

Moku's Declassified Earthbending Survival Guide

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Chapter 21

Yong stomped his right foot down, kicking up a single rock, then punched forward, a stone the size of my head flying towards me. I sidestepped it and returned the exact same attack. He smirked, catching the stone and tossing it down.

I caught the wince of pain from him though. Shoot, I'd placed just a bit too much heat on that. Slow it down. Don't finish the food too fast, play a little.

Yong kicked out at me, the stone beneath us sliding upwards and shooting at me. I weaved through the stones, tapping away what I couldn't dodge, then returned the exact same attack. Again.

"Are you a monkey, simply mimicking my every move!?" Yong scoffed, creating a wall of stone to block my attack. He kicked out at the wall, sending it sliding towards me.

I stomped down to create a wall and kicked out, sending it sliding towards his. When both walls crashed, mine tore through Yong's. Long training under Bumi, as well as my own ideas, had helped me create immensely dense and condensed attacks.

Yong's eyes widened. "Ah!"

He jumped aside while the wall went past. Before it could hit the scared people behind him, I sank it back into the ground and turned to face Yong. "It's not about mimicry. I'm just trying to see how my attacks compare. So far, I'm not impressed. Here, I want to try something."

I closed my eyes. Seismic sense replaced my vision, that wonderful sense of understanding the entire world around me. As long as it touched the ground of course. I raised my fists up. "Okay. Go for it."

"Are you... are you *mocking me*!?" Yong shouted. He stomped the ground, creating a pillar in front of him, then punched it, two stones flying towards me.

Through seismic sense, his earthbending felt strange. Different from what I was used to from Bumi or Toph. Like, the stones he was making were missing that feeling of solidity?

"Not mocking," I said confidently, bobbing and weaving between the rocks in a boxer stance, rushing towards him. "If you can't match up to my earthbending, I'll just try to see how I stack up in other ways."

"You dare-"

I ducked under another rock, then punched him in the arm. "Talking ain't free!"

"Gah!" He stumbled back, snapping his hands up to raise a wall between us.

So I punched through it. And found myself disappointed. "Seriously? That's the best you can make?"

"Uncouth brat!" Yong scrambled back, swinging his fists up and creating a tall pillar of stone. He swung his hands around and thrust his palms out, sending it forth.

I slapped my hands against it. I can't explain it. But when I touched the newest construct, a new emotion filled me. Disgust? Rage?

"ARE YOU SERIOUS!?"

I shattered through the trash in front of me, catching the pieces and sending them back into the earth. "That's it!? That's the best defense you can make!?"

Pillows. I'd spent most of my life fighting Toph, a good portion of the last year training with Bumi, and their earthbending was so *strong*. The stones they made were pulled together,

Yong, panicking, threw a rock at me. I let it shatter against me. "Earthbending is the *strongest* bending style. Water has versatility to heal, take any shape, provide life. Fire can be used anywhere they can breathe to destroy. Air is freedom incarnate. But earthbending is *strength*."

Yong, desperately, grabbed at the ground, clawing and swiping at me. The dust landed on my still closed eyes, then he rushed forward, creating a boulder nearly his own height and swinging it down on me.

I raised one hand over my head, shaped it like a blade, and chopped it in half, both pieces landing on either side of me. "We're supposed to be the mountain. But your bending is the opposite, man. There's no conviction to it. You just throw a rock and expect results."

"You-" Yong swallowed nervously, looking around. I ignored the crowd, instead frowning.

Yong, seeing me motionless, seemed to gird himself, circling me quietly. It took me a sec to realise he was trying to sneak up on me while my eyes were still closed. I turned to face him, and rushed him.

To his credit, he noticed his plan wasn't working and immediately slapped his hand on the ground, coming up with a standard earth gauntlet, blocking a punch from me. I took control of the earth around his fist, the stone cracking apart into dust.

My hand wrapped his, twisting him around, then punching him in the face, sending him scrambling back. He swung his fist out, another rock flying towards me from the ground next to him. I caught the rock and smashed it into his stomach, spit exploding from his mouth.

"See what I mean?" I squeezed down on the stone he'd tossed, turning it into dust. "No weight to your attacks."

Yong was sweating through his fancy silk clothes, eyes wild. He raised his hands.

I lost my patience and simply raised a hand. The earth around him snapped upwards in the shape of my fist, surrounding him entirely in stone, then *clenching* around him.

"Gah! Rah! Arrrgh!" Yong struggled, his arms and legs pinned to his sides, right arm awkwardly curved around his head.

"Enough," I stopped to look him in the eyes. "Yield."

Yong snarled, struggling more. "Never, you absolute boori-"

My fist crashed into his mouth, teeth flying out, blood spattering the stone fist around him. He stared at me blearily, body shaking with fear. I raised my fist again.

"Y-Yield!" He screamed, my punch stopping an inch from hitting him again. "I yield."

I opened my eyes for the first time, glaring at him as my seismic sense gave me a good look at him. Then I shrugged, snapping my fingers. The earth fist fell apart, leaving Yong to fall to his knees

"All right. I accept your surrender." I turned around and started walking away, my hands at my side. "Sorry I had to go so hard on you, I just expected you to be strong-"

Yong snapped to his feet. A cruel smile on his face as he swung out at me, a disc of earth spinning at my back.

My foot *slammed* into the floor, and honestly, I had very little idea of exactly *how* I did what happened next. Because it was almost like the floor shivered, and then Yong just kind of *sank*, like he was stuck in fast-acting quicksand, what had once been normal stone splashing like a liquid, before vanishing from view even as everything just kind of smoothed over. "OH SHIT!"

It was quiet for a moment. The crowd stared at me, while I took a second to blink. What... what had I just done?

I stared at the smooth rock, then swung my hand out. Unlike the weird liquid moving it had done earlier, it cracked apart as normal, a loud coughing sound filling the air as the dirt separated and let us see Yong's face. His face was dirty, wet with tears, gasping for air. He'd been buried for only a few seconds, but it must have been horrifying.

"Sorry. Wasn't expecting I'd literally dig you a grave."

Yong let out a sound like a dog whining. I eyed him for a moment, then looked at Long Feng.

He was staring at me, eyes narrowed. He hid it quickly and moved over to look into the hole. "It seems that beyond insulting one of our allies, you also decided a cowardly attack was in order, hm?"

Long Feng waved his hand, Dai Li men moving at his command. "A shame to lose a duel and go to prison on the same day."

Two Dai Li swung their arms, pulling Yong out of the ground, the stone cracking again.

Cracking. So it was completely solid. What had happened earlier? I'd just sort of reacted to Yong's attack...

While I watched the sweating and pale Yong get dragged off, Long Feng scoffed. "Dig him a grave. Funny."

"It wasn't on purpose," I admitted. "I just sort of reacted."

"And the rest of the fight?" Mingxia asked, walking over to me with my clothes. "You were kind of embarrassing the guy, then you got mad."

"He just... made me realize a few things, I guess." I turned and bowed in the direction of the King. "My apologies for causing trouble, King Kuei."

The king, shadowed within his palanquin, waved a hand. Long Feng nodded. "The king doesn't mind. You were simply defending the reputation of your family and kingdom. Though I personally wish you hadn't embarrassed him so thoroughly."

He was lying. I could tell through seismic sense. He seemed to be feeling smug more than anything.

"All right, everyone back to dinner!" Long Feng said firmly. People started separating into groups again, but I felt more eyes landing on us. I didn't care, still going over what had happened at the end of the fight. "For now, Prince Moku, have a good night."

"Hm?" I glanced at him. "Oh, yeah, you too."

I turned to stare back at the hole left from where I'd buried Yong. Long Feng seemed thrown off, but he shrugged and walked off, leaving Mingxia and I alone.

Back in the home that had been given to us, Mingxia watched me pace back and forth in front of her. Granted, I wasn't just doing normal pacing, I was trying to do dust stepping at the same time. I was kind of getting it? Sort of.

"Review the facts. When Yong attacked, what did I do?"

"You sort of..." Mingxia cocked her head to the side. She was juggling knives as she watched me, a practice in dexterity. "Stomped on the ground? But it was harder than the normal kind. Or it felt harder at least? And then the ground sort of sucked him in? It looked like he dropped into a pool or something."

I stumbled, messing up my dust stepping a bit, then went back to it. "And then it was solid rock again."

"Maybe you figured out lava?" She suggested, though I could tell she knew it was bs.

"Yong would be a charcoal briquet."

"So nothing of value would be lost."

"Snrk," I coughed, pushing down the laugh that followed that thought. "Mean."

"Oh, and burying him under ground wasn't?"

“He’s an earthbender, he’ll get over it.” I wasn’t really sure about that actually. The look on his face when he went from attacking me to buried under liquid earth had been one of immense fear.

“Regardless, it wasn’t lava. Which leaves only one option.”

“Liquifaction.” Mingxia stopped juggling the knives for a moment. She gave me an odd look. “Is that even possible? I thought only one person ever did it.”

“Yun, the False Avatar,” I confirmed. Saying it out loud made me feel uncomfortable.

Yun was powerful. Immensely so. In Wan Shi Tong’s library, we’d found records of all the Avatar’s adventures. Yun was a bender I honestly could say was on Bumi and Toph’s level. Maybe it was because of his specialized training, true talent, the big worm spirit joined to him, or maybe he was just that fucking determined.

But among his talents, one that earthbenders had been debating for centuries was his ability to make earth act like fluid. It had never been seen before or since. Not even from Avatars.

“It can’t be that, right?” I mumbled.

The handle of a knife smacked into my head, pain filling me instantly. “Ow! What the fu-”

“Dummy,” Mingxia glared at me.

“The hell!? Mingxia, what was that for!?” I shouted, glaring at her.

“You’re being dumb is why. Of *course* it was liquefaction! It couldn’t be anything else.”

“But only one guy in *history* ever learned that, and he was a damn genius!”

“So are you, dummy!”

I blinked. She glared at me, then sighed. “Maybe not a *genius*, but you’re a good earthbender! One of the best! How can you have so much confidence fighting people, but the second you-”

She stopped, struggling to speak. Then she stood up and walked over. She grabbed the knife she’d thrown and tapped me in the chest with the handle.

“You did that. Now figure out how, instead of deciding it was impossible because, for some reason, you have insanely high standards for how good an earthbender should be.”

“High standards?”

“Yes! Seriously, it’s annoying! You praise Toph all the time, but you never seem to get that she isn’t exactly a normal bender! She’s like, insanely powerful! You know why Yong was so easy to beat? It’s because he’s what most benders are like! Just guys who can throw an element. Not blind fighters, mountain tossing old men, or dummies who constantly trying to invent or rediscover old bending techniques.”

She tapped me on the bridge of my nose with the handle of her knife. “So pull your head out of your butt.”

She turned and walked away. “This is why I never found boys attractive. They’re all idiots.”

Ouch. I rubbed the back of my head and sighed. Was I really that bad?

I went back to dust stepping, thinking back. I mean, yeah, I really did bury Yong with liquid earth... I did that. Fine. But could I keep doing it?

How had that worked? Maybe it was something different about how I trained.

I stumbled again, the small pillar of dirt I’d created shattering as I lost focus. Mingxia had a point. I didn’t do things the way other earthbenders did.

Athena walked into the room then. I glanced over at her as she prowled to my side, rubbing her head against my chest.

“Hey girl.”

“Grrrrrr,” she growled, purring while I scratched under her chin.

“Lavabending,” I mumbled. “Maybe that’s the key, Athena. I’ve been working on that for what feels like forever. What if... the work I’ve done for that ended up-”

I stopped, looking at my hands. Athena pulled her head up to look at me, then bit gently at my right hand, pulling me to keep petting her. “I need to keep working at it.”

