the game has changed

by Nautica_Dawn

Summary

The war is over. Now comes the hard part.
wait for summertime

Ember Island is peaceful this time of year. It’s been strangely quiet, rebuilding from the damage the end of the war wrought on the island and they have been isolated, rebuilding the royal family’s beach house. But now they’re done and it’s summertime and they have nothing else to do.

Five months they’ve been in the Fire Nation, living freely. From the outside, it must look like they’ve been given a quiet place to hide out while the turmoil their return caused dies down.

To them, though, it’s pretty clear what’s going on.

They’re under house arrest.

Katara looks around at her small family. Toph is sprawled across the floor in her underclothes, her hair fluttering a little as a similarly dressed Ty Lee sits in a window, toying with the wind. From where she sits, Katara can see Zuko in the kitchen, bare-chested and working on a lunch that will hopefully help combat the ungodly heat pressing down on them.

She bends the warm sweat away from her body, sending it out the window closest to her. Dressed only in her bindings and with her hair pulled up with Hama’s comb, she’s trying to figure out just how summer in Ember Island can be so much worse than summer at the Temple of the Winds. They’re roughly along the same latitude on the map, so shouldn’t the climates be about the same?

Maybe it has something to do with the oceans. She’s taken to going down to the sea at night because it’s when the water is coolest. There’s still an unnaturally warm current there. Zuko says it’s because there are volcanoes underwater and they heat the water as they build new islands beneath the waves and to just wait a while and the activity will die down.

She doesn’t particularly care. All she knows is that it makes the water difficult to wield.

The repairs on the beach house are done. Aang didn’t do as much damage as they’d expected; it’d been rather surprising to get here and see the beach house still standing. They’ve been here since the New Year, when they made the choice to turn up at the celebration for Iroh’s coronation.

The past months have been spent in isolation. She has no idea what’s going on in the caldera and isn’t sure she wants to know. Kiki was sent home as a sign of good faith after the initial arguments were completed. Staying at the beach house was actually Zuko’s idea.

She still needs to drown him for that. It took a disturbingly long time to contact an airbender about going to the Temple of the Winds to watch over the animals and the gardens. They only got lucky because Jetsun was arranging a party to go help Elder Sora in Taku.

Speaking of Jetsun, they haven’t heard much from the Fire Nation Elder over the course of their imprisonment. Ty Lee has been sticking by windows. The airbender claims it’s to stay close to the wind, but Katara’s pretty sure it’s to keep an eye out for any messenger hawks.

She sighs and leans back against the table she’s sitting on. The wood beneath her is too warm to be comfortable, but it’s too hot to stay sitting up. The fans Ty Lee built into the ceiling, the ones that use the wind outside to power the blades indoors, are still above them. There hasn’t been a
proper breeze on the island for almost two weeks.

Five months and little news except from the airbender contacts that work independent of the Elders.

Which means Lungta.

They get a message here and there from Shan, but most of that is focused on what’s going on in the Earth Kingdom. There are only rumours about the Fire Nation.

A pitcher is set by her head. “Can you freeze part of this?”

She tilts her head enough to look at Zuko. His hair is falling out of the sloppy topknot he tied it into this morning, the stray strands hanging down around his shoulders.

Around the necklace. Her necklace. It’s not bone like the traditional Southern necklaces, but rather a smooth white stone Toph helped her find. It still looks strange to see it around his neck.

It’s even weirder to think about what it means.

“Yeah,” she says, reaching over her head to press a hand against the pitcher. Large chunks of ice take longer to melt, so she focuses on the liquid in the middle and encourages it to chill and solidify. “What is for lunch?”

“Fruit, mostly. We don’t have much else.”

She frowns. They’re going to need other food soon. They’re almost out of rice. There are noodles still, but not much and without a reliable source of energy—beans, tofu, something—they’re going to have problems. There’s a whole store of preserved fruit and some other things like that, but that’s not going to last long once the heat of summer shuts down the growing season and none of them want to go back to eating meat, not after recent encounters with death.

They’re still clearing out the gardens, which have mostly been reclaimed by nature so there’s a chance they’ll discover something strong enough to survive the summer, but she’s not holding her breath. They have no seed sources to replace anything that may have grown here. Unless there’s something already here, they’re going to have problems.

It’s just that they’ve been tucked away here and forgotten.

Five months and almost no word from the outside world.

Is everyone just hoping they’ll go away if they can’t be seen?

She can’t remember the last time she actually slept. The days are so hot she can barely function and the nights are for crawling out of the beach house and down to where the sand is cool enough it doesn’t mess with her senses.

Water laps at her legs, the tide pushing in around her. Katara’s told her not to lay beneath the tide line, but it’s the only place cool enough to sleep where the ground is solid enough to really hear the earth.

“You’re going to drown if you stay there.” Ty Lee this time, her form blurry through the sand.
“I’d rather drown than die of boredom.”

The airbender gets a little more definition as she steps onto the more solid wet sand, but the water still makes her fuzzy around the edges. “They won’t leave us here forever.”

“You sure about that?”

“They’re probably just withdrawing troops and making sure everyone knows the war is over.”

“And searching for Twinkletoes.”

Okay, too soon. Way too soon. Her chest tightens painfully and her throat closes up and all she can feel is that shaking end to Aang’s heartbeat all those months ago.

What’s going to happen to them? Will the world only come back for them when it finally realises that somewhere in the Tribes is a baby with the power to rule the world? Or will it be before then? Will they come because they have questions about how Azula died or why the caldera city was so damaged or all the ships they’ve sunk and all the factories they’ve destroyed or all the people they’ve killed?

“He wanted to die, Toph.”

She sighs. “I know.”

And she does. Every night all she thinks about is the way he felt, the beat of his heart and the pace of his breathing. Everything about him was at peace and so disturbingly calm. She’s only felt that once or twice before—her grandmother, for instance, the night before the woman went to bed and never got up again.

She just doesn’t get the why.

And just because he wanted to die, doesn’t mean Katara had to let him.

“What did he say to you?”

Ty Lee feels hesitant. “What?”

“In the Fire Nation, when you interrupted my fight. Aang said something to you.”

“Sort of.”

She clicks her tongue. “That’s not an answer, Snow.”

The airbender sighs. “He didn’t exactly say anything to me.”

“But he did say something.”

“Yes.”

“What?”

For a moment, the ocean is the only sound, the tide sweeping in against her legs and the night pressing in around her. It’s peaceful in a way, but she still feels jumpy. Like her blood’s too hot. There’s a rattling down in her bones and she needs to move, to fight, to live.

The war is over and sometimes, it feels like Twinkles isn’t the only one who died.
Her eyes burn. From the salt spray of the ever-creeping tide, she’d say. But Ty won’t ask and it even if she did, it wouldn’t do to lie.

Toph hates it. All the fighting she does these days is against the tears that keep coming and the anger that keeps bubbling up from her gut.

“He said he’s not the last. And then he flew away.” And with that, Snow stands up and leaves.

Toph sits up, turning to call the airbender back when a new form takes shape against her senses. “Katara.”

“Can we talk?” The waterbender sits down without waiting for her answer.

“How have you been?”

“Not sleeping” is the first thing that pops into her mind, but none of them have slept much in the months since the war ended, not after that first month or so when they still lived at the Temple and rarely did anything but sleep.

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Thought number two was closer to the truth: angry. Instead she answers with the first. The anger doesn’t make much sense because it’s not about Aang. At least, she doesn’t think it’s connected to Aang. It’s just a general anger. No real source but just there, lurking beneath the surface of the sorrow and confusion that is definitely connected to Aang and the rest of the war. It’s tangled up in the mess that makes her need to fight again, that desire to live and do something other than sit around and wait for life to happen.

Katara’s quiet for a few moments. “Funny how that works, doesn’t it? We’ve got nothing to do but sleep and none of us can.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Another pause. “I know.”

“Who do you think he is now?”

A hand gently brushes against her forehead, moving a lock of hair. “I don’t know, Toph.”

She leans away from the touch. “Why did he have to change?”

“He asked to.”

He what? “Aang asked you to kill him?”

“He asked to go home.”

“That’s not asking for death!” She jumps up to her feet. Off in the distance, she can feel Zuko and Ty Lee focused on them, but she really doesn’t care. That’s not what matters right now. “Home and death are not the same thing.”

“They are when he has no home in this world.”

“What do you mean by that? He has a home here.”

Katara stands up. “Where? With whom? The airbenders? They’ve made it pretty clear they
The waterbender pauses for a second and then starts up again. “You mean with us? You’re joking, right?”

“No, I’m not.” True, true, all true. But what about them? They owe it to Aang, don’t they? They abandoned him and hurt him and couldn’t they at least have tried to make it up to him?

The way things are, it’s like they just gave up—like Katara just gave up on Twinkletoes and how is that ever acceptable?

They are his masters, his kin even if there is no blood between them. And Ty Lee really is his kin—so is Zuko, but that doesn’t matter right now because masters come first. *Friends* come first.

Aang gave them the world and they gave him a home.

*They gave him a home.*

And then they took it away.

Was it always this difficult to breathe?

“We made him homeless.” Katara’s voice is soft and regretful and Toph hates it. “We left him and grew up without him. Three years is a long time. And you have to remember, home for Aang isn’t with us. It never was. No matter how hard we tried to make him at home in this world, it was never going to work. His home is always going to be the Air Temples, before the war.”

She gets where Katara’s going with this. Really, she does. Aang wanted to be among his own people but they are gone and never coming back. The war, the peace after it, none of it was his. It could have been, but it wasn’t.

But Twinkles is still a kid. Yes, the three years they were away must have done some damage, but he’s only fifteen.

She’s only fifteen. There are still decades ahead, an entire lifetime waiting to be lived. Aang could have gotten over some of his issues, couldn’t he? Couldn’t he learn to live in this world once the war ended?

Couldn’t he at least have been given the chance to forgive them for what they did?

No, no, nononononono.

She does not need this right now. It hurts to breathe, it hurts to think, and Katara’s worried voice and gentle hands hurt even more.

Toph stumbles back and there’s just a moment—just a tiny moment when she thinks any touch will make her dissolve into tears.

Unacceptable.

She turns and runs away instead.

Things aren’t exactly tense in the days that follow Toph’s outburst, and yet they are.
Something’s changed, but nothing’s changed. It’s just a few little things here and there. Toph is quieter than usual, and spends most of her time hidden away, only slinking out once a day for food. Katara stays down by the water most nights and sleeps most days. Zuko stays in the library, she thinks, when he isn’t cooking.

Who would have thought Zu-Zu liked to cook?

Ty Lee has lived with these people for three years, known two of them at least four years and known the last longer than she cares to think about. It’s like the end of the war removed everything defining about them. Who are they now that the war is over? Have their identities really been shaped by conflict so extremely that they cannot live in peacetime?

She herself was never on the front lines, not really. She doesn’t know what it means to be on a ship, easily recognized and hated by the world. She doesn’t know what it means to live on the back of a bison with no privacy and hunted by the world. She doesn’t know what it means to be a child having to face an adult with the very real possibility that that adult may kill her.

She’s been lucky.

She’s killed before, but it’s always been the Kagami way: as a shadow hidden and unknown. She’s been in danger, but it’s always been from a mysterious force she never really saw. The Fire Nation who hunted and killed airbenders has always been the specter haunting them. It’s never really had a face—Azulon was before her time, Ozai was a joke, Zuko would never hurt them, Azula would never hurt her.

That one hurts.

Hurts a lot, actually.

Azula doesn’t make much sense. Never has, really. The rule was to watch her and protect the airbenders from her, but Ty Lee has always felt the urge to protect Azula too.

Mai loves Azula and what Mai loves, Ty Lee protects.

Except the one time she didn’t is the one time it mattered.

The one time Ty Lee turned on Mai and took her breath until Mai went to sleep, Azula went to sleep too. But Mai woke up and Azula never will.

She and Zuko need to talk about that. She knows they need to talk about it. Azula and Mai comprise a major portion of their individual and shared histories and that needs to be sorted out before the future can be dealt with.

It’s just—she doesn’t know how to speak to him. Every time she approaches and considers starting it, she doesn’t know what to say. She knocked out her sworn sister, he killed his sister, the war is over, they rebuilt a house, he’s married—sweet Agni, Zuko is married.

It’s been almost six months and it’s like everything happened so fast at the end that she couldn’t catch her breath enough to stop and think.

How funny. She’s an airbender and she can’t breathe.

Twilight falls on Ember Island without warning. Here it is bright and sunny one moment, and then the glowing ochre of evening and then the silky dark of midnight, all in one heartbeat. It’s not like it is at the Temple. Ember Island is open and unprotected.
She never thought she’d miss the mountains.

“Ty, can you come help me?”

She blinks and turns to face Zuko. He’s standing next to the back door, a basket balanced on his hip. “What are you doing?”

“Laundry.”

“Yeah, okay.”

He leads her outside, towards the fountain that no longer works. In silence, they set up and it isn’t until night has almost fallen that he speaks. “It hasn’t changed anything.”

She looks up, pausing with a shirt held at the middle of the washboard. “What hasn’t?”

He smiles a little and points a hand at the white necklace around his throat, suds running down his arm as he does. “This. It doesn’t change anything.”

But it does. It does because they are in the outside world now and labels are needed where they weren’t. It does because Zuko is the Crown Prince again and he is married to a potentially disowned Water Tribe Princess and he is currently elbow-deep in soapy water washing clothes.

It’s absurd.

“Ty Lee, if you want to talk, you can.”

She shrugs. “I don’t know what there is to talk about.”

Without the war, the ongoing struggle, the Avatar, it’s like the earth has disappeared and they’re all just drifting. There’s no direction, no meaning. Just floating on a wind with no path.

What’s the point in flying if there’s no place to land?

“I just want to know when we’re going to leave.” She doesn’t like it here. She sent Kiki home with her glider, so she has no way to fly here. That’s infuriating, having the sky taken from her like that.

“Soon, I suspect. I doubt they’ll keep us out here past midsummer.”

She picks up another shirt. “I don’t like it. They’ve had six months to talk about reconstruction without us.”

“They won’t make any life decisions for us.”

“And if they do?”

Zuko grins. “I think we can take them in a fight.”

“We are not starting another war.”

“Katara might. From what I know, she has enough dirt on the Northern Water Tribe to trigger a civil war. And you should have enough information to destroy the Fire Nation.”

He’s right, probably. And they do have the airbenders behind them. She doubts Aunt Jet would let the White Lotus decide anything they won’t agree to, but still.

It’s been six months. Something’s happened and they have no idea what. That isn’t good. For any of
them. When they are finally summoned to the caldera, it will be into a situation with rules they don’t know. That’s not a good situation.

The White Lotus is deliberately putting them into a weaker position. No matter the intelligence they have, if they are too far out of the mainstream, they won’t have the higher ground to win the battle.

And the coming battles are going to be psychological. It’s not going to be the same as fighting the Fire Nation with the clear goal of ending the war.

“I just don’t like it.”

Zuko sits up and wrings out the bindings he’s cleaning. “None of us do.”

Around them, night falls.

The summons comes a week later. Things have just started to heal, maybe. Toph has finally started to spend time outside of her room and Katara has mostly returned to a daytime schedule.

Ty Lee is helping Katara in the kitchen when the hawk lands on his arm. He glances back at the house to see if either of them noticed it’s arrival before taking the scroll from it’s back and letting it hop onto one of the nearby trees. The summons itself is impersonally worded, though it is written in Uncle’s hand.

So Uncle is still mad. Unsurprising.

They are to be at Ran-Shao—a new name for the capital, that’s not a good sign—before the next full moon. The hawk seems to be staying put, so he slips inside the house and writes a quick missive to the Temple to send Kiki back. By the time he has sent the hawk on its way, he’s drawn attention.

“They finally call us in?” Toph tilts her head, black hair falling loose around her waist. She looks so small under the mass of hair. The things he’s seen her do, know she has done, none of it seems right.

She’s just a fifteen-year-old kid.

But then again, at her age, he wasn’t exactly a kid either.

He nods. “We have until the full moon.”

“We have no transportation.”

“I sent for Kiki. It’s still a couple of weeks until the moon, so she should get here in time.” He folds up the summons and tucks it into the folds of his belt before holding out an arm for the earthbender. “Shall we?”

She snorts and shoves him out the way. “It’s about time they got us out of here. Are the guards going to be leaving now?”

He sighs, glancing toward the perimeter of the estate. Toph is the only one to actually acknowledge the presence of the guard. He’s fairly certain Ty and Katara know about them, but they were the first to realise that they had just been placed under house arrest.

“Toph, please try to be on your best behavior when we get to the palace.”
She grins. “What, me? I never cause problems.”

He sighs. “I’m serious.”

She just waves him off. “Yeah, I know. We need to be a united front because we can’t let the White Lotus and the others control our destinies and there are some things they really shouldn’t know about our wartime activities.”

“What about our wartime activities?” Ty Lee bounces into view, a plate of fruit tarts balanced on her head.

“We have been summoned.” Toph slinks by the airbender, pulling back her hair. “Sweetness, what’s for dinner?”

“Berry soup, fruit tarts, and fruit.”

“No tea, just wine.”

“Wine?” He steps up beside the waterbender, helping her gather the other foods. “Please remember that it just takes a drop of wine to make Ty Lee drunk enough to think Toph can fly.”

“We’re out of tealeaves.”

“The gardens—”

Katara shakes her head. “There aren’t any good tea herbs there. Besides, this is only until Kiki gets here.”

“You heard that?”

She picks up the bowels in one hand and the soup pot in another. “It’s Toph. Yes, I heard.”

“It’ll be about a week before we can leave.”

She tilts her head contemplatively. “We might not have enough food. We still have some of those grains the Lungta sent us, but I don’t know how much longer it will last.”

“Beyond fruit what do we have?”

“More fruit. Some nuts, maybe. Everything else is either shutting down or preparing to ripen.” She sighs and looks around the kitchen. “Did anyone tell them we don’t eat meat before they locked us up?”

“I don’t know. Why?”

“Because the only reliable source of protein on this property is fish.”

Fish, right. A common food for Fire Nation and Water Tribe and since Toph is the only Earth Kingdom native among them, it would have been a reasonable assumption if no one knew about the change in diet.

Which is expected. No one bothered to ask anything personal while they were there. They were at the palace for a little over two days, during which time they were isolated in his old rooms. He’d only suggested sending them to Ember Island because keeping Toph and Katara isolated from their
elements is asking for trouble.

He just didn’t think it would take Uncle and the others six months to get to the point that they could deal with them.

It’s kind of hard to do any reconstruction without knowing the whole story.

But there is so much of their story that they won’t tell.

The Lungta, the mass destruction in the Fire Nation, the death of Aang—he doubts they’ll reveal much of that.

They set the table and gather round, eating in silence. The soup is good, made with the last berries the island will see until the weather cools down again. It’s when the food is gone and they’re each settled in with a shallow cup of wine watered down with fruit juice.

“So what are we going to tell them?” Toph sits with her cheek squished against her palms, elbows squarely on the table.

Beside her, Ty Lee is the picture of aristocracy. “You’ll have to tell them about Wulong and I’ll have to tell them about Ba Sing Se.”

“And Taku,” Toph adds.

The airbender nods. “And Taku. From there, we can say we hid in the mountains near there.”

“Which is true,” Katara says. “We’ll have to explain Kiki at the least, and we should probably tell them about some of what we did.” She sighs and runs a hand over her hair. “I just don’t know what.”

“Maybe we should wait and find out how much they’ve figured out?”

He sighs. “I don’t think we have much of a choice. They’ve had six months to talk. Chances are they’ve drawn more than a few conclusions.”

“You’ll have to tell them about you and Katara.” Ty Lee chirps. “And good luck with that one.”

He cringes. Beside him, the waterbender—his wife—does much the same. “We’ll cross that bridge when we have to. Daily to twice daily meetings sound like a good idea.”

He shakes his head. “Spending every moment not in a meeting together sounds like the better plan. United front and all that.”

They have to be united. Together they are strong enough to end an era. Separated, he doesn’t know what they’re capable of.

Separated, their weaknesses show.

“They won’t try to kill us or anything, will they?” Toph asks.

“Some might.” Ty Lee shrugs. “My family will definitely try to kill me at least once. Depending on how secure Mai is, she might go after Zuko or me. Katara’s the most likely to get attacked, though.”

“Thanks, Ty.” Katara grimaces.

Zuko nods. “We prepare all our own food, so pack what you can from here. We’ll have to sneak out
of the palace and secure our own food when we run out, just to be safe. And we stay in connected rooms. Uncle’s going to try and keep us in the Fire Lord’s wing, but I say we go for the nursery wing instead.”

“You want us to stay in kids’ rooms?” Toph scoffs.

“They’re connected, badgermole.” The airbender pats the girl’s arm gently. “The nursery has a large play room and it’s surrounded by bedrooms where the children and nurses would sleep. It’s the safest place in the palace.”

“And I’m going to assume you know all the weak spots, so you’re in charge of security,” he says to Ty Lee.

She nods in response and stands up, dragging Toph with her. “We’ll go talk about that now, you two settle the rest.”

Silence falls as airbender pulls earthbender from the room.

Awkward.

He turns and faces Katara. She looks the same way she always does these days: white wrappings bright against her dark skin, hair pulled back with the whale-tooth comb, the two necklaces glinting against her chest.

The two—she’s shortened the ribbon of her mother’s necklace so the pendant falls just a little past his, the traditional waterbending emblem a pair to the mark of the Goddess of the Seas.

There’s a rush of warmth thinking about the meaning of that emblem in his family. Maybe Ty was right, maybe his ancestors were pirates. “You okay?”

It’s a stupid question. She sleeps beside him. Or tries to, at least. None of them have slept well since returning to the world. Her nightmares have gotten worse and he knows she’s barely sleeping more than a couple of hours each night. Most of the last couple of weeks, when she’s slept through most of the day, isn’t because of Toph. It’s simple exhaustion.

She’s a nocturnal soul. Uncle once told him the polar night lasts longer in the South Pole than in the North, and that winter is much colder there. What must that be like, spending your whole life in a brutal environment like that and then uproots to travel the world and settle in a temperate climate like the Temple? And then spend half a year in the Fire Nation?

She’s extraordinary. Fourteen and she challenged everything. Took on the Northern Water Tribe’s customs and won. Took on his sister with Sozin’s Comet in the air and won. Trained the Avatar despite having minimal training herself. Even before that, what little she’s told him about being the sole waterbender in the South Pole—how she’s made it to this age, he doesn’t know.

And then there’s Toph, the girl who learnt earthbending from the badgermoles. Twelve years old and fought off the Dai Li, trained the Avatar, created a new form of bending using metal instead of stone; a child born blind but capable of changing the world. Ty Lee, too. An airbender in the company of the royal family. She survived his sister and Mai, the Fire Nation as a whole, and took back the skies.

They’ve traveled the world, fought everyone and everything that stood in their way and survived. How any of them have made it to this age is a mystery. By all rights, they should all be dead.

“You’re staring.”
He blinks and looks away. “Sorry.”

“No, it’s okay.” She waves him off. “Mind telling me what to expect in the capital?”

That’s an unsettling thought. Katara pre-comet would have been a naïve enough to charm and vicious enough to subdue any remaining aristocrats. But now? Post-comet, she’s more sea than snow. At the drop of a pin she can go from polite and sweet to terrifying and completely unforgiving. It’s reassuring when she’s out on the battlefield because he knows he doesn’t have to worry about her so much.

It’s not so reassuring in the political field.

“Ty’s right, you should expect assassins.” Pressure begins to build behind his eyes. “And be very careful. Try to avoid being alone at any time. You are technically a princess, even without me, so they will be critical of you. I don’t know how long it will take for news of us to spread. A few might try to approach you to try and gain favor with the Water Tribes.”

She snorts. “Thanks for reminding me of that. I think the Water Tribes are going to be more dangerous there than any Fire Nation or Earth Kingdom noble.”

He almost asks, but then remembers the Northern Water Tribe. They have no heir and the Southern Water Tribe has two.

“Anything I need to watch out for?”

“Not really. Waterbenders are a little more creative with assassinations, so keep alert. My father and my brother might try to beat you up. My grandmother is terrifying when she’s angry, but I doubt she’ll take it out on you. You remember Master Pakku, don’t you?”

“White Lotus, Northern Water Tribe.” He tries to remember what else he knows about the elderly waterbender. “Married your grandmother, right?”

She nods. “I doubt he’ll do anything out of respect for your uncle, but tell me if he does.”

“We’re going to have play this by ear, aren’t we?” It’s rhetorical, but he still feels like it needs to be said. They have no idea what they’re going to be faced with and that’s scary.

Katara leans against him, her head resting on his shoulder. “We survived the war. We can survive this. Can’t we?”

Possibly. She and he have an advantage. They are married and he supposes they could argue for custody of Toph. They’ve raised her since the age of twelve and she’s fifteen now. When is the age of majority in the Earth Kingdom again? Ty Lee is a year out from being an adult by Fire Nation standards, but Jetsun can protect her until then.

Until then, what? If the marriage isn’t considered legal by Fire Nation standards, what will they do? If they can’t argue for custody or emancipation for Toph, then what happens? If one of them falls to an assassin, what happens?

If they can’t outsmart the White Lotus, then what?

The war has ended and they have survived, but it feels like they’re about to step out into a new war. All the preparation they’ve done—the bending, the treaties, the intelligence network…

The intelligence network.
“We need to speak to the Airbenders.”

Katara sits up. “What?”

“We need to speak to the Airbenders,” he repeats. “We’re going to need the Acolytes if we’re going to make it through this.”

There’s a flash of recognition in her eyes and he knows she’s understood.

They’ll make it out of this. The world might have all the advantages, but they’ve survived against greater odds.

They won’t lose this fight.
Ran-Shao is more than a city with a new name. He hardly recognizes the caldera city. It is night when they arrive, and yes, things look different in the dark, but it shouldn’t be like this. More than three-fourths of the caldera is submersed in the night. The lights that should be on in noblemen’s homes are gone, not because their inhabitants have not made the journey but because those homes are no longer standing.

Six months and they’ve only just begun reconstruction. Looking closer at the caldera floor, he can just barely see scaffolding for new buildings. So the previous months have been spent cleaning up the damage?

Agni, how much was there?

“Zuko, the Acolyte is here.” Ty’s soft voice pulls him away from the window. There will be time to examine how his homeland has changed later. For now, it is time to focus.

The Acolyte is young, maybe fifteen or sixteen. She’s sort of pretty, with brown hair and classic Air eyes. She smiles softly and he can’t help but notice that Katara and Toph both refuse to acknowledge the girl. The waterbender sits off to the side, staring at the far wall, eyes glazed over. Toph picks at dirt under her fingernails.

Ty Lee is smiling too, but nervous like a battlefield. “This is On Ji. She’ll be helping us while we’re here.”

History, all history. Toph and Katara both know this girl, he thinks. They won’t look at her and she won’t look at them. That can’t all be Fire Nation bias, not when this girl is of Air blood.

Is it always going to be like this; their ghosts clinging to them with every step and every breath, the voices of the dead echoing throughout their minds? Things had settled down a little at Ember Island, but here it’s different. Here, there are people and lies. So, so many lies.

The Acolyte nods nervously. “Elder Jetsun sent clothes for you. She said you’re to report to the dinner at—”

“Mind telling us something we don’t already know?”

“Toph, behave yourself.” He scowls at the earthbender, but she’s truly blind in this place, so it’s not like she could acknowledge the expression.

That will take some getting used to.

An uneasy smile flickers across On Ji’s face. “It’s alright. You want to know what’s been decided.”

“That would be helpful.” He tries to sound reassuring.

“Not much.” She pauses, and then, “They’ve already figured out Avatar Aang isn’t returning.”
His heart clenches as Katara’s power flares. Silence reigns. If they’ve already discovered Aang’s death, then do they know how it occurred?

Apparently he spoke aloud, for On Ji responded. “The last I heard, they think he and Fire Lord Azula killed each other.”

Ty Lee places a hand on the younger girl’s shoulder. “What? That’s not possible. Azula died in her bedroom.”

“But she was found outside amid the ruins with a hole in her chest.”

Everything feels too warm. And the air—the air’s too thin. He tries to focus and stand up, but it’s too difficult to move. There are cool hands on his arm, helping him, he thinks. One room to the next, it’s dark in here.

“Don’t even think about attempting to bend in this condition.”

“I’m fine.” He’s gasping and his vision is a little blurry.

And all he can think about is that someone moved his baby sister from where he left her with her arms folded across her chest like she were sleeping, and put a hole where her heart should be and stuck her outside in the storm they left behind and who would—

“No, you’re not. And if you burn this place down trying to light a lamp, I will see to it you survive long enough to feel me slowly freeze your body from the inside out.”

Katara, then.

Something’s odd with his chest. His heart is running slower than it should, his blood colder than it should be. It’s calming. Not really anything else, just—tranquil. Agni, when was the last time he felt like this?

He leans forward, towards the power tugging on his heart. His forehead comes to rest on something small but strong—her shoulder, yes, that’s her hair tickling his skin and those are her arms coming up around him. Has she always been this small?

Azula was bigger than this. A little more slender, but taller. And so much warmer. Katara is so cold, the unnatural chill of the South Pole clinging to her like armour. She’s too cold, just like Azula when the lighting arched to her heart and the fire faded—

It’s too hard to breathe again. The floor is suddenly much closer, Katara keeping him from falling all the way. Her little hand is over his heart, her bending pulsing through his bloodstream to slow his heartbeat and, yes, she’s lowering his body temperature.

Smart woman.

“Breathe, just breathe.” Her voice is soft and steady. It sounds like sleep, almost. No, that’s just the cold.

He takes her hand away from his heart. Her wrist is so small. How is it that the most delicate people he knows are the most dangerous?

Dangerous thought, there. That leads to Azula and Azula is not what he needs to be thinking of right now.

“We shouldn’t have come here.”
“Was I supposed to leave you out there?”

He shakes his head. “I meant here, to the city. We should have stayed at the Temple.”

She pushes him away just enough to brush his hair back. “Possibly, but it’s too late now. We’re here and we have to see this through.

The tea is ready by the time Zuko and Katara return. Toph has wandered off to a corner of the room, clearly unhappy with what On Ji has said.

Then again, she herself isn’t too happy. Aunt Jet has to have a plan beyond this one.

*This* is madness.

“Ty?” Katara has a teacup in hand, sweeping up jasmine from the pot with her bending. “Did we miss anything important?”

She almost speaks, but sees Zuko. He’s not okay. “I should have warned On Ji to not mention Azula.”

It hurts to say her name, but this is a place where weakness is lethal.

Azula’s free now. Just focus on that.

“We didn’t know someone had changed things.”

Ty Lee nods, glancing back at Toph. “Take that to him. I need to talk to you.”

The waterbender raises an eyebrow but does as requested.

“Do you want me to fill him in on what’s happening?” Toph taps her shoulder. This is going to be the most difficult part of this, she thinks. There isn’t enough earth or metal in the palace for the earthbender to reliably sense things and it’s been too long since she’s spent much time in a place like this. More than likely, one of them is going to have to stay near her to keep track of the things she can’t sense.

“Please.”

No other words are exchanged. This is going to have to be fixed. She can only really carry on a conversation with Katara. With Toph, it seems to just be work and Zuko is still silent around her.

Katara and Toph haven’t really spoken since their argument on Ember Island. It’s only a miracle that Katara and Zuko are still comfortable with each other, she thinks.

Tea dances in front of her face. “Earth to Ty. You said we needed to talk?”

She nods and takes the teacup from the waterbender. “Is Zuko stable enough to do this?”
“Once the initial shock wears off, he should be fine. Why?”

Ty Lee takes a deep breath, focusing on her element and summoning its bravery. “They’re going to put us on trial.”
Silence.

Across the room, Toph is speaking to Zuko too quietly to hear without twisting the air in this direction.

The tea is ice cold when she takes a drink.

“Trial?”

She nods. “Each of us, individually, sitting before the court and answering increasingly invasive questions. On Ji said we probably won’t be formally told for a couple of days, but Aunt Jet lost the fight to keep this from happening this afternoon.”

It could be argued they haven’t actually broken any laws, but that’s a lie. They’re guilty of war crimes, easily. So is the Fire Nation, though, and the genocide of her people will outweigh everything they’ve done. But they have committed crimes against the Northern Water Tribe and the Earth Kingdom.

How many Dai Li agents did they kill?

How many trade routes and towns did they level to prevent the movement of the Fire Nation through the Earth Kingdom?

How many Northern ships and sailors went down because of their treaty with the Fire Nation?

How many civilians were on the naval bases they destroyed?

How many worked in the communications bases they demolished?

And before that, her association with Mai and Azula could get her a death sentence. For the others, Zuko is guilty of treason, among other things. Toph is probably guilty of illegal gambling, among other things.

And Katara—what will they do to the bloodbender?

“We need to talk about what we’re going to tell them, Katara. We can’t go out there with different stories of the same event.” She sets her tea down and takes the waterbender’s from her. It’s starting to freeze in hers and it is solid in Katara’s.

“I know. We’ll have to do it at night. I doubt we’ll be left alone during the day.”

“Probably not.” Good. Katara is the one who has the least interaction with any form of aristocracy. The more she understands the better this will go.

“I need to know more about the Water Tribe.”

“Why?”

“Because the Airbenders have spies everywhere except the Water Tribes. We need to know what we’re up against.”
“The North will be a bigger threat than the South. Gran-Gran and Master Pakku will protect us from the worst of the South.”

“Are you sure?”

“No.”

This isn’t good. She’ll have to talk to the Acolytes about fixing the lack of spies. Maybe they can turn a Water Tribe member or two. “I need to know what you have on the North.”

“What?”

She sighs. “I know you looked into why the Northern Water Tribe prospered while the South was driven to the brink of extinction. I need to know what you discovered.”

Katara won’t make eye contact. “I think the North had a treaty with the Fire Nation.”

“We already know that.”

“I mean before.”

Before?

Oh.

Before the attacks on the South. Before this most recent trade agreement.

“How old do you think it is?”

“At a minimum, seventy-five years.”

“Are you sure?”

Katara nods. “That’s about when my grandmother left the North and about when the North closed its borders.”

A picture is already forming, but she still has to ask. “Do you have any idea as to what the terms of the treaty were?”

Eye contact, finally. “I think they were killing waterbenders to prevent the Avatar being born there.”

Makes sense. “So that’s why they focused on the South?”

“But how did the Fire Nation learn how to overwhelm a waterbender surrounding by water? And the prisons here, like the one Master Hama was kept in; how did they learn how to do that?”

That’s a damning accusation. One that could easily start another war. The infanticide is strictly a Northern issue. Unconscionable, but it has nothing to do with the South.

Any information that may have been given to the Fire Nation to be used against the South, however, that is personal and dangerous.

She’ll have to get an Acolyte into the archives. The date sounds accurate, but if not, it’s hopefully close enough. There can’t be that many Water Tribe documents in the archives can there?
And that is, of course, hoping that any document about this is held there. If it were a verbal agreement, there probably isn’t any proof.

This is going to be so much fun.

This is annoying. Things are blurry at best here. They’re going to have to do something about this. Metal shoes, maybe? Will that help?

She’s sitting with Katara’s knee pressed against her leg on one side, and Snow’s thigh against hers on the other. She can feel Zuko all the way on the other side of Katara, their bodies in almost contact.

At least they gave her metal eating utensils. Just sensing her companions isn’t enough. She needs to feel her food, especially if she isn’t going to be able to distinguish the other diners in the room from the mess that is the wooden floors.

Seriously, who builds a wooden palace for firebenders?

“Our food is safe, isn’t it?” Ty Lee whispers.

“I can’t find any poisons,” is the soft response from the waterbender.

Poison apparently changes the feel of the water. Good to know that. Toph just sighs and shifts the cold metal chopsticks in her hand before picking up a dumpling. She doesn’t know what to say here. Ember Island was one thing. The guards were too far to hear them.

Here, though, where she can barely sense a thing?

She wants to run, to break down the walls and return it all to earth. It’s a fury, rattling her bones until she can’t breathe.

It’s probably not healthy.

“At least they’re acknowledging we’re here.”

Barely. No one has spoken to them, bar the Acolytes serving them. They’re out on display, sacrifices waiting to be slaughtered.

Is this what life after the war is going to be? Because she didn’t work to end it for things to turn out like this.

The plates are picked up and a new course set before them. She recognizes some of the smells. Zuko’s made this before.

Yes, he has. The flavours bring back the memories; it was their first night under house arrest on Ember Island. To this day, the dish tastes like an apology.

“What do we have to drink with this one?”
“It’s a plum wine. Earth Kingdom origin.” Snow says softly. There’s a rustle of fabric and a cold hand on hers before the slender glass is placed against her hand. “I told them to only use the iron or stone for you, but apparently they didn’t listen.”

“It’s fine.” The wine is sickly sweet. The plum wine the Lungta traded them a few times was much nicer. “I miss the days when we were breaking things.”

“So do I.” Katara, that time.

Toph can feel the agreement from the other two members of their group. It’s comforting to know she’s not the only one—missing feels like the wrong word. No one misses being at war. But the inaction following so much action is just strange. “Are we allowed to train?”

“There’s a small training ground near our rooms.” Zuko says. “It’s not ideal for an earthbender, but we can make it work.”

In other words, no.

“Clandestine bending.” She grins. “My specialty.”

“We can maybe go downstairs,” he adds.

She almost asks when she remembers their trip in that last night of the war. The underground palace beneath the caldera.

And the tunnel out of here.

Admittedly, that one was probably mostly for Katara. The lake down there is going to be their best source of water for her. But still. They can get out here from there.

Even a short vacation from stuffy clothes and stuffier nobles will be welcome.

“Do we know if anything will happen tonight?” She picks at the food, unable to eat.

“Probably nothing.” Zuko says. “They’re not going to attempt assassination until they’re certain of where we stand.”

“And where is that?”

“Toph, behave.” It’s a soft admonishment from their waterbender. It’s tempting to strike back, but she knows why they can’t be arguing in public.

They have to be a united front.

But it is a valid question. Where do they stand? What do they stand for? She’s fairly certain every one of them would have preferred staying out of sight and out of mind at the Temple. They’re only back because the political world outside the valley was too volatile to stay away.

But they could have done it.

They’ve all agreed that a school would be a good idea, and there’s enough Lungta and hidden airbenders they can easily fill a school. With their unified bending form, they can easily train benders of different persuasions. They can hire Acolytes and other wind children to teach other subjects. They could have, from the shadows, helped rebuild a civilization.

Instead they are here, in unknown territory surrounded by potential enemies and there is no fighting.
Just what are they supposed to be doing?
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Sokka has been staring at her since she walked in. It’s a little unnerving, because for the first time in her life, she has no idea what her brother is thinking. He looks more like Dad, tall and strong. But there is no humour present. No sign of his crooked smile or his vibrant laugh.

He’s a stranger to her.

How must she look to him, dressed as she is with only Zuko’s necklace visible above the collar of her dress? The other stays hidden. Aang had it and she doesn’t know how many people knew about it.

Guilt churns in her stomach and she sets down her spoon. The desert before her smells divine, but it tastes of ash.

“Katara?” Zuko keeps his voice down, not even turning to face her.

“I’m fine. Just ate too much.” She doesn’t even sound convincing. Not that she would need to. She’s barely touched her food. None of them have eaten much.

Why isn’t anyone talking to them? It’s just silent stares and judgment. Like these strangers know what they did, know all the lives they took.

She wants to drown them. She can feel the water rushing through the pipes in the floor and walls. There’s wine and water at the tables.

There’s blood in every body.

She sighs and closes her eyes, focusing on the red of Zuko’s heart, the green of Toph and the grey of Ty. The steady beat of hearts she’s known for four years is just about all that keeps her stable these days.

But then those thoughts lead to focusing on hers, and now that she knows what to look for, she can see the faint ribbons of green and grey in hers, the darkness of the abyss looking more purple around the edges than it should.

And then she thinks of the vibrant colours of Avatar spirit and then the steady dawn sky of Aang—

Breathe. Just breathe.

She needs to talk to Master Hama again. It probably won’t do to sneak out and break into the Tower again. She’ll have to do this officially this time. Which has a certain appeal to it. If she does it officially, she can ask for Master Hama’s release and return to the South Pole.

All she needs is an unbreakable argument to convince General—Fire Lord Iroh.

“Sweetness, wake up.”
She blinks. People are standing. The dinner is over. “Sorry, I was distracted.”

“Bloodbending?” Zuko asks quietly, helping her up.

“Trying not to.” She reaches out with her bending briefly, trying to locate Sokka in the crowd, but she can’t find him in the room and she’s not willing to cast a wider net. “Where do we go now?”

“I suspect we’re supposed to follow her.” Ty nods to the other side of the room, where On Ji motions for them to follow once they’re all looking in her direction.

They leave the room without anyone trying to speak to them.

“How long is that going to continue?” Katara looks back at the closed doors of the hall.

“They’re studying us.” Toph’s arm is hooked through Ty Lee’s, the first time Katara can remember seeing airbender and earthbender in contact since before Ember Island.

On Ji says nothing, just leads them through the palace. Katara tugs on Zuko’s sleeve, tilting her head up towards his ear to whisper. “Where is she taking us?”

The Acolyte stops then, turning towards them. “Fire Lord Iroh has requested Prince Zuko’s presence for tea. Elder Jetsun wishes to see the rest of you.”

“Katara stays with me.”

“I agree,” Ty adds. “Toph and I will meet with Aunt Jet. Prince Zuko and his wife will meet with Lord Iroh.”

The way she says his wife is annoying.

But that is the way things will be now, isn’t it? It doesn’t matter how they are in private, the world will still see her as less than him.

People are awful.

Zuko takes her arm and leads her by the Acolyte. She glances back just in time to see Ty Lee lead Toph away down a different hall, abandoning On Ji.

Poor girl. Hopefully things work out better for her.

Hopefully things work out better for all of them. Katara can’t remember the last time she really felt like herself. Then again, she can’t remember the last time she was even certain of who she was. Everything feels like freefall these days. She’s been using her bending to bathe, if only because she’s afraid of going under and never coming out if she does it any other way. She knows there something wrong in her head. The homicidal and suicidal thoughts aren’t normal. The anger and ennui aren’t normal. The crushing sorrow is—what happened at the end is a perfect justification for that particular emotion.

But the rest of it is just odd. She remembers the anger and sorrow from her mother’s murder, but this is different. This isn’t focused. The littlest thing sets her off. And the flashbacks. Those are the worst part of it all.

One minute, pulling the water out of vegetables to preserve them. The next, remembering the feel of a soldier’s heart bursting in his chest at her will.
She moves closer to Zuko, her free hand reaching up to feel the whale-tooth comb in her hair. It’s calming, the sensation of the old bone against her skin. The comb keeps her grounded. It reminds her of Master Hama and rather than remember that horrible introduction to bloodbending, she remembers the Five Flavor Soup and the joy at finding another Southern Waterbender. She remembers Hama in the Tower and the pride in her voice when she explained the abyss and Katara’s potential.

These days, Master Hama feels more like the nostalgia and comfort of her childhood than the South Pole does.

There’s probably something wrong with that.

She just doesn’t care anymore.

“Are you going to be alright?” She reaches up to brush a strand of hair away from his eyes.

He nods. “I can do this. Is he alone?”

She puts her hand against the door and focuses. There’s Iroh, tarnished gold. Imperial and comforting at the same time. There’s another bender present too, cold and bright like moonlit snow. A waterbender then, older. Close to Iroh’s age. And beyond them, non-benders. She sighs and focuses just a little more, trying to avoid alerting the waterbender.

Three non-benders. There’s a chill to them, much in the way Mai felt like a Fire Nation night, but different. One—female, yes, female—feels like the bitter cold of the Antarctic winter. The elder of the two men feels like the days of the midnight sun, the younger feeling more like a spring day.

_Sokka._

“No, he isn’t.” So Sokka, Gran-Gran, Father, and that means the bender must be Master Pakku.

“How bad is it?”

She stands up straight, head held high and holds his arm the way Ty Lee taught her proper court ladies do. “Brace yourself.”

“I was afraid of that.” He adjusts his own posture. “Are you ready?”

“No. You?” She watches as he hesitates before knocking.

“Not in the slightest.”

And then it opens.

Chapter End Notes

This story has gone so far off-script and only two chapters in. I think that’s a new record. Part of the reason for this is that I apparently underestimated how bad the psychological damage the characters were going to be dealing with post-war. I knew there was severe
damage, but it is manifesting in ways I didn't quite expect. Namely, I'm surprised by how cognizant they are of how bad the damage is.

This story is going to move slowly until I figure out how it is going to go. I know the epilogue already—it bridges the gap between "game" and "darkening of the light". But "game" has a plot that can go one of several ways, all depending on Katara and her story. Zuko's story is pretty much set. Toph and Ty Lee have a little more flexibility, but Katara is just a mess. Because of this, Katara may have a side story that fits between "game" and "light".

This one is also just going to move slower because it is almost entirely psychological. The actual plot is technically already there, but reconstruction post-war is slow enough on its own. Psychological healing is just going to drag it down even further. This is also the story in which the characters have to come to terms with the fact that they are not the same people they are in the original ATLA series. They've grown up and while they will hold onto some key traits, the war has changed them greatly (Sokka, Katara, and Ty Lee in particular).

That said, I hope you enjoyed this chapter and that you stick around for the full story.
She stumbles back into their rooms, her foot colliding with a step.

“Oh, sorry!” Snowlion has been distracted since they left the Elders. It’s a little annoying, but less so than being forced to sit outside because it was an airbender-only conference.

Which left Toph outside with On Ji.

Not an experience she ever wants to go through again. She shakes off Snow’s hand and starts to move towards her room until she realizes that she can’t quite tell which one it is. She’s only entered this shared space from the door connecting to the training yard where Kiki landed.

There was dirt there.

Breathe. Focus. The earth is in which direction?

“Toph?”

There, to her right and forward. So that means her room is to the left. She moves in that direction, dodging Snow. The first door has the wrong motif in the gold design along the door’s edge. The second door—yes, that’s it. Dragons and lilies.

“Toph, will you please just stop and talk to me.”

“About what?”

“Anything? I’m sorry about tonight. I should have insisted you be in there.”

“Was it anything I need to know about?”

“Reclamation of the Air Temples.”

“Is the Temple of the Winds included in that?”

“It hasn’t come up yet. Right now they’re debating what to do with the Northern Air Temple and how best to repair the damage to the Western Air Temple.”

So they have a reprieve for now, then. If they still have access to the Temple, they still have a home. They can still back out of this whole mess, can’t they? They can go back to the Temple, open a school, give up on the generation forged in war and help shape a new one.

That’s more effective than doing whatever it is they are right now.

It has to be.

Because right now, it seems like they aren’t going to be included on any of the important conversations.

She takes a deep breath. They’ve only been there since this morning. What was she expecting? To just be included immediately? They talked about this. Testing water and whatnot,
trying to figure them out.

But how can anyone do that when they’re all so wrong?

“We’re just going to be shown off like circus freaks until we’re put on trial like we’re criminals.”

“Toph, that’s not what this is.”

“Then what is it?”

Snow is silent. Not surprising. What can be said? They are being shown off. They are going to be tried like criminals. The airbenders are the only ones willing to include them in conversations, but most of that is going to be Snow and Snow alone.

There’s no place here for the rest of them.

She grapples with the door behind her back, opening it and stepping through, only to slam it shut behind her. It hurts to breathe and in this impossible place she can barely sense a thing. The silks and the smells and the isolation—it feels almost like she never left Gaoling.

But she did. She knows she did. She can feel it in her bones, the way the earth responds to her now. She remembers training Snow, finding Snow, surviving Wulong.

She remembers Aang’s heart shuttering to a stop.

It’s just that nothing feels real anymore. Not really.

There’s a knock on her door. “Toph, are you okay?”

She says nothing. Her tongue feels close to mutiny. If she says another word she’s going to end up saying everything because nothing is right.

“If I talk, do you promise to listen?”

She nods, sliding down to the floor beside the door.

“I know you’re hurting right now. We all are. And we’re all going to for a while longer. This isn’t going to be fixed overnight. It’s probably going to take us years to sort through everything. There’s a lot to unpack from the war and we can only face it when we’re ready.

“Right now, it’s too soon. What I need you to do is recognize that we’re all in this together. We were all there at the end and we were all involved. Each one of us has done things we regret, either through action or inaction. But we can’t change the past. We’ve made our choices and now we have to deal with the consequences. None of us are going to make it through this alone. Whatever is bothering you, it will eat at you until there is nothing left.

“I promised you I would do my best to stay.” There’s a pause, and for a moment, she thinks that might be the end, but then Snow’s voice crosses through the door once more. “I’m always going to fly, Badger. It’s in my blood. I can’t promise I will always stay where you can sense me, but so long as you give me a safe place to land, I will always come back. I can’t promise you any more than that. Just promise me you’ll talk, whenever you’re ready.”

She scratches at the bottom of the door, enough to get her fingers around it before sliding it open. “I’m not good at talking.”
“That’s okay.”

“I don’t want to go on trial.”

“None of us do.”

“I want to go home.”

“They can’t keep us away forever. The airbenders are on our side. They will help us.”

“How do you know?”

There’s a sigh. “Because I told them about our plans to found a school at the Temple. There will be a formal vote later, but it seemed to be a popular idea. And we’ve ended the war, opening up a path for reconstruction. They’ll help.”

She reaches out for where Snow is and finds the airbender’s shoulder. Moving carefully, she leans against it. “Do you think Sparky and Sugar are going to be fine?”

“Iroh won’t be too mean. He might be angry, but he’s not going to do anything that might damage the situation more.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“As sure as I can be.”

“That doesn’t sound very encouraging.”

Another sigh. “I don’t suppose it does.”

The tea tastes watered down and the sweets accompanying it are bland. Uncle’s smiles don’t reach his eyes, and yet it is the tea that disconcerts him the most.

There is something wrong with him.

Katara’s hand is wrapped around his and to the others in the garden; it must look like a wife supporting her husband. But none of them can feel the tug of her waterbending on his bloodstream, keeping his heart steady and calm.

She must be regulating her own, because she feels so very cold.

The older Water Tribe woman eyes him carefully. Sokka won’t look at him and the adult, Hakoda, is quiet as well. The two Masters do most of the talking.

The two Masters are the only ones who even look at Katara.

And here he was, thinking she was overestimating how bad the damage to her family was.

“It is a shame that battle went the way it did. We reclaimed Ba Sing Se, but Wulong and the Agni Kai here was a loss.”
It’s so tempting to correct that assumption. Everyone seems to think that because Azula went on to become Fire Lord that he lost the Agni Kai. Which he did, technically. Katara is the one who won that fight.

But for right now, it is best to keep that knowledge to themselves. The temperature drops a little more as Katara tenses. She’s going to have to spar later. Probably on a regular basis, for all of them. If they wear themselves out, maybe they can’t be too irritated with the White Lotus.

They keep baiting them to talk about the war. It isn’t going to work, he thinks. They would have better luck with Toph or Ty. Given that he and Katara can’t even talk about the war to each other, it’s unlikely they’re going to talk to anyone else about it.

That needs to change. If they’re really going to be put on trial, they are going to have to sort out their stories. No Aang, no Azula. Let the world believe what they already do about them.

It’ll be easier that way.

He glances at the waterbender beside him. She’s looking down at her tea, but her eyes are glazed over. He’s seen that same expression before, usually when she’s thinking about Aang. The events of that morning are still unknown to him beyond the Avatar’s death. It took recognizing his own distress in Katara to realize she had done to Aang what he did to his sister.

He just didn’t witness it. Toph and Ty did, he thinks, but he can’t be sure. No one is willing to talk about what happened at Wulong.

He holds onto her hand just a little tighter and takes a sip of tea. It’s gone cold. Surreptitiously, he checks for ice. None yet, but unless the topic changes there is going to be.

Uncontrolled bending probably isn’t the best reintroduction.

“Katara, how has your training gone?” The elder waterbender asks.

And that’s when he feels the twist in her bending. She’s happy, he thinks. Things are a little warmer, a little closer to normal.

“It’s Master Katara now. Master Hama saw to that.”

Somewhere, he suspects that is not the correct answer. Especially if the reactions of the other Southern Water Tribe members is anything to go by. Sokka looks ready to choke and the woman looks—he’s seen that look before. It’s the same one Ty had when she first saw the Lungta and realized the airbender population was far larger than expected.

Pakku’s brow wrinkles. “I’m afraid I’m not familiar with that name.”

“She’s Southern.” Katara says, reaching up to trace the comb in her hair. “The only known survivor of the Fire Nation prisons.”

So that’s where the comb came from. He knew it was Southern, but the most she’d ever really said to him on the subject was that it was an heirloom given to her. Which is apparently the truth, but he had assumed it belonged to her grandmother or mother.

“Hama is in prison.” Sokka’s fists are tight, his whole body rigid. This is history he’ll have to ask about later. “Where she belongs. Have you forgotten what she did?”

“She witnessed people rejoicing at the death of the moon and sought vengeance for the
crimes the Fire Nation has committed against the Water Tribe.” She takes a sip of her tea as if the conversation were casual. “Her actions may not have been the wisest at the time, but she has spent six decades in a land not her own, rejecting everything that made her who she is because she would be killed if anyone knew what she was.”

“You’ve changed.”

“I’ve grown up. Master Hama is merely a product of her environment.”

“She turned waterbending into an abomination.” And finally Sokka looks at his sister.

*That* part Zuko understands. Bloodbending. This whole thing is about bloodbending. He knew from conversations held when his scar was being healed that Sokka wasn’t supportive of bloodbending and for a while, Katara feared it too.

“That abomination has saved my life on more occasions than I care to count,” Zuko adds calmly. “Toph’s and Ty Lee’s as well. Not to mention countless others we’ve encountered over the years.”

The Lungta girl who crossed a horse and had a punctured lung. Master Sora, after slipping in the greenhouse. Victims of the prison camps they shut down. Bloodbending has been an invaluable tool during the war and the potentials for peacetime are obvious even to him. Even little things like scraped knees and busted lips. As he understands it, healing is more efficient with bloodbending.

And Katara wouldn’t be Katara without it. There is a darkness to her. There always has been. He remembers it from the first time they fought, and as she grew, the more obvious it became. The hunt for the Southern Raiders was when it was at the most obvious, and when he became aware of just how dangerous she actually is.

If anything, she’s more dangerous today.

But that’s because she’s in control, he thinks. She has a stronger understanding of her power now, much like the rest of them. Despite how withdrawn she’s been since the end of the war, there is still that quiet confidence in her that comes from being completely at ease with her element. He’s seen the same behavior in Toph and Ty.

Azula was like that too, just more overt with it.

Uncle holds up a hand. “Who is this Master Hama?”

“She was the last Southern Waterbender before me; the last one to be taken by the Raiders.” Katara addresses Uncle and Uncle only. Interesting. “I met her here in the Fire Nation. She had escaped prison using a rare form of waterbending. She trained me briefly, but during the course of that, she was arrested once again.”

“And where is she now?”

“The White Tower.”

Oh, this isn’t good. Katara isn’t supposed to know about the Tower. But it does solve a slight problem. It gives the White Lotus an angle for later questioning. If they focus on what they did in the Fire Nation, to the Fire Nation, they can maybe distract from what they did in the Earth Kingdom and to the Northern Water Tribe. They can limit how much information they give about the airbenders. The Lungta have nothing to do with the Fire Nation. So maybe this does work to
their advantage. Currently, no one but the airbenders know about the Temple. They managed to dodge giving away their exact location when he suggested staying at Ember Island. Kiki was sent to Taku to Elder Sora before she was sent on to the Temple. They never actually confirmed a permanent residence and no one thought to ask them.

Uncle shifts in his seat, arms crossing. “The Tower is reserved for the most dangerous benders.”

Katara shrugs. “People fear most that which they do not understand.”

“True enough. Do you believe this Master Hama deserves such imprisonment?” The temperature dips sharply as Sokka snaps. “Of course she does! She’s too dangerous to be free.”

Uncle and Master Pakku both scowl in the warrior’s direction. The waterbender turns back to Katara. “Do you agree with your brother?”

“No. Master Hama is merely an old woman who wishes to return to her home.”

“And how long has she been on Fire Nation soil?” Uncle asks.

