wouldn’t last. Firebending wasn’t airbending; it needed a root, a point to leap and dance from. With his leg broken, Aang couldn’t keep the fires going long, not when the last of the fuel was going out.

He didn’t need to. If this didn’t work, they were screwed anyway. If it did…

Sighting on Katara’s water-wire, Zuko made himself breathe.

He couldn’t bend lightning. Not like Uncle or Azula. But there was so much natural lightning in the firestorm…

Just like redirecting lightning. Move the energies away…

At the tip of the water-wire, yin and yang parted.

Lightning struck.

And then the world was nothing but a furious howl and biting winds and the last flaring sparks of fire and holding onto each other as everything was pulled into a roaring center-

It’s pulling us with it!

And spirit-hands grabbing onto them and pulling them back, out of the wild, wrenching pull of spirit energies, using Sam’s stubbornly body-bound soul to anchor them, just as he and Toph had used theirs to carry her safely into the Spirit World.

In his mind’s eye, he caught a glimpse of a dry, approving smile.

“Well done,” Khenut’s ghost said, and vanished into light.

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~

Sokka and Suki were out the door and running the instant Sanura popped the hatch.

Jack paused for a moment as the Tale’sedrin took off again, Sanura and Teal’c going to pick up their wayward geeks, and looked around.

He hadn’t exactly gotten a front-row seat to the action on the ground; Sanura had been fighting just
to keep the ship – and thus their redirected sunlight – in place and on target, as the updraft from the storm had tried to toss them hither and yon. All he knew was that it had involved one hell of a lot of fire.

As evidenced by the valley. Granted, he hadn’t exactly gotten a very good look at it before the yukiuso had hit, but he’d glimpsed deep snow. Not so much anymore. The valley was a black bowl of bare stone in the middle of the ice-wreathed mountains just starting to show the first hints of real morning light, the only irregularities a few rock outcroppings here and there, and one giant boulder with a cave-like crack in the bottom practically dead center.

Not a sign of the frozen bodies Sam had described.

*So much for recovering them for burial. Still – cremation’s not a bad way to go, I guess.*

The whole place was still radiating enough warmth that Sokka hadn’t even bothered to toss on a coat before running out to his friends.

Then the boy came to an abrupt stop, staring.

Toph was holding a black stone over the bald kid’s leg. The bald kid – Aang? – was sitting up a little, leaning against Katara as she hugged him.

All the new kids were *staring.*

Toph rocked back. “Whoof. Man, you never said anything about that really shaking all the dust out of you, Sugarqueen.” She scrunched black metal around in her hand until it was recognizable as her odd little black armband, and tucked it in her pocket.

The older girl started, then made a beckoning gesture. Water flowed out of the big sack she carried by her side and wrapped around the hand that she laid on Aang’s leg.

She lifted it almost immediately. “It’s healed,” she breathed. “But… how? I’ve never been able to set bone like that…”

“Heh!” Toph gave her a tired, but still very smug, grin. “Hello – earthbender!” She stretched her arms out and climbed back to her feet, wobbling a little. “Greatest earthbender in *three* worlds, now…”

“You figured out how to heal with *Earth?”* Suki asked, looking impressed under her facepaint.

“Yep! Fair’s fair, though. Sparky figured it out first.”

So apparently Zuko’s nickname really *did* mean Sparky. Daniel was probably doing a victory jig right now. Or he would be when he found out. Seemed that whatever had gone down when these merry misfits had taken out the yukiuso, it had pretty much the same effect as an EMP pulse. Sam’s radio was now officially an ex-radio.

Still, looked like most of the people were in one piece. Catching Sam’s eye from where she sat leaning against the giant block of volcanic stone that had probably started its day at the top of a mountain, he nodded. Sam flicked her fingers in a weary salute with a very real smile, but for the moment, her attention was on the conversation in front of her.

Which at the moment was involving eyes that were bugging even *more,* if that was possible. “Zuko figured out how you could heal with Earth?” Aang blurted.
“Nope.”

“You mean… he figured out a way to heal with fire…?” Sokka’s voice broke on a squeak as Toph nodded. He coughed for a moment before apparently deciding to pretend that he hadn’t made any such unmanly noise. “What happened to you two?” he demanded. “Ancient ruins and glowy star-something puddles and super-yukiuso and gliderships that go vroom and… Earth-healing! Fire-healing! What the heck?”

Toph’s grin had officially reached Epic proportions. “Isn’t it obvious?” she asked archly, and punched Zuko in the arm. “Zuko finally coughed up my Life-Changing Field Trip!”

A moment of silence.

“Ooooh…” the four newcomers said in unison.

Sam chuckled.

Zuko flushed bright red and glowered, rubbing at his arm. “Okay, the five of you need to let that joke die already,” he growled.

Sokka sniffed, raising nose and lecturing finger high in the air. “Sorry, Your Ponytailness, but you cannot argue with statistically verified evidence!”

“I’ll give you evidence, you…!”

And that, apparently, was the cue for the four newcomers to all pounce on Zuko and Toph in a whirl of laughing and ribbing. And it wasn’t at all one-sided, either; Jack thought he saw Zuko grab Sokka’s arm in a fierce hand-to-elbow arm-clasp as Toph gave Aang a backslap that nearly flattened the poor kid.

Feeling a tension he hadn’t even realized he’d been holding relax somewhere in his gut, Jack chuckled slightly and moved over to Sam. “You in one piece, Major?”

“Ask me in the morning, sir,” she said wryly.

“The yuki…?”

She nodded to the odd bit of equipment glowing an ominous red-orange in the mouth of the cave. “In there, sir. What’s left of it, anyway. Between the sunlight and the firestorm and whatever the heck Aang was doing to it before that… I’d say it’s seriously hurting.” She sighed heavily, eyes tracking the small speck in the sky that was swiftly growing into the returning Tale’edrin.

“Recommend we be very, very careful in disposing of this particular hazardous waste, sir. And preferably, permanent.”

“Recommendation noted and seconded,” Jack said, as the ship came down for a landing. “And believe me, I’m open to any suggestions you’d like to put on the table…”

Apparently that was a signal for the group hug to relent a little, as the kids started disentangling themselves and the excited chatter began settling out into something a bit more comprehensible.

“I mean, seriously,” Sokka was saying, shaking his head. “I think we may need a rule. No solo trips with Zuko, or something.” His tone was mocking, but there was very real relief hidden as he hastily disengaged from an ill-advised noogie attempt on Toph. Although from the way he was wincing, his ribs had already paid the price for his audacity.
“Can I have that in writing?” Zuko asked dryly.

Sokka ignored him. “I mean, seriously! Don’t scare us like that – we thought you’d been carried off by… by flying mutant ninja were-lemurs or something!”

Oh, wow. Even Jack didn’t score double-takes like that often, and he had thirty years of fine-tuning his bad joke skills over this kid.

“Flying…” Aang said slowly.

Katara pursed her lips. “…mutant…” she added skeptically.

“…ninja…” That was Zuko, in a perfect dead-pan.

Toph tilted her head to the side. “…were-lemurs?” she finished curiously.

Suki blinked.

“You know,” she said sheepishly, “given that we’re talking about us here… that’s not just possible, it’s disturbingly probable.”

“Yup,” Sokka said, nodding sagely as the others groaned. “I mean, come on. Weird stuff happens to us.”

Awww. It’s like a junior version of SG-1, Jack thought, suppressing a wry grin. No wonder Zuko and Toph had taken the Stargate’s unique brand of madness in stride. It probably felt like home. Just as Jack recognized the wry, resigned, oh yeah looks the kids were trading…

All except Zuko. Who was looking past Sokka’s shoulder and grinning.

“Sparky?” Toph asked in a low voice, nudging him.

Quickly smoothing his expression, Zuko looked at Sokka. “Sorry. No flying mutant ninja were-lemurs.”

Sokka’s shoulders slumped in obvious relief.

“…but I will raise you a giant mutant samurai crocomander-man.”

All four of the newcomers stared at Zuko. And at Toph, who was suddenly smirking the smirky smirk of Pure Evil.

With a very, very tiny hint of a smirk of his own, Zuko pointed.

Just joining them, and clearly aware of the flow of the conversation, Urdu yielded to the law of comedic drama and pulled the hood of his parka back.

Sokka’s jaw dropped. He looked at Urdu. He looked at Zuko. Back at Urdu.

The Unas inclined his head with grave courtesy that utterly failed to hide the fact that he was roaring with laughter under the surface. “I am honored to meet you,” he rumbled.

Sokka buried his head in his hands for a long moment. And then flung his head back to scream up at the sky.

“Curse you, universe!”
Yes, I’ve taken the language barrier out of the equation. I had several reasons for doing so, but primarily… well, with the addition of the GAang, the language issues went from a plot-enhancing obstacle to a major narrative problem. If only because the addition of other native speakers makes it harder to come up with ways to justify the characters needing to communicate. Especially in a crisis with nowhere to pause.

As for how it happened… there will be questions asked. Pointed ones. They just had to wait until Imminent Death was no longer an issue.

It’s far from the end of linguistic geekery, but… the Stargate series went with Aliens Speaking English for a reason. At this point in the story, that reason is more important than me indulging my pet axes to grind.

Besides. Jack. Sokka. The snark. How could I possibly resist?

That said… this chapter kicked butt. Specifically, my butt.

There is nothing like having to cut six thousand words of story because your Geekbunnies got ahead of your Awesomebunnies to really, really drive home that fact.

Part of the problem was the number of characters. I try very hard to stick to Equal Opportunity Awesome – everyone should get to do at least one Awesome thing. And when you have about fourteen different major characters to juggle? That gets really cumbersome. (And this, is why I try very hard to never write a scene with more than four characters in it. As it was, I had to pare things back a lot.)

The other part was that this particular part of the story has always been a little bit fuzzy. Let this be a lesson: if you have an Epically Awesome action scene mental image? Put it at the end of your story. Not the beginning. I started this fic with three basic images: the Great Escape, their arrival at the SGC, and Toph busting out of the SGC. I used them all up substantially before the finale. Oops.

…okay, so Zuko playing space heater was a seed image as well, and the driving force behind the yukiuso as a bad guy. And I am never writing a non-corporeal bad guy again.

