

## The Wisps Sing

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/29284320) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/29284320>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Teen And Up Audiences</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings</a>
Categories:	<a href="#">F/M</a> , <a href="#">Gen</a>
Fandoms:	<a href="#">Avatar: The Last Airbender</a> , <a href="#">Avatar: Legend of Korra</a>
Relationships:	<a href="#">Aang/Katara (Avatar)</a> , <a href="#">Aang &amp; Katara (Avatar)</a> , <a href="#">Aang &amp; The Gaang (Avatar)</a> , <a href="#">Aang &amp; Gyatso (Avatar)</a> , <a href="#">Aang &amp; Sokka (Avatar)</a> , <a href="#">Katara &amp; Sokka (Avatar)</a> , <a href="#">Aang &amp; Toph Beifong &amp; Katara &amp; Sokka</a>
Characters:	<a href="#">Aang (Avatar)</a> , <a href="#">Katara (Avatar)</a> , <a href="#">Sokka (Avatar)</a> , <a href="#">Toph Beifong</a> , <a href="#">Iroh (Avatar)</a> , <a href="#">Kuei (Avatar)</a> , <a href="#">Dai Li</a> , <a href="#">Joo Dee (Avatar)</a> , <a href="#">The Gaang (Avatar)</a> , <a href="#">Gyatso (Avatar)</a> , <a href="#">Raava (Avatar)</a> , <a href="#">Chit Sang</a> , <a href="#">Sensu (Avatar)</a> , <a href="#">Lee (Avatar)</a> , <a href="#">Gansu (Avatar)</a> , <a href="#">Dark Spirit (Avatar)</a> , <a href="#">Jet (Avatar)</a> , <a href="#">Lu Ten</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">Aang (Avatar)-centric</a> , <a href="#">POV Aang (Avatar)</a> , <a href="#">Post-100 Year War (Avatar TV)</a> , <a href="#">Spirits</a> , <a href="#">Spirit World (Avatar)</a> , <a href="#">Earth Kingdom (Avatar)</a> , <a href="#">Ba Sing Se</a> , <a href="#">Adventure</a> , <a href="#">Effects of War</a> , <a href="#">Spiritual</a> , <a href="#">Ghosts</a> , <a href="#">Action/Adventure</a> , <a href="#">Air Nomads (Avatar)</a> , <a href="#">Air Nomad Lore (Avatar)</a> , <a href="#">Mentioned Zuko</a> , <a href="#">Angst</a> , <a href="#">Angst with a Happy Ending</a> , <a href="#">Spirit World</a> , <a href="#">Post-Avatar: The Last Airbender</a> , <a href="#">Love</a> , <a href="#">Minor Character Death</a> , <a href="#">These characters have unexplored trauma my beloved</a> , <a href="#">Aang centric spirit world adventure no one asked for</a> , <a href="#">In which katara reminds him he isn't alone</a> , <a href="#">Also more trauma because why not</a>
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2021-02-08 Completed: 2022-07-24 Words: 17,541 Chapters: 3/3

# The Wisps Sing

by [itsmoonpeaches](#)

## Summary

“So,” the mysterious woman started, her back to him, “you have found me at last, Avatar Aang.” Her voice sounded regal, as if she had been a ruler once, and yet it was still kind. She turned to him and he was struck by the brightness of her irises. They glowed just so, like a light was shimmering behind them.

“You know me?” Aang stuttered out, a little wary.

Her lips quirked and she replied, “I know all of you.”

He did not know what to say except, “Who are you?”

-

Or, when the Earth King invites Aang, Katara, Sokka, and Toph to celebrate over a thousand years of Earth Kingdom Unification, they find out there was more to the invitation. There could not be more to find in the Dai Li's old hideouts, could there?

## Notes

This story has been sitting in the back of my mind for months, and it isn't until now that I am finally writing it. I welcome you on this journey with me. It is a friendship fic, a Kataang fic, and a fic that involves a lot of Aang-centric ideas.

The title is inspired by the song "The Wisp Sings" by Winter Aid.

# Glow

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Without a doubt, Aang was proud of the work that Toph had done on the Southern Air Temple. She had taken some time off from the Metalbending Academy to help him oversee the reconstruction efforts. It would not be long, she said, but she could not let the “amateurs” take over where she claimed she was an expert.

They were in the Southern Air Temple, stopping over to check in on the refurbishing process which the Fire Nation had spearheaded with funding. Things were running smoothly—to Aang’s immense satisfaction, and in truth it warmed his heart to see people from other nations come together to help with his lost one.

He knew Toph was one of the best when it came to making art out of earth (and earthbending in general), but he could have done without all the complaining.

“No, *no*, you lily livers!” Toph groaned in a hallway of ruined statues. She stomped the ground as she did so, and he could feel the tiles shake just a little. “Put it more to the left! You can’t just *decide* to put Guru Shoken in a random alcove. Are you *blind*?” Then, under her breath, “Blinder than me apparently.”

Needless to say, Aang was getting a headache. He pinched his eyebrows together with his pointer finger and his thumb, praying to whatever entity that would listen for some relief. Three years since the end of the war, and Toph had not changed one bit. In fact, he was sure that she had gotten bossier since she opened a school.

He leaned back onto the banister, letting his back press into the cool stone so that it might distract him. The crisp winter air was soothing for his throbbing head, and he liked that it was already starting to make him feel better.

He jerked alert when something cold and powdery hit him on the shoulder. When he looked down, he saw the remnants of a snowball sliding down his yellow woolen sleeve. He opened his mouth, about to call out to whoever had decided it was a good idea to disturb the Avatar, when he heard the familiar melodic laughter of Katara.

She was standing just a foot away from him clad in her blue traditional Water Tribe parka. Her hands were covered in deep purple mittens, and she held them up to her face to hide her giggling.

“You looked too uncomfortable there, Aang,” she grinned, walking toward him and wiping her mittens on her sides.

He blinked. “So, you wanted to make me more uncomfortable?” he asked incredulously. His hands settled upon her waist when she was near enough.

Katara tilted her head, her expression softening. “You looked like you needed it,” she added.

Aang sighed, feeling himself relax in a way that only she could make him. He observed her for a short moment, seeing how the years after the war only seemed to make her more beautiful. Sure, he had grown taller than her by a few inches. Her nose was at his chin was now, but Katara did not seem to mind the change nor the switch in height difference.

She had begun to lose more of the roundness in her cheeks. Her chestnut hair was consistently half-down, but she kept the loops of hair that she wore on the sides of her face. Her eyes were a darker blue, and her shoulders more confident. Hope had made her powerful, but peace made her into someone he held in his heart.

Aang smiled at her and leaned in to peck her cheek. When he pulled away, he said with a shrug, “You’re right, as always.”

Katara smirked. “Of course, I am,” she replied. She moved to stand next to him and then they were both resting against the stone rails. “So,” she started, “What’s on your mind? Toph can’t be *that* bad.”

As soon as she said that Aang heard Toph reprimand someone again. He grimaced when there was an additional scream of terror.

Katara winced. “Okay...maybe she can get a little...aggressive,” she conceded.

Aang chuckled and he let out a slow breath. “I don’t know,” he began. “I’m happy that we’re here and that Zuko has helped us get this far in refurbishing the air temples, but I guess I’m just...worried about getting it right. Seeing everything get put back to what it’s supposed to be is making me realize that I have a duty to my people to preserve our culture, our traditions...” He shook his head. “I think I always knew, but—”

Katara’s gentle hand met his cheek and she turned his face to hers, making his words stop. “You’re already doing great,” she said with confidence in her tone. “It’s not your job to make things perfect, just to do the best you can.”

“But I’m the Avatar—”

“You’re also Aang,” she cut him off again. “If there is anyone that your people could trust to do them right, it’s you. Anyway, you don’t have to do it alone. You have me.”

It was not easy even after the many times Katara had told him that the world believed in him, that *she* believed in him, to trust in that same faith himself. Yet he had to admit that it did help, at least for that moment.

“It’s getting late,” Katara spoke after a moment. The wind caught her words and made them sound like an echo. “We need to get ready for dinner, and then go to sleep...and I *mean* go to sleep,” she said with a frown. “If I find out that you were off wandering the temple at night, I’ll make sure that you and Sokka share a room for the rest of your lives.”

He gasped, scandalized. “Katara!” he whined.

“No complaining, Aang!” she reprimanded him, getting into his face and jabbing a finger to his chest. “You need rest, and you haven’t been getting much of it. Don’t think I haven’t noticed. Besides, we need to get up early tomorrow if we’re going to make it to Ba Sing Se in time for the Earth Kingdom Unification Ball.”

Aang groaned when he remembered the real reason why they stopped over at the Southern Air Temple. It was a pit stop that he, Katara, Sokka, and Toph had made after they left the Southern Water Tribe. Katara and Sokka had visited their home and family for a few weeks, and Toph had arrived to help with the construction of a factory under the Bei Fong’s company name. Aang had to admit that Toph might have gotten her excessive crankiness from having to wear shoes for an extended period. (“I can’t see anything through these things, Twinkle Toes! How am I supposed to tell you where I last saw Katara?!”) He had not thought of that until much later. In fact, it was understandable. He just did not want to say it out loud.

Word spread fast that he was in the Southern Water Tribe, and he had received a message from Earth King Kuei himself that his and his friends’ presence was requested at the commemorative ball.

“It’s been over a thousand years since the Earth Kingdom was unified,” groaned Aang. “I can’t believe we have to go to a party for it.”

“It’s a party that hasn’t been hosted in a little over a hundred years,” said Katara with a smile. She held his hand and squeezed it. “It’ll look good if the Avatar and his friends go. It’s another sign of peace. The Earth King isn’t asking you for too much, just to show up. I think it could be fun.”

The corner of Aang’s mouth quirked up into a smile. “Okay,” he said with a nod, squeezing her hand back, “then you’ll be my first dance at the ball?”

Katara lightly slapped his shoulder. “Why? Is there anyone else you’re planning on dancing with?” she laughed.

The two of them separated only when Toph yelled at them for being too noisy with their flirting. Aang could feel himself blush from his neck to the start of his arrow tattoo on his forehead. Katara sputtered next to him, just as red.

The workers around them shuffled away, moaning about aching bones just as Toph shoved them aside and praised a grand total of one individual for their hard work.

Sokka met with the three of them at the main courtyard near Monk Gyatso’s statue. Aang had refurbished it himself, and it looked brand-new. It was wooden and did not require Toph’s help or earthbending, but he still remembered what the monks had taught him about wood carving. It had taken him mere hours one day to piece the cracks back together. It was lucky that the Fire Nation had not touched it in their initial raids, but time had worn the figure out.

“C’mon slowpokes!” shouted Sokka, waving his arms. “We have Fire Nation roasted turtle ducks for dinner, curtesy of the chef!”

Toph nudged Katara, making Aang laugh behind them. “By *the chef*, he means that really annoying guy that agrees with whatever Sokka says about construction work.”

