I can't believe I left that garbage summary up for so long.

Zuko decides to fight Azula in the Crystal Catacombs. This sets off a sequence of events that leads to Zuko being Aang's tour guide through the Fire Nation. Yes, this is basically a first half of season three with Zuko there fic. But this one is different, I swear! 1) There's no shipping. 2) The plot is very different from the show. 3) Fire Nation culture is explored in depth. 4) Sensitive topics never addressed in the show are explored in depth. So it's different, see!

Notes

This is just the prologue, so it's the shortest chapter. The rest of the chapters will be a lot longer. It is written in present tense because it's supposed to take place in Zuko's head as he makes these significant decisions. But if present tense drives you nuts don't worry, because the rest of the story is written normally.
Prologue (The Crossroads of Destiny)

Chapter Notes

This chapter has been re-uploaded after a beta reading from my fantastic new proofreader nebulababe. So let's all give her a big round of applause! And then another round of applause cause she's great!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I need you, Zuko."

Azula always lies. And this was one of her worse lies. When had Azula ever needed anybody but herself? But even as he thinks that Zuko finds himself longing to help his little sister, to be the supportive big brother she had never let him be. They could be loving siblings, just like mother always wanted. Mother...

"I've plotted every move of this day, this glorious day in Fire Nation history."

Song with the burn marks on her calves that looked like hands, showing where someone had forced her legs apart. Little Lee and his family struggling to eek out a living while all the able-bodied men were off fighting the war. The refugees on the boat with fearful hungry faces. Was that the glory she spoke of?

"And the only way we win is together. At the end of this day, you will have your honor back."

That's all I ever wanted. But he knows it isn't true. Azula always lies. He's stolen, lied and cheated his way across the Earth Kingdom. Can anything restore his honor after that? I did what I had to do to survive. Father will understand. He wants me back...

"You will have Father's love. You will have everything you want."

Father's love. That's all I want. If I help Azula everything will go back to the way it was. The way it was before...

"Zuko, I am begging you. Look into your heart and see what it is that you truly want."

Uncle stuck with me for three years. He saved my life when Azula tried to kill me! But he helped the Avatar. The Avatar is the enemy of the Fire Nation. Anyone who helps the Avatar...

"If we'd known each other back then, do you think we could have been friends too?"

"You are free to choose." And just like that, she is gone. No Dai Li, no Mai or Ty Lee, no imperial firebenders. She really is giving him a choice. Azula never gave choices. She bent others to her will.

"Prince Zuko."

Zuko shakes his head. "We'll get you out of here, Uncle." Zuko makes a fist of flame and prepares to
bring it down on the crystals.

"Forget about me! It doesn't matter!"

"What are you talking about?! Of course it matters!"

"For once in your life, Prince Zuko, think about yourself. Forget about me. Forget about Ozai and Azula. What do you want, my prince? What do you believe?"

Zuko slams flames into the floor. "I don't know!"

"It is time to decide. I know it is difficult, but you must decide."

"She's done so many horrible things, Uncle, and I know she will do more. How can siding with her be my destiny? These people, the ones who live in this city, they aren't our enemies. They just want a safe place for themselves and their families. They're the overworked parents who bring their kids to the tea shop. The struggling workers just trying to make ends meet. They're..."

*Jin, the pretty girl he almost wished he had wanted to kiss. Smellerbee and Longshot, who never did him any harm and really did just want to start over. The guard who when Zuko returned his swords to him clapped him on the back, called him a good kid and asked if he ever thought about enlisting in the city guard. "Three hots and a cot, well maybe three lukewarms and a straw pallet at first, but a respectable young man like you can rise high."

"Do what you think is right, Prince Zuko. That is all I ask. Not what I think is right, or my brother or your sister. Do what you believe to be right."

Zuko bows his head.

...

Azula, the Avatar and the Waterbender. The Waterbender who lost her mother to Fire Nation soldiers. The Waterbender he chased all over the world. The Waterbender he fought so many times. *And still she offered to heal me.*

Aang spots him first. "Zuko!" An exclamation of shock, or was the Airbender calling out to him?

Azula looks over her shoulder. "I was beginning to wonder about you, brother."

"You don't need to wonder anymore." But even as he says so, he has no idea what he is going to do.

"She's crazy and needs to go down." But if I can return home with her... I can... I'll... Things will be...

"Did you free Uncle?"

Zuko shakes his head. He didn't. Uncle Iroh insisted he could take care of himself, and Zuko ran to confront...

She grins. It scares him. "Good."

"He's our uncle."
She scoffs. "He's a traitor."

He speaks in almost a whisper. "Then so am I."

Her eyes widen and she barely gets her hands up in time to block. Zuko's fireblast is fueled by years worth of resentment and anger. But she executes a perfect block, like always. She returns fire and he readies to defend, but he doesn't need to. A wave of water rises to meet Azula's flame. A few droplets of hot water land on him, that's all.

Azula laughs. "I can't wait to sit front row at your execution. Dai Li! Attack!"

They come from everywhere. Three against dozens. Zuko knows it will be a brutal, bloody battle. For just a moment his eyes lock with Aang's. The younger boy gives him a solemn nod, and then a lopsided grin. Well, things could be worse. Zuko is a fighter. He knows combat. He may be beneath cold earth surrounded by water, but he is in his element. And for a moment, it seems as though they might prevail. The Waterbender is a true master, and the Avatar is... well... the Avatar. Everytime Zuko looks at Azula he feels the pain and rage filling him. It fuels his fire. His flames are more powerful than they have ever been. He sees her take the stance, but he knows the other two won't recognize it. She is going to summon lightning. Zuko calls forth the memory of Uncle's technique. She's going for the Avatar. Zuko isn't sure if he'll be able to make it in time, so he runs. In. Down. Up. Out. In. Down. Up. Out. In. Down. Up. Out.

*In.* He assumes the stance just as the bolt leaves her fingertips. The impact is... It's the most intoxicating thing Zuko has ever felt. He is overwhelmed by the raw power. But he knows he has to focus.

*Down.* He stares at Azula. He needs to redirect the lightning at her. Without a leader the Dai Li will flounder.

*Up.* His sister. His little sister. What would Mother say? He reaches up, towards the ceiling, and sees her grin.

*Out.* Cold dread fills him as the lighting leaves him. She knows something he doesn't. Of course she does. It's Azula. As the darkness takes him he only has time to process two final things, the look of glee on Azula's face, and the sound of someone calling his name. "Zuko!"

Chapter End Notes

So that's the beginning! This is not going to be a "everything is the same except Zuko is there and makes snarky comments about things," story. His presence is going to make a significant impact. Already Aang hasn't been struck by lightning and is wide awake. The world does not believe the Avatar is dead. Things are going to diverge further from here. So if you like what you read, stick around.
Sokka looked from the sleeping, unconscious Fire Nation prince, then to Aang, to his sister, back to Zuko, to Aang again, and finally landed his gaze on Katara. "You want to run that by me again?"

Aang didn't seem to realize it was a rhetorical question. "So then after the rocks fell on Zuko General Iroh showed up and fought Azula and the Dai Li while Katara and I dug him out. Then General Iroh yelled at us to get to safety, so we did, even though I felt really bad about leaving him behind. Zuko was breathing all funny and Katara's regular healing wasn't working, so she used the spirit water to heal him. Then you guys picked us up and now we're flying to... Where are we flying to exactly?"

Sokka sighed. "Chameleon Bay, now what really happened?"

"That is what really happened," Katara snapped. "Will you quit asking?"

"I'm confused," the Earth King said. "Why would the Fire Nation prince side with us against the Fire Nation princess?"

"Well, it's not the first time," Aang said.

"He wasn't really siding with us back at that deserted village," Sokka said. "More like he just really didn't want his sister to win."

"I was talking about the Blue Spirit."

Toph brightened. "The famous Earth Kingdom rebel? That guy's a badass, you've met him?!

Aang looked at Zuko. "Well..."

"No," Sokka said.

"Really?" Even Katara sounded skeptical.

"Are you guys using nonverbal communication again," Toph groused. "I thought we talked about that."

"Zuko is the Blue Spirit."


"As always big brother, your eloquence is truly breathtaking."

"Why didn't you tell us?!" Sokka looked equal parts hurt and flabbergasted.
"I don't know!" Aang threw his hands in the air. "I didn't know what to think! He rescued me from Zhao, but then he threw a fireball at me! I don't understand it! I don't understand anything he does!"

"He's confused," Katara said quietly. "When we were imprisoned together, he told me that he lost his mother to the war. Just like us, Sokka."

"So that excuses all the bad stuff he did?" Sokka demanded.

Katara rolled her eyes and sighed. "Of course not. That's not my point. I'm just saying that maybe the reason his actions don't make sense to us is that Zuko might not understand why he does what he does either. He sounded really conflicted... and like he was in a lot of pain."

"Can't be easy," Toph said. "Growing up with pretty much the most evil guy in the world as your dad."

Sokka shook his head. He looked at the sleeping, unconscious Firebender one more time. "Well, I guess we'll get a chance to ask him all about it when we touch down." The light of the moon shone down on Zuko's pale face, showing his angry scar in stark relief. For a moment Sokka felt a chill, even though spring was coming to an end and the night was warm.

... Hakoda, Chief of the Southern Water Tribe, was an imposing man. He had a stern face and a strong stance. He could pass for a Firebender. Zuko glimpsed the Avatar and his companions standing a little ways back, with another Water Tribe warrior he had never seen before who the Chief had referred to as Bato when they came in. But Hakoda was the man conducting this interrogation, and Zuko had no doubt he was about to be interrogated. You'd think a little appreciation would be in order. Hakoda met Hakoda's gaze. He wasn't afraid. "I'm not afraid. I accept."

"So," Hakoda's voice was calm, but it carried the unmistakable weight of authority. "You're Prince Zuko."

"I am." Zuko held his head high, so no one could make the mistake of thinking he was ashamed.

"You've chased my children all over the world, hunting the Avatar."

"I did."

Hakoda appraised him. "And yet, you risked your life to defend the Avatar from your own sister."

"Was that a question?" That was a test. A man like Zhao would get angry when spoken to in such a way, but Hakoda only smiled. He wasn't easily perturbed.

"I guess I'm just wondering why the change of heart."

"I didn't change my heart." Zuko leveled his gaze at Aang. "The Avatar is the enemy of the Fire Nation, and therefore he is my enemy."

The Avatar looked confused. The Waterbender looked hurt. Her brother scowled. The Earthbender... She was interesting. She almost looked like she was listening to something. The toes on her bare feet dug into the earth.

"Then why did you save his life?" Hakoda asked.

Zuko sighed. "If you knew my sister, you wouldn't need to ask that question."
"Well I don't know her, so I do need to ask."

Zuko met Hakoda's gaze again. "The people of Ba Sing Se are innocent. I couldn't allow Azula to take the city. All those civilians would be vulnerable to her."

"You say you are loyal to the Fire Nation, and yet you try to protect Earth Kingdom citizens from being conquered by the Fire Nation-"

"No," Zuko snapped. "I tried to protect them from being conquered by Azula. You don't understand, she's evil."

The Water Tribe boy scoffed. "Because you're so friendly."

Zuko rolled his eyes. "Been home recently?" he asked his peer.

Sokka frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"If you had been home recently you'd have noticed your village is still standing. If Azula had been the one there looking for the Avatar, that wouldn't be the case. She would have reduced everything and everyone you loved to ash as punishment for daring to defy her. You may not think much of me, and that's fine. The feeling is mutual. But the two of us have something in common. We follow a code. In war you have to do terrible things, but there are lines you don't cross," Like lying, stealing, and cheating your way across the Earth Kingdom. Zuko almost flinched, but he managed to stop himself.

"So you're saying," said Katara. "Azula doesn't have a code."

"All Azula cares about is winning," Zuko whispered. "If she has to hurt you, if she has to do unspeakable things to you in order to do that, then that's just a bonus."

For a moment there was silence. "So," said Hakoda. "If a Fire Nation soldier other than your sister had been trying to conquer the city, you would have sided with them."

Zuko considered the question. "Depends on who it was exactly, but yes, probably."

Hakoda's expression was unreadable. "Most people would lie."

"I'm not a liar. And I'm not a traitor. Nor will I pretend to be one. I am loyal to my country, and to the Fire Lord." "Who are you?! And what do you want?!" Zuko took a deep breath and struggled to keep his voice steady. "Do you know what happened to my uncle?"

Katara gave him a look of sympathy. "He fought Azula to cover our escape. The last we saw him, he was up against dozens of Dai Li."

*I will not cry. Princes don't cry. "I see."

"You say you're loyal to the Fire Lord, but wasn't your uncle declared a traitor by the Fire Lord?" Hakoda asked.

"That was a misunderstanding," Zuko insisted. "My uncle committed no treason. You can ask your children, they saw the whole thing. Zhao went mad. He tried to kill the Moon Spirit. My uncle had to stop him. The balance between the sun and the moon is just as vital to the Fire Nation as the Water Tribe, if not more so."

"How's that?" Sokka asked in a skeptical tone.
Zuko rolled his eyes. "What do I look like, a Fire Sage? The point is that Zhao had to be stopped. He was unstable."

"Quick question," Sokka said. "Are there any people in the Fire Nation who aren't crazy? Because I'm starting to sense a theme here."

Zuko glared at Sokka. "At least we aren't a bunch of savages adhering to a ridiculous antiquated social structure!"

"Excuse me?! We're savages?! Your whole country is full of bloodthirsty murderers who want to set everything on fire!"

"Sokka," Hakoda's voice was, as always, calm but firm. "Please control yourself."

"I can't believe you used your spirit water on this guy," Sokka complained to his sister. "What a waste."

Zuko was taken aback. "You used your spirit water on me?"

"After all those rocks fell on you, your ribs were crushed. I can't mend bones, not normally. So I used the spirit water. It allowed me to heal what I normally wouldn't be able to."

"Thank you," Zuko said softly. "I... I didn't realize I was injured that bad." Zuko tried to remember what happened after he redirected Azula's lightning, but everything was blank up until he woke up in this tent being watched by Katara and Aang. "I'm such an idiot."

"Why's that?" Aang asked.

"I flinched."

"You flinched Zuzu. You always flinch."

"What do you mean?" Toph spoke up for the first time.

"I could have redirected Azula's lightning back at her, taken her out for good," Zuko said softly. "But at the last second I..."

"You did the right thing," Aang said. "If you had let her make you a murderer she would have won."

"Uh, Aang?" Sokka said. "She did win. She conquered Ba Sing Se!"

Zuko hung his head. "Then it was all for nothing."

"Not nothing," Toph said.

"How do you figure? The people I was trying to protect are at Azula's mercy! My uncle is either a prisoner or dead! Oh, and I'm currently held captive by my mortal enemy!"

"We're not your enemy," Toph said.

"Yeah, we are," Sokka protested.

"She's right," Aang said. "Zuko, you may not consider me a friend, but you saved my life - and more importantly, you risked everything to try and protect the innocent people who live in Ba Sing Se."

"Tried and failed," Zuko grumbled.
"But you did try," Katara said softly.

Zuko met her gaze and then looked away. "Now what are you going to do with me," he whispered.

"That has yet to be determined," Hakoda said. "You would help your situation a great deal if you agreed to provide us with military intelligence."

"Even if I were willing to betray my country like that - and I am absolutely not - I was banished from the Fire Nation more than three years ago. Any intelligence I could provide would be laughably outdated."

Hakoda's gaze almost had a palpable weight. Zuko wanted to look away, but he refused to give into the impulse. "Why?"

"I just explained-"

"Why were you banished?"

Zuko's face twisted into an expression full of rage and hate, pain hidden deep beneath those. "Why do you want to know? How could that possibly be relevant to anything?"

"Maybe I just want to get a better handle on what sort of person you are."

"You must have done something pretty bad if even the Fire Nation didn't condone it," Sokka said. Zuko's glare made it pretty clear he was probably imagining setting Sokka's hair on fire.

"What was your offence?" Hakoda asked.

"Cowardice," Zuko all but spat the word.

Aang laughed. "Cowardice?! You?! I can think of plenty of negative qualities for you Zuko, but cowardice? You hiked through a blizzard! You infiltrated one of the most secure military strongholds in the world! Without using Firebending! You challenged Katara to a fight during a full moon!"

"I didn't know she had found a master," he muttered. "And I couldn't use my bending without tipping off Zhao to my true identify."

"That's... so not the point," Aang said with the tone of the truly perplexed. "You're a lot of things, Zuko, but you aren't a coward."

Suddenly, Zuko found the floor particularly fascinating.

"Since you are both unable and unwilling to provide us military intelligence, we'll let you get some rest," Hakoda said. "Katara told us that even with water healing, the body needs rest to recuperate from an injury. We'll send food to you shortly. Do you have any dietary restrictions?"

Zuko sighed. "I'm allergic to milk," he muttered miserably.

"Who's allergic to milk?" Sokka scoffed.

"Most people are in the Fire Nation," Aang said. "Kuzon told me it's because people don't raise milk producing animals in the Fire Nation, so their digestive systems can't process it because they aren't used to it. That's also why seafood allergies aren't uncommon in the inland parts of the Earth Kingdom, but they're almost unheard of on the coast."
"Aren't you just a well of anthropological information?" Zuko said caustically.

"Why don't you raise milk producing animals in the Fire Nation?" Katara asked.

Zuko groaned. "What is this, a Fire Nation culture and history class? We're an island. Space is a valuable commodity, especially land that's suitable for farming. It takes way more acres to raise dairy animals than it does to farm produce, so we use our farmland for crops."

"What about meat?" Toph asked. "You don't raise meat animals?"

"It's. An. Island," Zuko said through gritted teeth. "We have a huge fishing industry. Also, people hunt. Any more asinine questions?"

"Maybe we should leave Zuko alone, you guys," Aang suggested.

"If you start to feel worse, send for me," Katara said. "I'll look over your injuries again tomorrow."

Suddenly, Zuko's blood ran cold. A horrifying thought entered his head. "When you healed me, did you..."

She looked confused. "Did I what?"

"Nothing, never mind."

Hakoda gave Zuko another one of those appraising glances, but didn't comment on his aborted question. "Is there anything else you require?" Hakoda asked.

Zuko sighed. He knew his request would be denied, but he gave it a shot anyway. "Can I have a candle?"

"So you can burn the tent down?" Sokka accused.

"If I wanted to burn this tent down, I wouldn't need a candle," Zuko said.

"That's true," Aang said.

"What's the candle for?" Katara asked.

"Meditation," Zuko said.

Zuko could have sworn Hakoda was staring straight into his spirit. "I will consider your request. In the meantime, try to get some rest. Bato, you will have the first watch. The prisoner is to be treated with courtesy and respect; however, if he tries to escape, use whatever means necessary to prevent him." Hakoda gave Zuko a meaningful glance before exiting the tent, followed by his son and daughter. Katara gave Zuko a brief glance he couldn't quite interpret on her way out. Sokka hadn't looked at him at all. Aang smiled and waved as he followed Katara out. Toph walked up to Zuko.

Zuko frowned. "What do you want?"

"I'm sorry your uncle was captured," she said. "He's really nice, and I hope he's okay."

"I don't know your uncle as well as you do, but I did once have a long conversation with him. And I'm pretty confident he would have said you're worth it."
The tears came then, refusing to heed him. "Thank you."

"Good night, Zuko," the young Earth Kingdom girl said. Then she, too, was gone. Zuko was alone with the stoic Water Tribe warrior. He sighed and laid down to rest his eyes. He hadn't meant to fall asleep, but lately a lot of things had been happening that he didn't mean to, and he drifted off.

... 

Hakoda looked at his son, his heart swelling with pride. Sokka's plan to invade the Fire Nation was an excellent one. Since Hakoda had been gone, Sokka had become not just a warrior, but a skilled leader. Even the Avatar heeded his words. Most impressive of all, the loss of the Earth King's forces had not deterred Sokka at all. He was, even now, trying to rework his plan into something feasible with their current resources.

"Your Majesty, do you think you could get messages out to your troops in the field? Even if the majority of your forces were captured at Ba Sing Se there's still a chance the remaining soldiers could reinforce our invasion," Sokka said.

The Earth King shook his head. "I don't know who or where my remaining generals are. Long Feng kept all of that information secret from me."

Sokka deflated for a moment, but then he perked back up. "That's okay. We'll work with what we have. And we have some friends who can help us out."

"We do?" Katara asked.

"Yep!" Sokka pulled a list out of his pocket and presented it to his sister.

"Sokka, these people are all over the Earth Kingdom! How are we supposed to get word to all of them in time? How do we get messages to them at all without risking interception by the Fire Nation?"

"We're going to sail to them, and the Fire Nation is going to help us."

"Has Sokka finally gone insane?" Toph asked. "Because I was banking on that happening a little while ago."

"I'm going to ignore that," Sokka said. "We're going to steal a Fire Navy ship!"

"Because that's so easy," Katara said.

"It won't be easy," Sokka said. "But we can do it. All I need is the greatest Earthbender in the world, the greatest Waterbender in the world, the Avatar and a few other minor things."

Katara blushed. "You think I'm the greatest Waterbender in the world?"

"Who said I was talking about you- Hey! Katara!"

Hakoda grinned. His children's skills as warriors made him proud, but the fact that they could still be children after everything they had been through? That made him happier than words could express.

... 

Zuko was woken by the smell of fragrant fish. He was just sitting up as the tent flap opened and Hakoda walked in. "You are relieved," he told Bato. The warrior gave the Chief a respectful nod and departed from the tent. Hakoda sat down cross-legged in front of Zuko and passed him the tray.
Zuko gave Hakoda a suspicious look as he took the tray from him.

"Something wrong?"

"Isn't this task a little menial for you?"

"I wanted to ask you some more questions."

Zuko paused in the act of bringing the chopsticks to his mouth. "I already told you, I can't provide you with any useful military intelligence, and even if I could-

"Antiquated social structure."

"Huh?" Zuko asked.

Hakoda nodded at the food. "Eat."

Zuko scowled, but he took a bite. The food was good, although a little bland for his palate. Still, it was nice to be eating fish again.

"You told my son that the Water Tribe has an antiquated social structure. What were you referring to?"

"I was talking about the way women are treated in your country," Zuko said.

Hakoda raised an eyebrow. "How are women treated in my country?"

Zuko took another bite of food. He suddenly felt very self-conscious. It was one thing to talk about foreign cultures at school, and another entirely to repeat his lessons to someone who was actually a member of that culture. "Well, women in the Water Tribes are treated like property," Zuko said. Although he sounded unsure.

"They are?"

"That's what I was taught," Zuko said.

"And how many Water Tribe women do you actually know," Hakoda asked.

Zuko frowned. "Well... one."

"My daughter?"

_I guess I don't really know her. We just fight each other a bunch._ "Yes."

"Whose property do you think she is?" The man wasn't even trying to conceal his amusement.

"No one's! _Oh man, he better not tell her I said that, she will kick my ass._"

"So what you learned about Water Tribe women applies to zero percent of the Water Tribe women you've met? Interesting."

Zuko stabbed his food. "Well she's the daughter of the Chief. Of course she would be exceptional."

"My daughter is exceptional," Hakoda agreed. "But not because she is my daughter. She is exceptional because she is hard working, brave, and compassionate."

_Well, I can't exactly argue she isn't all of those things._ "What do you want from me?"
"Nothing, we're just talking," Hakoda insisted. "Why do you think I want something?"

"You brought me food. You're trying to engage in civil conversation with me. You want something."

Hakoda considered this. "My daughter thinks you aren't a bad person."

Zuko huffed out a burst of laughter. "That's not what she said before."

"Something changed her mind."

Zuko stared at his food. "I've done things - things I'm not proud of. Honestly, I'm not even sure I know the difference between right and wrong anymore. But one thing I will never ever do is betray my country, or betray my family."

"Your sister isn't your family?"

Zuko was tempted to throw his tray at the Chief's head. He held back. "When my sister and I were kids, our mother showed us a nest of shrewmice in one of the royal gardens. They were cute, in a weird sort of way. The next day I went to look at them, and..." I still remember the smell. Like barbeque. "She had burned them all alive. I asked her why she did it. She told me..." They were vermin Zuzu. "The people who live in that city, she doesn't see them as people. They're just things to her. We're all just things to her." Zuko put his tray down. He wasn't hungry anymore. "I did what I had to do."

Hakoda's blue eyes locked with Zuko's yellow ones. "It can't have been easy."

Zuko broke eye contact. "Nothing in my life has ever been easy."

Hakoda gave Zuko a grim smile. "I believe you. So what else did your school say about us?"

Zuko rubbed his brow. "I don't want to talk to you anymore," he whispered.

Zuko hadn't expected his request to be honored. He was Hakoda's prisoner, and if Hakoda wanted to talk to him Zuko expected he would. Instead of a rebuke though, Zuko was given a candle. Zuko stared at it for a moment before taking it from Hakoda. "How does it work?" Hakoda inquired.

"Candles?" Zuko asked sarcastically.

Hakoda didn't rise to the bait. "I thought Firebending was all about creating bigger and more powerful flames. What's the point of just lighting a candle?"

Zuko pinched the wick, creating a small yellow flame. "It's not about lighting a candle. Any Firebender can light a candle, and any Firebender can create a big conflagration. Firebending is all about control. You must control the flames. You can't let them control you."

"Which is harder, lighting a fire, or putting one out?"

Zuko was shocked. That's a really good question. He grasped one of the basic concepts of Firebending almost instantly. "Putting one out," Zuko said.

Hakoda nodded.

Zuko closed his eyes and synced the flame to his breathing. He felt the flame dim and flare with each exhalation and inhalation. His anxiety began to abate, and he felt calm for the first time since Azula ambushed him and Uncle. Uncle. Zuko released the flame. He clenched his fists and opened his
eyes. He was relieved to see that he was alone. Zuko closed his eyes and began his meditation anew. I'm sorry Uncle. I will find a way to help you. I will remember all you taught me. I promise.

... 

Sokka looked through his telescope and grinned. "There." He pointed at a lone Fire Nation warship. "It's perfect. Ready?"

"I just want to go on record again as saying I really, really hate this plan," Toph said.

"Duly noted. Ready?"

Katara dropped to her knees in front of Toph. The younger girl sighed, but clambered onto Katara's back. Katara walked to the edge of their borrowed fishing boat and dove into the water. The surface parted before her, and Sokka could see a bubble of air enclosing the heads of both girls.

Sokka turned his attention back to the ship. He took a deep breath and started counting. One. Two. Three. Four. Fi- The boat shuddered to a stop. Sokka couldn't hold back a grin, but he did manage to hold in his whoop of delight.

A strong hand clapped his shoulder. "A fine plan, Sokka," Bato said.

"Wait until they send up their flare to head over. We don't want them getting suspicious," Sokka said. A moment later red sparks shot towards the sky. "Let's hurry!"

Their boat pulled flush alongside the warship. A Fire Nation sailor eyed them suspiciously. "Everything all right?" Hakoda called, looking every inch the common fisherman in his peasant's garb. "We saw your distress signal."

"We ran aground," the sailor said. "Water is gushing in faster than we've ever seen. Could you ferry us to the harbor?"

"Lucky for you, we didn't have much of a haul today. Tell your captain you're all welcome aboard."

The suspicion fled the sailor's face to make way for relief. "Thank you."

Sokka watched the ship sink lower and lower into the water as the Fire Nation troops rushed to salvage what equipment they could and board the fishing trawler. As the trawler headed back to Ba Sing Se, Sokka watched with a morbid sort of fascination the warship disappear beneath the surface.

"It was the damndest thing," the captain said. "One minute all is well, and the next we got a rock the size of a building jutting up into our hull, water coming in with more speed and force than I could have imagined possible. If it hadn't been for you... Well, needless to say, we're in your debt. You ever find yourself in any sort of trouble, ask for Captain Zing. I remember when someone does me a favor."

"That's very kind of you, Captain," Hakoda said.

"Don't think I don't know most Earth Kingdom ships would have watched us go down with smiles on their faces."

Hakoda shook his head. "Ignoring a ship's distress call isn't just a violation of maritime law, it angers the Ocean Spirit. He has a long memory."

The captain looked away. "If there's one spirit I don't want to anger... Well, you're a wise man. No
matter your motives, I owe you my life and the safety of my crew. It's a damn shame. She was a fine
ship."

Sokka felt tension start to form in his gut. What if this doesn't work? What if Katara can't bring the
ship back up to the surface? Sokka shook his head. A plan that depended on Katara's Waterbending
skills to succeed was pretty much already accomplished. Sure enough, after they had dropped off the
soldiers and sailed to the meeting point they found the warship floating on the waves looking none
the worse for wear. Toph's Metalbending was improving in leaps and bounds. The hull looked
unblemished; Sokka would certainly never have guessed how horribly it had been damaged if he
hadn't heard the captain's description and seen how fast the boat went down.

"Amazing," Hakoda said in an almost reverent tone.

Sokka just grinned. "Well everyone, take a good look at our new home."

...Zuko was meditating when he heard someone enter his tent, but he resolved to ignore them. The
intruder didn't interrupt, but quietly sat down. Eventually Zuko's curiosity got the better of him and
he opened his eyes. The Avatar was sitting cross-legged in front of him. Zuko scowled. "What do
you want?"

"To end the war," Aang said.

Zuko rolled his eyes. "I meant-"

"I know what you meant," Aang said softly. "What do you want?"

"Who are you? And what do you want?" Zuko flinched.

"We're leaving," Aang said.

Zuko raised a brow. "Where are we going?"

Aang didn't respond. He just gazed into Zuko's eyes. Zuko found the gaze to be quite unsettling, but
he refused to give any sign of it. Finally, Aang must have found what he was looking for. "We're
going to invade the Fire Nation."

Zuko's jaw dropped. "What?!" What have I done? I saved his life! I put all of my people in danger!
"You- you can't! I'll stop you!" Zuko clenched his fists. All he needed to do was wait for the Avatar
to be distracted. He was right there. It would only take a moment, then the threat of the Avatar would
be gone.

Aang remained calm. "You care about the people of the Fire Nation and the Earth Kingdom. I think
you even care about the people of the Water Tribe, despite knowing hardly any of them. Hakoda told
us you care about the way women are treated there. This war hurts the people of every nation. We
have a plan to stop it."

"By killing innocent Fire Nation citizens!"

"No," Aang said. "Would you like to hear our plan?"

Zuko felt suddenly ill. "Why are you telling me these things? Are you... Are you going to execute
me?"
Now Aang’s calm demeanor slipped. "What? No! Why would you think that? We would never do something like that! We wouldn't do that to any prisoner! And you saved my life! Three times!"

That seemed pretty sincere. But then why... "Why would you tell me your plans, then?"

Aang took a steadying breath. "Zuko, you and I both know this war has caused a lot of damage. I'm asking you to help me stop it."

Zuko stared at Aang in disbelief. "You want me to help you?! I've seen first-hand how devastating this war can be, and you want me to help you spread it to my own country?! So you can get revenge?!"

"No!" Aang shook his head. "I want to stop the war, not spread it!"

"And how exactly will invading the Fire Nation stop the war?"

"Because in a few months there's going to be a solar eclipse. For eight minutes all Firebenders will lose their bending. On that day, the Day of Black Sun, we're going to invade the Fire Nation capital. We'll capture the capital city and take the Fire Lord hostage. The Fire Nation will have to sue for peace to regain its capital and leader. The Earth Kingdom will be liberated and the war will be over!"

We're going to lose our Firebending. The capital is going to be invaded. He's going to attack my father. Zuko dropped his face into his hands. "What have I done?"

"Zuko-"

"Get out of here! Leave me alone!" Zuko punctuated his point by swiping fire through the air as he got to his feet.

Aang scrambled back. "Just hear me-"

"No! I'm going to find a way to stop you! I won't let you hurt my people! I won't let you attack my father!"

"Zuko, please listen to me!"

"No!" Zuko rushed Aang. The two of them went tumbling out of the tent. Aang regained his footing first, but Zuko sent a stream of fire at him.

Aang easily dodged. "It doesn't have to be this way! I'm not your enemy!"

"Yes, you are!"

As Zuko raised his hands to attack again ice suddenly encased his feet and legs. Zuko tried to dislodge himself, but it was no use. "I think you need to cool down," Sokka said as the two Water Tribe siblings came into view.

"Sokka," Katara said in an exasperated tone of voice.

"What happened?!" Toph came running into view.

"Jerkbender over here turned on us, just like I said he would," Sokka declared.

"It wasn't like that," Aang said. "I told Zuko about our plans-

"You did what?!" Toph, Katara and Sokka all exclaimed at the exact same time.
"Why?!!" Sokka sounded horrified.

"We all agreed we were going to let him go when we left!" Toph shouted.