By the by. Sokka’s suggested ward-off for the yukiuso? I didn’t make that up. It’s an accepted method for chasing off a kushtaka.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

I might as well give advance warning – the interpretation of Goa’uld history here is pretty much made up out of whole cloth, with fibers taken from canon. I tried not to blatantly contradict canon, so much as my knowledge would allow, but there are definitely more than a few things here that fall into the category of “no explicit evidence against it (so far as I know).”

Also, regarding the language protocols in the Stargates – in chapter four, Sam mentions that it takes two Stargates with active protocols, one of which matches a language the traveler already knows, in order for the “upload” to take place. Nor can it simply lift a language out of a traveler’s head, or from a bystander – it needs long-term exposure to put a coherent language pack together. (If this were not the case, Earth’s Stargate would have gotten translations up and running a lot faster.) The language pack on Earth’s Stargate would be English – that’s the language spoken in its vicinity, and the primary language spoken by its most common travelers. The Gate on P6X-486 would only have a basic language pack of whatever the basic interstellar standard spoken by Jaffa is, courtesy of the Jaffa implants. (Which, I should point out, are not canon; just my headcanon; I had to justify the relative ease of language for Teal’c in the first episode somehow.) The Gate on Asunyti had no language pack whatsoever, until the Avatar more or less shoved Asunytian down its metaphorical throat.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“You invented zats.”

Oh-ho. Djehuty – no, Urdu – really was smarter than the average Goa’uld and certain colonels. His odd, reptile-gold eyes widened slightly at the banked menace in her voice, and he raised large, clawed hands, palms forward in the universal I am unarmed, please don’t hurt me gesture as he leaned back slightly.

Even so, his voice was mild as he said, “Given their… less than socially acceptable tendencies, I found the zat’ni’catels preferable to leaving the System Lords armed only with lethal weaponry, Doctor Fraiser.”

Point, much as she hated to grant it. Pursing her lips, Janet glanced down at the report she’d been busily jotting notes on.

Technically, she really shouldn’t have been here. Yes, she’d come through the Gate at the start of this mess – but at the time, they’d thought P6X-486 was nothing more than an uninhabited world with some mildly interesting ruins on it.

I’ll admit, we’ve been mistaken in our preliminary assessments of worlds before… but this has to go down as one of the more spectacular ones.

Point being, as one of the SGC’s primary physicians – and particularly as a specialist in pathology, rather than trauma surgery or combat medicine, despite the whatever-works nature of her usual duties – she really had no business traveling to a world with a Goa’uld present, no matter how
accommodating or out of the ordinary he might appear. Particularly not when, miraculously, SG-1 and their cohorts had somehow pulled through with nothing more serious than bumps, bruises, chilling that was caught before it could develop into hypothermia, a few minor burns, and one broken leg that had been healed by alternative methods the minute the battle was over.

But when Jack had activated the Gate to radio back for proper diplomatic support, and to report that the yukiuso had been neutralized and they were withdrawing to Urdu’s ha’tak to recover, along with four more children from Zuko and Toph’s world who’d somehow arrived just in time to turn the tide of the battle…

Janet had to admit that personally, she wasn’t going to consider her earlier mission to P4-X684 completed until she’d seen Zuko and Toph safely home. And for both personal and professional reasons, she wanted to meet their friends. But that hadn’t been the only news Jack had radioed in which set a stir in the SGC. The social sciences, in particular, were all aflutter with one cat that had landed squarely amongst the pigeons.

*The Goa’uld may not always have been as we know them today.*

She looked at the report a moment longer, then looked back at Urdu. The Unas was watching her calmly. No doubt he’d guessed some, or more than some, of what was on the pages she kept looking at.

All right. She’d bite. “You said that the Goa’uld weren’t always…” *Psychopathic megalomaniacs,* had been Jack’s phrasing. She settled for a more neutral, “…the way the System Lords are now.” She bit her lip slightly, and took the plunge. “Do you know what changed? Why?”

Urdu blinked slowly. The motion carried the same faintly *inquiring* air that Janet associated with a human’s raised eyebrow. “Why do you want to know?”

Janet fidgeted with her pen. “I just thought…” she said, fumbling for a way to explain that didn’t sound… well, arrogant. Like she thought she could get away with playing God. “…if there’s a cause, then there might be a *cure,*” she finally said, in a rush, spreading her hands. “If we could get even a few Goa’uld to – not even to *help,* like the Tok’ra, but just leave us alone…”

She trailed off. For a minute…

Urdu… if she were to guess, she’d say he probably wasn’t particularly *old* for an Unas, not that she had any frame of reference whatsoever. But suddenly, he looked… ancient.

And very sad.

“Doctor Fraiser,” he said quietly. “You have just summed up my entire life’s work.”

Janet’s hands tightened on pen and pad as she drew them close again. “You do know why,” she surmised.

Urdu looked down for a moment at the display table in front of him – and oh, but Sam had *drooled* over that holographic display – but at the moment, his eyes seemed millennia away. “I do,” he admitted, and sighed. “There are… many factors at play, Doctor Fraiser. But… I believe the nail in the coffin, so to speak, came when Ra first discovered your Earth.”

Janet blinked. “Come again?”

Urdu gave her another of those eyeblink-eyebrow looks. “Much as I loathe the comparison… What
do you know about parasites, Doctor?”

Whoof. Janet couldn’t help a full-body shudder. “We define them as organisms that benefit at the expense of another,” she said. “They come in a lot of varieties – plants, birds that lay their eggs in another bird’s nest, organisms that get into the internal systems of creatures… some can even affect things like brain function.” Earth had plenty of nightmare fuel of that variety, long before the Goa’uld had come. Her interest in parasites ran to the intracellular – disease-causing bacteria and viruses both qualified. The effects of those alone… *Toxoplasma gondii* came to mind. *Not* something to read about right before bed. Fortunately, that sort of creature was…

Her eyes widened.

“…usually highly specialized,” she breathed.

Urdu’s smile was dry. “Goa’uld and humans evolved on completely different worlds,” he pointed out, almost gently. “There is, naturally, a certain… mismatch.”

*A mismatch.* Janet thought back to the dozens, hundreds of ways even an normal interaction of that type could go wrong, and swallowed. “Why risk it, then?” she demanded. “What makes humans so attractive to the Goa’uld?”

Truth be told, she’d wondered that ever since learning about the Unas on Cimmeria. It had been larger, stronger than a human. Tougher. And definitely more intimidating. And despite the history Daniel had found on Abydos, and Ra’s own claims, apparently Unas bodies were at least as easy to repair as human.

*Why would the System Lords give that up?*

Suddenly, she realized that the low rumble in Urdu’s chest, almost like a crocodile, was a *chuckle*.

“An unfortunate choice of words,” he said with a crooked smile. “I personally don’t find humans particularly attractive. Too soft and… hairy. You remind me of Unarian ground apes.”

Janet arched an eyebrow at him. “Always good to be underestimated,” she said, in a passable imitation of Jack as his most infuriatingly sarcastic.

Urdu snorted. “Which only goes to show that you’ve never *encountered* an Unarian ground ape,” he informed her, and shuddered dramatically.

*He is teasing me!* Janet hadn’t thought that the Goa’uld even understood the concept.

Which simply brought her back to the original question. “If aesthetics aren’t a factor…”

“They were not a factor originally,” Urdu corrected her, more solemn this time. “My people – Djehuty’s, rather…” He paused. “And may I say that you Tau’ri, and humans in general, have a frustrating lack of personal pronouns appropriate to dealing with *ghoti*.”

*They have an entire vocabulary, an entire language, based around the assumption that some people are under parasitic possession.*

Janet suspected the truth was far more complex than that. It didn’t stop the fiercely visceral sense of repulsion. She shuddered, and tried not to be too obvious about edging faintly away.

She suspected that Urdu noticed anyway. But he courteously continued as though it hadn’t happened. “Well. We tend to take on the preferences of our partners. My interests run far more
towards... say, Nubiti.” He shook his head. “Which can be somewhat disconcerting. The hazards of consecutive partners of different genders.”

Seated at a nearby display as she went over some form of schematic – from the bits of text Janet could make out, probably something from the Ancient database – the female Unas simply chuckled, not even bothering to look away from the display as she waved her hand in an unmistakable, *Go away, little boy, I’m not interested* gesture.

Janet swallowed. She knew they had to stay on track... but...

“How did you survive separation?” she asked, hands tightening on the clipboard holding the reports and her notes.

Now Nubiti did look up. “The Goa’uld secretes a neural cytokine when preparing to leave. It allows the links between the neural networks to dissolve and reseal safely...”

The clipboard dropped to the floor with a clatter.

“Doctor?” Urdu said, frowning in concern.


The worst of it was, she believed them. The whole concept of the toxin had irked her. Goa’uld weren’t like the parasites that needed the host to die as part of their life cycle. They were dependent on their hosts, in so many ways. Given that there was no practical way for a host to harm the Goa’uld, and the potentially dire consequences to a Goa’uld whose host died... having a built-in way to kill its host simply did not make sense.

But that it was actually a *beneficent* adaptation, but intended for a species with a completely different biochemistry...

“It’s an *abomination,*” Nubiti said hotly. “The azti is a *gift,* for healing and rebirth into a new self. To use it to *kill* your other half...!”

Urdu sighed. “Unfortunately, for the System Lords that was considered part of the appeal of humans as hosts – the ability to control, absolutely, and give nothing up.”

“Give nothing up?” Janet asked warily, picking up her clipboard again.

Urdu steepled his fingers – which looked very odd, given the heavy claws at the end of each – thoughtfully, and Janet was struck by the sudden sense that he’d had this, or similar, conversations many, many times before.

“A *ghoti* – a blending – between Unas and Goa’uld is precisely that,” Urdu said, and looked at her pointedly. “If you were to scan my brain, Doctor Fraiser – you would not be able to define any exact point where Ur ends and Djehuty begins.”

The hairs rose on the back of Janet’s neck. “But – if your neural matter is entwined that deeply...”

“It has a powerful effect on the personality.”

God, just the thought was terrifying. “You mean you literally take over the host’s brain.”