“She was taken the year you were born.” Zuko speaks carefully, glancing at Katara. He’s unsure of the date, but he does know that was the year of the last raid on the Southern Tribe until the raid that killed Katara’s mother.

“That is a long time to be away from her homeland.” Uncle turns to the Tribe members present. “What do you know of this Master Hama?”

“We never confirmed any murders, but it wouldn’t surprise me. She had people imprisoned in a mountain.” Sokka crosses his arms across his chest, eyes narrowed.

Uncle nods. “Do you believe she is a danger to anyone who is not Fire Nation?”

“She attacked Aang and me.”

“No, she attacked me.” Katara speaks quietly, eyes focused on her tea. “She just knew that using the two of you would be the most efficient way to force my hand. It was a means to an end. What happened to the two of you was my fault.”

Sokka looks ready to argue, but Katara’s tone makes it clear the conversation is over.

And it is then that the old woman speaks. “Hama is my cousin by marriage.”

The look on Sokka’s face is priceless. He’s speechless, for once. Katara looks interested, but he can’t tell if all this surprises her. Hakoda is still quiet. Deferring, Zuko sees. Hakoda is deferring to his mother.

Interesting.

“Your first husband, I assume?” Uncle asks.

She nods. “When I first came to the South, I lived with her until I married Nuvuk. She was raising her younger brother after their parents died.”

“What happened to the boy after Hama’s disappearance?”
The old woman’s eyes darken. “He was killed by a tiger seal on a hunt. Left behind a wife and a baby boy. I doubt anyone’s told Hama what happened to Haike.”

“Haike?” Hakoda says the name carefully. “Bato’s father?”

The woman nods. Beside her, Master Pakku sighs. “I think perhaps we had best retire for the night. This conversation can be continued later.”

During the trials, Zuko bets. A rogue waterbender in the Fire Nation will be of great interest to the White Lotus, especially a criminal; and if the White Lotus knows of bloodbending—Katara will be questioned viciously, more so than the rest of them.

Around them, the Water Tribe stands and says their goodnights to Uncle. Master Pakku, as he passes, lays a hand on Katara’s shoulder, much the same way Uncle used to do to him. After a few moments, the two of them are alone with Uncle.

“I think I should retire as well. Ty Lee and Toph are likely back by now.” She speaks to Uncle before turning to him. “Will you be okay?”

He nods, a little surprised when she leans over to press a kiss to the line of his jaw. Then she’s gone, the chill and the faint scent of the sea all that’s left. “I take it that wasn’t what you called me here for, was it?”

“No in the slightest. I had to send someone to bring Master Pakku and the others here when I was informed Katara was coming with you.”

“Where else would she be?”

“In your rooms, with young Toph, speaking privately with her family; I don’t know. There is going to be trouble because of what you’ve done.”

He stills. “Excuse me?”

“She sat there as if she were your wife. Don’t think no one noticed her hand in yours. The Northern Water Tribe has already petitioned the South for her hand and the South has agreed.”

He’s faintly aware of the nearby torches burning blue. “She sat beside me as she did because she is my wife.”

That’s the first time he’s really said it out loud, he thinks. Beyond a couple of conversations—no, when he spoke of this with Toph and Ty, it was always “we’re married” or other forms of a plural. It was never singular and never possessive. The words, like this, feel odd on his tongue.

Uncle sits up a little straighter. “The Water Tribes will not like that.”

“She is guilty of treason in the South and she would rather drown the North than align herself with them. I doubt she cares much if the Tribes are offended by her choice in husband.” She doesn’t. He knows she doesn’t. They had this conversation when she gave him the necklace he now wears.

He’d forgotten what this was like. In his memory, Uncle has always been just Uncle. Sitting here, though, it feels less like he’s facing his guardian and more like he’s facing the Dragon of the West. This is the man who became Fire Lord after the war, and it’s just right. As the Dragon, the world will listen. He’s not young and not green. He knows the horrors of the war better than most.
And above all, the Dragon is feared. Whatever Ozai-loyalists might be out there, they will fear the Dragon. The lower the chance of rebellion, the better.

“The Fire Nation will not accept it either.”

That wasn’t quite what he was expecting. “The Fire Nation doesn’t have to.”

“You are my only heir. Someday you will be Fire Lord.”

He sighs. “Could we discuss this another time? It is late and it has been a long day.”

Zuko doesn’t stay to hear Uncle’s response. It’s rude but it is late and this conversation needs preparation.

Because really, how is he supposed to explain that he’s not sure he ever wants to be Fire Lord?

She wakes up when the air shifts in the central room. It takes a moment to recognize the breathing as Toph’s and she almost goes back to sleep. But then she feels where Toph is heading. Zuko and Katara’s room. How odd. She gets up and moves to her door, focusing on the light draft around her door. The breathing from the room a door down from hers is—talking. If she strains, she can hear the conversation carried on the air.

She hears the soft knock and Toph’s quiet voice asking for entrance and she slides open her own door and heads that way. Katara has her usual black and gold nightshirt on; the one with the burned edges just over the heart. The waterbender motions for her to enter after Toph.

“Couldn’t sleep?” Ty Lee doesn’t really need an answer. She can see the exhaustion in those blue eyes.

“Could you?”

“Not really.”

Katara just nods knowingly and steps aside. Inside the room, Toph has already curled up on the bed where Zuko sits. “We’re all a little on edge tonight.”

Ty Lee sinks into the blankets rolled up towards the foot of the bed. “They’re going to keep doing that to us. Separating us, I mean.”

“As long as we limit how much time we each spend alone, we should be fine.” Toph grumbles, rolling over onto her back.

Zuko shakes his head. “That’s not good enough. We don’t need to be caught off-guard.”

“So long as they can summon us whenever they want, that’s what’s going to happen.” Katara takes a seat on the bed beside Zuko. “It’s bad enough they’re going to put us on trial. Are we going to be allowed representation to help us?”

“No.” Ty isn’t sure if it’s her or Zuko who says it.

“So we need to establish our stories, but we have no idea what we’re going to be asked.”
Toph rolls over, blank eyes staring up at the canopy.

“We don’t talk about the Temple or the Lungta.” Katara’s voice is firm. “No one needs to
know about the Temple just yet and the Lungta can alert the world to their existence when they’re
ready.”

Ty Lee nods. “We should let them continue believing Aang and Azula killed each other.”

“Except any earthbender worth their dirt is going to know an earthbender destroyed the
coronation plaza.” Toph says.

“Good thing Aang was an earthbender.” Zuko runs a hand through his hair. “They are
going to know we were here, though. There’s no way we made it into the caldera with no one seeing
Kiki.”

Ty Lee holds up her hand. “Who we got from the Earth Kingdom airbenders, who have
been preserving the species on their own for the past century.”

He nods. “We got here after Aang and Azula were fighting, saw the final attack and
realized it was too dangerous to stay so we retreated.”

“But why would Aang use a suicide attack?” Katara crosses her arms, leaning heavily
against the headboard. “We know he was unstable from the Guru’s reports, but the White Lotus
doesn’t need to know that we’ve had spies among them.”

“And they’re not going to want the world at large to know Twinkletoes was anything
short of perfect.”

Ty Lee looks around at her family. “Because he saw me. They’ll believe that, won’t
they? If he knew he wasn’t the last airbender, he would go to that extreme to end the war, wouldn’t
he?”

No one looks at her and slowly, Katara begins to nod. “She’s right. So Aang saw Ty, we
evacuated when we realized what he was doing, and we hid out in Taku until we heard things had
settled down.”

“Suki would have told them to go to Taku, so that one’s out.” Toph sits up, tilting her
head until the joints in her neck pop.

“We stayed in the Fire Nation,” Zuko says. “Just went to another island. Hira’a?
Kirachu?”

“Hira’a, isn’t that where your mother is from?” She’s fairly certain she remembers
hearing Azula say the name once, but maybe not?

Then again, Zuko won’t meet her eye. “Yes, it is.”

“Then there. It wouldn’t be unreasonable for you to have looked into Ursa’s fate. We
might be able to get them to believe we decided to switch objectives and search for her.” Ty glances
down at the earthbender. “We’ll need to fill in Katara and Toph on the situation there, but it is worth
a try.”

“But at that time? Wouldn’t it make more sense for us to go to ground elsewhere and just
return when we thought it was safe?” He makes a valid point. It is likely that the White Lotus will
believe finding Princess Ursa was always an objective of theirs, but the timing isn’t ideal. Most of
them will buy the story, but a few won’t. The question will be how vocal will the dissenters be. If they don’t raise objections, it won’t be a problem on the main stage, merely an obstacle in smaller dealings.

“You’ll have to make General Iroh believe it.” Katara says. “And he’s already inclined to scrutinize us more than the others.”

Ty Lee sighs. “Zuko, what did you do?”

“Why is this my fault?”

She gives him her best Mai impression. “Because you’re the only one he’s spoken to that could upset him.”

Katara sits up straight, pulling away from the firebender. “I was referring to bloodbending and Hama. I kind of dragged some of the Southern Water Tribe’s problems out into the open. With that information, he’s smart enough to start piecing together the attacks I was involved in. Not to mention I defended a madwoman in prison.”

Zuko pinches the bridge of his nose. “I’m still trying to figure out if admitting you broke into the White Tower was a good idea or not.”

“It distracted them, didn’t it?”

“Not as much as we needed it to.”

Toph moves to lean against the other post. “What did we miss?”

“Uncle wasn’t exactly thrilled to find out Katara and I are married.”

Ty nods slowly. It makes sense. Zuko is the only heir and the Fire Nation is delicate right now. The prospect of a Water Tribe Fire Lady could upset whatever peace Iroh has made with the pro-Ozai noblemen. “We need something that will distract him.”

“What about that nun?” Toph says. “You knew her. Thanh, I think? The one you said I shouldn’t tell Zuko about.”

Oolong tea and jasmine perfume—she hasn’t thought about the princess-turned-nun for so long. Already she can see their firebender’s mind turning. “It wasn’t Ursa.”

It isn’t Ursa, but it is someone who should do enough damage. Hopefully. It just depends how much of Uncle Iroh is still in the Fire Lord. There’s three years of thinking his beloved nephew was dead—it would have been Lu Ten all over again. Bringing her in this is risky, but it is their only chance if they want someone to take the scrutiny off of them.

Zuko scowls. “Then who was it?”

“Someone who will distract Iroh sufficiently.” She takes a deep breath before meeting his gaze. “It was Rinchen.”
The worst part about being married to a firebender is being unable to sleep past sunrise. After so long of waking up at dawn, it has become a part of her natural cycle. The only exceptions are lunar eclipses and other interruptions in the power of the moon.

And after last night’s marathon talks, she isn’t surprised when she is the first to wake.

“Tui and La.” The words come out on an exhale, barely audible. Her bloodbending works the familiar pathways of her family’s bodies, moving limbs out of her way. Sometime in the night, Toph moved to used her hip as a pillow, and Ty is oddly placed in the barely there distance between her and Zuko, arm stretched out to hold the earthbender. Zuko, the lightest sleeper, has the arm she was rest on curled up around her, just below her neck. It’s delicate work getting out of this, especially with the fabric of the bedding involved.

By the time she finally escapes, the sun is peeking over the caldera’s edge. She should wake up Zuko; he hates sleeping in. Yet, the way they all look makes her pause. When was the last time they all slept in the same space? When they were still sleeping on the floor of the Temple, curled around a fire trying to keep warm in the strange world the war dumped them in? They’ve kept separate rooms for so long now. Always next to each other, yes, but the more they settled into their new lives in the wake of the comet the more they looked like a normal family.

Well, as normal as they can be.

But that’s just it. They will never be normal. Not by the definition of the outside world. Then again, normal is unknown now. She can count on one hand the number of people who remember life before the war. Peace is a stranger to them all.

Quietly, she sets about gathering what she needs. Clean clothes, soap, her comb—no maybe not those clothes. She’s still a little confused about what she’s supposed to be here. She is a warrior, but the clothes Jetsun provided are those of a princess.

Katara takes a glance outside the window. It’s still early. There should be time. She picks up the sewing kit and leaves the room as silently as she can. The bath within the wing they’re staying in was built for children. The basin is shallow, a steady stream of water swirling through the small pool. It isn’t particularly hot, just warm. If she focuses, she can feel the water leaving heading towards the small garden on the level below.

A great window covers the far side of the room, just above the bath. She undresses and moves towards the water, her bending following familiar movements. When she’s finished, she fixes her bindings and then finds a seat along the window with her sewing. Morning in this part of the Fire Nation is surprisingly misty. The walls of the caldera protect the city from the sun, allowing the water in the air a little more time. Beautiful, really. Peaceful too. Looking at this, she can’t understand how violence bred here for so long.

The silence is what takes her by surprise the most. Perhaps the Fire Nation has taken to a later schedule with all the visitors who don’t keep to a start-at-dawn pattern. She takes a deep breath; there are no bodies nearby that shouldn’t be. Within her immediate sensing range, she can only feel the three she left behind. It almost feels like the Temple.

Almost.

The sense of security is absent here. It’s why she uses her waterbending to slice through the fabric, rather than rip the seams the way she would at home. Rather than move constantly to
check sizing and design, she summons ice sculptures of herself to hold the fabric up. The neckline is going to be tricky. And a belt. The one she normally wears will be too light. The silks she’s been given are so dark they could be mistaken for black. What little she has in the way of lighter colors will only do so much.

And still she has the same predicament. Princess or warrior? What is the acceptable line for both? If she wears the collar of the Southern Warrior, will that be disrespectful? It will cover the new necklace. She only needs the old hidden. But what about a skirt? Is it necessary or can she wear something like what Azula did? Is she too old for that? Too high profile?

The needle stabs her finger. She hisses and quickly encourages the blood to knit the wound closed before continuing sewing. This is why they should have stayed hidden. It’s bad enough their freedom has been curtailed, but already they know the scrutinizing eye of the outside world will cover every little thing from their clothing, speech, eating, etc.…

It’s maddening. If they are going to be put on trial then why weren’t they arrested and treated as criminals? Is it because there is no solid proof that their wartime actions were illegal? Or simply because of their social positions: heirs to two thrones, two to nobility?

They should have rethought reentering society. They know nothing about what’s going on. Some recon on the White Lotus and the rebuilding efforts would have been great, wouldn’t it?

She breaks the tail with a little too much force. The knot is solid, as is the stitching. She can clean up the frayed end of the thread later. Sighing, she wads up the finished garment and tosses it across the room, clear of the bath.

It feels like the world has shattered and she’s surrounded by the fragments. There is no order, or if there is, it’s beyond her comprehension. There is no stability here and in a world as badly damaged as this one, that seems an oversight. But maybe it is just them. Maybe the outside world has found the ground and they’re the only ones left struggling.

She just wants to go home.

Chapter End Notes

I don't like this chapter. At all. Personally, it is one of the worst things I've written in years. It is unfortunately necessary. I've been sitting on this for about three months now, trying to come up with a way to fix it. The information that makes this one so awkward is needed at this point, right now.

Transition chapters, so lovely.
Ty is the second to rise the next morning. Once again, they all fell asleep together. Just like the old days.

The pain radiates out from her ribs; it’s been too long since she’s thought of the war. The nights spent planning, attacking, and days spent training—she misses all of it. There must be something wrong with her. Who misses running for their lives and killing?

The war was awful. It was death and destruction and knocking friends unconscious and knowing loved ones are gone forever.

That pain will always be there. No matter how much time passes, Azula will always be gone. Mai will always be lost. And Ty Lee will forever be known as a daughter of the wind, placing her entire family in danger.

But this is her family now. Not the six sisters who all look (almost) exactly like her and the parents who didn’t even notice their youngest was an airbender.

Katara is already in the center room, braiding her hair. “Morning, Snow.”

“Good morning.” She takes a seat beside the waterbender. “We’re really not going out again, are we?”

“It’s safest.”

Yes, it is that. For as long as they are curiosities, dangerous creatures to be controlled and examined, they will be safest isolated and together. The only downside is that it’s just another imprisonment, albeit one that is self-imposed. “We’re going to need a new source of food.”

This means no more relying on the Acolytes and Airbenders to provide anything for them anymore. They’re going to need to find new sources for everything. It’s going to be the old days, right in plain view of the world.

Katara pauses before finishing the braid. “We will.”

“Any ideas?”

“Sneak out and steal it?”

Well, yes, that’s the obvious answer. They can try to steal from inside the palace, but that’s really too risky. This is far better. The sick part of her thinks it really will be just like the old days, back before they found some stability at the Temple with the gardens. They will forage and rotate
marks when stealing. It creates the lowest possible risk for deliberate poisoning and it will give them all time away from the palace.

And an opportunity to bend properly. It’s stifling here. The air doesn’t move right and Katara as isolated from her water as Toph is from her earth. Zuko is the only one at home in this world, or was once. He may not be anymore.

She smiles brightly. “Sounds good to me.”

Katara’s returning smile is almost impish. “Think we can get back before Zuko wakes up?”

This is what they need. A chance to go back to the life they know. They just need to find a balance between war and peace. “Let’s find out.”

How strange. They survived a war, but can’t survive peacetime. Not without sliding back into their habits formed in conflict. There are probably doctors out there who treat people like them. Names for disorders and the like.

Maybe someday, they’ll find out about that. Just not today, nor anytime soon. None of them are ready.

“We’ll need to get past the White Lotus.” Katara leads them out of their wing. “Do you think anyone has found Toph’s tunnel yet?”

“The one through the Fire Lady’s Palace?” It’s worth a shot. There are other ways out from down there if it is blocked off. And it probably would be a good idea to introduce Katara to the catacombs and tunnels beneath the city, if only for security reasons. “We’ll need to change into less conspicuous clothing, too.”

A female water warrior and an airbender will draw too much attention. There are enough members of the Water Tribes in the city that Katara can dress as a tribeswoman, but Ty Lee will need to wear Fire Nation colors.

They fall back into old behavior like lovers returning home. Walk silently; embrace the shadows, a small twist of bending to distract a wayward maid. What were they thinking, letting the airbenders acquire all of their necessities? They need this. The thrill, the secrecy—and really, she needs this in her own way.

The palace is Azula and Mai. It is days spent bundled up in the silks of Azula’s bed while Mai sings them songs banned by the crown years and years ago. It’s the smell of fire lilies and the taste of chocolate and ground chilies. These are memories she doesn’t really want anymore.

Or maybe she does. The memories of golden afternoons spent in the spa or bright mornings in the gardens are almost quaint. This is her version of the halcyon childhood people wax poetic about. It hurts like nothing else to remember the good, but it’s comforting too.

On the one hand, it’s remembering that Azula is gone forever and whatever bond she had with Mai is damaged beyond repair. On the other, it’s a reminder that good is still possible. Even when she was terrified of being found out as an airbender, she was still happy in those days. If she could manage that once, she can do it again, can’t she?

The tunnel is still there, apparently undiscovered. Did the White Lotus not look for it? Or did they not believe they made it into the palace proper? Katara goes in last, making mud and covering the hole, dragging the water out to set it.
“It’s beautiful.” The waterbender says when they make their way around the old palace.

Ty smiles. “It really is. Remind me when we get back to have Zuko show you the paintings.”

“We should explore inside. With him, of course. I doubt there’s any source of light in there.”

“We might be able to hide things down here.” Like a copy of the Northern Water Tribe treaty, or anything in the Fire Nation’s archives that might need to be removed to the Temple of the Winds.

Because they will be going back someday. Even if they have to fake their deaths a second time and disappear completely, they will be going back.

They make the rest of the journey to the surface in silence. Katara opens the tunnel and seals it behind them, leaving them exposed. Ty Lee tugs at the red clothes she’s wearing. It seems so odd to be wearing these colors after four years in the colors of the wind. Like dress-up when she was young, this is all just a game. This isn’t who she is anymore. There was a time when she would have been perfectly comfortable looking like a daughter of fire.

But that was before she learnt to fly.

Once the sky took her there was no going back.

“Where are we going?”

“Outside of the caldera for now.” The space between the mountain and the harbor; that should do well. There are wild plants and some farms.

The city looks so bare. They move between the scaffolding talking of nothing in particular. Assuming no one looked at them too closely, they should appear as two teens out for a walk. Not that there is anyone to see them. Ran-Shao is a ghost town. Did they do this with their battles? Or did Azula’s madness and Mai’s cruel rule lead to this abandonment?

Mai.

Oh dear. She’s going to have to deal with that mess eventually. There’s so much she and her sworn sister need to discuss. It’s just that Ty Lee can’t see how when even thinking of Mai hurts like lightning.

“Do you ever think of the Avatar?” It’s a ridiculous question and very likely insensitive. She should have started this differently.

But how do you start this? There isn’t a rulebook for talking about trauma, is there? A how-to guide for child soldiers on surviving in peacetime and learning to cope with all their tragedies?

“All the time.” Katara’s voice sounds old, exhausted. “It terrifies me, but I just want to see him one more time. What’s this about?”

“I don’t want to see Mai.”

“You have to.” It isn’t a demand or a reminder or even an encouragement. The way Katara says it makes it sound like it’s merely an observation.

They make their way over the edge of the mountain, descending towards the tree line. She veers off the path and begins picking what plants she knows they’ll need. “I know. We have too
much unfinished business. I wish we didn’t.”

Katara picks up a fruit. “What is this?”

“Tuna fruit.” Her grandmother loved it and for a moment, Ty Lee can taste the brightness mixing with rice and tea. “Put it in a separate container, though. It’s a cactus.”

“So I noticed. Cacti and my family are well known enemies.” Water trails out of the air, wrapping around the waterbender’s dark hand.

“You know you’re going to have to see your brother.”

The waterbender sighs and twists her bending to weave a basket, sweeping up all the fruit in the area with a flick of her wrist. “I already have.”

“Not like that.” If Ty Lee has unfinished business with Mai, then Katara has an entire lifetime to settle with her brother. “I’m going to have to deal with my family at some point too. You’re not alone in this.”

They reach the trees with two baskets full of food. The day is growing hot and by now both Toph and Zuko are likely awake. But this is like they never rejoined the world and it’s wonderful.

“We should head back. There’s enough here for a few days. Zuko and Toph can come out and get the rest.” Katara swings her baskets over her back, binding them together with vines pulled from the trees.

They still need rice and a few other staples that will be found closer to the sea. “I don’t want to go back.”

“Neither do I.”

But they have to. Out here, the world is quiet in that way only the wild can be. Despite being in such a heavily populated area, this space feels almost like freedom. She can feel the wind twisting through her hair. It carries with it whispers of flying. If only she had her glider. She could be out over the ocean by now, moving far away from the poison on the mountain.

Katara tugs on her arm, pulling her back towards the path. They don’t make it back to the palace until almost time for afternoon tea. Slipping back into their rooms, Ty Lee reaches out to find their firebender and earthbender. “We have company.”

The lungs are large but smaller than Zuko. So an adult male, if she had to guess.

“It’s Master Pakku.” Katara unwinds the baskets holding her collection. “Toph’s in the training yard if you want to go check on her. Maybe decide what we’re going to eat and establish a sneaking out schedule.”

Ty Lee just nods. “Good luck?”

The waterbender smiles then stills. “Zuko’s in trouble.”

“Go. I’ll find Toph.”

Just like that, whatever relaxation they had is gone. It will be a beautiful day when they can finally go home. Six months away from the Temple is too long.

Six months around other people is too long.
And to think, she used to love being the center of attention.

He wasn’t really expecting to find Katara when he woke up, though a note would have been nice. He knows she hasn’t been sleeping well, nor has Ty Lee. So to wake up and only find Toph curled up at the foot of the bed isn’t surprising. Reaching down, he shakes the earthbender awake. “I’m heading out to the training yard.”

She swats away his hand. “Sure thing, Sparky.”

She likely isn’t fully awake, but at least he gave her warning. None of them handle waking up alone well anymore. None of them handle sleeping alone anymore. The nightmares still come, but at least with someone else there, they have someone to save them if things get too bad. It might not be the most effective method. It’s just all that they have.

The morning is quiet. Stepping out into the training yard, he can see the city a bit better. Most of it has been destroyed. Looking off in the direction of the coronation plaza, there is nothing left but bare ground. A few of the nobility’s houses look to be in the process of rebuilding.

He remembers when this city was bustling this time of morning. Children running off to school and maids out to market, nobility filing in through the palace gates to meet with his father.

Now there is only silence.

His shirt falls to the ground outside the actual training area. Taking a deep breath, the movements come naturally. There is no fire accompanying them. This space was meant to handle benders considerably weaker than each of them individually. As tempting as it is to burn the palace to the ground, it wouldn’t be the best idea. Some of the people inside are innocent.

They do need to find proper training grounds, though. Not just for Toph and Ty Lee, but for him and Katara. He still hasn’t mastered lightning, and any of Katara’s combined attacks are simply too powerful for such a small space.

It’s after lunchtime when he hears Toph enter the space. “I was wondering when you were going to wake up.”

“This place is too hot.”

Yes, it is. They’ve been spoiled by the Temple. Humidity there is bad, but it’s high enough in the mountains that it stays relatively comfortable year-round. “We should try meditating. I know Katara and I can control our body temperature. You and Ty might be able to as well.”

“Give me dirt to bury myself in and we’ll be just fine.”

He smiles and closes his eyes, slowly shifting to the airbending stances. “Have you tried asking Katara to regulate your temperature for you?”
Toph snorts. “Haven’t you noticed she and Snow aren’t here right now?”

“I had.”

“Any idea where they went?”

Twist, jump, and spin again. Airbending is so much more relaxing than firebending. “Not a clue. Bending, perhaps.”

“Without us?”

“Maybe they went looking for food.”

She sighs. “We’re really going to do this? Isolate ourselves within the palace?”

Waterbending now, loose and controlled. Comforting in a way. It’s steady and yet flexible, the river that always flows but never moves the same way twice. “The game changed when they decided to put us on trial.”

“No, the game changed when you four decided to play dead and learn some new tricks.”

Definitely not Toph. He opens his eyes and spies the old waterbending master by the door. “Clearly we still need work if you can sneak up on us.”

The earthbender crosses her arms. “This one’s on you. Remember that I’m pretty useless here.”

Sliding into a pose Katara taught him one night on the full moon, still early in the non-platonic stage of their partnership, he turns away from them. “Is there a reason for your visit, Master Pakku?”

“Looking for my granddaughter.”

“She’s not here right now.” He can hear the series of pops from Toph standing up and stretching her back. “We can give her a message if you’d like.”

“I think I shall wait. She has to be back sometime before nightfall.”

One last stance. Clearly he isn’t going to have any peace to finish the waterbending stances, let alone begin the earthbending or firebending stances. “Toph, why don’t you go through your paces?”

It sounds like a suggestion, but the order is still clear. She huffs a little, but steps into the ring and drops into the first of the firebending poses. “Just call me when Sugar and Snow get back, okay?”

“I will.” Picking up his shirt, he motions for Master Pakku to follow him. “If you’ll wait in the center room, I’ll be right with you.”

There’s something odd about this. Speaking to an old master like an equal. Perhaps a bit rude, even. And yet it is likely their only choice. If they are to make the outside world understand that they will not be pushed around, that their lives are theirs and theirs alone, then they must make it clear that they are masters themselves.

They ended a war. It may have broken them into pieces that will never fit back together right,
but they still ended the war and saved the world. That has to give them some power.

And if not that, then the power they wield as benders. Working together, they could probably sink this island or wake up the volcano they stand upon.

He takes the clean clothes into the washroom, limbs already shaking. That’s a dangerous thought, there. Respect is one thing. Fear is another. Fear is never an acceptable path because that path is Ozai and look what Ozai has done.

Look what that path did to Azula.

The air is too heavy to breathe. Where is Ty? She can make this better and that constant beating—oh, that’s his heart, isn’t it?

What was it Katara did? Drop the body temperature? Like Azula feeling so cold when there should have been fire just below her skin—

Lightning isn’t cold. He still feels it searing against his palm, arcing between his fingers and La-La’s back and how she just went so cold so fast and this place is still filled with her voice and way her eyes flashed bright gold when she rarely smiled and when did she stop smiling like she meant it when did the madness take root when did she stop being his sister but that isn’t how it went because she’s always his sister and he killed her it was the only way to help wasn’t it because it was the right thing to send that little spark to her heart—

The cold sweeps in suddenly, his heart slowing and blood going from racing to sluggish. There are cold arms around him, icy hands rubbing circles into his shoulders and a voice singing a lullaby he doesn’t know the words to.

No, doesn’t know the language. This is heavier than Fire Nation, sharp consonants and all slurred together like each sentence is just one long word. Water Tribe. Southern. Katara.

It’s difficult to breathe with how cold she’s made it. Ice trails across the bath and frost creeps along the walls. Difficult to breathe, but not in the same way it was. He moves a little to wrap an arm around her waist, dragging her full into his lap. She doesn’t break the song and keeps her body nestled against his.

This is unsustainable. They can’t always be there for the other when the darkness creeps up. There’s going to be an incident at some point because one of them cracks.

But that’s in the future. They’ll cross that bridge when they come to it because right now it’s cold and he’s getting sleepy. “Master Pakku is waiting for you.”

“Don’t care.”

“We have to face him sometime.”

She draws away from him just a little and he takes the opportunity to raise the temperature in the room just a little closer to normal. “You’re not okay.”

“Neither are you.” He leans his forehead against hers, blue and gold focused on each other. “It was just a bad moment. I let my thoughts go where they shouldn’t.”

“We shouldn’t have come back.”

He knows what she’s thinking. They could have easily escaped Ember Island at any point in
their imprisonment and they should have. They should never have come to Uncle’s coronation. They should have gone back to the Temple and stayed there after the events at the Southern Air Temple.

“Probably not, but we did.”

“And now we have to deal with it.” She sighs, pulling away from him completely as the room returns to normal. “Stand up.”

Her bending twists around them both and he only now notices the folded blue clothes in the corner of the room. They change in silence. She finishes before him and waits patiently by the window.

Rather than go to the main room through the door, Katara leads him outside and to the window of the kitchen, climbing through easily. “What did you bring back?”

There are piles of fresh fruit and herbs on the counters. He picks up one of the prickly red fruits, burning off the bristles. She and Ty Lee must have left the caldera to find tuna fruit.

“What we could find. You and Toph have rice to find, as well as other staples.”

“We’ll still have to trade with the airbenders.”

“Probably.” She reaches down the tea Elder Sora sent them during their time in Ember Island. “Can you boil a pot of water?”

They get the tea ready quickly and he carries it out to the main room, following her as she carries a tray of fresh fruit. Master Pakku is standing beside one of the windows, looking out over the city. “It is beautiful here. Even with the damage.”

“Thank you.” He says it automatically. It may not be home anymore, but once this place was his and there is still that sense of belonging, however nostalgic it may be now.

“You wanted to see me?” Katara helps him sit down, the tug of her bloodbending checking his heart once more before she sits beside him.

Master Pakku turns away from the window and takes a seat across the small table from them. “I did. I thought it would be best if you heard about recent events from someone still friendly.”

No ill feelings from her former master. Good. At least they have one potential ally in the Tribes.

“And we should trust you?”

Please don’t burn this bridge, Katara. Please, please don’t burn this bridge.

“I would be insulted if you did.” The old man smiles and accepts the tea, but waits until one
of them takes a drink first. “I take it you are well aware of how the Tribes view your recent life choices?”

“I abandoned my brother and the Avatar. I let the Tribe believe I was dead for over three years and when I returned, I did not apologize or seek forgiveness for that abandonment.”

Pakku nods. “Your grandmother and father would both like a proper explanation for why you made the choices you did.”

“What are they wanting it before or after the trial begins?”

“So you’ve heard about that?” Just what is he playing at? She knows he has some level of protection from Tribal Law. He’s White Lotus, an Old Master, married to the royal family, Northern. If nothing else, he can plead ignorance of the South’s laws.

“We have our connections.” Beside her, she can feel Zuko’s heart. She’s not behaving as she should, probably, but this is Master Pakku and she has to play a different game. She grips his hand a little tighter and drops his heart rate just a little closer to calm. “Why don’t you go check on Ty Lee and Toph?”

“Actually, I would prefer it if he stayed.”

That’s interesting. To Zuko as well, apparently. “I’m not Water Tribe.”

“But you are family now.”

So it’s going to be that conversation. She’s not sure Zuko’s up to anything stressful just yet. His recovery time is different than the rest of them. Sometimes he’s like her and Toph and requires a full day before facing the outside world. Other times he’s like Ty Lee and handles social situations within an hour. “Master Pakku, why are you here?”

He sighs, setting down his tea. “The Northern Water Tribe is going to push to have your marriage annulled on grounds that it isn’t legal. The South will not oppose them. A formal vote will be held if the Fire Nation hears the petition, but for now they are not taking sides.”

“Do you know who they want to marry me off to?”

“There’s a young man a couple of years your junior.” Pakku picks up some of the fruit, turning it over in his hands. “A fairly promising waterbender who will be sixteen within the next two or three years. His name is Yakone, the son of a nobleman.”

“They know I’ll slaughter the entire Northern Tribe before I’ll agree to anything they want, don’t they?” She smiles as sweetly as she can. Depending on whether or not she finds the treaty and what it actually says, she may just kill them all regardless. But Pakku doesn’t need to know that.

This anger is likely irrational, but it’s all she can feel right now. A burning in her veins and a desire to flood the caldera and churn the water until there’s nothing left. To go north and see their palaces and canals crushed beneath the waves, the ocean turning red from all the blood.

“I’m well aware. I actually think you’ve made a better match with Prince Zuko here.”

Wait, what? “You support this?”

She looks at Zuko and finds him looking right back at her. This isn’t what either of them was expecting. “Master Pakku, I’m not sure what my uncle has told you, but you are aware of my history
with the Tribes, aren’t you?”

He smiles. “It wasn’t just your uncle, though Iroh’s stories were perhaps the greatest influence. Hakoda, Sokka, Suki, and Avatar Aang all told stories of you and your history with Katara. You’ve come a long way. Despite everything, I know your uncle is as proud of you as I am of Katara, if not more.”

“You’re proud of me?” This doesn’t make any sense. She went against everything the Tribes hold sacred. She turned her back on her brethren—but wait, Pakku is Northern. The North doesn’t hold the bonds of community and family as preciously as the South does.

Pakku nods. “You’ve been unapologetic from the day I met you. Of all the students I have ever had, you are by far the most powerful and the most accomplished. For being so young, you have done things men my age couldn’t even dream of. It may not have been for long, but to know that I had even a small part of making you the Master you are today is extremely rewarding.”

“So you know what I’ve done.”

“I just told you how proud of you I am and that’s what you take away from it?”

She just arcs an eyebrow.

“Sir, if you don’t mind, you are being a bit obvious.” Zuko has always been more polite than her, she thinks. Maybe not always, but when he bothers, he knows exactly how to behave. “I know Katara gave enough information about Master Hama to indicate some of the attacks she was involved in.”

Pakku picks up his tea again. “This is very good. Dragon Well Green, yes? An Earth Kingdom blend from the southwest.”

“Is that so?” She thinks carefully. “Zuko knows more about tea than I do.”

Her partner gives her a dark look in return. “We have reliable sources throughout the world.”

“You did quite a bit of travelling.” It isn’t a question. Just a statement. How much has the White Lotus pieced together? Do they know about their spies among them? Do they know what they did to the Northern Water Tribe? To the Earth Kingdom? She gave up the information she did about bloodbending to direct them towards the Fire Nation.

They were trying to make them believe that most of the past four years was spent in the Fire Nation but that was never going to succeed. The White Lotus knows they have an airbender, knows they have at least one bison.

Tui and La, did someone see Kiki or Pana? They’ve been careful, keeping ears to the ground to check for gossip about sky bison and airbenders in a world without Air Nomads.

Did someone from the White Lotus see Toph and Ty Lee that one time they visited the Guru at the Eastern Temple?

How much do they know?

Zuko’s hand is warm and reassuring against hers, his thumb tracing patterns against the back of her hand. “It was safer to move around.”

“It usually is.” Pakku sets down his teacup once more and she feels more than she sees that it
is empty. “The Water Tribes have written a treaty concerning inheritance of the Northern throne.”

“Has it been accepted?”

“Not yet. Depending on how you handle this, it may never be.”

“Handle what?”

Pakku smiles, looking more like a caring grandfather than the master he is. “Convince them your marriage to Zuko is genuine. The current terms of the treaty state that you will go North, marry Yakone when he comes of age, and he will take the throne at the age of eighteen.”

“I refuse.”

“And since another war would be best avoided, it would be preferable if you instead convinced them that your match to Zuko is not only a love match but also politically in the Tribes’ favor.”

Which it is. The Tribes stand a higher chance of getting restitution if one of their own is a member of the Fire Nation royal family. Zuko will stand by her regarding the North, but he has too much respect for Sokka and Dad to let whatever mess her relationship with them might be stand in the way of aid.

It’s just the love match part. She’s not in love with him, not as the outside world would see it. She loves him, yes, and she can’t imagine life without him but that’s mostly because she can’t imagine life without someone she trusts so blindly there beside her. Zuko is reliable. Even when he made the wrong choices during the war, he always came back and did his best to fix things. He’s loyal and above all he knows her in ways no one else does.

And the nightmares. Zuko is the only one she trusts enough to sleep beside her, if only because she knows that even on her darkest nights, she won’t kill him. More than that, she knows he won’t judge her come morning.

This is what she wants. It is what is best for the both of them. It just isn’t romantic.

“We can do that,” Zuko answers confidently.

She grips his hand, pushing his blood just so to make her question clear. “How is everyone?”

“Remarkably well, all things considered.” Pakku sighs and she can already hear the long arguments with Sokka. “Avatar Aang’s disappearance has caused quite a bit of stress, as has your return.”

Aang.

She’s going to have to deal with that. There will be questions. There will be judgments.

Will they think she should have tried to save him? To intervene between him and Azula? Will they think she didn’t care?

What would they say if they knew she killed him? That she did it because he asked her to and she agreed because she cared?

Aang would have grown up to be a wonderful man. He wasn’t suited for family life, but he was still a good soul for all his faults. He simply didn’t belong in this world.
“Katara?” Zuko’s fingers are warm against her cheeks and that’s when she notices the moisture.

Tears. She’s crying. In front of Master Pakku. “Sorry, just lost in thought.”

But the old master only smiles sadly. “We all miss the Avatar. There’s nothing wrong with grief.”

If only he knew.

Except that’s the problem.

No one can ever know.

So she just smiles in return. “How about some more tea?”

She’s not quite sure why she does it. It’s completely illogical, but it has been bothering her for some time. Maybe it’s just that things were uncomfortable back in their rooms. She knows she shouldn’t be alone, especially without how hard it is to sense anything in this place.

But Katara and Zuko were both shaken up and retreated to their room soon after Master Pakku left. Things with Snow are just a little too raw for her to be able to stay alone with the airbender right now.

It’s just that she has no one to talk to beyond them. So when she has the more than crazy idea to try and repair a bridge, she sneaks out of their rooms to do it.

If only she’d run into one of the others. They would have stopped her, talked her through all the reasons this is a Bad Idea.

And yet here she is, standing outside in the garden below Suki’s room. She can just vaguely feel the outline of the room, the gold running along the wood giving her a basic feeling of how everything is constructed. She tosses a rock up and through the open window, just waiting.

There it is. The pulse that comes from a human body. She’s still trying to identify the metal. It feels a lot like iron, but she needs to talk to Sweetness to determine once and for all if there really is iron in the blood. “Can we talk?”

“You knocked me out and let me believe a horse hit me in the head.”

“Actually, that was Snow. She made the call because we sort of had more pressing issues to deal with.”

“Aang being in Taku was more important?” Ah, there she is. Suki fills her senses as the warrior drops down to solid ground. Just focus on that. Don’t focus on his name, on the fact that Taku was what led to Wulong.
Katara and Zuko were there. We were hoping we could get them out before he got there.” They failed and from what she understands, Twinkles caught them in a rather compromising position.

What a brilliant reintroduction. Spend three years believing the girl you’re in love with and one of your closest friends are both dead and then find them perfectly healthy and wrapped up in each other. Add in a preexisting madness and there really was no other way for Wulong to go, was there?

She falls down to the ground, legs folding beneath her. Across from her, Suki also takes a seat. “Do you know what happened to him?”

Breathe. Stay strong. Focus on the feel of bugs stepping on the ground, the warmth of the afternoon sun pressing down on her. “I was in the saddle. I heard the attack, but wasn’t on solid ground.”

Lies. So many lies. She remembers so clearly what it felt like. Aang’s heartbeat gone so quickly, his knees hitting the ground, then his body, the realization that his heart was never going to beat again. And later, at the Southern Air Temple, the sudden shuttering end to Appa.

“Toph, are you okay?” This is all wrong.

“Do you hate me?” She should. Suki should hate all of them. She was plenty angry at the market.

“No.” Fans isn’t lying. “I’m upset, but Aang’s gone and the war is over. Whatever you four did, you had to have your reasons.”

“Snoozles isn’t taking this well, is he?”

“Not in the slightest. I figure one of us has to try to move on.” Also not a lie. “I thought a lot about what you said, about reintroducing yourselves to him in a controlled environment. You knew he wasn’t okay, didn’t you?”

Might as well be somewhat honest. If it makes it back to the White Lotus, then maybe it can help them. “People talk.”

Let them interpret that how they may. If they believe there is a leak somewhere in their ranks, maybe it will throw them into chaos. Maybe it will take some of the pressure off of her family.

And maybe it won’t. They still have so many ghosts trailing behind them. If the truth about Twinkles stays hidden, then what about Azula? What about everything else they did?

“He never got over losing you three.”

“We didn’t want to distract him.”

There’s a slight fluctuation in Suki’s presence. “You mean with Ty Lee. He would have abandoned everything if he knew he wasn’t alone.”

It hurts to talk about this, but at the same time, it helps just a little. She needs to talk about this and Fans has no idea what happened. Just listening to her talk about it is, while not exactly relaxing, almost relieving in a way.

But Twinkles is still too soon.
“Can you tell me about Sokka and the others?”

There’s a soft sigh, almost fond in tone. “Only if you’ll tell me about yourself and the other three.”

“Within reason.”

“I can do the same.”

Yeah, she needs this. Just to talk, without question or expectation. Or maybe Suki does have a motive for talking to her. Maybe not. This is going better than Toph expected.

But she needs to talk. And with her family still too uncomfortable, Suki is the best choice.

Chapter End Notes

I’m currently off work with a sprained ankle, unable to walk and pretty much restricted to the couch. So I may just get chapter five out within the next few days, given that this one was written within the span of two. Things sort of get moving in the next chapter, as we’ll see Iroh again.
It looks so strange to see them stroll through the palace gate with only five daughters. Chen Lee’s absence hurts more than it did. She knows what happened, Zuko sat her down and very calmly explained that Chen Lee had attacked and they reacted before realizing exactly who she was.

She just didn’t see anything. It’s one thing to be told your sister is dead. It’s quite another to see your whole family and realize that the one missing is never coming back.

This time of day, shadows are hard to come by. Tucking in even further from the edge, she watches them as long as she can without the sunlight hitting the bright yellow and orange of her clothes. By now they know the truth about her. But like her understanding Chen Lee is really gone, they likely don’t understand her because they haven’t seen her. None of them have seen her dressed as an airbender. None have seen her fly.

She sighs and turns back towards the interior of the palace. She left her glider with Kiki as a sign of good faith, but it aches something fierce to not have so soon after receiving it. A glider is something special, a tool that means the sky can never be taken from her.

So her family is here. All that’s missing is Toph’s. The risk for assassination is higher now, but it will be climbing steadily over the next few months. With the date for the first trial set a week from tomorrow, it’s likely they will be hunted as more information comes to light.

“Morning, Katara. The others not up yet?”

The waterbender looks up from the fruit she’s cutting. “We need rice and a few other things, so Zuko took her down the mountain for some bending and foraging.”

“How long did you wait to tell her she’s the first?”

Katara hold out the knife with a piece of tuna fruit on the end. “After she had tea.”

This is ridiculous, starting the trials with Toph. Is it because she’s the youngest and thus the most likely to slip up? Clearly they don’t know her. If Badger doesn’t want to talk, then she won’t talk. “Wise choice.”

“Anything interesting outside this morning?”

“Just my family.”

Katara stops what she’s doing. “Snowlion, are you okay?”

“I will be.” She twists the air just so to carry a lychee her way. “Do any of us have normal families?”

“If we did, we lost it after Wulong.”
She sighs, running a hand through her hair before trying again to peel the fruit. “I need to go see Mai.”

“Yes, you do.”

“I’m not sure anyone told my family that I’m an airbender.”

Katara puts down the knife, setting it aside and pushing the fruit away from her. “Do you think Mai would have told them?”

“I don’t know.” And she really doesn’t. On the one hand, telling them promises three years of fear that there may be another one. On the other, not telling them promises maximum pain when they finally do find out and realize they are the last ones to know.

It will all depend on how vindictive Mai was feeling after Ba Sing Se.

“They should hear it from you first, though, if possible.” Katara picks up the knife again, peeling lychees into a bowel.

“Probably.”

No, no probably about it. They deserve this. She’s been a failure of a daughter from the beginning. Not just the airbending, but also the circus and the refusal to settle down and her inability to really want a man. How much grief did she cause them in those first fourteen years?

But how much did they cause her? Never listening to her. Never paying any attention to her because she wasn’t the eldest like An Lee or the best at killing like Chen Lee or as adept at seduction as Su Lee or good at strategy like Ya Lee. She was just Ty Lee, the freak. She’s been called by the name of every one of her sisters, but she can’t remember a time when either of her parents called her by her name.

And she knows the history. Grandmother told her about Tinley of the West, how she ran away as a six-year-old when the Temples were burning with nothing more than a snowlion figurine and the knowledge of a brother in the South and changed her name to Ty Lee to stay safe. This is an honorable name and to be denied it—it’s just like being denied the wind for all those years.

“Do you want one of us to come with you?”

“I want all of you there.” This could condemn her mother to death. “Maybe Aunt Jet will tell them.”

Katara nods. “Would you prefer that?”

“Yes.” It would be easier. It would be so much easier to let Aunt Jet do this. “And no.” Because letting Aunt Jet do this is the coward’s path. She went to war, stole beautiful Mai’s breath, faced the last of the Air Nomads, and became a Master by training with the best each of the other three elements had to offer. She isn’t a coward. She’s a Master Airbender, a great-grandniece of Avatar Aang, kin to the wives of both Avatar Roku and Fire Lord Sozin and cowardice does not run in their blood.

Katara’s hands are always cold, but reassuring when they reach out for hers. “They likely already know, and you can tell them in your own time. You don’t have to be alone when you do this.”

“They’ll probably try to kill me.”
"Possibly."

No possibly or probably about it. They will. The Kagami won’t tolerate an airbender carrying their name.

What was the name Tinley and her husband took for their family? Namikaze? Divine wind? That will work just fine, fits better than Kagami ever did.

“Ty, we all have to pick our battles. You’re going to have to face both your family and Mai. You’ve just got to decide which one is more important.”

“Mai.” Mai is always more important. Always. No exceptions and what she did to Mai is far worse than anything she did to her family.

And she and Mai are long overdue for a talk about Azula.

The last time he was down here, it was a dark time. He was still torn between trying to be a good son and prince and doing right by the world at large.

Now, though, he’s here to settle one last ghost. What happened to Azula makes him want to run away and forget the woman who first gave up and called a child a monster. Azula was abandoned to Ozai long before Ursa disappeared and he really isn’t entirely sure how he feels about it. Anger, mostly, but also sorrow and a searing pain beneath his ribs. There’s confusion and pity and a few things he’s not sure how to name.

Azula would want to know what happened to Ursa. Seeing her there at the end, she looked so much like their mother it hurt. It took him several weeks to realize there were no mirrors in the palace that night. Did it hurt her too? To look into the mirror and see the woman who rejected her when she was nothing but a child?

Yes, Azula wasn’t the easiest child in the world. But she had been a happy child once, back before her firebending and her talking. Back before Ozai decided Zuko wasn’t worth the time. He always just believed his sister took after their father. Yet, he remembers what Katara said about the clock-flower tea. How it would only take his sister’s bending and her violence. Everything left behind was just Azula as she really was.

And what she really was a broken little girl who never grew up.

He’s not sure who is to blame for that. All of them, probably. Those months at Ember Island, he went through all of his family’s belongings still there, trying to find some answer to what went wrong with them. Uncle once told stories of how Ozai was a happy baby, excited by the world and actually rather sweet. Uncle wasn’t sure what changed, but there were fifteen to twenty years separating the brothers and Ozai had their mother’s death shadowing his birth. Maybe Azulon was simply biased against him for that.

But what happened to Azula? Was it Ozai trying to favour the younger child after what happened to him? Or was it something Ursa did?
Looking back, he doesn’t understand why his mother, one of the most understanding and gentle people he’s ever known, would so soundly reject a child like that.

There isn’t much of his mother down here. There’s plenty of her family, though, and places mentioned in various documents lead him to spread out every map he can find. It isn’t easy to read in the dim bluish light of his fire, but it’s all he can do. The fire hasn’t been red since that night.

It isn’t too much trouble though. He can still clearly see the forest that appears on some maps and not on others. It’s always in the same location, on an island too dangerous to inhabit in the southern isles, just a few clicks away from Seal Island. A larger landmass, haunted by stories told by sailors who will only pass by with a Sage and all the blessings they can get.

Sailors are a superstitious lot to begin with. This time, though, they may actually be on to something. A spirit forest near his mother’s homeland. How fitting.

Maybe Katara can talk to Yue and La. Maybe he can try to contact Agni. Get the lay of the land before trying to infiltrate a forest that dangerous.

He sighs, leaning back against a dragon’s rib. Is it even worth it? What will he say if he finds her? ‘I’m sorry I killed my sister but it’s not like I had much choice’?

Ursa hated Azula. It’s the only conclusion he can draw from his memories. Admittedly, there were things he never saw, things that happened just between mother and daughter and neither ever spoke of. Maybe their relationship wasn’t as bad as his with Ozai.

Or maybe it was worse.

Maybe Ursa really did hate Azula. Ozai was incapable of loving anyone and Zuko was too young and too stupid to believe his mother could ever be wrong. It wasn’t like Uncle was much better.

Azula was a monster because they made her that way. He’s tried thinking of it in other ways, tried thinking that maybe there was something wrong in their blood that made them predisposed to that kind of behavior. He just keeps going back to his own memories of a young Azula who would sneak into his room and climb into bed with him because she was terrified of the night.

And then the firebending came.

Everything seems to start there at the onset of his sister’s power. He can never seem to recall a time when Ursa was particularly close to Azula, so maybe there was some damage there from before Azula’s birth. It is entirely possible Ozai did something in usual Ozai fashion to ruin everything.

He just needs to know what happened.

That, and as much as he wants to forget, Ursa deserves to know what happened to her daughter. If she’s still alive, that is. As their mother, she is owed that at the very least. He can give her nothing else, not until he has answers.

Still, there’s a dark part of him that wants it to hurt her as much as this hurts him; wants her to know what it’s like to be unable to breathe and panic sparking through the bloodstream at the thought that Azula is dead because it was the only mercy he could give her.

The fires flicker and the ink on one of the maps smudges slightly. Breathe, just breathe. Tears won’t help here. Just breathe and don’t panic don’t think about any of it just focus on Ursa and the
Focus on needing these answers for Katara.

Katara, yes. And Toph and Ty Lee. They deserve better. This little family they’ve built together deserves better. If they are really going to move forward, if he and Katara ever have children, then he needs these answers. He needs to know that this madness isn’t in the blood. That there is someone to blame for what happened to Azula, even if it’s him.

He just needs to know what went wrong.

“Snow, can you get that?” She can hear the airbender moving around, but her senses are still too deadened in this place. Maybe they can steal some metal and line the walls.

“Good afternoon, Master Toph, Master Ty Lee.” She knows that voice and as hard as she tries not too, she smiles.

“General Iroh.” Snow quietly greets.

Toph hears them moving closer and can smell the jasmine as Iroh passes by. “You brought us tea?”

“A peace offering for my nephew.”

Snowlion takes a seat beside her, long fingers pressing into her wrist just enough to let her get a good sense on the airbender. “He isn’t here right now.”

“I take it that means Master Katara is gone as well?”

“She is.” Toph tries to remember where Sugar went off to this morning. When she and Zuko got back with the rice, there was already a light lunch waiting for them, but no waterbender. Snow’s been oddly quiet since they got back, so there wasn’t much explanation and Sparky disappeared soon after. “Did you need to talk to them?”

“It would have been nice after how things started.”

Snow sighs and stands up. “I’ll go find something for us to eat.”

She nods, listening for the barely-there sounds of Snowlion leaving the room. “You’ll have to excuse us. None of us are in the best mood right now.”

“The past few months have been rough.” It’s a statement, not a question, like he knows that they can’t sit still without fighting or plotting. Maybe he does. He’s smart enough to figure out some of their wartime activities and he knows Zuko well enough to know their resident firebender does not sit still well. “How are you, Toph?”

He sounds sincere, but with the shaky image she’s getting, it’s hard to tell if he’s really being honest or if this is just a ploy. It is Uncle Iroh, though, so maybe he’s worth the benefit of the doubt.
Sparky can yell at her later. “Angry.”

“Trouble sleeping? Depression? Nightmares? Flashbacks? Panic without reason?” He lists off their symptoms like he already knew. There isn’t any pity present. It sounds almost like he knows exactly what they’re going through. “There are many names for it. It’s often seen in soldiers after they come home. Here we call it fire-shy.”

“Does it go away quickly?”

He sounds so sad. “No. The Siege of Ba Sing Se was almost twenty years ago and it still feels like it was yesterday.”

She nods. He wouldn’t give that information if he weren’t serious about helping them, would he? He might be the Fire Lord but he is still Uncle Iroh, right? Caring is in his nature.

She wants to trust him but it’s not easy. Not like Suki. Iroh is a politician, but also a soldier. Which side is she supposed to trust as the dominant one?

Then again, she misses the recklessness of the war. It was all planned, but there was always this element of unknown. And she misses it. Terribly so. She needs to feel alive. Talking to Suki helped, a little.

Maybe taking this risk will help as well. She feels like she’s going to break if she doesn’t scream all the dark thoughts at the top of her lungs, hoping someone might hear her. “War is the easy part, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is. Destruction is often the easy part.”

Like deciding to destroy their relationships with the outside world. Their families, their friends, even Twinkletoes. By deciding to stay at the Temple with Snow, they did choose to destroy everything, didn’t they? They tore it all down with one decision that was so much easier to make than the choice to come back.

“We hurt you.”

He sighs. “Yes, you did. But I think you’ve hurt yourselves even more.”

Is their inability to function really that obvious? The tiny fractures separating them from each other, save Zuko and Katara who after everything seem closer than ever? “We hurt Aang the most.”

“That may be, but Avatar Aang was in pain for a very long time.” He’s probably right. Twinkles never did accept being the last of his kind and if he ever did, it would lead to—well, what happened. “How is my nephew?”

She blinks once or twice. “You want to know about Zuko?”

“I doubt he wants to speak to me.”

Toph bites her tongue to keep from responding. Iroh doesn’t need to know most of Zuko’s nightmares focus on Azula and their family. Zuko likely wants nothing more than to talk to Iroh, just not about the things Iroh probably wants to talk about. “He’s been doing better. Katara helps.”

“Are they a good match?”

“Perfect.” Probably the only proper truth she’ll tell while in this city. It’s almost scary how well
suited they are to each other. They move in sync with one another, they keep each other in check. “Who were you going to set him up with?”

“Honestly? Katara was my first choice until the treaties with the Ozai-sympathizers and the treaty between the North and the South.” He pauses and she feels a stone teacup pressed into her hands. “After her, my choice was Ty Lee until I heard about her relationships with Mai and Azula. After that, it was you.”

There’s a flood of something like jealousy at the mention of Snow. It takes a moment to register exactly what he said. “Me? That’s not right. At all.”

She and Sparky? That’s like marrying Katara and Sokka. She wrinkles her nose and moves away from Iroh just a little. Then again, it is semi-logical. If Sweetness isn’t available and Snow’s history rules her out, Toph is the most logical choice. Knives is out of the question, so that means Toph has the most history with him.

But their relationship is very different.

“It would have just been a suggestion.”

“You know we never would have agreed to that.”