"So?" Aang asked.

"So now we can't!" Katara looked at Aang in disbelief. "He'll tip off the Fire Nation!"

"I thought he could help us," Aang said.

"You thought I would help you betray my country and my father?" Zuko demanded.

"I know you're a good person-" Aang started to say.

"You don't know anything about me! You don't know what kind of person I am! But if you really thought I would help you invade my own country, then you're just as twisted and evil as Sozin said you were! But what could an Air Nomad know about loyalty or familial obligation?" Zuko sneered at Aang.

"Don't you dare talk to him like that!" Katara's voice trembled with outrage.

"It's okay, Katara," Aang whispered. "I know Air Nomad culture must seem strange to someone who grew up in a place where blood ties are so important. But our way of life is - was - just as valid as yours. My people practiced a philosophy of peace and compassion-"

"Right," Zuko said. "So compassionate you abandon your own children."

"In Air Nomad culture, children are raised by the community. Each child has access to all the resources of the community. No one is born privileged or oppressed. We all start our lives with the same opportunities. We are free to choose who we love and what kind of life we want to live. No one can force us to emulate their lifestyle just because they sired or gave birth to us. I'm not saying the way we lived was better than your way of life, but it was just as good, and we were happy."

Zuko looked at the ground. "And so class, since the Air Nomads were unwilling to repent their horrific practices, Sozin was forced to take extreme measures to save any child from having to be born into those kinds of circumstances ever again. He faced a difficult choice, but the world is now a better place." He shook his head, trying to reconcile what Aang was saying with what he had been taught.

"You're disgusting," Sokka said. "Calling Aang evil when your great-grandfather committed genocide against his people!"

"Let's play great battles of history! I'll be Sozin, and you can be the Air Nomads, Zuzu. Remember, you can't firebend."

"You can let him go, Katara," Toph said.

"Are you sure?" Katara asked.

"His pulse is lowering. He's done fighting." Toph sounded almost sad.

As the ice surrounding him melted Zuko felt colder than ever. "You can feel my heartbeat?" He felt sick.

Toph nodded. "That's how I knew everything you said to us was true. That's why we were going to let you go. Of course, that plan is shot to pieces now. Nice one, Twinkle Toes."
"Sorry, Toph," Aang said.

Hakoda and Bato walked over. Hakoda was carrying shackles. Zuko felt his pulse begin to race. "He's gonna run!"

As soon as Toph spoke, Sokka grabbed Zuko. "Oh no you don't!"

"Get off of me!" Zuko flipped the other boy off his feet, but before he could take a step the Earth itself swallowed him up to his ankles. "Let me go!"

"Wish I could," Toph said.

Hakoda gave Zuko a sympathetic look. "You attacked the Avatar. You'll have to be restrained."

Zuko created daggers of fire. "Try it!"

Water doused his flames, and in one quick, fluid motion Hakoda slapped the cuffs on him. Meanwhile Bato helped Sokka to his feet. "Ha!" Sokka grinned at Zuko. "How's it feel to be the one in chains after all that time spent trying to lock up the Avatar?"

"Sokka," Aang said quietly. "Don't."

"Bato, escort the prisoner onto the ship. Put him in a comfortable room and guard the door."

"Yes, Hakoda," Bato said.

Toph released Zuko's feet, and Bato began to drag him away. Zuko followed, knowing that, for the moment, he was defeated. But he swore to himself he would not give up, not without a fight.

...

The Fire Navy uniform felt strange and ill-fitting against Katara's skin. She touched her mother's necklace for comfort, and when that didn't alleviate all of her discomfort she looked out to the ocean for further solace. The waves were familiar. They were home. She looked around the deck. Her family was here. Her father and brother were adjusting little things to increase their speed; they needed every second they could conjure. Toph was experimenting with Metalbending some more. Aang was feeding and petting Appa. Bato, who was like a second father to her after her mother died, was cleaning weaponry. She took a deep breath. They were all safe and together. They had a plan. Maybe they really would win this war. You had a plan at Ba Sing Se. It didn't help you. She shook the thought away. They had split up, she wouldn't let them make the same mistake again.

Sokka walked over to her. "Dad wants to talk to everyone about the prince problem- no wait! I got it. Our little royal pain!" Sokka looked at her expectantly.

"I don't think it's funny."

"Oh come on. You're just mad because you were wrong, and I was right."

Aang joined them. "I don't think Katara was wrong about Zuko."

Toph joined them as the children reached Hakoda's location. Hakoda wore a thoughtful expression. "I agree," he said. "I think we might be able to deprogram him."

"Deprogram?" Toph's voice was skeptical. "Why does that sound like Dai Li stuff?"

"I don't think the prince has had his mind altered by methods like those used by the Dai Li, but I do
believe his perception of reality is colored by his Fire Nation education," Hakoda said.

"Or," Sokka proposed. "He's an evil jerk."

"He isn't," Toph said. "It's like General Iroh said. He's lost. He doesn't know what the right path is. We owe it to him, and his uncle, to help him find that path."

"We owe him," Sokka said skeptically.

"He saved Aang's life three times-"

"Two and a half at best," Sokka said.

"Don't interrupt me," Toph warned. "Helping him is the right thing to do, and if we succeed we'll have an ally who can help us navigate the Fire Nation capital."

"Toph's right," said Katara. "I think you're letting your personal feelings cloud your judgement."

"Not everyone can be saved, Katara," Sokka said. "Some people are just bad."

"I don't think Zuko is one of those people," Aang said. "He's nothing like Zhao. He cares, even if he is lost and confused. He cares about doing the right thing."

"Too bad his idea and our idea of the right thing are pretty much polar opposites," Sokka said.

"But that's still a starting point," Katara said. "Someone you disagree with is someone you can reason with. Someone who doesn't care at all, there's no talking to. I think we can get through to Zuko. I'm willing to try." For so long he has been the face of the enemy, but if we can save him maybe there can be a peaceful resolution to this war.

Sokka sighed and shook his head. "Well, I'm outvoted. I'll help however I can. How do we do this deprogramming thing, Dad?"

Hakoda looked to Katara. "You've had the most success getting through to him, love. Maybe in the morning the two of us can try to speak with him and find some common ground."

Katara nodded. She locked eyes with Aang and he smiled at her. I almost lost you. No matter his motives, Zuko prevented that. I'll find a way to repay him. She returned the smile.

... Zuko couldn't sleep. The chains on his wrists made every possible position uncomfortable. He stared up at the blank darkness of the ceiling and tried to quiet the turmoil in his mind. He thought about Azula, Uncle, his father, his- Mother.

"Never forget who you are." I forgot mother. I'm not sure if I ever even knew. I thought I was a loyal son. I thought I was a good person. I abandoned Uncle. I helped the Avatar. I attacked the Avatar. No matter who's right, I'm a villain. What do I-

The door creaked open. Bato of the Water Tribe stood in the doorway. "You are to come with me."

Zuko sat up. "Where are we going?"

"You'll see soon enough. Stand up."

That doesn't sound like a request. Zuko got to his feet. Bato gripped his arm and began to lead the
prince to the deck. *Something isn't right.*

"Did Chief Hakoda send for me?"

"No."

"Does the Avatar-"

"No more talking."

Zuko became frustrated. "I demand to know-"

"You are in no position to be making demands. Now be silent."

Zuko stewed. *Who does this guy think he is? I'm a prince! He's just a soldier. Except I'm not really a prince anymore, am I? I don't know what I am. Or who I am. I really let you down, Mother.*

Bato and Zuko emerged onto the deck of the ship. The moon was beautiful, lighting up the water with her lovely pale light. "The Moon Spirit," Bato said softly, "is the protector of my people."

Zuko shifted uncomfortably. *I'm well aware. The Ocean, too. I saw what they are capable of. "The Sun Spirit protects my people," Zuko said, just to have something to say.*

Bato didn't really seem to be listening, and he led Zuko further out onto the deck, closer to the railing. "Our people say that the Moon Spirit sees everything her light shines upon, so one must be careful with one's actions while she is out." Bato stopped at the railing. "I had a friend, a girl I grew up with, she once told me that the Moon Spirit lives in the heart of every member of the Water Tribe. Her light is always upon us, and she can see all that we do." Bato's grip had become painfully tight. "She was killed by a Firebender. After she was gone, her husband and I became... close. Their children, I love those children as if they were my own. I would do anything to protect them."

That was when Zuko realized. "You're going to kill me."

Bato finally looked at Zuko, and it was as though he were seeing the boy for the first time. "I want you to understand-"

"I do." He actually did. *I've been so confused. There's so much I can't reconcile. But this, this I understand. He sees me as a threat to the people he loves, so he is going to kill me. What could be simpler? "Maybe this is for the best." I won't have to be confused anymore. I won't be able to make mistakes anymore. "Can I ask you for something? A, um... last request?"

Bato evaluated him with cold eyes. "You can ask."

Zuko felt strange. *Is this even real? It feels like a dream. I'm about to die. "Can you make it quick? And uh... painless? Or as painless as something like this can be, I suppose." Don't let your voice shake. And don't cry. If you are going to die you might as well die with dignity.*

"Of course. I would have done that anyway. I'm not a monster."

*Neither am I! But Zuko wasn't sure enough of the sentiment to say it out loud. I'm sorry, Uncle.*

"Look at the moon. She's beautiful."

Zuko looked up. He felt Bato's hand grip his shoulder in a tight grasp. He heard the sound of bone scraping leather. He thought about closing his eyes and just letting it happen. *Never give up without a fight. Zuko grabbed Bato's hand with his chained ones and flipped the larger man over his shoulder.*
Bato hit the deck with a heavy THUMP. Zuko started to run away, but Bato kicked Zuko's feet out from under him and sent the boy sprawling on the deck. Zuko struggled to get up with his bound hands. Bato kicked Zuko in the ribs, and he gasped for breath.

"You just couldn't let it be easy, could you?" Bato kicked Zuko again and he landed on his back.

"Never..." Zuko struggled to breath. "Give up without a fight."

Bato knelt on Zuko's ribs. The teen would have screamed if he had the oxygen. Bato raised his knife. Zuko lifted his hands, using the chain that linked them to stop Bato's knife's decent. For a moment, they had a contest of strength, but Zuko knew that he couldn't keep it up forever. He could see red tinging the edges of his vision. Soon, he wouldn't have any oxygen left. Zuko put every last bit of his strength into pushing up. The hilt of Bato's knife hit the man in the face. Zuko surged forward, trying to force the heavier man off of him. For a second he thought he succeeded. Zuko stumbled to his feet, swaying but standing. Then a heavy blow impacted his head. His balance already shot all to hell, Zuko went tumbling over the side of the ship. _Don't inhale. Don't inhale. Don't inhale_. Zuko hit the water hard, and he slipped beneath the waves. Zuko kicked his way to the surface. Once his head was above water he took a deep breath, or at least he tried to. His ribs weren't exactly cooperating. The boat was already in front of him, and getting further away every second. "Help! Help me!"

Nobody heard. _Or nobody cares_._ Katara and Aang wouldn't leave somebody to die like this. They don't have it in them_. Zuko watched the ship become smaller and smaller. _What does it matter? You're going to die anyway_. Zuko shivered. The water was cold. He looked up at the stars. _If I can figure out which direction will bring me closest to land..._ Zuko would have laughed if it wasn't such a painful prospect. _There's no land in sight. I'll never be able to swim to safety before I drown. I have a heavy chain linked to my wrists! This is hopeless._

For a moment Zuko considered just allowing himself to sink below the waves. _I'd finally be able to get some sleep_. Zuko stared at the dark choppy water. _Never give up without a fight_. Zuko's legs were already starting to ache. _No one would know I gave up_. Zuko looked up at the moon. He sighed, and then he started swimming.

---

Chapter End Notes

There it is! If you think Bato is too OOC I respect that, but honestly we didn't get a whole lot of character development for him in canon. What we do know about him is that he is close with Hakoda and cares a lot about Katara and Sokka. The way he figures it Zuko could eventually escape and tip off the Fire Lord, or he could convince Hakoda he's changed, be released and tip off the Fire Lord. Bato can't allow either if those things to happen. So, murder plot. Toph is a big fan of Iroh at this point, and Zuko is benefiting from that association when it comes to her opinion of him. Katara feels like she forged a real connection with Zuko in the catacombs, and she feels indebted to him for saving her best friend's life. Aang thinks everyone deserves a second chance and Sokka is the skeptical one. Hakoda is the only one to see Zuko for what he really is, a scared angry confused abused kid.
The Awakening (pt. 2)

Chapter Notes

Re-uploaded after some hard work by Nebulababe proofreading this chapter. Kudos to her!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Toph ran her fingers along the wall, trying to feel out the different components of the metal, trying to feel the shape of the ship, trying to get the metal to speak to her the same way Earth did. Earth and I have easy conversations, like old friends discussing how their lives have been going. But you, you're like a taciturn Sifu, only revealing what you want me to know. But I'll crack you. The metal told her Sokka was approaching. She grinned, and patted it in thanks. "Hey, Snoozles! What are you up to?"

"I'm going to check our heading. We're making good time, which of course can only mean that something is about to go horribly wrong."

"Lighten up. All that frowning is giving you crow's feet."

"Really?!" Sokka's hands shot towards his face. "Wait. Will you knock that off?"

Toph grinned. "Sure, when it stops being funny."

"When do you think that will be?"

"Probably about fifty years."

"Great," Sokka said. "So I have that to look forward to."

Toph continued to run her fingers along the metal. She frowned. "That doesn't feel right." She started down the hall.

"What is it?" Sokka asked.

She sensed two people approaching, one very familiar and one less so. "Hey Sokka, Toph," Katara said.

"You going to talk to Zuko?" Sokka asked.

"Yes," Hakoda said. "Hopefully we'll be able to open a dialogue."


"Why?" Katara asked. "You were pretty optimistic yesterday."

"Because his room is empty," Toph said.
"What?!" The three Water Tribe members ran to the room and burst in. Toph didn't bother. Her feet knew what they knew.

Hakoda and his children soon came back out. Hakoda set at once to interrogating the guard. "What happened?!

"I-I don't know!" True.

"Was he in there when your shift started?!

"Y-yes!" Lie.

"Lie," Toph said.

"I swear! Bato said he was!" True.

"But you didn't check like you were supposed to," Toph said.

"Bato said not to!" True.

"Why would Bato tell you not to check on the prisoner?" Hakoda asked scornfully.

Toph sensed the man himself approaching. He answered before the guard had a chance to. "Because I killed him." True. True. True.

Toph gasped. "No!"

"Bato?" Sokka sounded incredulous. "But he was a prisoner. Our laws prohibit-"

"I know the law," Bato said in a calm steady voice. "I knew it and I chose to break it. If my life is forfeit, then it is forfeit."

"How could you?" Katara asked. She sounded like she was crying.

"I did it to protect you." True.

"Bato," Hakoda's voice was full of grief. "I cannot save you from the consequences of your actions."

"I understand. I knew-"

"How did he die?" Toph wanted to lie down and bawl, but she couldn't. Not yet. I'm sorry, General Iroh.

"What does it matter?"

"If I ever meet General Iroh again, I have to be able to tell him how his nephew died."

"It doesn't matter."

"It does matter!" Toph stomped her foot and encased Bato's feet in metal.

"Answer her question," Hakoda said in a voice of steel.
"I wanted to give the boy a quick, clean death," Bato said.

"Wanted to," Katara asked in a tremulous voice. "What does that mean?"

"He fought back."

"People do that when you try to kill them!" Sokka shouted.


"Lie!" Toph yelled. "Lie! Lie! Lie!" She stomped her foot again and the metal around Bato's feet tightened.

Bato squirmed in discomfort. "He did survive. He called out for help. Luckily no one else was around to hear."

"Luckily!" Katara's outrage was as forceful as a hurricane. "You left him there to drown! He was in chains! How could you be so cruel?!"

"Could he have survived?" Toph asked.

"It's almost impossible," Hakoda said.

"We've beat long odds before," Sokka said, going into plan mode. It kindled a spark of hope in Toph's chest. "I'll take Appa. Katara, you fill in Aang. He can take his glider. You can use your Waterbending to look around, right?"

"I'm on it," she said. "Let's go."

Toph wanted to help, but she knew she would be useless looking for someone in the ocean. Every second counted, so she tried to keep out of the way as the two teens got to work. "Toph," Hakoda said quietly.

"What?" she snapped. Don't cry. Don't you dare let him see you cry.

"Will you release Bato?"

"Why should I?"

"I need to arrest him and bring him before assembly to decide his fate."

"How about you throw him overboard?" Toph suggested.

"I can't imagine how hard this must be for you. You're too young to have to deal with this sort of thing. What happened here was... profane. I promise you that I will make it right."

"Can you bring people back from the dead?" Toph asked bitterly.

"No," Hakoda said gently.
Toph punched the wall, and the metal around Bato's feet split open. The warrior fell to his knees. "Then you can't make it right." Toph walked away, a single tear escaping her eye.

... 

Zuko stared at the rising sun. He was floating on his back, trying to rest. It was hard. Every time he shut his eyes he started to slip below the surface. He knew he needed to start swimming again, but his legs hurt so much. "You're weak. Even your soft hearted mother had a backbone when it counted. You disgust me."

"I'm sorry," he rasped to the ghost of his father's voice. "I'm tired."

"You're pathetic." A single tear slipped from Zuko's good eye. "You were lucky to be born. Now it seems that luck has run out. And not a moment too soon."

"Please, Father. I am your loyal son."

"You're a coward."

"I fought. You know I fought. I was in chains, but still I fought." Zuko had more to say, but his battered ribs and lungs decided he had said enough.

"Dying will be the best thing you ever did for our family."

Zuko closed his eyes as more tears escaped. He started to slip beneath the surface and felt something brush against him. *Something slippery, yet rough.* Zuko opened his eyes. If he had possessed fully functional lungs, or been less exhausted, he would have screamed. A Tigershark stared back at him. It was circling him. If he wanted, he could reach out and touch its striped skin or sharp whiskers. Zuko kicked gently, and broke the surface of the water. The Tigershark drew closer. It bumped against Zuko again. Blood in the water. It can taste my blood. Now it's deciding if I'm something it wants to eat or not. Zuko looked up at the sun. "Please," he begged. "Please, please, not like this. I don't want to die like this."

It had been a long time since Zuko had prayed properly. His mother used to take him to the temple to pray to the spirits, but that had been a long time ago. It was amazing how the imminent threat of being eaten by an aquatic predator can spark a spiritual reawakening in a person. "I know I've done bad things, and maybe I deserve to die, but please, please, not like this. Let me live. Give me a chance to do better. Let me make it right. Let me see my uncle again." Zuko was sobbing now.

The shark started towards him again. Zuko was too weak to swim away. He was too weak to even keep himself above water for much longer. He stared at the killer fish. It reached him and-

Zuko flinched. Then he looked down. The Tigershark had lodged itself under his chained arms and was keeping him above the surface of the water. "What?"

"Hello, Zuko."

Zuko looked up at the sun again. Floating in front of the great orb was the specter of a man Zuko would recognize anywhere. Zuko had memorized his every feature on the off chance that there had been some mistake, and he hadn't died 112 years ago. After all, Kyoshi had lived for over two hundred years. "Hello, Avatar Roku."
Roku gave Zuko a warm smile. That was perhaps the strangest part of all. The Fire Nation's greatest enemy, Zuko's greatest enemy, was looking at him like a kindhearted grandfather. It was disorienting to say the least. Even more than the shark saving his life, although that was definitely a close second. "We need to talk, young prince."

"Sure. I don't really have anything else going on right now. What's on your mind?"

"The fate of our country," Roku said.

Zuko would have laughed if he'd had the strength. "Our country?"

"It is true that the Avatar must serve the people of every nation, but just as Aang is and always shall be an Air Nomad, I have always been and continue to be a proud member of the Fire Nation."

"You betrayed the Fire Nation," Zuko accused. "You betrayed the Fire Lord."

"Prince Zuko, our country is more than the whims and wishes of just one man. The Fire Lord was always meant to be a servant of the people. Even Sozin, for all his faults, grasped this."

"Then why did you betray him?!"

"Zuko, I did my duty. Just as you have always done, to the best of your ability."

Zuko let more salty tears fall into the salty ocean. They wouldn't make that much of a difference. "I failed."

"How did you fail, Zuko?"

"I didn't capture the Avatar. My father gave me a task. My lord gave me a task."

For a moment, Roku was silent. "Prince Zuko, your father is not the rightful Fire Lord. You and I both know this."

"That's a lie!"

"Your Uncle Iroh was the Crown Prince."

"Fire Lord Azulon chose my father to succeed him!"

"No, he didn't. Zuko, you know that your father usurped your uncle's throne, that he used your mother as a tool to do this before discarding her, that he manipulated her love for you to bend her to his will, and that."

"Enough! I won't listen to these lies!"

Roku kept quiet for a long moment. "I know you love your father, but Zuko, your father has committed grave crimes, against the world, against his people, against his father, against his brother, against his wife and against his children. He has broken all of our laws, even our most sacred. You know this. You were there. He must be stopped."

Zuko looked away from the blinding light. "I'm not a traitor."
"No, you are not. Despite your father's best attempts to paint you as one, to force you to be one, you have never been a traitor. Now Zuko, now you have the chance to restore the rightful Fire Lord to the throne."

"Uncle Iroh," Zuko whispered. "Is he still alive?" I left you, Uncle. After everything you did for me, I abandoned you.

"He is currently on his way to the Capital City to be imprisoned for life."

"If I help the Avatar and restore Uncle Iroh to his throne, what will happen to my father?"

"His fate will be of his own choosing."

"That's not an answer."

"It is the only true answer I can give you."

Truth. That's more than I ever got from Azula, or my- If I can rescue Uncle Iroh and end the war... I could save the people of all the nations. "And if I refuse, you leave me here to die?"

"No, Zuko, your salvation is close at hand." Roku raised a hand and pointed into the distance. Zuko squinted and glimpsed a familiar profile. A glider being ridden by a small boy. "The choice is yours. No one can make it for you."

Zuko raised his shackled hands to wave down the Avatar. "Aang! Aa-" Zuko slipped off the Tigershark and slid under the waves. Don't inhale. Don't inhale. Don't inhale. Zuko kicked and struggled, desperate to reach the surface. No! No! He's so close! Zuko kicked and kicked and wondered where the surface had gone off to. So it was all a cruel joke, or some sort of hallucination. I really am going to drown. I'm- Zuko felt a hand grip his and pull. He went up, up until he broke the surface of the water. Zuko took as deep a breath as his abused lungs would allow. He was pulled up onto something steady and very, very cold. "Thank you, thank you."

"Zuko! Are you okay?"

Zuko bit back a sarcastic retort and looked up at his savior. "I'm going to help you defeat my father," he said right before he passed out.

...

Katara refused to let herself cry. Blurry vision could mean the difference between his life and death. I have to focus. But the sea was glassy and undisturbed for as far as she could see. She surfed farther and farther out on her iceboard, but saw no sign of the missing prince. Bato is my family. How could he do this? Bato had always been a good friend to her parents, and after her mother died he had been around more and more. He would take meals with them and help with the maintenance of their household. Sometimes he even spent the night when he thought Kanna, Sokka and Katara had all already gone to sleep. She shook her head. She couldn't allow herself to be distracted.

"Katara!"

Katara looked over her shoulder. Aang was gliding towards her. She turned to meet him, pulse rising, hands sweating, even though it was a windy, chilly day. "Is he...?"

"I found him, he's alive!"
Katara let out a breath she hadn't known she was holding. “Oh, Aang-”

“He’s hurt, though. We need to hurry back.”

She nodded, her spine turning to steel to match her resolve. Aang had done his part, and now it was time for her to do her’s. “What’s his condition?” she asked as she surfed under him.

“Not good, I think.” Aang hesitated. “When I pulled him out of the water he said he was going to help us defeat the Fire Lord.”

Why would he decide to help us after a member of our group tried to kill him? Did he just say that because he thought Aang wouldn't rescue him otherwise? “Do you think he meant it?”

“I don’t know. But… I think so, yeah.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter right now. We can ask him about it once he’s healed.”

…

Zuko felt… heavy. Even just opening his eyelids took way more effort than he knew it should. All he wanted was to go back to sleep, but he had to fight. I have to keep swimming. I have to find land. He tried to move his limbs, but it felt like he was submerged in a tub of molasses. At least I’m not in chains anymore. He turned his head and looked at his wrists. They were red and raw from the salt and metal rubbing against them, but he was free. How exactly did that happen, again?

“You’re awake.”

Zuko blinked. He turned his head again and saw the blurry outline of a Water Tribe warrior. His heart leapt into his throat. He struggled to sit up.

The figure reached for him. “Hey, it's okay.”

“Don’t,” he pleaded.

For once, his request was heeded. The hands stopped coming for him. The warrior dropped them into his lap. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

Zuko didn't know why, but he believed the man's calm, soothing voice. “Where…?” Zuko was having trouble getting his words to work properly. It was as though his brain had been dropped in the same tub as his limbs.

“You’re on the ship. You have a severe head injury. Can I ask you some questions?”

Zuko definitely wasn't up to another interrogation. “No more questions,” he murmured. “I'm tired.”

“Just a few. They won't be difficult.” The blur held up his hand again and Zuko flinched.

“Can you see how many fingers I’m holding up?”

Zuko stared at the fuzzy hand for what felt like a long time. “I'm sorry,” he finally said, expecting to be berated. “Can’t.”

“It’s all right,” the blur assured him. “Can you tell me your name?”

He doesn’t know my name? But I’m sure I know that voice. If he doesn't know it maybe I shouldn't tell him. “You first,” Zuko said.
“My name is Hakoda. You don't remember me?”

“I do. You're the Water Tribe Chief. You're Katara and Sokka's father. Are you the one that taught him to throw that damned boomerang?”

Hakoda laughed. It reminded Zuko of his uncle's laugh. *Uncle.* “I am. But I can't claim credit for his arm. He took to the thing like a fish to water. Do you know what day it is?”

“It's... the end of Spring. But it's not the first day of Summer yet. Almost though, right?”

“You're right,” Hakoda assured him. “Do you know what day you were born?”

“Why are you asking?”

“I'm trying to assess your head injury.”

_Bato hit me in the head. I fell in the water. I saw Avatar Roku. Was that real? How could it be?_

“Zuko, can you remember your birthday?”

“I was born during the last big monsoon of Autumn. The Fire Sage said it was an ill omen and that I might not live. I was smaller and weaker than my cousin had been. My dad said I was lucky to be born at all. My mother named me for her father. Dad didn't like that. Lu Ten told me they fought for a long time about it, while everyone was huddled in the storm shelter. She promised their next child would be named after Fire Lord Azulon.” _Why am I telling him all these things? I need to stop talking._

“In my tribe we say that children born during storms have been blessed by the Ocean Spirit.”

_The Ocean Spirit took Zhao, but he let me live. Is that why? Was I blessed by the storm?_

“Katara will be here soon. She'll heal you as best she can. Try to get some rest.”

“Am I going to die?”

“No, Zuko, you aren't going to die. Rest.”

Zuko was too tired to do anything but obey.

…”

Hakoda put a hand to the sleeping boy’s brow to feel if the fever had worsened. He was too warm, but not yet past the danger threshold. When Hakoda had carried Zuko into this room to get him out of his wet clothes, the boy had been shivering despite how warm he was. At least that had stopped. But his breathing still had a worrisome sound, and he was an unhealthy color under his pearly parlor. While dressing the boy, Hakoda had assessed his injuries. The head wound was bad and the ribs not much better. Of course, those weren't the only things Hakoda found. Scars. So many. _I suppose it was too much to hope his face was the only one._

The door slammed open. “Dad! Is he okay?!”

“He's stable Katara,” Hakoda assured her.

Katara was at the boy's side in an instant, her hands hovering over his battered skull. A blue glow that made Hakoda feel calm emitted from her hands. She bit her lip. “This kind of work is very delicate,” she confessed. “I'm not sure...”
“Just do the best you can,” Hakoda soothed her. “That is all anybody can ask of you.”

She nodded and took a deep breath. She closed her eyes, but her facial expression kept changing as though she were reacting to something. She doesn't see it, she feels it, like the little Earthbender. She's amazing, my daughter. Soon Katara moved onto Zuko's ribs, which Hakoda remembered her saying she couldn't heal. She can fix the soft tissue, but the bones will have to heal on their own. She did the wrists last. Hakoda watched in fascination as the flesh rubbed raw by iron and inflamed by salt knitted itself back together and returned to its proper color. Then Zuko opened his eyes.

“Katara?”

“How do you feel?” Katara asked.

Hakoda could see that she herself was exhausted after such an intense bout of healing, but she kept her focus on her patient. Hakoda couldn't be prouder.

“Better. You healed me again?”

She nodded. “Just patched a couple of things.”

“Thank you,” he whispered. “I owe you.”

“You don't owe me anything. I'm a healer. I have a sacred obligation.”

His eyes started to flutter closed again. “I'm sorry for... everything. All of it.”

“Zuko-”

“I'm going to make it right. Avatar Roku…” The thought went uncompleted as Zuko fell asleep.

Katara looked at her father. “What was that about Avatar Roku?”

Hakoda shrugged. “I'm not sure. Leave it for now, he needs his rest. And so do you, love.”

Katara gave her father a wry grin. “You might be right about that. I don't want to go too far though, in case there are any complications.”

“The room next door is unoccupied. Sleep. I'll stay here and wake you if anything changes.”

“Promise?”

Hakoda kissed her brow. “I promise.”

She smiled and walked away. Hakoda went back to his vigil.

…

Zuko stood at the top of the volcano, looking down at the city of his birth and childhood. He could feel the heat radiating from the mouth of the volcano behind him, which was odd because it had been dormant for a long time, but Zuko ignored it. He was fascinated by the city, watching all the people going to and fro about their lives. He had forgotten how much he missed it. After so long away, home had become an abstract idea, a vague goal for the future.

“I miss it, too.” That made Zuko turn around. Avatar Roku gave Zuko another one of his grandfatherly grins. “My prince,” Roku inclined his head respectfully.
“Is this real?”

“Only a dream,” Roku assured him. “But dreams can be very real sometimes.”

Zuko turned back to the bustling city. “I want to go home,” he confessed as though it were some sort of shameful secret. “I miss my country.”

“As did I,” Roku said. “When I first journeyed to the Southern Air Temple to learn Airbending I spent every night dreaming about fish fries, fire festivals, and long hikes on the hot beach.”

“I miss diving for oysterclams with Lu Ten, watching fireworks with mother, practicing swordsmanship with Master Piandao.”

Roku put a hand on Zuko's shoulder. Zuko's first impulse was to shake it off, but he didn't. He couldn't quite say why. “I'm sorry, Zuko.”

Zuko looked away from the city, towards the beach and the crashing waves. “In our history books I'll be remembered as the traitor prince, who betrayed his father and lord, who helped the Fire Nation's greatest enemy land an invasion on our shore. If I am not stricken out entirely, that is.” Zuko felt a pang of longing in his heart as he watched people picnic in the sands and frolic in the waves. That was me once. Or was it? It was all so long ago.

“Is that really what concerns you, Zuko? What others will say about you? I don't think it is.”

Zuko rubbed his face. “For so long I believed everything my father told me. I knew that I was weak and pathetic, because the Fire Lord said so, and the Fire Lord is infallible. I knew our country was superior and the people of the other nations savage because the Fire Lord said so, and the Fire Lord is infallible. I believed I could please him - earn his love - with unquestioning service and loyalty. But that was only ever a dream, a ridiculous dream. Now it's time to wake up. Not questioning my father didn't make me a loyal son, it made me a fool.” Zuko all but spit the last word. His contempt for himself raged within him like acid, eating away at him.

Roku squeezed Zuko's shoulder. “You were not a fool, but a child. Many of the trappings of childhood seem foolish to us as adults, but that does not mean that we were fools. We all must grow and change throughout our lives, and part of that growth is learning. Wisdom, Prince Zuko, is not inherent knowledge. Rather, it is a willingness to admit when one is or has been incorrect, and to learn the truth, even when it is painful. Many men and women who possess great sums of knowledge lack this wisdom. But you, Zuko, you who are only now at the beginning of manhood, are well on your way to possessing it. You will make many mistakes. You will stumble and even at times fall. But there are those around you who are eager to assist you in picking yourself back up again. And they need your help, too. The Avatar needs your guidance.”