Urdu gave her that odd eyeblink again, and it really did come across just like a chiding eyebrow.
“Doctor Fraiser, think. The blending is not one-way.”

Startled, she hauled back on her gut reaction. “…Your host rewrites your personality as much as you rewrite his.”

“Hm. I would call it *influencing*,” Urdu admitted. “There is no clear line between blue and green in the visible spectrum, yet they can still be called distinct colors. Or not, depending on how you are pre-disposed to view them. I am *Urdu* as much, or more, as I am *Ur* and *Djehuty*. But yes – exactly.” He frowned slightly. “This is far more confusing than it would be in Unarian, but… *I-Djehuty* of Urdu is not the same as *I-Djehuty* of Nubiti. Just as *I-Ur* of Urdu is no longer *I-Ur* the individual.”

He was right. That was confusing. *They make that many distinctions between different ways of saying I?* No wonder Sanura has at least three different names for Djehuty, depending on the context – *has to be confusing to keep straight. Danny’s going to be in heaven*. But if she broke it down and looked at it… “You’re saying that both sides of a… a *blending*,” God, it felt like treachery to call it that. She was glad Sam was out with Sanura and Teal’c, ensuring that the trapped yukiuso was dealt with permanently, rather than listening to this and remembering Jolinar, “become a kind of gestalt personality.” She shook her head. “And it doesn’t bother you?”

“It bothers some a great deal,” Nubiti said with a shrug. “Not everyone is prepared to become a Wisdom Seeker.”

No wonder. The idea of having your very self altered like that?

*Then again. Daniel’s pointed out a thousand times that culture has a huge impact on our concept of self-identity. If they come from a culture where this is common enough to have different pronouns… they may simply have a more fluid concept of self.* Hard as that was to imagine with the System Lords…

Ah.

“I’m guessing there are Goa’uld who aren’t too keen on that, either,” she said, eyes narrowing. “And that’s where we come in, isn’t it. Humans didn’t co-evolve with Goa’uld…”

“And your neurophysiology is compatible enough for control, but not compatible enough for blending.” Urdu shook his head. “The System Lords found the combination… addictive.”

*Humans: the interstellar tobacco*, Jack’s voice snarked in the back of Janet’s mind. But the physician in her was wincing. Psychological addiction aside – and while she wasn’t about to pretend she was an informed expert on Goa’uld psychology, there had been numerous studies on the effect even a little bit of unanticipated power could have on a human’s psyche – as a doctor, she was all to familiar with more physical forms of addiction.

Urdu sighed. “Please do not misunderstand me,” he said. “I have nothing against humans as a people – unfortunate resemblance to ground apes aside. But my own life would be far simpler if Ra had never found you.”

Believe me, the feeling is entirely mutual. The words were burning on the tip of Janet’s tongue when, suddenly, Nubiti laughed.

“You’re just being bitter,” the woman chided, without ever interrupting the amused rumble that seemed to come straight out of her chest. “You forget that you and I shared wisdom. The System Lords were lost long before Ra discovered Earth. The Stargates alone were enough to assure that.”

Janet felt her eyes widen as a chill ran through her. Swallowing once, carefully, she said, “Could you
explain that?”

For a moment, Nubiti looked startled. Then her eyes softened slightly, as though she’d read the dread in Janet’s thoughts. “You’re familiar with the language transference protocols in the Stargates, I assume,” she said.

*Language transference.* Interesting way to phrase it. “Yes,” she admitted. “Although we don’t really understand how it works.” And she did not like that. She wasn’t a neurologist, but – language was deeply embedded in the human brain. That the Stargates could manipulate it that precisely…

Nubiti nodded as Janet felt shocked realization cross her face. “The protocol does not harm humans, so far as we have observed – and the Wise One has observed the effects of Stargates on Jaffa and System Lord slaves for millennia,” she added. “It would appear that, despite the difference in neurochemistry, the neurophysiology of humans is close enough to the Gatebuilders that the protocols are harmless.” She sighed. “But Goa’uld and Unas… My time of *ghoti* was intended to be much longer, Doctor Fraiser. But in a crisis, I was forced to use the Stargates several times in very rapid succession, with no chance to disable the protocols. The damage done was… sufficiently severe that Djehuty and I both required the *azti* to recover.”

Janet shook her head. That toxin had stood as an implacable enemy for so long. To think that it was meant to heal…

She blinked, distracted. “Disable the protocols… So that’s why you speak with an accent!”

Urdu snorted. “In part. Although that is mostly the result of physiological differences.” He smiled a little too widely for comfort, baring sharp teeth. Not fully carnivorous, but definitely more in line with true omnivores like raccoons or bears than a human’s blunt dental accoutrements.

Janet’s mind had moved on, slotting thoughts into place. “But if there’s a way to disable the protocols… why haven’t you told the other System Lords?” she demanded. “If human hosts are harmful – if the Stargates can do brain damage…”

“What makes you think I have not?” Urdu spread his hands, real frustration slipping into his tone. “Ra listened, at least enough to avoid using the Stargates as his primary form of transportation. But most of the System Lords, the Tokra… They call me old, and a fool. What could they, born with the genetic memories of their forebears, possibly have to learn?” His lip curled. “In many ways, the beginning of the genetic encoding of memories was the death of Goa’uld civilization. At least, as embodied in the System Lords.”

Janet furrowed her brow with a frown. “It’s not native to the Goa’uld, then? The genetic memories?”

Urdu hesitated, obviously thinking. “Our genetic matrix – that of Goa’uld – does change over time, unlike most species. Particularly those who undergo *ghoti*; the *azti* plays a part there, as well. So yes – unlike many species, our young inherit some of our life experience, as well as our genetic matrix. But…”

“Not to the point of full genetic memories?” Janet guessed.

“No. That was the result of very deliberate genetic manipulation.” Urdu sighed. “And as a result… the System Lords and their offspring are born feeling that they already know *everything*. They are not curious.”

And that, Janet realized, summed up what had baffled Daniel and Sam and most of the SGC in general. How did *any* species manage to rise to such prominence if they weren’t curious?
Which is what made Djehuty stand out from the beginning, she recalled. So why is he different?

About to ask, another thought occurred to her, and she shivered. “The Goa’uld – no, the System Lords,” she corrected herself. He’s making a very clear distinction there. I wonder why. Does that mean there are Goa’uld out there who aren’t like the System Lords? Setting the thought aside, she continued. “They see their young as just copies of themselves, don’t they?”

Something bleak in the set of Urdu’s face as he nodded made Janet suspect he knew where her line of thought was leading.

Swallowing, she took the plunge. “Is that how they started…”

Urdu’s eyes darkened. “Eating their own offspring?” he asked bluntly. “It may be how they justify it.” Crossing his arms, he frowned at nothing in particular.

Janet carefully loosened her fingers on the clipboard. So at least one Goa’uld apparently found the practice repugnant as well. No surprise. Any species that fed on its own young – well. Evolutionary dead end, that. So that begged the question of why…

And I think we’ve already answered that. “It’s the naquadah, isn’t it?”

The question pulled Urdu out of whatever dark thoughts he’d fallen into, and he blinked quizzically at her.

Janet fiddled with her pen. “To be honest, I never thought about it much – not until we were faced with Zuko and Toph, and I realized that if we were going to keep them healthy, we’d need a bioavailable source of naquadah… The Goa’uld may not have nearly the concentration of it that they do, but you still need it, don’t you?”

“In small quantities, yes,” Urdu said, nodding at her. “Not in our natural state, but… much of our technology requires a level of naquadah to manipulate, despite my efforts otherwise. We have been modified to require it.”

Not in our natural state? Janet echoed in the back of her mind, startled. So the naquadah wasn’t inborn to the Goa’uld as it seemed to be with the children?

But if that was the case…

“Oh,” she said quietly, as facts slotted into place.

Now both of the Unas looked at her curiously.

“I always wondered why we didn’t hear of any mad hatters among the Goa’uld,” she said slowly.

That got her a blink – a real blink, not the arched-eyebrow equivalent – from Nubiti. “Mad what?” she echoed.

Janet flushed slightly. “Sorry – it’s a reference from Earth’s history. There was a time when we used mercury to cure beaver fur for hats. Hat makers tended to get… very, very strange after a few years. Humans don’t deal very well with heavy metals in the brain.” She looked at them. “And neither do the Goa’uld, do they? That’s what I’ve been missing. It’s not that there are no mad hatter System Lords – it’s that they’re all mad hatters.”

Urdu smiled faintly, but it seemed pained. “That sums up the nature of the problem, yes.”
No wonder the Goa’uld, even the Tok’ra, believed that Djehuty was senile. In the land of the blind, one person with vision would be called insane. “So you don’t have naquadah in your system?”

“I do,” he corrected her. “As I said – the System Lords were modified to require at least trace levels of it, although our tolerance to the damage was not raised accordingly.” He shook his head. “I simply avoid naquadah-dependent technology as much as possible, and regulate my intake very carefully. It is playing with fire, but…” He turned his hands up an a helpless shrug.

Janet tilted her head. “How do you get it?” she asked. Because given his reactions, she could not imagine Urdu following the System Lord custom of eating larvae.

“There is a particularly protein-rich algae that can carry naquadah in a bioavailable form; it is what our larvae eat,” Urdu explained, the very image of dignity. “The taste is, I admit, not the most appealing, but it is nutritious enough.”

Surprise had Janet bursting into laughter before she could catch herself. “Urdu,” she said, fighting and failing to hide a grin, “are you telling me that you eat Goa’uld baby food?”

“As he said,” Nubiti said, smiling back, “it is an effective and relatively safe source of naquadah.”

Urdu was rumbling a deep laugh in his throat, but it quickly faded into solemnity. “I knew that the System Lords would consider that solution beneath them,” he admitted. “But when I informed them, I never imagine they would turn to…” He trailed off, shaking his head.

“…That’s why you were interested in Asunyti, wasn’t it?” Janet realized, as her mind flashed back to the scene she’d walked into almost straight out of the Gate.

“Sokka? Rock candy. You have some. Give.”

“Sheesh, Toph, pushy much? I’ll have you know those are my emergency sup-ow, ow, okay, here!”