There’s a rustle of fabric like he’s shrugging. “It would have placated the noblemen for a while to know there was a possibility.”

“Do they like her?” She can’t understand how anyone can’t see the advantage of having Sugar at Sparky’s side.

“Katara wields quite a bit of respect. How she handles herself in the days to come will determine what the resistance to her marriage looks like.”

“And Snow? Her family isn’t going to be a problem, are they?”

Her cup of tea is removed from her hands. “I’m afraid I don’t know who Snow is, Master Toph.”

“Ty Lee.”

There’s an exhale and it’s risky to do to someone like Iroh, but she reaches out for the metal she knows is in the blood, just to get a better sense of his emotions. She’ll need to ask Sweetness for a description of what heart rate feels like for each of the emotions. “The Kagami Clan is a powerful one. They rose to power hunting down surviving Air Nomads. How they will react to one of their own belonging to the wind is unknown.”

“So all that’s left is to hear from my family?”

“They will be here before the trial begins. The hawk arrived this morning.”

Oh. So that’s—soon. Very soon. How long has it been since she was last on something approaching good terms with her parents? Five, six years? Before Aang, before the Earth Rumble. Hei Bai, she was twelve when she left. That’s way too young to have a bad relationship with her parents.

But there’s been no contact for close to five years and now they’ll be here within a week’s time. “I feel old.”
For the first time since they came back to the world, she hears Iroh laugh. It’s darker than what she remembers, not the light and jolly laugh she remembers. “War will do that to the soul.”

War will age the soul. Yes, it will, she thinks. War can take a twelve year old make them feel a thousand in the span of a couple years.

She’s almost sixteen and already a war veteran.

There’s something very wrong about that.

Zuko looks whiter than fresh snow when he finally resurfaces around teatime. She finds him just outside their rooms and leads him silently into their bedroom, away from where Toph sits with General Iroh. She can feel Ty Lee’s heart beating rapidly in the kitchen. She twists the blood in the airbender’s arm, just enough to make her aware of her return. Ty can figure out the rest on her own.

The door closes and locks behind her, her bloodbending walking him towards the bed. His body doesn’t show signs of an attack. Just exhaustion. What exactly was he doing? He had to have returned with Toph after she left to go practice her bending, but where did he go after that?

“Sit down.” He does. She releases her hold, kneeling down beside him. “Do you want to talk?”

“Not really.”

She pushes him down to a laying position, moving to curl up beside him. “Your uncle is in the main room with Toph.”

He moves just a little, enough to get both arms around her. “I don’t think I can face him right now.”

“That’s okay. Just go to sleep.”

She can feel him twisting a lock of hair around his fingers. “Can’t. I keep seeing her.”

Azula. Of course. Being back here, in this place, it would be like her going back to Wulong and staying there in a high stress situation for an undetermined length of time. She knew, logically, that they were going to have to talk about this at some point, preferably before they each went on trial.

There isn’t a set of rules to follow. How to talk about wartime trauma and all the awful things you did. That’s a conversation no one should ever have. She catches one of his hands in hers, right in right, locking their fingers together. “We’ve both done terrible things.”

Both he and she are right handed, which means it was these hands, linked together, that ended those two young hearts. Both actions were taken out of mercy and love. It’s just that knowing that was the motivation doesn’t make it any better. They still killed two people they each held precious in some way.

They both took an innocent life.
It’s taken her some time to come to that conclusion, but it is the truth. At least as far as she can see. Aang was just Aang, but Azula was a victim of circumstance. If she’d had the positive influences her brother had, there’s no telling what she would have been like. Maybe she would have been Aang’s firebending master. Maybe, in that other world where the iceberg never happened, Azula would have been her firebending master.

Everything the young Fire Lord did was to make her father happy. It was for acceptance, maybe, or something like it.

“Does it bother you as much? You have nightmares, but it doesn’t seem to hurt you in the same way.”

She sighs. “Aang asked to die. He was fully conscious and aware of what he was asking. It was what he wanted.”

She has to believe that. If nothing else, she has to believe she did what he wanted. It may not have been the right choice, but it was the correct one because it was what he wanted. All his life he’d been told to be this and be that. As the Avatar, every little thing was controlled whether he knew it or not. On the subject of his destiny, he was never really given a choice.

Maybe they don’t have a choice about destiny. It doesn’t matter anymore. Aang chose death, to be reunited with his people. She could give him nothing else, so she gave him that. It was the only choice.

“I just want to know where it went wrong.”

“Before either of us could have done anything to fix it.” That mess wasn’t their war. The damage was done generations before they came along and it was not their war. “One of us has to go deal with your Uncle.”

“Not me. I think I’d set him on fire in this condition.”

She unlaces their fingers and props herself up on one elbow, leaning down to press a kiss against the corner of his mouth. He turns a little and catches her, turning them over so he’s looking down at her. “Zuko, we have to deal with this at some point.”

He kisses her once. “Not today.”

“I do need to talk to him sooner rather than later.” His control over lightning is getting better, the tiny sparks arcing from his hand to her hip. “Preferably before the trial.”

“Is it important?”

“Very.”

He sighs and rolls off of her. “Sorry, I’m not feeling well right now.”

She bites back a laugh. He always feels the need to apologize, despite knowing full well that if he did something she didn’t like, he’d be pinned to the ceiling by his own blood in five seconds.

This, as they are right now, this is good. It’s almost normal. Their ghosts are present, but not crushing their lungs. Things aren’t tense the way they normally are. “I’ll be back in a little while. Try to get some sleep, okay?”

He nods and turns toward the wall. She keeps it subtle, but pulls on his heart rate just enough to
lull him to sleep. He hasn’t been sleeping well. None of them have, but for him and Ty it’s been worse. Something about this place and what happened here with Azula and Mai haunts them both.

In the main room, she reaches out for Ty and Toph, tugging on their limbs to make it clear she wants to talk to Iroh alone. By the time she makes it to the room, neither airbender nor earthbender is present.

“That’s an impressive talent.” Iroh pours a fresh cup of tea, holding it out to her. “Is this the bloodbending I keep hearing so much about?”

She smiles and refuses the tea. “We need to talk.”

“About Zuko?”

“About Master Hama.” She takes the seat across from him, pushing Toph’s abandoned tea out of the way. “I want to take her back to the Southern Water Tribe.”

Chapter End Notes

Apparently there is an upside to having a sprained ankle. This is the most writing I’ve done in months.

This chapter is a little messy, but the characters are more than a little messy. Right now I'm trying to set up the psychological issues that will be their major sources of conflict for the course of this story, beyond the trauma from the war.
It’s difficult to keep her excitement down when Katara suggests sneaking into the Fire Nation catacombs. Snow said it would be the most likely place for a treaty to be, especially one as dangerous as an alliance with the Northern Water Tribe.

She can’t help but agree. Honestly. The chance to sneak out and do something familiar like theft is too alluring. “Do you know exactly where we’re going?”

“Ty Lee’s directions are pretty simple. She’s not sure which room the Treaty will be in if it’s down there, but she marked a few possibilities.”

It would probably be better if Snow were down here herself, but Jetsun requested tea and Sparky decided now would be the perfect time to go visit Knives.

And then her feet hit solid earth and everything is clear. “You could have told me we were going underground.”

“That would spoil the surprise.”

Sweetness is just ahead of her, something like paper in her hands. These tunnels are filled with things, many metal and some large things that don’t feel like wood—bone. This is bone, that odd not wood with just a hint of iron. “So what are we looking for?”

“It’ll probably be a scroll.”

She follows the waterbender’s lead down the tunnel. “You really want this thing, don’t you?”

Katara stops and steps toward one of the piles, her movements showing her checking the paper Snow gave her. “I want leverage against the North and the Fire Nation. If this is real, it could start another war.”

“Isn’t that what no one wants?”

“Exactly.”

Oh, so that’s what this is about. Hold the threat of war over their heads and since no nation is stable enough to go to war right now, they’ll bend and do exactly what she wants. “Won’t you need the North’s version?”

“I’m working on that.”

This is the Katara she’s missed. That edge of ruthlessness mixed with determination. Her feet slide against the earth, mapping out the tunnels in her head. “What would this scroll be made of?”

“Ty seems to think it would probably be metal or wood capped with ice stones.”

“Like your necklaces?” She got a good feel for the one Zuko made her and he did say it was the same substance.
“Yes.”

She can work with that. The ground is cold beneath her hands, despite the constant heat of the island. Breathe, focus. Remember what that smooth stone felt like. Remember what the carvings of the Water Tribes felt like when Katara would etch them into stone during their time in the war.

There.

Up six treasure piles and down a small tunnel to the left. “Sweetness, this way.”

The waterbender doesn’t question her, just follows. This is good. Familiar. She’s on solid ground and she’s the expert. There are no questions, no uncertainty. She knows where she’s going, what she’s doing.

From down here, she could probably destabilize the entire palace.

Tempting, very tempting. Zuko isn’t in the palace right now and Ty Lee can fly.

But that would be bad. Part of why they came back, rather than run away from Ember Island, was to show they aren’t a danger to the outside world. Even though they are. They ended the war; they’ve decimated entire regiments, and took down the Fire Nation’s main communication system.

They are dangerous. They are extremely dangerous. The things they can do with their power is beyond anything anyone else has even attempted.

So they stay here, not using their power in the ways most familiar to them, and try to make peace.

No wonder Sugar is after this treaty. Leverage is what they do best. If they can’t use their power, then they’ll just have to find it another way.

“Toph, can you tell me exactly where it is?”

She reaches down for the earth just beyond the rug. “There’s a shelving unit to your right. Lots of gold. There’s something made of silver and ice stones on the very top, just behind the decoration there at the front.”

The sound of water moving through air breaks the stillness of the tunnels. The next moment, she gets a much better sense of the item as it falls into Katara’s hand. Parchment unrolls for the first time in decades, the smell wafting over. “This is it.”

“What does it say?”

“Exactly what I was afraid it would.”

“They gave fishing rights to the Fire Nation and were killing off their waterbenders?” She remembers the stories and speculation.

“And more.” There’s something about Sugar’s tone of voice that suggests the something more is something much worse.

“How bad is it?”

“The Tribes would go to war within an hour.”

With each other, she presumes. Which is means this is very bad. “Can you use it to get Hama
“I can probably use it to make the North pay reparations to the South.” Katara sighs and Toph hears the treaty rolling up again. “I need to see the North’s version.”

“Checking for discrepancies?”

“Wondering if the North’s contains more details about the Southern Raiders and the Fire Nation prisons.”

Oh. That’s not good. At all. “The North was involved?”

“If I’m reading this right, that was their first offer when the war began.”

Well then. That’s a war in the making.

Did Gaoling have a treaty like that? Or any other of the Earth Kingdom cities that prospered during the war? Even if they didn’t, the suspicion will be there if news of this treaty ever makes it out.

Even if it didn’t happen, what about the killing benders? Benders have always been a little rare compared to the majority of the population, but do any Earth Kingdom towns have an extreme minority? Are any of them missing entire generations?

Have any of them been pushed to the brink of extinction for it? “How many benders did the South have?”

Because that bit doesn’t make sense. Benders are always a minority; so how could the South be driven to oblivion just by targeting the benders? There had to be other casualties, yes, but not enough to do this kind of damage. Unless the Fire Nation was targeting the South to prevent benders from being born, but that doesn’t explain why there were any survivors. She’s heard the stories. By the time Hama was taken, the South was already in shambles. The Fire Nation could have destroyed them at any time.

So why didn’t they? Why not just eliminate the possibility of a Southern Waterbender ever being born? It’s what she would do if she were a conquering nation. Just prevent the possibility from being possible. It’s that simple.

“A majority. According to the stories, at the height of our power, we were one non-bender for every three benders.” Katara sounds so sure, like she’s just reciting facts. “The war came south after a couple of bad seasons, so it had dropped to one to two.”

“Has the North ever been like that?”

“Majority bender? Not to my knowledge. Gran-Gran always said benders were cherished in the north for how rare we are.”

“Do you think they were jealous?” She’s heard the stories about how the North treated Katara. The last Southern Waterbender is something precious, something to be strengthened. Not something pushed to the sidelines. Why didn’t the North listen when they heard what had become of the South?

But if they were jealous of the prosperity, that would explain it a little.

“Possibly.” Katara tugs on her hand, pulling her back the way they came. “We were known
for being the better traders, we had more benders, a larger population, and control over most of the Tribes’ interactions with the rest of the world. The Southern Air Temple was so close; they were a major trade hub in that part of the world. The Southern Water Tribe, the Earth Kingdom, and the Fire Nation all went through there.”

The Northern Water Tribe is too isolated. There’s a carved map of the world that shows everything in a form she can understand. The North Pole is so far away from everything populated. It’s like Kyoshi Island. A part of a whole, but so separate it may as well be a different world.

“Do you mind if we stay down here and look through the Earth Kingdom documents?” She has to know. Even if they find nothing, she needs to know that her homeland didn’t do this.

Katara pauses for a moment and then relaxes fully. “Of course we can.”

It may take time, but Toph wants to know what came before them. The things that crafted the world they were born into, the world that Aang did not belong to.


Despite everything, she looks good. But Mai has always been beautiful, especially with her dark hair loose around her. Pulled up, it always made her look older. Down like this, though, she looks as young as he knows she is. If he tries, he can remember what the soft locks felt like when his hands ran through them.

“Are you going to talk or are you just going to stare at me?”

“I see Aunt Zen made sure you were taken care of.” That sounded better in his head. It is true, though. Rather than a prison cell, she’s being held in a fairly nice set of rooms in an isolated and heavily guarded portion of the palace.

Mai looks up from her embroidery. Has she always done embroidery? He knows she was trained as a proper court lady, but it was always knives with her. He’s never seen her with a needle and thread.

And why exactly was she allowed a needle?

“Why are you here?”

“I wanted to see you.”

“You abandoned me with a note.” The needle goes in with just a little more force than necessary. “You left me in a prison cell. You pretended to be dead for three years and this is the first time in the seven months since you returned that you’ve thought of visiting me. What makes you think I would want to see you?”

She’s angry. Rightfully so, in this case, but it doesn’t make it any easier. “It’s about my sister.”

The needle stills and for a moment, he thinks she may kill him after all. “You have no right to
“Either I did what I did, or she would spend the rest of her life in a hospital or in prison.”

“At least she would be alive.” Mai really loved Azula. How did he never see that? Was it not as strong when they were younger? That look on her face, though. He’s seen it before on hundreds of faces during the war.

He and Ty Lee both loved Mai and wanted nothing more than for her to love them back. All this time when they were trying to catch her attention, she was only concerned with Azula. Did anyone know? Maybe Ty did.

But he let Mai into his life in ways only Katara has been since then.

“How have you been?”

“How quaint, you sound like you actually care.”

“I do.” And he really does. This is Mai. Despite everything, she will always mean something. Not just his own history with her, but the fact that when no one else did, she loved Azula and stood by her when his sister needed support the most. “I know you didn’t mean to hurt her.”

“I never hurt her. Not like you.” The embroidery is set aside completely, and Mai turns to face him fully.

There is tension in her body. Darkness in her eyes too. Her mouth pulls down just a little more than it used to and she looks like she hasn’t slept properly in months. There is sorrow. More than that, though, there is fury. Was she always this angry? Or is it just what the war has done to her? “The clock-flower?”

“That was an accident.”

“I know. Did the Sages say she couldn’t have the throne unless she stayed on it?” He’s careful to avoid sounding accusatory. He’s angry too, but he has no right. Not here, not with her. “And the longer she stayed on it, she would have needed a higher and higher dose.”

For just a moment, Mai shows a bit of weakness. Just a bit of softening at the eyes. “She was out of control.”

“It wasn’t that, was it?”

It wasn’t and they both know it. Azula’s madness began long before the comet. The road from there was a downward journey. The more the madness took her, the more a danger she would have been to herself. He’s watched the same process with Katara; knows he’s on the same path too.

“What do you want, Zuko?” She sounds so tired. There was always an edge of disinterest in her voice but nothing like this.

He takes a deep breath. “I don’t remember there being any mirrors in the palace that night.”

“I had them all removed a couple of years before.” She turns away, curling up in the windowsill.

“How long had she been seeing Mother?” He tries to focus on the way Mai’s hair is almost long enough to brush the floor. The way her skin looks paler than it used to or the way the dark red
suits her better than the black ever did. Just something that isn’t Azula and what happened that night.

“Long enough.”

“Before the comet?”

“I wouldn’t know.” Of course she wouldn’t. She was in the middle of a prison break in Ba Sing Se during the comet. “The servants seemed to think she snapped in the wake of Boiling Rock.”

In the wake of her betrayal, she means. In hindsight, he can see how dependent on Mai his sister really was. Losing someone that precious the way she did—to him, the way Mother and Uncle both abandoned her—would have done more damage than anything Father could have done to her.

“There were no guards that night.”

“I sent them all away.”

“Why?”

She looks at him with a familiar disdain. “Because the war was ruining this country.”

So she wanted it to end as badly as they did. He almost laughs. It’s absurd, really. They were so afraid of what Azula and Mai were capable of; it never dawned on them to consider Azula’s madness and Mai’s unwillingness to continue the war. They could have ended things years before they did.

The war may not have ended the way it did, had they gone that path. Does Mai realize that? That if she had given just an indication that she wanted the war to end and that Azula was in no condition to fight, the war could have ended without the deaths of Azula and Aang.

They should have stormed the palace the second they received news that Ozai was dead and Azula was Fire Lord.

“I know what happened was my fault.” He’s not sure how to say this; to explain just how deeply he feels this and how much he’s figured out now that it’s too late. “And I know there’s nothing I can do to make up for it. If there’s anything you can tell me to help me understand, that would be very appreciated.”

“I should tell you nothing.”

“You’re probably right.”

“Then why should I? You killed her.”

“And you covered it up.” Stay calm. Don’t get angry. Mai had to have had a reason for why she did it. There has to be a reason. “You staged it so it looked like Azula and Aang killed each other.”

She scoffs. “I staged it so it looked like the Avatar killed her. How was I supposed to know you’d kill him too?”

“I didn’t kill him.” The words are out before he can think about it. Mai’s always been sharp, the perfect politician. By now she’s probably heard that Aang is gone. As the only one outside his family to know how Azula died, she’s likely the only one to have figured out that Aang died by someone else’s hand.
“You didn’t?” She’s interested and this is bad. “No, I don’t suppose you would. The waterbender would, though. Did you burn his body? Did he get the funeral Azula should have had?”

“Mai, stop.”

“Don’t say my name.” Has she always been this small? She’s taller than Katara, but far more slender than anyone he knows. She looks like she’d break if someone touched her.

“Sorry.”

“I won’t tell them.”

“It would give you leverage with the White Lotus.”

There’s that almost smile he remembers. It’s a darker expression than it used to be, but it’s at least a glimpse of the woman he knew. “My position in the Fire Nation is destroyed already. The Sages have probably told them everything. Selling your secrets will get me nowhere.”

“Is that why you didn’t tell anyone about Ty Lee?”

There were too many surprised faces when they returned to the outside world and Ty Lee was in full airbender regalia.

“Anyone who believes an entire race could be destroyed like that is too stupid to bother with.” So she didn’t tell anyone. Which means Ty Lee’s family is in for a nasty surprise. He takes a chance and stands up slowly, moving to sit on the windowsill beside her. “Zuko, we’re not getting back together.”

“No one told you?” That’s a surprise. Given the way gossip travels here, he would have expected her to know everything by now.

She tilts her head a little to the right. “Told me what?”

Well, this is awkward. “I’m married. Have been for almost a year now.”

“And no children?” The way she says it makes it sound like she’s expecting a correction.

“No, not yet.” That’s a bridge he and Katara are going to have to cross eventually, but after everything he’s not sure either one wants a child anytime soon.

It’s almost strange now, to think of what might have happened if they had made a different choice after the Agni Kai. Maybe he and Mai would have been planning their wedding right now, rather than speaking as they are. He’s fairly certain they wouldn’t be happy, but maybe content.

He figured out years ago that Mai is not a woman to be controlled. Nor is Katara. It’s just different with Mai. She is her own person, untouchable by any mortal soul. Maybe that was why he was always drawn to her. The mystery and beauty, the sheer power held in her delicate frame.

Mai is impossible to know and not desire.

That scornful smile comes back. “Careful, or the nobles may call for a new bride.”

“Just tell me about Azula.”

“Ursa can probably tell you more.” Mai reaches over and picks up her embroidery again. “Everything I can tell you has to do with her.”
“I don’t know where she is.”

Those lovely silver eyes never leave the needle. “That’s your problem.”

The dismissal is clear.

Still, that went better than expected.

Aunt Jet looks so at home, sitting in a royal garden dressed in the saffron robes of their people. Ty Lee sends air through the last of the fruit tarts, gathering up little cyclones to carry the trays while she gets the tea.

“You’re getting better at that.”

“I’ve had some practice.” Household chores were a major part of her training at the Temple. She thought it was silly in the beginning, but the amount of control required for most of them made it very clear why that was pushed by the other three.

“Have you spoken to your mother yet?”

She’d forgotten how direct Aunt Jet could be. “No. I don’t know how much she knows.”

“She doesn’t know you’re an airbender, if that’s your concern. I’m not sure any of them have been informed.”

Ty Lee nods, placing the trays down carefully. She pours two cups of tea, handing one to her aunt. “I’m not sure how to tell them.”


It’s not her favorite tea, but it is Jet’s. Acquiring it wasn’t easy. It was fun, though. Sneaking through the marketplace, looking for a tea stand that carried the high quality Earth Kingdom tea her aunt preferred.

It’s too delicate for her tastes, but she drinks it anyway. “I don’t want anyone to be hurt.”

Jet’s hand is warm against her cheek. “Little snowlion, that concern is not for you. The guarantee that someone would be hurt was made when my sister married that man.”

There never has been much love lost between sisters, nor between Aunt Jet and Father. Is this the line between airbenders and the rest of their nations? When she made the choice to be Air instead of Fire, did she make a mistake?

No, not possible. She belongs to the sky. It’s in her blood in a way the flame never was.

It’s just that this path means no more nights spent gossiping with Ya Lee. No more gymnastics practices with An Lee. No more dancing with Su Lee. No more tea with He Lee. No more quiet reading with Min Lee.
And Chen Lee is gone forever.

“I’m not their sister anymore.”

They have the same faces, the same blood, but because the wind is in her and not in them, it’s like they belong to different families.

Aunt Jet pushes a fruit tart towards her. Lychee, from the smell. “They’re fools if they reject you.”

“Is that how you feel about my mother?”

The elder airbender sighs. “Some days I do. Most of the time I think of what Mother would have wanted. She never loved Ten Lee any less than she did me.”

“Did she really not know?”

“Mother never told her and I never told her. We thought it was safer that way.”

Safer, yes. It always has been safer for the non-benders to not know. Things are different now, though. They are free to bend the wind, to answer the siren song of the sky.

They drink their tea in silence. It isn’t until the pot is empty that Ty Lee finds her voice again. “Has there been any more discussions about turning the Temple of the Winds into a school?”

Aunt Jet smiles. “Some, but most of us are concerned about these trials. We’re currently talking to the Lungta about maybe revealing themselves.”

“Let them make their own choices.”

“We would if we could.” That doesn’t sound good. “It’s looking like the White Lotus may know more than they’re letting on.”

“I was afraid of that.” Ty Lee runs her hands through her hair. This isn’t good at all. They don’t need to be blindsided with the White Lotus throwing something unexpected at them. “Can you get in touch with an Acolyte? We need her here to take some of the heat off of us.”

“Rinchen?”

“You always were good at this.”

Her aunt sits back in her chair, a fruit tart balancing carefully on a cyclone. “That’s a risky move, bringing her here. Are you sure General Iroh can handle it?”

“But it will distract him enough he may not notice any discrepancies.”

“It’s also quite cruel.”

Especially in the wake of Zuko’s return. She knows it’s awful to do. She’s been over every possible plan and Rinchen is the only one with a high chance of success. “I understand if she doesn’t want to see him. The last time I saw her she was concerned about Azula, though. And I know Zuko would like to see her as well.”

Jet looks interested now. “Does he think she might know something of Princess Ursa?”

“Do you know anything about Ursa?”
“No.” Her aunt catches the tart and takes a bite, some of the cream catching on the corner of her mouth. “If I did, I would have told you by now.”

“I know.” Ty Lee has thought it all through. Rinchen is the only one who might know something. She and Princess Ursa were fairly close as the outsiders in the palace. Not to mention that Ursa was always very fond of Lu Ten. If Zuko is really going to find his mother, then Rinchen is the best bet they have for a lead.

That she can also distract General Iroh is just a bonus.

She finds them easily enough. It’s breaking their rules about making the White Lotus come to them, but this conversation is best had away from any prying eyes. They’re playing Pai Sho, of course, so when she approaches, she unceremoniously unrolls the treaty and tosses it across the tiles.

“Know anything about this?”

Iroh is probably too young. The date on it corresponds to the year of his birth but he was still the Crown Prince. It’s not inconceivable to be told of something like this.

And Pakku—Pakku would have been seventeen when this treaty was put into effect. The son of a nobleman, he would have known about this. He had to.

What about Gran-Gran? Did she know about this treaty? Did she know what was coming for the South when she moved in with Master Hama and fell for Granddad?

Iroh pulls the treaty towards him, eyes flickering side to side as he reads it. “Where did you find this?”

“Doesn’t matter. Did you know about it?”

“I knew there was a treaty, but not the terms.”

“Master Pakku?”

He crosses his arms, hands disappearing into his sleeves. “I remember when the treaty was being discussed.”

“Including the Southern Raiders?” The fury she’s kept pent up races along her veins, tugging at all the water in the garden. “The prisons? Your Tribe did this to us. By all rights I should take this to my father and let the South make their choices.”

It would be all out war between the Tribes. Despite the South’s limited population, they have always been the more ruthless Tribe. Their creativity with weaponry should more than make up for it.

And her sheer power—what she can do to the North would restore her standing with her family. They wouldn’t care about the abandonment and her marriage to Zuko. Not in the face of this.
“Let’s not do anything rash, Master Katara.”

She drops down, legs crossing as she pulls the water to reclaim the treaty. It fits nicely inside the fold of her robes when it’s rolled up. “Have any suggestions, General Iroh? Do you really want the Fire Nation alone to go down for what happened to the South? Especially since this idea wasn’t Azulon’s.”

“There doesn’t need to be another war, not now. The world is too fragile.” He’s a politician, yes, but in this case he’s wisely taking the defense. “Is there any chance the Tribes can talk this through without violence?”

“None.” She and Pakku echo. The elder waterbender reaches out and moves a tile. “If you have that copy, it would be best if you took the North’s copy as well. At least, before a new heir is decided.”

“Afraid my brother may make a bad choice? This treaty did open the door the Fire Nation killing Tui and look how that ended. Or are you more worried about the North realizing that not only did they killed their own god but that they are responsible for what happened to Yue? What about all the mothers who had to drown their children because they were waterbenders and might be the Avatar?”

What about the mothers in the South who drowned their children because they were born burning after what the Southern Raiders did to them? How many women drowned themselves for what the Raiders did to them? How many benders were violated like that?

That, more than anything, drove the South to where it is. Losing their women and their children guaranteed entire generations were never born in the seventy years it took for the war to ruin them.

This treaty killed her people, created and upheld by their brothers and sisters in the North.

How could the North do this to them?

“That, among other things. There are other details in the North’s version that would cause some distress.”

“Like what?”

“That our women be restricted to healing.” He says it so plainly and for that she’s almost grateful. He isn’t softening the truth, instead treating her as a proper Master with full honesty. “And our men only be taught certain things about waterbending.”

“Is that why I was so much stronger than them?”

“Among other reasons. Your Master Hama could probably tell you.”

“Hama is in prison because of what this treaty created.” She wants to rip his heart out. She could do it to. Turn it into an ice bomb and let the jagged spikes of blood puncture his lungs as well. She could paralyze him or freeze his internal organs. Maybe even boil his blood in his veins.

Who knows, she might even be able to rip all the water from his body the way Hama took it from those plants.

General Iroh coughs delicately to catch their attention. “I think Master Hama is due for release, effective immediately. Should I have her taken to your rooms when she arrives?”
“That sounds about right.” Pakku smiles blandly. “Master Katara can help her settle in to normal life.”

Iroh moves a tile on the board. “Of course.”

“And this will not be mentioned again, will it?”

Katara’s brows rise. “That depends.”

Pakku gives her a sideways glance. “Expect an invitation to the North’s Solstice celebration this year. There should be directions for the archives included.”

This was easier that she expected. “You really are desperate to avoid another war.”

It’s Iroh who answers, laughing darkly. “You have no idea, Niece.”

Chapter End Notes

And Mai finally appears.
The morning of the trial opens with clouds hanging heavy over the caldera. The rainy season is early this year, though the sheer number of waterbenders and airbenders in the city may just twist the weather. It’s quieter than it should be. The darkness, probably. Without a proper sunrise, it’s not easy for a firebender to wake up.

He’s only up this early because he couldn’t sleep, not after seeing Mai. He’s not sure which it is: seeing Mai again or the confirmation that Ursa is the reason for Azula’s madness. One of those things is keeping him up. He doesn’t particularly want to know which one it is.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning.” He says it without thinking, only realizing that Katara is still asleep in their bed and neither Ty Lee nor Toph is ever awake this early. The last bit of sleep fades away. An Acolyte—well, yes, an Acolyte. Just not On Ji or one of the others. “Rinchen.”

She’s smiling, just like he remembers. “You’ve grown up, turtle duck.”

“You and Mother were the only ones who called me that.” There’s already tea set out on the small table. He takes a seat across from her, accepting the cup she offers. Oolong, from the smell. She always smelled like jasmine and oolong. “You haven’t changed a bit.”

She reaches over, brushing a lock of hair behind his ear. “It’s been ten years. We’ve all changed.”

There’s a sadness that clings to her now. He tries to remember when he last saw her. It was sometime after the news arrived, but before the funeral. Was she even at the funeral? She wasn’t at Azulon’s. “How have you been?”

“Good.” She slides a plate of sweets towards him. “As good as can be expected, at least. I heard about your marriage. Congratulations.”

“Thank you.”

“What’s she like?”

“Strong, determined, brilliant, loyal. I think you’ll like her.” He’s careful to use present tense; keeping Rinchen here is part of the plan, partly to distract Iroh but also just because he’s missed her. It would be nice to have one member of his family here for the trials. At least, one he’s not on rocky ground with.

“If you like her, then I suspect I will.” The saffron robes drag across the table as she picks up her cup of tea again. “I also heard you were looking for Princess Ursa.”

“Sort of.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”
Have these seats always been this uncomfortable? “It’s what Azula would have wanted. And she deserves to know what happened to my sister.”

Not her daughter. Not until he has answers. If Ursa really did reject Azula the way he’s beginning to think she did, then Azula was never her daughter and Ursa has no right to this knowledge.

But Azula would want to know what became of Ursa. Mai just confirmed that suspicion.

“Did you know Ursa was engaged to another man when Ozai chose her for his bride?”

Blink once, twice. “What?”

Rinchen nods. “A young man she knew from the theatre. They were actors on Hira’a. Particularly famous for *Love Amongst the Dragons*.”

“Would she have gone back to him?” His stomach flips at the thought. He didn’t expect her to remain faithful to Ozai. He seriously doubts the ability of any woman to remain loyal to a man like that.

It’s just the knowledge that he and Azula were never supposed to happen. That Ursa had planned for other children and a different life. He’s looked in the mirror. His face is not that different than his father’s, and Azula was the spitting image of Ursa.

What did she think when she looked at them?

“That was her plan.” Rinchen reaches out for his hand, her fingers cold against his skin. “You know she loved you, despite Ozai.”

“But did she love Azula?”

Her smile falters a little. “She had some problems bonding with Azula, yes, but she did love her.”

He turns his hand to hold hers. “Are you sure?”

“No.” There’s the honesty he remembers. “Lu Ten did. He was so excited when he found out Azula was a girl. He wanted to teach her how to dance.”

“Dancing was illegal.”

“When did that ever stop him?”

Their marriage was so short, but their engagement was long. What was Rinchen’s relationship with Lu Ten really like? She always presented herself as the perfect princess, but he knew Lu Ten better than that. His cousin genuinely loved his wife, and she loved him. Rinchen had to be more playful than she pretended to keep up with someone like Ten-Ten.

Lu Ten probably would have been a good influence on Azula. He would have been a good influence on both of them if he had survived. “I’ve often wondered what would have happened if he survived.”

“We would have been there for both you and Azula. She was such a sweet baby. I always liked watching after the two of you.” Rinchen sounds honest. She doesn’t look like she’s lying and there’s no change in her body temperature.
This was what they needed. Rinchen could have been their mother when Ursa left. He doesn’t remember Azula ever having problems with Rinchen. “You taught her calligraphy, didn’t you?”

“And how to serve tea.” She looks pointedly at him. He sighs and adjusts his hands on the teapot, pouring the way Uncle always insisted. “I was planning on teaching her music, but then the news came from Ba Sing Se.”

“It shouldn’t have been him.” It should have been Ozai. The younger son not in line for the throne, Ozai was expendable. He should have been the soldier. He should have been the one who died at Ba Sing Se when the Outer Wall fell.

“Maybe not, but it was.” Ten years have been kind. She just disappeared after the news that Lu Ten was lost reached the palace. One day she was there and the next, her rooms were bare and it was like Lu Ten had died a bachelor. “I know it’s been a long time, but what can you tell me about my mother?”

Rinchen takes a deep breath and slowly, begins to speak. The woman she describes isn’t quite the woman he remembers, so he listens carefully.

Ty Lee slips out the window, not wanting to encounter anyone who might be up. And this way, she can sneak back in and pretend she just slept in. Rather than reenter the palace at another point, she tries to remember what Katara and the others told her about Avatar Aang’s airbending. The scooter, specifically. If she twists the air like so, and hops up—nope, that’s not right.

Attempt three gets her moving safely along the side of the palace. This is freeing, the ability to jump off at any point and land safely on the ground. Faster too. She doesn’t have to dodge anyone inside.

It becomes a test to see how elaborate she can make the journey. Killing time, really, but the better the mood she in, the better this meeting will go.

All too soon, she lands on the small balcony outside the guest room. There’s only one set of lungs here. Adult female from the size. The air sneaks into the lock of the door, sliding it open silently.

The room looks like any other guest room. Severe and elegant, just like home. “I know you’re awake.”

The rhythm of breathing is too rapid and uneven for sleep. Her mother sits up, dark hair swinging down around her hips. “I was wondering if I was going to have to wait for the trial to see you.”

Instinctively, Ty Lee moves toward the shadows. She’s never felt nervous wearing the colors of an airbender, but this is different. This is telling her mother the truth she’s kept silent for most of her life.
“I wouldn’t make you wait that long.”

Her mother glances over her shoulder. “You made me wait six years, Ty Lee.”

It’s suddenly very hard to breathe. “I think that may be the first time you said my name.”

“I didn’t want to play favourites.”


She just got the leftovers and hand-me-downs.

“Was I supposed to let them know about you?”

“What do you mean?” Is this some play? She moves the air to double check that they are alone. She’s out of sight of any sniper, unless a hole has been drilled through a wall. The air moves to check for that too. Nothing.

“I was born of an airbender, child. Sister to another.” Her mother stands up now. “Did you really think I wouldn’t know I had given birth to one?”

Her mother knew. That just—no. “You knew all along?”

The years she spent crying herself to sleep, the stress making her sick to her stomach when no one was looking, all of it done out of fear that someone in her family would find out what she was and her mother had known all along? That just can’t be right. She must have misheard something.

Small hands catch her face, thumbs brushing over her cheeks. She’s vaguely aware of tears against her skin. Hers, yes, she’s crying. She shouldn’t be. Crying is bad. It’s weakness. Smile and no one will know anything’s wrong.

“You were floating in your crib by the time you were a month old.”

“Does anyone else know?”

“An Lee might.” That’s not much of a guess. An Lee knows everything. “And Ya Lee might. She was still sleeping in the nursery when your power manifested. None of the others, though.”

“Father?”

“Never paid much attention to any of you.” Her mother draws away a little, waving a hand at the thought of him. “But you didn’t need me to tell you that.”

This isn’t what she was expecting when she came here. It was supposed to be a fight, a battle. Anything but this. She steps forward a little, careful to stay out of sight of any potential assassins, but enough in the light that her mother can see her a little clearer. “Did you know about our family?”

“The airbenders before you?”

“Where we came from. The first Ty Lee, her story.”

Mother shakes her head. “My mother never told me much about her mother, nor her father. That was for Jetsun.”
“Her name was Tinley.” She doesn’t mean to say it, not really. She just wanted to know how much was known. “The first Ty Lee, I mean. She was born Tinley.”

“Western Air Temple?”

She nods. “She had a brother at the Southern Air Temple.”

This is the history she’s kept from Zuko. The discovery at the Temple of the Winds, hidden among the genealogy records was surprising. She’s still not sure how to tell Zuko. Nor how to tell Katara, given the other name she found on that chart.

Tinley, daughter of Mamani. Mamani, daughter of Esen, mother of both Tinley of the West and Aang of the South. She still has a little trouble wrapping her head around that. Her great-grandmother was the younger sister of the Avatar.

He died never knowing that.

Her great-grandmother died never knowing what happened to the brother she went searching for. Her grandmother never knew who her uncle was. She should tell Aunt Jet before her mother, and maybe she will. Maybe she’ll tell the world when she’s on trial that that unstable young man was her blood kin.

Maybe she’ll tell them he was Zuko’s blood kin too. Mamani was cousin to both Haneul and Ta Min, the wives of Sozin and Roku.

“Does he have any descendants?”

“No. He died young.” And recently, but Mother doesn’t need to know that.

Her mother smiles, pulling her hair over one shoulder. “So many of your kind has.”

It goes unsaid that many of them fell at the hands of Kagami assassins.

Well, this is uncomfortable.

“Could you please state your name for the assembly?”

She can sense nothing in this wooden box. Bastards couldn’t even have the foresight to install a stone floor for her, or metal embellishments for her to get a rough idea of what this place looks like. Suki had to lead her up to the box, carefully helping her up the steps. She takes a deep breath and reaches out for the metal in the blood. It’s a full house, but of course it is.

“Toph Bei Fong.”

“And where are you from?”

“Gaoling, Bei Fong Province, Earth Kingdom.” Let them realize just how powerful her family actually is. They were the first to inhabit the valley that became Gaoling, controlling the
surrounding area for centuries before the Earth King united the Kingdom.

“How old are you?”

“I will be sixteen this autumn.”

“An autumn birthday for an earthbender?”

She sighs. “I was born in the southern hemisphere. It’s spring there when it’s autumn here.”

That was a fun realization, figuring out after four years that Katara and Zuko have the same birthday, making her exactly two years his junior and that they had been rounding her age down by six months for several years. Of course Ty Lee would wait until one incredibly boring day on Ember Island to bring that up, not any of the thousands of opportunities before then.

“And what was your relationship to Avatar Aang?”

“I was his earthbending master, beginning during his time in Gaoling and continuing until Sozin’s Comet.”

“Not after?”

“No, the events during the comet led the world to believe I was dead. I did nothing to correct that assumption.” Stay proper. Don’t swear at the White Lotus man questioning her.

At least, she’s assuming he’s White Lotus. The metal in his body doesn’t give her much to work with, and he’s not wearing anything metal. There are a few pieces of metal in the room, though. Mostly jewelry. A few stone pieces too.

“How did you meet Avatar Aang?”

Finally, a fun question. “I was the reigning champion at the local Earth Rumble. Twinkletoes challenged me and then defeated me by cheating.”

She remembers how steady his heart was, screaming honesty as he babbled about seeing her in some swamp weeks before and something about King Bumi and listening to the earth.

“What was your relationship with him like?”

“I thought this was supposed to be about my activities after the comet, not before.”

“Please answer the question.”

She waits a moment to see if anyone will intervene.

Silence. Brilliant.

“We were friends. Physically and mentally he was my age, so he was something like a brother to me. He was a fairly terrible earthbending student. Too flighty.” But funny and relaxed when he wasn’t being uptight or stressed.

“And you had no second thoughts about leaving him after the comet?”

She had thousands of second thoughts. Even considered leaving Zuko and Katara, briefly. But that would have revealed them to be alive and she couldn’t do that.
The freedom too. Living without Aang and the others was so freeing. Neither Zuko nor Katara pushed her too hard and Snowlione fit right in like she belonged with them.

“It was the best choice.” When in doubt, keep to the party line. “We recognized after the failure at Wulong that Aang had some growing up to do. We all did, really. Things were too distracting when we were all together, so maintaining distance was decided as the safest option.”

Best to leave Moon Girl out of this. No one needs to be clued into Sugar’s connections to the Spirit World, nor the possibility that she might be a lost Avatar.

“Ty Lee of the Kagami was also a reason for distance.”

She bites her tongue to keep from correcting him to Namikaze. “I found her in Taku. When we realized what she is, the only safe choice was to maintain distance. If Avatar Aang had realized he wasn’t the last airbender, it would have been chaos.”

“How long did it take to recognize Ty Lee as an airbender?”

“About two weeks after the comet.” A lie, but they don’t need to know it took closer to a month after the comet, two weeks after finding Snowlione. “That was about the time it took us to release her from the restraints.”

“You waited that long to decide you could trust her?”

“We waited that long to recover from Wulong. If it came to a fight, we were in no condition to fight.”

“What were your injuries?”

She takes a deep breath, trying to remember. “Katara had a head wound. She was unconscious for the first few days. She had a burned hand. Zuko was exhausted in the wake of the comet. He slept most of the first week. I had a rolled ankle and we had all inhaled ash and metal dust when the airships crashed down. There were various other injuries between us.”

“How did you heal from that within the time that you did?”

“Katara is a healer. The air in Taku is humid enough she was able to heal first herself and then us when she was strong enough to go down to the river.”

“Was it during this time that you came to the conclusion to abandon the Avatar and train Ty Lee instead?”

“No.” How to explain this? They said they were going to avoid the Temple during questioning but the Temple is central to that choice. “We first discovered what Ty Lee is and then discussed it. The idea to train her came up when we realized that taking her back to Aang would be disastrous.”

“How exactly did you train her?”

She probably shouldn’t tell them about their bending, but sooner or later someone is going to watch them and figure it out. She knows Pakku watched Zuko going through his waterbending paces, so it’s only a matter of time. “We figured out during a spar that each element is stronger when you combine bending forms. It was decided that we would create a unified bending form, meaning any element can train another.”
“Why train her?”

“You’re not a bender are you?” She doesn’t wait for an answer. “An untrained bender as old as Ty Lee is an extremely dangerous bender. They can lose control at any moment.”

“Speaking from experience?”

“Do you know how powerful I am?”

There is a cough from somewhere in the crowd. “Most of us are aware of your feats, yes.”

“My parents didn’t have me trained. Just the basics when they noticed I’m an earthbender. Given what I’m capable of, it was only a matter of time before I hurt someone. The badgermoles saved a lot of lives when they trained me.”

“Excuse me, but badgermoles?”

She nods, smiling. “I was trained by badgermoles. Ran away from home and found a couple of them in the nearby mountains. Kept visiting them and learning from them, just a group of blind earthbenders digging through the mountains around Gaoling.”

“Master Toph, if you could please be serious.”

“Oh, but I am, White Lotus, I am.”

This is going to be so much fun.

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The headache hasn’t lessened any. She had hoped that leaving the courtroom would make it a little better, but once Toph brought up the badgermoles, it was all downhill from there.

Someone really should have thought through putting her up first.

In a way, though, Katara can understand why Toph was chosen to be first. She’s the youngest, the least experienced with situations like this. People often forget that she’s also the Blind Bandit, but that’s beside the point in this case. Toph was as honest as she could be while still protecting their secrets.

Really, though, were they expected her to be serious?

She sighs heavily, reaching out for water. Down the hall is a room with water streaming down one of the walls. A fountain, she guesses. It’s not perfect, but it will do.

Has Iroh done some restoration to the palace to erase some of what Ozai and his predecessors did? Or did Mai do this in an attempt to keep Azula calm?

She knows Mai is being kept in the palace. If she had some kind of kindness in her, she would visit and tell her about Ty Lee, but Katara hasn’t been kind for a very long time.
The fountain is backlit by a steady amber flame hidden safely behind the veil of water. It would look better in blue, but Zuko stayed behind with Ty Lee. She reaches out to touch it, a stream of water pulling away to meet her hand. This is fresh water, pulled from the system of pipes that run throughout the entire palace. It feels a little like rainwater.

Perhaps this is what they use for the overflow during the rainy season.

Ty Lee has been trying to teach her what she needs to know to be Fire Lady, and Rinchen has joined in, but Zuko has been holding back. She doubts anyone else has noticed his reluctance to talk about the throne, but she’s beginning to think he doesn’t want to be Fire Lord. They haven’t really discussed it, not with everything else going on.

They haven’t really discussed a lot of things.

She doesn’t know how to have some of the conversations. As the Crown Prince, he is expected to have a child. She knows he isn’t ready for that; won’t be for quite a while if his problems with Azula persist.

As for her, she doesn’t know. Every time she thinks about it, she sees Aang and Nanuq.

Oh, Nanuq. She hasn’t thought of him in a long time. Eventually she’ll have to. At some point, someone will slip up and tell Bato what really became of his wife and son.

The first child she ever delivered; he was such a sweet baby. Shame his mother turned out to be one of the burning children.

There were questions about her own mother, come to think of it. Kya was like Sakari, born at just the right time that it was impossible to know whether there was fire in her blood or not.

And then there was Aang. She loved him as she imagines a mother loves her son and she tried her best to do right by him. When doing the right thing means killing, though, that’s when she starts to wonder if she’s actually capable of being a mother.

The war is still too fresh in her mind. Maybe a few years distance between Wulong and her will help her make up her mind. Maybe it will help Zuko settle down as well.

There’s a beating heart heading her way. Non-bender, old, female, familiar. “Hello, Gran-Gran.”

“Katara.” Gran-Gran sounds almost like she used to. “You look like a princess.”

“I am a princess.” Of the Southern Water Tribes, of the Fire Nation. She’s not entirely certain which one she should identify with, nor which one will accept her.

The old woman comes up beside her, white hair colored orange by the firelight. “So you are. Congratulations on your marriage. Hakoda and Pakku both spoken highly of Prince Zuko.”

“No Sokka?”

Gran-Gran’s expression makes it clear she shouldn’t press the issue. “Your brother is engaged to Suki. Did anyone tell you?”

“No, but I’m not surprised.” She’s feeling just a bit vindictive. “I hear you were going to marry me off to a stranger.”
Gran-Gran sighs. “We didn’t have much choice. The South is dying; the North was offering help. You were the price they wanted and I think you can guess how most of the South views you.”

“I did what I had to.” She does her best to make it clear the topic is closed. “How have you been?”

“Quite good. Pakku told me you got General Iroh to release Hama.”

“Did he tell you how?” Tui and La, she cannot hold her tongue today. She needs to spar. Maybe she can drag Zuko out tonight. Surely his stress levels are high enough he needs to fight. If not, Toph will likely be up for it.

“No, I was hoping you would.” Her grandmother folds her arms the way Pakku usually does, hands disappearing into sleeves. “I understand that the prison Hama was being held in does not normally see its prisoners released.”

She turns, careful of her skirt, deciding to be honest, just to find out. “I have the North’s treaty with the Fire Nation.”

“The Sleeper Treaty?”

“Is that what it’s called?” Sleeper, as in the fish? That's a deep, deep water creature. Even the best fisherman have trouble catching them.

“The one that closed our borders and gave the Fire Nation fishing rights in the arctic?”

So she did know about this. “Is it why you left the North?”

“Of course it was. I wasn’t going to stay in a place that would abandon its brethren so easily.”

That hurt. “Do you know the full terms of the treaty?”

“No. Just the fishing rights and closed borders.” Not a lie. The heart stays steady and body temperature doesn’t change.

Katara grimaces and turns away completely, moving towards the door. Before she leaves, she looks over her shoulder once more. “Be thankful.”
This is going to be fun~ As is stands right now, they'll all start like this, but then the questions will change.

Ty Lee being related to Aang will come up a few times, but it's just an idea that's been stuck in my head since I realized how much Ty Lee and Jinora look alike.
Day two, just as boring.

“You were with Prince Sokka and Lady Suki aboard the airships, correct?”

“Yes.”

“And where were Prince Zuko and Princess Katara?”

“Depends, what time of day?” They’re asking about the first time at Wulong. She doesn’t want to talk about this. The memory of the blast and what followed is blurry at best. “My job was to help stop the airships, not worry about them.”

“You did succeed in commandeering the airships?”

“Did Snoozles not tell you? Yes, we did.”

“Anything important about that part of the battle that we should know?”

“It was the first time I really used metalbending in battle, but beyond that, no.” This is going to take forever. All the questions, the repetition, and the need for specific details she either can’t or won’t give. It’s exhausting.

Maybe this is the real plan of the White Lotus. They’re just going to question them to death.

“Do you know what was happening with Avatar Aang and Fire Lord Ozai?”

“No. That would require seeing.”

Are they trying to get a baseline for the others? Do they think she’s the weak link? She has problems with anger, yes, but she’s not anywhere near as unstable as the rest of them.

“Master Toph, after stopping the airships, what happened?”

Maybe they’ll try asking Katara about this. She’s already told them Sugar was unconscious for the first few days. That could be fun. “Zuko and Katara arrived with Appa. There was an explosion, Ozai attacked, and we fell. Zuko and I managed to guarantee us a safe landing, but then the airships fell down. I got us to safety, where I was informed that Appa was flying off with everyone else.”

“How did you come to the conclusion that they believed you were dead?”

“Zuko made that call.” The way the earth rocked beneath her feet as the airships fell, even the way her lungs burned from the ash and metal; by all rights, they should be dead.

“Who made the decision to go to Taku?”

“I did.”

“Why there?”
Why Taku? That’s a good question. She isn’t sure. There wasn’t a real decision there. She just knew they had to get away from there and started running. Taku was just the first place she found in the direction she happened to be facing. “I knew we were in danger. Between our injuries and any retaliation from the Fire Nation, we needed someplace safe to recover. Taku is still famous for her medicines. Given that it’s been abandoned for about a century, I thought it would be a good place. Plenty of ruins to hide in.”

She reaches out for the earth in the room, trying to find the stones she placed around the wrists of her companions. To her right, towards the back of the room. Katara is seated in the middle.

“Master Toph, what happened once you arrived at Taku?”

“I found a safe place for us to sleep.”

“And then?”

She shrugs. “We slept.”

“For how long?”

Someday, this guy might remember what it means when she says she’s blind. “I’m not exactly good with time. A day? Ask one of the others.”

There’s some chatter from the crowd. “Who among you woke first?”

“I did.” Sparky was still too exhausted and Sugar was still healing. She’s fairly certain it was the morning of the second day after the comet. There was dew and a fine mist clung to the ruins. The temperature in Taku is relatively stable, but there were birds out and it was a little cooler than normal.

“Are you the one who discovered Ty Lee?”

She wants to ask why Snow isn’t given a title like the rest of them. Master Ty Lee or Lady Ty Lee. One of the two would be fine. Unless the White Lotus doesn’t recognize her as a Master Airbender and her being an airbender likely destroyed her position within the nobility. “Yes, I am. I went out to check security and found her.”

“Were you the first to realize what she is?”

“Yes.” The feather-light footsteps in Taku, the barely-there presence on the ground. Even before that, almost every jump she made in battle was impossible without airbending. They all should have known long before they did. “Her movements were consistent with that of an airbender. It wasn’t confirmed until Zuko saw her using her bending.”

“Did you leave Taku immediately after finding her?”

“No. Katara had a head wound. We didn’t want to move her until we knew she was going to be okay.”

“You said previously that she was unconscious for the first few days.”

“Yes.” Now to edit out Moon Girl. “She woke up late the day after I found Ty Lee. We stayed in Taku for a few more days until we were all healed.”

What purpose does this serve? Is what happened immediately after Wulong really that important? She was expecting questions about the soldiers she buried and the factories they
destroyed. Not this.

Is the fact that they abandoned Twinkletoes really that interesting?

“Did you have a plan when you left Taku?”

An old map showing a fifth Air Temple. “No. Earth Kingdom soldiers were moving into the area. We wanted to be gone before they arrived.”

“They could have taken you back to the Avatar.”

“Instinct. None of us have had good experiences with Earth Kingdom soldiers.”

Why did they run from the soldiers? It was mostly instinct, but was it also the indecision? The map, maybe. If the soldiers took them, they would have still had the map Sora gave them.

Even before they saw it, they were protecting the Temple.

“Where did you go after Taku?”

“The mountains, mostly. We kept to caves and secluded valleys, never staying in one place for long.”

“How often did you go back to Taku?”

“Initially, once every couple of weeks. After we established a routine, maybe once a month. Sometimes twice.”

“Were you aware of the Avatar’s trips to Taku?”

“Yes.” Maybe she should have lied there. But that would be an easy lie to catch. “Despite leaving him, we did do our best to keep tabs on his movements.”

“To avoid seeing him?”

“To keep him from seeing Ty Lee.”

“Did you go back to Wulong?”

Aang’s hear suddenly stopping, his body hitting the ground. Katara’s quiet acceptance, Ty Lee’s steady faith, and Aang is dead. “No.”

People file quietly out of the courtroom, hushed conversations all around him. Katara has gone with Ty to collect Toph while he waits here for them.

They should have been expecting there to be a question about returning to Wulong. He’s fairly certain no one knows Aang died there, but with two bison, there’s always a chance someone
saw something.

There is an upside to all of this, though. His trial has been confirmed as the very last of them. That gives him time to learn. The order of the trials is interesting. Starting with Toph, then Ty Lee, then Katara, and ending with him. Are they going in order of perceived difficulty, or is it by rank? Age? Why choose that order?

He sighs, retreating into the shadows a little more. Some of the faces around him are familiar, but many are not. He may have met them once or twice, but not consistently.

Moving back into the shadows a little more, he keeps an eye on Aunt Zen. He’s always wondered about Mai’s family. She doesn’t resemble either of her parents. Then again, knowing what he does about Aunt Zen, there’s always the possibility that Mai’s father is not Aunt Zen’s husband.

It’s a little surprising to see her here. He knows Mai has already been put on trial. The White Lotus has just been arguing sentencing for the past couple of months. That has to be frustrating. Will they do that to him and his family?

Can they do that?

Yes, he and the others are likely guilty of many crimes between them, but they still ended the war.

Well, no, actually, to the White Lotus they didn’t. From the perspective of the outside world. Azula and Aang killed each other, thus ending the war. He and his had nothing to do with it.

So they just have the airbenders to support them.

This is not going to end well.


“Hey.” Ah, there he is. He’s gotten better at sneaking around if he was able to slip into the shadows without alerting anyone.

There are multiple ways this can go: an all out fight, an argument, awkward conversation, or a serious conversation. Suki has been a little softer around them recently, so maybe Sokka is softening as well. Pakku, to his credit, seems to be trying to smooth things over.

“Hey.” He’s just going to let Sokka lead here; seems like the safer path.

“So you and Katara?”

“Is that going to be a problem?”

Sokka shrugs. “I always kind of figured there was something between you two.”

Interesting. “Not Aang?”

“Even I could tell she wasn’t interested.” Sokka shifts, crossing his arms across his chest. He’s taller than Zuko remembers, and wider in the shoulders. “I want to hate you.”

“It’s reasonable.”

“For marrying my sister or for abandoning us?”
So Sokka will still identify her as his sister. That answers quite a few questions. “All of it.”

“Is she happy?”

“We just came out of a war.” None of them are happy. He’s beginning to think they will be old before any of them is happy again. “How are you?”

“Just came out of a war.”

Awkward conversation it is. Better than a fight.

The Kagami clan drifts by. Despite Ty Lee being the only airbender, they all move the same way. “I heard you and Suki are getting married.”

“Yeah, we are. Not for a while, though.”

He wants to say something else, but can’t figure out the words. His relationship with Katara is so odd. “Congrats.”

“How long were you and Katara together?”

He assumes Sokka means before the whole marriage thing. “Depends on how you define together.”

Sokka makes a face. “I don’t think I want to know.”

“Probably not.” She counts it from the first time their relationship became physical. He counts it from the comet, when he realized there was no one in the world he trusted as much as her.