Roku laughed gently. “As I told you before, the Avatar must serve the people of all nations. Aang's travels around the world, before and after his internment in that iceberg, have served him well in understanding the needs of each nation. However, Aang's knowledge of the Fire Nation is one hundred years old. Aang knows well the current circumstances of the Water Tribes and Earth Kingdom. Now he must journey to the Fire Nation and interact with the people there. He must learn about our culture and our heritage. He must become familiar with our beliefs and customs. Just as Aang learned from the people of the Water Tribes and Earth Kingdom, he will learn from the people of the Fire Nation, and you will lead him through that journey. It will not be an easy task, but you will also learn a great deal and gain new wisdom.”
Zuko stared into Roku's eyes. “I’ve made so many mistakes. What if I fail again? What if I can’t help the Avatar understand our ways?”

“I think you will find you have a very eager student. Besides, you are only his guide. The learning itself will be up to Aang.”

Zuko took a deep breath. “How will he be able to trust me after everything I’ve done?”

Roku considered the question. “I suppose you’ll just have to ask him that yourself.”

The air around them seemed to be getting… thinner almost, and Zuko began to feel heavier, like he could sink right through the ground, even though the ground was dense rock. “Wait, Avatar Roku! I still have so many questions!”

“I will see you soon.”

Zuko opened his eyes.

…

Aang paced up and down the corridor. He wanted to check on Zuko, but he also didn't want to get in Katara's way if she was healing or wake Zuko up if he was resting. Aang considered going to look for Sokka, but then he remembered Sokka went to go visit Bato in the room where he was currently imprisoned, and even if the visit was concluded, Sokka probably wasn't in the best mood. To care that much about somebody, to trust them completely, and then be betrayed by them. That must be awful. Of course that thought only reminded Aang of the first time he had met Bato, and how Aang himself had been the one to betray his friends. Aang hung his head. Maybe he should go look for Toph.

Aang.

Aang's head shot up. The corridor was empty, but he knew someone had called him. "Hello?"

I need to speak with you.

Aang hesitated. "Roku?"

There is something important I must tell you.

Aang nodded. He headed to his quarters and then assumed his meditation pose. He allowed the sensations and concerns of his present life to fall away for a moment and reached out to his past life. He opened his eyes and looked at Roku. Aang inclined his head respectfully.

"Hello, Aang."

"Avatar Roku. You have something important to tell me?"

"It would be more accurate to say that I have something to show you. But I cannot show you here. You must journey to my home island. There I will be able to explain to you how this war started, so that you might finally end it."

"Your home island? But isn't that in the Fire Nation?"
"It is. You must travel across the Fire Nation, just as you have journeyed through the Water Tribes and Earth Kingdom."

"But what about the invasion? We'll never have time to pick everyone up and roam across the Fire Nation."

"You must leave this army for now, and reunite with them on the Day of Black Sun. This pilgrimage is crucial to not only the end of the war, but to your future as the Avatar."

Aang nodded solemnly. "I understand."

As Roku faded away, Aang got to his feet and set out to find Zuko. The teen was awake, and looking noticeably better than he had when Aang pulled him out of the ocean. It'd be hard for him to look much worse. Zuko was talking to Hakoda when Aang entered but stopped the moment he became aware of Aang's presence, so Aang didn't catch any of their conversation.

"Avatar Aang," Zuko said.

"Wow, that's so formal. How about just Aang?" Aang gave Zuko a lopsided grin.

"Alright... Aang. I have to tell you something. It's going to sound strange."

"I have a pretty high bar for what I consider strange," Aang said.

Zuko took a deep breath. "Okay, here goes." He looked nervous. "You need to come to the Fire Nation with me."

Aang laughed. "That's uncanny!"

Zuko flinched. "I know this is going to sound like some sort of trick, but-"

"I just came here to tell you the exact same thing!"

"You did?" Zuko frowned in confusion.

"Yeah! Avatar Roku told me I needed to go to his home island. I thought you could show me, Katara, Sokka, and Toph how to get there."

"Well, that was easy," Zuko said. "I was worried you would think I was either crazy or a liar."

"Why is that?" Hakoda asked. "What's your reasoning for wanting to take the Avatar to the Fire Nation?" Hakoda didn't sound suspicious, exactly, just curious.

"Same reason actually," Zuko said. "Roku appeared to me too. I have no idea how though. He told me you needed to spend time among the people of the Fire Nation."

"Great!" Aang grinned.

"Are you certain this is a good idea?" Hakoda asked. "If you are captured the invasion plan falls apart."

"All the more reason to go to the Fire Nation! That's the last place they'll think to look for me."
"I suppose it's not my place to question the Avatar," Hakoda said. "Katara is next door if you want to consult her."

"Good idea! See you later, Zuko! Feel better!" Aang collected air under him and rode his air scooter into Katara's room.

Zuko stared at the giant flying bison. The last time I saw this beast he was in chains. He's a lot more intimidating now, especially since he hasn't been beaten or starved recently. I wonder if he remembers me. Appa took a step towards Zuko, who quickly backed up. With his giant tongue, Appa licked Zuko, covering him in slobber. I guess that answers that question.

"Thanks," Zuko said. "Nice to see you again, as well."

"Talking to yourself, Sparky?" Zuko hadn't heard the young Earthbender approach.

Zuko turned to face her, glad she couldn't see his blush. "No, no I was just... We've met before, Appa and I."

"When you were hunting Aang?" Toph asked in a tone that defined nonchalant.

"No- Well, yes. But after that. Under Lake Laogai. I was there to capture him, but I ended up letting him go instead, and then I got a fever and had a dream about a pair of dragons..." Zuko trailed off.

"Wow," Toph said. "You might just be the worst storyteller in the whole world."


"You're not lying," she said with a chuckle. "We were at Lake Laogai too, wouldn't it have been something if we had run into each other?"

"Probably best we didn't." Zuko began to absentmindedly run his fingers through the bison's soft fur. It was longer and thicker than Zuko imagined. He could probably submerge his whole hand into it before reaching skin. "I would have just tried to capture Aang and run off with him, probably getting us both killed."

Toph snorted in amusement. "Are you familiar with the concept of too much honesty? Because some things can just go unsaid, you know."

Zuko shrugged. Petting the bison was oddly soothing. "A lie by omission is still a lie. I'm not a liar. Not anymore, at least. Nor will I be a thief or a manipulator. I'll be someone Uncle can be proud of, someone worthy of his forgiveness, and all the faith he showed in me when I was wretched to him."

"You okay, Zukes? Your heart is doing a weird rhythm. Sounds sad."

Zuko shivered. "Can you... always hear people's hearts? Do you turn it on and off?" One of the few things I thought was really and truly private. What's next? Can Katara read minds? Does Sokka have X-ray vision? What happened to privacy?

"I can't turn it on and off, exactly. As long as you are standing on, or at least touching, earth or metal,
then I can feel the vibrations your heartbeat makes using my Earthbending. Does that bother you?"
She sounded almost self-conscious on the final question.

*If she can't help it, then it's not her fault. There's no reason to make her feel bad.* "Not at all," he attempted to say in a tone of disinterest. Zuko had never been good at insincerity, but he hoped she bought it. He didn't know Toph very well yet, but he already liked her. She appreciated his uncle, and that was worth a lot. "Just curious."

"Liar."

*She just said she can hear your heartbeat and earlier told you she can use that ability to read lies, and you tried to lie to her anyway? You are such an idiot.* Zuko flinched. "No, I-

"It's okay. Thanks for trying to spare my feelings, but you don't need to. I don't care what other people think of me."

Zuko didn't need to listen to Toph's heart to know she was lying, but he knew better than to call her on it. He wasn't that much of an idiot. "I'm sorry."

"That's one of the only lies you've told the whole time you've been with us, and none of them have been lie lies. Why does me knowing if you're lying bother you if you don't really do it?" she asked.

"It's just…" Zuko dropped his hand from Appa. "It feels really personal. It's my heart. What's more private than that?"

Toph considered this. "You know, love and all that gooey emotional crap aren't really stored in your heart. It's just an organ that pumps blood to your brain. Your feelings are still private, but I'll try not to pay too much attention to your heart since it upsets you."

"Thank you," he said. "Does that mean you trust me?"

"Absolutely. I'm a great judge of character. You're good people."

Zuko was stunned. *I'm not worthy of her faith. But I'll work to become so.* He bowed to her. "I appreciate that, Master Bei Fong. You honor me."

Now it was Toph's turn to blush. "Just don't tell Katara I'm a softy. I have a rep to protect, you know?"

"Your secret is safe with me," Zuko said solemnly.

"What secret?" A suspicious looking Sokka appeared with a bag slung over his shoulder. "You already scheming?"

Toph rolled her eyes and punched Sokka in the shoulder. "Mind your own, Snwoozles. You have a few secrets of your own." She stood on her tiptoes and whispered something in his ear.

Sokka turned scarlet. "How do you- I never told anyone- That's private!"

Toph patted Sokka on the shoulder. "And private it shall remain," she said soothingly. "That the last of the stuff?"
"Yeah." Sokka tossed the bag onto the saddle. He turned to Zuko. "Look, I'm really sorry about what Bato did to you. It was wrong. You didn't deserve that. Nobody deserves that. But if this all turns out to be a trick to give Aang to your father I won't hesitate to take you down, got it?" Sokka glared at Zuko.

Zuko nodded. "Got it."

Sokka stared into Zuko's yellow eyes with his blue ones for a long moment before nodding and walking off.

Toph punched Zuko in the arm. "I think he likes you," she teased.

"Ow! What was that for?"

"That's how I show affection."

"Great," Zuko said.

Katara approached. She looked forlorn, staring into the distance. "You okay?" Zuko asked softly, before wondering if maybe it wasn't his place to ask.

But she gave him a soft smile. "Sokka and I were just reunited with our father, and now we're splitting up again. It doesn't feel right." She hugged her chest.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

She shook her head. "We'll see him again soon. And after the invasion we can all go home." She smiled.

Zuko wished he could return that smile, but his thoughts were far from pleasant. *Except for me. Will my people ever accept me again after what I have to do?* He looked away.

"Zuko?" Katara asked.

Aang floated over at that exact moment. "The Earth King wishes us good luck! Sokka's almost done saying goodbye to your dad. Let's load up," he chirped.

Zuko looked at the distant horizon. *My first time back home - with the exception of one ill fated attempt to pursue the Avatar - in three years, and possibly my last.* He climbed atop the bison.

"All right, everybody!" crowed Aang. "Next stop, the Fire Nation!"

Chapter End Notes

Roku! Why Roku can appear to Zuko will be explained later (although if you already have a guess it's probably right). Zuko's loyalty is pretty much his defining characteristic. There's almost nothing Hakoda, Aang or Katara could have said to make him betray the Fire Lord. What he needed to hear was something they didn't know. Ozai isn't the rightful Fire Lord. Now Zuko is on team Avatar!
If having Roku tell Aang pretty much the exact same thing he just told Zuko seems a little pointless, consider how the GAang would have reacted to Zuko's awkward fumbling explanation for how Aang's past life totally appeared to him and said they needed to go to the Fire Nation and no, this isn't a trick to take you to my father. That would have gone over great.

Up next, Zuko teaches the GAang some stuff about life in the Fire Nation! Cultures will clash!
Sokka took a hesitant step onto the rocky beach. "This is it you guys, we're officially in enemy territory." He swallowed dramatically.

Katara rolled her eyes. "Yeah, look at all the Fire Nation soldiers." She gestured to the deserted shore.

Zuko cleared his throat. "Actually, we've been in the Fire Nation for a while now. My country counts the ocean around and the air above our lands as being part of the Fire Nation. And the Fire Nation is actually the place you're least likely to find on duty Fire Nation soldiers. We're not invading our own lands, after all."

"Thank you, Mr. Smarty Pants," Sokka said sarcastically.

"Hey," Aang said. "Zuko is our guide. We should listen to him. I, for one, am learning a lot. A hundred years ago, the Fire Nation didn't count air space as part of their country. Nobody did. Air is the element of freedom, after all."

"And if there's one thing that's the opposite of free," Sokka said. "It's the Fire Nation."

"You might be surprised," Zuko said.

"Why's that?" Katara asked genuinely.

Zuko shrugged. "The only people you've met from the Fire Nation have been soldiers and colonials. That's not what most of us are like."

"What are you like?" Katara asked.

"Ummmm..."

"Ha!" Sokka laughed. "Some guide you are. Hey!" Sokka protested as Toph elbowed him in the gut.

"So Zuko," Aang said. "Where to first?"

"We should probably find shelter and a place for Appa to hide. Then we all need to get some new
"What's wrong with our clothes? These are Fire Nation clothes," Katara said.

"They're military uniforms," Zuko explained. "People will assume you, me, and Sokka are soldiers on leave, and they'll wonder how the hell kids as young as Aang and Toph wound up in military clothing. We don't need to draw that kind of attention to ourselves."

What a bossy know-it-all. No wonder he and Katara are getting along so well. I just wonder why Toph hasn't gotten sick of him yet. Sokka kicked a rock. As he watched it skitter away, he noticed something in the distance. "Look!"

"A cave," Katara said. "And plenty big enough for Appa to fit inside. Nice find, Sokka!" She started for it.

Toph and Aang followed her, and Sokka was about to as well when he noticed Zuko squat down and touch the ground. "Uh, Zuko? What are you doing?"

Zuko shot up. Clearly, he hadn't realized that anybody was watching him. "Nothing," he said heatedly. "Let's go."

What a weirdo.

... Zuko cleared his throat to get the shopkeeper's attention. The tall, thin man with a long, thin mustache looked up from his catalogue. He had small gold wire-rimmed spectacles that flashed in the sunlight. He adjusted his glasses. "How can I help you, young man?"

"We need to buy some clothes."

"Well, you've certainly come to the right place," the shopkeeper said pleasantly. "Just back from deployment, are we?" The shopkeeper came out from behind the counter.

"Yeah," Zuko said.

"Are you from the area?" he asked as he rifled through a box full of measuring implements.

"No," Zuko said. "We're staying with our aunt and uncle. They asked us to pick up some clothes for our cousins, too, while we were here."

The shopkeeper chuckled. "Just got back and they're already putting you to work? Isn't that just the way of it. Do any of you see anything you like?"

"How much is this?" Katara asked, drawing Zuko's and the shopkeeper's attention. She was fingering a lovely red silk wrap. "It's beautiful. And it feels so light." I doubt she's used to summers like this, being from the South Pole.

The shopkeeper walked over, smiling genially. "Ah, I see the lovely young lady has a taste for lovely things! This is a fine grade of silk, but never you fear. I would be honored to offer a hefty discount to the brave young woman who risked her life to serve her country."
Katara blushed. "Oh, I..."

The shopkeeper examined the outfits, finding one identical to the one Katara had chosen but more accurate to her proportions. "Try this on." The shopkeeper pointed out the changing room. "You'll be a vision in it, I'm sure."

Sokka approached with an outfit for himself. "What do you think? Would this look good on me?" Sokka appraised the outfit, seeming unsure. "I'm not sure if it's my color. I do like these buttons though, very fancy. I'm torn."

Zuko restrained the urge to roll his eyes at the Water Tribesman. And I thought my sister was vain. She's got nothing on this guy. Zuko yanked a cheap-looking robe off a hanger and looked for something that would appeal to Aang and Toph. In the background, he was vaguely aware of Sokka discussing the merits of various clothing ornamentation. Zuko picked up some headwear for Aang. He'll need this.

"What do you think?"

Everyone turned around at the sound of Katara's voice. The shopkeeper actually applauded. "Stunning!" he crooned. "Absolutely stunning! I should pay you to wear it. All the young women of the village will come flocking to me for clothing when they see you!"

Katara blushed. "Oh... Thank you..."

"That necklace doesn't really match, though it's an interesting design." The shopkeeper adjusted his spectacles.

Crap! We're screwed. "We, uh... found that on a campaign," Zuko said. "Thought it looked interesting. I'd never seen anything like it before."

The shopkeeper took a closer look. "That might be because this isn't an Earth Kingdom design. It's Water Tribe craftsmanship, if I'm not mistaken."

"Really?" Katara feigned ignorance. "Is it valuable?"

"Hard to say. Certainly, some might be enamored with such a novelty. You should keep it though. It's nice to have a memento of one's time abroad. It will be something to show your grandchildren, if nothing else." The shopkeeper smiled.

"I'll do that," Katara said. She took the necklace off and put it in her pocket. "But you're right. It doesn't really go with my outfit."

"How did you recognize that it was Water Tribe?" Sokka asked suspiciously.

That's a good question. Strange knowledge for a tailor in a small town to have. Zuko would have almost sworn the tailor looked nervous.

"I had a friend who was a member of the Southern Raiders. He showed me all kinds of oddities he found down there."

Sokka opened his mouth to say something Zuko just knew was going to get them into trouble. Zuko cut him off before he had the chance. "Do you think that T- Tsuki and, um, Lu Ten will like these?"
Zuko held up the outfits he found for Toph and Aang. *Next time, think of the fake names before you go into the store,* Zuko berated himself.

"Is your cousin starting school?" The shopkeeper seemed relieved to have something else to talk about.

Sure, why not? "Yes," Zuko said.

"He'll look a fine young man in this." The shopkeeper took the clothes from Zuko, including the ones Zuko had picked out for himself. The shopkeeper frowned. "You'll be much too hot in these."

"I'll be fine," Zuko said in a failed attempt at a casual tone. "I like them."

"I can find you something with a similar design that will be much cooler."

"Really, I'd prefer these."

The shopkeeper looked at Zuko again, and this time his eyes lingered on his face. "You shouldn't be ashamed of combat scars. They're a badge of honor."

Zuko flinched. "I..."

The shopkeeper patted Zuko's shoulder. "You served your Fire Lord with honor, and that is all that matters. Do you want to try this on before you purchase it?"

Zuko took the clothes and headed into the back, more to escape the shopkeeper than anything else. He kept an ear out, though, in case any more dangerous subjects came up. *This might turn out to be more difficult than I thought.* Zuko hesitated before starting to disrobe. He knew he was alone, but still he felt uncomfortable. Then he reminded himself that the less time the Water Tribe siblings spent alone with the shopkeeper the better, and he hurried up. Zuko was right to be concerned, because when he came out Sokka was haggling with the shopkeeper, who was frowning at the young man.

"If she gets a discount, does that mean I get one too?" Sokka asked.

Zuko kicked Sokka in the shins. "Ow! What was that for?"

"A thousand pardons," Zuko told the shopkeeper. "He has spent far too much time in the Earth Kingdom. He intended no disrespect to you. We are sure your prices are more than fair."

The shopkeeper seemed mollified. "Yes, no doubt you're used to dealing with unscrupulous Earth Kingdom scam artists who would charge you a month's salary for a burlap sack. You're back in the Fire Nation, though. Here, merchants conduct themselves with honor."

"Of course," Sokka said, clearly put out and struggling not to say something. "I'm sorry."

"No need for apologies, young man. I, like all of our citizens, am in your debt for your service to our country."

"So then- oof."

Zuko smacked Sokka upside the head while the shopkeeper wasn't looking. "Stop talking," Zuko hissed in his ear.
"Well now, here is your total. I’ll wrap the clothes for your cousins." Katara counted out the gold to give him while the shopkeeper painstakingly wrapped Aang's and Toph's outfits. The price had been exceedingly fair, although Zuko suspected it would have been even lower if Sokka had just kept his mouth shut. It's not really his fault, though. Haggling is just how things are done in the Earth Kingdom. How was he supposed to know it's perceived as an insult here? As their transaction was all but concluded the shopkeeper grinned at Katara again. "Truly, you are a vision. How nice it must be to be able to wear fine things again after being stuck in a uniform for so long. You need only one thing to complete the ensemble." The shopkeeper reached under the counter and pulled out a beautiful hairpin, a ceramic red flower. "What do you think?"

"Oh, we can't really afford."

"You misunderstand, dear girl! This is a gift. You have honored me by choosing to wear clothing made by my own hand. I wish to give you only a small trinket in return." He held out the flower.

"Oh, Than-" Zuko, out of the shopkeeper's line of sight, shook his head emphatically. "k you, but I couldn't."

"Please, child, it would do my heart good to give something to such a proper young lady, and so patriotic."

Zuko shook his head again, and then held up three fingers, hoping that she would understand. "It's too generous. I would feel like I was taking advantage of you. You've already been so kind."

"I am honored by your words, but I want you to have this. It will complete your outfit, and send even more young women to my shop. Please, you will be doing me a favor," he insisted.

Zuko shook his head again. "I'm sorry," Katara said. "It's too much. That's beautiful enough to be sold to a noble lady. I'm just a peasant."

"You do yourself wrong. You are a warrior, a faithful servant of our most gracious and noble Fire Lord. You deserve this as much as any noblewoman. Please, take it."

Zuko nodded and made a 'go ahead' gesture with his hand. Then he bowed slightly. Katara copied Zuko's bow but at the appropriate depth. "You honor me."

The shopkeeper put the hairpin in Katara's hair. It really did match her outfit perfectly. "All the young people of the village will be trying to either marry you or hide their marriage prospects from you," he said with a chuckle.

Katara blushed, and then she bowed again. "Thank you. I will make certain to tell as many people as possible about the excellence of your shop."

As they left with the package containing the clothes for the younger members of their group under Zuko's arm, Sokka glared at Zuko. "What was all that?"

Zuko looked at him in confusion. "What do you mean? The haggling thing? We don't haggle here. It's disrespectful."

"No it isn't," Sokka insisted. "And what was with not letting Katara take that hairpiece? He clearly wanted her to have it. Why shouldn't she take it?"
Zuko sighed. "There's a code of etiquette for giving and receiving gifts in the Fire Nation. It's really complex with the noble class, but among the common people it basically boils down to a few strict rules, one of which being that when a stranger offers you a gift like that, you have to say no three times before you accept it. Otherwise, it's an insult."

"That's stupid," Sokka declared.

Zuko felt a flash of annoyance, but before he could snap at Sokka, Katara interceded. "Come on, Sokka. How would you feel if Zuko called our culture stupid? It's just good manners."

"No, waiting until the oldest person at the fire has started eating before taking a bite is good manners. This is just dumb. If you want to give someone a gift you should just give it to them."

Zuko scowled. "Well, that's not how we do things here," he said. "Get over it."

Toph dropped the pair of shoes Zuko handed her onto the ground. "I'm not wearing these." She folded her arms.

"Toph!" Katara sounded upset, but Toph didn't care a bit. "These are brand new!"

"So? I didn't tell her to buy them. What was she thinking? I've had lots of brand new things in my life. Is that supposed to impress me? Toph jutted out her chin in defiance. "What do I care?"

"So we spent good coin on them, and you're getting them all dirty."

"Take them back," she said with a shrug.

"Be reasonable!" Katara pleaded. "What will people think if you walk around with no shoes on? We can't let anybody find out you're an Earthbender."

"I doubt that's the first conclusion that anybody will jump to," Toph said with a derisive snort. And if they do, I'll just throw rocks at their head until they agree to keep quiet. Better not say that to Katara, though. She won't approve.

"We can't be too careful," Katara insisted.

Toph was about to reply when she noticed Zuko bending down to pick up the shoes. He pulled something out of his pocket. Or at least his body weight shifted in the way people's usually did when they were pulling things out of their pockets. "Uh, Zuko?" Aang sounded nervous. "What are you doing?"

Toph was pretty sure the thing Zuko pulled out of his pocket was a knife, because his next movement was one she identified easily as Zuko stabbing her shoes. Toph laughed.

"Zuko!" Toph wanted to bottle Katara's outrage so she could savor it later.

Toph didn't realize what Zuko was doing until he tossed the shoes at her. She caught them easily. They had no soles. "Will you wear them now?" he asked.
Toph shrugged. "Sure."

"Problem solved," Zuko said. "Let's go get something to eat."

*I'm digging your style, Sparky.*

...

Zuko led his new companions into the village square. "Our number one priority is to not draw attention to ourselves, so let's all try to keep a low profile, and-"

"Meat!" Sokka ran for one of the wooden stalls advertising various meats.

*I can't believe this is the tactical genius that foiled all of my plans and outsmarted my sister once.*

"Meat!" Sokka begged the vendor.

The heavy man produced a hearty laugh that shook his whole body from his thick gut to both of his chins. "What can I do you for kid? I've got swordfish salmon burgers. Electric eels snake stuffed with crabs spiders. Sharkwhale cubes fried in its own fat-" the man began what was no doubt a very long list.

"That! The thing fried in its own fat please and thank you," Sokka said.

The cook grinned as he turned around to complete the order. "A man after my own heart," he declared. "What'll it be for the rest of you kids?" he asked.

"Those kabobs look good," Katara said.

The man grabbed one and threw it on the grill. "A kabob for the lady."

"Do you have anything for vegetarians?" Aang asked hesitantly.

The man stared at Aang like he had just started speaking a foreign language. "Anything for what now?"

"Do you have anything without meat?" Aang attempted a second time.

"Got some crispy seaweed. ‘Course, I fry it in sharkwhale fat..."

"He'll just have an ice drink," Zuko said quickly. "He's just kidding."

"Right, then," the man said. "Mango, Papaya or Banana," he asked.

"Banana," Aang said. "And can you put some onion in it?"

"Can I put-"

"Knock it off A- Lu Ten. He's a real prankster, this one," Zuko said.

"Uh-huh."
"I'll have one of those swordfish salmon burgers," Toph declared.

"You got it, little lady." The man handed Sokka a paper bag dripping grease. "You want hot sauce, fire sauce, or volcano sauce?" the man asked Sokka.

"Uh... do you have a regular sauce?"

"I said we have hot sauce."

"I'll take that, then."

The man handed Sokka a small container of a red sauce that looked incredibly spicy. "And what'll it be for you?" he asked Zuko as he wrapped the bottom of Katara's kabob stick in several napkins to catch all the grease and juices dripping off of it. The man handed the kabob to Katara. "Here ya go."

"Thanks!" Katara said.

"Do you have any fire flakes?" Zuko asked hesitantly.

"Do I- What do you take me for? Of course I do! I'll crisp them up nice."

"You don't need to," Zuko said.

"Oh, you're a Firebender, eh?" The man tossed Zuko a bag tied with string.

*I haven't eaten these in three years.* Zuko felt weirdly giddy to be able to eat his favorite childhood snack again. *They probably aren't as good as I remember. I probably built it up in my head because I couldn't have any.*

Sokka tossed a gelatinous cube into his mouth. "Mmmm, so good," he said with his mouth full. "I can taste the fat."

"I'm so ashamed to be related to you," Katara said as she took a delicate bite out of her kabob. "This is very good, sir."

The man laughed some more as he handed Aang his drink and Toph a glistening burger wrapped in several napkins. Katara counted out the money they owed him while Zuko opened the bag of fire flakes. He threw a handful into the air and then created a brief stream of fire for them to fall through before catching the now crispy flakes.

"Cool!" Aang grinned as Zuko dumped the flakes into his mouth. "Can I have some?!" He was bouncing on his toes.

"They're not vegetarian," Zuko reminded Aang. "Sorry. Otherwise I would share."

"That's okay," Aang said with a shrug. "I like my banana drink. Want some?"

"No thanks."


Zuko laughed. He tossed another batch into the air to crisp and catch, then offered the handful to
Toph. She grinned as she reached her much tinier hand in and pulled out a fistful of fire flakes. "Careful," Zuko said. "Hot."

Toph threw the whole handful into her mouth. "Yah! Aang! Hand over your ice drink!" She snatched it before he could comply and took a long sip before returning it half as full as it had been.

"Sorry," Zuko started to say, but Toph was now laughing.

"Give me some more of those."

Zuko chuckled and shook his head, but he complied. Instead of eating them straight this time, Toph sprinkled them on top of her burger. She took a bite and grinned maniacally. "Yummmm." Sokka, Katara, and Aang all laughed at Toph, or rather they laughed with her, Zuko realized. Toph was putting on a show, and clearly having a good time doing it. They all have a sense of humor about themselves and each other. They're not looking for weaknesses to exploit in each other. They trust their friends not to ridicule or manipulate them. Zuko thought of Azula.

"You okay, Zuko?"

"Huh?"

"Your face got all pensive."

"Just thinking." Zuko threw another handful of flakes in the air.

"What ab-" Their conversation was interrupted by a naked toddler running up to Zuko and holding out his hands.

Zuko laughed and dropped some crispy fire flakes into the kid's hands. The toddler stuffed his cheeks full of flakes, although most of them ended up on the ground, grinned, and then ran off without a word.

"Uhhhh..." Sokka stared at Zuko with wide eyes. "Does that happen a lot?"

"What happened?" Toph asked. "Some kid asked Zuko for free snacks. So what?"

"He wasn't wearing any clothes!" Katara sounded horrified. "He was naked!"

"So?" Zuko said through a mouthful of fire flakes. "What's the big deal?"

"Really?" Toph asked. "Are you guys pulling a prank on me? I can hurt you."

"It's true! That kid wasn't wearing any clothes. And that woman isn't wearing a shirt!" Aang pointed at a breastfeeding mother who, as he said, was topless.

Zuko grabbed Aang's hand and forced it down. "Knock it off," he hissed. "You're being rude. She's just feeding her kid."

"Why doesn't she use a blanket?" Katara asked. "That's what we do in the Water Tribe, and we don't take our shirts off."
"It's blistering hot out," Zuko said. "Covering your newborn with a blanket in this weather is a great way to give it heatstroke. Anyway, what difference does it make? If it bothers you, don't look." Zuko crisped another handful of flakes.

"So people in the Fire Nation just... walk around naked?" Sokka asked. "Just because it's hot? That's crazy!"

Zuko rolled his eyes. "We don't 'walk around naked'. She wasn't naked."

"That kid was definitely naked," Aang said in a mild voice. "No clothes."

"He was practically a baby. He's not even old enough to know the difference."

"Shouldn't his parents do something about it?" Sokka asked. "Shouldn't somebody make him get dressed?"

"Hold on, guys," Aang said. "This is a cultural difference. In Fire Nation culture apparently nudity isn't a big deal."

"Not when kids do it," Zuko said. "Adults don't walk around naked, that would be completely inappropriate."

"But that woman-" Sokka began.

"So do you think her kid should starve or get heatstroke?" Zuko asked. "Or do you think new mothers shouldn't be allowed outside until their kids are weaned?"

"Uh..." Sokka looked at Katara.

"What?" she asked.

"You want to take this one?"

Katara took a bite out of her kabob and chewed thoughtfully. "Nope!" she said after she had swallowed. "I like seeing you suffer. Also, I think Zuko might be right. It's like the thing Aang said about milk. Or seafood in the Earth Kingdom."

"I'm not following," Sokka said.

"Me neither," Toph admitted.

"Ooh!" Aang threw his hand in the air and started hopping from foot to foot. "I get it, call on me! Call on me!" he pleaded.

"Aang?" Katara said, clearly amused.

"When people grow up in different environments, it shapes them physically and culturally. People in the Fire Nation don't drink milk because this isn't a good environment for dairy farming. And they don't have the same nudity taboos as the Water Tribes or Earth Kingdom because the intense heat makes lots of clothing uncomfortable or dangerous."

"Excellent answer, pupil Aang," Katara said. "Full marks."
"Woo hoo!"

Zuko shook his head. "You guys are so weird," he muttered.

Aang whistled a jaunty tune. Katara and Toph had gone off to check out some hot mud pools that were supposed to feel amazing and have some sort of special medicinal properties. Katara's interest was as a healer, and Toph had decided to tag along because: "You had me at mud." Sokka wanted to try diving off of some tall cliff locals used when hunting for oysterclams. Zuko went with him because: "I don't want you to get yourself killed." Sokka was offended, but Katara seemed to appreciate someone taking over 'keep Sokka alive' duty from her for a little while. Aang, however, had different plans for the day. Still thinking about Avatar Roku's words, Aang was determined to interact with as many Fire Nation citizens as possible.

"Good day, Hotman. Hotman." People were giving him strange looks for some reason. Aang couldn't figure out why.

"There you are! I've caught you!"

Aang froze. He turned to see a severe looking woman glaring at him. "Me?"

"Yes, you! You thought you could get away with skipping school?"

"With... Yeah! That's what I did. Skip school. I'm sorry. I'll head there right away." Aang put on his most remorseful face. "I was wrong."

"You most certainly were. You can't fool me. I'll escort you to make sure you make it to class this time. Come along."

*Fire Nation school! This is great! What better place to learn about the people of the Fire Nation than their own schools!*

Zuko smirked at Sokka. Maybe it was petty, but the other boy had been giving him a hard time, and it was a little sweet to see the tables turned. Sokka gulped as he stood at the edge of the cliff, looking down at the choppy water below. "Are you sure this is safe?"

"Come on!" another teen loudly complained. "Jump or get out of the way! Some of us have places to be!"

"It's okay, Sokka. If you're too afraid-"

Sokka’s eyes snapped up to glare at Zuko. "I'm not afraid!" he declared shrilly.

Zuko held up his hands in mock surrender. "Of course not. You don't want to jump in the water for a completely different reason."

