A Gentle Wind and a Roaring Fire
by TheNocturnalHermit

Summary

Emi has been isolated from the world her whole life, living with an elderly herbalist at the edge of the Fire Nation. After her death, Emi is left to face the wide open world alone. Until she meets a certain banished prince. Together, they will learn so much more than they ever thought was possible.

Notes

I DO NOT OWN ANY OF THE CHARACTERS FROM AVATAR: THE LAST AIRBENDER. I OWN ONLY MY OCs. THIS WAS WRITTEN PURELY FOR ENTERTAINMENT.

Now that that's out of the way. I know this idea is hardly original and has been done to death a thousand times over. But the story refused to leave my head, so I figured what the hell, I'll add my two cents. I have tried to stick to the original plot of the series as much as possible. But since I have shoved my OC into the story, some of the plot may be a bit askew or altered and for that I apologize. Nothing is perfect, after all.

Now, without further ado, please enjoy the story of Emi.
The thirteen year old girl sat quietly on the stairs, peeking down into the floor below at their guests. Her mentor, the herbalist, was tending to a young boy who had a terrible burn on the left side of his face. With him was an older man, his uncle from what she had heard. He looked at his nephew with such a parental gaze, though, that it was clear he cared for him very much. The boy, however, radiated fury. His very aura was like a heavy blanket over the quaint little cottage.

“There we go, my dear. Keep this bandage on for at least a few more weeks,” the herbalist, Haruka, said with a light smile. The older man smiled in return and bowed his thanks while the boy merely sat there, glaring with his uncovered eye at the floor.

“We are eternally grateful for your services,” the man said. “Had we not found you, I fear what would have happened to my nephew.”

“Lucky you came to me when you did; the infection was just starting to form,” Haruka remarked, putting her bandages away. “Be sure to clean the wound often and keep applying the salve.” She pressed a small clay jar into the man’s hands, the aroma surrounding it light and soothing.

With another bow, he gave her the appropriate amount of money for services rendered before turning to his nephew. The ever silent and angry boy stood up and left the cottage without another word, the man and Haruka following him out.

Emi placed her chin on her hands, her eyebrows furrowed in thought. Distantly, she heard the two adults talking for a few more moments before silence fell again. Haruka then reentered the cottage, humming to herself.

“I know you’re there, child,” she suddenly said, her voice alight with amusement. Emi smiled to herself and rose from her seat on the stairs, descending into the main room.

“Haruka, may I ask you something?” the girl inquired, her sea green eyes radiating curiosity.

“Of course, child,” her caretaker replied, cleaning up the table where she had bandaged the boy.

“Those two were Fire Nation, right?”

Haruka paused in her cleaning for a slight moment before continuing. “Yes. They were.”

“Then why did you help them? You always tell me the Fire Nation natives are dangerous.”
For a moment, Haruka didn’t reply, merely continuing with her cleaning until the table was well scrubbed and all her supplies were put away. Afterward, her aged face turned to Emi and, with a nod of her head, she beckoned the young girl to follow her. They went through the back door and into the herb garden, where Haruka then set to gathering several flowers and buds into a basket she always kept by the door.

“The Fire Nation is dangerous, yes,” Haruka finally responded. “But that does not mean we turn our backs on those in need of help simply because of where they come from.” The older woman sighed and turned to smile at Emi, her deep brown eyes somewhat sad. “Of course, one must be careful of how they approach certain individuals.”

“Hmm…” Emi mused, crossing her arms. “So, why do we live in the Fire Nation if it’s so dangerous? Why don’t we go back to the Earth Kingdom? I want to see where you grew up! I want to see all the other places in this world!” Emi clasped her hands together, pleading with wide eyes. The older woman chuckled.

“We’re on the outskirts of the Fire Nation, for one thing. Far enough away to ensure our privacy and safety. As for going to the Earth Kingdom…” Haruka pursed her lips, her brow wrinkling. “It is better for us to stay here. Besides, I’m too old for such a lengthy travel.”

Emi nodded, disappointed and somewhat confused, but trusting her mentor to know what was best for them. A breeze flowed through the large garden at that moment, stirring her sandy colored hair. Emi smiled, closing her eyes and imagining that she was flying with the wind, completely free to do what she pleased, to go where she willed.

When she opened her eyes, Emi saw Haruka gazing at her with amusement. “Go on then, child,” she said, pushing her silver hair away from her face. “Practice your Airbending. But do be careful, yes? I really would rather not have to save you from the vines again.”

Emi laughed. “I’m getting better. I think.” She frowned slightly. “It’s hard to tell though. I wish there were other Airbenders around…”

“I know you do, child. But being the only one doesn’t have to be so bleak. It makes you very special and very precious,” Haruka said, touching the younger girl’s face tenderly. “You just need to be careful. I won’t be around forever. There will be a time when you must find your own way in this world.”

“I know, Haruka,” Emi replied with a smile. With that, she set off down the path and past the back gate, venturing out into the wild forest. It didn’t take long for the sounds of nature to emanate around her, making Emi feel at peace.

She soon came to what she often thought of as her clearing. The space was large, surrounded on all sides by tall trees so that she was guaranteed privacy. With a deep breath, Emi began to move her hands around, the wind following her motions until she had made an air ball. She pushed the
swirling sphere around her body a few times before shooting it across the clearing, hitting the bushes and scattering many leaves.

Before long, Emi was running all around the clearing, using her Airbending to leap into the air and twirl around, landing slowly and gracefully before taking off again. This was where her sanctuary was, where she could truly be herself. She loved her home, loved Haruka, and loved being an Airbender. Emi may have lived a rather solitary life, with only her mentor for company, but she understood why that was. She was the last Airbender in existence, aside from the supposed Avatar. But wherever he was, was a mystery to the whole world. If the Fire Nation knew what she was she would be in grave danger. Still, Emi would spend many a hour dreaming of what it would be like to have friends, to be able to be herself and not worry about what would happen to her because she would not have to hide anymore. Someday, she swore to herself, I’ll know what that life is like.

In the meantime, Emi danced around in the forest, enjoying every moment that came to pass.
An Unexpected Encounter

Two Years Later

Emi heaved a sigh as she let her pack drop onto the ground heavily, stretching out her back muscles. Despite her thick hair being pulled back into a ponytail, she had sweat glistening on her skin. She wiped her brow and scanned the horizon. She had spent the better part of the last few months carefully making her way across the Fire Nation, and now she was at the edge of the only land she had ever known. It had taken several changes in ships going from island to island, but in the distance Emi could make out the last Fire Nation territory before she would enter the Earth Kingdom proper. The island was relatively small, and held a temple honoring Avatar Roku.

She sighed again and looked down the cliff toward the harbor. The island she was on was also small, only holding a single village with the rest being pure wilderness. However, she was assured that ships come in from time to time; they were expecting a cargo ship to stop by that day before heading to the colonies in the Earth Kingdom. Emi fished around in her pocket, palming the last few coins that Haruka had bestowed upon her before she died nearly three months before. Emi’s heart still ached at the loss, but she knew it would not do to dwell upon what was. All she could do now was travel to the Earth Kingdom and find a new place to call home.

Emi lifted her pack from the ground and headed down the rocky incline, stumbling a little on the uneven ground as she went. She had only gone a short ways when the earth beneath her suddenly began to rumble dangerously, shaking with a violence she had never felt before. Emi swayed, her feet precariously placed along the edge of the cliff before she tumbled down with a shriek. Below, sharp rocks born of years from the relentless shifting of the ocean awaited her, but Emi acted quickly. With a swipe of her hands, she Airbended herself away from the rocks and toward the open ocean. She glided for several feet before dropping into the water, bursting back up and spluttering as she accidentally inhaled some of the seawater.

When she had managed to compose herself, Emi let out a light laugh, the thrill of nearly impaling herself almost funny now that she was in no immediate danger. What was that rumbling, though? she wondered, turning around in the water to look for the source. She gasped in shock, seeing the violent plumes of ash and lava flowing from the distant temple island. Well. That explains it, Emi thought to herself wryly. She shook her head and began to swim back toward the shore, fighting with the strong waves that wanted to keep her away from land.

“Ahoy there!”

Emi stopped and turned, looking over to see a ship sailing horizontally to her some distance away. She almost mistook for it a cargo ship, but quickly realized that was not the case. It was too streamlined, too imperial to have been made for such a base task. Upon the ship she saw several men, most of them dressed in Fire Nation armor. Emi gulped at the intimidating sight, but she didn’t have time to work herself into a panic as they had already lowered a longboat into the water and were paddling over to where she floated. Strong hands grasped the back of her tunic and hauled her into the boat. Before she knew it, they were paddling back to the larger ship and were being
pulled out of the water by more sailors.

Once her feet touched the deck, Emi was given a blanket by an older man with wise eyes and a kind smile. “Are you alright?” he asked.

“Um…yeah. Yeah I’m fine, thanks,” Emi said, drying off her skin as she spoke. “The eruption startled me and I fell into the water.”

“Ah. I see,” the man remarked, looking thoughtful. “It is a miracle you managed to avoid all of the rocks at the bottom of the cliffs.”

Emi flushed slightly and coughed, unsure of how to respond. Luckily, she was saved from having to do so by a door being slammed open. Everyone looked toward the noise, the crew members and soldiers standing to attention as a young man stormed onto the deck. He looked positively livid, and Emi shuddered slightly from the strength of his anger.

“Uncle, why are we still in Fire Nation waters?” he demanded, bearing down upon the older man. “We need to get out of here before Zhao comes back!” His golden eyes turned to Emi, and she noted with mild shock that a large scar graced the left side of his face. “Who is this?” he sneered, looking very annoyed by the new addition.

“This young woman fell into the ocean when the island erupted,” his uncle replied calmly.

“So?” the young man shot back. “That’s not our problem. We have more important things to deal with without being saddled with some girl who can’t keep her balance!”

Emi felt a flare of irritation, but kept her appearance calm. “With all due respect, I didn’t mean to bother you-”

“I wasn’t talking to you!” the young man interrupted her with a scowl.

“Excuse me?” Emi spat, her irritation winning out over her desire to be diplomatic. “Fine! If I’m such an inconvenience to you then by all means, I’ll jump back into the water and swim back to shore. The cargo ship should be coming along soon enough anyway.” She shed her blanket and turned to do just that.

“Prince Zuko, that is no way to speak to a young lady.” Wait…who? Emi turned back to see the young man glaring daggers at his uncle, who was instead looking at Emi. “A cargo ship is hardly a respectable way to travel. Where is it you need to go, my dear?”

Emi blinked, trying to get her thoughts together. “I…I just wanted passage to the Earth Kingdom. Any town will do, I just need a ship to bring me across.”
Despite his dismissive behavior before, now the prince was appraising her almost curiously. If scowling could be considered curious. He narrowed his eyes in suspicion. “Why would someone from the Fire Nation want to go to the Earth Kingdom?” he demanded.

“I’m afraid that’s my personal business, Your Highness,” Emi replied, opting for polite respect in the hopes this angry young man would leave her be. And if she happened to get a ride to the Earth Kingdom out of it as well, then all the better.

“We can’t leave this poor young woman to fend for herself,” his uncle remarked, a small smile playing on his lips. The prince groaned in irritation.

“Fine. But tracking the Avatar comes first,” Prince Zuko glared down at Emi. “And you will stay out of my way!” With that, he turned on his heel and left the deck, slamming the door behind him.

“Um…the Avatar?” Emi asked the older man in confusion as the rest of the crew went back to work.

“Yes, the Avatar has returned. Did you not know that?” he asked in surprise.

“No, I did know that. I just…why would the prince want to track down the Avatar?”

The older man sighed. “It is a long story. But in essence, my nephew needs to capture the Avatar to regain his honor and be allowed to return home. That is why we need to leave Fire Nation waters. Why we are in Fire Nation waters in the first place.”

“Why is he not allowed to return home?” Emi asked in confusion.

“Because he was banished,” the man replied, gazing intently at her.

“Oh…OH!” Emi’s memory finally clicked into place; this angry prince was the same boy from two years previous, when he and his uncle had come to Haruka to heal his infection. She couldn’t believe she was seeing them again after so long, and on their ship no less.

She looked over and saw the older man was now openly staring at her in confusion. Emi chuckled, flushing a little from embarrassment. “Sorry. I guess I’ve been out of touch with the news lately.”

His golden eyes still held something like suspicion, but he smiled kindly all the same. “That is alright, my dear. Allow me to show you to your room.”

He beckoned her to follow as he descended into the ship. Emi took in the dark, metallic hallways
with a feeling of foreboding; it wasn’t her first time on a Fire Nation ship by any means, but she was always struck by how stark and intimidating the build of the ships were. *Just like the Fire Nation itself,* she mused to herself with a light chuckle.

They eventually stopped in front of one door, the man opening it for her and inviting her to take a look. Inside it was starkly furnished, clearly only used for temporary guests. A simple bed was pushed against the far wall, a small chest of drawers opposite and the torches on either side of the door cast the room in a warm, if a little sinister, glow.

“It is not much,” the man mused as Emi dropped her pack on the floor in front of the drawers. “But it will do for the time being. May I ask your name?”

“I’m Emi,” she smiled.

“I am Iroh,” Iroh said with a bow. “Someone will come get you for supper later. Please, make yourself at home. Feel free to move about the ship if you so choose.” With that he left her to get acclimated to her new room.

Emi looked around the space again. *Well…this is home sweet home. For now, at least,* she thought to herself, tugging at her damp clothes. She wrinkled her nose and patted her hand against her wet mass of hair. Emi glanced out into the hallway, wondering if the risk was worth it. She had been very careful the last few months, and with the home stretch in sight she decided that she could get away with a brief lapse in caution, as long as she was quick about it. With a deep breath, she brought her fists together, a blast of air radiating from her body and instantly drying her clothes and hair. Emi smiled, readjusting herself. She decided to spend her time waiting for supper by going back out onto the deck; she always loved watching the ocean flow by.

As Emi turned to leave she was stopped dead in her tracks by the glowering face of the prince. And judging from the wicked gleam in his eyes, he had seen her Airbend.

*Well done, Emi…*
Before Emi could blink she was in chains, the metal cuffs heavy on her delicate wrists. The prince somehow managed to look excited and furious at the same time, a feat that she was mildly impressed with. Iroh had returned, but unlike his nephew he was regarding her thoughtfully. There were two soldiers in the room now as well, standing guard near the door as if Emi was liable to burst out and escape at any moment. Honestly, that was the last thing on her mind. Not out of desire to stay, but more for the fact that she wouldn’t get very far even if she did try.

“So, an Airbender,” Zuko remarked, his golden eyes glinting maliciously. “What was an Airbender doing in Fire Nation territory to begin with?”

“I grew up in the Fire Nation,” Emi answered evenly. “Obviously,” she added under her breath.

The prince snarled. “All the Airbenders are supposed to be extinct! The Avatar was supposed to be the last! How is it that you are an Airbender?!” he demanded.

“Well, I’d have to assume someone from my family must have been an Airbender,” Emi remarked, shifting in her seat on her bed. “But I never knew my parents.”

“Why not?” Zuko seemed angry at that very fact, something Emi took personally.

“Because, they either died when I was a baby or abandoned me!” she spat. “Either way, I never knew them. I was raised by an herbalist.”

“And she knew you were an Airbender?”

“Of course she did.”

“Where is she? What’s her name?” It seemed the prince had no end of questions he demanded answers to.

“She’s dead,” Emi replied shortly. “She died about three months ago. That’s why I was traveling to the Earth Kingdom; she kept me out of sight for most of my life, but I’ve always wanted to explore the world. Once she passed away I… I saw no reason to linger anymore.” She shrugged, her eyes stinging with old tears. Emi missed her mentor terribly, and it hurt her to talk about her in such a careless way. Of course, the prince didn’t care.

“So, we have an Airbender aboard the ship,” Iroh finally spoke up, stroking his beard thoughtfully. “What do you plan to do about that, Prince Zuko?”
Zuko gazed at Emi, making her feel very uncomfortable. She cast her eyes anywhere else besides where he stood as she waited for his answer.

“The Avatar believes he is the last Airbender,” Zuko finally said. “Imagine what he would do if he discovered that wasn’t true. Next time we get close to the Avatar, we’ll use her as bait. In the meantime…” His eyes caught hers, and he smiled cruelly. “You will train with me so I will know how to fight an Airbender and defeat them.”

“Um, that might be a problem-” Emi tried to explain, but the prince was not listening to her as he instructed his men to lock the door and keep her inside. Then they all filed out of the room, and after the clinking of the metal door as it closed she heard the sound of a lock sliding into place.

“Great,” Emi muttered to herself, looking bitterly at her shackles. She heaved a sigh and leaned back upon her bed; at least it was comfy.

For the next few hours, Emi entertained herself by creating air balls and zooming them around the room. She practiced her aim by trying to hit certain areas on the wall or the ceiling where the metal was either worn down or a screw was coming loose.

She had just turned her sights to hitting the door when a clanking from the other side indicated someone was unlocking her room-turned-cell. Emi sat up as a soldier enter the room with Iroh following close behind.

Without a word the soldier took her hands and unlocked the oppressive cuffs. Emi rubbed her raw skin gratefully, looking toward the older man cautiously. He had given off the feeling of being kind and genuine, but at the same time she couldn’t help but feel suspicious of everyone on the ship at that moment.

“Do you like tea?” Iroh asked, seemingly out of the blue.

“Um…” Emi tried to discern if this was somehow a trick, but the man’s face showed nothing but open curiosity. “Yes. I do.”

“Let me guess. I take you for an oolong tea drinker, yes?” Iroh remarked with a glint in his eyes.

Emi smiled. “How’d you know?”

“When you have been drinking tea for as long as I have, you learn to spot others’ preferences,” he replied, smiling. “Would you like to have tea with me?”

“Am I allowed to?” Emi asked, peering around the rather rotund man to see if the prince was
lurking anywhere nearby.

Iroh chuckled. “Do not worry about my nephew. He has a temper, but he is a good man. Deep down.”

“Must be really deep down, then,” Emi muttered standing up and stretching. Iroh laughed, the sound causing her to smile. She was beginning to enjoy this man’s company more and more. He was surprisingly a lot like Haruka with his humor, making her feel all the better about her new situation.

She followed Iroh up a few flights of stairs, coming to the bridge where some men stood around a table with a map and one was at the wheel, steering the ship through the choppy waters. Emi looked around, her eyes falling on another table where, laid out on top, there was something that looked like a board game.

“Is that Pai Sho? You guys play?” Emi asked excitedly. Iroh turned to her with a similar gleam of happiness.

“Oh, you know the game?”

“Yes! My mentor and I would play it all the time,” Emi said, looking happily at the board.

“Then let us drink tea and play a round!” Iroh declared. Within moments, they were seated upon cushions on either side of the table, tea cups in hand as they both pondered the game pieces before them and tried to figure out what moves to make.

They eventually gathered a small crowd of men watching their game in interest, and they even placed bets on who would win. Emi thought it was fairly funny, especially since she knew halfway through the game that Iroh would win. They both knew it. But they continued to play until the final tile was placed and the older man was declared the victor.

“Uncle!” Iroh and Emi turned to see Zuko marching toward them with his ever present scowl. “What is the prisoner doing out of her cell?” he demanded.

“Nephew, I did tell you it would beneficial to you and your mission if our guest was treated with respect,” Iroh replied easily.

“A prisoner does not deserve respect! Least of all an Airbender!” Zuko spat hatefully, making Emi cringe slightly. She was sitting right there, after all.

“Prince Zuko, the surest way for you to succeed is to show kindness and mercy. Besides,” Iroh lit up, “she makes an excellent opponent for Pai Sho!”
Zuko groaned, releasing a puff of smoke from his nostrils. “Whatever. We’re going to train. Now.” He directed this at Emi, glaring down at her.

“Um…okay… But I really should tell you-”

“Now!” With that the prince spun on his heel and stalked out of the room.

“I’m not a good Airbender,” Emi finished dully.

“Do not worry, my dear. You will do fine,” Iroh said bracingly with a smile. Emi managed a smile of her own, though it looked more like a grimace, before she stood up and trailed after the young prince. She found him out on the deck, having shed his armor and was now clad in only his trousers.

She stumbled a little on her way out into the open, forcing her eyes away from the strong muscle of his pale chest. Emi decided it was thoroughly unfair that such a mean-spirited young man should be allowed to look so handsome. She heaved sighed and turned to face the prince, managing to mask her previous embarrassment and look almost fierce. Almost.

Zuko breathed in, shifting into a beginning stance. Around them, the men scurried out of the way, but lingered along the sidelines to watch the events unfold. Emi really wished they wouldn’t; she was nervous enough as it was. She had never actually fought anyone before. She had no idea what to expect. Was she standing the right way? Would she be fast enough to dodge? Would she be strong enough to attack? Was she supposed to strike first or was he? Was there even a protocol for that sort of thing?

She really should be paying attention.

With a shriek, Emi managed to jump into the air in time, the stream of fire burning viciously below her. With another kick, she rocketed herself to the other side of the ship, landing gracefully upon the rail. She only had a moment to catch her breath before Zuko shot several fireballs at her, punching the flames out in quick succession. Emi kept up her dodging tactics, staying in the air more often than not. That didn’t deter the prince. He kept up his barrage of attacks, moving in an almost fluid grace that was deadly at the same time. If she hadn’t been the target, Emi could have admired his skill.

Just as she hit the deck again, Emi finally lashed out, creating a wave of air flying wildly toward the vicinity of the prince. Her attack hit several of the onlookers as well as Zuko, knocking them onto their backs in a heap. Emi looked over cautiously, poised on the tips of her toes to be ready to fly away at a moment’s notice.

Zuko was the first to get back up, quickly shaking off the unexpected attack. He swiftly strode over to Emi, and she couldn’t help backing up a few steps as he did so.
“What the hell was that?!” he demanded.

“Um…what do you mean?” Emi asked hesitantly.

Zuko scoffed. “All you did was dodge the whole time! What kind of Airbender are you?!”

Emi grit her jaw, bringing her irritation to the forefront to steel her spine. “I tried to tell you, but you wouldn’t listen! I’ve never fought anyone before! I haven’t even been trained properly!”

“Then learn. And fast. I need all the tools I can get to take down the Avatar. I will not have you screwing that up!” With that, Zuko stormed off, disappearing below deck.

Not long afterward, Emi was escorted back to her room and locked in again. She was assured she would be some given food from supper later, but she couldn’t care less about that. All she wanted was to collapse on her bed and sleep. At least in her sleep, Emi could forget where she was and what she was doing.

Even though she knew reality would be waiting for her on the other side when she woke up.
The next few days became a dull routine for Emi. Even when she lived with Haruka, they never really had such a strict plan for the day; they just did whatever they wanted. But now, she was awoken for breakfast at the same time every day. She would then be allowed out of her room for a short while to spend time with Iroh (which was easily her favorite part of the day.) They would drink tea and chat, or play more Pai Sho. Haruka had been a worthy opponent for Emi, but Iroh was clearly in a league all his own. Still, she relished the challenge and vowed to one day beat the man at his game.

She only wished she could say things were going as well with the prince.

After lunch, without fail, Zuko would drag Emi out onto the deck and promptly start shooting fire at her. Time and time again, she would dodge the attacks, staying up in the air as much as she could. Sometimes she would try and fight back, but either she wasn’t fast enough or her aim would be shoddy. And every time, Zuko would narrow his eyes and increase the power of his attacks, forcing Emi to run for her life.

Then came a brighter day. The day Iroh convinced his nephew to let Emi have more freedom upon the ship.

She had no idea how the man managed to make Zuko change his mind, and she honestly didn’t care. It was invigorating to be able to go where she pleased without the constant presence of guards or the angry prince. Her favorite thing to do (other than play Pai Sho with Iroh) was to sit on the rail of the ship and watch the sea pass them by. And sometimes while she watched the sea, Emi was also treated with a view of Zuko training with some of the other Firebenders.

Before she knew it, a week had come and gone. Emi was sitting out on the rail once again, enjoying the peaceful scenery when the ship suddenly gave a lurch. Emi let out a strangled yelp, clutching onto the rail as the ship changed its course. From the corner of her eye, Zuko and his sparring partner also stumbled from the jarring motion, falling against the side of the deck. With a growl, the prince stalked off toward the bridge, presumably to figure out why the ship was suddenly sailing in another direction. A few minutes later, Zuko came storming back out, looking furious.

“So…why’d we change course?” Emi asked hesitantly.

“Apparently a stupid lotus tile is more important than tracking the Avatar,” Zuko spat.

“Oh! That’s awful…”
“What?” He spun around to glare at her.

“Well…I-I just mean…I was planning on playing Pai Sho with your uncle later. But…you know, now I…can’t…” Emi trailed off, fiddling with her hair nervously. Luckily, Zuko merely grumbled and stalked away, leaving her unscathed.

A short while later, they docked at a busy port. Emi looked around at the bustling activity with wide eyes, desperately wanting to explore the area. She was finally in Earth Kingdom territory, and she was absolutely itching to experience the market for herself.

However, the prince had other ideas.

“Okay, fine, I get that I can’t go with you guys. But are the shackles really necessary?” Emi asked, pouting as the heavy metal was clamped once again to her wrists.

“Yes,” Zuko replied shortly, not looking back as he left the ship with several other crew members and soldiers.

“We will be back soon, my dear,” Iroh said bracingly. “And then we will have a rousing game of Pai Sho!”

Emi smiled weakly as she watched them disappear into the crowds, left behind with the remaining crew who also looked a little put out that they couldn't leave the ship. She heaved a sigh and sat upon the rail, figuring she may as well drink in the sights from where she was.

It was a very busy port, with many people roaming around carrying various packages and items. There were all sorts of ships as well, of varying shapes and sizes, and Emi gazed at them with fascination. She wondered where they had come from, what villages and towns they had been to. It didn’t take much for her imagination to run away with her, whisking her across the world to the many wondrous sights that Haruka had often told her about.

Some time later, she spotted the prince and the others heading back to the ship with significantly more than what they had left with. Emi sat up straighter, her eyes wide at the sight of so many packages. The crew members filed on board, promptly taking the items below deck. Zuko and his uncle followed shortly after, along with several new men who looked haggard and careworn, all wearing toothy grins that Emi did not trust.

“Any luck with the tile?” she asked Iroh.

“I am afraid not,” he sighed. Then he brightened. “But I did get plenty of other treasures at a great bargain!”
“More like a bunch of useless junk,” his nephew snapped. “Now, which way did you say the Avatar went?” Zuko returned his attention to the burly man in front of him. His lizard bird leered at Emi from its place on the man’s shoulder, making her cringe inwardly. The man grinned and pointed down the harbor toward a river a short distance away.

Zuko smiled menacingly. “Ready the boat!” he ordered his soldiers. As the men hurried to do as they were told, he turned his attention to Emi. “Let’s see what the Avatar makes of you,” he said with a hard glint in his eyes.

Before she knew it, Emi was standing upon the smaller boat with a select group of soldiers and crew members, the prince, his uncle, and some of the strange men that turned out to be pirates, while the rest were trailing along behind them with their own ship.

She stood as far from that group as she could, feeling her skin crawl at the lingering looks they would give her. Instead, she focused on what the plan was for getting the Avatar. She wasn’t entirely sure where she would come into play, as Zuko hadn’t thought to fill her in on that. But she hardly expected him to, given how he had been treating her this whole time.

Despite the circumstances, Emi couldn’t deny feeling a little excited to meet the Avatar. Another Airbender, after so many years believing she was the only one. She wondered if that was how he felt, too. Feeling alone in the wide open world, with no one else who understood what it was like to be the last living icon of an entire culture. But she knew. She knew all too well.

“Shouldn’t we stop to search the woods?” the pirate captain asked Zuko after about an hour of silence.

“We don’t need to stop,” Zuko replied. “They stole a Waterbending scroll, right?” The older man nodded. “Then they’ll be on the water.”

The evening wore on as they sailed sluggishly down the river, and soon it was nighttime. Emi kept shifting from one foot to the other, bored out of her mind. Whenever she tried to move around, her guards would haul her back into place and she would heave a sigh. The other men were silent and still, their eyes glued to the riverbanks on either side of the boat.

Suddenly, noises drifted toward them. Emi stopped her shuffling, her head tilted to the side; it sounded like a girl, cursing and splashing around in the water. With a glance to one another, Zuko and the pirate captain pulled up to the riverbank, calling their men with them and they all left to go after the noises. Emi stood with her guards, waiting with bated breath.

It didn’t take long for the group to reappear, this time with a struggling girl. Zuko promptly tied her to a tree and stood back, appraising his work. She looked close to Emi’s age, with a long, dark brown braid. Her blue eyes were glaring at Zuko with hate, and he returned the look tenfold.

Emi couldn’t hear all that was said, but she knew that Zuko was questioning the girl for the
whereabouts of the Avatar. When she didn’t comply, he dangled something that looked like a necklace in front of her face, trying to coerce an answer from her. When that didn’t work, he began speaking again, this time gesturing toward the boat where Emi was. From the angle she was tied, the girl he was questioning couldn’t exactly see her, but the Airbender could tell she looked skeptical.

The pirates became impatient with this little back and forth, but after Zuko threatened to burn their precious scroll, they stomped away into the woods to look for the girl’s companions. It took some time for them to return, and the sky was lightening by the time they did. They were dragging with them two boys. One looked similar to the girl in their attire, and the other was bald with arrow tattoos. Emi knew without a doubt that this was the Avatar. The other Airbender.

*Why does he have tattoos? Why is he bald? Did all Airbenders dress that way?* The questions kept forming in Emi’s mind, and she unconsciously took a step forward only to be dragged back by her guards. She grimaced, but kept her eyes glued to the bald boy, barely noticing anything else that was going on. It was in that moment that she knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that she needed to join the Avatar’s group and be done with the angry prince. She had done everything she could to try and help him, if only to keep him from constantly attacking her, but nothing made him happy. And if that was the case then there was no further purpose for her to be around him anymore.

There was, of course, the problem of her being a prisoner. But, maybe she could escape. Maybe-

Suddenly shouts rose up from the river bank. Emi’s eyes refocused in time to see the pirates throw down something that created a large cloud of smoke. The Fire Nation soldiers were soon dragged into the fray, and all she could hear were the sounds of their clashing swords and violent yells. A movement to her right indicated the girl had gotten free of her bonds, thanks to a strange flying creature. She took off down the bank toward the pirate ship and began her attempts to push it into the river. Before long, the two boys broke free of the commotion and ran over to join her. They reached the girl and, after a hurried conversation, the Avatar and the girl began a series of movements that, as Emi watched wide-eyed, dragged the water onto the shore and lifted the pirate ship back out onto the river. The trio jumped aboard and promptly began sailing away.

*No!* Emi despaired. She hardly had time to mourn, though, because just then the pirates invaded the prince’s boat, tossing the remaining guards overboard and setting sail after the Avatar and his friends. It would have been perfect if some of the men hadn’t tried to make a grab for her as well.

Emi shrieked, elbowing the offenders sharply in their ribs and running along the deck. Some of the other pirates tried to catch her, but she managed to avoid their grasp by jumping up in a burst of air. Her trajectory was off, however, for instead of landing on the rail as she had intended, she overshot it and landed with a heavy splash into the increasing current of the river.

Emi held her breath, kicking her legs out and trying to move her arms. But the metal shackles were heavy and weighing her down. She managed to break the surface of the water briefly to heave in a fresh gulp of air before being dragged back down into the depths, the flow of the river becoming swifter by the moment. Emi hit the bottom and tried to kick back up toward the surface, but her wrists were suddenly snagged. Emi looked down in horror to see her shackles had caught on some
of the rocks that littered the riverbed.

She tried not to panic. Tried to calmly and carefully wedge the chain back out, but she couldn’t do it. Her lungs were starved for air, and despite her attempts not to do so, she opened her mouth reflexively and gulped in large amounts of the river water.

Emi felt like her entire chest was being squeezed with a vise grip. Her vision was growing spotty, and she was starting to become horribly dizzy. *I’m really going to die…* That single, clear thought rose up in her dimming mind, calm as anything. Emi tried valiantly to keep fighting, but her limbs were no longer under her control. Darkness was engulfing her vision, and she could feel herself fading fast.

In her last moments of awareness, she vaguely felt an arm wrap around her torso, the other yanking at her chain until the rocks gave way. For a moment, Emi felt like she was flying. An odd sensation for one in the water.

Then, cool air upon her face.

The rushing river loud in her ears.

Soft sand beneath her body.

Warm lips upon her own-

*Wait, what?*

Emi promptly turned over onto her side, coughing up the water from her lungs violently. Dimly, she heard someone else coughing next to her. She felt absolutely bruised inside and out. Her muscles kept shaking with the effort to keep herself somewhat upright, so she relented and fell down upon her back, her eyes closed against the unusually bright sun.

“What the…*hell*…were you thinking?” a voice demanded from her right, sounding almost as exhausted as she felt, but far angrier. That could only be one person.

“What the…?” Emi wheezed, turning her head to look at the sopping wet prince, glaring down at her from where he sat.

“Who else would it be?” he retorted, wiping his face.

“But…why-?”
Both teens looked up to see Iroh running toward them, looking very relieved. Emi sat up with some difficulty, her lungs still aching with every breath she took.

As he reached where the soaked pair sat, Iroh began snickering. “Prince Zuko. You’re really going to get a kick out of this,” he chuckled some more. “The lotus tile was in my sleeve the whole time!”

Both Emi and Zuko snapped their heads up at that, looking incredulously at the older man who was holding out the “lost” tile triumphantly. With a growl, the prince leapt to his feet, yanking the tile out of his beaming uncle’s hand and throwing it as hard as he could into the river. If Emi had had the breath for it, she would have laughed.

---

“Wait, what did Zuko say?” Aang asked, raising an eyebrow.

“He was talking about how he had another Airbender on his ship. And that if you wanted to make sure nothing bad happened to them, then you would turn yourself in,” Katara explained, shaking her head.

“Well that says it all then; he’s officially gone crazy,” Sokka remarked.

“Still…doesn’t it seem a little too incredible?” Katara mused. “I mean, it sounds so fake that he should know it wouldn’t work on us. But, still-”

“It is fake, Katara,” Sokka interrupted with a roll of his eyes. “He’s just spewing nonsense because he can’t think of a better way to get to us.”

“Sokka’s right, Katara,” Aang added, his face grim but determined. “Zuko is just trying to get to me by attacking what he thinks matters most to me. But it won’t work; I am the last Airbender, and nothing will change that.”

Katara sighed. “I know, Aang. It’s just…I wish you didn’t have to be.”

Aang sighed as well, staring determinedly ahead to where they were flying. “Me, too,” he murmured.

For the remainder of their flight, the three friends were silent, all of them lost in their own thoughts.
A few days after their misadventure, things seemed more or less normal on the prince’s ship. Well...as normal as things on the prince’s ship could be. Except for one key difference; Zuko was ignoring Emi.

Not that she was desperate for the attention, but she had wanted to thank the prince for saving her life. He could have easily let her drown and be done with her, but he hadn’t. And while she knew he had only saved her because she was still bait for the Avatar, she found the act oddly...nice. For, Zuko, at least.

Not to mention the fact that she couldn’t steer her mind away from the feel of his lips against hers. It had been purely for the sake of saving her life. Emi knew this perfectly well. But being sheltered her whole life and more or less avoiding long term interactions as she traveled across the Fire Nation (for her own safety more than anything), Emi had virtually no experience when it came to romance. Not that Zuko was romantic in any way. He hated her, of course. But her traitorous mind continued to replay the moment their lips pressed together. And the soft, almost spicy taste of his breath filling her up-

Emi shook her head briskly, scowling lightly. She shouldn’t want these thoughts in her head. She should be trying to find some way to escape the angry prince’s clutches and join the Avatar’s group next time they met. She really needed to find something to distract her mind or else she would go insane.

But with Iroh taking a nap, Emi didn’t have a worthy opponent to play Pai Sho with. By now, the crew had accepted her presence and enjoyed her company, though she was not so sheltered that she didn’t know why that was. But they were gentlemanly enough, which she was both surprised at and grateful for. Still, she was able to beat all of the crew members at Pai Sho every time she played with them, so where was the fun in that?

*Maybe the sea breeze will do me some good.* Emi thought to herself. With that plan in mind, she ventured up to the deck from her room, breathing in the tangy salt air. She immediately went to her favorite perch and hopped up, kicking her legs against the side of the ship and watching the waves crash by.

Below deck, brooding in his room, Zuko lay upon his bed and scowled at the ceiling. Every time he thought he had the Avatar in his grasp, he managed to slip away. *Rotten Airbender,* he thought viciously to himself. Unwillingly, the image of the fair-haired captive swam up in his memory before he stamped it back down. If she hadn’t tried to escape the pirates, he wouldn’t even be having these...thoughts. But no, she had to go and almost drown, leaving him no other option but to save her life and- *No!* Zuko screwed his eyes shut, refusing to relive that moment. It was purely for the sake of saving her, nothing more. She was just a filthy Airbender; a peasant. Nothing more
than a pawn in his game, a way to get the Avatar to come without a fight.

Still…he didn’t have to save her. He could have just let her drown. She wasn’t much use to him anyway, come to think of it. Aside from being bait, she was a lousy target and a pathetic excuse for an Airbender. He loathed the Avatar and even he had to admit the boy was far more skilled than she was.

But even so, Zuko could see she moved with grace, almost always seeming to float along the ground wherever she went. He wondered if it was an Airbender thing. He couldn’t recall seeing the Avatar move in such a way. *That’s because you only pay attention to her…* a small voice inside him piped up.

This was getting him nowhere. With a snarl, Zuko sat up and stalked over to the door of his room. Maybe some sea air would clear his head. He needed a new plan of attack to get to the Avatar, and being cooped up in the dim interior of the ship was not helping him. Or so he told himself.

Once he was out on the deck, Zuko breathed in the salty air, allowing the sharp tang to relax him marginally. Until his eyes fell upon a certain Airbender sitting at her usual place on the railing. *Perfect…* he thought bitterly to himself.

Emi turned when she heard someone else come onto the deck, and her breath caught in her throat at the sight of the scowling prince. He stalked over to the other side of the ship and stood there, apparently glaring down into the ocean water.

This was her chance, she realized. She could give her thanks and then be on her way, and her conscious would finally be clear. But Emi hesitated, trying to gather her courage to approach such a bitter and angry man. *Just say “thank you” and let that be it. That’s all you have to do,* Emi thought to herself, attempting to rally her limbs into action. Heaving a sigh, she got down from the rail and approached Zuko.

“Um…excuse me? Your Highness?”

“What?” he snapped, not looking at her.

“I, uh…I just wanted to thank you…you know…for saving my life…a-and all that…” Emi fidgeted with her tunic nervously as she spoke. Zuko scoffed, turning toward her with his eyes narrowed.

“Is that all?” he asked impatiently.

Emi frowned, momentarily caught off guard by the question. “Well…I-I suppose…I’d also like to ask…why did you save me?” She looked him the eye this time, genuinely curious. Though she did have a good idea, she wanted to hear it from him.
“Well, I couldn’t lose you,” Zuko replied.

“What?” Emi was certain she had misheard him. After a few moments of awkward staring, Zuko seemed to finally register what he had said and quickly backtracked.

“Well…what I mean is, you’re the bait after all. I couldn’t afford to lose you, otherwise I’d lose my best chance at capturing the Avatar.” He was glaring off to the side, a slight flush in his pale skin. Another awkward silence fell between the two teens.

“Well…a-anyway…thank you,” Emi said again, moving to leave the deck. Zuko watched her disappear from view, gritting his jaw against his own thoughts. The Airbender had distracted him once again, and all just to thank him. It was absurd. Ridiculous. And oddly nice. Zuko rolled his eyes at that thought, moving his gaze back to the sea and forcing his mind to ponder where the Avatar might be now.

- - -

Later that night happened to be music night upon the ship. Emi had already been privy to such an event before, and she found it amusing to see the men dance together and play silly tunes. The crew and the soldiers put up such a stern and tough front most of the time, but when music night came around they all shed those facades to let loose and have fun. The first time Emi witnessed their camaraderie she had been stunned into silence before she burst out laughing, clapping her hands along with the rhythm of the songs they played.

Tonight, Iroh was breaking in his new sunghi horn that he had gotten from the port with the pirates. Emi loved the low, melodious notes that emanated from the instrument. She sat upon her usual spot on the railing and watched, laughing and swaying from time to time as she played audience to a number of songs and dances.

After a few hours, Emi decided it was high time to get some sleep, though it was clear that the rest of the crew would be up well into the night. She excused herself to go below deck, yawning widely as she did so. She was rubbing her tired eyes as she walked along the corridor when she ran into something warm and solid. Emi stumbled back only to be grabbed by her arms. She looked up and saw the scowling facade of Zuko standing before her.

“Watch where you’re going,” he snapped, pulling Emi back into a standing position. She flushed slightly, her embarrassment clear.

“Um, s-sorry. I was rubbing my eyes,” she explained.

“Obviously.”

Emi fiddled with her hair as the two stood there for lengthening moments. “So…were you heading up to the deck?”
“What does it matter to you where I go?” Zuko demanded.

“It doesn’t. I was just curious,” Emi quickly said. “You don’t seem to usually attend music night-”

“It’s a waste of time,” he cut over her, crossing his arms haughtily.

“Well…maybe. But it’s fun,” Emi reasoned.

Zuko scoffed. “I don’t have time for fun. I need to focus on capturing the Avatar.”

“Ah.” Emi pondered that for a moment. “What are you going to do when you capture him?”

“Bring him to my father and restore my honor,” Zuko replied, looking off at the far wall.

“How’d you lose your honor?” Emi asked, now genuinely curious about the prince.

“Why do you keep asking questions?” he snapped, narrowing his golden eyes at her.

“Why does anyone ask questions? To learn,” Emi retorted, frowning.

“Then learn this: there’s nothing you need to know about me,” Zuko hissed with barely veiled irritation. “Now go away.”

Emi heaved a sigh. “Fine.” She moved to the side and continued down the hallway, disappearing into her room. Zuko, however, stood in the corridor for a little while longer, his mind turning in unpleasant ways.
Troubled Waters

There was a storm coming. Emi could feel the air crackling with the intensity of it. She wondered idly if it was an Airbender trait, or just something she picked up from her years living with Haruka, who had always had a sixth sense for these things.

At least she wasn't the only one to sense it. Iroh kept looking up at the clear blue sky throughout the day, his brow furrowed in concern.

“There is a storm coming,” he said as he stood on the deck. “A big one.”

Zuko scoffed. “You’re out of your mind, uncle. The weather’s perfect; there’s not a cloud in sight!”

Emi looked up at the sky again, but despite the calm (or rather because of it) she couldn’t shake the feeling that Iroh was right.

“A storm is approaching from the north,” Iroh continued. “I suggest we alter our course and head southwest.”

“We know the Avatar is traveling northward. So we will do the same,” Zuko replied firmly.

“Prince Zuko, consider the safety of the crew.”

“The safety of the crew doesn’t matter!” Zuko snapped. Emi winced, looking over at the lieutenant who was appraising the younger man with annoyance. “Finding the Avatar is far more important than any individual’s safety,” he hissed, glaring over at the older man. He then stormed off the deck, slamming the door shut behind him.

“He doesn’t mean that,” Iroh quickly said, trying to soothe over the tension. “He’s just all worked up.”

“Yeah. We’ll see about that,” the lieutenant remarked sourly, moving away toward the bridge.

Emi hopped down from her rail and went to stand with Iroh. He looked up as she approached and smiled lightly. “You can feel it, too,” he stated. Emi nodded.
“The air feels…heavy. And…alive,” she said, wrinkling her nose as she peered up at the sky once more. “Do you suppose all the Airbenders could sense changes in the atmosphere?”

“I’m afraid I have no idea, my dear,” Iroh replied “But I do think that you have a special talent that you should use to your advantage.”

For the next few hours the crew worked as usual and the sky remained clear. But Emi was on edge, pacing from the deck down to her room and back again, always looking up when she was outside. The heavy feeling became stronger, and she knew they were fast approaching the front of the storm. Zuko was also pacing, but his was for another reason altogether. He kept glancing up at the sky, searching for the white speck that was the Avatar’s bison.

When her mind wasn’t occupied with the approaching storm, Emi found herself pondering upon the Avatar and his friends. She knew from the snatches of conversation she had overheard during her stay upon the ship that they were heading north to find a Waterbending master. Emi entertained herself most nights by imagining what it would be like to be a part of their group, friends on an adventure to help the Avatar master the elements. Not to mention she’d be able to be trained by a master Airbender. The very thought warmed her; she had all sorts of questions that she imagined herself asking the Avatar about the Airbender culture and way of life. Emi wanted to learn everything about her heritage.

But, for the time being, she was stuck with the Fire Nation prince as his prisoner who treated her like dirt more often than not.

Before long, dark, angry looking clouds appeared on the horizon. Emi shivered as a strong wind blew towards them, carrying a current of crackling energy; this was going to be a rough journey.

Zuko, Iroh, and some of the other crew members were standing around on the deck at that moment, also eyeing the approaching storm apprehensively.

“Well, looks like your uncle was right about the storm after all,” the lieutenant remarked to the young prince, frowning.

“Lucky guess,” Iroh said with a shrug.

“Lieutenant! You’d better learn some respect,” Zuko warned, approaching the older man with a fierce look. “Or I will teach it to you.”

The man scoffed as the prince turned away again. “What do you know about respect?” he retorted. Iroh and Emi stood together behind them, looking on with growing apprehension. “The way you talk to everyone around here, from your hardworking crew to your esteemed uncle, and even the Airbender girl, shows you know nothing about respect! You don’t care about anyone but yourself! Then again, what should I expect from a spoiled prince?”
Emi and Iroh glanced at one another, their faces mirroring dread. Zuko said nothing for a moment, his back tense. Then, he suddenly whirled around, shifting into an attack stance. The lieutenant matched the young prince’s movements, looking determined.

“Easy now,” Iroh spoke up as the men stalked toward one another, their arms coming together with heated smoke. “Enough!” Iroh swiftly broke them apart, looking from one to the other with a stern gaze. “We are all a bit tired from being at sea so long. I’m sure after a bowl of noodles, everyone will feel much better.”

For a moment the two men glared at one another. Then, the lieutenant turned and stalked away. Zuko scoffed and turned his back as well.

“I don’t need your help keeping order on my ship!” he snapped at his uncle, shoving himself away when Iroh tried to lay a consoling hand on his shoulder.

Not long after the near confrontation between the prince and the lieutenant, the ship entered the cloud cover and rain began to fall. Most of the men trooped down into the galley to share some food and drink as they waited out the storm, leaving a skeleton crew to keep first watch.

Emi sat in her room, not feeling much like socializing with the others at the moment. She listened to the steady thumping of the rain against the metal hull of the ship, creating an odd sound that was somehow soothing.

She heaved a sigh and got herself comfortable on her bed, deciding that some meditation might help focus her mind elsewhere. When she had lived with Haruka, the older woman had always stressed the importance of the calming exercise, encouraging her to practice daily.

“When the mind is at ease, the body follows,” her mentor had said to her many times. Emi smiled at the memory before letting her face fall into a frown. She hadn’t meditated in months, being too occupied with traveling across the Fire Nation and now being held captive upon the banished prince’s ship.

She adjusted her position and took in a deep breath, releasing the air slowly. Emi did this again. And again. And again. Letting her mind empty and become relaxed. An odd sensation then began to creep along her spine, like a sharp, crackling energy. Emi frowned slightly, but continued with her steady breathing.

Until…CRACK!

Emi’s eyes flew open, throwing her hands out to catch herself before she fell off the bed as the ship lurched suddenly. Without wasting another moment, she bolted for her door, yanking it open. Down the hall to her right, another door flew open and Zuko came running out, heading toward the deck. Emi followed close behind, both terrified and confused by the commotion that had erupted.
Upon the ship.

Once they arrived out on the deck they nearly fell over, slipping on the large amount of water spilling over the railings from the sea. The ship was being tossed about in the waves, lurching back and forth, side to side. Emi made her way over to the nearest rail and hung on for dear life.

“Where were we hit?!” Zuko shouted above the roaring of the storm.

“I don’t know!” the lieutenant called back, looking around desperately.

A movement above them caught Emi’s eyes, and she let out a shriek of fear. Both men looked to where her gaze was trained, seeing the poor helmsman dangling from his perch helplessly, unable to get a solid footing with the ship being tossed around the sea.

Without a second thought, Zuko and the lieutenant ran toward the ladder, climbing swiftly as the rain poured down all around them. Lightning crackled in the sky, flaring with deadly intent. One bolt suddenly came streaking toward the ship. Iroh held out his hand, and if Emi wasn’t mistaken she could have sworn the man had actually caught the jolt. The electricity traveled through his body, and Iroh directed the lightning into the sea without further harm to the ship.

Just then, the helmsman lost his grip and started to plummet toward the deck. Emi tried to shut her eyes against the sight, not wanting to see a man die, but she could not tear her gaze away. Luckily, the man was grabbed before he fell too far by the prince, who lowered him toward the lieutenant. Together, they eased down the ladder and righted the helmsman on his feet, very much alive.

Before any of them had a moment to breathe easy, a large white shape barreled through the air by the ship. Emi’s eyes grew wide as saucers as she saw the Avatar seated upon what must have been his bison. Zuko moved toward the retreating figures reflexively, and she could see he desperately wanted to follow them.

“What do you want to do, sir?” the lieutenant asked.

Zuko stared off in the direction the Avatar had disappeared to. “Let them go. We need to get this ship to safety.”

“Then we must head directly into the eye of the storm,” Iroh said, smiling at his nephew.

The storm got worse before it got better. Emi had never felt seasick before, but as the waters finally settled and they arrived at the eerily calm center of the storm, she felt like she could puke at any moment. Never again would she wish to sail during such an event.

“Uncle.” Emi turned to see the prince standing nearby, staring off into the distant storm clouds.
“I’m sorry.”

“Your apology is accepted,” Iroh replied, laying a hand upon his shoulder before turning away.

Just then, a glowing blue orb shot out of the sea nearby, melting away to reveal the bison once again. Zuko stared after the retreating figures of the Avatar and his friends, and Emi could see the boy looking back at the ship briefly before maneuvering his bison up over the storm clouds.

“Wow,” Emi remarked aloud, a smile gracing her weary face. “I have got to get me one of those!”

Zuko snapped his eyes to her, and for a moment it looked like he would yell, or say something sarcastic. Instead, he opted to simply shake his head and turn away. To Emi, it seemed like progress.

Chapter End Notes

I've been thinking about changing my update day, going from just Mondays to Mondays and Fridays (one chapter each day). Would that agreeable with people? Any thoughts? Yay? Nay? Neutral disinterest?
“We haven’t been able to pick up the Avatar’s trail since the storm,” the lieutenant was saying to the prince as they pored over the map in the bridge. “But if we continue to head northeast-”

They didn’t get a chance to hear what they would be able to do, for at that moment another ship pulled alongside the prince’s, quite a bit bigger in Emi’s opinion.

“What do they want?” Zuko demanded, glaring out the window at the new ship.

Who’s “they”? Emi wondered, her gaze returning to the Pai Sho board in front of her.

“Perhaps a sporting game of Pai Sho,” Iroh remarked, moving a piece forward. Emi looked up and saw the older man winking at her, which made her chuckle. Zuko scowled at the sound and waited for whoever “they” were.

It turned out, “they” were men working for someone called Admiral Zhao.

“The hunt for the Avatar has been given prime importance,” one of the men said in a crisp, business-like tone. “All information regarding the Avatar must be reported directly to Admiral Zhao.”

“Zhao has been promoted?” Iroh remarked, pondering the game before him. “Well, good for him!” He placed his winning tile and grinned triumphantly at Emi, who pouted and crossed her arms grumpily.

“I’ve got nothing to report to Zhao,” Zuko said shortly. “Now, get off my ship and let us pass.”

“Admiral Zhao is not letting ships in or out of this area,” the man replied tonelessly.

“Off. My. Ship!” Zuko snapped, causing the strange soldiers to retreat away from his anger.

“You are a worthy opponent, Emi,” Iroh said once the men had left. “You are improving everyday!”

“Oh really?” Emi remarked, raising an eyebrow. “Then why do I keep losing to you?”

“I have many years of practice. When you are my age, maybe then you’ll win a match against me,”
Iroh replied with a grin.

Zuko stalked over to them at that moment, scowling. “Enough of your stupid games! Come on, we’re training.”

Emi blinked up at the prince in confusion. “Really?” They hadn’t trained since the prince had saved her from drowning. She had wanted to ask him about it, but had decided it was best to just lay low and wait him out. Now, however, she was wishing he would have ignored her for a little while longer; he looked ready to blow something up, and she would be the closest target.

“Yes, really. Now let’s go!” Zuko turned and stalked away out of the room. Emi heaved a sigh and smiled halfheartedly at Iroh as she followed meekly behind.

Out on the deck, the prince had already done away with his armor, but he did keep his tunic on, which Emi was mildly disappointed about. She shook her head a moment later, exasperated; she needed her wits about her today. Zuko was angry and itching for something, or someone to attack. *And therein lies my usefulness to the prince,* she thought bitterly to herself as she took up her beginning stance.

As soon as she had settled her weight Zuko immediately struck, firing one fast, brutal shot after another. Emi leapt into the air and fought to stay up as he continued his manic assault. She tried to use her Airbending to deflect some of the fireballs, but the power behind them easily tore through her defenses and she would have to fly away just to avoid being hit.

“Um…Prince Zuko!” Emi tried to call out to him in between fleeing for her life. She could tell he wasn’t even training at this point, he was just blatantly attacking. It was like he didn’t even know it was her anymore, his golden eyes blazing with a deep-seated fury she had never seen. “Prince Zuko! Please, I-I really think we should stop!”

He ignored her, lashing out with a wide arcing stream of fire. It was fast, and without thinking Emi threw her hands up to try and block the attack with her Airbending. She managed to slow some of the fire down, the rest spiraling all around her. But her air shield faltered and the remaining flames coursed along her right arm, burning her skin.

Emi cried out in a panic, the sound finally punching a hole through the haze of anger that had taken over Zuko. He stared in shock at the Airbender as she crouched over in pain, and he felt something he hadn’t felt for a long time; regret.

“Emi!”

Zuko looked around as Iroh came running out onto the deck at that moment, going straight toward the injured girl. He examined her arm, which was blistering angrily but not severely burned. She would need a cold compress and a few bandages, but her arm would heal up soon enough.
Emi was ushered back inside and directed toward the ship’s physician. Once she was out of sight, Iroh rounded on his nephew, his expression grim.

“Prince Zuko, I understand your frustration. But you cannot take it out on those who do not deserve it,” Iroh chastised gently. “Don’t give up hope yet. You can still find the Avatar before Zhao.”

“How, uncle?!” Zuko demanded, rallying behind his anger. “With Zhao’s resources, it’s just a matter of time before he captures the Avatar!” He turned his back, glaring out over the water. “My honor. My throne. My country. I’m about to lose them all…”

“You will find a way, my nephew,” Iroh said encouragingly. “In the meantime, I think it would be best for you to apologize to Emi.”

Zuko stiffened at that. He hated apologizing to anyone, for anything. His uncle was different; he had known him his whole life. Even if he did feel bad about what he had done, he would not apologize. Iroh sighed and turned away, leaving his nephew to fume in peace. After a few minutes of silent brooding, an idea came to Zuko. It would be risky, but he was confident he could pull it off. He needed to prepare and head out quickly, though, to have any sort of chance. He turned on his heel and headed back into the ship with singleminded determination.

---

Aang sat on a stump, waiting for Prince Zuko to regain consciousness. He was thinking about what he had done, how he had saved him from Zhao and his soldiers. It went against everything he and his friends had seen of the prince in the past. Aang couldn’t help but wonder, and hope, that this was a sign. That maybe, there might be some grain of good in the young man.

He sighed, furrowing his eyebrows. He had also been unable to steer his mind away from the rumored Airbender the prince had told Katara about. Aang wondered if it was at all true, even while at the same time he stubbornly refused to let his hopes get too high. Still, he could ask Zuko about it…

The rustling of the leaves next to him indicated the prince’s awakening. Maybe…maybe Zuko just needed a friend. Someone who could show him kindness. Let him know that being good wasn’t a weakness.

“You know what the worst part about being born over a hundred years ago is?” Aang mused aloud. “I miss all the friends I used to hang out with. Before the war started, I used to always visit my friend Kuzon. The two of us…we’d get in and out of so much trouble together. He was one of the best friends I ever had.” Aang looked over at Zuko, his dark grey eyes sad. “And he was from the Fire Nation, just like you.”

Aang paused for a moment, thinking. “If we knew each other back then, do you think we could have been friends, too?”
There was a moment of silence between them, only the slight stirring of the trees around them making any noise. Then, Zuko lashed out, aiming a flash of fire toward the Avatar. Aang neatly leapt out of the way, jumping from tree branch to tree branch to get as far away from the prince as possible.

He didn’t stop his swift pace until he had arrived back to the frozen frog pond. Aang then paused for a moment, heaving a sigh. It hadn’t even been worth hoping for. Just like thinking there actually could be another Airbender in the world.

- - -

Emi lay on her bed, fingering her new bandages. She had been thinking a lot about what had happened the previous day, going from sympathetic to furious in turns. Part of her wanted to be forgiving, because she knew that capturing the Avatar was important to Zuko. But at the same time, he really didn’t need to be such an aggressive bully. She was trying to help him. Even though she’d much rather be a part of the Avatar’s group, she still tried to make the most of her time as a captive and attempted to get on the prince’s good side. If he even had one.

And for all that effort, how does he repay her? By nearly burning off her arm.

Well, not burning it off per se. But very nearly.

Three sharp taps against her door knocked her out of her silent musings. Emi sat up, wondering who would be visiting her. Iroh had already been by to make sure she was comfortable, and she wasn’t close enough to any of the other crew members for them to wander down to her room and check on her.

“Who is it?” Emi called out hesitantly.

She heard a sigh on the other side of the door. “It’s Zuko. May I…come in?”

He sounded exhausted. Emi frowned, but swung her legs off of her bed anyway and walked over to open the door. As soon as she did so, her eyes widened at the sight of the prince’s attire, completely black from his neck to his feet. And he did indeed look tired. And sooty.

“What happened to you?” Emi asked without thinking. Zuko scowled, but his usual heated anger was drastically dimmed, no doubt thanks to his exhaustion.

“That doesn’t matter,” he retorted, glaring at the floor before turning his gaze back to her. “Look… I just wanted to say…” He mumbled something incoherent under his breath.

Emi blinked, tilting her head in confusion. “Um…what? I didn’t quite catch that.”
“I said I’m sorry!” Zuko snapped. “I didn’t mean to…you know…burn you.”

“Oh.” That was a surprise. She hadn’t expected the prince to actually apologize to her. “Well, thank you. I appreciate it.”

Zuko merely nodded, eyeing the white bandages. “It’s not too bad…is it?”

“Oh, no. It’s more superficial than anything. All I have to do is coat it in salves and my arm will be good as new in no time.”

He nodded again, and for a moment an awkward silence hung over the two of them. Emi cleared her throat and looked at Zuko’s attire again. “So…do anything interesting last night?”

Zuko raised his eyebrow, looking at Emi for so long that she shifted under his gaze. “Interesting how?” he asked in return.

“Well, I’m no expert, but you seem to be dressed for sleuthing in the dark,” Emi said with a shrug. For a moment, it looked like Zuko gave a small smirk, but it was gone so quickly she couldn’t be sure if had merely been her imagination.

“Yeah. Something like that.”

“Did…did it have to do with the Avatar?”

A muscle in his jaw ticked. “Yeah.”

Emi didn’t want to push her luck. She knew it would be wiser to let the prince go about his business, maybe get some rest. But at the same time, her curiosity was overwhelming her. And despite his weariness, or maybe because of it, he seemed to be a little more willing to answer her questions than usual.

“Why is capturing the Avatar the only way to regain your honor?” she finally managed to ask, her sea green eyes gazing up at Zuko innocently.

Zuko felt the overwhelming urge to scowl, to yell at this Airbender and tell her to mind her own damn business. But then he caught sight of her bandaged arm, and with great difficulty he forced the urge away. He could answer her, and maybe then she would stop her incessant questions.

“I spoke out of turn during a war meeting when I was thirteen,” Zuko replied, glaring at the wall as he talked. “The generals were planning to use a squad of new recruits as bait during a battle. I
didn’t think that was right, so I said something about it. But it wasn’t my place to say anything. The only way I could redeem myself was to fight an Agni Kai, but I thought it would be against the old war general I had insulted. I didn’t realize that I was expected to fight my father instead, since it was in his war room I had been disrespectful.” He sighed, looking back at Emi whose wide eyes were glued to his face. “When I refused to fight, he gave me this scar as punishment for my weakness, and told me the only way I would be allowed home, allowed back to my throne, was to capture the Avatar.”

“But the Avatar’s only been back for a few months. You’ve been searching the whole world this entire time?” Emi asked in shock. Zuko gave a curt nod, and her gaze fell to the floor. “Wow.”

Zuko grimaced. “I don’t need your pity!” he snapped, causing Emi’s gaze to lift back up to his angry facade.

“I don’t pity you,” she replied. When Zuko scoffed in disbelief, she sighed. “It’s terrible that your father would punish his own son in such a way, for doing something that shouldn’t be punished in the first place. And I can’t imagine the struggle you’ve had to go through these past few years. I feel sad about that, but I don’t pity you.”

Zuko furrowed his brow, trying to detect some mocking tone in her voice. But he sensed nothing but sincerity.

“Do you remember going to an herbalist at one point, shortly after your injury?” Emi suddenly asked.

“Yes. Why?” Zuko inquired, narrowing his eyes slightly.

“That herbalist, Haruka, she was the woman who raised me,” Emi said, her eyes taking on a nostalgic gleam. “I remember sitting on the stairs when you guys came. She told me I had to hide out until you left, because you were Fire Nation. Even though we technically lived within the country, we were never really part of the Fire Nation. That cottage was like a separate world all its own. And it was nice, in its own way. But I’ve always wanted to travel the world, and explore what there is to see. Haruka knew that she would have to let me go, when I was old enough. But in the meantime, she had kept me out of sight, hiding me away from the world.”

Emi sighed. “She died so unexpectedly. She was there one day, and gone the next. I left not long after that. I couldn’t stay at the cottage without her. It didn’t feel like home anymore.”

Zuko didn’t respond, silently listening to her. He wasn’t sure what he was supposed to feel, all he knew was that, unlike with the Avatar, her story did not make him feel so angry. That in itself was confusing.

“Well, you probably want to get some rest,” Emi remarked, snapping Zuko out of his musings.
“Uh…yeah. Yeah, I’ll go and do that,” he muttered, moving away from the doorway and down the corridor.

“Have a pleasant sleep, Your Highness,” Emi called after him.

He stopped and turned back slightly. “You may call me Zuko. If you want,” he said impulsively. Emi only blinked, looking surprised, but she soon smiled in such a way that her whole face lit up. Zuko grit his jaw and turned back around, heading to his room and snapping his door shut behind him.

He changed out of his Blue Spirit attire, tucking the mask and the clothes away out of sight. He hung up his broadswords and slipped into his bed, the mattress feeling good against his tired muscles. As Zuko closed his eyes, the last thing he saw was the image of the fair-haired Airbender, smiling at him so happily.
So Close, Yet So Far

Days later saw Emi sitting with Iroh and Zuko, drinking tea. Since their surprisingly open conversation, Zuko had been a little less snappy with her. Although, he still had his temper of course. But at least he wasn’t glowering at her so much. And that was enough to please Emi.

Iroh took a sip of his tea, sighing appreciatively. “See, Prince Zuko? A moment of quiet is good for your mental well being.” He poured his nephew a cup of tea, and the prince took it with a doubtful look on his face.

Before he could take a sip, though, the ship suddenly lurched to the side, making Zuko spill the tea all over his face.

“I could have sworn we were docked,” Emi remarked to Iroh, who merely shrugged. Zuko growled and pushed himself away from the table, standing up to see what the commotion was. Emi and Iroh followed close behind.

Out on the deck, they saw a massive creature with a fierce looking woman riding atop, her pale skin absolutely flawless. The soldiers retreated well away from the growling beast, but Zuko and Iroh stepped forward.

“Get back! We’re after a stowaway,” the woman barked, wielding a nasty looking whip.

“There are no stowaways on my ship!” Zuko snapped, glaring at the woman.

The animal proceeded to rip into the deck of the ship, yanking a metal sheet up off from the bolting like it was made of flimsy paper. It hurled the ruined metal away, causing all of the men to duck. Emi just barely managed to avoid the projectile, more because Zuko had yanked her aside at the last second. He spared her a glare before letting her arm go, marching forward toward the woman and her beast.

The animal had its head tucked into the newly opened hole, and Emi could hear it snuffling loudly. Seconds later, a ragged and frightened looking man hauled himself out of the ship, vainly attempting to run away. The animal lashed out with its long tongue, striking the man on the back of his neck. He promptly fell over in a heap, completely motionless though his eyes darted this way and that in terror.

“He’s paralyzed,” Zuko remarked in amazement.

“Only temporarily,” the woman replied, hopping down from her beast to scoop the man up. “The
toxins will wear off in about an hour. But by then he’ll be in jail and I’ll have my money.”

“But how did you find him on my ship?” Zuko demanded as the woman dumped the stowaway onto the back of her creature.

“My shirshu can smell a rat a continent away,” the woman said with a smirk, hopping back up in her saddle.

“Well, I’m impressed,” Iroh piped up. The woman snapped her whip and the shirshu took off, running nimbly away. “Very impressed.”

Zuko shot his uncle a glare while Emi fought to keep her laughter in check. “We’re going after that bounty hunter. She will take us straight to the Avatar, and she needs to pay for my ship.” He stormed off, leaving Iroh and Emi looking after him.

“This is one order I will be most happy to follow,” Iroh remarked to her with a wink.

- - -

Several hours later, Emi found herself being forced to wait outside a very rowdy tavern. The bounty hunter’s shirshu lay on the ground nearby, growling softly whenever Emi shifted from her position. Wisely, the young Airbender stayed put.

Zuko had ordered her to wait for them while they went inside to confront the woman. Emi in turn had scowled, wanting to see the vibrant tavern for herself. She had been traveling with the prince and his crew for a while now, and she had barely been able to explore anything they had come across. It was thoroughly unfair in Emi’s opinion. Especially after all her time waiting to see the world firsthand.

After several long minutes, Zuko and Iroh exited the building following the bounty hunter. Emi made her way over to them as Zuko held out the same blue necklace she had seen him taunting the Water Tribe girl with.

“I need you to find someone,” Zuko explained, glaring at the woman.

“What happened, your girlfriend run off on you?” the bounty hunter asked, leaning against her shirshu in a bored manner. Emi felt an odd prick of annoyance at the phrase.

“It’s not the girl I’m after,” Zuko continued, silently dismissing the woman’s assumptions. “It’s the bald monk she’s traveling with.”

“Whatever you say,” she grumbled with a roll of her eyes.
“If you find them, I’ll consider the damage to my ship paid for.”

The bounty hunter scoffed. “Forget it.”

“Plus, we’ll pay your weight in gold!” Iroh chimed in. The woman paused before a nasty grin lit up her face.

“Make it your weight, and we got a deal.”

Iroh laughed. “You got it!”

“Get on.” The bounty hunter took the necklace from Zuko, who then approached Emi. She raised an eyebrow, about to ask him what he was doing when she felt the heavy weight of the shackles on her wrists.

“Is this really necessary?” she asked, frowning.

“Just get on the shirshu!” Zuko snapped. Emi heaved a sigh and hopped on as well as she could behind Iroh, Zuko joining shortly after. Once the bounty hunter had given her creature the scent, she climbed to the front and they took off at a brisk pace, easily covering a lot of ground in little time.

- - -

They seemed to just about run all over the place, tracking the scent through the forest, to an herbalist’s sanctuary (Emi had wanted to stay and chat with the old woman, eccentric though she may have been, but they left too quickly), to a town with a fortune teller, and back to the forest again where they stormed an abbey, scattering the poor nuns. She was getting wholeheartedly sick of sitting upon the shirshu in near constant motion, for more reasons than one.

Namely, the fact that a certain prince had his hands clasp her waist.

Not intentional, by any means; Emi had nearly fallen over several times when they first set off, so Zuko had had to keep her in place himself. That left her in an awkwardly intimate position with Zuko, the closest they had ever been. Try as she might, she could not ignore the warm weight of his hands resting against her, sometimes tightening when the shirshu’s motions threatened to unbalance her. Emi was torn between feeling highly embarrassed and oddly pleased with the arrangement.

Unbeknownst to her, Zuko was having a similar predicament. He had tried to keep some measure of distance between him and the Airbender, but her balance was atrocious and she had no sense of the shirshu’s rhythm (which amazed him, since she was an Airbender after all). So to save her from tumbling off and slowing them down, Zuko had grabbed onto her waist to keep her in place. Which meant their proximity was now very close indeed. In an attempt to exert some control over his thoughts, he forced himself to think only of what he would have to do to capture the Avatar.
It didn’t work as well as he would have liked.

At long last, they broke through the trees and came upon the their targets. Now, Zuko had something to focus on that wasn’t the feminine Airbender in front of him.

“So this is your girlfriend, huh? No wonder she left. She’s way too pretty for you,” Jun remarked as Zuko jumped off of the shirshu and stalked toward the two siblings. Emi felt that stab of irritation again at the choice of words, but she forced herself to ignore it.

“Where is he? Where’s the Avatar?” Zuko demanded.

“We split up,” the Water Tribe boy declared. “He’s long gone.”

“How stupid do you think I am?”

“Pretty stupid,” the boy smirked before grabbing his sister. “Run!”

They had barely gone a few paces before the shirshu lashed out with its tongue, rendering them both paralyzed.

“What are we supposed to do now?” Zuko demanded the bounty hunter.

Jun clicked her tongue and guided the animal toward the fallen teens. “She’s seeking a different scent. Perhaps something that the Avatar held.”

Once the beast had gotten the new scent from a roll of parchment paper, Zuko hauled the siblings onto the back of the shirshu and hopped up behind Emi once again. They took off back down the path they had come and toward the abbey they had burst into not long before.

The animal knocked down the shakily repaired doors once again, scattering the nuns in the courtyard. It began to circle around, sniffing the ground before raising its head to the air.

“What’s it doing?! It’s just going in a circle!” Zuko snapped.

Emi frowned as she heard something odd in the distance at that moment and looked up. Her jaw dropped in amazement at the sight of the Avatar flying toward them, using what looked like a glider. He was agile and swift, easily dodging the shirshu as it rose up on its hind legs to try and lash out at him. But the great beast went too far, tottering backwards and inevitably dumping its passengers. Emi managed to flip in the air, slowing her descent enough so that she was able to roll against the ground and jump back up.
Before she could get her bearings, she was knocked out of the way by the shirshu and the bounty hunter, who had jumped up to attack the Avatar. However, they were tackled by another giant beast; the Avatar’s bison.

Two battles were then ignited. The shirshu and the bounty hunter versus the Avatar’s bison, and Zuko versus the Avatar himself. The nuns had dragged the Water Tribe siblings safely out of the way, but every time Emi tried to follow she was blocked either by flames, wind, or giant animals. All she could do was stay as small a target as possible and hope for the best. It didn’t help that the metal shackles around her wrists kept irritating her newly healed skin and slowing her down.

Suddenly, Emi was hit with an onslaught of scents, all molding together to create a powerful aroma that overwhelmed her. Before she could look around to see what had caused it, a sharp tongue lashed out against her neck. The effects were immediate, her body falling limp and out of her control. She hit the ground face first, her hands tucked against her torso in a very uncomfortable way.

“Oof!”

Something solid fell against her moments later, knocking the breath out of her lungs. A male voice groaned nearby, his breath tickling her ear.

“Zuko?” she asked wearily, her voice strained against the paralysis.

“Who else would it be?” he retorted in irritation.

Emi heaved a sigh and looked at what she could see from her angle. Nearby, it seemed as if Iroh and Jun had also been paralyzed.

“Uncle? I didn’t see you get hit by the tongue.” Or maybe not.

“Shh,” Iroh shushed him, closing his eyes in bliss while the woman glared up at him with unveiled hate, unable to move away from his embrace due to her paralysis. Emi would have laughed if she hadn’t been so distracted by the prince’s steady breathing so close to her ear.

“Katara, are you sure?”

“Sokka you were right there! I’m telling you, when we got thrown off of that animal, she Airbended herself so that she wouldn’t fall to the ground. And she had shackles on her wrists! I mean, why else would Zuko be keeping a girl prisoner?” Katara retorted, touching her newly returned necklace as if to be sure it wouldn’t disappear again.
“Well…”

“Sokka, don’t even think like that!”

“Maybe she just had good reflexes, Katara,” Aang spoke up from the front. “But I promise, if we see Zuko again and she’s with him, we’ll do what we can to save her. Okay?”

Katara smiled gratefully while Sokka rolled his eyes. “If we see him again? Come on Aang, you know we’ll see that angry jerk again.”
The weeks that passed by after the fight at the abbey was surprisingly pleasant. Zuko continued to use Emi to train, only now he wasn’t mindlessly firing flames at her with an aggressive fury. He even gave her some pointers, which Emi found odd, but enjoyed at the same time.

“You’re not even an Airbender, though. How would you know what would be the best way to attack?” Emi remarked one day as they went below deck following their latest session.