Toph accepted the odd blue-green crystal with a smirk before cracking it in half and tossing one half to a very dubious-looking Zuko.

Janet vividly remembered the look on Urdu’s face when the crystal had crunched like sugar under hungry teeth.

“It wasn’t just the energy beings like the yukiuso. It wasn’t even mostly about them,” Janet said now, slowly. “You were looking for a better naquadah source!”

“…Not entirely.”

Janet blinked. “Not…?”

Urdu crossed his arms and regarded her with a level, unreadable gaze. Finally, as though coming to a decision, he said, “You recall that I said that the Goa’uld were modified to tolerate – and require – certain levels of naquadah.”

Janet nodded. “And you said the genetic memories were the result of modification as well.” She frowned. “Although I don’t understand why. If the results were so harmful… surely you foresaw at least some of the consequences!”

“You assume the Goa’uld were responsible for the modifications,” Urdu said quietly.

Janet opened her mouth. Closed it. Swallowed. Remembered the other part of Jack’s report.
“The Ancients?” she whispered.

Urdu nodded.

“But…” But that makes no sense, she wanted to cry. The Ancients had been part of a great alliance against the System Lords. Why would they have had a hand in creating them in the first place?

Then again… it’s not like we haven’t seen the Law of Unintended Consequences in full force before.

“But why would they do it?” Urdu finished for her in a rhetorical tone, and shrugged. “I never asked.” He shook his head. “But they were interested in the biological application of naquadah, as well as the study of energy-beings. Some of that research was done here.” He looked down at the display of the map. “I may even have been here. Although I do not recall it. Unsurprising. My memories of that time are… very distant.”

You’re that old?

Janet didn’t realize she’d spoken aloud until Urdu looked up at her.

“Old enough,” he said neutrally. “I was… lucky, if it could be called that. The modifications did not take properly; I was born deformed, crippled. Unable to survive long outside a specially engineered tank, or a host.” His face quirked in an expression that resembled a smile, distantly, but held something more bitter than amusement. “One of many such failed results. So the Ancients graciously released me back into the wild.”

Janet paused for a long moment, considering her possible responses. “How did you survive?” she finally asked.

“True luck, in that case. A wisdom seeker from a nearby clan encountered me, and took pity.” Urdu looked back at the holomap. “In many ways, it was he who was the true Wise One, although his descendants have granted that title to me.”

Following the line of his gaze, Janet studied the mountains, the location of the two labs highlighted in yellow, and then looked over at Nubiti and the display that the woman was ignoring in favor of their conversation. “You’re looking for the experiment records,” she surmised. “You want to try to undo the modifications?”

“…No.”

Startled, she looked back at him.

Urdu wasn’t looking at her. Instead, his gaze rested on something a thousand miles and probably as many lifetimes away.

“I have watched the collapse of my civilization for millennia,” he said softly. “And tried to reverse or mitigate the damage as best I could for just as long. My success has been minimal. Perhaps, had intervention come sooner… but it did not. It took me too long simply to find a place to begin even understanding what had happened. Now… You are a doctor, Janet Fraiser. If a limb is diseased beyond hope of treatment, and the effects reaching to the body, sometimes there is only one viable option.”

Janet swallowed, not certain she wanted to know what Urdu was looking at with those distant eyes.

No. Djehuty. She could feel it, in the weight of too many memories underneath that unreadable tone. She was not talking to Ur-and-Djehuty now, but the ancient Goa’uld himself.
Saying that his people may have to die.

She couldn’t imagine what it would be like, to watch your entire race spiral into insanity and know that in many ways, you were the last left. And to have no way to stop it…

Surely not his entire race? Amputating a limb implies that there’s an organism that can still be saved… There have to be other Goa’uld, ones who weren’t manipulated to such a destructive extent, maybe.

But even so… They would probably be no more Djehuty’s people than the humans SG-1 encountered on what felt like every other planet could be said to be the same people as humans from Earth.

“What about your children?” she blurted, without thinking. “You’re stable. Surely they would…”

Ah. But given that he viewed other Goa’uld as mad… Not exactly an attractive proposition, in more than one sense. Add in the fact that Djehuty was apparently a cripple by Goa’uld standards…

And Nubiti had just made a strange choking sound, and was staring fixedly at the display again, spine stiff.

Urdu glanced at her, then shook his head with a strange, wry smile. “I – Djehuty,” he clarified, slipping back into the tone Janet associated with Urdu, “tried once. But… while the Ancients’ modifications did not take so strongly with my mind, there were… consequences. Very few of the young survived. And of those that did…”

He shuddered once, violently.

“We’ve heard that the Tau’ri have met his surviving child,” Nubiti said coolly. “She is called Nirrti.”

Eyes going wide, Janet swallowed.

“Suffice to say, that is an experiment I do not intend to risk twice,” Urdu said. “So… no, Doctor Fraiser. Although I would rejoice if we were to find something that would help break the cycle of destruction in the System Lords, I am not holding out hope for that outcome.”

“Then why…?” Janet began, very tentatively.

Urdu glanced at her, his smile dark and full of very, very sharp teeth. “The Gatebuilders wished to Ascend, to leave this realm and their messes behind. And in the process, they created – and left behind – devices like the yukiuso trap. Devices that might be used to bring them back.”

Janet was careful to meet that dark smile without flinching, and swallowed, very carefully. Think about it. Later, she told herself firmly. Urdu had given her a lot to think about. Too much; her mind was reeling. Think about it when you have time to process.

But there was one thing she needed to know right now. Drawing herself up, and cursing her small statue against Urdu’s looming bulk, she met that smile with the steady stare of a military doctor.

“What are you going to do with the children?” she asked.

Urdu blinked, looking completely nonplussed. “Send them home, of course.”

She narrowed her eyes slightly. “Even though they’re Ancients.”

To her surprise, Urdu blinked again-
And laughed softly, shaking his head as, just like that, the looming sense of angry predator faded.

“They are,” he admitted. “Or at least – they are the descendents of a small, very particular group of the Gatebuilders.”

Janet studied him a moment longer, then looked down at the nearly-forgotten reports she still had in her hand. She hadn’t even noticed she’d been taking notes all along.

“Why are they called Renegades?” she asked, slowly.

“Ah.” Urdu leaned against the table, almost sitting on its edge. “That, is a very… interesting question. And the answer, I fear, is… I’m not certain.”

Janet blinked. “You’re not…?”

Urdu fingered the short horn framing the left side of his chin thoughtfully, rather like a man stroking a neatly trimmed beard. “You must understand,” he said slowly, “that what I know of the Renegades comes from those who called them that. And the Gatebuilders… did not care for dissenting opinions.” He snorted. “Likely because the mere existence of dissent implied that they might possibly have been wrong.”

“No one likes to admit that,” Janet said wryly.

“True.” Urdu shook his head. “I do not know why the Renegades rebelled against the other Ancients, or what drove them to a dur’Asada world.”

Janet narrowed her eyes at him. “But you have suspicions.”

Urdu thrmmmed deep in his throat. “Given the timing – it is not only possible, but likely, that their quarrel had something to do with the Gatebuilders’ interest in Ascending and leaving this phase of reality entirely. Which is… interesting.”

She raised her eyebrow.

“Because the golden glow of their Avatar is characteristic of Ascension.”

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~

“…and then it showed up the next night, and I really didn’t have any idea what to do, but then I saw an acorn and I thought, oh, okay, it’s mad because the forest is gone, maybe if I show it the forest is coming back, the way Katara showed me, then maybe…” Aang trailed off, big gray eyes narrowing suspiciously. “What are you doing?”

Jack was scowling as he shoved one of the odd sweet bars at a broadly smirking Toph. “She,” the man grumbled, jerking his chin at the earthbender, “suckered me into betting on how long it would take you to inhale.”

Zuko couldn’t quite suppress a smirk of his own. “Airbender,” he said with a shrug, when Jack narrowed his eyes at him. “Breath control is at least as important to Air as it is to Fire.”

Aang huffed. “Guys…” he said as he turned, clearly intending to appeal to the others-
“Yes, yes! All bets are called in now! Pay up, people!” Grinning fit to split his face, Sokka was making the rounds of the room, and the highly amused soldiers gathered in a nearby lounge, watching some kind of… play-in-a-box that the people who had come with Janet from that other world had brought with them, apparently on Jack’s recommendation.

A play in a box. Zuko was trying not to wonder too hard about how that was even supposed to work.

Aang puffed out a huge sigh. “I hate you guys,” he pouted melodramatically, and paused. “And you owe me some of that!”

Toph held the odd sweetbar protectively away from him. “Nuh-uh. Mine, Twinkletoes. I got it off Snark-Feng fair and square.”

Aang turned huge, pleading eyes at Zuko.

“Hm.” Zuko paused for a moment, pretending to think deeply. “Sorry, Aang. When it comes to Avatar versus the Blind Bandit, I’d rather err on the safe side.”

Suki snickered. “So you do have a sense of self-preservation. I’ve wondered.”

“Nah,” Katara and Toph said in unison.

“He’s just good at faking one,” Sokka said with a grin.

Zuko flushed slightly, remembering some of the downright stupid messes he’d gotten into, chasing the Avatar. Okay. Point to them, I guess…

Jack was listening to the banter with a pointedly raised eyebrow, looking far more amused than could be possibly good for anyone. “Sooo,” he drawled into the pause. “This sort of thing really is normal for you kids.”

Sokka frowned. “I’m not sure I’d call this normal,” he said, gesturing at the strange walls around them.

“Spirits?” Suki said pointedly.

“Utterly improbable coincidences?” Zuko added.

“Meeting utterly weird people?” Aang contributed, grinning broadly.

Sokka’s shoulders slumped. “Okay, so it… kinda-sorta is normal for us,” he admitted reluctantly.

Jack shook his head. “Next thing I know, you’ll be saying it’s Tuesday…”

Zuko and the others were blinking at him, trying to figure out what that was supposed to mean, when the distance-speaker clipped to the man’s belt made the odd crackling sounds that meant someone was about to speak.

“Sir, we’re approaching the drop point,” Sam’s voice announced.

Jack’s eyebrows bounced up. “Huh. That was quick. Good turn of speed on that thing…” Dropping his hand to the little switch on the device, he pressed it. He paused as it made an odd brrt! noise, then said, “Roger that. I’m moving to an area with better reception.”