“I heard Mai is still in the palace.”

“She is.”

“Have you seen her yet?”

“Yes.” No point in lying. “I needed to talk to her about Azula and Ty Lee.”

Sokka takes a deep breath. “Did she know about Ty Lee?”

“Being an airbender?” Sokka nods. “Yes, she did. She knew before we did.”

And proceeded to keep it a secret from everyone around her. He still wants to know why she made that choice. Ty Lee might be able to get it out of her, but he doesn’t want to press. Not now that she knows what happened that night. The last thing they need is Mai telling the White Lotus that he killed Azula and that Katara killed Aang.

Especially that Katara killed Aang.

He can feel the familiar pull on his blood. Looking around, he can see the top of Katara’s head.

“Has she really been using bloodbending?” Sokka’s question is so quiet he almost doesn’t hear it.

He almost points out that she’s currently using it, but decides that might be a bad response. “It’s a useful form of bending. Healing is more efficient when it’s done with the patient’s own
blood.”

And it can stop a battle in record time. It’s the perfect tool for torture when they need it. It can be used to calm someone down from a panic, or to encourage the right movements.

Not to mention the heightened sense of touch it can give, but that’s really not something Sokka needs to know.

“I heard she got Hama released from prison.”

By threatening his uncle. He bites his tongue to hold back that response, instead focusing on where Katara is trying to work through the crowd sans bloodbending. “She did. We’ll be taking custody until we can prove Master Hama isn’t a threat.”

“I just don’t understand her anymore.”

“War has a way of doing that.” He pushes away from the wall, stepping out of the shadows. Adjusting his clothing, he turns back to where Sokka is still hiding. “None of us are the same people. Not even you.”

He should give a proper goodbye. Something that at least hints at the fact that they were friends once or that they are brothers now.

It just doesn’t feel right, though.

“Do you think she’s okay?”

“There’s nothing in her body that suggests otherwise. She’s probably just stressed. We all are.”

He doesn’t look convinced. “She normally stays awake longer than this.”

“Zuko, just don’t think about it.” She glances to the room Toph and Ty Lee have been sharing is. Since the trials began, there have already been two attempts to break into their rooms. It’s safer if they stay together. “We should turn in as well. Tomorrow will be a long day.”

Given that the White Lotus covered the first year today, they’ll likely move on to the later years after Zuko was done healing. Which means they’ll be getting into their actions against the Earth Kingdom and the Northern Water Tribe.

If they’re lucky, no one ties Toph to the sinking ships or the various natural disasters they created.

“Is this really what the next few weeks are going to look like?” She waits until they’re in their room and preparing for bed to ask. “Wake up at dawn, go to court, ask questions we can’t always answer, get out by dinnertime?”
His hand is warm against her waist. “Have you noticed they’re just asking about a timeline with Toph?”

“They are, aren’t they?” She sighs and leans back against him. “So they’re going to determine a timeline with Toph, and then ask increasingly invasive questions with the rest of us?”

“Looks that way.”

She pushes him back towards the bed. “How is Rinchen settling in? Have you let Iroh see her yet?”

“Not yet. She’s not quite ready to see him again.”

Outside, it starts to rain. She curls up beside him, his heart beating in one ear and the rain in the other. “Is she looking into where Ursa went?”

“Calling every contact she has.”

“Do you really want to find her?”

He takes a deep breath. “Yes. No. I want to know what happened.”

“You just don’t know if you want to talk to her.”

“Right.” He moves just a little, pulling her closer. “I saw Sokka today.”

“I know.” She still doesn’t know what to make of that. When she sought out Zuko after helping Ty Lee get Toph out of the courtroom, she’d felt the dull blue presence of her brother. Not enough chi in the blood to make the colour vibrant like her or Pakku, but just enough to give away his water origin.

She hasn’t really seen Sokka since that night in the gardens. She doesn’t particularly want to. Every time she thinks about it, she keeps imagining herself confessing what she did. Of all the people in this palace, Sokka is the one that absolutely must not know what happened to Aang.

He takes one of her hands, threading their fingers together. “I don’t think he’s angry. I think he just wants to understand.”

“I don’t even understand what’s going on.” The rain intensifies outside and she feels it pulling on her bones. “I can’t tell him about Yue or La or Aang. I can’t tell him about most of what I’ve done since the comet and if I can’t tell him any of that, then I don’t know how to explain who I am today.”

“I had the same problem with Mai.”

“Did she tell you anything about Azula?”

“She told me to go find Ursa.” He presses a kiss against her hair. “And she told me she knew about Aang.”

“Not surprising.” Mai knows the truth about what happened to Azula. Of course she’s smart enough to figure out what happened to Aang. “Does she know it was me?”

“Yes.”

“Is she going to tell anyone?” She could make it look like a suicide, or maybe a heart attack.
No, a suicide would be better given Mai’s current situation.

Zuko flicks her wrist with his spare hand. “No, so stop considering homicide. Mai’s waiting sentencing by the White Lotus. She’s in too much trouble to be saved.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. She’s given up.”

That would make suicide all the more expected. How would Mai kill herself? Stabbing? Slit wrists? Poison? “What do you mean?”

“I mean she really loved my sister.”

“You sound surprised.”

“Just wondering how I never saw it before now.”

“We only see what we want to.”

The blood vessels show a smile. “I thought it was my job to quote Uncle.”

“That one is all Ty Lee.”

“They’re going to ask more about her tomorrow.”

“Probably.” He’s going to talk himself into an attack. Going from Mai to Ty Lee, that’s edging way too close to Azula. She takes a deep breath and begins gently tugging on his blood, lowering his body temperature and calming him to the point of sleep. It’s something of a double-edge sword. Even calmed and cooled, Zuko is still pleasantly warm, like curling up beneath good furs beside a steady fire. She’ll never tell him, but this is the real reason she likes sleeping beside him.

She turns a little, moving closer to him and feeling out lazily for the other hearts in the vicinity. Grey for Ty Lee, green for Toph, and a male non-bender in the main room.

Without thinking, she draws on the blood and when she can’t confirm an identity, pushes just so to stop the heart.

And then she’s awake, tugging on Zuko’s blood to wake him up. “Get up. I think I just killed someone.”

That gets him moving. “You did what?”

She tosses his swords to him, drawing her own. Waiting until she hears the other two drawn, she edges open the door, bending and weapon at the ready. Sure enough, there on the floor is a young man. Maybe a couple of years older than Zuko, probably of Fire Nation ancestry. She turns the body over, water pushing aside the mask. “Look familiar?”

“No. He’s not Kagami, and no White Lotus assassin would come in here.” He moves the swords to one hand and kneels down beside the corpse. “He’s definitely Fire Nation, though. The knife belongs to one of the major organizations.”

She takes a look at the weapon he holds up. It’s not particularly fancy, but there is a silver crest depicting what looks like a reptile of some kind. “Organization? Not a clan?”

He shakes his head. “This is from the House of the Seal Maidens. The emblem is an iguana
“Seal.”

“Assassins?”

“Prostitutes.”

She blinks. “A group of prostitutes just tried to kill us?”

“Heck to the no, that’s got to do with who their boss is.” Zuko slides the knife into the waist of his pants, setting the swords aside. “We need to get rid of this.”

Rather than discard her own sword, she freezes the blade to her hip. “Let’s get him outside. I can deal with it from there.”

“I can burn him.”

“That will draw too much attention. It’ll be faster to just rip the water out and crush what’s left.”

“Can you do that?” He stops, arms of the body scraping the floor.

She shifts the feet in her arms. “No idea, but we’re going to find out.”

They shuffle outside to the training yard, careful to keep to the shadows. This would be better if they had Kiki and could take the body out of the caldera, but they don’t so this will have to do. She drops the feet just beyond the area they actually train in. It’s a secluded little corner covered by the palace itself and a couple of potted trees. Motioning for Zuko to drop the body, she slides into position, focusing on the blood.

How did Hama do this? It was with plants, but she was able to take down a complete tree. Just find the water, every scrap, and pull?

Worth a shot. This had better work. The spirits owe her after all the grief they’ve caused.

And then there’s a pile of dust where the body is, ruby water swirling around her and Zuko.

He watches it carefully. “That’s mildly disturbing.”

She bites her lip, holding back the excited laughter. “But good to know. That’s probably not going to be the last would-be assassin we deal with.”

He nods. “If we’ve got the Seal Maidens focused on us, we’re going to have an interesting time.”

The water lazily moves through the air. It’s heavier than normal water, but she can still sweep up the remains of the assassin and push it all into the air beyond their balcony training grounds, scattering the blood into a fine mist that falls downward. “So why would the boss of these Seal Maidens want us dead? Is there a bounty on us?”

“Worse.” He comes to stand up beside her. “What do you know about Mai’s mother?”

Well, this is going to be interesting.
This part of the palace is quiet. She was careful to keep Toph asleep when she snuck out, and Zuko and Katara were busy disposing of the assassin’s body so neither of them noticed.

But she saw the knife.

She remembers seeing it for the first time when Mai turned sixteen, the iguana seal emblem bright against the black of the blade. That just leaves the question of who actually sent the assassin. Was it Aunt Zen? Or did Mai do this? Given the condition Azula was in, she’s fairly certain Mai was the one who killed Ozai, but there’s only a limited number of ways to get close enough to poison someone like him.

And if Mai is in the family business, just how deep in is she? Aunt Zen would want to groom her to take over the bordello. Admittedly, killing and disposing of assassins is probably exactly what she and the others need right now. They’re not so far removed from the war to be able to function as normal people.

Assuming, of course, that normal people don’t deal with assassins and various other potentially lethal situations.

Actually, they’re probably pretty far removed from normal.

She can feel the air moving just up ahead, right where the bedroom should be. Careful to keep her feet off the ground as much as possible, she slides the door open. “Mai?”

Silence. She can tell by the pattern of breathing that her sworn sister is awake. When was the last time Mai gave her the silent treatment? After Azula dragged her back from the circus? When she kissed Azula on the cheek when they were still small? When she did better at throwing knives that year she was twelve?

“Mai, are you working for Aunt Zen?”

“Would you hate me if I were?” The response is quiet. Without her bending, she probably wouldn’t have heard it.

She moves closer, taking a seat at the foot of the bed. “I think you did what you had to do to protect Azula.”

“That’s what I’ve always done.”

“I know.” She wants to curl up beside her, hold her until the shadows go away but knows she can’t do that anymore. “Even at Boiling Rock. It took me a while to figure that one out, but you thought Ozai was going to lose and that you could better protect Azula if you had favor with Zuko and Iroh.”

She has no idea if that’s correct or not. It’s just a guess, but right now, playing to Mai’s instinct to protect Azula is probably the best course of action.

Sure enough, Mai turns over. She’s just as beautiful as Ty Lee remembers; black hair spread out around her and silver eyes bright in the dim light streaming through the small windows. For a
moment, all she wants to do is lean over and kiss her until they both forget about everything that’s happened.

“She was only a danger to herself.” And then the moment’s gone.

“I know.” Her hand hovers over Mai’s leg, so close to touching. She withdraws it after a moment. Best to not start something. “You know what happened to Azula, don’t you?”

“Zuko killed her.”

Ty Lee nods carefully. “Mai, did you send a Seal Maiden assassin after us?”

“If I sent an assassin for you, you would all be dead by now.”

She has a point. Mai is nothing if not efficient. Even now, declawed and kept in captivity, she’s still nothing if not brutally efficient. “True. I would be disappointed if you failed.”

“That’s why I wouldn’t.”

It’s not much, but it almost feels like the old days. Just almost. Then she remembers that Mai is in prison awaiting sentencing and she herself is about to go on trial. “Would Aunt Zen try to kill us?”

“You know my mother.”

That would be a yes. “Do you know why?”

“You are an airbender and Zuko married a waterbender. Pick the insult.”

“I was expecting a Kagami assassin for my insult. They won’t be happy that Aunt Zen tried to do it for them.”

“The attempt on Zuko and his bride?”

Ty Lee wrinkles her nose at the description. This is the outside world, though. That is how Katara will be viewed until people get used to the idea. “Iroh and the White Lotus might have a few things to say about it.”

“Shall I expect a visit from them?”

“No.” If Mai is going to keep their secrets about Azula and Aang, she might as well be treated to honesty from them. “Katara and Zuko disposed of the body. No one will know.”

“Which one of them killed the poor fool?”

“Why does it matter?”

“Just curious.”

“You know I’m not going to give you any information you can use against us, don’t you?”

Mai props herself up on one elbow. “I can’t use this against you. If I was going to hurt you, I would tell General Iroh everything about his niece and the Avatar. I would also direct them to the records I was keeping on your wartime activities.”

“What?” That can’t be right. They were careful to make sure no one could trace the attacks
back to them.

Mai has that odd almost smile. “A few warships here and there. A couple of military outposts. Some supply routes in the Earth Kingdom. The Northern Water Tribe ships, though, those would probably be very interesting. So would the assassinations in the Earth Kingdom colonies.”

“You knew?”

She shrugs. “ Took about a year to figure it out. Once I saw the pattern, it was easy to piece together.”

Ty Lee stands abruptly. “I need to go.”

The others need to know about this. She’s out of the room as fast as she can be without alerting any of the guards to her presence. Toph needs to be warned. If the trial is really moving into that part of the war, they need to be prepared.

She just keeps going back to one thing: if Mai could do it that easily, then how easily can the White Lotus do it?

Chapter End Notes

Mai makes another appearance!

I go back to work on Tuesday, so updates will probably slow down after that. I'm hoping to get this monster finished before the end of the year so I can move on to 'darkening of the light', which will introduce the Equalists, the anti-bending movement, and the United Republic.
She wakes up the next morning feeling better than she has in months. Sitting up and stretching, her back pops audibly. Zuko is between her and the edge of the bed, but it’s sunrise so it’s about time for him to wake up anyway. She shifts enough to plant her foot against his stomach, pushing just enough to roll him off the bed. “Wake up, Flame Prince. Just because it’s the rainy season doesn’t mean the sun doesn’t rise.”

“I thought you liked to sleep in.” He grumbles, sitting up on the floor.

“Hama’s being released this morning. We need to be at the harbor to pick her up.” She tilts her head, taking a good look at him. “And you need a haircut.”

“You’re in a good mood this morning.” He stands up, picking up his pants from the foot of the bed and tossing his shirt at her.

“I knew what I was doing last night.” She quickly gets a little water around them both, cleaning as fast as possible before tossing the water out the window.

“Before or after we disposed of the body?”

“During.” The shirt is too big for her, the black fabric hanging loose around her. She tugs it closed a little more, struggling to get it tied tight enough. “It felt nice to do something like that again. Less like a prisoner, more like a warrior.”

He pauses, hands up and ready to tie back his hair. “Yeah, I guess it was.”

“It’s probably just the aggression towards the North getting to me.” Hama’s comb makes quick work of her own hair. She slides it into place, holding the mass of brown out of her face and off her neck. “There’s something wrong with me, isn’t there?”

“I think you know how I felt about going back to our old tricks.”

She grins viciously. There’s something about this them against the world mentality that feels like home. It is exciting and thrilling to be facing conflict again, a pleasant distraction from all the ghosts following them around. “The trial ends tomorrow, doesn’t it?”

“And Ty Lee’s begins the next day.” He reminds her.

“But that’s just one down. Each one is a little closer to the end.” Her hands brush against the flare of his hips. “And then when it’s all over, we can go back to the Temple.”

He pulls her a little closer. “You are liking this a little too much.”

“I can’t kill the Northerners.”

“Are you going to tell Hama?”
There’s the sobering moment. “I don’t know. How do I? Gran-Gran didn’t know about the Southern Raiders, but she did know about the treaty. How do I tell Hama that her best friend knew the North had betrayed them? That the Northern Tribe trained the Raiders and taught the Fire Nation how to build the prisons?”

“Be honest?”

“That will go just wonderfully.” She draws back a little. “Please remember that this is the woman who was placed in the White Tower because she’s dangerous.”

“Will she be getting her bending back?”

“Weakened, but yes.” She focuses on his heart, resting her forehead against his chest. The strength of the chi flowing through his veins is relaxing, reassuring even. It’s difficult to think of what Hama’s will look like. Without her bending at all, she resembled Azula, just small traces of the bright chi remaining in the blood. With just a little, though, it will be heartbreaking knowing that the block is there because Katara agreed to it. “Do you know what happened to the belongings the stolen benders had with them?”

“Stolen benders? Is that what they’re called?”

She nods. “Hama managed to keep her comb, but she said their clothing and personal things were taken from them. Is there any chance those things may have survived?”

“It’s possible, but I wouldn’t hold my breath.”

“Who would I need to talk to if I wanted to find out?”

One of his hands rubs up and down her back, the warmth seeping into her muscles. “Leave it to me. I’m going to be going through the archives anyway, so I’ll keep an eye out for it.”

“Just be careful.” She reaches up to trace over the damaged eye, checking blood flow as she goes. “You know what Sora said about the possibility of eyeglasses.”

“I’ll make sure there’s good light.”

Beside them, the door slides open. “Oh, sorry. Am I interrupting?”

Katara sighs and moves away from him, turning to face Ty Lee. “No. We were just about to come to breakfast.”

“Good, because we need to talk.” Ty’s a little excited this morning, but nervous rather than happy. “I was going to tell you last night, but you were a bit busy.”

“Get to the point, Ty.” Zuko says.

“I went to go see Mai last night.” The airbender floats a little when she sits down at the table.

Toph is already there, stone utensils dancing across the plates as they deliver breakfast to each of them. “Any particular reason for visiting Knives in the middle of the night?”

“Zuko and Katara killed an assassin last night.”

The utensils stop. “What? You didn’t wake me up for that? Way to steal all the fun.”

Zuko takes a seat beside her, flicking the side of her head gently. “It happened pretty
quickly.”

“So what did Knives have to do with this?”

“The assassin works for her mother.” Ty Lee’s hands are shaking around her teacup. “I wanted to find out if Mai had anything to do with the attack.”

“Did she?”

“No, but she could hurt us.”

Katara doesn’t remember there being anything particularly dangerous about the former Fire Lady. “She’s already said she won’t tell anyone about Azula or Aang.”

Ty grins weakly. “Yeah, but she didn’t say anything about the two years worth of records concerning our wartime activities that she has.”

That’s not good. “Just the Fire Nation attacks?”

“Water Tribe and Earth Kingdom too. She knows about the assassinations.”

Beside her, Zuko swears. “Those were mostly Lungta. The White Lotus can’t know about them.”

“Do we know where the records are?” If they can find them before the White Lotus, they can destroy them. Guarantee no one ever finds out what they did. The North won’t see her coming.

Ty Lee shrugs. “It’s Mai. She had free run of the entire caldera for two years. There’s no telling where they are.”

“She wouldn’t put them somewhere easily found.” Zuko steiples his fingers, eyes focused on the lychees Ty loves. “What about the library? She always loved it there.”

“What about her bedroom?” The two Fire Nation experts both stop and look at her. “It’s where I would hide them.”

“That would be Uncle’s room now, unless he’s chosen a different set of rooms.”

Oh, that would make this more difficult. “So we’re going to break into the Fire Lord’s bedroom?”

No one argues.

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This is the tricky part. How to explain their time in the northern Earth Kingdom without talking about the Lungta?

“Did you move into the eastern provinces of the Earth Kingdom at any point in the three years you were away?”
“Yes.”

“Ba Sing Se?”

“No.”

“The Eastern Air Temple?”

Stay silent too long and let them figure out it’s a yes or answer yes immediately? “No.”

Or lie and pray to all the spirits that the Guru doesn’t sell them out.

“Did you have any contacts beyond the airbenders in the Earth Kingdom?”

“The sandbender tribes in the Si Wong Desert.” That’s probably going to bring up more questions, but if the sandbenders are dragged into this, they know how to cover for the Lungta. Too many of them have married into the Air Nation for them to betray the wind.

Sure enough, there’s some chatter from the crowd. “The same sandbenders who stole the Avatar’s bison and stranded you in the middle of the desert?”

“The very same. They’re pretty helpful once you learn how to negotiate with them.” She adds a bright smile just for the effect.

“In what capacity did they help you?”

“Trade.” What did the Lungta do for them that she can assign the sandbenders? “Textiles and information. Later on weapons. They needed medicine and food, which we could supply. It was a beneficial arrangement.”

They don’t need to know about the assassinations. They can’t know about the assassinations. Especially not the ones in Ba Sing Se. She and the others can take the fall for the colonies, but Ba Sing Se must remain a secret.

Though, she doubts Kuei would mind if he knew they were killing off his opponents.

“At what point did you discover the Avatar’s companions were meeting with the sandbender tribes?”

“Six months after trade began?” She’s not sure of the timeline. That was still in the early days when the Lungta trusted only other airbenders. “We tried to keep an opposing schedule.”

“Did the sandbenders ever help you with attacks?”

“They supplied weapons and information. Nothing more.”

“They had nothing to do with the bombings in the colonies?”

She shakes her head. “That was all us.”

It’s probably not best to admit to bombing supply routes and the like, but since he specifically asked about the colonies, no one will likely mind. A lot of those were actually them; it was just towards the end of the war when they were focusing on attacks abroad that they turned it over to the Lungta.

“You were very busy in your time away.” There is the rustling of papers from his direction.
“We have the bombings in the colonies, a series of bombings at Fire Nation factories around the world, sunken Fire Nation ships, and at least three entire regiments who have simply disappeared.”

Not disappeared. Buried so deep not even the Earth King’s finest benders will find them.

Though, a few were killed by Katara and thrown into the ocean.

Zuko burned a few.

They don’t think about what Ty Lee did.

“We were trying to win a war.”

“Without open conflict?”

She shrugs. “Not as effective. The Fire Nation was always going to out number us. They were always going to be better armed and better trained. Up against that, playing dirty was the most efficient option. Rather than focus on a couple of battles, we went directly for their weak spots.”

“But you did have open conflict a few times, didn’t you. Specifically with Lady Suki at a sandbender market.”

Silence falls. She’s thought a lot about that fight. Once she realized it was Fans, she should have taken Snow and flown to Taku. No, they should have aborted the mission the second they heard the Lungta had company. Maybe they could have gotten Katara and Zuko out before Aang saw them.

Maybe Twinkles would still be alive.

“That was my call. I only let the mission continue that long because our information couldn’t clarify whether or not the newcomer was Fire Nation or White Lotus. By the time I’d established an identity, it was already too late.”

And by that time it was probably too late for Aang.

“Lady Suki’s report says Avatar Aang was in Taku at the time.”

“She may have mentioned it.”

“It also says that you told her you had someone in Taku as well.”

It’s too easy to remember the churning feeling in her stomach, piecing together the information to realize Sugar and Sparky and Twinkles were all in the same place at the same time. “Katara and Zuko had gone to restock some of our supplies. There are some herbs we can only get from Taku.”

Present tense. Make it clear to the bastards that their home is still there, that they will never come back to this world, not fully.

“Do you know if there was a confrontation between the Avatar and your party?”

She’s about to reach out for the stone on her family when she feels the gentle tug inside her arm. Three for yes. She nods to show she understands. “There was. Zuko and Katara were out sparring when Aang found them.”

“What transpired during this meeting?”
“I don’t know.” She hopes they believe her. “Neither of them have ever really talked about what happened that day.”

“What happened after?”

“We tried to follow Aang.” Now comes the tricky part. Make it clear they didn’t deal with Twinkles after that point. Don’t give away the truth. “We knew from past experience that he had some problems with high-stress situations and we knew that by trying to avoid one, we had also created one.”

“Did you find him?”

“Not until it was too late.”

Let them draw their own conclusions.

This is the happiest he’s seen her since before they left the Avatar. Katara can barely stand still, excitement bubbling over. He doesn’t fully understand it. He knows the history she has with Hama. By all rights, she shouldn’t be this happy about the other waterbender’s release.

But then he remembers that Katara and Hama are the only ones of their kind left.

“Would you settle down? You’re going to disrupt the water.”

She scowls. “I’d only make the ship get here faster. I need to talk to her.”

“About bloodbending?”

“Among other things.”

“Have you figured out how you’re going to tell her about the Sleeper Treaty?” He says it carefully, not wanting to upset her. The treaty is a delicate subject at best. Informing Hama of it is even more treacherous.

Katara settles down completely, blue eyes glazing over. “Not yet. I keep running through all the possibilities in my head, and each one ends in bloodshed.”

“What about not telling her?”

“Not an option.” She sighs heavily. “I don’t think this treaty will stay secret forever. I would rather she found out from me.”

“Why would anyone else know about it?” He reaches out to brush a stray lock of hair out of her face.

“I don’t think Gran-Gran and Master Pakku can keep this to themselves.”
“You think they’ll tell your father.”

“And Sokka.”

What he knows of Hakoda makes him think she’s really concerned about her brother doing something rash. He can understand it just a little bit. Pakku has lived most of his life with the knowledge that the North betrayed the South in the worst way possible. Kanna, while not aware of the worst of it, did still know the reason her husband and most of his family died.

That’s volatile information. Even the most levelheaded person could lose it knowing that. And to think, his greatest concern when he was younger was about bringing a wife into his family. “Well, it could be worse.”

Katara’s just a little too still. “Actually, it is.”

He doesn’t know what she means until he remembers suddenly why Hama was sentenced to the White Tower. “She does know about me, doesn’t she?”

“Not exactly.”

“Can we change the bending policy to none until proven safe?”

She looks ready to argue, but after a moment, her expression softens. “We can do that.”

“Thank you.” He’s not sure if should be comforted by her quick agreement or not. “Have you talked to the Southern Water Tribe about her going back to the South Pole?”

“Pakku is handling that.” There’s something in her tone that makes it clear the elder master is still trying to regain her trust.

Not that he’s surprised. If he were in her position, he would have burned them all by now. Or drowned, as the case may be. “She’s not going to try killing us in the night, is she?”

Katara grins wryly. “I’d like to see her try. She’ll be powerless and surrounded by people strong enough to cripple a nation.”

It’s the closest any of them have come to acknowledging exactly what they did to the Fire Nation. During the war, it was easy to rationalize their actions. Now, though, looking through the records various Acolytes have stolen for him, he can see exactly what Mai was talking about.

The war was ruining this country.

He was ruining this country.

The factories they destroyed and the lives that went with them; in some cases entire towns were slaughter in those incidents. They sank islands and disrupted supply routes.

But in hurting the army, they hurt the civilians too. The destroyed supply routes stopped medical supplies and food from reaching some of the smaller towns. Families lost the only hope of carrying on through the generations. Sickness and famine ravaged some of the outlying military posts they isolated. Add that in with soldiers’ salaries and pensions, weapons development, and various other costs, this country is bankrupt. The amount of money that Mai put into trying to salvage this country looks to have drained whatever was left in the royal accounts.

No wonder Uncle was hoping he would make a marriage in accordance with the wealthy
Ozai-supporter’s wishes. The Fire Nation is going to be expected to make reparations to the Southern Water Tribe and the Air Nations that they can’t afford. They’re barely going to be able to afford rebuilding their own nation, let alone the others.

The next few years are going to be ugly. People are going to starve. Hospitals will fail. Schools will shut down. If it goes like other instances throughout the world, there will be riots and revolution. In trying to create an empire, the Fire Nation has destroyed itself.

“I think you need to have Hama settled in somewhere before the New Year.” He says it quietly, though they are alone on the docks. Uncle did a good job clearing the area before Hama’s ship arrives.

Katara moves just a little closer to him, one arm around his waist. “Concerned about the future?”

“Among other things.”

Oolong and jasmine. She hasn’t smelled this particularly combination since that brief meeting during the war. The years have been kind to Rinchen, all things considered. Now that she can see the Acolyte out of the clothes of a nun and in the clothes of their people, she can see the woman she once knew.

“I’m fairly certain she didn’t go back to Hira’a.” Rinchen shuffles the papers in front of them, moving a map marked in yellow and orange to the top. “Ursa was adept at lying. When she told me she was going to find her fiancé, I wasn’t sure where else she would go.”

“Was he one of us?” So far, they don’t have a name to match this mysterious man. “That might help narrow it down.”

Rinchen shakes her head. “No. At least, I don’t think so. The archives say Ursa was the only one of us in that theatre troupe at that time.”

“Could he have been off the record?” She leans over a little to take a good look at the map. It’s escape routes, established in the years just after the war.

The Acolyte shrugs. “It’s unlikely, but possible. If he is, we have no way of tracking him.”

“Do you want me to see if I can get the Kagami records of Fire Nation families?”

“That would be helpful. I’m beginning to think the only way to find Ursa is to find him.”

That doesn’t sound very good. It’s not very surprising, though. Azula had to inherit her skill from somewhere, and Ozai was never well known as a good liar. Too proud and too brash. He always wanted people to know what he did.

Ursa, however, was an Acolyte to the core. Subterfuge is a way of life among them.

She flicks her wrist, a small breeze moving through the room. “She knew what she was
“I don’t think she ever wanted to be found.”

It says a lot about the two Acolytes who left the palace almost ten years ago. Rinchen stayed close, where she could easily return. She changed her name, but not her face.

Ursa seems to have changed everything. They can’t find any record of a woman matching her description, or any known aliases. There’s nothing from Hira’a or any island connected to Ursa’s history. She seems to have just disappeared. If Ty Lee didn’t know any better, she would suggest looking in the Spirit World.

She reaches over for one of Rinchen’s maps, pointing to an isolated landmass near Seal Island. “Zuko thinks there might be a spirit forest here.”

“That would explain the lack of records.” The Acolyte shuffles through the papers again, finding a different map. “There is a small village there. It was used just after the genocide to move airbender children throughout the isles.”

“What do the records say?”

“Nothing. No one wanted a paper trail.”

Understandable. The Western Air Temple didn’t have problems moving its children into Acolyte families. The South would have had some issues. “That sounds like a good place to start.”

It might not give them Ursa, but if Zuko’s right about the spirit forest, then it is a decent start. Someone there may know something. If nothing else, they can get confirmation and information about the supposed forest.

“I can be there by the end of the week.” Rinchen offers, rolling up the maps and tucking them away.

Zuko may not be happy about it. They need answers before he comes up with any plan, though. “Will you need anything?”

Rinchen shakes her head. “I should be back before his trial.”

Ty Lee nods. “I’ll let Katara break this to him.”

Safer that way. He doesn’t lose his temper with her. Probably because she can force him to calm down, but still.

“T still haven’t met her.”

She blinks. “Really?”

“Really.” The Acolyte stands up. “I’m beginning to think I’m never going to meet her.”

“You will. I’ll introduce you myself when you get back.”

Rinchen smiles. “I look forward to it. She sounds interesting.”

“She is.” Ty Lee folds her hands into her lap, attention drifting to the window behind the former princess. “Focus on the spirit forest for now. We don’t want to spook Ursa if she is there.”
“I will.”

She says her goodbyes to Rinchen. When she’s alone, she moves over to the window and looks out over the palace. She keeps going back to the thought that Ursa doesn’t want to be found. For Zuko’s sake, this needs to be done.

It’s just that when people don’t want to be found, things have a tendency to get ugly.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter, the end of Toph's trial, the return of Hama, and discussion of the group's mental health.
“You sent her there alone?” It’s taken him all day to find the airbender in a place where she cannot fly away or deflect to someone else. Katara broke the news to him late last night, after an extremely tense dinner with Master Hama.

Ty sighs heavily. “She’s more than capable.”

“It’s still dangerous.”

“She’s not ready to face Iroh yet.” She continues checking the vials he’s fairly certain are full of poison. “And Ursa is more likely to trust her than any of us.”

“But alone?”

Grey eyes focus on him and the expression in them is so close to Mai’s, he sees silver for just a moment. “Rinchen is more than capable of this. What’s this really about?”

He pauses. Rinchen is perfectly qualified to do this. He knows this. All the Acolytes are well trained and this is Lu Ten’s widow they’re talking about. Of course she’s strong enough to do this. “I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“You do want to find Ursa, don’t you?”

That’s the crux of it, he thinks. Does he want to find Mother? “Yes.”

And no. Always no. There’s a sick part of him that hopes he’ll be lucky and find a grave instead of the woman herself. It would be easier that way. He would determine what happened and maybe his memories of his sister will finally settle. There can be no more heartbreak with that outcome. If Ursa is lost to this world forever, then there is no way for his greatest fears about her to be confirmed.

But that also means he will likely never know the truth about what happened to make his family so poisonous.

He sighs and sits down, picking up one of the vials from the table. “We have the trials to worry about.”

“We need something else to focus on. The trials will drive us mad.” She takes the vial back, setting it beside an amber concoction. There is no mention of the fact that they are all mad already.

“Yours starts tomorrow.”

“I know.” Maybe that’s why she’s looking through her poisons now. He hasn’t seen her set out since the war ended. It must have been delivered alongside some supplies from the Temple. “If we keep at this pace, we should be done before the Solstice.”

“Which we will likely spend in the North Pole.”
“Katara planning on stealing the other treaty?”

“Of course she is.” He picks up another vial, the liquid inside a soft violet. “We need the leverage.”

Ty doesn’t take this poison from him, grey eyes focused on it instead. This one must mean something. “We need to get out of here.”

“And that.” What would this poison do? Put him to sleep? For a few hours? Forever? Make him tell the truth? Bind his limbs from moving?

“We’re a flight risk.”

“You’re the only one who can fly.”

She starts selecting certain vials, setting them in front of him. “You know what I meant. We need some kind of adventure. Looking for Ursa accomplishes your goal and helps the rest of us adjust after this mess.”

“But the White Lotus may not let us go?”

“I wouldn’t.” She shrugs, propping her chin up with one hand, elbow braced on the table. “We might be able to convince them to let us go, but they would be crazy to do it. There’s no guarantee we’ll come back.”

“We’ll be at the North Pole for the Solstice.”

She hums a little. “Still not a guarantee we’ll come back to Ran-Shao.”

“Katara will have to take Hama back to the South Pole.”

“If anything, that’s an incentive to stay away.”

“You and I want to know what Mai’s sentence will be.”

“That will be settled before the Solstice.” One last vial is placed before him. “And why would we be concerned about her?”

“Because it’s Mai.”

Ty Lee smiles wryly. “Careful. You’re a married man now.”

“She’s my sister’s widow. That makes her family.”

“And she’s my sworn sister.” The airbender nods sagely. “The White Lotus already knows the airbenders and Acolytes have been giving us information.”

So this is how this is going to go. They came back once and now they’re going to have to find arguments to return again. Did Uncle and the others consider this outcome when they were debating the future while he and his family were hidden away at Ember Island?

They disappeared once. They can do it again. Better now, probably. They have experience and hindsight in their favour. The gardens in the Temple are established enough and their alliance with the Air Nation strong enough that they can stay hidden forever. “We can’t abandon the world.”

There’s just that point. Katara may have been the one to do the actual killing, but she could
have been stopped by any of them. Aang’s death is on all of them and for that, they must pay the price. Keeping peace in the absence of a fully realized Avatar is the least they can do.

“That’s the job of the White Lotus.”

“They’re fired.”

She laughs. “It doesn’t work like that.”

“It should.”

“He really want that job? Rebuilding a nation and the world?”

He turns over the vial in his hands. “You mean do I want the throne.”

“To you?”

“I don’t know.” He says it without hesitating. It’s becoming more familiar, this ambivalence towards his birthright. “It isn’t clear-cut anymore. I know there isn’t another heir, but it’s not as simple as defeat Ozai and take the throne anymore.”

“Afraid?”

“Terrified.” And he is. He really, really is. After the war and everything that happened during some of the darkest days the world has ever known, this is what scares him. Frightens him to the point of insomnia and dysfunction.

“You’re not him, Zuko.” She sounds so tired as she says it. This is probably something she’s been expecting, though. Ty has always been the most perceptive of them. “No more than Azula was.”

Oh, maybe that’s it. Does his sister haunt her the way La-La haunts him? Has Ty considered every moment, every little thing that may have changed the outcome? Has she stayed awake at night, wondering where it all went wrong? Where Azula was doomed to die young? Does she think about the ways she may have been able to stop it?

“I know that.”

“You want to know if the madness is in the blood, though?” She slowly puts away the rest of the vials, leaving the ones in front of him. “And if it isn’t, then who inspired it?”

“Right.”

“Have you tried talking to Iroh about this?”

“I would rather have Rinchen around for that conversation.”

“You can’t rely on someone else to smooth things over for you.” She says.

“I know.” This is the real weakness in him, he thinks. He needs to know there is a net beneath him before he walked out into unstable territory. “I don’t want to find her.”

“But you need to.” There is no judgment, no pity, just a subtle understanding of this predicament.

He sets down the violet poison among its sisters, looking carefully at the way the pale colours
dance in the early sunlight. “I need to know what happened to Azula.”

He needs to know if Ursa ever loved his sister; if she ever really loved him. The more he learns about the woman, the more he begins to doubt her. She didn’t want to marry Ozai. She didn’t want him or Azula. They were the wrong children, never meant to be hers. How could she love either them?

Ty Lee moves to stand up. “That’s what happened to her.”

He blinks and turns to look up at her. “What?”

“That.” She nods at the poisons in front of him. “It’s likely what happened to her.”

And then he remembers the painting of the purple flowers. Carefully he picks up the violet poison again. “You mean the tea.”

She taps the vial in his hands gently. “It’s a clock-flower tincture. Given her symptoms and what Mai knows of medicine, this is the most likely combination.”

“Is this why you had your kit brought here?”

Her hand is strong against his shoulder. “You’re not the only one who needed to know.”

It’s not the first time he’s wondered about it, but now, the poison tea in front of him, he thinks about just how sick they all are. The war clings to them like a disease he’s beginning to think they’ll never recover from. It’s just a question of whether not any of them can survive it.

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It’s the last day. She keeps repeating it over and over again, hoping it will make this whole mess go by just a little faster. She’s told them everything she can to help them establish a timeline for their actions. It’s up to the others now to help fill in the details, all while covering up the worst of their actions.

What were they thinking? They should have escaped the second they were told about the trial. It would cast suspicion on them, but it’s not like anyone would ever find them.

“To clarify, you are saying that you do not know what happened in Ran-Shao the night Princess Azula and Avatar Aang fought?”

Sparky isn’t happy about this. Since they began talking about Azula, they’ve consistently referred to her as a princess and not as the Fire Lord. Did they do this to Knives too? “I was in the saddle the entire time. Without a connection to solid earth, I can only hear.”

They don’t need to know about how she’s honed her abilities to sense earth and its form from a distance. They might figure it out later, but fire ferrets will fly before she tells them.

“And what did you hear?”
“A battle.” What else are they expecting her to say? She heard Twinkletoes having tea with Sparky’s sister? “Is there a point to all these questions?”

“Clarification, Master Toph.”

“So you’ve said.” She grumbles under her breath, shifting in her seat. The wooden box must be to confuse her senses, to make her uncomfortable. Sneaky little bastards.

“What happened after you left the caldera?”

“Our bison was exhausted. We needed to find a safe place to rest, so we went to Hira’a.”

“Why that island? Is it of some significance?”

She sighs heavily. “It’s the birthplace of Princess Ursa. We’ve always talked about looking for her, so when we needed someplace to recover, we decided to hit two cat owls with one stone.”

“You actively looked for her while in Hira’a?”

“No. Not enough time and we didn’t want to spook her.”

“So what did you do?”

She shrugs. “Got a lay of the land, mostly. We never had a reason to go to Hira’a before.”

“The island of Hira’a is rather far from Ran-Shao.”

“It’s far enough away to be safe, but close enough we can easily return.” This is the hardest part of their lie. She needs to sell it if they’re going to make it through this intact. As the first on trial, it is her duty to make sure this lie holds up for the others.

Why exactly did their Acolyte surprise have to leave before they got to this part of it? Right now is when they need Iroh distracted.

“You had three months between the Battle of Ran-Shao and your appearance at Fire Lord Iroh’s coronation.”

“That’s not a question.” No reason to make this easy for them.

“What did you do in that time?”

She shrugs. “Argued mostly.”

Which is, surprisingly, the truth. After everyone was back to something at least vaguely resembling functional, the discussions about what to do next started. Volatile is the word Snow used for it. So much pain and anger; those discussions about whether or not they should return were some of the most brutal they’ve had.

It was the only time they’ve really talked about what happened in the war. Maybe that’s why none of them can talk about it now.

“About?”

“Everything. Whether or not we should return, mostly. Once that was decided, it was when and where and how. Were we going to get involved in reconstruction or simply let our loved ones know we were okay after all?”
“What made you decide to return?”

We haven’t, she wants to say. But she can’t. That would be bad, showing the greatest crack in their little façade. “Fans had already seen us. Sooner or later, someone was going to come looking for us.”

“Why stay?”

“Many of the same reasons. We didn’t want people hunting us down.” Maybe a little more truth wouldn’t hurt. “And we don’t want there to be another generation like us. So we’ll do what we can to avoid that.”

“What do you mean by ‘another generation like us’?”

Instinct kicks in and she feels for the familiar earth around her companions’ arms. “Screwed up. Haunted. Incapable of living in a peacetime.”

She probably shouldn’t give away that much information. Sooner or later someone is going to notice. Uncle already has. It’s just a matter of time before someone else realizes just how messed up they all are.

“You are war heroes.”

“Funny. It doesn’t feel that way.”

“Can you elaborate?”

She sighs heavily. “We were soldiers when we should have been children. Do you really not see what’s wrong with that? War in general is pointless. To allow kids on the front lines, though, that’s beyond insane.”

“You made the choice to go to war.”

“No, we made the choice to train the Avatar and to learn more about our bending and the world we live in.” Keep calm. Breathe. Don’t panic. “The war found us.”

It hunted them and sucked them in, mashed them up and when it was all over, spit them out. They’re barely recognizable when compared to the people they were. It’s a wonder anyone can speak to them and assume they are still the same.

It’s a wonder anyone can speak to them without ending up mangled by all their sharp edges.

“And your plans for after the war?”

“Stay together.” That part is really the only agreement they’ve made. They are family now and they will not be separated. “We’ve started talks with the Air Nation about opening up a school for airbenders.”

That one isn’t going to stay a secret for long so might as well reveal it now.

He coughs politely. “You are the sole heir to the Bei Fong family. Two of your companions are royalty. The last is the heir of an Air Nomad Elder.”

“Airbender.” She makes the correction without thinking. “The Air Nomads died with Aang.” It hurts to say his name. Less now than it did, but she’s said it so much over the past few days that the wound has been buried a little beneath other stresses.
There is no acknowledgement of her interruption. “What do your parents have to say about
this plan for a school? There is no one else to take over the Bei Fong fortune, is there?”

She shrugs. “Not really. But it’s not like they ever really intended to give it to me. They were
too busy pretending they didn’t have a child.”

That’s more vindictive than she should probably be, especially since she’s fairly certain her
parents are here. They should be, at least, if Uncle was right about them arriving before her trial
began. No one’s been for tea, not for her company. There’s been nothing but silence from them.

Just like old times.

Surprising that they even came, really. She would have expected anything with her name on
it to be thrown in the trash without hesitation.

“How do you know this?”

“I’m blind,” she growls, “Not deaf.”

Muttering from the crowd. Not that she cares. They can gossip all they want.

“Master Toph, were you aware that there has been a petition for you to be named heir of
King Bumi of Omashu.”

Well that’s just brilliant. “Don’t care. I want to teach.”

“You’re rather young to be making a choice like that. Only fifteen?”

“Almost sixteen. And aren’t you a little annoying to be asking me all these questions?” This
is already going to end badly, so she may as well make it as bad as possible. “Were you aware that
I’m petitioning for emancipation?”

More excited chatter. From somewhere behind her, the sound of wood hammering sharp
against wood echoes. “Quiet!”

Oh, so that’s where Iroh is sitting.

The inquisitor coughs politely. “You are asking to be released from parental custody at
almost sixteen?”

At least he learned that time.

“I am young.” She starts carefully. “I have also trained the Avatar, been to war, defeated the
Dai Li, discovered a lost civilization, and subsequently won the war. All I am asking is to be
recognized for the maturity my experiences have given me. If that’s a problem for some people, then
so be it. They’re not my concern.”

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Slate eyes watch her carefully. “When you said it wasn’t the Avatar, you could have told me it was *him.*”

“Zuko helped us win the war, and he’s been completely supportive about seeing the Southern Water Tribe repaid for the damages brought on by the Raiders.”

“There’s nothing they can do to make it better.”

“No, but they can help make things better for the future.” She went out of her way to make a traditional Southern Water Tribe tea and it wasn’t for this. If only she could release her hold on Hama’s limbs. Bloodbending against the will is exhausting with the full moon. Without it, it’s almost impossible. “He’s their prince.”

“Banished and disgraced.”

“He’s still a firebender.” Hama isn’t calming down. “Azulon’s grandson, no less.”

“And Avatar Roku’s great-grandson through the maternal line.” Two can play this game. “A not-so-distant cousin of Avatar Aang’s as well.”

Thank Tui, La, and Agni all for the airbenders’ meticulous genealogical records.

Hama settles a little at that. “He is your choice?”

“The only one.” Scary, almost. She’s so used to lying about her relationship that to be this honest about it is new in a way few things are anymore. “I’m not asking you to like him. Just try to be polite.”

“Does he make you happy?”

“He makes me alive.” It’s the easiest explanation she can come up with. None of them are going to be happy for a very long time. Alive is the greatest achievement right now, that remembrance that they survived and have the future ahead of them. That she did not die at Wulong or at Jongmu as it sometimes feels like she did.

This too makes her feel alive. This is the conversation she needed to have with Gran-Gran, that wary suspicion only a maternal figure can muster. Hama has it for all the wrong reasons, but at least it’s something approaching normal.

She did elope with a banished prince, after all. In any other situation, it would be treated as absurd. Her entire time in the war was absurd.

Then again, it was war. There is no such thing as normal. In light of that, how can there be such a thing as absurdity?

Hama’s stare is steady and calculating. After a few moments, she relents. “Good enough. I still don’t trust him.”

Katara releases her hold on the elder just a little. The tea is getting cold, anyway. “I’m not expecting you to.”

She’s learning to not expect anything of anyone. In the wake of everything, it’s just easier that way.

“How has your bloodbending been?”
She shrugs. “I disposed of an assassin’s body by ripping out all the water.”

Hama smiles darkly. “Impressive. Was it difficult?”

“I had the moon to help.” Now that the tea is cold, it tastes almost as if she got it just a bit too sweet. “I’m not sure if I could do it during the day.”

Actually, she’s fairly certain she can do it during the day. She can probably do it to a living body if she’s really determined. But Hama doesn’t need to know that.

“You’re surrounded by enemies here. You should try it sometime.”

She breathes out carefully, frost spreading across the surface of her tea. She’s going to have to do this eventually, so might as well get it over with. “I would gladly test out a few theories on the Northerners.”

Hama pauses, a pastry between her teeth. Swallowing the bite quickly, the elder moves into questioning mode. “Why the North? Why not the Fire Nation? They’re the ones who hurt us.”

“At the North’s suggestion.”

Hama clearly has no idea what she’s talking about. So there really was no rumour in the South. She’d wondered, briefly, if Gran-Gran had said anything after moving to the South Pole. But if Hama didn’t know, then this really was a well-kept secret.

“Katara, what are you talking about? The North would never give the Fire Nation the knowledge to destroy them.”

She thinks of Yue and Tui, of all the broken hearts in the aftermath of the Siege of the North. Carefully, she removes the scroll from the folds of her jacket. “Read this.”

Hama unrolls the treaty, eyes flickering side to side. For the first time, Katara wonders at her family’s ancestry. Hama’s eyes are too close to grey to not consider Air blood. It’s always been a curiosity of hers, after finding out about all the airbenders from the East and West. Did the Nomads ever intermarry with the Tribes? Are there airbenders who look like her and Sokka?

Hama’s heart rate spikes. So she’s finally reached the part about the Raiders. Or maybe the prisons? No, the Raiders. Carefully take hold of the limbs, regulate the heart and body temperature. Breathe carefully, direct Hama’s body to stay calm.

There’s the struggle. Even without her bending, Hama still knows how to fight against bloodbending. “Is this true?”

“Yes.” Calmly, she continues to drink her tea, watching as her Master slowly realizes the blind fury that’s been consuming her for months now. “I have confirmation from a Northerner old enough to remember.”

“Why?”

“I want leverage.”

Hama’s disdain has gotten more obvious since the Tower. “Why would the North do this to us?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know. With any luck, their copy will give a motive.”
“How are you going to get it?”

It’s going to be a long, long road to getting Hama in line. But when she does join them, it will make it all worth it. With what’s coming, they need all the Water Tribe support they can get. Hama may have standing similar to Katara’s own, but there is power in her age and position as one of the very last Southern Waterbenders.

The Northern invasion of the South will not continue. Even if she can’t make it public, she will make sure they pay for what they’ve done to her people.

It’s the least she can do.

“Trade secret.” She smiles, setting down her teacup to pick up the pot. “More tea?”

“Another assassin fail to kill you?”

That’s harsh. Ty Lee closes the door behind her, taking a deep breath. “I just want to talk.”

“Before I’m sent away to the colonies?”

She blinks. “The colonies?”

Mai doesn’t turn around, pale hands pulling the comb through long dark locks with more grace than any human should have. “That’s what the mice are saying the White Lotus is going to do to me.”

Mice. Spies. Mai’s learnt a lot in the past few years. “That’s not too bad.”

“They just have to decide my benefactor.”

Ty Lee leans against the wall, carefully watching her sworn sister. “Any preference? Maybe Aunt Zen can help you out.”

“Mother has helped me all she can.” Mai sets the comb down on the vanity, pushing her hair over her shoulder to fall straight down her back. Exactly when did she start wearing it down like this? “From what I understand, they were originally going to sentence me to the White Tower.”

“You would have been the first non-bender prisoner there.”

“Except the Tower is under Kagami control.”

“It is.” Ty Lee confirms. She hasn’t checked, but she’s fairly certain it was He Lee who took Master Hama’s bending. There’s a delicacy to the blocking that suggests He Lee, at least.

“That apparently makes me an escape risk, given my connection to you.”
“I’m no longer a Kagami.”

Mai hums. “Shame. Oh well. I suspect I’ll prefer the colonies.”

Given that a sentencing to the colonies will likely come with the stipulation that Mai never set foot on Fire Nation soil again, she likely will. Assuming her sentence is lightened over the years to allow travel outside the colonies to the Earth Kingdom proper, it could even be enjoyable at some point. “I suspect you will too.”

She turns slightly, black hair swaying. “What is it you wanted to talk about?”

“I don’t know.” Ty Lee has always had a problem lying to Mai. “Us, I guess.”

“There is no us anymore. My contract was with a Kagami, not a Namikaze.”

The use of the name brings her to a halt. Really, though, she should stop being surprised. Mai always knows more than she lets on. “You knew?”

“In hindsight, it’s fairly obvious.”

“You never said anything.”

Mai shrugs. “It was your business. Not mine.”

“Did Azula know?” It’s a ridiculous question, probably.

“I would be surprised if she didn’t.”

As would Ty Lee. Mai may have been the most perceptive of them, but Azula was the real strategist. Simple and efficient and brutal. “She never said anything.”

“Perhaps she was waiting for you.”

Everything seems so much more difficult now. Back then, she was terrified. Today, she isn’t sure. Maybe she could have told them the truth without any repercussions. It would have been so much better that way. “I used to use my bending around you all the time.”

“I remember.” Mai turns around completely now and she is more beautiful than Ty Lee remembers, now that she can see Mai in the full light of day. “You would create breezes when we were in the gardens and help direct my knives when I was too far off target.”

“I did. You were both so lovely in the wind.”

“Azula loved it.” Mai stands up, the dark silk of her clothes shimmering red in the light. “It just tangled my hair.”

“Too bad.” She’s feeling bold today. Reckless, even. “It was really for you.”

“Black hair flowing in the breeze? Isn’t that romantic. Does the earthbender let you do it to her?”

Ty Lee stands up a little straighter. “Toph? Where did that come from?”

Mai shrugs, gliding over towards the window. “If it’s Zuko and the waterbender, then you and the earthbender must also be a pair. It’s only logical. Or does she not like girls?”
“She doesn’t care.” This isn’t the direction this conversation was supposed to go. Not that this conversation had a direction to begin with but this is not what she was expecting. “You’ve changed.”

“So have you, darling.” This is not her beloved. This is not her precious, beautiful Mai. This woman has the same face, the same voice, the same eyes, the same grace and breathtaking beauty but this is not her Mai. “All covered up in orange now. It suits you better, to be honest. You look less like a liar.”

Mai just wants to hurt her. This is payment for the betrayal, for the abandonment. Maybe she deserves it. But this is not her Mai. This is a Mai full of anger and—oh yes, that’s a sentiment she recognizes. “I know you miss her, Mai, but she’s never coming back and there is nothing any of us can do about it.”

“Why wasn’t it you?”

“Who killed her?”

“Who found her.” Mai’s anger is cracking the surface, the perfect porcelain of her cheek stained with saltwater and she’s stepping closer now, challenging in her own way. “You would have left her alive.”

“Not to be imprisoned.” She’s heard Zuko’s explanation. “Not to never be a firebender again.”

“Her bending would have come back.”

Ty Lee shakes her head, thinking of everything Katara said and everything her grandmother and Sora taught her. “How long was she on the clock-flower? Two years? Daily dosing? Increase every month or so, then every week?”

“It was too keep her calm.” How tragic. Mai thinks she was helping. By now she has to know the truth. There’s no way she hasn’t been corrected.

“You can’t give benders clock-flower. That long and that much?” It’s awful to think about this, what that herb does to a bender. “The chi would have been completely destroyed. Katara can give you a better image. What it looks like to a bloodbender to feel for the chi in the blood and only find the wreckage of that poison? Do you want that?”

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this.” They’re so close now. Ty Lee can feel the warmth radiating off her sworn sister’s body. Maybe Mai will try to kill her. It would be fitting, in a way, if one of them killed the other. Their whole relationship has been vicious, a snake that’s finally started to devour itself after a complete loss of direction.

“War doesn’t like plans.”

“It wasn’t our war.” Silver eyes look red this close. How often has she been crying? “We should have had nothing to do with it.”

“Maybe so, but we still did.”

Mai is having trouble breathing now. It isn’t obvious, but the feel of the air pulling in to her lungs is shaky and ready to break down. “You’re disgusting to look at.”

“And you are more beautiful than any other.” Hot tears track down her cheeks and it really is
difficult to breathe in here. “I love you, Natsume Mai of Clan Samui.”

“I hate you.” Pale, cold hands on either side of her face, thumbs brushing gently across her cheeks.

Ty Lee smiles, gingerly reaching up to tread her fingers through Mai’s long midnight hair. “That’s okay.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, that did not go as planned.
“Stay put. Hurt anyone and I hunt you down. Sound good?” She adds a smile for effect. Gran-Gran is standing right there, even if she can’t hear the conversation.

Hama looks almost amused. “It’s Kanna. She would have given us a warning if she knew. Go be with your family now, little shark.”

She stays quiet about the use of words, finishing her goodbye. Hama wants to spend the afternoon with Gran-Gran. It’s not ideal, not this soon, but Hama is also completely powerless and Gran-Gran has Pakku nearby. Not close enough to anger the Puppetmaster, but near enough to intervene if necessary.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Zuko whispers in her ear when she returns to him by the door.

“Not in the slightest.” She takes his hand in hers, pulling him away from the South’s rooms. “But we have research to do.”

Life in Ran-Shao is an annoyance at best. There is barely any room to breathe, let alone think in peace. They don’t have the room to bend properly. Privacy is rare. And the people are simply awful. Dealing with noblewomen and dignitaries is reason enough to stay locked up in their small wing of the palace.

So they do research and plan and Katara does her best to not focus on how much better she feels now that it’s like war again. This is a world she knows how to navigate, after all. The lying and theft and killing is natural, an instinct honed by a life in constant danger.

It’s wrong, but she really doesn’t care right now. When they reach a true peacetime, when the school is up and running, when the world stops viewing them as dangerous creatures in a zoo, then they can deal with their issues. At that time, they can sort through all their ghosts and lay them all to rest.

But for now, they fight.

Back in their rooms, all looks fine. Nothing is out of place. Ty Lee’s bag is sitting on the floor beside the table. Zuko picks it up without question, leading her into a small library hidden deep in their wing. She finds the controls for the screens easily enough. It’s not as much protection as she would like. Understandable, though. This room is for young royalty to do their studies. A screen instead of a door makes far more sense.