"Well I don't see you particularly eager to jump in either!"
Zuko smiled. *I can't exactly turn down that challenge, now can I?* Zuko tossed the contents of his pockets, with one exception, at Sokka. "Watch my stuff."

"What are you-"

Zuko unsheathed his knife and put the blade between his teeth, before tossing the sheath at Sokka as well. "Hey! No cutting in line!" someone yelled.

Zuko ran. "Wait! Zuko!"

When he hit the water, instinct took over. He started kicking immediately, using the momentum from the dive to help him get to the bottom. *Lu Ten taught me how to do this,* he remembered. *We were at Ember Island. I was scared to jump, but he told me it was alright and that I could wait until I was ready. He dove down and came back with dozens of oysterclams. I helped him clean them and we found four pearls. One of them was a fire pearl. "I'm collecting these, Zuko. One day I'll have enough to make into a necklace. I'll give it to the woman I'm going to marry." Lu Ten grinned.*

"Who are you going to marry, Cousin?"

"Well, I haven't met her yet," he admitted.

We both laughed. *In the end, I summoned the courage to dive. I didn't make it to the bottom that time, but Lu Ten hugged me and said he was proud of me anyway. By the time that vacation was over I was bringing up oysterclams almost every time I dived down.*

Zuko took out his knife and started cutting oysterclams away from the rocks. *You would have made a great Crown Prince, Lu Ten. Much better than me. You wouldn't have disgraced yourself. You were always so brave and so strong. If you had lived...* When Zuko broke the surface holding up the bag of his catch, yelling "Dinner!" at Sokka and grinning, he was confident the ocean water was disguising his tears.

…

Katara raised a brow when she and Toph entered the cave and smelled stew simmering over the fire. "You started dinner?" she asked Sokka in disbelief.

Sokka shook his head and pointed at Zuko, who Katara now saw was whittling holes in oysterclam shells. " *You started dinner?* I didn't even know he could cook. *I figured he was used to having servants for that sort of thing.*

Zuko didn't look at her, focused on blowing on the oysterclam shell. "Is that okay?"

"Well, yeah, of course. I'm just surprised."

"Thanks," Zuko said dryly.

"No, it's just... Usually I have to do all of that stuff by myself. Thank you."

Zuko added his shell to a small pile of shells with holes in them and picked up a new shell. They were all clean and shiny. Katara thought they looked lovely when the firelight reflected off of them. "You're welcome." He started whittling his new shell. "It's oysterclam stew."
"I kind of figured that," she said.

"Zuko and I caught the oysterclams."

"You really jumped off that crazy tall cliff?" Toph asked Sokka. "I thought for sure you would pigchicken out."

"I jumped!" Sokka defended himself. "...Eventually."

Toph laughed. "I knew it!"

"Hey! I did jump. That's all that counts."

"Sokka did a good job," Zuko said mildly. "Especially since it was his first time."

"He pay you to say that?" Toph asked.

"No," Zuko said, not seeming to realize she was kidding. "Katara keeps all the money on her person." Well, I have to, otherwise Sokka spends it all on trinkets and jerky.

"Right," Toph said. "So where's Aang?"

Zuko shrugged and then blew on his shell. "He's not back yet."

Sokka sat up suddenly. "Yeah," he said in a strange tone of voice. "Where is Aang, huh, Zuko?" He glared at Zuko.

Zuko looked up from his shell. "Sokka," he said with a sigh. "We've been together the whole day. It's literally impossible for me to have done anything to Aang. He probably just got distracted by a colorful bird or flower and is on his way back right now." Zuko returned to his whittling. "Quit being paranoid."

"That's exactly what a guilty person would say!" Sokka scrambled to his feet and pointed an accusing finger at Zuko.

Katara's heart leapt into her throat. I can't believe I let us split up. What is wrong with me? If Aang's in trouble it's all my fault. I should have been there to protect him! Katara felt sick.

"Hey, guys! What are you doing, Sokka?"

Everyone except for Zuko turned to watch Aang enter the cave. "Where have you been?!" Katara practically shrieked.

"We were worried sick!" Sokka shouted, still pointing at Zuko. He then realized he was still pointing and lowered his hand, his cheeks reddening.

"I wasn't worried about you at all actually," Toph told Aang.

"I was at school," Aang said, sniffing the air. "What's for dinner?"

"Oysterclam stew," Zuko said. He pointed at a small pot between where the stew was simmering and
the rice was cooking. "I made you a vegetarian version." Zuko started stringing his shells together.

"Thanks, Zuko!"

"What were you-" Katara started to question Aang, but she was cut off by Zuko loudly clearing his throat.

"Are you getting sick Zuko," Aang asked, clearly concerned. "Are your ribs still bothering you? Maybe Katara should take a look at them again."

Zuko glared at Sokka. "I'm fine."

Sokka squirmed under the weight of Zuko's gaze. "Aang, what did you-"

Zuko cleared his throat again, louder this time. He tied the string of oysterclam shells together, making a necklace.


"Did you say something?" Zuko asked.

Sokka released a far more dramatic than necessary sigh. "I'm sorry I accused you of doing something to Aang." Sokka rubbed his neck. "My bad."

"Why would you think Zuko did something to me?" Aang asked.

"You were late!" Sokka yelled.

"We all agreed to be back before dark," Aang said. "The sun hasn't even started going down yet. Anyway, even if something did happen to me, why would you assume it was Zuko?"

"Well, you know... What did you mean you were at school?" Sokka deflected.

"Well, the school truancy officer saw me and thought I was skipping school. I guess you guys bought me a school uniform by accident-"

Zuko looked up suddenly and slapped his forehead. "I'm such an idiot! That's why the shopkeeper asked if our cousin was starting school!"

"See," Sokka exclaimed triumphantly. "I was right! Aang being late was Zuko's fault."

"Sokka," Katara said.

"I wasn't even late," Aang protested. "It doesn't matter anyway, Zuko, because I had a really good time at school."

Zuko raised a brow. "Seriously?"

"Yeah! I made a macaroni portrait of the Fire Lord! Look!" Aang pulled out what was, to Katara's utter amazement, actually a macaroni picture of Fire Lord Ozai. Zuko looked the opposite of impressed. "Does it look like him?"
Katara never realized just how severe Zuko could look when he wanted to. It wasn't just his frown. Zuko frowned a lot - way more than a person should, actually. It was the way his whole face went still, like he was holding in a powerful negative emotion that one wrong move would release like a powerful hurricane. She shivered.

"A little bit," Zuko conceded.

"Sweet!" Aang chirped.

Zuko threw his oysterclam shell necklace at Sokka. "Hey!" Sokka scowled at Zuko, who went over to the stew to stir it. "What was that for?"

"I made that for you," Zuko said. "My cousin made one for me the first time we went diving for oysterclams together. He said it's nice to have reminders of accomplishments you're proud of."

Katara didn't think it was possible for a person to look more guilty and upset than Sokka did in that moment. "Oh... thanks, Zuko. That's... really nice."

"Uh huh," Zuko sounded unimpressed.

"I really am sorry about-"

Zuko held up his hand. "Save it."

Sokka fingered the necklace, seemingly unsure what to do with it. "That's pretty," Aang said. "Can I have one?"

Zuko grumbled something that sounded suspiciously like, "I didn't sign on to be your personal jewelry maker," but he went back to his pile of shells.

"What are Fire Nation schools like?" Katara asked.

Aang sat down and started babbling about his day. The air was warm and full of pleasant smells. She was listening to her best friend speak with a voice full of joy. Katara felt warm and content, which is why she almost missed when Aang said something alarming.

"Wait. What do you mean, when you go back tomorrow? You can't go back tomorrow, we have to leave first thing in the morning," Katara told Aang.

"But we have weeks until the Summer Solstice. I have time to stay a little longer. I'm having a good time. Plus, I'm learning a lot about the Fire Nation."

"You need to be careful, Aang," Zuko said. "Fire Nation schools are very strict."

"I'll be careful," Aang said. "I promise."

"I agree with Katara," Sokka said. "I think this is a terrible idea and that we shouldn't stay in any one place for more than a couple days."

"But this is important!" Aang said. "The kids at this school are the future of the Fire Nation. If we do achieve peace they'll be the ones who have to maintain it. I have to learn to understand them."
"Well, how long do you think that will take?" Katara asked. "Seems like a pretty big task, getting to know a whole generation. We can't stay too long."

"It won't take long," Aang promised. "I'm already making friends! Isn't that great?"

"You're such a dweeb, Twinkle Toes," Toph declared. "You're probably the first kid in history to argue why he should go to school. Can we eat now? I'm hungry."

Zuko was a light sleeper. He hadn't always been, but his life had become such that it required a hyper-awareness of his surroundings, even when he slept. So when Katara got up and went outside, Zuko woke as well. He looked at the fire, which had almost died out, then at Aang curled up against Appa, Toph nestled in her nest of rocks, and Sokka actually clutching his boomerang in his sleep. Zuko stood up and channeled power into the fire, trying to keep his companions from getting cold. He wondered if he should go outside and check on Katara. On the one hand, maybe she left because she wanted some privacy. On the other hand, going to check on someone who wandered off seemed like a very Katara thing to do, and Uncle Iroh always said people often treat others the way they themselves expect or would like to be treated. Zuko got up and went outside. Katara was standing under the waning moon, up to her ankles in the surf, practicing her bending. It occurred to Zuko he had never seen Waterbending outside of combat before, so he sat down to watch her. At first he didn't think she knew he was there, so he was shocked when she spoke to him.

"I didn't know you have a cousin."

Zuko scooped up a handful of pebbles and let them drop from his hand, one by one, making tiny little clacking sounds as they hit the ground. "Had."

She was still facing the ocean. Oddly, the fact that she couldn't see him made it easier to talk to her. "I'm sorry."

Zuko shrugged, even though she couldn't see it. "He was a captain in the army. He... he was sort of my hero."

Katara turned around and hid his face from her, pretending the rocks were far more fascinating than they could ever possibly be. She walked over and sat down next to him. "You know, it occurs to me that I don't know anything about you," she told him. "I know everything about Sokka, more than I really want to, in all honesty. Aang is an open book, and he's shared almost everything significant in his life with me. Even Toph - I don't know everything about her, but I know a lot. You though... You keep surprising me. I should probably stop being surprised and accept that almost everything I think I know about you is wrong. Who are you?"

Zuko ran his fingers through the black rocks. "What do you want to know?"

She was silent for a long time. Zuko listened to the waves crashing against the shore and retreating over and over again. It was soothing. "When you captured me after I stole that Waterbending scroll, you told me you had lost your honor. How did that happen?"

Of course she would ask about that. She couldn't ask an easy question like what my favorite color is? "I already told you. I was a coward."

"I'm going to have to go with Aang on this one. You're no coward, Zuko."
"I was," he said. "That's why I was banished. I... refused to fight in an Agni Kai after I had accepted a challenge."

"What's an Agni Kai?"

Zuko picked up a rock and walked to the edge of the water. He threw the stone as far as he could. He watched it fall through the surface and imagined it sinking to the bottom. "It's a duel between two Firebenders."

"But if you were afraid to fight, why did you accept? Why not say no?"

Zuko clenched his fists in anger. She doesn't know what she's talking about! She couldn't possibly understand! Although a more rational part of his brain responded, That's because you're being deliberately vague. She doesn't have all of the information.

"Zuko?"

Zuko's palms were getting hotter and hotter. He forced himself to unclench his hands and turn around. "Do you love your father, Katara?" he asked.

She looked taken aback. "Of course."

"If he raised his hands against you, would you try to defend yourself?"

"My father would never do that," she said, sounding outraged on his behalf.

"But if he did," Zuko insisted. "Would you fight back? Or would you maybe think, 'This is my father who loves me. If he's doing this to me I must deserve it.' Would you just take it?" he said softly.

"I..." Katara looked bewildered. This is too far outside her realm of experience. She can't comprehend it. "I don't know."

"Well, I know," Zuko said. "And I didn't fight back. That's why I was banished."

After that it was so quiet Zuko would have sworn he could hear the blood flow in his ears. "Is that how you got that scar?" Katara whispered. She's quiet, like it's some shameful thing. And I guess it is, but it still hurts that she thinks so.

"Yes."

"I'm sorry I never got the chance to heal you, back in Ba Sing Se."

Zuko shrugged. "It doesn't matter."

"But-"

"Even if the mark were gone, the scar would still be there. Thank you for wanting to help me, but it's fine."

Katara stood up and walked over to him. "Even after he did this to you, you were still loyal to him. I
"I can't understand."

"No," Zuko agreed. "You can't."

Katara put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry. If you ever need to talk to some-"

"I'm going back inside. Sorry for interrupting your bending practice." Zuko headed back into the cave. Toph, was shivering even though the fire was still going strong. Zuko laid a blanket on top of her before settling back into his own sleeping space. He was never able to get back to sleep. Even after Katara returned half an hour later and her even breathing told him she was asleep, he continued to stare at the ceiling, unable to get the smell of burning flesh out of his nose.

Chapter End Notes

There you have it! More Toph and Zuko bonding! Fire Nation culture! Zuko's past! Funnily enough I am actually a vegetarian (not as strict as Aang though, I eat seafood sometimes) so I found writing the meat appreciation scene quite amusing. Let me know what you thought about this chapter. Positive or negative. All feedback is appreciated.

P.S. The stuff in italics is the internal monologue of the characters. Which means it might not strictly speaking be factually accurate. Just because Zuko thinks Katara is thinking something doesn't mean she necessarily is.

P.P.S. Cultural misunderstandings can be very complicated and tend to lead to very high emotions. The cultures portrayed in this fic are fictional, but if you are offended by anything in this story you have my sincerest apologies.
Here's the conclusion of the Headband. Warning for homophobia. This chapter has been re-uploaded after more hard work proofreading by Nebulababe. Thanks again!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Toph dragged Zuko along through the town. "I can't believe you didn't tell me there's a dormant volcano on this island! And we can go inside! That is so cool!"

"Technically, the whole island is a dormant volcano. Almost every island in the chain is. Well, some aren't exactly dormant..." Zuko trailed off.

"This is so cool!" Toph stopped in front of the smell of meat. "Hey, get me another one of those burgers."

"Katara still has all the money," Zuko reminded her. "It's almost like Sugar Queen doesn't trust us."

"I packed us some smoked oysterclams for lunch," Zuko said. "Want some?"

"We had oysterclams for dinner," Toph groused. "I want something else."

"What do you want me to do, hunt down a wild boar lion and serve it to you raw?"

"Of course not. Cook it first," Toph said with a cheeky grin.

Zuko chuckled, but a moment later he fell into another one of the pensive silences she was beginning to associate with him. This guy can't take a step without tripping over a negative thought, can he?

"You okay, Sparky?"

"Just thinking about my sister."

"Gee, thanks. I was just teasing him. I didn't try to set the guy on fire."

"No, no! I meant I was thinking about how you're nothing like her."

"Even she didn't put you through this kind of grief, is that it?" Toph asked.

"I always wanted to be a good big brother to Azula, but I never had the chance. She never... needed me. The only use she ever had for me was as a pawn in her various schemes. We never got to just be brother and sister. This... you poking fun at me and making unreasonable demands. Me taking you somewhere you want to go. I guess I just wonder if this is what it would have been like to have a sister who wasn't..."
"A homicidal pyromaniac?"

"Yeah," Zuko said softly.

Toph squeezed Zuko's hand. "My parents never had any kids after me. I think they were worried they'd get another defective one. But I always wanted a brother or sister. A brother preferably, someone who wouldn't be afraid to roll around in the dirt with me."

Zuko didn't answer at first, and Toph started to wonder if she had crossed some kind of line. *He probably doesn't want a spoiled, dirty loudmouth for a sister either. I'll just play it off, make some kind of joke about- "Hey!"

Zuko had suddenly yanked her forward, forcing her to stumble through a puddle of mud. He kept hold of her hand, though, ensuring she wouldn't fall. "Toph, you ruined your shoes! Katara's not going to be happy with you."

Toph shoved her hand into the mud, sending several clumps flying towards the Firebender. "Eat mud, Sparkles!"

*Having a sibling is even better than I thought it would be.*

... 

Zuko had been inside a lot of volcanoes in his youth. His entire country was really just a large collection of volcanoes. But seeing them through Toph's eyes - feet? - gave him a whole new perspective on them. By the time the two finished exploring, the sun was sinking into the horizon and the two were tired but elated. "I'm surprised Sokka hasn't chased after us and accused you of kidnapping me yet."

Zuko knew that was a joke, but he was starting to get sick of the constant mistrust from the other boy. He wasn't amused. "Yeah, you should probably go inside first, otherwise he'll assume I'm returning from disposing of your body."

Toph laughed. *I was only half joking, but at least someone is getting some enjoyment out of the situation.* "Do you think he'll ever come around?"

Zuko shrugged. "I just shrugged-"

"I know," Toph said.

"Oh sorry, I wasn't sure how much you picked up. Anyway, I guess he's entitled to a little bit of suspicion after."

"You want us to what?!" They heard Katara shouting inside the cave.

Toph and Zuko stopped. *I really don't want to go in there. Maybe we should go find something else to do.*

"Then Sokka will definitely think you kidnapped me," Toph pointed out.

*Great. I don't know what's going on in there, but I know I definitely don't want to be involved.* "Ladies first," Zuko said.
"Pigchicken," she said fondly as she led the way into the cave. Aang was flipping through a textbook Zuko recognized from his days at the Fire Nation Royal Academy for Boys. Katara and Sokka were standing over him yelling.

"I need you to pretend to be my parents."

*Yep. I definitely don't want to be involved in this in any way.*

"Aang, this has gone too far," Katara said.

"It's just for one meeting," Aang said.

"That's not the point! It's too risky, we're going to get caught," she told him.

"But I'm really getting through to these kids!" he pouted. "And I'm learning so much about how people in the Fire Nation are taught to view the rest of the world. That thing Zuko said about the Air Nomads came right from this book."

Zuko felt his cheeks heat up. It was also at this moment that the trio finally noticed Toph and Zuko had returned from their excursion. "You!" Katara pointed at Zuko. "Talk some sense into him!" *I'm the sensible one now? When did that happen? How do I reverse it?*

"Hi, guys," Aang said cheerfully. "How was the volcano?"

"Wicked," Toph said. "How was kid jail?"

"Great! Although I did kind of get into a little bit of trouble... for fighting."

*What?! There's no way. You? You got in trouble for fighting? You don't even fight people who are literally attacking you. You do that weird dodging thing.*

"I'm proud of you, Twinkle Toes." Toph punched Aang in the arm.

"Thanks," Aang said as he rubbed his arm. "But I didn't really fight him. He kept punching me, and I kept moving out of the way, and then he tripped over his feet." *Yep, that sounds like Aang.*

"Lame," Toph declared.

"Anyway, now the headmaster wants to meet my parents. So I need Katara and Sokka to be my mom and dad."

Zuko resisted the urge to slap his own forehead. "And you don't see the critical flaw with that plan?" he asked.

"They can disguise themselves to look older," Aang said.

"I do love disguises," Sokka admitted.

"Do I really have to spell this out for you guys?" Zuko asked. "Because I would rather not." *It's bad enough I said all that racist stuff back when we were enemies. I don't want to accidentally say something offensive now that we're tentatively friends.*
"What do you mean?" Aang asked.

"Ugh." Zuko grabbed Aang's and Katara's wrists and held their arms side by side, displaying the difference in pigmentation. "Get it now?"

"Get what now?" Toph asked. "How many times do I have to tell you guys to cut it out with the nonverbal communication?"

"Oh," Katara said. "Right. I guess Sokka and I trying to pass Aang off as our son would be a little unbelievable." She looked at Toph. "People from the Water Tribes tend to be dark skinned."

"Hmm," Aang mused. "Maybe you and Zuko could pretend to be my parents."

"What?!" Zuko and Katara shouted their horrified objection at the exact same time, while Toph started laughing hysterically.

"Knock it off, Toph!" Katara snapped.

"Ha ha ha! Ha ha ha!" Toph was rolling around on the ground in hysterics.

"You never laugh that hard at any of my jokes." Sokka sounded rather put out.

"Ha ha ha! Ha ha ha!"

"It's not funny!" Zuko shouted.

"Ha ha ha!"

"Stop laughing," Katara demanded.

"What's so funny?" Aang asked.

"Oh man," Toph wiped tears of mirth away from her eyes. "That's the best idea you've ever had, Twinkle Toes."

"I am not pretending to be Zuko's wife."

"Why not?" Aang asked.

"Because I don't want to!"

_That's a relief. I wouldn't even know how to pretend to be in a relationship with her. And I'm pretty sure if I were objecting that stringently she would be offended._ "Aang, it might be time to just hit the road. There will be other schools."

"Wait, I've got it! Zuko and Sokka can be my parents!" Aang looked incredibly pleased with himself.

_Don't murder the Avatar, Zuko. Remember what Uncle said about keeping your temper. Breathe._

Sokka started spluttering in disbelief. "Aang! Two guys can't have a kid!"
"Yes they can." Aang held up his book. "The Fire Nation has gay marriage. There's a whole chapter about it in my book. Actually, there's two, but the second one is in the health and human sexuality section and we haven't-"

Zuko snatched the textbook out of Aang's hand. "Enough! This is a dumb plan! The risk is high and the payoff is minimal. We should just leave."

"No wonder people from the Fire Nation are so messed up and violent," Sokka said. "That's just disgusting."

Don't murder the Water Tribe boy, Zuko. Remember what Uncle said about keeping your temper. Breathe. The tension in the air was as heavy as cast iron cookware. Zuko noticed the cover of Aang's book was smoldering in his hand. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Sokka squirmed under Zuko's murderous gaze. "Just... Two people of the same gender getting married? It's gross."

"And why is that?" Zuko's voice was deceptively calm. Not too deceptive though, because Aang's book was moments away from catching on fire.

"Seriously? It just is."

"Sure, like people from your country are just inferior to people from my country-"

"Hey!" Katara and Sokka both shouted in outrage, but Zuko spoke over them.

"And your culture just is barbaric and antiquated. And all Water Tribe men just are uneducated, sexist savages. And-"

"Stop it, you guys!" Aang sounded close to panic. "This is just a cultural misunderstanding! If we all open our hearts and minds to each other's-"

Sokka scoffed. "I don't want to open my heart or my mind to a country of racist pyromaniacs who also happen to all be huge perverts! The spirits fashioned man and woman to each be one half of a greater whole and for two-"

"Oh, so suddenly you're all religious now, is that it?!" Zuko yelled. "Because this is the first time I've ever heard you even mention the spirits. I've never even seen you meditate! But I do know you tried to blow up a door in a sacred temple once, so excuse me if I don't buy this sudden religious fervor, you hypocritical bigot!"

"I'm a bigot?! I'm a bigot?! You're the one who tried to justify a genocide!"

"At least I admitted I was wrong and am trying to do better!" Aang's book was ashes in Zuko's hand, but he didn't care.

"No you didn't! You never once apologized for any of the horrible stuff you did to us! You expected us to fall all over ourselves forgiving you just because you finally realized that your country's racist propaganda is garbage and that genocide might not be ok, which by the way, most people don't need to have explained to them!"
Both boys were sweating and panting, the weight and heat of their fury filling the room. *Maybe he's right,* a tiny voice whispered in the back of Zuko's head. *Maybe you haven't entirely put your old prejudiced ideology behind you. Maybe you need to work harder to overcome the parts of you that still believe you're better than them.* Meanwhile a much louder voice in his head was screaming about how *that ignorant barbarian has no idea what he's talking about! He's just an uncultured savage!* Zuko opened his mouth to unleash his fury upon the other boy when he suddenly found himself encased in rock. The only upshot was that Sokka was encased in rock also.

"Shut up - both of you - or I'll squish you!"

"He-" both began.

"What did I just say?!" The rocks compressed down slightly.

Zuko felt a twinge of panic. *Toph wouldn't actually hurt you. She just wants to make a point. Listen to what she has to say, and then she'll let you go.* But he couldn't hear her over the sound of his racing heart. *That's what you thought last time. You don't even know this girl. If your own family is willing to hurt you, why would she hesitate to do so? Everybody wants to kill you, Zuko. You have that effect.*

"Let me go." He struggled to keep his voice calm and even despite his panic.

"I'm not done talking."

"Okay, I'm listening! Just let me go!"

"When I'm-"

Zuko took a deep breath, and then he used his Firebending to destroy his makeshift prison. It was a dangerous move, what with some of the heat and concussive force rebounding on him, but he didn't care. He took one look around the cave, at a panicking Aang, furious Sokka, shocked Toph and, strangely, a Katara who looked very sad, and he ran.

…

Katara stared at the pieces of burnt and broken rock. "What is that guy's problem?" Sokka complained loudly. "We never should've let him join the group."

*He sounded scared. He was trying to hide it, but I could tell. Did he really think that Toph would hurt him? The two of them spent the whole day together, and when they came in, they both looked like they'd had a fantastic time.*

"I'm sorry," Aang said softly. "This is all my fault." He sat down hard.

"Aang, how could it be your fault?"

"I'm the Avatar. I'm supposed to promote peace between all the people of the four nations. I couldn't even mediate a dispute between two." Aang flicked a pebble away from him and sighed.

"Don't beat yourself up, Aang," Sokka said. "Fire Nation people are jerks. No one can get along with them. Who would want to anyw- Ow! Toph! Stop it!"
"That's not right. Ever since I came out of that iceberg I've had trouble reconciling the way the Fire Nation is now with the friends I had in the Fire Nation a hundred years ago. How could so many people change so quickly? But the thing is, they haven't changed. The kids I've been going to school with are just like kids everywhere else in the world. Some are jerks, and some are really nice, but most of them are just kids. They're just trying to find their way. They're no different from my friend Kuzon, or from us."

*He's right. Except...* "But Aang, if people in the Fire Nation are just like everyone else, why did Roku say you needed to come here and learn about them? They are different from us."

Aang considered this. *Monk Gyatso once told me that differences don't have to divide us. They can actually bring people closer together. He told me that the more I traveled and saw how different people are, the more I would realize that we are all the same. And he was right. These differences between us, they're cosmetic. Our customs may not be the same, but just because two people express love, loyalty, friendship or faith differently doesn't mean they don't both feel these things just as strongly as each other. Katara, you and I believe a lot of different things, but you're still my best friend. The fact that you eat meat or think two men can't fall in love doesn't change my feelings for you. My feelings are deeper than that."

"Wait," Sokka said. "You agree with Zuko? Come on Aang, he's wrong!"

"The monks taught me that love is a connection between two people's spirits, not their bodies. A person's physical form shouldn't preclude them from the spiritual fulfillment of a loving relationship if that's something they desire to pursue," Aang said.

Katara bit her lip. *I thought it was something shameful. I thought I wasn't supposed to talk about it, or even think about it. I certainly wasn't supposed to know about it. But maybe Aang's right."

"Toph," Sokka said. "You must agree with me. Two guys or two girls? Yuck!"

Toph shrugged. "My dad always said gay people are part of what's ruining our country. I figure anything he's that strongly opposed to must have some merit to it. Besides, people have been looking down on me for the way I am since the day I was born. I'm not about to turn around and do the same thing."

"Ugh, but it's-"

"Dad did it," Katara blurted out.

Silence filled the cave. "What are you talking about?" Sokka whispered with trepidation. "Dad loved Mom, just Mom."

Katara looked away. "Toph, could you...?"

Toph released Sokka and then walked over to Aang. "Come on, Twinkle Toes," she said as she pulled him to his feet. "Let's leave them to it." The two left.

"Katara," Sokka said. "What-"

"It was after Mom died. Dad and Bato became really close. I didn't understand it. I guess I still don't. But they shared sleeping furs. And Bato was always around, helping us with our problems, talking to us when we were upset-"
"Because he's- he was- Dad's friend!"

Katara sighed. "It doesn't matter. The point is that Aang's right. If two men love each other, or two women, who are we to judge? It's none of our concern."

"But men aren't supposed to fall in love with other men!" Sokka shouted.

"Like they're not supposed to fall in love with women engaged to be married," Katara whispered, so softly she wasn't even sure if she meant for Sokka to hear her. But he did.

"That's different! What Yue and I had was good and pure! We..." Sokka's shoulders slumped. "This is Kyoshi Island all over again, isn't it?"

"Maybe," Katara said. "And there's something else too. I think Zuko really is trying to be a better person. That's an admirable thing. Shouldn't we be helping him, instead of making it harder? And shouldn't we acknowledge that maybe, just like he has stuff to learn from us, there might be some things we can learn from him? We're all on the same side."

Sokka scoffed. "Now we are."

Katara smirked. *Got you.* "Exactly. Now we are. So let's act like it."

Sokka groaned. "Are you going to make me apologize?"

"I'm not going to make you. You are going to decide to do the right thing all on your own because you're my mature and responsible big brother that I look up to," she said sweetly.

He stomped off grumbling something that sounded suspiciously like, "Stupid little sister that always has to be right about every stupid little thing."

... 

It felt like the air itself was on fire. Flames shot from his hands and feet in quick succession as Zuko executed just about every Firebending move he knew, culminating in shouting enough flames at the night sky to almost singe the stars themselves. "Anybody ever tell you that you have anger issues?"

Zuko spun around. *Of course.* "Don't you know better than to sneak up on a practicing Firebender?!"

Sokka rolled his eyes. "You couldn't hit me even back when you were trying."

"So you followed me out here just to antagonize me?"

Sokka averted his gaze. "No. I actually came out here to apologize."

"Well you suck at it," Zuko said.

Sokka held up his hands in a placating gesture. "I'm sorry for what I said."

Zuko rolled his eyes. "Thanks, Katara."
"Hey! I decided to come out here all on my own, thank you very much! I'm trying to meet you halfway, but it's a little hard when you don't provide the other half!"

"Fine," Zuko snapped. "Let's hear this oh-so-great apology of yours."

"Uhhh..." Sokka rubbed the back of his neck. "That was it. You know, the part where I said I was sorry for what I said."

"Wow," Zuko said.

Sokka threw his hands in the air. "What do you want from me? A musical accompaniment? Me on my knees?"

Zuko shivered. Not that. Never that. "You will learn respect, and suffering will be your teacher."

"Hey, are you okay? You kind of freaked out a little bit back there, what with the dramatic demolition of those rocks, not that everything you do isn't dramatic, because it definitely is, extremely."

"Would you shut up?!" When Zuko finally turned to look at Sokka, half hoping the other boy had given up and left, Zuko saw that he was standing there quietly. "Sorry," Zuko said. "I just... I don't like being trapped, pinned that is."

"That's pretty reasonable," Sokka said.

That was unexpected. He's just accepting it? He isn't demanding an explanation or calling me a weakling or a coward? "I need to get over it."

"I'm sure if you tell Toph she'll understand and, you know, not do that in the future. She's pretty much your number one fan at this point."

"I don't want to hurt her feelings. Besides, I shouldn't be so... sensitive."

Sokka rolled his eyes again. "Well, you are. You get upset or offended about basically everything. You're like Katara if she could set things on fire whenever she got angry. Which is a terrifying thought."

Zuko remembered how Katara had trounced him in the North Pole and how she had gone toe to toe with his prodigy sister under Ba Sing Se. Katara probably would have been an amazing Firebender, but the thought didn't scare Zuko the way it did Sokka, not when he had Azula to compare it to. Zuko supposed he should be offended by what Sokka said, but honestly he could almost take it as a compliment. Katara has more compassion and courage than anyone I've ever met. There are certainly worse people to be compared to. "Fine."

"Fine what?"

"Fine, I accept your apology. I'm sorry too. I should have apologized to you a while ago. Let's just..." Zuko sort of waved his hand in a helpless I don't really have any idea what I'm trying to say sort of gesture. "Move on."

"Sure," Sokka said. "Follow up question."
"Uh-huh?"

"Wanna marry me?"

_Don't kill the Water Tribe boy, Zuko. Remember what Uncle said about your temper. Breathe._

…

Sokka scratched his mustache. _Why did I have to pick such an itchy disguise?_

Zuko elbowed him. "Stop that," he hissed. "I told you not to wear it."

Before Sokka could respond with a defense of his mustache, a woman entered the waiting area. "The headmaster will see you now," she told them. She glared at Aang before leading them down the hall to an ornate door.

Once inside, Zuko bowed to the headmaster, so Sokka copied him. Aang gave his own bow. The headmaster looked unimpressed. "So you're Kuzon's parents," he said. "I must say, your son has not made a good first impression."

_How dare he say that about my fake son?!_ Sokka opened his mouth to reply.