Aang tried to hide his smile, but to no avail. She was right, after all. Sokka had been preoccupied with developing an easier way for non-earthbenders to move rocks with some crane-like contraption for the past few days. The man who normally cooked most of their meals just so happened to be rather obsessed with Sokka and his ideas, and it was getting to Sokka’s head.

“Is there a vegetarian option?” Aang called, syncing his steps with the others as they made their way down the hall nearby.

Sokka scoffed. “Vegetarian? I still don’t understand how you can live without meat, Aang.”

Aang slumped forward. “So, I guess I’m eating rice again,” he grumbled.

Katara brightened next to him. “Actually, I roasted some water chestnuts for you so you can have them too. I tasted them and they’re pretty good!”

Sokka groaned. “Wait why does he get to have your cooking but not me? Katara, I’m your big brother!”

Aang sniggered as the siblings bickered all the way to the dining area, and Toph let out a heavy sigh in resignation. He could not help but feel sorry for her sensitive ears. It was a long walk to supper, but at least it was enjoyable when they did sit down.

Katara was right. The salted water chestnuts made for a savory, nutty side dish with his bowl of rice. He supposed it was difficult to expect too many airbender friendly dishes from Fire Nation workers when even their hippo cows ate meat.

The food gave him a warm, pleasant feeling in his belly. One that he did not know he needed. It made his eyes droop, and sleepiness settle in. Soon after, he was ready for bed. Sokka followed him out, saying that he was going to catch some shut eye as well. He was never one to turn down a few hours of slumber.

They both washed up, splashing fresh water on their faces in the privy. Aang said, “Goodnight,” just as Sokka started snoring.

When Aang closed his eyes, he felt himself loosen. Images danced on the backs of his eyelids. He saw himself standing in a field next to water. Sparks of fire lifted from the earth, the grass, the dandelions that swayed. When he opened them again, the picture disappeared.

Aang was already having a difficult time sleeping with Sokka’s loud snoring next to him in the other bed, and his imagination did not help. He shifted into another spot, hoping for some warmth. The hearth did not seem to help much when it was winter. He sent another soft blast of air across his body, hoping his mastery of the temperature around him with airbending would help.

It did not. As a matter of fact, it made him frustrated. The lethargy he had experienced earlier had gone.

He could not find a comfortable position on his mattress. He had been moving around his sheets and tossing from one spot to another for an hour while Sokka slept almost as soon as his head hit the pallet. Truly, Aang wished not for the first time that he had the same ability to pass out with minimal obstructions.

It did not help that his thoughts kept wandering and his whole body felt so awake. It was like there was something tingling under his skin, pulsing, keeping him aware beyond his senses. He could see every detail in the grains of the floorboards, hear every brush of the breeze as it pounded against the windowpane. The smell of sandalwood and incense was strong, as well as the musky scent of a century of decay. There was a shivering in his ears, a beat of invisible wings. Maybe, if he concentrated hard enough, he could imagine the shadow of a butterfly as it made its way across the room.

He moved yet again, craning his neck when he spotted something bright in the corner of his eye. A feeling, a strange one, came to fruition at the center of his chest. A wisp of an idea, a suggestion at the tip of his tongue that he did not understand. He saw flickers of memory just outside his line of sight: laughing as he tried to balance on the back of a glider with orange wings, the taste of jasmine tea on a cold winter's day, sitting across an old friend with a white lotus tile in the palm of his hand as he played a daring round of Pai Sho.

Aang shook his head, rubbing at his eyes. The threads of memories that were not his fluttered away. He blinked and then he saw it. A curious ball of flame hovered in the center of the door frame of the room he and Sokka shared, mere inches above the ground. It was the size of a small basket of fruit, the kind he would use to carry the lychees that Momo adored so much. Though, his lemur would probably wish for a bigger one.

The flames lacked the harshness of a blast of fire but were a soft yellow with tinges of white. Just looking at it made him feel calm somehow. But it was strange. A hollow glow.

Aang's bare feet hit the floor without a second thought. He found himself moving toward the ball of flame, almost as if he were in a trance. There was a pull, a tug, a moment of beckoning. The call moved, and he moved with it.

He walked silently through the twisting halls of the temple, careful to shut the door behind him. His feet barely touched the ground. Whispers echoed in his ears. They were calls, voices of the night. The ball began to rush and dart, and so he did the same.

He turned a corner, and another. This was a maze he should have known, yet there was nothing he could do to decipher it. A shadow, and a light. The ball of flame sputtered and sang something like a long-lost lullaby from his childhood. He did not recognize the words.

Then, the flames and the soft yellow glow were gone. Vanished. Like it was never there.

Aang gasped, halting by a rounded window that overlooked a balcony somewhere in a spire on the other side of the temple. Far away from where he had been before. There was a shape that formed where the flame should have been, light blue like the ring around a full moon.

His lips parted when he saw the figure. The robes, the beads, the back of a bald head, a line of a blue tattoo from the forehead to his neck. He knew who it was.

“Gyatso?” Aang murmured into the night. He pushed himself forward through the window, grateful that there was no glass. He made it through without any difficulty and alighted on the terrace below. Air billowed past him, through his loose trousers and long-sleeved winter robe. He could not feel the cold on his skin.

Gyatso did not move. Aang stepped forward, and then with a moment’s hesitation, reached out to his shoulder.

He was met with a breath of nothing. He stumbled forward, an aimlessness in the pit of his stomach. For a second he shut his eyes, letting the emptiness of the temple resound inside him like the reverberation of a wailing gong. He had to remind himself that there was no one there as he had been since the Hundred Year War ended.

He opened his eyes, blinking away his disappointment. However, he was surprised when another figure had replaced Gyatso.

There was a woman standing on the balcony now. Her skin was pale, unbelievably so. As if she were made from porcelain and shone silver from within. Her hair was pure white and reached the backs of her knees. She had an elegant topknot that crowned the top of her head, held together with a long ivory hairpiece embedded with diamond-shaped blue jade pattered across it. Sheer ribbons were strung through on either end and flowed like rivers on both sides of her face. Her clothes were silk waves that matched the rest of her, sapped of color except for displays of turquoise swirls throughout.

“So,” the mysterious woman started, her back to him, “you have found me at last, Avatar Aang.” Her voice sounded regal, as if she had been a ruler once, and yet it was still kind. She turned to him and he was struck by the brightness of her irises. They glowed just so, like a light was shimmering behind them.

“You know me?” Aang stuttered out, a little wary.

Her lips quirked and she replied, “I know all of you.”

He did not know what to say except, “Who are you?”

She looked at him with a careful gaze, pausing to investigate his face. It felt like she was studying him.

“Raava,” said the woman after a long moment. The name rang something within him, a familiarity he was not aware he had attached to it. Like something long forgotten.

“You are a gentle spirit,” she continued. “I have not spoken to one like you in an exceptionally long time. Since perhaps the beginning.”

“You’re a spirit,” he said as if on instinct. He stepped closer to her, as if drawn in.



Raava laughed softly into her hand, her serious façade breaking if just for a moment. She nodded as an answer. “You’re as observant as ever, my old friend.”

Aang was not sure what to make of her, this spirit. She should have been a foreign entity, yet he could not shake the feeling that he knew her even better than he knew himself.

“I feel like I know you,” he said instead of asking anything else.

She smiled at him, a gentle smile. “I come in many different forms as many spirits do,” she spoke, voice carrying in the whistling winds around the Patola Mountains that surrounded the temple. “I admit that you are not familiar with this one, but I chose it because it would be the most comfortable to you. I do not yet think you are ready to remember me the way you are now. Perhaps in the future you will be.”

When Aang did not speak, she came nearer to him. So close, that she brushed his hand. He did not flinch away. It felt right somehow. Like they were two parts of the same whole, like family that had reconnected after years of being apart.

“I came to you because you need to remember this at least. Because I am the only one who can teach it to you,” she stated. Her gaze never left his. “The true mind can weather all the lies and illusions without being lost. The true heart can tough the poison of hatred without being harmed. Since beginningless time, darkness thrives in the void, but always yields to purifying light.” She stopped to stare at him. Her eyes were unbelievably bright blue, like there was a light that shone behind them. “You remember that this is what the ancient one taught you.”

Aang let out a breath he did not know he was holding. He pictured the gigantic lion turtle on the day Sozin’s Comet arrived as it glided through the ocean waters, the day he ended the war and avenged his people.

“You are the Avatar,” Raava said, letting go of his hand. “You are a human and you are a spirit. You can do much more than bend the elements. You bend energy. You are light in the dark. I wonder...if all darkness can be purified, don’t you?”

“I don’t...understand.” Aang remarked, scrunching his eyebrows together.

“Darkness does not have to be evil,” Raava explained, “It is closer to a lack of hope.” She turned her head to the side. There was a flash of fire, of light, and she looked back to him. “Help them,” she said. “I will guide you.”

“Help who?”

In blinding white, Raava vanished from the balcony in an instant, and Aang stood alone with nothing but the resounding of a whisper. Not for the first time, he wondered what part of himself he was missing.

Flying to Ba Sing Se went smoother than Aang thought it would. Appa, who normally did not quite enjoy flights at the crack of dawn, was much more chipper than expected. It could have been the fact that he had been well groomed the day before, but he was sure that the only thing that would have stirred his oldest friend to get up early was the promise of a bushel of fresh moon peaches or a cart full of hay.

Momo spent his time on the back of Appa curled into a ball on Sokka's lap because Sokka had the tree nuts in his pocket and he kept trying to steal some. Toph hated it as usual but resigned herself to days of travel. At least, she said, that it was back to the good old days.

"It's a plus that we aren't running for our lives," she added, picking her nose and tilting her head back on the saddle. "That would stink."

Katara spent most of her time either next to Aang or fussing over the food supply because both her brother and Momo seemed to enjoy diminishing it more than she thought was acceptable.

"Sokka, aren't you done with your growth spurt yet?" she growled. "I can't believe your appetite."

"A man needs his muscles, little sister," Sokka replied with a smug look on his face. Aang did not get a chance to witness Katara freeze Sokka's hand to his satchel because he was busy steering Appa away from a stray raincloud.

After almost two weeks of nonstop travel and sibling rivalry, Aang was glad to see Ba Sing Se's city walls rise upon the horizon line. He was sure his friends were happy as well if the cheering was any indication. No matter how much he loved to be a nomad, sometimes a rush to get to a destination was too much. He had the sores on his rear end to prove it.

It was chilly here too, but not as pronounced as in the Southern Air Temple. Flurries drifted down to the ground, but only a meager amount stuck. Most of it seemed to melt within minutes of touching the earth. Late afternoon was starting to set in, and the sun had begun its decent into the west.

It was refreshing that when they landed, they had Appa unlike the first time they had visited Ba Sing Se. Even more refreshing when Joo Dee did not greet them with her unnerving smile and stilted, overly formal way of speaking. Instead, they were greeted by a single man who bowed low as they dismounted from Appa in front of their designated home in the Upper Ring. It was the same one they had stayed in previously, and just as unnecessarily luxurious.