“Where are the Water Tribe papers?” He sets the bag down on the low desk, tipping it over to reveal books and scrolls, loose sheets scattering across the dark wood.

From the bottom shelf beside the door, she selects a volume about Sozin’s youth. “Here you go. The lists are in the section about his visit to the Southern Water Tribe.”

“The one when he was seven or when he was sixteen?”

“Sixteen, after it was announced Avatar Roku would train in the North instead of the South.”
“Why was that?” He sounds curious, taking the book from her and removing the needed pages.

She shrugs, taking a seat at the desk. “No idea. Despite the South being more powerful, there’s never been a South-born Avatar. Maybe that’s why.”

There’s never been a Southern Avatar. She hadn’t known that when she started reading one afternoon, but Avatar Kuruk is the only Water Avatar born post-Schism and he was born just a couple of years after Iliamna led her people away from the North. The South, despite everything, simply isn’t old enough to have produced an Avatar.

They should have, though.

“Have you thought about asking La about it?”

She draws one of the newly supplied scrolls towards her, unrolling it to reveal a map of the Fire Lord’s chambers. “It’s on my to-do list.”

Given the unrest in this world, she’s a little frightened by what the other world must look like right now. She still needs to talk to someone on that side about her potential as a lost Avatar. How exactly does that work? If she dies, will there be another lost life after her? Will there always be the Avatar and the ghost of the life that should have been? What exactly did Aang’s century in the iceberg do to the cycle?

Zuko sorts out the papers, placing a beautifully written scroll on top. “The Acolytes are good.”

Very good, she thinks, leaning forward to take a better look at the careful writing. “Is that the transcript from Mai’s trial?”

“A copy. The real one is still in the archives.” Gold eyes move back and forth, his fingers tracing carefully over the words. “I’ve been thinking about where she might leave any record of us.”

“Found somewhere better?” She takes a second look at the map in her hands.

He sighs. “No, I’m fairly certain you’re right. Putting them in the Fire Lord’s rooms guarantees they’ll be found, if they exist.”

“We still can’t determine that?”

“Not yet. Jetsun has given us her best Acolytes, but without Rinchen we don’t have anyone who knows the layout of the familial wing well enough to do a non-invasive search.”

Even locked up, Mai is still causing them problems. She so effectively ran the regime in Azula’s name that no one suspected something was wrong until it was far, far too late. And now, she still has them on edge with little to no information and she’s just across the palace. “Did she do this kind of thing when you were with her?”

“Probably.” He sounds a little strained. Then again, she did just ask about his ex-girlfriend. “She would have given everything to Azula, though.”

“Where would it be hidden then?”

“If La-La hid it, then it’s probably somewhere in the villa.” He pauses, hands stilling over the scroll. “The records are in the villa.”
She has no context for what he’s saying, but this is his history so she’ll follow his lead. Maybe an Acolyte can do the search of the rooms here. “If Mai was living here with Azula, then wouldn’t she put them here?”

He shakes his head. “No, that’s not Mai’s style. She likes things organized and together. A home base, of sorts. Like the Temple for us.”

That makes a little more sense. “So you think she’d use the villa?”

“Azula had a wing to herself, a lot like this one. Mai and Ty Lee would spend hours in there with her.” He reshuffles the papers. “It’s a safe space for Mai. She knows it and its secrets.”

“We just need to figure out how to get in there.” They need out of this place. They need anything Mai may have collected. Two cat owls, one stone, as Toph would say. “What’s the layout of the villa?”

“Big, sprawling. Not as closed in as here.”

“Space for bending?”

“Lots of gardens.” He shrugs. “Actual gardens, not like here. Do you remember the lake at the side of the caldera? It’s against the caldera wall on the other side of the water.”

“How many people does it take to run it?” She thinks of the Temple, the city surrounding it. They managed that just fine. Maybe not the best it could be, but it worked.

“Not many. It’s always been meant for the members of the royal family not in direct line for the throne. Fewer people means better security.” He sits down slowly, attention fully on her. “Katara, what are you planning?”

She smiles. “Is there space for an earthbender?”

“And a waterbender. You want to move in?”

“Will we need to run it past Iroh?” She sets the map aside, folding her arms over the table. “And how quickly can we move in?”

“Since when have we asked permission?” He grins widely and for just a moment, she sees the young man she met so briefly in Ba Sing Se. It’s not much, but in a way, it’s more comforting than the thought of escape.

“Please state your name for the assembly.”

It’s going to be this, again. She remembers Toph’s time in this chair. Sitting in it now, she thinks it was designed to annoy them all. It’s all wood, so Badgermole can’t sense anything in it. It’s dry here, so Katara will be nervous (or would be, if she weren’t a bloodbender). It’s too cold for
Zuko.

And for her?

The air feels dead. Despite the room being packed with breathing lungs, pushing the air in and out, it is stagnant and heavy.

It’s awful.

“Namikaze Ty Lee, second of my name.” That draws a reaction. She chances a glance at her mother, but sees nothing. Even with this last betrayal, Ten Lee is the perfect Kagami bride.

“Your age?”

“Seventeen. Born in the tenth month.” There are roughly one hundred and fifty people present. Fire Nation sits to her left, the Earth Kingdom to their right with the Water Tribes sitting North to South just slightly to her right. Fully right are the airbenders and her companions, the group slowly fading into the Order of the White Lotus seated behind her.

That’s clearly intended to be unnerving. But how are they conducting these trials when they can’t view her face?

“What nation do you belong to?”

“Air.” More chatter. What were they expecting? She’s wearing the colours of the wind and she was careful to reveal the copy of the wooden necklace Katara salvaged from Jongmu when they burned Avatar Aang and his bison.

Interesting, though. They didn’t ask about nation with Toph.

“You were born to the Kagami Clan in the Fire Nation, correct?”

“Yes.” Mirrors? The banners hanging from the ceiling could easily hide them, but how would the White Lotus be viewing them when she can’t see them? It would be possible, she supposes, if everything were at the precise angle. How many people can set that up, though?

“You no longer identify with them?”

“Never really have.” She can create a mirror system like that. So can Mai, but Mai is out of the question. The Mechanist? Master Piandao? Sokka?

Oh, Sokka. Yes, he would be capable of something like this.

“Can you elaborate?” This man is annoying. Her eyes narrow, trying to pinpoint his identity.

“I’ve known what I am since I was a young child. And I’ve known what the Kagami do to airbenders for almost as long.”

Earth Kingdom color and body type but Fire Nation facial structure and eyes. Voice is odd, not really anything specific—oh, he’s from the colonies. That would explain a few things. He’s neutral, of mixed blood. No one can accuse him of playing favourites if he goes easy on any of them simply because he has no allegiance in common with any of them. “What can you tell us about your relationship with Lady Mai and Princess Azula?”

“Lord Azula.” The correction comes automatically. “Azula was the reigning Fire Lord at the time of her death, so the correct title would be Lord, not Princess.”
More chatter. Mostly from the Fire Nation and Earth Kingdom. Interesting. The Water Tribes are as cold as their environments, not giving away the slightest emotion. She’ll have to ask Katara about that.

“Your relationship with them?” Well, he’s an ass.

“Mai and I were sworn sisters. Azula wanted Mai, but the contract held and so she got the both of us.”

“Was there a formal contract?”

“No.”

“Then how would you classify your relationship with them?”

What exactly is he trying to get her to admit? “Why does it need classification? We were close.”

He sighs, taking off his glasses to pinch the bridge of his nose. “Did you have a romantic relationship with either Lady Mai or Prin—Lord Azula?”

Chances that they know something…he doesn’t look particularly stressed and there are no clear tells suggesting a lie. The focus in the room is a little distracting. Mai did go on trial, though. “No.”

“Did you have a sexual relationship with either of them?” He replaces his glasses, tawny eyes focused on her.

So someone does know something. This is just brilliant. Likely Mai gave away the information. She knew she should have read that transcript. “Yes.”

The sudden rush of sound echoes through the chamber, the air moving excitedly with the many voices. Behind her, she can hear Iroh calling for order. Really, what were they expecting? She’s trying to go through this trial as honestly as she can. It’s the only safe option with the Kagami and the Samui watching her so closely. She can lie all she wants about her three years at war. If it’s about Mai or Azula, though, she has to tell the truth.

The inquisitor waits until an uneasy silence falls before continuing. “Did they know about your airbending?”

“Yes.” Time to see how badly she can make this hurt.

There’s more murmuring from the crowd. “And yet you betrayed then-Princess Azula at Boiling Rock and Lady Mai at Ba Sing Se?”

Viperbat. She could take away his air, do it slowly so it looks like an accident. Maybe an allergy. The only people in this room who know what offensive airbending looks like wouldn’t call her out on it. “My contract was with Mai, not with Azula. I was honoring that bond at Boiling Rock.”

“What about Ba Sing Se?”

“It became impossible to pretend that I’m not an airbender.” Simple, short. No need to get into the ugly bits of it. “So I left.”
“How did you get to Taku?”

Do they know about the sanctuaries? She glances out the corner of her eye to spot the nun who helped her escape the city. A nod, an assurance that she can be honest about this. “I found a safe haven run by Acolytes. They gave me an eel hound and a glider. I would use the hound to get as far as I could and then use the glider when the hound was exhausted. At the next sanctuary, I would pick up another eel hound and so on until I got to Taku.”

“How did you get to Taku?”

“Elder Sora.” She shifts in her seat, leaning back to appear more comfortable. “As the eldest of us all, matters like mine are her jurisdiction.”

He nods. “Why did you leave Lady Mai and Ba Sing Se?”

Her brow wrinkles. Why double back to that point?

Unless he or the White Lotus believes she was lying about Mai and Azula knowing what she is. “The comet was in the air and the city was burning.”

“That doesn’t explain why you left.”

“Because I am an airbender.” She straightens her posture, taking hold of the air just for comfort. “And I was raised on the stories of what happened. I don’t know how other cultures handle this, but with us, we make sure our young know exactly what the Fire Nation did to us. The towers burning, our brothers and sisters dead in the halls of our most sacred places, fire falling from a red sky. The survivors made sure our stories include what it feels like to choke on ash and what burnt flesh smells like and what it’s like to burn alive. You’ll have to excuse me if I don’t handle fire well.”

The silence in the room is tense. It takes her a moment to realize her hold on the air in the room is perhaps a bit tighter than necessary. Breathe, relax. Don’t think of Grandmother’s stories about the day of fire and the knives in the night.

Most of the audience looks uncomfortable. Good. They should. The Air Nomads of old are dead, and their ghosts will haunt them all forever. Hers is a nation forged in fire and blood, beholden to no one and owing no apologies for their darkness.

The inquisitor coughs politely. “Forgive me, Master Ty Lee. If we could move on now?”

Well, at least he finally addressed her properly.

“‘That was a disaster.” Katara sinks down into her seat at the library desk, hands running across her face.

He takes the seat across from her, reaching under the desk to remove their collection of documents from the hiding spot. “It could have been worse.”
“How?”

“She didn’t kill him.” That’s a low bar for success. Still, though, it helps a little to have some kind of goal. Every day spent without taking a life can be counted as a good day, can’t it?

Even if the destruction and subterfuge feels more like life than whatever it is they’re doing now?

The waterbender sighs. “I think she was ready to kill everyone.”

So he wasn’t the only one who noticed the shift in the air. “Where is she now?”

“Meditating on the roof.”

He nods. “Where’s Hama?”

“She went to have lunch with Gran-Gran.” She shifts in her seat, untying her outer robe and pulling it off. “She’s supposed to be meeting her nephew today.”

“That’s a good start.” Where is that list? It was with the transcript from Mai’s trial, wasn’t it?”

“She seems to be settling in nicely.”

Katara reaches over and drags the list out from the depths of the economic reports, handing it to him. “It’s the first time in seventy years that she doesn’t have to pretend to be someone she’s not.”

Nita, Madhuk, Hama, Oki; dozens more names, some marked with blue ink like those, the rest in plain black. “Have you told her about this?”

She shakes her head. “Just the treaty for now. I want to give her time to adjust before throwing this at her.”

“The ones in blue are your family?”

“Nita was my great-grandmother.” She stands up and moves her chair to sit beside him. “Madhuk and Oki were my grandfather’s elder brothers. There were two more, but they died in the raids.”

“All waterbenders?”

She nods. “My grandfather and great-grandfather weren’t, but the rest were.”

“What were their names?”

“Nuvuk was my grandfather.” She starts digging through the records; drawing out everything they’ve collected on the Southern Water Tribe. “My great-grandfather was Dasan.”

He pauses over a scroll detailing the former relationship between the Fire Nation and the South. “Dasan? That’s not a Water Tribe name, is it?”

She shrugs, eyes never leaving what looks like a trade ledger. “We dealt with the outside world enough that our language isn’t pure Water Tribe like the North’s is.”

Reasonable enough, but the name still bothers him. It isn’t Water Tribe and it isn’t Earth Kingdom and it certainly isn’t Fire Nation. Which leaves Air, and her great-grandfather would have been alive during the genocide. “Any history of interracial marriage?”
Let her think that this is about them. Please let her think this is about them.

“Some. Usually not in the South Pole, though. Other races tend to have trouble with the extreme cold and the isolation from earth.” Fire and Earth, she means.

“What about Air Nomads?”

“Rarely came to the Pole, except during the Solstice celebration. Most of our trade with them occurred at Jongmu.” She still won’t say Southern Air Temple. Still, this is progress. “What’s this about? You’re the one with Air blood.”

“You could too. So could Toph. Their records aren’t perfect.” Detailed to an obsessive point, but there is still that dark age immediately after the genocide when they were trying to locate the survivors and find shelter. “Have you thought about asking Ty to look at their census for Jongmu immediately before the comet?”

She waves him off absently. “We have more important things to do. We still don’t know why the North would turn on the South like they did.”

“Protection from annihilation?”

Her glare is familiar and for a moment, he can’t remember the last time he saw her with the expression. “You know as well as I do that working together, the Tribes could have ended the war before it really began.”

She’s right about that. Waterbenders are terrifying in away other benders are not. If the Tribes had banded together in the beginning, when the South was still powerful, they could have easily recruited the Earth Kingdom and sent Sozin back to the Isles in shame. They might have even been able to save more of the Nomads. “And why no one did anything before the comet. Something like genocide has chatter before it. Someone had to know what was coming.”

“Do you think anyone else has notice this?”

The more they look back at the war, the more questions there are. “You would think so, but everyone seems focused on what comes next.”

She leans against him, head resting against his shoulder. “They’ll just make the same mistakes.”

And it will be war all over again. They need to know why the North betrayed the South. Why the world stood by and let Air fall. Why everything. She’s absolutely right. Until they know why everything happened the way it did, the way the Pai Sho board was set up in the very beginning, they can’t do anything without setting the game back up the exactly same way.

People are looking back at the antebellum years like they were a golden age. But for things to have gotten as bad as they did, those good old days had to have some fairly dark shadows.

“We’ll figure it out.” He wraps an arm around her, leaning back in his chair to make things just a little more comfortable while they read. It’s going to be a long, long time before they have any answers and as each day goes on, he gets a little closer to believing that the truth is worse than initially thought.
She doesn’t even try to coax Snow down from the roof. Her trial wasn’t nearly that bad; the airbender could use the time to unwind. Instead she finds her way to the kitchen, following the path of stolen stone tiles the Acolytes set out for her. It’s not a perfect solution, but at least she can sense where she’s going now.

The countertops are covered in stone as well, finally. Tapping a hand against one, she feels for the stone canister with the characters for jasmine carved into the side. She thinks it might be a little late in the day for tea. Who cares, though? Tea is always good.

She gets everything set up and the water boiling on the small fire Sparky keeps going on the stovetop. “Are you just going to stand there?”

Took forever for the interloper to step even slightly on her path. As the footstep settles more firmly on the tile, she gets a better sense of the person. “It’s good to see you again.”

Oh, that voice. The scent of gardenias overpowers the tea and she stops what she’s doing, dropping leaves unceremoniously into the pot. “Hello, Mother.”

“I wanted to see how you were doing.” Awkward and unsure, words she never thought she would ascribe to Poppy Bei Fong. “Lord Iroh told me what happened.”

Me. Why the singular? “Did Father come?”

“Your father is busy. They just opened a new mine.”

The kettle whistles and she finishes preparing the tea. “Would you like any?”

“I don’t want to trouble you.”

She sighs and reaches out for the iron cups she made in a fit of boredom. It takes a second to navigate them off the shelf, but eventually they land delicately on the counter. The water fills in, her hand pressed flat against the counter to get a sense of the change in temperature. “There’s a ceramic lining, so you won’t burn yourself.”

“Thank you.” Poppy has always been polite. Closer, now, fragile hands resting on the countertop. “Home has been quiet without you.”

“It was quiet even when I was there.” Where did that stool go? Ah, there. She hops up into the seat, elbows on the counter. Breathing steady, she reaches out for the other one in the room, lifting it and bringing it over for her mother.

“You’ve gotten better at your earthbending.”

“You have no idea,” she mutters into her tea. “How is the weather in Gaoling?”

This is really what it’s come to. She has no idea what to say to her mother. She isn’t particularly surprised that of her parents, only Poppy showed up, but still. It would have just been better if neither one came.

“The usual.”
So awkward. They never really had much to talk about when she still lived at home but now it’s just impossible. “Was there something you wanted to talk about?”

Hmm, that’s an interesting vibration. “Are you really petitioning for emancipation?”

“Yes, I am.”

Her mother drums her fingers against the counter. That’s a new habit. “You really don’t want to come home?”

An annoying habit, at that. Toph reaches across the counter and holds her mother’s hand still. “That messes with my senses.”

“Toph, are you ever coming home?” Poppy’s hand stays still.

The teapot lifts easily with her bending, refilling her cup. “I have a home.”

“I meant to Gaoling.”

“I wasn’t planning to.”

Poppy sighs heavily. “You should probably know that your father has moved to Ba Sing Se to join King Kuei’s court.”

Oh, so that’s why he didn’t show up here. “You didn’t go with him?”

“I’m currently splitting my time between Ba Sing Se and Gaoling, but the property in Gaoling is becoming too much to maintain.”

“Mother?”

“Your father has given me total control of what happens to you.” Poppy pushes her teacup away, the iron bouncing slightly on the stone countertop, shockwaves echoing out across the surface. “I am willing to agree to the emancipation request.”

She can see where this is going. “If I take over the compound in Gaoling.”

“And comply with the Bei Fong family laws to claim your inheritance when you turn eighteen.”

Toph chokes slightly on her tea. “No one has followed the inheritance laws in over three hundred years.”

“I think you can do it.”

Well, that’s a lovely vote of confidence. Just one problem.

One very, very big problem.

“Can you give me some time to think about it?”

“Of course.” The teapot leaves the countertop, the second iron cup growing warm and heavy again. “If it’s not too much trouble, could you please tell me about your travels?”

This did not go as expected. “Yeah, I can do that.”
Just please, anything but the inheritance laws.
The large audience is supposed to make it harder for them to lie, she thinks. Now that she’s been here for a couple of days, she can see the White Lotus members scattered throughout the room. It’s a simple, but brilliant set-up. Have them face the audience, like they’re having to account for their actions to the public, when in fact the crowd is just stacked with people who may know something to make it harder to work around them.

“There are very few men listed in the Air Nation records.” At least the inquisitor has stopped calling them Nomads. Progress, one step at a time.

She sits up a little straighter. “That’s the thing about war. Men tend to be drafted and killed.”

“This is what happened to your uncle and cousin, isn’t it?”

Bringing up Aunt Jet’s history, though, that’s cold. Very cold. Why is her family of any interest? “Yes, it is. The Fire Nation this habit of sending the odd ones to the front lines to die.”

“You were drafted as well, weren’t you?” He adjusts his glasses. “By Lord Azula when she joined the hunt for Avatar Aang, correct?”

“Yes.” The burning net and lovely Azula smiling bright and vicious in the firelight, she hasn’t thought of that in years.

Actual years. That was what, four years ago? It feels longer, but shorter too. Time doesn’t move right during war, it seems. How strange that something like war, a construct entirely human in origin, can be big enough to shape the entire world to the point of making time move wrong.

“And your service with her continued until the incident at Boiling Rock?”

“Correct.” That sounds wrong. It wasn’t an incident. It was a carefully but quickly decided political move by Mai. She simply followed her sworn sister.

He’s nodding. Why is he nodding? “It was after this that you were imprisoned at Ba Sing Se?”

“Yes.” Oh, he’s going to ask about how she broke out. That explains the interest in her family. Someone figured it out.

“You escaped before dawn on the morning of the comet.” Statement. Where’s the question? “The facility required an earthbender to open the doors, did it not?”

“It did.”

“You are not an earthbender, nor is Lady Mai.”

“Right.” She grins brightly. “We got out because a Dai Li agent let us out.”

The ensuing discord is glorious.
She leans back in her chair, waiting for the White Lotus to bring the room back under control. The Earth Kingdom contingency is on their feet, the airbenders look amused, Fire Nation couldn’t care less, and the poor Water Tribes are caught in the middle of it all. Most of the fights likely have nothing to do with what she said, just the tension in the room finally cracking.

That’s the problem with putting someone like her on trial. Because of the Genocide, she has ways of making people uncomfortable without ever acknowledging their existence.

Taking a chance to look at Katara, she nods. The waterbender returns the action and given the way the chaos intensifies, clearly understands the gesture. Not for the first time, Ty Lee thanks the spirits for letting Katara be her friend instead of an enemy.

And then it comes time to take a look at the other side of the room. An Lee is seated next to Mother, her back straight and expression blank. Ty Lee could make this awful, could have Katara bring the room back under control and then explain to them all how her eldest sister seduced a Dai Li officer into releasing her and Mai. That would launch it’s own mess. There were likely drugs involved, and then consent issues, and all the Kagami Clan’s darkest secrets dragged out into the light.

So this is what the White Lotus can do. The world is doomed if they are allowed to stay in control and direct the post-war future.

She nods again to Katara and watches closely as the room suddenly begins to calm down, the air temperature dropping slightly. She lends a hand, slowly rotating her wrist to move the stagnant air to something fresher and more relaxing.

Also good to know that she and Katara alone can control a group this large. That will probably come in handy later on. Actually, no ‘probably’ about it. If they’re really going to try to control the path of the world, they’re going to have to use everything they’ve got.

The room is still uneasy when the inquisitor returns, cleaning his glasses. “Do you know why a Dai Li agent would release you?”

She shrugs. “I have no idea. I just assumed Azula had changed her mind about imprisoning us.”

Believable. Please let the White Lotus not know anything about the truth.

“What purpose do you think she would have for releasing you?”

“Mai is the perfect politician. I’m an assassin. If she were planning to seize the throne, it would make sense to want us at her side.” Finally, the truth beyond the personal about what they were. More than friends or lovers or sisters, they were a small elite team under Azula’s control. The hunt for the Avatar was their only failure, a complete mess that spiraled out and ruined everything.

“And yet you revealed yourself to be an airbender and then abandoned Lady Mai to escape to Taku, where you met Prince Zuko and his party?”

“Correct.” She’s fairly certain it was actually ‘Master Katara and her party’ but that’s just a minor issue right now. Let the White Lotus think what they want about their dynamics. “I had just met with Elder Sora and was out for a walk when Toph found me.”

“How did Elder Sora react to your capture?”

She shrugs. “The point was to not reveal to anyone else that our kind still existed. She
couldn’t afford to let anyone know she knew me.”

“Prince Zuko saw you using your bending, though.”

“He did. That was an accident. I wasn’t paying attention to where everyone was.”

The inquisitor nods. “What exactly did you do?”

“What do you mean?” She tilts her head, sincerely hoping this isn’t going the direction she thinks it is.

“Your bending. It would have had to be something fairly obvious if you’ve managed to go so long without anyone noticing.”

And it went exactly where it shouldn’t have. She can’t reveal the Temple of the Winds, which means she can’t talk about the door. How else could she have exposed herself? Air scooter? No, she’s made it clear she’s not the airhead she pretended to be for all those years. She wouldn’t be stupid enough to attempt something that noticeable without total isolation.

“I was playing with a butterfly, moving it around while it tried to fly by me.” His expression is priceless. She simply smiles. “I was bored. They’d been in a meeting all morning and I thought I was alone.”

New plan: play the intelligent airhead. Can’t be that difficult to fall back into that old ditzy behavior, can it? Maybe this is how they can make it through the trials. Not worrying about keeping their lies in order, but simply figuring out how many ways they can make a mess of it all.

This could be fun.

... .

“Is there a reason for this?”

She reaches out carefully with her bloodbending, feeling for every delicate push of blood through the graceful body. Mai really is, well, gorgeous. No wonder Zuko’s still hung up on her.

He probably doesn’t even know it; the way his body reacts every time Mai’s name is mentioned. Ty Lee’s too. A subtle change in heartbeat, a shift in body temperature, all tiny little things. She knows Toph feels it too, but it just seems to be them.

“We never had a chance to meet. Properly, that is.”

“Omashu was good enough.”

It’s so tempting to kill Mai. No one knows about this visit; she was careful about avoiding all the guards on her way here. Came during shift change and used her bloodbending to turn the guards’ attention elsewhere. It would be so easy. She could mimic the symptoms of poison well enough no one would question the death, not if she staged it correctly.
She could do it easily enough. Ty Lee made sure she knew which plants in the garden are poisonous.

“You are a formidable opponent.” She’ll concede this point. Mai is one of the best fighters she ever encountered in the war. That Katara never won a fight against her is a slight annoyance, but one she can deal with.

“Shame you weren’t.” Unless, of course, Mai refuses to acknowledge her. “I could have used a challenge.”

Zuko can yell at her later. “Azula seemed to find me a challenge.”

Mai smirks. “Which battle? The one where she nearly killed Lord Iroh or the one where she did kill the Avatar?”

“The one during the comet when I chained her down like the rabid dog she was.” And then Mai is on her feet. It takes just a second for Katara to seize control, her power having gotten past any defenses long ago. A slender, snow white hand is just inches from her, struggling against her power. Using a little more force than necessary, she pushes the blood in Mai’s body back to a sitting position on the edge of the bed. “Do sit down. I would hate to kill you like this.”

“Witch.” So pretty and so angry; has Mai always been this way? Surely there had to be something beyond her beauty to garner so much love from everyone around her. “Why are you here?”

“Because I’ve heard so much about you, but never actually dealt with you outside of combat.” She’s not going to give the former Fire Lady the satisfaction of knowing Zuko and Ty are still in love with her. There really will be a faked suicide if it comes to that.

Mai nods, scowl etched deep into her face. “So you decided to visit when I am a prisoner in my own home. Dethroned and waiting to find out what hell I’m to spend the rest of my life in.”

“You did this to yourself.”

“I did what was necessary.”

Katara’s taken a look at the reports Zuko tries to hide. Mai’s actions make no sense. On the surface it looks like she did everything to protect herself, but it doesn’t quite seem right. Why kill Ozai? She’s beautiful enough she could have seduced him and still become Fire Lady. Why marry Azula and become her Lady?

Unless everything was to protect Azula. If the regime run domestically was to try and help Azula leave a good memory all while the Lord herself was rotting away inside the palace, then it starts to make sense.

How tragic.

Maybe that’s the real secret to Mai’s attractiveness. It’s not just her beauty and grace. It’s not her intelligence and it certainly isn’t her personality. But a sense of mystery, of tragedy? That’s an attraction for all kinds of people. Add a pretty face and no one can refuse.

“I know.”

Mai blinks, silver eyes betraying nothing. It’s the slight spike in heart rate that gives away the surprise. “That’s rather understanding of you.”
“You’re not the only one who did things most wouldn’t understand.” There, a subtle acknowledgement of what Mai knows about Aang.

“I suppose not.”

Could they have been friends in another life? Maybe in that other world where Azula didn’t die young and life wasn’t as twisted as it is. Maybe in that world, Mai wouldn’t be this dark. She might even be happy. “You are lucky, you know that don’t you?”

To have people who, despite everything, still love her. To hold bits of Zuko and Ty Lee; tiny pieces neither Katara nor Toph will ever be able to reclaim. To be forgiven for everything—and that’s the one Katara has the most problems with. Neither Zuko nor Ty have blamed Mai for the condition Azula was in, even though it was Mai’s ignorance that left the young Fire Lord like that. It is because of that clock-flower tea that Zuko decided death was the best choice.

And yet no one blames Mai.

“I suppose so.” The former Fire Lady looks almost amused. “Tell me, does anyone know you’re here?”

“No.”

“I could kill you.”

Katara scoffs, twisting the blood in Mai’s arm to turn the limb around painfully. To Mai’s credit, she doesn’t cry out. “I’m stronger than that.”

“Maybe so.”

“And I’ll kill any assassin you send.”

Mai leans back a little, long legs crossing delicately at the ankle. “As if I could send an assassin. I have no power anymore, remember?”

“Harmless as a tiger shark, I know.” Katara leans back a little in her chair.

“Pot meet kettle.”

So this is where they’re going to stand with each other. Opposing but not in conflict.

Let’s hope it stays that way.

The carefully formed metal is cool against her hands, the characters engraved in it bold against her senses. She keeps tapping it with her fingers to reveal the marks, not quite believing it. “It really says that?”
Snow leans against her shoulder, taking the tablet from her hands. “Toph Bei Fong is granted emancipation on the condition that she abides by Bei Fong inheritance laws by her eighteenth birthday.”

“And the rest?”

“The Earth Kingdom is in her debt for her work during the Hundred Year War. Her bravery and skill as an earthbender unmatched in her lifetime.” Snow giggles. “I think the Earth King likes you.”

“He better like me. I saved his sorry ass when the Dai Li were ruining everything.” She means siding with Azula and conquering Ba Sing Se, but she’ll hold on to that for Snow’s sake.

Not that Snow doesn’t understand it anyway. “It also mentions your work in Omashu and in crashing the airships over Wulong.”

“That’s more like it.” She grins widely, cheeks aching.

“What are the inheritance laws?”

“Some nonsense my mother wants me to comply with.” She leans into Snow a little. “It’s ridiculous. Those laws haven’t been used in three hundred years.”

“Why not?”

“It’s been that long since a male earthbender was born into the line.”

Snow makes an odd sound at the back of her throat. “Can you get me a copy of those laws?”

“Should be able to. Why?”

“Just curious. What are the main terms of it?”

She sighs, rolling back until she’s lying flat against the roof. “Essentially, I have two years to get married have an earthbender son.”

Snow is quiet for a moment. “Get me a copy of those laws. There has to be a loophole.”

“Talk to one of the Acolytes based in Gaoling.” She takes a deep breath. “There are Acolytes based in Gaoling, aren’t there?”

“Of course there are.”

“I don’t want to do this.”

“You want to keep your freedom, don’t you?”

“Of course I do.”

“And what else will you be getting if you comply?”

She folds her arms behind her head, kicking her shoes off into the training yard below. “One-fifth the Bei Fong fortune with an allowance equaling one percent of the family’s yearly income, as well as the Gaoling estate up front. When my parents die, I will get everything.”

“Sounds like a good deal.”
“I still can’t believe my father agreed to this. He always argued my cousin Yuan was the one they should name heiress.”

Snow lies down beside her, the metal tablet tapping against the roof. “Are there no sons?”

“Nope. My mother is the real Bei Fong, so I guess it makes sense that she’s the one deciding all this.”

“I take it sons are rare in your family?”

“Very.” When was the last Bei Fong male born? The last earthbender was three hundred years ago, but the last son was what, one hundred years ago? Sometime before the war, at least. It was Suyin Bei Fong who controlled the family when the war broke out, if she’s remembering that right. “I don’t want to marry.”

“At all?”

Her brow wrinkles. She doesn’t know how to form the words. There really isn’t a vocabulary for this, is there? It’s confusing enough on its own. “It’s not that.”

“Don’t want to marry a stranger.” Snow sounds so sure.

“I don’t want to marry a man.” Well, that’s one way of putting it. “At least, I don’t think so.”

Snow is quiet for a moment. “What do you mean?”

“I liked Suki more than Sokka. It took a while to figure it out, but she saved me once from drowning and I thought she was Sokka because I liked being that close to her.”

“But you should have been able to tell she was female.”

“That’s just it. I did know she was female, it just didn’t connect.”

“Because you liked the contact and girls aren’t supposed to like girls.”

“Right.” She turns on her side to face the direction she knows Snow is in. “I can’t follow the laws if I don’t want to be with a man, can I?”

“Get me a copy and we’ll see.”

“You don’t think it’s weird that I’m like this?”

Snow moves closer, forehead pressing against hers. “Not in the slightest. You’re not the only one who likes girls.”

Oh, right. Snow has history with both Azula and Mai. “How long have you known?”

“Since the night it was announced Zuko would marry Masuyo.” There’s a deep intake of breath followed by a slow and steady exhale that sounds a little like an attempt to stay calm. “I thought I wanted to be her, but then she kissed me and promised me that we’d be together forever.”

There’s history here Toph doesn’t fully know. She’s not entirely sure she wants to know. She knows about Mai and the sisterhood contract, but this thing with Zuko’s first betrothed sounds different. “Is she the only one? Other than Mai and Azula, I mean.”

“No, just them. I tried for a very long time to like boys.” There’s a moment of silence and
then a short laugh. “Are you jealous?”

Toph turns again, lying flat on her back. “Just curious.”

And rather relieved too.

But Snow probably already knows that.

“You’re sure?” He wasn’t expecting her back this soon, nor to have the answers she does.

Rinchen nods, smiling serenely over her cup of oolong tea. “It’s definitely a spirit forest.”

“Associated spirits?”

“The Mother of Faces.” Her nose scrunches up as she says it, lips twisting down. “I couldn’t find any record of a spirit by that name, though. Tried every variation. All I got was something connecting her to Koh the Face Stealer.”

“In what way?” He doesn’t want to go in there if it could get them in a situation like the faceless creatures Aang talked about that one stormy night on Ember Island.

Rinchen sets down her teacup. “It wasn’t clear. The language was from Seal Island and that’s not my forte. It looks like she’s the antithesis of Koh, though.”

“Antithesis?” The opposite? So what is the opposite of a face-stealer?

“It seems she grants faces, rather than taking them.”

The thundering in his ears is deafening, the temperature in the room rising. It takes a moment to realize it’s just him, just his heart racing too fast. “Is that why you can’t find her?”

“It would be the most likely explanation.” She nods, picking up the teapot and refilling his cup. “If she received a new face, she could take a new name and build a life off the record.”

“So there are no Acolyte records concerning her after Azulon’s death?”

“Nothing. She’s covered her tracks well.”

He doesn’t like the sound of this. “She doesn’t want to be found, does she?”

“It would appear not.”

“So what do I do?” What is the ethical choice here? She doesn’t want to be found and he doesn’t particularly want to find her. This whole thing is just about Azula. It’s about settling that ghost and maybe finding a way to move forward without a little of the darkness left behind by the war.
Rinchen reaches out, her hand cold against his wrist. “You can do what you wish with this.”

“That doesn’t help.”

“This isn’t an easy situation.”

No, it isn’t. The choice he makes here will have an impact that will take years to sort through. Either he doesn’t go after her and deals with the guilt over his sister for the rest of his life.

That isn’t right. He’s going to have guilt about Azula regardless of what happens regarding Ursa. This is about Azula’s fixation on Ursa and the origin of the madness that took his baby sister and made her a monster.

Rinchen traces small circles against his wrist with her thumb. It’s a gentle, soothing action and not for the first time, he wonders what life would have been like if she had stayed after Lu Ten’s death.

Maybe, just maybe, she could have saved Azula.

The question is, though, exactly who did Azula need saving from?

Chapter End Notes

Finally, some progress with Toph/Ty Lee.
It’s always been something she’s wanted to try. At least, since she discovered that there is iron in the human body. Just to see if she could manipulate it, solidify the iron and drag it out into the open.

It was just a thought.

Except now she has a dead assassin and new iron to play with. The only major drawback is that she can’t identify who sent the assassin, nor can she dispose of the body. No earth to bury it in up here in the palace.

And she’s not even in her own space. Even though they have the rule about bringing people to them, Kuei did give her freedom from her family. Going to him was the least she could do.

Hm, maybe if she can send a message? She twists the iron around to test it out. It responds well enough. Might as well see. It launches down the hall, bouncing off the walls and giving her a decent enough sense of what it’s hitting. Interesting. She knew she could remotely sense things if they were in contact with earth under her control, but this is very different.

This has serious potential to help her move around.

The metal hits something that flares against her senses. The door to their rooms, yes, that’s the motif. Lower down the iron and slide it under the door, then send it towards the study where Sweetness was reading that morning and hope she’s still there.

About five minutes later, the sound of shoes skidding across the floor fills the hall. “Toph? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Sugar. Just need a little help here.”

The waterbender sighs. “Do I even want to know?”

“He jumped me.” She shrugs. Maybe this guy has something on the weapon that can tell them where it came from. She didn’t get a good sense of it, but enough to know it’s an unusual weapon. “Is he Fire Nation?”

Then she feels the fabric. This isn’t right. Earth Kingdom, maybe?

“He’s Water Tribe.” Katara sounds weary. “Northern. He’s one of Arnook’s.”

“So we’ve got the Fire Nation and the Water Tribes after us now.”

“We knew we would.”

Toph scoffs, reaching down to find the assassin’s feet. “That was for the rest of you. I’ve done nothing to offend them.”
“Seriously?”

“Not publically, at least.” She grins brightly. “Now help me get rid of this.”

They need to get him outside. The only question is, how to do that without alerting someone? This portion of the castle is more highly trafficked with Kuei’s rooms near Arnook’s and Hakoda’s.

Sugar solves it by taking control of the blood, dragging the body away. There’s a new sound she can’t quite identify followed by the familiar sloshing of water. “Do I want to know what you just did?”

“Plausible deniability is probably the best for now.”

“Any idea why a Water Tribe assassin might be after me?”

“Not the slightest.” Katara sounds concerned, the waterbender’s movements hurried when she takes hold of Toph’s arm and pulls her away from the scene. “Zuko is the one with the target on his back, not you.”

“Mistaken identity?”

The waterbender’s laugh isn’t audible, but the movement brushes against her senses with an almost aching familiarity. When was the last time any of them really laughed? “Yes, because you look so much like a male firebender almost two heads taller than you and four years your senior.”

“He’s not really that much older than me is he?” And then she thinks about it. Snow is Sugar’s age and Sugar is two years older and if Sparky is exactly two years older than Sugar, then yes, he really is four years older. “So he was the senior citizen on the team. And here I was thinking he and Snoozles were the same age.”

She says it without meaning to. She should have stopped it at the team. Mentioning Sokka makes it obvious exactly which team she meant. It’s not like she actively thinks about them. It’s just…there. She stops walking, the waterbender already perfectly still at her side.

Is this the way it’s always going to be? One of them slips up and says something and it sends whatever little version of peace they’ve built this time into shambles? “Sorry. I didn’t mean to.”

“No, it’s okay.” Katara doesn’t sound okay, but she’s pretty sure she doesn’t sound okay either. “We’re going to have to get used to hearing things like that.”

“We need to talk about him.”

“We really don’t.”

This is dangerous in this portion of the palace, but if they were in their rooms, Katara could just tug on the right blood and create a distraction. She could do it here too, but maybe not. Blame it on the excitement. “I’m sorry.”

Confusion. That’s what those vibrations are. She needs to be on solid ground again, if only to get a better sense of the people around her.

“Toph, you don’t have to apologize.”

“No, I think I do. I know I wasn’t the most pleasant person to be around after Wulong.”

Please understand that she means the second Wulong: the morning that was cool but the
rising sunlight warm against her skin, Snow’s fingers strong around her arm and her feet solidly on the ground as that last shuddering breath shook the entire forest, the heartbeat that should have been steady suddenly gone.

Katara pulls away from her just a little. “You were young.”

“So were you.”

“Not by that point, I wasn’t.” Katara sounds stable, but the vibrations against Toph’s hand are chaotic at best. “It’s okay. Really, it is. You were grieving and I didn’t exactly involve you in the decision. I should have, but there wasn’t any time. Now let’s get out of here.”

The waterbender pulls hard on her arms, the blood in her legs clumsily pushing the limbs into a walking pattern. “Okay, then. But we’ve got to deal with this at some point.”

“Just not now.” Katara sighs, slowing their pace a little. She sounds exhausted. “Do you really have no idea why a Northern assassin might come after you?”

“To hurt you?” Worth a guess. It’s the best she can think of. Nothing she did to the North would obviously be her work. “To hurt the group?”

“They don’t think like that. If a Water Tribe warrior is going to come after you, they’re going to go directly for the throat and you’ll know they’re coming. Anything else is dishonorable.”

“That’s comforting.”

“It’s supposed to be.”

Someday she will learn how the Water Tribes think. Fire and Air make so much more sense, but maybe that’s because they both have connections to Earth. Water is isolated from them all. “Why do you think he came after me?”

“I don’t know.” A door slides open and Katara pulls her through. “Maybe they raised one of the ships or someone identified the metal used to make Ty’s fans. The only explanation is that they know you attacked Northern and North-protected vessels.”

“I guess we’ll find out when you’re in that box.”

Katara releases her arm, turning her loose as the door closes behind them. “Just go get dressed. Zuko and Ty have already left.”

“Do you know anything about the deaths of Lord Zhu, Lady Ruan, and Counselor Tran?”

“No.”

This isn’t good. This really isn’t good. Those are all colonial assassinations, but Counselor
Tran was a Lungta kill. And let’s see, she killed Ruan, but it was Katara who killed Zhu. Heart attack for the old man.

Really, though. Zhu was a war profiteer sold information to the Fire Nation in exchange for damaged weapons he then sold to the Earth Kingdom and then when the Earth Kingdom suffered heavy casualties, his heavy investments in the medical world paid off. It was a rather brilliant plan, but one that needed to stop.

And then there was Ruan. A wealthy widow with only her daughter to inherit, she was effectively the Aunt Zen of the Earth Kingdom.

Only worse.

Much, much worse.

Counselor Tran, though. Why did the Lungta want him dead?

“The bridge collapse at Jiang Li?”

That was an early mission. She casts a glance over at her companions. Zuko nods slightly. She returns the gesture and turns back to the inquisitor. “We did it.”

Murmuring rises up from the crowd. The inquisitor adjusts his glasses, waiting for quiet to come again. “Why?”

“We were trying to disrupt the supply line. The Fire Nation was using Jiang Li as a hub to move various items though the colonies.”

Including people. Didn’t find that one out until later, but oh, how the mighty fall.

“So you destroyed the bridge?”

“Yes. We wanted a temporary halt on the movement to see if we had missed anything in mapping out the path the goods were taking.” But it’s best to not mention the human side of it. Officially, that didn’t happen and the information will serve them better as blackmail. There are already Acolytes whispering in the right ears about getting the people released and shutting down the entire operation.

“Did you get it?”

“Yes. Within our first year, we had a complete map of the Fire Nation’s movements in the Earth Kingdom.”

“How did you use this information?”

“How do you think we used it?” She smiles brightly. “Disrupted some lines. Stole, switched orders around. Mostly we were trying to figure out from there what was going on in the Fire Nation.”

“The Airbenders here weren’t giving you information?”

“They were, but after Ozai fell, it became too dangerous for them to stay on Azar.”

“So they were removed? Where?”

She shrugs. “Everywhere but here, mostly. Mai and Azula were in charge and I warned
Elder Jetsun that they knew what I was. The appropriate safety precautions were taken to ensure our people did not die again.”

“And in the Earth Kingdom?”

“Already protected.”

“Do you know how?”

She tilts her head to the side, smiling serenely. “Do you really think I’m going to give away our security measures?”

“It’s just a question, Master Ty Lee.”

“Doesn’t change the fact that the last time outsiders found out our security, it ended with our world on fire and thousands of us dead.” Is this man just that daft? That’s the third time today she’s had to bring up the Genocide. Most people would have learnt to not ask such things by this point.

He holds up a hand. “I merely want to know if you and your party were using Airbender tricks to remain hidden.”

“Of course we were.” They were living in an Air Temple, not that they’ll tell anyone that. “Those are skills honed over a century of fear. If you’re going to hide, you’d be mad to not ask the Air Nation for aid.”

“Would Avatar Aang have known anything about this?”

She raises an eyebrow, doing her best to mimic Mai’s best are you stupid face. “I used my airbending in front of Avatar Aang countless times and he never noticed. Short of standing in front of him dressed as an airbender or showing him Kiki or my glider or something extremely obvious, he wouldn’t know. He was an Air Nomad, not one of us.”

There’s more chatter, stronger this time. “Is that what happened when he saw you?”

Oh. Oops. She really shouldn’t have said that. “I had Kiki, I was dressed like this, and I did have a glider. So yes, I guess that’s exactly what happened.”

“In what way did he see you that night?”

“An attack went wide and was coming our way. I blocked it.” Simple, believable. Please be believable.

“Was there any sort of acknowledgement from him that he had in fact spotted you?”

“Yes.” So that’s what this is about. “He raised his glider towards me and nodded before heading back in. At that point, it became apparent that it was too dangerous to stay and so I gave Kiki the order to leave the caldera.”

He nods. “Was your decision supported by the rest of your party?”

“No, it wasn’t.”

“Who disagreed?” More chatter from the audience. They’re interested in that night, obviously. The Avatar’s mysterious disappearance would be interesting.

“Zuko and Toph.”
“But not Princess Katara?”

That title seems wrong. “She’s a healer. She was more concerned with Zuko’s ribs and ensuring no one was seriously injured. It was the Avatar’s safety against ours and one life does not outweigh four.”

More chatter. So much more chatter. She glances over at Katara to make sure she didn’t just screwed up, but the waterbender just smiles. There’s a gentle feeling in her limbs, like a caress inside her arm.

“Prince Zuko had broken ribs?”

She turns back to the inquisitor. “Yes, he did.”

“And those injuries were sustained before arriving in Ran-Shao?”

“Two ribs were broken during the confrontation with Avatar Aang at Taku.”

And the room explodes into noise. People are on their feet, voices rising consistently.

Apparently they didn’t want to hear that the Avatar could hurt one of his friends like that.

She turns back to Katara, nodding slowly. It takes a few moments for the room to die down. She’ll have to ask how Katara does it. It’s about targeting the right hearts and making everything unnoticeable but how are those hearts selected? What makes a person obvious for manipulation?

The inquisitor coughs politely once an uneasy quiet returns to the room. “I thought Master Toph said she didn’t know what happened at Taku.”

“I don’t know exactly what happened, nor does she. Just that it was enough to hurt Zuko. No one told us the exact circumstances.”

He nods. “Do you have any idea where Avatar Aang may have gone after his battle with Lord Azula?”

“None. My people abandoned the holy places of old when it became obvious the Fire Nation knew about them.” Why is he jumping to the end of the war? There was so much in between—unless they’re trying to wrap up her testimony to get to Katara’s.

Or maybe she made them too uncomfortable.

Or maybe they’ve figured out she’s not as valuable, information-wise. Whatever they want to know about her people, they can get or have gotten from the Elders. Katara and Zuko, on the other hand, were more closely tied to Avatar Aang than any of them.

And if the White Lotus has figured anything out, if Mai has said even one word wrong, then they could be in for a very ugly surprise.
“Uncle?”

Iroh looks up, the flame in his hair glittering in the sunlight. “Prince Zuko, I was not expecting you. I was under the impression you were asking us to come to you.”

“I was.” He takes a seat beside the Fire Lord. “But something’s come up and I’d rather talk to you first.”

“Is everything okay?”

He takes a deep breath and takes the scrolls Rinchen brought back out of his sleeve. “There’s an uninhabited island in the south, not far from Seal Island.”

“You want to know about the spirit forest.” Uncle cuts him off, leaning away from the calligraphy in front of him. The elder firebender motions for a servant in the shadows and a few moments later, tea is set out between them. Uncle thanks the girl quietly before giving the order for all servants to leave the area.

“Is that really necessary?”

“Yes, because what lurks in that forest is not to be trifled with.”

Zuko unrolls one of the scrolls, holding up the painting. “The Mother of Faces?”

“Among other things.” Uncle looks almost proud. “You’ve done your research if you know her name.”

“She’s connected to Koh the Face-Stealer, isn’t she?”

Iroh nods. “The legends are unclear. The Mother is a Seal Island myth.”

“Uncle.”

“The oldest known Mother legends states that she is the Face-Stealer’s mother.”

“Does she grant faces, rather than steal them?”

“Nephew, what is this about?” Iroh pours the tea carefully between them. A black, how odd. When has Uncle ever preferred black tea? It’s always been that way: green, then white, then tisanes, and black only if there is no other choice.

It’s been sweetened lightly too. Maybe that’s for his benefit? Uncle has never liked his tea sweetened; says it covers the delicate flavors. “Is it possible that she went to the Mother to get a new face?”

Uncle looks uncomfortable. “Zuko, the legends say the Mother requires a price for a new face.”

“There’s an old Airbender village on the outskirts of the Forest. It’s not on any maps because it was used to move people through the islands after the Genocide.” He doesn’t particularly like the sound of a price, but this is the most logical course of action for Ursa. “As an Acolyte in the Royal Family, she would have known about it. Since she disappeared, there have been no sightings, no rumours, nothing. She’s not even on the Air Nation’s records and you know how detailed those are.”
“The Mother still seems a bit extreme.” Iroh sets down his teacup, arms crossing. “She loved you dearly. I have trouble believing she would sacrifice that just to stay hidden from my brother, who more than likely exiled her himself.”

There’s something about that—oh. “She did love me. I know that. But did she love Azula? If there were only one of us she cared about, then how do you know that she wouldn’t pay the price?”

Iroh’s frown deepens the wrinkles on his face. “It still seems a bit much. She was an actress and an Acolyte. Have you checked the smaller islands?”

“Not yet, but everyone I’ve talked to seems to think this is the most likely course she took.”

“The Acolytes?” When he nods, Iroh sighs heavily. “I suppose they would know the ways of their own. What are they saying?”

“Have you ever heard the name Ikem?” He’s been working with the others late at night, trying to find this actor in the Kagami records, but there’s been nothing.

Iroh nods slowly. “Once. Shortly after she found out she was expecting you, I found Ursa in the gardens crying. When she finally started speaking, she talked about the life she wanted.”

“Did she talk about any place she and he might have lived?”

“Just Hira’a.”

Of course it was just Hira’a. That’s all Rinchen knew as well, but what else was he expecting? The more he learns about Ursa, the less he trusts his memories of her. “You know what the Kagami and the Air Nation are like. If Ty Lee can’t find anything, then my mother is either dead or a completely different person.”

“That’s just it, Nephew.” Iroh gently takes his tea away. “That’s exactly what the Mother does. She makes you into someone new at the price of the old. If she went into that place and found the Mother of Faces, then she is no longer Ursa. It’s unlikely she would even remember that she’s from Hira’a.”

“Assuming the legends are true?”

“Correct.”

Which means they are running without a road. “How do you know all this? The Acolyte we sent only found something in Seal Island’s language connecting the Mother to Koh.”

“You do realize that I’ve been the Spirit World, don’t you?”

Right. Uncle would know more. “That’s why I came to talk to you.”

“I thought as much.” Uncle picks up one of the scrolls. None of it is in Rinchen’s handwriting; it was made very clear that nothing suggesting her presence was to make it out of their rooms. “Is your Acolyte certain Ursa would have gone to the Mother?”

“It’s only thing that makes sense. Ten years without even a sighting in the Air Nation or among the assassin clans? The only way she could do that is if she didn’t exist anymore.”

“But to give up everything like that.” Iroh shakes his head. “I cannot believe your mother would trade her memories of you, even if it meant freeing herself from Ozai.”
And Azula. That part isn’t said, but it’s implied. If Zuko was the only thing she would want to hold onto, then a deal like that makes perfect sense. There wasn’t enough good in her life. A fresh start with a man she genuinely loved—what if she has children? What if she has another little girl that she loves and cares for?

What if there is a little girl out there with the life Azula should have had?

He picks up his tea and drowns it in one go, trying to swallow the worst of the thoughts. “Will the Mother reverse her work?”

“I don’t know. Really, I don’t. All I know is that she’s the Face-Stealer’s mother and she grants new faces, rather than steals them.”

“And that she lives in that forest?”

“Correct.”

He picks up his tea again. The pot is still warm and full, so he might as well stay. “What was my mother like?”

Iroh smiles softly, taking up his own tea. “Well, she was devious, that’s for sure. Did I ever tell you about the time she snuck out of the caldera to go fishing in the middle of the night?”

“She did what?”

And then Uncle’s laughing and telling him the whole story.

It’s just going to be for tonight, but it feels almost like the old days.

Just almost, though.

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“You must be Katara.” The Acolyte is really rather pretty, the smell of jasmine and oolong swirling around her. “I’m Rinchen.”

Katara smiles, the expression genuine. “I am. It’s good to finally meet you.”

Rinchen takes a seat beside her, grey eyes focused on the water moving through the air. “Is this how you meditate?”

“Something like that. It’s good for stress relief.”

“I heard they rushed Ty Lee’s trial to a close.” So apologetic; she must be Air, that face can’t possibly be Fire.

Katara shrugs. “She’s not as valuable to them.”
Ty Lee doesn’t have the information she and Zuko have. They have the stronger connections to Aang and Azula. If that’s what the White Lotus wants to know, then this makes perfect sense. Put Toph and Ty up first to establish a timeline and some basic details, and then bring out the last two to answer the actual questions.

Maybe Mai lied when she said she didn’t tell anyone the truth.

Maybe the White Lotus just knows.

“No, I don’t suppose she would be. Your marriage to Zuko is reason enough to want the two of you in that box as quickly as possible.”

She blinks. “I didn’t think you were attending.”

The Acolyte smiles. “I still know what’s going on.”

“You’re a little creepy.” She twists the water around, freezing it into a butterfly to flutter through the room. “But in a good way.”

“Thank you. I’ve heard you are as well.”

“According to some.”

Rinchen crosses her arms, hands disappearing into voluminous sleeves. “It is true, though. You have to realize that to most of the world, your marriage is unexpected.”

“Because I’m Water and he’s Fire?”

“Because of your history, from what I’ve gathered.” The former princess unfolds one arm, the ice butterfly coming to rest gently on her finger. “As well as the fact that it isn’t political.”

“Is that the norm for the Fire Nation?”

“Among the nobility and royalty, yes.”

“Were you and Lu Ten arranged?”

Rinchen stops smiling. “No, not really. We chose each other, but it was presented as an arranged marriage to the rest of the world.”

“So you really loved him?” Katara flicks a hand, the ice butterfly shifting into a small bird.

“It was impossible not to.”

“What was he like?” Zuko doesn’t talk about his cousin much. She’s thought a few times it may have been because he was still a child when the Siege of Ba Sing Se occurred, but it could just as easily be because it’s too painful.

The Acolyte’s smile returns. “A lot like Iroh. A lot like Zuko too, I think. Just without the problems from the war.”

“Iroh did raise them both.”

“And I think he did a wonderful job with both of them.” Rinchen is quiet and steady, her voice gentle. For a moment, Katara thinks about what the Fire Nation could have been like with this woman as Lady. Maybe it all would have been different. Hopefully it would have been. Spirits know
this place needs a bit of brightness, even if it comes in another world.

She twists the little bird into snow, falling down onto the table and springing back up as frost flowers. “Did anyone beyond Ursa know about the Acolytes?”

“Lu Ten did, after a while. I only told him after we were married, just before he left for the war.”

“What was it like, being married to this family?” The question is probably a little nosy, but this is something she needs to know and Rinchen is the only one who can answer it.

“Like a madhouse. Azulon never fully recovered after losing Ilah and Ozai was Ozai. It was endless ceremony with the most inane rules. I used to feign illness just to get out of things.”

“Did that work?”

“Usually. I don’t think you will have to worry about that, though. Zuko doesn’t seem inclined to ceremony, nor does Iroh.”

Her hand comes up to brush the new necklace. “No, he really isn’t.”

Rinchen places a hand on her shoulder and she takes a second to feel out the Acolyte’s blood. “I think you’ll be just fine.”

“With Zuko or the Fire Nation?” Young, obviously—younger than she was expecting, actually. No sign of foreign blood, so there’s never been a child. A very dull grey chi coursing along the blood. Air, clearly, but not a bender.