Zuko beat him to the punch. "Honorable headmaster, you have our sincerest apologies. We know our son's manners are lacking, that's why we moved back to the homeland. The colonial schools are corrupted by Earth Kingdom morals, and our work keeps us too busy to tutor Kuzon ourselves. We hope going to such an esteemed school as this one will purge the Earth Kingdom influence from our boy," Zuko said.

The headmaster seemed to like that answer. _Suck up._ "It is true that colonial schools are notoriously bad. The one your son went to must have been particularly egregious; did you know they told him the Air Nation had no army? What a ridiculous claim."

"Very strange," Zuko said.

The headmaster sighed. "Have a seat."

The three boys sat down. "I'm sorry for any disruption I caused, Headmaster."

The headmaster glared at Aang. "It is always painful to see a good Fire Nation boy corrupted by less savory influences, but I don't think you're entirely the innocent in all this. Your parents are clearly loyal, hard-working citizens. You have their example to emulate, and you chose to copy your peers in the Earth Kingdom instead. This was your choice, and it was the wrong one. Don't you want to grow up to serve your country and the Fire Lord like your parents?"

"Yes, Headmaster," Aang said solemnly.

_Aang's actually a pretty good actor._

"How can you do that when you lack the proper decorum and say such fantastical things? Would you rather end up in the coal mines with uneducated louts and ne'er-do-wells? Would you?"
Aang shook his head. "No, Headmaster."

The headmaster tapped his desk. "I'm willing to overlook your previous indiscretions if you are willing to put in the hard work to catch up with the rest of the students. Does that seem fair?"


"I do not tolerate fighting amongst my students. Once you're sixteen you can join the army and fight all the bloodthirsty savages you like, but as long as you are among civilized people, civilized is how you will behave."

Sokka clenched his fists, struggling not to stand up for his people and the people of the Earth Kingdom. This guy doesn't know the first thing. This is what he calls civilization? Ba Sing Se makes this place look like a little kid's first snow castle. And they would call us bloodthirsty after what they did to us?

"I understand, Headmaster."

"I don't really think anything else needs to be said. I trust you will discipline your boy as you see fit?" the headmaster said.

My time to shine.

"Oh absolutely! Young man, when we get home you are going to get the thrashing of a lifetime, do you hear me?!"

Aang bowed his head contritely. "Yes, Father. I understand."

"There, there, Kuzon." Zuko patted Aang's shoulder. "Cheer up. It sounds like you've learned your lesson, so the rest of the year should be smooth sailing, right?"

"Right!" Aang grinned.

Even when he's pretending that kid can't hold onto a bad mood, and you're not exactly helping, Zuko.

"Well, it seems our business is concluded." The headmaster bowed to Sokka and Zuko. The three boys then bowed to the headmaster. As they departed, Aang was bouncing on his heels and grinning. Zuko pressed down on Aang's shoulder. Aang tried to adopt a more sedate pace, but each step was hit and miss. Definitely an Air Nomad.

"That was really nice what you said, Zuko," Aang said out of nowhere as they made their way back to the cave.

"What?"

"When you were trying to make me feel better." Aang beamed at Zuko.

Zuko blushed. "I was just acting."

"Well, you did a great job. You too, Sokka, I definitely felt the terror."
Sokka smiled. "I missed my calling as an actor for sure," he said.

"Look, Aang," Zuko said. "We really do need to start thinking about moving on soon. It's only a matter of time before you accidentally correct someone on history again or commit some sort of major faux pas. Haven't you learned enough from these kids? There are plenty of places in the Fire Nation we haven't seen yet."

"I know," Aang said slowly. "I think I might be almost ready to go. There's just one thing I need to do first."

"What's that?" Sokka asked absentmindedly as he looked over at a meat vendor and started drooling.

"I'm going to throw my classmates a secret dance party!" Aang did a little jig and then beamed at his companions.

Sokka and Zuko made eye contact. For the first time since Zuko joined the group, Sokka felt like they were really on the same page. Because Sokka saw in Zuko's eyes exactly what he was thinking himself: this kid is going to be the death of me.

... 

Zuko leaned against the wall of the cave. This is insane. Toph was remodeling under Aang's direction while Katara made a fountain and Sokka hung his makeshift decorations.

"Hmmmm," Sokka said, pinching his chin. "Do you think it's too red?"

Zuko tried to infuse as much exasperation as possible into a single expression and then directed that expression at Sokka. I can't believe this is the same group that evaded me on a cross global chase. How embarrassing.

"You're right. This is the Fire Nation. There's no such thing as too much red."

"We use other colors," Zuko protested.

"Only to highlight all the red."

Zuko grumbled vaguely insulting things under his breath. "Quit being a stick in the mud, Zuko," Katara said. "This might actually be fun! And this whole thing is supposed to be a celebration of Fire Nation culture. Isn't that your thing?"

"All it will take is one kid with loose lips to bring the locals down on us. We're supposed to be trying to fly under the radar. And you were the one who wanted to leave, what happened to that?"

Katara shrugged. "Who doesn't like a good party?" She put the finishing touches on her fountain and nodded at it in approval. "What do you think?"

Zuko appraised the fountain. "Whatever."

Katara rolled her eyes. "So you're just determined not to have a good time?"

"I haven't been to a real party since I was thirteen. They were all boring and awful and full of people shoving any kid even remotely in my age range at me, and I had to dance with all of them. It was
humiliating." Zuko kicked a pebble.

"Well you don't have to dance if you don't want to," Aang piped up. "Hey, do you know how to play the Tsungi horn?"

Zuko groaned. "Really?"

"I can't play and dance at the same time, and you don't want to dance."

"Fine," Zuko snapped. "I'll play the stupid horn if you promise that the second this stupid party is over, we leave." At least no one will try to talk to me while I'm playing an instrument. "Immediately."

"Deal!" Aang stuck out his hand.

Zuko glared at Aang, but he shook his hand. "Don't forget."

"Anybody ever tell you you're kind of antisocial?" Sokka asked.

Zuko kicked a pebble at him.

Aang flitted from person to person, giddy as he pulled them inside and situated them with refreshments. "I'm so glad you're here! Thank you for coming!"

"Hi, Kuzon."

Aang turned and saw the girl that had become one of his closest friends at school and smiled. "You made it!"

"Yeah." She blushed and looked away for some reason Aang couldn't figure.

"Want to dance?"

"With you?" She sounded almost hopeful. That was weird. She must be so excited to learn traditional Fire Nation dances! My plan is working!

"Sure!" Aang held out his hand.

It was a little difficult to frown while playing the Tsungi horn, but Zuko managed it as Sokka walked over. "Oh man, this is one of the funniest things I've ever seen. This so makes any possibility of being caught worth it."

Zuko couldn't respond without ruining the song. I will have my revenge.

"Where did you even learn to play?"

The Fire Nation Royal Academy for Boys, you dullard. Zuko remembered his embarrassment when his mother read his first progress report aloud at dinner one night. "Zuko is an excellent student. He
keeps good pace with the other children, and he shows a great natural talent for music. After only a
couple of months, he is already proficient at the Tsungi horn."

"Oh? Play for us cousin," Lu Ten said.

"I don't want to."

"Why not?"

"Lu Ten, do not tease Zuko," Uncle Iroh admonished in a light hearted tone.

"I'm not, I want to hear him play."

"Zuko should be spending less time on silly frivolities, and more time practicing Firebending. A
prince of the blood who still hasn't made fire at the age of six is an embarrassment," father said.

"I can make fire!" Azula said cheerily.

"And we're all very proud of you, sweetheart," Ursa said. "Just like we're so proud of you, Zuko, for
doing well in school. I'm a lucky woman to have two such hardworking, accomplished children."

"If he really worked hard, he would have bent fire by now," Father said.

"What other random skills are you secretly concealing from us?"

Zuko waited for a brief pause in the horn section of the song, took a deep breath, and exhaled a tiny
puff of fire at Sokka.

"Hey!" None of the fire had actually touched him, but Sokka was outraged all the same. "What was
that for?!"

Zuko was back to playing the horn and couldn't respond. Sokka stomped off, grumbling to himself.
Zuko allowed himself a small smile. Now that the other boy was gone, however, Zuko almost
missed his company. That's ridiculous. No I don't, Zuko reprimanded himself. He's obnoxious and I
detest him. Zuko looked down at the dancing children. Aang was pulling Katara onto the dance
floor. Sokka was making quick work of the buffet. Toph stood off to the side leaning against the
wall.

Unbidden, another memory surfaced in Zuko's brain. "What are you doing over here all by
yourself?" Lu Ten demanded teasingly.

"Nothing," I said like a sullen child.

"Come on, Zuko, this is a party! There are no bad moods allowed at parties."

"I don't want you to go."

Lu Ten sighed and knelt down next to me. "I'm coming back, don't worry. And when I return we'll
have conquered Ba Sing Se! It'll be the greatest military accomplishment since Fire Lord Sozin
conquered the Air Nation in a single day! And we won't even have a comet when we do it."

"Great." I didn't even look at him. I didn't care about the war. I was such a selfish spoiled brat. All I
wanted was for my uncle and cousin to stay home.

"Is there anything that could cheer you up?" Lu Ten begged me. He was always better to me than I deserved.

"Can I go with you?"

Lu Ten laughed. "We're not quite so desperate as to be recruiting eight-year-olds into the army, not yet anyway."

"But Master Piandao says I'm one of the best students he ever had! You said I could probably beat a few of the soldiers in your unit, even! I want to help you!"

"First of all, Zuko, you are an amazing student, that's true. But you're also just a kid. That isn't a bad thing. It's okay to be a kid. You should enjoy this time."

"But I'm so behind at everything! I've only been Firebending for a year! Azula is so good and I mess up all the time and-"

He wrapped me in a hug. "That doesn't matter, kiddo. Listen." He pulled back and gripped my shoulders. I forced myself to meet his gaze, even though I wanted to just disappear. "You don't have to compete with Azula all the time. She's good at the things she's good at, and you're good at the things you're good at."

"But she's better at all of the important things. No one cares about the stuff I'm good at. No one except you and Mom."

"Who told you that the stuff you like isn't important? It is important. You are important, Cousin, and you don't have to show up your sister to prove it."

"Dad-"

"Your dad just gets excited about Azula's Firebending because it's something they have in common, that's all. You and your dad have a lot in common as well."

"You think so?"

"Yeah, of course. Your dad loves you, Zuko. He just... He'll come around. I promise. In the meantime, keep working hard - not to compete with Azula, but for its own sake. Uncle Ozai will notice, and he will be proud of you. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Hey." He lowered his voice. "Can you keep a secret?"

What a fool I was. I was so excited at the very mention of a secret. I had no idea how terrible things were going to become. "Yes!" I whispered excitedly.

"Once my dad conquers Ba Sing Se, Fire Lord Azulon is going to give him the throne, and that's not all. My dad is going to make your dad the governor of Ba Sing Se, which means that one day you'll be governor! You'll have your own city to rule. Won't that be exciting?"
“Yeah!”

“Feel better?”

“Yes. Sorry for ruining your party.”

“You didn’t ruin anything.” He picked me up and started for the dance floor. "The night is young, even for little kids."

"I'm not little."

He laughed. "Yes you are! Let yourself be! Have fun. I promise I'll return soon."

I saw Dad dancing with Azula and Mom laughing with Uncle Iroh. My whole family looked so happy. I honestly believed everything was going to be okay. "I'm going to keep working really hard with Master Piandao. By the time you get back, I'll be able to make you so proud!"

He looked so sad. I couldn’t figure out why. "I'm already proud of you. I always will be. But I'm glad you're going to keep working hard, that's a wonderful thing."

"Do you think Dad will be impressed once I master the blade?"

He smiled, but it didn't look right. "Yes."

"Hey, Zuko." Zuko blinked. He'd been so lost in thought, he hadn't even realized the song had ended and the band was taking a break. "Nice playing."

"Nice dancing."

"Thanks!" Aang held out a bowl of fire flakes to Zuko. "Want some?"

"You're not supposed to eat stuff like that while playing the Tsungi horn, dries out your throat. Thank you, though."

"No problem! You're really good."

"Thanks."

"You okay?"

"I'm fine," Zuko snapped. He noticed that Toph was still standing all by herself.

"You want me to cover you for a bit?"

"No I- Yeah, actually. Could you?"

"Sure!"

Zuko passed the horn to the delighted Airbender. Is there anything that doesn't make this kid happy? Zuko made his way over to Toph. "Hey, Toph."

"Sparky," she replied.
"You aren't dancing."

"Are all sighted people this perceptive?"

Zuko blushed. "I just...

"I don't know how, okay?" She kicked a rock across the floor, causing several people to protest as they almost tripped.

"Would you like me to teach you?"

"So people can laugh at me even more?"

"Who's laughing at you?" he demanded.

"Everybody! I'm blind, not deaf. They're all muttering to each other, wondering who invited the blind girl. Why would anyone invite a blind girl? It's so awkward, she doesn't belong here."

Zuko looked away. "Yeah, the Fire Nation isn't very tolerant of, um... disabilities."

"Well, isn't that great for you?"

"No," he said softly. "It isn't."

"Just leave me alone, okay?"

Zuko wanted to say something, anything, to make her feel better, but he had to respect her request. He walked away feeling sick. "Are you supposed to be with the band?" Sokka asked around a mouthful of something meaty.

Zuko shook his head. "Where does all of that food even go? It defies physics."

Sokka stuck out his tongue, which happened to be covered in food. Zuko resisted the urge to vomit. "I thought the music seemed too cheerful suddenly."

"I was asking Toph to dance."

"Good luck with that. Toph hates dancing, and anything else that can be considered high society," Sokka said.

"All right," Zuko said.

"So I have a question."

This ought to be good. "Go ahead."

Sokka pointed at two girls merrily dancing with one another. "When two guys or two girls dance, who leads?"

"Either. Same as when a girl and a guy dance with one another. Usually just whoever knows the steps better."
"That's so w- wonderful!" Sokka corrected himself at the last minute.

"Uh-huh." Zuko couldn't have said what came over him in that moment. "Do you want me to show you?" he asked.

"What?" Sokka looked horrified.

_Abort! Abort! Turn back! _"Do you want to dance with me?" Zuko asked.

"I'm not..."

Zuko rolled his eyes. "I'm not asking you to have sex with me, you moron. I'm just asking if you want to dance. If you don't, you don't, but there's no need to get all awkward about it." Zuko started to go.

"Sure."

_Huh? _"Beg your pardon?"

"I'll dance with you. Whatever."

"Fine," Zuko said. He held out his hand for Sokka to take. At first, Zuko thought Sokka would back out, but the other boy took his hand after a momentary hesitation. Zuko led him to the dance floor. "Do you know this dance?"

Sokka shook his head. "Nope."

"Guess I have to lead then."

"Just don't make me look stupid."

Zuko grinned. "Unnecessary."

Sokka scowled, but he followed Zuko's lead as Zuko led them through the steps he had learned what felt like a lifetime ago at the Royal Court. "You're not really that bad," Sokka admitted begrudgingly.

"Thanks," Zuko said. "I'm touched."

"You must have missed this stuff."

"Dancing?"

Sokka nodded.

_Zuko considered. I didn't miss the dancing or the parties. What I missed was belonging somewhere. _"Not really."

"You don't like high society stuff either?"

Zuko was tempted to agree, especially since that was clearly the answer Sokka would most respect. But then he remembered his resolve not to do any more lying. "I liked some of it."
"Like being treated like a prince?"

Zuko scowled. "Forget it." He dropped Sokka's hand and started to turn away, but Sokka kept his own grip and pulled Zuko closer. "Knock it off," he insisted.

"You are so sensitive," Sokka said. "I didn't mean anything negative."

"Being a prince doesn't mean being treated like you're special. It means you have to be perfect at everything or you're a disappointment to your regal lineage."

"Nobody's perfect at everything."

"Exactly," Zuko said as they fell back into the pattern of the music. "That's the problem. It's a no-win scenario."

"So what stuff did you like?" Sokka asked.

"I liked calligraphy."


"Well, what about you? What do you do besides eat meat and concoct hare-brained schemes that always work for no discernable reason?"

"I," Sokka said with fake pomp and circumstance. "Practice the ancient art of sarcasm. Also, I'm a scientist."

Zuko raised a brow. "You're a scientist?"

"Yeah, I am. I helped invent the hot air balloon. It was a pretty big deal."

"The what? That sounds fake."

"Well it's not! It's a balloon that holds up a little basket with people inside it." Zuko snorted. "There is no way that's real. How gullible do you think I am?"

Sokka scowled. "Whatever." He pushed Zuko away from him. "Song's over."

"Right," Zuko said. "Thanks, I guess."

"Sure," Sokka said as he walked away.

A tiny hand slipped into his. Zuko looked down and saw Toph. She snuck up on me. That's a difficult thing to do, the girl has skills. Go ahead, laugh it up."

Toph shook her head. "Dance with me."

Zuko grinned before sweeping the young girl into his arms, just like his cousin had for him all those many years ago. Eight. Eight years isn't actually that long. Although it's half a lifetime for me, I suppose. Toph wrapped her legs around his abdomen and rested her head on his chest. I was this
young once, but it doesn't feel that way.

"If you drop me, I'll murder you."

"I would never do that," he assured her.

"I know," she whispered. "Thanks."

"For what?"

"Letting me do this on my terms. Aang would have just dragged me out onto the dance floor. Katara would nag me about being social until she wore me down. Sokka... wouldn't ask me at all."

*She has a crush. That's so sweet. Poor kid. I bet he doesn't even know, which is probably for the best. "Nobody has the right to make you do things you aren't comfortable with doing."*

"Even for my own good?"

"Yes. It's your life."

"Thanks, Sparkles," she whispered.

_I thought I was so subtle when I blinked away my tears and sniffed up the snot as I waved at the ship carrying my uncle and cousin off to war. I wasn't. "Disgusting," father said. "You are a prince of the blood. Act like it."_

"I'm sorry, Father."

*I had no idea I was never going to see him again. Just like I have no idea if I'll ever see Uncle again. What if my father has him executed before the Day of Black Sun? Or what if we win and he becomes Fire Lord, but he's so angry at me for abandoning him that he has me banished all over again? Zuko came to a stop as the song ended and people started to disperse. "Party's over."

"Yeah," Toph said as she jumped down.

"Did you have fun?"

She shrugged. *I know the feeling.*

**Chapter End Notes**

All right. Headband is done. On to the Painted Lady. Btw, Sokka saying Zuko never apologized to any of them when he did at the end of Awakening is not a plot hole. Sokka wasn't there when Zuko apologized to Katara, and Katara isn't going to bring it up because saying he apologized to her but not Sokka probably would have just made Sokka angrier.

If you're worried this chapter paints the Fire Nation in too positive a light then stick around for the Painted Lady, because we're going way off script and the Fire Nation...
does not come out of that episode smelling like roses. The bold tags, yeah they're for that chapter. So buckle in.
Aang relaxed on his bison's back, staring up at the clear blue sky as they floated down the river. "Yuck," he heard Katara say. "What is all that... gunk?"

Aang sat up and looked down. The river had gone from a clear blue to an ugly sickly grey. "That can't be good for the fish," Aang said. *Or any people nearby.*

"It's pollution," Zuko said in a bored tone. "There's probably a weapons factory nearby."

"Someone should tell them they're contaminating the river," Aang said.

Zuko gave him a funny look. "I'm sure they know. They just don't care."

"But that can't be good for the environment!" Aang felt outrage blooming in his breast. Rivers were such an important part of the ecosystem, providing a home for fish and other aquatic animals, water for the creatures of the land and air and irrigation to plant life. *Someone thinks it is acceptable to destroy something so essential and beautiful to make things that kill people?*

Zuko shrugged. "One of the side effects of progress," he said casually.

"There's nothing progressive about destroying the natural beauty of the environment," Aang insisted.

Zuko rolled his eyes. "What do you want to do? Knock on their door and politely ask them to stop?" Zuko sat up and cleared his throat before adopting a terrible impression of the younger boy. "Yes hello, I'm the Avatar, the mortal enemy of your country, I'm sure you've heard of me. Will you please stop making highly profitable weapons and make something a little gentler on the environment? Maybe something peaceful like candy? What do you say?"

"That's an idea," Aang said. *Who doesn't like candy? Way better than things that hurt people.*

"A terrible one," Sokka said. "We're not getting side tracked on another save the trees quest," he said. "The last time that happened I got stuck in the Spirit World."

Zuko stared at Sokka. "You've been to the Spirit World?! When? How long were you there? What happened?"

Sokka gave Zuko a weird look. "Why are you so excited? What's the big deal?"

"Do you have any idea how rare it is for a human being to survive a journey to the Spirit World? It's
"Aang goes to the Spirit World all the time," Sokka said dismissively.

"I wouldn't say I go all the time." I never knew Zuko was so interested in the Spirit World.

"Aang's the bridge between our world and the Spirit World," Katara said. "It's a lot easier for him to cross that boundary than it would be for a normal person." Plus it helps when Roku is around to guide me, since I usually don't actually know what I'm doing.

"Oh, so I'm just a normal person," Sokka demanded. "Thanks Katara, I really appreciate that. Way to make me feel good about myself," Sokka grumbled.

"You people are-" Zuko forced himself to calm down. "What happened," he asked.

Aang tuned Sokka out as he relayed the story (with the standard Sokka elaborations). He had after all been there when it transpired (well he had been there for the actual events, not the version Sokka had concocted). He saw some aquatic wildlife that looked unwell, and even a few that were mutated. Ugh. So gross.

"Aang?"

"Huh?" He looked up.

Katara was looking at him fondly. "Sokka found a village on the map. I think we should stop for some supplies," she said.

"Sounds good!" We'll be able to meet more Fire Nation citizens. What fun lessons will I learn this time? Aang smiled cheerily.

... Zuko sat on the edge of the pier next to Toph as they both dangled their feet just above the surface of the water, not actually wanting to touch the disgusting sludge. "Stupid wooden town," she grumbled. "What do you guys have against good old fashioned earth? I mean a wooden town in the middle of a river? Worst. Idea. Ever," she proclaimed.

Zuko patted her shoulder. "There, there,"

Toph made a rude gesture with her finger that had Zuko biting his cheek to keep from laughing. "I'm sure they'll be done soon. How long can it take to buy a few days' worth of supplies?"

"But you're forgetting that Katara stupidly allowed Aang and Sokka to accompany her. Which means at least five arguments about whether or not we need some stupid doodad Sokka is infatuated with and at least three different instances of Aang pulling Katara off to see 'the coolest thing ever Katara, you just have to see it!' So you might need to adjust your estimation."

"You're right," Zuko said. "We're going to be here forever. Might as well buy a house and start planting crops."

"I may not be able to see you with my Earthbending right now, but I can still hear you and gauge your location well enough to shove you into the water."
"Please don't. The water looks so gross."

"Can I interest you in a sculpture of the Painted Lady young man," an old peddler asked as he approached the two pushing a cart full of his wares.

Zuko's expression soured. "No."

"If you pray to her maybe she'll heal your sister's unfortunate affliction."

Zuko saw Toph tense. "We don't want your frogsnake oil. Leave us alone," Zuko snapped at the old man.

"Frogsnake oil? You would say that about such a benevolent spirit as-"

"Get lost!" Something in Zuko's expression must have made the peddler weary, and he moved on.

Toph was squeezing the wooden planks hard enough for her fingernails (which sorely needed to be clipped) to leave divots in the wood. "What's their deal?"

Zuko looked at his murky and malformed reflection in the water. "In the Fire Nation there's a big emphasis on productivity. Everyone is supposed to contribute to the ever growing greatness of our country. So if someone is... less able to contribute... they're seen as unworthy. Our whole lives we are told we're the superior race. I guess certain flaws undercut that message."

Toph was scowling at the water she couldn't see. "Because I'm disabled, so clearly I'm inferior?" Toph's voice was hard and cold. *Maybe I should tell her about... No. Bad idea."

"No! But yes, that is what we are taught."

"And what makes you so special?"

"I'm not special," Zuko said. "We aren't born with these beliefs. They're taught to us. I had the opportunity to see other perspectives when I was a refugee."

Toph was quiet. She seemed to decide she wanted to talk about something else, almost anything else. "Who's the Painted Lady? I've never heard of her. She's a spirit?"

"I think she's only worshipped in the Fire Nation," Zuko said. "Also she's fake."

"Fake?"

"She doesn't really exist." *I wasted so much time praying to her. Mother did too. I took so long to learn my lesson.*

"Okay," said Toph. "But who is she? What's her story? I never knew there were spirits unique to each nation. I mean obviously different nations put different emphasis on different spirits, but I thought we were all on the same page about who the spirits are." *It's not a pleasant story. Certainly not something to fill an innocent kid's head with. Besides, it's all lies. I know that now.*

"They're taking too long." Zuko got to his feet and brushed his hand against Toph's to let her know he was offering her assistance. "Let's go look for them."
Katara knelt down next to the ailing child. "It's the fever," her weeping mother said. "People never used to get sick like this before the factory started dumping its waste in the river. Now every other day someone passes from the fever. I don't know what to do to help her. Have you ever seen anything like it before in the other villages where you practiced healing?" The mother sounded so hopeful. No, but I could heal her easily with Waterbending. Except I can't Waterbend in front of you. So what am I supposed to do? I can't just do nothing.

Sokka knelt down next to her. "I know what you're thinking. You can't," he whispered urgently. "If word were to get to-

"I know," Katara hissed. "What do you want me to do? Let her die?"

"Is there another way? An herb, or-"

"I can help your daughter," Katara said. I will find a way. I will make a way. I can't let an innocent suffer just to protect myself. It would be a violation of everything Yagoda taught me.

The mother stared at Katara with wide eyes, for a moment not seeming to comprehend. "You can?! Oh bless you! The Painted Lady herself sent you, I'm sure if it." The woman grabbed Katara's hand and kissed it as though she were some powerful queen. Katara blushed.

"Who's the Painted Lady," Aang asked.

"Who's the-" The woman stared at Aang as though he were an alien. "How could you not know the Painted Lady?"

"He's from the colonies," a voice spoke up. Katara turned around and saw Zuko standing there holding Toph's hand. "Of course it doesn't matter anyway because you've been worshipping a lie."

The woman gasped. "How dare you say such a thing?! Get your blasphemy away from us! It's no wonder the spirits saw fit to strike your daughter blind if you would say such heretical things about such a-"

"Such a fake useless delusion?"

The mother covered her ears with her shaking hands. "I'm not listening to you!" Tears sprang from her eyes and her whole body trembled with distress. She was obviously terrified.

What on Earth is this? Why is she so upset, and why is Zuko acting this way? He's tormenting this woman for no reason at all. He doesn't even know her. How could he do such a thing?

"Your ignorance won't help your daughter," Zuko said. "Maybe if you spent less time praying to a fable and more time trying to get your daughter away from such a toxic environment, then she wouldn't be sick!"

"Zuko!" Katara hadn't meant to say his name. It had just slipped out in her horror.

Zuko's eyes widened. Toph's grip on his hand tightened. Sokka and Aang exchanged looks of trepidation. But the bereaved mother only laughed. "You have a cursed name. The traitor prince bore the same name before his death."
Before his... "Prince Zuko is dead," Katara asked. "How did he die?"

"He tried to sell his sister, the gleaming light of the West, out to the Earth Kingdom in exchange for an army of Earthbenders to use to overthrow and assassinate his most noble father, our glorious Fire Lord Ozai. Princess Azula was forced to kill him in self defense and grieves for him terribly, though the spirits know he doesn't deserve her grief. The traitor General Iroh partook in this most heinous plot, but thankfully he was arrested and will stand trial at the capital for his many crimes," she said.

"That's a-" Toph began.

"A relief," Zuko said. "It's a relief we don't have to worry about their treachery anymore. Our nation is safe from them."

"But not safe from heretics it seems."

"I wasn't struck blind," Toph said in a voice that trembled with rage. Careful Toph. I already screwed up. Don't make it any worse. If we drop too many hints she'll start to put the pieces together. "I was born blind. And there's nothing wrong with that! Or with me!"

The mother scoffed. "Cripples are born to parents who anger the spirits. It's-"

"I'm not a cripple! I'm the-!"

"Enough." Katara didn't shout, but she spoke with such absolute authority that everyone fell quiet. "Zuko, take Tsuki back to our camp. I have to take this child somewhere where I can treat her in silence. Sokka, you'll help me. Aang, stay with her parents." Katara's voice was firm and brokered no argument.

As Zuko led a furious looking Toph away and Sokka started to pick up the weak and almost insensate child the mother leaned over and whispered in Katara's ear. "Please tell me that man isn't your husband kind lady. I would hate to see one as kind and innocent as you made to suffer for his evil. The spirits-"

Katara shook her head. "He's just a friend," she assured the woman.

"You need better friends," the mother said as Katara took her daughter away.

Maybe I do.

...

Toph was punching rocks while Zuko bored holes into his leftover oysterclam shells. He wasn't making a necklace, he just needed an outlet for the raging emotions inside of him. It seemed Toph had laid claim to destroying the campsite (and Zuko wasn't quite angry enough to set all of their things on fire anyway), so he made due with the fragile shells. He whittled hole after hole into one shell, until the shell cracked, unable to maintain its structural integrity. Zuko picked up another shell as Toph continued to demolish their campsite. All I do is destroy things, and now I'm rubbing off on her.

"What the hell is wrong with you?!"
Zuko looked up. He was surrounded by shell fragments and only just now realizing that he had several cuts on his hands. Blood was oozing from his fingers. Toph stopped ripping apart the earth for a moment to listen to Katara yell at him. Toph was panting with what Zuko guessed was both rage and exhaustion. Zuko put down his whittling stick and met Katara's furious gaze. Her eyes were hurricanes. "I told the truth."

"What does it matter if that woman prays to some random spirit?! It gives her comfort, who does that hurt?!"

Zuko spoke softly, so that Katara would have to strain to listen. "The Painted Lady isn't a spirit. She's a lie. These people stay here, in this desolate used up place, and they pray to the Painted Lady to save them. Their children are dying, and they won't do anything about it because they believe the Painted Lady will heal them. And when their children die they will blame themselves for not being faithful enough. So that's who gets hurt Katara. The innocent kids."

"These people don't have anywhere else to go! And why should they have to?! They didn't ask for their home to be destroyed! How could you be so cruel to someone with a dying child?!" A loud crack filled the air as Toph split a large boulder in two. "Would you knock that off?!" Katara stomped her foot.

"You didn't stick up for me!" Toph's voice trembled with rage, but Zuko could make out the pain beneath. "You let her say that horrible stuff about me!"

"Toph," Katara said in a gentler tone. "She's a grieving mother. What she said was awful and wrong, but-"

"But nothing!" Toph shattered the boulder into shards hardly bigger than the oysterclam pieces scattered around Zuko. "I am not broken! I am not a tragedy! I am just as good as any of you!" She stomped her foot and shook the ground. "I'm better than all of you!"

"Toph," Sokka said warily.

"No! Shut up!" The ground felt as solid as a flooded marsh even though it was stone.

"Aang," Sokka whispered out of the corner of his mouth. "Do something."

"Like what," Aang whispered, clearly terrified. "She's stronger than me."

"Talk to her."

"That'll just make her angrier."

"Good point, don't say anything."

"Toph," Katara begged. "Please calm down. We can talk about this."

"I don't want to talk! My value as a human being isn't up for debate!"

"Mom! Mom! We have to help it! It has a broken wing! We have to save it!"

"Oh Zuko, I'm so sorry. It won't be able to survive like this. I know it's hard love."
"But we can help it!"

"No, we can't."

"No one is trying to-

"Why were they protesting?"

"They want free stuff from grandfather."

"What kind of free stuff?"

"Food, housing, stuff like that."

"Don't they need that to survive cousin?"

"Zuko... They don't contribute to our country. If we started supporting every person who can't or won't work we wouldn't have the resources to continue expanding our borders and increasing our greatness. I know it seems harsh, but some people... don't deserve to be a part of society. Helping them will only prolong their suffering. In the end it's kinder to let them sink or swim."

"She said I was a curse!"

"Prince Zuko, how is your vision?"

"It's fine Uncle."

"Any blurriness or loss of-"

"I said it's fine!"

"She didn't- Stop! Stop it!"

Zuko was drawn from his flashback by Katara's shout. He looked at her horrified expression, eyes blown wide. She was looking right at him he realized. He followed her gaze to his hands and saw that he was clutching crushed shells in his hand. The sharp fragments were embedded in his flesh and the blood was flowing freely. "Oh," he whispered.

"Zuko!" Aang clutched his head in obvious distress and agitation. "Why would you do that to yourself?!"

"I... didn't mean to. I was just..." Zuko opened his hand and let bloody shell fragments fall to the ground. Some were still deep under his skin though.

"Zuko..." Toph sounded frightened.