In my training, I’d focused on different ways of producing lava, condensing and releasing the stone over and over, trying to heat it, cool it, anything. Something about that training made me able to liquify earth. So now I had to figure that out.

I didn’t know if I was disappointed or excited. Another technique to try and learn. And I was still trying to figure out dust stepping, damn it!

I reached into Athena’s satchel and pulled out a notebook, as well as a stone tablet. With a thought, I began writing in braille.

“Hey Toph. So, you aren’t going to believe this. First, Ba Sing Se has some lames living in it. That’s not the unbelievable part though, because-”

Athena fell asleep in my lap as I continued to write, with me falling asleep right after.

Chapter 22

“It’s the Gravedigger!” Someone mumbled as I walked past with Mingxia and Joo Dee. I let out an aggrieved sound at that.

We entered the training ground/sauna that Joo Dee had shown us the first day we entered the city, more people staring at us as we walked. More of that *fucking name* following me.

It started about two days after that party. Well, it started spreading at the party after I left, I guess. It was my fault. I’d said it then.

“Sorry. Wasn’t expecting I’d literally dig you a grave.”

People took something I’d said while still in shock and I guess they decided to reuse a classic.

“It’s unfair,” I said while Mingxia stopped us in the courtyard, looking around. “I buried *one* guy! Jianzhu buried like, a million!”

“I believe it was somewhere in the thousands,” Joo Dee said. When I looked over she just smiled, though I could swear she was teasing me.

“Whatever! Point is, he had to work at it. I do it to one guy, accidentally, and now I’m getting people whispering at me like I’m a psycho.” I pointed at one group of nobles, who shuddered and tried to hide away from me. “It ain’t right, I tell you.”

“Oh, boo hoo, you’re feared and respected wherever you go.” Mingxia stuck her tongue out at me. “Make with the weights, Gravedigger, Eater of Babies and Puppies.”

I rolled my eyes and did as asked. Mingxia laid down on the bench I created and began benchpressing while I continued speaking.

“At least people still sent books over. And food.”

Lot’s of both, actually. Books arrived in neatly wrapped packages, on carriages sometimes. I sometimes sent letters out reminding people I didn’t need the best of books or something, I wanted any and everything even remotely unique, but I wasn’t sure how many people got that.

Some people sent out food, which I immediately had transferred to the Lower Ring. Far as I could tell, it did actually feed people, so that was good.

I kept good as my word in the meantime. Anyone who sent me stuff got a letter sent on my behalf to my 'father'. It was up to him if he'd actually listen to their request, though I figured he would. The nobles just wanted favorable deals on things he was already planning on selling for reasonable prices.

A little evil, but all they lost were books they never read and food they didn't need. Worth it.

"At least you're popular," I mumbled, glaring at Mingxia. She pushed up her weights again, somehow grunting and giggling at the same time.

She'd gotten a few letters after the party. Turns out, Sokka wasn't the only one who thought Kyoshi Warrior's were hot.

We continued our workout for a while, just focusing on physical strength, agility, sparring hand to hand, and then a final set of stretches for flexibility. No such thing as a martial artist who wasn't flexible.

Joo Dee watched the whole time, which was a bit eerie. She disappeared just before we finished the workout, then came back to us with news. As she did, smiling that same smile, I had to keep my thoughts to myself.

Everytime I looked at her, it was a reminder that she was a brainwashed slave. I tried to be as nice as possible, tried to keep calm. I was finding it harder though.

"The King has accepted your request to meet with him." Joo Dee said while I was musing on the idea of visiting a lake and tossing hat wearers into volcanoes.

"He did?" I blinked. Then I frowned. "I made a request?"

"Your father did, I believe."

I could swear I heard a cackle in the distance.

"All right. I mean, when? A week from now?"

"Tonight, after you've cleaned yourself."

"Tonight!?" Mingxia yelped, looking at me, then Joo Dee. "So soon?"

"Yes! I think you impressed him."

"Well, she is pretty impressive." I said while teasingly punching Mingxia's shoulder. She rolled her eyes, then refocused on Joo Dee.

"Anything we should know in particular?" She asked.

"Oh no, nothing specific. Come as you are, if you wish."

I nodded, hiding my own thoughts a bit. In truth, I didn't want to see the king. I'd planned on sneaking away. To visit a lake.

Apparently not though. "Can we bring Athena?"

"Your eel hound?" Joo Dee stared at me. "Whatever for?"

"Rrrrrr," Basco growled.

Athena cocked her head at the bear. Then she snorted.

He reeled back and seemed a little offended.

"Oh look, they're getting along!" The King of Ba Sing Se said pleasantly.

The king was, I was sad to say, an unimpressive man. His clothes were very fancy and expensive looking, but he had the build and look of a young university student. I didn't hold it against him, but he just lacked any presence on his own.

The long line of guards and Dai Li helped. As did the big throne room and the throne itself. Whatever else you could say about Bumi, his throne room was functional rather than being huge and impressive.

Kuei looked happy to see his bear interacting with my eel hound, but he was also looking at me with real curiosity over the tiny glasses he wore.

"I know it was already mentioned at the party, but you're the first fellow member of royalty I've ever met." Kuei said with some fascination to his voice.

"You've never met Bumi?" Mingxia asked, surprised.

"Oh, no. He never really leaves Omashu, and I've never left the palace." Kuei said casually.

Mingxia stared at him, then at me. I didn't look at her, just smiling up at him. "Well, it's nice to meet you. Hopefully I didn't ruin the party."

"No no, it was exciting!" The King said. "Oh, you were so mean too! I've never seen an earthbender who could make rocks act like water!"

"Neither have I." Long Feng said.

I glanced over at him. His eyes were calm, face carefully neutral. His heartbeat was a bit quick though. Not panicky or anything, just focused.

He knew. He knew what I'd done was something new, or rather old and unique. I wanted to groan. This was all Bumi's fault. If he had just let me be a regular guy visiting the city, Long Feng would barely know me. Instead, I was the Prince of another nation who had displayed a new form of earthbending.

I glanced around the room at the Dai Li, marking their positions in the room, then refocused on Kuei. "To be honest, I'm not sure why my father wanted us to meet, your majesty. Unlike the nobles, I doubt you have to use me as an intermediary."

"Oh, not at all," Kuei said happily. "I just wanted to meet a fellow member of royalty."

Long Feng winced. Right, having the King of Ba Sing Se acknowledge me as somewhat of an equal wasn't exactly what he wanted. Good for him that no one else was around.

"Yeah, I'm glad I got to meet you before I left." I was kinda lying. I mean, I didn't hate the idea of meeting the guy, and seeing Athena play with a bear was fun, but I did *not* want to deal

"Left?" Kuei blinked, looking over at Long Feng, then back to me. "You're leaving soon?"

"Today, probably," I admitted. "I have some places I want to visit. Maybe head to the beach, or up into the mountains. Go somewhere I can learn something new."

"You just go wherever you want?" Kuei asked, sounding a bit, well, jealous.

"Basically? It's nice. I mean, I have to defend myself, ourselves, from bandits and other dangers," I carefully avoided talking about the Fire Nation. I was fairly confident I could fight the Dai Li, but no reason for it yet. "But we've seen some..."

When I stopped to think of the right word, Mingxia chimed in. "Amazing things. Places I couldn't imagine."

The Library being the primary one. Also, that strange chunk of ice in the desert, the underground training area under Omashu, Ba Sing Se itself. For a pair of country bumpkins like us, this had been a dream.

“Ahhh, I wish I could travel the world like that,” Kuei said sadly.

“Yes, well, the burdens of leadership, your highness,” Long Feng said with a small and very fake chuckle. “Now, I believe Prince Moku and his companion have a ferry to catch, do you not?”

He gave me a pointed look. I smiled back at him. “Sure. King Kuei, it’s been a pleasure. Hope we can meet again, maybe explore the palace together.”

“That sounds very nice,” Kuei said, still looking thoughtful, with seemed to worry Long Feng. “Have a good trip!”

“Come on Athena,” Mingxia said.

My eel hound snapped her teeth at Basco and turned to join us, leaving the king and his ‘advisor’ behind, one glaring at us a bit.

Whatever. Not our fault that Kuei had a natural human curiosity. All we’d done was talk, and we’d avoided the hot-button topics that Long Feng wanted us to.

For now. Next time though...

‘And so, with the information we’ve gained, I believe a full assault on the Dai Li’s stronghold is possible, but must be done as a full sweep. We would need to take out every single one at the same time as their leader, and leave no possibility of any escaping to rebuild.

As such, ‘dad’, I’ve included diagrams of every tunnel and hideaway I sensed, the full scope of their numbers as I could tell, the things Mingxia noticed about their leader and his psychological profile, and some details I noticed about the castle.

I wouldn’t have begun planning this out, until I met the Joo Dee. The Dai Li have been kidnapping and brainwashing their own citizens. So now, they aren’t surviving to meet the future I see when I dream.’

I finished the long message in braille and looked around. We were on the ferry heading out of the city, the sunlight shining down on us. I was resting against Athena as she happily chewed on a hunk of meat. Mingxia was sharpening some blades she’d been given as gifts from some girl back in Ba Sing Se.

We had more luggage than we’d came with. Books, some small treasures nobles gave us, that sort of thing. Once we reached a private space, I’d give them to a fox spirit for a certain giant owl to take in.

For now, I stared at the message I'd written in braille for Bumi. Thanks to his interactions with Toph and I, he'd learned the language. That wasn't an issue. The real issue was that the message felt... well. It felt short. For what I wanted to say about how I'd felt about Ba Sing Se.

The city was peaceful. Except for the places the poor lived. They took refugees, then gaslit them into saying the war that took their homes, family, and friends, didn't exist. And of course, they allowed thousands to die through inaction. Omashu was the current most active force in the Earth Kingdom, and we didn't have even half the fighting population that the Earth Kingdom could bring forth.

But mostly. I liked Joo Dee. She had been kind in a way I couldn't entirely put down to just her brainwashing. I wanted to free her and her 'sisters'.

Because fuck Long Feng. That was the final word... Ohhhhh.

I wrote down one more thing. *'Also, fuck Long Feng, he sucks.'*

"You're giggling." Mingxia pointed out.

"I'm planning bloody and violent revolution, I'm allowed to giggle."

Mingxia grinned at me. I closed my first envelope and opened a piece of paper to start writing to a certain owl god.

After all, while most of the books the nobles had given me were already in his library, there had been some gems. And then there were the treasures I had no use for. The library was supposed to be a repository for all knowledge, right? Well, knowledge, while held primarily in books, could also be held in other things.

'Wan Shi Tong. I'm writing a letter with a suggestion to add more artifacts to your library, perhaps in a wing of some sort. While you did have a few things, I think dedicating more to the maintenance of certain key items from different cultures and times can preserve knowledge. I will be sending this letter along with a few treasures from modern day Earth Kingdom nobles, but will work on having more dedicated scholars helping send more unique artifacts. If you decide this idea is not worth pursuing however, please let me know. Also, enjoy the books.'

With that done, I looked up at Mingxia. "So. You had some time to look over the list of places we wanted to go. You have somewhere in mind?"

"Yep," Mingxia looked out at the horizon. "I want to visit Yu Dao."

"Yu Dao?" I frowned, going over my notes. "Yu Dao, Yu Dao. That's not-" I flipped through a few more pages, then back a few more. "That's not in here? Should I know that place?"

"You should. It's an Earth Kingdom village. Or it was. Now it's the oldest Fire Nation colony in the world."

"What."

"Yep. The first one. And I want to go there," Mingxia gave me a dangerous look. "So. When do we head out?"