“I’m not talking about bending, it’s about stance,” Zuko retorted, rolling his eyes. “And you have a pretty pathetic one. You can’t keep flying away every time someone attacks you.”

“But if I’m nice to them, maybe they won’t attack me in the first place!” Emi reasoned, grinning widely. Zuko slapped his hand to his face, moving further down the corridor to his room. “What? It can work you know!” A slamming door was her only response.

Emi shook her head and chuckled, moving to go into her own room to freshen up. It was music night on the ship once again, and she was eager to enjoy the atmosphere.

A few hours later, Emi was sitting upon her rail, enjoying a rather good show. Iroh was singing a lovely little tune with the accompaniment of a few instruments. It was very calming and pleasant to listen to, making Emi sway upon her perch. And it was made all the more entertaining with the dancing partners in the form of the cook and the helmsman. They were surprisingly graceful, wafting about the deck in seamless movements.

Suddenly, a sound behind her made Emi look around, her eyes widening at the sight of several Fire Nation soldiers being led by a gruff looking man with the most massive pair of sideburns she had ever seen. It would have been amusing if he didn’t radiate a bitter sense of power.

“Admiral Zhao,” Iroh greeted, his face now a careful mask of caution.

“General Iroh. I’ve come to commandeer this crew,” Zhao replied without further pleasantries, looking over the solemn faces of the men standing around. “There’s a special expedition to the north pole I’m undertaking, where I’ll have need of every man available.” His sharp eyes fell on Emi then, his smirk calculating. “And who is this? I didn’t figure the prince to be the type to take on…companions.”

Emi felt her face heat up, but she kept her eyes locked with the admiral’s.

“Cho is the daughter of an old friend of mine,” Iroh interjected, staring at Zhao in such a way that
gave Emi shivers. “She has been under my care for the last few months.”

“My sincere apologies,” Zhao said with a bow to Emi’s direction. “I did not intend to insult anyone. General Iroh, I’d like to extend an invitation for you to join my crew. Your friend’s daughter would be welcome as well, kept perfectly safe I assure you.”

“I appreciate the offer, Zhao. But we will stay with my nephew,” Iroh replied with a short bow. Zhao didn’t seem the least bit surprised at his response.

“Very well. Let us go and give the news to the young prince together, then, shall we? I will need to be leaving soon, and the men need to pack up their belongings.”

Iroh gave a curt nod, ordering the men to get going before turning to Emi. “Perhaps you should return to your room, Cho.”

Emi nodded meekly and slid down from her railing, bypassing the two men and scurrying off to her room. Once she was safely inside, she heaved a sigh of relief. So, that was the infamous Zhao, she remarked to herself, frowning. She brushed a piece of hair from her eyes and plopped down onto her bed. With the entire crew being taken away, all that would be left would be herself, Iroh, and Zuko. She shivered, thinking of how the young prince would take the news. Not well at all, Emi mused silently.

Over the next half hour, Emi could hear the sounds of the men bustling up and down the corridors, gathering their belongings and heading out to join their new crew. Then, there was only an unnerving silence. After a short while, she heard a gentle knocking on her door. When Emi stood up to answer it, she saw Iroh standing in the corridor with a tight smile.

“How’d it go?” Emi ventured, looking around to see if Zhao was still lingering around.

“As well as could be expected,” Iroh said with a sigh. “I am going for a walk; it’s a nice night for it. Would you care to join me?”

Emi thought about it. It would be nice to go for a walk through the woods and just enjoy the night, but part of her would much rather settle down to sleep.

“Thank you, Iroh, but I think I’ll just turn in now. It’s been an…eventful evening,” Emi said with a small smile.

Iroh nodded and bid her a goodnight, strolling down the corridor and up to the deck. Before Emi shut her door, she glanced down the other end of the hall to where the prince’s room was. She sighed and retreated back inside her room, settling onto her bed and ready for a good night’s rest.
Just as she was falling asleep, she heard the squeaking of a metal door in the distance. Emi turned over, brushing it off as nothing important. Several moments later, she heard the barest of knocks against her door, and a soft voice calling to her.

“Emi?”

She sat up, her brow furrowed in confusion. “Zuko?” she called back. She heard an irritated groan and her door opened quietly, the prince poking his head in to glare at her.

“Not so loud!” he hissed, looking back toward the corridor. He then beckoned her to follow, disappearing from her doorway.

Emi frowned, but got up from her bed and stepped out into the hallway. There she found Zuko standing stiffly, on high alert for…something.

“What are you doing?” she asked in an undertone, only to be shushed as soon as the words left her mouth. Before she could get all worked up, Zuko grabbed her wrist and pulled her along stealthily through the corridors, pausing every so often to listen to what Emi took as a perfectly silent ship.

They soon came to the bridge. Emi looked out of the windows to the quiet night outside, still sensing nothing of what was apparently worrying the prince. She stood still for a moment as Zuko continued to look around, his brow furrowed in confusion.

Then, she heard it; a soft hissing sound so faint she could almost believe she imagined it.

“Zuko, do you hear-?” Emi started to say when a loud squawk caught their attention. They looked over, and on the rail outside sat the large lizard bird belonging to the pirate captain.

The creature took off, and suddenly the whole ship was wracked with a violent explosion. Emi reacted instinctively, pulling Zuko closer and wielding her Airbending to create a cushion against the billowing fire rushing towards them. They were shot out of the bridge windows, falling down towards the water below as the entire ship was swiftly engulfed in flames.

They fell heavily into the ocean, the force knocking Emi into a daze. She shook her head, trying to clear herself of her dizziness as she grabbed hold of the unconscious prince, swimming as far away from the ship as she could while keeping him afloat. After some distance she pulled them out of the water, laying Zuko down as gently as she could on the beach. She then took a moment to catch her breath, coughing up some seawater she had inhaled.

“Zuko?” Emi breathed, crawling over to the prince. He had many cuts on his face and torso, and some burns as well. But he was alive and breathing, and that was all that mattered. He began to stir slightly, groaning against the pain of their fall.
“Zuko! Emi!”

“Iroh! We’re over here!” Emi turned, calling back to the older man. He suddenly burst through the trees, the panicked look on his face melting into relief as he saw them.

“Thank goodness, you’re alive!” He dropped to his knees next to his nephew as Zuko opened his eyes.

“Uncle…the ship-”

“I know, Zuko. It’s been destroyed.”

“It was those pirates we ran into a while back. We saw the captain’s pet,” Emi explained.

The older man scowled. “Of course. But they wouldn’t have done all this just for the sake of revenge. They were paid to do this,” Iroh said, frowning angrily.

“By who?”

“Zhao,” Zuko hissed, sitting up gingerly. His face was twisted into a bitter look.

“Why would he do that?” Emi asked, shocked. She hadn’t liked the guy, but she couldn’t begin to understand why he would try to kill one of his own people.

“He didn’t want me in the way of his hunt for the Avatar,” Zuko spat hatefully, moving to stand up. Iroh held him back down firmly.

“Careful, Prince Zuko. We need to think of a plan and move accordingly,” his uncle said firmly, taking on a thoughtful expression.

---

The plan was simple, but brilliant. Iroh went to Zhao in light of Zuko’s “death” and accepted his offer to join the crew. Emi went along as well, after being assured she had not also been a target of Zhao’s attack. Somehow, the thought that the man hadn’t care whether or not he killed her did not make her feel in any way better.

Zuko joined the crew in disguise, dressing up as one of the soldiers with heavy helmets and masks covering their faces. They then began the journey northward, Emi sticking close to Iroh whenever possible. The tension upon the ship, the sheer anticipation she could see in each soldier’s face that she passed, made her feel on edge and wary. These people were out for blood, that much was clear.
Before she knew it they were at the icy wall of the Northern Water Tribe, the air bitterly cold even with her Fire Nation cloak to help guard against the chill. As soon as the ships were within sight of the tribe, they unleashed hell.

The battle was violent. Emi could hear it even from her shared room with Iroh below deck. Part of her was morbidly curious to see what was going on, but another part of her stayed firmly in place, knowing that seeing the evidence of war would not make it any better. The sounds on their own were bad enough.

When a cease-fire was called as night set in, Iroh went to get Emi and they both set out to look for Zuko. His plan was to sneak into the Water Tribe and find the Avatar while Zhao was stuck on his ship for the night. They both felt the young man was being too ambitious; the first part of his plan was fine, but what of the escape plan? The route back to the ships? How would he hide the Avatar? How would he even keep the Avatar restrained? All these questions swam in Emi’s mind, but she kept her mouth shut.

Instead, she focused on applying the healing salve that she had managed to salvage from the wreckage of Zuko’s ship to the wounds on his face. It had already begun working its magic, but it would still be a few weeks before he was back to normal.

“Well. I guess we’re even now,” Emi remarked after a few minutes of silence.

“What are you talking about?” Zuko asked impatiently, his eyes fixed on the far wall.

“Well, first you saved me from drowning. And now, I saved you from being blown to bits. We’re even,” Emi replied with a crooked smile, smoothing the salve into Zuko’s skin gently.

He grimaced. Her touch was too soft, too kind. He liked it, and he hated that he liked it. Zuko knew that he owed her gratitude now, after having saved his life from that damned explosion. He clenched his hands into fists as he thought about what Zhao had tried to do to him. It made him furious. But he wouldn’t act on that fury just yet. Not with this Airbender in front of him.

“You didn’t save all of me,” Zuko retorted. He looked sidelong at Emi, who rolled her eyes but had a smile playing on her lips.

“There was bound to be some casualties,” Emi remarked, replacing the lid on her healing salve. “Besides, your new scars will just be another story to tell.”

Zuko scowled then. “I don’t need any more scars!” he snapped. But instead of ducking her head or stammering nervously, Emi simply gazed evenly at him.

“No one really does,” she said. “But, the scars we do have tell the story of our life. It can take a
long time to get to the end we want. But once we get there, we realize it was all worth it. Every moment, good or bad.” Emi smiled then. “Scars serve as a memory for trials passed and overcome. They are never good moments in our life, but they show us that we have the strength to prevail, even when we are knocked down.”

There was a few moments of silence as Emi put away her salve. Zuko stared off at the wall, pondering what she had said. She sounded a lot like his uncle, which was both a comfort and an annoyance.

Soon after, all three were standing at the back of Zhao’s ship. Zuko was in a small dingy, getting ready to lower himself into the sea below. Iroh was telling him to be careful, to make sure he kept his hood up and used his breath of fire when the cold got too intense.

Zuko nodded, not really listening. His eyes were on Emi’s, whose own green gaze was on his. She was worried, that much he could tell. He began to lower himself down with the two of them watching until Iroh said it was time to go back to Zhao.

“Emi,” Zuko called up to the Airbender before she got too far. She looked down at him, her head tilted questioningly. “Thank you.”

---

Emi did not like being here. Not under these circumstances. She stayed on sidelines, keeping well away from the scene as she looked on with wide eyes.

It had been a full day since Zuko left the ship. And he had not managed to return with the Avatar. Once Zhao’s army had broken through the wall, he led Iroh and a few select men with him to a special location within the tribe. Emi had ridden with Iroh, not wanting to be a part of the invading forces but not wanting to stay behind on the ships either.

Now, as night had fallen once more, they were standing within an oasis, the air crackling with a current of energy. It would have been peaceful if everything had not been tainted in a red haze.

Zhao apparently had a plan to capture the Moon Spirit and rid the Water Nation of their power, giving the Fire Nation the upper hand in their war. An insane venture, for all the nations needed the moon to keep the balance. Iroh was currently confronting the madman, and not far away the Avatar and his friends were also trying to talk sense into him.

Nothing good can come from this, Emi thought to herself sadly.

“Whatever you do to that spirit, I will unleash on you tenfold! Let it go, now!” Iroh had taken up an offensive stance, glaring down the admiral. The Avatar and his friends were doing the same, ready to leap into action if need be. After a tense stretch of silence, Zhao relented and released the white koi fish back into the pond. For a brief moment Emi thought that, miraculously, all would be well.
Then, with a roar of fury he lashed out with his fire, killing the poor spirit instantly. Above them, the moon disappeared from the sky, rendering their whole world to darkness.

True to his word, Iroh jumped forward and unleashed his fury upon the admiral and his soldiers. Zhao managed to get away, leaving his men to endure the brunt of Iroh’s attacks. They were soon left in a heap upon the ground, unconscious.

The Avatar and his friends stepped forward as Iroh knelt in front of the pool, holding the dead spirit in his hands. Emi felt her heart ache at the terrible sight; how could anyone kill something so pure?

“There’s no hope now,” one girl lamented, her white hair bold in the darkness. “It’s over…”

The Avatar closed his eyes, pained, before his tattoos began to glow. His eyes then flew open, the white glow reaching the orbs as well. “No, It’s not over.” His voice took on a disembodied quality that made Emi shiver in fear at the stark promise behind his words. He stepped forward into the pool and stood still, the remaining koi fish swimming around him.

Suddenly, he disappeared into the water, only for it to glow a brilliant blue and white. The Ocean Spirit used the Avatar’s body and energy, rising from the depths of the water as a massive being and moving from its oasis home and out into the thick of the battle, intent on getting its revenge.

In the silence that followed, Iroh laid the deceased Moon Spirit back into the pond. Emi edged forward slightly, taking in the sad sight and wishing with everything she had that something could be done to help.

“It’s too late,” the Water Tribe girl said softly. “It’s dead.”

Iroh sat back, gazing at the spirit for a moment longer before looking to his left. His eyes widened in sudden knowing. “You have been touched by the Moon Spirit,” he said to the white haired girl. “Some of its life is in you.”

“You’re right,” she remarked softly. “It gave me life. Maybe I can give it back.”

Oh... Emi watched, her sorrow growing as she realized the sacrifice that had to be made. The Water Tribe boy tried to stop the girl as she stood up determinedly. The young Airbender could tell he loved her very much. But the girl was resolved, and as Iroh held up the white koi fish for her to place her hands upon, a flash of light illuminated the darkness. Her eyes fell closed and she collapsed into the boy’s arms, his face stricken. Her life was no more.

Her physical body then disappeared, and Iroh laid the fish back into the pond. The girl turned spirit rose up from the water, brilliantly luminous as only the moon could be. She leaned down toward the Water Tribe boy, promising to always be with him and kissing him one last time. As she vanished from their sight, the moon reappeared in the sky and the darkness was chased away.
Before she had another moment to process what had happened, Emi was being pulled away by Iroh. She chanced a look back and saw the two Water Tribe siblings staring after her.

“Hey! Wait!” the girl called out, but they soon disappeared from view.

Iroh led her through the village stealthily, running into Zuko along the way. Emi was relieved to see that he was alright, but she had no time to express this as they had to keep moving lest they be caught.

After throwing together a makeshift raft, they all boarded the rickety surface and took off into the ocean, sailing away from the Northern Water Tribe as the dawn rose, the sun lightening the sky.

For a while all three of them were silent, lost in their own thoughts. Emi kept stealing glances at Zuko, as if to assure herself that he was indeed alright. Somehow, along the way, the thought of him being grievously injured, or worse dead, created an odd ball of tension within her stomach. And knowing that he was alive and well made her feel pleasantly content.

As she wrapped herself in her hooded coat, guarding against the chill of the air, it suddenly hit her; she was in love with Prince Zuko.

---

Aang, Katara, and Sokka were standing on the balcony of the ice palace, looking out over the wreckage of the village. They had all endured a trying period, but they had come out of it intact and ready to move on to the next challenge. However, the topic of their conversation now was of the girl who had, once again, made an appearance in their lives.

“We both saw her this time. And she looked right us!” Katara was saying to Aang.

“Yeah but if you ask me, Katara, she actually seemed willing to go with that guy,” Sokka remarked wearily.

“Something just doesn’t add up with her,” Katara mused, ignoring her brother. “I really think we need to try and find her.”

“We can’t waste time looking for some girlfriend of Zuko’s!” Sokka threw his hands up in aggravation. “We need to get to the Earth Kingdom so Aang can start learning Earthbending.”

“Katara, I know you want to do the right thing,” Aang said to his friend kindly. “But we can’t make any detours right now. Sozin’s Comet is coming, and I need to master the elements before it’s too late.”
With trepidation, Katara let the subject drop once again, forcing her mind to focus on the task at hand. Together, they all went back inside to begin the preparations for their journey.
Three weeks. Three long, exhausting, horrendous weeks spent upon that raft. Emi had never been so grateful for land in her life, and she thoroughly hoped that she wouldn’t have to make another trip out to the ocean any time soon.

They were currently at a Fire Nation resort, being given top notch treatment after their harrowing journey. Emi thought her bones would melt from the professional ministrations of the masseuses, easing away the aches and pains. After her turn, she sat down against one side of an opening in the wall where one could view the cherry blossom trees and the water streaming through the natural space. On the other side sat Zuko, his demeanor stiff and unwelcoming. It had been hard on all of them to be stuck on that raft for so long, but it seemed during the journey Zuko had retreated back into his shell of anger and hate. It made it especially difficult for Emi, with her recent revelation.

They had not been friends, per se. But they had been becoming friendlier, and Emi knew that somewhere deep down inside the young prince was a good heart. She had even seen fits and bursts of it. But now that the Avatar had once again escaped his grasp, and with the added loss of his ship, Zuko seemed to be a drowning man grasping at twigs. She wanted to say something consoling to him, but she couldn’t begin to think of what would be helpful.

Nearby on the table, Iroh was just finishing up with his massage, stretching languidly as he stood up. He noted his nephew’s mood and came over to sit by him.

“I see. It’s the anniversary, isn’t it?” he asked.

“Three years ago today I was banished,” Zuko said with a bitter tone. “I lost it all; I want it back. I want the Avatar, I want my honor, my throne. I want my father not to think I’m worthless…”

“I’m sure he doesn’t,” Iroh replied bracingly. “Why would he banish you if he didn’t care?”

Emi slapped her hand to her face as Zuko turned his head to glare at his uncle. He swiftly stood up and stalked away from them.

“Erm…that came out wrong, didn’t it?” Iroh asked, looking at Emi.

“I’d say that’s a safe bet,” she remarked with a half smile.

A little while later, Emi entered the house they had been staying in after a walk along the beach. She ran a hand fondly over the lilac and pink robes they had been given. She missed her old clothes, but they had been too dirty and ruined to salvage. It was only when she looked up that she
saw they had a visitor.

The young woman appraised Emi with sharp eyes hard as steel, her attire very similar to what Zuko had worn when they had first met.

“Excuse me, this is a family conversation,” she sniped, her tone dripping with malice.

“She’s my friend,” Zuko spoke up before Emi could, causing her to flush a little. The young woman smirked.

“Oh really?” Her eyes gleamed with some sort of calculation before she turned back to Zuko. “Well, as I was saying before we were so rudely interrupted,” Emi grimaced at that but stayed well away from the stranger as she edged closer to Iroh, “I’ve come with a message from home. Father’s changed his mind; family is suddenly very important to him. He’s heard rumors of plans to overthrow him. Treacherous plots. Family,” she shot a glance toward Emi, “are the only ones you can really trust.”

She looked away then, seemingly remorseful. “Father regrets your banishment. He wants you home.” There was a silence after these words, causing Zuko’s sister to turn back and glare at him. “Did you hear me? You should be happy, excited, grateful! I just gave you great news.”

Iroh stepped toward her as if to shield Zuko from her sight. “I’m sure your brother simply needs a moment—”

“Don’t interrupt, uncle!” the young woman snapped before turning back to Zuko. “I still haven’t heard my thank you. I’m not a messenger; I didn’t have to come all this way.”

Zuko was silent for another moment before he spoke. “Father…regrets? He…wants me back?”

His sister sighed. “I can see you need time to take this in. I’ll come to call on you tomorrow. Your…friend is also welcome to join us, should you decide to come back.” She sent a smirk toward Emi. “Good evening.”

Emi let out a breath she hadn’t realized she had been holding once Zuko’s sister was gone. She did not trust her. Not one bit.

Later that night, Zuko was happier than Emi had ever seen him. And she wanted to be happy for him; she really did. But she still could not shake the feeling that something was amiss.

“We’re going home!” Zuko said yet again, packing up his meager belongings. “After three long years. It’s unbelievable!”
“It is unbelievable,” Iroh remarked. “I have never known my brother to regret anything.”

“Did you listen to Azula?” Zuko scoffed. “Father’s realized how important family is to him. He cares about me!”

“I care about you!” Iroh replied, stepping toward his nephew. “And if Ozai wants you back, well, then I think it may not be for the reasons you imagine.”

Zuko scowled, turning his back on them. “You don’t know how my father feels about me! You don’t know anything!”

“Zuko, I only meant that in our family, things are not always what they seem.”

He swung back around hatefully. “I think you’re exactly what you seem; a lazy, mistrustful, shallow old man who’s always been jealous of his brother!” Zuko stalked away, leaving an awkward silence in his wake.

---

Early the next morning, Emi was shaken awake by someone. She squinted her eyes open, and in the dim light of dawn she saw Zuko kneeling by her bed.

“What?” Emi mumbled, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

“Are you coming with me?” Zuko asked in an undertone.

“Going…where?” she muttered.

Zuko scowled. “Back home!” he hissed. “Are you coming with me, or not?”

Emi sat up straighter, her sleepiness quickly fading away. Azula had said he’d be welcomed to bring her along, but she didn’t think he would seriously entertain the idea. And there was still the matter of what was going to happen to his uncle.

“Um…yes. Yes, I’m coming with you.”

A short while later, Emi and Zuko were walking down the steep path toward the harbor, where Azula’s ship sat waiting for them. Emi glanced back at the little house they had been staying in, wishing that Iroh was going with them as well. She didn’t like the rift that had opened up between Zuko and his uncle, but she didn’t say anything. Instead, her mind turn to another potential problem.
“Is…is this a good idea, Zuko?” Emi asked hesitantly.

“What do you mean?”

“Well…I’m an Airbender. Is it really wise for me to be going to the Fire Nation capital? I mean…the Fire Nation did wipe out the other Airbenders-”

“You’ll be fine,” Zuko interrupted, fixing her with an intense look. “I won’t let anything happen to you. I promise.”

Emi flushed a little and looked away, unable to hold his gaze any longer. Just then, they heard a huffing sound behind them. Both teens turned to see Iroh running down the path after them.

“Wait! Don’t leave without me!”

“Uncle!” Despite his stony expression before they left, he looked thoroughly relieved to see his uncle joining them. “You’ve changed your mind!”

“Family sticks together, right?” Iroh said when he had caught up to them, winking at Emi.

Together, the three of them made their way down the rest of the hill, approaching the Fire Nation ship. Azula stood upon the deck in front of the walkway, and there were several guards poised along either side of the pier. Emi felt like this was an awful lot to go through to simply welcome family home, but she kept her face carefully neutral as she and her companions came up to the walkway.

“Brother! Uncle! Esteemed guest! Welcome,” Azula greeted with a bow. The trio bowed in return as she continued speaking. “I’m so glad you decided to come.”

“Are we ready to depart, Your Highness?” the captain asked, his voice a little too pleasant.

“Set our course for home, Captain,” Azula said with a sweet smile. Emi heard Zuko repeat the word reverently, making her heart ache at the clear longing in his voice. They began to make their way up to the ship, following the captain.

“You heard the princess! Raise the anchors; we’re taking the prisoners home!”

Emi stilled. So did Iroh and Zuko. The captain looked completely petrified by his mistake as Azula immediately shed her pleasant façade and glared down at him with an icy expression.
Iroh promptly spun around, taking down several of the guards behind him as he did so. Zuko shoved the captain into the water, enraged. “You lied to me!” he spat at his sister.

Azula chuckled. “Like I’ve never done that before.”

She turned, walking away as the two guards on either side of her attacked. Without another thought Emi leapt forward, spinning her hands around and Airbending the soldiers out of the way with a whirl of wind. Zuko ran past her, heading straight for his sister who was staring at Emi in shock. However, Zuko kept up his barrage of hits, determined to land a punch.

“You know, father blames uncle for the loss at the north pole,” Azula taunted. “And he considers you a miserable failure for not finding the Avatar! Why would he want you back home? Except to lock you up where you can no longer embarrass him!”

Zuko roared his fury, lashing out faster than before, his Firebending swirling into the air. And still Azula dodged his attacks, her mocking smile firmly in place.

“Imagine how he’ll reward me for bringing in an Airbender,” Azula spat. “The perfect bait for the Avatar. I wonder why you never thought to use her for that. Unless you had another reason to keep her around?”

Suddenly Azula grabbed Zuko’s wrist, halting his attacks. She then lashed out her arm and shot her own flames, only hers were colored blue. Emi’s eyes widened at the lethal sight and she rushed forward as Zuko fell back against the deck. On the upper level, Azula began to swing her arms around in a steady motion, electricity crackling from her fingertips.

As she shifted her stance, readying to strike at her brother, Iroh suddenly leapt forward and grabbed her hand. The lightning traveled through his body and out his own fingers, striking the mountainside next to them. He shoved his niece into the sea and then ran down to Zuko, pulling him to his feet.

“Come, there’s not much time!”

Together the three of them fled the ship, running into the forests beyond the beach. After several long minutes, they eventually collapsed by a riverside once they felt like they would be adequately sheltered from the search party Azula was sure to have rounded up. Emi, Zuko, and Iroh heaved breaths of air into their starved lungs as they rested.

“I think we’re safe here,” Iroh said after a moment. Zuko didn’t respond, instead reaching into his belt and taking out a knife with carved symbols upon the blade. Emi watched silently as he grasped the blade and cut through the wrapping holding his long patch of hair into a ponytail. He then held the knife out to his uncle, who cut through the small bob at the top of his head. Both men silently dropped their hair into the river, washing away what was left of their ties to the Fire Nation.
“Ow!”

“Hey, watch where you’re going!”

“I was here first!”

“I’m trying to find food!”

“Well, so am I!”

“Argh!”

Both Emi and Zuko tumbled out of the bushes were they had been searching for some berries to eat. Or anything, really. But they had had no such luck, and only ended up in a confused tangle of limbs upon the ground.

Zuko shoved himself away from the Airbender, standing up and brushing off his tattered clothes that they had procured (i.e. stolen) from a farmer’s washing line they had come across. The three of them had been out in the wilderness for a while now, and they were running out of options for sustenance.

Emi followed suit shortly after, more delicately and with a finesse that Zuko hadn’t managed. He was pacing around now, furious at the lack of food that they had been unable to find.

“I can’t live like this!” he snapped after a few moments. “I wasn’t meant to be a fugitive; this is impossible!”

Emi, however, wasn’t listening to him. Her eyes were focused on the figure behind him. She tapped Zuko on the shoulder and gestured in the direction of her gaze, where his uncle was currently crouched down staring intently at an exotic looking flower.

“Uncle…what are you doing?” Zuko questioned, stepping toward the older man with Emi in tow.

“You’re looking at the rare white dragon bush,” he explained. “Its leaves make a tea so delicious it’s heartbreaking! That…or it’s the white jade bush which is poisonous.”
Emi chuckled while Zuko grit his teeth in annoyance. *Well, I certainly wouldn’t be brave enough to find out,* she mused to herself.

“We need *food,* not tea. We’re going fishing.”

“Wait, what?” Emi tried to protest, but Zuko had already grabbed her arm and was hauling her away toward the nearest water source.

They eventually stopped at a small pond, where Zuko set to hacking out two, very rough looking spears. He shoved one into Emi’s hands, looking at her expectantly.

“Well?” he prompted when she just stood there.

“Well what?” Emi retorted, glancing over at the pond.

“Are you going to help me fish or not?” he snapped.

Emi fiddled with her spear, trying to put this as delicately as she could. “Well…the thing is… I mean, you know I don’t eat meat so…I-I really couldn’t kill an innocent animal-”

“It’s a *fish.* There are millions of them all over the world, it’s fine,” Zuko interrupted her impatiently. Emi huffed, blowing a piece of hair out of her eyes.

“Well, not to me it isn’t! It doesn’t feel right, I mean,” she looked back into the pond, watching a small fish swim around happily, “look at how adorable this little fish is. How could you want me to kill something so pretty?”

Zuko wrinkled his nose and peered into the pond. He couldn’t begin to fathom what Emi saw in the runty fish wriggling around in the water, but he didn’t have the heart to make her do something she so desperately did not want to do.

So he allowed Emi to hang back while he attempted to stab his spear into the water. But all the larger fish kept evading his sharpened tool, and eventually the only thing he managed to catch was a fish even smaller than Emi’s that wriggled pathetically on the end of the spear before falling still.

Zuko grumbled and stalked back to where they had left his uncle, Emi following close behind. Despite his bad mood, she had found watching Zuko try to fish a highly entertaining thing to witness. She nearly bit her tongue from trying not to laugh out loud, knowing that he had been nice enough to allow her to stand aside while he fished and tried to get them something to eat. Even if she wouldn’t have partaken of the meal anyway.
When they arrived back at the clearing, Iroh was right where they had left him. However, he seemed unusually itchy now.

“Zuko. Emi. Remember that plant I thought might be tea?”

“No way,” “You didn’t,” both Emi and Zuko said at the same time.

“I did. And it wasn’t tea.” Iroh stood up and turned around, and both teens recoiled in horror. The old man was covered in angry red blotches, his face swollen. Emi was amazed he could even speak.

“When the rash spreads to my throat, I will stop breathing,” Iroh continued, unperturbed by their reaction as he continued to scratch. “But look what I found!” He held up a branch full of red berries. “These are bacui berries, known to cure the poison of the white jade plant. That…or maka’ole berries that cause blindness.”

Emi grimaced and snatched the branch away from Iroh before he did himself more harm.

“We’re not taking anymore chances with these plants!” Zuko snapped in irritation. “We need to get help.”

“But where are we supposed to go?” Emi piped up, crossing her arms. “You guys are enemies of the Earth Kingdom, and we’re all fugitives from the Fire Nation.”

“Don’t get so complacent, Emi,” Zuko snorted. “If the Earth Kingdom discovers us, they’ll have me and my uncle killed and you thrown into jail for the rest of your life.”

“But if the Fire Nation discovers us, we’ll be handed over to Azula,” Iroh remarked, itching his rashes.

The three of them glanced at one another before nodding. “Earth Kingdom it is,” Zuko said, leading the way.

They managed to find a village not too far from where they had been resting. Zuko had donned a straw hat while Emi had bundled her hair up in a strip of cloth to help cover up their distinctive traits. They got Iroh into a healing house straight away, where a young woman took care of his poisonous rash by using an array of herbs and tonics that Emi had never seen before. She had wanted to get a closer look, but Zuko held her back firmly on the bench next to him, giving her a stern look.

“You three must not be from around here,” the young woman remarked. “We know better than to
touch the white jade, much less make it into a tea and drink it.”

Emi chuckled as Iroh gave a halfhearted “whoops.”

“So, where are you traveling from?” she asked a moment later, slapping Iroh’s hand away from his healing rash as he attempted to keep itching.

“Yes, we’re travelers!” Zuko said too enthusiastically, shooting up from his place on the bench. *Oh, so you can move around*, Emi thought to herself, rolling her eyes.

“Do you have names?”

“Names? Of course we have names! I’m…Lee. And this is my cousin…Cho. And my uncle…Mushi.”

Iroh shot Zuko a glare. “Yes, my nephew was named after his father, so we just call him Junior,” he grinned over at the teens.

“Mushi, Junior, and Cho, huh? My name is Song.” The young woman turned back to smile at Zuko and Emi. “You three look like you could use a good meal. Why don’t you stay for dinner?”

“Sorry, but we need to be moving on,” Zuko replied shortly.

“That’s too bad. My mom always makes too much roast duck.”

“Where do you live, exactly?” Iroh inquired eagerly. Emi smothered a grin, ignoring Zuko’s glare as she did so.

---

Later that night, they had just finished a wonderfully filling meal of roasted duck and noodles. There were a few tense moments during dinner, especially when the war with the Fire Nation was brought up, but overall Emi thought the night went well.

“Thank you for the duck,” Iroh said to their hostesses as they stood outside their front door. “It was excellent.”

“You’re welcome,” Song’s mother replied, smiling. “It brings me joy to see someone eat my cooking with such…gusto!”

“Much practice,” Iroh remarked, patting his belly. He and Emi bowed to the two women, but from the corner of their eyes they saw Zuko had simply turned his back and made to leave.
“Junior! Where are your manners?” Iroh scolded his nephew. “You need to thank these nice people.”

Zuko turned around and gave a curt bow, clasping his hands together. “Thank you,” he said tersely.

“I know you don’t think there’s any hope left in the world,” Song called out to him as the three of them left. “But there is hope; the Avatar has returned!”

“I know,” Zuko muttered, only low enough for Emi to hear.

They left through the family’s gate and made their way toward the road. When Emi saw Zuko wasn’t keeping pace with them, she turned back to see what had stopped him. He was eyeing the family’s ostrich horse that was tied to the post nearby. With a quick look around, he untied the creature and hopped onto its back.

“What are you doing?” Iroh hissed at him. “These people just showed you great kindness.”

“They’re about to show us a little more kindness,” Zuko retorted, staring down at the pair. “Well?”

Iroh and Emi glanced at one another before they both hopped onto the ostrich horse, taking off down the road at a brisk pace.

---

Emi lay in her bedroll later that night, wide awake much to her dismay. They had stopped at another clearing to get some sleep, but she found her mind was too active to rest. She had so many thoughts running around her head that she couldn’t focus on any one thing. Emi heaved a sigh and looked up into the night sky, admiring the myriad of stars that blinked down upon them.

“Can’t sleep?”

Emi turned her head to see Zuko looking over at her as he lay nearby. “Nope. You?”

“No.”

They fell silent for a moment, Emi trying to pin down one thought in particular. “Where are we going next?”

Zuko sighed. “I don’t know.”

“Well…we can’t keep traveling like this for much longer. Right?”
“No. We can’t.”

“Hmm.” Emi frowned up at the sky, pondering. “I don’t mind it too much, though.”

“What? Being fugitives barely able to survive in the wilderness?” Zuko asked bitterly.

“That may be what we are, but I look at is as a way to see the world. I’m finally experiencing things first hand, learning what the world looks like for myself and not hearing about it from someone else’s memories.” Emi smiled over at Zuko. “For me, at least, this is kind of fun.”

Zuko grimaced and sat up, turning to face her fully. “You’re a weird girl, you know that?”

Emi sat up as well, raising an eyebrow. “I don’t think so. I’m sure there’s plenty of people who would agree with me.”

“Good luck finding those freaks,” Zuko scoffed. Emi merely rolled her eyes and propped her chin on her hands. After a few more moments of silence, she glanced sideways at Zuko. His hair was growing back more fully now, a soft fuzz covering his scalp.

Sensing her stare, he turned to meet her gaze. “What?”

“Your head looks like a peach.”

Zuko blinked. “What?” he asked again.

“Your hair,” Emi explained. “It looks soft. Like a peach. Can I touch it?”

“Why do you want to touch my hair?!” Zuko asked indignantly.

“Oh come on. Please?” Emi batted her eyes, smiling as sweetly as she could. Zuko glared over at her and found himself nearly drowning in her sea green pools. He closed his eyes against the sight and nodded stiffly.

He heard her shuffling a little closer to his bedroll, and after a moment he felt Emi’s soft hand running over his scalp gently. Shivers ran down Zuko’s spine, but he fought to make himself appear neutral. After running her hand through his growing hair a few more times, Emi moved back. He opened his eyes and raised his eyebrow.

“Well? Was it everything you ever dreamed it to be?” he asked sarcastically.
Emi smirked. “All that and more,” she shot back.

Zuko nearly chuckled, shifting his gaze to the headscarf that was concealing her own sandy hair. More and more often of late, he had wondered what it would be like to run his hands through those light colored waves. And here was his opportunity to find out; something he just couldn’t pass up.

“Your turn now,” he said, smirking as Emi’s face took on a confused look. “Fair is fair.”

Emi pursed her lips and tugged her hair out of its covering, letting the soft waves tumble freely down her back. Her locks had grown longer during her time with Zuko, going from shoulder length strands to just brushing the middle of her back.

She held her breath as Zuko reached out his hand and ran his fingers through her hair. As he brushed against her scalp, Emi felt shivers run along her spine, making her tremble lightly. It was a very pleasant sensation.

“Cold?” she heard Zuko ask softly.

“Just a little,” Emi remarked with a blush, shrugging it off. Next thing she knew she was being pulled into his side, his long arm wrapping around her shoulder as he continued to play with her hair.

“Better?” he asked.

“Mmhmm,” Emi mused, not trusting the strength of her voice at that moment.

Zuko shifted them so they were laying back down, Emi curled against his side comfortably. The next few moments were spent in a surprisingly pleasant silence.

“Do you still miss her?” Zuko suddenly asked.


“Yeah.”

“Yes. I do. But…it doesn’t hurt so much to miss her now. I just think of everything we did together, all the fun we had. I learned so much from Haruka. She was my family.”

Another silence fell between them, and Emi was sure the prince had had his fill of conversation for the night.
“My mother and I used to have a lot of fun together, too,” Zuko said, almost too low for her to hear.

Emi hesitated, sensing that this was a delicate matter for him. But her curiosity and desire to learn more about Zuko spurred her forward. “If you don’t mind my asking, what happened to her?” she asked timidly.

It took a few minutes before Zuko answered her. “She disappeared when I was kid,” he said stiffly. “I’ve never been able to find out what happened to her.”

“Oh…I’m sorry,” Emi said, sadness permeating their little bubble of peace. “You’ll find her again. I’m sure of it.”

“Really?” Zuko scoffed bitterly. “What makes you so sure? It’s been years. Who knows if she’s even alive…”

“Well, you’re stubborn enough to find her no matter what it takes, I’m sure,” Emi remarked with a light chuckle. She sobered shortly after, though. “Besides, she’s your mother. And if you cared for her like I cared for Haruka, then nothing will keep you two apart.”

Zuko didn’t say anything, but Emi did feel his arm tighten around her shoulders. Without thinking of it, she smiled and closed her eyes, resting her face against his chest and letting his heartbeat lull her into a pleasant sleep.
The next several days passed with ease. They continued to travel southward, sticking to the forest for the most part but entering villages when it could not be avoided. On such occurrences, they would more often than not beg in the streets to gather coins. Or, Emi and Iroh would while Zuko sulked in the background, refusing to debase himself to such an act.

It seemed to Emi that Zuko’s moods often soured quickly the longer they spent living on the road. He had been very much the same while on his ship, but at the time he had had a purpose, something to drive him towards his goal. Now, as a fugitive, he was completely without direction, stuck in the company of his uncle and an Airbender.

However, unlike on the ship, Zuko would sometimes act…nice toward Emi. They actually had some proper conversations without any ulterior motive behind the words. But it seemed that once he reached an unspecified moment Zuko would shut off and withdraw back into his surly shell.

Despite this, Emi found herself becoming more and more enamored with Zuko, something that she was not sure was the wisest thing to do.

They had just finished crossing the Great Divide, a huge canyon system that Emi could have stared at for hours. It had been difficult for them to cross, especially relying on Emi’s Airbending to help get their ostrich horse up and down the steep inclines, but they managed to make it through in one piece. Though a near miss with some canyon crawlers threatened to make that a mistruth.

“Why don’t we stop for the day?” Emi suggested as they left the canyon behind.

“We still have a few hours of daylight left, and you want to stop?!” Zuko asked incredulously from his spot at the reins.

“Oh, excuse me for being tired from hauling your butt through a canyon!” Emi snapped, crossing her arms.

“Who’s the one who cowered with our mount while me and my uncle fought off those canyon crawlers?!” Zuko retorted, twisting in his seat to glare at the younger girl.

“Alright, settle down!” Iroh piped up from his place between them. “An hour of rest will do us all good. Then we can get a little more travel in before stopping for the night. Fair?”

Zuko scoffed, but pulled their ostrich horse over to a cluster of rocks that would serve as a respectable shelter for them. In the distance, Emi could see a large forest just barely poking up
above the horizon.

They all dismounted and stretched out their limbs tiredly. Emi gave their ostrich horse a grateful pat, and the creature responded with a friendly nudge to her hand.

“You know, we should give him a name,” Emi remarked aloud.

“Why?” Zuko scoffed, turning around to glare at her.

“Because, he’s been with us for over a week now. He’s part of the group; he should have a name.”

Zuko rolled his eyes and muttered “whatever” before turning back to set up their blankets.

“I think that is a wonderful idea,” Iroh assured her, smiling. “What shall we call him?”

“Hmm…” Emi tapped a finger to her chin, pondering the ostrich horse. “How about…Daichi?”

At this the animal gave a toss of his head, ruffling his coat. “I think he approves,” Iroh remarked with a laugh.

Afterwards, they all settled down under the shade of a rocky overhang, letting their muscles rest. As her mind drifted, Emi found herself wandering back to the secluded cottage miles away in the Fire Nation. Since her conversation with Zuko a week prior, she had been thinking about the little house more often than she had before, especially being in such a stark and unforgiving landscape. Emi longed for the crowded trees and the lush grass that grew as tall as her waist. She missed all the flowers and herbs that grew in the large garden behind the cottage. But most of all, she missed Haruka with her wise eyes and friendly smile and wonderful stories of her travels in her youth.

She would sometimes ask after such tales why Haruka had settled down in the Fire Nation of all places when she had stopped traveling. “I had my reasons, child,” Haruka would say, “There are some things far more important than moving house.”

Emi wished she had thought to question her mentor further, but she never did get the chance.

They moved on an hour later, a bit more rested. By the time they stopped for the night, the forest beyond had slowly risen up from the horizon with more of the lush trees in view.

Emi sat back against a boulder, her stomach growling. It had been a few days since they had eaten anything, and their water supply was dwindling. She sincerely hoped they could find a clean water source close to the forest edge tomorrow. She had had to deal with thirst and starvation already; she wasn’t ready to go through it again.
So, to take their mind off of their stomachs, Emi and Iroh exchanged stories from their past while Zuko lounged nearby, seemingly asleep.

As night crawled on, darkness settling over their camp, the older man heaved a sigh. “We should be getting to sleep. We have a long day of travel tomorrow,” Iroh remarked, stretching.

Emi smothered a yawn behind her hand. “Yeah, you’re right. Good night, Iroh.”

“Sleep well, Emi.”

They settled on their respective blankets, and within minutes she heard Iroh’s soft snores permeating the quiet air. Emi let out a soft sigh and stared up at the sky, mostly filled with clouds but here and there were pockets where she could see the stars. To her left she heard Zuko shuffle, stretching out his muscles.

“You guys finally decided to sleep, huh?” she heard him mutter quietly as he readjusted himself on his own blanket.

“Well, forgive us for enjoying a nice evening conversation,” Emi remarked just as quietly.

Zuko scoffed. “Does it always take you so long to fall asleep?” he asked. She could almost imagine him rolling his eyes.

“Usually,” Emi said, smothering another yawn. “Haruka always said it was because my mind was too active for its own good. She used to make me a special tea that would help me fall asleep faster.” She sighed. “I never did find out what she put in it.”

“Probably poison,” Zuko muttered. Emi wrinkled her nose and shot a blast of air over at him, causing the sand to settle over his body.

“Good night, Zuko,” Emi sniped, turning over on her side.

She heard him chuckle, the sound filling her heart with warmth. “Good night to you, too.”

*Damn him.*

---

The forest was absolutely beautiful. Emi had never seen trees with such red leaves. As Iroh and Zuko rode Daichi along the forest path, she opted to jump from branch to branch with her Airbending, laughing as she swung about and made the leaves dance. This was something she had missed dearly as well; being able to leap around on blasts of wind, feeling freer than she had felt in
months.

Zuko grimaced at the sound of the Airbender's joy, hating how it made his heart leap. He spared a glance up into the trees to see Emi chasing the birds around, her smile as wide and gleaming as he had ever seen it. He forced his golden eyes back down to watch the path, clenching his jaw in irritation.

This. This was what his life had become. Endless traveling through a foreign country, completely unable to return home where he belonged. Just thinking about it made Zuko sick with anger. He refused to lie down so obediently, though. He would not become a faceless entity destined to wither away quietly and without purpose. He had a birthright to claim. And he would claim it. He just needed the Avatar-

“Ooh! Hog monkeys!”

Zuko was snapped out of his dark brooding by Emi’s squeal of delight. He watched as she dropped down from a nearby tree, her Airbending slowing her descent. Only now did he see the small troop beyond the bushes off of the path, their beady eyes appraising the strangers in their territory.

Hog monkeys were notorious for their temper. But of course, Emi wouldn’t know that, seeing as how she had never met one before. Zuko stared as the oblivious Airbender walked toward the animals as if they were fluffy bunny rabbits.

“Emi! Get away from those things, they’re dangerous!” Zuko snapped.

“What? Why?” Emi turned around to look at him in bemusement. As she did so, one of the hog monkeys leapt forward. Without thinking, Zuko jumped down from Daichi with Iroh right behind him. Before either of the men could do anything, though, Emi’s laughter stopped them in their tracks.

It appeared the animal was actually being friendly and licking Emi’s hand.

“See? They’re not dangerous,” Emi remarked, smiling over at the men. Beside him Iroh chuckled, but Zuko was not amused. He marched over to her, shooing the hog monkey and the rest of its troop away. “Aw, what’d you do that for?” she pouted in disappointment.

“We don’t have time for you to play with wild animals!” Zuko snapped, furious. “We need to find food and water!”

“Well hold on, I’ll go look ahead and see where the river is.” Before he could protest Emi took off in a whirl of air, gracefully jumping from tree branch to tree branch.
“She has a free spirit,” Iroh remarked, smiling over at his nephew. Zuko muttered something unintelligible before he mounted the ostrich horse, his uncle following suit.

“She shouldn’t be wandering around so much,” Zuko spoke up after a few moments of silence. “She has no idea what dangers could lurk around here.”

“Hmm,” Iroh mused, not saying anything more.

Not long after that, Emi rejoined the two and lead them in the direction of the river. They stopped for the night by its banks, all of them drinking the clear water gratefully.

“Oh! And look what I found when I was scouting for the river.” Emi grabbed a makeshift bag full of plump fruit and held it out for them to see. “I know they’re safe because a bunch of hog monkeys were eating them.”

“Again with the hog monkeys?” Zuko snapped, irritated. Emi frowned, but said nothing else. If Zuko wanted to be in a bad mood for the evening, that was his problem.

They settled down around their campfire to eat the fruit Emi had found. She opened the bag to lay out the tender delicacies, only to withdraw her hand with a hiss.

“Ow! Something bit me!” Emi stuck the offending finger in her mouth to clean off the drops of blood that had formed. She peeked into the bag, putting her hand inside more cautiously this time while Iroh and Zuko looked on grimly. After a moment, Emi withdrew her hand again, this time lightly clasping a small, grey creature with large liquid eyes and black stripes along its body.

“It’s a sugar glider!” Iroh exclaimed, smiling at the tiny animal. “How fortunate for you to have found one, my dear. They tend to hide from large creatures like us.”

The sugar glider wriggled out of Emi’s grip to run along her arm and onto her shoulder, hiding within the tumble of sandy locks. Emi giggled and took out a bit of fruit, tearing into the flesh and holding a piece out for the little creature. It pondered the offering for a moment before taking the fruit and nibbling on it delicately.

Iroh reached into the bag and took out two more fruits, handing one to his nephew. They sat around and ate in silence, save for some fits of chuckling from Emi as the sugar glider ran all over her arms, shoulders, and around her head. Once she had had her fill of fruit she caught the little critter and examined it.

“Now let’s see…yep, you’re definitely a female. Now what shall I call you?”

Zuko rolled his eyes. “Another pet? How many do you need?”
“You can never have too many pets,” Emi remarked, tickling the sugar glider’s belly. “Besides, she wants to come with us. And how can I say no to this face?” She held up the little animal, its large eyes staring into narrowed golden ones.

“You’re impossible…” Zuko hissed, standing up and stalking away through the bushes and out of sight.

“Oh! I know, I’ll call you Yuuka!” Emi said, grinning at the newest addition to their group.
Spark in the Dark

Chapter Notes

My sincere apologies for the late post. I have recently become immersed in another fandom and, suffice it to say, I have been plagued with several ideas for stories. It's not the greatest excuse but it is mine.

So it'll just be the one chapter today. On Monday I'll go back to posting two chapters. Hope you all enjoy this one! It's...it's interesting. To say the least.

Spark in the Dark

Two more weeks passed on the road, and in that time they had traveled through more forested areas, even skimming along the edge of the Si Wong Desert. That had been particularly arduous, and Emi could not fathom how people managed to live further out in the vast sands. She knew Haruka had traveled through the desert herself many years ago, and she hadn’t envied the older woman even then.

It was during this time as well that Emi and Zuko began their training sessions again. Although, Emi privately considered them more like friendly matches than actual training, but she never said anything to Zuko about it. She could never tell these days what words would send him storming away angrily. That didn’t stop her from teasing him from time to time. Of course that was just the more traitorous, flirtatious part of her that she had yet to successfully stamp down.

They made their camp in a forest clearing, with a village a short distance away. Iroh and Emi had made a brief stop within the town to beg on the streets and earn a few coins that would help in getting more substantial food and other supplies such as blankets and salves. Since Zuko refused to take part in such an act, he had gone ahead with Daichi and settled to wait for them in the forest. When they returned, his sour mood had not abated in the slightest.

“Ah, nothing like some fresh produce to really fill one up,” Iroh remarked happily, laying out the newly purchased vegetables. Yuuka scurried out of her pocket in Emi’s tunic, sniffing the food curiously.

“No, Yuuka, that’s not for you. You can have some food later,” Emi scolded the sugar glider, picking her up and tucking her away again.

“I will prepare a nice stew. Why don’t you two youngsters go and train for a while; work up an appetite,” Iroh suggested, eyeing his scowling nephew wisely.

“Sounds good to me! What do you say, Zuko?” Emi asked.
Zuko merely glared over at the Airbender before shoving himself away from the ground and stalking off. Emi had known him long enough to know that he was accepting the invitation and not rejecting it. Once she had placed Yuuka safely on the saddle of Daichi, she followed the surly young man into a smaller clearing nearby.

They both took up positions and shifted into their stances, muscles taut and ready to spring into action. There they stayed, neither moving for several long moments. It had become something of a game of theirs, to see who would strike first. It had originally been Zuko’s doing; a way to get Emi to actually make the first move rather than waiting and defending all the time.

Suddenly, Emi sent a gust of wind sailing toward Zuko. He neatly dodged it and sent a stream of fire toward Emi, who jumped high into the air and somersaulted to the other side of the clearing.

The air filled with the crackling sound of fire and the rustling of wind as both teens jumped around, retreating and advancing in turns. Emi was proud to say she had in fact gotten better at her Airbending, moving with a swifter pace and countering the prince’s attacks more often than not. However, her array of moves were limited, whereas Zuko had several tricks up his sleeves. As such he came out as the victor in most of their matches. Although, his wins steadily became more difficult to obtain.

Emi jumped up, kicking out and sending a powerful burst of wind toward Zuko. He made to block, but he underestimated the strength of the attack and he was swiftly knocked onto his back, the breath escaping from his lungs in a rush. Before he could get his bearings, he felt a weight plopping down onto his torso.

“Oof! You didn’t have to sit on me, you know!” Zuko snapped as he glared up at the grinning Airbender.

Emi shrugged. “I couldn’t think of any other way to pin you down. Now, if I was an Earthbender, I could encase you in rock. Or as a Waterbender I could freeze you in a block of ice!” She chuckled at the imagery that brought on.

Zuko narrowed his eyes at Emi before shoving himself upright. The Airbender neatly lifted into the air and settled down a short distance away, still grinning.

“Zuko! Emi! Supper is ready!” Iroh’s voice came floating through the trees. Both teens left to go back to the campsite, their stomachs growling enthusiastically.

They settled down around their little campfire, eating from makeshift wooden bowls. Yuuka had crawled onto Emi’s shoulder after trying a taste of the stew, only to squeak and retreat to a higher perch after deeming the food inedible.

“I have been thinking,” Iroh spoke up after several minutes of silence. “I believe it is time we try
and find a village to settle down in.”

Zuko grimaced. “And just where are we supposed to go?”

“We’ve been out in the wilderness for a while,” Emi mused thoughtfully. “Maybe it’d be safe to hide out somewhere now.” She looked over their shabby and unkempt appearances; they certainly looked like simple Earth Kingdom travelers.

“Yes. But we’d have to choose somewhere populated, where people wouldn’t take too much notice of three new settlers,” Iroh continued, stroking his beard thoughtfully.

“No,” Zuko said, setting down his bowl. “It’s too dangerous. We’re better off as we are.”

“Are you sure about that?” Emi remarked, raising an eyebrow. “You’re the one who complains when we beg on the streets of every town we pass through. If we actually lived in one of those towns, we could get jobs!”


“We do what we must to survive, nephew,” Iroh said firmly.

Zuko scoffed, standing up. “I’m sick of just surviving. I’m sick of being a fugitive!” He turned his back on them, storming out into the darkening forest.

Iroh sighed and began to clean up after their little meal, Emi helping him out. They banked the fire and settled down onto their blankets to sleep. Maybe things would look better in the morning.

- - -

Emi was awoken by Yuuka later that night, who crawled out of the blankets and promptly scurried away.

“Yuuka!” Emi hissed, not wanting to wake Iroh. She sat up and looked around, noting that it was still dark. And Zuko hasn’t come back yet, she mused as she saw his untouched blankets. Emi sighed and stood up to give chase to her sugar glider, wondering what could have possibly possessed the little animal to suddenly take off into the night.

She picked her way through the trees, straining her ears to hear the faintest rustling or squeak that would signal where Yuuka had gone. Emi frowned, wishing for a moment that she was a Firebender just so she could have some light to see by. The moon was dark, and clouds drifted through the sky periodically. She heaved a sigh and continued to make her way through the forest, vowing to make a tiny leash for her sugar glider if this was how she intended to spend her nights.
Suddenly, Emi felt an arm wrap around her torso. She opened her mouth to scream, but the sound was muffled quickly by another hand covering her mouth.

“What are you doing out here?”

Zuko?! Emi thought incredulously, her panic swiftly turning to irritation. She fought to wriggle out of his grip, and after a moment he relented and let her go. Emi swiftly turned around and, without another thought, slapped him hard across the face.

“What the hell was that for?!?” Zuko hissed loudly, rubbing his offended cheek.

“For scaring me half to death, you jerk!” Emi hissed back, crossing her arms. “Geez, I thought you were some creeper!”

Zuko scowled. “What are you doing out here?” he asked again.

“Looking for Yuuka. She just suddenly took off,” Emi replied, still fuming as she scanned the surrounding trees.

“Your little pet was looking for a midnight snack,” he remarked, jerking a thumb behind him. “I saw her take off back to the campsite with several berries in her mouth.”

“Oh thank the spirits,” Emi sighed, relieved. She turned her attention back to Zuko, her curiosity chasing away her annoyance at him. “What have you been doing out here all night?”

“None of your business,” Zuko snapped, scowling down at her.

Emi rolled her eyes. “Fine. If that’s how you want to be.” She made to move past him, but he stopped her with a hand on her arm.

“Wait.” She looked up at him. “I’m…sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Emi said, turning to face him. “I just…me and your uncle worry about you, you know.”

Zuko didn’t say anything for a moment, looking off into the distance as his mind turned with several thoughts. “It’s not a good idea for us to settle down anywhere right now,” he said.

“Why not?” Emi asked, but she already had a feeling she knew.
“Because,” Zuko retorted, his face twisting in annoyance.

“Because is not an answer,” she shot back, stepping away from him. “It has to do with the Avatar, doesn’t it?” When Zuko didn’t reply, Emi grimaced. “What are you thinking, Zuko? That if you run into him again, capture him, that your family would welcome you back with open arms?”

Zuko glared at her. Then he pushed her back against the nearest tree, his face livid. “Don’t speak to me like you know anything about my family!” he hissed angrily. His sudden movement had startled her, his grip strong on her shoulders but not unbearable. Emi grit her jaw and steeled her spine; he had to hear these words, whether he liked it or not.

“I’m not claiming to know your family,” she said. “But think, Zuko. Think about what they’ve done to you, what they’ve said! Do you honestly believe handing the Avatar over to your family will change anything?”

“The Avatar is my only hope to regain my honor!” Zuko scowled, “Without that, I have nothing!”

“You have your uncle!” Emi retorted. “And...you have me, too. Are we not enough for you?”

Zuko didn’t say anything. They simply stared at one another, the moments ticking by. Emi then became acutely aware of the position they were in, so close that their bodies nearly touched, his hands caging her in on either side of her head. His body heat rolled off him in waves; she bet he was more comforting than any blanket could ever be.

Their eyes were locked, gold and green molding together. Emi saw something shift in Zuko’s expression, but before she could figure out what it was his mouth had descended upon hers. The last time she had felt his lips, she had been half delirious from nearly drowning, and it had not been a true kiss. But this. This was a kiss. His warm lips moved against hers softly yet insistently. Emi reacted on instinct, drawing her hands up to his shoulders and holding on for dear life as she moved her own lips against his experimentally. When Zuko traced the tip of his tongue against her bottom lip, Emi thought she’d burst into flames from the sheer pleasure of it.

Too soon for her liking Zuko pulled back, resting his forehead against hers and breathing a little heavier. Emi could only lean against the tree, grateful for its support elsewise she would have melted right at his feet. Zuko raised a hand and gently traced the curve of her jaw, his expression difficult to decipher. After a moment he silently took her hands from his shoulders, clasping one and leading her back toward the campsite.

Zuko kept up his odd silence, even as he guided her back to her blankets. He then settled into his own a short distance away and promptly turned over to go to sleep. Emi sighed inwardly, wondering what had just happened and if it was a good thing or a bad thing. Yuuka curled up against her shoulder, her breath smelling of fresh fruit. Emi closed her eyes and willed herself to
sleep, deciding to deal with what had happened in the light of morning when it came. She would, however, always cherish that moment in the forest.
The tardiness of these chapters is pure neglect on my part.

*sighs* I'll try again next week.

The days following their kiss were, as Emi figured they would be, highly awkward. Zuko hardly looked in her direction, and when he did he would flush slightly and scowl. She wanted to confront him, to talk about whatever this was between them and clear the air. Instead she stayed silent, knowing the effort would be futile.

They soon found themselves in another village, sitting on the side of the street to beg for coins. Daichi was taking a nap behind them while Zuko was lounging against the wall and scowling at the ground, furious that he had to witness this display. Iroh and Emi both held out their straw hats as makeshift bowls, peering up pathetically at the passerby.

“Spare coins for weary travelers?” Iroh asked as one came walking down the street. The man paused, thinking it over before tossing a few copper coins into his hat.

“Thank you, sir!” Emi called out as the man left. Zuko scoffed.

“This is humiliating!” he snapped. “We’re royalty; these people should be giving us whatever we want!”

“They will, if you ask nicely,” Iroh replied.

A young woman passed by them and Iroh put on the largest, saddest eyes Emi had ever seen. “Spare change for a hungry old man?”

She chuckled. “Aw, here you go,” she said, adding a silver coin to their meager pile.

“The coin is appreciated; but not as much as your smile!” Emi found it amazing how charming this scruffy old man could be.

The young woman tittered again before moving off. She was soon replaced by a man whose face resembled that of a vicious rat. Emi recoiled slightly, not liking the aura of this particular individual.
“How about some entertainment in exchange for a gold piece?” he sneered, holding up the shiny coin.

“We’re not performers,” Zuko snapped.

“Not professional, anyway!” Iroh remarked enthusiastically. He set down his hat and stood up, charging into a spirited song. He was boisterous and loud, and Emi smiled at his entertaining performance.

“Come on, we’re talking a gold piece here! Let’s see some action; dance!” The man withdrew his swords and began to strike at the ground near Iroh’s feet, making the old man dance as he sang. Emi scowled. Zuko looked infuriated.

“Okay, that’s enough!” she interjected, standing up swiftly before she could stop herself.

The man leered at her and laughed. “Nothing like a fat man dancing for his dinner! Here you go.” He tossed the gold piece at Iroh’s feet before sheathing his swords, walking away with a cocky swagger. For a moment, none of them said anything.

“We’re done here. Let’s go,” Zuko hissed, moving to haul Daichi to his feet. Iroh and Emi looked at one another, shrugging before they hopped up onto the ostrich horse behind Zuko.

They quickly left the town behind and settled down in the forest nearby. Zuko hadn’t said another word since they left the populated area, a constant scowl adorning his face. Iroh and Emi began to set up their little campsite while he stalked away into the trees and disappeared.

“He will be fine,” Iroh assured Emi as she stared after him. “He is still adjusting.”

“I know it’s hard for him,” Emi remarked, tickling the head of her sugar glider. “But fighting this isn’t going to make it any easier.”

“I agree. But this is a path he must accept for himself. Only then will he find peace.”

Somehow, “peace” and “Zuko” in the same sentence didn’t go together. But she would follow Iroh’s example, and simply wait for that day to come. If it would ever come.

- - -

They had begun acquiring a lot of new stuff. Food, clothing, blankets, dishes; all sorts of goods. Emi had her suspicions, but she didn’t voice them aloud. Talking to Zuko lately was more of a strain than anything else. He had completely shut off with her, giving short answers when he couldn’t avoid it. Although Emi tried to ignore it, she felt deeply hurt by his actions. Had he only
kissed her for the hell of it? Just something to do to shut her up? It was highly insulting, especially
given how she felt for him.

She and Iroh had set up camp in a shallow cave not long after the incident in the Earth Kingdom
village. Zuko, as was his habit these days, had disappeared some hours ago. Emi was grooming
Daichi while Yuuka was playing with a leaf that Iroh was teasing her with. Just then, they heard
footsteps approaching. They looked up to see Zuko emerge from the trees, carrying two large
baskets full of food. He dropped them in front of his uncle and promptly turned away.

“Where did you get these?” Iroh asked.

“What does it matter where they came from?” Zuko retorted, disappearing into the forest again.

Emi sighed and moved over to the baskets, peering into their contents. “He’s stealing them, isn’t
he?” she asked, taking a pastry and peering at it.

“Hmm,” Iroh mused, saying nothing more as he took a sample bite out of the delectable desert.
Judging from the look on his face, it must have tasted absolutely divine.

Despite the knot of worry within her chest at the thought of Zuko stealing so much stuff, her
stomach demanded the tantalizing food that was teasing it with its aroma. She took a bite out of the
pastry as well, relishing the taste while at the same time feeling horrible guilt.

Later that evening, they decided to take a walk through the forest. Emi watched, smiling, as Yuuka
glided from tree to tree, chasing after various insects to munch on. Then, in the distance, they heard
something that sounded like a scream. Both of them paused, listening intently.

“What do you suppose it was?” Emi asked Iroh, turning to the older man.

He stroked his beard thoughtfully. “I’m not sure. We’d better head back to camp, though. Just to be
safe.”

Night had begun to fall as they made it back to the cave. Zuko had returned once again, sitting in
front of the fire pit with his ever-present scowl. Nearby sat a rather fancy looking tea set.

“Looks like you did some serious shopping,” Iroh remarked, kneeling in front of the new items.
Emi paused in the mouth of the cave, watching them intently.

“Yes, but where did you get the money?” Emi asked, steeling herself for whatever outburst Zuko
would throw her way.
“Do you like your new teapot?” Zuko asked, ignoring Emi.

“To be honest with you, the best tea tastes delicious whether it comes in a porcelain pot or a tin cup.” Iroh sighed and moved to sit next to Zuko. Sensing this was best left to the two of them, Emi discreetly moved away, Yuuka perched on her shoulder.

As she wandered through the trees outside their camp, Emi thought about what Zuko had been doing. She did understand his frustration, to a certain extent. He had grown up knowing nothing but the best, surrounded by wealth and status. But even so, as she remembered how nastily Azula had spoken to him, how she had insulted him and told him that his father despised him, she wondered why Zuko would possibly want to return to that environment.

Emi sighed, stopping in her tracks. Her love for Zuko made her want to help him in any way she could. But her morals also demanded her attention, and she knew that what he was doing was wrong. Stealing from others would not bring him the satisfaction he was looking for. But she also feared that it would not come even if he did manage to capture the Avatar and bring him to his father. And that was something that she sincerely hoped would never happen.

“What are you doing?”

Emi shrieked and jumped high into the air, startling Yuuka as she went. She landed with a crash on the nearest tree branch, bruising her ribs in the process. As she peered down, she saw Zuko staring up at her, looking annoyed.

“Must you keep doing that?” Emi hissed, untangling herself from the tree and landing gracefully upon the ground.

“If you would actually pay attention to the world around you instead of daydreaming all the time, you wouldn’t have this problem!” Zuko snapped, moving to stalk away.

“Gee, thanks for the advice. Glad to know you care so much!” Emi retorted heatedly. He paused briefly before growling and storming away again.

Emi and Iroh were sitting together the next day, enjoying the quiet peace of the forest outside their shelter. At a noise nearby Emi looked up, noticing Zuko standing at the mouth of the cave. Immediately, she sensed something off with him; his demeanor was stiff with resolve.

“Uncle. I thought a lot about what you said,” Zuko began.

“You did? Good, good,” Iroh replied with slight smile.
“It’s helped me realize something. We no longer have anything to gain by traveling together.”

Emi felt her heart constrict as Iroh’s face fell slightly. He…couldn’t be serious. Could he?

“I need to find my own way.” Zuko picked up his bag and turned to leave them.

“Wait!” Iroh called out. He went over to Daichi and took his reins, guiding him over to Zuko as Emi trailed behind a few paces with Yuuka on her shoulder. He silently handed over the reins to his nephew, who promptly leapt up onto the animal’s back.

Zuko looked back briefly, his eyes flickering over his uncle’s before settling onto Emi’s. She couldn’t begin to guess what he saw in her expression. Zuko grit his jaw and urged Daichi into a trot, quickly leaving the small clearing and disappearing from sight.

“What do we do now?” Emi asked, her voice timid.

Iroh sighed and turned back toward the cave. “Now? Now we pack up our belongings and follow him.”

Emi blinked in shock. “What?! Why would we do that? Zuko’s made it perfectly clear he doesn’t want us…” Bitterness laced her tone as she said this. Iroh turned to look at Emi, his eyes full of understanding.

“He needs to have time to himself, to learn what it is he needs.” Iroh’s eyes sparkled as he continued to gaze at Emi, a slight smile on his face. “When he comes to that realization, we will be there to help him.”

Emi sighed, unsure if that would ever happen. However, she packed up her bags with Iroh, and together they headed off in the direction Zuko had gone.
Helping Hands

Zuko was exhausted. He had no food and little water. The sun beat down upon his back mercilessly, and beneath him his ostrich horse was shuffling along the rocky landscape lethargically.

*Do you honestly believe handing over the Avatar to your family will change anything?*

He scowled, forcing her voice away from his thoughts.

*Even if you did capture the Avatar, I’m not so sure it would solve our problems.*

He didn’t understand. Neither of them did. Without the Avatar, he had no honor. And without his honor, he had nothing.

*You have your uncle! And...you have me, too. Are we not enough for you?*

No, it wasn’t enough. Not for him. Zuko closed his eyes, in his delirium thinking back to that moment in the forest. Her eyes, her damnable sea green eyes, had called out to him, louder than ever before. All those months of admiring her in his dreams had come to a head, and he had finally given in to the need to taste her.

Even in his memories, she tasted divine.

*In the darkest times, hope is something you give yourself. That is the meaning of inner strength.*

He had plenty of strength. He had had the strength to strike out on his own, away from those two. They were only dragging him down. Especially her, always distracting him and making him confused.

Suddenly, a tantalizing scent permeated the air. Zuko pulled Daichi to a stop and looked around. To his right, down the hill, two people had stopped to make camp. They were roasting their dinner over a campfire, and Zuko’s stomach grumbled at the very smell of it. He gripped the handles of his broadswords, ready to leap down there and fight for the meal.

Until he saw the woman. She was heavily pregnant and looked weary, but she smiled up at her husband as he knelt beside her, rubbing her belly gently.

Zuko grimaced, releasing his grip and forcing himself away from the tender sight. The affection in
their eyes only reminded him of another’s, and that made him both uncomfortable and oddly wistful.

---

Emi and Iroh continued to track Zuko over the next few days, staying well enough away so that he had no idea they were following him. They saw that he had stopped in a village briefly, but had moved on quickly the next day. They took advantage of the isolated town and filled up on some supplies before they continued on.

They talked of many things, but neatly avoided speaking of Zuko directly. Emi found herself feeling bitter and depressed whenever she thought of him. His departure had been taken as a personal rejection, an assurance that no, she was not good enough for him to be around. Every time her mind would wander down this path, Emi would have to remind herself that he had left his uncle as well. She was not alone in the rejection. She was, however, alone in her infatuation with Zuko.

Iroh soon decided it was time they stopped for a breather. After assuring themselves that Zuko was heading in a more or less linear fashion, they dropped their packs with a grateful sigh, Iroh settling down onto the ground beside the road they had been walking along.

They had only been resting for a moment when Emi felt the earth rumble beneath her feet, shards of rock quickly jutting up from the ground. She managed to leap out of the way neatly, but Iroh was not so lucky. He was shoved over onto the dirt, where he groaned in pain.

“That really hurt my tailbone…” he lamented.

From behind a nearby boulder a small girl stepped forward, her gaze vacant but she still managed a fierce expression.

“Who are you? What are you doing here?” she demanded. Emi figured she couldn’t be more than twelve years old.

“We’re travelers,” Emi explained, stepping forward. The girl’s head snapped to the direction of her voice, her blind eyes narrowing.

“Someone’s light on their feet,” the girl remarked, frowning.

“Um…I-I suppose,” Emi said, confused by her words.

The girl sniffed dismissively. “I thought you guys might have been trouble,” she explained carelessly.
“No, no trouble,” Iroh said, standing up. “We were just stopping for a rest.” He paused, scrutinizing the girl. “You look like you could use a rest as well. Would you care to join us for tea?”

The girl was silent for a moment, thinking, before she managed a shrug. Taking that as a yes, Iroh began to set up the fire to make their tea. As he did so, Emi and the girl stood around awkwardly in silence. Until Yuuka became curious and glided over to the girl, sniffing her.

“Hey!” she cried out, startled. Yuuka gave a squeak and flew back over to Emi, who chuckled apologetically.

“Sorry. That was my sugar glider, Yuuka. She doesn’t normally greet strangers, but I guess she must have been curious about you.”

The girl frowned. “I didn’t sense her. That’s why she startled me. I can usually tell what animals are around and where.” She paused then, tilting her head. “She’s with you right now, isn’t she? On your shoulder. You really are light on your feet…”

“That’s amazing,” Emi remarked. “You’re really lucky to have that skill.”

“Oh yeah. Super lucky,” the girl replied sarcastically, crossing her arms.

Emi frowned. “No, I really mean it. People who see normally have a limited perception. But you have a whole different perspective that others will never have. That’s lucky.”

The girl remained silent, thinking upon that. Just then, Iroh called them over for tea. They walked over and settled down on either side of the campfire as he poured out the tea cups.

“Here is your tea,” he said, holding out the cup to the girl. She hesitated a moment before reaching over and taking the cup. “You seem a little too young to be traveling alone.”

“You seem a little too old to be traveling at all,” the girl remarked dryly.

Iroh chucked. “Perhaps I am.”

“I know what you guys are thinking,” she said, bitterness lacing her voice. “I look like I can’t handle being by myself.”

“We weren’t thinking that at all,” Emi remarked, sipping her tea.

“You wouldn’t even let me pour my own cup of tea!”
“I poured your tea because I wanted to. And for no other reason,” Iroh replied gently.

“People see me, and think I’m weak. They want to take care of me. But I can take care of myself by myself!” Her tenacious resolve struck a chord with Emi, distinctly reminding her of someone else.

“You sound like my nephew,” Iroh remarked. “Always thinking you need to do things on your own, without anyone’s support.”

“There’s nothing wrong with letting people who love you help you,” Emi chimed in thoughtfully. When she realized how she had phrased it, she quickly backtracked. “N-not that I love you! I mean…we’ve only just met, after all.”

The girl and Iroh chuckled, making Emi blush and focus back on her tea.

“So, where is your nephew?” the girl asked curiously.

“We have been tracking him, actually,” Iroh said.

“Is he lost?”

Iroh and Emi glanced at one another. “Yes. A little bit,” he responded. “His life has recently changed and he’s going through very difficult times. He’s trying to figure out who he is, and he went away.”

“So, now you’re following him?” the girl asked.

“We know he doesn’t want us around right now,” Iroh continued. “But, if he needs us, we will be there.”

“Your nephew is very lucky,” the girl mused. “Even if he doesn’t know it.” She then set aside her empty cup and stood up, smiling. “Thank you.”

“Our pleasure. Sharing tea with a fascinating stranger is one of life’s true delights.”

“No, thank you for what you said. It helped me,” she said, picking up her bag and hauling it over her shoulder.

“I’m glad,” Iroh replied.
“Oh, and about your nephew? Maybe you guys should tell him that you need him, too.”

Emi blushed again as the girl strolled back down the road, disappearing from sight. Did she really need him? She loved him, that was for sure. She frowned at her empty tea cup, unsure of how to process those words.

Later, they had gotten back on the road. Neither of them spoke, but they didn’t feel the need to. Sometimes, simply walking in companionable silence was just as pleasurable as talking. It was nice to admire the scenery they passed, watching as small animals darted out of sight when they saw the two of them approaching.

Suddenly they heard a commotion in the distance. With a quick glance to one another, they took off running toward the source, fearing what they might find.