“Understood, sir.”
Jack glanced at Zuko and the others and raised an eyebrow. “Wanna come?”

Zuko raised his unscarred eyebrow back. “Is there anything we could do if we did?” he asked bluntly, thinking back to the absolutely insane plan Sam had proposed for disposing of the yukiuso as though she did this sort of thing every day.

*Then again, given that they seem to use this Stargate to visit other worlds on a regular basis, and have gliderships and flying buildings… Maybe they do.*

And he’d thought *King Bumi* was crazy.

“Stand around and look pretty? It’s pretty much what I do,” Jack said with a shrug.

Toph and Sokka both snickered. Zuko traded a long-suffering look with Katara before turning back to the older man and shaking his head. “We’ll be fine here.”

“Your call.” Making a flick of his fingers near his head that seemed to be a kind of casual salute, Jack glanced past them, into the small room where Daniel was enthusiastically explaining Jack’s strange portable play to a curious audience of Urdu’s soldiers, then headed for the door, shaking his head.

Zuko’s ears caught the edges of one of the actors in the play, declaiming the lines, “You're gonna endanger us, you're gonna endanger our client. The nice lady who paid us in advance before she became a dog.”

He blinked.

“Um.” Toph rubbed at her ear. “Okay. That was weird even by our standards.”

Zuko looked from the doorway to her, and back again. “…I was really hoping I’d misheard that.”

Sokka blinked at both of them. “Misheard what?”

Toph rolled her eyes. “You know – that. You made more sense after drinking cactus juice, Snoozles!”

“Um…” Suki looked back and forth from them to the room. “It just sounded like babble to me…”

Startled, Zuko looked at the others. They all nodded agreement.

Toph’s jaw dropped. “Wait – you don’t understand them? But… you were talking to Snark-Feng just fine, a minute ago!”

Zuko tilted his head, thinking hard, and blinked. “Two languages,” he blurted, as something he’d noticed when they were exploring the strange hidden workshop clicked into place. “Sam and Janet – their world has its own language. But the language of these… Jaffa… they all speak it.” He pointed at the others. “You understand them when they speak the Jaffa language. But for some reason, Toph and I understand both…”

Aang’s eyes widened. “Wow!” he exclaimed. “You mean, they speak whole separate languages? Like the sacred language? Not just really, really heavy dialects the way you get with the swampbenders?”

Sokka cleared his throat. “Kinda wondering how any of us are speaking any of it in the first place,” he admitted. “Because, I’ve got to say, those swampbenders made no sense half the time…”
“Like these people do even when you do know what they’re saying?” Katara said with a slightly crooked smile.

Zuko couldn’t quite fight the rueful smile of sympathy, before he looked at Sokka. “I don’t know how you four are speaking the language. But – Toph and I were in the Spirit World with Sam.”

More than that. They’d pulled her across the barrier with them. He should probably be grateful that he and Toph weren’t trying to play with tame lightning toys. And that Sam wasn’t trying to earthbend inconvenient walls out of her way.

“And somehow, it… stayed with you?” Aang hesitated, looking troubled. “Are you guys really okay?” he demanded. “I mean, I know you said you were okay, and Katara looked you over, but you look…” He trailed off, face puckering as he bit at his lower lip. The expression would have been funny, if he hadn’t looked so worried.

Aang looking worried. They must look pretty bad. “Just tired,” Zuko said firmly. “It’s been an… interesting week.”


Wait. “What?” He twisted to stare at her. “You’re…?”

“I know, it makes no sense. We were in a mountain,” Toph admitted, and shrugged. “I poked a little. When I was healing Aang, and again when Katara was checking us. Whatever’s in the rock candy, we’re both low on it.”

Zuko shook his head. He didn’t even like rock candy, but just this once, it had been… well, he still didn’t like the taste, but he wouldn’t turn down another shard if it showed up.

“Maybe it’s this whole… different world thing?” Suki suggested tentatively, looking like she only half-believed the words had come out of her own mouth. “Maybe the elements are different on other worlds, or… something.” She shook her head. “Different worlds. No one at home is ever going to believe this…”

Zuko looked at them. “How did you four even get here?” he had to ask.

Sokka scratched the side of his head, pursing his lips. “Now that, is a bit of a story,” he admitted. “I mean, we figured out something was wrong when Aang turned up with you guys still nowhere to be found. So we went looking for you. Found your campsite and the stairs, followed them up to the old temple…” He paused, narrowing his eyes at Aang. “And I think we need to have the talk about never split the party again. You keep taking off and forgetting that your backup can’t fly.”

Aang swallowed, looking pale under his arrow tattoos. “I… think I remember that part.”

The hairs stood up on the back of Zuko’s neck, and he didn’t have to look around to know that he wasn’t the only one.

Wide-eyed, Katara rested her hand on Aang’s arm. “What do you remember?” she asked softly.

Carefully, Aang ran his tongue over his lips, as though trying to moisten them. “Sleepwalking,” he said at last. “Or… it felt kind of the way dreams do, you know? When you’re going somewhere, and your dream-you is moving and doing things,” he waved an arm demonstratively in the air, and Zuko absently side-stepped the puff of wind, more out of engrained habit than anything else, “and dream-you knows exactly what’s going on but you-you is just along for the ride?”

Sokka was pale. “You mean, like… Hama?”
Aang shook his head vigorously. “No! Hama was all…” He stuck his arms out, hands hanging limply from his wrists, and shuffled forward and back a step or two. “You could feel yourself getting jerked back and forth, remember? It was really weird. But this… I wasn’t being controlled, I just… wasn’t the one saying yip-yip.”

“…Creepy,” Toph said, shuddering with a vigor that Zuko suspected couldn’t be entirely attributed to an Earth Rumbler’s sense of drama.

Dropping his puppet pose, Aang looked around their small circle uneasily – they’d all drawn in close, letting the background noise of the cheerful chatter (and sounds of things going boom; whoever was putting on that play, they were at least as fond of their effects as the Ember Island Players) cover their quiet conversation from any eavesdroppers, deliberate or not. Even so, Aang lowered his voice a little. “That, and… well, there was something else. The world just… felt different.”

Zuko frowned. “How so?” he asked carefully.

Aang’s lips puckered in a frustrated moue. “It’s really hard to explain…”

“Try,” Katara urged.

“It was like everything around me went all… fragile. See-through. Like glass,” Aang said slowly. “Because suddenly I could see the… the not-being of it all, and the being – it was all just different forms of energy, and if I reached…” Aang silently moved his hands as though shaping an airball, and finally exhaled noisily before looking around their circle again. “I’ve had that feeling before. When I fought Ozai.”

In the Avatar State, Zuko concluded silently.

Sokka raised his hands. “Wait a minute, wait a minute,” he said, brow furrowed. “Look… so I’ll grant that there definitely was some Avatar-induced freaking-out back in that temple, even before the whole Berserkatar BOOM thing. And, okay, sure, you’ve moonlighted as Roku or Kyoshi a time or two when the Avatar had something to say or, you know, a volcano to blow up – which, wow, you’d think Roku would be a little less casual about that, given how he died… um. Anyway.” He shook his head. “Now you’re telling me that the Avatar Spirit can take over your brain? Without triggering the Avatar State?”

Aang swallowed hard, looking very, very pale. Zuko didn’t blame him. The Avatar State was terrifying enough, but… to not be able to trust that your thoughts were your own…

Suki cleared her throat. “Um… Okay, this is probably a stupid question, but… does the Avatar Spirit go off and do its own thing a lot?” she asked uneasily.

“No!” Aang almost shouted, modulating his tone down to a fierce whisper just in time. “It’s not supposed to happen at all, not anymore, not now that I’ve mastered the four elements and opened my chakras! I’m supposed to be able to control the Avatar State now…!”

Aang broke off abruptly, biting his lip and closing his eyes. Then his shoulders drooped, and he slowly sank down to a crouch, balancing on the balls of his feet as he rested his elbows on his knees and hung his head.

“Maybe I’m not as ready as I thought,” he said quietly. “The Avatar State… it’s huge. Ancient. And I don’t think it would know what calm meant if calm snuck up and bit it on the nose.”

“Doesn’t sound like a very calm thing to do,” Sokka said thoughtfully, in what was most definitely a
deliberately light tone.

“Try having tea with Uncle when he’s in a philosophical mood,” Zuko suggested dryly.

Toph giggled. “That’s not calm sneaking up and biting. That’s calm hitting you over the back of the head with a boulder.”

The grins that flickered around their group were strained – but Zuko thought the effort was worth it, no matter how clumsy, when Aang’s shoulders shook with a surprised snicker. When the airbender raised his head, his expression was still solemn, but there was a light in his eyes again.

But he shook his head. “See… the thing is, I haven’t really mastered any of the elements except for Air and maybe Water, have I? Not unless I’m actually in the Avatar State, which would kinda defeat the purpose. And… the Avatar’s not supposed to know until he’s sixteen right? Maybe there’s a reason for that.”

“Is there some way we can help you?” Katara asked.

“Um…” Aang scratched his head. “Short of throwing Iroh and a pot of tea at me the next time I Berserkatar?”

Suki snorted. “I’m not sure that would help.”

“Wouldn’t,” Sokka said solemnly. “You do not want to see what Aang gets like when the tea’s too strong.” He looked at the airbender. “Any other ideas?”

“Not really,” Aang admitted, shoulders slumping again for a moment. Then he straightened, eyes brightening. “But – maybe it doesn’t matter for now. I mean, the war’s over! I can go back to being a kid for a while, at least until I’m sixteen. And I can take the time to master the elements for real…” Aang trailed off, blinking at the expressions around him. “Um. Guys?”

Zuko glanced at Sokka, only to find the Water Tribe warrior looking back at him.

This is not at all the way we imagined this conversation happening. But – we’re here, we have some privacy, and we’re not going to get a better opening than this.

Zuko nodded silently.

Sokka sighed, hooking his thumb his sword harness. “Aang,” he said quietly, “the war’s not over.”