"*Kukukuku*," Athena clicked.

I swear she was laughing at me.

"Why do you want to go there?" I asked, befuddled.

"Because it's perfect for us to get some more info on the Fire Nation," Mingxia explained. "It has both Earth and Fire citizens, so we won't look too out of place."

I thought about it before shaking my head. "That's a little too reckless, ain't it? I mean, choosing a Fire Nation colony makes sense, but does it have to be the oldest and presumably most well-defended?"

Mingxia thought about it for a moment. "That's sort of why it's the best one. They know it's safe. So security is more lax. If we showed up in a newer one, they just fought for it, so they're expecting more pushback. Yu Dao is deep in their territory, they've had it for decades, and the Earth Kingdom folks consider themselves more fire than earth by now."

She made a sort of sense, honestly. It seemed risky for no reason though. "Why?"

"For your whole liquid earth and lava thing," Mingxia said. She flipped her knives into sheathes hidden about her person. "Master Phoenix once said that if you're having trouble with a technique, it helps to watch or fight someone who has already used it. But if our fighting against the Fire Nation all this time hasn't helped, maybe a mix will help?"

I narrowed my eyes. Finally I shrugged. "Okay. I guess that makes sense. And what you said earlier, about getting more info on the Fire Nation?"

"Getting more ideas about their troop numbers, movements, and supply trains can help us turn things around in key areas on the coast," she said firmly. "I think the stuff we've done has helped fight back against them, but we need more than that if we're going to have any real effect on the war."

I nodded in agreement. In my dreams, I knew that the Avatar was going to show up and save the world. But in the meantime, a lot of people were still in danger. And as time went on, I was becoming less inclined to worry about some nebulous timeline that was already shattered apart by now.

“All right. Yu Dao, the oldest Fire Nation colony. Let’s do it!” I closed up the letter I had been writing. “I mean, it’s not like we’re on the radars of bounty hunters, or that the Fire Nation probably has guys looking to take us out specifically after we took out their camps, supply lines, and most recently engaged in an act of piracy against them. If it all goes wrong, I can just blame you.”

“That’s the spirit?” Mingxia said hesitantly.

Chapter 23

On the journey to Yu Dao, I kept up my training. I wasn’t exactly a master of duststepping yet, but I spent a lot of time on our journey walking alongside Athena and Mingxia practicing it.

The distance from Ba Sing Se to Yu Dao was long. Yu Dao was all the way on the West Coast, and we had to make sure to avoid the Taihua Mountains, with their treacherous peaks and constant freezing blizzards.

Plenty of time to practice my moves. I kept up all my regular training, sparring with Mingxia and Athena (Athena liked stalking me through the woods and grasslands, which was both terrifying and fun. Good practice for if I ended up getting hunted).

We punched and kicked stone pillars to toughen up our limbs, stretched our bodies, ran across the land, worked out with makeshift weights, and trained with our weapons.

And I kept up duststepping. I was getting a better sense of the flow I needed to do for it, moving from pillar to pillar, making them just strong enough to briefly hold my weight. I found some success. Hopefully by the time I reached Yu Dao I could do it right, use it to rise up to buildings and step between streets.

With enough practice, it would give me insane battlefield mobility.

Mingxia kept up her training as well, but she added a new one. She would have me wrap her in bindings, from simple earthen handcuffs I bent around her wrists to actual ropes, then she would work on escaping as quickly as she could. She also worked on lockpicking with the help of manuals. I practiced it a bit as well, but I couldn’t dedicate as much of my time as she could.

Still, even with all of our training, as well as stopping four times to shut down some bandit attacks, Athena was an eel-hound. Fastest land animal in the world after all. It took us a couple weeks to reach Yu Dao.

In the meantime, I got a better sense of what exactly I was trying to master when it came to liquefaction.

While I kept calling it 'liquefaction', it was because I didn't have a better name for it. Maybe 'hydrostone'? 'Fluid solid'? It wasn't like lava or ice, changing the state of matter through heat.

On looking back at that moment when I buried uh... what's his name. When I buried him, it hadn't felt like turning stone into sand or moving mud. It was all still a big solid piece, just still somehow moving like water.

It was like... oh! Like an energy beam! Or a hardlight shield. Something was technically flowing and moving, but it was a solid and physical thing. If you touched a hardlight object from those science fiction stories in my memory, it would be as solid as stone. But it continued to move. This felt like the opposite. Instead of light flowing to be stone, this was stone flowing like water.

Maybe there was a name in that. Something that maintained its actual state, but mimicked another form. Perpetually one form, mimicking another?

I meditated on that for a long while. On the differences, or lack thereof, between the different forms of bending I was doing.

And I felt a bit jealous of Yun. That kid had gotten the best schooling from every form of bending teacher, then followed that up with melding together with Father Glowworm, some kind of uber spirit that made him even more powerful... Although, I wouldn't have wanted to lose my soul for a power boost. Hard work would do for now.

One other thing I started working on was minimalism. Not the lifestyle, though I was already kind of engaged in that with my lifestyle. Instead, I was working on one of Bumi's signature techniques.

Not the swimming through earth thing. I was tempted to believe that was Bumi mastering the liquifying earth thing and not telling anyone, but until I could talk to him about it I would never know.

No, what I wanted to master was the ability he had to shift earth by just twitching a single muscle. Bumi could somehow move earth by shifting his cheek, narrowing his eyes, or flicking a finger. And not small things. In my memories, he'd managed to make roof tiles crack apart steel. With his face.

In my own experiences, I'd once watched him toss stones at cannonball speeds by clicking his tongue.

So yeah, I wanted that. One advantage experienced benders had was that they could dodge others by watching their moves. But if I could bend the same amount with the twitch of a finger, the danger I could represent would be insane.

We worked our butts off, traveled, joked around fires, and I told stories about wizards in windy cities, ninjas in bright orange, and assassins that used pencils as weapons. It was nice, after the time we spent in Ba Sing Se. Just friends travelling through the wilderness.

It almost disappointed me when we got to Yu Dao. Although that place was likely going to cause its own brand of problems.

I clenched my fists and punched the boulder in front of me. Then again and again.

"What's the point of that, again?" Mingxia asked me. Behind me, she was juggling blades in her hands, bouncing them around at odd angles, her fingers moving smoothly between each knife.

"Minimalistic bending," I answered, sweat dropping off my nose. I slammed the boulder with a right and left jab, a hook, uppercut, then an elbow strike, moving as fast as I could. "I'm bending the stone at the point of impact to soften it just enough that I won't hurt myself, while still providing a good punching bag."

I slammed my fists into the boulder again, only to wince when I was just a touch too slow. Still, I kept talking and kept punching. "I'm training multiple things this way. Cardio, minimalistic bending, possibly liquid and lava as well."

"And the reason we aren't approaching Yu Dao?" She asked pointedly.

We were on a hill just within sight of the town. It was very big, compared to other colonies we'd seen, surrounded by a wall that, to my eyes, seemed to have been built by Earthbenders, rather than the Fire Nation itself. We could see guards at the gates, looking just alert enough to not get in trouble.

I looked over at her. She seemed bored. Which, fair enough. "We're just waiting for the sun to be higher up. Fire Nation guards calm down a lot when the sun is all the way up."

Something about them feeling more powerful also made them more lax... Which, Mingxia knew? She was the one who figured that out actually. Was she really that bored?

"What are your plans?" I asked searchingly.

"Huh?" She looked over at me, putting her blades away smoothly. "Like, my plans for when we enter the city? Or life goals?"

"I was thinking the former, but now I kind of want to know the latter." I admitted. Mingxia had been following me for a while now. I was wondering what her goal was. Beyond just helping me fight the Fire Nation, I mean.

Mingxia looked over at me. Her hair was getting long. Mine too, actually. We could get a haircut in the city, but for now I was more focused on her.

"I want to expand the Kyoshi Warriors," she said, crossing her arms. "I'm not a leader or anything, but I think I can help with that. I've learned so much since I left, and I want to teach the Kyoshi Warriors about it... plus," she scowled. "The Dai Li."

I nodded. Like the Mingxia's friends, they were a group that had been founded by Kyoshi. Seriously, Kyoshi's influence on the future was *ridiculous*. "They disappointed you."

"Yeah! I mean, they might as well be a sister organization to us, and they turned into something... horrifying. They're supposed to protect people!" She tightened a hand on a knife handle that hadn't been there before, scowling in frustration. "I can't ever take the chance the Kyoshi Warriors become something like that. I want to expand them, but in the right way. Take them global, to become real protectors of people."

"And if they decide to stay on the island?" I asked pointedly.

"Then I'll just make a new organization!" She stopped, realizing how loud she'd gotten. Then she blinked. "Oh..."

"Hm?"

"Nothing, just, I never thought of that until now." She swallowed. "It feels like I'm betraying the Kyoshi Warriors by saying that."

"I mean, I think it's an awesome idea," I shrugged. "Besides, you only said that you'd do that if they refused to go along with it. I think you'd be surprised how ready a lot of them would be to help you out."

"That's a nice thought," Mingxia said, though she didn't seem to believe me. Ah well. She still seemed a bit more relaxed. "Yeah. I can start working on an organization meant to do what the Dai Li should have. Something built to protect people. If I can work with the right people, have them work in the shadows and the light."

She took out her notebook, frowning at it. "I've thought about it a bit already. We'd need supplies, bases, and some influence in important groups. Some benders as well."

"You wouldn't want it to be pure non-bender?"

"No. Benders give valuable options, and it isn't like we get anything out of keeping them out of a group. If we invite them in, we get access to more than we'd lose in pride. Besides, it's not like non-benders will never have a place. We've got a lot to give to the world."

I had to admire her a bit. I wasn't one of those people who thought benders were better than non-benders, but you'd be blind not to realize how many advantages benders got. An average bender got a head start others didn't. Mingxia deciding to create an organization that still invited them in, despite her background, which spoke a lot to her character.

Then again, like seventy percent of the people she'd beaten in fights were firebenders, so her confidence was justified. She saw them as a possible resource, not a threat.

"Very Batman of you," I teased.

She grinned, having heard a couple of stories from me about the unpowered superhero long before. Hm. Maybe I could teach her some more relevant stories about vigilantes? Robin Hood was a classic. Same with Zorro.

I was going to start in about that when I noted the position of the sun. "Should be good now."

Mingxia glanced up and sighed. "Too bad. I like your stories."

That made me blink. "Uh, how did you-"

"You have a tell."

"I have a *storytelling* tell?"

Mingxia nodded while packing up. I gave a disbelieving look to Athena. My eel-hound scoffed out a breath rather than answer.

"No respect, I get no respect," I mock grumbled, lowering my fists. I swept out a hand, letting my punching rock crumble and moving to climb on top of Athena.

We rode towards the gate of Yu Dao at a calm pace. The guards eyed us... oddly? Like, they had the confidence we'd expected, what with the sun beating down on us, but there was an alertness to them I hadn't expected. And a lot more of them than I expected.

I didn't let my nervousness show, instead approaching calmly and stopping when a Fire Nation guard waved us to stop. He approached and looked us over. "Name?"

"Yuta." I said.

"Samee." Mingxia lied as well.

"Uh huh. ID's."

We took them out carefully, handing the false identities to the guard. He gave them a harder look than I expected. Granted, while the identities weren't real, they were made from ones we'd stolen from camps in the past, so they shouldn't have required so much introspection. As far as the ID's said, we were from one of the other Fire Colonies, nothing special.

"Purpose of visit?"

"Here for the big day!" Mingxia said, surprising me a bit. That was enough for me to realize what was happening though. "My auntie invited us! It's, like, so exciting, ya know!?"