They soon came to an abandoned town where a vicious fight had broken out. Emi watched in shock as she saw the Avatar flying around, avoiding the blue flames of Princess Azula. Zuko was there as well, fighting both the Avatar and his sister. The strain was telling on him, and it wasn't hard to see why; Azula was a fierce and talented opponent.

The fight had disappeared into a rundown building, but moments later Zuko was thrown back through the rickety wall and fell to the ground in a heap while Azula continued to chase the Avatar through the streets. Emi and Iroh dropped their bags and ran over to help Zuko up.

He stirred, slightly dazed. “Uncle? Emi?”

“Get up,” Iroh urged, giving Zuko a hand. As they stood, Emi saw that the Water Tribe siblings had joined the fight. And still, Azula was holding her own all too well. Even when the blind Earthbender arrived and snuck up on the princess, she managed to avoid and evade all their attacks.

Azula ducked down an alleyway for an escape, only to be blocked by Iroh. She edged away, swiftly trapped on all sides; the Avatar and his friends with Zuko, Iroh, and Emi to her front, and the crumbling walls of the ruins behind her.

“Well, look at this.” Azula sneered. “Enemies and traitors, all working together.” She raised her hands in defeat, her sharp eyes glaring at them. “I’m done. I know when I’m beaten. You got me. A princess surrenders with honor.”

_Something’s not right_, Emi mused helplessly, the air thick with tension. She looked to her left, trying to discern what the others thought. Iroh also looked concerned, but he kept his stance firm and unyielding.

Then, with lightning reflexes Azula struck, a flash of blue flame pelting toward Iroh and hitting
him square in the chest. He cried out in pain, tumbling to the ground. Zuko stared after him, eyes wide with horror and fury. Together they all attacked Azula, but their combined efforts were not enough. She managed to disappear in the confusion.

Emi turned on her heel, running toward Iroh with Zuko right behind her. “Salve…I-I need my salve…” Emi muttered to herself, gently peeling back the burnt clothing of Iroh’s tunic. She then felt a nudge against her side, looking down to see Yuuka holding the little clay jar in her paws. “Clever girl. Thank you,” Emi said, taking the jar from her pet. Zuko knelt beside her, looking terrible.

“Get away from us!” he suddenly snapped. Emi looked up to see the Avatar and his friends had tried to approach them, looking worried.

“Zuko, I can help,” the Water Tribe girl offered gently, stepping a little closer.

“Leave!” he shouted, flinging an arc of flames toward them. They looked at one another before taking off, leaving Zuko and Emi alone with Iroh.

“He’s still alive, Zuko,” she said quietly. “We just need to get him to a shelter. And he needs bandages.” She had finished applying the salve and already his burn was looking marginally better.

Zuko gave a short nod and together they hauled Iroh off of the ground, taking him over to a restless Daichi. Once they had secured Iroh to the ostrich horse’s back, they went to a small little hut of a house outside the ghost town, safely away from the smoldering buildings. Emi ran back out to the town to retrieve hers and Iroh’s bags, leaving Zuko with the task of ensuring Iroh was comfortable. When she got back, he was still kneeling by his uncle’s side.

“He’s going to be okay, Zuko,” Emi smiled gently, kneeling beside him and taking out several strips of bandages. “Here, help me lift him and we’ll get him wrapped up.”

Before long, Iroh was freshly bandaged and resting with nearly all of their available blankets. Yuuka had crawled onto his shoulder, curling up against his flushed skin. Emi chuckled a little and tickled the top of her head before she moved over to sit by the wall, leaning against it. Moments later, Zuko joined her.

“Thank you,” he said after a few moments of silence. “I don’t know what I would have done…” He trailed off, but Emi didn’t need to hear any more.

She patted his hand. “It’s okay, Zuko. He just needs to rest. Then we can move on.” Emi made to move her hand away, but Zuko tightened his grip, keeping their clasped hands on his lap.

She blinked, but then decided to just enjoy the moment, leaning against his shoulder for a more comfortable position. Not long after, she felt his cheek resting against her hair, and Emi fell asleep.
with a contented smile on her face.
Chapter Summary

Hurrah! I actually remembered to post these chapters on time. Today is going to be a good day.

Sympathy for the Weary

Emi woke slowly the next morning. The upper part of her body was moving steadily up and down. Strange. As she opened her eyes, all she saw was pale flesh in her immediate vision. She sat up, yawning languidly until all at once the memory of the previous day hit her. Emi looked over at the makeshift bed they had given Iroh and saw that he was already sitting up, looking over at her with an amused smile.

Emi only had a moment to wonder what the older man was so tickled by. Then, beneath her, Zuko shifted and sat up as well. Her face flared red with embarrassment; somehow during the night they had managed to shift themselves until they were lying on the ground, with her half sprawled on top of Zuko.

“Uncle!” he exclaimed softly, moving over to where Iroh sat. Emi followed but kept a distance between them, her face still uncomfortably warm. “How are you feeling?”

“Sore,” Iroh remarked, easing his shoulder up and down as it pulled at the wound.

“Azula did this to you,” Zuko explained, scowling. “It was a surprise attack.”

“Somehow, that’s not so surprising.” He shifted his seat a little, wincing as he struggled to get in a better position.

“I’ll make some tea,” Emi offered, moving away to give Zuko and his uncle time to catch up. Once the tea was finished, she poured out the cups and handed them to each man respectively. “Hope I made it the way you like it,” she shrugged halfheartedly.

“It’s good, Emi. Thank you,” Zuko assured her, smiling lightly. Iroh gave a nod in agreement, his eyes sparkling with amusement once again.

“So!” she said loudly. “What’s the plan now?”

“I’ve been thinking,” Zuko began, staring into his tea cup thoughtfully. “It’s only a matter of time
before I run into Azula again. I’m going to need to know more advanced Firebending if I want to stand a chance against her.”

Emi grimaced at the thought of the cold young woman. She had never met anyone as vicious as her, and she sincerely hoped she never would again.

“I know what you’re going to say,” Zuko continued, “She’s my sister, and I should be trying to get along with her.” Emi nearly choked on her tea at that; who in their right mind would want to get along with the likes of her?

“No,” Iroh said. “She’s crazy, and she needs to go down.” Thank the spirits, Emi remarked to herself silently.

With effort, Iroh moved to stand up, holding his injured shoulder as he did so. But once he was at his full height, the only thing his face showed was determination. “It’s time to resume your training.”

After a fresh pot of tea was made, Iroh, Zuko, and Emi sat in a circle together around the small, smoldering flames that the tea pot sat upon. Emi was curious to see what new things Zuko would need to learn, especially to win against a prodigy like Azula.

“Lightning is the purest expression of Firebending,” Iroh began. “Without aggression. It is not fueled by rage or emotion the way other Firebending is.” He poured out the fresh tea as he spoke. “Some call lightning the cold blooded fire. It is precise and deadly, like Azula. To perform the technique requires peace of mind.”

“I see,” Zuko mused, taking the proffered tea cup. “That’s why we’re drinking tea; to calm the mind.”

“Oh yeah, good point!” Emi chuckled quietly, take a large sip of her tea. “I mean…yes.”

Afterwards, they ventured outside and into the dusty landscape surrounding their little shack and the ghost town down the hill. Emi and Yuuka sat nearby on a boulder while Zuko and Iroh worked.

“There is energy all around us,” Iroh was saying to his nephew. “The energy is both Yin and Yang. Positive energy and negative energy.” Emi tilted her head; she recalled how Haruka had told her the same thing so many years ago. And that, with the proper training, anyone could sense energy, whether they were a bender or not.

She listened as Iroh continued to explain the way lightning could be controlled, and as he did so, she found herself thinking that this was a highly dangerous move. Emi shuddered to imagine how a Firebender would feel controlling that much power. That even though they held it in their hands,
one wrong move and they could easily kill themselves.

Iroh then began to show Zuko how to create the lightning. He moved with precision, each sway of his arms and the shifting of his stance were deliberate and controlled, even as electricity crackled around him. Then he shot his hand out, lightning streaking through the sky and crashing into the clouds above. Yuuka squeaked in alarm at the noise and dove into Emi’s tunic to hide.

“I’m ready to try it!” Zuko stepped forward eagerly.

“Remember, once you separate the energy you do not command it,” Iroh explained. “You are simply its humble guide. Breathe first.”

Zuko took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. He then shifted into a stance similar to what his uncle had done and mirrored the movements. But something was off; Emi could sense the energy was not flowing as it had with Iroh. When Zuko tried to shoot the lightning, there was a loud explosion instead and he was flung back several feet, hitting the ground hard.

Emi winced, wanting to go over and help him up but knowing it would be better to leave him be.

For the next hour Zuko continued to try and shoot lightning, only to have it explode when he made to release the energy. He became more and more frustrated, his face contorting with his anger.

“Why can’t I do it?!” he shouted as he sat up for the umpteenth time. “Instead of lightning it keeps exploding in my face! Like everything always does!”

“I was afraid this might happen,” Iroh remarked. “You will not be able to master lightning until you have dealt with the turmoil inside you.”

“What turmoil?!” Zuko demanded, rounding on his uncle.

“Zuko, you must let go of your feelings of shame if you want your anger to go away.”

“But I don’t feel any shame at all; I’m as proud as ever!”

“Yes, that’s the problem, Emi mused, stroking her sleeping sugar glider as she lay in her lap.

“Prince Zuko, pride is not the opposite of shame, but its source. True humility is the only antidote to shame.”

“Well, my life has been nothing but humbling lately,” Zuko remarked bitterly.
Iroh was silent for a moment before he spoke again. “I have another idea. I will teach you a Firebending move that even Azula doesn’t know! Because I made it up myself.”

Zuko turned back to his uncle, smiling gratefully. Iroh beckoned for Emi to join them as he settled his nephew on the ground, taking a long stick in hand. Emi sat next to Zuko, wondering what the older man was going to teach him next.

“Fire is the element of power. The people of the Fire Nation have desire and will, and the energy and drive to achieve what they want,” Iroh began, drawing the symbol of the Fire Nation into the dirt before them.

“Earth is the element of substance. The People of the Earth Kingdom are diverse and strong. They are persistent and enduring.” Emi smiled at that; Haruka had been born in the Earth Kingdom. The description fit her very well.

“Air is the element of freedom.” Emi looked up at Iroh, seeing him smiling at her. “The Air Nomads detached themselves from worldly concerns, and found peace in freedom. Also, they apparently had pretty good senses of humor!”

Zuko said nothing, but Emi chuckled. “Well, I know I certainly do,” she remarked, Yuuka giving a squeak.

“Water is the element of change,” Iroh continued. “The people of the Water Tribe are capable of adapting to many things. They have a deep sense of community and love that holds them together through anything.”

“Why are you telling me these things?” Zuko asked.

“It is important to draw wisdom from many different places. If you take it from only one place, it becomes rigid and stale.” Iroh drew lines in between the symbols for each nation. “Understanding others, the other elements, and the other nations, will help you become whole.” He then drew a circle around the symbols, encompassing them as one.

“All this four element talk sounds a lot like Avatar stuff,” Emi remarked.

“It is the combination of the four elements in one person that makes the Avatar so powerful,” Iroh said. “But it can make you both more powerful, too.” He prodded them each with his stick. “You see, the technique I am about to teach you, Zuko, is one I learned studying the Waterbenders.”

Emi looked back down at the etchings in the ground. Her eyes were drawn to the Air Nation symbol, and for the first time she felt a powerful longing tugging at her heart. She had always dreamt of being a great Airbender, but it had been such an impossible dream. She had never really
known anything about the Air Nation because so much of their history had been wiped out a hundred years ago. But she wasn’t alone; the Avatar was around, a boy who grew up with the Air Nomads and knew all about them. She sighed, wondering if she’d ever learn her heritage, or if she was doomed to walk alone without ever knowing.

She looked up and saw Iroh and Zuko staring at her curiously. Emi cleared her throat awkwardly. “I’ll…leave you guys to it. I’m gonna go…explore.” She managed a smile and stood up, Yuuka perched on her shoulder as she strode away from the two men. She needed a little time to herself.

- - -

By the time it occurred to Emi that she should be heading back, the sky had darkened and thunder rumbled menacingly through the air. She squinted up at the clouds, which were heavy with rain. Yuuka twitched her nose before diving into the safety of Emi’s tunic. As the first drops began to fall, she sighed and started to make her way back toward the dilapidated house that they had been camping in.

However, once the rain really started to pour and lightning was lacing through the sky, Emi was distracted by a figure on the cliffs to her right. She peered through the heavy rainfall and saw it was none other than Zuko. He was yelling to the sky, his fury palpable even from her distance.

“Come on! Strike me! You’ve never held back before!” Zuko screamed to the flashing lightning. Emi watched, her heart ripping at the sight of him falling to his knees in despair.

She hesitated, not wanting to intrude upon his solitude. But her feet had other ideas. Before she knew it Emi was standing next to Zuko, his body shaking from anger, hate, fear; who knew what the man was feeling. She knelt down and cautiously laid her hand upon his shoulder. He stiffened, but didn’t move away. Encouraged, Emi scooted over until their sides were touching and she could wrap her arm around his shoulders, her other hand gripping his tightly. For a moment, his hand was limp in her own, but Zuko soon returned the grip.

They knelt there for some time, the storm raging around them but they were oblivious to the lashing rain and thunder. All that mattered was their silent solace in one another’s arms.
Iroh would not stop groaning and grunting every time Daichi’s feet hit the ground. They had resumed traveling again, even though both Emi and Zuko had insisted Iroh get a little more rest. However, the older man had in turn insisted that he was fine to travel.

Yeah, right, Emi thought to herself, rolling her eyes at the man’s theatrics. He had been going at it for a good hour, and didn't seem to be content to stop anytime soon.

“Maybe we should make camp,” Zuko suggested.

“No, no, please. Don’t stop just for me,” Iroh said, his voice strained. He then set off into a new array of groaning and moaning, making Emi slap a hand to her face.

“Oh for the love of- just stop already, Zuko!” she called out to him.

Zuko sighed and pulled Daichi to a stop, all of them dismounting. Iroh promptly sat upon a boulder off of the path, rubbing his shoulder wearily.

“Maybe next time you’ll listen to us and stay put,” Emi remarked, crossing her arms.

Before he could reply Daichi whipped his head around, clacking his beak in agitation. In the distance, they could hear the sound of people approaching. Zuko swiftly took up an attack stance while Emi’s eyes scanned the surrounding forest warily.

Iroh merely sighed. “What now?”

The answer appeared moments later. Several men rode in on their komodo rhinos, surrounding the trio swiftly. They all glowered menacingly down at the small group, making Emi moved closer to Zuko as Yuuka ducked her head back down into her tunic.

“Colonel Mongke,” Iroh greeted, standing up and laying a hand on Zuko’s shoulder. “What a pleasant surprise.”

“If you’re surprised we’re here, then the Dragon of the West has lost a few steps,” Mongke remarked nastily, clashing his wrist armor together. The rest of his group readied their weapons, looking eager for a fight.
“You know these guys?” Zuko asked his uncle in surprise.

“Sure. Colonel Mongke and the Rough Rhinos are legendary,” Iroh remarked. “Each one is a different kind of weapons specialist. They are also a very capable singing group.”

Despite the tense situation, Emi found herself smothering a laugh. These guys? A singing group?

“We’re not here to give a concert!” Mongke snapped, shifting into an attack stance. “We’re here to apprehend fugitives!”

“Would you like some tea first?” Emi stared at Iroh in shock; was he really asking these guys to sit down for tea? “I’d love some. How about you Kachi? I make you as a jasmine man. Am I right?”

“Enough stalling!” Mongke yelled. “Round them up!”

One of the men swung a heavy chain with a cannon ball attached at the end, sending the projectile toward the trio. Iroh swiftly kicked it out of harms way, letting the chain wrap around the leg of the nearest komodo rhino. He then dodged a stream of fire from Mongke and slapped the creature’s hindquarters, making it take off at a run and drag two of the Rough Rhinos with it.

Emi saw the archer take aim at her, letting loose a flaming arrow. She swiped the air in front of her, sending a thin blade of wind toward the oncoming arrow and neatly splitting it in two. He followed up with several more shots, Emi using a blast of wind to shield herself as Zuko jumped forward and knocked them out of the way. He then aimed a spout of fire toward the archer, burning a hole into his bow and snapping the string in half.

Mongke started punching out fireballs at them with swift precision. Iroh and Zuko deflected the blasts while Emi jumped onto his komodo rhino. Before she lost her nerve, she fell back on her hands and kicked out, using her Airbending to send the colonel flying from his seat.

Iroh grabbed Daichi, leaping onto his back and hauling Zuko up behind him. They ran by the colonel’s steed, where Emi neatly jumped on behind Zuko. The remaining Rough Rhino gave chase, throwing his bombs toward the road in front of them. Emi turned around in her seat, heaving in a breath and blowing out as hard as she could. The resulting wind knocked the bombs back and landed in front of their would be attacker. He was swiftly engulfed in the resulting explosion, billows of smoke drifting in all directions.

“It’s nice to see old friends,” Iroh remarked as they made their getaway. Zuko hauled Emi to face the right way on their ostrich horse, scowling as he did so.

“Too bad you don’t have any old friends that don’t want to attack you!” he snapped at his uncle.
“Hmm…old friends that don’t want to attack me…” Iroh mused to himself. Emi rolled her eyes, looking back behind them every so often to make sure they weren’t being followed.

---

They soon stopped at a place called the Misty Palms Oasis. In Emi’s opinion, it was everything but. The entire place looked rundown and shady. If anything, it looked like an oasis for criminal types. She trailed behind Iroh and Zuko as they made their way into a makeshift tavern, unable to shake the feeling they were being watched. Nervously, she readjusted the scarf hiding her pale hair, making sure no strands were falling out.

“No one here is going to help us,” Zuko said bitterly to his uncle as they took seats at a table. “These people just look like filthy wanderers.”

“Well…so do we,” Emi remarked, tugging at her dusty old clothes.

Iroh didn’t reply, simply gazing around at the various people milling about in the dim interior.

For a long while they simply sat at the table, Emi growing increasingly bored while Zuko’s scowl became more pronounced. Iroh just continued to observe the other patrons with mild interest. Whatever, or whoever, he was looking for seemed to have not made an entrance just yet.

At long last, his eyes seemed to settle on someone in particular, a small smile gracing his face. “Ah, this is interesting. I think I found our friend.” Zuko and Emi looked over to see an old man sitting alone at a Pai Sho table. Emi felt her face light up at the sight while Zuko merely scowled.

“You brought us here to gamble on Pai Sho?” he demanded.

“I don’t think this a gamble,” Iroh replied cryptically, standing up and making his way over to the man. Zuko and Emi looked at one another before following him.

“May I have this game?” Iroh asked once he had reached the table.

“The guest has the first move,” the other man said, gesturing toward the empty seat. Zuko and Emi took seats nearby to watch. Iroh laid down his first tile, the white lotus. “I see you favor the white lotus gambit,” the man remarked. “Not many still cling to the ancient ways.” He bowed, his palms clasped together.

“Those who do can always find a friend,” Iroh replied, mirroring the position.

“Then let us play.”
It was the most bizarre, fast paced game of Pai Sho Emi had ever seen. Her eyes flicked from one tile to the next, unable to figure out what sort of strategy the two men were applying. Zuko seemed no better off, looking just as confused as she was. Before she knew it, the last tile had been placed, creating the image of a lotus upon the board.

“Welcome, brother,” the man said. “The white lotus opens wide to those who know her secrets.”

“What are you old gasbags talking about?!?” Zuko snapped.

“I always tried to tell you that Pai Sho is more than just a game,” Iroh replied, smiling secretively.

Before Emi could consider this a tall, muscled man stormed over to their table, his companion following close behind. “It’s over! You three fugitives are coming with me!” he yelled, looking rather intimidating while his friend was much less so, though he had a calculating glint in his eyes.

Iroh’s game buddy suddenly stood up, glaring at the three of them accusingly. “I knew it! You three are wanted criminals with a giant bounty on your heads!”

Emi’s eyes widened while Zuko snarled. “I thought you said he would help!” he turned to his uncle angrily.

“He is. Just watch.”

“You think you’re going to capture them and collect all that gold?” the old man continued in a loud, carrying voice.

All at once, the tavern fell silent. Emi could feel the stares upon them filled with greed, while the looks that fell toward the first two men were filled with deadly intent.

Then, chaos erupted. Every man fought against each other, determined to take the fugitives and collect the money for themselves. Emi found herself rooted to the spot, leaving Zuko with the task of dragging her along as they followed Iroh and his friend out of the tavern in the midst of the fighting.

They traveled through the decrepit streets until they came to a particular building. As the man ushered them inside, Emi saw that it was filled with an array of plant life.

“It is an honor to welcome such a high ranking member of the Order of the White Lotus,” the man said to Iroh with a bow. “Being a Grand Master, you must know so many secrets.”

“Yes, I do. I have many secrets, but they are not for public consumption.”

“Now that you’ve played Pai Sho, are you going to do some flower arranging? Or is someone in
this club going to offer some *real* help?” Zuko demanded as they followed the older men to the back of the shop.

“You must forgive my nephew,” Iroh remarked to his friend. “He is not an initiate, and has little appreciation for the cryptic arts.”

Emi clapped a hand to her mouth so Zuko wouldn’t see the amused smile that lit up her face.

They stopped in front of a door, where the old man knocked and stepped back. A small hole opened up at the top as another man’s eyes peered out at the small group.

“Who knocks at the garden gate?” he asked.

“One who has eaten the fruit and tasted its mysteries,” Iroh replied. The man inside disappeared from view, opening the door to grant them entrance. As Emi and Zuko made to follow Iroh and his friend into the room, the door promptly shut in their faces. After a moment the hole opened again and Iroh's eyes peered out at them.

“I’m afraid it’s members only,” he explained. “Wait out here.”

Emi sighed as the little hole closed once more and leaned against one of the tables, unwrapping her hair in relief. Yuuka finally poked her head out of her tunic, sniffing curiously at the new smells.

“You’ve gotten better,” Zuko remarked after a few minutes of silence.

“At what?” Emi asked, her brow knitting in confusion.

“Your Airbending. Your fighting. You’ve gotten better.”

“Oh.” Emi blushed a little at the compliment. “Thanks. I’m still no master though…”

“You’ll be fine,” he replied, looking away.

They fell into a silence. Zuko kept stealing glances over at Emi as she wandered around the shop with Yuuka in tow, admiring the many different plants. He had found during his time alone that he had missed the sight of her, missed her smile, her laugh. Even the annoying way she seemed to be excited about everything. Zuko scowled to himself, forcing his gaze away. However, his eyes eventually trailed back to where she stood, gently prodding the leaf of one plant. Another thing he missed was how it felt to touch her, to be near her. Her gentle warmth was a balm to his rage, a light for him to grasp onto in the middle of his storming mind.
But even so, it couldn't work. She was an Airbender, and he...he was the heir to the Fire Nation throne. He had a purpose, a destiny to go back to his home. And there she wouldn't be able to go. He had tried to convince himself before, when they first became fugitives, that she could stay by his side. But he had had a lot of time to think and he knew Emi would not be safe there. She didn’t belong with him.

Even thinking that made his heart ache in a strange way.

Several hours passed as Emi lounged against the tables, bored out of her mind. Zuko had somehow managed to fall asleep, which she thought was quite an achievement. She took the opportunity to drink in the sight of him. Even careworn and covered with dust from the road he looked handsome. Regal. Everything a prince should be. His hair had gotten longer, too, coming out of his scalp like a tuft of ragweed. She found herself wanting to run her hands through the locks again. He'd probably not go for it this time, she reasoned to herself with wry grin.

Just then the door finally opened, startling Zuko awake.

“What’s going on? Is the club meeting over?” he asked when he had gotten his bearings.

“Everything is taken care of,” Iroh replied, bowing to his friend. “We’re heading to Ba Sing Se.”

“Ba Sing Se?” Zuko repeated incredulously. “Why would we go to the Earth Kingdom capital?”

“The city is filled with refugees. No one would notice three more,” the other man replied.

“We can hide in plain sight there,” Iroh continued. “And it’s the safest place in the world from the Fire Nation. Even I couldn’t break through to the city.”

The door to the shop suddenly opened and another man walked in. “I have the passports for our guests. But there are two men out in the street looking for them.”

The four of them exchanged grim looks, going over to peek out the window. Outside, they saw the two men who had started the fight in the tavern last night, shoving the wanted posters of Zuko, Iroh, and even Emi into the faces of passerby. Emi grimaced, wondering how they were going to be able to get past them. When she voiced this concern, Iroh and his friend looked amused.

“I and my nephew will be hiding in flower vases,” Iroh remarked. “You will be fine walking alongside the cart.”

Emi raised an eyebrow at the mental image of Zuko and Iroh crouching down inside flower pots, biting back a chuckle. She retrieved her scarf and tied her hair back up, tucking in the pale strands. Yuuka returned to her place in her tunic, and they all began to leave the shop through the back
door. Until Emi stopped in horror.

“Wait! What about Daichi?” she asked anxiously.

“We can’t take the ostrich horse with us, Emi,” Zuko said impatiently.

“But…what’s going to happen to him?” She didn’t want anything bad to befall the creature. He had been with them through so much, it didn’t feel right to just abandon him.

“I assure you my dear, we will take good care of him for you,” Iroh’s friend said, smiling down at her.

Emi pursed her lips, but nodded and continued to follow the others. At least she could be assured that Daichi would be safe and happy.

The man that gotten them their passports held the cart holding large vases for Zuko and Iroh to climb into, placing flowers in after them to ensure that they would be completely covered. Emi would walk with him, pretending to be a brother and sister on their way to deliver two vases of flowers to the next town. Emi felt a bubble of excitement well up inside her at the thought of seeing more of the Earth Kingdom. But more importantly, she was thrilled to be going to the city where Haruka had grown up.

Chapter End Notes

Because I have no self control, I might start posting my second ATLA fanfic here at some point. I'm trying to be good and wait for this story to at least come to completion, but everyone's support and comments are making me eager to post more stories. Sincerely, thank you for taking the time to read this stuff. It means a lot to me.

<3
In it for the Long Haul

Chapter Notes

You know what's really cheesy and probably done to death at this point? A jealous love interest. So on that note, enjoy this ridiculousness of a chapter. Why?

Because gods help me I love a jealous Zuko.

In it for the Long Haul

Emi and her companions were currently on a ferryboat sailing for Ba Sing Se. They were using their old aliases: Mushi, Cho, and Lee. Emi found herself watching the passing scenery with fascination. It was a very different feeling to sail through a bay rather than across an ocean; far less choppy waters, for one thing.

Zuko, of course, was as bitter as ever. He loathed being surrounded by so many pathetic people, and he loathed that he was counted among them.

“Who would have thought after all these years I’d return to the scene of my greatest military disgrace…as a tourist!” Iroh remarked, chuckling at the irony. Emi smiled while Zuko merely glared at them both.

“Look around. We’re not tourists. We’re refugees.” The men were currently standing at the rail while Emi sat upon it, sipping the rather foul tasting gruel. Even so, it was food, and she was grateful for it. Zuko, however, spat the stuff out. “I’m sick of eating rotten food, of sleeping in the dirt! I’m tired of this.”

“Aren’t we all?’”

They turned to see a tall young man standing some ways behind them, a lazy smirk upon his face as he chewed a grass stalk. Emi could tell he was a smooth guy, naturally charismatic. But she didn’t trust his type. They could easily twist words to suit their purposes. Dangerous people if they have certain inclinations.

“My name’s Jet. And these are my Freedom Fighters.” He gestured to the two kids beside him, a girl and a boy, though the girl looked very boyish. “Smellerbee and Longshot.” They nodded in greeting.

“Hello,” Zuko replied stiffly.
“Here’s the deal,” Jet said, walking a little closer. “I hear the captain’s eating like a king while his refugees have to feed off the scraps. Doesn’t seem fair, does it?”

“What sort of king is he eating like?” Iroh asked.

“The fat, happy kind.”


“You guys want to help us…liberate some food?”

Both Emi and Zuko looked into their bowls. Now that she knew there was better food to be had, she couldn’t stomach looking at the gruel. She dumped her bowl into the water while Zuko threw it forcefully away.

“I’m in,” he said.

“Me too,” Emi added, hopping down from her post on the rail.

“No, you’re not,” Zuko snapped, glaring down at her.

“Excuse me, but you’re the one who said I was getting better at fighting,” Emi retorted, crossing her arms.

“This isn’t about fighting; this is about stealth!” he shot back, turning away from her. Emi wanted to shout in frustration; she was an Airbender for goodness sake. Who knew stealth better than she?

“We could use all the help we can get,” Jet remarked, winking at Emi.

Zuko shot him a furious glare. “Fine,” he relented, storming off.

After assuring her that they would return around nightfall, Emi turned back toward the rail, her mood significantly more sour now.

“Who is he to tell me what I can and can’t do?” she lamented to Iroh. “I mean, I am an Airbender! I know I can’t go flying around the boat, but I can use it to my advantage! He knows that! Right?”

Iroh listened to her tirade in silence, a small smile playing on his lips. “Perhaps he just wanted to save you from any possible harm,” he remarked.
“Or maybe he just enjoys irritating me,” Emi scowled. Iroh chuckled but said nothing more.

That night they made a smooth liberation of the food. Emi fought to prove herself to Zuko, to show him she wasn’t a weak liability as she sneaked along the upper decks with the other Freedom Fighters. She felt she had done an exemplary job, and with little use of her Airbending.

They handed out the food to the other passengers afterward, all of them murmuring words of thanks and gratitude. Then, the group sat together to eat and chat. Emi listened silently as Jet explained some of his reasons behind moving to Ba Sing Se. She had to admit, he wasn’t as shady as he had come off at first. But there was still something beneath his façade that just didn’t quite sit right with her. Once she had eaten her fill, Emi moved away to enjoy the night in quiet elsewhere. Besides, she was still irritated with Zuko.

Emi breathed in the night air, relishing the tang of the water as they drifted through the bay. She leaned against the rail, letting her mind wander to the great city of Ba Sing Se, wondering what would await her and Zuko and Iroh once they got there.

“Hey.”

Emi nearly jumped out of her skin, whirling around to see Jet standing nearby with a small smile on his face.

“Sorry, did I scare you?” he asked.

“It’s okay. I was just thinking. I guess I got lost in thought,” Emi replied, turning back toward the water. She felt him move to stand beside her, looking out over the waters as well.

“You were pretty great tonight,” he remarked. “I’ve never seen anyone move as gracefully as you do.”

Emi blushed, grateful for the darkness that hid the reddened skin from his sight. “Um…thank you.”

“You know, we could use someone with your skill in our group,” Jet said, moving his hand to catch a strand of hair that had fallen out of her head scarf. “Huh, never seen yellow hair before.”

“I-it’s a family trait,” Emi muttered, shoving the offending strand back into her scarf.

“I like it. It’s pretty. Like you.”
Emi’s blush deepened. While on the one hand she was flattered by his interest, on the other she herself was not interested. And there was a very good reason for that.

“...Well,” she managed to say, stepping back from the rail. “It’s getting l-late. Should probably… head back. Go to sleep. O-or something.”

Jet raised an amused eyebrow at her flustering. “Alright. Good night, Cho.”

“Night,” Emi muttered, quickly making her way back to the sleeping area while at the same time trying not to seem too eager to escape. As she passed by a shadowed corridor, she failed to notice the golden eyes that stared after her. They soon returned their attention to Jet, the orbs narrowing.

- - -

It was a very misty morning. Zuko stood at the rail, scowling out into the pearly clouds that raced over the water. He hadn’t gotten much sleep last night. Not after seeing Jet flirting with Emi. His scowl deepened and he tightened his grip on the metal at the mere memory of it. He couldn’t help but wonder what would have happened if Emi had stayed there any longer. She had seemed embarrassed by his attention, but at the same time she hadn’t said anything against it. Zuko didn’t like that. Not one bit.

Behind him, he heard someone approach. “You know, as soon as I saw your scar I knew exactly who you were,” Jet remarked.

Zuko glared at the water. *Keep going after Emi, and you’ll find that out first hand,* he promised fiercely.

“You’re an outcast, like me,” Jet continued, oblivious to Zuko’s anger. “And us outcasts have to stick together. We have to watch each other’s backs.” He came to stand next to Zuko, peering over at him. “Cause no one else will.”

From out of the mists, the wall of Ba Sing Se appeared. Zuko took a breath and finally looked over at Jet. “Do you think being an outcast automatically grants you certain liberties?” he asked, his expression painfully neutral.

Jet frowned. “What are you talking about, Lee?”

Zuko’s façade broke, his fury blazing in his eyes. “I saw you last night with Cho; forcing yourself on her! Is that what you think you deserve? To do whatever you want to whoever you want?!!”

Jet held up his hands. “Whoa, whoa, easy there, Lee! It wasn’t anything like that-”

“If you ever go near her again, I’ll make sure you regret it,” Zuko hissed, storming away before Jet
Emi could not fathom what had pissed Zuko off so badly. He refused to look at or even speak to her. He simply marched off the ferry as soon as it had docked, leaving her and Iroh to trail along behind him.

“Do you know why…?” Emi asked, but Iroh shrugged.

“Perhaps he just had a bad night’s sleep. He was quite restless last night,” he remarked. Emi frowned, but let the subject drop.

They soon arrived at the passport booths where they were checked over by a surly middle aged woman with a rather large mole on her forehead.

“So, Miss Cho, Mister Lee, and…uh…Mister Muhshi, is it?” she remarked, looking over their respective passports.

“It’s pronounced Moo-shi,” Iroh corrected gently.

“Are you telling me how to do my job?” the woman snapped.

“Uh…no, no,” Iroh assured her, moving closer to the station. “But may I just say that you are like a flower in bloom; your beauty is intoxicating.”

Emi had to clap her hands against her mouth to keep her giggles quiet while Zuko ran a hand over his face in exasperation.

“Mm, you’re pretty easy on the eyes yourself, handsome. Rawr,” the woman flirted, stamping their passports. “Welcome to Ba Sing Se.”

She pushed the passports toward Iroh, who turned back to the two teens and held out the tickets with a wide grin.

Zuko snatched his. “I’m going to forget I saw that,” he hissed, stalking away.

“You’re a very charming man, Iroh,” Emi assured him as they followed a few paces behind.

They soon found themselves in the train station with hundreds of others, all watching for the next ride to come in. Emi and Zuko sat on either side of Iroh as they waited. She looked around at the other refugees, smiling at the rambunctious children who were so oblivious to the world around
them. As her gaze wandered back over to the station entrance, she saw Jet coming toward them, his friends hanging back. She blushed anew and quickly looked away, making herself busy with their bags as Yuuka helped out by pawing at the material.

“Get your hot tea here! Finest tea in Ba Sing Se!” A tea vendor came rolling through, and Iroh waved his hands excitedly.

“Oh! Jasmine, please!” he called out to the man. The vendor poured him a cup of tea and moved on. When Iroh went to take a sip, however, he spat it right back out, startling Emi and Yuuka. “Blech! Coldest tea in Ba Sing Se is more like it! What a disgrace!”

Jet stared at Iroh for a moment before turning to Zuko. “Hey, can I talk to you for a second?”

Zuko heaved a sigh and stood up, following him a short distance away.

“Look, whatever it is you think happened between me and your cousin, I assure you I had nothing but good intentions. And I’m sorry if it came off the wrong way,” Jet explained. “I really didn’t mean any harm. But, look, I do think you guys could be an asset to our group, especially in this city. Do you want to join the Freedom Fighters?”

“Thanks, but I don’t think you’d want us in your gang,” Zuko replied shortly.

“Come on, we made a great team getting that captain’s food. Think of all the good we could do for these refugees.”

“I said no,” Zuko turned and walked back to Iroh and Emi.

“Have it your way,” he heard Jet reply. He resisted the urge to scowl; barely.

Emi looked up guiltily as Zuko returned to them. She had been playing lookout for Iroh as he heated up his tea, something she knew Zuko would definitely frown upon. But she just couldn’t resist the man’s sad eyes.

Zuko paused next to them, scanning the area. He then promptly slapped the steaming teacup out of his uncle’s hands. “What are you doing Firebending your tea?!” he hissed. “You know, for a wise old man that was a pretty stupid move!”

“I know you’re not supposed to cry over spilled tea, but,” Iroh looked down sadly at his broken cup, “it’s just so sad!”

“And you!” Zuko rounded on Emi. “What were you doing letting him?!”
“Oh come on, it was just a cup of tea. What harm can that do?” Emi retorted, glaring up at Zuko. He grit his jaw and turned away as the train pulled into the station. They all grabbed their belongings and headed over with the rest of the refugees in silence. Once on the train, they sat in some empty seats next to a family with a newborn baby.

“What a handsome baby,” Iroh complimented the mother, tickling the infant’s chin.

“Thank you,” she replied, smiling.

Emi smiled at them as well before turning around in her seat to watch the new scenery unfold. She admired the sprawling fields and hills that sat between the inner and outer walls, but once they made their way through the second tunnel, Emi gaped at the city that spread out before them. It must have covered miles all around. She felt Yuuka squirm out of her place in her tunic, also eager to take in the sight of this new place.

Next to her, Zuko was watching Emi from the corner of his eye, his face expressionless and his mind a tangle of confusing thoughts. Whatever happened next, they would be stuck in Ba Sing Se for a long time. And he wasn’t sure how he felt about that.
Haruka had warned her once that Ba Sing Se, though a great Earth Kingdom city, did have its share of poverty and families struggling to survive. The wonder of seeing the city for the first time was now shadowed by the location of their new home, which was in the Lower Ring.

Still, Emi was determined to make the most of it.

They were walking through the streets, Emi gazing around at the sights curiously while Zuko kept his eyes on the ground, his jaw clenched. Iroh had disappeared after passing a flower vendor, eager to observe the different plants.

Emi ran a hand over her new clothes; well, new to her. Her long tunic and trousers were second-hand, but she appreciated that she had some fresh clothes regardless. Especially after their harrowing trek across part of the Si Wong desert. Iroh soon caught up to them, holding a beautiful vase of orange flowers.

“They are gorgeous,” Emi remarked, sniffing the petals appreciatively.

“I just wanted our new place to look nice. We do have a lady with us, after all,” Iroh said with a wink.

“This city is a prison,” Zuko muttered darkly. “I don’t want to make a life here.”

“Life happens wherever you are, whether you make it or not,” Iroh replied. “Now come on. I found us some new jobs, and we start this afternoon.”

“Ooh, excellent! I’ve never had a job before!” Emi exclaimed, clapping her hands excitedly.

“You’re excited about working?” Zuko asked in disbelief.

“It’s like your uncle said; life happens wherever you are. Might as well make the most of it, right?” she shrugged sheepishly, taking off down the road after Iroh.

Their new jobs consisted of serving and making tea, and cleaning up tables. Emi grinned; of course Iroh would pick a tea shop as a place to work. They were handed plain white aprons that would serve as their uniforms while their new manager appraised them.

“Well, you certainly look like professional tea servers,” he remarked, smiling. “How do you feel?”
“Ridiculous,” Zuko replied bitterly.

“Great!” Emi replied enthusiastically.

“Uh…does this possibly come in a larger size?” Iroh asked, still struggling with the tie to his apron.

“I have extra string in the back,” their manager said. “Have some tea while you wait.” He poured them their cups and handed them out before going to the back room.

Zuko merely stared at his cup. Emi gave it a sniff, wrinkling her nose at the exceptionally bitter tang. Iroh took a great gulp of the liquid, his face contorting with disgust.

“This tea is nothing more than hot leaf juice!” he cried out.

“Uncle, that’s what all tea is,” Zuko grumbled impatiently.

“How could a member of my own family say something so horrible?!” Iroh demanded indignantly. “We’ll have to make some major changes around here!”

He grabbed the offending pot of tea and dumped it out of the window nearby. Emi frowned at her cup and gave it an experimental sip. She had to admit, it really did taste awful.

Their first day of work went rather well. They had had a steady stream of customers, but they were not so overwhelmed that they were running around in a panic. Overall, Emi really enjoyed herself. More so because of the fact that she was able to interact with people without being a prisoner or a fugitive. To them, she was just a tea shop girl. And she rather liked it.

Emi lounged on her bed back at their apartment at the end of the day, relaxing with Yuuka resting on her belly. Iroh and Zuko were in the other room, also resting. Their new home was small and cramped, the area they lived in was in close quarters to other tenants and from time to time she could hear the chatter of people nearby.

“Would either of you like a pot of tea?” Iroh called out to them.

“We’ve been working in a tea shop all day,” Zuko snapped wearily. “I’m sick of tea!”

“Sick of tea?!” Iroh repeated incredulously. “That’s like being sick of breathing!”

Emi chuckled, moving to stand up and laying Yuuka in her vacated spot. The sugar glider merely cracked open her eye before curling up once again.
“I’ll have some tea,” she said, walking into the other room.

“Of course you would,” Zuko muttered darkly.

Iroh rummaged around the cupboards for a moment, frowning. “Have either of you seen our spark rocks to heat up the water?” he asked, turning to them. Zuko didn’t reply and Emi gave a helpless shrug. Iroh stroked his beard thoughtfully and left their apartment. A short moment later, he returned with some new spark rocks.

“I borrowed our neighbors’. Such kind people.” Iroh struck the rocks together, making the fire for their water to boil.

“Well that’s good,” Emi remarked. “Wonder what happened to ours, though.”

“I’m not sure. We’ll get some new ones tomorrow before we head to work,” Iroh replied, making the tea.

Once the tea was set, he poured out a cup for himself and Emi. They sat down at the low table, drinking in companionable silence while Zuko lounged a short distance away, brooding over whatever dark thoughts had taken hold of him.

- - -

One night, not long after they had settle into their new home, they were nearing the end of their work day. The air within the tea shop was comfortable and lazy, and Emi felt herself being affected by the aura. She wanted nothing more than to lounge on a chair by the window and sip tea while admiring the sounds of the night.

However, she had a duty to attend to, and that was helping Zuko clear the vacated tables of the discarded tea cups and pots. Meanwhile, Iroh was pouring more tea for a couple of officers nearby.

“This is the best tea in the city!” one of them complimented.

“The secret ingredient is love,” Iroh replied, holding the tea pot with reverence. Emi chuckled while Zuko looked at his uncle with disgust. She followed him back to the counter with a tray of used cups, where the manager stood looking very happy with their business.

“I think you’re due for a raise,” he remarked to Iroh.

Before the other man could reply, the door to the shop slammed open. Emi looked around in alarm, her eyes widening at the sight of Jet standing there. And he looked livid.
“I’m tired of waiting!” he snapped, marching forward. “Those three are Firebenders!” He pointed an accusatory finger at Iroh, Zuko, and Emi. Well…right on two counts, she remarked to herself silently, backing away from the mad glint in Jet’s eyes. He withdrew his hooked swords, ready to start fighting.

“I know they’re Firebenders!” Jet continued. “I saw the old man heating his tea!”

“He works in a tea shop,” one of the officers said, looking concerned.

“He’s a Firebender! I’m telling you!” Jet insisted.

“Drop your swords boy; nice and easy,” the man commanded, both he and his partner standing up grimly.

Jet ignored them and approached the accused three. “You’ll have to defend yourselves. Then everyone will know. Go ahead; show them what you can do.” Emi gulped nervously as the Jet continued to edge closer and closer. However, Zuko stepped forward, taking the swords from one of the officer’s belt and wielding them himself.

“You want a show? I’ll give you a show,” he promised, readying himself.

Emi had never seen Zuko fight with swords before. She had had no idea he had even been trained with such weapons. Not until now. And she was enthralled.

Both men moved with ease, each swing of their blade effortless. Zuko made to move to higher ground, using the tables to his advantage even when Jet sliced through the wood. He was as agile and graceful as he was when Firebending. Emi realized that this was a useful skill to have, when one couldn’t rely on their bending solely.

The fight then moved outside, both men crashing through the door but swiftly regaining their footing. They slammed together, their blades shaking with the muscled force behind them.

“You must be getting tired of using those swords,” Jet taunted. “Why don’t you go ahead and Firebend at me?”

Zuko merely snarled and shoved Jet away, following through with a barrage of hits.

“Please, son! You’re confused!” Iroh called out to them from the doorway where he, Emi, and the officers stood watching. “You don’t know what you’re doing!”

Both ignored the older man, swiftly wielding their blades dangerously close to one another. After
one slice nearly grazed the skin of Jet’s face, he leapt up and landed on a well nearby, out of reach.

“You see that?! The Fire Nation is trying to silence me!” he yelled out to the gathering crowd of onlookers. “It’ll never happen.”

He leapt down, coming back to Zuko with a fresh round of attacks.

Emi shifted from one foot to the other, wanting desperately to help but knowing there was nothing she could do. Iroh seemed to feel the same way as they watched the vicious fight go on. Suddenly, through the crowd came several well-dressed men with green and black robes, their hats pulled low over their faces.

“Drop your weapons!” one of them demanded.

Jet and Zuko immediately backed off, but Jet wasn’t finished. “Arrest them! They’re Firebenders!” he commanded the new men.

“This poor boy’s confused,” Iroh explained. “We’re just simple refugees!”

“This young man wrecked my tea shop and assaulted my employees!” the manager added furiously.

“It’s true, sir. We saw the whole thing,” the officer said while his partner nodded in agreement. “This crazy kid attacked the finest tea maker in the city.”

Iroh blushed. “Oho! That’s very sweet.”

“Come with us, son.” The new men approached Jet, blocking his attack when he tried to swing his sword at them. Emi noticed their hands looked oddly lumpy, but before she could get a better look they were hauling Jet away, even as he continued to accuse them of being Firebenders.

---

Emi was silent for the remainder of the evening as they walked back to their apartment. Her mind was in a twisted whirl of confusion and regret. She hadn’t particularly liked Jet, but he wasn’t evil. He clearly had dealt with a lot in his past, and that was obviously because of the Fire Nation. She only hoped that he’d be okay. Eventually.

Once they got into their apartment, Iroh immediately set out to get ready for bed, worn out from the excitement of the night. Emi still felt wide awake, so she stayed out in the main room, sitting by the window with Yuuka in her lap.

“What’s wrong with you?”
Emi turned and saw Zuko standing there, his arms crossed. “Nothing,” she replied with a halfhearted shrug, turning back to the window.

Zuko scoffed and went to sit next to her. “No. It’s something. You’re never quiet like this.”

“I am sometimes,” Emi frowned.

“Yeah. When you’re asleep,” Zuko remarked, smirking lightly. “So what’s wrong?”

“I’m…worried about Jet,” Emi relented. She felt Zuko stiffen next to her.

“Why?” he snapped angrily. Emi turned to see him glaring at her, so she quickly explained herself.

“Look, I know he was the one who attacked you…and accused us of being Firebenders. But…still, he’s clearly had a hard time in his life. He’s just…he hasn’t been dealing with it properly. That’s why I’m worried about him. I just wish he could find his peace…”

Zuko continued to scowl at her and Emi sighed, reaching up to undo her scarf. She let the thick waves tumble down with relief; she really hated tying up her hair so often. She fingered a sandy lock, frowning. “Do I look like a Firebender to you?” she asked Zuko.

He blinked, clearly thrown off by her sudden question. “Why? Did you take it as an insult?” Zuko retorted.

“No!” Emi shook her head quickly. Then she sighed. “Well…I don’t know. I mean…I am an Airbender, but…maybe I don’t look like one…”

Zuko took the hand that had been fiddling with her hair into his own, gripping lightly. “Trust me, Emi. You definitely look like an Airbender.”

“You’re just saying that because you’ve known me for months,” Emi mumbled, blushing lightly.

“Just take the damn compliment, will you?” Zuko snapped.

Emi couldn’t help but chuckle. “Fine, alright. Thank you, Zuko.” She leaned over and kissed his cheek, making him flush slightly.

They sat there for several long moments, just staring at one another. Emi was beginning to feel uncomfortable at the intensity in the air, so she cleared her throat awkwardly.
“So…you know how to fight with swords?” she asked lamely.

Zuko huffed in amusement. “Yes, I do.”

Ignoring the way his laugh made her feel, she continued. “Do you think…maybe…I could learn how to fight with swords?”

“Seriously? You barely know how to fight with your Airbending.”

“Well, maybe if I learned another way to fight I’d get better with both!” Emi reasoned. “Come oon. Please?”

_Damn those eyes_, Zuko thought bitterly as Emi grinned up at him innocently. He heaved a sigh. “Fine. But we’ll have to find somewhere private to practice. Knowing you, you’d take someone’s head off if they got too close.”

“Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence,” Emi snapped, punching his arm lightly before standing up and striding over to her bed for the night. Zuko shook his head, smiling as he got up and went to his own bed.
Practice Makes Perfect

By the time they were able to get away and explore their part of the city more freely, they had already been in Ba Sing Se for nearly two and a half weeks. The work in cleaning up the tea shop and setting everything right had taken some time, but soon enough they had a steady stream of customers once again. All thanks to Iroh’s delicious tea recipes.

Emi stood from their little table after breakfast on their day off, stretching languidly. She was eager to go out and find a hideaway so she could start learning how to sword fight. She also thought of it as the perfect opportunity to get some Airbending in as well; Zuko and Iroh weren’t the only ones having to hide their bending, after all.

“Come on, hurry up!” she chastised Zuko as he steadily finished eating. He rolled his eyes while Iroh laughed.

“Big plans today?” he asked, winking at Emi.

“She wants to learn how to sword fight,” Zuko muttered, standing up at long last.

“Good for you, my dear! It is always wise to know several ways to defend oneself,” Iroh remarked. “Have fun you two. And be careful!”

“We will!” Emi replied, giving Yuuka a goodbye scratch on the head. Once he had strapped his swords to his belt, she took Zuko’s arm and dragged him out of the apartment.

As soon as they were outside, he yanked his arm back. “Would you calm down?” he snapped at Emi.

“I caaan’t,” Emi whined, shifting from one foot to the other. “I’m too jittery!”

Zuko ran a hand over his face in exasperation and stalked off down the street, Emi walking swiftly next to him.

It took them the better part of the day, but they finally found an abandoned cluster of buildings very near the inner wall. There was no one around as far as they could tell, and once they ducked inside a large warehouse, they were completely shielded from any prying eyes that might be patrolling on the wall.

Zuko removed his swords from his belt, holding the handles out for Emi to take. Once she did, she nearly dropped them on the ground; they were much heavier than what she had been anticipating.
“You have to hold them with a firm grip,” Zuko instructed. “You can’t be afraid of them.”

“I’m not afraid of them,” Emi insisted, still holding the swords delicately.

Zuko rolled his eyes. “Yes, you are. You’re holding them like they’re going attack you at any minute. If you want to be a sword fighter, the blades have to be an extension of yourself.”

Emi heaved a sigh and readjusted her grip, holding the swords more firmly. Now that they were comfortable in her hands, she didn’t feel like they were as heavy as she had originally thought.

“Now,” Zuko began, moving to stand behind her, “we’ll go through some basic stances. Slowly; you want to get a feel for the way you shift your weight with the swords.”

Emi fought to pay attention to what Zuko was showing her. But the way his chest brushed against her back, the grip of his hands on her own as they wielded the swords together, it was all so… intoxicating. She was only able to retain half of what he said, and by the time he moved back to let her go through it again, alone, that part was already melting away. Still, Emi was determined to make it known that she could handle using swords. She repeated the steps, her limbs shaking from carrying the extra weight alone now, but she managed to complete them. Somehow.

“Not bad,” Zuko said, sounding genuinely surprised.

Emi wrinkled her nose. “See? And you still have your head attached,” she remarked with a smirk.

“We only just started, Emi. Once we get going with the real practice, we’ll see how many limbs we come out with,” Zuko replied with a chuckle.

“Har har,” she said dryly, handing him back his swords. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’ll take advantage of this place to practice my Airbending.”

She turned her back, moving a few paces away when a flash of fire streaked by on her right. Emi turned around, raising an eyebrow at Zuko, who in turned grinned back at her.

Well then, Emi remarked inwardly, turning fully to face him. He wants to play? Fine, we’ll play.

She spun her hands around, creating a large air ball and sending it flying toward Zuko. He jumped to the side, punching out a few fireballs of his own. Emi cast an air shield against the flames, kicking her leg out to send a wave of wind back at him.

They leapt around the warehouse, shooting blasts of fire and air back and forth. Both teens were
swift and agile, able to dodge and attack almost simultaneously. Emi began laughing halfway through their match, her heart lighter than it had been of late.

She swung her hands out in front of her, a strong blast of wind flying through the air toward Zuko and hitting him square in the chest, effectively knocking him to the ground. Emi then swiftly leapt into the air, settling delicately onto his midriff.

“Ha! I win!” Emi announced, a playful smile on her lips.

Zuko didn’t reply. He couldn’t, really. He was far too focused on the way Emi was sitting upon him, straddling his waist with her hips so tantalizingly close to his own. And if she leaned down any more, he would be able to kiss her. And kiss her, and kiss her, and-

“Zuko? Hello? You okay?”

Zuko snapped his eyes to her green ones, alight with concern at his silence. He managed a laugh that sounded more like a grunt. “You just knocked the wind out of me, what do you think?” he remarked, hoping she wouldn’t be able to feel his heart hammering against his chest.

Emi titled her head, pondering the young man before her. She then shrugged and moved off of him, letting him stand on his own.

“Well, we should probably be heading back.” Emi said, looking out the door of the warehouse at the setting sun.

Zuko merely nodded, leading the way back to their apartment. When they arrived later that night, Iroh asked them about their training session. Emi immediately launched into an animated explanation, her face alight with joy. Zuko’s lips twitched in a smile but he turned away from the pair and went over to his bed, in desperate need of sleep.

- - -

During their time in Ba Sing Se, Emi had noticed one customer in particular who seemed to hang around the tea shop more often than anyone else. She was a pretty young woman, and she often eyed Zuko with interest whenever he came around to pour her tea or clear away her table. This made Emi grit her teeth so often that she would develop headaches.

“Uncle, we have a problem.”

Emi turned as Zuko came over to the counter with a tray of dirty dishes. Iroh was on a ladder nearby, restocking their supplies.

“One of the customers is on to us,” he continued, jerking his head toward one of the few occupied
tables in the shop. The one with the pretty girl. “Don’t look now, but there is a girl over there at the corner table. She knows we’re Fire Nation.”

Emi raised an eyebrow; how could Zuko be so blind? *Well...he doesn’t even know I’m in love with him,* Emi mused to herself bitterly. Iroh stepped down from the ladder and turned to look at the girl in question, only to have Zuko yank him back around.

“Didn’t I just say don’t look?!” he demanded in an undertone.

“You’re right, Zuko,” Iroh said with a glint in his eyes. “I’ve seen that girl in here quite a lot. Seems to me she has quite a little crush on you!”

“What?!” Zuko sputtered. Emi then saw the girl getting up from her seat and walking up to the counter, smiling pleasantly. She grumbled an excuse about her head and went to the back room; she could not deal with this. Not today of all days.

Back at their apartment later that night, Iroh was helping Zuko get ready for his date. Emi sat at the table nearby, silently listening as Iroh gave his nephew all sorts of pointers. Zuko was silent as well, his face a collage of odd emotions. Finally he was ushered out, the closing door ringing loudly in Emi’s ears.

“So, what shall we do for the rest of the evening?” Iroh asked Emi, joining her at the table. She shrugged halfheartedly, tickling Yuuka’s belly. Iroh frowned, pondering the young girl. “What’s on your mind, my dear?”

“Nothing,” Emi replied shortly. Iroh stroked his beard, peering at her knowingly.

“I think Zuko will find this night to be very enlightening,” Iroh said casually. “Sometimes, we need to go down different paths to be able to realize what it is we truly want.”

Emi raised her eyebrows at the older man, unsure of what he was trying to get at. “We both know what he wants, Iroh,” she remarked with a sigh. “To return to his rightful throne and follow his destiny.”

“Destiny has a funny way of steering us toward places we never would have thought to go,” Iroh replied with a smile.

“I suppose…” Emi frowned, lost in thought. “…It’s my birthday today.”

“It is?!” Iroh asked incredulously. “Why didn’t you say anything before?”
“I don’t know... Maybe because...this time last year, I was still living in that cottage at the edge of the Fire Nation. I was still living with Haruka.” Her eyes began to fill with the tears she had been fighting all day. “And...I didn’t feel so alone...”

“Oh, Emi.” Iroh moved to sit beside her, wrapping an arm around the sniffling girl. “You are not alone, my dear. We are with you.”

“Thank you Iroh...but that’s not what I meant,” Emi muttered. “When I lived with Haruka...I knew I was one of last Airbenders. But...it didn’t seem so bad back then. But now that I’ve traveled the world...and now that I know I’m not the last...somehow I feel so alone and lost. I feel more isolated than I did at the edge of the Fire Nation.”

“I am sure that someday you will meet the Avatar and learn of your heritage,” Iroh replied soothingly.

Emi scoffed. “How can I do that, Iroh? How can that ever be possible with the Fire Nation hunting him down? When I live with a man who still wants to capture him and turn him over to his family?” And that same man I am so foolish as to love despite that... she thought bitterly to herself.

“I cannot promise it will be easy,” Iroh said somberly. “The path you wish to follow will be a very difficult one. But if you are resolved, then I have no doubt you will succeed in the end.”

Emi smiled, still doubtful herself but grateful for Iroh’s support nonetheless.

They had some calming tea before she decided to turn in for the night. As Emi stood in the small washroom, washing away the traces of her tears, she caught sight of herself in the mirror. She had never bothered to notice before, but tonight she decided to really inspect herself.

The soft roundness of her cheeks were gone. A lot of her baby fat had been stripped away, leaving her a little more hardened yet still feminine. It was an odd contrast; she had her curves, and in some ways they had become more pronounced and yet she had angles as well, especially in her cheekbones. Emi furrowed her brow, pondering herself before she frowned and turned away from her reflection, deciding that what she needed the most at that moment was a good few hours of sleep.

- - -

She was awoken awhile later by the sliding door opening and closing to their sleeping area. Emi stirred lethargically, peering out the window at the dark night. Yuuka yawned on the pillow beside her head, curling up into a tighter ball.

“Sorry. Did I wake you?” Zuko’s voice came drifting quietly toward her.

“S’okay...” Emi muttered, still half dazed with sleep. She heard him walking along the floor until
he was within her sight, kneeling down on the ground next to her bedroll.

“Uncle told me it was your birthday today,” Zuko whispered.

“Mmhmm…” Emi mused. Part of her wasn’t entirely sure this wasn’t just some dream; it certainly wouldn’t be the first time her imagination had run wild while she slept.

“I…got you a present.”

“Really?” Emi yawned, gazing blearily up at Zuko. “What would that be?”

“Close your eyes.”

Emi sighed and closed her eyes again. She had almost been pulled back to the realm of sleep when she felt Zuko’s hands upon her face, and moments later his lips. It was a soft, gentle caress, yet it still set her skin smoldering pleasantly. Emi decided if this was all just a dream, then it would easily be the best dream she had ever had.

Zuko pulled away briefly before he reconnected their lips with another, more brief caress before moving away fully. Emi could have sworn he said something; it sounded like “better”. But she couldn’t be sure. She was already being lulled back into unconsciousness, a small smile upon her face.
The next several days that passed were pleasant for Emi. She had, of course, blushed furiously the
day following Zuko’s date; she still had no idea if that kiss had actually happened or if it had been
her own mind playing tricks on her. Zuko certainly wouldn’t say. But he, too, seemed to flush a
little when he looked in her direction. At least this time, though, he wasn’t shutting her out.

The girl Zuko had went on a date with didn’t come back to the tea shop. Emi wasn’t sure what had
happened, and while her curiosity was itching to find out she decided that as long as they didn’t
seem to have hit it off, that was all she cared about.

They were currently working in the tea shop, Emi pouring tea out for a pair of wealthy looking
customers. She gave them a kind smile and asked if there was anything else they needed before she
moved on to the next table. Behind her Zuko was clearing the empty tables, a sour look on his face.

She moved back to the counter where Iroh and the manager were standing looking like proud
parents. Emi bit back a laugh at the image they made as she set the tray down. Next to her Zuko set
his down as well, with a bit more force.

“Okay…is something wrong?” Emi asked hesitantly.

“Oh, no. I’m so happy we’re doing great business thanks to the flirty tea shop girl!” Zuko snapped,
glaring at her.

Emi narrowed her eyes. “What’s that supposed to mean? I don’t flirt, I’m just being nice!”

“Yeah, right,” Zuko sneered.

Emi scoffed indignantly and pushed past the older men; if Zuko wanted to be angry and brooding,
then that was his issue. But he would not drag her down as well.

She stood in the street outside the tea shop, trying to calm herself down. She used to have such a
mild temperament, but her time with Zuko seemed to be rubbing off on her.

Emi was snapped out of her brooding by the sight of papers raining down from the sky. She
wrinkled her nose in confusion, looking around for the source but saw none. She picked up one
flyer and looked at it, gasping with shock as she read the inscription.

Just then, the tea shop door opened and Zuko stormed out. Emi made to stuff the flyer away, but he
spotted her attempts.
“What are you doing?” he demanded, stepping forward. But Emi jumped back swiftly.

“N-nothing! Hey, we should get back to work, right? Let’s go!” Emi made to move past Zuko but he easily blocked her path. Before Emi could do anything else, he reached behind her back and snatched the flyer out of her hand. His eyes widened as he took in the words, and Emi’s heart sank.

“The Avatar…he’s in Ba Sing Se…” Zuko muttered to himself. He seemed to remember Emi was there, his golden eyes snapping to her sea green ones. “Why did you try to hide this from me?”

“Because…it’s not going to do you any good,” Emi explained, crossing her arms against the scowl Zuko had on his face.

“Not going to do me any good? Me being a fugitive the rest of my life is something good, then?!?” Zuko demanded.

“Look, I just didn’t think-”

“No, you didn’t think!” Zuko interrupted angrily. “I thought you were my friend! What kind of friend stands in the way of someone’s happiness?! Of their way back home?!”

He didn’t wait for her to reply, storming away angrily down the street and out of sight. Emi sighed, rubbing her teary eyes angrily. _Nothing good can come from this_, she thought to herself, moving to go back into the tea shop.

---

Later that day, she and Iroh were getting settled into their new apartment. Once she had returned to work, he had given her the wonderful news that he would be running his own tea shop, hence the move to the Upper Ring. Emi was happy for Iroh, but her happiness was soured by the argument she had had with Zuko. She wondered where he was; he hadn’t returned since he had stormed off earlier.

“So, I was thinking about names for my tea shop,” Iroh remarked as he unpacked. Yuuka kept getting in his way, playing with the various articles of clothing but he patiently removed her from the chest every time she did so. “How about the Jasmine Dragon? It’s dramatic, poetic; has a nice ring to it!”

Before Emi could answer the door opened and Zuko walked in. Without a word, he reached into his pocket and showed the flyer to his uncle, completely ignoring Emi.

“The Avatar is here in Ba Sing Se,” he said. “And he’s lost his bison.”
Iroh frowned, taking the flyer and looking it over. He then sighed. “We have a chance at a new life here. If you start stirring up trouble, we could lose all the good things that are happening for us.”

“Good things that are happening for you two!” Zuko snapped. “Have you ever thought that I want more from life than a nice apartment and a job serving tea?!”

“There’s nothing wrong with a life of peace and prosperity,” Iroh replied patiently. “I suggest that you think about what it is that you want from your life. And why.”

“I want my destiny.”

“What that means is up to you.” Zuko scowled and stalked away. Emi shook her head and continued to unpack mutely.

- - -

Several hours passed and Zuko had not returned. Emi kept pacing from the door to the window, Yuuka a comforting weight upon her shoulder but she could not help the anxiety that had settled in her stomach.

“Something’s wrong,” she said to Iroh, who had also been looking pensive.

“Yes. I believe you are right.” He stood up determinedly. “You stay here. I will go look for him.”

Emi nodded stiffly as he left the apartment. She hurried to the window, watching a few moments later as he disappear down the darkening streets and out of sight. With a sigh, Emi returned to pacing until she couldn’t even do that anymore.

“Maybe I’ll just get some sleep,” she muttered to her sugar glider. “I won’t be of any use if I’m exhausted from staying up all night.”

Not that she knew if she would be needed. But still, Emi thought that if she could fall asleep, then the wait wouldn’t seem so bad. She laid down on her bed and forced her breathing to be deep and even. Then, she emptied her mind of everything but the sound of her breaths. Slowly but surely, her muscles relaxed as the tension eased away, allowing her mind to finally settle.

“Emi…”

She looked around for the voice, so distorted and vague. But it sounded like they needed help. And she wanted to help.

“Where are you?” she called out, looking through the deep mists.
“Emi!” another voice laughed, sounding very familiar.

“…Haruka?” It was impossible, she knew. But there was no mistaking her voice. Then, as Emi tried to peer through the thick fog there she appeared, the mists clearing. Her mentor was floating in the air, her wizened face glowing with happiness.

“There you are, child!” she remarked, laughing. “I thought I lost you.”

“I haven’t been lost, I-I’ve been right here!” Emi called back, tears of joy blurring her sight.

“Why are you so sad, child?” Haruka asked, frowning.

“I…I thought you had died…” Emi replied.

“Oh, my dear. I am dead.”

“What?” Emi tried to move forward, but she was stuck to the ground. Haruka faded away from her sight, and all around the sky became filled with other people flying so freely. Emi tried to follow them, to find her mentor, but she couldn’t; the more she moved the faster she sunk into the ground.

Emi struggled, desperate to get free. As she looked around in panic her eyes fell on another familiar figure. “Zuko!” she called out. “Please, help me!”

“Why?” he sneered.

“Because…” Emi clenched her eyes shut, trying to force out the words that she had been keeping secret for so long. “Because…I love you. Please-”

Zuko scoffed and turned away. “I don’t need your love. You’re too weak; I could never love anyone like you.”

“Zuko, wait!” Emi cried out, but he disappeared into the darkness.

“You don’t belong here.”

Another voice, a man’s voice, unfamiliar to her ears, radiated through the air surrounding Emi.

“Let him go; you can’t help him. Not now.”
“But—” Emi tried to argue, only to have her voice stick in her throat. She was still sinking, still trapped, and the flying people above were watching her with detached interest. She tried to yank herself out of the ground, but then she looked over and saw Zuko nearby, seemingly asleep and also sinking into the ground. She had to help him. She had to. But Emi couldn’t save them both. But she couldn’t possibly choose. She couldn’t let go of the man she loved—

The front door opening snapped Emi to awareness. As she looked around dazedly, she saw that she had been tossing and turning in her sleep, her blankets askew and in a confused tangle around her legs. Yuuka had made her nest nearby at some point during the night, where she would be safe from the flailing limbs.

Emi quickly shot up from her bed, running out into the main room where Iroh and Zuko were. She let out a sigh of relief; they were okay. But then she took in Zuko’s appearance more fully. He was once again garbed in his black uniform, his swords swinging listlessly in his grip. And even more alarming was that he looked so…sickly.

“You did the right thing,” Iroh was saying. “Letting the Avatar’s bison go free.”

“I…don’t feel right…” Zuko muttered, swaying dangerously on his feet. He suddenly collapsed onto the ground, and Emi and Iroh rushed forward to his side.

“What’s wrong with him?” Emi asked anxiously.

“He is at war within himself,” Iroh explained, looking strained. “He made a critical decision that was in conflict with his image of himself. This illness will be something he must work through within his own mind. In the meantime, we will be here to help him through his fever. But once he awakens from his metamorphosis, he will be the prince he was always meant to be.”

Emi shuddered, hoping and praying that Zuko would be okay. She rallied with his uncle, gathering several blankets together to make a comfortable bed for Zuko. While his uncle helped him out of his black uniform, Emi went to their half-unpacked belongings, taking out her salve. It was best for physical wounds, but sometimes Haruka would use the cream on those suffering with mental illnesses and maladies as well. Perhaps it would help Zuko.

“Let him go. You can’t help him. Not now.”

“Yes, I can,” Emi muttered determinedly to herself, pushing the vague voice away.

They stayed with Zuko throughout the day, getting fresh bowls of water when the old ones would get too warm. He swam in and out of consciousness, occasionally able to rise enough to drink some water. Otherwise he slept fitfully, shaking with the intensity of his fever.
As night fell, Emi offered to watch over Zuko. She could tell Iroh was exhausted but he did put up a bit of a fight, wanting to stay with his nephew. However, Emi won in the end and he shuffled off to his bed for the night.

Emi sighed, placing a fresh wet cloth over Zuko’s forehead. She leaned her back against the wall nearby; she would rest for a moment. She only hoped there would be no repeat of her damning dreams this time.

---

*He sat upon his dais, fire flowering all around him. It felt right to be there; just like he had always imagined it would feel. Before him stood rows of Fire Nation soldiers, ready to go at his command. On the pillars on either side of him his two dragons coiled around the marble, one red and one blue.*

“*It’s getting late,*” the blue one crooned. “*Are you planning on retiring soon, My Lord?*”

“I’m not tired,” he replied.

“*Relax, Fire Lord Zuko. Just let go. Give in to it. Shut your eyes for awhile.*”

He felt his eyelids grow heavy. Maybe…he could-

“No, Fire Lord Zuko!” the red dragon cried, snapping him out of his daze. “*Do not listen to the blue dragon. You should get out of here, right now. Go! Before it’s too late!*”

“*Sleep now, Fire Lord Zuko,*” the blue dragon hissed, lulling him back into exhaustion.

“Zuko?”

He knew that voice. But…she was so faint, he could barely hear her…

“Sleep…”

If only the dragons would leave him be, he would be able to find her.

“Zuko! Please, come back!”

*His surroundings crumbled all around him, a black void opening up to swallow him whole. All there was was darkness and the blue dragon’s sharp eyes as it grinned wickedly, slithering its way closer.*
“Sleep…just…like…mother!”

Emi opened her eyes blearily, looking around at the morning light. She sat up straighter, her back cricking from the awkward position she had fallen asleep in. Her eyes settled on Zuko’s sleeping form, and she was pleased to see that his fever seemed to have abated.

She knelt back down by his bed, soaking a cloth in the water and dabbing it along his forehead. Zuko began to stir, his eyes opening and falling onto hers.

“How are you feeling?” Emi asked softly.

“Better,” he replied, smiling. She blinked; she had never seen him smile so widely before.

“Um…th-that’s great! I’ll go let your uncle know you’re awake now. Good thing, too. It’s the grand opening of his tea shop today. He’ll want you to be there for it!” Emi made to get up, but Zuko held her back, holding onto her arm with surprising strength for someone who had been sick all day and night.

“Hold on,” Zuko said softly, smiling at her. Emi found she couldn’t move either way, she was too stunned by his smile. She thought it suited him very well, but at the same time she had a nagging thought at the back of her mind.

Pushing it aside for now, Emi knelt back down next to Zuko and he sat up, his face inches from hers. She pulled back a little on instinct, but Zuko’s hand caught the back of her head and pulled her toward him, his lips connecting with her own. Emi felt herself immediately melting into his embrace, but nearly jumped out of her skin when she felt the lightest grazing of his teeth against her bottom lip. She gasped softly, and Zuko wasted no time in flicking his tongue into her mouth, lightly stroking her own.

This was a whole new experience for Emi, one that she quickly decided she absolutely loved. She tentatively let her tongue caress his, and she could feel his breath quicken as he drew her a little closer to him.

This time she was the one to break off the kiss, needing air or else she would faint right on his lap. As they caught their breath Zuko rested his forehead against hers, still smiling contentedly.

A clattering from the other room startled them, reminding Emi of where they were and who was nearby. She blushed and stammered something about going to see Iroh as she stood up, a little shakily at that. Zuko’s chuckling followed her out of the room, making her blush even more.
Emi found Iroh standing in front of their stove, brewing up some kind of white pasty substance. He turned at the sound of her approach, his eyebrows rising at her unkempt appearance.

“Are you alright, Emi?” he asked. “You seem a little…flustered.”

“What? Oh…y-yeah, I’m great! Super! Fantastic!” Emi babbled, grinning widely. Iroh continued to appraise her for a moment longer before turning back to his pot.

Just then Zuko came into the room, fully dressed and looking better than ever. Although, Emi figured her observation was probably due to their morning kiss… She blinked, her eyes focusing as she noticed that Zuko was smiling slyly at her. Emi grit her jaw and forced her gaze to the opposite wall as she took her seat at the low table.

“What’s that smell?” he asked his uncle, going over to the pot.

“It’s juk,” Iroh said, stirring the white substance. “I’m sure you wouldn’t like it.”

Zuko took an appreciative sniff, smiling at his uncle. “Actually, it smells delicious. I’d love a bowl, uncle.” He held out the dishes while Iroh raised an eyebrow at him. He glanced over at Emi, who was mindlessly drawing patterns on the table, her face still red.

“Now that your fever is gone, you seem different somehow,” Iroh remarked, an amused glint in his eyes as Emi raised hers to look over at the pair. She stuck her tongue out at him and looked away again.

“It’s a new day. We’ve got a new apartment, new furniture, and today’s the grand opening of your new tea shop!” Zuko took his and Emi’s bowls over to the table, setting hers down in front of her and giving her a kiss on the forehead before sitting down. “Things are looking up.”

Iroh smiled and joined them at the table. They ate in companionable silence, although every so often Emi’s mind would wander and she’d blush anew. If either man noticed they didn’t remark upon it.

Later that morning, they opened the Jasmine Dragon for the very first time. Almost immediately they got a steady stream of customers. It was a blessing to have extra help with the shop, otherwise they’d be overrun.

During a brief lull sometime around midday, Emi joined Iroh and Zuko as they stood off to the side
to admire the new shop. It was intricately decorated with an open flow in mind, lending plenty of tranquility in the already peaceful tea shop. Emi had to admit, Iroh really outdid himself with this place.