While Aang would have preferred to stay with Iroh near the Jasmine Dragon tea shop, he did not want to impose when there were so many guests and a bison to take care of. He was sure that Iroh would protest, but Aang thought that he deserved some time away from politics after so long embroiled in them. He was glad to learn that the old man was invited to the ball.

"General How," greeted Aang with an answering bow. "I didn't expect to see you here."

The general was the same upright, dutiful man that Aang remembered him to be. His hair was a dark brown, pulled back into a neat topknot with an intricate hairpiece with the symbol for

the Earth Kingdom engraved in gold. His beard reached inches below his chin and was trimmed meticulously. He had piercing olive eyes, and a perpetual serious expression. Even in peacetime, he wore his armor. The chest piece and pauldrons were immaculate.

“Welcome to Ba Sing Se, Avatar Aang, Master Katara, Master Toph, Master Sokka,” he said. “I’m here to greet you on behalf of the Earth King.”

Aang did not fail to notice that Sokka preened a little at being called a master. Toph elbowed him in the side and Sokka doubled over with a grunt.

“Thank you,” Aang replied.

General How studied them for a moment before speaking again. “If you would follow me,” he remarked, “there is an urgent matter we must discuss before the ball tonight.”

Alarmed, Aang glanced over at the others. They all nodded at him. He gestured for Appa to find a place to rest somewhere in the gardens. Momo followed with a chittering sound, scampering into the matted grass with him.

Aang and the others followed General How without complaint. The air was thick with trepidation. The palace guards did not bother to say anything to them when they passed, but merely lowered their heads in quick succession. The grand entrance to the Earth King’s home stood before them, impending and bright with gold leaf and emerald hues.

The sloping golden tiled roofs were edged with precious carvings and sweeping designs. The Earth Kingdom symbol of the circle with a square in the center was carved above doors. Everything was exquisite and overall, too opulent for Aang’s tastes. Somehow, the lack of Fire Nation reds that had once been draped on the walls of the palace made the place seem even more ostentatious.

They were led not into the throne room as Aang had thought they would be brought into, but to one of the Council of Five’s offshoot chambers. The ominous green glow that covered the room highlighted the lacquered furniture and the similarly colored gleaming stones in the fireplace.

Standing at the head of a rather long table was Earth King Kuei himself, clad in his usual royal attire and robes. His plait lay tidy on his shoulder, and his crown atop his head in the green and gold of his kingdom. Beside him stood a Dai Li agent with a scar scratched on his cheek. He wore all dark greens and a conical hat.

The king raised his head as soon as they entered behind the general. The doors slid shut, and General How bowed. “Your Majesty, Captain Liang, I have brought the Avatar and his friends,” he informed them. He gestured toward them and moved to the opposite end of the table.

Aang followed, the others making their way to the empty spots and filling them in. He inclined his head toward Kuei, frowning. “General How said there was something urgent?” he asked. “Is there something going on with the ball?”

Kuei blinked at him from behind his small, round glasses that sat atop his nose. “Ah yes,” he replied with a nod, “the ball. No, there isn’t anything particularly wrong with that.”

They stared at each other for a while. An awkward silence stretched between them. The king bit his bottom lip and shifted from foot to foot.

“Then...” Aang trailed off, hoping for clarification.

Kuei gulped before responding. “You see, the ball might have been the initial reason why I invited you all here, but in truth...it’s because I have a problem that I need your help with.”

Sokka huffed. “Well, why didn’t you tell us before?”

Kuei glanced away, looking nervous. “I was afraid word would get out. People are still questioning my authority, you know...since I have been Long Feng’s puppet for most of my rule. I wanted your help done in secret.” He sighed, suddenly looking tired. “My people are disappearing,” he finished.

Aang stood up straighter then. He took a quick look around the table, seeing the surprised expressions on his friends’ faces. He felt the same.

“What do you mean?” Aang asked, digging his fingers into the wood of the tabletop.

“It started just a few weeks ago, about when we seriously started to reform the Dai Li,” spoke Kuei. “Captain Liang officially became their leader after a few years of being the unofficial one. I commanded them to start clearing out the old hideouts, picking out the people who might not be loyal to me or the Earth Kingdom. It went well at first. Then, a palace maid went missing one night. Then a few nights later, one of the royal guards. It kept happening, and always at random.

“My people vanish into the night. No one knows what happens to them, and even with all the investigations my men have done, we cannot find who is taking them or why. There is no pattern.”

Aang narrowed his eyes. He looked into the fireplace, into the simmering green flames that had begun to rise.

“We do have a lead, though,” said General How somewhere across him. He nodded to someone behind him.

There was shuffling, and a curtain was pushed back. Into the chamber room, a familiar face appeared. Her black hair was just as long and straight. Her face just as tanned and her posture just as proper.

“If I could be of help, Avatar Aang,” said Joo Dee with a slight bow. Her eyebrows were crinkled with worry. “All I have is an unusual story.”

Aang turned his attention to her, nodding. “Anything helps,” he remarked.

Joo Dee grimaced. “I saw something the other night, and it compelled me to follow,” she spoke with a tremor. “Something that looked like a lantern, but I do not know who was carrying it. It was near the ancient parts of the city, where the Dai Li sometimes kept their prisoners. If it weren’t for the curfew gong well...I don’t know where I would have gone.”

He felt Katara’s eyes on him, and when he looked up, he knew that they were thinking the same thing.

-

Aang brushed his hands on his formal tunic, trying to wipe off the stray pieces of flint that might have attached to it. The buttons were a nuisance, but at least the colors were a familiar yellow and orange. Katara fixed his high collar and straightened the auburn folds that created a sash across his torso.

“I like this on you,” she said with a smile.

He laughed softly. “Maybe I should wear it more often,” he answered. He stepped back to appraise her. “You look beautiful.”

Katara had chosen to wear a dress more in line with traditional Water Tribe fashion. It had a long blue skirt trimmed with white fur and a matching belt in the middle. Her sleeves were long and wide at the end, reminiscent of a Northern Water Tribe parka. Simple wavy patterns trailed down the center, and around her neck she wore her mother’s necklace. The ocean carving there was dainty against her skin.

Her hair was half-up in its usual style, but she had pinned a pretty jasmine flower to her bun that produced a sweet, scented cloud around her. She had light blush on, just enough to bring her eyes out.

“Thanks,” Katara beamed. She held out her hand. “Should we go?”

They held hands. Sokka and Toph were behind them and Aang could hear Sokka pretending to gag at their supposed “loveey-doveyness”. He was tempted to tease Sokka more with it, but he did not want to ruin the moment.

“I can’t believe we were invited here to do more work,” complained Sokka as he caught up with them in his own formal wear. “I thought this was supposed to be a shindig with minimal Team Avatar things to do.”

Toph sauntered up to them. Her hair was done in an intricate braid that a stylist made for her. She did not particularly enjoy being forced into a dress, but after Katara told her she was allowed to be barefoot, she conceded. “I just came here to hang out with you idiots,” she said. She shoved a pinky up her nose. “Frankly, I’m surprised we got this far with no requests from some important official. I was kind of expecting it. Anyway, could be fun.”

“You call searching for missing people *fun*?” Sokka asked, taken aback.

“Exactly,” Toph grinned. She flicked her pinky in Sokka’s direction. “Get with the times.”

Aang let the two of them talk out their grievances all the way to the gate where they were met with an entourage of people including the Earth King himself. In the waiting crowd, he spotted Iroh clad in Earth Kingdom colors. His gray hair was tied up into a topknot.

When they made it inside where there was a grand dance floor and lines of buffet tables with busboys wandering about, he was reminded just what kind of a city Ba Sing Se was.

Iroh joined them at the front, grinning widely with an excitable laugh that was infectious. Aang was sure that Iroh wished Zuko was there, but there was only so much that could be done since his nephew was the Fire Lord. Kuei had apparently extended the invitation, but it turned out that making the Earth Kingdom Unification Ball an international event was not in the cards when it was a rather small celebration in comparison to more important ones.

The next best thing was to invite important people from the Avatar's circle that were not world leaders themselves, but Aang realized that his friends might as well have been. It was an ancient tradition that the companions of the Avatar were akin to some of the most influential individuals on the planet.

Aang could not help but observe the people that were invited. Did anyone here know someone that was stolen? Were they hoping against hope that he would be able to help them?

At the front of the hall, the king and some of his men stood at the front. The crowd hushed, and Kuei spoke.

"We are here to celebrate when the Hao Dynasty began and brought our people together," he said, voice carrying. "Now, during the Hou-Ting Dynasty, the Earth Kingdom remains united. Though we have had a century that tested our resilience, in the end we are still here as one people."

There was clapping, applause, some of which Aang joined in on. He tried to let the feeling of elation overtake him. The ball began. Stringed guzhengs played, and the music warbled through the tall pillars like a singing choir of their own.

Iroh led them to the tea table where he proudly offered them some of his best concoctions. "This one has such a lovely floral aroma," he said with a puff of his chest. "You really must try it. I insist!"

Aang knocked back a cup, and then sipped another. He tried the fried bean curd puffs, picked his way through a plateful of steamed eggs seasoned with sesame, and delighted in slices of dragon fruit.

"This is really great, Iroh!" he exclaimed, and the old man was pleased.

Afterward, it was Katara that had dragged him onto the dancefloor when a bouncy tune had begun. A few bells and gongs rang throughout, and people jumped at the chance to hop into step. He did not realize that his shoulders were tense until her hands were on them.

"Relax," Katara said, bringing him to the border of the floor. "We're here tonight to have some fun. Tomorrow, we can worry about everything else. Besides, if the king was going to

use the ball as a cover for inviting us anyway, we might as well enjoy it.”

Aang chuckled, eyes crinkling. “You’re right,” he agreed.

They spun and laughed together. They met eyes, they brushed sides. Another spin, and colors started to whirl into different shapes and sizes. The thrill of the notes that played sent shivers down his spine, into his skin, his core. The firelight twinkled, flickered, changed from yellow to white to green to something else entirely.

He saw Iroh, guffawing at something a younger man had said to him. His golden eyes flashed as if in some unnamed emotion. A ball of flame came and dissipated. But no, it was Aang’s imagination. It had to be.

“Do you ever wonder what it was all for?” someone must have said. He could not pinpoint who it was. “The war.”

The music slowed down. His head pounded. Katara brought him to sit down. She came back moments later with a cup in her hand. She offered it up to him, a concerned look on her face. He took it with a sigh.

Moments later, Sokka and Toph sat next to them.

“Man, the food here is great,” marveled Sokka. He stretched his limbs out. “It’s a good thing this is almost over though. I’m exhausted.” He raised his eyebrows at Aang and Katara. “You two behave now. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Aang lifted a hand. “See you later, Sokka,” he said.