Sokka walked over and sat down cross-legged in front of him. "Can I help you get those out? I don't think Katara can heal it with the pieces still inside."

Zuko wearily held out his hand. Sokka gently took it in his own and pulled out a pair of tweezers.

Zuko looked away while the other boy worked. "This is the Painted Lady Zuko. She protects the victims of injustice. If ever anyone hurts you, you can pray to her. She'll heal your wounds and ease
"your suffering."

"Done." Zuko was once again pulled from his reverie. He looked down at his mangled hand. "Katara, can you..." Sokka trailed off.

Katara came over and took her brother's place. She still looked furious. She held her hand over his own and Zuko saw the blue glow that was becoming all too familiar to him. "Will the little girl be okay?"

"What do you care," Katara snapped.

"Of course I care. I-"

"Finished." Katara stood up.

Zuko tested his hand. It was as though it had never been injured at all. He felt shame spreading through him like a raging fire. He had shown humiliating weakness. What would father say? It occurred to Zuko that his father would have a lot more to say about the treason, and since he was betraying his father he shouldn't really care what he might think anymore anyways. It didn't help. His shame endured. He got to his feet and didn't look at any of them.

"Are you okay," Aang asked.

His shame grew. "I'm going for a walk."

"When will you be back," Sokka asked.

"When I get back!" He didn't wait for any response, and the speed at which he left was more similar to a run than a walk.

…

Toph sat down amidst the debris of her destruction. She felt like crying, but she refused to let any of her companions see her weep. "Toph," Aang started. The gentleness in his tone just made her more furious. She felt like a ratviper ready to bite and tear and hurt.

"I'm not broken. I'm just blind." Why can't they understand that? Why can't anybody ever understand that? What's so amazing about being able to see? As far as I'm concerned it just seems like a distraction. It makes people petty and shallow. It makes them overlook their other senses. If I had the choice I wouldn't even want to see, pretty stars or sunsets be damned.

Katara knelt down in front of her. "We know that Toph. I'm sorry I didn't stick up for you to that woman. You're our friend, and you deserve to be treated with respect," Katara said with her soft tone.

"So if I weren't your friend I wouldn't deserve to be treated with respect?"

"Of course that's not what I mean Toph," Katara whispered gently.

"Everywhere I go people treat me like I'm defective. Like I'm a burden." My own parents thought I was useless, an embarrassment to be hidden away.
"It's not like that in the Water Tribe," Sokka said. "At least, not in the Southern Tribe, and I don't think Northern either."

"What do you mean," Toph asked.

"In our tribe," Katara said "We function as a unit. We all work together to ensure the survival of the entire tribe. No one is allowed to go hungry or stay cold. We see to each other's needs. If a child is born with a disability the whole tribe is expected to help that child with whatever he or she might need, just the same as they would be expected to for any abled child, and that child will be taught whatever skills he or she can develop to help the tribe."

"What if the kid can't help at all?" A person shouldn't have to have some amazing special talent to be allowed to exist as a disabled person. I'm the greatest Earthbender in the world, but my life would still be worthwhile even if I weren't.

"That's okay too. Every member of the tribe is a vital part of our community. Tribe is Tribe. You don't have to do anything special to be worthy of being Water Tribe. Every child born into our nation is a blessing from the spirits and treated as such," Katara assured Toph.

I was never even acknowledged by my community. And these people here think I don't even deserve to exist. A single tear escaped Toph's eye. "Your home sounds pretty great," Toph said. Except for all the ice and snow of course. Still, it would almost be worth the cold to live somewhere where disabled people are actually accepted instead of scorned and ostracized. Toph blinked away her escaped tear.

Katara wrapped her arms around Toph, and the younger girl let her. "I'm so sorry," Katara said. "I promise I will never prioritize someone else's feelings over yours again." Katara squeezed her.

"I'm sorry I destroyed the camp."

"We should probably get out of here anyway," Sokka said casually. "Who wants to volunteer to track down Zuko?"

Toph wiped her eyes. "I'll do it."

"I can-" Aang began.

"I'll do it," Toph insisted. I need answers, and I don't think I'll get them with you guys listening.

... Zuko sat on the cliff edge staring down at the filthy water. "Don't jump," the stealthy Earthbender said in a voice far more sedate than the one she normally used.

He didn't look at her. "Ha ha," he said in his most dry emotionless tone.

"Well I'm no Sokka," she admitted.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

She sat down next to him. "You scared me. Why would you want to hurt yourself like that," she demanded.
"I didn't want to. And I never meant to frighten you. I just..." He struggled to find the words to explain without actually telling her anything.

"You just what?"

*You can't tell her. Once people find out about your weaknesses they'll use them against you. Keep your mouth shut.*

"Zuko?"

*You have to say something.*

"Earth to Zuko. Come in sparky."

"Almost everything I ever believed, everything I was taught, the principles my country and culture are founded on, is a lie. A horrible destructive lie. Ours is the superior race. We are destined to rule the world. All sacrifices are justified to bring about our destiny. Weakness and imperfection are blights that must be excised. I believed all of that. In my core of being I believed every word."

"But you don't now."

"But I did!" Zuko slammed a hand down on the ledge. "I'm so embarrassed and ashamed and..." Zuko clutched the rock in his fists. *It's a good thing I'm not an Earthbender, or I would probably send us tumbling down into the water.*

"Well... Maybe that's a good thing. It's good that you're ashamed of what you used to believe, because it was wrong and hurt people. But that means you should also be proud of who you are now. Because you moved past all of that and are helping people."

Zuko stared at the sick river. "You're pretty wise for a kid," he admitted.

"I was just trying to channel my inner General Iroh. How'd I do?"

Zuko felt a pang. "Do you think he'll forgive me for abandoning him?"

"I think he already has, if he was ever mad at all. Your uncle cares a lot about you. When I first met him you were all he wanted to talk about. He'll be so proud to find out you've been helping us."

Zuko released a shuddering breath. *I owe her the truth, but I just can't do it.*

"Let's get out of here. There have to be more interesting places in the Fire Nation to not see." Toph got to her feet.

They didn't speak on their way back to camp, but they didn't have to. Zuko found that for the first time in his life he had someone he could honestly relate to. Someone who he could understand and who understood him in turn. Not a loving mother or a supportive mentor, but a friend, a real friend, who he trusted more and more each day. *You'll screw it up Zuko. You always do.* Zuko banished the doubts from his mind. He knew they hadn't gone far, but for now he held his ground against them. That was enough.

"Guys." Aang sounded nervous when the two returned to the campsite that looked like a battlefield.
"Something's wrong."

Zuko was instantly on high alert. Did the locals get suspicious? Someone spotted the bison? What happened?

"I think Appa's sick." Some of the tension released from Zuko's shoulders.

"Can't Katara just use her woo woo magic to fix him with the splashy splash," Toph asked.

"My what? Water healing is an ancient art sacred to my people. It is not woo woo magic or splashy splash." She sniffed in indignation.

"Plus the woo woo magic isn't working," Sokka added. "Looks like we're stuck here until Appa recovers."

"Does that mean I have to put the campsite back together," Toph asked.

"We'd sure appreciate it," Aang said.

Zuko felt a sinking feeling in his gut and tried to repress it. So the bison is a little under the weather. It'll probably be better by morning and we can get out of this cursed place. Zuko looked at the poison water and shivered.

Katara clutched her basket of herbs so tight her knuckles were almost white. Sneaking one kid away to heal in secret was difficult enough. And she was too sick to see what I was doing. I can't help anyone who might realize I'm a Waterbender and tell someone. But there has to be a way. I have to find a way. Soon. This ruse won't last forever. If Appa stays 'sick' for too long Aang will start to panic. Toph can tell when I'm lying. Sokka is smart enough to put it all together if he gets suspicious, and he will eventually. Suspicion is pretty much his default setting. Zuko's not exactly dim either. And he really wants to get out of her. What's his problem anyway? He was way out of line earlier. I got so caught up in helping him I almost forgot what a jerk he can be, even when he isn't evil anymore. That poor mother.

"Please," an elderly woman approached Katara. "Spare some change. Just a few coins. We're so hungry. My son is too proud to beg, but it's been days..."

Katara wordlessly pulled some coins from her purse and held them out to the old woman. She fought the tears trying to reach her eyes. This is wrong.

The woman kissed her hand. Her lips felt like crumpled paper, dry and unpleasant. "Bless you lady. Blessings."

Katara turned and ran before she could say or do something stupid. Someone has to help these people, and it can't be me. But it has to be me. There's no one else. Someone has to do something.

Katara stopped in front of a vendor selling sculptures of the Painted Lady. Someone will.

"You're weak. Weak and pathetic just like your mother. It's only fitting you should have to be the one
to take her place. You didn't even put up a fight. Quit crying and fight! Fight!” Zuko sat up suddenly. His breath was ragged and his heart pounding. Just a dream, he reminded himself. But his father's voice was still ringing in his ear and his arms felt like they were still burning even after all the years gone by. Zuko got to his feet and realized to his disgust that he was shaking. Zuko knew he wasn't going to be able to get back to sleep. He started walking. He followed the river for want of another path. Weak. Pathetic.

Zuko was so caught up in his thoughts and memories that he almost didn't notice the mist. But once he did he stopped in his tracks. It was her. It can't be. That's impossible. She isn't...

Zuko ran. He had to confront her. He had to demand an explanation. At first she didn't seem to notice him, which was ridiculous. She was a spirit, how could anything escape her notice? He stood on the rocky shore and stared at her ethereal figure. "You're real," he croaked.

She looked at him. Or at least it seemed that she did. She was still obscured by mist, and clouds hid the waning moon. For a moment Zuko considered that he might be dreaming, but a quick pinch to his wrist confirmed that he was awake. This was real. She was real.

"You're real!" His voice was no exhausted whisper now. It was powered by rage and indignation. "You were real the whole time! I prayed to you! I prayed every night! Just like mother taught me!"

She didn't answer. Of course she didn't answer. She went years without ever acknowledging him. Why should it be any different now? Zuko felt fury boiling his blood, begging to be released in the form of fire. Why shouldn't it be?

Zuko sent a stream of fire towards the spirit. The river rose up to meet his flames and where the two met a cloud of steam burst into existence, completely covering the Painted Lady. By the time the steam had faded the spirit was gone. She was gone. Zuko felt sick. His legs were wobbling and he sat down before he could fall down. She was always real. My prayers didn't go unanswered because I was praying to a fable. She heard me, she just didn't care. Zuko started to sob. Once the tears started he couldn't stop. He could hear his father laughing about it.

"Crying over a spirit?"

Zuko remembered all the nights he whispered to the Painted Lady under his red silk sheets, begging her to keep him safe. It never worked. He came in the night, leaving the small boy Zuko tried so hard to separate himself from burnt and bloody. Zuko cried and cried. When the sun came up he was still there all wept out and shaking from misery and lethargy. In all his life he had never felt so alone as he did in that moment.

…

Aang woke up with a loud yawn and stretched. Katara was already awake, stirring something over the fire looking tired and miserable. Aang stood and padded over to her. He sat down cross-legged next to her. She looked over at him and smiled. "Don't worry," she said softly so as not to wake the others. "No meat." She set the spoon down.

"I'm more worried about you than about breakfast. Are you stressed about healing Appa? I have confidence in you Katara. You'll figure it out eventually."

"Right," Katara said. "Appa."
Aang cocked his head. "Is there something else going on? Is it the sick people in the town? I know you want to help them. I wish there were a way."

Katara looked around the camp. "Did Zuko ever come back last night?"

Aang also surveyed the camp. He could hear snores coming from Toph's earth tent and see Sokka curled up in his sleeping bag. But Zuko was nowhere to be seen. "I didn't realize he went anywhere," Aang admitted. "I hope he's okay. He seemed really..." I'm not sure how to put it. He was certainly something. That thing with the shells...

Katara shook her head. "We've all tried to be so nice and welcoming ever since he joined the group. Even Sokka has pretty much backed off. We gave him a clean slate. And then he went and pulled a stunt like he did in town. He's volatile."

Aang shifted uncomfortably. He struggled to find the words he was looking for. He knew Katara was just concerned, and Aang was concerned too, very concerned. But something felt wrong. The trouble was that he didn't know exactly what. Then all thoughts of Zuko fled his mind as he gaped at Katara's face. "What happened to you?!"

Katara touched what looked like a sunburn on her cheek. It wasn't too bad, faint enough that Aang was only just noticing it. But he hated to see any of his friends injured. "Oh, I didn't..." Katara quickly healed herself. "I was experimenting with steambending last night. I didn't even realize I overdid it."

"You work so hard," Aang said. "You need to rest every once in a while."

Katara smiled. "I appreciate you looking out for me, but I'm fine," she promised.

Aang bit his lip. "You're my best friend."

Katara knocked her elbow against him gently. "And you're mine. I- He's back."

Aang turned around and saw that Zuko was trudging back into camp. There was no other way to put it than that he looked terrible. His eyes were red. His hair was a mess. He was paler than normal and covered with a sheen of sweat. His clothes were dirty. He didn't acknowledge them as he entered the camp. He just sat down on his sleeping bag and stared at his muddy shoes.

"Hey Zuko," Aang said. "We were w-"

"I saw her," he told his shoes.

Next to Aang Katara stiffened. "I don't understand," Aang said. "Saw who?"

"I saw the Painted Lady. She's real."

Zuko looked more miserable than Aang had ever seen him. Aang wasn't quite sure what to say. Why does the Painted Lady being real make Zuko so upset?

"Maybe it was just a shadow," Katara suggested. "It was really cloudy last-"

"I'm not crazy!" Zuko's shout woke Toph, but not Sokka who could sleep like the dead. "I know what I saw! I saw her!"
"Okay," Aang soothed. "You saw her."

"Quit patronizing me!"

"No one is patronizing you," Katara shouted at him. "Calm down! You don't have to always blow up over every little thing! We're just talking to you!"

Zuko's face twisted into an inscrutable expression. He almost looked at war with himself. "We need to leave."

"Appa's still sick," Katara said.

"Well I don't care! This place is bad news and we need to get out of here. We don't have to go far, just enough distance to get away from this town and river."

"We're not going to risk Appa's health just because you have the heebie-jeebies!" Katara crossed her arms.

On the one hand Aang could clearly see that Zuko didn't just have the heebie-jeebies. He was obviously very upset about something. So much so that he was almost shaking and looked half like a spirit himself. On the other hand Aang was outraged that Zuko would dare so casually disregard Appa's well being.

"This place is dangerous! And if you can't see that you're just dense! Why won't either of you listen to me?!"

"Because you're not making any sense!"

Zuko rubbed his face. Unfortunately since his hands had soot on them this had the side effect of making his face even dirtier than it already was. "Can't you just trust me? Please? We shouldn't stay here Katara. This spirit is... bad."

Katara scoffed. "So you're an expert on the spirits now? Aang's the Avatar. He's the bridge between our world and the Spirit World. If anyone is going to be judging this spirit's intentions it should be him. Right Aang," she asked.

Aang gulped. *I don't know anything about this spirit. But I guess there's only one way to learn.* "Sure. I can try to talk to her. Where did you see her Zuko?"

Zuko looked ready to explode he was so obviously furious. "Find her yourself," he snapped as he stormed off.

Katara rolled her eyes. "Jerk."

Toph looked ready to object and Aang just knew another confrontation was brewing between the two girls. Sleep deprived Katara + protective Toph = a muddy mess. "I'll go talk to him," Aang said quickly. "Katara, do you think you could look over Appa again? And Toph, could you go into town with Sokka and find out if any of the locals saw the Painted Lady last night," Aang asked.

Both girls hesitated. "Of course Aang," Katara said obligingly as Toph rolled her eyes and snapped "Fine!" dramatically.
Two bombs defused (temporarily). One to go. Aang grabbed his staff and started in the direction that Zuko had gone. Looking over his shoulder Aang saw Toph rudely shaking Sokka, apparently deciding he was as good an outlet for her frustration as any. But those two had a deep loyalty and affection for one another and Aang knew once Sokka was properly awake they would set to their task with little or no conflict. Aang looked towards Appa for a quick peek before he ran after Zuko. Aang's running skills were incredible and he knew he would have no problem catching up to the older boy. Katara was petting and hugging the bison, whispering something soothing into his ear. Aang smiled. Appa was in good hands. Katara pulled some berries from her basket to give to him. Medicine, Aang thought dismissively. Although strangely the berries were the same color as the splotches on Appa's tongue. What a weird coincidence.

Aang shook his head. He needed to get going. I don't know what happened between this spirit and Zuko, but it's my job to figure it out and make it right. Maybe this can be a good learning experience for both of us. I'll work on my mediation skills, which could use some improvement, and Zuko will learn about the Spirit World. It's obviously something he's interested in. He and Katara will apologize for their silly misunderstanding and we'll all be friends again. Everything is going to be fine. With a whistle on his tongue and a spring in his step Aang took off running after the Firebender.

Chapter End Notes

I feel like Katara's behavior in this chapter might be somewhat controversial, so let me try to get ahead of that. Katara and Zuko are not mind readers. They don't know what the other is thinking. Katara is a very kind empathetic person who only wants to help people. Right now the people who need her help the most are the people in the village. If Katara knew why Zuko was acting the way he is and how much he was suffering she would probably be a lot calmer and understanding about his actions. But she doesn't because he isn't communicating with her. Zuko is used to be ridiculed when he shows 'weakness' so he isn't telling people how much all the Painted Lady stuff is effecting him emotionally. That's not Katara's fault. That's Ozai's fault.

I mean death of the author and all that. You can interpret the story however you like and you will hear no complaints from me, just letting you know this is written to be an honest misunderstanding, not Katara being a jerk. K, I'll shut up now.
The Painted Lady (pt. 2)

Chapter Notes

Here it is! The conclusion to the Painted Lady. Is this chapter any good? Maybe. I dunno. It sure is dark though. All the warnings apply here. Just like... all of um.

Anyway, I know that we have seen Zuko with his shirt off in cannon and he didn't have any scars. I know this. It's a fanfic. So we're all gonna pretend Zuko has always compulsively kept covered. K? K.

Also this chapter ran over a thousand words longer than the chapter length I try to get for each installment. But I didn't want to go back through it and cut stuff, so sorry about that. Anyway, on with the show.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Toph hesitated in front of the wooden path into the town. One more step and the world will disappear. “C’mon,” Sokka said. “Let's go.”

Sokka doesn't understand. He can't understand. She took a weary step onto the wood and started the short, but seemingly endless, trek over the river into the town that stood nestled in the center of it. “This is lame. Why does Aang want to talk to some stupid spirit anyway?”

Toph wondered if the beat of silence was Sokka shrugging. He often shrugged before answering questions, but she had no way of knowing if he just had because she was walking on wood instead of Earth. She hated it. “Who knows with him? Avatar stuff maybe?”

Toph scoffed. “I don't see how any of this is supposed to help us take down the Fire Lord, and you heard what Zuko said. This spirit is bad news. Why poke the sabertooth mooselion?”

“I try not to get involved in all the spirit mumbo jumbo myself. We’ll get the information from the villagers, pass it on to Aang, and hopefully that will be the end of our involvement.”

“Right,” Toph said. “And what do you think the odds of that plan working out are?”

“Slim to none,” Sokka said casually. “But hey, that's life traveling with the Avatar.”

…

Zuko was employing his tried and true anger management method, throwing fireballs through the air. It never really worked to be honest. Sometimes he finished practice even angrier than he had been when he began, but it was the only outlet for his rage that he had. So he drilled and drilled and drilled. Muscle memory led him through the sequences as his mind was elsewhere, consumed by memories of blood and fire. Candles lit before the altar. Mother's soft hands carding through my hair. I cried when she was gone, and I cried even harder after. There was blood on the red silk that only I could see. Everything smelled like ashes. My skin smelled like ashes. My sheets smelled like salt and iron. Ash and blood and flame and silk and no number of candles could ever fix any of it. I should have fought. I was weak. I didn't fight.
Zuko was out of fuel. He turned around and saw the Avatar standing there, watching him. There was no judgement in his eyes, no wariness, neither contempt nor fear. He was just watching quietly, declining to interrupt.

"What do you want," Zuko said with all the venom of a snapping turtle-python.

"I just want to talk to you."

"Unless what you have to say is that we're leaving I'm not interested."

"I'm going to try to talk to the Painted Lady. You seem pretty sure that she's dangerous or evil. I'd appreciate it if you would tell me why, so that I can be prepared. You were so sure she wasn't real, and now that we know she is you're just as sure she's bad. Why?"

Zuko clenched his fists. *I'm supposed to bare my soul to them to sate their curiosity? Well I won't do it! "I just know."*

"How?"

"I just do okay??" Zuko's fists filled with flame. Aang didn't so much as take a step back. *He really does trust me, or he's a cocky idiot. Although I suppose they aren't mutually exclusive.*

"I don't understand. Why don't you want to tell us? Did you do something bad?"

Zuko scowled. *Because I'm the evil fire prince, so I must have done something horrible, right?* Zuko turned away.

"Do you not trust us?" That hit closer to home than Zuko would have liked. *I don't trust them. But I can't trust anybody. I never even told Uncle. He wouldn't have ever looked at me the same way again. It's the same situation here. If I tell them it will change how they see me, and there won't be any going back.*

"Do what you want to do. It's obvious you don't value my input-" Zuko began.

"We do-"

"I said my piece. When you talk to the Painted Lady ask her how she decides which prayers to answer." *Shut up!*

"What-"

"We're done here." Zuko stormed off. *I'll find somewhere to practice my Firebending in peace! But of course Zuko knew there would be no peace for him.*

Katara stood on her ice board and began to bend the water into a veil of mist to obscure her from view. She knew Aang would be looking for her tonight, which meant she would have to be extra careful. The smart thing to do would be to take a break for the night, but she couldn't let these people suffer one moment more than necessary. Besides, the sooner she finished healing them the sooner Appa could be 'cured' and they could all leave. Katara came to the boardwalk and stepped gingerly onto it. She made her way towards the healer's hut, where the sickest of the villagers were resting.
Katara went in and knelt before the person closest to the door. She surveyed the room to make sure they were all asleep. Of course if anyone woke they would only see the 'Painted Lady' healing the sick, but it couldn't hurt to be careful. Katara finished healing the people in the hut and then moved outside to make a few house calls.

"There you are!" Katara flinched. She turned around and saw a woman with sunken eyes and the figure of a scarecrow. "Oh thank you! You healed my brother! Thank you! Thank you!"

Katara started to back away. She whipped up more mist around her by bending the water particulates through the gaps in the wood planks.

"Please, wait! I want to make an offering to you! Please my Lady! Don't go!"

Katara fled. *I can't let her get close enough to me to recognize me. I guess the other patients will have to wait until tomorrow night. It's too risky to stay in the town now.* Katara surfed down the river back towards camp. *At least there's no sign of Aang. I got lucky with-"

"Hi!"

Katara was tempted to take a page out of Sokka's book and slap her own forehead, but now was not the time for dramatic gestures. She turned around and saw Aang hanging onto one of his balls of bent air. His feet gently touched the water, which froze under him.

"I'm the Avatar. You probably already knew that, being a spirit and all. I was wondering if we could talk."

Katara shook her head.

"Oh that's too bad. My friends heard a lot of stories from the villagers about the amazing stuff you did for them, but my other friend is convinced you're a bad spirit. He won't tell me why, but I was hoping you could help me clear things up. You see, I'm the bridge between the human world and the spirit world. It's kind of my job to resolve any misunderstandings." Aang grinned at Katara expectantly. Katara increased the amount of mist around her. "Wait!"

Katara turned and prepared to surf away. Unfortunately that was when a gust of air dissipated the mist. Katara gasped and tried to bend the water to conceal herself. Too late she realized her hat and veil were gone, blown away by the same Airbending that had removed her mist cover. She covered her face with her hands.

"Katara?!"

Katara peeked over her hands. "Hi Aang?"

"You're- But- How- Why- What-" Aang stared at her in confusion. "I don't understand."

"I'm sorry Aang. I had to help the people in the village. This was the only way."

"Wait a minute! You're the one who made Appa sick," he shouted angrily. "How could you?!"

"He's not really sick," Katara assured him. "I just made it look that way to buy time. Please try to understand. I couldn't turn my back on these people. They needed me," she pleaded.

Aang sighed. "I guess I do understand, but I just wish you hadn't lied to us. I was really worried
about Appa, and I think you really freaked out Zuko.” *No less than he deserves*, Katara thought.

“I just need one more night,” Katara said. “I’ll finish healing the villagers and then we can leave without anyone being the wiser.”

“Well…” Aang looked torn. “Okay, but you need to tell the others what you’re doing.”

“What? Why?” *There's no way that will end well. They'll be furious with me for lying.*

“Because they're our friends and it isn't right to lie to them. And because I think Zuko deserves to know the truth about the Painted Lady.”

Katara rolled her eyes. “He doesn't deserve anything after the way he's been acting.”

“It's obvious he's afraid of this spirit. Knowing it's you will put his mind at ease. Katara I'm not comfortable lying to him about this. I think he should hear the truth from you, but if you won't tell him I'll have to.” Aang looked resolute.

“Fine.” *This isn't going to be pretty.*

…

The campfire was a somber gathering place that morning as the five companions ate their breakfast in tense silence. Zuko was surprised Aang hadn't reported his success or failure in contacting the Painted Lady last night. Aang was prone to overshare. He kept stealing glances at Katara instead. She was stirring her bowl, looking nervous and agitated. Aang cleared his throat loudly. “Katara-”

“Okay!” Katara put down her bowl.

“You okay Katara,” Sokka asked.

“I'm the Painted Lady.”

For a moment Zuko couldn't breathe. *She heard me. She knows. This is a disaster. This is so humiliating. How could this happen?* “Are you okay Zuko?” Sokka was staring at him.

Zuko looked down and saw that the contents of his bowl were boiling. He carefully set it down and leveled his gaze at Katara. “You're the one I saw on the river the other night,” he asked.

“Yeah,” she said. “I-”

“You had no right!” Zuko jumped to his feet.

“Excuse me?!” Katara scrambled to her own feet. “I have every right to help the innocent!”

“The Painted Lady is sacred to my culture! How would you feel if I dressed like the Moon Spirit and ran around the Water Tribe trying to get people to worship me?!” *How dare she?!!* Katara scoffed. “You don't even believe in the Painted Lady! And all I was trying to do was help these people! You don't care about them at all! You don't care about the damage your father's war inflicted on them! You don't care about anybody but yourself!” The boiling water in the pot over the fire sloshed dangerously close to the edges while the flames beneath licked the metal pot hungrily.

“This isn't about me! You have no business appropriating Fire Nation culture like that!”

“You are so phony! Just admit the real reason you're mad is because you're embarrassed!”
Zuko’s eye widened. She wouldn’t tell them what I said. She wouldn’t be so cruel.

“You couldn't see through my disguise and got spooked thinking I was a real spirit. Now that you know there is no spirit you're humiliated about being so afraid. Isn't that the truth?”

“No! It isn't! You don't know me! And you don't know anything about my culture or religion!”

“That's not the point!”

“Yes it is!” Zuko noticed Sokka stand up and pull Toph away from the fire. Aang followed them wearily. “You don't even know who the Painted Lady is and yet thought you could represent her to people who worship her!”

“I saved their lives!”

“That doesn't make it okay to make a mockery of our faith! I wouldn't do that to you!”

“You wouldn't need to! You wouldn't care about a Water Tribe village suffering! You were willing to burn mine to the ground!”

“Katara,” Sokka said hesitantly.

“You don't even care about your own people!”

“You don't know what I care about!”

“I know you-”

“He's right Katara.”

Everyone turned to stare at Aang. Did the Avatar just take my side? Over Katara's?

Katara was apparently just as shocked as Zuko was. “What are you talking about?”

“If… If someone appropriated Air Nomad culture the way you just did with Fire Nation culture I would be really upset. I know you were only trying to help, but I kind of think Zuko has the right to be angry. None of us even know who the Painted Lady is. How could any of us accurately represent her? And she's obviously important to people in the Fire Nation.”

“But…” Katara looked at Sokka.

Sokka rubbed his neck. “I don't know. If someone pretended to be Yue, especially someone from another nation, I'd be furious, but I don't really see why this Painted Lady is such a big deal. What is she even the spirit of?”

“Succor,” Zuko whispered.

“Huh,” Toph said.

Zuko looked at the fire. It had died down, and the water was still now. “She eases the suffering of those who… have been unjustly harmed.”

“Okay,” said Katara carefully. “Why is she only in the Fire Nation? What's her story?”

Zuko ground his teeth. They could never understand. Their cultures are too different.
“Zuko,” Aang said. “Avatar Roku said I needed to learn about Fire Nation culture. Isn't this—”

“Shut up,” Zuko snapped. Then he instantly felt bad. Aang looked crestfallen. Zuko cleared his throat and looked away. “If you want to learn then listen.” Zuko unconsciously rubbed his arms. “Fire Nation society is… It's…” Zuko rubbed his face in frustration. He looked around and saw that everyone (except Toph) was staring at him in confusion. “My uncle said that the Water Tribe is about community and family bonds above all else. Everyone takes care of each other. There is a hierarchy, but it's loose and secondary to social bonds. Is that true?”

Sokka looked at Katara. “Well yeah. We have a Chief, but the Chief is still subject to the will of the people. And he doesn't govern anyone's day to day life. He's just there to keep everyone organized if there's a disaster or something.”

Zuko nodded. “Well the Fire Nation isn't like that. Our society is based on obligation. We have a very strict social hierarchy and everyone knows their place in it. The allegiance owed to a lord or a parent or a master is absolute. You do not disobey or disrespect your lord, your father or your teacher. You just don't do it,” Zuko said.

“And if you do,” Toph asked wearily.

“They punish you as they see fit.” Zuko took a deep breath to steady himself. “But it's not a one way relationship. A subject must be loyal to his or her lord, but that lord must protect his or her subjects from harm. A child must obey his parents, but those parents must provide for that child. A student must respect his master, but that master must teach his student. There's… balance.” Zuko squeezed his arm tight.

“That's so different from the way the Air Nomads did things,” Aang marveled. “We were always encouraged to exercise our freedom.”

“So what happens if a lord or parent or master breaks their end of the bargain,” Sokka asked.

“They're not supposed to,” Zuko said.

“But if they do,” Katara insisted. “Whoever is in charge of this village clearly isn't upholding their responsibility to it.” She crossed her arms.

“You're hurting me!”

“Be quiet! I can hurt you a lot worse.”

“Da-” I screamed. I tried to muffle my scream into the mattress, but I was too late.

“Zuko?”

Zuko blinked and looked at Aang. “Huh?”

“Who makes the lords do their job.”

“Nobody,” Zuko whispered. “You're just supposed to do it. Our whole society is founded on the belief that some people are born superior to others. They have power because they deserve to have power. If you're Fire Nation you're better than Earth Kingdom. If you're a noble you're better than a peasant. The lord's word is law and his decisions are not questionable. His noble blood is supposed to ensure his righteousness.”

Katara scoffed. “And the last hundred years of corrupt despots forcing endless war haven't woken
the people up to the fact that maybe that's a stupid idea,” she said caustically.

Zuko shook his head. “No.”

“I'm just not seeing what any of this has to do with the Painted Lady,” Sokka said.

“Right,” Zuko said. “Okay, well… A long time ago… A really long time ago, there was a soldier. We don't know what her name was. But she was a fierce warrior and her mother was a skilled healer. The soldier lived with her husband and many children. Her mother was also a member of their household. One day there was a terrible battle. The soldier, her husband and all but one of their children went off to fight for their lord. The youngest child stayed behind with her grandmother. So… the husband and the older children all died in the war.”

“They all died?!"

A kiss atop my head. “Yes love.”

“That's so sad!”

“It is my sweet.”

“Did the lord praise them for their sacrifice?”

“Listen to the rest of the story Zuko.”

“The soldier lived, but she was gravely injured and would never be able to fight again. In fact there were few jobs she would be capable of due to her wounds. However she decided to learn healing from her mother to assist her community in whatever way she could. That Autumn there was a bountiful harvest, and when the soldier went to get her share… she was turned away by her lord's guards.”

“But mom! She was a veteran! And the widow of a fallen soldier! She should have been provided with whatever she and her family needed for the rest of her days! How could those men turn her away?! I actually cried. What a pathetic sentimental child I was.

“She petitioned her lord, but he dismissed her complaint. They needed every resource for the war effort... and had none to spare on cripples and freeloaders. So she was forced to eek out a living on donations from those whom she and her mother healed. She couldn't bring herself to charge those who had nothing, so the family barely made it from week to week.”

“Why didn't the Fire Lord punish that corrupt noble for mistreating his people?!”

“I don't know Zuko. It was a long time ago.”