“Who would have thought when we came to this city as refugees that I’d end up owning my own tea shop,” Iroh remarked proudly. “Follow your passion, and life will reward you.”

Emi smiled at Iroh before catching Zuko’s gaze. He had been staring at her off and on all day, and it gave her a pleasant little thrill every time she caught his eyes. She blushed lightly and looked away again, forcing her mind to focus on their patrons.

“Congratulations, uncle,” Zuko said.

“I am very thankful.”

“You deserve it. The Jasmine Dragon will be the best tea shop in the city!”

“No. I am thankful because you both decided to share this special day with me. It means more than you know.”

“We’ll always be here for you, Iroh,” Emi smiled.

Zuko grinned as well, giving his uncle a hug. “Now, let’s make these people some tea!” he declared, walking off toward the back with Emi in tow.

“Yes! Let’s make some tea!” Iroh exclaimed excitedly, going over to the kettles.

Once in the back the two teens gathered together fresh cups to bring back into the main room. The platter to carry the dishes was filled to capacity, and while Zuko insisted that they make two trips Emi in turn insisted that two trips was for wimps.

“Just be careful. We wouldn’t want you to get hurt,” he said, frowning a little. Emi looked over at him, amused by his concern while at the same time finding that she kind of missed that look on his face.

“You worry too much,” she remarked with a light smirk. Before Zuko could make a retort she leaned up and silenced him with a kiss. After a few moments they pulled back, conscious of the waiting crowd eager for more tea.

“So,” Emi said as they walked back out to the main area of the shop. “The Jasmine Dragon’s doing well for its first day, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. Uncle’s really proud,” Zuko replied.
“He should be. He’s really come a long way. We all have,” Emi added, grinning. Zuko chuckled and kissed her cheek before moving on to serve tea. She followed suit, her small smile firmly in place for the remainder of the day.

- - -

Later that night they were cleaning up the shop once it had closed for the day. They had done really well, and Emi knew they’d have a lot of business in the future.

As she was clearing a table a man walked in, wearing very official looking robes. He made a beeline for Iroh, handing him a roll of parchment with a bow. “A message from the royal palace,” he said, leaving shortly after.

Iroh opened the scroll and scanned the writing, his eyes widening with every word he read. “I…I can’t believe it!”

“What is it, uncle?” Zuko asked.

“Great news! We’ve been invited to serve tea to the Earth King!” he exclaimed happily.

“That’s amazing!” Emi remarked, smiling widely.

“We must prepare. Only the finest tea will do!” Iroh ran off to the back, going to do just that.

Emi and Zuko chuckled, happy for the older man as they continued to clean up the shop.

The next day they made their way to the palace. Emi was awed by the grand structure, easily the biggest building she had ever laid eyes upon. Yuuka stirred slightly within her robes, having refused to stay behind as they left. Iroh was holding the intricately carved box that contained the necessary instruments for tea making with great care.

“Many times I imagined myself here,” he remarked to the two teens. “At the threshold of the palace. But I always thought I would be here as a conqueror.”

“And now, you’re an invited guest of the king,” Emi said with a smile. Yuuka poked her head up from the front of her robes, squeaking her agreement.

“We all are,” Iroh chuckled. “Destiny is a funny thing.”

“It sure is, uncle,” Zuko said.
Once inside, they were led through the winding hallways to the gardens out back, where a small pagoda sat amid the colorful flowers and hedges. After a few more winding hallways, they found themselves inside a spacious area with many wall hangings, a large backless throne situated on a raised platform before them. The trio knelt upon the floor in front of the throne where a small table sat, waiting for the tea to be served. Once everything was in its proper place, they waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Emi frowned; did it usually take this long to be granted an audience with royalty? She had no idea, but judging from the concerned looks on Iroh’s and Zuko’s faces, she gathered not.

“What’s taking so long?” Zuko remarked after a time of silence.

“Maybe the Earth King overslept,” Iroh guessed, looking around intently.

Just then, several men filed into the room. Emi recognized their uniforms as being the same ones from when Jet was arrested some time ago. They swiftly lined up in such a way that the trio was completely surrounded. The blank countenances of the men made her spine tingle in apprehension.

“Something’s not right…” Emi muttered.

“It’s tea time!”

The young Airbender felt her heart constrict at the sound of the cold voice. Azula herself walked into the room, wearing Earth Kingdom clothing and looking very satisfied at the circumstances. Zuko’s face suddenly lost the pleasant façade he had kept up the last couple of days as he jumped to his feet angrily.

“Azula!”

“Have you met the Dai Li?” Azula asked pleasantly, ignoring their looks of shock and hate. “They’re Earthbenders, but they have a killer instinct that is so… Firebender. I just love it.”

Iroh poured out some tea calmly, standing up. Emi followed suit, keeping close to the two men as she stared warily at the Dai Li. “Did I ever tell you how I got the nickname the Dragon of the West?” he asked his niece.

“I’m not interested in a lengthy anecdote, uncle,” Azula replied, gazing at her nails in a bored manner.
“It’s…more of a demonstration, really.” Emi frowned at Iroh, wondering what he was doing as he took a sip from his tea cup. Before she knew it Zuko had pulled her to his side, their backs against Iroh’s as he let fly a stream of fire from his mouth. They turned on the spot, the flames scattering the Dai Li. Zuko then grabbed Emi’s hand, pulling her toward the exit as Iroh kept up his fiery breath.

They pelted down the hall, the Dai Li agents shooting their rock fingers at them. They managed to avoid the missiles, keeping up their hell-bent pace until they came to the end of the hallway. Without missing a beat, Iroh shot out the wall with a bolt of lightning, jumping down into the bushes below. Emi made to follow, but she saw Zuko had stopped.

“What are you doing?! Come on!” Emi urged him.

“No, I’m tired of running!” he snapped, his old anger boiling to the surface. “It’s time I faced Azula.”

“Zuko, now’s not the time-” Before she could finish her sentence, Zuko grabbed her by the arm and pushed her out into the gardens. Emi used her Airbending to slow her descent, glaring up at the vacated hole. She had a very bad feeling in the pit of her stomach.

“Come, we need to get help,” Iroh said, taking her by the arm and running through the palace gardens.

“Where are we going to go?” Emi asked, her worry for Zuko inching higher the further they got from the building.

“To the only ones who can help,” he replied tersely.

As it turned out, those people were the Avatar and his friends. Emi kept close to Iroh, nervous as they approached the doors of the large house which they had been able to find thanks to a Dai Li agent who had tried to stop them. He was currently bound and gagged on the ground nearby, and none too happy about it.

Emi had only ever seen the Avatar and his friends from afar. Now, she would be standing with one of their enemies (though certainly not their greatest one) asking for help to save that particular individual. Yuuka stirred inside her robes, helping her to focus on something else. Their little guest also wriggled around, but they both ignored him.

Iroh knocked on the door, and they only had to wait for a moment before it was opened by the blind Earthbender.
“Glad to see you guys are okay,” she remarked with a smile, while the two boys behind her recoiled in shock.

“We need your help,” Iroh said, Emi lingering shyly behind him.

“You guys know each other?!?” the Avatar exclaimed incredulously.

“I met them in the woods once and knocked him down. Then, they gave me tea and some very good advice,” the Earthbender explained.

“May we come in?” Iroh asked. The girl nodded, and they approached the interior fully. Emi chanced a glance at the group and saw that both boys were looking at her oddly. She quickly averted her gaze, flushing slightly and patting her scarf to make sure her hair was well concealed.

“Princess Azula is here in Ba Sing Se,” Iroh explained.

“She must have Katara!” the Avatar gasped in horror.

“She has captured my nephew as well.”

The Avatar had a brief moment of hesitation before he took on a determined look. “Then we’ll work together to fight Azula, and save Katara and Zuko.”

“Whoa there!” the Water Tribe boy exclaimed, marching up to his friend. “You lost me at Zuko.”

“I know how you must feel about my nephew,” Iroh said. “But believe me when I tell you there is good inside him!”

“Good inside him isn’t enough!” the boy snapped. “Why don’t you come back when it’s outside him too, okay?”

“Katara is in trouble,” the Avatar pleaded with his friend. “All of Ba Sing Se is in trouble. Working together is our best chance.”

He seemed to struggle for a moment, but the Water Tribe boy finally relented and gave his nod of approval.

“We brought someone along that might help,” Iroh remarked, moving to go back outside.

The Earthbender ran out with him, immediately creating a rocky cage for the captured Dai Li agent.
Iroh approached him and pulled the strip of cloth that had been keeping him quiet out of his mouth.

“Azula and Long Feng are plotting a coup. They’re going to overthrow the Earth King,” the man immediately said.

*Well, that didn’t take long,* Emi remarked silently to herself.

“My sister; where are they keeping Katara?” the Water Tribe boy demanded.

“In the crystal catacombs of old Ba Sing Se. Deep beneath the palace.”

That was all they needed to hear. The group immediately took off to the palace, Emi still struggling to wrap her mind around the strange turn of events. An unpleasant wedge of worry was lodged in her stomach, and she couldn’t help but wonder what would come of this day.

Despite her fears, Emi did feel a thrill being on the back of the Avatar’s sky bison. They flew high over the city, covering ground far faster than they would have on foot. Before long they were outside the walls of the palace, the Avatar guiding his bison down and out of sight.

“Well what do you know,” the blind girl remarked as they all dismounted the great beast, her hand against the ground. “There is an ancient city down there. But it’s deep.” With a strong movement of her arms, she created a crater in the ground, quite deep but it would take a lot more effort to get into the catacombs themselves.

“We should split up,” the Water Tribe boy said. “Aang you go with Iroh and…uh…sorry, I didn’t catch your name before.”

Emi flushed slightly at being addressed so suddenly. “Emi.”

“Right. Go with them to get Katara and the angry jerk. No offense.”

“None taken,” Iroh shrugged, and despite herself, Emi smiled; it was fitting. Most of the time.

“And I’ll go with Toph to warn the Earth King about Azula’s coup.”

With that they split up. Aang was an excellent Earthbender, for being born an Airbender. Before long they were walking through a large, dark tunnel, Iroh holding a flame in his hand to light the way as the Avatar worked. They were all silent at first. For Emi, she just felt so awkward being close to another Airbender. Under different circumstances she would have been elated. But the constant worry kept that particular excitement at bay.
“So,” Aang finally spoke, breaking the silence. “Toph thinks you give pretty good advice. And great tea.”

“The key to both is proper aging. What’s on your mind?” Iroh asked kindly.

“Well, I met with this guru who was supposed to help me master the Avatar State, and control this great power,” Aang said, smiling for a moment before his face fell. “But to do it, I had to let go of someone I love. And I just couldn’t.”

Emi found herself sympathizing with his dilemma. She was strongly reminded of her dream, wondering if she could ever have the strength to let Zuko go. *If he doesn’t let me go, instead,* she thought sadly.

“Perfection and power are overrated,” Iroh said. “I think you are very wise to choose happiness and love.”

“But what happens if I can’t save everyone and beat Azula?” Aang asked worriedly. “Without the Avatar State…what if I’m not powerful enough?”

“Power comes from your essence,” Emi remarked without thinking, almost forgetting who she was talking to. Aang looked at her in surprise while Iroh smiled his encouragement. She blinked nervously, but continued on. “Well…what I mean is…my mentor told me once that to be truly strong in life you have to know yourself; mind, body, and spirit. The right path will not always be clear, and you might sometimes think you’ve made a bad choice. Maybe you will make some bad choices. But as long as you trust your instincts and listen to your heart, you’ll always be strong enough to overcome whatever obstacle that tries to get in your way.”

Aang smiled at her. “Thanks,” he said, shifting the rocks again. As the final bit of stone crumbled away they were met with a large and beautiful underground cavern, a pool of water shimmering in the glow of the crystals that lined the rocky walls all around them.

“They can’t be much further now,” Iroh remarked as they left the cliff, picking their way down a rocky path.

Before long they found another, smaller chamber hidden from sight, which they only managed to discover thanks to Aang’s Earthbending skills, which far surpassed anything that Emi had seen before. No doubt, that young Earthbender was in a league all her own.

Once the Avatar had created a shorter tunnel in the stone wall, they spotted Zuko and the Waterbender, Katara, within the chamber. The pair were standing near one another as if in deep conversation, but as soon as she heard the collapsing wall of rock Katara’s face lit up at the sight of her friend.
“Aang! I knew you would come!” She ran over to him, hugging the Avatar tightly. Emi, however, only had eyes for Zuko. He looked shocked and betrayed by their presence with Aang. Iroh ran over to him anyway, hugging his nephew tightly. Emi edged closer to the two of them, noting that the Avatar and Zuko were glaring at one another. Well, it was no wonder, really.

“Uncle, Emi…I don’t understand. What are you doing with the Avatar?!” Zuko demanded.

“Saving you, that’s what,” Aang retorted, making Zuko take a step toward him angrily. Iroh held him firmly back.

“Zuko! It’s time we talked.” He looked over at the Avatar and his friend. “Go help your other friends; we’ll catch up with you.”

Aang bowed and Katara nodded, looking curiously at Emi before Aang dragged her away.

“Why, uncle?”

“You are not the man you used to be, Zuko,” Iroh said firmly. “You are stronger and wiser and freer than you have ever been. And now, you have come to the crossroads of your destiny. It is time for you to choose.” Emi stiffened, her spine tingling as she sensed something, or someone, coming toward them within the walls. “It is time for you to choose good.”

Emi leapt into the air, hiding among the crystals along the far wall and ceiling as several shards shot up out of the ground, pinning Iroh in place. Two Dai Li agents and Azula came sliding down a hole that appeared in the wall moments later.

“I expected this kind of treachery from uncle. But you, Zuko?” Azula scoffed. “Prince Zuko; you’re a lot of things but you’re not a traitor. Are you?”

“Release him immediately!” Zuko demanded.

“It’s not too late for you, Zuko,” Azula continued. “You can still redeem yourself.”

“The kind of redemption she offers is not for you!” Iroh called out to his nephew.

“Why don’t you let him decide, uncle?” Azula snapped at the older man before turning back to her brother, a calculating smile on her face. “I need you, Zuko. I’ve plotted every move of this day; this glorious day in Fire Nation history. And the only way we win is together. At the end of this day, you will have your honor back. You will have father’s love. You will have everything you want.”
“Zuko…I am begging you. Look into your heart and see what it is that you truly want.” Emi felt her own heart tearing itself apart; the physical display of emotions crossing Zuko’s face made her fearing the worst, and hoping the best.

“You are free to choose,” Azula said, sending her Dai Li agents back up into the tunnel while she left through the one the Avatar had made.

As soon as she was gone Emi dropped down from her perch, staring at Zuko with apprehension.

“Zuko…you don’t believe her. Do you?” she asked.

His gaze snapped to hers. “Why shouldn’t I?” he demanded. “She’s my sister; she’s family!”

“So is Iroh!” Emi stepped forward. “And I trust him a hell of a lot more than I would her! Has she ever been there for you? Has she ever guided you when you needed it most?”

“Shut up!” Zuko yelled, his anger flaring. “You don’t know anything about my family!”

“I know what I’ve seen, and what I’ve seen is that your so-called family, excluding your uncle, don’t care about you!” Emi yelled back. “They never have! Why, Zuko, why would want to go back there?!”

“That’s where I belong! It’s my destiny!”

“And what about us?! Will you just abandoned us like we never existed?!”

“Why should I care about you?!” His words whipped her like a lance, stinging painfully. “You’re nothing to me! You’re a pathetic, weak, cowardly Airbender who will never be worthy of anyone!”

Emi stilled in shock, her anger swiftly leaving her with only despair and heartbreak. She swallowed with difficulty, casting her eyes to the stony ground. “Zuko…please…just, d-don’t do this.”

“Why?! Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t!”

“Because…” Emi grit her teeth; it was her last hope. If this didn’t work… “Because I…love you-”

Zuko scoffed harshly. “I don’t need your love. I don’t need anything you have to offer!”

He turned and stalked out of the cavern, leaving a chilling silence in his wake. Emi felt disconnected from her body, her mind going numb and yet at the same time she felt the most
incredible pain she had ever endured radiating from her chest. She blinked, her vision blurred with tears she hadn’t noticed before.

“Emi.” Somehow, Iroh’s voice reached her in her fog. She took a shaky breath; she had to get him out. Once he was freed, they would go to Zuko and everything would be okay. As long as Iroh was free, they’d be okay.

With that thought in mind she moved over to Iroh, trying to break the tough crystals. There had to be some weak spot somewhere.

“Emi, listen to me—”

“We’re going to be fine…” Emi muttered to herself, her limbs shaking. “We-we’ll get out of here, a-and we’ll be fine… Everything will g-go back to the way it w-was…”

“Emi!” Iroh yelled, causing her head to snap up and meet his sympathetic gaze. “You must go. Find the Avatar and his friends. Go with them.”

“What? N-no! I can’t leave you like this, a-and we can’t leave him—”

“Yes, you must. This is your chance, Emi. The path you wanted to take. You will be far safer and happier with the Avatar’s group.” Iroh smiled gently. “It will be alright.”

Emi clenched her jaw, squeezing her eyes shut to guard against the tears that would not be stopped. With a strangled cry she hugged Iroh as best as she could. “I’m so sorry, Iroh,” she whispered. “We’ll see each other again. I-I promise.”

“Yes, we will,” Iroh replied gently, giving her a kiss on the forehead. “Now go!”

Before Emi could change her mind, she took off running through the tunnel. Her mind had been blanketed in a daze once again, and all she registered was the pounding of her feet against the ground and the rustling of her gaudy robes, the intricate fabric threatening to trip her at any moment. But she pushed onward and before long, she came to the cliff where she had first seen the catacombs. Below, fighting with fierce intensity, Aang and Katara were matched against Azula and Zuko.

Even seeing him from a distance caused a stab of pain along her already wounded heart. But at the same time a hot prickling of anger worked its way along her spine, steelying her. If he wanted to abandon her, to abandon the only two people who had ever had his best interests at heart, fine. She would not leave him with the image of her standing alone, brokenhearted and weeping. No, she would leave him regretting the day he thought he could tear her apart.
With a feral cry, Emi leapt down, slamming a blast of wind toward the Fire Nation siblings as soon as she hit the ground. The current knocked them off their feet, causing Katara and Aang to look around in shock.

But Emi paid them no attention. She aimed her next strike towards Azula, who had gotten to her feet quicker than her brother, kicking out her legs to send another wave of air catapulting toward the princess. Katara soon joined her, lashing out with her water whips. Together they were able to keep her off balance, unable to get in a good hit.

However, Azula was cunning. She aimed two quick shots; Emi was able to block the first but the strength of the second hit Katara hard, throwing her against the crystal wall. Emi grit her teeth, swiping out a blast of air until she, too, was thrown against the wall. She looked up, dazed to see the Dai Li agents had come dropping down from the ceiling; they were surrounded and outmatched now.

“Come on!” Katara called, standing up and making a circle of water around them with several octopus-like limbs rising from the liquid ring. Emi obediently stood next to the other girl, but she couldn’t fathom how they were going to escape from this.

Just then, Aang disappeared beneath a crystal shelter of rock. Moments later it glowed white, the light bursting apart the makeshift tent. Aang rose into the air, his eyes glowing just as they had in the north pole. Emi felt a sense of peace wash over her; everything would be okay now. It had to be.

Until lightning flashed all around the cavern.

Azula stood nearby, her arm outstretched and an evil grin upon her face. Aang fell from his height, and before she knew it Emi was being swept along a large wave of water that knocked over the Dai Li and the Fire Nation siblings. She and Katara both caught Aang, coming to a rest on the other side of the cavern and staring down their enemies, who were already recovering from the sudden wave and quickly getting to their feet.

Before they could do anything else, Iroh jumped in front of Emi and Katara, lashing out at the Dai Li with a wave of fire.

“You’ve got to get out of here!” he yelled to them. “I will hold them off as long as I can!”

Emi wanted to stay and help Iroh. There was no way he would be able to keep the Dai Li and Azula back long enough for him to escape as well. And he knew that. But it was no longer her place to worry about him. Instead she helped Katara lift Aang as the Waterbender guided them up along a waterfall nearby, the sounds of fire crackling and earth rumbling behind them.

They caught up with the others outside the palace, along with the Earth King and his pet bear. They all mounted the sky bison and flew off into the air, leaving the fallen city of Ba Sing Se
behind them.

Up front Katara sat with Aang, using water from a special looking bottle to heal his wound. They all watched with baited breath as the soothing liquid was absorbed into his skin. For a moment, it looked like it was too late. Then, his tattoos flared with their white glow, and Aang stirred briefly before falling unconscious.

Emi sighed and settled back against Appa’s fur, relieved that the Avatar was okay. She felt Katara move next to her a moment later, assured that her friend would stay alive.

“My name’s Katara,” she introduced herself. “I’m sure you’ve met Toph, and my brother Sokka. And...of course...”

Emi nodded, saving her from the trouble of having to mention his name. “Yeah. I have. My name is Emi.”

“And...you’re an Airbender,” Katara stated, her weary face taking on an amazed expression.

“Wait, she’s a what?!?” Sokka interjected, shocked.

“Airbender, idiot,” Toph remarked from her place gripping onto the bison’s fur.

“Yes. I am,” Emi replied tonelessly. Any other time she would have been amused by their back and forth. Now, however, all she could feel was the aching pain in her heart.

Inside her robes Yuuka finally poked her head out, sensing that the danger had passed.

“Aw, it’s so cute,” Katara commented gently. “What’s its name?”

“Yuuka,” Emi replied, smiling slightly. She picked up the sugar glider and handed her to Katara, who petted her soft fur.

Emi then turned to look ahead to where they were flying. She didn’t want to look back; there was nothing back there for her anymore. Now, all she could do was go with this new group and maybe, just like Iroh said, she would be happier.
Emi stood on the deck of the Fire Nation ship a little ways away from the others. She had honestly thought she had seen the last of these. But, of course, that was not the case. They had just set sail from Chameleon Bay a few days ago. Katara and Sokka’s father and a few other men from his tribe had commandeered this ship in disguise so that they could be free to move through the waters safely.

Aang still had not woken up. Katara went down to his room several times a day to give him healing sessions and check on him periodically. Emi was moved by her care, but her heart still ached painfully from the loss of her own love. Not that he had ever loved her in return, of course.

Emi did her best to keep a low profile on the ship. Everyone she passed would look at her with curiosity and something else she couldn’t place. It made her feel strange, like she was some exhibit to be gawked at. She didn’t like it.

She heaved a sigh and looked down into the water, the gentle current lulling her into a sense of peace that she desperately needed.

“Hi, Emi.”

Emi grimaced. So much for that. Despite her flare of irritation, she turned around and managed a smile. “Hey, Katara. How’s Aang doing?”

“Still unconscious,” she replied, her face full of worry and concern. “But, I’m sure he’ll be okay.”

“Yeah. He’s got his friends to help him out,” Emi replied kindly.

“Yeah.” Katara fell silent, seeming to think hard on something. “Hey…I was wondering.”

_Oh please no._ “About?”

“Well…I was thinking it would be good for us to talk.”

_Don’t do this to me._ “Talk?”

“Yes. About…things.”
“This can’t be happening. ‘…Things?’”

“She wants to know what you were doing with Zuko this whole time,” Toph remarked, approaching the two girls with Sokka close behind. “And frankly, we want to know, too.”

“Um…I-I really don’t-”

“I mean, come on, we know you know what it was like for us!” Sokka interrupted. “Help us understand!”

Emi grimaced again and Katara laid a hand on her shoulder, glaring at the other two. “I was going to talk to her alone,” she scolded her friends. “But, Emi, you really don’t have to do this now, you know. I mean, we can wait-”

“It’s okay, Katara,” Emi held up her hand, stalling any further words. Maybe…this could do me some good, she relented inwardly. “Let’s just go somewhere a little more private. This isn’t exactly something everyone needs to hear.”

They all trooped below deck, filing into Emi’s room. It looked much the same as her room on Zuko’s ship had. This did not do much to help her cope during her first days with the Avatar’s group.

“Okay…so, where should I begin?” Emi asked helplessly once they were all settled.

“How about where you grew up,” Katara suggested. Emi gave a genuine smile at that, knowing that talking about Haruka would give her strength.

Some time later Emi had finished recounting her tale, skimming over some of the more…delicate parts involving her and Zuko. But she knew they got the gist that she had cared about him. Deeply. And had been just as hurt by his betrayal as they had.

“I told you!” Katara yelled at her brother once Emi had fallen silent, punching him in the arm.

“Ow! What are you talking about?!” Sokka asked indignantly, rubbing the offended area.

“I told you and Aang that he had another Airbender with him! But nooo, you guys didn’t want to listen to me.”

“Well…come on, you agreed that it was a ridiculous idea! No offense Emi.”

Emi chuckled, the sound stilted after a few days of having nothing to laugh about. “It’s okay. I
understand. I would have been skeptical too if I were in your place.”

“Just for the record, I knew she was an Airbender all along,” Toph spoke up with a smirk.

“And you didn’t tell us?!” Sokka demanded, rounding on her.

“How did you know?” Katara asked in surprise.

Toph scoffed. “Please, she’s as light on her feet as Twinkle Toes. Maybe even lighter, and that’s saying something!”

“Twinkle Toes?” Emi asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Aang’s nickname. Maybe I’ll give you one, too, if I can think of it. Hard to top Twinkle Toes, though,” the girl remarked with a shrug.

“Well, we’re glad you confided in us, Emi,” Katara said with a smile. “And we’re glad you’re with us. I know Aang will be so happy when he wakes up and finds out he’s not the last Airbender anymore!”

“…Yeah…” Emi muttered, suddenly feeling intimidated at the prospect of meeting Aang, properly, as another Airbender. She would have nothing to hide behind then. She wondered if she’d be good enough, if she could stand a test against the other Airbenders he had known.

“I’m going to go do another healing session with him. Would you like to join me?” Katara asked, seeming to sense her sudden panic. Emi thought for a moment, before smiling lightly.

“Sure. I’d love to.”

---

A week later Emi was strolling along the deck, far more at ease now. She would still slip into moments of melancholy, wherein she would shut herself in her room and cry until she had no tears left. Aang’s closest friends understood her need for space during those times, and she was eternally grateful to them for that.

As they made their way west they had found some acquaintances of Aang’s and his friends. They quickly joined the undercover crew and were filled in on the invasion plans Sokka and his father had come up with. When Emi had first heard of this she had been shocked, and for more reasons than one. It had originally been the group’s hope that they could get the support of the Earth King and his armies so that they could attack the Fire Nation directly, but once Ba Sing Se fell and the Earth King went off on his own to travel the kingdom in disguise, a new plan had to be hatched.
When her initial surprise had worn off, Emi found herself admiring the plans and the minds behind them. The invasion in and of itself would be simple, but if all went well it would be very effective.

A sudden commotion behind her snapped her out of her thoughts. Emi turned, her eyes widening as she saw Aang with scruffy hair adorning his normally bald head shuffle onto the deck, weakly holding onto his staff and staring around at the gathering group in confusion. He suddenly swayed dangerously, looking like-

“Oh no, someone catch him he’s gonna faint!” Toph cried out. Emi jumped forward, sending a disc of air to cushion his head before it could clunk onto the metallic deck.

“Thanks, Emi,” Katara said gratefully, running forward to help Aang sit up.

After a few minutes, he reopened his eyes, groaning slightly. His friends helped him up and left him and Katara alone to talk. Emi stood a short ways nearby awkwardly, unsure of what to do.

Thankfully, that decision was made for her as Katara helped Aang up to go do a healing session for him. She was safe. For now.

- - -

“You need to rest,” Katara said after she had finished their healing session. “I’ll come back later to see how you’re doing.”

Aang nodded absently, his sluggish brain still turning over the various faces he had seen up on the deck. Then, one face in particular stuck out in his mind’s eye. “Katara, that girl…who is she?”

Katara smiled. “Her name’s Emi. She was a captive of Zuko’s for a while before joining us. She…she’s an Airbender, Aang.”

Aang blinked in shock. He had had his suspicions. He remembered her vaguely from the tunnel, and the catacombs. He could have sworn she had been Airbending, but there had been so much going on. And then he was struck by Azula-

“Rest,” Katara insisted, gently pushing him back against the bed and tucking him in. “You’ll meet her later, when you have some of your strength back.”

Aang nodded, watching his friend leave the room. He heaved a sigh and closed his eyes, but even with his exhaustion he felt a small smile grace his face; he wasn’t the last anymore.

- - -

Aang was very upset. And Emi didn’t blame him, really. Because the world thought he was dead, he had to hide out in plain sight. And that meant hiding everything he was. She felt her heart twinge in sympathy, but there was nothing to be done about it. This was an advantage the group
could use in their fight against the Fire Nation.

They were currently docked at a small port, the excitement and terror of having escaped another Fire Nation ship that had discovered who they really were and the serpent of the bay had made them all tired and hungry. Not to mention some repairs needed to be made for their ship. Katara had gone below deck to ask Aang if he wanted anything to eat, but he had been too put out to want anything of the sort.

Once they had had their fill, they filed back onto the ship. Emi stretched, wondering how much longer they’d have to wear their disguises. The Fire Nation cloaks did the job well enough, but having the heavy cloth over her already cumbersome robes from Ba Sing Se made it difficult to do much of anything. Before she could lament any further Katara came running back onto the deck, her face full of panic and tears. She was stopped by her father, who asked her what was wrong. From what Emi could hear, Aang had apparently disappeared from his room, intent on regaining his honor and letting the world know the Avatar still lived.

It was quickly decided that they needed to go after Aang before he did something dangerous. Once they had gathered a few supplies and made plans on where to meet up with the rest of the invasion force, the four of them piled onto Appa and took off. Katara was scanning the waters below them while Emi had her eyes to the sky, Sokka taking over the reins. Toph clung to the new saddle for dear life as Sokka maneuvered them through the rougher patches of a storm that was slowly but surely dispersing.

It was a few hours before any sign of the young Avatar appeared.

“There! I see him!” Katara yelled. Emi and Sokka peered over the edge of the saddle, and far below they saw the dim shape of Aang lying on the beach of a small, crescent shaped island, still running with oozing lava. Emi immediately recognized it as the island she had seen months ago, when she had first met…him.

Sokka angled the bison down, landing several feet away from Aang. Katara immediately leapt down, running toward her friend with relief and closely followed by Emi and the others.

“You’re okay!” she cried, hugging Aang tightly as he stirred sluggishly. Sokka and Toph soon joined them, and even Appa and the lemur Momo cuddled down with their friends. Emi stood awkwardly nearby, feeling slightly betrayed as Yuuka glided over to join the group.

“Come on, Emi,” Katara called to her. “You’re part of the group now, too.”

Emi hesitated a moment longer before smiling and kneeling down with them, feeling surprisingly content as she did so.

“I have so much to do,” Aang said as they pulled back from their hug.
“I know. But you’ll have our help,” Katara promised.

“You didn’t think you could get out of training just by coming to the Fire Nation, did you?” Toph remarked, raising a teasing eyebrow.

“What about the invasion?” he asked.

“We’ll join up with my dad and the invasion force on the day of the eclipse,” Sokka said.

“Hey, what’s-” Toph began to ask, grabbing what was left of Aang’s glider as the ocean waves bumped it against her foot. “Oh. Sorry Aang…”

The sight of the destroyed relic made Emi feel sad, knowing he had probably had it since he been with the monks decades ago.

Aang took the ruined staff, standing up with the rest of the group following suit. “That’s okay. If someone saw it…it would give away my identity. It’s better for now that no one knows I’m alive.” He leapt up into the air, landing on a tall rock some distance away. He twirled the staff around his head before jamming it into the stone, leaping back down onto the ground. Before long the old glider caught fire, the flames completely erasing it from their sight.

Emi sighed, looking over to see the others gazing at her. Or rather, her and the only other Airbender left in the entire world. Aang seemed just as nervous as she was. He approached and bowed deeply once he was within a few feet of her.

“It’s an honor to meet you, Emi. I can’t even begin to tell you how happy I am that there’s another Airbender in this world,” Aang said, smiling.

Emi smiled as well and mirrored his bow. “I know exactly how you feel. I’ve always wanted to learn my heritage. And,” she ran a hand across the back of her neck nervously, “I’d also love to learn some more Airbending. Self-training can only take me so far.”

“I’d be happy to help you,” Aang replied.

“As long as you still work on your Earthbending,” Toph chimed in, crossing her arms.

“And you can’t forget your Waterbending,” Katara added with a laugh.

With that they all piled onto Appa, taking off into the skies once more. Emi sat against the saddle, Yuuka in her lap and her new friends surrounding her. She felt a new sense of peace settle over her
wounded heart, and she knew that as long as she stuck with them, she’d be just fine.

--

Zuko lay in his bed, brooding in the darkness. He was finally home, back in the palace where he belonged. He had been welcomed with open arms. His father had finally accepted him, his honor was restored, he had a girl to call his own.

He had everything he had ever wanted.

And yet he was still not content. The face of his uncle swam up in his mind, the old man’s façade grim and disappointed. Zuko felt bad about what he had done to his uncle, but at the same time he had always known what his nephew wanted all along. All his uncle had had to do was go along with him, and they would both be comfortably back home. Instead, the old man was rotting in prison. And he...he was unable to sleep.

Zuko scowled in the darkness. That’s why he was having these doubts; his lack of sleep was messing with his mind. And when he did manage to sleep, all he could dream of was her. Her and her damn eyes, full of hurt and anger and sorrow. Well, what did she expect of him? She knew what he had wanted, just like his uncle had known. If she got hurt in the process, that was her own damn fault.

He turned onto his side, forcing his eyes closed. Tomorrow, he would go and see Mai. Maybe she would be able to chase the fair-haired Airbender from his mind once and for all.
They were pretending to be a cloud. Emi thought it highly strange and unusual, but it was the best disguise they could make for the giant sky bison. After all, they were in the Fire Nation, and Appa would stick out like a…well…like a giant sky bison.

“I think I see a cave below!” Aang suddenly said, pausing in his bending. Emi and Katara glanced over, but all they could see was the white filmy cloud that they were creating. Toph suddenly sneezed, making Sokka shush her violently.

They moved further down toward the ground until they were low enough to release their hold on the cloud, the air and water dispersing rapidly. As soon as Appa was settled on all six feet, Sokka leapt down and crept along the rocks, peering around for anyone suspicious. There were a few birds perched upon the scattered stones that watched him with interest, but otherwise they were completely alone.

“Is he…always like this?” Emi asked the others as they dismounted a little more carefully.

“Always,” Toph confirmed, crossing her arms.

“Great job with the cloud camo, but next time let’s disguise ourselves as the type of cloud who knows how to keep its mouth shut!” Sokka snapped, peering around the rocks again.

“Yeah, we wouldn’t want a bird to hear us up there chatting and turn us in,” Toph remarked sarcastically.

“Hey! We’re in enemy territory,” Sokka glared at them. “Those are enemy birds.” One of the birds hopped onto Sokka’s head, cawing serenely.

They all chuckled at his theatrics, moving on to go into the cave Aang had spotted. As they walked Sokka kept darting around, his narrowed eyes locked for any sign of foreign movement. They eventually made it into the cave with their sanity intact; barely.

“Well, this is it!” Sokka announced. “This is how we’ll be living until the invasion begins. Hiding in cave after cave…after cave…after…cave…”

“Sokka, we don’t need to become cave people,” Katara sighed, shaking her head. “What we need is some new clothes.”

“I’ll say,” Emi remarked, eyeing her worn and tattered robes bitterly.
“Yeah. Blending in is better than hiding out,” Aang added. “If we get Fire Nation disguises, we’d be just as safe as hiding in a cave.”

“Plus, they have real food out there,” Toph piped up, punching the wall and making cave hoppers flee in all directions. “Does anyone want to sit in the dirt and eat cave hoppers?”

Momo immediately lunged forward, grabbing one of the hoppers and stuffing it into his mouth. Emi chuckled, laughing outright with her friends when Yuuka dove into the fray and snatched the half eaten insect from Momo’s paws.

“Looks like we got outvoted, sport,” Sokka remarked to the lemur. “Let’s get some new clothes!”

They eventually found a small house a short distance away from their cave, where the owner had plenty of washing hanging in the breeze. Emi felt a little hesitant to be stealing clothes, again, but she was sick of wearing her Earth Kingdom garb. It was far too cumbersome and it held memories that she’d rather not think about.

“I don’t know about this,” Aang said, echoing Emi’s own doubts. “These clothes belong to somebody-”

“I call the silk robe!” Katara yelled, jumping up from her hiding place and running forward.

“But if it’s essential to our survival…” Emi remarked with a wry grin.

Aang grinned back. “Then I call the suit!”

They all ran forward, grabbing their new clothes while the owner dozed on his porch, completely oblivious to their presence. Once they had gotten their respective outfits, they ran back to their hideout to get changed. Emi felt a sense of relief as she finally rid herself of her Earth Kingdom robes. She even changed out her old scarf for a newer one, tucking her pale hair out of sight.

Afterwards, they stopped by a jeweler’s stand to purchase some accessories for their outfits. There, she chose a simple black choker with a red jewel embedded into the fabric to adorn her neck.

All in all, Emi felt a lot different now that she had shed her old clothes. She looked around at her new friends, all of them garbed in Fire Nation outfits. Toph had punched out the soles of her shoes so that she could see better, and Aang had gotten a headband that covered his arrow tattoo. Even Katara had put her mother’s necklace away so that they could all be assured they’d be safe from suspicion.

Once they had made the final touches on their outfits, they set out for the main part of the town. Aang hid Momo in his tunic while Emi did the same for Yuuka, but in her waist scarf. Sokka rolled his eyes at the both of them.
“I used to visit my friend Kuzon here a hundred years ago,” Aang explained as they lurked around a hidden corner of the town. “So everyone just follow my lead and stay cool. Or, as they say in the Fire Nation: stay flaming!” He strolled out onto the street, the others following him skeptically.

“You actually traveled through the Fire Nation this century; do they really still say that?” Toph asked Emi as Aang shot off odd phrases to highly confused passerby.

Emi chuckled. “Not that I ever heard.”

“Figures,” Sokka remarked. They walked along the streets until they spotted a meat shop. Emi and Aang eyed it with disgust while Katara, Sokka and Toph all looked elated.

“Oh, we’re going to a meat place?” Aang asked.

“Come on, Aang, everyone here eats meat. Even the meat!” Sokka replied.

Emi and Aang grimaced. “You guys go ahead, we’ll just…get some lettuce out of the garbage,” he said. The others went inside the shop, leaving Emi and Aang alone to find food for themselves.

“You know, I did pass through here some months ago when I was traveling from my mentor’s cottage,” Emi remarked to Aang. “I know where we can find some decent food.”

“Really?” Aang asked, brightening.

“Yeah, follow me; it’s just down this street,” Emi said, taking off. “They do sell meat, of course. But you can buy just plain vegetables if you want. They give you strange looks, but hey, we get the veggies in the end.”

They walked a few paces down the road, happily thinking of their vegetarian meal when they were stopped by a trio of soldiers.

“It’s over; we caught you!”

Emi and Aang looked at one another, panicked. “Who…us?” he asked nervously.

“It couldn’t be more obvious you two don’t belong here,” the older man replied. “Next time you play hooky, you might want to take off your school uniform. Like your friend did. Although, you should have stayed away from him if he still had his uniform on.”

“Um…I think-” Emi tried to say, but they were promptly grabbed by their shoulders and escorted
their apparent school.

“Where’s your uniform?” one of the guards asked Emi.

“It’s…back…home…” Emi managed to say.

“And where is that?” she asked again, impatiently.

“We just moved from the colonies,” Aang jumped in. “My sister left her uniform there.”

The guards were unimpressed, but they gave Emi some spare clothes to wear. Before they knew it, they were hauled into a classroom with a severe looking teacher.

As she questioned the guards about the new students, Aang quickly leaned toward Emi. “What do you know about Fire Nation schooling?” he asked under his breath.

“Nothing!” she whispered back. “I grew up in a cottage on the outskirts of the Fire Nation; I never went to school!”

“So, they’re from the colonies, hmm?” They were startled out of their furtive conversation by the teacher’s voice, her eyes appraising them sternly as the guards left. “Both of your etiquette’s’ are terrible! In the homeland, we bow to our elders. Like so.” She demonstrated by placing her right fist beneath her open palm facing inward.

“Sorry, ma’am,” Aang and Emi said, mirroring her movement. Aang hadn’t gotten it right the first time, but he quickly adjusted when one of the students discreetly showed him how.

“And we don’t wear head coverings indoors,” the teacher scolded, tapping their heads with her stick.

“I…have a scar. It’s really embarrassing,” Aang lied.

“Me too,” Emi quickly added with a sheepish shrug.

“Very well. What are your names? Or shall we just call you the mannerless colony slobs?”

Aang chuckled lightly. “Just slobs will be fine.” When the teacher remained un-amused, he added, “Or…Kuzon and Cho.”

That day of school was enlightening for both of them. More for the discipline that was required of
them than anything else. However, she and Aang ended up kind of enjoying themselves, especially when they kept making a ruckus behind their teachers’ backs.

Once the bell had been rung at the end of the day, the students all filed out. Aang and Emi walked along with them as calmly as they could, Emi clutching her other clothes with a disgruntled look. She had not been allowed to change back into her disguise even though they had been dismissed.

“We made it through the day, Momo,” Aang remarked to his lemur, his head poking up from Aang’s tunic. Emi pet the small lump in her own shirt, feeling Yuuka stir within the fabric.

“And it was pretty fun,” Emi added, smiling at her friend.

“Don’t let the Headmaster catch you with that monkey.”

They both whirled around, seeing the girl from their first class standing behind them a short ways away.

“What monkey?” Aang asked sheepishly, Momo once again hidden from sight.

“Don’t worry, I’m not a tattletale. My name’s On Ji.” She smiled kindly at them. “I like your headband by the way,” she said to Aang.

Emi frowned, sensing someone behind them. She turned around and took a few steps back from a glowering young man as he shoved Aang aside to stand next to On Ji.

“On Ji, you don’t have to baby-sit the new kids,” he taunted, sneering at them.

“Wow. You must be one of those popular kids we’ve been hearing about,” Aang remarked, fascinated.

“That’s right. Now listen friend, I know you’re from the colonies, so I’ll say this slowly.” He got right in Aang’s face, scowling. “On Ji. Is. My. Girlfriend. Don’t forget it.” He poked Aang’s chest, making Momo squirm inside his shirt. The young man glowered again and took off with On Ji, giving Aang the stink-eye.

“Nice meeting you!” Emi called after him. “Jerk,” she remarked to Aang, both of them chuckling.

“I don’t believe it.” They turned around, another kid coming toward them in shock. “He didn’t beat you up! Not even a little!”

“Guess I’m just lucky,” Aang said, shrugging.
“We’re on our way to play hide and explode. Do you guys want to come?” A couple more kids came running up to them, grinning excitedly.

Aang and Emi glanced at one another, similar smiles growing on their faces. “Definitely!” they both said, running after the other kids.

---

Later that night Emi and Aang arrived back at their cave, laughing about the game they had just played. It had been thrilling to actually have fun with other kids; Emi had never gotten that chance before and now she lamented the fact.

“Where have you guys been?” Katara asked once they appeared in the cave. She took in their sooty appearances and wide grins, a frown on her face. “We’ve been worried sick!”

“We got invited to play with some kids after school,” Aang said, removing his head covering. Emi opened her tunic a little to let Yuuka glide out, Momo chasing after her playfully.

Sokka shot up from his place laying on the ground. “You what?!”

“We enrolled in a Fire Nation school,” Emi explained. “Accidentally,” she said as an afterthought.

“And we’re going back tomorrow,” Aang added.

“Enrolled in what?!” Sokka was still exasperated, falling back onto the ground in a heap.

A group meeting was called then. Once Emi had changed back into her original Fire Nation clothes, they all gathered around their campfire to discuss Aang and Emi’s sudden decision.

“Look guys, I’m trying to be mature and not immediately shoot down your idea,” Sokka said. “But it sounds…really terrible.”

“Yeah, we got our outfits,” Toph remarked. “What do you need to go to school for?”

“Every minute we’re in that classroom, we’re learning new things about the Fire Nation. We even got a picture of Fire Lord Ozai!” Aang explained, holding up the painting. “And here’s one I made out of noodles!” He presented the other picture.

“Impressive, I admit, but it’s still too dangerous,” Sokka said.

“Hmm, that’s too bad,” Emi remarked, looking sidelong at Aang with a wry smile.
“Yep. Guess we’ll never find out about the secret river then,” he added. “It goes right to the Fire Lord’s palace.”

“Yeah, we were supposed to learn about it in class tomorrow…” Emi sighed wistfully.

“Hmm…I am a fan of secret rivers,” Sokka mused. “Fine. Let’s stay a few more days.”

“Flameo Hotman!” Aang exclaimed, jumping up from his seat triumphantly.

“You know, Tenderfoot, aren’t you a little old to be going to school with Aang?” Toph remarked with a smirk.

“I never got to go when I was younger. So, no, I don’t think I’m too old,” Emi replied, crossing her arms. “And, really? Tenderfoot?”

“Hey, I said I couldn’t top Twinkle Toes,” Toph shrugged.

Their second day of school did not go as smoothly as they had hoped it would. For their history class, they had had to answer questions about the Air Nation army. Emi had no idea if they had even had an army, but according to Aang they had not. And their teacher was not impressed with him trying to act like he had been around at the time. Which, in truth, he really had. Music class hadn’t been much better, both of them being scolded for tapping their feet and swaying to the music.

Inevitably, they had gotten in the most trouble near the end of the day. Well, Aang was the one targeted by On Ji’s jealous boyfriend. And Aang never even landed a punch on the kid; he did himself harm (although Emi did trip him…) But they still got in trouble which led them to needing Katara and Sokka’s help to speak with their Headmaster as their “parents”.

Although Emi had traveled through the Fire Nation for several months, she had never really stopped to learn how the day to day life of the villagers and townspeople functioned. She had been too caught up in her own sorrow over Haruka’s passing, and too focused on getting to the Earth Kingdom to really bother. But now that she had seen for herself the way life was for the kids of the Fire Nation, a life of too much work and not enough fun, she really felt bad for them.

Back in their cave hideout, Sokka was still in full-on “dad” mode.

“That settles it! No more school for either of you youngsters!” he declared, stroking his fake beard.

“I’m a year older than you,” Emi remarked dryly, rolling her eyes.
“We’re not ready to leave!” Aang insisted. “We’re having fun for once! Just being normal kids.” He sighed, shuffling over to Appa who nudged him gently. “You don’t know what it’s like, Sokka. You get to be normal all the time!”

“Ha, ha!” Toph mocked, making Emi snicker.

“Listen guys; those kids at school are the future of the Fire Nation. If we want to change this place for the better, we need to give them a little taste of freedom.”

“What could you possibly do for a nation of depraved little fire monsters?” Sokka asked.

“I’m gonna throw them a secret dance party!” Aang announced, doing a little jig.

Sokka stared aghast. “Go to your room!” he demanded in his “dad” voice.

“Come on, Sokka,” Emi simpered, standing up. “This will really help them out, let them see what it’s like to have fun and not be so…destructive! Please?” She gave him the widest, most pleading eyes she could muster.

“Ugh…fine!” Sokka relented, slapping a hand to his face. “Just put those eyes away!”

Emi and Aang jumped with joy, clapping their hands together.

“I knew having two Airbenders around would be trouble…” Sokka grumbled sourly.

The dance party had gone rather well. The kids from school had fun and laughed and danced around. Well, at least they did so once Aang had showed them how. And Emi had to admit, the Avatar was a fine dancer. Especially when he went a round with Katara, both of them moving seamlessly together. They were simply perfect.

Even though their party ended early thanks to the guards and the Headmaster turning up, the kids from the school helped to distract the adults while the group got away safely and discreetly.

Emi lounged against the saddle as Appa flew through the night sky, letting her hair out of its wrapping with a sigh of relief.

“You know, you never did tell us why you have such pale hair,” Sokka remarked, eyeing her suspiciously.
“Gee, I don’t know, maybe one of my parents had pale hair,” Emi replied sarcastically, rolling her eyes.

Aang laughed. “It wasn’t unusual for some of the Air Nomads to have pale hair, Sokka. Some were even paler than Emi’s.”

“Really?” Emi mused. She thought about that for a moment, smiling. “So…what about those tattoos? Did all Airbenders have them?”

“Only master Airbenders got their tattoos. As a habit, boys would shave their heads long before receiving their tattoos. The women would shave their heads when they were ready to receive them, but they could grow their hair back afterward. Most would still shave the front part of their heads, though, to show the arrow a little better.”

“Huh,” Emi remarked. She continued to ask Aang all sorts of questions about the Air Nomads while the others listened vaguely. He didn’t seem to ever get sick of answering her questions; she had a feeling that he relished the interaction just as much as she did.
For Those in Need, We are Friends Indeed

Emi and Aang were sitting cross-legged on Appa’s saddle, both in deep meditation while the others were lounging around watching the scenery pass them by. Appa was currently wading through a murky river, the stench permeating their carefully created cocoons of peace. With simultaneous breaths, Aang and Emi opened their eyes and stretched out their arms.

“I haven’t done a good meditation in…jeez it’s been a long time, I guess,” Emi remarked, smiling contentedly.

“Regular meditation is the key to being a great Airbender. Or any bender, really,” Aang said, standing up. “It helps you get in touch with your spiritual self, and that’s the part that enables you to become one with the wind.”

Emi nodded and looked over the edge of Appa’s saddle into the murky water, wrinkling her nose in disgust. “You know…I think this river might be polluted.”

“Well that explains why I can’t catch a fish around here,” Sokka remarked, pulling up his fishing line. “Because normally my fishing skills are…off…the hook!” The others merely looked at him. “Get it? Like a fishing hook!”

“Too bad your skills aren’t on the hook,” Toph retorted, making everyone else laugh.

“Looks like we’ll have to go somewhere else to get food,” Katara said. “Assuming that it will fit into Sokka’s master schedule.”

Emi watched with wide eyes as Sokka unrolled an impressively long sheet of paper that held every possible activity they could do and the time in which they could do it before the Day of Black Sun would arrive.

“Hmm…it’s doable. But that means only two potty breaks today!” Sokka declared, consulting his schedule.

“Hey, maybe we can get food there,” Aang said, pointing to a distant village floating on the river.

They then guided Appa out of the murky water. On the bank, they set to cleaning off his fur of the smelly gunk. Aang then threw a blanket of moss over the great bison to hide him from view. Momo and Yuuka also hid in their own little moss coverings near the great beast.

“Now you look just like a little hill with horns,” Aang remarked to his companion. “Bye, buddy!”
Appa grunted in return.

They all walked out to cliff that overlooked the town. Even from their distance, Emi could tell it looked very poorly kept. She was amazed at how anyone could survive in such conditions.

“I don’t feel anything,” Toph remarked. “Where is this village?”

“It’s in the middle of the river,” Emi replied, wondering how they could possibly get to it.

“Sure is!”

They looked down and saw an old man on a rickety looking raft, smiling toothily at them. His clothes were well worn and shabby, and his hair looked like a flyaway white tumbleweed.

“My name’s Doc. Mind if I ask who you are?”

“We’re…um…from the Earth Kingdom Colonies,” Katara explained with a quick smile.

“Wow, colonials!” Doc remarked. “Hop on; I’ll give you a ride into town.”

They all made their way down the cliff side and gathered onto the raft, Doc using a long pole to drive into the river bottom and pull them toward the village. Emi looked at the water with trepidation, making sure her feet were tucked well away from the edge of the raft.

“Why do you guys live on the river?” Katara asked.

“Because we’re a fishing town,” Doc explained, moving his pole over their heads to the other side of the raft. “At least, that’s how it was before the factory moved in.” He pointed to their right, directing their attention to a distant structure with smoke pouring out in heaps and sludge running from the pipes into the water. “Army makes their metal there. Moved in a few years ago and started gunking up our river. Now our little village is struggling to survive.”

Emi frowned; no wonder the place looked so careworn. In front of her, Katara and Aang exchanged looks of similar worry.

They soon made it to the docks of the village and filed onto the piers that made up the streets of the town. “Thanks for the ride,” Aang said to Doc as they wandered off.

Everywhere they went, Emi saw the residents of the village sitting outside, looking depressed and weary. The children had no light in their eyes, and the adults look more tired and hopeless than anyone should. The sight tugged at her heart; she wished there was something they could do.
Appa was sick. They had been planning to leave first thing in the morning, as Sokka’s master schedule had demanded, but with their main mode of transportation out, that was a no-go.

Emi stood with the others, pondering their furry friend. The herbalist part of her, the one that Haruka had honed over the years, felt that something was off. If Appa had gotten an illness from the river, his tongue wouldn’t be purple. Haruka had treated people with pollution sickness before. But then again, he wasn’t even human; perhaps the sickness was affecting him in a different way.

“Katara, can you heal him?” Aang was asking, worry etched all over his face.

Katara looked the sky bison over, thinking. “It looks like he needs some medicine. Maybe we can find the right herbs in town.”

“I could go looking for some around here,” Emi offered. “Haruka taught me all about medicinal plants native to the Fire Nation. I’m sure we can find the right plants ourselves and make the tonic.”

The others looked happy enough to go along with this, especially Sokka. But Katara quickly waved her suggestion away. “Maybe it would be better to go to the people who’ve lived here longer. I mean, we don’t want to hurt Appa accidentally. Not that I’m saying you would do that, of course.”

Emi raised an eyebrow, confused. But nevertheless she shrugged and nodded in agreement. “Okay. We can do it that way, too.”

“Come on, Katara, the girl was raised by an herbalist!” Sokka interjected.

“It’s okay, Sokka. We’re better off doing this the cautious way,” Emi replied, smiling.

But even as they ventured back into town, Emi frowned in confusion at Katara’s insistence. However, she shoved the feeling away; they had more important things to worry about. Like the fact that the village seemed so much more lively today.

“Is it just me, or does this place seem different?” Toph asked as they walked along the piers.

“Yeah, the people do seem…happier,” Emi remarked as a little girl ran by them, laughing.

They stopped by the fish stand where they had gotten their meal from the day before and asked Shu (who look a hell of a lot like Doc) what had happened to make everyone so happy. He explained that someone had come during the night to give them food.
“The Painted Lady is part of our town’s lore,” Shu said, bringing out a small figurine of the spirit. “They say she’s a river spirit who watches over our town in times of need. I always thought she was just a legend. Until now!” They looked around at the town again and Emi had to admit, they did seem more content.

“See, we don’t need to help these people! They already have someone to help them,” Sokka remarked to his sister. He turned back to Shu. “All we need is medicine for our sick friend.”

“Medicine? Sorry, all the medicine we have goes to the factory,” Shu said. “That’s why there’s so many sick people in our village.”

With trepidation, Sokka agreed that they would stay an extra night so Appa could rest. Emi was sorely tempted to suggest she go and find the herbs herself again, but she let the matter drop; maybe the sky bison really did just need to rest.

---

The next day, Appa was still not feeling well. They had gone back into the village once again to buy some food and, once again, the people of the village seemed lively; even more so than the previous day. Apparently the Painted Lady had come back in the night to heal their sick. Emi thought it was a wonderful thing for the village, having their own personal guardian. But then Sokka had made a remark that unless the factory itself was destroyed, nothing would really change for the better. Not for the long term.

And Emi had to silently agree with Sokka.

Once they returned to their camp, they settled down to wile away the hours until they could sleep. Since they had been stuck in one place for the last few days, Aang took the opportunity to teach Emi some more advanced Airbending moves.

“So, you already know how to make an air ball,” he was saying. “Now the next step is to make a bigger air ball and balance on it, like a top!”

“Like a…what?” Emi asked, confused.

“Like this.” Aang moved his hands around, creating a large air ball. He then promptly jumped on it and started to zoom around their campsite. The way he was balanced upon the swirling sphere looked difficult to achieve, but Emi was determined to try for herself.

With a deep breath Emi mimicked Aang’s motions, creating the largest air ball she had ever made. She quickly jumped up, trying to get herself into position. But she was off balance and was quickly tossed around before landing several feet away.
“Ow…” Emi muttered, sitting up as her friends laughed.

“The look on your face!” Sokka chuckled.

“Don’t worry, it takes time to get the right angle,” Aang assured her, helping her to her feet. “Just keep practicing.”

And that’s exactly what she did. By the time night had fallen and they were all getting ready to sleep, Emi had managed to stay on her air scooter for a few brief moments before she lost control and fell off again. But still, she was proud of herself, and she nestled into her blankets with a smile on her face.

Later that night, she was awoken by an odd noise. Emi peered up from her blankets, looking through the darkness. She saw something slip away past the boulders surrounding their campsite, heading toward the river village.

She pushed back her covers and got up silently, tiptoeing along the ground and trying to keep the figure in sight. Suddenly, someone bumped into her from behind. Emi jumped, startled, and whirled around, seeing Aang standing there with a similar look of surprise.

“Jeez, Aang! You scared me,” Emi remarked quietly.

“Sorry,” Aang apologized. “You saw her too, right?”

“Who? That person that went by?” Emi asked, looking back over to the rocks.

“Not just any person; the Painted Lady! Come on, before we lose her!” Aang took off, Emi keeping pace right behind him. When the spirit was within their sight again, he called out.

“Hello, Painted Lady spirit!”

“I don’t think she wants to talk to us,” Emi remarked as the figure quickly took off, startled by their presence.

“Don’t worry, I’m the Avatar; the bridge between our worlds. We just need to catch up to her, then I can explain that we need her help!” Aang replied, taking off with a burst of his Airbending. Emi raised an eyebrow but set off after him, reveling in their speed.

The spirit soon left the land and was zooming over the water. Aang wasted no time in jumping after her, using his Waterbending to create little ice floats while Emi jumped from spot to spot behind him.
They crossed the river and ran into the village, and still the spirit refused to listen to Aang every time he called out, trying to explain who he was and what they needed her help with. Emi frowned as he jumped onto the roof of one building, thinking he could use the height advantage to overrun the Painted Lady. But he wasn’t paying attention, and he soon ran into a post jutting up from the roof. The spirit swiftly pulled ahead, running back onto the river and then over the land beyond.

Emi helped Aang up, exchanging determined looks with him before they took off again, this time in separate directions. They eventually cornered the spirit; Aang blocking her path forward and Emi blocking her path back.

“My name’s Aang,” he explained, pulling his headband back to show his arrow tattoo. “I’m the Avatar. And that’s my friend, Emi.”

Emi peered at the spirit, frowning. Granted, she had never met a spirit before. At least not up close and in person. But something seemed…odd about this one. She kept her head down, her hat and gauze fabric covering her face.

“Well, hello Avatar; Avatar’s friend,” the spirit said in a soft, high voice. “I wish I could talk but I am very busy.”

“Yeah, me too. I hate that,” Aang remarked. “You know, you’re very pretty for a spirit. I don’t get to meet too many spirits, but the ones I do meet; not very attractive.”

“Really?” Emi asked curiously. Aang nodded while the spirit before them chuckled.

“Thank you…but-”

“You seem familiar, too,” Aang suddenly said, trying to look closer. Emi furrowed her eyebrows. Now that he mentioned it, her voice did strike a chord with her.

“A lot of people say that,” the spirit replied nervously.

“No,” Emi said. “You really do seem familiar…”

“Look, I really should get going.” The spirit tried to edge away from them, but Emi sent a blast of air toward her, knocking her hat up off of her head. She whirled around, trying to shove it back on but they had already seen her face.

“Katara?!” Aang asked incredulously.
Katara turned around in defeat. “Hi, Aang…Emi.”

“You’re the Painted Lady?! But, how!?” They both stared at her in shock.

“I wasn’t at first. I was just trying to help the village,” Katara explained, taking off her hat. “But since everyone thought that’s who I was anyway…I guess I just kinda became her.”

“So you’ve been sneaking out at night? Wait…is Appa even sick?” Aang demanded.

“He might be sick of the purple berries I’ve been feeding him. But other than that, he’s fine,” Katara replied.

“I knew it!” Emi exclaimed. “Pollution sickness does not cause purple tongues!”

“I can’t believe you lied to everyone so you could help these people,” Aang said.

“I’m sorry. I know I shouldn’t have.”

“No, I think it’s great!” he explained. “You’re like a…secret hero!”

Katara smiled, looking thoughtful. “Well, if you guys want to help, there’s one more thing I have to do.”

- - -

It was a very eventful night. The trio went on to destroy the factory and stop its harmful pollution once and for all. Even though Sokka had just been joking, Katara knew that he was right. Nothing would change with the factory still running. They wreaked havoc within the building, destroying anything and everything with the use of their bending. Emi felt a thrill at having done something good, and she and her friends all returned to camp as the morning dawned, smiling widely at their success.

But once they got back, their smiles fell when they saw Sokka and Toph waiting for them, their faces stony.

“Hi, Sokka!” Katara greeted, smiling sheepishly. “We were just…out on a morning walk!”

“Oh really? A morning walk?” Sokka took Katara’s sleeping bag and dumped the grass she had stuffed it with onto the ground. “I know you’re the Painted Lady, I know you’ve been sneaking out at night, and I know you’ve been lying about Appa and feeding him purplizing tongue berries!”

Toph opened her mouth, showing her own purple tongue as she held up the bag of berries.
“Katara, what you did put our whole mission in jeopardy,” Sokka scolded, crossing his arms. “We’re leaving. Right now!”

Katara hung her head and shuffled off to pack her things. Aang and Emi made to follow, but Sokka stopped them with a glare.

“And how long have you two known about this?” he demanded.

“Hey, we just found out this morning,” Emi said, ushering Aang along as they escaped Sokka’s glaring.

They had nearly finished packing and were about to pile onto Appa and take off when they heard the sound of several motors revving in the distance. As the group ran to the edge of the cliff, they saw a bunch of Fire Nation soldiers tearing toward the village through the water on their jet skis.

“What did you do?!” Sokka demanded, turning to Katara.

“I…kinda destroyed their factory,” she explained.

“You what?!”

“It was your idea!”

“I was joking! I also said to use spirit magic and made funny noises!” He slapped a hand to his face. “Did you even think this through? The army is going to blame the villagers! They’re headed there right now to get revenge!”

“Well, what was I supposed to do?”

“Leave! Do nothing!”

Katara snarled. “No! I will never, ever turn my back on people who need me!” She stood up, glaring down at her brother. “I’m going down to the village. And I will do whatever I can.”

Sokka scowled, but he stood up and went after Katara, stopping her with a hand on her shoulder. “Wait. I’m coming too.”

“I thought you didn’t want to help,” she retorted.
“You need me. And I will never turn my back on you.”

Katara stared at her brother for a moment before she smiled and hugged him. “Sokka…you really do have a heart.”

Emi smiled, then chuckled when Aang was punched in the shoulder by Toph as he made a heartfelt observation.

“So, what do we do now?” she asked them.

“Well…if they want the Painted Lady, then I say we give them the Painted Lady,” Sokka said, smirking as his idea took form.

---

They watched from afar as the soldiers bullied the villagers, setting up their plan quickly. When the Firebenders made to light their missile, Emi and Aang blew a fierce wind toward the flames, extinguishing them instantly. The soldiers tried to light it again, and again, but each time the Airbenders put out the fire.

Toph then began to pound a large boulder against the ground, creating a rhythmic drumming. Appa lent his deep voice, adding to the sonorous sounds. Sokka played a flute while Emi, Katara, and Aang created a mass of clouds that rolled along the water, seeping all around the village. All in all, it created a very spooky atmosphere. Then, Katara took up her position as the Painted Lady while Aang went ahead to hide under the docks.

Emi watched in fascination and apprehension as Katara pelted toward the soldiers. But she knew as long as Aang was with her, she would be fine. The young Waterbender easily lifted several of the soldier’s jet skis into the air, crashing them against the cliffs. This effectively scattered the men and women, making them take off on their remaining rides. The leader, however, remained stubborn and tried to attack Katara himself. But Aang blew her high into the sky, safely away from the streaming flames before pelting an Airbending attack toward the older man and sending him flying into the murky water.

Sokka, Toph, and Emi then took a river boat over to the village once the soldiers had been chased away for good. As they got to the docks, the citizens were cheering for Katara.

“Thank you!” Doc exclaimed as he approached her. “Me and my brothers owe you a lot-” He stopped, his eyes widening as he got a closer look the supposed spirit. “Hey, wait a minute. I know you; you’re not the Painted Lady! You’re that colonial girl! You’re a Waterbender!”

Shocked, Emi looked over to see Katara’s face paint had been worn off during the fight. The villagers started turning on her, livid that she had portrayed their spirit and for the fact that she was a Waterbender. Sokka quickly stepped in front of his sister, shielding her from their anger.
“Maybe she is a Waterbender!” he yelled to the villagers. “But she was just trying to help you! Because of her that factory won’t be polluting your river and the army is gone! You should be down on your knees, thanking her!”

“Sokka, it’s okay,” Katara said, stepping out from behind her brother to address the village. “I shouldn’t have acted like someone I wasn’t, and I shouldn’t have tricked you. But I felt like I had to do something.”

“It doesn’t matter if the Painted Lady is real or not,” Emi added. “What matters is that your problems are real and this river is real. You can’t wait around for someone to help you; you have to help yourselves.”

“But, what should we do?” Doc asked.

“Maybe we can clean the river!” Toph called out from within the crowd.

“Yeah…we can clean the river!”

The villagers rallied together and quickly set out to begin the work. After being assured their secret would be safe (even though Doc’s sanity was questionable at best, in Emi’s opinion) they set out to help with the cleaning. It took the entirety of the day, but thanks to Katara’s Waterbending and Aang and Toph’s Earthbending, they were able to make the river crystal clear once again.

They stayed on the cliffs for one more night. The friends laughed and talked around their campfire, Emi listening with rapt attention as the gang recounted some of their more amusing adventures.

“Man, I would have loved to have seen Sokka wearing a dress,” Emi remarked, chuckling.

“Hey, it wasn’t a dress! It was a warrior’s uniform!” Sokka insisted, crossing his arms.

“Yeah. A warrior’s uniform for girls,” Katara teased with a smirk.

“Yeah…well…whatever.”

Soon after they decided to turn in for the night, Sokka insisting that they get going first thing in the morning. However, as Emi lay on her bedroll, she found herself wide awake and unable to sleep. She frowned in the darkness, idly stroking Yuuka’s fur. After several long minutes, she heaved a sigh and sat up carefully, not wanting to disturb the others.

Emi made her way down the rocks and toward the river shore. She knelt down, letting her hand
immerse into the now clear water. Something about helping these people, working together with her new friends, made her miss an old part of her life. Emi sighed and sat down on the sand; her thoughts turned to him less and less often these days. But she still couldn’t forget him. Not so easily.

“Couldn’t sleep, either?”

Emi turned and saw Katara walking over to her from the other side of the beach. She shrugged halfheartedly. “I guess my mind is too restless,” she replied as the younger girl took a seat next to her.

“I understand,” Katara said, looking out over the river.

“You did a really great thing, you know. Helping these people,” Emi remarked. “I’ve never seen a group of people so determined to rally together in times of need.”

“Well don’t forget, you’re a part of this group now,” Katara smiled at her. “You helped out, too.”

“Thanks.”

Katara pursed her lips thoughtfully. “You know…I’ve noticed you’ve been a lot…happier lately.”

“Yeah. For the first time since I left my old cottage, I feel like I belong somewhere,” Emi smiled before it turned into a frown. “I mean…I thought I had found somewhere to belong before, but-”

“It’s okay, Emi. You don’t have to go back there. Ever again,” Katara laid a hand on her shoulder, looking determined. “We’ll stay by your side. I promise.”

Emi grinned. “You know, I never had much of a family. Haruka was wonderful and I loved her dearly, but I never knew what it was like to be around kids my own age. Being with you guys…I almost feel like this is what it’s like to have siblings. To have a real family.”

“We are a family,” Katara said, hugging an arm around her shoulders. “All of us.”
On the Edge of a Sword

These late chapters brought to you by "hanging out with friends and forgetting all about this story". Hey, even hermits need to socialize from time to time.

On the Edge of a Sword

“Wow. This is amazing to watch!” Katara sighed as they leaned against the rocky incline. They were observing a meteor shower, and no matter how many times Emi saw them, she would never cease to be amazed by the blazing rocks that fell from the sky.

“Kind of makes you realize how insignificant we are,” Sokka remarked.

“Eh. You see nothing once, you’ve seen it a thousand times,” Toph shrugged carelessly.

Suddenly, the four of them sat up straighter as a huge meteor came pelting through the sky above them. They all let out gasps and sounds of amazement at the sight.

“You’ve never not seen anything like this!” Sokka exclaimed as the burning rock zoomed over their heads, crashing into the ground on the other side of the cliffs with a resounding BOOM.

With a quick glance to one another, they quickly mounted Appa and flew over to the wreckage. The ground was ablaze from the meteor’s impact, and a town nearby was in danger of being engulfed if the flames were not stopped.

“The fire’s going to destroy that town!” Katara exclaimed.

“Not if we can stop it!” Aang replied determinedly, landing Appa a safe distance away. They all dismounted while Katara took over the reins.

“There’s a creek over here. I’ll bend the water onto the fire!” she said, taking off again.

“Toph, let’s make a trench to keep the fire from getting closer. Emi, you can use your Airbending to blow back any embers that try to start a new fire,” Aang instructed them.

“What should I do?” Sokka asked as they started to run off.
“Keep an eye on Momo and Yuuka!” Aang replied as the lemur flew by with the sugar glider clinging to his back.

Emi rounded the side of the crater, using her newly learned air scooter move to speed herself along. The flames were leaping all over the place, but she managed to keep the embers from spreading toward the oblivious town. Aang and Toph used large slabs of rock to extinguish a good portion of the fire while Katara flew overhead with Appa to bend water onto the spitting flames. Aang then took the remaining water, sending an icy breath to create a cooling dome of snow that successfully stamped out the remaining blaze.

“Good work everybody!” he smiled as they gathered together in the aftermath. They then settled down elsewhere to sleep the rest of the night, exhausted from their efforts.

The next day, the group headed over to the town to get some food. Emi was just grateful they had pure vegetarian dishes, a rarity in the Fire Nation to be sure.

“These people have no idea how close they were to getting toasted last night,” Aang remarked as he sat down at their table.

“Yeah. The worst thing about being in disguise; we don’t get the hero worshipping! I miss the love…” Toph lamented.

“Boohoo, poor heroes,” Sokka snapped from his place on the stairs nearby.

“What’s your problem?” Katara asked in concern. “You haven’t even touched your smoked sea slug.”

“I don’t blame him,” Emi remarked, eyeing the dish warily.

Sokka heaved a sigh. “It’s just…all you guys can do this awesome bending stuff like putting out forest fires and flying around, and make other stuff fly around… I can’t fly around, okay? I can’t do…anything.”

“That’s not true!” Katara insisted. “No one can read a map like you.”

“I can’t read at all!” Toph added.

“Yeah, and who keeps us laughing with sarcastic comments all the time?” Aang remarked. “I mean, look at Katara’s hair, right? What’s up with that?”

Emi slapped a hand to her face as Katara looked around, mortified. “What? What’s wrong with my
“N-nothing! I was just trying to-”

“Look I appreciate the effort,” Sokka interrupted. “But the fact is each of you is so amazing and so special. And I’m…not. I’m just the guy in the group who’s regular.”

After a moment of silence Katara stood up, moving over to sit next to her brother. “I’m sorry you’re feeling so down, but I hope you know none of us see you that way.” Sokka remained silent, leaving Katara to ponder. “I know something that’s gonna make you feel better!” she said excitedly.

“You do?” Sokka asked doubtfully.

They quickly left the restaurant and headed down the street until they came to a shop that specialized in weapons. Sokka was very excited, eagerly rushing into the building to start browsing.

“Maybe a little something to reinvigorate my battling,” he mused aloud. “Hey, about these?” He picked up a pair of nunchuks and started to fling them around until he managed to hit himself on the head.

“Maybe not,” Emi remarked with a chuckle, moving around to see the other weapons for sale. She turned a corner and balked at the sight of Aang, completely decked out in heavy armor and accessories. She and Katara both stared at him, baffled.

“What do you think?” he asked. “Pretty slick, huh? All I need to complete the outfit is a wind sword.”

“A what now?” Emi asked, moving forward cautiously to peer at the shiny armor.

“It’s where I get a sword handle and then I just swing it around and bend air out like a blade.” He started moving his arm around, making swishing noises until he eventually toppled over from the weight of all his armor.


“You know, all joking aside that’s actually a pretty good idea,” Emi said enthusiastically. “I mean, minus the whole…outfit.”

“I’ll just stick with what I got,” Aang said from his place on the floor.
They continued to browse around while Sokka tried to decide what he should get. He tried out several different weapons of varying sizes and lethality, but none were quite his fit. Then, his eyes fell on a very beautiful sword being showcased on the far wall.

“That’s what Sokka’s talking about,” he grinned, running a hand over the beautiful sheath.

“You have a good eye,” the shopkeeper said, coming over to them. “That’s an original from Piandao, the greatest sword master and sword maker in Fire Nation history. He lives in the big castle up the road from here.”

“I’ve heard of him,” Emi remarked as the shopkeeper walked away. “He’s very selective with the students he takes on.”

“That’s it! That’s what you needed all along Sokka!” Aang exclaimed.

“A sword?” Sokka asked.

“Not the sword, a master. We’ve all had masters to help us get better,” Aang explained. “You should see if you can study with Piandao.”