Toph groaned when someone asked her to dance, but he and Katara only pushed for her to try it out. At least Iroh had asked for her hand later. Though the two of them stumbled through it, Toph seemed to actually enjoy it. Their dance was an amiable end to the night. Iroh requested to meet with them the next day, or at least sometime while they were visiting.

Aang massaged his skull when the headache went down. He was grateful that the king had told them that they could rest that evening. It really had been a long journey.

When they made it back to their guest home, Katara kissed him on the cheek, and the three of them went to turn in. The candles were already snuffed out. He was careful not to trip over Sokka’s things.

Aang laid down on his bed and let the quiet seep into his ears. It was calming. At least Sokka was not snoring so loud this time, he thought.

He dreamed of flying arrows and caverns snaking through the earth. He chased after one and then another. When his fingertips almost caught a swaying shadow, he thought he saw the face of a white-haired girl. Another boy was running after her, calling her name. “Yue!” yelled the other boy, but he was met with nothing.

Aang shot up in his bed, his heart pounding. The sun was already high in the sky when he realized it.

Sokka was gone.

## Chapter End Notes

This is a story that involves some Filipino folktale references, some of which have already been referenced. Shout out if you can figure out what!

As always, if you enjoyed this, please feel free to leave a comment and/or kudos down below!



# Spark

## Chapter Summary

Aang turned to where Sokka was supposed to be, about to ask him if he had any breakfast, when he saw that his bed was still made. Not a wrinkle in sight.

“Sokka?” he asked the empty space, alarm rising into his throat.

The echo of the strange vision he had last night came in blackened wisps that nudged across his mind. He tried to make sense of it, but it only brought him into a deeper sense of dread.

-

Or, Aang, Katara, and Toph search for Sokka and run into problems they didn't know were possible.

## Chapter Notes

It only took me 5 months to update this and I am truly so sorry. I've basically been updating everything but this story for some reason, even though I've been writing it on and off for a while. I can tell you that it will take me less than 5 months to finish this though, so I hope you stick around for the conclusion!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Aang was a young child of six years when he got lost in a forest at the base of the Eastern Air Temple's mountain range. He was small for his age, but nevertheless still curious with a grand sense of adventure. Perhaps grander than it had ought to be.

He was there with his guardian Gyatso, and some of his peers for the Chrysanthemum Festival. It happened every autumn, and the Air Nomads celebrated together, often visiting other temples and each other.

Aang thought it was nice enough. He liked the loose white chrysanthemum petals that the airbending masters would send into the wind on gusts that surrounded the temple's spires. There were chimes and gongs that would ring their melodies. There was chanting that had beautiful prose that lilted upon the breeze. He and the other children watched from the balconies in awe, seeing how they honored their ancestors that were long gone represented by the petals.

It was on this particular day that Aang observed Gyatso seemed a little down. He had noticed it the year previously, but he could not be so sure. Now, he realized that it might have been a pattern. He was young, but he could read people well. At least, that was what Gyatso told him. He was able to tell when Jinju hurt himself after playing airball and he tried to hide it from Monk Tashi. He gave himself some credit for that.

It was just after midday when the petals were settling into the winds that Aang made the spontaneous decision to look for a white dragon bush for his guardian if only to make him happy again. It was, after all, this plant that produced the best tea in the world and Gyatso quite liked his teas. He never forgot to remind Aang. ("Tea is the essence of the soul, young one. Having a cup of tea with a stranger is an open invitation to get to know them.")

He heard from his guardian that the white dragon bush was native around the eastern Earth Kingdom. Though they were on Air Nomad land, he had supposed that that was close enough. It was going to be tricky because it was rare. He had to be careful too. A white dragon bush looked similar to a white jade bush, and if he was not vigilant, he could be plucking a poisonous plant.

Luckily, Gyatso had taught him the difference. His guardian said that it was imperative that he knew what was good enough to forage and what was not. Air Nomads lived off the land, he told Aang. It was part of who they were, and therefore they needed to learn to work with it.

Aang had thought hard about how a white dragon bush's flower petals were reddish-pink with white streaks, while white jade petals were white with dark orange streaks. He repeated the mantra in his head. He had to be sure.

*Pink and white, not white and orange*, he thought. It was like a song, a steady rhythm. *Pink and white, not white and orange*.

The words were helpful for a time. He picked through the forest with an ease that only a light-footed airbender could possess. He was small, but he knew his way around a wind current. He avoided jutting rocks and branches without so much as a blink or hesitation. It was as if some invisible force was taking him on a ride, pushing him forward. It all came so naturally.

He did not think about the fact that this flower was rare. Childlike wonder was like a burst of confidence that could never be replicated after it disappeared.

Aang did not notice that he had wandered too far, too astray, in a forest that he was not familiar enough with. What he did realize was that the trees were taller than he remembered, seemingly shadowed giants that loomed over him. The sky had started to darken into a navy blue, stretching above him with the ominous fingers of night.

Still, Aang persisted. Even in the fading light he searched, picking through the leaves and brush with careful fingers and keen eyes. He reached for a bloom that glinted in the sunset, the edge of it the right kind of pinkish hue he was looking out for.

Then, there was a sudden howling wind too strong for him to handle that came. It blew a branch into his face. He was tumbling down the knoll in seconds, yelling for someone to catch him. His hands were reaching for purchase to no avail.

He crashed with a resolute *thud* into the trunk of a great pine. Its needles shuddered above him and a few fell onto his face. Aang groaned. He blinked open his eyes, spots dancing in front of him, and squeezed his eyelids shut. He could not bring himself to move. All thoughts he had of the white dragon bush were shaded in a throbbing ache at the back of his head.

Aang decided to lay there, unmoving. He must have been there for hours among the decaying leaves of the forest floor. It could have been minutes. He really could not tell. He was so dizzy.

He tried to distract himself with a lullaby he remembered hearing throughout the dormitories that helped the younger children fall asleep.

“In water live the spirits of the sea, in earth the crystals glow, the embers of fire are our forefathers, and in the air a butterfly flows,” he sang in a half-hearted tune. “In water live the spirits of the sea...”

Aang could feel himself sinking into the leaves, slumping into himself. He could hardly feel the bruise anymore.

He almost let the darkness take him before he felt hands on his chest, his arms, patting him awake. “Aang!” shouted a familiar voice into his face. “Aang! Don’t sleep!”

When he opened his eyes, he saw the wrinkled visage of Gyatso. His deep-set gray eyes were lined with concern, and a frown curled his lip downward. He helped Aang to sit up. A metal lantern with a flickering flame was on the ground beside him. The wick was starting to shrivel. The light lined Gyatso’s figure in the dim light. Already, there were specks of stars peeking out through the swathe of clouds.

“If I didn’t hear you singing, I wouldn’t have found you,” said Gyatso. He brushed the dirt off Aang’s acolyte robes. “Where have you been, young one? I have been so worried.”

Aang leaned into Gyatso’s touch and sniffled. “I was looking for the white dragon flower for you,” he mumbled. His words slurred. He was so tired. “It’s ‘mportant. You like tea.”

There was a brief pause, and then Gyatso spoke. “It is not the flower nor the tea that is important to me,” whispered Gyatso into his ear, “It is you, young one. My Aang.”

“But...you seem so *sad*...’specially today.”

Gyatso looked surprised, and then he softened. His arms tightened around Aang. He pulled away for a moment to look him in the eye. He did not speak for a while, perhaps thinking hard on what to say next. Aang could see it in the way his mouth tugged downwards. “I’m not sad,” he said slowly. Carefully. “There is just someone I miss.”

He had the same wistful expression he had every time he talked of his old friends from his younger years, and the friend he mentioned on occasion from the Fire Nation.

When Aang peered at him in confusion, Gyatso chuckled. He continued. "When you are as old as me, there are a few people you lose along the way. But you know, they are not truly gone from us, and we celebrate them every year during the Chrysanthemum Festival."

"But..." Aang started, unsure what to say.

Gyatso looked pensive as he glanced into the forest, then he looked back at Aang. "That song you were singing...some say it originated when the Avatar began. It is sung by our people because it helps us to remember that we as travelers, as nomads, should always understand others. And, though we are all so different, we are all connected.

"There is one thing that connects us all, even if we fail to see it. That is that someday we will all become spirits ourselves. The Water Tribes believe that we all return to the sea, the Earth Kingdom believes that the spirits of their ancestors sometimes reside in the crystals hidden in the earth to guide them, the Fire Nation believes that one day they will join the flames that light our paths in the stars."

Aang felt himself being carried in Gyatso's arms. They were leaving the forest now. The steady rhythm of Gyatso's steps started to lull him into calm.

"What do we believe?" Aang asked, closing his eyes.

There was a pause before Gyatso started again. Softly, like a leaf gliding onto the surface of a pond. "They say that the souls of those we lost return to us in times of need. Flying to us as a simple, lovely creature, following us when we call them with our hearts. One day, young one, if you are lost, look for a butterfly," he whispered.

Aang drifted off as they walked up the winding path back to the temple. He awoke the next day with a bandaged head and a relieved Gyatso fretting over him.

---

There was a certain panic that came with rising in the morning. There was the moment when the world materialized after a long, dreamless night, or if luck was not a friend, it came in stark contrast to the vivid nightmare that just occurred. It was in this space of time that Aang realized that something was wrong.

They had slept in, worn out from the ball the evening previously. Still, there had been an unspoken agreement that they were intent on helping the Earth King with finding the disappearing people the next day. No matter how late it was, Aang knew they had to prepare.

Aang turned to where Sokka was supposed to be, about to ask him if he had any breakfast, when he saw that his bed was still made. Not a wrinkle in sight.

"Sokka?" he asked the empty space, alarm rising into his throat.

The echo of the strange vision he had last night came in blackened wisps that nudged across his mind. He tried to make sense of it, but it only brought him into a deeper sense of dread.

His stomach dropped when he found the window locked shut. Desperate, he hoped to find Sokka hiding in their wardrobe as a joke. When he opened it, he only saw his own formal robes hanging.

Aang burst through the door of their shared quarters and looked all over the guest house. He felt for his vibrations with his earthbending. Yet, there was no sign of him.

He pounded on Katara and Toph's door next.

It was Katara who answered for them. Toph was crankily rubbing at her eyes on her mattress, frowning with the intensity of a badgermole whose home had been disturbed. Her hair was a bird's nest, and her mood was apparent with the scowl she was sending him. He almost feared giving her more to be upset about.

Aang did not wait for either of them to say anything. "Sokka is missing," he said quickly, eyebrows crinkling together with worry. "I can't find him anywhere. I don't think he came home last night."

Katara's breath hitched. "What?" she asked, eyes widening. She did not bother to smooth out her nightclothes, nor to brush her hair into a presentable style. She went on her own panic-driven search around the grounds after that.

She returned to the sitting room only when she had searched everywhere possible. Aang shook his head when he saw her distraught face. Neither he nor Toph had found anything while she was away for those minutes. Toph most of all was adamant that Sokka was nowhere near the vicinity. She claimed that she could not feel anything with her feet.