The guard smiled, losing his gruff nature. "Yes, it is. We're all very honored. None of the other Fire Nation colonies will be as lucky!"

"I'm so jealous," I said, doing my best grumble possible.

"Hey, at least your aunt invited you." The guard said, handing back out ID's. "Now, no earthbending without a permit, and we expect to see you either out of town before a week or submitting an approval to be moved in. Not the usual rules, but we're making an exception for safety, considering the circumstances."

"Of course," I said like I had any idea *why* they were being so cagey.

The guard grinned again, waving us on. "And hey, maybe if you're lucky, you'll get to see the princess!"

Princess. Princess. PRINCESS. *PRINCESS.*

"Spirits, I hope so!" Mingxia said, prodding me to move forward. Athena seemed to sense my anxiety, but she carried forward. I kept silent as we continued on. There were a lot of guards inside the city. A LOT.

Once we were deeper in, security was a lot less omnipresent, but we still stayed quiet until we got to an inn with a stable. I tied Athena into a stall while Mingxia paid for a room with two beds, then we met inside. After a quick check for any sort of listeners, I finally swallowed.

"Princess!?"

"Shhhh!" Mingxia threw a pillow at me from her bed. I caught it and put it to my mouth.

"AHHHHHHHHHHH!" I screamed at the top of my lungs, muffled by the pillow. When I stopped, I tossed the pillow aside, gasping.

"Feel better?" Mingxia asked.

"The spirits are messing with me."

"So that's a no then."

"Of course it is." I began pacing, trying to recover my brains. "The one time we decide to entire this city, the Princess of the Fire Nation is coming!? I mean, it would be hilarious if it wasn't happening to me."

"I mean, we can just avoid her," Mingxia pointed out reasonably.

"Sure, or the spirits will decide to keep messing with me by having her drop into my lap from the sky."

"Do you *seriously think* the spirits are messing with you?"

"It would explain so much, Mingxia." I stopped, glaring around. I took a quick sense of the world around us. Nothing. "Damnit. I should have spent more time on the spiritual side of bending."

"What, did you try to sense a spirit?" Mingxia's sarcasm was not helpful. "You're being ridiculous. Sit down."

I did so on the floor, crossing my arms while frowning. Mingxia giggled. When I gave her a look, she waved a hand.

"Sorry. It's just funny, you look like you're pouting."

"I kind of am." I glared at the floor. After a moment, thoughts racing, I nodded. "Okay. We need more information. Confirm that princess isn't some kind of euphemism, find out the timetable on her arrival and departure, general attitude in the city towards her-"

Mingxia listened closely as I continued, trying to cover as much as I could, before she stopped. "Okay, why are we doing this? You aren't planning to... well?" She ran a finger along her throat.

"No." I hesitated. "No, no. I guess the plan is to just stay far away from her and the enhanced guards until they leave. We only came here for some information about the Fire Nation. Not to get in trouble with the fucking princess. Besides. If she tried to fight us..."

I thought about that. For a moment, I imagined it. Azula coming at us, full force. Her blue flames tightly focused and ready to slice, burn, and tear me apart. Or erupting with bursts of lightning, if she had gotten that far.

A part of me realized I must have been insane, because the thought of that made me feel excited rather than terrified. That sort of fight would be awesome.

But logically it wasn't needed. Still... one day.

"Is she that strong?" Mingxia asked.

"She's still growing, like us. But she's a prodigy. And worse, a prodigy that actually works her ass off, uh, from what I've heard. If we fight, it'll be as close to fighting an actual firebending master as we'll get for a while."

I clenched a fist and stared at it. "Information. We'll split up to cover more ground, meet back here at night. Good?"

"Good. Best of luck. And hey, if you do run into the princess, maybe you can just use your *princely* status to counter her."

I scoffed. "That'll be the day."

Chapter 24

Yu Dao was a nice town. Granted, part of that was probably because of the 'princess' visiting. People were hanging Fire Nation colors and flags everywhere, with light streaming through the cloth to give the city a red hue. Many folks were wearing their best clothes. In my own simple workout gear, I felt underdressed, if just a bit.

The other folks around us were a combination of nervous and happy seeming. There was a very lively energy in the air. The closest I'd felt to it was when the nobles in Ba Sing Se had been waiting for the king, and even that wasn't as much.

Which, fair. The Princess of the Fire Nation visiting Yu Dao was a once in a million event. The King was in Ba Sing Se permanently.

And yeah, I was sure it was Azula who was coming. I'd wondered, for a moment, if it was someone else. But no. Zuko was a guy based on Bumi's intelligence network, so I didn't have to deal with some gender-swapped thing, Ursa was long since disappeared, and there weren't any other siblings.

Azula was coming into town.

I wandered the city, looking around with my eyes and my seismic sense. I was curious at how strange things felt. The stones around me felt warmer. Literally so.

Bending, to me, never felt as purely spiritual as some made it out to be. Bumi, Toph, me, we all were very physical in our bending, in how it felt, worked, in the way we controlled things. But sometimes, under moving rocks with my mind, under the physical strain, I would feel a bit extra.

Stones in Omashu and Ba Sing Se felt the same as stones anywhere else. But here, there was a warmth to them. A heat. Was it from all the firebending around us?

Because there were firebenders actively doing their thing as I walked. Some, about six of them, were doing small displays of artistic dancing a courtyard, flowing between movements in a somewhat familiar style. It looked like when Fire Nation soldiers fought, but with a sense of grace, fun, beauty. The fire flowed out at the apex of their snapping fists and feet in brilliant displays of light and heat.

I watched with interest for a while, flickering my head with each movement. It reminded me of the Sun Warriors dance. What little I remembered of it. It wasn't the same, more modern movements flowing in, but it was like I could see the foundations it had once come from.

The six dancers aimed upwards on the final move, releasing six plumes of flame upwards from their palms. I smile just a bit. The stones around me warmed more deeply, and I turned and moved on.

The city saddened me as well. The buildings were mostly Fire Nation in architecture, but I could see the Earth Kingdom ones as well. The fire folk mixed with the earth, laughing, hugging, and arguing with them in the streets. But the hierarchy remained. The soldiers were all wearing that snazzy Fire Nation armor, the rich folks wore red garb, and green belonged to the laborers. There were exceptions, guys in really fancy looking emerald silks, but they proved the rule.

I wandered a bit more, ignoring the sounds of horns in the distance. I felt the echoing of footsteps through my seismic sense. Rhythmic and focused, moving in unison.

In the largest courtyard, I found them. Soldiers running drills. I moved behind a building to hide my earthbending a pillar up to a rooftop, where I sat to take a good look. I was the only one on the roofs, watching the soldiers moving.

They moved in different formations and stances in lockstep. Sometimes marching, sometimes stopping to go through katas. At one point, two men came together in a false sort of fight, fire dancing between them. Very fake, but interesting.

It was all interesting. I'd never really gotten a chance to just study firebending movements.

As I watched, a very ornate, silk and gold covered carriage led by a procession of soldiers entered the road leading through the courtyard. The soldiers doing their drills separated for the carriage, but otherwise continued their movements. Looking closer, it was less drill and more... parade. For those in the carriage, for the citizens, maybe both.

I couldn't help it. I kept my eyes on the carriage. I had to know. To see. The silk curtains were open. I knelt down and narrowed my eyes. A red curtain embossed in gold was blown by a gust of wind.

Gorgeous. I'd kind of expected that. She had eyes of pure gold, looking at the soldiers without (ironically) a hint of warmth, elegant and sharp features, and a hair darker than any shadow I'd ever seen. She seemed bored with the performance of the soldiers.

I scratched my chin as I watched her. And again, she was very pretty. Mingxia and Toph were also pretty, but they weren't likely to kill me.

She panned her eyes across the crowd of soldiers. After a moment, they went to the buildings. And then, like they'd been dragged by a magnet, her eyes landed on me. Of course they did.

I sat down fully, not taking my gaze away. What would be the point? She saw me, and hiding away would just lead to her wondering why I was hiding. I moved my eyes carefully around to the carriage being carried by her attendants, the soldiers, the courtyard, then back to the carriage.

She wasn't looking at me anymore, eyes moving around the courtyard as well. Along the buildings. Back to me.

We met eyes across the dozens, hundreds, of feet between us. She smiled. It was dark, focused. Then her smile turned just a bit.

It took me a second to realize why. I was smiling too.

The carriage continued, and I felt the warmth in the stones around me. I got up and dropped down. With some focus, I brought up bursts of stone, duststepping down out of view of anyone.

That had been... interesting. Why did I smile?

It would have been nice to think it was because I saw a pretty girl and went all gaga, but that wasn't the feeling I had. When I'd seen her, eyeing me, a part of me wondered if she was going to point me out. Or attack me. And the idea made me smile.

"Maybe there is something off about me?" I wondered. I walked off, roaming the city a bit. Later that night, I told Mingxia about the carriage, the drills, and the princess. Nothing beyond that though. In turn, she told me that the princess, who had never left the Fire Nation before this, was

going on a single visit to raise morale in the wake of increased Earth Kingdom activity, as well as pirate activity.

Activity from Omashu.

My fault. Because of me, the Fire Nation was doing a parade to show off their power and dominance. Because Bumi was being more of a thorn of their side, because we'd hired privateers.

I kept quiet on that. I wasn't sure if I was feeling chagrined or proud, to be honest. I slept comfortably either way.

The next day, the party atmosphere continued. Mingxia went out into the city again, seemingly noticing that I needed space. Which, fair.

Yu Dao was even more festive than before. Scarlet hues filled the air. At a vendor, I grabbed a piece of spicy kebab to eat and listened as he talked excitedly.

"Yep, eyes like the sun!" He said smugly. He was Fire Nation, with gray hair, a shaved chin, and a wide belly, his smile wide as he gestured. "Our princess came through in her carriage right here!"

The street we were on was way too small for that behemoth of a carriage. "You don't say?"

"Oh yes. She was beautiful beyond compare," Well, she was pretty, not sure about *beyond compare*. "With a warm and loving smile!" A smile, yes, but it had been more calculating and amused. "And a laugh like a cracking fire."

Oh hey, one thing I couldn't confirm.

I finished off my kebab and handed him a coin for another two. He handed them over. "Hey, maybe you'll get lucky, get a chance to see her."

"Hopefully before she sees me."

"What?"

"Nothing, have a good one." I turned and walked off into a nearby alley. I held up a kebab as I did. "We're going to have trouble doing any real intelligence gathering."

Mingxia dropped from a rooftop to land beside me. She took her kebab. "Thanks, and yeah, we are. I tried roaming around the Mayor's office and home. The security is through the roof. The Princess basically took over his nicest rooms."

"How do you know that?" I asked while finishing off my food. "Thought you couldn't get in."

"The servants complain," Mingxia said, stopping to chew her food. "She's pretty demanding. And really rude to the Mayor's wife and daughter."

Of course. Azula was raised on a premium diet of superiority, why wouldn't she be mean to the Mayor's Earth Kingdom wife and earthbending daughter.

"Well, we'll just continue as we are then. Maybe the guards have something? And the criminal element is probably keeping up their business, just being quiet about it."

"I'll check. How about you, any luck mastering your thing?"

"Some? Fire Nation has been training constantly in that courtyard. And the stones here are weird. Warm. Maybe I'll unlock something through them."

"Uh huh," Mingxia sounded skeptical, but I didn't blame her. "You said something about an underground fighting ring."

"God, I hope so," I mumbled. "Tidao's scrolls had something about that. But who knows how often that stuff goes down, right? Or if they'll do it while this is going down. I could use a guiltless fight though. Just to keep me from doing something stupid."