Aang’s eyes went huge in a suddenly pale face. “But… I…”

“You defeated my f… Ozai,” Zuko said, swallowing and pretending that it had been ingrained caution against being overheard that had made him change his words, and not a wrench of grief. Not for Ozai himself. For the father he’d tried to make himself believe he’d had, his entire life. He pushed on. “Technically, that ended the war – but only technically. The fighting – hasn’t. Not really.”

“Like with General Fong,” Toph added, grimacing. “You saw what he was like. He didn’t care.”

“But it takes two to fight!” Aang argued. “If we just…”

“It may take two to fight, but it only takes one to break a peace. One way or the other,” Suki admitted. “Kyoshi Island was neutral, but… we only managed that because we weren’t worth the trouble it would take to conquer us. Neutrality only lasts until someone decides that you have something they want.”
Zuko winced. “…Yeah. Sorry about that,” he muttered.

Suki eyed him for a long moment, then shrugged. “It happened. It’s over. At least you and your guys left when Aang did.”

Somehow, that didn’t really make him feel any better.

“Yeah, well, there are a lot of guys who aren’t interested in leaving, let alone leaving be, just because we say that the Avatar says the war is over,” Sokka said bluntly. “And the Earth Kingdom isn’t the only place with a General Fong or five.” He kicked at the floor, suddenly not quite looking directly at any of them. “A couple sailed with my dad.”

Katara winced as Aang’s stare went from her to her brother.

“I-I heard rumors, but… you mean they’re true? But… can’t Chief Hakoda…”

“Tell ‘em to stop?” Sokka smiled dryly. “How? The Southern Water Tribe is a whole bunch of tribes. Not all of them want to listen to Dad anymore. Not now that the Fire Nation isn’t taking over the world.”

Katara met Aang’s gaze sadly. “I know. You want to just be a normal kid again, for a while. You should get to be a normal kid for a while. But Aang… the world needs the Avatar now, more than ever. Or we’re going to tear ourselves apart before we can adjust to the idea that we don’t have to fight anymore.”

Aang frowned slightly and then turned, so that his back was to them. Not angrily, not dismissively – more like he was trying to create a bit of space so that he could think.

“I’m sorry,” Katara said, sounding miserable. “I know you don’t want to…”

“It’s not that, Katara,” Aang admitted. “It’s just…” He drew in a deep breath. “It’s just, I’m not sure I even should.”

Toph blinked, before inserting her pinky into her ear and turning it. “Come again?” she said, frowning.

Aang twisted about a little to look at Zuko. “Do you remember what you told me? About the turtle-ducks and the wild hog-monkeys?”

Zuko blinked, thinking back. “…Yes,” he said finally. “Why…?”

“I’ve been thinking about it,” Aang said simply. “When I fought Ozai…” He frowned slightly. “When I fought Ozai, I took away his bending. So he wouldn’t hurt anyone anymore.”

Zuko held the reflexive shudder down with an iron mental grip. “He wouldn’t have stopped for anything else,” he said firmly.

“I know that!” Wincing, Aang lowered the tone of his voice. “I know that,” he said, softer now. “And if I had to, I’d do it again. But… Once I was in the Avatar State, Ozai didn’t even have a chance. I pretty much acted just like him, like having the most might made me right-”

“You’re not! You weren’t!” Katara snapped, lunging forward to grab Aang’s hands. “You’re nothing like him,” she said fiercely, blue eyes hot. “Ozai could have stopped, any time. You only fought him because he wouldn’t. And… you risked your life, your spirit, to find a way to keep him alive.”
Zuko bit his lip, so that he wouldn’t say what he was thinking – that Ozai probably would have preferred being killed to the life he lived now. Aang didn’t deserve that.

And it wasn’t like he could throw any stones. Azula would probably have preferred it as well. And yet, when he’d seen a chance to end the Agni Kai without killing her…

The airbender smiled weakly, and Zuko saw his hands shift to return Katara’s clasp with a little squeeze. “Thanks, Katara,” he said, and drew in a deep breath. “But… don’t you see? Maybe there wasn’t another way. But when you get down to the basic facts… I beat Ozai up because I didn’t like what he was doing.” He looked up at her, face miserable. “What gave me the right to do that?”

“It’s not a question of right,” Zuko said. “It’s responsibility. You were there, and you had the ability to stop him, and you had to decide whether or not it was worth what you had to do.” He crossed his arms and tried not to show how much this whole conversation reminded him of dark nights, staring over reports and decrees by firebending-steady candlelight and wondering who he thought he was fooling by pretending he had the first idea of what he was doing, playing Fire Lord…

Or a long, uneasy night on an alien world, sharing nightmares and what ifs with Toph.

“But how do I know I’m making the right choice?” Aang asked desperately. “I beat Ozai up to make him stop. That didn’t stop Sozin when Roku tried it – and you know what? Taking Sozin’s bending wouldn’t actually have changed anything. He didn’t kill Roku, the volcano did – I think Roku might not have made it even if Sozin hadn’t been there, although maybe if Sozin hadn’t he’d have run away sooner. And Sozin – he started the war. But you don’t have to be a bender to get people to fight. Jet showed us that.” His hands tightened on Katara’s. “General Fong? I had to threaten him to make him stop fighting, even for a little while. Where does that stop?” He looked at her pleadingly.

“Should I have gone all Avatar on you, when you wanted to find the man who killed your mother? If that’s not right, but fighting Ozai or Fong was… Where’s the line? Where does it stop?”

Toph punched him in the shoulder.

“Ow!”

“You’re over-thinking this, Twinkletoes,” Toph told him bluntly. “The thing is, you’re the only one who can tell a lot of people to stop and have ‘em listen without tossing in a smackdown or two. Yeah, sure, there’re always going to be Ozais and Azulas and Jets around who won’t listen to anything less – but a lot of people will listen to you. You’re the Avatar.”

Aang’s lips pressed together. “Being the Avatar doesn’t make me wise.”

Katara blinked. “But you’re the bridge to the Spirit World…”

“What does that mean, though?” Aang looked around at all of them again. “So I bend all four elements, and I’m really powerful. That’s it, I don’t get any special knowledge. Not until I meditate and try asking past Avatars for advice – and even when I do that, all I get is that past Avatar’s opinion.” His lips pursed. “Why do we even have an Avatar, if all I really am is a giant beatstick?”

“The Avatar is a guardian.”

Now everyone was looking at Zuko. Oops.

Crossing his arms over his chest, Zuko shrugged uncomfortably. “That’s what I found in the ancient archives. The really ancient ones, hidden in the most stable part of the islands.” He still remembered finding that hidden latch in an old ruin, the hours of figuring out how the door worked, and opening up the deep shaft lined with ancient tablets in the sacred script, barely intelligible at best.
“Huh.” Sokka scratched his head. “A guardian? So… what’s he supposed to be guarding against?”

Zuko winced. “I don’t know. That part of the archive was lost.” The lowest depths of the shaft had been completely flooded, the tablets broken or worn down by erosion, and he hadn’t had the time or the knowledge to excavate it. Maybe if he’d asked for scholars from Ba Sing Se… but they all had a long way to go before relations between the Fire Nation and the rest of the world warmed up enough for that.

But he did have other options. “So I started checking other old archives, and then old ruins. That’s what led me to the ancient temple ruin, actually.” He sighed. “I suppose that was a dead end, though.”

“…I don’t think it was.” Aang bit his lip. “When we found that temple… I could feel the Avatar Spirit. It felt… scared.”

Dead silence fell.

“The Avatar was scared?” Toph demanded. “The Avatar? What of?”

Sokka cleared his throat. “Um. Anybody else remember something about a freaky big yukiuso?” he asked dryly, waving his hand over his head.

Aang shook his head fiercely. “Except it wasn’t,” he said firmly.

“So what was it about?” Suki asked, her eyes narrowing.

Aang hesitated. “I’m… not sure,” he admitted. “Just that… it had something to do with that – what did you call it? A Stargate? It was like…” He paused, swallowing, as his gaze flicked around the room before he dropped his voice, so low that all of them had to lean in to hear. “Like the Avatar remembered something about… out here. On the other side of the Stargate. Something bad. Something it…”

“…was trying to protect us from,” Suki finished, eyes wide. “Oh. No wonder the Avatar panicked, when it realized Zuko and Toph had been taken through the Stargate.”

Aang smiled weakly. “Yeah. Know how I said it was like sleepwalking? That part was more… like suddenly realizing you’d sleepwalked yourself into a nightmare.”

Katara hugged him fiercely.

“Whoof.” Sokka shook his head. “Guess that answers how the Avatar knew how to open the Stargate. I’d kinda been wondering about that part.”

Like Sam and her friends… “Then, the people we’ve met…” Zuko asked slowly, trying not to betray the knot in his stomach. He liked Sam and Janet. Jack. Teal’c. Daniel. They seemed like good people…

And we all know what my track record is with trusting people, don’t we? Ozai. Azula. Even Uncle had been manipulating things behind his back for so long, although in Iroh’s defense he’d always done it with good intentions…

And that spirit-trap. It had something to do with the Avatar, although the inscription had made no more sense when he’d looked it over again before handing it off to Sam for disposal than it had before.
Although at least he was able to figure out that what he’d taken for dish probably was more like container.

But Aang was shaking his head again. “No, they’re okay,” he said brightly.

“Which is probably a good thing,” Sokka said slowly.

Zuko tensed. Sokka’s expression was thoughtful, in the way that he’d learned to associated with the Water Tribe warrior’s… rather unique form of tactical genius.

By the way Katara’s eyes narrowed, she recognized it, too. “How so?” she asked warily.

Sokka spread his hands. “Look. The Avatar might know this stuff, but at last check, the Avatar didn’t do a lot of talking.” He arched his brow at Aang, who frowned thoughtfully, but shook his head. “Yeah, thought not.”

There wasn’t a lot of room in their little circle for pacing, but Sokka stalked back and forth over the two paces or so of space that he did have. “But these new pals of yours do know about this, right? Maybe they can tell us something.”

Zuko opened his mouth, then closed it as the door slid open. “Looks like we’ll have a chance to ask,” he said, as Jack, Sam and Teal’c stepped into the room and headed towards them.

“The yukiuso?” he asked, when the three were close enough.