“That’s a great idea! I could have never gotten to where I am without Master Pakku,” Katara said. “Everyone needs a teacher.”

“I’ve advanced so much further in the last couple of weeks training with Aang than I have ever managed on my own,” Emi added.

“I learned from badger moles,” Toph remarked. “They don’t talk, but they’re still pretty good teachers.”

“It would be nice to be a master swordfighter,” Sokka said as he admired the blade of the sword. “Alright. I’ll talk to him!”

---

Not long after the group made camp a short ways outside of the town, Emi came to an important realization; Sokka was the one the group relied on to have a plan for them. With him off training with Master Piandao, they seemed at a complete loss of what to do. Which both amused and aggravated Emi.

Her three friends were currently laying on the ground of their campsite while Emi was practicing her Airbending. Appa was lounging under the shade of a rocky overhang while Momo was taking a nap with Yuuka. The sun was hot, beating down upon the land with a relentless energy.
“What should we do today?” Aang asked the others.

“I’m tapped out. I already picked my toes; twice!” Toph replied.

“Twice?”

“The first time was for the cleaning. But the second time was just for the sweet picking sensation.”

“Sokka’s been in charge of the schedule,” Katara remarked. “I’m not sure what we should be doing.”

“Plus it’s so hot today…” Toph sighed.

“How hot is it?” Aang asked with a smirk.

“I dunno. Real hot?”

“It’s so hot…it’s so hot that…Momo is…shedding like Appa!” Katara attempted the joke, but not entirely well. “Huh? Huh?”

“I guess the jokes don’t run in the family,” Aang said sadly.

“Oh, everyone’s a critic.”

“Hey, Tenderfoot!” Toph called out to Emi. “How is it you’re not dying of this heat?”

Emi chuckled, landing gracefully next to the group. “Maybe because I grew up in the Fire Nation? I’m used to this weather,” she shrugged. “Come on guys, there’s plenty to do! How about we go for a swim?”

The others looked at one another, mumbling halfhearted replies. Emi rolled her eyes and stood up, hands on her hips. “Okay, suit yourselves. Melt in the heat if you wish.” She started to walk away when Katara called her back.

“Wait, where’re you going?”

Emi turned back slightly. “I’m going back into town. Seeing all those weapons…I dunno, I just felt like looking again.”
“You should really stay here, Emi. It’s safer if we go into town together, as a group,” Katara said, her blue eyes emanating worry.

“Well…” Emi hesitated, but she knew her friend was right. “Okay. But you guys seriously need to find something to do, or I’m going to go crazy watching you lounge around like slugs!”

---

The next day they left Piandao’s castle, Sokka with his new, handmade sword and the blessing of a master. His final test had been rigorous, and they had all watched with bated breath as the older sword master kept swinging his blade with a vicious talent. But Sokka had held his own exceptionally well, and Emi knew he’d become a great master himself someday.

“So, anything else we need to do before we leave?” Sokka asked the group as they walked down the path. Toph was morphing her new meteor rock into crazy shapes while Emi was lost in thought.

“Yeah, Emi wanted to go back to the weapons shop and buy a sword for herself,” Katara remarked, snapping Emi out of her reverie.

“Not to buy!” she quickly said. “I-I just…wanted to look around again is all.”

“Oh,” Sokka raised an eyebrow a little in confusion. “Well, one more trip couldn’t hurt.”

So they returned to the weapons shop where they looked around once again. However, while her friends meandered through the shop Emi made a beeline to the display with the dao broadswords.

She knew it was no good to remind herself like this, but she couldn’t help it. There was still a part of her, and probably would always be a part of her, that would love him. Despite everything. And that just made her angry with him and with herself.

Sokka came up next to her as she stared the swords. “You really want those? They’d be kinda heavy for someone like you,” he remarked, looking sidelong at her.

“I wasn’t planning on getting them,” Emi replied shortly. “I was just looking.” She stalked away from the display with more determination than necessary, looking around at all the other swords. Her eyes soon fell upon a particular blade, long and lean looking with a short handle and a curved edge.

“Wow, what kind of sword is that?” Emi asked aloud.

“A scimitar,” the shopkeeper replied, sensing a possible sale. “Lightweight and best for slashing.”
“Hey, that’d be perfect for you!” Sokka said.

“Well…maybe,” Emi allowed before shrugging. “But, really, we can’t possibly afford it. Besides, I don’t need to know any sword fighting.”

“All students of Piandao’s get half price,” the shopkeeper needled.

Emi was still doubtful; her desire to learn sword fighting hadn’t abated, but the last lesson she’d had had been with him. She wasn’t sure if she had the spine to keep learning after everything that had happened.

“We’ll take it,” Sokka said firmly, taking the sword and its sheath down from the wall.

“Sokka, what are you doing?!” Emi demanded, following him to the register. “I said I don’t need a sword!”

“Hey, he’s buying you a sword,” Toph remarked, crossing her arms. “If I were you, I wouldn’t complain.”

“I’m not complaining! It’s just…i-it’s not necessary!” Emi insisted.

The transaction complete, Sokka led the way back out of the shop, where he thrust the newly bought sword into Emi’s hands.

“You guys go ahead, we’ll catch up with you,” Sokka said to the group. Once they were out of earshot, he turned to Emi. “He started to teach you, didn’t he?” he asked evenly.

“What?! No! That’s not-” Emi stopped herself, her shoulders slumping. “How did you know?”

“Please, I’ve never seen anyone look at swords with so much anger and longing before,” Sokka remarked, smirking. His face then grew serious after a moment. “You can still learn, you know. Honestly, it would be good for you to have another way to fight. Your Airbending is getting better, but in the meantime why not have a fallback option?”

“I know,” Emi sighed, stroking the sheath of her new sword. “I just wasn’t sure if I could. With one thing…and another…”

Sokka laid a hand on her shoulder, smiling gently. “Don’t worry, big brother Sokka is here to help you!”
Emi rolled her eyes. “Yeah, still a year older than you.” She smiled as well, though. “But, I guess I can accept the brother part.”

“Good,” he said, slinging an arm around her shoulders and walking her back toward their camp. “Nothing bad will happen to you while I’m around. I promise.”
Zuko was livid. He, his girlfriend, his sister, and their friend were being shipped off to Ember Island as if they were little kids. His father had wanted to meet with his advisers alone, and apparently the whole wide open palace wasn’t enough distance for him.

“Doesn’t your family have a house on Ember Island?” Ty Lee asked Azula.

“We used to come every summer when we were kids,” the young princess replied dryly.

“That must have been fun!”

“That was a long time ago,” Zuko muttered, hating the peppy girl that was always happy. She had nothing to be happy about, yet she still managed to smile and laugh more often than not. She was so annoying, and so much like-

He clenched his eyes shut. He had gone a long time without slipping down that path. He may not be able to control his dreams, but he had control over his thoughts during the day. And Zuko would not allow her to permeate them.

Once they docked on the beach they were met by Lo and Li, and were promptly ushered into a pathetic excuse for a beach house. Zuko grimaced at the stench of old lady once inside, but he was downright sickened by seeing the old women in their bathing suits.

Maybe being on the beach with the sea air and Mai would help his mind settle. Like that has worked so well in the past, a part of him sniped.

“Aang, I know swimming is fun and all, but do you think you should really be exposing yourself like that? Cover up!” Toph called out from her place on the rocks. Emi frowned, running a hand through her wet sandy hair; it wasn’t like they were out in the open, after all.

“What? I’m wearing trunks,” Aang replied as he floated by in the crater lake.

“I think she means your tattoos, Aang,” Emi said as she flopped onto her back in the water.

“You should cover up too, Tenderfoot!” the girl snapped back.

“There are walls all around us,” Katara said. “It’s completely safe.”
“Thank you, Katara!” Emi remarked, holding her breath and diving beneath the water. By the time she poked her head back up, Aang had managed to disappear into a tunnel in the rocks, sliding down the resulting waterfall. He was just making his way back over the wall, laughing as Momo flew around his head.

“He couldn’t fathom what had possessed them to even accept this stupid invitation. They had nothing to prove, nothing to gain. He was royalty; he didn’t need the acceptance of a bunch of beach teens.

But his sister was adamant. Zuko heaved a sigh as they made their way to Chan’s beach house. Sometimes she got the oddest ideas in her head. Though this one was certainly the topper of them all.

They were the first ones to arrive, thanks to Azula taking the whole “party from dusk to dawn” thing literally. But not long after, the rest of the partygoers showed up and soon the whole house was ringing with laughter and chatter. It made Zuko feel ill.

He sat with his girlfriend on one of the couches, his eyes trained on Ruon-Jian. He had been eyeing Mai since they had first arrived, and he didn’t like it. Mai was his girlfriend, his way to forget… everything. He needed her, and he wouldn’t let some jumped up hormonal teen swoop in and take her. Zuko scowled. Maybe he was just being too protective. He was never like this before. But then again, there were a few times when he was a fugitive-

“I’m hungry,” Mai said tonelessly.

“So what?” Zuko sighed.

“So, get me some food.”

“Sure.” He left the couch and went to get his girlfriend what she wanted. However, as he was on his way to bring the dish back he was bumped into by another guy.

“Hey, watch it!” he snapped. “That food was for my cranky girlfriend!” He looked over to where he had left Mai and saw none other than Ruon-Jian standing there, talking with her. In that moment, Zuko didn’t see Mai, but another girl; a girl with sea green eyes and fair hair, and she was laughing happily at whatever story that arrogant jerk was spinning for her.

With a snarl he ran over, forcefully shoving Ruon-Jian away from his girl. He didn’t have the right
to make her laugh, that was his job. Emi’s smile was for him alone-

“Zuko, what is wrong with you?!” Mai’s voice cut through the haze of his anger, snapping him back to reality.

“What’s wrong with me?!” he retorted, forcing the image of the Airbender away from his conscious thought.

“Your temper is out of control! You blow up over every little thing! You’re so impatient and hotheaded and angry!”

“Well, at least I feel something!” Zuko snapped back. “Unlike you; you have no passion for anything! You’re just a big blob!”

Mai frowned and turned her back. “It’s over Zuko. We’re done.”

*Finally,* a small voiced piped up in his head as he stormed out of the beach house.

He stalked through the night, the sound of the waves his only companion. Zuko was fuming. He was angry at Mai, he was angry at his father, he was angry at his uncle; he was angry at everyone. But more than anything, he was angry at himself.

Zuko eventually found himself at the threshold of his family’s old summer home. The memories he had there were the best from his childhood, a time when his family was actually somewhat peaceful.

After forcing the doors open, he wandered through the silent home, covered in dust from years of neglect. He paused in front of a painting of his family, their faces somber even back then. Zuko’s eyes lingered on his mother’s face for the longest time. He wondered what she would think of him now; think of what he had done. To his uncle. And…to her.

Emi. Even when she was his captive she had a light about her, a way of looking on the bright side of life. It had annoyed him so much but now that he had gone without her laughter and her incessant need to experience every little bit of life for so long, he found he missed it. A lot.

Zuko finally allowed his mind to drift back to the last time he had spoken to her. Her confession had barely penetrated his fury, but he couldn’t deny that small bit of pleasure that made his heart jump whenever he replayed those three words. But he had torn her apart. Ripped her heart to shreds and stomped on the remains. He wondered where she was now, if she was still with the Avatar. Maybe she was happy now. Maybe she even had someone else to love-

Zuko stopped his thoughts right there, a pang clenching his heart at the very idea of another man
being with her. Holding her. Kissing her. Zuko heaved a sigh then; what did it matter now? She was gone. And even if he did see her again, what could he possibly do to make up for what he had done? Despite his doubts, Zuko couldn’t stop the myriad of ideas that formed in his mind of how he would win Emi back, if he ever had the chance.

- - -

Emi was awoken suddenly from her sleep by Toph. She sat up blearily with the others, rubbing her eyes while Yuuka yawned.

“Guys, you’re all going to think I’m crazy, but it feels like a metal man is coming,” the Earthbender explained.

“Um…” Emi couldn’t even form a response for that. A sudden glint blinded them temporarily, and they all looked up to see a man standing on the precipice of the crater lake. Emi was shocked to see he actually did have metallic limbs; a leg and an arm. He stood there, staring at them. She noticed he had an odd tattoo on the middle of his forehead, but that was all she could gather. The next thing she knew, he took a breath and fired an explosion from his mind, the attack hitting the side of the rocky incline near their camp.

They all jumped out of the way, Toph using her Earthbending to fire large rocks toward the strange man. He blew right through them with another mental attack, and Emi and Aang jumped forward to create an air shield, cushioning the blow. Katara then ran ahead, taking the water from the lake to aim a large ice spike at him, but that, too, was destroyed by his mental Firebending. With another shot, the metal man destroyed part of the crater wall, raining down chunks of rock and making the group run for cover.

“This is crazy!” Sokka exclaimed. “Who can beat a guy who blows things up with his mind?!”

“We can’t!” Aang said, moving forward. “You guys jump on Appa, I’ll try to distract him!”

“I’m coming with you!” Emi yelled after him, jumping up before any of her friends could stop her.

“Emi, it’s too dangerous!” Aang yelled back to her.

“Come on, two Airbenders against a metal man; what could go wrong?” Emi smirked, taking off on her air scooter. Aang followed close behind, both of them nimbly maneuvering up the rock wall and out of the crater lake, where the metal man aimed another explosion at them.

They slid down the embankment and took off running through the rock pillars on the other side. Emi kept her ears open for the telltale sound of his intake of breath, or the clanking of his metal limbs. It wasn’t all that hard to keep track of him; he was no lightweight, that was for sure.

Aang and Emi both hid behind different pillars, heaving air into their starved lungs as quietly as
they could. They could hear the stranger stalking along through the pillars, looking for them. Then, he suddenly appeared, aiming an attack at Aang. He jumped out of the way as the pillar exploded into millions of pieces. Emi leapt out from her hiding place and aimed a blast of wind, streaming the air the way Aang had showed her. She picked up several small rocks along the way, pelting them toward the metal man at high speed. He blocked the missiles and drew in a breath. Emi leapt out of the way just as he fired another mental attack, exploding the ground where she had been.

She caught up to Aang, who sliced through the rock pillar next to them, making it fly toward the metal man. He exploded the stone and swiftly shot another bolt toward them. Emi and Aang leapt up, both of them shooting wind from their palms to cushion the blow. They were blasted further into the sky, separating and landing several yards away from one another. Aang had punched through another rock pillar and used the stones to hide himself from view. Emi silently scaled her own pillar, staying low against the rock as she watched the metal man creep along, looking for them.

He paused before the pile of rocks that concealed Aang, peering at them suspiciously. Just as he went to aim a bolt at the pile, Aang leapt up over him, encased in a stone suit. At the same time, Emi leapt down and back up, sending a sharp blade of air careening toward the metal man. He dodged and sent another fire bolt at them, pushing them up into the sky where they were swiftly caught by Appa and their friends.

Breathing heavily, Emi chanced a look back at the rapidly shrinking form of the assassin. *Who was he?*

“*We’re okay,*” Aang assured Katara, who was holding him as he caught his breath.

“*Well that was random,*” Toph remarked.

“I don’t think so,” Katara said, looking over Emi to make sure she was alright, too. “I get the feeling he knows who we are.”

“How would he know that?” Emi asked, bemused. “*We’ve been hiding out for weeks, and we’ve been just fine!*”

“Maybe someone recognized us,” Sokka replied from his seat at the front. “We haven’t exactly kept that low of a profile.”

“Look, we got away from him. That’s all that matters right now,” Katara said bracingly.

“Yeah. For now,” Emi remarked, looking back the way they had come. She couldn’t help but wonder who the assassin was, who had sent him. And, most important of all, when they would be seeing him again.
They were finally going back home. Zuko was grateful; he couldn’t take much more of staying at that beach. Even though they got back at Chan and his idiot friend Ruon-Jian, he still didn’t feel quite as content. He managed a smile, though, as his on-again girlfriend stroked his cheek lovingly. While he was glad that she was being more in touch with her emotions, it still wasn’t the same. She wasn’t the girl he wanted.

He had admitted a lot of things to them last night as they sat around their campfire. The one thing he didn’t say aloud though, but he admitted in his heart, was that he loved Emi. And he wanted her back. But that was not so easy to do. Maybe the path would become clear to him. Maybe…maybe he could meet with his uncle. Briefly. Just to get his advice. Zuko sighed, closing his eyes. If his uncle wasn’t still ignoring him, of course.
Anyone out there enjoying the first day of summer? I'm not. I loathe the heat and dream of snow. But such an occurrence will not happen for many a month to come.

*heaves a long-suffering sigh* I should have been born during an ice age.

Emi and Sokka watched on the sidelines as Toph, Katara, and Aang began their training session. It was ingenious, really, to have Aang blindfolded as they worked. But of course, when one has a blind Earthbender for a teacher, that was to be expected.

What was unexpected was the sudden turn of events where Toph accidentally hit Katara with her attack. From there, everything just spiraled downward and ended up with both girls physically wrestling, their pupil all but forgotten.

At that moment, Sokka grinned mischievously and took off, rounding around some stray boulders to attack Aang from behind.

“Sneak attack!”

Emi slapped a hand to her face as Aang easily slid a slab of rock up from the ground, effectively halting Sokka’s so-called “sneak attack.”

“It’s not very sneaky when you yell it out, Sokka,” Emi remarked as she walked up to them.

At a noise off to the side, they all turned to see Katara and Toph still going at it in a pile of mud, with no signs of stopping anytime soon.

“Uh, guys?” Aang said. “I thought we were supposed to be training me.”

Finally, the girls seemed to come to their senses and straightened up.

“Very well pupil,” Katara said with as much dignity as she could muster. “I believe you’ve had enough training for today.” She walked away, still covered in mud.

“While Katara cleans up, let’s go have some fun!” Toph declared as she easily shook off her own
share of mud. The three of them exchanged wide grins before cheering with enthusiasm.

They all ventured into the nearby town, admiring the scenery and observing various stores that lined the streets. Sokka looked up, seeing the local messenger hawks flying through the sky and going in and out of their roost at the shop nearby.

“You know, I’ve been thinking about getting one for myself,” Sokka remarked as they passed by the building. “That way, I wouldn’t have to talk to anyone; I could just send them messages!”

“I gotta say, I like the idea of not talking to you,” Toph smirked.

“Sounds like a lot more effort if you ask me,” Emi said.

“So, guys, what are we going to get with our last silver piece?” Aang asked, holding the coin up.

“We can get more money,” Toph said, stopping in the middle of the street. They turned back to her, eyebrows raised. “Right there.”

She was pointing to the street below where Emi could see a shell game being played. She had witnessed these before from when she had traveled through the Fire Nation the first time; it was a rigged game where the dealer would hide the pebble in his sleeves and just rake in the coins.

“This is where you seeing people are at a disadvantage,” Toph explained as they moved down to get closer to the game. “Everyone guesses wrong because the dealer moves the rock at the last second. But I can feel it with my Earthbending.”

It didn’t take long for the dealer to set his eyes on Toph. The greedy smirk on his face told Emi that he thought he could see a sure thing when he spotted it. She hid a smile behind her hand; boy was he about to be proven wrong.

Later they made their way back to camp, loaded with fresh supplies and food. Emi had to admit, it was fun cheating at a fixed game. That was how she reasoned with the small stab of guilt she felt at being dishonest. He’s the one who was being dishonest first, she thought to herself. No big deal.

“Where did you guys get the money to buy all this stuff?” Katara asked as they set down their baskets. Emi frowned; her tone reminded her strongly of another’s who had asked a very similar question some time ago.

“Toph got us money,” Aang explained. “She scammed one of the guys in town who moves the shells all sneaky like.”
“She used Earthbending to win the game!” Sokka chimed in. “Classic!”

“Ah. So she cheated,” Katra remarked, her face stern.

“Hey, I only cheated because he was cheating,” Toph said. “I cheated a cheater. What’s wrong with that?”

“I’m just saying, this isn’t something we should make a habit of doing.”

“Why? Because it’s fun? And you hate fun?”

“I don’t hate fun,” Katara insisted. She grabbed Momo and stuck him on top her head. “See? Fun!” The lemur slid off and chattered indignantly, running as far from her grasp as he could get. Yuuka gave a squeak and ran off as well, also afraid to be within Katara’s reach.

“Katara, I’ll personally make you an Avatar promise that we won’t make a habit of doing these scams,” Aang said, raising his headband to show his arrow and bowing to his friend.

Emi was no Toph, but even she could tell he was lying. So, when the three of them ventured back into the village the second time, she declined to go with them. To her annoyance, her guilt was winning out over her reasoning, though she was sure that had something to do with another matter entirely.

She sighed, standing up. Maybe I’ll work on my sword fighting, she thought to herself. Some of the stances Sokka had showed her could use some work.

---

Emi was glad she quit when she did. It seemed that Aang, Sokka, and Toph had been very busy, scamming the whole town in various ways. Katara was un-amused, to say the least. And Emi didn’t blame her.

“You guys, I think these scams have gone far enough,” she told them as they were gathered around their campsite. “If you keep doing them, something bad is going to happen.”

“Would you for once just stop being such a sourpuss and lighten up?” Toph remarked, tossing Katara a coin.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Katara snapped. “You think I should be more like you? Like some wild child?”

“Yeah! Maybe. Maybe then you’d see how great we have it! I mean, look at us! We’re traveling around the world, making easy money, having fun, with no parents to tell us what to do!”
Emi winced. Sure, she had been having the time of her life with her friends. Still, she would have given anything to have had parents. To have Haruka back.

“Ah, I see. You’re acting like this because of your parents,” Katara remarked knowingly.


“They were controlling over you, so you ran away. And now you act like your parents don’t exist! You act like you hate them, but you don’t. You just feel guilty.”

“I do hate them.”

“I don’t think so. I think you miss them. But you don’t want to deal with that, so instead, you act like this crazy person!”

That was the final straw.

“Look, I ran away to help Aang!” Toph spat at Katara, standing up.

“You know what? It doesn’t matter. These scams put us all at risk and we don’t need that! We’ve already got some third eyed freak after us.”

“Speaking of that third eyed freak,” Sokka chimed in. “I think I’ve come up with a name for him. What do you think of Sparky Sparky Boom Man?”

“That’s…interesting?” Emi ventured, shrugging.

Katara ignored her brother. “We have enough money. You need to stop this!”

“I’ll stop when I want to stop and not when you tell me!” Toph stomped on the ground, her bag of coins jumping up and landing in her hand. She stormed a good distance away and made an earth tent to shut out the rest of the group.

“Speaking of money, I’m off to spend some. See you guys later!” Sokka said, leaving the camp.

Katara huffed in annoyance, turning on her heel and storming away from the remaining two, muttering under her breath as she did so.

“Well then,” Emi remarked, turning to Aang. “Up for a little training?”
“Yeah, let’s go! I think you’re ready to start learning how to make a tornado,” Aang remarked, jumping up to his feet.

Emi grinned and they took off to a clearer area to begin training.

---

Later, after Sokka had returned with a new messenger hawk perched on his shoulder (which Momo did not take a liking to at all), he and Toph left again, presumably to go scamming. Katara was in a foul temper, storming around the camp and tidying things that didn’t need to be tidied. Emi and Aang stayed out of her way, leery of getting the brunt of her frustration if they were to accidentally step a toe out of line.

Finally, she seemed to calm down. But in place of her cleaning frenzy, now she had an odd look on her face. Emi wasn’t sure what had happened, but all she really cared about was that it was safe to be within sight of her friend again.

Just then, Toph and Sokka came back with their new purchases and a fresh bag of coins.

“Well. Look who decided to join us,” Katara remarked as they set their baskets down. “Where have you two been? Off scamming again?”

“Yes, we were,” Toph replied shortly.

“And I suppose you don’t think what you’re doing is dangerous at all?”

Emi frowned, sensing something about to happen.

“No, I don’t.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

“Well then, what’s this?” Katara pulled out a sheet of paper with what looked like an amateur drawing of Toph at the top. Emi grimaced; a wanted poster. Of course.

“I don’t know!” Toph snapped, exasperated. “I mean, seriously, what’s with you people?! I’m blind!”

“It’s a wanted poster of you!” Katara explained, undeterred. “The Runaway. Is that what you’re
called now? Are you proud of this?!”

“Where did you get that?” Toph demanded.

“It doesn’t matter where I got it, the fact is-”

“You went through my stuff! You had no right!”

“Your stuff was messy, and I was straightening up and happened to stumble across it.”

“That’s a lie, you’re lying Katara!” Toph accused.

Katara drew in a breath, her face stony. “Fine, it’s a lie! But you’ve been so out of control lately- I knew something was up! I knew you were hiding something, and you were!”

Toph scowled, ripping the poster out of Katara’s hand and stalking past her.

“Don’t you walk away while I’m talking to you!” she demanded.

“Oh really mom?” Toph taunted. “What are you going to do, send me to my room?”

“I wish I could.”

“Well you can’t! Because you’re not my mom and you’re not their mom!” she gestured to Emi, Sokka, and Aang, who had been watching this argument silently.

“I never said I was!” Katara retorted angrily.

“No, but you certainly act like it! You think it’s your job to boss everyone around, but it’s not! You’re just a regular kid like the rest of us! So stop acting like you can tell me what to do; I can do whatever I want!”

Katara frowned. “I...don’t act that way. Sokka, do I act motherly?”

Sokka stiffened. “Hey, I’m staying out of this one.”

“Emi, do you think I act motherly?”
Emi blinked. “I…I really don’t think it’s my place to say…” she muttered, avoiding Katara’s eyes.

“What do you think, Aang? Do I act like a mom?”

“Well, I-” Aang started to say, rubbing his eyes.

“Stop rubbing your eyes and speak clearly when you talk!” Katara scolded.

Aang sat up straighter. “Yes, ma’am!”

Toph scoffed. “I can’t be around you right now!”

“Well, I can’t be around you!” Katara shot back. Both girls stormed off in opposite directions, leaving an awkward silence in their wake.

“Great. Now what do we do?” Aang asked after a few moments.

Emi sighed, standing up. “Maybe for now we should just let them cool off. Later we can try and talk to them.”

“Uh, Emi, I know you’ve been in the group for a while now,” Sokka said apprehensively. “But I don’t think you’ve been around long enough to really understand the…dynamic between Katara and Toph. Once they start arguing, it takes them a long time to cool off.”

“Believe me, I don’t doubt that,” Emi assured him. “But I trust my gut, and right now it’s telling me that we should leave them alone. I’m going for a walk. Don’t do anything until I get back, okay?”

Aang and Sokka looked at one another before nodding. Emi then turned and walked away from the camp, needing to get her own thoughts in order.

However, by the time she came back nearly an hour later she returned in time to see Katara storming further away from the camp angrily. Emi groaned in exasperation and ran over to where she had left the boys.

“What did you two do?!” she demanded.

“Sokka thought it’d be a good idea to send Katara a written apology pretending it was from Toph,” Aang replied immediately, earning a glare from Sokka.
“Oh for-” Emi heaved a sigh. “Fine. I’ll go talk to Katara. Sokka, you talk to Toph. Aang you go and...do Avatar stuff,” she said, leaving the boys to their tasks.

Emi soon found Katara below the cliffs by the water, glowering down into the pool. “Hey,” she greeted, sitting next to her.

“Don’t tell me Sokka put you up to this,” Katara snapped, her gaze fixed.

“No. Actually, it was my idea,” Katara turned to Emi, narrowing her eyes. “Please, just hear me out.”

Katara sighed. “Okay, fine.”

“I get where you’re coming from. I really do. But at the same time, I also get where Toph is coming from. I grew up isolated like she did. Thankfully, Haruka never really suffocated me to the point where I’d run away, but there were times when I came close.” Emi smiled sadly. “I knew she just wanted to keep me safe, that she was doing what she thought was best for me. But sometimes, I wonder if it wouldn’t have been better if we just ventured out a little more. Maybe visit some of the cities and towns nearby. Even just going to a different island would have been nice.

“I loved Haruka dearly and I always will. But sometimes, one can be too protective of those they care about. With Toph, I know you care about her. And I know she cares about you. You guys just have to find a good balance between looking out for each other and letting loose and having fun for the sake of fun. I know it’s hard to think that way, with everything we’ve been through and everything you’ve dealt with in your past. But it’s still in you. I know it is.”

“…Thanks, Emi,” Katara smiled slightly. “I know I do tend to be motherly with everyone. I’m just so used to it, what with taking care of my family after my mom died. It’s hard to break the habit. Especially when I’m around the people I care about.”

“I’m not asking you to break the habit,” Emi assured her. “I’m just asking that you be a little more open minded. Because, believe me, this group does need some motherly affection from time to time.”

Katara grinned and hugged Emi. Both girls then stood up and made their way back to the camp. Once there, Katara made a beeline for Toph.

“Hi, Toph. Um, I wanna-”

“Katara, stop. You don’t need to apologize,” Toph said. “I was the one being stupid. These scams are out of control, and I’m done with them.”
“Actually, I wasn’t going to apologize,” Katara remarked. “I was going to say I want to pull a scam with you.”

“What?!” Emi exclaimed while Aang and Sokka looked at Katara in shock. “Katara, this isn’t what I meant by being open-minded.”

“You want to pull a scam?!” Toph interrupted incredulously.


“You know I’m in!” Toph exclaimed.

“Guys, are you really sure this will work?” Emi asked worriedly.

“It’ll be simple, Emi. The wanted poster of Toph says she’s worth a lot of money; ten times more than all the other scams put together,” Katara said, her face alight with excitement.

“So you’ll, what, pretend to capture her and collect the award money?” Emi crossed her arms, frowning. “What about Toph?”

“She can Metalbend her way out of jail, and then we get away with enough money to keep us set until the Day of Black Sun!”

“I gotta say, I love this plan,” Toph remarked.

Emi was still doubtful, but she trusted the girls to know what they were doing. So they took off into town, leaving Emi, Aang, and Sokka behind to wait for them.

After a few hours, though, they were all worried.

“Do you think this scam of theirs should be taking this long?” Aang asked as he paced around.

“I was just wondering the same thing,” Sokka said. “We’d better check it out.”

They stood up, looking over their menagerie of animals. “You two behave,” Sokka said to Hawkey and Momo. “Appa and Yuuka are in charge.” With that they left to go look for their friends.

Once they got into town, though, Emi felt her senses spike with apprehension. There was no one on the streets, and everything was eerily silent.
“Where do you think they might be?” Sokka asked as they walked.

“Where do you think anyone is?” Aang asked in return.

They entered the central courtyard, where the bronze statue of Fire Lord Ozai stood. Emi stopped, her spine tingling in warning. “Something’s not right…” she muttered. Suddenly, both she and Aang heard the telltale intake of breath.

“Sokka, watch out!” Aang grabbed Sokka and dragged him behind the statue as Emi jumped in behind them. The explosion hit the ground where they had just been moments before, rubble and dust spraying all around.

“It’s Sparky Sparky Boom Man!” Emi cried out before turning to Sokka. “See? It doesn’t really fit him.”

“I’ll think of a new name later, let’s just get out of here!” Sokka yelled as the metal man jumped down from the nearby rooftop, hitting the ground hard and sending another fire bolt toward them. They jumped out of the way, running toward the outer buildings. They narrowly avoided another attack as they did so, running into an empty cart and hiding behind it for a quick breather.

“This guy is too good! He shoots fire from his brain!” Sokka exclaimed.

“We should split up. He can’t chase all three of us!” Aang said. He and Sokka took off in opposite directions while Emi leapt up from behind the cart, narrowly avoiding another blow from the metal man. She aimed a blast of wind toward him before making an air scooter and zooming by as he was knocked off balance by her attack.

Along the roof of one building Aang ran, bypassing him swiftly. The man drew in a breath, aiming a bolt toward the young Avatar who leapt into the air to avoid the attack only to hit the bronze chest of the statue. He slid down, landing dazedly on his feet before tumbling the rest of the way to the ground.

Before the metal man could strike again, a stream of water encased his head and swiftly turned to ice, rendering him temporarily powerless. Emi jumped down next to Aang, helping him to his feet as Katara and the others joined them.

“Let’s get out of here!” Toph exclaimed, running away from the metal man before he could break free. Behind them, Emi heard the ice shatter and the intake of breath that precluded the inevitable explosion. Toph whirled around, sending a shard of rock flying toward him.

Something must have gone right, because although they heard an explosion, nothing shattered near them. Emi breathed a sigh of relief but kept up their fast pace; she would rest easy once they were
in the sky on Appa.

“Hey, I got it! The perfect name for that guy!” Sokka suddenly exclaimed. “Combustion Man!”

“Good job, Sokka. Now let’s get out of here before Combustion Man catches us!” Toph said as they rounded a corner.

“See, it fits so well!”

---

Once they were a safe distance away from the town, Aang landed Appa and they all began to unload their bags for the night. Except for Katara and Toph; it appeared they were writing a letter together. Emi smiled and continued to unroll her blankets, happy that the two girls were friends again.

She lay in her bed roll, idly scratching Yuuka’s head while Momo lay nearby; he really had taken a shine to the little sugar glider in the weeks they had known each other.

“Hey, where’s Hawkey?”

Emi glanced over to see Sokka looking around for his messenger hawk while Katara and Toph looked a little sheepish.

“We…kinda used him to send a message,” Katara said with a shrug.

“What?! And you couldn’t ask?” Sokka demanded indignantly.

“Maybe it was urgent,” Emi piped up from her bedroll.

“Yeah, that’s it!” Toph remarked. “It was urgent. Top secret; can’t say anything about it.”

Sokka continued to grumble as he set up his bed for the night, making Emi snicker under her breath. They all settled down, yawning and whispering to one another before, one by one, they fell asleep. Emi rolled over to her side, letting the peace of their campsite wash over her and lull her to a dreamless sleep.
Emi sat with her head in her hands, admittedly bored. She would have thought telling scary stories around a campfire would be…well…scary. *Maybe it’s just the way Sokka is telling it,* she remarked inwardly as the Water Tribe boy continued to move around animatedly.

“Suddenly, they heard something down the hall in the dark. *Ooooo*…” he said in a hushed voice. “It came into the torch light…and they knew…the blade of Wang Fung was haunted!” Sokka whipped his own sword out, making various high pitched noises of terror while the rest of the group merely looked at him.

“I think I liked the Man With the Sword for a Hand better,” Aang remarked.

“Water Tribe slumber parties must stink,” Toph huffed.

“No, wait! I’ve got one,” Katara piped up. “And this is a true Southern Water Tribe story.”

“Is this one of those ‘a friend of my cousin knew some guy that this happened to’ stories?” Sokka asked, flopping back onto the ground in a huff.

“No. It happened to mom.”

Emi sat up straighter. So did the others. Katara took a breath and began. “One winter, when mom was a girl, a snowstorm buried the whole village for weeks. A month later, mom realized she hadn’t seen her friend Mimi since the storm. So mom and some others went to check on Mimi’s family. When they got there, no one was home. Just a fire, flickering in the fireplace.”

Emi felt a tingle of apprehension run along her spine, Yuuka curling into a tighter ball on her lap as they listened, enraptured.

“While the men went out to search, mom stayed in the house. When she was alone, she heard a voice: *it’s so cold…and I can’t get warm*…” Katara distorted her voice, making it high and shaky. “Mom turned and saw Mimi standing by the fire. She was blue, like she was frozen. Mom ran outside for help, but when everyone came back, Mimi was gone.”

They were all huddled around themselves, looking at Katara with wide eyes.

“Where’d she go?” Sokka asked from behind his hiding place in the form of a tree root.
“No one knows,” Katara said somberly. “Mimi’s house stands empty to this day. But sometimes, people see smoke coming up from the chimney; like little Mimi is still trying to get warm…”

Silence fell over the campsite then. Reflexively, Emi looked around, feeling a sense of foreboding about the woods now.

“Wait!” Toph suddenly said, sitting up straighter. “Guys, did you hear that? I hear people under the mountain!”

The four of them immediately drew closer together, Toph’s words freaking them out. “And they’re screaming,” she continued, standing up to tilt her head as if to hear better.

Sokka regained his composure, scoffing. “Nice try.”

“No, I’m serious!” Toph insisted. “I hear something.”

“Look, we’re all just a little…on edge from the ghost stories,” Emi remarked, her eyes darting around the darkness.

“It just…stopped,” Toph said softly, confused.

“Alright…now I’m getting scared,” Aang muttered, clinging to Katara.

“Hello children.”

They all shrieked and jumped up, dashing to the other side of their fire and clinging to one another as a figure emerged from the darkness. She was an old woman, with long white hair and a shawl draped over her thin shoulders.

“Sorry to frighten you,” she said, stepping further into the clearing. “My name is Hama. You children shouldn’t be out in the forest by yourselves at night. I have an inn nearby, why don’t you come back for some spiced tea and warm beds?”

They all relaxed, smiling sheepishly at their jumpiness. “Yes, please,” Sokka answered.

Hama smiled kindly, leading them out of the woods and into the town nearby. Her inn sat on a hill overlooking the village, its façade worn and creaky in places. Emi still felt a little jumpy from their scare, but she allowed herself to relax with her friends; as long as they were together, they’d be just fine.

They were seated at their hostess’ table, where Hama set out cups and poured them her spiced tea.
“Thanks for letting us stay here tonight,” Katara said as she served them. “You have a lovely inn.”

“Aren’t you sweet,” Hama remarked, taking her seat. “You know you should be more careful. People have been disappearing in those woods you were camping in.”

“What do you mean ‘disappearing’?” Emi asked in shock.

“When the moon turns full, people walk in. And they don’t come out,” Hama replied in a grave voice. “Who wants more tea?”

Emi blinked at her sudden change of disposition. They all stared her, hesitant and wary of what she had said.

“Don’t worry,” Hama assured them. “You’ll all be completely safe here. Why don’t I show you to your rooms and you can all get a good night’s rest.”

Emi nestled down in her bed later that night, eyeing the dark walls apprehensively. Yuuka gave a squeak and burrowed under the covers.

“It’s okay, Yuuka,” Emi said, turning over on her side. “It’s just the creepy night we had. Things will look better in the morning.”

- - -

Indeed, the next morning Emi felt refreshed and wide awake, smiling at the streaming sunlight. Not long after they had gotten up, Hama gathered them all together to go shopping in the bustling town. They trailed after the old woman, helping to carry baskets as she bought various food items and other goods. Katara and Hama seemed to have taken a shine to one another, both of them talking and laughing as they walked through the market.

They passed by one vendor, overhearing him as he explained to another man about having to put off deliveries until after the full moon. It struck Emi as suspicious, and she wasn’t the only one.

“People disappearing in the woods, weird stuff during full moons; this just reeks of Spirit World shenanigans,” Sokka remarked.

“Are you sure? Last time we thought a spirit was roaming around it turned out to just be Katara playing the Painted Lady,” Emi said.

“Trust us, Emi, we’ve had plenty of run-ins with the spirits to know the difference,” Sokka replied.

“I haven’t,” Toph said with a shrug.
“I bet if we take a little walk around town, we’ll find out what these people did to the environment to make the spirits mad,” Aang mused.

“And you can sew up this little mystery lickety-split, Avatar style!” Sokka grinned.

“Helping people; that’s what I do.”

They caught up with Katara and Hama, who turned to them with a smile. “Why don’t you all take those things back to the inn? I just have a couple more errands to run; I’ll be back in a little while.

“This is a mysterious little town you have here,” Sokka remarked, stroking his chin.

“Mysterious town for mysterious children,” Hama replied cryptically, smiling as she turned away.

They walked back to the inn and put the baskets away in the kitchen, unloading the supplies they had gathered.

“That Hama seems a little strange,” Sokka said as they worked. “Like she knows something. Or she’s hiding something.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Katara snapped. “She’s a nice woman who took us in and gave us a place to stay. She kinda reminds me of Gran Gran.”

“But, what did she mean by that comment ‘mysterious children’?”

“Gee, I don’t know. Maybe because she found five strange kids camping in the woods at night?” Katara remarked sarcastically. “Isn’t that a little mysterious?”

“Hama is a bit strange,” Emi allowed, pondering the floor. “But so was Haruka. She would sometimes say the oddest things that would make her patients a little uncomfortable.” She chuckled. “Frankly, I thought it was funny.”

Sokka frowned in thought before turning to stride out of the room. “I’m going to take a look around.”

They all exchanged baffled looks before taking off after him as he walked up the stairs. “Sokka!” Katara called after him, but he ignored her. “Sokka, what are you doing? You can’t just snoop around someone’s house!”

They followed him hesitantly as he strode down the hallway, opening the doors he passed and
peering into the rooms. “It’ll be fine,” he assured them.

“She could be home any minute!” Aang said worriedly.

“Sokka, you’re going to get us all in trouble!” Katara scolded her brother as they ventured further along the hallway. “And this is just plain rude!”

“I’m not finished yet,” Sokka retorted, yanking on a pair of cupboard doors that were apparently locked. “Argh…come on-” They suddenly flew open and a bunch of handmade puppets tumbled out, making them jump back in surprise.

“Okay…that’s kinda creepy,” Emi admitted as Katara moved forward to put the puppets away.

“So she’s got a hobby. There’s nothing weird about that,” she said. Sokka frowned and continued on doggedly, going up another flight of stairs to the attic. “Sokka, you’ve looked enough! Hama will be back soon!”

They followed him up the stairs where he was yanking on another door. “Just an ordinary puppet loving innkeeper, huh? The why does she have a locked door up here?”

“Why does anyone have a locked door? To keep people from snooping around through their stuff,” Emi reasoned.

“We’ll see,” Sokka said, peering through the keyhole. “It’s empty, except for a little chest.”

“Maybe it’s treasure!” Toph piped up excitedly. Sokka grinned and took his sword from its sheath, jiggling the lock.

“Sokka, what are you doing?” Katara demanded. “You’re breaking into a private room!”

“I have to see what’s in there!” Sokka retorted. He managed to unlock the door and swiftly strode inside, the rest of the group following reluctantly, but at the same time (at least in Emi’s case) curiously.

“We shouldn’t be doing this…” Aang remarked, looking back the way they had come.

Sokka picked up the chest, peering at the small keyhole. “Maybe there’s a key here somewhere,” he mused aloud, looking around the empty space.

“Oh! Hand it over,” Toph beckoned, taking the chest from Sokka. She then removed her meteor arm cuff, molding it into the shape of a key and started to work the lock on the chest.
“Come on, come on!” Sokka urged her.

“This isn’t as easy as it looks,” Toph snapped while Katara kept pacing around them.

“Guys, I don’t know about this,” Aang muttered.

“It’s not too late to go back, you know,” Emi added, chewing her fingernails nervously.

“This is crazy. I’m leaving!” Katara snapped.

“Suit yourself,” Sokka retorted. “Do it Toph!”

Just as Katara turned to leave, they all heard the click as the chest was opened. Immediately, the five of them gathered around the small box, eagerly trying to see what was inside.

“I’ll tell you what’s in the box.”

They all jumped, turning around swiftly to see Hama standing in the doorway, her expression indescribable. She stepped forward, and Sokka held out the chest with a sense of shame they all felt. She opened the lid and reached inside, taking out…a comb.

“An old comb?” Sokka said, disappointed.

“It’s my greatest treasure,” Hama explained, holding the comb tightly in her hand. “It’s the last thing I own from growing up in the Southern Water Tribe.”

Emi had been shocked. They all had been. Hama told them over dinner (a traditional Southern Water Tribe feast that she had painstakingly put together to surprise them) that she had been one of the last Waterbenders the Fire Nation had taken prisoner in her youth. She spent years in captivity, suffering along with the rest of her brothers and sisters. Then, somehow, she had managed to escape and eventually made her home within the Fire Nation.

Her tale was sad, and Emi sympathized with her. But she couldn’t help but feel something was off with her story; just how had she managed to escape? And why didn’t she go back to the Water Tribe when she was free?

But Emi kept her silence, even when Sokka voiced her doubts. Hama’s sorrow was just too delicate to break with their incessant questions. I’m sure we’ll find out eventually, she mused to herself.
The next day, while Hama was off with Katara teaching her the ways of Southern Waterbending, Emi, Sokka, Toph, and Aang ventured through the woods surrounding the town to look for any signs of spiritual upset. However, the trees seemed as tranquil as they did when they had first entered the forested area.

“This has to be the nicest natural setting in the Fire Nation,” Aang remarked, looking out over the scenery from the cliff where they stood. “I don’t see anything that would make a spirit mad around here.”

“Maybe the Moon Spirit just turned mean,” Toph shrugged.

“The Moon Spirit is a gentle, loving lady!” Sokka suddenly snapped, whirling around on the Earthbender angrily. “She rules the sky with compassion! And…lunar goodness!”

Aang and Emi stared at Sokka in shock before glancing at one another uncertainly.

“Hey, look,” Emi nudged Aang, gesturing to a man walking nearby.

“Excuse me, sir?” Aang asked, running over to him. “Can you tell us anything about the spirit that’s been stealing people?”

“Only one man ever saw it and lived,” he replied. “And that’s old man Ding.”

“Where does old man Ding live?” Toph asked, tugging the man’s sleeve.

After getting the necessary information, the group headed back into town; the night was setting in and they didn’t want to be stuck in the forest during the full moon.

As they walked down the silent streets, they came upon old man Ding himself. He was a rickety looking fellow, trying to board up his windows and doors but not having a very successful time with it.

“Old man Ding?” Aang asked, startling the man and making him misaim his hammer, hitting his thumb instead of the nail.

“Gah! Dagblammit… What?!” he snapped at them. “Can’t you see I’m busy? Got a full moon rising…and why does everyone call me that? I’m not that old!” He crouched down, trying to pick up the plank of wood he had dropped, but couldn’t manage it. He sighed. “Well…I’m young at heart.”
Aang moved forward to help him, and together they picked up the plank and readjusted it against the window. “Not ready to get snapped up by some moon monster yet, at least,” he remarked.

“We wanted to ask you about that,” Sokka said, taking up the hammer and nail and driving the metal into the wood.

“Were you able to get a look at the spirit that took you?” Emi asked.

“Didn’t see no spirit,” Ding said. “Just felt something come over me, like I was…possessed! Forced me to start walking toward the mountain.” He pointed to the ominous rock that jutted up against the night sky. “I tried to fight it, but I couldn’t control my own limbs! It just about had me into a cave up there, and I looked up at the moon at what I thought would be my last glimpse of light. But then, the sun started to rise. And I got control of myself again! I just hightailed it away from that mountain quick as I could!”

“Why would a spirit want to take people to a mountain?” Sokka mused aloud.

“Oh no!” Toph suddenly exclaimed, startling them. “I did hear people screaming under the mountain! The missing villagers must still be there!”

“Oh no…” Emi gasped in horror, looking back up at the mountain. “We’ve got to help them!”

They quickly left old man Ding and ran back toward the forest. Once they were within the trees, they kept moving until they got to same area where they had been camped before. Toph knelt down, touching her hand to the earth.

“I can hear them! They’re this way!” she said, taking off again. They kept running until they found the mouth of a cave, partially hidden by trees and rocks.

“This is the place,” Toph confirmed.

“I can’t see anything down there,” Sokka remarked worriedly.

“That’s why you have me. Let’s go!” Toph took Sokka’s hand and jumped down, Aang and Emi following close behind.

They ran blindly through the tunnels, trusting Toph to lead them in the right direction. If they had been on their own, Emi knew they would have gotten lost. Or hurt. Or both. Before long they came to a metal door with torches lit on either side. Toph used her Metalbending to punch through, Sokka and Aang taking the torches to help them see. They had only gone a few paces when they all stopped in shock.
There were the villagers alright. Chained up to the walls of the cavern and looking weak and fragile.

“We’re saved!” one of them exclaimed in relief.

“I didn’t know spirits made prisons like this,” Aang remarked, looking around while Toph took her space rock and began to unchain the prisoners. “Who brought you here?”

“It was no spirit,” a woman said.

“It was a witch!” another man added.

“A witch? What do you mean?” Sokka demanded.

“She seems like a normal old woman,” the first woman said. “But she controls people like some… dark puppet master.

“Hama!” Sokka grit his teeth, furious.

“Yes! The innkeeper!” another man confirmed.

“I knew there was something creepy about her!” Sokka exclaimed.

“We have to stop Hama!” Aang added.

“Me and Toph will help these people. You guys go!” Emi said, taking the torch from Aang.

It took some time to get all of the villagers free. As they did so, Emi and Toph asked them more about what Hama had been doing to them. It seemed she had recreated her own prison experience, leaving these people chained up like she had been and forced to go hungry and thirsty for extended periods of time.

*So she was out for revenge, Emi mused bitterly. But not just against her jailers; against all of the Fire Nation citizens.*

“The one thing I don’t get is how she managed to control everyone,” Emi said once the last prisoner had been freed.

“I don’t know. But we’d better get back to the others,” Toph remarked, placing her meteor cuff
back around her arm. “They might need our help.”

Together they led the prisoners out of the cave, helping those who were greatly weakened by their incarceration. Soon, they were back out in the open. Not far from their cave, they could hear the sounds of a bending battle going on. Concerned, Emi and Toph rushed forward with the other men and women in tow.

When they got to the clearing where the fight was taking place, they were met with a powerful sight; Katara, using her Waterbending to force Hama to her knees. Emi’s eyes widened in shock. Now she knew how the innkeeper had been controlling the villagers. And it made her sick to think about it. But not as much as realizing Katara had had to use such a foul technique just to stop the witch.

Before long, Hama was clapped in chains once more, with the promise that she would never again see the light of the moon. But Hama did not seem at all disturbed by that fact.

“My work is done,” she promised evilly, turning back to grin at Katara. “Congratulations Katara; you’re a Bloodbender.”
“This is it; the official rendezvous point for the invasion force,” Sokka said as they emerged from the bushes. Emi looked around appreciatively. It was large, isolated, and they were the only people around. It was perfect.

“How’d you pick this place?” Toph asked.

“Before we split up, my dad and I found this island on a map. It’s uninhabited, and the cliffs surrounding the harbor seemed like the perfect place,” Sokka explained as they began to settle down for the night. Emi eagerly unwrapped her hair from its perpetual scarf; if she was lucky she wouldn’t have to wear it again.

“Nice choice, Sokka,” Katara remarked. “And we’re here four days ahead of schedule.”

“Wait…four days?!” Aang shouted, jumping up from the ground in a panic. “The invasion’s in four days?!”

Sokka yawned. “Whatever. That’s like…four days from now. Let’s just…calm down…and…” He fell asleep halfway through his sentence.

Emi rolled her eyes. “I think what Sokka was trying to say is let’s just get as much rest now while we can,” she said, stretching out on her bed roll. “We’re gonna need it.”

“I…guess,” Aang remarked. Emi rolled over, closing her eyes. She was tired; they all were. After the incident with Hama, they had been traveling almost nonstop. Now that they were here, all she wanted to do was sleep.

The next morning, Emi was stirred awake by an odd noise. She sat up blearily, looking around until she spotted Aang standing in front of a tree, punching the daylights out of it. She glanced over and saw Katara was also awake, looking at their friend with confusion. Sokka and Toph woke up moments later from the incessant noise.

“Um…Aang?” Emi asked. He either didn’t hear her or ignored her. Katara sighed and stood up from her bedroll, walking over to him.

“Hey. How long have you been up?” she asked.

“A couple hours,” Aang responded wearily. “I’ve got a couple more skills to refine if I’m going to
fight Ozai.”

“You know, there is such a thing as over training,” Katara said gently.

Aang ignored her, promptly aiming a solid punch into the trunk of the tree, only to fall backwards from the strength of the impact. The tree shuddered, relieving itself of its leaves all over the Avatar’s limp form. Or, at least he was limp until he jumped back up, sliding into an attack stance and circling around Katara.

“You don’t get it, do you?!” he demanded, his eye twitching. “My form is bad, I’m sloppy, and I still don’t know any Firebending! Not even the basics!”

“That’s okay Aang,” Sokka replied as he glanced over his map. “The eclipse will block off all Firebending anyway. You don’t need to know any. Plus, it’s a stupid element.”

“Well…okay. But I still have to work on everything else! I better spend the whole day training,” Aang gave short, stilted bows to them all and took off on an air scooter, leaving them in a stunned silence.

“I’m not saying he’s going about this the right way,” Emi piped up after a few moments. “But I certainly could use a little more training. Sokka, you up for that?”

“Wouldn’t you rather be making wind or something?” he retorted, still pouring over his map.

“Well, naturally. But since Aang is being…you know,” Emi shrugged. “I don’t have that option. Come on. Please?” She smiled widely, blinking her eyes innocently.

Sokka rolled his eyes. “Alright, alright. We’ll work on your sword fighting. And you do need to work on it.”

“You know, Tenderfoot, if you want some help with your Airbending you can always ask me,” Toph remarked as they stood up and gathered their swords.

“You? Why would I do that?” Emi asked, strapping her scimitar onto her back. “You’re an Earthbender.”

“Trying to dodge flying rocks and moving ground will definitely help you. Trust me,” she smiled with satisfaction. Sokka and Emi exchanged glances, shrugging as they went off to work on their sword fighting.

By the time they finished for the day and were settling down to sleep, Emi had managed to win
over Sokka at least once during their training. She was very pleased with herself, and laid down on her bedroll to rest her weary muscles.

Not too long after that, she heard Aang shuffling back to their campsite, yawning widely and falling against the grassy ground in a heap.

“Good night Katara. Good night Sokka. Good night Toph. Good night Emi. Good night Yuuka. Good night Appa. Good night Momo. Good night Appa and Momo-”

“Go to sleep already!” Toph snapped, effectively ending Aang’s rant. Emi stuffed her blankets in her mouth to silence her giggling. She then heaved a sigh and closed her eyes, feeling Yuuka curl up a little closer to her as they both drifted off to sleep.

- - -

“Sokka get up, I need to know what day it is!”

Emi snapped her eyes open, bolting upright at the Aang’s sudden shouting. She quickly looked around and grimaced; he looked far worse today than he did yesterday.

“Wha- who’s talking?!” Sokka grabbed his sword and jumped up, promptly running headfirst into a boulder.

“Relax!” Toph snapped, sitting up blearily. “It’s still two days before the invasion.”

“Sokka, you’ve got to get up and do your rock climbing exercises!” Aang insisted, ignoring Toph and yanking at Sokka’s arms and legs.

“What?” he asked in confusion.

“In one of my dreams you were running from Fire Nation soldiers trying to climb this cliff! But you were too slow and they got you!” Aang exclaimed in a panic.

“But, that was just a dream,” Sokka retorted, standing up. “I’m a great climber!”

“Then climb that cliff!” Aang demanded, pointing to the rocky wall near them. “Climb it fast!”

Toph, Emi, and Katara sat together, watching these events unfold with patient dismay. Emi wondered what had gotten into Aang lately. She hoped it would blow over soon, whatever it was; they needed him to have his sanity for the invasion.

“Don’t drink that!” Aang suddenly yelled to Toph, making Sokka fall down the bit of rock he had
managed to climb.

Toph spat out the water. “Why?! Is it poisoned?!”

“In my dream we were right in the middle of the invasion and you had to stop to use the bathroom! We die because of your tiny bladder!”

Aang then turned his manic gaze to Emi. “You need to make a glider and learn how to fly! In my dream you got stuck in a pit of komodo rhinos and you couldn't fly away! You were trampled to death!”

He then turned to Katara. “And you need to start wearing your hair up! In my dream your hair got caught in a train and-”

“Aang!” Katara interrupted, laying a soothing hand on his cheek. “I know you’re just trying to help, but you really need to get a grip! You’re unraveling.”

Aang stared at her for a moment before sighing. “You’re right. I’m losing my mind…” He walked away, still twitching a little.

“That glider thing wasn’t a bad idea, though,” Emi mused thoughtfully. Katara shot her a glare. “What? I’m just saying, I don’t like the idea of being trampled to death.”

Later that afternoon, they had gathered themselves together to lounge around while Sokka went to work on making Appa’s armor. As they sat, Aang paced around the campsite like a caged tigerdillo.

“It’s like every time I think about how stressed I am I just end up more stressed!” he ranted. “I’m like a big growing snowball of nerves!”

“Of course you are,” Sokka remarked. “That’s because you’ve got to fight the Fire Lord, the baddest man on the planet! And you better win or we’re all done for- hey!”

Emi had aimed a sharp blast of air toward Sokka to shut him up. Katara glared at him as he sat back up. “Sokka, you’re not helping!”

“What? It’s true. That’s the deal, he knows it,” he retorted with a shrug, only to be knocked back over by another blast of wind.

“You know what?” Katara said, walking over to the shivering Avatar. “I’ve got just the thing. Get ready to be de-stressified!” She then ushered Aang away to do some yoga stretches in a natural hot
spring not too far from their campsite. Once they had disappeared, Emi stood up, stretching languidly.

“I don’t suppose either of you know how to make a glider?” she asked Toph and Sokka.

“Yeah, right,” Toph smirked.

Sokka stroked his chin, thinking. “You’d need a sturdy, yet flexible material for the wings. Plus a mechanism to make them spring out from the staff.” He shrugged. “I doubt you’d be able to find the materials you need around here. But I wouldn’t worry about it, you can Airbend just fine without a glider.”

“Maybe, but…that’s not the point,” Emi pouted, crossing her arms. “I wouldn’t feel like a real Airbender without one.”

Suddenly the earth jerked beneath her feet. Reflexively, Emi leapt into the air and drifted down several feet away. As she regained her footing, she sent a glare toward the blind Earthbender, who was grinning.

“Toph! What was that for?!” Emi demanded.

“I told you I’d help with your Airbending, Tenderfoot,” she remarked, standing up. “And if you’re feeling that self-conscious about it, then I’d say you could definitely use my help.”

She promptly sent another barrage of rocks sprouting up from the ground, making Emi leap into the air again. They kept this up for a while, Toph always sending a rock jutting from the earth when Emi dared to set a toe onto the land. She was almost getting good at dodging the Earthbender’s attacks, until she was distracted by Aang coming back from the hot springs with Katara, still looking worse for wear. Suddenly she was catapulted into the sky, landing in a heap several feet away.

“Don’t get distracted!” Toph yelled at her. “I want you to be able to stand within inches from me without me being able to see you!”

“What?!” Emi demanded incredulously. “That’s impossible!”

Toph didn’t bother to reply, stomping her foot into the ground and sending a large rock her way. Emi grit her teeth, spiraling into the air and landing as delicately as she could on the ground. For split second, it looked like she had managed to fool Toph. But then the girl rent a crack in the ground, making Emi have to jump into the air again just to be saved from being squished.

After nearly hour of this, she was finally allowed a reprieve when Aang still needed help relaxing;
neither Katara’s yoga nor Sokka’s therapy session seemed to help him. So Toph was commissioned to give Aang a back pounding massage using a bed of several rocks. When that didn’t work, she suggested acupuncture, but that only made Aang run in fear.

Emi tried to help out as well, suggesting a game of air scooter tag. However, Aang seemed to be unable to get into the spirit of the game, too distracted by his thoughts to zoom away properly.

That night they all settled down to sleep, though Emi had her doubts that Aang would be able to do so.

“Thanks for everything, guys,” he said halfheartedly.

“So, do you feel less stressed?” Katara asked. “Ready for a good night’s sleep?”

“I kinda think I sorta might slightly feel a little better…maybe.”

“Then our work here is done,” Sokka declared, yawning and falling back against his bedroll. The others followed suit, exhausted from the day. Despite her worry for Aang, Emi felt herself slipping easily into the world of sleep. As she drifted off, it occurred to her that she had not gotten such good nights’ rests in a long time.

“AAAHII!!”

Emi shrieked, bolting upright in her bedroll a few hours later. All the others sat up as well, alarmed and looking around in confusion. Even Appa, Momo, and Yuuka were startled. They all looked over to see Aang sitting up, breathing heavily and his eyes wide with panic.

“What happened, Aang?!” Katara asked as they rushed forward.

“It’s the nightmares…they just get worse and worse!” Aang said, hanging his head hopelessly.

“Look like it’s time for another…therapy session!” Sokka grinned, donning his fake beard once again.

Aang glared at him. “No, that won’t help! Nothing helps! There’s only one thing I can do; I’m gonna stay awake straight through to the invasion.”

Emi and her friends looked at one another in shock. There’s no way he can pull this off, she thought incredulously to herself. But Aang would not be swayed, so they settled back down into their bedrolls to sleep, leaving Aang to wander around, muttering under his breath and twitching at odd intervals.
The next morning, true to his promise, Aang had stayed awake all through the night. As they got cleaned up and stretched out their muscles, he was still pacing around lethargically, muttering to himself.

“Invasion…all aboard for the invasion…”

“You don’t look so good,” Katara remarked, walking over to him. Emi sighed and wandered off, figuring she could work on her Airbending one last time before the invasion tomorrow.

She had been going through her stances for a good fifteen minutes when she caught sight of Aang lurking in the bushes nearby. He leapt out, moving to hide behind a rock before jumping out again and yelling to a tree stump that she noticed had the noodle likeness of Ozai stuck to the bark. He leapt up, firing wild air shots that completely missed the large stump. One stray blast of wind knocked Sokka over as he stood several feet away.

“Hey, I’m trying to build Appa some armor here so he doesn’t have to go to the invasion naked!” Sokka yelled to Aang, hauling himself back up to his feet. “He’s your bison.”

Aang ignored Sokka completely, muttering to himself about Ozai’s impeccable defenses. He leapt into the air again, shooting more blasts of wind that were way off target. Emi herself was almost knocked over by one of his wild attacks, but she managed to deflect in time. Without further ado, she retreated over to where the others were, and they all stood around, staring as Aang seemed to slip further and further into his delusions. He even started talking to Momo, using the lemur’s chattering noises as if they were words.

“Aang?” Katara spoke up, making the Avatar’s crazed eyes snap to her. “We’re all starting to get a little worried about you.”

“You’ve been awake too long,” Sokka said.

“And you’re acting downright weird,” Toph remarked.

“You can’t keep this up much longer,” Emi added.

“Ugh…look I appreciate what you guys are saying, but the stress and the nightmares; they were just too much! Staying awake is the best way for me to deal with them.”

“No, it’s not!” Emi insisted, but Aang’s focus was now elsewhere. He was looking from Appa to Momo and back again with panicked eyes. He suddenly leapt forward toward Sokka, grabbing the front of his shirt.
“Sokka, what should we do?!” Aang demanded in agitation.

“About what?” Sokka asked in return, arching an eyebrow.

“About that!” He pointed over to where Appa and Momo were, both animals looking back at Aang with mild expressions.

But apparently, Aang was seeing something else entirely. He stumbled around the clearing, looking all over the place with vacant eyes and muttering every so often.

“I just need to jump in a cold waterfall!” he suddenly yelled, clapping his hands to his face and running off screaming.

The four of them could only stand there, speechless as Aang’s shouting died away.

Katara heaved a sighed. “This has gone on long enough. Come on guys, we need to help him,” she said, taking off in another direction.

“How are we going to do that?” Toph asked. “Nothing we’ve tried has worked!”

“Ther e’s one more thing we can try,” Katara replied with a smile.

- - -

They saw Aang approach the makeshift bed apprehensively. Emi didn’t blame him, really, given his current state of mind. They had done everything they could to make a calm, safe little haven for him. It had ended up looking very surreal.

“Oh look, another hallucination,” Aang remarked, prodding the fluffy wool. “An imaginary bed made out of clouds.”

“Hey, it’s real!” Toph said as they stepped forward. “We spent hours working on it!”

“We made it for you,” Sokka added. “A good night’s sleep will probably take the crazy away.”

“Maybe,” Emi piped up with a grin.

“Look, you guys keep telling me I need to sleep, but I can’t!” Aang snapped. “The invasion’s tomorrow!”
“Aang-”

“No, Katara!” Aang interrupted. “There’s still so much I haven’t learned! I don’t need sleep; what I need is practice! Quick, hit me!” He tried to take up a defensive stance, only to sway dangerously on his feet.

“I’m not going to hit you,” Katara said.

“Want me to do it?” Toph offered, earning a nudge from Sokka.

“Listen to me.” Katara stepped forward, placing a hand on Aang’s shoulder. “You’ve been training for this since the day we met. I’ve seen your progress; you’re smart, brave, and strong enough.”

“You…really think so?” Aang asked doubtfully.

“We all do,” Sokka said. “You can do this.”

“You’re definitely ready,” Emi smiled.

“You’re the man, Twinkle Toes!” Toph added.

“Thanks, guys…” Aang said, finally looking more peaceful. He gave a huge yawn and laid down on the makeshift bed, his friends watching over him. “You know what? I think I am ready.”

They all smiled and went to their own beds for the night, eager to get some rest for the big day that was soon to come.
Beneath the Shadow of the Sun

Chapter Notes

Getting down to the last ten chapters people. You ready for it? I am; got three little ficlets (and potentially a fourth, though it's not really a ficlet) ready to join this series once this story is complete. It's gonna be good.

Beneath the Shadow of the Sun

Emi and her friends woke up as the sun rose, ready to begin preparations for the imminent invasion. Sokka, Katara, and Toph removed their Fire Nation disguises and redressed in their normal attire. Since Emi had no other clothes, she was left wearing her Fire Nation outfit. But at least her hair remained uncovered, tied back into a long braid.

Sokka poured over his maps while Katara got him a drink of water. Emi and Toph stretched out their muscles and worked through some stances, limbering up for the fighting that would soon take place. Aang joined them not long after, looking very refreshed.

“Sounds like you slept well,” Katara remarked as he greeted Momo cheerfully.

“Like a baby moose lion. I’m ready to face the Fire Lord!”

“So what’s your strategy for taking him down?” Toph asked. “Going to get your glow on and hit him with a little Avatar State action?”

“I can’t,” Aang said, his face falling. “When Azula shot me with lightning my seventh chakra was locked, cutting off my connection with all the cosmic energy of the universe.”

Toph scoffed. “You know what I just heard? Blah blah, spiritual mumbo jumbo, blah blah, something about space.”

Emi shook her head, chuckling as she looked out over the harbor. She frowned upon seeing a mass of clouds rolling toward them along the horizon. “That’s some fog,” she remarked. “Do you think it will delay the invasion?”

Sokka looked up, a grin quickly spreading on his face. “No. That is the invasion!”

They all ran down to the beach, Toph and Aang creating piers out of stone for the ships to dock. Sokka and Katara rushed forward to greet their dad as he descended from one of the ships while
Emi observed the soldiers who would be fighting today. She saw some gangly looking men and women with leaf and wood armor, their accents odd. Several Earth Kingdom soldiers had joined the effort as well, including a young Earthbender the gang knew from their earlier days named Haru.

In the middle of their introduction, Toph was scooped up by the biggest man Emi had ever seen. Apparently, he and another Earthbender used to fight with Toph during their Earth Rumble days back in her home city. Emi chuckled at their reminiscing, until an explosion from a nearby ship startled them all.

She looked over worriedly, seeing an older man with wild hair and patchy eyebrows stumble up from the cloud of smoke. Another boy rolled down the ramp smoothly, grinning up at the gang as they went to greet them.

“Was that a new invention?” Sokka asked.

“Yes. But unfortunately the incendiary capabilities of peanut sauce proved to be a failure,” the man said sadly. Two more people joined them; a large man who carried a boy about Toph’s size on his shoulders.

“You’re making peanut sauce bombs?” Sokka raised an eyebrow.

“They’re destructive,” the large man said.

“And delicious!” the boy on his shoulders added, licking at the sauce covering his face.

“Were you able to complete work on the plans I sent you?” Sokka asked the mechanist.

“Yes I was! And I think the Fire Nation will be quite surprised.”

“Aang, my dad and I made this for you,” the boy in the chair said, holding out a beautifully crafted staff. Aang took it and gave it a little twirl, causing blue wings to pop out at both ends, along with handle bars. Emi sighed enviously as her friend beamed.

“A new glider! This is amazing!”

“And as a special feature, I added a snack compartment,” the mechanist remarked, demonstrating the mechanism.

“You’re Emi, right?”
Emi looked around at the boy in the chair, startled. “Um, yes. I am.”

The boy grinned and held out another staff. “We made this for you, too. Sokka sent us a message that there was another Airbender around.”

Emi took the staff gently, almost afraid to hold it but excited at the same time. It was just the right length for her, and it fit perfectly in her hands. She opened up the glider and green wings came out, soft to the touch yet made of a durable material. She grinned widely, feeling as if she could float away at that very moment.

“It’s an honor to meet you,” the boy said. “My name is Teo, by the way.”

“Thank you!” Emi squealed, jumping forward to hug the boy tightly. Then she turned her affections on a very embarrassed Sokka. “This is amazing, you guys! I can’t believe it; my own glider!” Suddenly, her enthusiasm deflated a bit as a thought occurred to her. “Oh, but…I have no idea how to use it…”

“Don’t worry Emi,” Aang said brightly. “You’re a great Airbender. You’ll pick it up right away.”

She smiled back, gazing at her new glider reverently as she snapped the wings back into their compartment.

Once all of the soldiers had gathered, they settled down on the beach to go over the plans for the invasion. Emi sat with her friends at the head of the gathering, along with the planners and leaders, which included Sokka since the Day of Black Sun had been his discovery. However, when it was time to make his speech, he became thoroughly nervous and started ranting on and on until his father kindly stepped in and relieved him of having to present the plans. Instead of looking thankful, though, he looked very put out by his failure to rally the soldiers.

Hakoda, however, was certainly a seasoned professional. He made the points clear about the invasion and what everyone would be doing and where they would be going. By the end of his speech, he had everyone cheering with confidence that on this day, they would win the war.

Afterwards, everyone geared up for the battle. Aang finally shaved his head and had even managed to salvage most of his old clothes. Katara had two water skins strapped to her sides, filled with the liquid that she could bend. Toph got some new armor fashioned in the style of the Earth Kingdom. Appa’s armor fit him perfectly, completely covering him and protecting his weak spots. Emi strapped on her sword, clutching her new staff in her hands. She would be riding with Katara once they got close to the mainland of the Fire Nation palace. And once there, she would be helping the effort to keep the Firebenders at bay, along with whatever weapons they had in their arsenal. Sokka donned the traditional Water Tribe armor, his sour mood after failing to rouse the soldiers seeming to have dissipated.

Soon, they were all loaded onto the ships. Emi felt a tingle of apprehension and excitement race
along her spine, quickening her blood. This was it. The invasion was on its way.

---

Zuko entered his room, removing his imperial armor and letting his hair down from the prince’s knot at the top of his head. The war meeting with his father and the generals had shaken him to his core. All this time, this time of feeling out of balance and on edge, came to a head during that meeting. He knew then, without a shadow of a doubt, that he could no longer be the son his father wanted him to be. And that was something he no longer wanted for himself, either.

With a sigh Zuko went over to his desk, smoothing out the paper and preparing his note. She would be furious. Devastated. He knew it would be better to do this face to face, but he couldn’t. Zuko had already seen what happened when a girl got her heart broken, and he didn’t want to go through that again. Maybe, someday, he would make it up to Mai. But right now he had to do what was right. This decision was long overdue, but he would make up for it. Whatever it took. And maybe his uncle would help him. Just as he had helped him learn of his tangled heritage.

Zuko finished his letter, leaving to go to Mai’s house. He knew she wouldn’t be there, and he was grateful for that. He left the letter where she would find it, muttering an apology to the air. Not that that would do any good. He left then, heading back to the empty palace.

Once back in his room, he knelt before his mother’s shrine. “I know I’ve made some bad choices,” he murmured. “But today, I’m going to set things right.”

With a small bow, he stood up and strapped his broadswords and his bag around his back, taking one last look around his room before lifting the hood of his cloak and leaving.

It was time he and his father had a little chat.

---

They had barely managed to get past the Gates of Azulan. Thanks to Sokka’s idea (though with a great deal of guesswork from the mechanist due to Sokka’s…lack of detail) they managed to sneak by beneath the water using submarine type vehicles. Emi stood inside one such sub, admiring the work of the mechanist. Katara worked with the Swampbenders, making the subs move through the water at a swift speed.

“Unfortunately, there is one problem I couldn’t fix,” the mechanist was saying. “The subs have a limited air supply. Before we land on the beaches, we’ll need to resurface.”

Once they had gotten clear of the gates and before they got within sight of the beaches, the subs broke the surface of the water. While the other soldiers stretched and readied themselves, Emi stood on top of one of the subs with her friends, a heavy feeling in the air.

“So…this is it, huh?” Aang remarked.
“Are you ready for the Fire Nation to know the Avatar’s alive?” Sokka asked.

Aang took a deep breath, looking determinedly at his friends. “I’m ready.”

They all gathered together then, hugging one another tightly.

“I hope you kick some serious Fire Lord butt, Twinkle Toes,” Toph said as they pulled back.

“Everyone listen up!” Hakoda spoke up at that moment. “The next time we reach surface, it will be on the beaches. So stay alert, and fight smart. Now, break time’s over! Back in the subs!”

Sokka and Toph retreated below after saying their final good lucks to Aang. Emi looked over at Katara, but she seemed to want to speak to Aang alone. So with one last hug to the Avatar, Emi opened her glider and flew over to where Appa floated in the water and waited for her friend, looking out over the ocean.

There had been something nagging the back of her mind since that morning, and she had been trying to fight it all day. But now, Emi relented and allowed the thought to surface. She was about to attack the Fire Nation, with the Avatar and other soldiers and friends. She was about to attack Zuko’s home, and his father. She heaved a sighed, wondering what he had been doing this whole time. Probably enjoying everything he’s ever wanted, Emi thought with a tint of bitterness. She shook her head then, forcing the feeling away. She had bigger problems to worry about, and she needed her wits about her.