“With both.” The vote of confidence is comforting. “It’s about time this family saw something new. This nation, too. I’m sure you’ve seen the reports.”

“Famine, poverty and the resulting austerity, disease, widespread death.” Katara lists off the projections, swirling the ice flowers back into liquid water. “The Fire Nation will be lucky if it doesn’t completely collapse.”

The water dances, bursting out into dozens of ice butterflies.

Chapter End Notes

Toph's scene has been one I've been thinking about for a while, but I'm really not happy with how it turned out. Still, there are only so many times a scene can be rewritten.

And we get Iroh's input on the Mother of Faces as the resident spirit expert.
They weren’t lying about how uncomfortable this box is. The closest water to her is the blood in the inquisitor’s body, not counting her own. She tries to stay calm, working her way past his defenses to watch the dull muddy chi swirl through capillaries and veins.

“Katara of the Southern Water Tribe.” She says it carefully, enunciating every word. “I was Avatar Aang’s waterbending master.”

“And you studied under Master Pakku of the Northern Tribe, correct?”

“And Master Hama of the Southern Tribe.” Distract him with bloodbending. That’s her best bet—or her worst. It depends on how much they know about what happened to Aang.

Which really, this is terrible timing. Zuko overslept this morning, despite going to bed first. She searched his blood this morning but couldn’t find anything. His stress is getting worse, the tension in his shoulders obvious even from this distance. Toph is barely sleeping and getting worse the longer this inheritance thing drags on. Ty Lee seems to be the only one not in worsening condition.

At least they’re getting out of the palace for good today.

“You were present for the Agni Kai between Lord Azula and her brother.”

“I was.”

“As a healer, what explanation would you give for Prince Zuko’s defeat?”

“Excuse me?” That’s an odd question.

The inquisitor adjusts his glasses, his heart rate quickening a little. “What is your medical opinion for why Lord Azula, in her condition, was able to defeat her brother?”

Oh, they mean the madness. It did say in the transcript of Mai’s trial that the former Lady had given a detailed description of Azula’s mental state.

“Her instability lowered inhibitions. When she saw an opening, she changed the direction of her lightning towards me, rather than Zuko. He took the attack in my place and was left unable to fight.” There’s quite a bit of chatter from the White Lotus behind her. Breathe, feel for the water. Hmm, that’s an odd heartbeat and from so many.

“According to the Fire Sages, Lord Azula was found in chains, unable to move, let alone fight.” Sneaky python rat.

“Because I intervened and fought the rest of the Agni Kai in his place.” She sits up a little straighter. “I defeated Fire Lord Azula that day and chained her to the grating above the waterway.”

Honestly, that should have been obvious. Only she would subdue a firebender there because it was the one spot in the plaza where she had something approaching the upper hand.
And then the rush of noise echoes off the walls. Why are any of them surprised by this? She reaches out finds the loudest hearts in the room; the ones with the fastest heartbeat and the most blood pushing into the places that allow for raised voices. Dragging the rate down and cooling the blood as best she can without the familiarity, she tries to calm things down before the tension breaks completely. Well, except Sokka.

It’s tempting to let his excitement stand. There’s something that feels like pride in his body.

The room settles down and the inquisitor adjusts his glasses once more. Must be a nervous behavior. The tension in his limbs doesn’t suggest nervousness, though, so maybe just a habit? “And it was you who removed Prince Zuko from the caldera?”

“Yes.” She’s thought about what might have happened if they had stayed. Maybe they could have held the caldera. Maybe they would have died. “There was still a chance to get to Wulong before the comet left and Appa was getting nervous about being away from Aang for so long.”

“A bison made it from the island of Azar to Wulong Forest in the Earth Kingdom in just a few hours?”

“He flew higher than usual, where the wind moves faster.” She takes a deep breath, waterbending reaching deep into the wood around her. There has to be water somewhere in there.

“Are you sure?”

She scowls. “I’m sorry, but I wasn’t exactly focusing on Appa. I was a little more concerned with the man who had just taken a bolt of lightning to the heart.”

“My apologies.” He holds up a hand. Does he think that will signal that he’s not a threat? “If I could ask about Prince Zuko’s injury?”

Nodding slowly, she threads the fingers of her hands together, trying to remember the feel of his heart that day. “Severe burns on the chest. Weak and irregular heartbeat, but still strong enough there was a good chance of survival.”

“That’s a bit odd for a lightning strike.”

“I think he partially deflected it. You’ll have to ask him.”

“And you spent the journey to Wulong healing him?”

“Yes.” Breathe slow, stay calm, don’t think about the second Wulong. “At first I tried conventional healing, but when that failed, I decided to attempt bloodbending.”

The entire room is silent now, the absence of noise eerie with all the eyes on her. “Bloodbending? I was under the impression that was a form of bending only capable under the full moon.”

“If used for certain things.” She’ll have to explain the scar, but no need to fill them in on some of her more adventurous bloodbending attempts in the field. “This was relatively minor, and I was working with his body rather than against it. The blood was trying to heal the injury. I just helped it along and gave it a little more power.”

“Did it work?”

“Yes. He was still weak for a while after, but the irregular heartbeat was corrected and full
strength returned in a reasonable amount of time.”

“What happened when you arrived at Wulong?”

“The comet had almost gone and Aang was—” What was that attack? “I’m not sure what he was doing. Whatever it was, it failed. Ozai attacked the airships soon after and I lost consciousness. The next time I woke up, I was in Taku and days had passed.”

The inquisitor nods, pacing slowly in front of the box. “What happened when you woke up?”

“It was night and the full moon was out. I managed to make it down to the river and healed the last of my injuries.” There’s no need to tell them about Yue or La or any of that. Best to not complicate things more than they already are.

“Did you notice anything on your way back?”

“Excuse me?” What is that supposed to mean? Did someone see them? Who could have possibly been within the region? There wasn’t enough time for the White Lotus to get someone to Taku to collect herbs for Aang. The only reason she and the others made it there was because of Toph pushing herself to the point of exhaustion.

“When you left the river to return to your campsite, did you notice anything about your surroundings?”

He’s fishing, but in an empty pond. She reaches out for the familiar red of Zuko. No sign of anything wrong, so she might as well tell the truth. “I didn’t make it back on my own. Zuko woke up sometime after I left and came to find me. I was still a little unstable after the head wound, so he took me back.”

“You and Prince Zuko were rather close.”

What? Her hand comes up to brush the new pendant, just visible above her gown. “I was in no condition to walk through the ruins alone. Head wounds take longer than almost any other to fully heal. Waterbending can take out the worst, but recovery time varies.”

“It was a severe injury, then?”

“I was unconscious for most of a week.” A very blurry week of healing and sleeping and trying to not think about what just happened at Wulong. “Even after waking up the first time, I could only stay awake for a couple of hours at a time.”

“How long did it take to return to normal?”

“Until just after the new moon.”

He continues pacing, hands clasped behind his back. “When you woke up, Master Ty Lee was already with your group?”

“Yes.” Yue was a blessing that night. Any more alert and not focused on the moon, and she likely would have attacked that strange grey heart.

“What was your reaction to seeing her?”

“I’m fairly certain I asked her if she was injured, why she was there, what her name was and
then promptly told her that if she made one wrong move that I’d kill her.” She smiles softly. “Of course, that was before I’d fully recovered. By the time I was back to normal, we knew she was an airbender.”

“How did you react to finding out about that?”

She shrugs. “Surprise, mostly. The next morning, I asked her to help me with laundry and got her to talk more about it.”

“Using bloodbending to calm her down?”

“No.” She says. “By telling her what it was like to be the only known South-born waterbender in half a century.”

He looks directly at her, the first time since this began. “That worked?”

She shifts in her seat. “Waterbenders were considered an omen of death by the time I was born. Growing up in an already harsh environment with a strange power you don’t know how to control and that makes most of the populace either terrified or in favour of your death has a way of bringing people together.”

And now it comes to the real deflection. Instead of talking about the war, she’s going to air as much of the Tribes’ dirty laundry as she can without bringing up the Sleeper Treaty.

The inquisitor does look uncomfortable. She takes control of his blood, just lightly pushing it to slowly elevate his heart rate. A bit of a chill along the spine, maybe, just enough to unnerve him a little more.

“You were the one who healed Prince Zuko’s scar, were you not?”

So he’s going to steer clear of the entire thing. Maybe she shouldn’t have messed with his blood. “I did.”

“Bloodbending again?”

“Yes.”

“Exactly how did that process work? By that time the injury was almost four years old.”

“By waiting until the full moon, knocking him out, and reopening the wound bit by bit.” Katara says. “I started about three months after the comet and finished about two years later.”

“So Prince Zuko was only active in the field for the last year of your isolation?”

Oh, perhaps she shouldn’t have said that. “Correct. He controlled which missions we took and when.”

“And he did this for the entire two years?”

“No.” Might as well be completely honest. “The last seven months or so I spent working closest to the eye. He mostly did work not related to the war for that time.”

“During this time, what did you do?”

“Beyond healing?” He nods, so she takes a deep breath and prepares to heavily edit her history. “I took over the assignment of missions and oversaw Ty Lee’s training. With the exception
of the three days of the full moon, I was usually out in the field.”

“That’s quite a bit of work for a teenager.”

“What I was doing with them was considerably less than what I did when I was still with my brother and Aang.” She smiles grimly, leaning back in her chair a little. “Zuko and Ty Lee came knowing how to cook, how to do their own laundry, some sewing, and basic first aid. Toph learned along the way. I didn’t have to be anyone’s mother, freeing up most of my time.”

Freeing up most of her in general, really. Here and now, in this box, she has a chance to make the outside world understand that she isn’t the Katara they’ve probably all heard stories about. She’s a warrior now and whatever may come, they’re going to respect her as such.

He makes the call to move them out of the palace immediately after Katara’s trial ends. They could have left at any time. Rinchin spent the day moving most of their belongings into the villa. The sun is setting and it is time almost time to eat—Agni, did that mess really take that long? And they’ve got days left of it. Just how invasive is the White Lotus planning on being?

“Solid ground!” Toph’s excitement bounces around the silent gardens and he turns in time to see the earthbender press a kiss to the grass. “Sparky, why weren’t we living here when we first came here?”

“Because of reasons.” He says, picking up the small satchel his things are packed in. “Ty, which room do you think would be best for her?”

The airbender blinks. Her eyes are shining when she turns to look at him, tears already gathering in her lashes. “The room I used to sleep in is closest to the Lion Hawk Garden and can be accessed easily from the outside.”

“Can you show her the way?”

She nods, motioning for Toph to follow. He maybe should have talked to Ty more before arranging things. But things were getting to tense in the palace. Here, it’s more open. They’re mostly at ground level and there’s enough water and space that Katara and Ty Lee can easily practice.

It’s just the ghosts here. There’s Ursa, back when she still seemed like the perfect mother. There’s Mai, when she was just the pretty girl and best friend. Even Ozai, when he was merely ambitious and even longer ago, when he had something approaching pride for his son and genuinely somewhat affectionate.

And then there’s Azula. Young, lively Azula, back before the madness took her.

“You okay?” Her hand is cold against his arm. “You were a little out of it this morning.”

“Just tired. It should be better here. Assassins will have a harder time getting in.” He takes her
hand in his and leads her into the building. “We’ll talk it over with Ty, but security shouldn’t be a huge issue here.”

“Toph should sink that land that connects us to the rest of the caldera. If this is only accessible by boat, then it will be much safer.”

“Tomorrow.” They’re already at the split. Go one direction and reach his old bedroom. Go the other and find his parents’ rooms.

She presses her free hand against his upper arm, the chill of bloodbending absent. “Zuko?”

Which direction? On the one hand, his old room makes sense, but the ghosts are stronger there. Bedtime stories his mother and uncle and even his father told him. Nights when Azula was too afraid to sleep alone. Nights when Lu Ten stayed the night and they spent it telling stories of the war with their fire and mock-fighting.

On the other hand, there is something incredibly tempting about the thought of Katara in his parents’ bed. One last little thing to spite Ozai. It’s all rather pointless now. His father will never know that his only son wed a waterbender. It takes away a bit of the satisfaction in the complete disrespect. And he somehow doubts Ursa would care.

“This way.” He finally decides and leads her down the hall to his old room. If nothing else, it has a smaller bed and he knows she doesn’t like large beds. Something about too much space holding in the cold.

The villa is almost eerily quiet by the time he closes the door behind him, the darkness of his childhood bedroom engulfing them both. Flicking a wrist to light the lanterns, he turns around slowly. Not much has changed in the years since he last lived here. The bed has been stripped of its silks and all the little decorations have disappeared, but the furniture is all still there. Rinchen must have done some cleaning. There’s no sign of dust or any other signal of abandonment.

And no one has been here since his family left. Ozai made sure of that.

“So this was where you slept.” She sounds a little amused. He knows this has to be different than what she was expecting; compared to the grandeur of Lu Ten’s old room, this one is almost plain. Turning around, he finds her by the window, a pile of red silks in her arms.

He reaches out for the silks. They’re new, not the faded vermillion he remembers. These are darker, much darker, and finer than what he had. “Must be from the palace.”

“Help me make the bed?” She sets all but one down, letting the remainder fall open a little between their hands. They work quietly, moving about silently in the candlelight. He hadn’t told Rinchen to prepare their rooms at all, simply to help move their things in. The cleaning and whatnot could be handled by them.

But this works. He never considered that this could be so exhausting. A shift of light and the maid who told stories long banned in the isles is there, dusting off the windowsill. The silks block Katara for just a moment, and he thinks he can hear a young Azula running about when she was three and they built a fort out of his bedding to hide from the monsoon.

“We should probably prepare something for dinner.”

Katara runs a hand across the silks, smoothing out any wrinkles. “Is the kitchen prepared for Toph?”
“No.”

She nods. “Then we probably should. Do you think Ty will be up for eating?”

So she picked up on the tension. “Probably not.”

How long is it going to take to settle in here? They didn’t last long at the palace, and the past is stronger here. He knows they’ll be in the caldera until after the trials, and it will probably be another month or so if the White Lotus is going to be as invasive as he thinks they’re going to be.

They need to get out of here. They need to get back to the Temple.

They need to get away from the world.

So little has changed here. In the gathering darkness, she can almost hear the sounds of her childhood when beautiful, beautiful Mai was still her beloved and Azula was still shiny and new to them.

Once she has Toph settled into her old room—still open and airy like Princess Ursa knew exactly what her daughter’s new friend was—she finds herself standing outside a dark door, unable to step forward. She can’t really think about staying Mai’s room alone. It just seems invasive.

But at the same time, this room is the only one left that she might be comfortable in. It’s just that, well, she keeps thinking of that night when she felt Azula’s breath end. There should be a pair of lungs or two on the other side of this door, but there’s nothing save the emptiness of a place long abandoned.

The wood is rough against her hands, the door sticking slightly. Moving the air just so, she lifts it out of its tracks enough to slide it open. And the silence hits her completely. Sliding the door closed around her, she reaches into her pocket for the flint. Getting one candle lit is easy enough. Getting the rest of them lit is a little more difficult. This room was designed for a firebender, after all.

But she gets it done before settling in the center of the room. It looks just like it did all those years ago, but quiet and unadorned. The bed is bare, a small pile of red silks folded up at the foot.

So Rinchen knew someone was going to choose this room, or did she simply put bedding in all the rooms?

No, more likely she guessed which ones they would choose. Zuko would go to his old room with Katara, Toph is most logically in Ty’s old room and then there’s this room.

Moving as quietly as she can, she makes the bed. It’s a little ridiculous. There is no one here to tell her to stop or to get out. There is no more Azula to guard this room so dearly. There is no more Mai to stand beside their princess with knives at the ready.
There is no more small elite team.

The silks don’t smell right. There should be water lilies and sunshine with just a slight hint of smoke. Maybe the lingering scent of sea salt, mulberries, and steel. And maybe, just maybe, a hint of fresh air and tuna fruit.

Of course, this room shouldn’t be so silent, so still. There should be voices; laughter and something like happiness.

It’s been four years since Boiling Rock. Even longer since they shared this room. There is no reason to be so caught up in the past. She’s had so much time to grow accustomed to the end of them, to the end of their childhood and the almost-peace they had. There’s been time to grieve the loss of her friends.

Were they friends though? Once upon a time, it felt like they were parts of her, pieces of her heart taken out and made whole. Even mad Azula, who was so beautiful and so loving when no one was looking. As they grew and it became more Azula and Mai only, those feelings may have weakened a little, but it was still there. They were hers and she was theirs.

And now it’s all over. She’s known. It’s been impossible to not know. There’s just something about this place that makes the silence unavoidable. There will be no recovery here, no stories in the night, no stargazing, no sleeping in a jumble of limbs and Mai’s long hair.

She slowly slides down to sit with her back flush against the door, legs drawn up close to her body. Dust hangs still in the air and everything in this room is all wrong.

She can only ignore the tense silence in the villa for so long. Resting in the garden, she listens carefully to the breath of the earth and all the creatures that call it home. At least the ones in royal gardens. It’s glorious, being out here where she can sense every worm moving through the dirt, every little bounce of a baby turtleduck stumbling around on solid ground. A leaf falls from a tree, sending out delicate waves across the stones it hits.

Taking a deep breath, she stretches out both arms, fingers curling through the grass to scrape the dirt beneath. “Is there something you need?”

Rinchen is much clearer out here. She’s been standing at the edge of the garden for a while now, just quietly waiting for something. The Acolyte moves forward, each step revealing something that looks like a book in her hands. “The Gaoling Acolytes delivered the Bei Fong laws today, as well as a copy of Earth Kingdom laws that may apply.”

“Any good news?”

“Quite a bit.”

“So I don’t have to have a kid by my eighteenth birthday?”
Rinchen coughs politely, kneeling to sit beside Toph. “No, that part you still have to comply with.”

“Then what’s the good news?”

“It seems the part about the child needing to be male is more of a cultural idea than an actual law.”

“What?”

“There’s nothing in either the Bei Fong laws or the Earth Kingdom laws that specify that the child must be male. All they say is that the child must be an earthbender.” The sound of papers rustling covers the sound of the birds. “It’s probably just an oversight. The Earth Kingdom probably assumed that clans would specify inheritance and the Bei Fong family likely assumed the same about the Earth Kingdom. The preference for sons is simply culture. It isn’t law.”

Toph takes a deep breath, releasing it slowly. That is good news. It doesn’t take away the worst of the inheritance laws, but it does free up some parts of it. “And the marriage thing?”

“Still working on that.”

“Wouldn’t it be easy to find?”

Rinchen’s vibrations do an odd little flip. “Well, it seems the laws regarding marriage either don’t exist or are very well hidden.”

“What do you mean?”

“I can find plenty of laws detailing how property is transferred in a marriage and there’s quite a bit over divorce and child custody and how and when a contract can be drawn up. There are some miscegenation laws that may cause you some problems, but I suspect you can successfully argue that Airbenders belong to the Earth Kingdom as much as they belong to the Fire Nation.”

“I never said anything about an Airbender.”

“Of course not.”

“All I said was that I don’t want to marry a man.”

“Which is where the law is unclear.” Rinchen’s hand is warm against Toph’s forehead, brushing her hair out of her face. “I’ll keep looking. In the meantime, your mother had your allowance for the past few years delivered.”

Toph blinks, pressing her hand more firmly to the earth to check Rinchen’s sincerity. “What?”

“It appears that under Bei Fong laws, while you were studying earthbending away from home, you were entitled to a rather lovely allowance. Lady Bei Fong has established a bank account with back pay for you.”

“I wasn’t studying.”

“You were learning more about your power and actively engaged in education, were you not?”

“Well, yes—”
“Then don’t insult the fire ferret.”

Insult the gift fox? “What is that supposed to mean?”

“It’s an old story. A young woman rescued a fire ferret and it granted her wishes. Later on, she insulted it and it took back all its gifts.” Rinchen settles more fully on the earth, books set aside. “What your mother has given you is what the heir of the family is entitled to. It’s on par with what Lu Ten was given as the heir of the Crown Prince.”

“So it’s a lot of money.”

“Yes.”

“Enough to start the school?”

“Probably, but it would be best to have an actual income source.”

Toph nods slowly. “What would I need to know to invest it?”

“Would you like me to contact a financial advisor?” Rinchen’s vibrations change with a slightly movement around her mouth. A smile? It’s been so long since Toph could really sense so delicate a movement.

“Please. Any advice?”

“Food will be a safe investment. So will education and health.”

“You’ve seen the reports.”

Rinchen lies back against the ground. “I don’t need to see the reports.”

So things are really that bad. It was easy to guess, and Zuko has been stressed about the situation, as has Katara. The Water Tribe and Fire Nation were hit the hardest during the war, but even the Earth Kingdom is likely feeling some of the stress. The Air Nation will be subject to whatever country they are residing in, but will likely be fine.

Any nation that can survive what Air has will be perfectly fine.

“This world is a mess, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is.”

Toph has no response and Rinchen seems to have nothing more to add. So they simply stay in silence in the garden, listening to the quiet of the world.

Chapter End Notes

Zuko and Ty were both really difficult to write. This chapter probably would have been out a lot faster had it not been for those two sections. Next chapter, though, we start moving into the larger character arcs for both of these characters. Most obviously with Zuko, but hints of Ty’s major arc will begin appearing. Especially with regards to how Ty’s arc interacts with Mai’s.
It isn’t the fire that wakes her. The flames currently devouring their bedding are something to be concerned about, but the arrhythmic heartbeat beside her is more important.

He isn’t tossing and turning, nor is he speaking as he often does. That eliminates most of his nightmares, but the uncontrolled firebending and fever are definitely the symptoms of one. Sitting up, she douses the flames with water from the pond outside the window. His heart is what worries her most; she’s already fixed an incorrect heartbeat once with him. She doesn’t particularly want to go through that again.

Here’s to hoping it’s just the stress. His skin is searing against the hand she places gently on his chest. Just breathe in and breathe out, slow his heart and drag all the water in to surround the bed with ice. It’s getting cold, even for her, but he still doesn’t come out of whatever it is.

At least the fire has stopped.

“Zuko, it’s going to be okay. You’re safe. The war is over. No one blames you for anything. You made the best choice you could.” She keeps repeating it over and over again, running water across his body in a familiar pattern. This is what’s worked for the past three years, so why isn’t he calming?

It won’t do anyone any good if he takes cold, so she lets the ice melt and return outside. She can handle any bending. It’s just the way he’s so still and so hot doesn’t seem right.

And that he won’t wake up.

That part is absolutely terrifying.

She could shock the system, grab his heart, and force him to wake. That would probably just do more damage, though. There has to be a better way. And the heat is a problem. Pulling off her nightshirt, she curls up as close to him as she can, carefully regulating her body temperature to stay as cold as possible.

Slow as dragons grow, he eventually loosens up. Still running too high a fever and still sound asleep, but a little less tense. It’s progress, at least.

The continued mantra of reassurances switches. Her native Water Tribe and occasionally the silky, flowing Fire Nation that he’s taught her and even the soft and careful Air that Ty Lee and Rinchen have been teaching them. She still cycles through to the common tongue, but the varying cadences seem to have an effect.

They ought to. Zuko’s language skills far exceed her own. He’s always correcting her Fire since apparently she can never get the very bizarre ‘j’ and ‘h’ sounds right so she intentionally mispronounces a few words. Maybe that will catch his attention.

Eventually, his heartbeat settles and starts to speed up in a pattern she knows well enough. Raising her temperature closer to normal, she continues the waterbending and switches completely to
the common language.

“I’m awake now.” His voice is rougher than usual and she takes the water away, using it to pick up the half-empty teacup he left on the other side of the room. “Thank you.”

She moves away completely, letting go of her bending and pulling her nightshirt back on. “Are you going to be okay?”

He nods. “Just a bad dream.”

“I figured. Do you want to talk about it?”

“I don’t know.”

That’s not a normal response. So this really wasn’t a dream he’s had before. “Nightmare?”

“Not really.”

“Zuko, I’ve never seen anything less than a nightmare trigger your bending.”

He’s more awake now, carefully lighting the lamp beside the bed to take stock of the damage. “At least it didn’t completely burn through. That canopy isn’t exactly lightweight.”

“I think I woke up before it really got going.” He’s deflecting, but she won’t push it. “I may have disturbed the turtleducks outside, though.”

“Did you take their water?” He sighs heavily, running his hands through his tangled hair. One hand catches on a particularly nasty knot.

Carefully, she reaches over him to help. “I returned it as quickly as possible.”

“They aren’t nocturnal, so I doubt you did any harm.”

“That’s good.”

“And I don’t want to be Fire Lord.”

She blinks. That isn’t what she was expecting. “I know you’ve had some doubts, but are you sure?”

“Positive.” Voice firm, heart steady. He’s completely serious about this.

“How long have you been thinking about this?” She tries to think back. He’s indicated in the past that it might come to this, but she was anticipating a few years before they had to make any major decisions about it.

He looks at her cautiously. “Since you finished healing my scar. Didn’t really start thinking about it as an actual option until Ember Island.”

“And how long have you been sure this is what you want?”

“I was pretty sure that first night we were here, when we sat through that tea after dinner with your family and Uncle.” He shrugs. “I think that last time I talked to Uncle alone was when I knew.”

“You think?”
His scowl is a little lighter than it usually is. “I don’t really remember that night.”

It wasn’t that long ago, so there’s no way he’s forgotten. And that night, it was the one before her trial began. He overslept, she remembers. Even though he went to bed hours before the rest of them, he still overslept. “What do you remember?”

“I went to ask him about the spirit forest and the Mother of Faces.” He moves a little, shifting to lean against one of the bedposts. “We had tea and talked.”

“About?”

“Mother, I think.”

“You think?”

“I kind of zoned out after we talked about the Mother of Faces.” The scowl deepens. “Apparently she grants new faces and lives in return for the person’s memories.”

“All of them?” That’s another jar of vipersharks and not one they need to be dealing with right now, but if that’s what he remembers, then there isn’t much choice.

He nods. “She probably doesn’t remember I exist, let alone Azula.”

“But we’re still going to find her.” She takes his hands in hers, holding tightly so he knows beyond all doubt that she is right there. This close to the edge, any form of isolation is risky. “Even if she doesn’t remember, we owe it to Azula to find out what happened. Now do you remember anything else about that night?”

Zuko takes a deep breath, eyes closing. “The tea.”

“What about it?”

“Black, lightly sweetened.”

That makes her pause. “You said Iroh doesn’t drink black tea.”

“I know.”

“Or sweetened tea.”

“It ruins the flavor.” The way he says it suggests he’s heard that particular line many times before.

What was it Ty Lee said? Black tea has the strongest flavor, making it the preferred tea for poisons. A sweetener could cover up certain abnormalities, but that’s a very dark thought. Iroh wouldn’t poison Zuko, even if it were just a sedative—

But some truth serums can act as sedatives.

Iroh wouldn’t do that, would he? “Zuko, were you thinking about Azula at all that night?”

He meets her gaze and she can see the moment he realizes exactly what she’s saying. Even in the dark, the loss of color is obvious and he’s far too still. “It’s Uncle.”

“He’s White Lotus.”
Zuko pulls away from her then, and is promptly sick over the edge of the bed.

She wakes up to the smell of ginger tea. Stumbling out of bed, she feels her way out of her bedroom and down the halls, following the scent. Thank goodness the kitchen has stone flooring. She knows it the second she steps on it, the vibrations showing her Sparky hunched down over on a chair beside the open doors and Sweetness moving about preparing breakfast. The sound of water moving through the air accompanies a perfectly lovely smell.

“Ginger tea and melon soup for breakfast?”

“Morning, Toph.” Katara stays focused on whatever she’s doing, so Toph settles on the floor beside Zuko.

His head is in his hands, and he doesn’t seem so well. Chaotic is the word she would use. “Didn’t sleep well?”

“Not really. You?”

“Well enough.” Reaching her arms over her head, she arcs her back until the vertebrae pop. “This place is quiet, but the gardens make it sound almost like the Temple.”

“I suppose it does. Just without the waterfall.”

She grins brightly. “I can fix that.”

“Toph, even though it is dormant, this is still a volcano.” He reminds her gently.

“I’ve always wanted to try lavabending.”

“And have you always wanted to become a fugitive?” Katara’s voice is lighter than it’s been in a while, some of the stress of the past missing from the tone.

Toph shrugs. “I’ve been a fugitive before. Regicide will be new, though.”

Zuko stands up, vibrations still unstable. His hand is searing hot against the top of her head when he brushes her hair back. “Let’s try not destroying any capitol cities.”

“Well, if you and Sugar over there had been a little more destructive, it wouldn’t have been an issue.” Oh, maybe that’s not the best thing to say. With the trials, though, the events of the comet have been pressing on her thoughts.

A bowl is placed firmly in her hands, one of her preferred metal spoons pressed against her thumb. Katara places a cup of tea down on the floor. “We were sort of busy trying to subdue a Fire Lord. Not to mention, we were expecting to use some parts of the city in the near future.”
Except all of that went up in smoke when Twinkles lost. This is the closest they’ve gotten to talking about it and Toph wants to push the subject, but Katara has already returned to the other side of the kitchen, talking quietly with Zuko.

Hm, so something happened. It’s the second day of Katara’s trial, but they can’t possibly be discussing that. At least, not by themselves. That was an everyone-we’re-all-completely-screwed conversation. This is something very, very different.

There’s a popping sound, like someone stretching their back and then Snow’s light footsteps echo on the stone floor. “Morning, everyone.”

“Morning, Ty.” Katara actually sounds somewhat awake, unlike the airbender’s exhausted tone.

If anything, Snow’s as screwed up as Sparky this morning. Hei Bai, did either of them sleep last night?

No, of course they didn’t. How could they? They had the same problems the first couple of nights in the palace, when the memories kept them awake. It has to be worse here. This is the place Zuko grew up, isn’t it? Of course there’s more history here.

The ginger tea burns down her throat. It’s stronger than usual, so clearly brewed with the intent of settling an upset stomach. “Sparky, you sick?”

“Slightly.” The word is strained, a strange fluctuation in his presence against the stone. “Ty, what do you know about truth serums?”

“White Lotus get you?” Snow plops down on the floor beside her, tea and soup in hand. The airbender is warm, Toph notices idly.

Katara’s sighs wearily. “He went and had tea with Lord Iroh by himself the other night.”

“The night before your trial began?”

“Yes.”

Snow hums, the shape of the teacup rattling against her shaking fingers. “Black tea from the southwest mountains in the Earth Kingdom? Lightly sweetened with palm sugar instead of honey but still a little bitter?”

“Yes.” Sparky resumes his seat on the other side of Toph. “You know what it is, don’t you?”

“Probably Poor Wife’s Judge. It’s the least likely to be fatal.”

Toph swallows the last of her soup. “Snowlion, you scare me.”

The airbender’s presence is settling down a little, but not by much. “It’s not an easy poison to manufacture, but Iroh would definitely have the means to get it. Its most obvious symptoms are extreme fatigue and memory loss. Once it hits the bloodstream, it’s like a blackout.”

“That would be it.” Katara confirms, vibrations rippling out from where her back connects with the prep table. “How bad is this?”

She feels Snow’s shoulder brush against hers as the airbender shrugs. “It’s most often used by wives trying to find out if their husbands are cheating. Effective, but only if you ask the right
questions and the subject isn’t completely focused on one topic.”

“So if I kept talking about my mother?”

“You were probably fine.”

Toph tilts her head to the side, pressure releasing from the vertebrae. “We’ll find out at the trial. Which we should be getting to, shouldn’t we?”

“It’s another hour until sunrise.” Sparky says.

She stands up, popping the rest of her back. “I’ll get my bath, then.”

Uncle poisoned him. He should be focusing on Katara down there in that tiny little box, but his attention keeps drifting to the White Lotus behind her and Uncle’s very prominent spot in the center.

Poor Wife’s Judge, Ty said. He’s heard of it. There are few in the aristocracy who haven’t. Stories are that before Aunt Zen came to town, there was a lively black market for it and some more lethal options.

Of all the things to happen, this is the worst yet. He just wanted to know about Ursa and the spirit forest. He trusted Uncle, thought he knew the man behind the crown and that’s exactly what Iroh was counting on, wasn’t it? That he would blindly trust any member of the White Lotus—he should have known better.

“Was there any situation before Sozin’s Comet in which you used bloodbending?”

“Yes.” Katara’s voice is steady, even though so far away. “I hunted down the Southern Raiders to find the man responsible for my mother’s death.”

Beside him, Toph bumps his shoulder with hers. “You saw her bloodbending?”

“Yes.” He keeps his voice down, though there’s enough noise in the room now from the Water Tribe and Fire Nation to cover most sounds.

“And you weren’t freaked out?”

“At little surprised. I didn’t know waterbenders could do that.”

Toph nods. “Brave.”

He doesn’t fully understand it, but he never really new Hama. Finding the old woman sitting among the Southern group, he can see her proud smile. Where there is excited chatter around the
room, she sits tall with pride. She hasn’t spent much time around them, custody instead shifting to Katara’s grandmother. Something about getting Hama back to her roots.

The room settles down again, and the little inquisitor coughs politely. “And after?”

“Of course I did.”

The inquisitor is nodding. “What about manipulation of the sea?”

“This isn’t good.” Ty whispers.

“We knew they were going to ask.” He tries to keep his voice calm. He knows as well as she does the ramifications of what they did to the navy. “We ended the war. That’s all that matters.”

Except it isn’t. None of them believe that, but they need the world to see it that way because that’s the only way to move forward. They need to stand strong, to show the world that life after war is possible, that the ghosts recent and old don’t have to control things.

It has to be the end justifies the means because if it isn’t, then they are no better than Sozin and the soldiers who attacked the Air Temples.

Katara’s simple yes is firm, her back straight and head held high. And just like that, the White Lotus can add hundreds to the body count.

“We knew it was going to come to this.” Ty’s hand is cold against his. When Toph takes the other, it’s only mildly warmer. Both are steadying, though. Comforting, reassuring in these last days of this mess that they are not alone.

“If the know how many we killed, then can’t they jump to the conclusion that we may have killed more important people?” Toph leans against him, keeping her voice so low he can barely hear her.

Ty shakes her head. “Unless Mai told them something, then they have nothing.”

“Speaking of which, any luck finding her records?” He watches carefully as the inquisitor moves on to questions about the naval attacks in the last year of the war. The sinking of the shipyard still seems to be written off as a natural disaster, so at least they still have some secrets.

“Not yet.” Ty sighs heavily. “I haven’t had time.”

“You’re staying La-La’s room, aren’t you?”

“Yeah.” So that’s why the airbender is so tired today. She probably didn’t sleep.

Toph elbows him in the side. “Sparky, any idea where the White Lotus could get the idea that Katara could talk to the spirits?”

“What?”

She motions down to where the inquisitor is fully facing Katara. The waterbender is too still, her back too straight.

“Master Katara, do you or do you not have the ability to enter the spirit world?”

Agni, Tui, and La no. Absolutely not.
“Zuko, tell me there is no chance that in thinking about the Mother of Faces that you brought up Katara.” Ty hisses, her hand nearly crushing his.

“I don’t think so.”

“Is there any possibility?” Toph scoots a little closer to him, her arm pressed against his.

He closes his eyes. “Katara may have mentioned talking to La about the Mother.”

“Has she?” Ty grimaces as Katara’s response comes out too shaky.

“Not yet.”

“They can’t know about Moon Girl. The North will destroy her.” Toph says. “Yue was their only heir. They’ll take it to mean she wants Katara to take her place as princess.”

“You can’t know that.”

“No, but I can know that that’s the way we’ll have to spin this.” The earthbender is almost growling, irritation radiating from her. “There is no way in the seven hells we are telling them the truth.”

The chatter from the crowd increases to a near impossible level. Ty’s wind twists around them, shielding them from the worst of the noise. “She’s right. No one can know the Avatar Spirit has shattered.”

“We don’t know that for sure.” This is the worst possible outcome. Yes, it is most likely that the Avatar Spirit is not whole. But the fact remains that they simply do not know.

They don’t know for sure that Uncle poisoned him with Poor Wife’s Judge, nor whether or not Uncle slipped him anything at all. They don’t know what the White Lotus knows. They don’t know whether or not Mai actually kept records or that those records still exist.

They don’t know anything.

And that, more than anything, is what will hurt them.

. . .

She has to find those records. With the White Lotus aware of Katara’s spiritual abilities, Mai’s records are more important than ever. She’s already searched her old room and Mai’s old room, but found nothing. Azula’s room has turned up similar results, though the old letters in her hands proves Mai was in fact hiding things here.

But where would she put those records?
Tossing the letters onto the bed, she leaves the room and makes her way toward the kitchen. Toph is already there, the earthbender sitting at the prep table with a pot of tea in front of her. “Hey, Snow. Want some? It’s jasmine.”

“Please.” It’s a good jasmine too, based on the smell. “Silver Needle?”

“That’s what Zuko called it.”

She nods, leaning against the prep table to pour a cup. Silver Needle is—or was, at least—Mai’s favourite. Azula always made sure it was available. So many nights were spent watching the stars and drinking this, the smell of jasmine overtaking the air.

Did he know this? Did Mai make it for him, telling the old stories as she did? The one about the fisherman taken by seal maidens or maybe the priestess princess with her loyal hounds; stories older than the crown and long since banned. Did she tell him about the red string of fate? Or the one about the bride of the sea god?

Did she ever tell him the legends of Seal Island?

Ty Lee pushes the teacup away from herself, the jasmine bitter on her tongue. “Do you like it here?”

Toph shrugs. “It’s better than the palace. You?”

“It’ll get better.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“There’s not really much to talk about.” The teacup shines in the dim light, the crude glaze one of the early ones, back before she and Katara figured out which plants to use for dyes.

The earthbender tips her barstool back on two legs, her feet propped up on the corner of the prep table. “You spent a lot of time here as a kid, didn’t you?”

“I pretty much lived here.” It is true. Once Azula decided to keep them, she and Mai were kept as sisters to the princess. They went home to their families once in a while, but most of their time was here. “We used to get into so much trouble.”

“Sneaking out after dark?”

“All the time.” She can’t help but laugh at the memories. “Playing pranks on Zuko, trying to sneak into the city; there was even one time when we tried to sneak out of the caldera.”

“But normal hijinks were just Sparky pranks?”

“Or stealing sweets.”

“Didn’t Flame Princess have all the sweets she wanted?”

Ty breathes out, wind rushing around as a gentle cyclone inside her teacup. The disturbance just barely skims the surface of the tea. “Ursa rarely let Azula have sweets. It was always some silly little thing, like accidentally setting something on fire. Azula covered it well. Had to. She didn’t like admitting that she had trouble controlling her firebending, so she just took whatever punishment Ursa thought up.”

“So no sweets for being a young bender unable to control a volatile element?”
“Usually.” She hasn’t thought of the beginning of the blue fire in so long. “The blue is the result of intense heat. It makes the fire harder to control. Zuko’s age and training are probably the only reasons he’s been able to control it so well. Azula was about as good as you would expect a six-year-old trained by Ozai to be.”

And, quite probably, the reality that Zuko’s mental and emotional health is far greater than anything his sister could have ever aspired to.

Toph whistles lowly. “And I thought my parents were bad.”

“This whole family was a complete mess. Still are, if Iroh really poisoned Zuko.” She glances over at the beautifully carved cabinet in the corner of the room. “There’s a cupboard over there, where the cooks stored the spices. The top shelf was where they kept the best.”

“I was wondering what that thing was. I couldn’t get it to open when I tried to identify it earlier.”

“There’s a trick to it.” Was that thing always so small? It seemed bigger when she was standing on Mai’s shoulders trying to reach the lock. “Took us about a month to finally figure it out. We treated it like it was a special assignment for the war. The enemies’ secrets were hidden inside and we had to get it or we would lose the war.”

The earthbender chokes back a laugh. “That’s morbid.”

“It’s the way things were.”

“It’s also all the explanation needed for why our generation is so spectacularly screwed up.”

“ Probably.” They really were morbid, weren’t they? “There’s a false compartment in the back of the top shelf, where the really rare herbs and spices were hidden.”

“Why were they hidden?”

“Because they were illegal. Most of them were from the Earth Kingdom, outside the colonies. A few were from the Water Tribes. Either way, the cooks weren’t supposed to have them because it was against the law to export them from their home countries and especially to import them to the Fire Nation.”

Toph snorts into her tea. “So they hid the sweets in with them?”

“The best ones.” She takes a sip of tea. “Azula loved the delights made with arctic ginger from the Northern Water Tribe. Mai was always partial to the honey drops. Those had sky mint from the Patola Mountains and they were good.”

“Do we have either of those in the greenhouses?”

“Not yet. I’ll talk to Katara about maybe trying to grow some.”

Toph frowns. “Think there are any sweets left?”

“It’s unlikely, and anything left would be so old it won’t be good.”

“Then maybe spices. We can make them.”

Ty Lee grins. Standing up, she walks over to the cabinet and coaxes the latch into unlocking. When the small, carved camellia finally turns, she presses it in and pops the doors open. There are
still some spices and herbs in little glass jars and old tea tins. The top shelf is—disturbed. Leaning in to take a closer look, she can see the little disturbances in the dust. It’s been a while, but someone accessed the back panel.

There’s no way.

No, Mai wouldn’t—except she would. This is absolutely something she would do. How many people alive know about this, know how to access the cupboard, know that the compartment in the back even exists? How many alive know about the honey drops?

Pushing the jars and tins in front out of the way, she carefully opens the compartment, revealing a jar of honey drops, another of ginger delights, and a series of thick scrolls balanced precariously behind them.

Chapter End Notes

I decided to try something new with the trials. I'll probably do this again because it was kind of fun. Ty Lee ended up doing way more explaining this chapter than she normally would do. I think she needed to talk in that last scene, though.
At least they’ve abandoned the talk of spirits. It didn’t take much, just a quick side conversation with Aunt Jet in the rush to leave the courtroom after yesterday’s continuation of the spiritual questions. From what she can tell, her fellow wind children took it upon themselves to inform the White Lotus that Katara’s dealings with the spirit realm are not something to be trifled with and kindly let the subject go.

Very little in this world is as intimidating as the serene smile of an upset airbender.

It’s just that without the spirits to discuss, there are certain other subjects the inquisitor has found to poke at.

“What was Avatar Aang like the last time you saw him?” As if that isn’t the most loaded question in the two realms. Not that the White Lotus can know that. Their whole reason for agreeing to these trials was to make sure the history written down was the history they wanted written. By controlling the information the outside world knows, they can get a better grasp of their futures and from there, the future of the world.

That’s a fairly dark thought, when put in those words. She glances at Zuko and Toph beside her and thinks that maybe that darkness is earned. They went to war as children and emerged monsters of the worst sort. It even appears that the White Lotus is beginning to recognize that, if Iroh would go so far as to use the Judge on his own nephew.

But, of course, that’s all just conjecture at this point. Rinchen’s promised to look into it, so maybe they’ll get an answer sooner rather than later.

“At least this isn’t like the rest of it.” Zuko mutters, shifting in his seat.

On the other side of him, Toph shrugs. “I think maybe they’re drawing blanks. If they were relying on only a few avenues to try to get knowledge, then we may have destroyed a couple of roads.”

If only they could be so lucky. “I don’t think that’s it.”

No, this is very likely a different tactic. Yesterday and the day before were exhausting, trying to find ways to answer the spiritual questions without actually answering them. So today will be easy questions and it’ll be back to the difficult ones tomorrow or the day after.

Oh no, it would be tomorrow. If they’re already up to the Avatar, then this is the close of Katara’s trial. Which means the day after might be, if they are very lucky, a day of rest with Zuko’s beginning the following day. Well, it wouldn’t be given as something to rest. That’s an old trick from time out of mind; create lots of tension and then just before the worst of it, make the victim wait.

Waiting, the anticipation, the knowledge of what’s to come is more disquieting than almost any other force in the world. There’s something in humanity that simply doesn’t like waiting.

Down in the box, Katara is finishing up her description of Avatar Aang in those last few weeks after Taku. Cleverly avoiding the spiritual aspect of it, the words are crisp and clear as any medical professional’s.
The inquisitor is nodding. “And did you happen to see Lord Azula before her death?”

“No.”

Ty Lee sits forward a little. This is where the situation gets hairy. The White Lotus knows about the clock-flower. Have since Mai’s trials; they really should have read those transcripts before. Now the question is simply whether or not the White Lotus will call foul on Azula’s death now or when they have Zuko in the box.

Apparently Zuko, as the inquisitor moves on to more specific questions about the Avatar. She leans against the firebender, gently manipulating the air around them to prevent her voice from carrying any further than him. “You realize they’re going to accuse you of Azula’s death.”

“Mai was the one poisoning her.”

“So you want to frame the reigning Fire Lady?”

He shrugs. “It’s better than admitting the truth. If they examined my sister’s body, then they can probably match the wounds to Mai’s knives.”

It’s a valid point. “But if they can make that leap, then they can probably make the leap that Avatar Aang didn’t use a suicide attack.”

Zuko stays silent and she lets the wind still. This is the worst part of it. Will the Lotus accuse Katara of the Avatar’s death now or later, when they can go at a Zuko destabilized by questions concerning Azula’s death? She knows what she would do, what the Kagami trained her to do: always aim for the weak spot. If there isn’t one already in existence, create it.

And right now, Katara has too much power. Between the bloodbending and the potential spiritual powers, their waterbender has proved to be far more dangerous than the world at large likely suspected. That can work to their advantage. Having someone that scary on hand does provide them with a certain level of protection.

However, it also exposes them to more scrutiny. If they think Katara killed the Avatar, then she will be watched carefully as a potential threat to global peace.

How strange. Katara, the one who sacrificed so much for peace, who likely was born intended to be the world’s primary peacemaker, as a potential evil.

Then again, it does fit. If Avatar Aang really did steal her destiny by running from his, then it only follows that Katara be as bad as he was good. All things in balance, after all.

“We shouldn’t have come back.” It’s their mantra, it seems. The regret of returning to the outside world, rather than stay at the Temple.

“We didn’t have a choice.” Zuko’s response almost disappears in the sudden cacophony following the inquisitor’s most recent question. Something about the Avatar’s health that skates dangerously close to asking about Katara’s spiritual connections.

She shrugs, leaning against him. “Maybe not, but we could have tried.”

He doesn’t answer, nor does she expect it of him. None of them are willing to admit the truth, that there was no staying in at the Temple once the war ended. It’s all just wishful thinking, a happy alternate to what they’re going through.
That’s what imagination is for, isn’t it?

“Are you sure you want to do this?” He completely understands if she wants to stay away. After recent events, her hesitation makes perfect sense.

But she just smiles and links her arm with his, steering him towards Uncle’s favourite tea spot. “You want to know if he used the Judge, don’t you?”

“There are other ways to find out. You don’t need to get involved with this.”

Rinchen sighs. “True, but I want to know as well. These are not the actions of the Iroh I knew.”

“He’s White Lotus.” He keeps his voice low. “From his perspective, I’m the weak link because of my emotions. If I were him, I would have done the same thing.”

“No, you wouldn’t have.” She says it with such conviction he almost stumbles. Has she not been paying attention? The things he’s done—are nothing she knows. She doesn’t know about Azula. She doesn’t know about the countless others. She doesn’t know what he did with the sole purpose of bringing the Fire Nation to its knees.

“If it were the right choice, I would have.”

She pats his hand gently. “No, you would have suggested to Ty Lee that this needed doing and you’d leave it to her.”

Then again, maybe she does know him. “That does sound like something I would do, doesn’t it?”

“You might be nineteen and far more tortured, but you’re still the same boy I knew. Who we are at the core never changes. We just change how we express ourselves.” Rinchen releases him just outside Uncle’s rooms, the Acolyte turning to face him. Her smile softens a little as she reaches up to take his face in her hands. “You’re not quite what I expected, but I’m proud of you. And I know Lu Ten would be proud as well.”

“It’s good to have you back, Rinchen.” Not for the first time, he wonders what might have happened if it had been his cousin who survived the siege. “I wish you could have stayed.”

“It wasn’t safe anymore.”

He nods. “So you’ve said. Did Mother tell you what she was planning?”

“She did suggest that I perhaps didn’t want to be in the caldera in the coming months.” Rinchen adjusts the collar of his shirt. “With her and Lu Ten both gone, I had no one to protect me.”

“And I was too young.”
“A little, yes.”

“Uncle would have protected you.”

Her smile fades. “Your uncle didn’t know the truth about me. He thought I was nothing more than a Fire Nation noblewoman. Given what he was like before Ba Sing Se, I had no guarantee that he would watch out for me. I did what I had to in order to survive. I didn’t think you and Azula would be left so exposed.”

She’s not apologetic, but he doesn’t expect her to. She had no way of knowing what would happen; that Ursa’s emotional damage to his sister would last longer without a balm to remind the girl that she was loved, that Ozai would hurt his only son the way he did, that brother and sister would drift so far apart that attempted murder didn’t seem out of the ordinary. “I’ve thought about what might have been if you had stayed.”

“It’s better to forget those dreams. Those are worlds that will never come to pass.”

“I know.” The dreams are all he has, though. What if Rinchen had stayed? What if Mother stayed? What if Mother and Father loved each other? What if Father loved him? What if Mother loved Azula? What if Lu Ten lived? What if he didn’t speak up in the war room?

What if no children went to war?

What if Azula survived? What if Aang survived?

The ‘what if’s will devour him, he knows this, but they bite at his ankles as he walks and lurk just outside the periphery regardless of whether he is asleep or awake. All the little things, the crossroads from the war where he could have taken another path and maybe changed the way things turned out—Rinchen’s hands lightly tap the sides of his face. “Stop that. Stop that right now. Are you really so unhappy that you would wish for another life?”

He blinks. “What?”

She steps away from him, crossing her arms across her chest. “Are you unhappy?”

“Not really.”

“Then why entertain paths that would put you somewhere else?” She sighs heavily. “Your sister was damned the second your mother rejected her.”

That hurts. “You can’t know that.”

“No, I can. You yourself told me that Azula’s focus was on Ursa. All she wanted was to know her mother loved her, correct?”

“That’s right.”

“Then only Ursa could have saved Azula, and even then there’s always the possibility that the damage was too severe.”

She’s probably right, but it still feels wrong. Like he failed, like he should have been able to find another way to save her. But even now, almost a year later, he still can’t think of an alternative. In the condition she was in, the choices were a hospital or prison. He found the third avenue, or at least one of the other options. Maybe there had been another. Maybe—no, Rin’s right. Those are the thoughts that will kill him.
He sighs heavily. “I just think there had to have been something that could be done.”

“You sister was never your responsibility.” She straightens her clothes, turning to face the door with her head held high. “Your sister was awful to you and no one would expect you to grieve her. That you do despite of her actions is honorable.”

“It doesn’t feel like it.”

She links their arms, placing her free hand on the door ahead of them. “It rarely does.”

“So this is what it’s like to read?”

Her mother laughs softly. “To a beginner. I’ve left instructions for your friends for how these work.”

“They’re good at teaching.” She doesn’t tell her mother that she already knows how to read and write. Ty and Zuko taught her at the Temple. At first it was just the labels they helped her make to find things in the kitchen and the armory, but it eventually grew. A good portion of their wartime reports are raised characters on thin sheets of stone.

“I probably should have found you a tutor a long time ago.” Cold fingers push a lock of hair out of the earthbender’s face. “I probably should have insisted on a proper education all around.”

She shrugs, pulling away a little. “I’ve done alright. Two of my friends have had formal educations. If I have any questions, I can just ask them.”

Two with formal educations and all four of them with educations forged on the front lines of war. She doesn’t tell her mother much about what she’s done over the years. That would open up too many questions she doesn’t particularly feel like answering. So Toph plays dumb and lets Poppy believe what she wants.

“An acolyte came to talk to me about investing your allowance. She said you had approved it.”

“I did.” She sits up a little straighter, holding her head high and keeping her shoulders back. “I’ve already chosen a few investments I’d like to make.”

“Are you sure about them?”

“Positive.” Food and medicine are going to be the most promising ventures in this post-war world. Technology too, but that’s going to require a little more research. The last thing she wants to do is get involved with the wrong group.

And, of course, the various Bei Fong businesses. That’s always a good investment.

But she’ll keep that bit to herself.
Poppy shifts in her seat, vibrations nervous. “Have you given any thought to the other side of our arrangement?”

“You mean the marriage and children thing?” She can feel the swaying reverberations of a nod and sighs heavily. “Yes. I had every law searched trying to find a way out of it, but there really isn’t, is there?”

“No.”

“It’s still a bad rule.”

“That may be, but unless your line is secured, it can be argued that the Bei Fong fortune would be better off with one of your cousins who will provide a child.”

“Will they be held to the earthbender requirement?”

“They will be of a branch family, an emergency heir.”

“So that’s a no.” Of course it is. The inheritance laws were written with the intent that the fortune never passes to a branch heir. Why would they be held to the same standards? “Did you consider that I might not be ready for children?”

“You’re almost sixteen.”

“I just came out of a war. Excuse me if I’d like to salvage what’s left of my childhood before settling down.”

Poppy huffs. “And who was responsible for that? I don’t seem to recall anyone telling you that you had to be a soldier.”

“I was just supposed to ignore the Avatar when he asked me to be his earthbending master?”

“That’s not what I meant.” At least she seems to understand that the chance to train the long-missing Avatar wasn’t an opportunity to turn down, despite everything that happened over the course of those long months. It’s progress.

But there are things Toph’s never going to be able to say, mostly because she isn’t quite sure how to. It doesn’t make much sense to her, but she can sort of see where her parents were coming from when they decided to lock her up in the estate. The denying her existence to the world at large is still a bit baffling. Parents, though, can’t choose them and can’t live with them.

Sometimes she thinks it would have been better for them all if she’d stayed with the badgermoles. Except then she wouldn’t have heard the guards talking about the Earth Rumble and she wouldn’t have met Twinkles—and she wouldn’t have met Twinkles.

Not meeting Aang, that’s a thought. She could still be with the badgermoles, hidden away as a wild thing in the mountains of Gaoling. There’d be no fighting, no killing (possibly), and she wouldn’t be here in the Fire Nation capitol with her mother trying to explain how she turned into the monster that she is.

Except that means never meeting Zuko and Katara and Snow.

And that’s a world she never wants to know.

“I’m sorry I’m not the daughter you wanted.” She is, for what it counts. It can’t be easy
having her for a kid, especially when all they ever wanted was a sweet child to grow up and be the perfect Bei Fong heir.

Poppy’s hands are small and strong around Toph’s. “You’re not what I expected, but I wouldn’t have you any other way.”

“What?” This cannot—seriously? After everything, that is what her mother has to say?

“You’re everything you shouldn’t be for the world you were born into and the family you come from.” Poppy’s grip tightens. “But I’ve found I rather like being able to say my daughter is the greatest earthbender in the world.”

She feels Ty approaching before the airbender actually makes herself known. It was supposed to be different here. The villa is isolated and quiet, a place where she doesn’t have to worry and shouldn’t be using her bloodbending so much.

But it’s just so hard to relax. The tension winds up in her muscles, a tinderbox just waiting for a spark. The need to fight, to move, to use her bending to the fullest extent is growing ever stronger.

“You know what they’re going to do Zuko, don’t you?”

“They know about Azula?” She hasn’t made it all the way through the transcripts of Mai’s trial, but Ty probably has.

The airbender nods. “They questioned the Fire Sages, who told them that the only condition for Azula’s coronation was that Mai kept her on the clock-flower. By the time she took the crown, she’d already lost her bending to the poison.”

“So they know she didn’t fight Aang.”

“If they have any sense, then that’s the logical assumption.”

“We should have read those transcripts first.”

“We had bigger problems.” Ty Lee sighs heavily, leaning back to sprawl across the grass. “Attempted assassination and mental breakdowns. Way more important than some bureaucratic nonsense. And they didn’t get us copies of the transcripts until after the trials began.”

“I thought Acolytes stole them for us.”

“They did, but only because the White Lotus wouldn’t hand them over. We did file a formal request for them.”

That doesn’t sound good at all. “They knew we were going to cover things up.”

“Of course we were. Like we were going to do anything else.”
“Have you made any progress in getting through Mai’s records?”

Ty frowns. “Most of it we already knew. The newer information largely has to do with the Fire Nation and the state the country is in.”

“How bad is it?”