"We need to scour the city," Katara said, a slight tremble at the end of her words. "This isn't good."

Toph stormed off into the girls' bedroom, muttering about getting changed. Aang knew it was her own way of showing she was concerned.

When she was gone, Aang turned to face Katara fully. The light outside was dimmed and the sky overcast. It made silhouettes appear on the furniture in their sitting room as it filtered through the window panes, and on the planes of her features. There were shadows under her eyes.

Aang could see the way Katara wrung her hands together, how she tensed with nearly every movement. He knew that Sokka going missing would cause anxiety within all of them, but he knew most of all that Katara would take the brunt of it. He placed a hand on the side of her face and smoothed his thumb over her cheekbone.

"It's going to be okay," he whispered, peering into her eyes, and coaxing her to look at him. He did not look away. "We'll find him. I promise. We'll do whatever it takes."

She leaned into his touch and sighed. “Okay,” Katara replied.

Of course, the day started out dismal with the news. Even for late winter, it was cold. Aang could admit that, and he could regulate the temperature of the air around himself. Ba Sing Se was supposed to have mild winters, and yet the wind was sharp, and the light powdered snow crunched under his feet as the three of them finally stepped outside of their apartments.

Toph was utterly miserable in the freezing temperatures. She refused to wear proper shoes and instead opted for thick wooly socks that she had packed but never intended to use. A terrible option, and she was told so. Katara insisted that she wear something more appropriate, even shoving a pair of boots onto her feet—but Toph remained as stubborn as always.

“Listen here, Sugar Queen, I’m gonna have the earth as close to my feet as possible and you can’t tell me what to do about it!” Toph screeched at Katara just as they were leaving. “If I can’t feel where we’re going, this is going to be a whole lot more difficult than it needs to be.”

Aang wanted to intervene as soon as he saw Katara fuming on the steps of the entrance of the guesthouse. “Toph, I think you need to be a little more—”

He was too late. Katara launched at Toph with an icicle, and Aang had to hold her back with an arm around her waist as soon as Toph slammed the door to go inside to remove the boots she had tried to wear at Katara’s behest. It was not a helpful situation, especially with the glaring issue they were facing. Though, Aang supposed that maybe Toph was feeling cranky too. He could not blame her.

Still, after walking on the streets for a while, Toph complained about not being able to see properly and how she could not feel the tips of her toes (or anything for that matter). He kept his mouth shut after that.

They started with Captain Liang first, asking if he had seen anything. However, the captain merely added Sokka to the ever-growing missing persons list, and the Dai Li began their own mission to find him.

“Unfortunately, Master Sokka isn’t the only one to go missing last night,” Liang stated with a somber tone. “Two others have disappeared as well. We’ll do everything we can.”

Disheartened, Aang, Katara, and Toph split off and searched through the parts of Ba Sing Se that were the oldest, largely in the areas around the palace and Upper Ring. Anything for a clue. It was all they had to go on, and all Joo Dee had offered the night previously as useful information. It was nearing sunset when a lead from a Dai Li agent brought them to a poetry club called the Five-Seven-Five Society. Which, to Aang’s admittance, was deeply confusing.

As soon as he stepped in to ask after Sokka, a middle-aged woman with her hair done in an elaborate knot said with a smug expression, “We are artists here. Not wandering, clueless, men. We do not keep oafs.”

Aang could do nothing but gape at her audacity, but a rather intimidating and bulky bouncer grunted as he stood in their way.

“What’s your response?” growled the man. “Better have the right number of syllables.”

Aang groaned, scrubbing a hand down his face. “Let’s just go,” he sighed as he gestured to Katara and Toph. “Sokka isn’t here.”

“No way!” Toph bellowed. “Let me at ‘em!”

“Let’s go Toph!” commanded Katara with a scowl as she latched onto her arm and began to drag her away. “We don’t have time for this.”

They left annoyed and disappointed. The aggravation grew when Katara noticed that the woman had the gall to answer their query in haiku. She left a trail of icy surfaces in her wake, and the crunchy snow on the ground did nothing to save them.

Aang did not know what this was. There were no proper clues left behind, no lingering footsteps, not even a minute crack in the earth that Toph could detect. They combed through every nook and cranny, even scaling buildings when the opportunity arose. When there were no results, they turned to flying on Appa and drifting from one landmark to another. Momo was unhelpful, but the lemur did manage to give Aang an idea when he came back with a broken teacup as a “present”.

Aang gasped, steering Appa back toward the Upper Ring from the Middle Ring. “That’s it!” he exclaimed. “Iroh!”

They made it to the Jasmine Dragon when the stars had just begun to peek out in the darkening purplish blue sky. Appa took up the entire courtyard at the front, landing just shy of the frozen decorative fountain in the center and just at the top of the stairway. Aang stood underneath an awning near the front, holding a map of the city that the Dai Li had provided them. He barely registered Katara and Toph sliding off his bison with confused expressions on their faces.

“Wait, what are you talking about? What about Iroh?” questioned Toph. She walked toward him and stopped a few feet away. Her hands were tucked into the pockets of her coat, and her red nose only made her appear more stubborn. Momo had stretched his wings and landed on her shoulder, chirping his agreement.

Aang unfurled the map enough by the time Katara was next to him. She looked over his shoulder, frowning.

Aang sighed, scrunching the map together in his hands. “I’ve been...seeing these balls of flame,” he started, haltingly and a little hesitant. “They reappear from time to time, and it always feels strange. The last time I saw one was next to Iroh at the Unification Ball. He...reacted to it when no one else did.”

He could feel Katara’s stare boring into him, and Toph’s silent judgement. He did not have to look at them to know.

“You’ve been seeing these things?” Katara asked, mouth agape. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

He could hear the disappointment in her voice when he finally decided to glance back up at her. “I didn’t think much of it before but...what if there’s more to this?”

But Katara saw right through his deflection. “Why didn’t you *tell me*, Aang?” she emphasized, hands on her hips and her lips in a thin line. Hurt in her eyes.

His shoulders sagged. “I saw one at the temple and then I saw Gyatso,” he admitted softly. “It felt like a dream. I thought it was.”

There was a pregnant silence. He and Katara shared a look, and he was suddenly aware of how much a part of him still dwelled on the past.

He gulped, turning his attention to the setting sun, the stripe of its remaining light just a blur on the skyline of buildings and rolling hills that made up the city. “Joo Dee mentioned a lantern and how she was compelled to follow it...what if it was really one of these things? What if they’re connected?” he spoke into the air. His thoughts swirled with what he had seen, and what he was missing.

Toph crossed her arms. She gave him the most judgmental stare she could without being able to see him. “You think Sokka followed some fireball and ran off with it?” she scoffed. “That sounds farfetched to me.”

“I don’t know, but it’s the only lead we have. Sokka vanished without a trace, just like the other citizens,” Aang replied. He narrowed his eyes. “It could be the spirits. If it is, then we could be dealing with anything.”

Someone cleared their throat behind them. Aang and Katara jumped when they turned around and Toph appeared unsurprised.

“I think you’re right,” said Iroh as he cracked open the door. In his hand was a key. He gestured at them. “Please, come inside. I was just locking up, but it seems that I should share with you my suspicions.”

Aang and the others did not hesitate to follow him. He led them to a small round table he had set up in the back of the teashop where Aang recalled particularly private guests such as himself were served if they ever visited during business hours.

"Sit. Have some tea. I made too much," he said, and chuckled. "I guess the universe was trying to tell me I would have guests."

He took a moment to go to the back to gather three more teacups before sitting down in front of them. He poured them each a cup, the steam rising over the rims as he did so.

Iroh gestured for them to drink. “Go ahead,” he said. “It’s some of my favorite tea from the white dragon bush. A rarity around these parts...with a taste so delicious it’s heartbreaking.”

When Aang took a sip, the liquid gold touched his lips for only a second before he realized what it tasted like. A memory. It was sweet and earthy, a little reminiscent of a flower



budding in the spring. He glanced up at Iroh, eyes wide with surprise.

Just for a moment, he thought that he could see the flicker of something behind the man's shoulder. A gentle smile, a twinkling eye. But it disappeared as soon as the sun went down. They were left in the dim darkness, faces alight with only the flitting orange-tinted brightness of candle flames.

"Lu Ten...my son," Iroh started in a soft voice, "He died during the war. Yet last night, I heard his voice for the first time in many years."

Toph continued to sip on her tea, not uttering a word. Katara inched forward in her seat. Aang could feel the stillness surround them, an anticipation that made the world seem quiet.

"He died just inside the city walls of Ba Sing Se," Iroh continued. He placed down his cup, clinking it onto the tabletop's surface. "I was too preoccupied with being a general to remember that my son was not invincible. I forgot what was important, and I blamed myself." He sighed, not looking Aang in the eyes. "I spent months, years, searching for a way to get him back...even for a way to find him in the Spirit World. But, as you must know, Aang, the world does not quite work like that."

*Help them. I will guide you.*

A voice echoed in his head, an ache in his chest. Another promise to keep.

There was a calm that washed over him when he looked at Iroh again. The gold that wavered in the older man's eyes was molten, a silent plea for something distant. They shared a kind of look that felt meaningful, even if there were years and experiences that separated them.

With a sudden clarity, Aang knew what he was facing.

He stood up, his wooden chair scraping against the floor beneath him. "Iroh, stay here. If you've felt them already, that means you'll be a target," he commanded. He rushed to gather his staff. "Katara, Toph, we need to go to the crystal catacombs of Old Ba Sing Se."

Aang turned, letting the door remain open behind him until they followed.

-

He knew he was acting purely on instinct, but something stronger than even the Avatar State before he had control over it compelled him to move. It was as if a compulsion tugged at his core, dragging him along on a string that refused to detach itself. A feeling, more than anything else, that begged for him.

There was no time for questions, and perhaps that was what frustrated Katara and Toph the most. He could not give answers when his voice was stuck in his chest, locked there until he had fulfilled the duty his spirit was telling him needed to be completed.

"*What* is going on with you, Twinkle Toes?" questioned Toph from behind him as she stomped her way toward where he knew the entrance tunnel to the catacombs was leftover

from their first days in Ba Sing Se. “You know you’re acting really strange and it’s scaring me a little. I don’t *get* scared.”

He ignored her complaints and instead said, “Come over here, Toph. It looks like this tunnel isn’t used a lot. I need your help to make sure it’s safe to go through.”

Toph huffed, acquiescing to the cause. She spread her arms out, stamping on the ground. A ripple went through the earth. She stood straight and pointed through the dark hole. “Seems safe enough to me. It feels like the Dai Li cleaned it up after the Earth King ordered them to sniff out the bad eggs.”

Toph jumped in first with a confident step. Aang went to follow her but realized that Katara had not moved since they landed Appa in the palace courtyard. The great beast moaned with worry while Momo chittered atop his horns.