“The daughter... She grew older. And one day while she was working in the fields trying to earn extra coin for her family the lord’s son happened to see her and ah... He was... enamored by her beauty and ah... asked for her favor.” Zuko blushed at his awkwardness.

Toph snorted. “You mean he thought she was hot and asked her to sleep with him?”

“Toph!” Sokka sounded scandalized.

“Is this story appropriate for kids,” Katara asked.

“Kids?! You're two years older than me Sugar Queen. Give me a break. And I heard some really raunchy stories back at Earth Rumble-”
“I don't wanna know!” Sokka squaked.

“Me neither,” Aang said wearily.

“Just finish the story Zuko,” Katara said with a resigned expression.

That's what I was trying to do before I was interrupted. Zuko huffed in displeasure. "Well at first she of course wanted nothing to do with him. But he was persistent and... charming. He listened to her grievances and assured her he would speak to his father about her family’s plight. And over time she developed uh... affection for him. And she er..."

"Granted her favor?" Toph seemed greatly amused by Zuko's awkwardness.

Zuko turned beat red. "Yeah." Zuko looked down at his feet and kicked a few bits of dirt towards the fire. "She did."

"Then what happened," Katara asked when it seemed like Zuko wasn't going to say anything else.

"The daughter became pregnant. The soldier went to her lord to request that the child be provided for." Zuko's voice cracked. He remembered being held in his mother's arms when she told him this part of the story. He remembered his sorrow and indignation. "The lord's son denied their relationship and said that the child wasn't his." "That's so wrong! How could he do that to his own child mom?! It isn't right! That was his baby!" "Once again she was turned away." Zuko worked his foot against the earth like he was squishing some sort of bug or worm. "The soldier... did everything she could to provide for her child. But that year the harvest was bad. People couldn't afford to pay for their healing. What little food there was kept being siphoned off to the war effort. The soldier and her mother were willing to go without in order to help the daughter and her baby. The mother died before the daughter went into labor. Maybe from malnutrition. Maybe from age. Maybe from grief. Maybe she was just tired. The daughter... She did not survive childbirth. So once again the soldier went to her lord and begged the son to claim and provide for his child, or at the very least send a wetnurse until the baby could be weaned. But..."

"But she was turned away," Katara said softly.

"That isn't right! That isn't fair!"

"Yeah," Zuko said. "She was."

For a few moments, no one spoke. "Did- did the baby live," Aang asked.

"No," Zuko said. You had to have known the answer to that question. Haven't you been paying any attention at all? "She did everything she could of course. But it wasn't enough."

"Her whole family," Katara whispered.

"All gone," Zuko said. "She was alone and disabled. She wasn't the only one. All around her she saw her neighbors suffering just as much. That night she prayed to the spirits. She detailed her plight and the plight of her community."

"And the Painted Lady answered!" Aang grinned, looking rather pleased with himself for solving the puzzle.
"Aang," Zuko looked at Aang like he was an idiot. "That soldier was- is- whatever. The soldier and the Painted Lady are the same person." Zuko took a deep breath. "The Sun Spirit looked down on this righteous pious woman and listened to her prayer. He appeared to her, in all his resplendent glory, and asked her what she wanted from him. She told him all she wanted was to save others from the suffering she had been forced to experience. The Sun Spirit offered to grant her request, but demanded a sacrifice from her."

"Like she hadn't sacrificed enough!" Katara looked furious. Zuko saw hurricanes start to brew in her eyes again. I can't believe I actually fought this girl. I can't believe I fought her and lived.

Zuko sighed. "Do you want to hear the end of the story or not?"

"What did she have to sacrifice," Aang asked.

"Her humanity. She would have to become a spirit. She would leave the cycle of life, death and reincarnation to join the spirits. She would have to forsake all the pleasures of mortal life for the rest of eternity. She would never be reunited with her loved ones in any of her next lives because her current life would be her last. A hefty price. But she agreed to pay it without hesitation."

"And I bet she kicked that corrupt lord's but, huh?" Toph spoke with grim satisfaction.

Zuko shook his head. "She healed the sick, filled the cupboards of the indignant with food, eased the hearts and minds of the weary and blessed the upcoming harvest. Then she moved on to the next village. And that's the story of the Painted Lady." Zuko looked up.

"Are you kidding me?" Katara looked angrier than ever if that was at all possible. "Are you telling me that after everything that lord and his son did, all the pain and suffering they caused, they just got away with it? No wonder Fire Nation soldiers are so quick to commit atrocities! All of your stories are about how if you abuse authority and hurt people there won't be any consequences for you! Honestly, what kind of sick twisted mind comes up with something like that?" Zuko averted his gaze.

"Umm Katara," Aang said. "I don't think that's the point of the story."

"You mean you actually gleaned some sort of moral from that horrible tale?"

"Yeah, I did," Aang said. "The story isn't about the lord. He doesn't matter. What matters is that a person can suffer, over and over, in horrible ways, and instead of letting that suffering make them bitter and angry, instead of using their suffering as an excuse to be hateful and cruel, that person can choose to be kind and generous. The Painted Lady sacrificed everything, all the joy she might have found in her future lives, to save anyone from ever having to suffer the way that she did ever again."

For a long, long moment, that stretched on and on, no one said a word or made a sound. "Please Painted Lady, protect me from my father. I know he doesn't mean to hurt me. I know he's just trying to teach me how to be a better son and a better prince. But it hurts so bad and mom still hasn't come back... Please keep me safe."

"I guess it's kind of fitting that you dressed up like her after all," Sokka told Katara.

"What?" Zuko's voice was dangerous.

"I mean that's Katara to a t. What Aang just said, it describes her perfectly."
Zuko shook his head. "You have no idea what you're talking about," he insisted.

"I know my own sister-"

"But you don't know the Painted Lady, not like I do. She abandoned us! All of the people who were counting on her! Who prayed to her! Who- Who begged her..." Zuko wiped away a rebellious tear.

"You prayed to her," Toph asked. "Why?"


Katara grabbed his arm. Even though her hands weren't on fire he still felt like he was burning. He snatched his arm back and glared at her. "Yes you do," she said.

"I thought I was just a heartless bastard who doesn't care about his people."

Katara frowned. "What did you pray for?"

"That's none of your business!"

"Well how am I supposed to understand if you won't talk to me?" Frustration was leaking back into her voice.

"I don't need your understanding! I don't want it! Leave me alone," he roared.

"You are so messed up Zuko." She sounded more concerned than accusatory, not that it made Zuko any less angry. "You can't keep all that stuff buried inside. You're poisoning yourself with it. I only want to help you."

There was a part of Zuko, a part buried deep down beneath all the rage and the pain, that wanted to tell her everything, to spill his guts, leave nothing out and let her think what she would. *What's the worst thing that could happen,* he thought. But he already knew the answer to that question. *She will look at you with pure unbridled disgust.*

"Zuko?"

"You're not my mother. And I don't need your- your- mollycoddling. You need to quit trying to save everybody. It's not like you're so perfect!" Zuko watched the concern morph into hurt morph into anger. He almost regretted it. Almost.

"Fine. Keep that rage all bottled up inside. I hope you choke on it." This time it was Katara who was the one taking a dramatic exit. Zuko almost wanted to apologize. Almost.

Sokka watched his sister storm off. Then he watched Zuko depart in the opposite direction. He watched Aang sigh dramatically and plop to the ground in a cross-legged position. He watched Toph bite her lip and stomp an earth chair into existence to fall into. "Well, that could have gone better," Sokka said.
“Gee, ya think,” Toph asked.

“I just don't understand it,” Aang said.

“What's not to understand twinkle toes? This is what happens when two high strung people lock horns. And no one is strung higher than madame fussy britches and sir sparks a lot.”

I should probably stand up for my sister, but Toph's right. Once she becomes convinced of something there's no reasoning with her. It's usually not too bad because she's right so often, but every once in a while you get cases like this.

“But all Katara wants is to help the people of the village, and all Zuko wants is for his culture to be respected. Those are both perfectly reasonable positions. And they were getting along fine before we got here. I just don't understand why they can't find a compromise.”

“Well you weren't exactly helping,” Toph said.

Is this going to be another fight? Seriously? I can't take much more of this. I'm the meat and sarcasm guy, not the reasonable responsible guy.

“What do you mean?” Aang looked more hurt than angry, but Sokka knew better than to underestimate Toph's ability to piss people off.

“You keep trying to force them to be nice to each other. All that's doing is creating resentment,” Toph insisted. “If you just let them work it out on their own they would eventually come to some kind if accord. In their own time that is. But you just had to force the issue and dredge up all these 'issues' and now they're even angrier at each other than ever.”

When Sokka saw Aang's heartbroken face he had to speak up. “That's not fair Toph. It's not Aang's fault that Zuko has emotional problems and Katara is so bullpig headed,” he insisted.

“But if I can't even get two kind-hearted people with mutually compatible goals to get along how am I supposed to bring peace to the world?”

“I don't know if kind-hearted is the first adjective that springs to mind when I think about Zuko,” Sokka said.

“That's because you don't know anything about him at all,” Toph accused. “Zuko does care about the people in that village, and he cares about all of us. Sure he's not great at expressing himself, but who would be with the freaking Fire Lord for a father. I mean c'mon, we've all seen Azula. Zuko could have turned out like that instead. Can you even imagine having two of her running around?” Toph shivered.

Sokka, for his part, blanched at the idea of having two Azulas in the world. Ugh. Why would she even bring that up? I'm going to have nightmares for weeks. But…

“Hey! I have been super nice and accommodating to Zuko ever since that stupid dance party. It's not my fault he has a temper and sets things on fire at the slightest provocation, now is it,” he demanded.

“See! This is exactly what I'm talking about! I'm the one that destroyed the camp the other day, not Zuko. What exactly has he set on fire since we got here?” She crossed her arms in challenge.


“Meanwhile, I tore apart the whole camp! But no one said a word to me about that. The only person Zuko has hurt or inconvenienced since we got to this village is himself. Doesn't that say something?
Like maybe he's really honestly hurting and doesn't need us to armadillo-dog pile on top of him in addition to all the crap that he has going on?” Toph jutted out her chin and kept her arms crossed, clearly projecting that she had no intention of budging from her stance.

“Yeah but…” Toph tears stuff up all the time, that's just how she is. I'm used to it. I guess it is a bit of a double standard though. “Okay, let's say you're right. We tried to help Zuko and to get him to tell us what was wrong. He didn't want our help. It only made him angrier!”

“Of course he's angry!” Toph threw her hands up in the air. “Nobody likes having help forced on them. Trust me, I know. It sucks.”

“So then what are we supposed to do?”

“Just don't be a jerk! Is that so hard?”

“Hey I'm not the…” Oh no. Sokka stared in disbelief at the column of smoke rising from the direction of the factory. Sokka locked eyes with Aang and the two shared a thought. Katara.

“Okay, both of your hearts just went into overdrive. Did you do a nonverbal communication thing again? Because if I have to tell you one more time not to do that I'm—”

“We have a serious problem.” Why do you always have to do this to me little sister? Why?

…

Zuko saw the smoke and ran back to camp as fast as his feet could carry him. If somebody got hurt while I was off sulking… Zuko skidded to a stop in front of Aang, Sokka and Toph. “Is everybody okay?” His heart was still racing.

“We need to get Katara and get out of here before someone shows up to investigate what happened,” Sokka said. “How could she be so stupid?” He looked ready to tear out his hair.

Zuko raised a skeptical brow. “You think Katara is responsible for that? Doesn't seem like her.”

“Well we can find out for sure in just a few minutes.” Aang pointed at a figure surfing towards the shore of the polluted river.

There's no way Katara did something so short-sighted and reckless. I can't believe it.

“What were you thinking?!” Sokka waited until Katara was in earshot to start yelling.

Katara crossed her arms and widened her stance, looking for all the world like the most stubborn Earthbender in history. And Zuko knew the actual most stubborn Earthbender in history. “I did what needed to be done. Zuko's story made me realize that I had overlooked something.”

“What?!” This is my fault now? How is everything always my fault? This is so unfair.

“So long as people like the ones who run that factory go unpunished they'll continue to abuse the people they have power over. They were never going to choose to stop polluting the river, so I made them stop polluting the river.”

“ That's what you took from the story?!” Zuko was starting to miss his old haircut because it would be a lot easier to resist the urge to yank every single strand of hair out of his head if he still had a buzz cut. “That was not the point of the story! That was the opposite of the point of the story! Are you kidding me right now?!”
Katara shrugged. “Well the way I see it, it was open to interpretation. Aang thought it was about overcoming suffering. I see it as a warning in regards to what happens when evil men are allowed to have control over people.”

“You- This- You- I-” I can't believe she did this!

“Guys I uh, I think we broke Zuko,” Sokka said.

“Do you have any idea what you've done?”

“I saved the village,” Katara said.

“No, you haven't. You've doomed them.”

“What do you mean,” Aang asked nervously.

“First of all,” Zuko said. “The kind of heavy metal and toxic chemicals these factories produce will take years or decades to filter out of the river. People are going to continue to get sick no matter what. Second of all, the noble in charge of this region isn't just going to shrug off that lost tax revenue. He's going to raise taxes on everyone who lives in this district, including all the people in that village, if there are any survivors after that factory's security team is done with them. Which I doubt there will be.”

Katara had gone pale and she looked ready to shake apart. Maybe I shouldn't have told her the truth. She was only trying to help. She doesn't deserve to suffer for that. She's suffered enough already for so many things she had no part in.

“I don't understand… Why would they-”

“The factory owner is going to assume the sabotage was done by a villager. Who else would have a motive? He'll make an example out of the whole village in retribution.”

“I didn't know… I didn't realize.”

“I could have told you,” Zuko said. He didn't mean for it to sound as harsh as it did.

“There has to be something we can do!”

“I think we've done enough,” Toph said.

“No! I can't accept that!”

“What do you want to do,” Sokka asked. “We can't fight them. You, Aang and Toph can't use your bending without risking tipping off the Fire Lord to the invasion. I don't think Zuko and I could take the whole security force if it's big enough to wipe out a whole town,” he said.

“Prince Zuko, take a look at this. Wanted dead or alive, an Earth Kingdom rebel known under the moniker of the Blue Spirit. Wears a theatre mask depicting the famous character and wields the dual Dao. Highly skilled and extremely dangerous. Any information regarding this rebel is to be reported to Admiral Zhao. I do not envy this man nephew. He must be truly desperate to take on such a visage. Everyone knows the Blue Spirit is a malicious and frightful being.”

“You picked the wrong spirit.”

“Huh,” Sokka asked. Everyone (except Toph, who had her ear angled towards him) was looking at him. “What are you talking about?”
“The Painted Lady is a spirit of benevolence and compassion. You should have picked a spirit of chaos and malice. That would scare off the security force and provide an explanation for what happened to the factory,” Zuko explained.

“Do you have any in mind,” Katara asked.

“Toph, how detailed can you get with your Earthbending,” Zuko asked instead of answered.

“Sparky, who do you think you're talking to?”

“I need you to help me carve a mask.”

Aang held the heavy stone mask in his hands. “I don't understand. Why don't you want to do it?”

Zuko looked at the smiling face held in the Avatar's hands and felt his heart leap up into his throat.

“Who are you? And what do you want?” “Because I'm not that person anymore, and I don't want to be. To you that's just a mask, one you can put on and then take off again. But the Blue Spirit was my identity. It's who I became when I felt like I had to do something dishonorable. I did terrible things with that mask on. Things I am so ashamed…” Zuko tore his gaze away from the mask. “And I don't ever want to be that person again.” Zuko refused to meet the Avatar's eyes. “I just can't…”

Zuko felt a touch on his shoulder and flinched away from it. He looked down and saw concern in Aang's big grey eyes. “It's okay Zuko.”

“No, it's not. You don't know what I did.”

Aang considered this. “I don't know about every bad thing you've ever done, but I do know about a lot of them, because you did a bunch of those bad things to me. And I forgive you. For each and every one of those things, I forgive you.”

Zuko looked away. “I don't deserve it.”

“Monk Gyatso once told me that forgiveness is a sort of gift. You don't give it to someone because they deserve it. You give it to them because you want them to have it. I want to forgive you. You're my friend,” Aang said.

Zuko rubbed his arm. “I'm not a very good one.”

“I think you're better than you realize.”

Zuko blushed. “We should ah… hurry up and go save that town.” Zuko headed for Katara's ice board. She would sneak them to the village where they would provide pyro and hydrotechnics to support Aang's illusion.

Zuko had been in a lot of awkward situations, but surfing with Katara, even for only a few minutes, definitely ranked high on the list of uncomfortable experiences. At least once they were under the wooden planks they couldn't speak. Scaring away the security force turned out not to be too difficult, and in the end almost the entire village decided to pack up and leave, fearing that it wasn't safe to live somewhere that had been touched by such an evil spirit.

Packing up took a lot less time than normal. Once they were up in the air Zuko felt the tension in his gut uncoil and a weight slip from his shoulders. For the first time in days he felt like he could breathe again. It's over. And I was right. She isn't real. My prayers weren't ignored, there was just no one to
They didn't fly for very long because they had left so late in the day, but it was long enough, and the village and the river were both far behind them. Zuko was content to let Aang, Sokka and Toph carry the conversation over dinner, and he even felt his heart warm when Toph fell asleep cuddled up next to him clutching his arm like a stuffed platypusbear. He knew he probably wouldn't have any sensation in that arm in the morning, but when he looked at her peaceful face (craning his head to get her in the view of his good eye) he decided it was worth it.

Sokka yawned. “Well goodnight everybody.”

“Yeah, I'm going to bed too,” Aang said.

Zuko hoped that Katara would leave with them, but she remained by the fire. Zuko would have fled at the prospect of being alone with her, but disturbing Toph was not an option. Katara held her knees to her chest and stared at the fire. He couldn't read her expression. Rather than risking saying something stupid he turned his gaze to the fire as well. The warmth was a comfort to him, and his inner fire reached out to the fire in the pit, drawing strength and solace from it. In time it began to lull him to sleep. “I'm sorry.”

“Huh?” Zuko blinked. He had almost forgotten that Katara was there. “Oh. Me too. I'm s-”

“You don't need to be,” Katara said.

“No, I was an ass.”

Katara considered. “Well I was a bigger ass.”

“It's not a competition,” Zuko said.

“Fair enough. We were both asses and we're both sorry,” she said. “I never should have said those horrible things about you, or treated your culture like some frivolous thing. I was wrong.”

Zuko looked at her earnest face. “Sokka was right,” he said. “You are a lot like the Painted Lady that my mother told me about. You care so much about other people, even people who don't actually deserve it. If anyone has the right to be the Painted Lady, it's you. Everything I did to you and the people you love, and you still gave me a chance. You saved my life. Thank you.”

She stared at him. “Do you really think you don't deserve to be cared about? Zuko, you do.”

Zuko hid his face. “When you… Did you see my scars? All those times that you healed me?”

“Yes.” Don't look at her. You can't see the disgust if you don't look at her. “I'm sorry. I never meant to invade your privacy. I was only-”

“Katara it's okay. I mean it's not. But it wasn't your fault. You saved my life. I am so, so grateful to you for that.” Even if I feel like throwing up knowing that you know.

“Are you?”

His surprise made him look up. To his even greater surprise she didn't look repulsed, only mournful. “Of course I am. I owe you my-”

“I didn't mean… Do you want to live?”

“How could you ask that?”

“I knew a girl once, in the Southern Water Tribe, who used to hurt herself, and one day she-”
“You think-!” Zuko forced himself to lower his voice so he wouldn’t wake Toph. “You think I did that stuff to myself? You think that I-”

“No,” she said firmly, and she had such an authoritative voice it stilled him at once. “I’m talking about what happened with the shells.”

“I didn’t mean to do that.”

“I know,” Katara said. “I know you used to pray for succor. I know that someone hurt you, someone burned you and cut you and did all of these horrible things to you. I know that I don’t have the right to know any of these things because you didn’t choose to disclose them. But I just want you to know that you can talk to me about anything. I will listen, and I will not judge you. If ever you feel the need to hurt yourself or anything like that I really hope you’ll come talk to me instead. But if you choose not to I won’t get mad. You can come to me for healing and I promise I won’t ever snap at you like I did before with the shells. Okay? I promise.”

The strange thing was that he believed her. He believed every word. I don’t deserve her kindness. I don’t deserve the compassion of someone this selfless and wholly good.

As if she could read his mind she stood up and walked over to him. “Can I sit here?”

He nodded.

She sat down. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“Yes it was.”

“It wasn’t.”

And then the words came spilling out. The words and the tears. Salt and water and so, so much pain all flowed out of him. “My mother sacrificed herself to save me. I wasn’t a good enough son. I didn't deserve to be a prince of the Fire Nation. They were going to get rid of me, but she sacrificed herself to give me another chance. And I messed it up. He made me take her place. I-I-I-” His sobs overwhelmed him and he felt like he couldn’t breathe. She wrapped her arms around him and let him cry into her shoulder and he knew he didn’t deserve it, but he wept onto her dress anyway. He sobbed until he was all dried out, and she didn't say a word or move away or look at him in disgust.

“My mother died to save me too.” He looked into her eyes. For a moment neither needed to speak, because the words passed between their eyes. This is our pact. This is our bond. Maybe if we combine these loads and bare them on both our shoulders they won’t be so heavy as when we carried them alone. “A man came looking for the last Waterbender in the Southern Tribe. He came to kill the last one. He came to kill me. She took my place. I-I-I-” His sobs overwhelmed him and he felt like he couldn't breathe. She wrapped her arms around him and let him cry into her shoulder and he knew he didn't deserve it, but he wept onto her dress anyway. He sobbed until he was all dried out, and she didn't say a word or move away or look at him in disgust.

“My mother died to save me too.” He looked into her eyes. For a moment neither needed to speak, because the words passed between their eyes. This is our pact. This is our bond. Maybe if we combine these loads and bare them on both our shoulders they won’t be so heavy as when we carried them alone. “A man came looking for the last Waterbender in the Southern Tribe. He came to kill the last one. He came to kill me. She took my place. I-I-I-” His sobs overwhelmed him and he felt like he couldn't breathe. She wrapped her arms around him and let him cry into her shoulder and he knew he didn't deserve it, but he wept onto her dress anyway. He sobbed until he was all dried out, and she didn't say a word or move away or look at him in disgust.

“Zuko stared at her. “She died because of my grandfather's cowardice. She died because Fire Lord Azulon was consumed by the fear that the Avatar was going to be born into one of the Water Tribes and wanted to make sure there was no one left to teach the Avatar. She died because my family tried to destroy your culture. She did not die because of you. And I am so sorry for everything that we stole from you.” He waited for her to strike him, for her to condemn him, call him a monster. Instead she leaned against his shoulder and let him put his arm around her and cried into his shoulder this time.
When Katara woke up the fire was dead. Toph was still nestled into Zuko, but he was in the middle of some horrible dream. His whimpering might even have been what woke her up. She bit her lip, trying to decide whether it was better to rouse him from the terror or let him sleep. All of a sudden the fire came back to life. Katara almost jumped out of her skin. She would have screamed, but she felt like her breath had been stolen from her. On the other side of the fire stood the Painted Lady. Seeing her in person Katara now realized the red lines the villagers painted on their sculptures weren't tattoos or skin paint. They were battle scars. They came from swords, rocks and balls of flame, maybe even sharp shards of ice or gusts of wind. She was a soldier. That part of the story at least had been true. Maybe the whole thing was. A spirit stood in front of Katara and Katara felt like she would shake apart with fear. *She's come to punish me for daring to impersonate her. She's come to kill me. She's come to-* The Painted Lady reached out with both hands, and Katara couldn't move. One hand touched Katara's forehead, and the other touched Zuko's. The prince stilled, his nightmare banished. Katara in turn felt all of her fear, guilt, rage and pain slide away. She knew it would return, but for now she felt as peace. It was such a relief to be able to set her burdens down, if only until the sun came up. The Painted Lady took Katara's hands into her own. The spirit's hands were cold, but it was a pleasant chill, like the snow she played in with her brother when they were toddlers. The spirit held Katara's hands, the hands that healed, the hands that took care of others, the hands that fed her friends, protected the innocent and did so many wonderful things. The Painted Lady kissed each hand once, and Katara understood.

The spirit brushed a hand over Toph's brow and then went over to where Aang and Sokka slept before touching each of them as well. Then she faded away, and Katara slipped into a sleep more peaceful than any she had slumbered in a long long time.

Chapter End Notes

So that's that. Let me know what you think. The origins of the Painted Lady. Cliche? Heartbreaking? You decide! Also I intended to end this chapter with Katara and Zuko still mad at each other, but Katara is just too empathetic and way more mature than me and she made up with Zuko while I wasn't paying attention. Couldn't be helped.

I know this chapter had way too much talking and time wasting nonsense, but I hope you all found something you enjoyed in it. Next up: Sokka's Master! More stuff about Lu Ten and Zuko's childhood as well as more jewelry making! Because I know that's what everybody enjoys about this story, Zuko making jewelry.
Happy Valentine's Day everybody! Ah, love is in the air. And I have a present for all of you, my loyal readers. This fic is not about romance. In fact there are no relationships in it at all. But seeing how it is that special day, the most commercial of holidays, and knowing how much so many of us in the fandom like all that relationship stuff I'm going to write some romantic mini fics for some of you in celebration of the holiday. If you want a mini fic just leave a comment on this chapter with a prompt and the pairing you want. I don't know how many people (if any) will be interested in this, so I can't say how many I'm going to do. But if you want one, ask for one. If not you can still comment on the chapter. (Seriously I live for your comments you guys.) Obviously all prompts much be in the A:tLA universe. Deadline for requesting your mini fic is Saturday night (as late as you want, I won't start writing them until Sunday morning). Okay, hope you all have a swell V-day!

Iroh’s first hint that something interesting was about to happen was the sound of footsteps. The steps were light and rhythmic like a dancer's, not the heavy angry tread of the guard who usually had this shift. Iroh’s second hint was the smell of delectable tea. Iroh's third hint came when a tray appeared in front of him containing a delicious looking meal, a steaming cup of tea and a beautiful white flower.

"Not many still cling to the ancient ways,” Iroh murmured.

“Those who do can always find a friend,” the man with dancer's feet replied.

Iroh picked up the cup of tea and sipped. He savored the complex flavor. “I hope you did not undertake all this risk simply to bring me a good cup of tea. Although if you did, I most appreciate it. This is a fine cup of tea indeed.”

“Grand Lotus Iroh,” the man said. “I come bearing a message from Grand Lotus Piandao.”

“Ah, how is my old friend?” It feels like so long ago that we cut a bloody swath through the Earth Kingdom together. But it really wasn't such a long time, was it? Some of the orphans we made are probably still children. I must never forget what I have done. If nothing else this imprisonment gives me time to meditate on my past wrongdoings. “Still refusing every young man that comes to his door?”

“Master Piandao has taken on a new student.”

“That is good. Old men like us need to spend time around the young, lest we become too set in our ways. But tell me, what is his message?”

“Your nephew is alive and well.” At that moment Iroh almost bowed down to pray to every spirit he knew and all the ones that he did not. Zuko is alive. My s-nephew is alive. “He is traveling with the Avatar and his companions.”

“The Water Tribe siblings and the Young Earthbender,” Iroh asked. I really liked that girl.
“I don’t know that much. This message was passed to me by Piandao’s manservant. I was not present for any of the events. I’m sorry.”

“There is no need for apologies. You have given me a gift of incomprehensible value.” Zuko is alive and with the Avatar. Iroh remembered entering the cavern to see a bolt of lightning hit the ceiling and send rocks tumbling down onto Zuko. Iroh had felt like his heart would stop beating forever. One son was not enough to punish my transgressions. This city would take another from me. This city will take everything but my life, so that I can suffer all the more. But Iroh had seen Zuko’s chest rise. Iroh attacked the princess and her treacherous Dai Li, allowing the Avatar and the Waterbender to get Zuko and escape. Iroh sipped his tea. The taste was even better now. For the first time since entering that cavern Iroh felt like he could breathe. It was like the sun was coming up over the horizon, promising a new day.

“Do you have a reply for Grand Lotus Piandao?”

Iroh finished the tea. It is a new day. We cannot squander it. “I have a message, not just for Piandao, but for the whole order.” Iroh put his cup down and raised his eyes to meet the gaze of the man with dancer’s feet. “Every one of us.”

The man took a moment to absorb the magnitude of Iroh’s statement. “Yes Grand Lotus Iroh. What is your message?”

“A garden cannot bloom that exists only in shadow. A flower must see sunlight to reveal its beauty to the world. The Avatar has returned, and as the sun rises we must seek out its warmth, even if by doing so we risk our own demise. My brothers, we will meet outside the walls of Ba Sing Se on the day of Sozin’s comet. One hundred years ago my grandfather changed history. Now, we will change it again.”

The man bowed his head. “I am honored to have served you, if only in this small way.”

“You have done no small thing this day. May the Earth be steady beneath your feet. May the Sun shine on your endeavors. May the Wind blow only good omens your way. May the Moon light your path.” Iroh bowed his head.

“As it once was, so it shall be again. The seasons come and go. We shall meet again.”

When Iroh looked up the man was gone. Iroh set to finishing his meal before the ornery guard could come by and see it. Zuko has found his path. I could not be happier. Now I must complete my own destiny. After finishing his meal Iroh created a small flame in the palm of his hand. “Spirit of the Sun,” he whispered. “I call upon you to safeguard my nephew in these times of trouble. If blood must be spilled, let it be mine. If someone must pay for the transgressions of my family, I beg you to let me balance that scale. My nephew is young and full of promise. He is kind, loyal and more honorable than he ever realized. Please, keep him away from harm.” Iroh closed his fist, sending the cell back into darkness. But even in the inky black Iroh felt as though light were all around him. He began to hum to himself.

Winter, Spring, Summer and Fall. Winter, Spring, Summer and Fall. Four seasons. Four loves. Four seasons. Four loves. Winter maid, moonglow adorns you. Winter maid, sea foam surrounds you. Carry me, safely to new lands. Carry me, onto my next life. Winter, Spring, Summer and Fall. Winter, Spring, Summer and Fall. Four seasons. Four loves. Four seasons. Four loves. Spring lad, flowers adorn you. Spring lad, stone surrounds you. Tend the fields, care for the new life. Tend the fields, till the harvest time comes. Winter, Spring, Summer and Fall. Winter, Spring, Summer and Fall. Four seasons. Four loves. Four seasons. Four loves. Summer lady, sunlight adorns you. Summer la-
“Hey! Knock it off! Don't make me go in there and beat you into compliance! Be quiet!”

Iroh stopped humming. But the song went on in his heart. He had everything he needed, everything he wanted. Zuko was safe. He was safe and he was with good people. At that moment Iroh considered that he just might be the happiest man in the world.

Chapter End Notes

So this chapter takes place after Sokka's Master. You might be thinking: 'But Electrons why not post it after Sokka's Master then?' That's a very good question. Which I will answer at the end of this note.

But first a quick word on Iroh's song. I cut it off where I did so as not to spoil the plot of the Avatar and the Fire Lord. The Water Tribe worships the Moon and Ocean Spirits. So which spirits do the Fire Nation worship? The Sun and... Well you'll have to wait for that chapter to find out.

Now as for why I posted this little interlude when I did. You see
OMG you guys!!! Everybody should stop what they are doing right now and go watch Black Panther. I saw it yesterday and I am still shook by how incredible it was. Michael B Jordan brought his A game to every single second that he was onscreen. I was in awe. This isn't relevant to the story or anything, I just wanted y'all to know it's pretty much the greatest movie ever made.

Which makes posting this chapter extra hard, because it's embarrassing. Ugh you guys. Just ugh. So I'mma let you in on the secret to my totally hectic writing process. 1. Come up with story 2. Outline story. 3. While halfway done with step 2 start writing scenes out of order based on whatever scene you are fascinated with at the moment. 4. As soon as you finish a sizable portion of the first chapter edit it, insert foreshadowing, post it, and then go back to writing random scenes. 5. As soon as you finish a sizable portion of chapter two rewrite it to remove continuity errors with chapter one, insert foreshadowing, edit it and then post it.

And so forth and so forth. If you think that doesn't look so bad: I had to rewrite huge chunks of this chapter because the Painted Lady ended differently than it did in the outline. It was so time consuming and annoying.

"But Electrons," you ask "Why don't you just write the story in order or stick more faithfully to your outline?"

This is an attack. I'm being attacked right now. "Security!"

Anyway, here's Sokka's Master. Oh and I'm working on the Valentine's Day fic. A little disappointed I didn't get much of a response for that offer, but it is what it is. Whatever. On with the show.