“We’ll be lucky if there isn’t a civil war within the next five years.”

It’s going to be like that across the world. The Water Tribes might escape if she can get the other version of the Sleeper Treaty, but there is nothing to protect the Fire Nation and the Earth Kingdom. “Do you want to get out here?”

“Leave Azar?”

“I don’t think we can do that just yet.” Though it is the most appealing move. “We only need to make it a week or so and then we’re free to go.”

“Assuming the White Lotus actually lets us go.”

“They will.”

Ty sits up, stretching her arms high above her head. “So confident. Want to go down to the marketplace?”

Twenty minutes later, they’re standing on the edge of the caldera in clothes that will help them blend in. It’s a quiet journey down to the city below, but the market is suitably busy enough that they can just vanish amidst the crowd.

“What’s our tea selection look like?”

The airbender presses close as they move around an arguing couple. “Perfectly fine. Li’s been making sure our stores don’t run low.”

“And I know we’ve got plenty of rice.” She slips into the old covers from the war with ease. There’s something about this skin that feels better than Katara of the South. It’s a comfort, a form of security in a strange world. “You said the herbs and spices were fine?”

“We could use a little more chili flakes.”

Of course they do. The rate at which Zuko and Ty go through them would be astounding if she weren’t familiar with Fire Nation foods. “We need eggs too. I’ll meet you at the waterfront in an hour?”

The airbender breaks off and they move separately through the market. There isn’t much money, so it’s stealing and distractions and all the tricks they picked up in those three years of freedom. While trying to pick up a few lychees for Ty, she catches sight of a woman in red across the street.

It’s just instinct, but everything in her is telling her to run, despite the lack of obvious danger. She takes the old escape pattern, built up to avoid the Dai Li in Ba Sing Se if they ever needed to go back to the walled city. She comes out closer to the water, breathing deeply and relaxing slightly.

And then she sees a flash of red.

Stashing her basket of goods, she runs and runs and runs. It’s thrilling, doing this. She’s not
dressed for a fight and she needs to stay near the water in a city she doesn’t know. The excitement of a difficult battle after so many months of languishing—how have they managed to stay sane for this long?

Except they’re not, they’re really not. She laughs, jumping over a cart of cabbages to disappear into a complex of laundry houses, exiting again near the waterfront. It’s close enough the hour that she should be safe to wait on Ty, so she moves towards the water and finds a secluded spot to jump in, resurfacing beneath the old wooden dock built along the shore.

Breathe in, breathe out. She expands her senses to feel for the hearts around her. Mostly strangers, but after time, her legs are burning from staying in position and a familiar grey heart brushes along the edges of her awareness. There’s tension in Ty as well, excitement and adrenaline pushing the chi and blood around much faster than normal. She reaches out and tugs down on the airbender’s limbs, just enough to alert Ty to her location.

Seconds later, Ty Lee swings down to meet her beneath the docks. “You’ve got one too?”

“A woman in red.”

“Same for me. There are at least three of them.”

“We can take them.”

Ty winces. “One of them is Su Lee.”

Katara almost asks what the problem is, but then the name registers. “Su Lee? Your sister?”

“The very one.”

“So this is a Kagami hit?”

“Unlikely. The sheer red shirts are a uniform for the junior Seal Maidens.”

“The prostitutes again?” Tui and La, just how much power does this brothel wield? Bordello, her mind corrects, remembering the exact words Zuko used. But really, is there that much of a difference? They’re still people trying to kill them. That’s all that matters at this point. “How do we handle this?”

“Knock them out and get out here faster than an eel hound chasing food?”

“Bloodbending or just waterbending?”

Ty shifts slightly, adjusting her position between two beams. “Which one will be more accurate?”

“I can identify the tension of a killer, but this many at once? I could kill someone if I try to take them all out at once.” And going one by one is too risky. The longer they stay conscious, the higher the chance they think to look below the dock. “Can you do it?”

The airbender stills. “What do you mean?”

“Can you take away the air above? Just enough to make them lightheaded or pass out.” Her legs are starting to burn. Carefully, she draws up water to freeze, helping them both stay put. “I’ll monitor their hearts and make sure they stay alive.”

This is all so weird. They’re under attack and actively trying to not kill their assailants. Just a
year ago, she would have stopped their hearts and it wouldn’t have been a problem. Now, though, it is peacetime. If they want to make it through the White Lotus to go home to the Temple, then it would be best if there were no inexplicable disappearances of people who might be missed.

And they’ve already killed one of Ty’s sisters. It would be for the best if they didn’t take a second.

“I don’t know if I can.” Ty’s heart is fluttering, the nervous energy slowly spreading along her veins. “I’ve never done anything like that before.”

She has a point. During the war, they trained her to kill. The exact method of taking away just enough air to knock out but not kill is extremely delicate; it’s far easier to just use bloodbending. “Just think of it as a whirlpool of air, the middle of which is like when you fly to high and the air is too thin to breathe.”

“But wide enough to cover them all?”

Katara nods. “I’ll draw them overhead, if you think you can do it.”

It takes a moment, but eventually Ty nods, grey eyes bright. Breathing deeply, Katara reaches out for the limbs of the would-be assassins, tugging on them enough to steer them gently towards the pier. Across from her, the airbender has closed her eyes and the wind is slowly starting to move. “They’re in position.”

And then the air pushes out and above. She keeps a close eye on their hearts, noting the increase in heart rate as the air pressure drops. Eventually everything starts to slow down as the thin air takes its toll, hearts pushing slower to preserve what little rich oxygen is already in the blood. “Stop.”

They fall one by one, a tangled heap of bodies on the pier. She flicks the water out to catch one of them, pushing the slender woman back onto the wood. Quickly, she releases the ice beneath the dock and then she and Ty are out, swinging over the fallen to run at top speed back towards the caldera.

She can’t stop the smile, a combination of the exhilaration of a familiar pattern and pride for her student and that sheer joy of being alive. Ty’s hand reaches for hers, their fingers lacing together as the airbender laughs.

Yeah, they needed this.

Chapter End Notes

That did not go as planned. It's also something of a mess, but it's kind of a transition. I'm trying to wrap up the trials quickly so we can get to the Search for Ursa arc.
How is she supposed to explain that she doesn’t give a viper-rat’s ass what happens to the Northern Tribe? Then again, she really should care. With the decimation of the South, the North is now the most powerful faction in the Water Tribes. Control them, and she controls the fate of her nation. She just has to get her hands on the other copy of the Sleeper Treaty.

“Chief Arnook has nephews, doesn’t he? Surely one of them can inherit in lieu of Princess Yue.” She takes a deep breath, thinking back to the Northern genealogical charts the Air Nation kept. “As I recall, Hahn was a nephew of the royal family, so clearly there was always the intention for one of them to take over, even if it were by marriage to the Tribal Princess.”

The interrogator—they really should learn his name if they’re going to be dealing with him constantly—adjusts his glasses. “True, but Princess Yue was not the only Tribal Princess within the Water Tribes. By marrying Prince Zuko, you have placed the inheritance of the Water Tribes in a rather delicate situation.”

“I don’t see how. Pick a nephew and marry him to a distant cousin. It’s fairly simple.”

“Do you know how inheritance works in the North?”

“I would presume it works like the South. Oldest child down to the youngest and then on to other relations, and out until you find someone of the blood who can inherit.” She glances over to where Sokka sits, his back painfully straight. “If that fails, then an election is held.”

“Has it ever come to that in the South?”

“No. We tended to have large families. My grandfather was the youngest of five. All of his brothers died in the raids, which is how he ended up on the throne.”

“And when he died?”

“My father was still a toddler, so my grandmother ruled as regent by right of marriage, as the only other surviving male of my grandfather’s line was his maternal cousin.”

“The cousin didn’t take over?”

“He was still a child at the time, but when he came of age he took a position as an advisor.”

The interrogator nods. “Because he was a maternal relation?”
“Because my father was alive and healthy and of the main branch.” She can’t help but scowl; what is it with the outside world thinking Southern women are weak and helpless? “My great-grandmother Nita was the ruling Chief in her time as the firstborn.”

There are murmurs from among the crowd. Mostly Northern, from the look of it. Idiots. “Daughters inherit as sons?”

“Firstborn children inherit, regardless of whether they are male or female. At least historically.” She sits up a little straighter. “It’s no secret that a son is more likely to die in childhood than a daughter is. If we only let sons inherit, we would have lost everything centuries ago. The South Pole is not as forgiving as the North.”

“So you have no intention of helping the North?”

“The North never helped me.”

That gets a reaction out of the crowd. She can see some of them on their feet, but finding Pakku next to her grandmother, the old master only nods grimly in her direction. There’s probably a warning there, but it’s useless. She’s not stupid enough to bring up the Sleeper Treaty here in the open. The point of all this is to avoid a war, not start one.

“You were trained by Master Pakku in the North, weren’t you?”

She nods. “Only after he found out who my grandmother was. He did it out of love for her, not because of my skill. It was Master Hama who trained me in the Southern Waterbending style.”

“Bloodbending?”

“We worked up to that.” It’s so tempting to reach out and grab his heart. “Bloodbending requires a basic knowledge of Southern Waterbending. The rest I learned on my own after her imprisonment from Air Nation scrolls.”

He’s pacing again. “Are you planning to teach bloodbending at this school your friends are wanting to open?”

“If I have students who are strong enough and won’t abuse it.” She smiles a little, thinking back to Mai’s words and the snide comments some of the Acolytes have been passing on to her from the Fire Nation nobles. “And if I have any waterbender children, I will teach them. This is a part of their heritage, after all.”

And that’s how to upset the Northern Water Tribe and the Fire Nation in one strike. What’s most upsetting? That she is willing to pass on bloodbending or the very real possibility that the Fire Nation could have waterbenders in the royal bloodline?

“You are in favor of the school plan, then?”

“It’s needed. There are entire generations of benders in this world who don’t know how to properly use their elements. Not to mention all of the mixed-race children. You have siblings of opposing elements and other benders suddenly popping up within families of different nations. They need somewhere safe to go.”

“You mean the airbenders born into the Fire Nation and the Earth Kingdom.” He stops right in front of her, the light on his face making the mixed heritage in his own features very obvious.

“And the children born to mixed marriages in the colonies.”
And, as blasphemous as it is, any burning children who might still be born in the South Pole. There are some tragedies that need to remain firmly in the past and if there is a safe space for those children, then maybe the South can begin to move on without repeating the horrors of the war years. Airbenders, too, but firebenders born to people who fear fire above all else. Waterbenders born to families who still regard the power as an omen of death. Earthbenders born where they have been punished and taken from their homes to work in mines.

All the children born of war with power in their hands—those are the people this school is for. The last thing anyone wants is someone deciding vengeance is a worthwhile pursuit with abilities they do not know how to properly wield.

But there are things that are not spoken of, so she won’t tell the White Lotus about this. Some secrets of the South are worth protecting. For Sakari, Kya, and all those hurt by the suspicion of fire, she will stay quiet in public. Stand tall for the airbenders instead, when really this is for healing the wounds left all over the world.

“You okay, Sweetness?” She steps heavily onto the ground, relishing the feel of solid earth after a day spent in the palace. “You’re feeling a little heavy right now.”

“Just tired.”

Beside Katara, Snowlion stretches out against the grass, vibrations subdued. “Come sit with us. We’re just talking about our plans for the school.”

“Have you thought about Taku at all?” She drops down on the other side of Sugar, senses radiating out through the garden to reveal a serene setting.

Snow sits up, form flaring against the ground as her elbow hits the ground hard. “Taku?”

Toph nods. “I’m thinking about maybe talking to Sora about rebuilding some of the gardens to start growing medicine again. There’s going to be high demand in coming years. Maybe a few gardens for food as well. Taku’s land is really good for growing things.”

“So you’re serious about investing in agriculture?”

She shrugs. “It’s the smart move. Medicine and food are going to be the biggest markets in the post-war. With the collapse of the Fire Nation, there’s going to be shortages worldwide, except maybe in the Water Tribes.”

Sugar whistles lowly. “That’s cold, badgermole.”

“We need money for the school. It may be cold, but it’s realistic.” She taps her hand against the ground, feeling all the bugs crawling through the grass. “We’ll need food and medicine for the school, too. We’ve got enough for ourselves and maybe a few others, but how many airbenders will be in the first class?”
Snow’s vibrations flare up just a little as the airbender sits up. “The Council is promising us one hundred students for the first class.”

“That’s more than I was expecting.” Toph says, turning to where she knows Katara is. “And how many waterbenders do you think we’ll have?”

“Maybe fifteen to twenty at the most. They’ll probably mostly be from the Foggy Swamp.” There’s some bitterness there, but now is not the time to ask. Whatever is going on with the Water Tribes will eventually come out.

“Do we have any projections on possible firebenders?” Snow nods. “Assuming we just get kids from the colonies, even if they’re orphans, we’re still talking about fifty or so kids if the Acolytes are right. Probably about the same number of earthbenders from the colonies.”

“So that’s over two hundred students right there.” She scratches her head. They may have bitten off more than they chew with this project. “We’re going to need to feed them, and to outfit the city to properly house them. We’ll need other teachers and supplies. We simply can’t do this without some kind of consistent funding.”

“We can hire Acolytes to teach. There’s enough of them in multiple disciplines that would be willing to help us.” There’s a rhythmic tapping along Snow’s leg, like her fingers are doing that very annoying movement that Poppy’s did against the counter. At least it’s not against stone. “But that’s still talking about huge classes. Maybe we should cut the class size down until we get the hang of this. The Air Nation is talking about reopening the Temples to serve as schools and shelters.”

“But how long will that take?” Katara’s starting to show signs of doubt, which wasn’t the intention of this conversation. “The Eastern Temple is probably ready to go, but the North has been taken over by Earth Kingdom refugees, the South is filled with dead bodies, and the West was so heavily damaged by Azula and Combustion Man that it’s unlikely any of them will be ready within five years. The Temple of the Winds is the only one really available right now.”

“We can do this. Maybe with smaller classes to start. Maybe we just start with airbenders and add the rest slowly over the following years?” She needs to fix this because this school has to happen. It’s their only chance to control their own destinies and save the children of the world from ending up like them. “We’ll rebuild Taku, invest in the right places, start small with airbenders and go from there. We can do this. The Acolytes and Lungta and Airbenders will all help us and the Foggy Swamp will help too, won’t they?”

Katara’s nodding, that’s good. At least it feels like she’s nodding. The vibrations are a little too distant from the ground to get a good sense. “Probably. They seem to be aware of some of the problems in the Tribes now.”

Toph taps her hand against the ground, focusing on raising a scale model of Taku from the ground. “So this is what I’m thinking of. Some of the Air Nation is talking about going back to Taku to help Sora rebuild her greenhouse and learn medicine-making. We’ll help, and expand the gardens by repairing the terracing and water management systems throughout the valley. If we do it properly, the fields should be self-maintaining. They’ll just need some pest management and harvesting done by people.”

There’s a splash from nearby and something that feels like water threads through her model. Beside her, Katara relaxes. “I’ve taken a look at the irrigation in the city, and it’s not too badly damaged. Most of the springs are still functional and from the way the rainwater moves down the mountains, the terraces are built to be water management in addition to fields. The ones at the bottom
are where the most water collects, so it’d be best to grow rice there. Maybe on the terraces farthest out from Sora’s greenhouse? They’re wider than the ones closest where most of the medicinal herbs are.”

“That’s what I was thinking.” Good, at least one of them is getting what she’s thinking. “We’ll help plant the most valuable medicinal plants closest to Sora’s greenhouse and then go from medicinal to food radiating out to the edges of the city. There’s some terraces near the gate that feel like they’d be good for cabbages, if we want to make it up to that merchant we kept running into.”

Snow feels confused, but Sweetness collapses into laughter. “Cabbage merchant?”

“Did you never run into him?”

Snow’s vibrations don’t clear up. “I don’t think so. Did you?”

“Repeatedly.” Sweetness recovers enough to start talking. “No matter where we were, we seemed to run into him and without fail knocked over his cart. So many cabbages were lost because of us."

“‘My cabbages!’” Toph cries, doing her best to mimic the merchant before laughter takes over. “We really should make it up to him. And he’d be a good investment. Cabbages are a good strong crop and they’re easy to do on a grand scale. People may not like them, but they’re cheap to grow and cheap to sell.”

“It’ll work as a stop gap. They’re a good pioneer plant until we can get other plants established.” There’s a smile in Katara’s voice, the first Toph’s heard in a long time. “At least until we can get rice growing on a grand scale again. I know the rice fields in the Fire Nation have lost most of their laborers.”

“It’s like that in the Earth Kingdom too.” Ty Lee sounds excited, her vibrations showing an airbender just barely staying still. “This would actually work. I’ll take the proposal to the Air Nation if you want me to.”

Toph shakes her head. “I’d rather do it myself.”

“Feeling okay?” Katara sits down beside him, hand on his shoulder. “You’ve been quiet since this morning.”

He moves aside to show her the papers before him. “I think I’ve got a reasonable substitute for the monarchy.”

She’s quiet for a moment. “You’re really serious about this, then?”

“Do you not want me to be?”
The hand on his shoulder tightens just a little. “I want you to be happy. This is just a big decision, and I don’t want you to do something you might regret.”

He reaches up to thread his fingers through hers. “This is what I want. With the way things are going to be now that the war is over, a monarchy won’t work. The damage to the nation is too severe; there’s no way a single ruler can solve all this. There are too many islands for that.”

He’s been over it so many times now. All the islands, the current population and Mai’s own projections for the future in addition to the Air Nation’s projections. The smaller islands will need a voice in the coming years and that’s something that simply can’t be guaranteed under the current system. The nobles will only speak up for the things that are in their interests and Uncle can only do so much by himself. The White Lotus might lessen some of the damage, but they can’t do everything.

Even if he and the others provide support alongside the Air Nation, there is no path to rebuilding the Fire Isles with an absolute monarchy in control.

A thousand years and it all ends with him.

How’s that for memorable?

“Elections?” Katara has one of the papers in her free hand, blue eyes tracing the lines of writing. “You’re wanting to put an elected government in power?”

“You told me how the small council in the South Pole was traditionally created. Every clan elected a representative, right?”

She nods. “So every clan would have a voice. You want to do that for the islands?”

“I’m trying to figure out how best to do it.” He picks up another paper. “Some of the islands are more heavily populated than others, and they’ll still need a ruler. Uncle will do it for the meantime, but what happens after him? I don’t want it, and I don’t particularly want any of my descendants on the throne and without Azula’s bloodline continuing, there are no more heirs. Azulon and Sozin were both only children. Any potential relation is too far removed from the main branch to inherit.”

She’s quiet a little too long and it’s that silence that points out exactly what he’s said. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to presume.”

She removes her hand from his and leans against him, still looking at the paper. “It’s okay. We’re going to have to talk about it sometime. And you’re right. If you’re not going to inherit, there’s no reason for any of our children to. I don’t particularly want them inheriting any title from the Water Tribes, not knowing what the North might do with that.”

“So this is going to be something we do?”

“Maybe.” She puts the paper down. “I know it’s expected and a part of me does want children, but after everything, I’m not sure I can.”

“Aang wouldn’t want you putting your life on hold because things went sour with him.”

She smiles, still not looking at him. “It’s not Aang that scares me.”

He moves a little to put an arm around her shoulders. “You know my hesitations about this.”
“Aang wasn’t the first child I ever killed.”

That, however, was not what he was expecting. She’s talked some about what it was like
growing up in the South Pole and he just thought it had to do with that but this? “What?”

“Just after the men left to join the war.” Her body temperature is dropping dramatically. “My
grandmother took me to assist in a birth. Sakari, Bato’s wife. It was their first child. A perfectly
healthy baby boy. His name was Nanuq.”

“And you killed him?”

“He was a few months old, just starting to crawl.” She takes a deep breath. “You have to
understand, when the Southern Raiders came, they did actually raid the South. They didn’t just take
our waterbenders. Their aim was to destroy the Tribe completely.”

He has a fairly good sense of where this is going. Hama’s hatred of the Fire Nation is starting
to make a little more sense. “This isn’t something Sokka knows, is it?”

“It’s not talked about. Very few know about it anymore, especially since all of the known
burning children are dead.” She pulls away from him just a little. “There were some, though, that it
was impossible to know. They were born at times that it wasn’t clear who their fathers were and they
looked just like every other Tribesman. It wasn’t unless they had fire in their hands that anyone could
know.”

“Nanuq was one of them?”

She nods. “Sakari was. She was an unknown, a nonbender like my mother, so there was no
way of knowing until she found him playing with a flame.”

Like her mother? Kya? Did she really just imply that there was a possibility that her mother
was half Fire Nation? No wonder this isn’t talked about. “How did you end up killing him?”

“My grandmother handed him to me and I was told to go take him to La.” She has her knees
drawn up to her chest. He can’t really remember the last time she looked so small and fragile. “So I
did. He was still too young to stand up, let alone swim. I held him until he went to sleep and then put
him in the water. His furs were heavy enough to weigh him down. He didn’t wake up, just slept
through the whole thing. I still remember watching him disappear into the darkness of the water.”

“What happened after that?”

“A week later, Sakari covered herself with tiger seal blood and walked into a polar bear dog
den. They tore her to pieces. My grandmother ruled that Bato was to be told that Sakari died in
childbirth and that the child was stillborn. Since it was impossible to get a message to him after they
left, it wasn’t a huge problem.”

“Beyond Aang, was Nanuq the only one?”

She nods. “When I got home, I told my grandmother that I’d send her to La if she ever made
me do that again. It’s the only time I’ve ever threatened a member of my family like that, but by that
age I knew that was what happened to waterbenders and what most of the villagers wanted to do to
me. It’s one thing knowing about it, but something so different actually seeing it happen and being
the one to do it.”

“No one said anything?”
“It’s just what was done in the South. We’re not as forgiving as the North. Never have been and never will be.”

He brushes a strand of hair out of her face. “So you’re afraid of having children because of that?”

“No.” Finally she looks at him and there are tears welled up among the blue. “I’m terrified of having a son that looks like me with fire in his hands. I’m not sure I can do that.”

What exactly is he supposed to say? Is there anything right to say to that? He’d known that life in the Southern Water Tribe had been awful in the years after the raids began but she’d always held back some of the information. It hadn’t been hard to figure out what some of it was. The burning children were a logical assumption for an all-male attacking group aiming to destroy an entire civilization. Cut off supplies and try to destroy future generations. The Fire Nation’s military playbook is fairly simple in its brutality.

He settles for pulling her close, raising his body temperature to keep her warm. She’s almost entirely in his lap and he can see the outline of his plan to replace the monarchy spread out on the table in front of them. “I thought I was afraid of being my father, but I think now I’m more afraid of being my mother.”

“You’re nothing like Ozai.”

“I know, and that’s why I’m so afraid of being like my mother. Uncle always told me I was like her, but it’s not like she was mother of the year.” He releases her enough that she can move into a more comfortable position. “We’ve both got demons. We’ll just have to figure this out as we go.”

And that is arguably the most terrifying prospect of them all.

She stretches out against the grass, letting the wind lift her up just a little. It’s a quiet night, though there’s some tension and sorrow on the wind coming through Zuko and Katara’s open window. She doesn’t dare listen to it; they’ve both got some shadows they need to deal with on their own. Instead, she listens to Toph’s conversations with the Acolyte financier that Aunt Jet sent over to help establish the investment plan.

That’s happy sounds. It’s the sound of the future, of progress, of a life that they can actually find peace in. It might take time, but it’s something at least.

She reaches out her arms to push herself higher off the ground, reveling in the freedom of the wind around her. This is the part about being an airbender that she loves the most. The embrace of her element feels like home in a way nothing else ever can.

After being deprived of this for so long, it’s a little hard to keep her feet on the ground.
Is this what Avatar Aang felt like? A century in the iceberg had to be excruciating even if he wasn’t conscious through it. There’s just something in their blood and bones that says when they’ve been earthbound for too long. It screams at them in their dreams, claws at their insides and rips them apart until they take to the sky again.

It is here, among the clouds, that they are home.

But it isn’t really her home. Maybe it could be, if she weren’t tethered to the ground by so many heartstrings. Would her great-grandmother and grandmother be okay with this? Her grandmother loved her nonbender daughter just as much as Aunt Jet, so maybe. But great-grandmother? Tinley, the first Ty Lee? Would she be okay with this after having her right to fly so violently taken away?

Would she be okay with this if she’d ever known what became of that unknown brother?

All those heartstrings and so many of them have been cut in recent years. She can’t go back to her family, except Aunt Jet and this new little family she’s claimed all by herself.

And then there’s Mai.

Ty Lee floats carefully down to the ground, landing lightly on the grass. She’s going to have to deal with Mai again and soon, if the whispers are right and the sentencing is going to come down within the next month. Mai likely won’t see her again, though, not after their last encounter.

So that leaves the White Lotus.

Katara and Toph both seem to understand her history with Mai, and Zuko surely won’t mind if she approaches Iroh with the intent to petition for leniency on Mai’s behalf. Yes, her former sworn sister has run this country into the ground but she did it trying to save it. She just inherited a lost cause from Ozai. Nothing more. This damage wasn’t her fault, not really. There are a few of her scrolls that would help her, if Aunt Zen has really used up all of her influence.

She really should go see Iroh anyway. It’s been too long since they’ve spoken one-on-one.

Ty Lee floats up once more and turns in a somersault mid-air.

She can deal with the ground world later. Right now it’s time for her and the sky.

Chapter End Notes

I wrote this chapter in about an hour and a half after writing up two chapters for my original novel today.

I think it shows, because we’re about twenty chapters out from where I was planning on finally revealing the information about Nanuq and the burning children. If you’ve been paying attention, that bit of the story was first hinted all the way back in chapter seven (hours of the sky) of ’world’. Admittedly, though, we are quickly closing in on Katara’s major confrontation with the Northern Water Tribe, I guess it is the right time to be dealing with some of the heavier issues regarding the Water Tribes.

We’re finally getting to the part of the story where they’re really beginning to focus on moving on, and yes, Cabbage Corps is going to be a Bei Fong company by the time the
Korra years come around.
drink the oceans dry

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“I still don’t like you.”

He sighs heavily. “I know you don’t, Master Hama, and I don’t expect you to.”

The old waterbender huffs, curling deeper into her furs—how is she even wearing those anyway? It’s summer in the Fire Nation—silver eyes trained on him like a snake hawk watching its prey. This is the way the entire tea has gone and he’s really struggling to figure out exactly why Hama wanted to speak to him.

“Katara is keeping up with her bending, isn’t she?”

“Of course she is. That’s why we left the palace. There wasn’t enough water there.”

“There’s always plenty of water, if you know where to look.” Hama’s grin makes it very clear exactly which water she means.

He coughs and pours more tea for her. Green, no sweetener. He doesn’t think he can go for black tea anytime soon after the Incident. “I assume you’ve been settling in nicely with the Southern Water Tribe?”

“It’s home. Of course I am.”

He won’t call her out on it. They’re not that close, not yet. There’s absolutely no way the old master is doing okay with the new Tribe. It’s not the same world she was stolen from. Not left, that difference is important. She was taken. Always remember that. For everything that she has done, the root of it is in the trauma inflicted by his home nation on orders from his family.

And besides, in the years to come, he needs to be prepared for damaged souls far worse than Hama to come out of the woodwork. They’re not going to be able to keep the Fire Nation’s instability secret for very long. Once talk of restitution comes up, it will be out that they have no money and no infrastructure and nothing of any use that will help them successfully survive in the post-war.

The second that weakness becomes known, all bets are off.

What are they thinking, believing they can stop another war from breaking out in the post-war?

And when exactly did they stop thinking of this time as peacetime?

“You’re thinking too hard.” Hama’s voice is sharp enough to drag him away from the cliff
edge. She’s still looking sour, but he’s beginning to think that maybe that’s just the way she is.

More than half a century in enemy territory will likely do that.

“I’m sorry. It’s been a stressful month.”

She snorts. “The White Lotus can’t put your sister or father on trial, so they’re going to go after you.”

That was a perhaps a bit too gleeful than necessary. “I’m well aware, Master Hama.”

Will she still be so cautious around him when the Lotus inevitably asks about Aang’s death? Will she still be so hateful when she finds out he killed Azula?

Breathe, focus. It’s getting easier to think about that. Or is he just getting used to it? It’s too hard to tell at this point what the difference between adapting and apathy is.

“You’re taking care of her, aren’t you?”

It takes him a moment to realize she means Katara. Looking back up at the old master, he can see the grudging curiosity buried in the hostility. “You’re really worried about her.”

“She’s my student, of course I am.”

“And your family,” he says gently. “I know about Chief Nita.”

She goes very still before nodding slowly. “And my family. Just how much has she told you?”

“More than you would probably like me to know.”

“As expected.” Hama grimaces something he thinks might be an attempt at a friendly smile. “She chose you for some reason La only knows. I can’t kill you and she’s asked me to at least attempt being nice. Says you betrayed the Fire Nation to save the Water Tribes.”

“I betrayed the Fire Nation to save the world.” He returns the smile more easily. “Katara won’t kill you if that’s what you’re afraid of.”

“Her association with the spirits doesn’t scare you?” Those silver snake hawk eyes are back to the intense focus they started out with at the beginning of this meeting.

He shrugs. “Better her than someone else.”

Really. Once it became apparent what was going on, he very clearly remembers his first fleeting thought as I hope to Agni that Azula never develops this.

But that was back in those almost peaceful days when they were operating out of the Temple doing little disruptive missions like imps wreaking havoc and Azula was still the scary monster in the night.

Things were so much simpler then.

“You have a point.” Her smile returns and becomes something vicious, razorblade sharp and so very like Azula’s at her most violent. Not for the first time, he wonders exactly why Katara likes this woman. “You do love her, though? I will kill you the second I get my bending back if you’re lying.”
“And you would be able to tell? My sister was good enough to fool Toph.”

Hama shakes her head. “You’ve got the face of an awful liar.”

He takes a drink of tea, letting the warmth seep through his chest. “She is the only one.”

The answer may not be what she wants, but it’s the best he can give. He does understand where this is coming from. Hama is worried about Katara. Hama spent over half a century in a hostile land after being forcibly taken and imprisoned by people who look like him on orders of people who gave rise to him. That her only student and cousin has chosen a life with him is obviously a reason for concern.

At least she doesn’t have her bending.

Small miracles.

She’s in the gardens going through her paces when an almost familiar presence steps onto her earth. “Rinchen, is that you?”

“Hello, Master Toph. Are you the only one here right now?”

She slips into the first of the airbending stances. “Yeah. Zuko’s having tea with Hama and Sweetness went somewhere after breakfast. Snow’s going to have tea with Iroh.”

Iroh, now. Not Uncle. That’s going to take some time to get back to, if ever.

And that kind of sucks.

Is the post-war going to be like this forever?

The Acolyte takes a seat, the vibrations echoing throughout the garden. “She went alone?”

She means Snow. That tone isn’t one Toph was hoping to hear. “So he did poison Sparky.”

“That’s the thing about the Judge. Let it sit in sunlight too long and it will discolor.” Something brushes against her senses in—tap a foot against the ground a little too hard while going into the next stance—Rinchen’s hands. “It’s a weak mix, based on how faint the change is, but it’s enough that it could be used on someone under extreme stress with the correct steering.”

“You know that much?” She knew life in the palace could probably be stressful, but this is edging into terrifying territory. How much do they really know about this woman? Toph is at a disadvantage here if it comes to needing to bury Rinchen where the sleeping fires of the mountain will devour her.

The Acolyte laughs, an easy gentle sound that has Toph pausing to remember the last time she heard something so free. “Me? No. I took it to the local apothecary. Said my husband had been insistent that I use this honey instead of the other we normally used.”

“They didn’t recognize you?”
The ground echoes a shift in weight that might be a shrug. “I was never very public when I was a part of the royal family. The ten years of age also helps.”

“So you don’t look like you did back then?”

To her surprise, Rinchen laughs again. “Spirits, no. I was nineteen when I married Lu Ten. At thirty I would like to say I no longer look so much like a child. Give yourself ten years and people might not recognize you either.”

Ten years. She hasn’t really thought that far ahead yet. It’s been so short term for so long now, just day by day until they reach the next goal. What is their next goal? The school?

Yeah, assume the school.

So once they get that going and assuming everything goes well and it’s a success, what happens then? For her, she has a two year deadline to have a child with her power. If she manages that, then in ten years she will be the mother of an eight-year-old.

She’ll be twenty-six.

Stopping her paces, she falls down to the ground, the impact sending out a wave that gives her a sense of everything on the little island they’ve created. She can feel the trees swaying the wind and the insects moving in tiny little echoes across the ground.

This is what keeps her grounded. Mentally that is. Physically she’s pretty good about staying on solid ground. Has to be, after all.

“Master Toph, are you feeling all right?”

She can feel the Acolyte about to stand up, but she waves a hand, indicating to stay put. “I’m fine. Just thinking too much.”

“At your age, the future can do that.”

“Was it like this for you at sixteen?”

Rinchen moves a little, her whole body stretched out across the ground. “At sixteen, I was already betrothed to Lu Ten. I thought I knew where my life was going. It was all planned out.”

“And then he died.”

“And then he died.”

Toph sighs. “That’s the problem with the future. Anything can happen and plans rarely play out the way they’re supposed to.”

Just look at what their war was like—because it was theirs, in the end, even if it was in the start, even if they never wanted it. They had all these carefully made plans about reintroducing themselves to Twinkletoes and then going after Big Bad Azula as one grand force.

Only, Twinkles never recovered after Wulong and found them too soon, mucking up that first plan. Then they finally do go after Azula and find out she’s just a husk of the fierce warrior she once was and is nothing more than a puppet emperor for a failing nation.

Spirits, they didn’t even have to go to the Fire Nation to end the war. All they had to do was wait for it to collapse under its own weight. Snow and Sparky both have told her what the records
look like. At most, the Fire Nation under Knives had only a couple of years before completely falling apart.

“The what ifs will kill you faster than the future will,” Rinchen says. From the tone, Toph is pretty sure the Acolyte has said this before to someone else. Probably Sparky. He does tend to dwell on the past more than the rest of them.

“I know.” To her right, Rinchen moves enough to give a stronger sense of what the woman must look like. Delicate, mostly, in the same way all children of the wind seem to be, but there’s a tension in the body. Stress similar to what she can feel in Zuko and Katara and Ty Lee.

Does she feel like that?

The all have marks from the war, but what about the things no one can see? The nightmares and hauntings, the little things burnt into their minds that they will never be able to forget? What happens to those wounds? Do they just live with them, everything scarring over and warping them even more than the war itself did?

Or does it just mean that the war isn’t over for them? That it never really will be? Will they always be looking over their shoulder? What about if they do have children? What will their kids be like, growing up with them? None of them know how to be children, let alone how to shield someone from the horrors of the world.

No, they are the kind who jump right in. If something awful is going on, chances are they will be right in the middle of it. They’re soldiers. They’re not really cut out for the post-war life, are they?

“I just keep thinking we screwed up.” She stretches out against the ground, feeling for the hum of the volcano beneath her. “Like there’s some great cosmic joke going on and right now we’re just waiting on the punch line.”

Well, this could have gone better.

“You really should have been one of mine. Once we realized that idiot was going to stay in the iceberg and you were going to come anyway, that is.”

Katara breathes deeply, doing everything Ty Lee and Zuko have taught her about meditating. Breathe, empty the mind. Relax.

Ignore the flame hand on her shoulder.

“Hey, aren’t you listening to me? I’m trying to tell you that you had the chance to be awesome and were twice screwed over.”
Breathe in. Breathe out. There are no thoughts in her mind. There is not a fire god masquerading as a teenage girl hanging onto her and trying to gain her attention.

And to think, she just wanted to talk to Yue.

“You know, you should give me your firstborn.”

“What?” There goes whatever concentration she had. “I am not giving you my firstborn or any children.”

The fire girl frowns, light dimming just a little as she floats just in front of Katara. “I don’t mean like that. I mean you should let me bless him. It’s only fair after La stole you from me.”

“La didn’t steal me. I was born into the Southern Water Tribe to a Water Tribe family. Of course I was going to be a waterbender.”

The girl doesn’t look impressed. “Tell that to the Four Brothers. They wanted you to be an airbender because of your grandfather and great-grandfather. They only lost because it was an airbender who stole your destiny the first time around.”

“Look, I don’t mean to offend you, but I don’t want to talk to you.” Katara closes her eyes again, determined to stay calm.

“Moon Girl is busy trying to explain why she intervened with human conflict.” A bright light passes before her eyes and she thinks it might be the girl’s hand. “So you’re not going to be seeing her for a while. Should have tried that fish-breathed loser you’re so close to.”

Clenched teeth are bad for teeth. Relax and ignore the slight. “My business is not with La, but with someone who lived under wartime Water Tribe law.”

She can feel the girl sitting beside her, shoulder pressed against hers. “Yeah, you’re just going to have to find someone else to answer those questions. I can’t help you with that and like I said, Moon Girl is busy.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“Because I like you!” There is absolutely no way this is who she thinks it is. It just can’t be. “And you should have been a firebender. I don’t like how the blood got into you, but it’s there and it might as well do some good.”

Breathe, Katara. Just breathe. “I’m pretty happy as a waterbender.”

“Afraid they might have killed you if you weren’t?” Despite the girl being made of fire, the temperature in the area drops to just over freezing. “Hey, there’s no reason for that.”

“Yes, actually there is,” Katara says slowly. “Please leave. Go away and never contact me again.”

“Can’t do that, sweetheart.”

Of course she had to come up here without her water skins. It’s not like the caldera walls could have a nice river or anything nearby. No, of course not. She’s up here with a girl made of fire and absolutely no method of extinguishing her.

“Could you at least give me a little space?”
The girl moves away and when Katara opens her eyes, she sees the living flame kicked back midair like she’s across a chair. “You’re feisty. See what I mean about making a good firebender?”

“Waterbenders are more terrifying.” If nothing else, she can put Hama’s madness to good use. “We have a darkness in us that no other bender has. We are the storm, the devouring sea, the drowning rains, and the raging river. We are the patient destruction of everything you love.”

“Poetic. The Fire Nation once had the best poets in the world.”

“And now it’s just a ramshackle mess about to collapse under its own weight and very likely take the whole world with it.” That was a failed attempted at keeping any bitterness out of her voice.

Oh well. It’s not like she asked to have a spirit hanging around. Or, actually, she did. Just not this spirit.

“Fair enough.” The spirit shifts, settling to sit midair, legs and arms crossed as she faces Katara. “I would have protected you, though, had you been one of mine. I could have gotten you to here, encouraged the Sages to take you in. You could have saved this nation.”

“I don’t think I could have, even if I were a firebender.” There’s no use attempting to meditate now. “Sozin damned this country when he decided to kill the airbenders. This country is Aang’s burden. Not mine.”

“You can’t know that.”

“No, actually I can. I know the new airbenders, the ones born of survivors. They’ve been working to destroy this country for years. The only way I would have been useful would have been as an airbender.”

Fire Girl looks unimpressed. “You would have made a dreadful airbender. That’s probably the one mercy of that little brat stealing your destiny. You never had to find out just how bad you’d be at it.”

“You can’t know that.”

“Yeah, I can.” Fire Girl laughs, the fire of her hair flaring wildly. “There are some pretty great fortune tellers on my side of the veil. The Four Brothers were upset about it because of your blood.”

“My blood, my blood.” Katara shifts, uncrossing her legs and folding her arms over her knees. “What exactly is this fixation on my blood?”

The spirit stops laughing. “You don’t realize it, do you?”

“What?”

“Had you been the Avatar, you would have been the first one to carry within you the blood of more than one nation.” She rolls through the air, fire trailing after her. “That’s why we’re all so interested in your kids. Between you and the prince, only Earth is missing. Not that that matters. The Three Sisters have that little Bei Fong girl at their mercy. They couldn’t care less about you and your prince.”

The Sisters must be the Earth Spirits. So, one for Fire, two for Water, three for Earth, and four for Air. That’s not the Avatar Cycle, so why that order?
“We predate the first benders.” The spirit smiles. “You were thinking aloud.”

“So you thought you would just interrupt my meditation and come here instead of Yue to demand my firstborn child?”

“Something like that.”

“You haven’t even told me who you are.”

The spirit laughs, flipping over to look at her upside down. “You already know who I am.”

“Excuse me if I’m having a little trouble believing the powerful fire god of the Fire Nation is a teenage girl on a permanent sugar high.”

The spirit’s smile looks absolutely wicked from this angle. “You know, you could just call me Agni.”

“You’re not my spirit.”

“I could have been. Avatar or firebender, either way you would have been dealing with me.” The grin definitely turns devious. “You could deal with me anyway if you just let me bless your firstborn son.”

“Thank you, but I’m rather happy with La and Yue.”

“Your husband is a firebender. A very powerful one at that. Do you really think La will be able to claim all your children?”

“Who says he will be the father of all my children?”

Agni scoffs. “Sweetheart, even La has acknowledged that some of your kids will be blessed by me instead. Besides, you’ve got enough trust issues to make a kodama look downright social.”

“My firstborn son, though?” Katara ignores the insult, again. “We’re both girls here. Why not the firstborn daughter?”

“La’s already laid claim to her. It’s only the son that’s up for grabs.”

“That’s a little presumptuous, isn’t it?”

“What is?”

Katara frowns. “You’re assuming that there will be more than one child. You wouldn’t be okay with La claiming the firstborn daughter if you weren’t sure there would be a son in addition.”

“Just agree to let me bless him.” Agni smiles widely, the fire hair flaring again. “Please? I promise it won’t be that bad having a firebender for a son.”

“You do know my history with firebending Water Tribe boys, right?”

“Of course I do. Nanuq was one of mine. La brought me a lot of kids like him from the Southern Water Tribe.”

Bile rises up at the back of her throat. She closes her eyes, focusing on her blood and bringing her heart rate back down to calm levels. “Then you can probably understand why I don’t want to agree to this.”
“But you’re going to, if only to make me disappear.”

“Will you leave me alone if I do?”

Agni sits up straight, holding up one fiery hand with the other over where the heart should be. “I promise!”

“Agni, I promise you that if you go away now, I might not track you down with an entire ocean’s worth of water at my beck and call.”

“But the son?”

“Agni, go away.”

And here they go again.

“You want leniency for Lady Mai?”

Ty Lee sits up straight, careful to turn down everything he offers. “Yes. She was only trying to save the Fire Nation. I have proof. It was Ozai that did this to the country, not her.”

“The austerity measures she put in place certainly made the situation worse.”

Well, yes, he is right on that. Unfortunately. Mai was never the best with economics. That was always more her area of expertise. Mai was diplomacy and Azula was military. That was how they operated.

They were a small elite team, each one making up for the others’ weaknesses.

And now she’s the only one still standing.

“That may be, but she did what she could. Mai had no help, no advisors, and an already failing nation.” She takes a deep breath. “And she killed Ozai. No offense, but that alone was a public service.”

“As was keeping Azula on the clock-flower tea.” Iroh nods. He looks so different from the man she remembers. There is no trace of the jovial uncle who snuck her sweets when no one was looking and who helped her escape to the circus the first time.

She always thought that was because he recognized that she had no desire to be a Kagami assassin. But maybe it wasn’t. Maybe it was interpreted as a desire to escape Azula.

Which, to be completely honest, was something Ty Lee never wanted.
These are the chains holding her down to the earth. As much as she hates being earthbound, she would never trade the bonds she has for any facsimile of freedom.

“Mai is a politician. Her priority has always been the Fire Nation.” What other reason would there be for draining the royal accounts instead of using taxes or other forms of income the way her predecessors did? “Yes, she made some bad choices, but nothing she has done warrants a harsh sentence.”

That one she had to go through all the records to confirm. It’s true, though. Mai was Azula’s favorite and thus spared the worst of her attentions.

Iroh is nodding. “That may be, but I’m sure you’ve realized what the clock-flower tea means. There is no way Azula fought the Avatar that night, which means Mai is now under suspicion for two murders.”

Ty Lee goes very, very still. Please let this be the truth the Lotus wants; that this is what the White Lotus is considering. They can spin this to let Mai take the fall for the two deaths. They can work with that; can protect Zuko and Katara with that.

Even if it means beautiful, beautiful Mai may never again be in the sunlight that so favored her.

“That may be, but it was their deaths that ended the war.” That’s neutral enough for now.

“There were certainly other paths that could have been taken.”

Ty Lee shrugs. “Maybe. As it is, we know Azula was likely never going to recover and Aang was unstable at best. Perhaps this is better. We are facing the coming peacetime with something like a blank slate.”

She leaves out the greater details. It would be easier to acknowledge the rest, that Aang was very likely suicidal and that he did in fact ask Katara to die. If that hadn’t been his intention, after all, then he could have easily stopped her. Katara may have been the stronger waterbender, but Aang was not only more powerful in general but larger than her as well.

But that is a conversation for another time. Preferably in the distant future when the war hopefully can no longer hurt them. For now, there is only Ty Lee, Iroh, and the future of Natsume Mai of Clan Samui.

Chapter End Notes

I finally hit the 50K mark for NaNo, so it's sort of back to the originally scheduled writing (almost because while yes, I reached the 50K mark, I'm still about 150 chapters out from the end of that novel).

This chapter is a transition of sorts and only Agni was really willing to talk. For anyone wondering what she's based on, I've always imagined her looking like Flame Princess from Adventure Time but with an attitude more like Toph's.
“That wasn’t so bad.” Toph sits to his left, legs stretched out alongside his.

“No, surprisingly not.” He looks out across the garden, trying to think over every little detail of the trail today. It was shorter than the others. That was unexpected. “Do you think the Air Nation intervened again?”

“Probably can’t. Snow said she thought the Lotus was looking into the possibility that Mai killed Twinkles and your sister. Getting involved would only make you look guilty, wouldn’t it?”

“So right now they’re just verifying earlier information.” He sighs heavily. “That’s great.”

“Might be trying to make you nervous too.”

“That box does that pretty well.”

Toph laughs. “Yeah, it does. I swear they designed that thing to make us uncomfortable. It’s far from earth, dry, and in a place with stale air.”

“It’s too small.” He knows her senses are not the best on wood, so he makes sure the impact of his feet with the floor is heavy enough she can tell how much longer his legs are than hers.

She is right about it, though. The Lotus will likely be trying to make him nervous if they have a reason to believe Mai is responsible for the two deaths. Azula, yes, because his sister was effectively a harmless child at the time.

But Aang?

How are they going to do this? Acknowledge that what happened to Aang was their responsibility or let Mai take the fall for it? Either he or Ty should probably go speak to the Fire Lady.

Except, that sounds like an awful idea. The last time he saw Mai, it ended with her realizing Katara killed Aang and him very much afraid of a sewing needle. He can’t afford Mai figuring out anything else.

But then again, it could very likely be the last chance he has to see Mai. The rumors about exile in the colonies are louder than ever; more than likely that exile will come with the stipulation that she not have any contact with anyone from her former life.

That will be—he’s not entirely sure how he feels about that. Ty might be able to single out the emotions involved for her, but for him it’s a little more difficult. Mai is Mai. She is beautiful and terrible, enchanting and distant. He’s spent years away from her before. The first time was his own exile, when he believed he’d find the Avatar and return triumphant to her waiting patiently for him. The second it was after Boiling Rock and again he believed he would return triumphant and she would be the Fire Lady to his Lord.
Only the comet went differently. Then it was something else entirely. He tried to not think about her. Thinking about her then meant acknowledging the very real chance that she would die before the war ended.

Then it did and Mai survived. Now it’s different. Now it’s knowing that lovely Mai is probably going to be sent away somewhere and forgotten.

That’s going to eat at him. Not as badly as Azula and Ursa, but somewhere near his failure of Iroh will sit his failure of Mai.

“You know, Sparky, this trial is a good chance to prove that your marriage to Katara is a good thing. Don’t ruin it thinking about Knives, okay?” Toph bumps into his arm. “Seriously, don’t. I think some of the White Lotus earthbenders have figured out how I read people and they’ll notice that weird thing your heart does when Knives is mentioned.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“You’re not comfortable letting her take the fall for Twinkletoes and your sister, are you?”

“No, I’m not.” He returns the gesture, knocking her shoulder with his. “It’s the best way to protect us, I know.”

“You just don’t like it.”

“I really don’t.”

Toph sighs. Her head drops against his arm, dark hair going everywhere. “Would you rather tell them the truth and let them tear us apart?”

“I won’t do that.” Which is the truth. As much as he dislikes it, letting Mai take the fall is the safest option. “We’re going to have to figure out how to spin this if we’re changing our story.”

“Simple. You wanted to protect Knives out of respect for her saving your sorry ass at Boiling Rock and Snow wanted to protect her because of that sister contract thing. We lied because you asked us to.”

It’s a sound enough idea and he tells her so. There really isn’t an alternative path. They’ve dug themselves into a rather interesting hole. Either they let Mai take the fall for the two murders or they admit the truth.

Because they were murders. He doesn’t think the Lotus views Azula’s death as such, but it is. His sister was defenseless and unaware of what was going on around her. Even though done out of mercy and love, it was still murder.

Aang too. The Lotus may see it as a tragedy but what little he knows suggests that it was going to happen whether it be by Katara’s hands or by Aang’s own. Neither death was actually necessary to end the war. Not really.

“How did we get to this?” Toph’s hair is soft beneath his hands, the strands tangling together with the familiar gesture.

She snorts, leaning against him. “You’re asking the wrong person, Flame Prince.”

“Are you having any luck with the inheritance laws?”
“None. You think your uncle will give me citizenship?” She smiles brightly. For a second, she looks more like the little girl he knew in the Western Air Temple than the master he’s been dealing with for the past three years.

More than that, she reminds him faintly of the young woman Azula could have been had the madness not taken her.

He moves enough to put his arm around her shoulders. “I don’t think that will help you.”

“Air’s the only nation not wanting us to do something awful, isn’t it?”

“Air’s the only nation in a position where they can’t ask us to do anything we don’t want to.” They’re a strong nation, true, but still in shambles and in the shadows. “We’ll figure this all out.”

Toph snorts. “I always thought the war was supposed to be the hard part.”

“Hate is always easier than love.” He pulls her just a little closer, thinking of the almost happiness this oddball family has managed to find in each other. “At least, that’s what Uncle always told me.”

Ty Lee keeps quiet, dressed in dark clothes and pressed as close to the wall as she can get. None of their Acolytes can get close to the Water Tribes, which leaves the option of doing this herself.

There’s no way she can send one of them in here in good faith. Not after Toph’s encounter with the assassin. It’s dangerous enough being here alone.

They simply don’t have enough information on the Water Tribes.

She’s tried to piece it together from the Sleeper Treaty and what Katara’s been willing to share. It doesn’t paint a pretty picture. It’s actually fairly gruesome. Of all the nations, Water seems to have suffered the most under the shadow of war.

They know Water entered the war with the original Sleeper Treaty roughly seventy years ago. It gave the Fire Nation fishing rights in the north for an elusive deep-water fish known as the sleeperfish in the Water Tribes and as a delicacy called ice fish in the Fire Nation. The Northern Water Tribe was to eliminate all waterbenders born during certain times to prevent the Avatar from coming of age among their number. There are apparently other terms in the Tribe’s copy of the treaty, but until that document is recovered they’re just going to have to guess.

Apparently Pakku told Katara something about the surviving female benders being restricted to healing only and the men only being taught certain things about waterbending.

And that’s just the North. What was done to the South is far more extreme. The North trained the Southern Raiders and designed the prisons used for captured waterbenders, ensuring the
elimination of the more powerful Southern Tribe in just a couple of generations.

Brutish and simple but so, so effective. The genius in the engineering has to be in the way the Southern Water Tribe seems to have turned against itself in the wake of the raids. Infanticide and suicide rates don’t exist, but Katara’s been doing what she can to come up with the numbers required to form at least a basic framework of how bad the damage actually is.

It’s going to be like this for every nation, probably. Even Air. If they’re going to keep the school and themselves safe from the world at large, then they’re going to need all the weapons they can get. And in this world, that weaponry comes in the form of information.

According to Katara, the Northern Water Tribe will present the greater threat. It certainly appears to be the case. The only Water assassin they’ve dealt with so far has been Northern and if the waterbender’s trial was anything to go by, then the North is facing a crisis in the line of succession.

So Ty Lee is falling back on everything the Fire side of her family taught her. She inches forward just a little more; enough to get a hold on the air in the room to bring the sounds towards her.

“We still want to go through with the original treaty.” Fools, they’re having this conversation in the common tongue? Do they really not know how things work in the Fire Nation?

There’s a movement in the air that feels like someone shaking his head. “That’s not an option anymore. I’m sorry, Chief Arnook, but we’re going to have to renegotiate.”

That voice—no, it couldn’t be. She leans forward just enough to catch sight of the man’s back and sure enough, that’s Sokka. He’s still as proud as ever, broad shoulders held back and head high. Brave young man, staring down the Northern Water Tribe’s leadership like this. He’s not alone, either. It looks like his father is there which raises the question of why isn’t Chief Hakoda handling this?

Unless this is about the line of succession. The new treaty between the Tribes involved Katara marrying a northerner, so if this is about the succession of the North, then it would concern Sokka more than the current chief.

Right?

This is odd. She really should have gotten a breakdown of Water Tribe politics from Katara before doing this.

A sigh from old lungs and there’s a ripple of sound through the North’s representatives. She can’t quite catch any of it, but there’s a strong sense of disagreement in it.

“I can offer an alternative.” Sokka again, sounding so confident. He’s really grown up, hasn’t he? “Suki and I will be wed next year. The North can have our firstborn on his or her twelfth birthday to secure the line of succession within the royal families.”

“We could just as easily ask for Master Katara’s eldest waterbender.”

“That runs the risk of a firebender being your next Tribal Heir.”

The air stifles the sound of her laugh, but there’s still the swift movement pushing the wind aside that matches someone hearing something. Based on the position, it’s more than likely Sokka.

There’s more murmuring among the North and a voice she assumes belongs to Chief Arnook speaks up. “Lady Suki is of Earth Kingdom birth. Your child would just as likely to produce an
“Kyoshi Island has not had an earthbender since the days of Avatar Kyoshi.” Point. Kyoshi Island is not known for her benders. Never really has been. Even the least educated members of the Fire Nation know that.

So why is the North bringing up the possibility?

There isn’t any logical reason unless they’re just really that desperate to have Katara be a part of the Northern royal family.

Oh spirits. They should have seen this coming. Exposing Katara’s spiritual gifts were dangerous as is, but this. Agni in a blizzard, this is about that power being a part of their dynastic bloodline. Just how bad is the damage in the North for them to go so far as to refuse what is a completely logical solution to their succession crisis?

Though, this gives Iroh and the Fire Nation reason to support the marriage to Zuko. It might be the wrong element, but if this is right, then the world is shaping up to recognize Katara as the single most powerful waterbender alive.

Which gives her family—her real family, not the people she was born to—the leverage they need in keeping themselves safe. They’ve already got Toph, the most powerful earthbender alive and Zuko’s well on his way to claiming the firebending title. She’s fairly certain she can take the position for the airbenders. If they can do that—if they can become the most powerful people alive and the world is without a fully realized Avatar, then they can argue that they should not belong to any one nation.

It would solve Zuko’s qualms with the Fire Nation throne and it would safely remove Katara from any issues of succession within the Water Tribes. It might even help Toph, if they can argue that she can do more for the Earth Kingdom as an independent entity. The Bei Fong family won’t be able to tie her down in any way if they can get the weight of the Earth Kingdom behind the little earthbender.

They can use this.

“You want to rebuild Taku?” There’s a note of interest in the Elder’s voice. The wooden seats make it unfortunately impossible to get a better read on the assorted Airbenders she’s speaking to. “For the purpose of growing food and medicine?”

The reports Snow wrote out for her are hopefully as detailed as they need to be. “Right. As it is, the world is facing a food shortage now that the Fire Nation is on the brink of collapse and the situation in the Water Tribes has grown as dire as it has.”
“You’ve done quite a bit of research.”

“I’ve been to many of these places and experienced the hardship firsthand.” She needs to get out of here fast. So much formality in such a short amount of time; it’s frustrating in the same way the calm in the wake of the war was.

She needs to fight again.

It’s always going to be like this from now on, isn’t it? Try to do this adulting thing and the monster of the war will raise its head and demand she go back to the days of fighting and treachery and lying.