Aang held out his hand to her. “C’mon,” he remarked. “Sokka’s waiting for us.”

Conflicting emotions flitted across her face. Fear, concern, apprehension. He wished that he could smooth out the lines of them himself.

Katara met his eyes. “Aang, I don’t know why you’re so bent on this. I don’t know if it’s your Avatar spirit calling out to you or not,” she started, biting her bottom lip, “but all I know is that whatever this is has you and Iroh hearing the dead...and I’m afraid of what I’ll hear. I’m afraid of what Sokka could’ve heard.”

He knew what she was saying. He was afraid too.

“Trust me,” Aang offered, spreading his fingers wider toward her.

She took his proffered hand and nodded. “I do,” she replied.

The two of them entered the void. Aang held a firebended flame in his hand, lighting their path. Toph must have made it further than they realized because she was nowhere to be seen. Remnants of her earthbending remained along the walls, however. Little nicks and tells that he was used to seeing, and in a way, an odd comfort.

The tunnel kept going before them, slowly opening from the darkness until he recognized the iridescent emerald glow at the end of it.

Opaque green crystals jutted out from rock surfaces, peeking through caves, breaking through the walls. The light of them encased them, covering them in an eerie, diaphanous radiance that painted Aang’s pale skin. Katara walked beside him, a free hand on the mouth of her water pouch. She glanced around; lips set into a hard line.

In the silence, they made it through cave after cave, wandering along some vague road that Aang followed more with his gut rather than his mind. The constant glow of the crystals awakened him, and with each step, they were deeper inside.

And the deeper they went, the lonelier it became.

Aang's hand brushed up against a stone, and then the smooth surface of one of the crystals. A shudder went through his arm, his body. A whisper came, soft against the shell of his ear, beckoning.

He reached for Katara, and their hands clasped together. He could feel his breathing increase in tempo, an unexplainable panic rising within him.

There was music in his head. A daunting tune. A familiar one. He found it coursing through him like the blood in his veins. Gyatso's face came to the forefront of his mind as he tried to concentrate on moving forward.

He could feel Katara's fingers tighten around his.

They rounded another corner. He had no idea where they were now. They had already passed the cavern that held the ancient rivers that had been cut into the ground. The distant sounds of trickling water ebbed away behind them.

The crystals grew ever brighter if that was possible. They revealed artificial shelves in the rock walls. Little stone figurines rested atop them in clusters, and some by themselves. Small, faceless statues with the ambiguous outlines of a nose and mouth. Sitting in unusual positions, knees drawn to their chests. They looked like offerings, old alters created by someone so long ago.

The whispers increased. He heard a laugh, a giggle, and he brought Katara around to search for it with him. They ran in circles, looking for the source. But they only found nothing but another set of statues on more eroded shelves built into the pillars.

Dread pooled in the pit of his stomach. "Toph!" he called. Katara repeated their friend's name with him.

"Toph, are you here?!" yelled Katara.

There was no answer.

The light was impossibly dim and bright at the same time. There were shadowy figures that appeared in the crags, the curves—all of them reaching out to them. Aang tried to airbend them away to no avail.

It was all they could do when they finally ran. Past dilapidated alters, into a room that held too many white skeletons hastily covered with reed mats that were falling apart. Strips of Earth Kingdom clothes showed beneath the mats in colors and hues that Aang was sure he would never forget again.

He glanced behind them, seeing more shapeless arms reach their branching limbs toward them, encroaching on the little space they had left.

Balls of silent flame phased through the crystals, the same yellow and white he recognized from the temple. They bobbed in and out of existence, lighting a route for them as they edged the walls of another underpass in the labyrinth.

He knew they had no choice. Katara sprinted near him, her breath heavy, her footfalls the only thing that echoed in the hallways as they lurched ahead.

A ball of flame inched closer to him for the briefest second, and suddenly he was somewhere else.

It was a memory, a vision. He saw it just beyond the ground he was running on. A sheen of something reminiscent to a swathe of silk wavered in front of him.

Aang was in the body of someone else, but at the same time he was not. He stood on the outside looking in.

A young man with a disheveled topknot materialized, weary and graying far too early. He had a lame leg and leaned on a cane as he hobbled over to a shorter figure. "You're my little brother, Chit Sang," he said. The rising sun was at his back. "I'm just looking out for you. I hope you've thought this through. We're not from a noble family and that means the army will be less kind to us. Joining the 41st Division won't be easy."

The shorter teenaged boy with darker hair that the man talked to slumped before him. Chit Sang turned, stubbornly refusing to look at his sibling's face. The older brother sighed, placing a hand on his Chit Sang's shoulder. "When you go to war there are two things you hope for," he continued, "to come back alive, and if that isn't possible, to die quickly. I'll pray to our parents' ghosts that you are of the former."

Aang gasped as the scene faded, and he could see that he and Katara were closer to the surface than he recalled them being.

They shouted in a desperate cry together as they made it to the top. The path was still lit with fire, but just as Aang thought they were out of the woods, a blinding light overtook them and pushed them both further until they faced the still and half-frozen surface of Lake Laogai.

Like miniature stars hovering above the water, more balls of flame indicated where they had to go next.

"Aang," Katara murmured beside him, "that's..."

He breathed, trying to steady himself. He could no longer deny the pull that he was sure she could feel too. "There's no turning back now," he said.

Without letting go of each other, they plunged into the water.

A rush of emotion and flickers of disjointed memories hit him all at once. Then, like he was waking up from a long dream, eyes bleary from sleep, he was forced to focus on one.

A hazy house emerged like a specter before him, and he could see the backs of two people.

"Do you remember the sunrise over the Great Divide?" asked the blurry person sitting on a crumbling rooftop. It sounded like the gravelly voice of a middle-aged man. Another smaller person sat next to him, legs dangling off the tiles and looking like they were listening intently.

The man continued, "The clouds part just over the canyon, high in the sky, letting in tiny drops of light. And then, just for a moment, there are patches of land that brighten up. Then another moment passes, and the clouds cover it up again. That's what life's like, Lee. Even your brother, Sensu, who's out there knows it. That's why he went out to fight in the war...to make sure those little patches of light stay a little longer for our people."

The scene disappeared when they crashed through the lake's surface, the pieces of ice floating about them. Aang gripped onto Katara's hand as they started to turn and flip within the water.

The twilight in the memory was like a long sunrise, and they rose through it hand-in-hand, until they broke through and breathed.

He should have felt cold when he and Katara stepped out of the water, but when he saw their blue and transparent forms, he knew why he did not.

Someone laughed, a bristling disembodied voice that whistled through the leafless trees that surrounded the lake.

"Who's here?" called Aang, cupping his hand to the side of his mouth. Something pounded in the air, something old that he could not name.

Without warning, an androgynous being filtered through the trees, as if from the center of them and through the bark. They wore all white robes that cascaded down their body in waves, dripping like melting snow. Their hair was a river of black that went well past their waist, and their eyes were a brilliant green that burned into Aang as he dared to look. It was as if he was looking into nature itself, beautiful yet full of raw power.

Their skin was porcelain and without any imperfections, unnervingly so. They even lacked the dip that would be just above their lip. Still, the person grinned at them.

"I am the spirit of this land," they intoned. Their voice was like expensive silk upon skin. It raised the hairs on the back of Aang's neck. "You will heed my warning, Avatar. The war has ravaged my domain. You will come to me, and you will respect it."

## Chapter End Notes

There's a lot of Filipino folklore references in this chapter, but since I don't want to spoil everything, I will only reveal some here. I'll reveal the rest in the notes of the final chapter.

- The small figurines are based off of anito, or ancestral spirits. Anito are carvings made of wood or stone that sit on alters and honor ancestors.

- The skeletons under reed mats are a slight nod to the pasatsat, a lesser known folktale ghost. During World War II, Filipinos did not have time or money to properly bury their dead, so they were often hastily buried with reed mats. They say that the tale of the

pasatsat ghost came about because of this, and the ghosts of those people would appear in front of travelers.

# Flame

## Chapter Summary

“You have dared to find me,” said the spirit. Their porcelain features cracked just so to reveal an unamused smirk. “You have even dared to bring a human with you. You Avatars grow bolder with each incarnation.”

Aang could only do so much to shake himself back into reality. He could feel Katara’s fear next to him. It was as if unseen energy radiated from her. His eyes flicked to her for just a second. She was just as blue and transparent as he was. But Katara had little experience with the spirits, not as he had. She was vulnerable.

-

Or, Aang and Katara confront the spirit that guards Ba Sing Se.

## Chapter Notes

Hi, I realize it's been a whole year. My bad. Anyway, here is the final chapter! I hope it isn't terrible!

Beware there is some gore ahead.

As usual, any comments and/or kudos are much appreciated!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Looking into a flame was like trying to reach out into the far reaches of a hazy memory. On the limned edges of a faded past, there were images that were clear. But on the flickering outside of the fire, those things were obscured with light and shadow. This is what it was like trying to see the spirit in front of him.

Aang did not understand what he was searching for now. He could only stare deeply into the verdant green of this being’s eyes, transfixed.

“You have dared to find me,” said the spirit. Their porcelain features cracked just so to reveal an unamused smirk. “You have even dared to bring a human with you. You Avatars grow bolder with each incarnation.”

Aang could only do so much to shake himself back into reality. He could feel Katara’s fear next to him. It was as if unseen energy radiated from her. His eyes flicked to her for just a

second. She was just as blue and transparent as he was. But Katara had little experience with the spirits, not as he had. She was vulnerable.

He turned his attention back to the spirit. “Great spirit,” he started. His voice trembled. “We didn’t mean to trespass. We’re only looking for our friends and the missing citizens.”

The spirit laughed. It sounded like glass breaking. “I am the land on which Ba Sing Se stands on,” they said. They gestured to their surroundings. “I am the trees, the caves, and Lake Laogai. What you seek is on my territory and not of any others of my kind.” They paused. Their eyes bored into Aang’s. “Are you accusing me?”

“No, that’s not—”

“I have slept for a thousand years,” interrupted the spirit. Their eyes flashed a golden yellow. “I have lain dormant, sealed beneath my city, content to have used my energy to rejuvenate this once barren land for the refugees who had no home to return to.” Their teeth were bared now, peeking under their pale lips. “It was humans who woke me, disturbed me as they dug deeper into the catacombs, searching for the remnants of their Dai Li. It was humans who I discovered defiled me, and who trapped their own, killed their own, killed the descendants of those I saved!”

The spirit scoffed and seemed to grow in height. Their perfect hair lengthened down their back, stretching like crooked fingers. “If the suffering that occurred during my slumber wasn’t enough, I found that there is a century of it pockmarked onto my land! Innumerable souls buried and forgotten in *my* soil.”

Aang panted when the earth began to shake. He clasped Katara’s hand. He hoped neither of them would let go.

“I will show you what you have done.”

The spirit rushed forward, their hand snatched the front of his cloak, and yanked. His yell caught in his throat; the air sucked from him. He felt Katara’s grip rattle, her fingernails digging into his spirit form’s skin.