"Man, you *really* want to fight her, huh?" Mingxia teased.

"That obvious?"

"Your smile has just been so weird, Moku." I rolled my eyes. Yeah, she might've been right.

"Just go do the sneaky ninja thing."

"All right. No fighting crazy people while I'm gone."

At the end of the alley, Mingxia hopped upwards, disappearing just as I exited. To someone looking at either end, I had entered alone, and left alone. So cool.

I continued for a long while, heading towards the courtyard where the soldiers were training. Instead of going to the rooftops this time, I joined the crowd of citizens watching. The crowds weren't giant or anything, just curiously drifting in and out to watch, with some real patriots, bending nerds like me, and cute kids fascinated by the stuff going down.

Taking a spot along the edges, I watched and sensed what I could. Part of me wished I could have joined in. Mimicking the movements would have helped me, now that I was trying to get more a spiritual sense of things.

Lavabending, moving liquid stone, they had to be tied somehow to firebending, or at least share some similarities. I watched closely, narrowing my eyes. The soldiers who were doing best were the ones who seemed to have the best breath control.

Deep breaths, released in controlled bursts with each release of heat. Breathing exercises were important for all martial arts, sure, all exercise really, but there was a flow to the way firebenders did it. With my seismic sense, I could feel how the stronger ones had better mastery of their breathing, how every inhale and exhale had purpose.

And the area around us was being affected by it. The stones were hot. Not just warm. And, when I touched them, pressing a palm to the rough ground, they were actually cold in the morning chill. The heat wasn't a true, physical one. Just when I reached out with my bending, with my chi. I stared at the soldiers a while longer, tracing their movements. One guy I was staring at stepped forward, and I saw her again.

Azula, walking along looking bored, a beefy and nervous looking man walking along with her. The Mayor of Yu Dao, presumably. There was less distance between us now. I had to wonder what this was for. She'd already seen the drills yesterday, why keep going?

I stopped staring at her to instead focus on the soldiers. She and the Mayor walked through the training soldiers, ignoring fascinated civilians staring at Azula. Bored, Azula eventually waved at the Mayor, who nodded and said something to an attendant before they left.

I felt a bit relieved that she hadn't seemed to notice me this time.

Azula

He was there again. The earthbender who had been on the roof when she arrived in this pathetic little town. He hid the way he noticed her well, but not well enough. Some random earthbender, curious about her visit.

"Tell me," Azula said to the Mayor, a fat and nervous man. Then again, a lot of people were nervous around her. It was the smart thing, smarter than overconfidence. "You allow earthbenders to practice in this city?"

"Oh. U-Um, yes, yes we do," Morishita wiped at his forehead. "Not while you're here, of course, Princess Azula, we've outlawed it for the duration of-"

"Oh no, that's perfectly fine," she said calmly. An idea was beginning to form. Something to destroy her boredom. "In fact, I'd like to see it for myself."

"Pardon, my lady?" Morishita asked.

"I see firebending all the time. And usually I see good firebending." Morishita flinched at the implied insult. Good, he'd noticed. "I'd like to get a chance to see earthbending. I don't suppose your wife and daughter would be willing to let me spar with them?"

Morishita's face fell. Azula smirked. If she had him figured out, and she *a/ways* had people figured out, his next words would be.

"Oh, no need my lady!" Mirishita said quickly. "We have quite skilled earthbenders who would be more than willing to show you their skills."

"Is that so?" Azula hummed, pretending she hadn't planned it out. "Well then, let's make it fun. Anyone who defeats me gets their weight in ban."

"That's... generous," Morishita mumbled.

Azula stopped walking. "I'm sorry. Generous? Are you implying that any of them actually have a chance against your princess?"

Morishita froze. "Ah, no, of course not, I would never say such a thing! I just meant t-that, as a way to draw in fighters, it's a very good way to bring people in!"

She hid her internal glee. She hadn't wanted to come here, but if she was, she could at least have some fun. "In that case, make it open to the public. Some small exhibition bouts for our own people to fight the earthbenders, and if they can get through that, they get a chance at me."

"I... yes, Princess Azula."

"Oh, you're pouting. Why?"

Morishita hesitated before answering. "I have done a lot to maintain harmony between the two sides that live in our colony. I worry that having these fights as purely firebenders vs earthbenders will cause division."

Good. Showing the earthbenders the dominance of the Fire Nation was a wonderful thing. Really, reminding the people in this city who their masters were was part of the point.

They had the divine right to rule, and she was very willing to remind them of that.

No need to mention that, however. Azula went the other direction. "How nice. But don't worry, mayor. I'm sure this will turn out perfectly fine."

She snapped her fingers and walked off, forcing the Mayor to follow.

Moku

A day later, the news went out. I stared at a poster declaring the exhibition bouts. A three day event, Earthbenders only. They would fight Fire Nation soldiers, and if they won enough...

"I really shouldn't." I said. Then I headed out to sign up.

Look, it wasn't the smartest decision, but it was something I wanted damnit. Time for a *real* fight! If Azula was smart, and she was *smart*, she would choose the fighters herself, and pick the right ones for the job.

Maybe a jobber or two to make the earthbenders confident. Then a real powerhouse to demolish them. And if someone got to her, well, they would get destroyed.

I clenched my fists as I headed to where the sign-ups were being done, a small makeshift booth near the center of town, a few streets from where the soldiers did their drills. A line of people were gathered before the booth, all in greens and browns. I joined the line behind a beefy looking older woman. She glanced back at me and grinned.

"You here for the money, or the fights?"

"Fights, to be honest." I answered her. "I'm hoping I can learn some new tricks."

"Ha. My kind of kid," she held out a fist, which I bumped. "The fight scene is kind of shut down with the princess, so this gives a good reason for me to keep in shape. You should join up after she leaves! Get some real experience."

"I would love that," I grinned. "Last thing I did like this was the Earth Rumble."

"Earth Rum-" She stopped, narrowing her eyes. Then her eyes widened. Her smile grew. "Oh. Ooooooh. Well this should be *fun*."

"You a fan?" I asked casually as we reached the booth.

"Your fight was interesting. The shortest championship record in history, and the youngest champ until you got beat by someone younger."

"The Blind Bandit is a badass." I said easily.

The large woman laughed, leaning over to put her name on the sign-up sheet. When I did the same, I didn't use my real name.

Sun Wukong.

Better not to cause issues. After all, I was still on wanted posters. None that I'd seen in Yu Dao, but I'd be dumb to do this with my real name.

Granted, it was better not to do it at all and risk someone seeing me and making connections, but if I was going to do something dumb, it would be in a smart way. Besides, I had a hunch this was the right decision.

The stones around me were warm when I left that booth, and felt warmer with every step. Maybe I wasn't the most spiritual of guys, but I took that as a sign.

Chapter 25

The next day, in a large clearing near the Mayor's home, spectators, fighters, and soldiers gathered en masse. It was a massive space set up for big parties, displays, and today, an arena that could hold thousands to watch two people fight.

Mingxia and I stood on a balcony overlooking everything next to others. Mingxia. Who was staring at me.

"I know." I said.

"Do you?" She asked pointedly.

"I need to do this."

"Do you?" She said again. When I didn't respond, she rolled her eyes. "Didn't you say this girl was practically a monster?"

"Yep. In a couple of years, she'll become one of the strongest benders on Earth." If I had my timeline right. It was almost 97 AG, the Avatar would show up 100 AG. I had time. For now, unless Sokka and Katara got to Aang early for some reason. By then, Azula was already a terror capable of beating any Fire Bender who wasn't an older relative of hers.

"What is with all the weirdly strong bender teenagers these days?" Mingxia asked. "You, Toph, Azula-"

"And you haven't even met the water one." I snarked. "I have a theory that the longer the Avatar is gone and nature is in danger, the more the world overcompensates by making other benders and the Avatar himself overpowered. It's why we got legends like Bumi, Iroh, and others."

"That sounds stupid."

I barked out a laugh. Mingxia grinned at me, then sighed. "Well, while you do that, I'll take my chance."

"Be careful," I said. My eyes panned to a small podium at the 'front' of the makeshift arena. It was made of the same black and red silks the Fire Nation loved, with golden swooping decorations on it. The Mayor, his wife, and his daughter sat at the front of the podium. His wife wore Earth Kingdom colors, while his daughter had Fire Nation, though she had bracelets and necklaces in the traditional green and brown.

Azula was sitting on a big chair in the center, looking positively gleaming in the sunlight, like Agni was favoring her somehow. No longer bored, she looked more like she was anticipating things, her lips quirked just a bit upwards.

"She's *really* hot," Mingxia said with awe. Azula's eyes glittered in the sun, and Mingxia sighed just a bit. "Is she uh..."

"Open to your advances? That's kind of up in the air. I'm gonna say no, because even if she did like girls, I'm pretty sure she's Fire Nation-sexual."

Mingxia sighed. "Damn. But seriously-"

"Yeah, I know." I chuckled. "I'm not immune either."

"You aren't? Sometimes I think you're training-sexual."

"I do like girls, I just don't ever have time to worry about that sort of thing." I rose from the balconies railing and looked around. "Good luck."

"You too." We bumped fists and I walked off one way, while Mingxia went the other.

After all, the Mayor and his family were out of the house and most of the soldiers were here. What better time to infiltrate their home?

Downstairs, I joined with the other big group of fighters. Had to be around 30 or so folks, all in browns and greens. We made for a very undisciplined group of rowdy folk. Especially in comparison to the ones across from us.

Fire Nation soldiers, dressed exactly the same. No helmets, but all the same red and black gear, all looking very serious in their neat lines.

We could not have contrasted each other more. I didn't notice that much. I was looking at Azula. It was interesting. She was very good at putting on a cold calm smile, but there was more beyond that. Seismic sense helped. A bit.

Truthfully, I didn't trust it. She'd once shut down Toph with it, in a world that would never be. But here, in this younger world, maybe I could still use it on her. And through it, I got a sense of tension, soft and smooth, but with small peaks of excitement. Hopeful for what was coming next.

While I was looking at her, I sensed someone walking up behind me.

"You looking at her cause you like her, or cause you want to fight her?" The big woman from earlier whispered in my ear.

"The second. What do you think?"

"She's a weird one." The big woman walked around me, crossing arms thick with muscle and fat. "Comes into town and decides to set up all of this, with her as the final fighter. And now she's sitting up there, lording over it all."

She nudged me. "Still. If I can give some advice to the great Sun Wukong, the five second champion?"

"Hit me."

"Focus on the fight in front of you." She pointed at the army in front of us.

I smirked. "That is good advice. But I did focus on the fight in front of me. There are a couple of good things I learned about battle. 'All warfare is based on deception.' That's my favorite. But a big one is that you don't win a war by winning only the first battle. You have to win all the battles at once."

"Win all of them at once?" The big woman frowned. "That's twisty thinking words."

"Ha!" I barked out a laugh and nodded. "Right. Well, I'm a reckless one, so I'm not good at it, but you never step into a war until you're confident you will get what you want from it. So I've been planning my battles since the second I got here."

I nodded to a lithe looking man at the edge of the lines of soldiers. "Him. I saw him training in the courtyard. He's very good at standing at attention, isn't he?"

The big woman grinned. "Handsome, in a skinny brat kind of way."

"He's a terrible fighter though," I said. "Breaths like a drunk komodo rhino, can barely do the drills, and loses focus easily. He's kept at the edges of the drills, where he blends into the crowd. He looks good in a line. But if you fight him, and strike immediately with a big attack, he'll fall apart instantly."

I pointed closer to the center, this time at a man and woman. "Those two. They're dangerous. Their moves are crisp, they have tight control over their breathing, and they use fire like a knife. If you fight them, don't try to strike immediately. Take them seriously. Because they aren't fighters. They're killers."