“Drop-kicked into the sun,” Jack said, radiating satisfaction. “I don’t care how big and bad it was down here – it’s not going to survive that.”

Sam sighed. “I just wish we could have found some way to save the trap for analysis.”

“Given a choice between letting that thing out and burning up the box with it? Know which one I’d rather choose,” Jack said bluntly.

“Urdu believes he can recreate it, given time to analyze the database,” Teal’c said gravely. “And it is possible that there exist other chambers with active or dormant traps in them. Although one would urge great caution in approaching them, lest we find ourselves coming full circle with a second spirit.”

“Um. Yeah. Letting another of those guys out? That would be very bad,” Sokka said slowly, eyes bugging in a way that suggested he wasn’t really paying attention to his mouth. A moment later, he blurted, “You really literally threw it into the sun? Isn’t the sun… huge? And really, really, really far away, and…”

Katara elbowed him, hard. “Babbling.”

“But it makes no sense!”

Jack grinned. “We’ve got cool toys.”

Oh boy. There was a very scary look on Sokka’s face. Last time Zuko had seen something like that, Sokka had been elbow-deep in a dismantled fire lock and about to make it blow up in the middle of the palace For Science. A quick glance at the others showed they recognized it, too.

Time for an intervention. And some answers.

“What now?” he asked, fixing Jack with the same level gaze he’d learned to use to make Aang calm
down and think, or to help steady an uneasy officer coming to report to his Fire Lord for the first time. Or to warn a courier that honesty was probably the best policy… not that the last always worked.

Now it was Jack’s turn to glance around at his friends – his unit? “Yeah. About that… Oi, Danny! You’ve had your fun, come play nice.”

The comment earned him an eyeroll from the other man, but Daniel did extract himself from the small room and its occupants to join them.

“This is incredible… apparently, Ancient Egyptian language and culture were strongly influenced by Goa’uld-Unas culture. That must be why the translation protocols left Djehuty’s name in the Old Egyptian form, it’s reflecting the fact that he uses the original Unarian form of the name,” the bright-haired man said as he approached, scrawling frantically with one of those odd metal-tipped brushes these people favored. “And then there are the pronouns – they have at least fifteen ways of saying I. There’s a singular I, there’s an I each for the Goa’uld and the host – the Jaffa have picked up those for the symbionts they keep – and then there’s an I specific to the combined individual. And then there are ways of referring to past hosts, past symbionts…”

Symbiont? That… wasn’t a very comforting thought. And from the pale look on Sam’s face, she wasn’t entirely comfortable with the direction of the conversation, either.

A muffled noise made Zuko blink and look over. Katara was giggling, a hand over her mouth as blue eyes sparkled. “You sound like Professor Zei,” she told Daniel.

Toph’s jaw dropped slightly. “Mr. Head-of-Anthropology?” She blinked. “Whoa. I completely forgot about him… You’re right, he does.”

Daniel’s chatter cut off as he stared at them, eyes wide with surprise. “Head of anthropology?” he echoed, as though not quite certain he should trust his ears. “You mean… like the head of a department at a university? Oh – a university is…”

“We know what a university is,” Sokka said, rolling his eyes. “I mean, sure, we didn’t get much chance to visit the big one at Ba Sing Se, since people were actively avoiding talking to us, but…”

“You have universities?”

Toph glanced sidelong at Zuko. “Uh-oh,” she muttered under her breath, grinning. “I know that tone.”

Yeah, so did Zuko. Usually in the word Shopping! as uttered by Sokka.

Daniel was leaning in, a delighted light in his eyes. “How are they organized? You’re obviously literate – is that common, or is it just an educated class? Is the university primarily religious, or – wait, if you have people studying anthropology…” He cut himself off, pale skin betraying a bright blush of embarrassment. “Sorry. It’s just, we almost never meet cultures that have advanced to that level… I’d love to visit.”

Zuko expected Jack to make a snarky comment about that. Instead, the man looked at them expectantly, eyebrow raised.

Zuko met that silent invitation with a skeptical look of his own. “You want to visit our world?” he asked bluntly.

“Well, seems like a waste to come all this way and not see the sights,” Jack said innocently.
“Why?” Zuko pressed, narrowing his eyes.

“What? We can’t just be friendly sociable types?”

He snorted. “As if.” Ignoring Aang’s be nice frown – Iroh did it better, and he’d been ignoring his uncle for years – he made a short gesture, taking in the strange sandstone of Urdu’s ship that they’d been busy escaping from only a week ago, and the ice fields beyond. “You didn’t know about spirits? Fine. But I watched you. You’re used to disasters striking. And you came back here anyway.” He kept his gaze fixed on Jack. “I’ve seen more than enough to know that traveling through the Stargate is dangerous. And you expect me to believe you’re doing it for fun?”

Jack’s eyes narrowed in return, and Zuko was struck by the sudden feeling that the man wasn’t used to being called on his nonchalance. Tough. He wasn’t going to back down on this.

The burgeoning battle of wills, however, was interrupted when Sam stepped forward. “You’re right,” she said simply.

“Major,” Jack said sharply.

Sam shook her head. “Sir, they’re right. And they have every right to know what they’ve been pulled into.”

Daniel pushed his glasses up. “And Aang’s important on your world, isn’t he?” he asked shrewdly.

Zuko tried to keep his sudden tension from being obvious. Not that there was really much point, not when Sokka and Katara both moved protectively to shield the airbender.

Daniel winced. “Sorry. But… the Avatar? That’s a title. A singular title, suggesting there’s only one. When you consider what he did against the yukiuso…” He spread his hands, eyes sheepish.

Toph crossed her arms. “And what are you planning on doing about it?” she asked.

Sam glanced at Jack, who frowned at them for a moment longer, then shook his head and made a go ahead gesture.

“To ask for aid, if you are willing to give it,” Teal’c said simply.

“Aid with what?” Suki asked, tone as pointed as a spear.

Sam drew in a deep breath – bracing herself, Zuko realized.

“This is a bit of a long story. But it starts when, about fifty years ago, archeologists on our world discovered a buried Stargate…”

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~

“You’re not coming?”

Sanura shook her head at the sun-haired woman’s careful question. “I am Djehuty’s Prime,” she said bluntly. “I have obligations to him. I need to remain by his side – to convince him to limit the explosions, if nothing else.” Her lips curved in a dry smile. “Especially now that Sergeant Dyne has come to play.”
Aang hid a grin under his hand. He hadn’t gotten to meet the woman Toph gleefully called Schemes, not really, but he’d certainly overheard her.

“Oh. My. God. Death Ray. Solar-powered ha’tak Death Ray. This is awesome.”

The crocomander-man who’d introduced himself as Urdu had looked just a little nonplussed. “Do the words death ray and awesome normally accompany each other?” he’d asked Daniel, in an undertone.

“…Pretty much, yeah.”

“Ah. Just checking.”

“Besides,” Sanura was continuing, “I would rather remain here for the time being, until we know how the Tok’ra will respond to the fate of Lieutenant Nekht.”

“He opened a door that was clearly marked Do Not Open,” Jack said dryly. “And we have security camera evidence to prove it. Not a lot they can say about that.”

Sanura shrugged. “Indeed. Nevertheless… The Wise One has never been a friend of the Tok’ra, but neither has he been a foe. But if he is to open neutral relations with the Tau’ri? That may cross a line. The ha’tak is still damaged – and we took many casualties, between the yukius and your escape.”

Zuko and Toph both winced.

Aang’s heart went out to them. He understood fighting to protect your friends, or yourself. And things happened when you fought.

But this whole mess had started because of a misunderstanding. And there were people dead because of it.

What would have happened to the world if I’d killed Zuko, just because he was our enemy? Aang shivered violently. He didn’t want to think about that. Zuko had been scary and relentless and angry… and he’d been trying to do the right thing. Always.

Sanura hadn’t missed all the wincing. She reached out and ruffled Toph’s hair, smirking at the dangerous glare she got in response. “Do not concern yourself. Most of the casualties from the ha’tak will recover, although some needed to be revived in the sarcophagi. They will rue the hangovers, but they will heal.”

“Speaking of side effects.” Janet shoved a large pack at Daniel. “Here. Supplies for testing food sources, nutritional supplements, and extra MREs in case you’re not sure. Don’t forget, you’re going into the opposite problem Zuko and Toph had on our world. If there’s enough naquadah for them to get it from their diet… We don’t know what level of naquadah content is safe, and I’d rather not take chances. Heavy metals tend to accumulate higher on the food chain, and in the oceans. Avoid meat, especially from carnivorous animals. Avoid seafood if you can.”


The fire-haired woman frowned at him. “Be very careful about illnesses. Avoid anyone who’s sick. Remember what I said about immune systems. And we’ll see you in a week.” She frowned. “I’m really not happy with you gone for so long on a new world…”

Jack shrugged. “Can’t be helped. Sounds like they’re really spread out. If we’re going to talk to people there, we need to pad the schedule for travel time.” Pursing his lips, he looked at Aang and
his friends. “You’re sure we’ll actually be able to talk to some of the head honchos?”

“Sure!” Aang said, grinning at him. “I mean, I’m the Avatar.” Which might not mean what a lot of people seemed to think it meant, but Zuko and the others were right – people did listen to the Avatar.

…kinda. Sometimes. When they felt like it.

And maybe Sam and her people hadn’t told them everything – Aang knew a simplified story when he heard it. Still, it sounded like they really meant well.

Plus… they wanted to know more about that Stargate, and the temple they’d found it under, and Aang was real interested in that, too.

He hadn’t told the others everything about his odd dream-vision, while he’d been in the Avatar State. Not the end of it, when he’d leapt through the mirror, and the rush of knowledge-memories that had washed over him-

-protect hide run fight Won’t let them! sanctuary breached secret lost defenses down-

-and then been gone as he awakened as Aang again.

Except, not entirely. Because over and over again, he’d felt a funny sense of other in the back of his mind, reaching out and feeling the world around him at that small-yet-large level he’d learned to associate with the Avatar State. He wasn’t getting a sense of threat from anything – nothing that set off the horror that swirled around the concept of the mysterious them, but…

_I think something in the Avatar Spirit… woke up._

…Oops?