A myriad of colors blew past them in streaks and incomprehensible shapes. Whispers of nothing, sounds of burbling water, the faint light of the moon. They all blurred and stilled into one new image.

As if they had not just gone faster than the speed of a lightning strike, Aang and Katara halted. He glanced at her with wide eyes, unable to decipher the strange thing that had just occurred. The spirit was nowhere to be found.

“Where are we?” asked Katara. Aang could only shake his head. He did not know either.

“Dal,” said a woman’s voice from behind. “You keep carving those bamboo flutes and you never sell them.”



Katara let out a startled breath. A middle-aged woman with a messy bun walked out through Katara's body as if she was not there. Her clothes and skirt had worn edges and the threads were coming loose.

The room began to materialize. There were rickety floorboards and sliding screens that needed repairing. Hasty patches plugged holes in the rice paper panels. The screen was open with a slight crack, and outside Aang could see the suggestion of a porch and nighttime. Three pairs of shoes waited near the deck propped by a stone step.

"They keep me busy," said a man with graying hair and an unkempt beard. He was sitting cross-legged near the doorway, whittling away at a length of bamboo. On a woven mat beside him was a pile of finished flutes.

"They're a distraction. You want to fight."

"We have a daughter to protect," Dal insisted. He did not take his eyes away from his flute. His knife moved steadily across its surface. "You know as well as I do that if I go out there, there is a chance I would leave you and her alone."

The woman sighed. "Song may be young, but even she knows that the war is coming," she said. "The Fire Nation is encroaching on our village. It's either we leave before they get here, or we prepare to save our home." She shook her head. "You know I'm with you in whatever decision you make."

Dal lifted his head now, eyes sharp. "It's dangerous," he said. His words were steel.

"They destroyed our hometown. You don't think I haven't had the same thoughts?"

A waxing moon shone through the crack in the screen. The white light emanating from it repeatedly brightened until it was blinding. Aang turned to Katara to hold her, his back to the moon. He shielded her face from its light.

He wheezed as he felt an unpleasant and sudden tug on the back of his robes. He was pulled backward, Katara huddled at his chest.

When he and Katara stopped moving, they were somewhere else.

The ground was soaked with blood. Rivulets of crimson red snaked through the cracks like tributaries. Blackened Earth Kingdom flags rustled in the hot wind. Pillars of dark smoke rose from stacked corpses and ashes rained from the heavens.

They were on a battlefield.

"No," whispered Aang. "I don't want to see this." He held onto Katara like a lifeline.

"Don't look," she said in earnest, but it was too late. He could not stop looking. He wanted to be sick.

A Fire Nation soldier ran at an Earth Kingdom soldier. His hands were on fire. He punched the man through the gut. At that exact moment, a woman speared the Fire Nation soldier

through the heart, and he let out a guttural cry that stopped almost as soon as it began.

Groups of adversaries clashed against each other. Sword against sword, earth against fire. Clanging metal reverberated like gongs ringing in a terrible cacophony. Soldiers limped by with severe burns, and others with wounds deeper than Aang had ever seen. Pus and blood seeped down their arms, their legs, and their stomachs. Whatever was left of them.

If they could fight, they tried. If they could not, they asked to be put out of their misery.

The Fire Nation soldiers were winning. They started to push back. "Capture whoever is alive!" commanded the general.

"No," murmured Aang.

He knew that what he was seeing was not real. *But it had been.* This was his failure laid out before him.

"Aang, please!" Katara begged. She tried to get his attention. She held his hand and squeezed it tight. "Don't look! This isn't your fault!"

He had not realized that he had said his thoughts aloud.

The scene shifted. The night turned to day, day into night, on the same field. The battle had dwindled, but there were vestiges of soldiers still fighting.

"Sensu!" bellowed a man. He wore a topknot that had nearly come apart. His Earth Kingdom armor was peeling off him. "Where are you? Son!" He raced past them.

A few men on komodo rhinos stopped him. Trailing behind them was a line of prisoners all stripped of their clothes to their underwear. Thick ropes bound them together.

"You're gusty to come alone, old man," said the Fire Nation soldier at the lead of the pack. He wore a general's pauldrons. "Most of your battalion is dead."

The man fell to his knees. He dropped his sword. "Please," he pleaded. "I'm just here for my son, nothing else! I'll stay out of your way!"

The general stared at him. His tawny eyes were scrutinizing. "What's your son's name?"

"Sensu," replied the man.

"And your name?"

"Gansu."

The general laughed. He gestured to one of his subordinates to untie someone near the rear. "So, you're the father of that disobedient one, huh?"

A teenager not much older than Zuko was when Aang first met him stumbled to the front. A soldier with an ax strapped to his side shoved him from behind until he tripped over himself.

“Son!” gasped Gansu with a relieved grin. He ran forward to help the boy up.

Aang saw the general nod for a second, but it was too late. The soldier had already swung his ax.

Blood splattered through Aang and Katara. He felt the fresh warmth of it pass through him for a brief instant. Once it was over, he wondered if his insides would freeze. He lost his voice. Katara stiffened.

Sensu’s head rolled at the feet of his father. The rest of his body tilted toward the ground in a lifeless heap.

“A shame, really,” said the general in a bored tone. “What use is a prisoner of war if their family comes crawling back to the battlefield themselves? We wouldn’t have any more collateral.”

Gansu breathed hard. His chest heaved.

The general chuckled. “It’s your fault, old man. He could have lived.” Then, he gestured to his subordinate again. “Kill him.”

The ax arced upward.

Aang was being tugged at all sides. A voice he recognized shouted, “Let them go!” but he did not know where it came from. The words echoed all around them, clanging on invisible cave walls.

And then, like someone snuffing out candlelight in the dead of night, everything turned to black.

For a few moments, all he could hear was his and Katara’s rapid breathing. It must have been a reflex because neither of them had returned to their bodies. He could not see a thing besides their own glowing forms floating in the middle of pitch darkness.

He opened his mouth, about to ask Katara if she had heard the voice too before they were brought to this new place. But as soon as he was about to speak, blue and white light appeared.

One after another, balls of fire popped into existence. They were pinpricks of color on an otherwise colorless expanse. They arrived in a circle around them. Their flames blinked and wavered, crackling as if they were real. Maybe they were. He could not tell what was real and what was not anymore.

He and Katara stood in the center of them, spectators to their ethereal floating light. When he breathed, he thought he could see the echoes of frozen air escape from his lips. From that air, the true images of the flames fled and formed.

He could see the outlines of people now. They were spectral beings tinged blueish purple, and their transparent bodies allowed him to see the individual balls of flame that were encapsulated in each of their centers.

“I can see them...their energy. It’s all twisted up inside,” Katara said with a gasp. Her hand slipped from his. “It looks like an injured person’s chi paths before someone heals them.”

Aang realized she was right. The forms that surrounded their fire were uneven and ragged. As if they were struggling to stay together. There was a chill that rippled from the base of his neck to the end of his spine.

“Tell my father, Iroh, that I’m sorry,” said one of the spirits. He was a handsome young man wearing a neat topknot and Fire Nation armor. “I’ve regretted not telling him all this time.”

It was like a punch to the gut. Aang felt every word uttered as if they were a part of him. He breathed desperately and hunched over. Katara’s arm was the only thing that steadied him.

Another spoke. “Tell my mother and my brother Lee that my father and I didn’t mean to leave them,” said the spirit of Sensu. Beside him stood Gansu. His eyes were filled with guilt.

“Tell Chit Sang I’m proud of him,” said a spirit with a lame leg. He clutched onto his cane. “He was able to save so many who fought in the 41<sup>st</sup> Division and he was punished for it. I didn’t mean to get sick. I didn’t mean to leave him alone at the Boiling Rock.”

“Tell Song I’m sorry for not protecting her,” said the spirit of Dal. He came as one of the last wearing an Earth Kingdom chest plate that had been damaged beyond repair. “She doesn’t deserve to have that scar.”

By the time everyone had spoken, others arrived. Their voices were loud and deafening. He could hear too many things at once and his head ached. More and more came until the blackness was a sea of white and blue. Dai Li agents, prisoners with shackles still attached to their ankles, soldiers carrying lances, children with burns on their faces, and a mother holding an infant.

Aang and Katara had pressed closer together, overwhelmed. The sound of the pleas was too much to bear.

In another breath, Aang saw green eyes. The nature spirit finally showed herself. Their face was blank, but beneath the lack of emotion that served as their façade, there was a seething kind of anger that simmered.

Aang stood up straight. He knew that something was wrong.

The nature spirit’s voice was soft, but that only made the sharpness they were hiding that much more potent. “You humans have taken too much from me,” they whispered. “It’s only fair that I take what is precious to you.”

The spirit reached for Katara.

The flames gathered into one spot, blocking the spirit. The light was too bright now. He squinted and searched for Katara until he knew she was by his side. The wall of flames acted like an impenetrable shield.

A shape of a person appeared. A ball of blue fire floated in the middle of them, visible through their translucent body.

“Jet?” Katara murmured.

“You have to get out of here,” Jet commanded. Aang recognized him as the voice who had asked that they be let go. His eyes were wide and determined. “Go!” He pushed Katara, and with a final shout, he pushed Aang too.

-

Aang jolted awake in his body. Night had settled on Ba Sing Se, but not a single star peeked through the clouds. The sky was overcast. The remnants of winter’s last snowfall threatened to come down. He could hardly make out the silhouettes of the forest that surrounded them. The soil underneath him was frozen solid.

All was silent. For a moment, he thought he was alone.

Then, Katara was screaming.

He pushed himself up in a panicked rush, only to find that she was right next to him.

She squirmed on the cold ground at Lake Laogai’s shore. He grasped her shoulders and tried to calm her down, but all he could do was watch.

“Katara!” he begged. “Katara wake up!”

The earth vibrated. Her eyes snapped open. Her irises were an unforgiving jade, and when he looked into them his knees felt weak. Katara’s hands shoved him off as she launched to her feet, and out of her mouth spoke a voice that was not hers.

“A human spirit is weak, Avatar,” the nature spirit said. “Did you think your friend could stop me? Those souls couldn’t let go of their regrets.” They smiled coldly, and on Katara’s lips, it looked more frightening than Aang could have ever imagined.

“Let her go!” he shouted, gritting his teeth. He stumbled backward. *“Please!”*

“Don’t forget who is to blame.”

The spirit raised an arm, and the surrounding trees braced as if caught in amber, trapped by the machinations of the wind. The branches stretched in a swift movement, their pointed edges all aiming to where he stood. Hundreds of cutting stems and twigs came crashing down. He barely had time to barricade himself behind a protective tent made of earth.

For a few minutes, he was safe. His heart pounded. He tried to think about what to do next. He did not have time.

Roots shot out from the ground. Wrapping themselves around his feet and ankles. He was able to earthbend through the wall he had made right before he was whipped out into the open, hanging upside down meters above.