Jobbers, idiots that you could take out in a moment, and ringers, guys meant to win.

"Ladies, gentlemen, and warriors!" A loud voice rang out. I glanced at the speaker, a man in fancy robes with a booming voice that didn't match his thin body. "On behalf of your mayor, and the Princess of the Fire Nation, I give you the first Volcanic Games!"

A loud set of shouts came from the ground ringing the arena. There were a lot of people, hundreds, in all the green and red shades. Despite the way things were set up in the arena, the crowd watching was very much a mix of earth and fire.

"These will be a series of battles between benders, one on one duels across this arena!" The announcer nodded to a group of earthbenders. Not fighters, just folk with the ability. Each one stomped the ground. In front of them, a section of earth was outlined in a circle, creating makeshift rings.

"The winners of their battles will then fight the winners on the other side. In the end, the strongest of the earthbenders will fight the strongest of the firebenders!"

Azula rose to her feet. The man in fancy robes looked a bit nervous. "A-and in order to be fair, the princess herself will be joining! That way, she can show exactly *why* she is the final fighter!"

A stir came over the crowd. Azula herself smirked, flipping her hair back as she walked. "Of course. I can't simply claim to be the top bender here without proving it, can I?"

She came to a stop in a ring. "Now. Give me my first vic-... opponent."

"Yes, princess!" The announcer guy said. He coughed, waving a hand. "When I call your name, enter your ring! Earthbender Bolan and Firebender Mazo, ring 1!"

A weirdly familiar looking guy with movie star good looks ran to the first ring with a bit of glee, while a much more reserved firebender woman followed.

The announcer continued. One by one, each ring was filled, over and over. Midway through, the big lady, Goli apparently, got called up. Ironically, to fight the jobber I'd noted earlier. She leaned over with a grin to speak in my ear.

"One sec. I'm gonna break that guy's hips. Maybe in a fun way."

I rolled my eyes as she strolled over to her ring, and continued to wait calmly for mine. Near the end, Azula and I hadn't been picked yet. I waited calmly, hands behind the small of my back.

"-Earthbender Sun Wukong, and Firebender Azu-"

I snapped my eyes towards her, narrowing my eyes-

"-don."

I scowled. Azudon. Seriously?

Clenching my fists, I focused on the ring I'd been assigned to, walking into it and stopping.

"What, I have to fight a little kid?" A tall and powerful looking man walked to take a spot across from me. I eyed him up and down as he smugly smirked. "Come on, brat, shouldn't you be suckling at your mom's teat?"

I shrugged, still thinking over how to handle things. The man ran a hand through his long hair. "Spirits, I really wanted to have some fun. Now I almost feel bad."

"Can't have that." Didn't want him to not try after all. "Tell you what. If you win, I'll give you my prized eel hound and every cent I own."

Azudon's eyes lit up. "Ha! Stupid brat, you should have just gave up!"

"Fighters!" The announcer barked. Azula had taken a ring at the end against a very nervous looking man with a belly round as a barrel. "Ready!"

Everyone took their stances. Except Azula and I. Azudon scowled at me. "Take this seriously, brat."

"I'm giving this exactly as much attention as it deserves. You fight like shit, and I don't let shit bother me."

Azudon's scowl became a growl.

"BEGIN!" The announcer shouted.

Azudon grunted as he snapped a massive fist out at me, a plume of fire erupting towards me. Just like when he did his drills.

I slid to my right and began walking towards him, my left arm getting warmed by his flames. "You breathe too heavily. No focus on it, just gasping and puffing out air."

"I'm going to cook you, brat!" Azudon snapped out another blast. I took off my top shirt, leaving me in a brown tanktop, and swept it through the flames. As I'd known it would, the snapping cloth swept through the flames.

"See? Your fire is just unfocused. You should have burned this shirt to ash-"

"Shut your mouth! RAAAAGH!" He leaped up and kicked in a circle. I sat down on the ground, letting the arc of fire pass overhead. I frowned when I noticed how close the fire got, and didn't get what I expected..

"Oh come on, man. You didn't even singe my hair?"

I heard someone laugh, but just stood up and kept walking forward.

"Damn, brat-" the tall guy snapped out his hands, a pair of flames shooting out in a mimicry of daggers. He rushed me, breathing heavily, and began swinging, trying to stab me in the chest first.

I stomped the ground. A single large rock shot up. I grabbed a hold of it, the stone surrounding my left fist, then wrapped that stone glove in my shirt, before blocking his dagger with that hand.

"Wha-" he swung at me again, and again. I blocked each stab with my cloth enveloped fist, his flames finally igniting my fist. I took a step back and looked down at the fire surrounding my right hand.

"Look at that. I'm just as good at firebending as you are."

His eyes widened with rage. "Yaaa!" He rushed me again.

I slipped around another stab, then punched him in the face. He stumbled back, snapping hand out with a small blast of fire. I punched through it, jabbed him twice in the face, then ducked under another kick, scowling. When I hit him in the stomach, right as he took another gasping breath, he coughed, his air completely leaving him.

Because he was really bad at focusing his damned breath.

"I told you!" I exploded the stones around my fist, reaching out and grabbing the guy by the back of his head and pulling him down to be face to face. "FOCUS. You waste your breath instead of channeling it into your firebreathing, you-" When he tried to slam a fire blast into my stomach, I slammed a punch into his forearm, sending his blast into the ground. "Listen, you idiot. You aren't made for this. Go back to your trainers, listen to them, and you might be ready in a decade."

My fingers dug deeper into his hair, pulling hard. He gasped in pain. I rolled my eyes. "Oh, grow a pair."

I pulled his head back, then slammed it down into my knee. When he groaned instead of passing out, I did it again, then again, before slamming his skull into the floor, forehead first.

"Uh...uhhhhh," he gasped, passing out.

I stretched. "Well, guess I'm keeping my eel hound."

I looked around. A few people were still fighting, desperately dueling with each other. Goli, the big lady, was sitting on top of the skinny guy, grinning at him while she said something. He looked nervous, but not hurt too bad.

Azula's guy was getting carted out in a stretcher. He was crying, arms and legs covered in burns. "Oh god, it hurts, it hurts, oh god-"

She wasn't smiling or smirking, but I got a sense of real satisfaction from the way she was looking at the poor guy as he was taken away. The crowd closest to her ring was quieter than the rest, though there were still some cheers.

Sensing my eyes, she looked over at me. I gave her latest victim a pointed look, then looked over at her with a raised eyebrow. Her lips flickered just a bit.

"And that is the last fight!" The announcer shouted. I sensed that fight ending, funny enough. Bolan and Mazo had somehow finished in a tie. "With that, we have our winners! Give them a round of applause as we continue to the next round!"

I sat down on the floor, waiting while my opponent was dragged off. Goli strode over. "Damn, Wukong. That was a mean way to finish him off."

"Head trauma here is better than being dead because you didn't take your training seriously." A big headache, and all he'd need is some time to heal. "I notice you beat your guy."

"I even got a date out of it," Goli said with a grin. Her smile faded. "The princess though... I think I'm gonna quit if I have to fight her. Don't want her burning off my good looks."

I nodded. "That's the smart thing."

"That mean you're going to do the same?" When I didn't answer, Goli grinned.

"The next round is beginning!" The announcer shouted. "This will be the final fight for the day, so bring your best efforts!"

Of those who had fought, there were more firebenders than earth. Made sense. The firebenders were handpicked soldiers. The earth was all volunteers. Of course firebenders had the

advantage in terms of skilled fighters, even with a few meant to lose. I wondered how they were planning to deal with that discrepancy.

I got my answer.

“Due to the incredible skill of several earthbenders, we have graciously decided to have them duel with multiple opponents!” The announcer said.

The crowd went quieter, then louder. I smirked. “So that’s how it is.”

“Now, people, people!” The announcer boomed. “This in the name of keeping things fair! In order to match their incredible strength, we simply must do this, and it allows us to keep the fighting even!”

“Cheaters!” One woman shouted, a few others joining in. The announcer scowled, but continued speaking, his voice echoing loudly as he shouted out names.

And as I’d hoped, when he got to mine...

“Earthbender Sun Wukong, fighting firebenders Suzon and Joki!”

I stood up and walked over to the next ring. My next opponents moved to face me. A woman about my height and a man just a bit shorter, both well built and serious looking. The woman, Joki, was one of the killers I’d noted earlier.

They bowed, as did I.

“You going to take this seriously?” Sozun, the man, asked me. He had a thick well groomed beard and a very serious look on his face.

“I told the last guy. I take things as seriously as I need to.” I took a stance this time. “So. Who goes first?”

“Begin!” The announcer shouted.

Joki answered my question with a small fireball. I snapped up a simple pillar to block it. When I saw the fireball smash through the pillar before it dissipated in a wave of heat, I smiled. Good. A real fight.

Suzon rushed forward, blasting fire at me. I fired back, jabbing the air quickly to send small condensed pebbles that sliced through each blast before Suzon got to me. He leaped up to axe kick down at me with a wave of fire. I created a small dome around me, blocking the blow.

Coincidentally, the same dome also blocked Joki's attack from behind. No need to reveal my seismic sense, so best to make any big blocks and dodges I couldn't have seen seem accidental.

Suzon and Joki's flames quickly heated up the dome. I exploded the earthen walls into dust, blowing the dirt outwards, then rushed Joki. She spun around, kicking out a tight burst of controlled flame. Running towards her, my next step sent a stick of earth snapping up in front of me.

My palms met rough stone as I ripped the staff out of the ground and spun it around through Joki's fire, taking apart the controlled flames and making it to her. Unlike Azudon, she didn't panic, instead shifting to meet my staff with far denser fire daggers than the ones he'd used. Her breathing was calm, even, and controlled.

I swung at her head. She ducked and twisted to try and get into my range. I spun my staff to block her, then snapped the staff in half to create a pair of thick sticks, getting into her range instead and lashing out for her head. She blocked one stick, only to wince when the other slammed into her thigh.

Behind me, Suzon rushed me. I took a step to my right, pretending I was trying to get a different angle on Joki, and made a show of widening my eyes and creating a wall to block a powerful stream of fire. Joki took control of the stray fires that almost hit her and spun her arms around before sending them at me. I dropped down, landing on my side, then spun around, my legs slashing outwards.

The ground around me exploded and swung out in a spray of stones, smacking into Joki and forcing Suzon to back away. Joki rolled to her feet, startled.

"That was—"

"It's a good move," I admitted. What I'd done was a mimicry of something I'd seen more athletic firebenders do, a breakdancing type of thing. In my memories, it was a Zuko type of move.

I snapped apart the sticks in my hand and tossed them into the air, grinning. "You guys are *good*. You'd think of all bending styles, firebenders would be the ones to make me sweat, but that last guys was just... blegh."

Suzon sighed. "Yeah, that kid needs work."

We all got back into our stances. I narrowed my eyes. Joki and Suzon punched outwards, unleashing twin blasts of red heat, a loud 'fwoosh!' sound filling the air. It was met with a 'boom-crack' as a big wall rose before me. The fire began to eat through the wall, heating it red, then exploding it apart, turning the ground I'd been standing on a scorched black.

I wasn't there. I'd gone under ground while they couldn't see me. I exploded from underneath Suzon. He seemed used to fighting earthbenders who tried similar tricks, because he swung down at me with a fist of flame. My left forearm, surrounded by stone, blocked that attack, while I slammed a fist of rock into his chin, splitting it open in a spray of blood while shooting upward. In the air above him, I pulled at the floor behind him, raising a pillar of earth that hit him in the back as I dropped both my knees into his chest.