Suddenly, Katara joined her on Appa, swiftly pulling the water up around them to create a sphere of air for them to breathe. The bison submerged once again, following the subs as they continued on their way toward the Fire Nation palace.

Once they were within sight of the inner harbor gates, a bell sounded dimly above them. Metal chains and hooks started flying into the water, but most of the subs managed to swiftly avoid the attacks. However, one was unlucky enough to be hit. The chains began to pull it up out of the water, but Katara guided Appa to follow the captured sub, breaking the surface where Emi withdrew her sword and swiftly cut the chain before they dove back out of sight.

Ahead of them, the subs fired their torpedoes, breaking through the metal grates that covered the holes within the wall. They all made it through to the other side, and before Emi knew it they were approaching the beach. She took a breath, exchanging a look with Katara as both girls prepared themselves for the real fight to begin.

They broke the surface when the subs did, the machines docking onto the beach and opening to reveal the Earth Nation tanks housing Earthbenders. Their metallic facades were flexible and sturdy; easily able to maneuver through the onslaught of bombs and fireballs that fell upon them as the invasion emerged.
Katara landed Appa, jumping to the ground while Emi opened her glider and took to the skies. Below, the Fire Nation let loose their own tanks, the Firebenders within the metal shells attacking at short intervals. Emi grit her teeth, angling down and spinning through the air, kicking her miniature tornado at one such machine. The vehicle was upended, smashing into another behind it. She made a sharp turn upward as a stream of fire was let loose toward her.

Even as Emi fought against the Fire Nation soldiers, she kept an eye on her friends and allies, making sure they were doing okay. For one moment, it looked like Hakoda was being overwhelmed, and she made to dive down to help. But the older man was swift, easily dispensing of the enemy soldiers with nimble speed.

Suddenly, one of the towers lashed out with a bolt, hitting the truck with spare boulders that the mechanist was driving. The enemy continued to rain down upon them, each hit devastating and swift. Emi angled her glider straight at one of the towers, letting go and removing her scimitar in one fell swoop. She swung through the air and sliced through the metal of the battlement. Emi then caught her glider in midair, flying one handed with her other hand gripping the handle of her sword. It made for awkward controlling, but she was steady and confident, focusing only on attacking the towers and avoiding their return fire.

Nearby, she saw Appa flying past, Sokka doing the same while his father used bombs to scatter the soldiers within the towers. She managed to strike one more down before a fireball from the ground whizzed by her head. Emi sheathed her sword and gripped onto her glider, diving down toward the offending soldiers. Before she hit the ground, Emi retracted the wings of her glider, using her staff to create a wave of wind that lifted the Firebender’s machine high off the ground, catapulting it into the water.

Suddenly, an explosion from above alerted Emi. She saw Katara and Sokka run toward the battlement, soon returning to Appa with their injured father in tow. Emi swung her staff around, opening her glider and taking to the air after them.

She landed just as they had dismounted from the bison. Katara was kneeling by her father, trying to heal his wounds while Sokka crouched nearby, gripping onto his battle helmet.

“How does that feel, dad?” Katara asked worriedly.

“A…little better… I…need to get back…to the troops-” Hakoda tried to sit up, but the pain was too much.


“Everyone’s counting on me…to lead this mission…Katara,” he argued weakly. “I won’t…let them down…” He tried again to sit up, only to fall back moments later.
“Can’t you heal him any faster?” Sokka asked his sister.

“I’m doing everything I can.”

“We’re holding our own out there,” Emi said. “But it won’t be for much longer; these guys are tough.”

Sokka frowned in thought, looking back toward the sounds of the battle. “I’ll do it.”

“No offense, Sokka, but you’re not exactly Mister Healing Hands,” Katara remarked.

“No. I’ll lead the invasion force,” Sokka explained, standing up.

“Don’t be crazy Sokka-”

“Maybe I am a little crazy,” he said, frowning. “But the eclipse is about to start, and we need to be up that volcano when it does!”

“You can do this,” Hakoda smiled up at his son. “I’m proud of you, Sokka.”

“I still think you’re crazy,” Katara sighed. “But, I’m proud of you, too.”

He smiled at them before turning to Emi. “Come on. I’m going to need your help with this.”

“You got it. Good luck, you guys.” She nodded to Katara and Hakoda. Emi then unfurled her glider, taking off into the air with Sokka and Appa.

Sokka landed Appa back on the battlefield, where the bison swiftly overturned a Fire Nation vehicle that had gotten too close to the Earth Nation tanks. Emi landed briefly on the bison while Sokka turned to the invasion force.

“Listen up everyone!” he called out to them. “I want the tanks in wedge formation; warriors and benders in the middle!”

They quickly complied, making a solid wall of tanks with Appa at their head.

“We’re taking that tower and heading for the royal palace!” Sokka resumed his seat, turning to Emi. “I want you flying above us and making as much trouble for these guys as you can,” he said.
She grinned and leapt back into the air, Sokka’s battle cry following her as they all charged forward. Emi swooped around, dodging fireball after fireball and spinning out blasts of wind as retaliation. The tanks plowed onward, shoving aside the enemy soldiers easily. Sokka used a truck of explosives to ram into the wall, the resulting explosion making a hole for the soldiers and warriors to march through.

Emi looked to the sky, noting that the eclipse would be beginning soon. *That explains why the Fire Nation soldiers are falling back,* she thought to herself, looking down at the men and women that were retreating even as they kept aiming fireballs at the invasion force.

However, they refuse to fall back completely. The soldiers dug in their feet, rallying together and creating a wall of Firebenders and machines to attack them. The invasion force did the same, using their tanks to make a shield against the brunt of the attacks.

Emi landed in front of the tanks, twirling her staff around and slamming it into the ground, making a large wave of wind slicing through the air toward the Fire Nation soldiers. She knocked another one of their tanks onto its side, swiftly making an air shield against the retaliation. Emi continued to fire her Airbending at the soldiers alongside the Earthbenders and the Waterbenders until a figure in the sky caught her eye.

*No way…it couldn’t be.* She was sure she was seeing things. But no, it was Aang, back before the eclipse had even started.

Emi fell back behind the tanks, joining her friends at the same time as Aang. He looked distraught, and that did not bode well for them.

“Please tell me you’re here because the Fire Lord turned out to be a big wimp and you didn’t even need the eclipse to take him down,” Sokka implored as Aang collapsed to the ground.

“He wasn’t home,” Aang said, bemused. “No one was. The entire palace city is abandoned.”

Sokka’s eyes widened in shock as a ripple of grim understanding went through the group. “They knew.”

“It’s over,” Aang despaired. “The Fire Lord is probably long gone. Far away on some remote island where he’ll be safe during the eclipse.”

“No,” Sokka mused, thinking. “My instincts tell me he wouldn’t go too far. He’d have a secret bunker. Somewhere he could go and be safe during a siege, but still be close enough to lead his nation.”

“If it’s an underground secret bunker we’re looking for,” Toph piped up, “I’m just the girl to find it!”
“The mechanist gave me this timing device,” Sokka said, pulling the object out. “It looks like we got about ten minutes before the full eclipse. Ten minutes to find the Fire Lord.”

“We can still do this,” Aang rallied. “We can still win the day!”

“Wait,” Katara spoke up. “If they knew we were coming, it could all be a trap.”

“Ozai could just be waiting for you to try and find him, and then confront you when it’s too late and the eclipse is over,” Emi added, worried.

“Maybe we should use the time we have left to make sure we all get out of here safely,” Katara continued.

“Everyone who is here today came prepared to risk everything for this mission,” Hakoda said. “They know what’s at stake. If there’s still a chance, and there’s still hope, I think they would want Aang to go for it.”

Sokka sighed. “What do you think?” he asked Aang. “You’re the one who has to face the Fire Lord. Whatever you decide, I’m with you.”

Aang looked down for a moment before standing up, determined. “I’ve got to try.”

Sokka, Toph, and Aang took off on Appa, leaving Emi, Katara, and her father to focus on the battle at hand.

As the eclipse drew nearer, the Fire Nation soldiers kept falling back. The tanks soldiered on, oblivious to the attempts of the enemy to keep striking them down. However, whenever one tank looked like it was close to collapsing, Emi would take to the air and sweep the Fire Nation soldiers away, allowing the invasion force to push ahead as they climbed the mountain to the palace city.

“The eclipse is starting!” the mechanist warned them. “Put on your eclipse glasses!”

They all drew out the curious shades that would protect their eyes from the sun before continuing on. Emi chanced a glance upward, almost stopping in amazement as the sun grew dark and shadowed. The force crested the hill, looking down upon the abandoned city.

“Surround the periphery!” Bato called out. “We have to secure the palace by the time the eclipse is over! Otherwise, we’ll be in for the fight of our lives.”

The soldiers poured down the hill, swarming around the city. Emi flew overhead to make sure the
Firebenders were, in fact, powerless. She grinned when she saw one group try to shoot flames at the invasion, only emitting a flash of smoke and nothing more. With that, it was small work to secure the city and hold it until news of Fire Lord Ozai’s defeat reached them.

However, as Emi landed next to Katara and her father and the eclipse retreated, she felt a shiver of apprehension. Bato ran over to them as they removed their eclipse glasses, looking nervous.

“What should we do, Hakoda?” he asked. “Shouldn’t something have happened by now?”

“I don’t know,” Hakoda said grimly. “But now that the eclipse is over, I expect we’re going to see some Firebenders any minute.”

Emi frowned, looking up at the sky only to gasp in shock. All the other soldiers looked up as well, their eyes widening in horror.

War balloons were floating through the air from behind the palace, Firebenders feeding the fuel inside them.

“My own inventions…” the mechanist lamented, ashamed. “Oh, this is terrible!”

“Oh no,” Emi breathed. Behind the war balloons, massive airships rose up from the mountains, drifting along with a menacing promise; they were about to fight for their lives.

“They’re back!” Katara suddenly called out, shaking Emi from her horror. She looked around and saw Appa flying toward them.

“It was all a trap!” Sokka said as soon as Appa’s feet touched the ground. “Azula knew we were coming and she’s plotted out every move!” He dismounted, furious. “We just got to get to the beach as fast as we can. If we can make it to the submarines, maybe we can get away safely.”

“They’ve got air power,” Aang suddenly said, looking toward Emi. “But so do we.” Emi nodded, opening up her glider and taking to the sky. “We’re going to do everything we can to slow them down!” Aang opened his own glider and took off after Emi, both Airbenders swiftly aiming for the airships. Behind them, Appa rose into the air with Katara astride him.

Emi dodged the Firebenders’ attacks as they drew closer, withdrawing her scimitar and wielding it around to cut through the delicate fabric of the war balloon. Aang used his staff to punch straight through another one, both balloons sinking to the ground quickly. Katara bent a stream of water from one of her water skins, slicing through the last war balloon. She then joined her friends as they all turned to the airships.

These were significantly more difficult to confront. Several Firebenders per ship shot endless
fireballs at them, making them dodge and weave through the flames. Emi tried to knock some of the benders off balance, but she was stopped by a barrage of attacks directed at her.

“We can’t keep them all back!” Katara called to them. “There’s too many of them!”

“Let’s join the others!” Aang called back, dodging another fireball. The three of them swiftly retreated, angling down toward where the invasion force was.

“Try and find some cover!” Sokka yelled as they landed beside him. “I think we’re about to see some bombs!”

No sooner had Toph and other Earthbenders created a wall of rock overshadowing them the bombs were dropped, shattering with violent explosions all around the mountainside. Their shelter nearly broke, but Toph and the others were able to keep it steady. Once the wave was over, they emerged cautiously from their rock overhang.

“Why aren’t they turning around to attack us again?” Emi asked in confusion.

“They’re headed for the beach…” Aang mused before his eyes widened in horror. “They’re going to destroy the submarines!”

“How are we all going to escape?” Sokka asked aloud.

“We’re not,” Hakoda replied.

“Then our only choice is to stand and fight,” Sokka rallied, determination backing up his words. “We have the Avatar. We could still win!”

“Yes. With the Avatar we could still win; on another day,” Hakoda straightened up. “You kids have to leave. You have to escape on Appa together.”

“What?!” Katara ran toward her father. “We can’t leave you behind! We won’t leave anyone behind!”

“You’re our only chance in the long run,” her father insisted firmly. “You and Sokka have to go with Aang somewhere safe. It’s the only way to keep hope alive.”

“The youngest of our group should go with you.” Bato added. “The adults will stay behind and surrender. We’ll be prisoners; but we’ll all survive this battle.”

“I’ve got some experience with Fire Nation prisons,” Haru’s father said. “It’s not going to be easy.
But we’ll get by.”

“They’re at the beach now,” Emi muttered. They all watched as the airships flew over, dropping their bombs and destroying the submarines in one swift, violent act.

There was nothing left to do. Emi and her friends gathered around Appa with the youngest of the invasion force. She waited on the bison while the families said their goodbyes. Aang knelt nearby, upset by the outcome of this day. She inched over to him, laying a hand on his shoulder. No words needed to be said; they lost this battle, but it wasn’t over yet. Not by a long shot.

Once Katara and Sokka joined them, he stood up, wiping his tears away. “Thank you all for being so brave and so strong,” he called out the remaining invasion force. “I’m going to make this up to you.”

With that, they settled in Appa’s saddle, Aang taking the lead and guiding his bison into the sky. Emi looked back at the soldiers they were leaving behind, hoping they’d all be okay.

“I know just the place for us to go where we’ll be safe for a while,” Aang said to their group. “The Western Air Temple.”

---

Zuko watched the bison disappear into the clouds as he guided his war balloon. He had a feeling he knew where they would be heading; he had been there himself, years ago.

As he drifted through the sky, he thought back to his confrontation with his father. Finally, he had found out what had happened to his mother. But the question remained; where was she?

It would have to be answered at another time. Right now, he needed to stay on the Avatar’s trail. And Emi’s. He had caught sight of her golden hair on the bison as they flew off and disappeared into the horizon. Just the sight of those familiar locks made his heart twist. But there was so much to be done first. He needed a plan on how to approach the group. It wouldn’t be easy, by any means. But it would be worth it. To redeem himself; to the world, to the Avatar and his friends, to his uncle, wherever he was. And to her.
Bitter Words and Broken Hearts

Chapter Notes

Happy Fourth of July! And for those who don't celebrate it, hope you're having a great day!

Bitter Words and Broken Hearts

They were walking along a barren landscape, tired and drained. Emi looked around at their slumped shoulders and weary faces; the defeat of the invasion weighed heavily upon them all. Especially for those who had to leave family behind.

“This is humiliating,” Katara spoke up.

“Do you mean getting thoroughly spanked by the Fire Nation or having to walk all the way to the Western Air Temple?” Sokka asked sarcastically.

“Both.”

“Sorry guys, but Appa gets tired carrying all these people,” Aang apologized, scratching his bison affectionately. Emi smiled lightly, stroking the head of Yuuka who was hidden in her waist scarf; she was grateful the sugar glider had remained out of sight during the battle. She wouldn’t know what she would have done if her friend had been hurt. Or worse.

“I wonder how the rest of the troops are,” Teo mused aloud.

“They’re probably on their way to a prison,” Haru replied bitterly. “It seems like my dad just got out. And now he’s going back in.”


“I miss not having blisters on my feet,” Sokka retorted.

“Hey!” Toph suddenly exclaimed. “We’re here! I can feel it!”

Emi and the others looked around; all she could see was the edge of the cliff they stood on and the mountains beyond. “Maybe your feet need their eyes checked,” Emi remarked. “There’s nothing here.”
“No, she’s right,” Aang said. “We are here!”

“Wow… it’s amazing!” Toph remarked, smiling widely.

“Ugh, that’s it. I’m going to see for myself,” Emi said, snapping her glider open and taking to the sky, diving down over the edge of the cliff. Her eyes immediately widened at the sight before her.

The Western Air Temple was built right into the cliff, the structure turned completely upside down. Emi could only gape at the old buildings, half buried under the greenery of nature, and yet there was still an air of tranquility about the temple that spoke of the Airbenders of the past. As she flew, staring at the magnificent architecture, she found herself laughing with joy. At long last, Emi was able to see an air temple for herself; and it was even better than she had ever imagined.

Below, Zuko stood among the ruins, his mind lost in the memory of the last time he had been here. Suddenly, he heard laughter, followed by the roar of the bison. He looked over, swiftly concealing himself behind a wall as he watched the Avatar land among the ruins on the other side of the temple. And gliding behind them was...

“Emi.” Zuko felt his throat close up at the sight of her, even from a distance. Her laughter was like the sweetest honey to his ears. He had missed it dearly.

Zuko frowned, edging away until he could run up the staircase nearby. He needed a plan to do this the right way. If he could do it the right way.

Emi landed next to her friends, still smiling widely. “This place is amazing!” she laughed, staring around at the various statues and carvings.

“So different from the Northern Air Temple,” Teo remarked, looking around as well. “I wonder if there are any secret rooms!”

“Let’s go check it out!” Haru said, running off with Teo and The Duke in tow. Emi and Aang made to follow, but they were quickly stopped by Katara.

“You guys go ahead,” she called out to the boys. “I think we need to talk about some things.”

The trio merely shrugged, taking off again and laughing as they disappeared from sight.

“Why can’t I go?” Aang asked, disappointed.

“We need to decide what we’re going to do now. And, since you’re the Avatar, maybe you should
“Okay, I get that for him. But can’t I go?” Emi asked.

“Because you’re part of the group, too. And if we have to stay, you have to stay,” Toph retorted, crossing her arms.

“Fair enough,” Aang said, sitting down with the others. “So, what’s the new plan?”

“Well, if you ask me, the new plan is the old plan!” Sokka replied. “You just need to master all four elements and confront the Fire Lord before the comet comes.”

Aang scoffed, looking away. “Oh, yeah, that’s great. No problem! I’ll just do that.”

“Aang, no one said it was going to be easy,” Katara said consolingly.

“Well, it’s not even going to be possible!” he exclaimed, turning back to her. “Where am I supposed to get a Firebending teacher?”

“We could look for Jeong Jeong,” she suggested.

“Yeah, right.” Aang flopped back against his stone seat. “Like we’ll ever run into Jeong Jeong again.”

“Who’s-? Oh never mind,” Toph started to ask. “If it’s important, I’ll find out.”

“Oh well. Guess we can’t come up with anybody,” Aang said, jumping back up. “Why don’t we take a nice tour around the temple? Come on Emi, you should definitely check out some of this stuff!” He took his glider and ran to the edge of the platform, taking off into the air with Momo right behind him.

The others looked around at her. “Um…well…i-it wouldn’t hurt to just look around…” Emi muttered, standing up and taking her glider as well. She jumped into the air, catching up with Aang rather quickly. She knew it was important for them to figure out a new plan, but at the same time they had just gotten their butts beaten by the Fire Nation; some down time was definitely in order. It didn’t take long, though, for their friends to find them.

“Aang, can we talk about you learning Firebending now?” Katara called out to him.
“Uh, what? The wind…is too loud in my ears!” Aang called back, making Emi roll her eyes. “Check out this loop!” He dove up, swiftly turning in the air and flying level once again.

“Aang, I really think we should be making some plans about our future!” Sokka yelled to him.

“Okay!” Aang replied, miraculously overcoming his deafness. “We can do that while I show you the giant Pai Sho table!” They all landed in another part of the temple where a large fountain took up the center of the platform.

“There’s a giant Pai Sho table?” Emi asked excitedly.

Yep! Oh, and you’re gonna love the all day echo chamber,” Aang added.

“I think that’ll have to wait,” Toph said, pointing behind her. They looked around as Appa moved, revealing Zuko standing not too far behind them. Emi stared in shock, the others steeling themselves for whatever the prince had up his sleeves.

“Hello. Zuko here,” he greeted. Her friends swiftly shifted into defensive positions, but Emi found she couldn’t move, only to grip her staff tighter. “Hey, I heard you guys flying around down there, so…I just thought I’d wait for you here.” He seemed nervous, which was definitely a new thing for him.

Suddenly Appa approached him, giving a low bellow before licking Zuko with his massive tongue. Aang and the others stared in shock as the bison licked him again, seeming content with the prince’s presence.

“I know you must be surprised to see me here,” he said, wiping the saliva away.

“Not really. Since you followed us all over the world,” Sokka replied stiffly.

“Right…well, uh…anyway. What I wanted to tell you about is that I’ve changed.” Emi narrowed her eyes in suspicion, his own gaze flicking to her for a moment. “And…I uh…I’m good now. And, well I think I should join your group. Oh! And I can teach Firebending. Uh, to you,” he said to Aang. There was a moment of silence, and he tried to continue. “See, I-”

“You wanna what now?!” Toph demanded incredulously.

“You can’t possibly think that any of us would trust you, can you?” Katara added, furious. “I mean, how stupid do you think we are?!”

“Yeah, all you’ve ever done is try to hunt us down and capture Aang! You even tried to use another
Airbender as bait!” Sokka yelled.

“I’ve done some good things!” Zuko insisted. “I mean, I could have stolen your bison in Ba Sing Se, but I set him free! That’s something!” Appa gave Zuko another lick, and Emi had to fight the urge to smile at the disgruntled look on Zuko’s face. She couldn’t be feeling like this for him; not after what he had done to them.

“Appa does seem to like him…” Toph allowed.

“He probably just covered himself in honey or something so that Appa would lick him,” Sokka reasoned. “I’m not buying it!”

“I can understand why you wouldn’t trust me,” Zuko said. “And I know I’ve made some mistakes in the past.”

“Like when you attacked our village?” Sokka shot at him.

“Or when you stole my mother’s necklace and used it to track us down and capture us?” Katara added.

“Look,” Zuko sighed. “I admit I’ve done some awful things. I was wrong to try and capture you. And I’m sorry that I attacked the Water Tribe. And I never should have sent that Fire Nation assassin after you-”

At this, Emi’s jaw dropped, and she stormed past Sokka to glare at Zuko heatedly. “That was you?! she demanded.

“You sent Combustion Man after us?! Sokka added, stepping up next to Emi and laying a restraining hand on her shoulder.

“Well, that’s not his name, but-”

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean to insult your friend!” Sokka snapped angrily.

“He’s not my friend!”

“That guy locked me and Katara in jail and tried to blow us all up!” Toph yelled.

Zuko looked down for a moment before moving his gaze over to Aang. “Why aren’t you saying anything?” he asked. “You once said you thought we could be friends. You know I have good in me.”
Aang looked at each of his friends. Sokka shook his head, but Emi couldn’t make herself do anything more after her outburst. She was angry, hurt, shocked, and…happy to see Zuko again. But these things he was saying…it wasn’t enough to erase all the bad he had done. Was it?

“There’s no way we can trust you after everything you’ve done,” Aang said firmly. “We’ll never let you join us.”

“You need to get out of here. Now!” Katara demanded.

Zuko grit his jaw, stepping forward. “I’m trying to explain that I’m not that person anymore!”

“Either you leave, or we attack,” Sokka warned.

“If you won’t accept me as a friend,” Zuko said, dropping to his knees and holding out his wrists. “Then maybe you’ll take me as a prisoner.”

“No, we won’t!” Katara snapped, unleashing a stream of water toward Zuko and shoving him several feet back. Emi winced, looking away. “Get out of here and don’t come back. And if we ever see you again…well…we better not see you again!”

Zuko hauled himself to his feet, walking away from the group in defeat. Emi’s eyes followed him, somehow wanting to help him and at the same time wanting to hurt him.

“Why would he try to fool us like that?” Katara asked aloud as they unloaded their belongings from Appa after Zuko’s departure.

“Obviously he wants to lead us into some kind of trap,” Sokka said.

“This is just like when we were in prison together in Ba Sing Se,” Katara continued. “He starts talking about his mother and making it seem like he’s an actual human being with feelings.”

He is, came the sharp mental reply. Emi grit her teeth, willing herself not to say anything.

“He wants you to trust him and feel sorry for him so when you let your guard down, he strikes!” Sokka remarked.

“The thing is…it worked,” Katara sighed. “I did feel sorry for him. I felt like he was really confused and hurt. But, obviously when the time came he made his choice. And we paid the price. We can’t trust him.”
“I kinda have a confession to make,” Aang spoke up. “Remember when you two were sick and I got captured by Zhao?”

“And you made us suck on frozen frogs?” Sokka grumbled bitterly. “How can I forget? I had a wart on the flap that hangs down in the back of my throat for a month!”

“Sokka, I looked at it and told you there was nothing there!” Katara reminded him.

“I could feel it!” he snapped. “It’s my throat hole flap!”

“When Zhao had me chained up, it was Zuko who came in and got me out,” Aang continued. "He risked his life to save me.”

Emi frowned, thinking back. She could remember a time when Zuko had returned to his ship after being gone for a whole day and night, after he had burned her in anger. She wondered if that was where he had been; setting the Avatar free only to take him captive for himself. If that was the case, why hadn’t he succeeded?

“No way. I’m sure he only did it so he could capture you himself!” Katara insisted.

“Yeah! Face it Aang, you’re nothing but a big prize to him,” Sokka added.

Emi had had enough. While her friends continued to talk, she slipped away, taking her glider with her. Yuuka made to follow, but she shushed the little sugar glider and moved as swiftly and quietly as she could; right now she needed to be completely alone before she said something she was going to regret. Or worse, not regret.

- - -

“I can’t believe her,” Katara muttered darkly as Toph disappeared. “How could she even think to defend him?”

“Hey, where’s Emi?” Aang asked, looking around. They had only just noticed the absence of the other Airbender, having been too caught up in their grim reminiscing of what Zuko had done to them in the past.

“She’s probably upset at Zuko’s reappearance,” Katara reasoned, sighing heavily. “She was the one who was the closest to him out of all of us.”

“Well, that’s not gonna happen again,” Sokka promised, crossing his arms. “Not while I’m around.”

“None of us are going to let anything happen to her,” Katara added.
“I just hope she comes back soon,” Aang said, scratching Yuuka behind the ears as she glided over to him.

---

Emi woke up, stretching. She had fallen asleep in another part of the temple, watching the stars as she got lost in her thoughts. Despite all the hours she had put into her pondering, though, she was no closer to deciding how she felt about Zuko coming back into her life. Her stomach grumbled then, making her grimace.

*I should be getting back,* she mused to herself, standing up. *They’re probably wondering where I am.*

Emi twirled her staff, opening up her glider and taking off into the sky, the cool air effectively waking her up more fully. She drifted along with the wind casually, enjoying the moments of just being before she had to come back to reality.

As she landed on the platform several minutes later, however, she was greeted with the sight of Toph on her stomach, an avalanche of rocks crumbling from a hole in the wall behind her while Katara used her healing water on her feet.

“What happened?” Emi asked, running over to the group.

“Where have you been?!” Sokka demanded, his hand stopping her. “We were worried sick! I swear, between you and Toph-”

“I just needed to fly around for a while. I fell asleep in another part of the temple,” Emi explained, shrugging his hand off. “I’m fine, Sokka. Now what happened to Toph?”

“Toph went to see Zuko,” he spat out hatefully. “He burned her feet as a result.”

“…What?” Emi stepped back, shocked.

“I just thought he could be helpful to us,” Toph said from her place on the ground. “And if I talked to him, maybe we could work something out.”

“So he…attacked you?” Emi asked hesitantly.

“Well…he did and he didn’t,” Toph replied. “It was sort of an accident.”

“But he did Firebend at you,” Aang reiterated.
Toph sighed. “Yes.”


“It’s going to take awhile for your feet to get better,” Katara said, removing her water. “I wish I could have worked on them sooner.”

“Yeah. Me too,” Toph grumbled.

“Zuko’s clearly too dangerous to be left alone,” Sokka mused aloud. “We’re going to have to go after him.”

“I hate to go looking for a fight, but you’re right,” Aang said. “After what he did to Toph, I don’t think we have a choice.”

“We’re sorry, Emi,” Katara apologized as Aang and Sokka picked Toph up.

“For what?” Emi asked.

“We know your past with Zuko is…complicated,” she said delicately. “I know this must be hard for you-”

“It’s not!” Emi insisted, making her friends turn to look at her. “I-I mean…maybe in some ways it is…b-but…” Emi sighed, running a hand over her face. “It doesn’t matter,” she muttered.

Sokka and Aang laid Toph’s feet into the fountain, exchanging looks at Emi’s stammering.

“Ah, that’s the stuff,” Toph sighed. “Now I know how the rest of you guys feel. Not being able to see with your feet stinks!”

Emi stood a little ways away from the group as they talked. She shifted on her feet, chewing her lip as her thoughts refused to settle. Then, she straightened up, her spine tingling in warning. Before she could look around to see what had triggered it, an explosion hit the corner of the ceiling where their platform was, making the mountainside shake violently. They all looked up, seeing Combustion Man standing on the cliff nearby, and running up to him was-

“Zuko!” Emi cried out, automatically taking a step forward. Katara caught her arm, dragging her back to hide against the wall with the rest of their friends.

“Stop! I don’t want you hunting the Avatar anymore!” They peered around the corner to see Zuko
confronting the assassin. “The mission is off; I’m ordering you to stop!”

He was shoved aside as Combustion Man aimed another explosion at them, destroying the top of the fountain and showering them with rocks and dust. Emi leapt forward, aiming a powerful blast of wind toward the metal man. He rocked back on his feet before firing another bolt at the temple, making her run back for cover again.

She chanced a look around the corner, her eyes widening in fear as she saw the assassin taking aim at Zuko. He disappeared in a sheen of fire and smoke, and when the clouds cleared, he was gone.

Until they saw him clinging to the vines below the cliff.

Emi breathed a sigh of relief; her heart had nearly stopped at the thought of him being dead. Her relief quickly turned to determination as she and Aang ran back out into the open. Both Airbenders leapt up, creating a mass of swirling air and aiming it at the assassin. He plowed through the winds, leaping forward and shooting his mental attack at them. They nimbly dodged the debris, jumping back into hiding with their friends.

Another bolt; Katara ran forward with a wave of water, lifting the mass and clawing the liquid into ice shards. Combustion Man blocked the attack with his metal limbs, straightening up to fire at them again. But they had retreated further away from the edge of the platform.

“He’s going to blast this whole place right off the cliff side!” Toph exclaimed in fear.

“I can’t step out to Waterbend at him without getting blown up!” Katara despaired as another explosion shattered nearby. “And I can’t get a good enough angle on him from down here!”

Sokka furrowed his eyebrows in thought for a moment before he smiled. “I know how to get a good angle on him!” He shifted past his sister, taking out his boomerang. After another shot was fired, he pulled his arm back. “Alright buddy, don’t fail me now,” he implored, letting the boomerang fly.

They peered out cautiously; just as the assassin was preparing for another blast, he was knocked in the head by Sokka’s weapon.

“Yeah, boomerang!” he exclaimed, catching the blade as it came back to him. Their faces fell, though, when they saw Combustion Man get back to his feet, looking livid. “Aww, boomerang!” Sokka lamented.

They retreated as he made to aim again. However, something had gone wrong; or at least for them, something had gone right. The assassin ended up blowing himself up, taking the tower he had been standing upon with him.
The four of them ran to the edge, looking down as the wreckage plummeted through the mists. Emi glanced over at the cliff where the assassin had been standing before, seeing Zuko hauling himself up, safe and sound. The relief she felt was startling and comforting at the same time. She then grimaced; this was not going to be easy.

Zuko soon made his way to the wrecked platform where they were all gathered together, waiting.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but...thanks, Zuko,” Aang said.

“Hey, what about me?” Sokka remarked. “I did the boomerang thing.”

“Listen, I know I didn’t explain myself very well yesterday,” Zuko sighed. “I’ve been through a lot the past few years. It’s been hard. But, I’m realizing that I had to go through all those things to learn the truth. I thought I had lost my honor, and that somehow my father could return it to me. But I know now that no one can give you your honor. It’s something you earn for yourself, by choosing to do what’s right. All I want now is to play my part in ending this war. And I know my destiny is to help you restore balance to the world.”

Zuko turned to Toph, bowing. “I’m sorry for what I did to you. It was an accident.” His eyes flicked to Emi’s and held her gaze. “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.”

“I think you are supposed to be my Firebending teacher,” Aang said, stepping forward. “When I first tried to learn Firebending, I burned Katara. And after that, I never wanted to Firebend again. But now I know you know how easy it is to hurt the people you love. I’d like you to teach me.”

Zuko smiled, visibly relieved. “Thank you. I’m so happy you’ve accepted me into your group.”

“Not so fast,” Aang remarked with a small frown. “I still have to ask my friends if it’s okay with them.” He turned back to the rest of the group. “Toph, you’re the one that Zuko burned. What do you think?”

“Go ahead and let him join,” Toph shrugged. “It’ll give me plenty of time to get back at him for burning my feet.”

“Sokka?”

“Hey, all I want is to defeat the Fire Lord,” Sokka remarked. “If you think this is the way to do it, then I’m all for it.”

“Katara?”
She was silent for a moment, glaring heatedly at Zuko. “I’ll go along with whatever you think is right,” she finally said, though with great reluctance.

“Emi?”

She swallowed with difficulty, clenching her staff tightly. She knew what her answer was, and she hated it. Because Emi knew, deep in her heart, that a small kernel of love still burned for Zuko. She closed her eyes and heaved a sigh; she may still love him, in her own way. But she didn’t trust him. Not yet.

“You need to learn Firebending,” Emi said. “He’ll be good for that much, at least.”

“I won’t let you down! I promise!” Zuko assured them. The others merely walked away from him, carrying Toph and heading back inside the temple. Emi was the last one to leave, trailing a short ways behind her friends. She paused briefly, looking back at Zuko on impulse. For a moment, they merely stared at one another before Emi broke their gaze and continued to walk away.

Zuko sat in his new room, unpacking the few belongings he had brought with him. He was relieved that he had finally managed to convince the Avatar’s group to accept him. Or, at the very least, allow him to stay amongst them. He knew he had a lot of work to do to earn their trust. Especially Emi’s.

It had torn him up inside to see the look of betrayal, anger, and hurt in her eyes, but somehow, beneath it all, he thought he could still see a flicker of her old love for him. Zuko had berated himself for a fool countless times for not acknowledging it sooner. Maybe though, with time, she would love him again.

Suddenly, his door opened. Zuko stood up, smiling kindly, but his face fell at the cold expression in Katara’s eyes.

“You might have everyone else here buying your…transformation. But you and I both know you struggled with doing the right thing in the past.” Katara stalked toward him, her cold fury rooting him to the spot. “So let me tell you something right now; you make one step backward, one slip-up, give me one reason you might hurt Aang or Emi, you won’t have to worry about your destiny anymore. Because I will make sure your destiny ends, right then and there. Permanently.”

Katara turned on her heel, storming out of the room and slamming the door behind her, leaving Zuko feeling shaken, but determined.
Dancing Dragons

Emi walked along one of the temple hallways, admiring the stonework etchings. Yuuka sat on her shoulder, nibbling on a bit of fruit that Momo had found for her. She scratched the sugar glider behind the ears as she rejoined the campsite where her friends were gathered around, wiling away the hours. Well, minus Aang.

He and Zuko had gone off to another part of the temple to begin their training. Emi was sorely tempted to peek in on them and see how it was going, but she stamped the urge down. There was no reason for her to be hanging around those two when she had her own skills to hone. However, as she made to approach Sokka she saw him striding away, idly chewing on an apple.

“Where are you going?” Emi asked indignantly. “You said you’d help me train a little more!”

“And I will, Emi. Relax,” Sokka remarked, shrugging. “I’m just taking a break to see how the jerks are doing.”

“The who?” Emi asked, perplexed. Then she clapped her hand to her forehead in understanding. “What did Aang do to become a jerk?”

“He’s Firebending. It’s a jerk element,” Sokka explained, walking away again.

Emi frowned, moving to join the others; maybe she’d go with Teo, Haru, and The Duke to explore the temple a little more. However, before she walked more than a few paces Yuuka jumped from her shoulder and took off after Sokka, having finished her fruit slice and eager for more.

“Yuuka! Get back here!” Emi scolded, taking off after the sugar glider.

By the time she caught up with the little creature, she had already made herself comfortable on Sokka’s shoulder, chewing on the remains of his apple. Emi made to pluck the critter up, but she stopped when she saw what was going on. Aang and Sokka were both watching Zuko attempting to Firebend, but he was only able to make small spurts of flames. Emi raised an eyebrow, leaning against the wall to watch the show as well.

“We don’t need an audience!” he suddenly snapped, glaring at Sokka and Emi.

“I don’t blame you,” Emi remarked. “This is a pretty pathetic display.”
Zuko snarled, making Sokka chuckle. “Alright, alright, we get the point. Come on Emi, we can go do our own training that doesn’t have anything to do with jerk-bending.”

“What are you training with?” Zuko demanded before they had gotten too far.

“Sokka’s been teaching Emi how to sword fight,” Aang piped up. “When I’m not around to teach her Airbending, anyway.”

“Yeah, see, someone did start to teach me awhile back,” Emi remarked, tapping her chin mockingly. “But, he apparently decided I wasn’t worth his time.”

With one last scathing look, Emi turned on her heel and walked away, Sokka grinning behind her.

Later that night, however, he was not grinning. Emi managed to get the better of him three times out of five. She put her sword away lovingly, grateful that she had been able to get better with using her blade. And with her Airbending as well. Now that she thought about it, she had changed a lot in the time since she had left her old cottage.

Emi sat down with the others as they ate dinner, wondering if she could go back and visit the isolated little house at some point. It would be a long flight, after all. However, she was the closest she had been to her old home since she had started her journey. It would be nice to see the small cottage, for old time’s sake.

Zuko came into the firelight at that moment, looking very forlorn. “Listen everybody, I’ve got some pretty bad news. I’ve lost my stuff.”

Emi raised her eyebrows while Toph immediately put her hands up. “Don’t look at me! I didn’t touch your stuff.”

“I’m talking about my Firebending,” Zuko explained. “It’s gone.”

Katara burst out laughing almost as soon as the words were out of his mouth. “I’m sorry. I’m just laughing at the irony. You know, how it would have been nice for us if you had lost your Firebending a long time ago?”

“Well, it’s not lost. Just…weaker for some reason.”

“Maybe you’re just not as good as you think you are,” Katara retorted.

“Ouch,” Toph remarked.
Zuko frowned in thought. “I bet it’s because I changed sides.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Katara said, sipping her soup.

“I don’t know. Maybe it isn’t,” Aang mused. “Maybe your Firebending comes from rage. And you just don’t have enough anger to fuel it the way you used to.”

*That certainly makes sense,* Emi thought to herself.

“So, all we need to do is make Zuko angry!” Sokka exclaimed. “Easy enough.” He began poking Zuko from all sides, using Emi’s staff.

“Okay, cut it out!” Zuko snapped while Emi sent a blast of wind towards Sokka, retrieving her staff indignantly. “Look, even if you’re right, I don’t want to rely on hate and anger anymore. There has to be another way.”

“You’re going to need to learn to draw your Firebending from a different source,” Toph said. “I recommend the original source.”

“How’s he supposed to do that, by jumping into a volcano?” Sokka joked.

“No,” Toph remarked. “Zuko needs to go back to whatever the original source of Firebending is.”

“So…is it jumping into a volcano?” Sokka asked again.

“I don’t know. For Earthbending, the original Earthbenders were badger moles. One day, when I was little, I ran away and hid in a cave. That’s where I met them. They were blind; just like me. So we understood each other. I was able to learn Earthbending not just as a martial art, but as an extension of my senses. For them, the original Earthbenders, it wasn’t just about fighting. It was their way of interacting with the world.”

“That’s amazing Toph,” Aang remarked. “I learned from the monks that the original Airbenders were the sky bison. Maybe you can give me and Emi a lesson sometime, buddy!” he called over to Appa, who grumbled in response.

“Well that doesn’t help me,” Zuko said. “The original Firebenders were the dragons. And they’re extinct.”

“What do you mean?” Aang asked. “Roku had a dragon. And there were plenty of dragons when I was a kid.”
“Well they aren’t around anymore, okay?” Zuko snapped.

“Okay okay, sorry,” Aang apologized sheepishly.

“So, go to the Sun Warrior ruins. They were the first people to learn from the dragons, right?” Emi remarked, stirring her food around. She looked up when silence met her words and saw the others staring at her. “What? I may be an Airbender, but I did grow up in the Fire Nation,” she snapped.

“Yeah, staying in an isolated cottage with an eccentric herbalist,” Sokka retorted.

“Look, Haruka told me a lot of stories about many places all over the world. Just because I haven’t seen all there is to see, doesn’t mean that I don’t know about them,” Emi said. “And if I remember correctly, the Sun Warrior’s civilization isn’t too far from here. We can go and see if there are any remaining carvings or manuscripts about their lessons from the dragons.”

“What do you mean, ‘we’?” Zuko demanded, crossing his arms.

Emi glared at him. “I mean I am not letting you go with Aang on your own. Besides, like I said, I haven’t seen all there is to see. And if you guys are going to the ruins of a lost civilization, then I’m coming too!”

Zuko grimaced, pinching the skin between his eyes. He was torn in wanting Emi to come along, since it would be the first time in a long while that they would be in such close proximity. But at the same time, he couldn’t know for sure what would await them in the ruins. It could be dangerous, and he didn’t want her getting hurt.

“I think it’s a great idea!” Aang remarked, shaking Zuko from his thoughts.

He heaved a sighed. “Fine. We leave first thing in the morning,” he said shortly, stalking away.

- - -

“Emi, you don’t have to do this, you know.”

Emi looked over at Katara; behind them, Zuko and Aang were preparing Appa for the journey. They were expecting to be gone for no longer than a day or so.

“It’s fine Katara. I’m not afraid of him,” Emi said, shifting her staff from one hand to the other. “Besides, I really do want to see the Sun Warrior ruins. Haruka told me that she had stopped by there once during her own journey. They have a lot of ancient tombs and shrines, not to mention the myriad of carvings!”
“I know, but…just be careful okay?” Katara implored, her expression stern.

“I will. And I’ll make sure everyone’s safe,” Emi promised hugging her friend before going over to the bison. Once they were all aboard, Aang urged Appa to take to the sky, the rush of wind fueling Emi’s excitement.

Although Aang and Emi were quite content to enjoy the flight, Zuko became more and more restless as time went on.

“We’ve been riding for hours,” Zuko grumbled after a long stretch of silence had passed. “I don’t know why, but I thought this thing would be a lot faster!”

Appa bellowed, making Aang and Emi chuckle. “Appa’s right, Zuko. In our group, typically we start our missions with a more upbeat attitude!” Aang remarked.

“Ugh,” Zuko scoffed, lounging against the side of the saddle. “I can’t believe this.”

“Don’t worry, you’ll get the hang of it,” Aang assured him.

They flew for awhile longer, Emi entertaining herself by watching the clouds roll by. Then, the endless ocean below them gave way to land. And nestled within the mountains was the ancient ruins of the Sun Warriors.

“Ooh!” Emi suddenly shouted, leaning forward. “There it is!” She grinned widely as Aang steered Appa down. She heard someone laugh under their breath, and turned to glare at Zuko. “What?” she demanded.

“Nothing,” he said quickly, looking away. Emi pursed her lips before turning back to watch the ruins come closer. Zuko chanced another look at her, smiling at her familiar air of excitement.

As soon as they touched down onto the ground Emi leapt from the saddle, slowing her descent and grinning around at the many structures and pyramids surrounding them. She took the lead as Zuko and Aang followed behind, gaping at the sights.

“Even though these buildings are ancient,” Zuko mused as they walked, “there’s something eerily familiar about them. I can tell the Fire Sages’ temples are somehow descended from these.”

“Okay, so we’ve learned something about architecture,” Emi remarked, looking around. “Maybe you guys can learn something about Firebending next. Haruka always said the past can be a great tea- aaaaah!” Emi tripped, her foot catching on a thin wire that opened the ground in front of them to reveal deadly sharp spikes. Before she could fall too far, an arm slid around her waist and pulled her back into a strong chest.
“Emi! Are you okay?!” Aang asked, looking from her to the spikes in horror.

“Yes, I am fine,” Emi hissed through gritted teeth, trying to get Zuko to let her go.

“You need to be more careful!” he scolded.

Emi rolled her eyes. “Gee, I’m sorry, I wasn’t aware traps from a thousand years ago would still be functioning.” She elbowed Zuko lightly in the ribs and promptly took off, using a jet of wind to bounce herself over the spikes and land safely on the other side.

“You boys coming, or what?” Emi asked with a smirk.

Aang grinned, using an air scooter to ride the wall and land neatly beside her. Zuko frowned in concentration, taking a running start and dashing along the wall, landing next to them moments later.

“There’s probably a lot more traps, though,” Aang remarked, turning to carefully examine their surroundings. “Maybe this means we shouldn’t be here.”

“Where’s that upbeat attitude you were talking about?” Zuko smirked, turning to take the lead. “Besides, people don’t make traps unless they got something worth protecting.”

They continued to wander through the ruins, climbing the stairs of one of the pyramids to see a mural carving depicting two dragons breathing fire around a Sun Warrior. Emi gazed at the picture, fascinated.

“This seems promising,” Aang remarked. “Though, I’m not sure what this tells us about the original source of Firebending.”

“They look pretty angry to me,” Zuko added.

“I thought the dragons were friends with the Sun Warriors.”

“Well, they had a funny way of showing it.”

“Maybe when the dragons breathed fire on them, they were suddenly able to Firebend,” Emi mused aloud. Aang and Zuko merely looked at her, and she shrugged sheepishly. “Well, it’s not like there’s anyone around from that time to tell us, now, is there?”

Aang frowned, pondering. “Zuko, something happened to the dragons within the last hundred
“My great grandfather Sozin happened,” he replied shortly, moving away from the mural. “He started the tradition of hunting dragons for glory. They were the ultimate Firebenders. And if you could conquer one, your Firebending talents would become legendary, and you were given the honorary title Dragon.”

“Wait…Iroh is known as the Dragon of the West,” Emi muttered as they came to another part of the pyramid ruins. “Are you…saying he actually-”

“My uncle conquered the last great dragon. Long before I was born,” Zuko confirmed, running his hand over the remains of a stone dragon head.

“But I thought your uncle was…I don’t know. Good?” Aang said.

“He had a complicated past,” Zuko replied. “Family tradition, I guess. Let’s just move on.”

They eventually came to a set of gates with ornate, golden doors. An obelisk at the top of the stairs held a ruby jewel within its head, and on the ground between the stone tower and the doors was what looked like a carved circle with gems placed at even increments. Aang rushed forward, attempting to pry the doors open himself, but with little success.

“It’s locked up!” he said, disappointed.

Emi and Zuko scratched their heads, thinking. Suddenly, Zuko looked back at the obelisk. “Wait. It’s a celestial calendar. Just like the Fire Sages have in their temples.”

“Hmm,” Emi mused, looking around and spotting a sunstone at the top of the doors. “So, when the sun hits that at the right angle, the doors will open?”

“On the solstice.”

“Monkey feathers!” Aang grumbled. “The solstice again? We can’t wait here that long!”

“No, we can’t,” Zuko said, withdrawing his sword from its sheath. “But we might be able to speed time up.” He knelt down, angling the blade with the light streaming through the obelisk jewel. “Let’s see if we can outsmart the sunstone.”

He continued to tilt his sword this way and that until it finally hit the stone. The jewel began to glow, and within moments the doors shuddered opened.
“You know Zuko,” Aang remarked as they gathered at the threshold, “I don’t care what everyone else says about you; you’re pretty smart.”

Zuko smiled for a moment before frowning and turning to Emi, his eyebrow raised.

“Hey, I never said a word about you,” she defended herself, stepping into the room. Aang joined her, and they peered through the gloom until they suddenly saw a fierce looking face glaring at them. They both drew back, startled.

“Relax,” Zuko remarked, moving into the room. “They’re just statues.”

“Awfully creepy statues…” Emi muttered, moving through the open space and into the circle the statues made. “Why are they positioned so…oddly?”

Aang leaned down to read the inscription at the base of the first statue. “It says this is something called the Dancing Dragon.”

Emi raised an eyebrow but moved on, looking around the room. There didn’t seem to be anything else within the space except for these statues and the murals around the walls. Suddenly Aang ran up to Zuko, grabbing his arm.

“Zuko, get over here! I want you to dance with me!”

“What?!” Both Emi and Zuko demanded, though with vastly different inflections.

“Just do it!” Aang insisted, dragging him over to the first two statues. Emi stood back to watch, highly amused.

“Ugh,” Zuko commiserated.

“Lets follow the steps of the statues,” Aang said, getting into position. After a moment of hesitation, Zuko did the same, and they both shifted into the next step. It was then that Emi noticed stone tiles in the ground that collapsed once weight was applied to them.

“Don’t you see?” Aang said as they moved, “These aren’t dance moves; these statues are giving us a lesson. I think this is some kind of Sun Warrior Firebending form.”

“This better teach us some really good Firebending,” Zuko remarked.

Emi watched, wide eyed, as Aang and Zuko continued to mimic the statues, coming together with their fists aimed toward one another. As the last stone dials were pressed, the center of the circle
opened up, a pedestal with a golden egg perched upon it rising up from the ground.

“Hurray!” Aang shouted happily. “Wait…what exactly is that?”

“It’s some kind of mystical gemstone,” Zuko said, approaching the golden egg.

“Oh, sure. Let’s just run right toward the ancient treasure,” Emi scoffed, following him. “Nothing could possibly go wrong.”

“Emi’s right, we shouldn’t touch it!” Aang called out.

“Why not?” Zuko asked.

“Remember what happened out there with those spikes?” Aang remarked, worried. “I’m just really suspicious of giant glowing gems sitting on pedestals.”

Zuko frowned, turning back to the gem to pick it up. Emi groaned, shaking her head while Aang looked even more panicked.

“It feels…almost alive,” he mused, holding it carefully.

Emi rolled her eyes, marching forward to take the gem. “Okay, you’ve touched the treasure. Now let’s put it back an- AAAAAAAAAH!” Emi and Zuko cried out, a fountain of green sludge erupting from the pedestal and slamming them into the ceiling. Emi and Zuko were promptly stuck to one another, the sludge seeming to act as some sort of glue.

“Oh no! It’s another trap!” Aang yelled as the doors closed.

“Ya think?!” Emi yelled back, struggling to get free of the goop.

“Emi, please don’t move around so much…” Zuko muttered in her ear. She almost asked why when she suddenly realized their…intimate connection. But she hardly had time to be embarrassed by it, for Aang suddenly sent a wave of air toward the ceiling in an attempt to free them. All he succeeded in doing, though, was flipping them over onto the ceiling grate. Moment’s later Aang joined them, getting himself stuck to the metal bars as the sludge rose.

“I can’t move!” Aang panicked. “Zuko, Emi, do something!”

“Us? We can’t move either!” Zuko snapped. Emi felt the breath get squeezed out of her as the goop relentlessly pushed against them before finally stopping.
“It stopped,” Aang said, relieved.

“At least we have air,” Zuko remarked, his chest vibrating against Emi’s back. “Maybe if we stay calm, we can figure a way out of this.”

Night fell and they were still stuck to the grate. Despite the obvious consequences of fidgeting (as much as could be done with the goop), Zuko and Emi found themselves unable to stop from adjusting themselves every so often. Emi felt a wave of embarrassment wash over her every time she brushed against Zuko, along with another spike of something that she wasn’t sure she wanted to know about.

“You had to pick up the glowing egg, didn’t you?” Aang remarked after a few hours of silence.

“At least I made something happen!” Zuko snapped. “If it were up to you, we would have never made it past the courtyard!”

“HELP!!” Aang yelled, making Emi wince at the noise.

“Who are you yelling to?!” she demanded. “We’re the only ones here!”

“Well, what do you think we should do?” Aang asked.

“Think about our place in the universe?” Zuko suggested. Emi rolled her eyes and, despite the drawbacks to her, nudged against Zuko as hard as she could. The sharp intake of breath was well worth the repercussions to herself.

Then, suddenly, they heard footsteps nearby.

“Who’s down there?” a man demanded, peering into the grate. They stared in amazement at the painted face of the older man, wearing tribal clothing.

Before long, they had been hauled back to the courtyard where they were surrounded by the very much alive Sun Warriors. Odd creatures with long snouts and tongues were positioned around the drenched teens to lick up the goop. Emi hoped they’d be quick about it; she’d had to practically sit on Zuko’s lap as they waited to be unstuck.

The chief approached them, his expression stern. “For trying to take our sunstone, you must be severely punished!”

“We didn’t come here to take your sunstone,” Zuko explained. “We came here to find the ancient
“Yeah, right!” Another man stepped forward, clutching the sunstone. “They are obviously thieves! Here to steal Sun Warrior treasures.”

“Please,” Aang implored. “I don’t normally play this card, but…I’m the Avatar.”

The Sun Warriors looked at one another, skeptical. The goop had been cleaned enough so that they could stand up, though Emi and Zuko were still relatively stuck to one another.

“Please, hear us out,” Aang continued.

“My name is Zuko. Crown prince of the Fire Nation. Or…at least I used to be.” He sighed. “I know my people have distorted the ways of Firebending. To be fueled by anger and rage. But now I want to learn the true way; the original way. When we came here I never imagined the Sun Warrior civilization was secretly alive. I am truly humbled to be in your presence.” Zuko, Emi, and Aang bowed respectfully. “Please, teach us.”

“Well, not me, obviously,” Emi spoke up, smiling sheepishly. “I’m just an Airbender. Helping my friends.” She suddenly stumbled forward with a yelp, the creatures finally relieving her of the sludge connection with Zuko.

“If you wish to learn the ways of the sun,” the chief said, looking over Zuko and Aang, “you must learn them from the masters; Ran and Shaw.”

“Ran and Shaw?” Aang asked, surprised. “There are two of them?”

“When you present yourselves to them, they will examine you. They’ll read your hearts, your souls, and your ancestry. If they deem you worthy, they will teach you. If they don’t, you will be destroyed on the spot.”

Emi felt a shiver of fear run along her spine at his words. She looked to Aang and Zuko, who both seemed apprehensive, but determined.

As the sun rose, they found themselves at the top of a tall pyramid, where a large fire was burning brightly in a carved alcove.

“If you are going to see the masters,” the chief said to Zuko and Aang, “you must bring them a piece of the eternal flame. This fire, the very first one, was given to man by the dragons. We have kept it going for thousands of years.
“I don’t believe it,” Zuko mused in amazement.

“You will each take a piece of it to the masters to show your commitment to the sacred art of Firebending.”

“Um…mister Sun Chief, sir? Yeah, I’m not a Firebender yet. Couldn’t my friend here carry my fire for me?” Aang asked sheepishly.

“No,” the chief said, turning back to the fire. Emi looked on as he grabbed hold of a flame, guiding it out and splitting it into two for Zuko and Aang to carry. “This ritual illustrates the efforts of Sun Warrior philosophy. You must maintain a constant heat. The flame will go out if you make it too small. Make it too big, and you might lose control.”

Zuko took the proffered flame while Aang hesitated, clearly wary. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m just a little nervous.” He held his hands out, taking the flame. After a moment, he relaxed, even smiling a little. “It’s like a little heartbeat.”

“Fire is life,” the chief remarked. “Not just destruction. You will take your flames up there.” He pointed to the distant mountains, where two sharp peaks split to stab the sky. “The cave of the masters is beneath that rock.”

The Sun Warriors stood, up, making their way over to the mountain. Emi lingered behind with Zuko and Aang a little longer, worried for the two of them.

“So…” she mused, fiddling with her staff. “You ready to do this?”

“Yeah. I think so,” Aang said, still looking nervously at his flame.

“We’ll be fine, Emi,” Zuko assured her.

“Right.” She shifted on her feet. “Well…I guess I’ll see you guys there. Good luck.” Emi twirled her staff, opening her glider and jumping into the air, swiftly flying toward the mountain peaks.

- - -

“Hurry up,” Zuko said as he peered down the embankment at the Avatar, several yards behind him.

“I can’t,” Aang insisted. “If I go up too fast, my flame will go out!”

“Your flame’s going to go out because it’s too small. You’re too timid; give it more juice.”
“But, what if I can’t control it?”

“You can do it. I know you can,” Zuko said, smiling slightly. “You’re a talented kid.”

Aang smiled back at him, catching up after a few short moments. They continued walking for a ways in silence, Zuko concentrating on his own flame.

“When are you going to tell her?” Aang suddenly asked.

“Tell who what?”

“Tell Emi that you love her.”

Zuko nearly stumbled at that, his flame flickering before resuming its steady flare. “What are you talking about?” he muttered.

“I’ve seen the way you look at her,” Aang continued. “Well, everyone has seen the way you look at her. Sokka and Katara don’t really like it.”

Zuko didn’t say anything. He didn’t trust himself to speak.

“If it’s because you’re too shy-”

“That has nothing to do with it!” Zuko snapped, turning around. “After everything I’ve done, why would she ever want to be with me?”

“Because she loves you.” Aang said it so casually. Zuko wanted to believe him. But he couldn’t.

“Yeah. I can just feel the love coming from her,” he retorted, moving back up the mountain path.

“She may not admit it now, but she does love you.” Aang continued as they walked. “I can tell.”

“How?”

“She looks at you the same way you look at her. And she didn’t just come with us to look around these ruins,” Aang smiled. “Although I know that was a part of it.”

Zuko frowned in thought. “She doesn’t trust me, though.”
“So earn her trust back. Just be yourself,” Aang replied.

*You make it sound so easy,* Zuko mused to himself as they neared the crest of the mountain. He sighed and brushed aside his thoughts of Emi, even though he’d be seeing her again very soon. Right now, though, he needed his wits about him to face the Firebending Masters.

---

Emi watched in trepidation as Zuko and Aang made their way up the long staircase to the bridge above, connecting the two caves of the masters. She had wondered what sort of Firebending masters lived in a cave; it seemed rather odd to her. Around her, the Sun Warriors pounded their drums and chanted, creating their ritual of respect for the masters.

Zuko and Aang finally reached the top, and the chief called the chanters and drummers to a halt. The sudden silence was deafening.

“Those who wish to meet the masters Ran and Shaw will now present their fire,” one of the warriors called out to them using a curved horn to amplify his voice.

“Sound the call!” the chief commanded. Another warrior took position behind a very long, very large horn, the sound radiating for miles around. The mountain suddenly shook as if something very large stirred within the stone.

Emi watched moments later, baffled, as it seemed Zuko and Aang were having some kind of argument, fighting with one another. She slapped a hand to her face in exasperation; leave it to them to not be able to work together for longer than ten minutes.

“Stop cheating off of me!” Zuko suddenly snapped.

“Quit being stingy!” Aang shot back.

Then, another quake rocked the mountain, much louder and heavier this time. Suddenly, a large red reptilian shape launched itself from one of the caves, spreading its wings and swirling around the platform where Aang and Zuko stood. Another dragon soon joined the first, blue in color. Both beasts flew around and around, their long bodies twisting gracefully in the air. Emi stood in shock, her jaw hanging open so wide she must have looked like a fool. But she didn’t care; she was seeing two real live flesh and blood *dragons*.

“Best. Field trip. Ever,” she murmured under her breath, grinning.

Before long, Zuko and Aang began to mimic the positions of the statues in the sunstone shrine, the dragons moving with them seamlessly. It was a beautiful thing to witness. But her smile fell when the last step was made, and the dragons finally stopped, hovering in front of Aang and Zuko. The
great beasts stared at them and for a moment, Emi feared the worst. Then, the masters clung to the sides of the stairs, emitting fire from their massive maws. Emi gasped in fright, until she saw the looks of approval (and in a few cases disappointment) among the Sun Warriors.

After a few moments, the dragons cut off their fire and took off into the sky, whirling around before diving back into their caves. Judgment was passed, and they had been deemed worthy.

Emi was bouncing on the soles of her feet as Aang and Zuko came walking down the stairs, similar expressions of wonder on their faces. As soon as their feet touched level ground, she launched herself at them, hugging them both tightly.

“That was amazing!” she shrieked, grinning at their baffled expressions. “I can’t believe it; actual dragons! Oh, and I nearly had a heart attack when they spat their fire at you but- You guys did it! You really did it!” Emi hugged them again and stepped back. “What was it like? Their fire?”

“That was amazing!” she shrieked, grinning at their baffled expressions. “I can’t believe it; actual dragons! Oh, and I nearly had a heart attack when they spat their fire at you but- You guys did it! You really did it!” Emi hugged them again and stepped back. “What was it like? Their fire?”

“Their fire was beautiful,” Zuko said, smiling. “I saw so many colors; colors I’ve never imagined.”

“Like Firebending harmony,” Aang added.

“Yes. They judged you, and gave you visions of the meaning of Firebending,” the chief said as he approached them.

“I can’t believe there are still living dragons,” Zuko remarked, amazed. “My Uncle Iroh said he faced the last dragon and killed it.”

“So, your uncle lied,” Aang said.

“Actually,” the chief remarked, “it wasn’t a total lie. Iroh was the last outsider to face the masters. They deemed him worthy and passed the secret on to him as well.”

“He must have lied to protect them,” Emi smiled. “So that they’d be safe, and no one else would ever hunt them again.”

“All this time, I thought Firebending was destruction,” Aang said. “Since I hurt Katara, I’ve been too afraid and hesitant. But now I know what it really is; it’s energy. And life.”

“Yeah…it’s like the sun, but inside of you,” Zuko mused. “Do you guys realize this?”

“Well, our civilization is called the Sun Warriors. So, yeah.” the chief replied, amused.

“That’s why my Firebending was so weak before,” Zuko turned to Aang. “Because for so many
years, hunting you was my drive, it was my purpose. So when I joined you, I lost sight of my inner fire. But now, I have a new drive. I have to help you defeat my father and restore balance to the world.” Zuko slid into his Firebending stances, flames shooting out from his palms strongly and vividly. Aang did the same, elated when his fire was controlled, yet powerful.

“Now that you have learned the secrets, and you know of our tribes’ existence, we have no choice but to imprison you here forever,” the chief glared down at the trio, making them recoil in shock. “Just kidding,” he grinned. “But seriously; don’t tell anyone.”

- - -

They arrived back at the Western Air Temple several hours later. They were all grinning, reminiscing about their little adventure. Emi had been a little more relaxed with Zuko, but she was still apprehensive of being too relaxed. The events of the last two days had effectively made her almost forget everything he had done. It wasn’t her intention to hold it against him forever. But even so, she couldn’t forgive him so easily. Not yet.

They landed Appa in the temple a short distance away from the rest of the group. They were all gathered around the remains of their fire pit, seemingly in deep discussion. As Emi, Aang, and Zuko approached them, their heads snapped up.

“There you guys are!” Katara exclaimed, standing up swiftly. Emi stopped, tilting her head; something was off about her.

“Yeah, we were wondering when you guys would get back,” Sokka added, also standing up.

“We had a little trouble. But we got what we needed,” Aang explained, grinning at Zuko who smiled back.

“Well that’s great!” Katara remarked too pleasantly.

“Yeah…” Emi mused. “The ruins were pretty impressive. A lot of fun to look around.”

“So glad you enjoyed yourselves!” Sokka grinned widely.

“Okay, what is with you two?” Emi demanded. They looked at one another for a moment before Toph groaned aloud.

“Just tell her already, jeez!” the Earthbender snapped.

“No, Yuuka is fine,” Katara assured her, looking to her brother. He heaved a sigh and waved his hand, Teo rolling forward with Haru and The Duke in tow.

“We…found these when we were exploring yesterday,” Teo said, holding out a bundle of dusty papers tied together with string. Emi raised an eyebrow, thoroughly confused.

“Okay. But…what does that have to do with me?”

“This letter was tied to the front of it,” Haru said, handing the roll over to Emi.

Emi took the paper and smoothed it out, her eyes scanning the writing. The more she read, the more shallow her breath became, until she had to stop reading altogether before she collapsed.

“Emi?” Zuko asked, worried. “What is it? What happened?”

“It’s…” She swallowed with difficulty. “This letter…it’s from my mother.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh snap.
Chapter Notes

I'm posting these chapters a little early because why not.
It has absolutely nothing to do with the cliffhanger in the previous chapter.
I feel no guilt about that.
...
Just enjoy this week's chapters.

All of This Past

“This can’t be real…” Emi muttered, pacing around their campsite with her eyes glued to the aged paper. “Haruka would have told me about this…she would have…right?”

“Oh. You know it’s a shock?” Emi snapped, her eyes flicking over to the Waterbender. “Why don’t you try going sixteen years believing no one from your family is alive only to find out the so called ‘mentor’ you idolized your whole life was in fact your grandmother! A-and that her daughter gave birth to her granddaughter in these ruins!”

“Emi, it’s going to be okay,” Aang said consolingly. “You just need time to absorb this.”

Emi scoffed, tossing the letter aside. She had only read part of it, but she couldn’t take any more at that point. This was far too much to handle all at once. She wished Haruka were alive, only so that she could demand some answers; why hadn’t she ever told Emi they were related? Why did she never mention she had a daughter? Why were she and her daughter separated in the first place? Who was her father? What had happened to him?

She knew, in all honesty, that those answers probably lay within the bundle that Teo had kept in his lap. Emi took a step toward him before stopping and pacing several steps away. *I want the answers...but I don’t want the answers...* she mused bitterly to herself. Emi ran a hand over her face as if to rub away the oncoming headache she could feel beginning to pound in her skull.

“I…need some time to myself,” Emi muttered, snatching up her glider. “I’ll be back later.” With that she took off into the sky, spiraling away out of sight.

Her friends stood around for a few more moments, lost in their own thoughts.
“How much did you guys read?” Zuko asked then, turning towards them.

“If you’re asking did we snoop around on purpose, no we did not,” Katara snapped. “Those papers were found by accident, and as soon as we found out who they were meant for, we stopped reading. We barely know anything beyond that it has to do with Emi’s family.” She turned on her heel, stalking away.

“She’ll be fine,” Sokka remarked.

“How? Emi or Katara?” Zuko asked bitterly.

“Both,” Sokka shrugged. “This is some pretty heavy stuff. Whenever Emi is ready to face it, we’ll help her with whatever she needs.”

Zuko heaved a sigh, rubbing his eyes. The group dispersed to go about their business. Aang decided it would be best for them to resume training, although Zuko had a feeling he only suggested that so that he wouldn’t worry so much about Emi. In the end, he decided to be grateful for the gesture.

Several hours later Emi came pelting back, landing nimbly upon their campsite platform. Everyone looked up but didn’t say anything as she made a beeline for Teo.

“Where did you find it?” she asked, flicking her gaze to the bundle in question.

“In one of the rooms on the other side of the temple,” he answered, putting down his dinner. “We can show you, if you want.”

By way of answer, Emi gave a curt nod of her head. Teo turned around and wheeled himself in the proper direction, the whole group trailing behind. They were eerily silent as they walked, but it didn’t faze Emi. Her own mind was too tumultuous to hold any sort of conversation. She had decided during her flight that she would read the papers and get her answers. If they didn’t satisfy her in the end, she would have Aang or Zuko burn them and pretend they had never existed.

Easier said than done.

They eventually stopped before a pair of large wooden doors, the wood worn down in places where bugs had been feasting upon the once polished bark. Teo nudged one of the doors open and rolled to the side, allowing Emi to enter the large space. The only windows were in the form of skylights, half choked by the creeping vines of the past century. It looked like at one point this must have served as a meditation room, judging from the lack of furniture and the open flow plan. There were, however, several small tables situated around the room, some of them collapsed under
Emi turned, holding out her hands for the bundle. Once she had the papers resting in her grasp, she looked up at her friends. “I’d like to read these alone. Please,” she said softly.

“Okay,” Katara replied with a gentle smile. “You know where to find us if you need us.”

Emi gave a curt nod, waiting for their footsteps to disappear before shutting the door and turning to look around the room she had been born in. She was acutely aware of the weight of the papers as she waited, hesitating. Emi heaved a sigh and moved to sit in a corner of the room, placing the bundle delicately on the ground before her. One of her friends had retrieved the original letter she had tossed aside, placing it back on top of the pile. She unrolled the paper, reading more carefully this time.

To my Beautiful Blessing.

I cannot begin to tell you how it breaks my heart that I will not be there for you as you grow up, becoming a beautiful and strong woman. But it was not fated to be, and I can only be grateful that you have come into the world and brought hope along with you.

You will soon realize, my dearest, that you are an Airbender. One of the last in existence. You will be burdened with having to hide yourself, just to survive the cruelties that lurk within the shadows of this world. I pray my mother, your grandmother, Haruka, will take good care of you, and teach you all you need to know to make it through the war.

There is so much that I long to tell you. And there is no time in which to say it. I can only assure you that, although we will never meet, I will always love you with all my heart. As soon as we realized you would be coming into this world, we were overjoyed. Not a day has gone by that I or your father haven’t given you our love. No matter where you go, no matter what may come to pass in your life, we will always watch over you.

The fates have not been kind to us, my darling. Even now my strength is fading while you lie sleeping peacefully next to me, only hours into your new life. Your father cannot be around to see you. But know that he gave his life so that you may have a chance to live. His gift for you is the gift of Airbending. Use it well, and pass on all the knowledge you have to your own children. Enclosed you will find the journals and the teachings of the Air Nomads of the Eastern Air Temple. Your ancestors.

Find your happiness, Emi. Never let the darkness consume you. You are a brilliant light that will guide so many lost souls back to life. You will help bring back the Air Nation. I know it.

All my love,
Your mother, Akemi
Emi sat back after reading her mother’s letter, her eyes misty with tears. She turned her attention to the bundle of papers, untangling the string and taking the topmost sheet out. There were listed different names, with lines drawn to connect four of the names. Three of these had the dates of birth and death, while one only had the date of birth. This was her name, at the bottom of the list. Before her was a man named Samir, and before him another man named Zeru, and at the top of the list a woman named Era. Emi’s eyes drifted back to the name before her own; the name of her father.

Before long she had several papers scattered around her, her eyes pouring over journal entries and various scriptures taken from the Eastern Air Temple so many years ago. Emi soon caught sight of several different entries in particular, written in her father’s hand about the day he met her mother.

---

It’s almost second nature now, living on the road. My father always told me and my brother that it was in our blood; the wanderlust. So it hasn’t bothered me to be a drifter, wandering aimlessly from village to town to city. It’s almost a comfort, in a way. Not a day goes by where I don’t miss them. But like my father taught us, if you start living in the past, you will never live again.

Samir reached a hand under the head scarf he had tied on to keep his pale locks hidden, scratching at an incessant itch. He nodded and smiled at the passing villagers as he walked along the streets. It had been over a week since his last visit into civilization, and he was in sore need of fresh supplies. Samir grimaced, picking at his dusty tunic; a fresh change of clothes wouldn’t hurt, either.

However, as he reached into his pocket he drew out only a few, meager copper pieces. Samir rolled his eyes and looked around, peering at the various shops that stood along the sides of the street. He spotted one a few yards away that looked promising, so he strolled along until he was able to enter the doorway and take a proper look.

It was a cozy little tea shop with plenty of customers sitting at the tables, talking and laughing with one another. A girl moved from table to table, serving tea and smiling at the customers. Samir took a moment to admire her coal black hair and sea green eyes before he moved forward toward the counter.

“Excuse me, sir?” Samir asked politely to the rotund man polishing the wood. He raised an eyebrow by way of answer. “I was wondering if you had an available position in this shop of yours. I’d only be temporary. Just long enough to earn some pocket money and then I’d be on my way.”

“We don’t need any more help,” the older man snapped. Samir frowned, trying to think of how to best sway the surly owner when the serving girl came up next to him.

“Actually, Hideki, we could use the extra help,” the girl said, her voice low and clear. “News around the village says a squad of Earth Kingdom soldiers will be coming through on their way to
the colonies. And you know how much soldiers adore their tea.”

Samir fought to keep his face neutral, but it was hard while watching the surly mask of the shop owner struggle to make a decision. He didn’t blame him; if he had those eyes staring at him, he would probably agree to do anything.

“Oh…alright. But just until the soldiers move on,” Hideki grumbled, turning away to go into the back room.

“Wow. Thanks for that,” Samir said, turning to the girl.

“You’re welcome,” she replied, smirking. “Hideki is a hard man to get along with. The only thing he cares about is money. He only agreed to hire me because his shop was getting too busy for him to handle alone.” She sighed, placing her tray onto the counter. “He makes a good cup of tea, though.”

Samir chuckled. “Well, don’t worry. Once the soldiers pass through I’ll be on my way.”

“You going anywhere in particular? If you don’t mind my asking, of course,” the girl asked, intrigued.

“Nowhere,” Samir shrugged. “I just go wherever I feel like it.”

She chuckled lightly. “Oh, you’re one of those wanderer types then, huh?”

“Nothing better than the open road,” Samir replied, grinning.

“Akemi! I don’t pay you to stand around and chat; get back to work!” Hideki suddenly shouted from the back room.

“Oops. Well, I’d better get going. See you tomorrow? We open an hour after sunrise,” Akemi said, grabbing another tray and smiling at Samir.

“Yeah, definitely,” he grinned. “The name’s Samir, by the way.”

“Samir, huh? That’s kind of unusual,” Akemi remarked as they strode toward the front door together.

“What can I say? I’m an unusual guy.” He winked at her before walking back out onto the streets, a spring in his step.
I’ve never been one to think about settling down, having a family. That was always Raijin’s goal. For an Airbender, he was awfully serious most of the time, always going on and on about responsibilities and duty. Maybe it was because he was five years older than me. Or maybe he got it from our mother, who had grown up with pretty much the same mentality. As for me, I was happy enough to just live in the moment and have fun. I didn’t want to be tied down, I just wanted to enjoy the beauty of each day that came to pass.