The blood rushed to his head. He gathered the air around him, intent on slashing himself free. When he finally did, he tumbled downward. He caught a glimpse of the extended arms of Katara, and he came to a decision.

Aang earthbended pillars to climb on. Step after step he avoided the branches that grasped for him. Some nicked his cheeks, calves, and back, but he was determined to make it through.

He reached the edge of the lake on a precarious column and somersaulted onto the frozen surface. With waterbending, he softened his fall and refroze the floe he stood on.

Another wave of branches hurled toward him. With a grunt, he swiped a great slice of fire at them, superheating the energy until much of the wood burned away. He heaved into a stronger stance and pushed out his arms.

All around him, the water of the lake sloshed. He soared with concentrated force. The water was a swirling vortex, and then he slammed his palms together.

The spirit screeched. The branches were ripped apart. Splinters thrashed into the air. Tiny shards ricocheted off ice. There was more water than trees. Like a frozen typhoon, the lake churned around the eye of the storm and in the center of that eye was the spirit.

Aang needed one more burst of power.

He tapped deep into himself, searching at that moment for his past lives. He felt their familiar strength coursing through his body.

He breathed and then—

“You’re tired of fighting.”

Aang swiveled around, startled.

“It is nice to meet you again,” said Yangchen. She was as tall and fair as he remembered. Her long waves of chestnut hair cascaded down her back, tied neatly into a low knot. Her Air Nomad robes flowed in their natural golds and oranges, and she stood proudly showing off the arrow tattoos that they both shared. “You need our help.”

Aang gulped, unsure what to say.

A hill emerged and he found himself standing on it. A full tree towered over it at its crest with swaying leaves that trickled down to the grass. At the base of the tree was an unreadable plaque and sticks of burning incense.

There was a picturesque sunset that kissed the landscape, and he could see far beyond where they stood the rolling knolls that made up the city of Ba Sing Se at a different time of year.

“They don’t tell you that even when a battle is over, the fighting doesn’t stop.” Yangchen peered at him, her silver eyes shining.

Her form flickered, and then she was Kuruk. He was dressed in sleeveless summer attire. The pelt of the polar bear dog he normally wore was nowhere to be seen. “We’ve all wanted our conflicts to end,” he said. His deep tenor seemed to reverberate through the quiet atmosphere. “But you know I’ve fought too, and I know that it won’t end. It never does. That’s why you are always reborn.”

Aang shuddered. “I didn’t want all of this,” he answered. “I didn’t want all those people to be hurt. I didn’t want this war. But now the war is over, and it’s supposed to be peace. I’ve ended it, but it looks like none of that mattered.”

Kuruk shimmered and transformed into Kyoshi. She was a giant compared to Aang. Her shadow stretched across the hill. Her face paint would have been intimidating if not for the gentle way she gazed at him.

“Sometimes people die without justice,” she told him. “Sometimes they are gone when it is too soon. We spend our lives seeking to restore balance and to fight that injustice, and it follows all of us.”

Kyoshi stared at him for a long moment, and then her eyes bled into gold. Roku stood before him now.

“In this world, even the Avatar can only control their choices. Love doesn’t need explanations. Honor, your nation...those things are trivial in the end,” he said. “But there is always someone in your heart who you want to protect. That is the only reason you should fight.” He paused. “Who is your reason, Aang?”

Everything was engulfed in a flash of white.

When he had fallen back into himself, he found that the spirit in Katara’s body was encased in ice with only their head free. The spirit growled at him, unable to move.

Aang’s lips hardened into a line. He could see now what he had been missing.

The spirit may have taken over Katara, but they were still a spirit. He could see the borders of their true form shivering and quivering. Jagged. Incomplete. Their eyes were not a constant green, but a stream of tumultuous and poisonous shades.

He relaxed his position, his hands lowering to his chest. He moved like the flow of the ocean. Back and forth, side to side. He did not stop looking at Katara.

Beneath the ice entrapping the spirit, rivers of glowing gold water rolled. He thought of soothing things, happy memories, the beaming faces of the people he cared about the most, and he began to heal.

The ice melted in sections. Slowly at first, then in quick succession. Katara landed on her feet. Her shoulders rolled back, her chest puffed out, and a wisp of smoke was released from her center until the spirit emerged in their own separate form.

Katara and the spirit faced each other, eyes closed, serene expressions on their faces. Aang watched them. He walked from the floes onto stable ground. The lake water receded behind him. He stopped just short of the two of them, just steps away.

“I understand now,” Aang said. He faced the spirit who had not yet moved. “You didn’t have any hope left.”

The spirit sighed and opened their eyes. They looked tired.

Aang walked until he was beside Katara. He held her hand. She was aware now and they smiled at each other.

“Your spirit is bright, Avatar,” they replied, breaking through the silence. Aang turned his attention back to them. “A spirit like yours can never forget what darkness does, but it can never give me hope,” continued the spirit. “But you’re also human.” Their eyes moved to his and Katara’s entwined hands.

“I won’t thank you for what you’ve done,” they added. “Instead, I’ll remind you what has been done, of what I nearly took.” They nodded at Katara. “A spirit always leaves a mark, especially yours. You of all people should know this.” The spirit looked him in the eye and said, “The four elements, reincarnation, unbelievable power, the light of peace...they’re all *her* marks. Raava’s marks. *Your* marks left on you for nearly ten thousand years since the first of your kind.”

Aang stiffened. “What did you do to Katara?”

The spirit laughed. “Don’t worry. It’s nothing you can see.”

“What did you do?” he repeated.

“Longevity. Perhaps something else,” they said simply. “It is nature’s mark. A blessing, a curse...ever-changing as the world goes on. She could outlive anyone.” Their gaze never left his. “Maybe even you.”

“But...that’s a good thing, isn’t it?” He pressed his palm into Katara’s shaking one.

They smiled. “That’s for her to decide.”

Soon after, the nature spirit faded away.

-

The night was ending, and they were all alone.

His frosty breath obscured his vision, but he kept himself warm. His fingers around Katara’s were soft with her touch. When they turned to face each other, flurries started to dance down from the sky.

“Are you okay?” he whispered. He pressed his forehead to hers.



“As long as you’re here,” she responded.

He embraced her. They lingered for a moment. He knew there would be nights that followed that were scary and hurtful, full of things neither of them wanted to recall. But they had each other right now.

Katara exclaimed in wonder. “Aang, look!” she marveled. They separated.

From the forest, dozens of people wandered out. They all appeared dazed. A pair of Dai Li came out together, rubbing their foreheads. A woman that looked like Joo Dee stumbled across the brush. Teenagers around their age, noble girls, a man with a headwrap carrying a cabbage, and many others.

“I have no idea what happened, but I feel like I really need to go to the bathroom,” said someone familiar. Seconds later, Toph ambled out from behind a massive trunk.

“That, my friend, is a symptom of Spirit World shenanigans,” said Sokka sagely right next to her. He slumped. “Yeah, I need to go to the bathroom too.”

“Sokka, Toph!” Katara shouted excitedly. Aang laughed and followed her. The four of them huddled in a hug.

“Yeah, yeah,” groaned Sokka as he wriggled. “Another win for Team Avatar. I’d rather not make this a habit.”

“I blacked out, so it’s fine with me,” said Toph.

They pulled apart, grinning at each other.

“Well, we’re glad everyone’s safe,” said Aang.

A few people around them gasped in awe. Aang looked around, following where many were pointing.

Bulbs of white flame rose from the trees. They drifted around them, twisting through the branches, and avoiding the gathered crowd.

“What are those?” asked Sokka. He shook his head. “Never mind. I don’t care. I need to pee.” He latched onto Toph and dragged her onto the path that led away from Lake Laogai that some citizens were already taking.

He waved at Aang and Katara. “Thanks for saving us but let’s never do that again! If I have to deal with one more spirit kidnapping me, I’ll—”

“Hurry *up*, Sokka!” commanded Toph. “You’re not the only one that needs to go!”

The crowd started to trail behind them, barely recognizing Aang and Katara in favor of the need to go home after days away. He was sure that he would have to give the Earth King an explanation for their reappearance soon, but at least for now it was not the time.

The lights bobbed along the treetops, brushing against evergreens and bare boughs. The floating snow reflected their glow.

He had forgotten what the quiet sounded like.

There was a certain tranquility that came with snowfall. He thought that this was what it probably felt like for Katara growing up in the tundra of the Southern Water Tribe before she knew what ash mixed with snow meant. A beautiful white without imperfection, without care, without worry...meandering to the ground like petals caught in a breeze.

"You're thinking about something," Katara remarked. She spoke gently. He saw her now, inches from him. Her eyes sparkled in that knowing way of hers.

He glanced at the lake, not answering.

She sighed. She reached for both his hands. "When you were...healing the spirit inside me...bending their energy, I could feel you. I know what you want, Aang."

He felt her thumbs brush his knuckles.

"You want forgiveness."

"When I opened my chakras to master the Avatar State," he said after a long pause, "I forgave myself for a lot of things."

She shook her head. "I don't think that's what you're looking for. You're looking for forgiveness from your people, not yourself. You're afraid that they will never forgive you, and it feels like it's impossible when there's no one around to tell you that you're forgiven." She removed one of her hands and cupped his cheek. "You deserve this too, Aang."

He saw the way she looked at him. She was his person, the one who gave him a reason to fight. Only Katara understood him in a way he could not understand himself.

"My people weren't given a proper send-off." Maybe this was an excuse. He did not know what kind of answer he was looking for.

She smiled and gestured to the sky. "But now they will," she said. "Look."

One by one, the white flames burst into gold. They looked like fireflies chasing each other, showering the field and the lake with a spectacular starry sight.

They had no leaves or petals. They had no chrysanthemums. It was not the season for that. Though at least, they had the wind.

Aang watched them, remembering a time long gone at the air temples. "Go in peace," he told the lost spirits. And finally, they did.

The last of the lights dissipated. They were transient breaths that glided away.

Though it was impossible, he caught sight of a butterfly in winter. The pink of the early dawn light shone through its yellow wings, the color of the sun when spring arrived to thaw the snow. He heard no more voices, no more threats. Not a tune from his distant memory either. Katara kissed him and he leaned into her arms. He heard silence and their mingling breaths.

At last.

## Chapter End Notes

There are a lot of things I wished to say in the chapter that I decided not to in favor of keeping this as mysterious as possible. I think that this chapter is about inferences. There is a reason for everything said and done from the first to the third and final chapter.

Some additional notes:

- The balls of flame are based on will-o'-the-wisps, St. Elmo's Fire, or what is called "santilmo" in Filipino folklore. They are floating flames that are said to be the lost souls of people who met tragic ends. Often, they lead living people into traps like bodies of water that lead them to drown.
- The nature spirit is based on a diwata from Filipino folklore. They are believed to be guardians of natural features including forests or mountains. They are often depicted as beings that live in the trunks of trees.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!