"Gah!" Suzon gasped out. I dropped down from his chest, leaving him on his back with the pillar holding him up like a piece of meat at the end of a stick. "You-"

"Damn, you're tough," I said, slammed my elbow into his hanging head to knock him out.

"Damn it!" Joki swung her foot up and around, an arc of flame slicing towards me like an axe chopping towards my head.

I side stepped it while sliding a foot outwards, a small wave of dirt aiming at her other foot. When the wave hit, she stumbled, and tried to punch with a fireball. Off-balance, her desperate attack was easy to dodge while punching outwards. The rock I fired slammed into her just below her ribs. Her eyes widened as she fell back. I reached behind me to grab the ground with my bending, then swung my arm up and around, a boulder rising up and around me to *slam* down into her, shattering apart.

If I'd tried, I could have made the boulder stronger, strong enough to flatten her. The fact it had shattered instead was me being nice. The gravel of that boulder fell off of her, leaving her staring up at me as I walked over.

"Surrender?"

The bruised and bloody woman nodded, staring at me. "Who are you?"

"Just an earthbender looking for a fight."

I looked around. The announcer was staring at me in shock. I stomped the ground. Suzon and Joki were brought on sliding platforms of earth towards the arriving medics, who gave me a surprised look before they began working.

Looking around, the other earthbenders who had taken on multiple opponents had lost. It was just me and five other benders now. Goli was wincing with a big burn on her arm, though it would heal with the right treatment. She gave me a grin as she was taken away, her victorious opponents staring at me.

"And with that, the first day of fighting is done!" The announcer said loudly. "It seems our firebending fighters have done quite well, but we must give a round of applause for our brave earthbenders!"

The crowd above began clapping. I was breathing heavily, and tried to copy the way Suzon and Joki had been breathing. Immediately, I felt better. Like energy was flowing correctly. And here I thought I knew how to breathe as a martial artist.

The crowd did some shouting and hollering, while I ignored them in favor of the person who rejoined the crowd. Mingxia was grinning and clapping. I shared her grin and then looked at Azula.

Her opponent was alive. And once again, massively injured. Azula's back was turned away from the massive crowd, but I could see her hiding a smile. Oh yeah. She was clearly a menace.

Our eyes met again. We shared savage smiles. If I didn't get a chance to fight her... well. I would find a way to get that fight anyway.

"Tomorrow, the second stage of fighting will begin! And this will be quite the event, ladies and gentlemen!" The announcer shouted.

The Mayor stood, stepping forward, with the announcer moving to give him the floor. "I declare these first rounds of the Volcanic Games over! Well done fighters, and we will see you tomorrow!"

He swept out of the arena, looking very serious. His daughter and wife followed with a group of guards, his daughter glancing back at the arena. Everyone got escorted out of the arena, a few folk patting me on the back as we walked out. Mingxia joined me on the way out, giving me a grin.

"You have fun?"

"Yep. Even learned a couple of new tricks. How about you? Learned anything new?"

"Oh, loads. Think I'll have to send your dad some of it."

I laughed, nodding. "Been a good day for all of us, then."

Later that night, I went to the stables to give Athena food and a brush down. She chewed on premium hunks of hippo cow while I brushed her scales of any dirt, removing a couple of ticks that had made it under her scales and massaging sections of her musculature to keep her healthy. Her tail flickered happily as I continued to take care of her.

I stopped to take another careful breath. Now that I'd seen it done, I could see where I'd been wasting my own breath compared to a skilled firebender. Azulon had been terrible at it, but even I had something to learn.

Not that the stables had anything nice to breathe, considering the huge animals within it.

I brushed off another section of Athena, smiling at the pleased growls she was letting out. "You know, I think your servants would freak out if they knew you were here."

Golden eyes in the darkness crinkled in amusement. "Loping easily like some kind of predatory jungle cat"

"Only if they notice. And if they do, who cares. I'm the princess, and I do what I want."

I faced her fully, Azula smirking at me. "Princess Azula of the Fire Nation. What can I do for you?"

Chapter 26

Azula, one of the most dangerous people alive, was a couple of years younger than me. She was shorter as well. It didn't seem to worry her too much. She walked over to me, cool as a cucumber.

"I'm mostly sating my curiosity. Wondering a few things about who the strange little earthbender that has been spying on the Fire Nation is."

"Scoping out your next victim?"

Azula let out a laugh. "Victim? Not competition?"

"I get the sense you don't consider anyone competition."

She seemed pleased. "Wow. You really know me, huh?"

"No, I'm just a people person." I finished brushing off Athena and patted her head, then closed up her stall. Once it was locked up, I turned and stood at attention before the princess. "I made a mistake, being on that roof. I doubt I'd be anything but another earthbender otherwise."

"Actually it was the way you fought. I don't see kids who are so willing to obliterate people the way you did. I think you broke one guy's back."

"I seem to remember a Fire Nation princess turning her opponents into slabs of barbeque." I looked over at Athena's saddle bags. "I have some seasonings for your next fight if you want, to help the flavor really come out of their flesh."

"Ohhhh. Dark," Azula said with a grin. "You sure you don't want to just cover yourself with that stuff?"

"I'm good. You aren't going to beat me, so it'd be a waste of good salt and thyme."

Azula didn't seem displeased, instead crossing her arms with a smug smile. "You're confident. I like confident people."

"Don't lie. You don't like confidence. You like the look on confident people's faces after you destroy them utterly." I shrugged. "I get the feeling if you beat me, I'd just be a fun memory of your dominance in the back of your head."

"..." Azula narrowed her golden eyes. "You sure like talking like you know me. Now how would that be?"

"Mostly hearsay." I rubbed my hands together and looked around. I didn't sense anyone. No Fire Nation soldiers around to rush in and take me out. Still...

"It was the name, right? I kinda figured the Fire Nation was hunting me by my real name these days."

"Oh, the bounty posters did get updated. But I still remember the name 'Sun Wukong'." Azula said, eyes alight. "I was thinking it might be a coincidence for a bit, but when I looked into it, well, there you were. You're taller than the posters."

"Buffer, too." Seriously, they had me as basically a twig. At thirteen, I was a lot bigger and taller than most. And my face was like... doughy, in the art. I faced her fully. Despite the circumstances, I didn't feel worried. "So. Princess Azula."

"'Prince' Moku," she said, the quotations around my so-called royal title completely audible. She was grinning. "Why did you join the tournament? Trying to assassinate me?"

"To get stronger, actually," I admitted. "I've been training constantly to get stronger, and I wanted to see what I could learn from firebending."

She frowned. "Like what, the Avatar?"

I scoffed. "No. But why should the Avatar be the only one to get insane levels of power?"

Azula's eyes widened, then seemed to sparkle. "Fair. Too bad you aren't a firebender. Stuck in the dirt like you are, well, you'll always be striving for scraps of real strength."

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, yeah. Every bending style thinks they're the best."

"They do. Isn't it nice that I'm the only one who's correct?" Azula said smugly.

Little brat. Granted, I knew that even this smaller version of Azula could likely kill me if she wanted to, but that didn't prevent her from being a brat.

"So, are you planning on killing me now?"

"I did wonder about it," Azula made a show of pressing a finger to her lips and tapping it, pretending to think it over. "If I told them to, an entire army would hunt you. Dozens of Fire Nation soldiers, surrounding you and doing everything they can to kill you."

I grinned. "That does sound fun. A fight against a whole city."

Azula scowled. "That was supposed to scare you."

"Come on, like you don't think the opposite would be fun as hell."

She seemed to think about it. And a very sadistic smile appeared on her face. "Maybe a little."

"Still, I doubt that was your final decision," I said.

"No. My next one was to assassinate you in your sleep." Azula shrugged. "Boring, but a quick burst of fire while you're in bed would do the trick."

"Yeah, that would be boring. For you, I mean. I imagine I'd have a very different opinion on the experience."

We both laughed.

"So what is my fate?" I asked. "Should I start running now?"

"You would, if you were smart." Azula said. She smirked. "But you won't. You want to keep fighting."

"I do. I'm learning a lot." I admit freely.

"Then I'll let you," Azula said confidently, eyes sparkling with vicious delight. "Go ahead and fight everyone you want. And if you get to me, I'll be able to kill you in front of everyone. Imagine the story. The 'Prince' of Omashu, sneaking into a tournament to try and fight the Fire Nation Princess, only for her to heroically kill him in the final match. I might get a whole play based on it."

There was a brief silence. I shrugged. "Yeah. That's one ending. The other is that I beat *you*."

Azula laughed, shaking her head while turning her back on me confidently. "Sorry. I like stories with realism. Not fairy tales. See you at the tournament, Moku."

"See you at the tournament, Zula."

She paused, turning to look at me. "Zula?"

"You did just say you were going to kill me. I figure I can afford to give you a nickname."

"...You're a confusing kid." She decided, nodding firmly.

"Pot, meet kettle." I returned, shrugging.

Azula seemed to decide that we were done and walked off, calm and relaxed. Didn't even say goodbye. The entire time we spoke, the only time her heartbeat sped up was while thinking of killing me.

She was crazy. But for some reason, I liked her. It was clear she loved the prospect of a fight. For the reason of dominating others rather than testing herself, but it was enough common ground for me to be excited.

I headed into the inn, thoughts racing with the prospect of tomorrow's fights.

"Is she staring at you?" Mingxia asked.

I looked over. Azula, pointedly, was not staring at me. "No."

We were in a large building just on the outskirts of where the soldiers did their drills for some reason, standing with the crowd. The building wasn't ostentatious or anything, just big enough for everyone, more of a warehouse than anything, despite the fancy clothes of the richer folk in their fancier section of the room.

Azula was center stage as usual, on a large podium with the mayor, his family, and the guards.

Some people had a little entourage around them now, earthbenders and firebenders surrounded by men and women acting like groupies or something. I had Mingxia and no one else. Thankfully, it seemed like not going out to get drinks like the other fighters led to me not getting anyone crowding me.

"Well, not staring, but she's keeping you at her periphery," Mingxia said, narrowing her eyes. "She's good at it, but not even close to as good as Master Phoenix."

Ah. Okay, yeah. "She probably figured out who I am."

"Oh, did the brilliant disguise of the name you had on your first wanted posters fall apart?" Mingxia snarked. Then she frowned. "And you don't mean *probably*, do you?"

"Keep your stuff together and remember our escape plan."

"Spiritsdamnit Moku."

I chuckled a bit, feeling less worried than I probably should have. "Sorry. But hey, we're getting a lot out of this."

"Yeah? Well I have to send out any actionable intelligence I have before the fucking fire princess can warn her people," Mingxia scowled.

"You'll have time," I leaned forward, looking around the building. It didn't seem like it had enough room for us to actually fight. "She doesn't know you're here, as far as I can tell."

"Far as you can tell," Mingxia pointed out. She sighed. "Damnit. I really wanted to see the fights today."

"You still can," I pointed out. "We won't be able to send anything out yet anyway. So we might as well enjoy ourselves."

"Easy for you to say, you damn battle maniac," Mingxia sighed. "Just do your best. Don't let that crazy chick beat you."

"If she does, it won't be by choice." I then stepped forward when the attendants waved at the fighters. Fire and Earth folk alike walked out in front of Azula. She smiled as she looked at a crowd of powerful fighters, all showing respect to an eleven year old, and seemed to preen at the attention.

Then she leaped down from the podium, joining the rest of us as the announcer stepped forward.

"Earthbenders! Firebenders! Welcome to the second stage of the Volcanic Games!" A cheer rose from the crowd around us, while the fighters tried their best to look confident and stoic. The announcer seemed a bit more upbeat compared to the day before.