I’ve been on my own since I was fourteen. The raid on our village destroyed everything we had, and everyone I was tied to. Since then, I’ve learned to go my own way. And that in itself is a kind of freedom. I haven’t had the desire to be with anyone for longer than a few days. I have always been content to be on my own. That is, until I met her. Akemi.

The next few weeks flew by for Samir. He had always managed to enjoy himself while doing whatever mindless task needed to be done. That was how he dealt with the monotony; by having fun. But somehow, with this tea shop and working with Akemi, there was no monotony. Or, if there was, he didn’t notice it.

They quickly hit it off, before long talking as if they had known one another for years. He learned that she had been on her own for the past year, having left her mother and her home in Ba Sing Se when she was sixteen. She never said why, exactly, but Samir noticed whenever she made mention of her mother she spoke with a mixture of bitterness and regret.

Akemi, in turn, learned that Samir had had an older brother and parents, but that they had been killed during a Fire Nation raid several years ago. When she had heard the tale, her face had taken on a horrified expression and she hugged Samir tightly for several long moments. They were easily the best moments of his life.

The one thing Akemi did not know about Samir, and that he was not about to tell her, was that he was an Airbender. His father had warned him and his brother often when they were kids that it was too dangerous for them to be open about their bending. They were the last Airbenders in existence, aside from the Avatar himself. But since no one had seen him in almost a hundred years, that would just make them more susceptible to danger.

And for the longest time, Samir was okay with hiding his bending. He understood the dangers and had no qualms about keeping it a secret. He made it into a game of sorts, testing to see what he could get away with before anyone became suspicious. Raijin had hated it when his younger brother would pull such stunts, and he would always scold him for it or take him to their father for the scolding.

It wasn’t until he had met Akemi and gotten to know her that Samir wanted her to know about his Airbending, and not just as a game or a joke.

He had always wondered how his father and his grandmother had managed to settle down with
people who knew of their Airbending yet never said a word to anyone else about it. Samir knew they had been very lucky, to have found such understanding people. It made him wonder if he could ever find such a person. If he might already have.

**Plans should never be taken seriously. We all have intentions, ways we want to do things or say things. But more often than not, the events happen in a completely different way than we would have expected them to go. A few weeks after meeting Akemi, I knew I was lost. I hadn’t stayed long in one place since my home village six years ago, but since meeting her I knew then what my brother was always talking about. I wanted to be with her, but there was still the matter of my Airbending to reveal. I had the perfect plan. But, like I said, plans should never be taken seriously.**

Samir entered the tea shop to work for the third week in a row. In a few days, the Earth Kingdom soldiers would be moving on. They had had to stay put in order to get fresh supplies and rest their weary souls. But soon they would be marching onward, and normally Samir would be getting ready to head out himself.

But he couldn’t. Not alone, at least. Akemi had wormed her way into his heart and nestled there quite comfortably. He had known a few women before, but he had never felt for them what he felt for the emerald eyed siren that had captured his spirit so effectively. He had never been in love before, but he knew that this was what it was supposed to feel like.

However, Samir didn’t have the faintest idea of how he was supposed to approach Akemi, confess his love, and ask her to be with him. There was also, of course, the fact that he was an Airbender and he had yet to tell her that.

*End of work today, Samir promised himself, *I will tell Akemi everything. And if she is the woman I think she is, she’ll accept all of me…I hope.*

“Samir?”

He jumped, almost upended the tray of dirty tea cups he had been carrying. He spun around and saw Akemi standing behind him, an eyebrow raised.

“Are…you okay?” she asked, frowning slightly.

“Wha-? Oh yeah! Yeah, I’m totally fine,” Samir grinned, taking the tray back toward the tub of water. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Well, you’ve been very…odd today. More so than usual,” Akemi remarked.

“Well I can assure you, Akemi, I’m just fine,” he smiled, moving back to the main room to clean
off the empty tables. Akemi shrugged and went back to work, leaving Samir breathing a sigh of
relief but at the same time tensing back up. This was not going to be easy.

Finally, the last customer left and they could close up the shop for the night. Hideki stalked away,
grumbling about the shortage of money lately while Akemi and Samir were left to clean up the
remaining tables and dishes.

“I swear that guy has a giant stick up his ass,” Samir muttered, washing the tea cups and giving
them to Akemi to dry.

“Well, if that’s the case then the kindest thing you could do for him is remove the offending
object,” Akemi laughed, putting the newly dried tea cups away.

“Har, har,” Samir smirked, rolling his eyes. “If you’re so concerned about it, why don’t you do the
honors?”

Akemi frowned, splashing the soapy water at Samir while he laughed.

As soon as everything was in its proper place and all the surfaces were cleaned, they left the tea
shop and locked the door. Samir shifted his bag on his shoulder as he walked Akemi to her little
apartment on the other side of the village. She had offered to let him stay with her when she found
out he had just been camping in the woods on the outskirts of the village, but Samir had declined;
he didn’t feel right about staying with her just yet.

But now was his chance. He could pull her aside and tell her everything, and hope that his instincts
about her were right and that she wouldn’t freak out on him.

“Akemi,” Samir said, stopping in the middle of the street. She stopped as well, turning to look at
him questioningly. Before he could say anything more, she let out a gasp of fear and he was
slammed from behind by another man.

Samir fell to the ground heavily, feeling his bag being ripped away from his shoulder as the thief
took off, running swiftly. Akemi ran to his side.

“Samir! Are you okay?!” she asked worriedly, but he didn’t pay any attention to her. His eyes were
 glued to the retreating figure with his bag, his memories. He needed it back. Now.

“Samir, wait!” Akemi called out as he jumped to his feet and ran after the thief.

The man glanced back, his eyes widening as he saw Samir running after him. He pushed forward,
running faster to get away from his victim. But Samir had an ace up his sleeve. The thief soon
ducked down an alleyway, away from prying eyes. Perfect, he thought to himself as he pelted after
the man. The thief had gotten halfway down the alley when Samir lashed out, sending a powerful blast of air toward the man. The thief cried out in shock, tumbling head over heels several feet away before coming to a halt, unconscious.

Samir ran forward, grabbing his bag and checking the contents within to be sure that they hadn’t been damaged. He breathed a sigh of relief; they were safe. As Samir turned to head back to Akemi, he stopped in his tracks when his eyes fell on the girl in question. Her eyes were wide, her mouth open in shock.

“Akemi-” Samir started to say, but she began to back away.

“How-? When-? I-” she stuttered, still inching backwards.

“Akemi, please, I-I meant to tell you-”

“Are you the Avatar?”

“What?!” Samir asked in returned, shocked. He shook his head vehemently. “No! No, definitely not! I’m just…an Airbender.”

“How…how is that possible?!“ Akemi demanded. “The last Airbender is said to be the Avatar. All the others were wiped out!”

Samir sighed and walked forward, slowly and carefully. Akemi leaned back, but she didn’t retreat any further. He stopped once he was within a few feet of her, his gray eyes full of pleading.

“My grandmother managed to escape the Fire Nation’s attack on the Air Nomads,” Samir explained. “She lived in secret for years, until she met my grandfather. Then, you know, they had a kid. He was an Airbender. He had kids. We were Airbenders. Or…I am, anyway.”

“So…this whole time…you were lying to me?” Akemi’s eyes fell to the ground, her tone betraying her hurt.

“No! I never lied about anything, I swear,” Samir insisted. “I just couldn’t tell you. Not yet. I was…actually going to tonight. Since I’d be moving on in a few days. I wanted you to know the true me.”

Akemi frowned, thinking. “So, you’ve been hiding out,” she stated. “But, then why would you risk discovery to go after a thief? That seems like a big gamble to me.”

Samir smile crookedly and held out his bag. “This has all of my family’s writings and accounts,
going all the way back to when my grandmother lived in the Eastern Air Temple. It’s more precious to me than my own life.”

“I see,” Akemi said, nodding in understanding. “But, why tell me in the first place? I mean, if you’re going to be leaving soon, I really don’t see the purpose…”

Samir flushed slightly, running a hand over the scarf covering his hair. With a sigh he finally untied it for the first time in her presence, letting her see the sandy locks for herself.

“I, uh…” He rumpled his messy hair, trying to get the words out. “I-I was going to tell you… because…I was wondering…if maybe you wanted to… a-and if you accepted, that is. I mean, I don’t want you to do anything you don’t want to do! I just-”

“What, Samir?” Akemi asked, a smile twitching on her lips.

“I love you,” he blurted out, staring at the ground as his face flushed. “And…I was wondering if you would consider joining me. On my travels.”

She was silent. Samir was afraid to look up, to see the look of disgust or cruel amusement or something else that would crush his heart and leave him humiliated. After several tense moments, though, he couldn’t take the silence any longer and he chanced a look up at Akemi.

He felt shame coloring his blood as he saw tears in her eyes.

“I-I’m sorry,” he muttered, turning away. “I’ll just go-”

A hand grabbed his shoulder, forcing him to turn back. Before Samir could look properly bemused Akemi’s lips were upon his own. He didn’t need to ask what was happening or why. He kissed her back without hesitation, his arms winding around her waist to hold her tight. If he had his way, she would never leave his side for as long as they lived.

Akemi pulled back, smiling against his lips before hugging him properly. “I love you, too,” she whispered in his ear.

Samir felt like he could simply float away right then and there.

When my family was killed, and I was left alone in the world, I never thought I could feel as complete as I did when I was with them ever again. But with Akemi, I was whole. I remember my grandmother told us once, when we were little kids, that all things boil down to energy. Energy that is given and taken and reborn, time and again. The love of my family will always be with me, but in their absence that love dwindled. But now, with Akemi, that love has returned in full force.
We have been traveling for awhile now. She loves the new sights as much as I do, and we always have fun whether we are surrounded by others or just enjoying the company of two. I am eternally grateful for her, and I know we will make a great family. Just as my father did. Just as my grandmother did. And maybe, we will see the end of this war, and our children may live in peace and not have to hide ever again.

---

Emi sat for a long time, staring at the papers that contained the writings of her ancestors, all dead and gone. She had dried tear stains running down her cheeks, but whether from sorrow or joy or both she couldn’t decide.

She heaved a sigh, looking up at the ceiling windows; night had fallen some time ago. Her friends would probably be asleep by now. Emi began to slowly gather up the papers, piling them together neatly and carefully. Her original shock and anger had worn off, leaving an odd sensation behind that she had no words for. The closest she could come to was content, but even that didn’t quite cover what it was she was feeling.

As Emi gathered everything together, a small bit of paper slipped out and fell back to the floor. She set the bundle down, picking up the stray object that she had not noticed before. As soon as Emi had turned it around, her eyes widened in shock. It was a painting, done with muted colors that had faded over the years. Still, Emi could clearly see the man’s sandy colored hair and the woman’s sea green eyes, both smiling peacefully at the artist.

Emi fell back, clutching the only picture of her parents in existence. She stared for what seemed like ages, picking out small details that matched her own; aside from the hair and the eyes, she had her mother’s mouth with same slight upturn that Haruka had always said hinted at humor. She had her father’s nose and ears, her mother’s height and hands… Finally, for the first time in hours, Emi smiled.

Once she had gathered the bundle together again, placing the picture of her parents at the top, she made her way out of the room of her birth and ventured back to where her friends were.

She tiptoed around their sleeping forms, silently making her way to her own bedroll. Once she reached it, her sugar glider opened her eyes and gave a soft squeak in greeting.

“Hush, Yuuka,” Emi whispered quietly, scratching her pet behind the ears.

“Emi?” She looked over, seeing Zuko stir nearby, rubbing his eyes tiredly. “How are you doing?”

“I’m…” She paused, tilting her head. “I’m fine.” And she was. She was fine with everything.

“Did you find the answers you were looking for?” he asked, sitting up.
“Mostly,” Emi replied, shifting the bundle onto her lap. “I mean, there’s still a lot to find out, with Haruka and my… mom. But with everything else, it’s pretty clear.” She toyed with the edge of her parent’s painting for a moment before sliding it out of the bundle and moving to sit next to Zuko. “These are my parents,” she said, handing him the picture.

He took the picture, smiling at the couple. “They look happy together,” he commented.

“Yeah,” Emi said, smiling. “They spent almost four years together. Until the raid…”

Zuko’s smile fell as he handed the picture back. “I’m so sorry, Emi,” he said, looking away. “This is all because of my family. My ancestors. If it wasn’t for them, you’d still have your parents.”

Emi was silent for a moment. Ever since she had started reading through her family’s journals, she had been thinking much the same thing. But, at the same time, she felt she had to disagree. She hadn’t quite understood why at the time. Now, though, she felt like she could.

“I’m not sorry,” Emi said, making Zuko’s eyes snap to her in disbelief. “Of course, I would have loved to have known my parents. Everyone wants a family to surround them with love and support. But, if your great grandfather hadn’t started the war, I probably wouldn’t even exist. Or if I did, we never would have met.” She sighed, leaning back on her hands to observe the crumbling ceiling of the temple. “Maybe, sometimes, bad things have to happen so that the good things can become more meaningful. Ever since I started traveling the world, I’ve spent so much time just admiring the sights and the people. Even in the middle of a war, there is still much happiness to be found. If one can be open-minded enough to see it.” She paused for a moment, blushing a little. “And… I really enjoyed being around you. Even though most of the time you were a foul tempered prince.”

Zuko chuckled despite himself. Emi turned to him, her expression serious. “You are making an effort to make everything right, aren’t you?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said without hesitation. “While there’s still hope, I will not stop fighting until balance has been restored.”

Emi smiled, leaning forward to kiss his cheek. “There’s always hope,” she said before standing up to go over to her own bedroll to sleep away the rest of the night.
Emi could tell her friends were dying to know what she had found out, but they were tactfully not saying anything until she was ready to come forward. Just to draw out the anticipation, she took her sweet time eating her breakfast as, one by one, the others finished and sat around, apparently thinking of what to do for the day. As soon as she set her bowl aside, Sokka spoke up.

“Sooo…” he mused, stroking his chin. “How’d it go?”

Toph punched his arm while Katara glared at her brother. “That’s not what we said we would do!” she hissed at him.

“What? Your way was too long,” he complained, glaring back at her.

Emi chuckled. “It’s okay. Really. I had a lot of time to…absorb everything. And honestly, it went pretty well. I learned a lot about my family. At least, my father’s side of the family. I suppose that’s the side they really wanted me to know, since I get my Airbending from him.”

“Did he know which Air Temple he came from?” Aang asked excitedly.

“Yep. My ancestors kept records of their lives as well as some scriptures from the archives of the Eastern Air Temple. That’s where my great grandmother grew up,” Emi said, patting the bundle lightly.

“Really? What was her name? Maybe I knew her!” Aang continued, his eyes bright.

“Era.”

“She was a caretaker in training for the bison nurseries at the Eastern Air Temple!” Aang exclaimed. “She even helped herd bison between temples!”

“Wow, really?” Emi mused, smiling. “That’s amazing!”
“So, what, your family just hid in plain sight all these years?” Toph asked. “Didn’t they have to tell their partners that they were Airbenders at some point?”

“Well, yeah,” Emi replied, shrugging. “But, I guess my great grandfather and grandmother loved their partners enough to keep their secrets. I mean, I wouldn’t exist right now if that weren’t the case.”

“Fair enough,” Toph allowed.

“So who were the other Airbenders in your family?” Teo asked.

“Well, there was my father Samir and his brother Raijin,” Emi reeled off. “And my grandfather, Zeru, who was an only child. And before him there was Era and her brother. I don’t know any more beyond that.”

“I’m glad you were able to find out some things about your family, at least,” Katara said, smiling. “And I’m glad it doesn’t upset you so much now.”

“I was shocked more than anything, honestly,” Emi remarked. “What I still don’t understand is why Haruka never told me about any of this. She never even said she had a daughter! I just…I don’t get it.”

“Maybe she had her reasons,” Katara shrugged. “I’m sure she never meant to upset you intentionally.”

“I know,” Emi sighed, standing up. “At least I know my Airbending heritage. I am thankful for that much.”

Once all the dishes had been cleaned up, the group separated to do their own things. Teo invited Emi to join him, Haru, and The Duke to explore more of the temple; they had barely begun to scratch the surface of what lay within its depths. Grinning, Emi happily accepted and ran off with her friends.

Zuko watched Emi follow the other boys as they ran back into the temple, that old feeling of jealousy stirring in his gut. He didn’t have long to brood, however, because Aang came up to him shortly after she disappeared.

“Ready for some more training, Zuko?” he asked excitedly.

“Yeah,” Zuko relented. “Come on.” They left for the emptier area of the temple where they had first begun their training, though Zuko’s mind was otherwise occupied for the rest of the morning.
By lunchtime, Emi and her friends trooped back into camp, laughing wildly about a slide they had found and had immense fun zooming down numerous times. Emi got a lot of practice with her Airbending, making it more enjoyable for herself and the others. Especially after a round with Teo where she stood on the back of his chair and they rocketed down at a high speed.

“You know, you really do have the spirit of an Airbender, Teo,” Emi remarked as she accepted her food from Katara.

“I said the same thing when we first met,” Aang piped up.

“Thanks. That really means a lot to me,” Teo smiled, patting Emi’s hand.

“Look, just make sure you Airbenders don’t get carried away, alright?” Sokka remarked. “This place is falling apart as it is, we don’t need you guys to be whipping around with your air and wind and all that.”

“Sokka, I solemnly swear to you that we are being responsible individuals and respecting this temple,” Emi said, raising her hand seriously. “Besides, it’s a lot sturdier than you think.”

“Exactly. Me and Emi went down that slide a dozen times, and we were fine,” Teo added, chuckling at the memory.

“Yeah, but next time I want to go on your chair, too!” The Duke piped up.

“Hey, how are your Firebending lessons going?” Emi asked Aang.

“Great! I’m learning a lot,” Aang replied, grinning.

“It better be going well,” Katara muttered under her breath, shooting a glare at Zuko. He either didn’t notice or didn’t care; he was scowling down at his bowl, ignoring everyone else.

The rest of the meal passed by with quiet conversation all around. For the most part, Emi sat back and listened, grinning at some of the comments and remarks. Afterward, they separated once again to enjoy the remaining hours of the day. Emi stood up and strapped on her sword, wondering if she could ask Sokka for a training session. As she looked around to see where he had disappeared to, Teo tugged on her sleeve.

“Hey, want to go another round?” he asked, grinning.

Emi smiled back. “I was actually going to ask Sokka if he’d swordfight with me. But…I can’t seem
“He went to go find a place to fish,” Zuko interrupted, coming toward them. “But I can spar with you.”

Emi blinked, flushing a little. The last time she had sparred with Zuko, it had been a rather uncomfortable (yet at the same time enjoyable) experience. “Oh, no that’s okay. I’m sure you and Aang need to get back to training-”

“He went with Katara and Toph to another part of the temple,” he interjected once again. Before Emi could think of anything else to say, Zuko took her firmly by the arm, steering her away from Teo. She looked back at her friend’s bemused face, giving a helpless shrug. He nodded and whirled his chair around to catch up with Haru and The Duke.

Before long they arrived at an emptier part of the temple. Zuko finally let Emi’s arm go, but he did not move away from her. She heaved a sigh, blowing a bit of hair out of her face.

“That was really rude of you, you know,” she remarked, crossing her arms.

“Oh really?” Zuko scoffed, glowering down at her. “You’ll have to forgive me for insulting your boyfriend.”

“What?!?” Emi stepped back in shock. “Oh for- What is the matter with you? Why would you even think that? Teo’s my friend!”

“Like he doesn’t want anything more!” Zuko snapped. “I’ve seen how he looks at you!”

Emi ran an exasperated hand over her hair. “So? Aang looks at me. Sokka looks at me. You gonna give them the evil eye too?”

“Maybe I should,” Zuko muttered darkly.

“Jeez! Why are you acting like such a-” Emi stopped, realization dawning on her. “Wait…are you-? Are you jealous?”

Zuko scowled but said nothing, a light flush decorating his pale complexion. Emi placed a hand over her mouth to smother her smile. Part of her was flattered that Zuko was acting so protective, but she knew it was not the way to go about their current relationship. He had left a large hole in her heart, and although it had healed over, the scar still hurt. Especially with his reappearance. It made her confused and wanting two different things at the same time.
Emi sighed. “Zuko, there is nothing for you to be jealous about. Even if any of these guys felt anything romantic for me, which they don’t, they’re not the ones I want.”

Zuko looked over at her, his eyes narrowed. “Then who is?”

“I can’t answer that right now.”

“Why not?”

“Gee, I don’t know,” Emi snapped, glaring at him. “Maybe because the man I do want broke my heart into a thousand pieces and then came waltzing back months later acting like nothing happened!”

“I screwed up! I know that!” Zuko shouted. “I’m sorry, Emi. I know that doesn’t make up for anything, but I don’t know what else I can do! I mean, you said there was hope but how can I believe that when you still hate me?!”

“Zuko, there is hope. And I don’t hate you…” Emi crossed her arms, looking away. “I want to forgive you. I really do. But every time I find myself ready to do it, I remember everything that happened and I feel abandoned all over again. I just…need some time.”

They fell silent, both wrapped in the awkward haze they had created. It was several minutes before one of them broke the silence.

“I did mean what I said before. About sparring with you,” Zuko remarked.

Emi’s lips twitched in a smile. “That’s alright. I’m not the weak little swordsman I was before; I really don’t think you could handle my skill now.”

“Oh really? Sokka’s that good of a teacher, is he?”

“Well, he was trained by Master Piandao. So…yeah,” Emi replied idly, shrugging.

“So was I,” Zuko grinned.

Well…so much for that, Emi muttered inwardly, disgruntled. “I guess it would be alright, if you think you can keep up,” she continued with false bravado.

Zuko rolled his eyes and unsheathed his broadsword, moving to a respectable distance before taking up an attack stance. Emi did the same with her scimitar, mirroring his movement. It felt like the old days when they would have bending training, waiting for one of them to make the first
move. She clenched the hilt of her sword, eyes narrowing.

They stood still, barely breathing. Then, Zuko swung out, his blade a blur of metal as it came crashing against Emi’s sword. She just barely managed to block in time, her muscles shaking with the effort, but she grit her teeth and pushed back, following through with an uppercut of her own. Zuko easily deflected, swinging his sword around to knock her off balance.

Emi jumped neatly out of the way, heading to higher ground using the stone wreckage of a fallen pillar. Zuko aimed his swings toward her ankles, but she managed to neatly leap to the side, her light blade flying through the air to connect with Zuko’s sword.

It was a game. Fall back, leap forward, then retreat again. Emi was growing tired quickly, though; Sokka had gone easy on her during their lessons, she now realized. She made a mental note to give him an earful when she saw him again.

Zuko also seemed to be holding back a little, lessening the extent of his blows at the last minute. But at the same time, he seemed determined to show her that he was stronger than Sokka. The thought almost made Emi laugh, but she wisely kept her mouth shut.

With a final swing of his blade, Zuko came crashing into Emi, their swords locked as they stumbled into a nearby wall. The resulting contact knocked the breath out of her lungs, and her grip loosened on her sword until it fell from her hand. Zuko smirked, caging her in with body and blade.

“I win,” he declared in a low voice. His tone, for some odd reason, sent shivers down Emi’s spine. Her mind was at war with her own body, demanding that they push Zuko aside and move away. Get some distance. But her body wanted to be closer, to feel his heat against her own. And his lips…it had been so long since she had felt his lips upon her own. Emi’s eyes kept flicking toward them, lingering on their softness. Almost as if they were magnetized, their faces drifted closer to one another, their breaths mingling deliciously to create an intoxicating headiness.

Suddenly, they were both doused in water and drenched to the skin.

Zuko and Emi broke away from one another, spluttering indignantly. She looked over to the side to see Toph snickering while Katara and Sokka were glaring at her the same way Haruka would when she had done something wrong. She grit her teeth in annoyance.

“What was that for?!” she demanded, bringing her fists together to create a sphere of air that rid hers and Zuko’s clothes of the seepage.

“You guys looked like you could use a cold splash of water,” Katara retorted, glaring at Zuko.

“As a matter of fact we did,” Emi replied, crossing her arms. “We were just finishing up a sparring session.”
“Lying,” Toph remarked to Sokka in a singsong voice.

“We’re not lying,” Zuko insisted, glaring back at Katara.

“Well, since you guys are clearly done with whatever you were doing, why don’t you and Aang go back to your Firebending training, Zuko,” Sokka suggested with a tone that said there was no room for arguing.

Zuko grit his jaw but he sheathed his sword nonetheless. Before he left, he retrieved Emi’s scimitar from its place on the ground, handing it back to her silently. For a moment he held her gaze, his golden eyes seeming to smolder with some intensity. But before she could ponder upon it any more, he moved away and left the four of them alone. Which Emi really did not want.

“What is the matter with you?” Katara demanded as soon as Zuko was out of earshot. “Have you forgotten what he did?!”

“Of course not!” Emi snapped. “We really were just sparring. Nothing happened!”

“But something was going to happen,” Sokka said sternly. “And it’s a good thing we came by when we did!”

“Good thing I could feel them,” Toph remarked, still smirking a little.

Emi blushed furiously, but she stood her ground. “I know what I’m doing. I don’t need you guys to babysit me!”

“I think you do,” Katara retorted. “I think you need to be reminded just who Zuko is and what he’s done to us all! Especially to you!”

“I am well aware of what has happened, Katara. But he's training Aang now. People are capable of changing!”

“Not him.” Katara turned on her heel, storming away from the trio angrily.

“Emi, you need to watch yourself around him,” Sokka jumped in. “I’m not just saying this because of his past, but because he...because of what—”

“Because before long you guys are going to end up being locked away in a room together. Alone,” Toph cut in, crossing her arms.
Emi flushed ten shades of red. “What?! I wouldn’t- I mean that’s not- y-you’ve got this all wrong-”

“Emi, I am saying this because I care about you and I don’t want anything to happen that you would regret; stay away from Zuko,” Sokka ordered, giving her a hard stare.

Emi remained silent, still blushing furiously but knowing it was better to keep her counsel to herself. She followed Sokka and Toph back to the main campsite, where Katara was studiously ignoring her. Emi heaved a sigh and collapsed onto her bedroll, Yuuka promptly curling up on her belly. As she scratched her sugar glider’s ears, she wondered what would have happened if she and Zuko hadn’t been interrupted. Just the thought made her blush anew, but beneath the embarrassment was a tiny spark of warmth somewhere in the region of her lower belly. Emi pushed the thoughts away, both terrified and excited by their possibilities.

Chapter End Notes

Admittedly, though, there have been numerous times throughout this story where I’ve had to stop writing and just question why my mind comes up with such sappy and embarrassing moments for my characters.

I’ve yet to come up with an answer.
The following evening they were sitting around their fire while Zuko served them tea. As he went around handing out the cups, he was attempting to remember a particular joke that Iroh had apparently adored. Emi had to bite her lip to keep from laughing at Zuko’s failed attempts to get it right. Although, when he handed over her cup of tea, she suddenly didn’t feel like laughing anymore. Emi briefly caught his gaze before flushing and looking back down into her cup, busying herself with taking a large sip.

“It’s nice to get a chance to relax a little,” Toph remarked. “It hardly ever happens.”

“Yeah, it’s almost like a vacation,” Haru added, sipping his tea.

Emi smiled, looking around the worn temple. Despite its crumbling façade, she really did enjoy being here. She shifted her gaze back to the group in time to see Zuko and Sokka move away from the firelight. Her brow furrowed; she sincerely hoped Sokka wasn’t about to give Zuko the same lecture he had given her. Emi still blushed with embarrassment from the memory of it.

However, they returned a few short minutes later, Sokka looking ready for sleep but Zuko was eyeing him with suspicion. The group cleaned up their tea break and set off to their respective bedrolls, falling asleep one by one.

Later, Emi was roused from her fitful slumber by the sound of someone tiptoeing through the campsite. She rolled over, looking around in time to see Sokka sneaking off to where Appa was laying a short distance away. He was carrying his pack, his eyes darting around to make sure everyone was still asleep.

Frowning, Emi got up silently and grabbed her staff, making her way through their sleeping friends with more precision and stealth than Sokka had managed. She ducked behind a pillar, watching as he crawled onto Appa’s saddle, only to give a low shout of surprise and fall back to the ground. Emi winced, raising an eyebrow as she saw Zuko stand up from the saddle, glaring down at Sokka.

“Fine, you caught me,” Sokka muttered as he sat back up, gathering his supplies together. “I’m going to rescue my dad. You happy now?”

“I’m never happy,” Zuko retorted.

“Look, I have to do this. The invasion plan was my idea, it was my decision to stay when things were going wrong. It’s my mistake, and it’s my job to fix it.” Sokka approached Appa again as Zuko jumped down from the bison. “I have to regain my honor. You can’t stop me Zuko.”
“So, what, you’re just going to fly into a Fire Nation prison on a sky bison?” Emi asked, stepping out from her hiding place. Both of them jumped and whirled around, guilt plastered on Sokka’s face and annoyance on Zuko’s.

“What are you doing here? Spying on us?” Zuko demanded.

Emi rolled her eyes. “Sokka woke me up. I saw him sneaking away and decided to see what he was up to.” She snickered then. “You’re not terribly great at stealth, you know.”

“Look, both of you just go back to bed,” Sokka snapped, irritated. His eyes suddenly widened and he sputtered in agitation. “I-I mean, not together! Just… go away and let me do what I have to do.”

“Emi is right, Sokka,” Zuko said, ignoring his little outburst. “You can’t go to the Boiling Rock on Appa. We’ll take my war balloon.”

Sokka heaved a sigh, reluctantly stepping back away from the sky bison. Both of them made to go in the direction of Zuko’s balloon, but when Emi started to follow Zuko stopped her with a hand on her shoulder.

“You’re not coming with us,” he said sternly.

“Why not?” Emi demanded. “I’m not a little girl that needs to be sheltered, Zuko. I can keep up with you two.”

“It’s too dangerous. You’re staying here, and don’t tell any of the others where we went,” Zuko continued, his golden eyes boring into hers.

Emi grit her teeth. “Maybe I will. Maybe it would be better to have the rest of the group come along. We could use their expertise-”

“No,” Sokka spoke up, stepping forward determinedly. “This requires as few people as possible. We’re going to have to lay low and move fast. And I know that you’re an Airbender!” he overrode Emi as she opened her mouth to protest. “That’s all the more reason you should stay here and be safe from the Fire Nation. Now we have to go, we’re losing time.” He turned away, heading over to the war balloon.

“Like you two are any safer than I would be,” Emi muttered darkly, crossing her arms.

Zuko smiled a little. “Here, give Aang this.” He pressed a small rolled up bit of paper into Emi’s hand. “Homework until we can get back.”
“Yeah, yeah,” Emi sighed, pocketing the note and turning away to go back to sleep. She was pulled back around when she had barely gotten more than a few steps away, and before Emi could protest she was silenced by Zuko’s lips.

And just like that, all of her love for the Fire Nation prince came flooding back in full force. It no longer mattered what had happened it the past. All Emi cared about was the feel of his warm breath mingling with her own, the firm swipe of his tongue against her lips as he asked for entrance, which she granted without hesitation.

There was a sense of need and longing that she felt from his kiss, his grip firm around her waist as she clung onto his shoulders for dear life. Emi felt like her blood was boiling, heat radiating to places she had never been more aware of until that moment. She let out a soft sound of approval, which made Zuko shudder lightly and kiss her all the more insistently.

“A-hem!”

Emi and Zuko broke away to see Sokka standing nearby, his arms crossed and his expression livid. Emi blushed furiously, quickly disengaging herself from Zuko’s arms. He let her go. Reluctantly.

“Alright here’s the deal,” Sokka said, stepping toward Emi. “I’m going to let you go back to your bedroll and go to sleep without making a big deal out of this, as long as you keep quiet about where we are going. Deal?”

Not able to trust her voice, Emi merely nodded and meekly scampered away, her face still red. Sokka spared a withering look at Zuko before he stalked back toward the war balloon. Zuko looked back to where Emi was settling down for the night before following Sokka, a small grin plastered on his face.

- - -

They had been flying for a few hours in a stony silence. Zuko mentally rolled his eyes as he added more fire to the balloon’s fuel tank. Sokka had refused to look at or even speak to him since they had boarded the balloon and set off to the Boiling Rock, and although at first he hardly cared or noticed, Zuko was beginning to get irritated by the treatment.

“Oh, just spit it out already!” he snapped in the silence. “You know you want to.”

“What is the matter with you?!” Sokka retorted, finally fixing Zuko with a hard glare. “How can you justify kissing her like that? After everything you’ve done!”

“She kissed me back!”

“Of course she did! She doesn’t know any better!” Sokka ran a hand over his face in exasperation.
“Look, I promised her I’d protect her from anything that would hurt her, and that includes you!”

“I won’t do that to Emi ever again!” Zuko snapped. “I can’t.”

“Right now, that’s not good enough, Zuko.” Sokka sighed. “I saw how she was after Ba Sing Se. We all helped her get over what had happened. Now that you’re back, I don’t think she’s thinking clearly. You need to back off and give her space. You need to prove that you’re a change man.”

Zuko scowled, shoving more fire into the furnace. “Believe me, Sokka. I’m doing just that.”

---

The next morning, Emi woke up with a start. Her dreams had been filled with blazing, golden eyes and heated, intimate touches. She was mildly surprised to find that she hadn’t burst into flames during the night. She rubbed her eyes, forcing the red blush away as she sat up and yawned. The others were stirring, preparing for their day by getting breakfast together for themselves and their pets. Yuuka promptly scurried off, jumping on Momo as he continued to slumber.

“Hey, where’s Sokka and Zuko?” Katara asked, looking around as Aang attempted to get up, but he seemed very reluctant to do so. Emi blinked, remembering the paper Zuko had given her. She stood up and unrolled it, walking over to the group.

“They said something about going hunting,” Emi said, grateful that her voice was steady. “They gave me this for Aang.”

Katara took the paper, reading the contents aloud. “‘Gone to get meat. Be back in a few days - Sokka and Zuko. Aang, practice your Firebending while I’m gone. Do twenty sets of fire fists and ten hot squats every time you hear a badger frog croak - Zuko.’”

Aang had gone back to his bedroll, still tired and intent on getting more sleep. However, in the distance they heard the croaking of the badger frog, and the young Avatar grumbled under his breath.

“No one else has homework,” he lamented, standing back up to do his assigned work.

“Well, it’s about time someone went to get some decent food,” Toph remarked, crossing her arms. “I’m sick of eating soup and rice.”

“There’s plenty of plants around here,” Emi said thoughtfully, looking around. “I’m sure some of these would be edible.”

“Blech!” Toph scoffed, making a face. Then she became mischievous. “You must be pretty bummed out though, huh, Tenderfoot?”
“About what?” Emi asked, raising an eyebrow.

“It’ll be a few days before you can _spar_ again,” she snickered.

Emi flushed, making Toph laugh harder while Katara shook her head in exasperation.

“It’s okay Emi,” Aang piped up, pausing in his hot squats. “We can still practice Airbending. When I’m done with my homework anyway…” He heaved a sigh and went back to work. Apparently he had not heard what had happened the other day.

“Emi, I’m going to go wash some of our blankets. Why don’t you come along and help out?” Katara suggested, picking up the scattered bedding. Emi hesitated for a moment before following suit. She knew exactly why Katara wanted her help and she was in no mood for another lecture. She only prayed that Sokka would keep his mouth shut about what had happened between her and Zuko last night. Katara would have a conniption if she knew.

They bundled the blankets together and set off for another part of the temple where a steady stream of water flowed from a river above through the stone walls, before falling over the edge of the platform in a waterfall. Both girls knelt before the stream, dunking the blankets into the chilly water and scrubbing away the accumulated debris and dirt.

“You’ve really come a long way, Emi,” Katara remarked as they worked. “You’re a lot more confident and independent than when we first met.”

“Thanks,” Emi said shortly, knowing that the real reason for her friend to bring this up was coming.

“I know you’ve dealt with a lot in the past, and I just don’t want to see you sliding back and ruining all the progress you’ve made.”

“Katara,” Emi sighed, pausing in her work. “I understand your concern. And really, on a certain level, I appreciate it. I know you and Sokka and all of our other friends care about me, and I care about you guys.”

Katara frowned. “…But?”

Emi grimaced at the accusatory note in her voice. “I…I admit I’m confused by what I feel for Zuko. There’s still a part of me that loves him, despite everything that he has done.”

“But how can you possibly still care about him?!” Katara demanded. “How can you so easily forget how he hurt you?”
“Don’t think for a second that I’ve forgotten what he did to me!” Emi snapped. “I know exactly what he did and believe me, I couldn’t stop thinking about it for weeks after Ba Sing Se, even though I tried! The only thing that helped me was you guys! And I really, really am grateful for it.” She heaved a sigh, sitting back on her heels. “Love isn’t rational. I can’t turn it on or off at will.”

Katara sighed as well, looking down at the half washed blankets. “I know it’s not rational. I’m sorry for being so hard on you, Emi. It just makes me crazy to see you get so close to him after everything he’s done! I don’t understand how any of our friends can trust him so easily.”

“He’s training Aang,” Emi replied with a shrug. “I guess that’s good enough for them.”

“Well. It’s not good enough for me,” Katara muttered, going back to washing the blankets with renewed vigor. “I can’t trust him.”

Emi watched her friend for a moment before laying a hand on her shoulder. Katara paused and looked up, her blue eyes hard. “I don’t expect you to, Katara,” she assured her. “But…if you could, maybe, try to be a little lenient on me? I don’t have your resolve when it comes to Zuko…” She blushed, thinking back to their kiss the night before.

Katara’s eyes softened and she smiled a little. “I’ll try,” she promised. They continued washing the blankets in companionable silence, Emi drying them off quickly with her Airbending. Soon enough, they trooped back into the campsite with the freshly washed cloths.

As they replaced the blankets to their respective owners, Emi looked over and saw Aang sprawled along the ground, fast asleep.

“Aang!” Katara scolded, making the Avatar jump up guiltily.

“What-?! I wasn’t sleeping! I swear!” he insisted.

Emi chuckled while Katara rolled her eyes. “Aang, just because your Firebending teacher isn’t around, doesn’t mean you should slack off. You need to learn this stuff!”

Aang heaved a sigh, his shoulders slumping. “I know, I know,” he grumbled.

“Tell you what, Aang,” Emi remarked, turning toward him. “After you finish up your exercises, we can go for a flight around the temple.”

“Yeah, that sounds great!” Aang exclaimed, his mood dramatically lifted.
“Well, about when the next badger frog croaks?” Katara asked, raising her eyebrows.

“Don’t worry, Katara, I’ll still do the homework. It’ll be nice to have some free time too, though,” Aang assured her, going back to his work with renewed determination.

---

“I didn’t do anything wrong!” Zuko spat at the guards as they shoved him into a new cell. They merely sneered and turned away as another voice came from the darkened corner of the room.

“Come on, Zuko. We all know that’s a lie.”

He turned around in shock as Mai stepped forward, her grey eyes bitter and angry.

“Mai…” Zuko felt his heart plummet to his feet, dread filling every fiber of his being. He sighed and sat in the only chair in the room, hanging his head. “How did you know I was here?”

“Because I know you so well.”

“But, how-”

“The warden’s my uncle, you idiot,” Mai snapped. Zuko grimaced and looked away as she held out his goodbye note. “The truth is, I guess I don’t know you. All I get is a letter? You could have at least looked me in the eye when you ripped out my heart!”

“I didn’t mean-”

“You didn’t mean to?!?” Mai scoffed, turning the letter around to gaze hatefully at the writing. “Dear Mai. I’m sorry that you have to find out this way, but I’m leaving.”

“Stop!” Zuko interjected, unable to hear anymore. “This isn’t about you. This is about the Fire Nation.”

“Thanks, Zuko. That makes me feel all better,” Mai retorted, tossing the letter at his head.

“Mai, I never wanted to hurt you,” Zuko said, standing up to face her, something he knew he should have done in the first place. “But I have to do this to save my country.”

“Save it? You’re betraying your country!” Mai scoffed incredulously.

“That’s not how I see it,” he said firmly.
She scowled and looked away, glowering at the far wall. “You’re also doing it for her, aren’t you?”

“Who?” Zuko asked, but he had a bad feeling he knew exactly who she was talking about.

Mai shot her eyes back to his, glaring heatedly. “Don’t play stupid with me. Azula told me all about that Airbender girl you had been hanging around with while you were playing fugitive. Tell me something, Zuko.” She stepped up to him, forcing him to hold her gaze. “Do you love her?”

“Mai…” Zuko grit his jaw. “I never wanted to hurt you.”

“But you did,” Mai hissed. “Because all that time, you were in love with someone else. So what was I to you? A distraction? A convenience? Something to waste time with until you could be with her?”

“I wanted to be with you!” Zuko snapped. “I tried! And I know I shouldn’t have made you feel used-”

“No, Zuko, you shouldn’t have!” Mai yelled, her eyes glistening. “You might have just been using me, but that didn’t stop me from falling in love with you! So what am I supposed to do now, now that you’re back with your precious Airbender? What happens to me now?!”

Zuko worked his throat, trying to say something, anything to appease Mai. He did care for her, but he knew that wasn’t enough to make up for how he had used her to get over Emi. And even that hadn’t worked; he had still wanted her, and all his efforts now were split between helping Aang become strong enough to face his father and trying to get Emi to forgive him.

Before he could say anything, a guard came running to the opening of the cell door in a huff. “Ma’am, there’s a riot going on! I’m here to protect you.”

“I don’t need any protection,” she snapped.

“I’m sorry, but I’m under direct orders from your uncle to make sure nothing happens,” the guard continued, making his way into the cell.

Zuko narrowed his eyes in swift calculation and shot a flash of fire toward the guard, making him jump out of the way in shock. His body went to shield Mai’s, who promptly shoved the man aside and ran after Zuko. He managed to get the door closed and locked it before she could catch up to him. For a moment, they both stared at one another, her eyes swimming with angry tears and his filled with regret. He heaved a sigh and took off down the pathway. It wouldn’t have mattered if he had been able to come up with an answer for Mai. The damage was done, and nothing he could say would make that any better.
Night had fallen, and the group was getting ready to sleep. Emi yawned widely, Yuuka doing the same on her shoulder. Before they could get comfortable, though, a whirring sound started drifting through the air. They all snapped their heads up, exchanging confused looks. It didn’t take long for the source of the noise to appear; one of the giant air ships from the Fire Nation had come to call.

Emi and her friends steeled themselves, readying for a fight. But before they had the chance to strike, the hatch opened and revealed Zuko and Sokka strolling out of the ship with smiles on their faces.

“What are you doing in this thing?” Katara demanded in shock. “What happened to the war balloon?”

“It kinda got destroyed,” Zuko replied with a shrug.

“Sounds like a crazy fishing trip,” Aang remarked.

“Did you at least get some good meat?” Toph asked eagerly.

“I did; the best meat of all. The meat of friendship and fatherhood,” Sokka said with a grin.

“Um…what are you talking about?” Emi asked, her eyebrows raised.

The answer appeared moments later. A girl came out of the ship, along with Hakoda and another burly man who introduced himself as Chit-Sang. And they were all wearing ragged clothes similar to Zuko.

“Dad!” Katara ran up to her father, tears in her eyes as she hugged him fiercely.

“Hi, Katara,” Hakoda greeted, holding his daughter.

“How are you here? What is going on?” She turned to Sokka and Zuko, smiling. “Where did you go?”

“We kinda went to a Fire Nation prison,” Sokka explained. He was then swiftly pulled in by Katara to share their hug with their father.

“Seriously, you guys didn’t find any meat?” Toph asked.

Emi chuckled. “I guess you’ll have to make do until a proper hunting trip can be arranged,” she
remarked with a shrug. Toph harrumphed and crossed her arms, disappointed.
Full Circle

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Full Circle

The group was sleeping peacefully. Emi woke slowly, enjoying the birdsong as the morning sun warmed her pleasantly. The events of last night had drained them all, and they agreed that sleep was the best thing for them to do. Emi sighed contentedly, sitting up and stretching as Yuuka yawned blearily. Not too far away, Aang was doing the same.

They both smiled in greeting to one another and looked out over to the old fountain where a flock of birds were bathing. As they watched, suddenly, they all flew away. Emi felt a shiver of apprehension run down her spine at the same time the birds took off, eerily silent.

Then, a bomb came catapulting over the edge of the platform, heading straight for their group. Aang jumped into action, swinging his staff and sending the bomb flying away with a burst of air where it hit the side of the cliff and exploded.

Another bomb was not far behind the first. As the others sat up in alarm, Emi grabbed her staff and together, she and Aang ran to the edge of the platform to see several Fire Nation airships creeping up toward the temple, firing their bombs without prejudice. They leapt backwards, twirling their staffs in sync to slam the metal slats of their platform closed which, hopefully, would provide them with temporary reprieve. At least until they could make their escape.

The group gathered together, watching warily as each bomb shook the foundation of their shelter. Suddenly, Emi was pulled to the side as the ceiling began to crumble. She only had a moment to look around when the shower of rocks fell down where she and Katara had been standing. Not too far away, she saw Zuko had managed to push Katara out of the way of the falling rocks as well. She snarled something under her breath and pushed away from Zuko, going back over to the others where Toph and Haru had made a large tunnel in the rock of the temple.

“Come on, we can get out through here!” Toph yelled to the group.

They all ran toward the tunnel while Emi and Aang tried to coax Appa into the enclosed space. Despite the imminent danger, the bison refused to budge. Suddenly, Emi realized that Zuko had not joined the others as they made their way toward the escape route.

“What are you doing?!” she demanded.

“Go ahead, I’ll hold them off!” he called back, not tearing his gaze from the airships floating by. “I think this is a family visit.” With that he took off.
“Zuko! It’s too dangerous!” Emi yelled, running after him. She was quickly pulled back by Aang and Sokka, who held tight onto her arms.

“Come on, we’ve got to get out of here!” Sokka insisted while Katara took Appa’s reins. Emi looked back to where Zuko had disappeared over the crumbling metal wall, her resolve hardening. She shook off their hands and ran forward again until she nearly face planted into the ground thanks to the mound of rock that had enclosed her feet.

“Damn it Toph, let me go!” Emi snarled at the Earthbender.

“What, so you can get blown up by the Fire Nation?!” the girl scoffed. “I don’t think so!”

Emi grit her teeth, almost falling over again as the temple shook with the amount of bombs being thrown at them. She looked over and saw a flash of blue fire, Zuko’s distant form dodging it wildly. Emi heaved a breath and poured every ounce of energy she had into her bending. Two violent gusts of wind poured from her palms, effectively breaking her free of her entrapment. Emi opened her glider in midair, soaring through the crumbling temple and ignoring her friends’ shouts.

Her eyes were fixed on Zuko as he leapt from a falling pillar, aiming to grab onto the nearest airship. He lost his grip, however, and was soon plummeting down into the hazy mists. Emi angled her glider, flying swiftly toward his falling figure.

“Grab on!” she yelled out to him, spiraling around. With a jet of fire, Zuko managed to propel himself over and grabbed hold of Emi’s staff as she rocketing back up, neatly dodging the oncoming bombs.

“Are you crazy?!” Zuko demanded.

“No more than you are, apparently!” she shot back, flying over the airship Azula was on. “Now for spirits’ sake, be careful!”

Zuko didn’t deign to reply. He dropped down from her glider, landing smoothly on top of the airship to face his sister.

Emi heard the sound of rock crumbling. She looked over to the temple platform and saw Appa flying out with a shield of rock against his face that gradually crumbled away. She could see the hard stares of her friends, demanding she come back to the safety of their bison. But Emi grit her teeth and flew around Azula’s airship, keeping an eye on Zuko. Their battle was fierce. Zuko and Azula were both shooting their flames with speed and precision, leaping around the precarious airship with the intent of knocking the other overboard.

But she couldn’t stay in the air and simply watch forever. The Fire Nation soldiers began aiming
their fireballs at her as well as her friends on Appa. Emi swirled around the flying flames, occasionally kicking out her feet to send a wave of air careening toward the soldiers and knocking them off balance.

A sudden explosion recaptured Emi’s attention. She looked back to Azula’s ship just in time to see both siblings tumbling back along the sides of the massive vehicle, falling into thin air. Emi angled her glider, speeding toward Zuko. He spotted her coming and kicked out with another jolt of fire, grabbing on to her staff. Appa flew close by and they both landed in the saddle, panting from their respective efforts.

They all looked back at the plummeting figure of Azula. “She’s…not going to make it,” Zuko muttered, his tone indescribable. However, with a burst of blue fire, Azula shot herself toward the edge of the cliff, using her hair pins to rip onto the rock as she steadied herself, glaring at their retreating figures.

“Oh course she did,” he sighed, looking away.

Emi let out a breath, sinking back against the saddle to rest. Her quiet moment didn’t last long, however.

“What the hell is the matter with you?!?” Zuko demanded, glaring over at her.

“Funny way to talk to someone who just saved your life. Twice!” Emi snapped back.

“Zuko is right, Emi,” Sokka jumped in. “You can’t be so careless. You could have gotten killed!”

“I didn’t take any risks that no one else in this group would take,” Emi retorted. “Just because I’m one of the last Airbenders, doesn’t mean I’m so damn fragile!”

“This has nothing to do with that!” Sokka shot back. “You need to be more careful in the future. What you did was reckless and could have gone wrong in a thousand ways!”

“Enough!” Aang interjected firmly from the front before Emi could make any other arguments. “What’s done is done. Let’s just find somewhere to make camp. Away from those airships.”

Sokka heaved a sigh, sparing one last glare at Emi before he looked away. She wrinkled her nose, looking sidelong at Zuko but his stony gaze was elsewhere. Emi leaned back against the saddle as she stroked Yuuka in her lap, forcing her mind away from their disagreement and looking forward to where they would settle for the night.

---

They eventually made camp on an isolated plateau, the scent of the sea stirring around them. It had
been awhile since they had put up tents, and Emi found she had sort of missed the atmosphere of just sitting around the campfire in the middle of nowhere, laughing with her friends. Well, now there was the inclusion of Zuko and Suki, Sokka’s girlfriend.

“Wow, camping,” Aang remarked as they ate their dinner. “It really feels like old times, doesn’t it?”

“If you really want it to feel like old times, I could chase you around awhile and try to capture you,” Zuko quipped with a small grin. Emi couldn’t help but chuckle with the others. Except for one, at least.

“Ha ha,” Katara muttered darkly.

“To Zuko!” Sokka exclaimed, holding up his cup. “Who knew after all those times he tried to snuff us out, today he’d be our hero!”

“Hear hear!” the others chimed in.

“I’m touched,” Zuko said. “I don’t deserve this.”

“Yeah. No kidding,” Katara snapped, standing up and stalking away from the fire.

“What’s with her?” Sokka remarked after her abrupt disappearance.

Zuko stood up as well, heaving a sigh. “I wish I knew,” he muttered, doggedly going to where Katara had disappeared to.

“What’s with him?” Sokka asked the remaining group.

Emi rolled her eyes. “Honestly, Sokka, sometimes you are denser than a rock,” she remarked, draining her cup. “Katara still hasn’t forgiven Zuko for what he’s done.”

“Ah,” Sokka mused, pondering the flames. His eyes snapped back to Emi’s after a moment. “So, wait, does this mean you’ve forgiven him, too?” he demanded.

“Um…” Emi flushed. “Well, I-”

“Of course she has,” Toph chimed in. “After all, she can’t stay away from those sparring sessions.”
“Toph!” Emi yelled, blushing furiously.

“Sparring sessions?” Aang asked, confused. “I thought you were training with Sokka, Emi.”

“I think Toph is talking about something else,” Suki explained with a small smile.

“What else would she be talking about?”

“Okay!” Emi said loudly, jumping to her feet. “Well this has been an eventful day hasn’t it I’m ready for a nice long sleep goodnight!” She hurried away from the campfire, Toph’s laughter following her all the way to her tent.

- - -

Despite her best efforts, Emi found it hard to fall asleep that night. She kept tossing and turning, sighing at intervals. It got to the point where Yuuka cast her withering look before scurrying out of the tent, presumably to make her bed with Appa and Momo.

“Ah, screw it,” Emi muttered, flinging back her covers in defeat. She edged over to the opening of her tent, peering out to make sure no one else was around. All was quiet, and with relief Emi fully emerged from her shelter, stretching her limbs as she walked out of their camp.

Emi breathed in the salty air, looking up at the moon fondly. She perched herself on a rock and leaned back, kicking her legs idly as she allowed her mind and body to simply relax. She missed moments like these, when she could just sit in silence and ponder the terrain around her. Not that she didn’t enjoy the company of her friends any less, but there were times (especially lately) when she just needed to step back and take a breather.

She was almost dozing off when she heard footsteps behind her.

“Emi?”

She straightened up, looking around to see Zuko a few paces away. “Good evening,” she greeted, turning her attention back to the ocean.

“It’s late. You should be getting some sleep,” he remarked, stepping a little closer.

“I can’t sleep,” Emi shrugged, looking sidelong at him. “So, I figured I might as well do something enjoyable in the meantime.”

Zuko chuckled lightly and shook his head. “Enjoyable. Right.”
“Well, what are you doing lurking around in the middle of the night, then?” Emi asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I was talking to Sokka.”

“About what?”

“Do you ever run out of questions to ask?” Zuko shot back.

“Of course not,” Emi smirked. “Curiosity is bottomless.”

Zuko heaved a sigh. “I was asking him about his and Katara’s mother. About what happened to her.”

Emi frowned. “Why would you want to know that?”

“I think Katara is taking out her anger at what happened to her mother and adding it to the anger she has with me,” Zuko replied bitterly.

“Makes sense, I suppose.”

“I know who killed her.”

Emi snapped her head around, staring at Zuko in shock. “How?” she demanded.

“I’m the son of the Fire Lord. I know which soldiers are stationed where. The Southern Raiders would have been responsible for the attacks on the Southern Water Tribe,” Zuko said tonelessly.

“Oh.” Emi paused for a moment before looking back up at Zuko. “So, what are you going to do about that?”

“I’m going to offer Katara the chance to get her closure,” Zuko replied, looking back at Emi evenly.

“Is that really wise?” she asked. “It happened so long ago. What if something goes wrong? What if the man responsible is already dead? What if Katara ends up getting her revenge but hates herself for it afterward?”

“She needs the chance. I can give that to her.”
“Why do you care what she thinks about you, anyway?” Emi demanded, crossing her arms. She knew it was childish, but somehow Zuko’s need to make Katara like him was irking her in an unpleasant way.

“I have to make up for what I’ve done. Everyone else has forgiven me except for her. And you,” Zuko explained, his gaze hard.

“Who says I haven’t forgiven you?” The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them.

Zuko raised his eyebrow. “Have you?”

Emi opened her mouth before closing it again. Had she truly forgiven Zuko?

“Emi.” She looked around to see him step closer, mere inches away. He raised his hand, lightly caressing her cheek. “When I get back, after I’ve helped Katara, I need to talk to you. Alone.”

She swallowed nervously, the idea both exciting and terrifying. “Okay…why?”

Zuko merely smiled and kissed her forehead. “It’s about time we decided exactly where we stand together,” he said. After a moment he let her face go and turned, walking back to the camp.

Emi waited a few minutes before sliding off the rock to head back to her own tent. Sleep eventually found her.

- - -

The next morning Emi was roused by loud voices. She sat up, rubbing her eyes blearily before crawling out of her tent. Once outside, she saw Katara and Zuko standing near Appa while Katara was arguing with Sokka and Aang. Emi stepped closer cautiously, avoiding the golden gaze of the prince as she did so.

“Wait, stop. I do understand!” Aang was saying to Katara. “You’re feeling unbelievable pain and rage. How do you think I felt about the Sandbenders when they stole Appa? How do you think I felt about the Fire Nation when I found out what happened to my people?”

“She needs this Aang,” Zuko interjected. “This is about getting closure and justice.”

“I don’t think so. I think it’s about getting revenge,” Aang said, his face somber.

“Fine! Maybe it is. Maybe that’s what I need!” Katara snapped angrily. “Maybe that’s what he deserves.”
“Katara…you sound like Jet,” Aang remarked sadly.

“It’s not the same!” Katara insisted. “Jet attacked the innocent! This man; he’s a monster.”

“Katara, she was my mother, too,” Sokka said, stepping forward. “But, I think Aang might be right.”

“Then you didn’t love her the way I did!”

Sokka gaped at his sister, his hurt clear on his face. “Katara!”

Aang sighed. “The monks used to say that revenge was like a two-headed rat viper. While you watched your enemy go down, you were being poisoned yourself.”

“That’s cute. But this isn’t Air Temple preschool,” Zuko remarked sarcastically. “It’s the real world.”

“Now that I know he’s out there, now that I know we can find him, I feel like I have no choice,” Katara added.

“Katara, you do have a choice,” Aang pleaded with his friend. “Forgiveness.”

“That’s the same as doing nothing!” Zuko snapped.

“No, it’s not.” Emi stepped forward, frowning at him. “Haruka always told me it’s easy to do nothing, and it’s hard to forgive. But by truly forgiving someone, everything else becomes easier.”

“It’s not just hard. It’s impossible,” Katara hissed, turning to stalk away from them. Zuko and Emi stared at one another for a moment before he, too, walked away.

The rest of the day was spent in a stony silence, with hardly anyone speaking to one another. By the time night fell, though, that changed. Because it turned out Katara and Zuko were just going to take Appa and fly off regardless of what they had tried to say to them.

Aang and Sokka marched over to Katara and Zuko, who were clad in dark attire and packing up their supplies onto Appa’s saddle. Emi followed close behind, watching the proceedings with rapt attention.

“So you were just going to take Appa anyway?” Aang asked incredulously.
“Yes,” Katara replied shortly.

“It’s okay. Because I forgive you,” Aang remarked kindly. “...That give you any ideas?”

“Don’t try to stop us,” Katara warned, un-amused.

“I wasn’t planning to. This is a journey you need to take. You need to face this man. But when you do, please, don’t choose revenge. Let your anger out; and then let it go. Forgive him.”

Zuko rolled his eyes as Katara hopped onto Appa. “Okay. We’ll be sure to do that guru goody-goody.”

Emi frowned and shot a blast of air toward him, almost knocking him off of the bison. “Don’t be a smartass, Zuko. Just...be careful. Both of you.”

Zuko glared down at her for a moment before his eyes softened and he gave a nod of his head. Katara flicked the reins, urging Appa into the sky. Before long, they were out of sight.

“You know, you’re pretty wise for a kid,” Sokka remarked to Aang.

“Thanks, Sokka.”

“Usually it’s annoying but right now, I’m just impressed,” he continued.

“I appreciate that,” Aang said with a slightly exasperated expression.

“So, can I borrow Momo for a week?”


Sokka merely shrugged, making Emi roll her eyes and walk back to their camp; but not before sending a blast of air towards Sokka that knocked him flat on his butt.

---

A couple of days had passed by the time Appa came back. Zuko was the only one present, explaining that Katara had needed a little space and that she was waiting for the rest of them on Ember Island. They all packed up and loaded the sky bison, flying off once again toward the island. While they flew, Zuko filled them in on what had happened between Katara and the man who killed her mother. Emi was torn between feeling relieved that Katara had not gone through with her revenge, and worried that she might be thinking of her actions as a weakness. She could
only hope that her friend would be okay.

Once they landed on Ember Island, Aang immediately jumped down from Appa and ran over to where Katara was sitting on the dock, Zuko following him a short distance behind.

As they talked, Emi took a look around at the surrounding scenery; there was a large house up the hill beyond the rocks along the beach; Zuko’s family’s summer home, once upon a time. She gazed at the careworn façade, wondering what he was like as a boy. If his family had seemed happier through the eyes of a child. For his sake, she sincerely hoped so.

She was shaken from her thoughts by a hand against the small of her back. Emi looked around to see Zuko standing next to her, a light smile on his face.

“So…it went well?” Emi asked.

“As well as can be expected,” Zuko replied, his eyes locked with hers. “Now, I think it’s time we have our own talk.”

“Okay.” She allowed herself to be steered toward the house, her imagination running wild with all the reasons Zuko would need to speak to her alone. Before they had made it too far, though, Sokka jumped in their way, his expression stern.

“And just where do you two think you’re going?” he demanded, crossing his arms.

“We’re just going to have a private conversation, Sokka,” Emi said in annoyance.

“Oh, suuuure you are,” Sokka rolled his eyes. “Please, I wasn’t born yesterday. You two are not going anywhere alone!”

“Don’t be such a hypocrite, Sokka,” Zuko remarked with a light smirk. “You’ve spent plenty of alone time with Suki, apparently.”

“Wait, what?” Emi asked, looking around to see Suki ducking her head to hide her blush. Sokka was stammering incomprehensibly, making it easy for Zuko to maneuver around him and continue leading Emi up to the beach house.

“What were you talking about back there?” Emi insisted as Zuko ushered her inside. She took a moment to admire the interior, dusty though it was.

“When I went to talk to Sokka the other night, he was waiting for Suki with a rose in his mouth,” Zuko said, grimacing at the memory.
Emi blinked, chuckling at the image of that. “Wow, he is a hypocrite,” she remarked.

Zuko smiled. “Yeah, he is.” He took her hand and led her through the house, going upstairs to a room with a balcony view of the ocean. They both sat in chairs outside, Emi allowing the salty air to help calm her nerves.

“So…what do we need to talk about?” Emi asked hesitantly.

“I need to tell you something,” Zuko said with a sigh. “About what I was doing when I was back in the Fire Nation capital.”

“Okay,” Emi said, waiting.

“I had a girlfriend. Her name is Mai.”

“Okay,” she said again, feeling her throat tighten a little. *Don’t be an idiot, you knew he wasn’t thinking about you at the time!* she chided herself fiercely. That didn’t stop the kernel of hurt that settled uncomfortably in her chest, though.

“I was just using her,” Zuko continued, his golden eyes catching and holding her misting green ones. “To forget about you. But I couldn’t. I couldn’t stop thinking about you, about wanting to be with you again. And I knew I had made the worst mistake possible, hurting you the way I did.”

Despite her jealousy, Emi felt a twinge of sympathy for this Mai girl. She wouldn’t be surprised if she had also fallen in love with Zuko. It would seem he was only capable of hurting people.

Zuko took her hands, shaking her out of her dark thoughts. “Emi, please, I am begging you. What can I do to make it up to you? I will spend every day of the rest of my life apologizing if I have to.”

Emi’s lips twitched in a sardonic smile. “That’s not necessary, Zuko,” she said, frowning in thought. “Does she know? About me?”

“Yes,” Zuko said, glaring at the floor. “Azula told her all about you, about how we had traveled together when I was a fugitive.”

“Oh. What did she have to say about you leaving her?”

“Why do care what she had to say?”

“Did she love you?”
Zuko heaved a sigh, running his hands over his face. “Yes. She did.”

“And you left her,” Emi stated.

“For you!” Zuko snapped.

“Did you ever love her?” Emi continued, ignoring his outburst.

“No. I couldn’t tell her I loved her when it wasn’t true.”

“You’ve never said it to me, either,” she muttered, almost too low for him to hear.

“…Emi-”

“Zuko, I know what you’re doing for Aang and the rest of the world is genuine. I know you’re making up for your mistakes,” Emi interrupted. “Believe me, I get that. But I just still…I-I don’t know… I guess I’m just so confused about us right now-”

“Emi, I love you.”

Emi blinked in shock, almost sure she had misheard him. “…Y-you what?”

“I love you,” Zuko repeated, his gaze unwavering. “I’ve loved you for a long time but I wouldn’t let myself admit it. I thought I was doing the right thing by abandoning you and my uncle, and siding with my father and my sister. But nothing they do is right. They are not doing right by the world and I will always regret the hurt I put you through because of my idiocy. But I swear to you, I will never abandon you again.”

“You…love me?” Emi asked dazedly, relishing the taste of the words.

Zuko let out a brief chuckle. “Yes, Emi. I do. I know you don’t feel the same about me anymore, but that won’t change how I feel about you. And I won’t stop trying to earn your forg-”

Emi cut off Zuko’s words by crashing her lips against his to silence him. She kissed him for a moment before drawing back a little. “Just…stop talking for a minute, Zuko,” she muttered, pressing her lips back against his. She could feel his smile as he moved his mouth along hers, grasping her by the waist and pulling her closer. Emi ended up straddling his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck as his tongue teased the tip of hers. Their breathing grew more haggard, Zuko gripping onto her hips with a possessive energy. Emi let out a soft sigh, digging her teeth lightly into his bottom lip and making him shiver in response. Zuko tugged up her shirt a little, the
feel of his palm against her bare back igniting a flame within her belly.

“Hey lovebirds! Dinner is ready if you can spare a moment of your precious time!” Toph’s voice came floating up toward them from downstairs.

They broke away from their heated kiss, both of them breathing heavier than was appropriate for a simple talk. After a few moments of awkward yet intense staring, Emi managed to gather her wits about her enough to scoot off of Zuko’s lap, adjusting her shirt back in place with a heavy blush. As she was fixing her hair, she felt Zuko’s arms wrap around her waist, his chin tucked into the spot between her neck and her shoulder.

“So…does this mean you do forgive me?” he asked softly, his breath tickling her ear.

Emi smiled and turned around, cupping his face in her hands. “Well, yeah. I kinda have to forgive the man I love. Just…don’t make me regret it, okay?”

Zuko smiled, leaning in to kiss her softly. “I promise.”

Chapter End Notes

I don't care if that ending scene doesn't exist in the real world, if I want sappy cheese in my stories then damn it, I'm having me some sappy cheese.
The next day, Emi woke up feeling very much at peace. It was almost like a weight had been lifted that she hadn’t even known she had been carrying around. Once she had gotten dressed, she and Yuuka ventured downstairs to eat breakfast with their friends. It had not escaped anyone’s notice at dinner the previous night that she and Zuko had come to an understanding. Toph kept chuckling to herself while Sokka kept shooting them both pointed looks throughout the meal. The other three merely took it in stride. Emi was eternally grateful that Katara had finally found it in herself to forgive Zuko and accept him as their friend. Spirits only knew how she would have taken their relationship if she hadn’t done so.

After breakfast, Sokka and Suki went into town to do a bit of exploring and to get Suki some Fire Nation clothes so that she could blend in. The others had changed into their own gear, but since Emi had had her “borrowed” clothes for awhile now she was all set. She did, however, leave her hair uncovered; her sandy locks had gotten quite long during her travels and it was more of a hassle than anything else to keep wrapping it up in a scarf. She preferred to have Katara help braid it for her.

While Aang and Zuko went into the courtyard to begin their training, Emi, Katara, and Toph decided to sit on the sidelines and watch. Emi had to admit, now that Zuko had been given the gift of the true meaning of Firebending, his movements were almost hypnotizing to watch. She made sure to check herself and not get too lost in staring at him, though. Toph’s near-silent snickering every few minutes was enough to make her grind her teeth.

“Doesn’t it seem kinda weird that we’re hiding from the Fire Lord in his own house?” Katara remarked as Aang and Zuko finished with their session.

“I told you,” Zuko sighed, wiping off the sweat from the back of his neck with a cloth. “My father hasn’t come here since our family was actually happy. And that was a long time ago. It’s the last place anyone would think to look for us.”

“And it’s so conveniently located,” Emi added, thinking back to the map they had looked over the night before.

Just then Sokka and Suki came into the courtyard, Suki in full Fire Nation disguise. “You guys are not going to believe this!” Sokka exclaimed, holding a large rolled up bit of paper in one hand. “There’s a play about us.”

“We were just in town and we found this poster,” Suki added as Sokka unveiled the poster in question. Emi cocked her head to the side as she looked at the artistic rendering of Sokka, Aang, and Katara. *Hmm, not bad,* she remarked to herself.
“What?” Katara asked, baffled as she stood up to take a closer look, Emi and Toph following behind her. “How is that possible?”

“Listen to this: The Boy in the Iceberg is a new production from acclaimed playwright Pu-on Tim, who scoured the globe gathering information on the Avatar. From the icy South Pole to the heart of Ba Sing Se, his sources include singing nomads, pirates, prisoners of war, and a surprisingly knowledgeable merchant of cabbage,” Sokka read.

“Brought to you by the critically acclaimed Ember Island Players,” Suki finished as Sokka rolled the poster back up.

“Ugh!” Zuko groaned. “My mother used to take us to them. They butchered Love Amongst the Dragons every year.”

“Sokka, do you really think it’s a good idea to attend a play about ourselves?” Katara asked her brother.

“Come on, a day at the theater? This is the kind of wacky time wasting nonsense I’ve been missing!” he said excitedly.

“Well…it couldn’t hurt,” Emi mused. “I mean, as long as we’re careful we should be fine.”

“Yeah, it could be fun!” Aang chimed in.

So it was decided. Later that night the group headed over to the theater. The building was already packed, but they managed to get seats in a top box. Zuko and Emi followed Katara and Toph as they went to sit in the first row while Sokka and Suki took seats in the back. As they settled down, Aang looked awkwardly from where Zuko sat to where Katara sat.

“Hey…uh, I-I wanted to sit there,” he said, flushing a little.

“Just sit next to Emi, what’s the big deal?” Zuko retorted, removing the hood he had kept low over his face while they had been in the public eye.

“I was just- I wanted to- …Okay,” Aang relented, taking his seat. Emi grimaced at Zuko’s lack of tact, but she didn’t dare say anything lest she embarrass Aang in front of Katara. In any case, her mind was immediately distracted as Zuko took her hand in his own, and a small smile of contentment graced her face. She was even able to forget the annoying scarf she had had to bundle her hair in once again.

“Why are we sitting in the nosebleed section?” Toph asked. “My feet can’t see a thing from up
“Don’t worry, I’ll tell your feet what’s happening,” Katara assured her as the lights dimmed. The curtains on the stage were raised, and Emi grinned as the actors portraying Katara and Sokka came into view, looking as if they were on a boat in the South Pole. Sokka and Katara themselves seemed excited by this, smiling widely at one another.

However, as the actors began to speak and move around, Emi had to bite her lip to keep from laughing; it seemed the Ember Island Players had decided to interpret the Southern Water Tribe siblings in an…unflattering way. Sokka’s character, for instance, seemed only capable of making jokes about food and being hungry all the time.

“This is pathetic!” Sokka whispered angrily. “My jokes are way funnier than this!”

Toph laughed along with the crowd. “I think he’s got you pegged!”

Katara’s character then burst into an epic speech about hope, weeping openly as she did so.

“Well, that’s just silly,” Katara grumbled. “I don’t sound like that!”

“Oh man, this writer’s a genius!” Toph remarked happily.

Then, Aang’s character came into the picture and Emi couldn’t help but let out a burst of laughter, much to Aang’s chagrin.

“Wait, is that a woman playing me?!” he asked incredulously.

“Yeah, I think it is,” Emi managed to say in between chuckles.

“I don’t do that!” Aang insisted as his likeness tittered away like a fairy. “That’s not what I’m like! And I’m not a woman!”

“Oh they nailed you, Twinkle Toes!” Toph laughed from the other side of the bench.

Just then, a Fire Nation ship prop came onto the stage with Zuko’s and Iroh’s actors upon it. Emi was caught between feeling amused and sad by their likenesses, though she couldn’t deny that Zuko had been a lot like his character when they had first met. But with Iroh, she felt that the writer had completely ignored the old man’s wisdom and kindness. I wonder where he is now, she thought idly to herself.

“They make me look totally stiff and humorless!” Zuko complained, crossing his arms.
“Actually, I think that actor is pretty spot on,” Katara replied with a smirk.

“How could you say that?!” he demanded.

“Let’s forget about the Avatar and get massages,” the actor portraying Iroh suggested on the stage.

“How could you say that?!” Zuko’s actor demanded.

Zuko ducked his head while Emi patted his arm reassuringly.

The play went on, following Katara, Sokka, and Aang as they ventured slowly toward the North Pole. Emi had only ever heard bits and pieces of their travels, and she couldn’t help but wonder if some of the events that were in the play had actually happened, or if the actors were just being dramatic.

Finally, they came to the part where Emi and Zuko would meet for the first time. Emi was both anxious and excited; having seen how her friends had been portrayed thus far, she wasn’t sure what to expect with her actor.

In the end, it seemed the playwright had decided to make her seem completely ditzy, always asking questions about the most random things, like what a ship was and if fire was actually hot.

Emi’s jaw hung open as she glared down at her likeness, the actor sporting such pale hair it could almost pass for white, and she was constantly giggling at the most inappropriate moments when laughter was not even necessary.

“This is insane!” she sputtered indignantly. “I’m not like that at all!”

Her friends were chuckling as her likeness bounced around on the stage. Katara fought to control herself, though. “Well, Emi, you are rather curious,” she said.

“Well, being curious and being a complete moron are two very different things!” Emi shot back, crossing her arms and legs tightly as she glared down at the stage.

As the play continued they all went through periods of chuckling and glaring indignantly at the stage, though admittedly the moments they laughed were becoming fewer. The writer seemed to only care about their supposed trademark attributes and magnified them by a hundred, making them seem like a bunch of phony posers.

At long last, an intermission was called and they were able to step outside the theater to stretch
their legs.

“So far, this intermission is the best part of the play,” Zuko scowled as he leaned against the stair rail.

“Tell me about it,” Emi muttered next to him.

“Apparently, the writer thinks I’m an idiot who tells bad jokes about meat all the time!” Sokka added as he sat down next to Suki with a fresh bag of jerky in one hand.

“Yeah, you tell bad jokes about plenty of other topics,” Suki remarked with a grin.