Yeah. If Sam and Jack and their friends thought they might be able to dig up the answers to some of those mysteries… Aang was kinda inclined to help.

“Besides,” he added cheerfully. “We might not have enough time to get in touch with the Earth King or the Water Tribe chiefs, but we’re right next to the Fire Nation, and Zuko’s…”

An arm dropped over his shoulders and leaned.

“Zuko’s got an in with the palace,” Toph said cheerfully, as if she weren’t putting all her weight on Aang’s shoulder. “So you definitely can talk to the Fire Lord.”

Jack pursed his lips. “What about…”

“Sir? We’re ready to dial,” Sam called. Nodding, the man turned and went to join her.

_Thunk!_

“Ow!” Aang barely managed to strangle the yelp in the back of his throat. Toph had just kicked him! Those boots hurt!

Hopping on one foot to rub the back of his leg, Aang gave her a dour look. “What was that for?” he demanded.

Toph scowled at him. “You were going to tell them about Zuko.”

“Well, yeah…” Aang trailed off, feeling his eyes widen. “Wait. You mean they don’t know…?”
Toph’s grin was pure evil. “Nope. And don’t any of you dare spill the beans, not until we’re someplace I can kick off these stupid boots. I want to feel their reactions!”

Sokka’s mouth formed an O of sudden understanding. Then he began snickering. “Hey… think we can keep a lid on things until we get to the palace? Because that would be awesome.”

Aang grinned back. “Bet we can!”

Suki cleared her throat. “Um. Guys… is that really a good idea?”

The three of them turned to grin at her.

Katara reached over to pat Suki on the shoulder. “It’s best not to argue with them at this stage,” she said ruefully. And paused. “And it would be kind of funny…”

Zuko grumbled, reaching up to pinch the bridge of his nose.

Then all of them stiffened as an odd, soft humming went right past their ears and straight into their bones.

“What is that?” Aang yelped.

“Relax,” Toph said, although she wasn’t taking her own advice, shifting her feet as she turned to face the circle of the Stargate, which had just started to move. “That’s just the gate thingy waking up.”

It was creepy.

Which wasn’t just him, Aang realized with a sudden shock. The humming in his bones was weird—but the creepiness came right out of that sense of other still mixed into his spirit.

Frustrated, he closed his eyes and poked at it.

What are you trying to tell me?

“We’re ready.”

Startled, he blinked his eyes open, meaning to ask what the heck that was supposed to mean…

“I’m still not happy about this,” Tui muttered, as the last of their desperate band vanished across the event horizon, leaving only the nine of them on the dais. “Asunyi was declared off-limits for a reason.”

“Which is why this will work,” Shu said firmly. “They’ll believe we’re dead, and good riddance to such undesirable elements. Keep faith. Hiran hasn’t been wrong yet.”

Oma bit her lip. “I just hope this really will help him.” Her jade eyes flickered away from the others, towards…

Me?

“It will. And if it doesn’t, we’ll go all the way back to Earth if that’s what it takes. We’ll find a way to fix this,” Agni said fiercely, and turned his back to shimmering silver, a scarred palm reaching towards them. “Let’s go.”

“Aang?”
Aang jumped, eyes flying open.

Zuko frowned at him, the expression dark and severe thanks to his scar, even though anyone who knew Zuko would realize it was just worry. “What’s wrong?”

Aang blinked, looking around. It was full morning, not nightfall. Sam was standing by the sthaanu-

Wait. How do I know what its name is?

-while the rest of her friends were standing on the dais, waiting.

“Aang?” This time it was Katara speaking, and Aang suddenly realized that all his friends had gathered around him.

He shook his head fiercely. “It’s nothing,” he said, grinning sheepishly at them. “I just… I think I had a vision.”

No. That wasn’t a vision. A memory.

Zuko studied him for a moment. “Are you okay?” he asked.

Aang nodded. “Sorry. I was just distracted for a minute.” He looked past the firebender, to where silvery blue-white was rippling in the center of the circle. “I’m fine.”

Zuko considered him a moment longer, then nodded. “All right. Let’s go,” he said, and held out his hand.

For just a moment – golden eyes, outstretched hand, the rippling of the Stargate silhouetting a familiar, trusted figure – the two scenes overlapped.

One thing left to do. He closed his eyes, and reached.

Time. Distance. They were nothing but illusion.

In a valley a few miles away, a power switch flipped to OFF.

And the cold night burst free.

He opened his eyes and smiled at the stars.

“You won’t follow us,” he told them. “The ice won’t let you. Forget. Like the river forgets snow.”

Then it was gone. Zuko was still waiting, hand extended.

Aang shivered, clasping his friend’s hand and letting Zuko help pull him up onto the dais.

“Yeah. Let’s go home,” he said, and stepped through the Stargate.

~Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.~

~END~
Yes, you read that correctly. *The Dragon-King’s Temple* really does end here.

And no, I haven’t answered every question that has come up. That’s deliberate, for several reasons.

First and foremost – this is a crossover, yes. But it’s not *about* the crossing over. At its core, the plot of this is fairly simple: the SGC has found two dislocated kids and has to find a way to get them back to their homeworld safely. That plot is complete. Which means that going any further would involve introducing a new plot, and new events.

This story isn’t about *Asunyi*. It’s about Zuko and Toph, and the SGC, and the Stargate universe. Move the characters onto Asunyi, and the entire landscape of the story changes.

Which I would like to do, at some point. After all, the GAang – and most of the readers – aren’t the only ones who really want to see SG-1’s faces when they go to meet the Fire Lord! (Besides. SG-1? On Asunyi? We’re looking at political shenanigans and Indiana Jones style adventures – can you *imagine* what Daniel’s reaction to Wan Shi Tong’s library would be?) But while Zuko and Toph in SG-1 balanced well in terms of EOA... SG-1 in Asunyi doesn’t.

Besides. I need to take a break from this ‘verse for a while. It has eaten my brain.

I do kind of wish I’d been able to go with my original plan for this story – in which Djehuty was the bad guy, cut and dried. It would have been much more straightforward than trying to figure out how to set up a fight against what amounted to a maliciously sentient blizzard! But when I sat down to start writing the story, with the Goa’uld as a fairly generic bad guy in the back of my head, the very first line was Janet’s little mental rant about zats. And my bunnies ran with it. After all, wouldn’t it be ironic if the Goa’uld in question were the one who invented zats? But wait, if that’s the case, it means two things. First, he’s got to be fairly old. Second, he’s an inventor.

Well, what if he were *really* old? Say, the oldest? Because you know, I have trouble buying that the Goa’uld have really always been this way. They can’t have stolen all of their tech, simply because you need the right scientific and technological concepts to understand it. That suggests that they had a fairly advanced civilization of their own at one point. Given that they share their homeworld with another sapient species, the Unas, that civilization by definition would have to include both species. So just for fun, let’s say that Unas and Goa’uld are, in fact, genuine symbiotes – they co-evolved together and both sides benefit from the relationship. So how do we explain the change that led to the canon System Lords?

Well, start with humanity itself. Just because the Goa’uld have a symbiotic relationship with a species they co-evolved with, it doesn’t follow that it works so well with other sentient species from different worlds. Going off of *The Enemy Within*, it’s pretty much canon that Goa’uld merge with the host’s brain to a startling degree. That sort of thing would be highly specialized; odds of Unas having exactly the same sorts of brains as humans are vanishingly small. Different biochemistries, different neurological wiring… I can see that sort of contact going spectacularly wrong.

And while we’re at it… Stargate translation. That means that Stargates *mess with the brain*. Which apparently works for humans just fine, and one has to assume the same
holds true for Ancients as well, given that they *invented* the things… but what happens when you get another sentient species that isn’t compatible?

Neuroscientists can tell all sorts of horror stories about what just an itty bitty problem in the brain can do.

Plus, naquadah. Canon says that Goa’uld originally didn’t have it in their systems. So, heavy metal poisoning is possible… And what about that genetic memory thing? I can see that looking like a good idea at first, but combine that with the side effects of everything else, and whoo boy.

…yeah, I admit. When I pulled back and looked at all of that… oof. The Goa’uld are kind of screwed.

And there’s a canon race that ran around meddling with and “improving” other races (such as, oh, the Wraith…) and then failing to clean up their messes… and that dovetailed neatly with my headcanon about the origins of the Renegades.

And while we’re on the topic of history – if you think that Tui, La, and Agni sound familiar, well, they should. What, did you think the Avatar was the only spirit with a History? (And yes, I put Oma and Shu with them for a reason. It can be summed up as, “Legends are rarely completely accurate.”)

Thank you to everyone who supported this story!

**End Notes**

“Even the Dragon-King’s temple floods.” Chinese proverb meaning, “You can be harmed by the things you control.”

Regarding languages: If you can’t figure out what they’re saying, don’t worry – you aren’t supposed to. (On the same principle, I’m not going to offer translations. If it’s not in English, you’re not *supposed* to understand what it means!)

However, the basic language I use for the benders is Japanese, simply because I happen to be fluent in it and thus can use it with confidence. (Chinese or Sanskrit would be more appropriate – save that I don’t know them!) And, for the record – this is colloquial, slangy Japanese, not the formal version that you learn in class. However, it is transliterated more or less phonetically, based on how a native-English speaker would probably hear it. The “language” I use for English as *heard* by the benders is, in fact, English – but filtered through Japanese phonetic rules, with a few tweaks. (For one thing – if you have names like Azula, then you have L’s, which regular Japanese does not.)

Also: I did some research, and yes - apparently English, particularly American English, tends to sound incredibly sing-songy to native speakers of Japanese, Chinese, and German. "You don't speak English, you sing it" is fairly common advice. Also, compared to Japanese, individual syllables of English are much slower, and much more phonetically complicated, meaning that to a Japanese speaker, it sounds very slurred, elided, and drawn out, while to English speakers, Japanese tends to sound staccato and tongue-twister-y.
“Magic kung fu kid” – yes, this is a shout-out to Avocadolove’s “Rampage,” which provided a basic seed for this particular bunny.

Take out the P, X and hyphen, and the planet code is telephone-numerals for “HOTH.” It amused me.

Works inspired by this one: Tyrant Queen of Mutant Ninja Were-Lemurs by MarbleGlove

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