"For the second stage, we have decided on continuing with balanced fights based on the abilities of the fighters that have been here today. We are, however, changing the *venue*." He nodded to a pair of earthbending servants behind him. Each swung a fist at the wall behind the podium.

The wall sank into the earth, revealing the large courtyard the soldiers did drills in. Except it had been transformed. What was once a large empty space now had fire pits arranged in circles around the area, creating new makeshift rings that dwarfed the size of the original ones. The announcer continued speaking.

“As of now, all Earthbenders and Firebenders have full allowance to commit as much damage as they like to the arena. All spectators, we request you stay within the designated safe zones where our own benders can defend you. Fighters. When I call your name, go to the designated ring.” The announcer said almost solemnly.

That was kinda big. While both groups of fighters had some leeway, there were some rules that had been standard for any fighting like this. Mostly based around not using wide spread attacks or causing enough damage to truly hurt others. In earthbenders' case, just diving into the ground and striking from there, or making a dozen walls. In a firebenders case, cooking the entire world around them.

Removing those limits meant things would get really unfair for the folks less capable of unleashing or countering those moves. Which was putting it lightly. Broken bones and burning skin was already on the menu, but this was going to be *worse*.

I narrowed my eyes and glanced towards the culprit. She had a shit-eating grin on her face and a skip in her step.

“-Wukong,” The Announcer said. Azula teasingly waved at me as I passed, leaving me to head out to meet my new opponent.

I stopped outside the ring he was stood in, starring at him. “What in the spirits?”

He was *huge*. Man was built like the Boulder’s older brother. I walked forward, looking up at him. He seemed distinctly unimpressed.

“A child? How old are you?”

“Well, I’m an orphan, but my best guess is around 13.” I answered honestly.

He raised an eyebrow. He looked to be in his thirties, with a size, musculature, and scars that all told a story of someone who had been at this for a while. He shook his head, looking around. “Kid, just give up. You don’t want to get hurt.”

“No one *wants* to get hurt.” I frowned. “Well. I guess masochists do. But I’m here for a good reason, and I need to follow it through. Besides, I have someone I need to fight.”

I pointed at her. And my large opponent scowled. “Don’t joke. At this point I need to put you down just so you don’t get yourself killed.”

He lowered himself down into a stance that looked only vaguely similar to the other firebenders, with his legs set wide, arms loosely held up, like a muay thai stance more than anything.

"Your stance is kinda interesting." I noted, intrigued. "Did you take some cues from the other nations you've fought? Even more than Suzon and Joki?"

His eyes narrowed. "So you're *that* boy. Very well. Firebender Awnuld is my name."

Fire surrounded his fists for a moment, his breath even. "Are you ready?"

"On my mark!" The announcer shouted. I slapped my hands together and got into my stance, my legs wide, body low, one hand out and the other closer to my hip.

"Ready." I said.

"Begin!" The announcer shouted.

There was a sound like air getting sucked out of a balloon, and fire burst towards me. I exploded forward, the ground opening to swallow my lower half while pushing me forward, driving me underneath the tight fire ball that burned over my head.

Awnuld slapped his right hand downwards, creating an almost liquid wave of fire while he softly sighed out a gust of air. I snapped my hands up and rose out of the ground on a pillar of earth, avoiding the wave of fire, before smashing the pillar with a fist, the stones surrounding my arms, shoulders, and chest as I dropped towards him.

The massive firebender, rather than backing away, surrounded his arms in fire that *flowed*, creating almost tentacle-like arms of flame that snapped out at me. I blocked his right arm with my left, then did a hook punch towards his stomach that he pushed away with his left arm in turn.

We danced in the center of the ring for a moment, trading and parrying fire and stone hands. I stomped the ground from time to time, sending a burst of stones flying at him from the floor around us, using small precise pebbles, head-size stones, and shotgun-like pellets.

Awnuld blocked those with precise bursts of flame, either pushing away the stones or blasting them apart, only getting small bruises for my trouble. In return, he released big waves of fire in bursts from his body, either widespread moves that forced me to block with pillars and walls, or small burst I had to duck around. The heat around us left me pouring sweat, while dust covered us from my earthbending.

But I was relentless. I didn't stop moving, striking over and over again, my fists flying. The way Awnuld fought was like some hellish combo of firebending and waterbending, acrobatics and fluid movements. They might sound the same thing, but it was the difference between gymnastics and tai chi.

A quick flip to dodge one of my punches, then when I punched again, he pushed my hand away with a single palm on my wrist, a smooth and elegant move.

"North or South?" I spat out, creating a pillar to block another burst of fire.

"South," Awnuld spat out. He grimaced. "Got bad. Real bad."

I created a wall behind him, in between the heartbeats of our parrying battle. Around us, other battles raged. Massive stones smashing apart, fireballs the size of a house dissipating, fire and earth raging.

I pushed Awnuld up against the wall I'd made behind him. In a quick move, he snapped his hands back to press his palms against the wall, a wave of heat erupting to smash into my wall.

And do nothing. My walls weren't that weak, and instead I clenched my fingers, forcing the spots he'd tried to explode through to erupt out and wrap around his hands, trapping him there. Awnuld had half a moment to show shock, then I punched him in the face with a fist enveloped in rock.

Trapped there, his hands bound, I moved as fast as I could, my fists slamming into his stomach twice, forcing the breath from his lungs, then a trio to his head. He let out a scream, fire exploding from him, finally destroying the wall, just as I snapped my hands back, then forwards. The dust all around us, which I'd been purposefully preparing, snapped together.

When Awnuld tried to attack, to raise a hand, the earthen dust I'd gathered was already rushing him, quickly snapping together and *smashing* into him, wrapping around him and spinning him upwards. Into a cyclone of earth.

I'd seen a few expert firebenders pull a similar move, creating small tornadoes of fire. Here, the dust I'd gathered carried and spun Awnuld upwards, while I stomped the ground and punched towards the sky.

The stomp made a staff of earth. The punch shot it upwards, and my clenched fist guided it.

Awnuld exploded with raw force, screaming above me, destroying the cyclone. And my staff slammed into his forehead with devastating force. I unclenched my fist, shattering the staff into loose rocks that wrapped around his waist while he was dazed, then *pulled*, bringing him down head first into the ground.

"..." I walked over and kicked the big man over to his back.

A giant bruise on his forehead, bleeding from the mouth, and a whole host of bruises and cuts, even some burns to match my own.

Still breathing. And based on how he was twitching, I hadn't broken his neck.

"W-Winner, Moku!" An announcer shouted.

I didn't have to look up to see Azula had won as well. Her opponent was worse off than mine. Burns across his chest, arms, and back, an open wound in his stomach. He would heal... though I wasn't sure how he would be mentally. As he was carried off, I saw a shell-shocked look on his face.

Azula, the little psychopath, saw me looking. Teasingly, she raised a finger to her eye and pulled down, sticking her tongue out.

In response, I reached into a pocket, tossing a cotton bag across to her. She caught the bag in her hand and opened it with a bemused look.

Seasonings for food.

"Pfft-HAHAHA!" Azula laughed, burning the bag in her hand while giggling.

I smirked, watching as Awnuld was taken off the field. Well, we'd both won. Now I just had to fight, what, two more guys, and I'd be in it to fight Azula in the finale?

Life never works the way you expect.

"Earthbender Sun Wukong!" I moved to enter the ring.

"Fire Princess Azula!"

We snapped our eyes to stare at each other, both surprised.

Okay. Maybe we didn't have to wait for the finale.

My cheeks began to hurt all of a sudden. Oh. I was smiling.

So was she.

The earth beneath me shook. The firepits around us rose.

And Azula and I entered the ring together.

Mingxia

Later, Mingxia would talk about the fight. About how she'd been as surprised as Moku and Azula when they were called to fight each other before the so-called final fight. She was the only one.

"Poor boy," one man said. "The princess is going to burn him apart like the last ones."

“That kid’s been doing well,” a woman noted. “He’s a little rough too.”

“Yeah, but she’s the *princess*. She was born to win.”

Later, she would laugh at that memory. Just a bit.

Because that day was the first time she saw just devastating two benders truly unleashed their full power could be. Not a training ring like in Omashu, not fights against rank-and-file. Two prodigies near their full potential.

And a town that wasn’t ready.

Chapter 27

“Didn’t think we’d get to do this so early, ‘Sun Wukong’,” Azula said across from me, smirking at me.

“Me neither. Really wanted this to be a whole final battle thing,” I said idly. “Now I really don’t want to lose. I’ll be jealous if some other person ends up being your last fight.”

“Ha!” Azula said. “That’s so sweet! I, on the other hand, won’t even remember you after I beat you.”

“Azula, you will remember me for the rest of your life,” I promised.

Somewhere, the announcer shouted for everyone to begin. We ignored him, instead speaking more.

“So how do you want to do this?” I asked. “You want to start slow, go hard from the start, maybe do a turn-based thing?”

“I’d rather see what you can really do,” She

Moku Notes



Pyrography for both fire and lavabending mastery

Fumi- Firebending Conspiracy Theorist who makes explosives and spouts conspiracy theories. She used to live in a fire nation colony, and was very obsessed with righting the wrongs of the Fire Nation, constantly questioning the line she was told to toe by her elders. She became a real problem at some point, destroying some cells to release Earth Kingdom prisoners, and disappointing her parents. Moku and Mingxia pick her up, and are thus accused of kidnapping a Fire Nation citizen ever since.

She's a bit crazy. While some of her theories are spot on, a lot of them reflect dumb fanon and bad theories from our own world.

- The Fire Nation is secretly ruled by a Phoenix King, with Ozai as only a puppet figure
- Spirits are actually hallucinations purposely caused by the government to prevent the growth of society and explain away large damage to the environment.
- Omashu has a secret facility dedicated to training the strongest Earthbenders in the world
- The Avatar has been alive the whole time and has been working from the shadows to manipulate the world, using the air to whisper to people with subliminal messages.
- The Air Nomads were actually a psyop to prove Fire Nation dominance and put fear into the other nations, and airbending itself isn't real. Have you ever met an airbender? Ha!

Introduction of Avatar Aang Movie elements

- Tagah is awoken early due to an immense battle at the base of his mountain, with a single crack beginning his freedom. As the story continues, the crack continues, shattering as time goes by, until finally it shatters apart and releases a problem into the world, at the same exact time that Aang awakens.
- Tagah becomes a nomad, learning about the issues of the day. He also becomes a man fighting for vengeance, killing Earth Kingdom soldiers in secret. On finding out the truth about the Air Nomads he extends that to the Fire Nation, further killing dozens.

- When rumors of a final airbender Avatar being awakened reach him, he heads out to find him, hoping to use the power of the Avatar to find and get the staff back. Over the course of finding Aang, Moku hears about him as well, but only as a rumor, a monster that grows in the shadows.
- When Tagah meets Moku and Aang, it is at the same time, in the midst of taking apart a manufacturing port for Fire Nation war machines. Tagah helps them, but is racist towards Moku and others (Handy insults below!)
 - Mudface
 - Dirtcrawler
 - Stoneback
 - Rock-lover
 - Blowjobber, airsucker, fair-weather, spineless, cloudhead, breeze-bitch.
 - Snowpacker, ice-chucker, fish-fucker, seal-humper, icicle sucker, squint, sea-chugger, swamp slime
 - Sandy-ass, dirt eater, mudfucker, wallhumper, gravelmaker, slagger, brickshitter, mudhut
 - scorch-whore, cock-freezer, ass-grits, bluster-cunt.
- Tagah needs Aang to learn all four elements and obtain the Avatar state before he can get the staff, so he works to keep his actual intentions secret until Aang can gain his full strength.