“I know!” Sokka exclaimed around a mouthful of jerky.

“At least the Sokka actor kinda looks like you,” Aang said gloomily a few steps down. “The lady playing the Avatar doesn’t resemble me at all!”

“I don’t know. You are more in touch with your feminine side than most guys,” Toph replied with a smirk. Aang growled at that.

“Relax Aang,” Katara mused from the top step. “They’re not accurate portrayals. It’s not like I’m a preachy crybaby who can’t resist giving overemotional speeches about hope all the time.” Everyone merely stared at her. “What?”

“Yeah, that’s not you at all,” Aang sighed wearily.

“Listen friends,” Toph piped up. “It’s obvious that the playwright did his research. I know it must hurt, but what you’re seeing up there on that stage is the truth.”

“Sure it is. And if I ever meet that jerk in person, I’ll give him another truth he can ‘portray’ in his stupid play,” Emi spat as the intermission was called to an end and people began to file back inside. Her friends merely exchanged amused and exasperated glances as they went to take their seats. Zuko shook his head and took her hand, leading her back inside.

The play resumed, and before long it came to the part where Katara, Sokka, and Aang would meet Toph for the first time. However, when the big moment came, it was nothing like what Emi had heard from her friends. Nor was the actor anything like the real Toph. They all burst out laughing while Toph angled her head, confused.

“Wait a minute. I sound like…a guy. A really **buff** guy!” Toph remarked.
“Well Toph, what you hear up there is the truth,” Katara said with a sly grin. “It hurts, doesn’t it?”

“Are you kidding me? I wouldn’t have cast it any other way!” Toph laughed. “At least it’s not a flying bald lady.”

Emi and Zuko looked over at Aang, who was glaring moodily at the stage. The scenes continued to roll by, and other than the moments when they would grumble under their breaths at the unflattering portrayals of themselves (expect for Toph, who grinned widely whenever she heard her actor speak up) the time seemed to drag on forever. Emi found herself dozing off slightly, bumping into Zuko’s shoulder until he sighed and lifted his arm to hold her closer. However, when a scene came up that had Jet under the influence of the Dai Li, Emi found herself frowning in confusion.

“Did Jet just…die?” Zuko asked, voicing her own thoughts.

“You know, it was really unclear,” Sokka remarked from behind them.

Then, not long after, there was a scene that made Emi sit up straighter. Or, at least try to if it hadn’t been for Zuko keeping her firmly at his side. Zuko’s actor and Katara’s actor were in the crystal catacombs of old Ba Sing Se, apparently confessing their love for one another. A small voice in the back of Emi’s mind piped up, insisting that it was nonsense and there had not been a single moment between Katara and Zuko where they would have been attracted to one another. Even so, she felt that old flare of jealousy raise its ugly head.

Beside her, Aang suddenly stood up and walked out of the theater, Sokka’s requests for snacks following him out the door. Emi looked back, vaguely wondering if she should go as well when Zuko leaned down next to her ear.

“Don’t tell me you believe any of that,” he murmured. Emi looked around to see his expression was stony.

She grimaced. “Well…no. I don’t.” When Zuko didn’t look appeased, Emi snuggled in closer and kissed him lightly, ignoring Sokka’s pointed coughing behind them. “I promise,” she added before turning back to watch the play, though she hardly felt like it anymore. Thankfully, another intermission was soon called and they all filed outside the theater once again.

“It seems like every time there’s a big battle, you guys barely make it out alive,” Suki remarked as they stood around. “I mean, you guys lose a lot.”

“You’re one to talk, Suki,” Sokka retorted. “Didn’t Azula take you captive? That’s right; she did!”

Suki frowned at him. “Are you trying to get on my bad side?”
“I’m just saying.”

“Does anyone know where Aang is?” Katara asked.

“He left to get me fire gummies like, ten minutes ago,” Sokka grumbled. “And I’m still waiting!”

“I’m going to check outside,” Katara said, walking off.

Emi heaved a sigh. “Is this thing over yet?” she asked aloud. “I’ve had enough of plays to last me a lifetime.”

“I think there might still be one last act left,” Suki said, making Emi heave another sigh.

“Relax, we’ll be out of here soon,” Zuko assured her, holding her hand. Although his face was pinched with annoyance as well. Emi merely nodded.

“Suki, what are the chances you can get me backstage?” Sokka suddenly asked as a little kid in an Aang costume ran by. “I’ve got some jokes I want to give to the actor me.”

“I’m an elite warrior who’s trained for many years in the art of stealth…I think I can get you backstage,” Suki replied with a grin. They took off, leaving Toph, Zuko, and Emi sitting by the wall of the theater.

“Jeez, everyone’s getting so upset about their characters,” Toph remarked. “Even you seem more down than usual, Zuko, and that’s saying something.”

“You don’t get it,” he muttered. “It’s different for you. You get a muscly version of yourself taking down ten bad guys at once and making sassy remarks.”

“Yeah, that’s pretty great,” Toph mused with a grin.

“But for me, it takes all the mistakes I’ve made in my life and shoves them back in my face.” Zuko sighed. “My uncle; he’s always been on my side. Even when things were bad, he was there for me. He taught me so much, and how do I repay him? With a knife in his back! It’s one of my greatest regrets. And I may never get to redeem myself.”

Emi squeezed his hand. “You have redeemed yourself to your uncle,” she said. “You may not realize it yet, but you already have.”

“How do you know?” he asked.
“Because I once had a long conversation with the guy,” Toph chimed in. “All he would talk about, all he and Emi would talk about, was you.”

Emi flushed as Zuko pushed back his hood, looking from Toph to her with a slight smile. “Really?”

“Yeah, and it was kind of annoying.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“But it was also very sweet,” Toph added. “All your uncle wanted was for you to find your own path and see the light. Now, you’re here with us. He’d be proud.” They fell silent for a moment enjoying the glow of the praise until Toph punched Zuko in the arm.

“Ow! What was that for?!?” he demanded.

“That’s how I show affection,” she said with a shrug.

“Very true,” Emi remarked with a smirk.

Just then, the boy dressed up as Aang came running back through, pausing in front of them. “Your Zuko costume’s pretty good,” he said to Zuko. “But your scar is on the wrong side.”

Zuko growled as the boy ran off once again. “The scar’s not on the wrong side!” he yelled, pulling his hood back up with a jerk. Emi chuckled and leaned against Zuko as he grumbled under his breath.

Before long, intermission ended and they all trooped back inside for what would hopefully be the final act. As Emi sat down and looked around, she noticed Aang still hadn’t come back. Katara had reappeared moments before the play resumed, looking very flustered. She wondered what had happened, but her thoughts were drawn back to the production on stage, as bad as it had been all night. By the time the invasion segment started, Emi heard Aang slump down in a seat behind them. It was much like the rest of the play had been, except now Sokka’s actor seemed to be firing off random noises and jokes that actually portrayed the real Sokka quite well. Emi smirked, knowing his and Suki’s covert entrance to the back stage had been a success.

Finally, the play had reached the present moment where Zuko had joined their group after the invasion.

“Well, I guess that’s it,” Sokka remarked as he stood up, stretching. “The play’s caught up to the present now.”
“Wait, the play’s not over,” Suki said, tugging him back down into his seat.

“But, it is over. Unless…this is the future!”

“Don’t be ridiculous Sokka,” Emi sighed, glaring back at him. “I’m sure the playwright has written some dramatic ending that will get him so many positive reviews. Not like he deserves them, of course…”

Not long after the stage was lit with an ominous light, an actor portraying Fire Lord Ozai on scene now along with Princess Azula. Sozin’s Comet had apparently arrived. Zuko’s and Aang’s actors appeared moments later, only for the stage to clear and Azula and Zuko faced off in their battle, using colorful streamers that represented their Firebending. Within minutes, broad streamers of fire rose up from the stage, engulfing Zuko’s character as he yelled his final word. The stage cleared again, leaving Azula’s likeness to bow to the crowd and walk off. While the crowd erupted with cheers, Emi and her friends turned to stare at Zuko, wondering what he must be thinking.

The scene changed and it was time for Fire Lord Ozai and Aang to face off next. Emi had a bad feeling, knowing in the pit of her stomach how this was likely going to end. With the comet prop slowly inching along overhead the actors began their fight, using the colorful streamers to represent fire and air. As with Azula’s likeness, Ozai’s actor created a large wave of fire that also engulfed Aang’s character, effectively defeating the Avatar and giving ultimate power over to the Fire Nation.

The whole theater burst out in applause and cheers, standing up to give their respect to the actors. Emi and her friends, however, remained seated, too stunned to do anything else. Only once the building began to empty did they file out quickly, eager to get away from the atrocious scene.

“That…wasn’t a good play,” Zuko said as they walked along the beach.

“Without a doubt,” Emi remarked.

“I’ll say,” Aang muttered.

“No kidding,” Katara added.

“Horrible,” Suki said.

“You said it,” Toph grumbled.

“But the effects were decent,” Sokka allowed.
Emi rolled her eyes but didn’t deign to reply. She was too engrossed in what she had seen, and even though it was just a play she couldn’t help but feel bothered by so many things. Her characterization in the play, the assumed ending to the war, the allusions to Zuko and Katara; it only served to make her scowl deepen as they finally made it back to the house.

The group separated, heading to their individual rooms for the night and yawning widely as they went. Emi stumped up the stairs to her room, reaching for the handle when a hand stopped her.

“You’re angry,” Zuko remarked.

“Well you must be, too,” Emi retorted, removing her hand from his and opening her door. “I mean, what the hell was all that drivel? It was ridiculous!”

“Yes, it was,” Zuko agreed, leaning against the door frame. “Which is why you shouldn’t take any of it seriously.”

“I’m not,” Emi insisted, moving Yuuka from her pillow to the side of the bed. “But that doesn’t mean I can’t be angry.”

“It’s a waste of your time.”

“Of course you’d say that,” she muttered.

Zuko heaved a sigh. “What exactly is bothering you about that play? The part where we all die and the Fire Nation wins the war?”

“That’s hardly a pleasant image, I’ll admit,” Emi remarked, ripping her scarf out of her hair and sitting on the bed, crossing her arms.

“Then what? Is it the actor who played you? We all got crappy ends on the deal there, except for Toph!”

“I know that.”

“What then?” Zuko ran a hand over his face in exasperation until he stilled, staring at her incredulously. “Don’t tell me the worst part of that play for you was the catacombs.”

“Zuko, if you’re going to patronize me you can just go ahead and leave. I’d like to go to sleep soon,” Emi said, looking stubbornly away.
Instead of leaving Zuko stalked into the room, taking a seat next to Emi and pulling her face around to his, his eyes hard. “You promised me you didn’t believe any of that,” he accused.

Emi grimaced and tried to remove her face from his grasp, but he wouldn’t budge. She heaved a sigh. “I… I tried! It’s just… when I saw my character up there it made me realize that… maybe I am kind of naïve and stupid sometimes. I mean, I grew up so isolated that everyday things to most people fascinate me. Maybe you’d be better off with someone more mature. Like Katara…”

“I can’t believe you,” Zuko scoffed. “How could you think that?! That’s why I love you. And only you.”

Now Emi scoffed. “You actually like me being a naïve idiot?” she asked incredulously.

“I love that you see the good in everything,” Zuko corrected, moving his hand to cup her face gently. “I love that you’re so determined to find happiness in every situation you come across. Traveling through the Earth Kingdom with you around was actually a highlight for me, even if I didn’t admit it at the time. I love you, Emi. Every part of you.”

Emi let out a small chuckle, feeling her knot of anxiety loosen. “I love you, too, Zuko. I know I was being silly. I just couldn’t help but wonder if I was even good enough or you.”

“I’m the one that should be wondering that, not you,” he replied seriously.

“You have a good heart, Zuko. You always have,” Emi said, stroking his scar lightly. “You’re the one who just said you loved that I see the good in everything, right? Well, I’ve always seen good in you.”

Zuko smiled and leaned forward, kissing her softly for a moment before pulling back. “I mean, I had some doubts for awhile of course,” Emi added with a grin.

“Very funny,” Zuko retorted, poking her in the side before standing up. “Now get some sleep. Maybe a good night’s rest will erase some of the horror we witnessed today.”

“One can only hope,” Emi replied, smiling. “Good night, Zuko.”

“Good night, Emi,” he murmured, kissing her forehead before leaving the room and shutting the door quietly behind him. Emi nestled under her blankets, Yuuka yawning and stretching next to her. She smiled as she closed her eyes, sleep finding her swiftly that night.
A few days later, Emi and her friends sat on the house steps while Aang was doing Firebending drills under the instruction of Zuko. Emi watched, impressed; Aang had really gotten the hang of Firebending in the short time he had studied under Zuko. Zuko, however, seemed to think Aang needed more improvement, for he was barking out orders like some drill sergeant.

“More ferocious!” he demanded as he watched the young Avatar. “Imagine striking through your opponent’s heart!”

Aang let loose another fireball, groaning in frustration. “Ugh! I’m trying!” he insisted, turning back toward Zuko.

“Now let me hear you roar like a tigerdillo!” Zuko yelled, clenching his fists.

Aang promptly spun around, arms flung out to the sides as he emitted a halfhearted roar, small spurts of flames flying from his hands and mouth. He looked back at his teacher sheepishly while Zuko glared.

“That sounded pathetic! I said *roar*!”

Aang spun around again, this time emitting a more impressive roar as streams of fire flew from his hands and mouth. Even Emi felt a little shaken as she watched. Zuko gave a short nod of approval at his pupil’s efforts as the flames dispersed.

“Who wants a nice cool glass of watermelon juice?” Katara called out, holding up the refreshing drinks in her hands.

“Ooh! Ooh! Me, me, me!” Aang started running toward her, eager for the beverage only to be halted by Zuko as he gripped onto the back of Aang’s shirt.

“Hey, your lesson’s not over yet!” Zuko admonished even as Aang kept trying to get away. “Get back here!”

Emi chuckled as she saw the disappointed look on Aang’s face while they all sipped from their juice glasses.
“Come on, Zuko,” Suki piped up. “Just take a break. What’s the big deal?”

Zuko scowled, but he let Aang go. “Fine. If you want to lounge around like a bunch of snail sloths all day, then go ahead!” He turned on his heel, stalking away from the group.

“Maybe Zuko’s right,” Sokka remarked. “Sitting around the house has made us pretty lazy. But I know just the thing to change that…” He promptly stood up, stripping off his clothes to reveal his swim trunks underneath. “Beach party!”

The others laughed and followed Sokka eagerly as he ran down the path toward the beach. Katara stopped, though, when she saw Emi wasn’t with them.

“What’s wrong? Don’t you want to have some fun?” she asked.

“Of course I do,” Emi smiled. “But, maybe I should go check on Zuko. He’s being awfully… grumpy today.”

“When isn’t he grumpy?” Katara remarked, rolling her eyes. But she continued down to the beach, leaving Emi to wander around and see where Zuko had disappeared to. However, after nearly twenty minutes of venturing all over the house and around the trees beyond, Emi could not find a single trace of him.

“Maybe he decided to actually have some fun at the beach,” she mused to Yuuka. The sugar glider merely blinked her large eyes as she sat on the Airbender’s shoulder. She heaved a sigh, trying to figure out what she could do next when she suddenly heard the sounds of fireballs being thrown. Yuuka gave a squeak of fright and dove into Emi’s waist scarf as the girl whirled around, her eyes wide with shock. She soon saw Aang leaping from the trees and into the top floor of the house, Zuko hot on his trail.

“Zuko! What the hell are you doing?!” Emi demanded. He ignored her, scaling the house swiftly and disappearing inside. She groaned and ran around the side of the house, trying to discern where they were. An explosion suddenly shattered the air, and she saw Zuko fly through one of the windows and fall to the ground in a heap. Emi ran towards him just as the others came tearing up the path, Aang jumping down from the fresh hole in the side of the house, Zuko hot on his trail.

“What’s wrong with you?!” Katara demanded. “You could have hurt Aang!”

“What’s wrong with me?” Zuko shot back, standing up. “What’s wrong with all of you?! How can you sit around having beach parties when Sozin’s Comet is only three days away?!” They were all silent, gazing at Zuko seriously. “Why are you all looking at me like I’m crazy?”

“About Sozin’s Comet…” Aang said. “I was actually going to wait to fight the Fire Lord until after it came.”
“After?”

“I’m not ready. I need more time to master Firebending.”

“And frankly, your Earthbending could still use some work, too,” Toph remarked.

“So…you all knew Aang was going to wait?” Zuko asked, staring at them.

“Honestly, if Aang tries to fight the Fire Lord right now he’s going to lose,” Sokka said. “No offense,” he added to Aang.

“The whole point of fighting the Fire Lord before the comet was to stop the Fire Nation from winning the war,” Katara explained, stepping forward. “But they pretty much won the war when they took Ba Sing Se. Things can’t get any worse.”

“You’re wrong.” Zuko murmured, turning away from them. “It’s about to get worse than you can even imagine.”

Emi and the others listened, horrified, as he recounted the last war meeting he had attended before he left to join their group. Ozai’s plan was to use the power of the comet to wipe out the Earth Nation completely, just as Sozin had done to the Air Nomads. Emi clapped her hands to her mouth while the others gasped and looked at one another, disgusted.

“I wanted to speak out against this horrifying plan. But I’m ashamed to say I didn’t,” Zuko said bitterly. “My whole life I’ve struggled to gain my father’s love and acceptance. But once I had it, I realized I lost myself getting there. I’d forgotten who I was.”

Katara sank to her knees, shaking her head hopelessly. “I can’t believe this…”

“I always knew the Fire Lord was a bad guy, but…this plan is just pure evil!” Sokka remarked, holding Suki to his side.

“What am I going to do?” Aang despaired.

“I know you’re scared,” Zuko said, approaching the young Avatar. “And I know you’re not ready to save the world. But if you don’t defeat the Fire Lord before the comet comes, there won’t be a world to save anymore.”

Aang shook his head, backing away. “Why didn’t you tell me about your dad’s crazy plan sooner?!”
“I didn’t think I had to!” Zuko retorted. “I assumed you were still going to fight him before the comet. No one told me you decided to wait!”

“This is bad…” Aang muttered, sinking to his knees. “This is really, really bad…”

“Aang, you don’t have to do this alone,” Katara assured him.

“Yeah! If we all fight the Fire Lord together, we got a shot at taking him down!” Toph grinned.

“We won’t let you give up,” Emi added.


“Fighting the Fire Lord is going to be one of the hardest things we’ve ever done together.” Aang sighed, allowing a smile to grace his face. “But I wouldn’t want to do it any other way.”

They all smiled in return, gathering around Aang for a group hug. Emi noted, though, that Zuko remained standing off to the side awkwardly. “Come on, Zuko,” she beckoned, holding her hand out for him.

“Being part of the group also means being part of group hugs,” Katara added.

He grimaced but took Emi’s hand, entering the group hug. They were bowled over moments later by Appa, who apparently wanted to join their moment of affection as well.

Afterward, Zuko took Aang back to the courtyard to teach him how to redirect lightning, a skill Emi knew would be essential if Aang was going to face the Fire Lord. Remembering Iroh’s lessons from months before, she shuddered at the thought and went back into the house to rid herself of the unpleasant images.

- - -

It was late afternoon, and Sokka had decided it was time for them to do some training as a group. Finding an isolated cluster of rocks and hills, he sat them all down and began his speech.

“Listen up, Team Avatar. In order to take out the Fire Lord, or in this case the Melon Lord,” Sokka gestured to the makeshift figure behind him, “our timing has to be perfect.” He knelt on the ground in front of them, drawing out the plan. “First, Suki and I will draw his fire. Then, Katara, Zuko, and Emi charge in with some liquidy hot and windy offense, and while the Melon Lord is distracted Aang swoops in and bam! He delivers the final blow.” Emi grimaced at the deep gouge in the
ground over the Melon Lord’s face.

“Um…what about me?” Toph asked.

“For now, you’re the Melon Lord’s forces,” Sokka said.

“So, I get to chuck flaming rocks at all of you?”

“Whatever makes the training feel more realistic.”

Toph grinned mischievously. “Sweetness.”

They all split up, gathering at their appointed positions where they would dive out and begin their fight. Despite it just being a training session, Emi could feel the atmosphere crackling with deadly intent. And it made her stomach queasy.

“Mwuahahaha!” Toph cackled as she stood at the head of the clearing, surrounded by the flaming vents and oiled rocks.

Emi rolled her eyes; of course Toph would find this whole venture to be highly entertaining.

Sokka gave the signal and they took off, Emi following closely behind Zuko and Katara. Off to their side, Sokka and Suki were running full force, chopping down the rock guards that popped out of the ground. Suddenly, a flaming boulder came pelting toward the two of them. Suki neatly dodged the missile, but Sokka barely managed to avoid complete disaster.

“Watch it, Toph!” he yelled to the girl.

“I’m not Toph! I am Melon Lord! Mwuahahahaha!” She shot another flaming rock, this time aiming for Katara, Zuko, and Emi. The other two jumped out of the way while Emi released a blast of air, cooling off the fire and using her scimitar to cut through the stone, the cracked halves falling to the ground on either side of her. Ahead, Zuko and Katara had been surrounded by the rock guards, but they easily dispensed with the dummies using their bending. They kept charging forward as the sky filled with flying fire and rocks.

“Now, Aang!” Sokka shouted.

Aang leapt up, swinging his staff high in the air, and for a moment it looked like he would crush the Melon Lord’s head. However, as he landed he stopped his blow mere inches from the dummy, his face a tangled mess of anguish and regret. He stepped back, shoulders slumped.
“What are you waiting for?” Zuko demanded. “Take him out!”

“I can’t,” Aang said, shaking his head.

Sokka grumbled and stalked forward, facing Aang. “What’s wrong with you?! If this was the real deal, you’d be shot full of lightning right now!”

“I’m sorry. But it just didn’t feel right! I didn’t feel like myself.”

Sokka heaved a sigh and unsheathed his sword, swiftly taking the Melon Lord’s head clean off. “There. That’s how it’s done.”

Emi winced at the same time Aang did. She had not been raised by the Air Nomads, but Haruka had taught her the value of a life. And if anyone knew the struggle Aang was feeling right then, it was her. But…it has to be done, she thought to herself as they trooped back to the house. There’s no other way.

That night they sat outside to eat dinner, Aang sitting a short distance away. He had been silent since their training session, and while Emi wanted to talk to him, to let him know she understood how he felt, she decided it was best to leave him be.

“I have a surprise for everyone!” Katara announced as she entered the yard, holding a rolled up bit of paper in her hands.

“I knew it! You did have a secret thing with Haru!” Toph grinned triumphantly.

Emi and the others just stared at her. “Uh…no,” Katara replied, momentarily thrown off. “I was looking for cooking pots in the attic and I found this!” She unrolled the paper, revealing a painting of a chubby faced baby smiling happily. “Look at baby Zuko! Isn’t he cute?”

The group all laughed while Zuko merely frowned, un-amused.

“Oh lighten up, I’m just teasing,” Katara remarked.

“That’s not me,” he said shortly. “That’s my father.”

They fell silent at that, looking again at the happy baby.

“But…he looks so sweet and innocent,” Emi mused as Katara rolled the painting back up.
“Well, that sweet little kid grew up to be a monster,” Zuko muttered bitterly. “And the worst father in the history of fathers.”

“But he’s still a human being,” Aang finally spoke up.

“You’re going to defend him?!” Zuko demanded indignantly.

“No. I agree with you. Fire Lord Ozai is a horrible person, and the world would probably be better off without him.” Aang stood up, facing his friends. “There’s gotta be another way.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know… Maybe we can make some big pots of glue, and then I can use Gluebending to stick his arms and legs together so he can’t bend anymore!”

Emi raised an eyebrow at this while Zuko smirked. “Yeah! And then you can show him his baby pictures and all his happy memories will make him good again!” he remarked sarcastically, making the others chuckle.

“Do you really think that would work?” Aang asked hopefully.

“No!” Zuko snapped.

Aang hung his head and sighed, moving to pace in front of them. “This goes against everything I learned from the monks. I can’t just go around wiping out people I don’t like!”

“Sure you can, you’re the Avatar!” Sokka said. “If it’s in the name of keeping balance, I’m sure the universe will forgive you.”

“This isn’t a joke Sokka!” Aang suddenly snapped, glaring furiously at them. “None of you understands the position I’m in!”

“Aang, we do understand,” Katara said consolingly. “It’s just-”

“Just what, Katara?! What?!”

“We’re trying to help!”

“Then when you figure out a way for me to beat the Fire Lord without taking his life, I’d love to hear it!” Aang turned on his heel, stalking away from the group.
“Aang, don’t walk away from this!” Katara called after him, making to follow until she was stopped by Zuko’s hand on her shoulder.

“Let him go. He needs time to sort it out by himself,” he said.

“You probably agree with him, don’t you Tenderfoot?” Toph remarked to Emi.

She sighed. “I was never raised by monks. But Haruka did teach me that all life is to be valued.”

“Yeah, well an herbalist has to be like that. But she wasn’t in charge of saving the world,” Sokka said. “Aang is. And he needs to accept that.”

“Even if it means going against who he is?” Emi asked.

“He’s the Avatar. It’s everything he is,” Zuko replied.

Later, they had all disappeared into their rooms to get some sleep. Emi sat on her bed, staring at the shadowy walls. Yuuka nudged her gently, looking up at her curiously.

“I’m worried, Yuuka,” Emi murmured to her sugar glider, scratching the animal behind the ears. “I don’t want Aang to have to do something he doesn’t want to do. But, what else can he do?”

She sighed and looked out her window, the expanse of the sea marred only by a small island out in the distance. Emi gave a huge yawn and curled up in her blankets, sleep beckoning to her.

---

The next day after breakfast, they all pitched in to pack their belongings onto Appa. Emi stood with the others as Sokka made the final touches to the ties, but her gaze was elsewhere. Something was nagging the back of her mind, and she couldn’t figure out what it was. Yuuka wasn’t helping; the little creature kept gliding around their heads, making odd chattering noises every so often.

“Okay, that’s everything,” Sokka announced, standing up on the saddle.

“No it’s not,” Toph spoke up. “Where’s Aang?”

They all stopped what they were doing and looked at one another, worried. Her friends immediately ran back into the house to search for the Avatar. Emi made to follow, but Yuuka gave a particularly loud squeak and flew off in the opposite direction, into the trees.

“Yuuka! Not you, too!” Emi groaned, taking off after the sugar glider. The animal kept chattering
as she flew from tree to tree, occasionally looking back at Emi. Soon they broke out into the open and onto the beach where Yuuka perched on a large rock, her eyes fixed on the sea.

Emi opened her mouth to scold her pet when she noticed a pair of footprints heading out toward the water. There were no marks heading back so whoever it was, was likely to still be out there. Emi frowned; why would Aang go for a midnight swim and not come back? As she stared at the horizon for lengthening minutes; something else nagged at her, but she couldn’t place it.

Suddenly, from behind her, she heard the others approaching.

“Emi, what are you doing out here? Did you find him?” Zuko asked.

Before she could respond, Sokka gasped. “There’s his footprints!” he exclaimed, pointing to the marks in the sand. “The trail ends here.”

“So…he went for a midnight swim and never came back?” Suki asked in disbelief.

“Maybe he was captured,” Katara guessed, worried.

“I don’t think so. There’s no sign of a struggle,” Sokka remarked.

“I bet he ran away again,” Toph piped up.

“Uh-uh. He left behind his glider and Appa,” Sokka shot down that idea swiftly.

“Then what do you think happened to him, oh sleuthy one?” Toph retorted.

“It’s pretty obvious. Aang mysteriously disappears before an important battle; he’s definitely on a Spirit World journey!”

“But if he was, wouldn’t his body still be here?” Zuko reasoned.

“Oh yeah. Forgot about that…”

“Then he’s gotta be somewhere on Ember Island,” Katara said. “Let’s split up and look for him.”

“I’m going with Zuko!” Toph announced, clinging to the prince’s arm much to his embarrassment and Emi’s amused dismay. They all stared at her. “What? Everyone else went on a life-changing trip with Zuko. Now it’s my turn!”
So they went their separate ways, scouring the area for their friend. However, Emi found herself being drawn back to the beach time and time again. She reasoned it was because of Yuuka, who kept flying back to the same spot every time they got out of sight of the water. But still, something felt...off. And it was driving her crazy that she couldn’t figure it out.

“What is it, Yuuka?” Emi finally asked in frustration. “What do you want?!”

Her sugar glider chattered loudly, looking back out toward the ocean. Emi ran a hand over her face, looking over the flat horizon in dismay—Wait a minute… Emi thought, peering along the water in both directions as far as she could see. Wasn’t there an island here last night? Yuuka chattered again, jumping up and down, reminding her distinctly of-

“Momo! He’s not here either!” Emi exclaimed, slapping a hand to her face. “Thank you, Yuuka. I’m sorry it took me so long to figure it out. Let’s head back and see what the others found.” Though they’re not going to find much of anything, she mused silently.

Back at the house, the others were sitting around on the steps of the house, disappointed by their fruitless searching.

“I’m guessing you didn’t find anything either?” Sokka asked Emi as she ran up to them.

“Hasn’t anyone realized that Momo is missing, too?” she asked in return, ignoring his question. They all sat up straighter, looking shocked. Sokka, however, interpreted her news quite differently than she would have preferred.

“Oh no!” he gasped, turning to Appa. “I knew it was only a matter of time! Appa. Ate. Momo!” He forced the bison’s mouth open, peering inside. “Momo? I’m coming for ya buddy!”

“Sokka. Appa didn’t eat Momo,” Katara said, exasperated. “He’s probably with Aang.”

“That’s just what Appa wants you to think!” Sokka snapped, crawling further into Appa’s mouth.

“Get out of the bison’s mouth, Sokka!” Zuko ordered.

“Look. Last night before I went to bed, I saw an island off the coast of the beach,” Emi explained, tearing her eyes away from Sokka’s antics. “But this morning, i-it just disappeared!”

“What are you getting at?” Toph asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I know it sounds crazy, but maybe Aang and Momo are on that island.”
“You’re right. That is crazy,” Zuko said, rolling his eyes. “Islands don’t just float around wherever they want to, Emi.”

“I’m telling you, this is no ordinary island!” she insisted.

“So what are we supposed to do? Get on Appa and fly around to every island we see on the off chance Aang might be there?” Katara reasoned.

“Well… I don’t know,” Emi sighed.

“Emi, I’m sorry. But we have a real problem here; Aang is nowhere to be found and the comet is only two days away,” Zuko said.

“What should we do, Zuko?” Katara asked. They all looked to him; even Sokka did as he slipped out of Appa’s mouth in a pool of saliva.

“I don’t know,” he remarked, standing up. A moment of silence followed as they continued to stare at him. “Why are you all looking at me?”

“Well, you are kinda the expert on tracking Aang,” Katara said.

“Yeah. If anyone’s got experience hunting the Avatar, it’s you,” Toph added.

Zuko sighed, thinking. “I might know a way,” he mused after a few moments of silent pondering.

With that, they all piled onto Appa’s saddle, flying through the darkening skies and toward Earth Kingdom territory. Even though they hadn’t believed her, Emi kept her eyes on the waters below, searching for an island that would seem to be out of place.

“I don’t want to tell you how to do your job, Zuko,” Sokka remarked after awhile. “But why are we heading toward the Earth Kingdom? There’s no way Aang’s there.”

“Just trust me,” Zuko replied, his gaze fixed on some point ahead.

They eventually touched down onto the ground, stopping in front of a very familiar tavern. Emi and the others followed Zuko inside, the interior just as rowdy as it had been the last time Emi was here. Although now she was able to actually step inside and see the ruckus for herself.

“And the reason you brought us to a seedy Earth Kingdom tavern is what now?” Katara asked, raising an eyebrow at the wild crowds.
“Jun,” Zuko answered, pointing to the beautiful bounty hunter as she sat at a table, calmly drinking from her cup and kicking out at a stray man that stumbled toward her.

“Oh yeah, that bounty hunter with the giant mole,” Sokka remembered.

“What mole? Her skin is flawless,” Suki remarked.

“No, she has this giant mole creature she rides around on,” he explained.

“Her shirshu,” Zuko said. “The only animal that can track Aang’s scent anywhere in the world. It’s the only shot we have of finding him.”

They watched as Jun finished fighting off the rowdy men; though, admittedly, she hardly had to land any hits, her movements being so graceful and swift. And she didn’t even spill a drop of her drink.

“I don’t know who this Jun lady is, but I like her!” Toph declared, grinning.

“Hey, I remember her,” Sokka mused as Jun kicked out a chair and sat back down. “She helped you attack us!”

“Yup. Back in the good old days,” Zuko remarked, moving forward to talk to Jun.

“Yeah. A boatload of fun that was,” Emi muttered, remembering how she had been chained up as a prisoner at the time.

“Oh great. It’s Prince Pouty,” Jun grumbled as they gathered around her table. “Where’s your creepy grandpa?”

“He’s my uncle. And he’s not here,” Zuko replied tersely.

“I see you worked things out with your girlfriend.”

Emi, Zuko, and Katara all looked at her indignantly. “He’s not my boyfriend!” “She’s not my girlfriend!” Katara and Zuko retorted at the same time. Zuko then pulled Emi firmly to his side, glaring down at the bounty hunter. “Emi is.”

“Oh yeah, your little prisoner,” Jun remarked, unabashed by their outrage. “Kinky. So, what do you want?”
Emi flushed red while Sokka and Toph fought to keep their giggles silent. Zuko scowled. “I need your help finding the Avatar.”

“Humph. Doesn’t sound too fun.”

“Does the end of the world sound like more fun?!?” Zuko spat angrily while Jun calmly took a drink.

They eventually got her to agree to help them, following her outside where Appa and the shirshu had apparently made a truce and were laying together peacefully.

“Nyla…” Jun crooned in a sing-song voice, tossing a slab of meat toward her shirshu. The giant creature caught it eagerly, munching down the flesh quickly. “Who’s my little snuffly wuffly?” Jun petted her mount tenderly. The shirshu lashed out with its tongue, making Jun laugh. “Whoa! Careful there. Okay, so who’s got something with the Avatar’s scent on it?”

“I have Aang’s staff,” Katara said, rummaging through the pile on Appa’s saddle and taking the staff out. She handed it over to Jun who then held it under Nyla’s nose. The beast sniffed at it for a few moments before pacing around the clearing, turning its head this way and that. Before long, however, the shirshu slumped onto the ground, pawing at its nose.

“So…what does that mean?” Emi asked.

“It means your friend’s gone,” Jun said, petting the shirshu’s head.

“We know he’s gone, that’s why we’re trying to find him,” Toph snapped impatiently.

“No I mean he’s gone. He doesn’t exist.”

They all stared at her in shock.

“What do you mean Aang doesn’t exist?!?” Sokka demanded. “Do you mean he’s…you know…dead?”

“Nope. We could find him if he were dead,” Jun remarked easily. “Huh, it’s a real head-scratcher. See ya.”

“Helpful. Real helpful,” Toph scoffed as Jun mounted her shirshu.

“Wait! I have another idea,” Zuko spoke up. “There’s only one other person in this world who can
help us face the Fire Lord. I’ll be right back with a smell sample.” He quickly ran over toward their packs. Within moments, he came back holding a rather smelly sandal.

“You saved your uncle’s sweaty sandal?” Sokka asked, holding his nose.

“I think it’s kind of sweet,” Toph remarked, making Emi chuckle.

The shirshu stepped forward, sniffing at the sandal in Zuko’s hand. This time, it did not take long for the beast to get a hold of the trail.

“Let’s do this,” Jun murmured, allowing her mount to take off in the direction of the scent.

“Hey! Wait up!” Zuko called after her as they all mounted Appa. The sky bison took to the air and they followed Jun as she and her shirshu ran across the landscape. Emi watched as the scenery changed below them before looking back the way they had come. She prayed to the spirits that Aang was okay, and that he would be ready to face the Fire Lord if they needed him. Which, they most certainly would.

Chapter End Notes

One more week left! Are you excited? I'm excited. I had so much fun writing this, and then posting it here has just made everything even better. You guys have been amazing. Truly.

But I'll save the whole sappy spiel for the true end of this story. See you next Monday!
They eventually came to the ruins of the wall of Ba Sing Se. Emi looked around, the darkness adding an eerie feeling to the crumbling façade.

“We’re going to Ba Sing Se?” Zuko asked in surprised as they landed on the ground next to the bounty hunter.

“You’re uncle is somewhere beyond the wall,” Jun said. “Nyla’s getting twitchy, so he can’t too be far. Good luck.” She slapped the reins and they took off again, disappearing quickly into the night.

Zuko sighed. “It’s been a long day. Let’s camp and start our search again at dawn.”

Emi yawned, grateful for the chance to rest. They didn’t make a proper camp, merely getting comfortable around Appa while Toph went into her usual rock tent. Emi let her eyes fall closed, feeling secure with Zuko laying beside her.

A few hours later, though, they were woken by Toph dismantling her rock shelter as a circle of fire surrounded them. They all jumped up, looking for the source of the flames when they spotted a group of older men in blue and white robes looking down at them.

“Well, look who’s here!” one of them remarked, cackling madly. Katara and Sokka grinned at one another as the wild man continued to guffaw. Emi couldn’t understand why, but she did recognize Piandao amongst the men, and that was enough incentive for her to feel relatively safe.

“What’s going on?” Toph asked as the fire was put out and the men descended to their level. “We’re surrounded by old people!”

“Not just any old people,” Katara said, approaching the group. “These are great masters and friends of ours! Pakku.” She bowed to a thin man with a stern face, but that changed dramatically as he smiled and bowed in return.

“It is respectful to bow to an old master,” he remarked. “But how about a hug for your new grandfather?”

Katara and Sokka gasped. “That’s so exciting!” Katara exclaimed, hugging the older man. “You and Gran Gran must be so happy to have found each other again!”

“I made her a new betrothal necklace and everything.”
“Welcome to the family Gramp Gramp!” Sokka said happily, hugging the man tightly.

“You can still just call me Pakku,” he remarked, nudging the exuberant young man away.

“How about…Grampakku?” Sokka suggested.

“No.”

“And this was Aang’s first Firebending teacher,” Katara continued, introducing Zuko to the next man in line.

“Jeong Jeong,” he said, bowing.

“Master Piandao,” Sokka greeted his sword master.

“Hello, Sokka,” Piandao bowed in return.

“It’s good to see you again, King Bumi,” Katara greeted the eccentric man who seemed to have a habit of giggling every so many minutes.

“So, wait, how do you all know each other?” Suki asked.

“All old people know each other, don’t you know that?” Bumi remarked, chuckling.

“We’re all part of the same ancient secret society, a group that transcends the divisions of the four nations,” Piandao explained.

“The Order of the White Lotus,” Emi said, exchanging smiles with Zuko.

“That’s the one!” Bumi laughed.

“The White Lotus has always been about philosophy and beauty and truth,” Jeong Jeong continued. “About a month ago, a call went out that we were needed for something important.”


“Well, that’s who we’re looking for!” Toph exclaimed.
“Then we’ll take you to him—” Piandao started to say before Bumi interrupted.

“Wait! Someone’s missing from your group…someone very important…” He shuffled forward, looking all around until he was right in Sokka’s face. “Where’s Momo?”

“He’s gone. And so is Aang,” Sokka explained, a little unnerved by the man’s proximity.

“Oh well,” Bumi mused, straightening up. “So long as they have each other I’m sure we have nothing to worry about. Let’s go!” With that he shot off into the air using his Earthbending, cackling as he did so.

“He’s…interesting,” Emi remarked, looking at the other masters who all wore expressions of patient dismay.

“He is wise…in his own way,” Piandao allowed. “Come, we’ll take you to our camp.”

They all followed the members of the White Lotus through the broken wall, venturing around boulders and rocks until they came to the place where the society had set themselves up between the inner and outer walls. It looked a lot like a soldier’s camp, which Emi reasoned it pretty much was.

“Well, here we are,” Bumi remarked. “Welcome to old people camp!”

Zuko stopped, looking around. “Where…? Where is he?”

“Your uncle’s in there, Prince Zuko,” Piandao said, pointing to a tent several yards away.

Zuko heaved a sigh and moved forward. At the threshold of the tent, however, he paused, wavering in his resolve. It had been so long, and he had so much to say. But would any of it make a difference? Would it redeem him in his uncle’s eyes? He sank down onto the ground and stared at the entrance to his uncle’s tent, feeling utterly pathetic.

Several paces away, Emi was looking over at Zuko’s slumped form, sympathizing with his predicament. After checking to make sure the others were otherwise occupied, she walked over to him and sat down on the ground as well.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“No, I’m not okay,” Zuko snapped. “My uncle hates me, I know it. He loved me and supported me in every way he could, and I still turned against him. How can I even face him? How could he ever
Emi smiled lightly, laying her hand on top of his. “Because Zuko, I know you’re sorry for everything that has happened in the past. I know you regret your actions deeply, and you’ve done everything you can these past few weeks to make up for it. That’s why I forgave you, because I knew that good heart I saw inside you so long ago had finally come out into the open. And that’s why your uncle is going to forgive you, too.”

Zuko allowed a small smile on his face before leaning over to kiss Emi lightly. With a deep breath, he stood up and went inside the tent. Emi stood up as well, heading back over to her friends to wait for Zuko and Iroh to come out, whenever that would happen to be.

---

Daylight seeped into the tent, but Zuko had barely dozed. He was waiting for his uncle to awaken, wondering what he would say to him when he did. He kept coming up with several excuses and apologies but cast them away almost immediately, deeming them to be useless.

His uncle finally stirred, sitting up and yawning only to still when he glimpsed Zuko out the corner of his eye.

“Uncle,” Zuko began, hoping against hope. “I know you must have mixed feelings about seeing me.” His throat closed up as all of his regret and sorrow washed over him. “But, I want you to know that I am so, so sorry uncle. I’m so sorry and ashamed of what I did. I don’t know how I can ever make it up to you, but I-”

His words were cut off as Iroh grabbed him and pulled him into a fierce hug. Zuko felt both elation and disbelief. “How can you forgive me so easily?” he asked in shock. “I thought you would be furious with me!”

“I was never angry with you,” Iroh murmured. “I was sad, because I was afraid you’d lost your way.”

“I did lose my way,” Zuko admitted.

“And you have found it again,” Iroh said proudly, pulling back to get a better look at his nephew. “And you did it by yourself. And I am so happy you found your way here.”

“It wasn’t that hard, uncle,” Zuko remarked, smiling as they hugged again. “You have a pretty strong scent.”

His uncle chuckled as they pulled away again, a smile lighting up his face. “And how is Emi doing?”
“How did you know she was here?” Zuko asked, surprised.

“When you are as old as I am, my nephew, you learn to spot a strong bond when you see one,” Iroh replied with a grin.

Zuko smiled back. “She’s good. She’s become a great Airbender, thanks to Aang.”

“I am glad. Let us go greet your friends, shall we?” Iroh suggested, standing up to leave the tent with Zuko close behind.

Emi looked up from her bowl as she heard footsteps approaching. She grinned when she saw Iroh, jumping up and running over to hug the older man.

“Iroh! It’s so good to see you!” she exclaimed. Yuuka wriggled out of her place in Emi’s waist scarf and scurried around the man’s shoulders, squeaking excitedly.

“And it is good to see you, my dear,” Iroh replied, stepping back to get a better look at her. “You have grown even more beautiful than before.”

Emi blushed and chuckled, leading them back to the rest of the group to eat. Although she was happy to be with Iroh again, Emi knew they had more pressing matters to deal with. They needed a way to fight the Fire Lord, and Sozin’s Comet was just around the corner, making their time strenuously short.

“Uncle, you’re the only person other than the Avatar who could possibly defeat the Father Lord,” Zuko said as they ate. Emi raised an eyebrow; did he really just say “Father Lord”?

“You mean the Fire Lord,” Toph corrected.

“That’s what I just said!” Zuko snapped.

“Hmm…” Iroh mused thoughtfully.

“We need you to come with us,” Zuko insisted.

“No, Zuko. It won’t turn out well,” Iroh said firmly.

“You can beat him. And we’ll be there to help,” Zuko said, gesturing to the group.
“Even if I did defeat Ozai, and I don’t know that I could, it would be the wrong way to end the war,” Iroh replied wisely. “History would just see it as more senseless violence; a brother killing a brother to grab power. The only way for this war to end peacefully is for the Avatar to defeat the Fire Lord.”

Zuko fell silent for a moment, thinking. “And then…then would you come and take your rightful place on the throne?”

“No. Someone new must take the throne. An idealist with a pure heart and unquestionable honor. It has to be you, Prince Zuko.”

“Unquestionable honor? But I’ve made so many mistakes!”

“Yes, you have,” Iroh allowed. “You struggled, and suffered. But you have always followed your own path. You restored your own honor. And only you can restore the honor of the Fire Nation.”

“I’ll try, uncle,” Zuko promised, looking grim.

“Well, what if Aang doesn’t come back?” Toph asked.

“Sozin’s Comet is arriving, and our destinies are upon us,” Iroh mused. “Aang will face the Fire Lord. When I was a boy, I once had a vision that I would take Ba Sing Se. Only now do I see that my destiny is to take it back from the Fire Nation. So the Earth Kingdom can be free again.”

“That’s why you gathered the members of the White Lotus,” Suki observed.

“Yes. Zuko,” Iroh said, turning back to his nephew, “you must return to the Fire Nation, so that when the Fire Lord falls, you can assume the throne and restore peace and order. But Azula will be there, waiting for you.”

“I can handle Azula,” Zuko scowled.

“Not alone,” Iroh said. “You will need help.”

“I’ll go with him,” Emi volunteered.

“No! It’s too dangerous,” Zuko insisted, staring her down.

“Everything about this day will be dangerous,” Emi reasoned calmly. “And honestly, if we’re going to be fighting for our lives, I’d rather do it by your side.”
Zuko stared at her for another few moments before he sighed, taking her hand. “Fine. But I’d feel better if we had someone else with us. Katara,” he turned to the Waterbender. “How would you like to help us put Azula in her place?”

Katara grinned. “It would be my pleasure.”

“What about us?” Sokka asked, gesturing to himself the remaining two girls. “What’s our destiny today?”

“What do you think it is?” Iroh asked in return, smiling lightly.

Sokka thought for a moment. “I think that…even though we don’t know where Aang is, we need to do everything we can to stop the airship fleet.”

“And that means when Aang does face the Fire Lord, we’ll be right there if he needs us!” Toph added.

Afterward, they all gathered whatever supplies and weapons they would need for this day. The air was filled with a heavy power, making Emi’s heart race. Piandao had found a giant eel hound for Sokka, Suki, and Toph to ride, a lithe creature that could run incredibly fast over land and swim swiftly through water.

Meanwhile, Katara, Zuko, and Emi mounted Appa, Zuko taking the reins. “So, if I’m going to be Fire Lord after the war is over, what are you going to do?” he asked his uncle.

“After I reconquer Ba Sing Se, I’m going to reconquer my tea shop and I’m going to play Pai Sho everyday!” Iroh answered happily.

Emi grinned, but it was short lived as she set her eyes on her three friends beside them. Sokka gave a nod to them, his face determined. This day was going to change them forever, for better or worse.

“Goodbye, General Iroh,” Suki said.

“Goodbye, everyone. Today, destiny is our friend. I know it.”

Sokka urged the eel hound into a fast run while Zuko urged Appa into the sky. Emi looked down at the dwindling figures of the White Lotus and her friends, her eyes misty. She took a deep breath as Yuuka licked her hand. She turned her eyes forward, watching as they sped toward the Fire Nation, and toward Azula.
Despite the ominous glow of the comet as it appeared in the sky, Emi could not help but feel awed by the sight. She wasn’t even a Firebender, and she could feel the crackling energy that the comet gave off. It was a power that was neither good nor evil; only those who wielded it could twist it either way.

Just then, the Fire Nation palace rose into view. Below, they could see Azula kneeling on the steps, the Fire Sages surrounding her and preparing to crown her as Fire Lord.

“Yuuka, stay in the saddle with Appa,” Emi urged her sugar glider as they descended toward the ground. “You’ll be safe with him.” The little animal blinked her large eyes, staying still where Emi placed her.

They landed in the courtyard, startling the Fire Sages before the ceremony could be completed. Zuko, Katara, and Emi jumped off of Appa, facing Azula with determination.

“Sorry, but you’re not going to become Fire Lord today,” Zuko stated. “I am.”

Azula laughed, the sound oddly high and stilted, making Emi cringe inwardly. “You’re hilarious.”

“And you’re going down,” Katara promised fiercely.

Azula glared at them, shooing away one of the Fire Sages as he tried to complete the crowning ceremony. “You want to be Fire Lord so badly? Fine. Let’s settle this; just you and me, brother. The showdown that was always meant to be. Agni Kai!”

“You’re on.”

“Zuko, what are you doing?” Emi asked incredulously.

“She’s playing you,” Katara added. “She knows she can’t take all three of us so she’s trying to separate us!”

“I know,” Zuko said. “But I can take her this time.”

“But, you even admitted to Iroh that you would need help,” Emi continued worriedly.

“There’s something off about her,” Zuko replied, frowning. “I can’t explain it, but she’s slipping. And this way, no one else has to get hurt.”

Katara and Emi looked at one another, concerned, but they couldn’t do anything else but follow
Zuko as he went to the other side of the courtyard, kneeling into his beginning stance for the Agni Kai while Azula did the same on the other side. Katara and Emi retreated behind the pillars surrounding the courtyard, looking on as both siblings stood and turned to face one another.

“I’m sorry it has to end this way, brother,” Azula sniped, pulling off her gaudy cloak and grinning madly at Zuko.

“No. You’re not,” he muttered.

Emi felt her heart leap into her throat as Azula lashed out, her blue flames far more powerful than normal. Zuko brought his hands together, his own fire a shield against her attack. The resulting clash of blue and orange caused the flames to fly high into the sky, making Katara and Emi take a step back away from the dangerous heat.

Azula didn’t stop there. She leapt up, kicking out one streak of fire after another. Even in madness she was precise and calculating. But Zuko was not the same bender he used to be; he countered every hit Azula shot at him, holding his own against his sister’s attacks.

It didn’t take long for some of the surrounding buildings to catch fire, the result of their fierce battle an obvious mark to anyone with eyes. Azula growled, leaping up and slamming her foot into the ground to create a large stream of fire that catapulted toward Zuko. He used his fire to separate the funnel, making the flames dissipate around him.

Zuko then countered with a huge fireball that thundered along the ground. Azula dodged the attack, jets of blue fire spilling from her feet to make her fly toward her brother as she punched out several quick shots. Azula continued to circled around and around her brother, her flames blocked by Zuko’s while at the same time he tried to land a hit on her. He suddenly dropped to the ground, spinning and kicking with his feet to create a large ring of fire that successfully knocked Azula off balance, making her crash and roll along the ground for several feet. She stood up moments later, panting as her face contorted with rage.

“No lightning today?” Zuko taunted. “What’s the matter, afraid I’ll redirect it?”

“Oh, I’ll show you lightning!” Azula snapped, blue electricity crackling around her as she created the deadly attack. Emi took an unconscious step forward, her heart racing. Suddenly, Azula’s eyes shifted to hers, pinning her place.

It was as if time had slowed down. Emi couldn’t move, could barely breathe. All she saw was the lightning streaking her way. Dimly, she heard someone shouting, and then a body blocked her vision.

She winced, clenching her eyes shut as the crackling sound of the lightning crashed into the sky. Emi tentatively squinted open her eyes, only to have them widen as she saw Zuko in a heap on the ground nearby, groaning and clutching at a wound just below his chest.
“Zuko!” Emi cried out, her and Katara trying to run to his aid only to be stopped by a stream of blue fire. Azula cackled, flying toward them with a wild grin. Katara snarled and took water from a nearby trough, aiming at the mad princess. Azula dodged the attack, disappearing for a moment until she dropped back down, punching out her fireballs. Emi created an air shield while Katara tried to attack Azula again, but she was just too fast.

“Katara, you have to help Zuko!” Emi said, pulling them back behind the safety of one of the pillars for a breather.

“But you can’t handle her on your own!” Katara insisted. “She’s too strong. We need to work together!”

“You’re the only one who can heal Zuko!” Emi shot back. “Please, Katara. The world needs him to be Fire Lord.”

“And the world needs Airbenders!”

“I’ll be okay,” Emi promised with a quick smile. “Please, go!”

Katara grit her jaw before giving her a swift hug, running toward where Zuko lay while Emi ran behind her, her eyes searching for Azula. She appeared upon the rooftop, lightning crackling from her fingertips.

“I’d really rather our family physician look after little Zuzu if you don’t mind!” she yelled out to them, her face twisted in a mad grin. Emi clenched her jaw and punched out a powerful blast of air, disrupting Azula’s attack. The princess scowled, leaping down from the building and shooting streams of fire from her palms. Emi jumped out of the way, swinging her hands around to create an air scooter and zooming away, hoping to get Azula to attack her and ignore Katara and Zuko.

It worked.

Emi shrieked as a strong blast of blue fire streaked past her, making her lose concentration and tumble to the ground. She leapt up seconds later, another crack of lightning hitting the ground where she had just been.

“That’s all you air peasants do; run, run, run!” Azula taunted, cutting off Emi’s route with another blast of fire. “Your people were weak! And you will meet the same end they did!”

Emi jumped out of the way of another fireball, kicking out with her feet to send a sharp wave of wind toward the princess. Azula dodged the attack, shooting another bolt of lightning at her. Emi leapt into the air, landing a short distance behind Azula and promptly spinning her hands around, creating a funnel of wind beneath the princess. Azula cried out, kicking with her feet and shooting
blue fire in all directions. Emi winced as a flame licked her side, but she forced her mind to ignore the burn and pushed out with her hands, sending Azula flying to the other side of the courtyard.

The princess leapt back up seconds later, cackling madly as she streaked back toward Emi, her blue flames fanning out behind her. Emi spun around on a funnel of air, narrowly avoiding colliding with Azula. She lashed back around, the air following her movements and flying toward the princess to knock her off balance again. But Azula was ready, spinning out a powerful blast of fire and counteracting Emi’s wind. She launched herself at the Airbender once more, fire flying all around her.

Emi took a deep breath and began moving her hands around, gradually going faster and faster until both she and Azula were trapped within a large sphere of swirling air. Azula tried to Firebend at Emi but the winds were too strong, blowing out the flames before they could go anywhere. Emi grit her jaw, making the winds move faster; too fast for proper breath to be drawn.

Emi then began to shrink the swirling ball of air, soon escaping from the mad winds and gulping in deeps breaths while Azula remained trapped inside the swirling sphere. Then, Emi suddenly ceased her bending. Azula collapsed onto the ground in a heap, dazed from the lack of air.

Katara appeared by her side at that moment, holding a length of chain in her hands. Together, they dragged the princess over to some grates along the perimeter of the courtyard, securing her down and making sure she couldn’t escape. Once that was done Emi stumbled back, unable to believe she had actually managed to survived.

“You’re hurt,” Katara stated, taking some water and covering her hands over the burn on Emi’s side. To be perfectly honest, she had barely noticed it after the initial sting.

“Thanks, Katara,” Emi said, smiling at her friend. “And…Zuko?”

“He’s okay,” Katara replied, leading her over to where Zuko lay, resting. They helped him to stand up, one hand clutching the wound on his abdomen, but otherwise he seemed perfectly fine.

Suddenly, Azula began screaming and crying, breathing blue fire in her tantrum until she simply rolled around in her chains, her breath coming in heaving gasps. They all looked at her in pity, Emi shaking her head at the terrible sight.

“Emi,” Zuko said, looking over at her. “What you did was stupid and dangerous.”

Emi frowned, looking pointedly at his wound. “Yeah? I’m not the only one who’s an idiot, then,” she shot back.

Surprisingly, he grinned. “And I’m proud of you,” he continued.
“Me, too,” Katara added, making Emi blush.

“I’m proud, too. Of all of us,” she remarked, hugging them both. “Do think the others-?”

Just then, a loud rumbling sound permeated the air. Behind them, a tattered airship dropped down to the ground, and from within the depths their friends came pouring out.

They all came together with grins of happiness and light spirits. Emi beamed at Aang, who seemed to have a new way of carrying himself.

“I take it everything went well?” she asked Sokka, who she noted was using Suki as a crutch due to a busted leg.

“Yes. The Fire Lord is done! And Aang didn’t even have to kill him!” he exclaimed.

“Yes?” Emi turned her attention to Aang, grinning. “So you found a way! How?”

“A giant lion turtle taught me how to take someone’s bending away,” Aang remarked with a shrug. “I thought he was an island at first.”

Emi blinked in shock. “So…then I was right! There was another island! I knew it!”

They continued to exchange stories of their adventures while at the same time checking one another to be sure they were okay. Aside from Zuko and Sokka, no one else seemed to have suffered any serious injuries.

Before long the news spread, announcing the end of the war and the fall of Fire Lord Ozai. Once his father and sister were tucked safely out of harm’s way, Zuko invited his friends to spend the night within the barren palace. It was just like all those times they spent camping, except this time they were surrounded by the finery of royalty. Zuko and Sokka were treated for their wounds before they all settled down to sleep, exhausted from their harrowing adventures. Emi fell asleep laying next to Zuko, who had insisted she stay by his side. She felt like she was in a surreal dream, like everything was too good to be true. She knew, however, that was not the case. The Hundred Year War was over, and she and her friends had all made it through to the other side, stronger and wiser than they had been before.
The next day, it was as if a dark veil had lifted from the world. The sun seemed brighter, the air seemed fresher. The attendants of the Fire Nation palace had returned eagerly, now that Princess Azula was no longer around to bully them. Aang and Emi were also given traditional Air Nomad robes in honor of their parts in the ending of the war.

Emi walked along the halls of the palace, feeling very content as she made her way to Zuko’s coronation. She gave small smiles to those she passed by, their expressions hesitant and awed. She still wasn’t entirely sure how to act, now that she was free to be the Airbender she was. Everything felt so new, so fresh, and it filled her mind to the brim with the possibilities. So much so that, as Emi turned a corner, she nearly ran into someone.

“Oh! My apologies, I didn’t mean-”

“You’re Emi, right?”

Emi looked up into the grey eyes of a young woman. Her expression was void of any emotion, but the young Airbender didn’t detect any hostility from her. “Yes, I am.”

“I’m Mai,” the other woman replied.

“…Oh.” Emi flushed, looking over Zuko’s ex-girlfriend again and immediately began making comparisons to herself. She was willowy, with a quiet dignity that would suit a Fire Lord perfectly. Great, Emi mused bitterly to herself. “Are…are you looking for Zuko?” she asked.

“I just finished speaking with him, actually,” Mai remarked evenly, picking at a bit of invisible dust on her sleeve.

“Oh,” Emi said again. There was a moment of awkward silence as they regarded one another. “I’m sorry!” she suddenly blurted out.

“For what?” Mai asked.

“For…” What was she sorry for? It was hardly her fault that Zuko had broken Mai’s heart. But… still… “For whatever bitterness there is between you and Zuko,” Emi said honestly. “I don’t wish to come off as sounding pretentious, but I do know what it’s like to be rejected by him. To love him and know he doesn’t love you back.”
“Well, that’s where you’re wrong. He did love you back. Even if he didn’t admit it,” Mai shrugged, almost seeming bored.

“Maybe. But, at the time, he really fought hard to deny me. And it worked. For a while…” Emi trailed off, heaving a sigh and running a hand over her face. “I’m not making things any better, am I?”

“If there was anything wrong between me and Zuko, then no, you wouldn’t be making anything better,” Mai remarked. “However, we came to an understanding. We’re fine now.”

“Really?” Emi asked, hopeful. “That’s…great?”

“I suppose so,” Mai sighed. “I haven’t completely forgiven him for using me to get over you, but I have decided that it’s not worth my time to worry about anymore. Besides,” at this, Mai finally allowed a small smile on her face, “if you were able to handle his temper for weeks traveling through the Earth Kingdom, I think you have a decent shot at being with him for the long run.”

“Wow…thank you, Mai. That means a lot, coming from you,” Emi said, smiling.

Mai merely nodded, continuing on her way as if nothing had happened. Emi raised an eyebrow, but shrugged it off as Yuuka poked her head up from the gold and crimson robes curiously. She chuckled, scratching the sugar glider behind the ears as she made her way back through the corridors and out into the palace courtyard.

The area was filled with various people from all three nations, everyone talking and laughing with one another. Emi made her way through the crowds, looking around until she spotted her friends. She grinned and made a beeline toward them. They greeted each other anew, all smiling widely and laughing. She was somewhat surprised to see another old friend of Azula’s had joined Suki’s warrior group; apparently during their time in jail, Ty Lee and the other Kyoshi Warriors had really hit it off, especially with Ty Lee’s lessons on chi blocking.

A gong sounded at that moment, and the crowd turned to face the front of the palace where Zuko stepped out with Aang a short distance behind him. Emi grinned at the sight; both had changed so much over the time she had known them, and she couldn’t be prouder. The crowd cheered and clapped, rejoicing in the their heroes.

“Today, this war is finally over!” Zuko declared. “I promised my uncle that I would restore the honor of the Fire Nation. And I will. The road ahead of us is challenging. A hundred years of fighting has left the world scarred and divided. But with the Avatar’s help, we can get it on the right path, and begin a new era of love and peace.”

Zuko then knelt down as a Fire Sage stepped up behind him, holding the golden fire crown high above his head. “All hail Fire Lord Zuko!” he crowed, stepping back to let the newly crowned Fire
Lord stand up. The crowd cheered again, Emi clapping along with them as she grinned at Zuko with a fresh wave of pride. His eyes scanned the crowds, catching and holding her gaze. It was only a matter of moments, but in that span they simply stared at one another, something stirring within them. An unspoken promise.

- - -

After the coronation, the group gathered together to make plans to fly to the Earth Kingdom the next day to meet with Earth King Kuei and begin the talks on what would happen with the Fire Nation colonies. They chatted about this over dinner, which was a grand feast in Emi’s opinion. After a few hours she was the first to excuse herself, though, wanting to relax in her guest room. They had all been invited to stay the night within the palace once again, this time as honored guests with their own rooms.

As the night dragged on and she heard the doors to her friends’ rooms open and close distantly, Emi sighed, unable to sleep. She sat on the floor by the large window instead, looking out into the quiet night. Yuuka had abandoned Emi to sleep with Momo in Aang’s room, something Emi felt both amused and dismayed by. Without her little sugar glider, she felt oddly alone in the large room, even though her friends were just down the hall.

At that moment, a soft tapping sounded on her door. Emi raised an eyebrow, wondering who could be calling on her this late at night. Maybe Sokka’s looking for Suki, Emi thought to herself, chuckling as she imagined the awkward look on Sokka’s face when he’d realize he had the wrong room. She stood and went over to her door, opening it to reveal not Sokka, but Zuko.

“Oh,” Emi blinked in surprised, smiling. “Fire Lord Zuko, what brings you to my humble abode at this hour?”

“You know, everyone’s been calling me that all day,” Zuko remarked as Emi stepped aside to let him into the room, closing the door behind him. “But somehow, I like it best coming from you.”

“Oh really?” Emi asked in amusement. “Well, Fire Lord, is there something I can do for you?”

“Maybe,” Zuko mused, smirking a little.

Emi rolled her eyes and plopped down onto her bed. “So, you ready for your first official meeting with the Earth King tomorrow?”

“I’m not sure,” Zuko said, sitting next to her. “Azula was the one who was trained in politics. I know some stuff, but I doubt I’m as well educated as she was.”

“Zuko, Azula went crazy and tried to kill us all,” Emi remarked. “I’m sure you’ll do just fine. Besides, Earth King Kuei is a reasonable man, from what the others have said. I’m sure you guys can come to an agreement.”
“Always so positive, aren’t you Emi?” Zuko smiled.

“Someone has to be in this relationship,” Emi smirked.

He chuckled and reached over, stroking her cheek. “You looked beautiful with your Airbender robes today.”

“You looked pretty good yourself, Fire Lord,” Emi replied, leaning into his touch.

Zuko let out a breath, resting his forehead against hers. Their eyes locked again, energy sparking between them in the quiet darkness. “Say it again,” he ordered softly, his tone sending shivers down her spine.

She gazed at him for a moment, a myriad of emotions racing through her blood. She then leaned forward a little more, her lips just barely grazing his. “Fire Lord Zuko,” Emi breathed.

Their lips came together heatedly, urgency and need pouring through their kiss. It didn’t take long for them to sprawl back against the bed, more than ready to connect in the most intimate way possible.

Emi sat with her friends in the Jasmine Dragon, enjoying the quiet atmosphere before they would head off to the Earth Kingdom palace and celebrate the beginning of the Harmony Restoration Movement. Iroh was playing his sunghi horn, much to Emi’s delight. She had greatly missed the low melodious sounds of the instrument. Zuko sat next to her as they drank tea, his warmth a pleasant reminder of what they had shared the previous night. She blushed lightly as she thought back to it, silently sending another prayer of thanks to Haruka’s spirit for having the foresight to teach Emi how to protect oneself during such encounters. That conversation had certainly one of the most embarrassing for the young Airbender, but Haruka had powered through and showed her how to create the concoction that would save her from becoming a mother before she was ready.

“Emi?”

Emi snapped her head up, startled out of her daydreaming as she looked at Aang standing before her. She blinked in surprise; she thought he had gone out to the balcony.

“What’s up?” she asked.

“I’d like to talk to you for a minute, if that’s okay,” he said, smiling at her.

“Sure.” Emi stood up, giving Zuko a light kiss before she followed Aang back out to the balcony.
“So, what’s on your mind?” she asked.

“I was just talking with Katara,” Aang remarked, smiling at the ground as he blushed slightly.

Emi frowned in confusion at his demeanor until a sly grin made it into her face. “Talking…and kissing?” she needled. Aang’s deepening blush was all the answer she needed. “That’s great! It’s about time you two got together.”

“Yeah,” Aang chuckled sheepishly. “But, that’s not what I want to talk to you about. Katara was telling me about how you handled Azula during the comet.”

“Oh?” Emi mused, raising an eyebrow.

“It took a lot of courage to do what you did, Emi. You’ve grown a lot in the time we’ve known each other. You’ve become a great Airbender.”

“Thanks, Aang. But somehow I get the feeling you didn’t call me out here just to compliment me.”

“Well, that is a big part of it,” Aang grinned. “Your actions during the end of the war have proven to me that you have what it takes to be a great bender. To be a master.”

Emi’s eyes widened in shock. “What…what are you saying Aang?”

“I’m saying you’ve earned your tattoos. If you want them.”

“Wha-? Really?!?” Emi’s mouth hung open. “I…I don’t know what to say. I mean…I never thought-”

“That you’d become a master?” Aang asked. “Emi, all the work you’ve put into your training has proven that you have everything it takes to become a master. You’ve definitely earned the right to wear Airbender tattoos.”

Emi blinked, looking back out over the balcony and into the streets below. Since the fall of the Air Nomads, her family had not been able to get their tattoos. Her great grandmother had earned them shortly before the war started, but her son and her grandsons could not wear such revealing decorations. Instead, they had small arrow tattoos placed on the back of their necks, hidden beneath their hair. The only sign that they had become masters. Only her father had never even gotten that much, being too inexperienced at the time to have become a master, and his family dead and gone by the time he did achieve mastery.

Emi smiled, closing her eyes against the tears of happiness that threatened to spill over. What
would her family think of her, earning proper Air Nomad tattoos and not even having to hide them from the world? She hoped they’d be proud.

“I… I am so honored, Aang,” Emi said, turning back to the young Avatar and bowing. “This means so much to me. I joyfully accept! When can we get the tattoos done?”

“I was thinking today, actually,” Aang remarked.

“Really? So soon? But, don’t you have to get certain supplies together, or isn’t there a specific ceremony to set up?” Emi asked, bemused.

“Well…” He ran a hand against the back of his neck sheepishly. “Everything’s already been prepared, actually. The announcement of the Harmony Restoration Movement will coincide with your ceremony. We figured it would make the occasion more meaningful; a new master Airbender coming to light just as the world begins its healing.”

“Wait… what do you mean, ‘we’?” Emi asked in confusion. “Do the others know about this?”

“Of course. You didn’t think Twinkle Toes would have done this all on his own, did you?”

Emi turned around, seeing Toph and the rest of her friends grinning at her. “You all knew about this?!” she asked incredulously.

“Yep,” Zuko remarked.

“Well, we weren’t sure what the plan would be for the Fire Nation colonies at the time, but we knew you had to have your ceremony around whatever we ended up announcing,” Sokka added.

“But… when-?”

“Last night, after you left the dinner table,” Suki explained.

“Guys… this is…” Emi shook her head, her words failing her as she ran over to hug her friends tightly. They all gathered together, sharing the moment before they pulled back. “So, today? Don’t tattoos take a little while to heal?”

“That’s where I come in,” Katara said, smiling.

“You’ll be good to go for tonight!” Aang nodded.
“Okay. Let’s do it!” Emi said, her excitement growing.

- - -

Hours later Emi peered out at the crowd, her nerves bouncing around. She was wearing the traditional hooded robe of Airbender initiates, the golden fabric practically drowning her small frame. Underneath she had on a simple yellow tunic and trousers, the outfit also following the Air Nomad tradition.

“Are you ready?” Aang asked, stepping up beside her.

“I think so,” Emi replied, looking back at him. “I’m kinda nervous, though. I didn’t expect so many people.”

“Between the upcoming announcement for the plans with the colonies and the fact that a new Airbending master is being presented, a lot of people really wanted to witness this for themselves,” Aang replied. “You’ll do fine, Emi. Trust me.”

She heaved a sigh and nodded, following Aang out onto the stage with her head bowed. A few paces behind, she knelt down as he had instructed her to do when he went over the procedure beforehand, keeping her head bowed while Aang addressed the crowd.

“For the last one hundred years, the world has known nothing but chaos and ruin,” Aang began. “The nations stand, shaky and weakened, but still ready to move forward into a new time of peace and harmony. And it is the desire of myself and Fire Lord Zuko that a new era needs a fresh start. The Harmony Restoration Movement will be the forerunner of that beginning, restoring the Earth Kingdom and the Fire Nation to their own rightful places!”

The crowd let out a cheer, ecstatic about the news. Emi smiled to herself, allowing their happiness to soothe her nerves.

“A new age of peace is upon us,” Aang continued. “And as we rebuild the world and the nations, we will be aided by the help of one of the last Airbenders in existence. Emi has proven that, like her ancestors before her, she can endure whatever challenges come her way. With persistence and wisdom, she has become someone with immense courage, using her ingenuity to resolve conflict. It is with these traits that she has earned the right to be called an Airbending Master!”

Aang stepped next to Emi, pulling back her hood and standing aside to allow her to rise. She unclasped her cloak, letting the garment fall away to reveal her newly tattooed arms, legs, and head. The crowd roared and clapped, making her smile sheepishly. She looked over to the side where her friends were gathered, seeing all of them hollering and grinning at her with pride.

“You know,” Emi remarked to Aang over the noise. “I couldn’t have done any of this without you. I would have never gotten to this point if I had stayed in that cottage for the rest of my days.”
Aang smiled. “You put in the effort, Emi. I only passed on what I had learned from the monks. It was your desire to grow that allowed you to do so. And someday, you’ll pass on what you’ve learned to others.”

“Yeah,” Emi smiled, facing Aang and bowing deeply. “We both will.”

Aang bowed in return before gesturing to their friends to join them. Above, the sky erupted with fireworks and the crowd began to move toward the feast that had been set up for both occasions.

“Congratulations, Tenderfoot!” Toph exclaimed as they waited for the mass of people to pass by. “You’ve finally grown up.”

“You know, just because you’ve invented a new bending technique, doesn’t mean you can be all sassy,” Emi shot back with a grin.

“Hey, sassy is my middle name;” she retorted.

“I gotta admit, you look weird without hair,” Sokka remarked, earning a punch to his shoulder from Katara. “Hey! I’m just saying…”

Emi laughed. “It does feel weird. But the honor of getting my tattoos is way more satisfying. Besides, it’s just hair. It’ll grow back.”

“Well let’s get going then! Won’t want to be late for your own celebration, right?” Suki said, grabbing Sokka’s hand and running off toward the direction of the feast. The others followed close behind, save for Emi and Zuko who trailed along a little more slowly.

“Everything feels so different now,” Emi remarked quietly. “But…in a good way.”

“Yeah. I suppose so,” Zuko replied with a light smile. He then frowned a moment later. “It’s not going to be easy, though. We all keep saying it but…it really isn’t going to be easy.”

Emi took Zuko’s hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “Don’t fret, Fire Lord. We’ll make it through. And it’ll all be worth it by the end.”

“How can you be so sure?” he asked with a smirk.

“I can’t,” Emi shrugged. “But still, we have to try, right? The world needs us to do that much.”

“Yeah. It does,” Zuko wrapped an arm around her shoulders, giving her a kiss on her cheek as they
moved to join their friends. For the rest of that night, they all talked and laughed with one another, not worrying about anything that had happened or would come to pass. All that mattered was that moment in time, and each other.

The End

Chapter End Notes

And so we conclude this part of Emi's journey. But don't worry, there will be a sequel! A big thanks to everyone who has been reading along and leaving support. Truly I cannot express my gratitude enough to you all. Nothing makes me happier than knowing my writing has brought someone else some entertainment.

So stay tuned for the next few Mondays for some short stories involving Emi's ancestors. Hopefully by then the sequel will be completed. And after THAT...well, who knows. That's the beauty of writing stories; anything can happen.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!