“About your proposal for the trade routes,” one Elder begins. “I noticed you’ve avoided any major roads and used none of ours.”

Toph nods. “I didn’t want to use any Air Nation paths for security reasons and I’ve avoided the main routes because I know how open to attack they are.”

“You believe this is a concern?”

“We’re looking at one civil war at the least within the next decade or so.” Water Tribes won’t be a huge issue for trade, except by sea. The Fire Nation or the Earth Kingdom, though, will be a nightmare, especially if Sparky and Snow are right about the colonies. “That’s why I’d like to keep the construction at Taku quiet for the meantime and all of my trade routes have been designed to hopefully disguise the origin of the products. Taku was a target early on because it was a major source of food and medicine. That will make it an appealing target again.”

There’s a murmur among the airbenders. One—Kunthea, she thinks, sighs. “Yes, your great-grandmother inherited the Bei Fong estate in the wake of Taku’s destruction, didn’t she?”

“If you’re talking about Suyin Bei Fong, then yes, she did.” Toph sits up a little straighter. “I’ve based this plan at least partially on her actions. We secure a source of food and medicine, then trade routes to the busiest markets, and move goods quietly and safely.”

“Your plan here has outlined a path to acquiring other companies.” That’s Jetsun. “Including a cabbage merchant.”

Toph bites back the laughter. “The cabbage man is a unique situation.”

“In what way?”

“It’s not just the Fire Nation that needs to make reparations for those they’ve hurt,” she starts off diplomatically, still trying to curb the worst of the still lingering amusement over this part of the plans. “In the course of the war, we’ve all done damage. If we are going to expect the Fire Nation to give aide to those they’ve hurt in addition to fixing their own problems, then we are going to have to lead by example.”

There’s a murmur among the Airbenders and then Kunthea speaks up again. “A fair point and your timeline here is well thought out. I suppose the only question left is why you are telling this to us. By rights, Taku still belongs to the Earth Kingdom.”

Not if Zuko and Snow get their way with the colonies, but no one is supposed to know about that plan right now. “Taku has been an Airbender sanctuary for a century, not only helping those within your community but protecting one of the greatest secrets of the survivors. Elder Sora and the rest of you are the ones who matter.
She takes a deep breath. “In addition to that, I would like to discuss the hiring of Acolytes.”

“Not actual airbenders?”

“Not right now. If we get the trade to expand east to Ba Sing Se, then yes. The shortest path is to cross the Si Wong and airbenders are the best at that. For right now, I want to focus on the western Earth Kingdom and certain areas in the Fire Nation.”

For the first time since the meeting began, a different Elder speaks up. “I think we can agree your plan is sound. The profits from this will primarily go towards the school at the Temple of the Winds, correct?”

“Yes.” It’s the short and pretty answer. It’s the one that covers the investment of the back pay she’s gotten as the Bei Fong heiress and protects the school’s financial future if she can’t find a way to alter the inheritance laws without going into the ugly bits of it.

“Do you know when you would like to begin reconstruction?”

The relief sweeps down her spine, taking some the tension away. This little bit of their future will work. One step forward every day.

They can do this.

So she pulls out the next set of reports and plans, the ones marked with the careful one in raised ink, and begins to explain.

Cabbage and some relatives, yes. That will be an important stage until the lower terraces can be repaired for rice cultivation. Maybe some kind of grain from the rural Fire Nation as well? No, not that. They require too long of a warm season.

Katara sits in a quiet corner of the villa, protected overhead by the sloping roof off the bath with a beautiful view of the gardens stretching out before her. Around her are botanical texts and the carefully curated notebooks of potential food sources kept during the tests of plants when they were securing food at the Temple. The climate at Taku is very similar to the Temple, so most of the successes at one should be successful at the other.

Long beans would be a good idea. They’ve had quite a bit of good luck with the red seeded and lavender varieties. Carrots too—the deep violet roots that came from a Lungta trader have done very well over the years at the Temple. There’s also that bright orange one that looks like a boarox’s heart. The monkey tail peas would probably work as well.

She sets the book down and reaches for the notebook she’s been making notes in for the Taku Project. Arranged by season and alphabetical in order, each entry covers a description of the
It’s a good distraction from everything else. Plants are steady in a way people never will be. They’re more resilient, the water pushing steadily through their bodies without an ounce of the darkness always present in bloodbending. The garden has always been a safe space at the Temple.

Maybe Taku can do that for the whole world; give just an ounce of serenity in the tumultuous post-war.

“What do you think about dragon egg melons?” She can feel the steady grey just behind her, the landing silent in the stillness of the growing night.

A lamp is set beside her, the flames casting flickering light across the pages as Ty sits down. “They’d be good. Though the yellow one from Omashu would be good too.”

Katara writes it down quickly, watching from the corner of her vision as Ty Lee draws a book close. “The green giant eggplant?”

“That one too.” The airbender shifts a little. “Is this what you’ve been doing all day?”

“I snuck into the palace library to steal some of their botanical texts from the Earth Kingdom.” She blushes slightly at Ty’s flat stare. “And I maybe took all of their books from the Southern Water Tribe.”

“How did you carry them?”

She shrugs. “I didn’t. They’ve been in the Fire Lady’s Palace for some time. I’ve just been bringing them here as I need them. What do you think about the crane melon for something sweet?”

It was actually Rinchen and Zuko’s idea. Moving the books was mostly the work of Acolytes in the palace. She’s just been taking this side of the work to have something to do.

It’s better than going to the trials with the anticipation curling in her stomach until she’s sick. Sitting here all day isn’t any better. The water has the same weird feeling Ember Island’s has, so bending is awkward. She still goes through her paces, but actually picking up the water—she needs a real fight. Something she can go all out in.

La knows when that will be.

So instead she does this. She reads texts on agriculture by day, compiling the information needed to put the Taku project into motion. By night she reads the books taken from her homeland, losing herself in the myths and history lost in the South Pole.

Ty nods, moving just a little closer until her head is resting against Katara’s shoulder. “That’s good. They’ll need some kind of onion too. Probably multiple varieties of each plant, actually.”

“I’m just starting with the main varieties. I’ll add the back ups later.” She pulls another book close, the careful drawings of capsicums blazing bright against the pages. “Is there something you wanted to talk about?”

“How does the line of succession work in the Water Tribes?”

“I’ve already told you about the South.” The rainbow peppers would do wonderfully at Taku, but they’re so viciously hot that the Fire Nation and the colonies would be the only real markets for them. “The North’s system is a little more like the Fire Nation’s because of their
preference for sons.”

“Daughters can inherit the throne here.”

Katara blinks. “They can?”

Ty sits up. “The throne goes to the eldest firebender. It’s just that in Zuko’s family, daughters tend to be rare. And then there’s the issue that upon marriage, she joins her husband’s family and loses her position within the royal family.”

“So even if the daughter was the rightful heir, she’d still lose the throne if she got married?”

“Mmhmm.”

“The Northern Water Tribe, from what I understand, either gives the throne to the eldest male or it goes to the husband of the eldest princess. Marriages are arranged, so it seems to usually be a nobleman and possibly a distant relative of the crown.”

“It stays in the family, then?”

“Yes.”

“Are the royal families in the North and South related?”

That’s an odd question. “No, we’re not. Iliamna was a wealthy merchant’s daughter, but not a member of the aristocracy. The only reason her family enjoyed any kind of privilege in the North is because her great-nephew was Avatar Kuruk. As far as I know, there’s never really been any intermarriage between the royal family and that one.”

She’s moved on to radishes when Ty speaks next. “So why is the North so obsessed with someone from your family taking over their throne? And I thought Kuruk was her nephew. That’s what the Air Nation records say.”

“Historical texts aren’t always accurate. The books from the South pretty consistently say he was her great-nephew and that Yangchen was the Avatar at the time of the war.” The rattails would do well in Taku, but they’ve got a rather unique flavor, so maybe one of the more traditional varieties as well would be a good idea. “I honestly have no idea why the North is so focused on us. They’ve made it very clear that they don’t like us and the feeling is mutual. The Schism is still very present in inter-Tribe relations.”

“That was centuries ago.”

“After a very brutal civil war that almost destroyed the North Pole.”

“What was it over?”

She sets down her books and turns toward the airbender. “It’s complicated. You have to understand that when speaking to non-Water people, most of us try to conform our ways into something you can understand.”

“It all seems fairly straightforward, though.”

“Except our concept of royalty isn’t exactly the same. That was one of the major points in the war and a big difference between North and South. The chieftain’s family are seen a guardians of the Tribe. We protect the history and the culture and we’re the spiritual and military leaders of the
people.”

“That’s pretty much the way it works elsewhere.”

Katara shakes her head. “Except that in the South, it means we do more work than anyone else. The reigning Chief and the heirs lead the hunts and we keep only enough to feed ourselves. Most of what we catch is given to the community. If we’re waterbenders, we help strengthen any water-based structures and we do healing if we can. Our duty is to our people. If the Tribe suffers or falls, that failure is completely ours. The most diplomacy we do is smoothing out conflicts between various clans and that’s largely the realm of the oldest member of the family.”

“And that isn’t always the Chief.”

“It frequently isn’t.” She thinks back on Nita and Dasan, on Gran-Gran and Grandfather, on her own parents. “Even if the Chief is the eldest in the family, that part of the job is usually given to their spouse or sometimes even a child. We don’t exactly rule the Tribe, so much as fill necessary roles and rather than having one person do it all it’s sort of a family affair.”

“But the North doesn’t see it the same way?”

Katara shakes her head. “No. What sparked the war was a series of bad years. The division between the Chief and his people had grown so wide that warriors took up arms against their leader because the Chief and the other rich had food and clothing and everything they needed but most people didn’t. The North has always functioned more like the Earth Kingdom in the relationship between the Chief and the Tribe.”

“So they see your family as peasants?”

“More or less. Iliamna’s family essentially threw away their wealth because it was a belief in the family that the community took priority over any one individual.” She closes the last botanical text and sets the notebook to dry. “Apparently the North considered it treason to steal from the Chief to feed the rest of the Tribe. They see us less as peasants more as thieves and liars. The group that fled the North and settled the South was almost entirely composed of waterbenders and engineers, so just think of the damage that did to the North.”

Ty nods. “That’s why the South and the Foggy Swamp traditionally have the higher percentages of benders. Spirituality is required, but blood does play a role.”

“As I understand it.” Katara quickly stacks up all of her books. “Now what’s this about?”

“I was spying on a meeting between the Tribes today.”

That doesn’t sound good. She sighs heavily, pinching the bridge of her nose. Meetings between the Tribes have historically always gone terribly. The current book she’s reading is detailing the particularly disastrous attempt at a trade agreement brokered by Avatar Kyoshi late in her life. Despite the youth of the Southern Tribe, they had all the power even then. That meeting was followed by fifty years of very frosty silence between the two groups.

“What happened?”

“Well, you were the center of the conversation.”

Breathe. Try to not change the temperature in the garden. Try very hard to not give frostbite to the tender tropical plants. “So the South hasn’t disowned me?”
“Not from what I saw. You might be a bit of a black sheep-goat, but they seem to think keeping you as one of them is their safest option.”

“What’s your professional opinion as an ex-political spy?”

“It is the smartest move. Your connections to the spiritual world are leverage for whatever nation you call family.” Ty stretches out across the veranda, grey eyes staring up the ceiling. “The downside is, to protect you, your brother has kind of promised the North his firstborn.”

And there goes her control of the temperature. She looks down at the airbender, ice creeping along the wood of the villa were the water in the air condenses. “Tell me everything.”

Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year!

The information about the Water Tribes is a bit longer than I intended but I couldn't get anything else out for Katara's scene. Toph was actually the most difficult to write, with Ty Lee and Zuko as the easiest. All in all, not a bad chapter given that my only real goal with this was to get some interaction between Zuko and Toph.

The plants listed here are actually real plants. Cabbage and rice are fairly straight forward, but others mentioned are the Chinese Red Noodle Bean, the Chinese Mosaic Long Bean, Pusa Asita Carrot, Oxheart Carrot, Monkey Tail Cowpea, Dragon's Egg Cucumber, Chinese Yellow Cucumber, Cambodian Green Giant Eggplant, Crane Melon, Chinese Five Color Pepper, and Rat's Tail Radish. All can be found from Baker Creek Seeds.
“You want to be on Azar, preferably here in Ran-Shao,” Snow starts slowly, voice accompanied by the shuffling of papers. “But that’s going to be a long way off for now.”

“Why? They need supplies just like everyone else.”

“Yes, but we’re politically toxic and this city is all about politics.”

Of course it all comes down to politics. Ba Sing Se is the same so why would the Fire Nation be any different? The Water Tribes are going to be another bucket of electric worms altogether. “So I’m going to have to use the same tactic we’re already using in the Earth Kingdom?”

“A little more delicately, actually.” There’s a final shuffling of papers and then Snow’s hand is on hers, guiding it towards the gently embossed ink of the map. “You’re going to have to do this as a step-by-step process. Start with minor islands. The smaller the population the better.”

“And then move up to small settlements on middle islands?”

“Then to moderately sized towns and Azar will have to be the last step in it all.”

She sighs, pulling her hand away and sinking back against the cold wood of the wall. “I’m starting in the colonies. Won’t that count for anything?”

“The colonies are effectively a different country.” Snow settles in against her, shoulder barely brushing hers with each breath. “They have a very different culture and they’ve been separate from here for so long that whatever family ties might remain mean nothing.”

Well, since Snow brought it up…

“Are you and Zuko really going to propose breaking the colonies off into their own country?”

“Zuko is. I can’t be involved in this.”

She nods. “At least not publically.”

“Right.”

Things are finally beginning to come together and it’s not at all the way they imagined. “They hate us, don’t they?”

“I think they’re afraid of us.” The airbender sighs heavily. “As they should be.”

It’s all worse than a pile of platypus bear dung. Snow can’t be involved in the colonies because any interference from the Airbenders will make it look like a push for a formal Air Nation (despite that just not being the Air way) and Sparky is trying to come up with a polite way of saying he wants to dissolve the monarchy in the Fire Nation and Sweetness is facing a political disaster in the Tribes and she’s still looking for a way out of the inheritance laws.
And, well, *this*. Her plans for the trade that will support Taku and the Temple are getting more and more complicated as the days go on. “What if the companies are hidden behind others?”

Snow is quiet for a moment, ruffling through papers. “That might work. Obscure the origins of the company for long enough to become established and then make it clear this is one of ours.”

“My mother might be willing to keep some of them under the curtain of the family business until I take control.” She thinks, at least. Mother hasn’t exactly said those words but the woman does seem interested in seeing them succeed. She doesn’t exactly understand it. Maybe in time she will.

She thinks she’d like that—getting to know her mother. They’ve been strangers for long enough. Admittedly she hasn’t actually told her mother anything about the Temple, but the school is something Poppy can support. Surely it is.

And the school *is* public knowledge at this point. By now there’s probably rumours about Taku, so let the outsiders draw their own conclusions.

“We’re just kids,” she finally says.

Snow’s hand is cold against her forehead, brushing a lock of hair back. “Only because the age of majority in the Earth Kingdom is eighteen. Zuko’s still nineteen, though.”

“Doesn’t change the fact that we’re all too young.” Neither one will acknowledge the one thing that has stayed unspoken among their group. Even though they are all way too young to be doing any of this, it doesn’t change the fact that they are the only ones who can do it. The alternative is to leave everything to the White Lotus and other similar groups.

Nothing will change. The status quo will be maintained and war will be on the horizon in under five years. If these people couldn’t end the war with their decades of experience and she and hers managed to do it in just a couple of years, then surely this is logical.

Victors write the history books, don’t they?

“None of us are really children, Toph.” And then there’s that. They’re not children but they’re certainly not functional enough to be adults. How many others like them are out there? How many innocents were taken in by the war and left behind as some kind of monster?

She brushes her hand against the raised ink of the map, finding the now-familiar feel of her homeland’s western shore. “Let’s just focus on the colonies for now.”

One step at a time.

It’s no different than the war.

She finds Pakku alone in the Water Tribe apartments. Feeling around for the familiar hearts of her family and finding none, she frowns and greets the lone Master. “Did you approve of Sokka’s plan?”
“Which plan?” Pakku doesn’t even look up from the papers in front of him. “The new construction plans for the South Pole or the new ship design or perhaps the new hunt rotation he’s proposing?”

Katara drops herself into the seat beside him. “The one where he gives his firstborn over to the Northern Water Tribe.”

“You mean the plan to protect you from the North?”

“I can handle them.”

“Not without the other half of the treaty, which you currently do not have.”

Something within her snaps and in less time than it takes to bring his exhale down, sharpened with all the months of irritation and stress to little needles pressed just against the pulsing vein in his neck.

It would be so easy to press them further in, to let the red spill out and the anger burns with the need to do it to see the North pay for everything—

There’s something like home pressing against her, calm and steady and dragging the blood in her veins slower until she’s just shy of sleepy. Pakku can’t do this. No, this power is ancient, familiar in a way her own body is. If she turns just right, she can see the pale barely-there moon high in the midday sky.

Too busy to talk to her, huh?

The water reluctantly falls away.

Pakku’s eyes narrow to the point they look more like the slits of blue among the ice of the arctic. “Are you having problems controlling your bending?”

“No, just a little stressed.” The potential for someone correctly identifying Zuko as Azula’s killer and subsequently her as Aang’s, fire spirits wanting her firstborn child, the possibility of even having a child, Sokka being an idiot, the fact that she and her makeshift family are effectively prisoners in enemy territory—

Wait, enemy territory? When did Ran-Shao become that?

When did it start feeling like they were at war again?

Her step-grandfather doesn’t look like he fully believes her, but he still nods as if accepting her explanation. “You should try meditating. The push and pull of the tide can be very relaxing.”

“It can be.” So too can the push and pull of a familiar person’s blood. “But even we children of the moon need proper sleep.”

“So we do.” The tension in his body begins to relax, and she settles down. “Is the villa too loud? Fire Lord Iroh did mention the noise from the caldera tends to be loudest at the edges.”

She smiles. “I haven’t noticed.” Not when the ghosts of the garden palace are so loud. How could anyone sleep there? Still, it’s better than trying to sleep in the place where all the evil came from. “Sokka. Northern Water Tribe. Did you know about this?”

“He did what was necessary. Without this, there would be nothing protecting your children
“Who says I even plan on having children?”

“If you want to keep your marriage to the Crown Prince of the Fire Nation, you will.” His smile is charming, but the warning is clear.

Different tactic: “Any child I have will have a 50-50 chance of being a firebender. The Fire Nation would never agree to let a potential heir be taken by a different nation.” Not to mention the chance that any child of theirs could be an airbender, regardless of what Agni might have said.

“The Fire Nation would have no choice in the matter. You should know as well as anyone that the restitution owed to the Water Tribes far exceeds what this country can actually pay.”

The anger surges through her veins, past whatever control Yue and La may have had.

Breathe. Just breathe. Remember everything she’s said to Zuko during his bad episodes. Make it cold—well, no. Not cold. Warm. It needs to be warm; to be the sluggish heat of summer that slows everything but the strongest-willed firebender.


Don’t think of the Tribes, of the history, of the war. Keep it neutral.

“The Fire Nation owes the Air Nation more than any other.” There’s a good topic change. “The reconstruction of the Temples will cost more than anything else. Not to mention the number of airbenders that are off the record. All of them will need to be found and trained.”

“I thought that was what your school was for.”

“And I thought the Sleeper Treaty was supposed to grant all the protection I would ever need from the North.”

“You don’t have the other half yet.”

“The half I have is damning enough.”

Pakku sighs heavily. “Dear Katara, you have much to learn about the North.”

“When did you become aware of your sister’s condition?” This is what they feared. Ty Lee sighs heavily, sitting back against the wall. Here in the shadows of the courtroom, she and the others are hidden to the left at the very back of the room.

Katara is already agitated, has been since long before this surprisingly late trial day. Toph sits on the other side, steady and silent as any child of rock with not a trace of stress to betray her.

Really, they should have known today would be the day. Not starting the trial until after noon leaves just enough time to worry, to give the public the suggestion that something has changed.
After all, Mai’s trial was done in private with only some of the Lotus present. So all of this was unknown until the inquisitor revealed it.

They’ve prepared for it, though.

“Probably about a year before the end. Ty Lee and Toph were here on a reconnaissance mission when they crossed paths with the Acolyte Rinchen. She gave them the information about Azula’s inability to use her firebending.” Zuko’s voice is strong and calm, not the shaky fragile thing it was last night. Small blessings. They need more than that, though. So much more.

There’s nodding, the air moving just the way she remembers from her own trial. From here, she can see the light glinting off his eyeglasses. “Rinchen is Princess Rinchen, correct? Your cousin’s widow?”

“Yes.”

Another small blessing: Zuko reintroduced Rinchen to Iroh not that long ago but before this became a risk.

There’s a ripple of noise throughout the courtroom.

“Princess Rinchen is back?” a woman whispers somewhere to her right. Looking down, she can just make out the classic gold crane hairpin of Clan Tsuru. That’s one of the more powerful families from Ember Island, right? She tugs on the air to bring the sound closer. “I could have sworn she was killed when Ozai claimed the throne.”

Ty Lee bites down hard on her tongue. Princess Rinchen never left, living all those years in the shadows of the mountain. But no one needs to know this. No one can know this.

No, that’s not right. Not anymore.

They have no reason to hide now. The world knows the Airbenders survived, that they have rebuilt themselves amid the ashes of their ancestors. Knowing that an Airbender temple operated in the capital city of the Fire Nation is no news at all.

“Never mind that. I thought they were just joking about Princess Azula not being able to use her bending,” one of them whispers.

Just focus on Zuko.

Just don’t think about her long lost princess.

“Your Highness, during your time away, did you ever return to Ran-Shao?”

“No.” He looks nervous. That odd quirk of tapping his leg in quick four tap sets is a nervous habit she hasn’t seen since—well, since the last time Zuko dealt with his blood kin for any amount of time. “It was too dangerous for me to be here. Too many people know I what I look like without the scar.”

“Did you not think age would help disguise you?”

Even from here she can see Zuko’s scowl. “I am well aware of how much I resemble my father.”

A hush descends on the room. Yes, that was just *brilliant*. Point out how much you look like
your tyrant father in a room that is potentially terrified of you.

Not like anyone would ever see anything else. Even in Azula, people only saw Ozai. Never Ursa, despite how much Azula looked like her. From the roots of her brown hair to the tips of her pale toes she was so beautiful, just like—

There’s a strong hand around her wrist, thumb rubbing circles against her skin. Toph says nothing, blank eyes staring ahead. It’s a calming, grounding gesture. Just focus on that and it will all be okay.

The inquisitor is nodding. “How then, could your sister have fought the Avatar to the point of mutual annihilation?”

“How should I know?” Zuko says, “I was unconscious during the final battle. Broken ribs courtesy of an unstable Avatar, remember?”

“Something that occurred several days before, if not a week. Surely you were healed enough to be awake for long periods of time.”

He shrugs. “You should have asked Katara about that. Healing with bloodbending is more tiring for her, I know. I’m not sure what effect it has on the patient. I’m not usually awake when she’s doing any major healing.”

The waterbender beside her sighs, the air slipping out as a hiss from behind her teeth. “It uses the patient’s chi to encourage the healing. Of course it’s tiring for them.”

“They’re just trying to poke holes in our story,” Ty Lee murmurs. “Don’t give anyone any reason to doubt us further.”

Katara remains silent, but the airbender knows the warning has been heeded. Not that it was needed, really. They all know how dangerous this situation has become. One wrong move is all it will take for the world to fall away and the darkness seething just beneath the surface to swallow them all.

It’s a terrible way to live.

“Remember that thing we talked about?” Toph says, kicks her feet back and forth. Ty Lee hadn’t noticed it before, but the earthbender’s legs are too short to reach the floor from her seat. It’s a strange, young sight. Very strange, in fact. Toph normally seems so big.

“Which thing?” Katara asks. “We’ve talked about a lot of things.”

“The walk in the night thing.”

Ty Lee nods slowly, sees Katara looking grim at where the inquisitor is trying to get ever more details about that night. It has been, up until now, just the occasional suggestion. They could do it easily enough. No one yet knows about the Temple of the Winds, and those that do have an idea of it will not sell their secrets.

Because there will be those that want the Temple.

If they run away now, it will seal their fate as enemies of the world. Nowhere will be safe. The people they interact with will have to cut ties for their own safety. She and hers will become hunted. All this she knows, and she knows her odd little family knows it too.
It doesn’t change the appeal of it.

“You know we can’t do that.” Zuko keeps his voice low, even though they are tucked away in the deepest part of the garden villa. After today, after the Judge, after everything, he can’t be blamed if he’s so paranoid. The trials have turned to the worst. Spirits, the inquisitor came so close to outright accusing him of his sister’s murder.

Which would be true. He did kill Azula. It was murder, plain and simple.

He just doesn’t want to deal with the potential fallout.

Beside him, Ty Lee sighs. “We can’t go on like this. Especially not with Mai still in the city.”

“She hasn’t sold us out yet,” he points out.

“No, she hasn’t.” Ty Lee leans against a column, shrouded in shadows. “Honestly, that scares me more.”

It’s his turn to sigh, if only because he knows arguing is pointless. Ty Lee is right. Of course she is. She knows Mai better than he ever will. Mai has kept their secrets thus far, and at this point the information is more damning than anything else. They have all four sat before the most important people in the post-war world and sold a story to wipe themselves clean of any suspicion.

And Mai could destroy it all.

“Would they believe her?” he asks.

Ty shrugs. “Some would.”

And in the end, that’s all that matters, isn’t it? Only a few people have to believe them liars and killers to ruin any chance of peace for them. Conspiracies have a way of lingering, he thinks, especially those rooted in truth. The accusation of kinslaying never did leave his father, after all, even though he’s relatively certain Ozai would never do such a thing himself when there were people who could be manipulated into doing it.

Zuko takes a deep breath. There’s a sweetness in the air from the water and the flowers in the gardens. Somewhere close by, he can hear Toph and Katara quietly discussing something.

“Is there anything we could do?”

“To do what?” Ty Lee blinks up at him. “If they’re doubting our story, we can hardly go after the only other witness. That’s essentially admitting our guilt.”

“No more death, please. I was thinking about influencing some members of the court.” He shrugs. Politics. Of course it comes down to politics. “Not all of them could have made it through the war without getting their hands dirty. Is there any way of finding information?”
She shakes her head. “Pray the airbenders already had spies in place. Otherwise, we can’t go near the court without drawing attention.”

He almost asks, but there’s not really any need, is there? This place is a viper-shark nest. There will be spies tripping over spies and all will be on high alert. The Acolytes will already be under suspicion, given what has come out over the course of this.

“It feels like the walls are closing in on us, doesn’t it?”

“Probably deliberate,” she says, very gently. “Stressed people are more likely to show weakness.”

He looks at her for a long moment. “Your family?”

“Mai, actually.” She shrugs. “Azula was only so good at unsettling people because Mai was an expert at it.”

“I think that’s the first time I’ve heard you talk about them in months,” he says. “Really talk about them, I mean. Not related to us in any way.”

She shrugs. “It’s getting easier. Not better, really. It still hurts, just not so much I can’t say anything.”

That makes sense, he thinks. Zuko hasn’t really tried talking about his sister or Mai in years. At least, not in any way that wasn’t directly tied to what was going on at any given moment. Mai is a lot of fear, right now, and Azula…well, that devolves into that last night no matter what he tries to do. “Do you ever think about what might have happened?”

“Yes,” she tells him. “Just not as much anymore.”

“It’s hard to believe we were ever that young,” he says. The clouds over the caldera are smeared gold and pink-turning-purple with the fading sunlight. It’s quiet, a sight he saw many times growing up, and he can’t remember the last time it felt like home. “That’s all I can ever seem to think about it.”

Ty Lee grins, a crooked expression that usually means she’s about to be awful. “What do you think it’ll be like when we’re actually old?”

He shrugs. “You’re assuming we survive that long.”

“I’m serious!” Ty makes a face at him. “We all feel so old now, I can’t imagine being old. What if we turn out like the White Lotus or the rest of them?”

Zuko blinks. That’s an interesting thought. What if they do. Right now they’re on the outside, protecting each other and protecting themselves. But isn’t that exactly what the White Lotus did during the war? Isn’t that what everyone did during the war? Look how well that turned out; everyone’s a little paranoid and a bunch of kids are being treated like the enemy.

What would it be like with things flipped around? He can’t imagine the people they’ve lost ever growing old. Azula was a comet, burning and bright and never meant to last. Aang was much the same. For those left, Zuko thinks they’re all either very unlucky or just outright cursed.

Survive a war and the peace that comes after is worse. How’s that for irony?

“I don’t know,” he admits. “I don’t think there’s any way to know.”
Oh boy, so it has been a long, long time.

To give a brief rundown of what happened between the last chapter and this one finally getting finished (I've had this thing one page away from being done for almost a year now): I moved several hours away from where I was living, started a new job and have since worked five different shifts within that one job, got a new pet who has required a lot of my time, and if you've been lurking around here you've probably seen the monster project that is 'queen and country'.

No, I have not abandoned this. I just need to rewatch ATLA to get back into the swing of writing these guys, so there will be some lags in updating until I get used to the fandom again. At this point, I've invested too much time and resources into writing this thing to give it up. I'm stubborn like that.

Basically, I'm sorry. I'm kind of an inconsistent writer. Y'all are wonderful for sticking with this through everything.
“Hey, Zuko,” Toph says, settling in to sit beside him. “Could I ask you a royalty-related question?”

“I might not be able to answer, but I’ll try. Remember I was sort of kicked out of royalty before I could really be a part of it.”

She takes a deep breath. She and the others have been going over every applicable law on her situation with the Bei Fong family. It’s not that she’s entirely opposed to the inheritance laws. Now that it’s been settled that she won’t have to marry a man and then figure out how to get rid of him without a prison sentence, all that’s left is the child issue. And that one she’s not found a solution to.

“When it came to the nobility, did your family ever weigh in on any domestic situations?” Not quite the question she was going for, but close enough.

She can already feel him shaking his head, though. “Not normally. If it was criminal and severe enough, the petition might go before the Fire Lord, but in general the noble houses handled things themselves.”

“There aren’t any autonomous regions in the Fire Nation, are there?”

“Sort of,” he says. “Traditionally Seal Island and the Western Air Temple, but Ember Island and some of the outer isles have always had a bit more freedom than the ones closest to Azar. And today the Temple and Seal Island are both abandoned, so technically everything is under direct control of the crown now.”

“Makes sense. Gaoling is an autonomous state. Still a part of the Earth Kingdom, but it’s rare for the Earth King to do anything for us,” she tells him. “We’re a world away from Ba Sing Se.”

“Makes sense. Gaoling is what, two month’s journey from Ba Sing Se?”

“A month and a half on the normal routes.” It’s faster to go by air or to cut across terrain most carriages would smash themselves to bits on. “What do you think would happen if I asked Kuei to step in? With my family, I mean. Do you think he’d help if I asked him to change our bylaws?”

“That’s assuming he even can,” Zuko says. There’s a sound like splashing followed by the chatter of hungry turtle ducks. She remembers her mother doing something similar with the various birds that went through Poppy’s gardens. She’s never fully understood the desire to sit still and toss
breadcrumbs at birds, but she holds out a hand until he puts a bit of bread in it for her to throw. “Depending on the legal situation between Gaoling and Ba Sing Se, he may not be able to. Even if he can, he may not want to offend a family as powerful as yours by forcing them to do something.”

She tosses a bit of bread, and is pleased to hear it land in water. “That’s what I was afraid of.”

“What’s the exact wording?” he asks, and hands her more bread. “Of the heir provision, I mean. Does it specify anything beyond the earthbending?”

“It says I have to have an earthbending heir by the time I’m eighteen,” Toph says.

“Just an heir?” he asks, and she tosses the bread at him. There’s a squawk and a splash, and she can finally feel the turtleducks on land as they dive for the stray food. “Thanks for that,” he says. “I’m serious. Does it simply say you have to have the line of succession secured or does it specify that you have to be the child’s natural parent?”

“Does that matter?”

“Yes, it does,” Zuko tells her. “Remember that most of my education was in law. This one in particular, since it’s kind of how my father became Fire Lord. If the law simply says you need a designated heir, then it may not have to be your natural child. My family is too small to go far beyond the immediate family, but you have cousins, don’t you?”

She nods. “Yeah, so? Naming one of them heir is what my mother is trying to avoid.”

“But one of them could have a child you could adopt as your own. Legally the child would be yours, then. Still a Bei Fong by blood, and not requiring you to do something you’re not comfortable with.”

“Still not comfortable with that,” she says. “I’m not going to demand someone give me a kid.”

“So don’t,” he says. “Are all of your cousins upper class? Offer it as a way of securing the kid’s future. You’d be surprised how many people would give up their children to ensure a better life. How do you think the Fire Nation built its army? It was offered as a way out of poverty.”

She listens to the turtleducks for a long, long moment. He has a point; of that she knows.

“See, this is why I don’t do politics,” she tells him. “It makes you think of awful things like how to get people to give up their kids.”

“I’m not going to argue that.”

“Good,” Toph says. She doesn’t have that many cousins. Poppy is an only child, and Opal… no, her grandmother had a cousin. That’s how this whole mess started. She leans against Zuko, because that’s his mess too. And the Water Tribes’. “So about those population estimates. Any chance we could get that for all the nations?”
“So what are we looking for?” Ty Lee asks, and picks up a rather lovely old woodblock showing a Fire Nation noblewoman in a rather lovely state of undress. “Other than possible new reading materials?”

Katara doesn’t even bother looking, and the airbender finds her frowning at the treasures around them. “Hama said the soldiers took everything from the waterbenders they kidnapped. I just assumed they burned it, but after seeing everything down here…”

“You think they kept it as spoils,” Ty Lee finishes. “You said the South was wealthy?”

“Yes, we were. And my great-grandmother was the reigning Chief when she was taken. Gran Gran said she’d been wearing the Stardust Crown when she was taken,” Katara explains. “I can’t imagine they’d just throw something like that away.”

“They might have melted it down,” Ty Lee says. She puts the woodblock back and leans over to see what else is in the box. Katara does have a point, admittedly. Zuko’s ancestors were near-obsessive about keeping spoils that showed their strength. They might have missed Monk Gyatso’s necklace, but they didn’t miss the removable statues and adornments from the Western Air Temple. And their woodblocks. That’s Air Nomad art. She thinks of Azula’s careful calligraphy, and the blotched colours of the few paintings she did.

She should probably look for those. If they still exist, Zuko and Mai might like them. And Ty Lee, too. Azula was always a gifted artist, even if she didn’t do it very often.

Katara’s shaking her head. “It wasn’t metal, or burnable. Gran Gran always said it was made out of carved night.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s not a real substance.”

“It’s just a name,” Katara explains, leading them down through the belly of the dragon to the next chamber. Ty Lee’s always thought it a little distasteful to keep the archives down here. The dragons are holy to more than just firebenders; they’re truly majestic creatures. But dignity in death is never anything this nation has been good at respecting.

“Does it have another name?”

“Obsidian,” Katara says, and glances over her shoulder. “There’d be whalebone artefacts as well. Possibly some others. But obsidian, mostly. It was supposedly used in weapons and jewelry.”

Ty Lee moves ahead of her and takes a peek into the next chamber. Fire Nation. It looks like things from Fire Lord Zuzen’s time, given the prevalence of rubies. She has no idea how long these things have been down here, but given that Zuzen was almost five hundred years ago and rubies have been out of fashion for almost three, she can hazard a probably safe guess. “You might want to talk to Zuko, then. They’ve not been popular since before the war, but his family does have a rather lovely collection of jewelry.”

“Is this standard spy training?” Katara asks, and Ty Lee knows it’s a joke but there’s a still a bit of sting there. “Learning where all the valuables are?”

“Yes, but—Azula loved amethyst,” she says. “There’s a necklace she always begged Ursa to let her wear.”

“Really?”
“Ursa always said no.”

Ty Lee doesn’t look back at the other woman. There’s nothing really to say about it. Azula wanted a lot of things, and Ursa always shot them down. It’d been one thing when it was just Ty Lee and Mai whispering about how mean the Fire Lady was being. It’s been quite another now that Zuko’s been poking into the past and how things went wrong with the last Fire Lord.

There’s too many moving parts, right now. Katara’s digging into the Water Tribes, Zuko into his family’s past, and Toph is focused firmly on the future. And then there’s lovely Mai, and all the ugly bits they’ve buried in this city. It’s a ruthless thing, the past. Immutable and often horrific in hindsight.

“Have you seen the whole collection?” Katara asks.

“Not really,” Ty Lee says. She tries to think back on that last, brief trip into the palace depths. “We were only in there for a moment. Most of it is in boxes.”

“They keep a lot of things in boxes, don’t they?”

Ty Lee has to stop at that. Boxes? Well, yes, they do. Everything is neatly tucked away in boxes of all kinds, and most of them probably imaginary. There’s the boxes in the Catacombs, that may have once been arranged by Fire Lord but now are bleeding into one another as the sides break down. There’s the boxes inside those boxes, that vary in strength and are only sometimes closed.

And there’s the boxes no one can see. Hers come with names like airbending, genocide, Azula, Mai, and so on. She’s pretty sure Zuko’s look much the same, albeit without the airbending and the genocide and probably more family drama and child abuse. It is kind of a thing they do, these children raised in the shadows of fire.

She shakes off the thoughts. “Right, sorry, I got off track. What’s obsidian look like?”

“Shiny and black,” Katara tells her. “And extremely durable and sharp. They were made before the Pirika Gate was built.”

“The what?”

Katara stops and looks back at her. “You guys really aren’t taught anything about the rest of us, are you? I mean, you, obviously, because the airbenders, but the Fire Nation in general isn’t good on global education, is it?”

“That’s one way of putting it,” Ty Lee says, shrugging. She swings around to the next chamber, and picks up a jade dragon figure. “Fire is superior, and so on. The Water Tribes are usually described as backwoods peasants who live in the snowy equivalent of a mud hut.”

Katara sighs and Ty Lee feels the air shift. There’s tension there, and something that feels like irritation and resignation. “The Pirika Gate. It guards our ancestral lands and is what kept our history and our spiritual centers safe. It’s an impenetrable storm. The last of our priestesses created it by calling on the spirits of winter to seal off the kingdom.”

“So what’s on the other side?”

“Our homeland. Half of Sokka’s designs are meant to try and build the things we were told about,” she says and leads them to the next chamber. More Fire Nation history. Ty Lee frowns. They’ve been down here for hours, and so far, they’ve seen every nation represented. Except the Water Tribes. “The North Pole is a sea surrounded by land, but we’re land surrounded by sea.
There’s stories that say we have a royal palace finer than any other nation’s, carved from a single mountain. We had the best ships, the best jewelers, and were at the forefront of medicine.”

“That sounds like a nice place,” Ty Lee says. “Are we sure this is all real?”

“Honestly?”

Ty Lee looks at her expectantly.

“No,” Katara admits, deflating a bit. “I want to find the stolen artefacts to prove it one way or another. Maybe. The obsidian mostly. It’s not easy to work with and the crown had to come from one massive piece.”

“You still haven’t explained what obsidian is,” Ty Lee says, moving a spear that looks like it belongs in an Ember Island play. “Or I got you side tracked. Sorry about that.”

“It’s a stone sharper and stronger than any metal,” Katara says, waving off the apology. “Black as true night. I’m surprised you don’t have it here. Ours came from the volcanos that are supposedly on the other side of the Gate.”

“This is also a nation ruled by firebenders who are averse to using things that don’t melt or burn,” Ty Lee tells her. Or things that don’t make them look powerful. Or things that aren’t beautiful, but what Katara’s describing probably is. Ty Lee got a good enough look at Sokka’s starry black sword to have a good idea of what’s being described.

And she’s pretty sure she has seen something like that, once, long ago. It’d been a birthday present, she thinks. It was a beautiful thing, shimmering black and delicate, but sharper than any other blade. It was beauty and mystery and secrecy all in one small, curved dagger with a bone handle. A perfect match for its mistress.

“Mai had a dagger with a blade like that,” Ty Lee tells her. “Azula gave it to her.”

Katara goes very still. “Do you know where it is?”

“No,” Ty Lee says. “But I can probably find out.”

Zuko takes a deep breath. He should have known this would be next. The last two days have been incessant questions about Azula and Aang, about the communications system and everything to do with the Fire Nation.

Except one major issue.

The future.

He’d thought it odd that Katara was confronted early in her trial about their arrangement, but the inquisitor instead went over every minute detail in his. He’s lost count how many times there’s been some veiled or direct reference to Azula and the clock-flower, or to Ursa, or yet another attempt to get him to admit he was in Ran-Shao during those three years. Which he wasn’t, and he’s starting to wonder if there’s something they don’t know about this city and the years after the comet.
“I’m sorry, could you please repeat that?”

The inquisitor adjusts his glasses and a ripple goes through the room. “I asked what your intentions were with regards to the throne. You are once again the Crown Prince of the Fire Nation.”

“Yes, I am,” Zuko says. Agni help him. He’s only got a rough draft of the parliament proposal written up, mostly in scribbles across multiple other things. “But given that my uncle is currently Fire Lord, I don’t see why it matters right now.”

“And yet you intend to teach at this school?”

“As long as I can,” Zuko says. “We know that may not be a permanent solution, but while we can, we want to do whatever we can to help.”

The inquisitor nods. “Still, that seems unusual. The sole heir to the throne and his wife going into something like that while their respective countries need help.”

“They’ll get it,” he says. “We’re not focused on just the airbenders. This will eventually be open to all. And if things work there, then maybe bring some of the teaching over here to our schools, and maybe establish schools in the Tribes. We have been discussing this.”

The inquisitor nods again and adjusts his glasses. The glint off the lens looks only mildly more diabolical than it should. “Current estimates are that almost half of Fire Nation citizens believe the races should not mix. Have you thought about how they will react to this?”

How they will—it’s not been announced. How they will react to this. There’s no way this has been kept secret this long, that the people in this room are the only ones aware of what’s happened. There’s simply no way.

“There will be worse things they’ll have to face in the coming years.”

“Are you aware that your marriage is the first between someone of your family and someone of a different nationality?”

There’s a part of him that wants to point out that Haneul was an airbender, but it sticks on the nationality part. She was an airbender, yes, but also of the Western Air Temple, which sits in Fire Nation territory. That Sozin married someone belonging to the people he later destroyed is probably not a thing to point out now.

But the rest of it. There’s a subtle pull on his blood and he thinks of the moon, of the sea, of the cold and that leads back to the first time he really noticed Katara. The Oasis feels like a fossil from another lifetime, all dusty and tinged with that amber discoloration of age.

“Yes, I know that,” he says. “And what you’re about to ask is something incredibly personal, so please don’t. I get that you’re here to make us prove we’re not dangerous, or whatever. But there are some things we should be allowed to keep to ourselves.”

The inquisitor looks away and he knows he’s hit the mark just right. It always comes back to children. He should have known that there would be whispers. He did know, actually. As it stands right now, Uncle has no heir beyond him. Azula and Ozai are both dead, Ursa and Rinchen are both ineligible, and he went and eloped with a Water Tribe princess. The stones around his neck feel colder than normal, and for just a moment he wishes he could take it off and trace each bead.

At least they seem to have accepted it as a legal marriage, even if it’s not, really.
“My apologies,” the inquisitor says, and maybe actually means it. “It was a surprise—”

“No it wasn’t,” Zuko says, interrupting. He knows where that’s going. “How was any of this a surprise? That we’d actually done something about our relationship? Because I know it can’t be that it exists. I saw the show the Ember Island Players did. If they could call it, so could the rest of you.”

The pull on his blood is a little more insistent, a tug in his wrist that he shakes off. She won’t do anything beyond that, and he’s not sure he can explain just how he knows that, but he does. He’s always known.

He’s always known.

Well, this is not how this was supposed to go.

“I walked into that final Agni Kai knowing it was a life or death fight for the future of this country. And I knew there was a very real chance that I would lose,” he says, and has to swallow around the rock lodged in his throat. He was expecting this, the daggers lancing through his ribs, even though he should have. He knows that crushing feeling, that sense of absolute darkness settling down around him. He knows it well, and it has a name.

Azula. Azula and her blue fire, her lightning, and her rage. She was by far the stronger firebender. She was the better strategist. If she’d been anything other than a broken little girl, she would have been magnificent beyond words. Probably still awful, but that was just Azula. He doesn’t think it’s possible to have been raised by Ozai and not turn out awful.

He tries to think of Azula with her fire and that spark in her eyes. Alive, that’s what she was. Azula was alive. She was steady and knew what she wanted and went for it, no matter how misguided she might be. She has been the subject of many a nightmare, a source of pure terror in his life, and yet she was once a girl he played with. He remembers running around the palace playing hide-and-seek. And this is the Azula he wants to remember, even knowing she became a monster modelled on their father, this is the Azula he tries to focus on.

This one, with the fear at her command and the death in her wake. Not the girl he last saw. Not that. Just anything but that.

“I did lose, actually. You know that,” he says. “I went into that fight knowing it would determine the path my kingdom took, and I threw it all away. Willingly. Because when it came down to it, Katara was more important. To me.”

“I think that’s enough,” the inquisitor says, and takes off his glasses. “I am sorry to have wasted your time.”

And just like that, it’s over.

“Well, that was different,” says Sokka, as he slides through the door onto the balcony Zuko’s chosen to hide in, once everyone is released from the courtroom. “That was one hell of a way to end it.”

The Water Tribe princeling doesn’t look all that disturbed. Or curious or anything expected actually. He just sets a bottle down between them, two cups set over the top and then proceeds to lean against the railing like this is a totally natural thing for them to do.

“You realize I’m just waiting for Katara,” Zuko says.
Sokka nods. “Yeah, but Ty Lee also flew in and dragged her off somewhere and Toph went with her mother, so I think you’ve been abandoned for now.”

“So you brought,” Zuko leans in to try and read the label, “something?”

“Ice wine,” Sokka says. “It’s gonna go bad if it’s not used soon, and I miss being silly.”

“So wine. On a balcony. Where anyone can find us.”

“Wine, on a balcony, with my brother,” Sokka says, and flips the two cups off the bottle and promptly sets to opening it up and pouring. Zuko thinks it’s probably not the kind of pale wine he’s used to; rice is the dominant grain in both the Fire Nation and the Earth Kingdom, and rice wine reigns supreme. But *ice* wine is something else. Even from here he can smell the sweetness that belies a different origin. “That was bold. I mean, I knew you were brave but that was something else.”

Zuko takes a drink. It is definitely sweet, and freezing cold. And he’s fairly certain there’s a reason Sokka’s brought this out here to talk to him. “I’m still not sure what they were after.”

“Nothing, really, not after Iroh told them to back off,” Sokka says. “I should probably apologize. I mean, I know I didn’t do anything, but I heard about the Poor Wife’s Judge.”

Ah, that.

“Do I even want to know?”

Sokka shrugs and turns to put his back to the city. “Probably not, but I’m still going to ask you to listen. No offense, but you’ve all been doing most of the talking lately and some of us have some things to say if any of you would stop and listen.”

That. Well. Zuko’s not sure he actually has anything in response to that. “You’re right, probably. I don’t know anymore.”

“Katara may not have known about this, but once upon a time we had a hunting party get stuck in the mountains over winter,” Sokka starts. “Nasty thing, that was. Being alone that long made them kind of crazy. There were only three survivors, but they didn’t trust anyone but each other until the end of their days. Never full re-assimilated. Lived just outside the village and kept to themselves, which, I mean, fair. They’d seen and done some pretty awful things to stay alive and didn’t feel like they could share with anyone but each other.

“My grandfather apparently found them after two disappearances were linked back to them,” he continues. “Gran Gran told me he never recovered from having to execute them, but the things they were doing... just, I like you guys, so please don’t be crazy cannibals who won’t talk to us. Pretty please?”

And there’s the Sokka he remembers.

“We’re not cannibals.”

“Oh, good,” Sokka says. “So, right. About the Judge. That kind of wasn’t Iroh’s idea. It was sort of Pakku’s. I’m pretty sure I’m not supposed to know any of this, but Dad kind of got involved and there were some really loud and angry words and Suki’s kind of permanently eavesdropping so we kind of heard about everything.”

“And Pakku wanted me poisoned *because*?” Zuko asks. The news about Hakoda getting
involved he files away; the Water Tribes are a complicated thing and he’s still not sure what to make of any of it. The Fire Nation is almost distressingly simple in comparison.

“Given what we heard, Pakku apparently doubted you were actually in love with my sister. Dad and Iroh both called foul on that, which, given that my father barely knew you and even he could tell you had a thing for my sister,” Sokka trails off. He takes a deep breath and then pours himself another glass of wine. “Which, dude, really. My sister? I mean, I’m not joking when I say I’m happier with you than anyone but did you never get the message that you don’t hit on your friend’s sister? That’s like a step away from stealing your friend’s girlfriend. Which, don’t. Seriously. Go near Suki and I’ll have to kill you twice. Once for each of them. And maybe another three times for Katara.”

“Please stay on track, Sokka.”

“Right. So there was that, and then the whole thing about Aang and Azula,” Sokka says. And there’s the part Zuko was expecting. Sokka takes a deep breath. “Pakku thinks you guys killed Aang. And Azula, but even Iroh and Dad are agreed on that point. But you’ve all said no, and Mai confessed, so that’s a thing.”

“And Pakku thought using the Judge and potentially ruining the only healthy familial relationship I’ve ever had was a good idea?”

“I know, it’s kind of a shitty idea. Iroh only agreed because Pakku leveraged the restitution the Fire Nation owes to the Tribes.”

“Which we can’t afford,” he says, and doesn’t even bother thinking about why he’s still referring to the Fire Nation as we. That’s been the thing swirling around for weeks, sick and thick and seeping out the walls to cling to everything. “Especially what the South can demand. My father drove the economy into the sea.”

“That’s putting it lightly,” Sokka tells him. “Pakku agreed to get the North to back off their demands, which was for some reason more than what the South was asking for, but that’s the North for you. So Iroh did it. And promptly came to yell at Pakku about it being a bad idea because apparently all you talked about was your mother and how you don’t think you’re good enough for my sister. Which you’re not. No offense. No one’s good enough for Katara.”

“Sokka.”

“How is she?”

There’s the moment he was waiting for. Sokka has always been a study in contradictions. He’s wicked intelligent and ridiculous and insanely loyal but just as capable of being ruthless as Katara is. But like this, Sokka just looks like all the innards have been scooped out of him and the hollowed out shell is just an echo chamber of memories.

There are parallels here, and that much Zuko knows. There are parallels between him and Katara, of course, of losing their mothers to the Fire Nation and of anger and the desire to do right by this world. But with Sokka, there are parallels far more painful. Sokka looks the way Zuko feels about Azula. It’s a slumping in the shoulders, a curve to the spine. It’s in lines of the face that never seem to show up in the mirror, but can be felt in the downturn of the mouth and crease at the brow.

Katara and Azula are more alike than Zuko likes to admit, most days. Both prodigies, but young and beautiful. Both determined and intelligent. Both dangerous in the same raw way their elements are. Both carrying a darkness in their hearts, spread out as a shawl over their shoulders.
Both charming in their own way, both stubborn to the point of world-changing. But beyond that, they couldn’t be more different. Where Azula had whatever compassion and love she may have been born with burned out of her, Katara still has that capacity.

“About as well as you’d expect,” Zuko says. “She was just put on trial without being charged with anything.” Sokka gives him a *look*. “You know, you could just ask her. She is your sister.”

“I know she’s my sister,” Sokka says, glaring. “I just don’t know what to say to her. You, I have no problem with. But she’s my baby sister. I don’t know if should yell at her or just…I don’t know. I really don’t.”

“That’s rough, buddy.”

Sokka’s jaw actually drops, and it takes a moment for Zuko to realize exactly what he’s just said. But Sokka looks more like himself and less like the eternally worried older brother, so worth it. “Low blow, jerkbender. Low blow.”

“I try.”

“Jerk.”

It’s beautiful. So, so beautiful. It’s a hundred million stars pouring out of nothingness still wrapped in darkness and smoothed into something sleek and dangerous. She can trace the lines of the blade, carefully. She’s already had to heal two slices in her hands where she strayed too close to the edge. Even after all these years, it’s still sharper than anything she’s encountered.

And the handle. Not bone as Ty Lee had described it, but *whalebone*. It’s whalebone of the same quality as Hama’s comb, and she can trace her fingers over the carved lines and can still make out the designs.

“Hey, Toph,” she says, feeling the earthbender behind her.

“Hey, Katara,” Toph says, and she feels a hand on her shoulder as the girl kneels down beside her. “Okay, I can tell you’ve got something in your hands, but it’s all a little fuzzy right now.”

Katara takes one of her hands and sets the dagger firmly in it. “Careful, it’s sharp.”

“What is it?” Toph asks.

“A knife.”

“Obviously. I mean what’s it made of. It’s not metal.”

Katara frowns. “What do you mean? It’s stone.”

“No, it’s not,” Toph says. She flicks the blade, well away from the edge. “If it were stone, I’d know what kind. This has flecks of earth in it, but I’ve never felt anything like this.”

Katara takes the blade back, tilting it so it catches the dying light falling in through the windows. It’s not stone. She’s inclined to agree, if only because it shines like the finest gemstone.
But that would still be a type of earth. There’s so little of it left in the Southern Water Tribe, these days. She tries to think back to the few ceremonial weapons that remain, and the stories behind them.

Little to nothing, is the only problem. The most that was said about the origin of obsidian is that it was born from fire and ice and harvested from the volcanoes that lie beyond the eternal storm.

“It’s called obsidian,” Katara says. “It’s a ceremonial dagger, I think. There’s clan markings on the handle.”

“I’m assuming this thing is Water Tribe, then,” Toph says. “Is it yours?”

“No,” she says. “We have wolves. This is for the Tiger Seal Clan. The last of them would have fallen before Hama’s time.”

“This thing is important, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Katara says. “It is. That it survived this long means the rest of what was taken might have made it. Ty Lee said Azula gave it to Mai, so if I can just figure out where Azula found it, I might be able to find the other things the Raiders stole.”

“You’ve not really told me a whole lot about your people,” Toph says. “You know all about my people, and we spent enough time hearing about Aang’s, and then running around Zuko’s home turf, but I was never in the Poles.”

“You’d probably hate the North.”

“Sea surrounded by land? Yeah, probably.”

“But you’d like the South,” Katara says. “Especially the mountains. They’re a challenge for most people, but I think you’d show them who the boss is. There’s hot springs at the base, if you know where to look, and they’re warm and full of rocks.”

And she misses it. Holding this knife, seeing the carvings; she misses the South Pole with a keening below her heart. There’s an emptiness between her ribs, right where the cold and the snow and the ice is supposed to be. Where the eternal night and the long ember-lit summers sing across the snowfields. Where the lights dance among the stars, bright and beautiful and breath-taking. The view out over the ocean, the whales that come in during summer and the seals that remain throughout the long winters.

It was home for so long. She loves the Temple, even the house on Ember Island, but none of those places gave her life the way the South Pole did. With as disconnected as the world’s been, maybe going back to their roots is what they need. Maybe they all need answers.

Maybe starting over is what they need.

Chapter End Notes

GUESS WHO IS BACK~~~

so sokka decided to talk. a lot. and i think i’m just kind of going to toss the last half of the outline for this story and just figure things out as i go for a bit. i’ve already retooled the family tree to stay constant across the various AU's (bar the avatar!katara one. that
one's just...different). incidentally this chapter also spawned a new planned fic that will just straight up be a zutara based around something that's said in his scene. and on the zutara front, i'm 200K words in, it was time for something to happen there.
Note

Some of you will probably see the note that's been added to world but I'll put it here just in case.

I am currently rewriting everything (except strange birds. Aang is removed enough from the plot of these to be okay) to match the updated plot and timeline. I will be completing the update before updating anything. In the meantime, in the kingdom of heaven will be ongoing and there is a new AU that will be going up as soon as I figure out some editing issues.

Thank all so much for being patient with this series. All your words of encouragement have really kept this alive when my own desire to finish it has sometimes waned. I could not be doing this without you guys, and I just want you to know that I'm doing everything I can to make sure this rewrite exceeds expectations.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!