Toph felt Zuko's warm hand wrapped around her cooler one as he moved her extended finger from point to point, trying to help her map out the constellations in her head. “This star is the phoenix's beak. This is the tip of its wing. This is its claw.” Toph tried to put the shape together in her head. It didn’t look anything like a bird.

“Are you sure you know these constellations?”

“I lived on a ship for three years,” he said with a slight edge of agitation to his voice. “Yes, I am.”

“Use your imagination Toph,” Katara said. “The shapes aren't going to line up exactly right.”

“Uh huh.” Toph reclaimed her hand. “I think this is one of those things you have to see to really appreciate,” Toph said. “Thanks for trying Zuko.” Toph dropped her hand onto the solid stone, letting it fill her with familiar comfort.

“What is,” Toph demanded.

“A meteor,” Katara said. “It looks like it's…”

“It didn't burn up in the atmosphere,” Zuko shouted in a high frightened voice. “It's headed right for that town! Come on!” He jumped up and started running. Toph followed despite having no idea how they were supposed to go up against a giant ball of flaming rock.

Luckily the meteor didn't actually hit the town itself, but the abandoned field it did impact wasn't far away and the field was consumed by flame almost immediately. Toph felt Zuko shift his weight into a stance she had never encountered before and the heat began to lessen and then die. “Wow,” Aang said. “I didn't know that Firebenders could do that.”

“Put fires out,” Zuko asked in a quizzical tone as Toph headed for the meteor’s crater, ignoring Katara imploring her to be cautious.

“Yeah. One time I tricked Zhao into setting all of his ships on fire and he didn't seem to have any way of putting them out,” Aang said.

“Ha! That was awesome,” Sokka reminisced.

“He must not have bothered to learn how,” Zuko said. “A lot of Firebenders don't. A Firebender is supposed to have control over his or her bending at all times. Learning to put out a fire is like admitting you're going to make a mistake and set something on fire you don't intend to.”

“But what about situations like this one,” Katara asked. “And isn't it best to always be prepared for an accident? Even if you are really skilled?”

Toph felt Zuko shrug. She dug her feet into the earth and tried to feel the composition of the meteor without touching it. Even from a distance it was still hot enough to make her sweat. “My father didn't think so. He was always of the: the more fire the better school of thought. My mother is the one who taught me how to put fires out to help me with my lessons.”

“What do you mean,” Sokka asked.

Zuko sighed. “I started bending late, I mean really late. I was seven years old and my sister had already been bending for a year. When I was finally able to make fire I was relieved, but I was also terrified. My cousin always talked about how amazing firebending was and how great and powerful it makes you feel, but I was so scared of the flames at first. During practice my instructor was always pushing me to create bigger and hotter flames. I was never able to even master a kata before he pushed me to the next and I was terrified that I was going to burn myself, or worse, set the palace on fire.”

“How is setting the palace on fire worse than burning yourself,” Aang asked.

“Because my father would have been a lot more dissapointed about the palace. When I told my mom how scared I was she taught me how to put out fires, so I wouldn't be so nervous and hesitant. It helped. I felt… more in control.”


Zuko shrugged again. “It's never my first choice of combat method. Remember our first fight at the South Pole? In the beginning I didn't use any bending at all. The truth is, I'm not a very good Firebender. I don't have any natural talent. I've improved a lot, but that's mostly due to my uncle's
teachings. He's a great master, and just about anybody could figure out how to firebend under his tutelage. He even figured out how to adapt Waterbending moves for Firebending.”

“Really?” Katara sounded skeptical.

“Did you see that move I used against Azula in the crystal catacombs? My uncle invented it.”

Toph slid her foot and tried to make the meteor bend to her will. *This feels strange, but I'm the only person in the world who can bend metal. I can master this space rock.* She bowed her head in concentration, only half listening to Zuko and Katara's discussion. She would never admit it to either of them, but the idea of using techniques from the different bending styles fascinated her.

“When you threw the lighting back at her?”

“Yes.” Toph felt Zuko go through the motions of the move. It was almost identical to one of Katara's Waterbending stances. *I wonder what would happen if I tried to bend rock like water or fire, or even air? Twinkle Toes would love it.*

“That does kind of look like a Waterbending move,” Aang said. “But when did your uncle ever get the chance to study Waterbenders?”

Zuko shrugged. “He's traveled all over the world. I learned to stop questioning how he knows what he knows. Usually the answer was some sort of proverb. I hate proverbs.”

“Well all this talk about bending sure is interesting, and by interesting I of course mean really boring,” Sokka said. “But we should probably get out of here before someone shows up to investigate the big boom. Let's go Toph!”

“You don't have to shout,” Toph groused. “And give me a minute. This rock is different from anything I've ever bent before. I want to explore it a little.” Toph scrunched her nose and licked her lips. *I just need to concentrate. Just... focus.*

“Well how long is it going to- Hey!”

Toph put up her hand and made the ground beneath Sokka's feet dump him on his ass. She heard Aang snicker, but she blocked it out. *I can tell there's something different about you. You are Earth, but you're not. I need to go deeper, break you down to your smallest parts. Feel what it is that makes you different.* Toph was starting to get a headache. She reached out her hand to touch the meteor, but a larger warmer hand snatched hers away. She had been concentrating so hard she hadn't even felt Zuko approach. “What was that for,” she snapped.

“You need to wait for it to cool down.”

*Right. Almost forgot.* “There's something special about it. I just can't put my finger on it.”

“You'll figure it out. We can come back tomorrow and blend in with the crowd of gawkers that's sure to arrive. But for now we should probably get going,” he told her.

Toph's sighed. “You're right,” she admitted.

“How come you listen to him, but I get knocked into the dirt,” Sokka complained loudly.

“He annoys me less,” Toph said with a smirk.

Sokka grumbled all the way back to their campsite, but Toph wasn't listening. Her mind was
occupied with shapes. Not just the shape of the Earth itself, but the shape of all the tiny pieces that it was composed of. Unlike those silly constellations these shapes made sense, and Toph knew she could discover their secrets.

... Zuko sighed the sigh of the long suffering as Sokka dragged his four companions into the weapons store. “I thought we agreed that after we picked up supplies we would go check out the meteor,” Toph complained.

“Weapons are supplies,” Sokka said.

Zuko rolled his eyes. The inside of the store was almost identical to the way it had been the last time Zuko was here, even though that was more than three years ago. “Did you help make this?”

My chest puffed up with foolish pride. “Yep.”

“This is fine work. You might have been a blacksmith in another life Prince Zuko.”

I laughed. “Or a great swordmaster.”

“The way I hear it that might be this life.”

Zuko ran his finger along a long sharp steel blade, careful to keep his skin away from the cutting edge. He was equally careful to keep out of sight of the shopkeeper, who might recognize him even after three years and a marred face.

“This is nifty,” Sokka said.

“You’ve a good eye. That's a Piandao original.”

“That's good right,” Sokka asked.

Zuko resisted the urge to peek at them and catch a glimpse of the sword. “Master Piandao is the greatest sword maker and Master Swordsman in Fire Nation history. In the history of the whole world even! Boy and girls used to come here from all over the Fire Nation just for the opportunity to possibly train with him.”

“Used to,” Katara asked. “What happened?”

The merchant sighed. “Master Piandao hasn't taken on a new student in three years. He vowed to never teach the art of the sword to anyone ever again.” Zuko's heart was racing. Master Piandao hasn't taken on any students since I left the Fire Nation? Why? It couldn't have anything to do with me could it? “These days he spends all of his time at his estate, all alone but for his manservant, who brings me swords to sell and picks up supplies. Everyone who's tried to convince the Master to teach them has been turned away at the gate. A young man offered the Master a golden statue inlaid with precious jewels so valuable it would be almost impossible to appraise, but the Master wouldn't even see him. Some say he's gone mad.”

“What happened three years ago,” Aang asked.

“Everyone has their theories, but no one knows for sure. One day Master Piandao just up and dismissed all of his students and declared he would never take another. His students were devastated, and each pleaded with him to reconsider, but he refused. One claimed that the night before Master Piandao had received a letter from Capital City, but she didn't know the contents of the letter or even
who it was from.”

“Huh,” Sokka said. “Sounds like a real mystery.”

“Some think the Master had a secret lover in the army, and the letter brought news of his lover’s passing. Others say that the Fire Lord himself forbid the Master from teaching the art of the sword ever again. Those theories are pretty far fetched I grant you, but no one can figure out why such a revered Master would abandon teaching so suddenly. I suppose we’ll never know the truth. Not that lack of knowledge will keep people from gossip and speculation mind.”

“Huh,” Sokka said. “Could you excuse us? Our parents are probably wondering where we are.”

“Sure thing. You kids have a nice day.”

Zuko was so relieved to be leaving the store that at first he didn't notice Sokka's contemplative mood. Katara did though. “What are you thinking, and how much trouble is it going to get us all in,” she demanded of her brother.

“Well I'm not thinking about blowing up a factory or anything,” Sokka shot back.

“Come on guys,” Aang pleaded. “Don't start.”

“I'm with Katara,” Toph said. “You're being too quiet. You've got a capital P plan brewing.”

“Maybe I do,” Sokka said.

“So what is it,” Toph asked.

“Well I was just thinking… I'm a great warrior-”

“And so humble,” Zuko said.

“Also true,” Sokka said. “But I would be an even better warrior if I learned from a great Master! Katara, you learned from Master Pakku, Aang, you learned from Gyatso, Katara and Toph, Toph you learned from… Who taught you how to Earthbend anyway? Not Master Yu?”

Toph scoffed. “In his dreams. I learned from the original Earthbenders, the badgermoles.”

Zuko stopped short. “Really?” Just when I think I've heard it all. I should really stop being surprised by this stuff. “Like Oma and Shu?”

“You know the legend,” Katara asked.

“Everyone knows that legend. Sometimes I still get that stupid song stuck in my head.”

Aang and Katara shared impish grins. Sokka took on a look of pure terror. “Don't even think-”

“Secret tunnel! Secret tunnel!” The two belted out in tandem. “Through the mountain-”

Sokka and Zuko both groaned loudly while Toph hooted with laughter and joined in. “This is all your fault,” Sokka shouted over the song.

Zuko didn't even try to defend himself. “I would completely understand if you murdered me for this,” he said as he tried to ignore the music.

“You two are so dramatic,” Toph said as she, Katara and Aang got bored with the tune.
“Well yeah,” Sokka said. “Anyway, as I was saying, I’ve never had a Master. I’ve had to learn my fighting technique on my own.”

“So you want to see if Master Piandao will take you on as his student,” Aang asked, voice pitching up in excitement. “That’s a great idea!”

“Except for the part where he doesn’t take on students anymore, remember,” Toph asked.

“Yeah, but I’m pretty convincing,” Sokka said.

“Well it can’t hurt to try,” Katara said. “And if he says no we can just look for another Master.”

“Or I could challenge him to a fight and impress him with my determination and skill until he has so much respect for me that he has to agree to teach me. I call that move the Katara.”

“Cute,” Katara said, chuckling.

“And if all else fails maybe your grandmother used to date this guy too,” Toph suggested.

“Ugh,” both siblings exclaimed simultaneously.

“I don’t want to know,” Zuko said loudly. “No one explain. I’m literally begging you.”

“You’ve lost story privileges,” a horrified looking Sokka told Toph. “From now on you aren’t aloud to hear about anything that happened before you joined Team Avatar.”

“Sokka,” Katara said. “It’s still not catching on.”

“Give it time,” Sokka whined.

They go from revealing they learned their bending styles from mythic creatures in an epic backstory pulled right out of one of Uncle’s ballads to squabbling like toddlers. I don’t get it.


“I don’t really have any strong opinions on group names one way or the other.”

“No, about me studying with Master Piandao.”

“Oh, right.” Duh you idiot. “Well it would certainly be an amazing opportunity. We all need to be in top form for the invasion. Just try not to be too disappointed if it doesn’t work out.”

“And in the meantime I’m going to take apart a super cool space rock,” Toph said as she rubbed her hands together in anticipation.

“Just make sure you put it back together afterwards,” Katara warned. “We don’t want to draw too much attention to ourselves.”

“Like by blowing up a factory,” Toph asked.

“Come on guys,” Zuko said. “Katara made one mistake in a long history of saving us all from a variety of unpleasant situations. Why don’t we just, ya know, move on,” he asked.

“Suck up,” Toph complained. But she couldn’t have been too mad because she grabbed Zuko’s hand and dragged him off to look at the space rock with her. Maybe I should tell him…
“Wait, hang on,” Zuko called after Sokka as the other boy started towards the Master's estate.

“What's up?”

“In my culture you always bring a gift to a Master you want to take you on as a student, usually something that demonstrates skill or knowledge in the field you wish to enter.”

Sokka frowned. “Like what?”

Zuko knew most of the things they carried with them were essential supplies. Sokka didn't really have anything that would make a suitable gift for the Master. Maybe one of his weapons could work, but Sokka would have to explain where he got something of Water Tribe craftsmanship and that could get complicated. Zuko reached into his pocket and pulled out his knife. “Here.”

Sokka hesitated. “I can't take that.”

“Why not?”

“Because it's yours.”

“Well you need something to present to the Master to prove your worth. Tell him you're from the colonies and won it in a fight against a member of some Earth Kingdom militia.”

Sokka shook his head. “I can't take your stuff.”

Zuko became frustrated. “Well you need to bring him something. I'm offering it to you.”

Zuko could have sworn Sokka was grinning now, like there was some hilarious joke that Zuko wasn't in on. “I just can't take it.”

“It's a gift.”

“Okay,” Sokka snatched the knife from Zuko's hand so fast if the blade hadn't been in a sheath Zuko's hand would have been sliced open.


“I'm just following your dumb rule.”

Zuko's face fell. “Oh.” Well what was I expecting? That a few civil conversations made us friends? Although I didn't really explain the minutiae of the rules now that I think about it.

“What is it,” Katara asked, ever perceptive.

“That rule is for strangers, not f-acquaintances.”

“Whatever,” Sokka said, not really seeming to see the implication. “Thanks for the knife.”

“You're welcome,” Zuko said, but Sokka had already turned to leave and Zuko wasn't sure the other boy had even heard him.

…

“You want to learn from the Master?”

Sokka grinned as he puffed out his chest. “I sure do. Name’s So-” Sokka cut himself off by clearing
his throat. Nice one! Now you need to think of a Fire Nation cover name that starts with an S! I don't know that many Fire Nation names to begin with! Okay, don't panic.

“Sorry, I didn't catch that.”

“It's Saku. My name is Saku.”

“Let me guess. Your father is a gardener?”

Sure, why not. “Yeah. Great gardener.”

“And you have no interest in such a monotonous profession and wish to learn something more exciting, like swordplay?”

How dare you insult my fake father's fake profession?!” “Hey, being a gardener is a noble calling! It isn't as easy as people think.” At least it isn't easy in the South Pole, where it's more like impossible. Maybe it is easy in the Fire Nation, I wouldn't know. Gah! Why do I always overcommit to the role? “That is to say, er…”

The man at the gate didn't seem annoyed or contemptuous though. If Sokka hadn't known better he would have said the man looked almost impressed. “Then why don't you want to follow in your father's footsteps?”

“Well I uh… I just don't have the aptitude for it really and uh… I'm not passionate about it.”

“But you are passionate about swords?”

“Swords, spears, clubs, boomerangs, I'll fight with almost anything. Whatever works. I've been fighting for a long time. Sometimes it feels like I've been fighting my whole life. But there wasn't anyone around to teach me. I had to learn on my own. There were a lot of times where I ended up on my backside in the dirt. But I never gave up. I can't ever give up. Fighting is…”

“Your passion,” the man guessed, not unkindly.

“I'm not a violent person.” Just stop talking Sokka! You're digging yourself into a deeper and deeper hole! “I don't like hurting people.”

“People get hurt in fights,” the man said.

“I know. But the thing is… There's always going to be people out there who will prey on the innocent. They've always got one excuse or another why they have the right, but in the end they're all the same, bullies. I just need to know that if people are in trouble I'll be able to protect them. I can't just back away and let someone, anyone, get hurt. So I fight. Win or lose I have to fight. I might as well learn what I'm doing first, don't you think?” Sokka chuckled nervously and gulped. “Right?”

“I will take you to see the Master, but I must warn you that he will in all likelihood turn you away. Try not to take it to heart. I see that you have a gentle spirit, not unlike another young man that once stood where you stand. If you are not taken on I encourage you to seek out another Master for your training. You seem deserving.”

That's really nice. “Thank you, that's… thanks.”

“Are you not used to hearing such praise,” the man asked as he led Sokka up the hill.

“I just… My sister is an incredible bender, and sometimes people are so caught up looking at her
they don't even see me. I love her with all my heart and would do anything for her, and it's not like she didn't work hard every step of the way to get where she is. Sometimes I just…”

The man nodded. “Are you a bender?”

*Did he hear a word I said?* “Why would I need to learn swords if I could whip out some flames whenever I wanted? Like my sister, who is a Firebender and bends flames.” *Nice save.*

“Some of the Master’s past students have been Firebenders of varying skill levels. Many believe bending to be the most powerful form of combat, but Master Piandao does not hold that view. A skilled Swordsman can hold his own against any sort of bender if he has been trained in the proper techniques. And it is always useful to know several different combat forms. You said that you use many different kinds of weapons to fight. Fire is just one possibility.”

“I guess I never thought about it that way.”

The man opened a nondescript wooden door and gestured for Sokka to enter. Another man was sitting at a low table doing calligraphy. Sokka squared his shoulders and marched in. “So,” the man said, causing Sokka to come to a sudden stop. “You've come to learn from the Master?”

“I…” All of a sudden Sokka's throat felt dry and all of his words deserted him. *Speak up dummy!*

“Lizardcat got your tongue,” Piandao asked.

Sokka pulled out the knife. “I brought you a gift Master.” *Should I bring it to him or keep still?*

“I have been given many gifts by eager young people over the last few years. I returned them all. What makes yours so special,” he demanded.

“Well…”

“I thought so,” the Master said.

“Hey,” Sokka said. “I may not be the son of some great house who could afford to lug a cart full of gold up the hill, but I'm dedicated and I work hard. Isn't that more important?”

Master Piandao put away his brush and rose to his feet in a slow deliberate move. He turned to face Sokka. *He looks so stern. Maybe he's about to throw me out.*

Sokka held out the knife. Piandao took it and examined it for far longer than Sokka would have preferred.

“He's probably finding a million things wrong with it. ‘This is no ornamental blade. It has been used often, but it has also been well cared for. Earth Kingdom make…”

“I'm a colonial,” Sokka said quickly.

Piandao gave no indication that he had heard Sokka. “Did you steal it,” he asked abruptly.

“What?! No! It was a gift.” *I was supposed to say I won it in combat! Ugh. What is it about this guy that has me so nervous?* “Like I said, I don't come from wealth or anything. Most of what I own is tools, clothes, survival supplies and stuff like that. And half of that stuff isn't even really mine. It's mine and my sister's.”

“So you asked someone to give you this knife?”

“No.” *This guy must think I'm a real jerk.* “A friend of mine gave it to me. I told him to keep it, but he insisted I take it,” Sokka explained.
“Hmm. He must not be a very good friend, if you didn't want to accept his gift.” What? Oh this must be more of that etiquette nonsense Zuko keeps going on about. It's so silly. In the Water Tribe almost everything is owned communally anyway. We don't have to give each other things. If someone needs something they can usually just take it, within reason.

“Well… We didn't used to be friends. To tell you the truth, he's kind of a weird guy and I don't really understand him at all. But I've come to see he means well. Maybe we aren't good friends at the moment, but we're becoming friends at least. All of my best friends are people I didn't really get along with at first now that I think about it. Sometimes you have to get past your initial bad impression of someone and let them show you their true selves.”

Master Piandao put the knife in his pocket. “I once knew a young boy who was very shy and withdrawn. People often assumed he wasn't good at much because of his nervous disposition and disinclination for showing off. But he was a hard worker and a great talent. He could have become an even greater Master than myself.”

Master Piandao's voice cracked on that final statement and he looked away. “Did he die?”

“Well, I'm sorry.” Piandao knew loss. He knew his words fell far short of any possibility of comfort because nothing could soothe the pain of a fresh loss. “Was he your son? Did he die in the war?”

“He wasn't my son. But I had a responsibility to him that I failed.” What was it Zuko said? A student must respect his master, but a master has to teach his student? “As to the war, yes, he did.”

“I didn't mean to intrude on your grief. I'll go.”

Before Sokka could turn around Piandao shook his head. “No, stay. I will train you.”

Sokka stared. “You will?!” Calm down! Play it cool. “I mean…” Sokka bowed. “You honor me Master Piandao. I will be a good student.”

“That remains to be seen. Come along.”

…

Zuko approached Katara as she scrubbed a metal pot to glistening. He hesitated. Maybe I should just leave her alone. I know we made up and everything, but I shouldn't push my luck.

“Do you need something,” she asked without looking up. She didn't sound annoyed, so that was a good sign. Aang was absorbed with Toph's experiments on the pieces of meteor she had snuck away from the impact site. The two of them were alone. “Or are you just fascinated by the process of cleaning cookware?”

“I uh… do you have a knife? For, you know, cutting things.” I'm just going to go ask Toph to entomb me in the earth until the end of time.

Katara looked up, clearly amused. “I know what a knife is Zuko,” she said, suppressing a laugh. He flushed. “No, I know. I just uh… need one.”

Katara held up a sharp blade. “Will this work?”

Zuko took the knife. “Thanks, I’ll bring it back.”
Katara shrugged. “You don’t need to. If I need it for something I’ll come find you.”

“But isn’t it yours?”

“It’s just a tool. It belongs to everybody.”

“Huh.” *That’s an interesting notion.*

“Do you need anything else?”

“Nope. Oh uh… I’ll make dinner tonight.”

Katara looked up and smiled. “Thanks.”

“No problem.” Zuko walked away from the campsite towards a lake he remembered well from his early days training with Master Piandao. He made sure there wasn’t anybody nearby before disrobing and jumping into the water. He took a deep breathe and dove down.

“Look at this one Zuko.”

“Wow. It’s huge!”

Lu Ten chuckled as his deft hands separated the shells and began carving the meat out. “It had probably been down there for a long time.”

“Years,” I asked with excitement.

“Maybe even decades,” he said somberly.

“Are you teasing me?”

“Would I do that?”

“Yes.”

He laughed again as he flicked guts at me. I shrieked in protest while he howled with laughter. “Careful cousin. If we’re dirty when we get back to the manor I doubt Master Piandao will allow us back inside.”

I sighed. “I don’t think he likes me.”

“What? Why do you say that?”

“He’s always telling me to slow down. He won’t let me move onto the next move until he’s decided I’m ready, even if I showed him that I can do the current one perfectly. Sometimes he even makes me go back and drill moves we did weeks ago! He thinks I’m hopeless.”

“Hey, that’s not true.” He placed two fingers under my chin and lifted my face so that I was looking at him. “I know Master Piandao has a different teaching style than you’re used to, but he teaches everyone that way. I for one think that you have made exceptional progress.”

“Really,” I asked skeptically.

“Would I lie to you?”

“Yes.”
Lu Ten clutched his heart. “Oof! I am wounded Zuko! Mortally wounded I tell you!”

“Knock it off.”

“Zuko, come closer so that you can hear my last words. Please cousin, they are of dire import.”

“You’re just going to tickle me or something.”

“Would I do that?”

“Yes!”

“You are so suspicious Zuko. I give you my solemn vow as a prince of the Fire Nation that I will not tickle you. Now come here.”

I approached wearily. He jumped up and swept me off my feet. “Hey! You promised!”

“I promised I wouldn't tickle you. I never promised that I wouldn't throw you into the water, now did I cousin,” he asked merrily.

“Wait, wait, wa-” I was in the middle of a poorly timed inhale when I hit the water. My lungs filled with liquid. I panicked. I kept trying to breathe. I reached for the surface, but I had forgotten which way it was. I thought I was going to drown. But only a second later I was yanked out of the water. Firm but gentle hands were pounding on my back as I hacked up water.

“Are you alright?! I am so sorry! I was just playing around! I didn’t mean- Are you okay?!”

“I'm-” I coughed some more. “I'm okay.”

“Are you sure?”

“It was my fault. I shouldn't have opened my mouth.” I hacked up the last bit of water.

My cousin rubbed circles on my back. “I need you to listen to me for a minute, okay cousin?”

“Are you mad at me?”

He pulled me into a hug. “No, I'm mad at me.”

“It was an accident.”

“Oh Zuko.” He ruffled my hair. “What's wrong with you kiddo? Yell at me. Call me a jerk.”

I shook my head. “It was an accident.”

“It was. It was an accident. I would never ever hurt you on purpose, you know that right?”

I nodded.

“But you have every right to be angry with me all the same. I should have thought it through before I did that. I made a dumb mistake that almost got you really hurt. It was my fault, not yours, okay? It's never your fault if somebody else hurts you. And if they try to tell you it is they're in the wrong, not you. Understand?”

I thought about my father and his fury that I hadn't done any Firebending yet. “But what if I…” I bit my lip. “What if I do something bad?”
“Like what?”

“What if I… What if someone shows me how to do something over and over again but I just can’t do it and they get frustrated with me?”

“Did Master Piandao—”

“No!” I shook my head emphatically.

He sighed. “Your dad still giving you a hard time about Firebending,” he asked quietly.

“I… I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

Lu Ten picked up a towel and started drying my hair. “Okay Zuko. Let’s go back up the hill and eat some of these Oysterclams, sound good?”

I nodded. “Sounds good.”

Zuko broke the surface of the water with another bag full of shellfish to see Toph sitting alone, cross-legged on the bank. “Toph?”

“I thought you were never going to come up for air,” she groused. “I was starting to doubt that you were here at all, even though I can feel your stuff in a pile over there.” She pointed.

“Do you need something?”

“Yeah. You’re going to teach me how to swim.”

She doesn’t know how to swim? “Sure thing.”

“Great.” She stood up. “You can’t tell Katara about this by the way. You can’t tell Aang or Sokka either come to think of it because they would tell Katara. Just tell no one.”

“Okay, is there—”

“I’m sorry, can you get out of the water? Talking to a disembodied voice is kind of creepy.”

Zuko hesitated. She can’t see my scars, he reminded himself. He exited the water. “That does sound somewhat disturbing,” he agreed.

“I’m so used to feeling where everyone is all the time. Most people close their eyes and the world goes away, but I don’t close my feet. I’m always aware of what’s going on around me, so when someone is somewhere I can’t sense them…”

“Freaks you out?”

“Big time.”

“You can’t sense things in the water?”

“Or up in the air,” she said.

“And that’s why you can’t swim?”

“I never learned. I never thought I would need to know. Why would I want to go somewhere that cuts me off from my element? Why would I want to unable to sense anything,” she said.
“What changed your mind?”

She sighed and kicked a pebble. “You know about the Serpent's Pass,” she asked.

“Sure. I took a ferry past it once.”

“You took the ferry into Ba Sing Se? How did you get a ticket? You didn't steal one did you?”

“My uncle knew a guy that got us some fake papers. Then he flirted with the customs agent—”

“Yuck! Too much honesty, too much honesty!”

Zuko smirked. “Hey, I had to witness it.”

She shivered. “Blah!”

“So when we're up on Appa…”

“Misery, torment, the works.”

He flinched. “I'm sorry.”

She scowled. “Don't you dare pity me.”

“I'm not. I just think you’re really selfless for doing something that's painful for you to help save the world. Not a lot of people would.”

She considered this and then grinned. “Yeah, I'm pretty great. Feel free to bow and kiss my feet whenever I walk by you,” she said.

Zuko tried to resist the urge to roll his eyes, remembered she couldn't see and then went ahead and rolled them. “Why can't Katara know you're learning to swim? Seems like something she'd be excited about, wouldn't it be?”

“She's offered to teach me dozens of times and I always turn her down,” Toph said. “She'd get all sad and dejected about it. Then she would want us to get emotional with each other. Barf.”

Zuko snorted. “Can I ask then why you want me to teach you? Katara seems to have more experience with the whole teaching thing.”

“Yeah, she's a great teacher. Always wants to make sure everybody is having a good time.”

“And that's… bad?”

Toph edged closer to the water and dipped her toe in with trepidation. “When we were going over the Serpent's Pass I fell in the water and almost drowned. Katara thinks that learning how to swim could be some fun bonding activity for the two of us. But I will never enjoy being in the water just like I will never enjoy being up in the air. I want to learn how to swim because I now realize it's a necessary survival skill, not because I think it will be fun. It won't be fun. It'll be torture. And I could try to explain that to her, but she would just try to find a way to make it fun. She wouldn't understand.”

Zuko nodded. He wasn't sure if Toph was right about Katara, sure she liked to make things enjoyable for people, but she did listen when people tried to talk to her. It doesn't matter whether Toph is right or not though. She has the right to learn how to do this on her own terms.
“So, when do we start Sifu?”

Zuko scowled. “Don’t call me that.”

“Fine Mr. Flames.”

“That’s so much worse,” he protested.

“That’s what you get for complaining.”

Katara was smiling as she and Aang returned from Waterbending practice. Not only had their session been both enjoyable and productive, but dinner was almost completed by the looks of it and the camp was tidier than it usually was after she had been away for a while. *It's nice to not be the only one who picks up after herself a anymore, she thought cheerily. Aang used his Airbending to sprint the rest of the way to the campfire. “Hey guys! What did you do today?”*

“Earthbending,” Toph said as she picked at her toes. *Blah. Why Toph? We're about to eat.*

“Diving,” Zuko said. “I made you another necklace. Actually I made one for all of you.”

Katara’s eyes widened when she saw Zuko pull out three strings of, not shells, but pearls that shimmered and shone like moonlight. Well, most of them did. The first necklace had only a single large pearl and on either side of it were strung little nautical odds and ends like small shells, sea glass and bits of coral. The second necklace was the same, but it had three smaller shining white pearls instead of a single large one. The third necklace was identical the second except for that the pearl in the center was not white, but a brilliant red that danced like flames.

“Thanks Zuko!” Aang took his necklace, the one with the single large pearl and immediately put it on. “How’s it look,” he asked.

“You look great,” Toph exclaimed.

“Thanks!”

“Uhh… You know she's messing with you don't you,” Zuko asked. “She can't see you.”

Aang shrugged and grinned. “A compliment is a compliment.” He tried to glimpse his reflection in the stew pot and was unsuccessful.

“Never change Twinkle Toes,” Toph ordered.

Katara fully expected Toph to reject whichever necklace Zuko offered her, and so was quite surprised when Toph took the one handed to her and put it on without a single comment about 'girly stuff' or any other derogatory remarks.

The necklace with the pearl that shone like fire was the only one remaining. Zuko offered it to her quietly. She reached out and took the necklace. “Thank you,” she said. “This is…”

“Can we eat now,” Toph asked. “I'm starved.”

Katara rolled her eyes at the younger girl, but they all sat down to eat. The food looked and smelled incredible, even Aang's seaweed stew didn't appear to be half bad. Katara took a bite and was delighted to discover that the flavor profile was not identical to their last pot of oyster clam stew. There were subtle changes that improved the flavor. “This is great,” she said.
The dinner passed quickly and amicably. Soon the four of them were sated and ready for sleep after a long active day. “I wonder what Sokka is doing right now,” Toph asked. “Hopefully this Master isn't as tough to please as I am.”

“Aren't you pleased with my Earthbending progress Sifu Toph,” Aang asked.

Toph harrumphed. “We’ll evaluate your progress tomorrow Twinkle Toes. Bright and early!”

“Aw…” Aang put down his bowl. “Then I'm going to bed.” He pet Momo and then dropped into his sleeping bag to almost immediately start snoring. Momo curled up on his chest.

Awwwww. Katara shook her head and went to start collecting the dining ware only to realize that Zuko had already done so. “Oh, you don't have to do that. You cooked. I'll clean.”

“I've seen you clean up on nights you cooked.”

Well that's true. “You really don't have to.”

“I know.” He continued collecting dishes.

“Well... thanks. Good night.”

He didn't look up at her. “Good night.”

Katara went over to her sleeping bag and made herself comfortable. She didn't fall right to sleep as Aang had. She tended to lie awake for a little while at the end of the day and reflect on the events that had transpired while planning tomorrow's activities. Katara's mind was like her hands. It rarely stilled. I'm glad Zuko was in a better mood today. Although he was still acting a little strange. I guess he's always somewhat awkward, but he seemed particularly so today. Although it was sweet that he made jewelry for everyone. I appreciated that he made dinner and did the dishes. He... Oh no.

Katara leapt to her feet. She looked around the campsite. Everyone but her was asleep. Katara bit her lip. Oh no. What do I do? Calm down Katara, you could be wrong. You just need to talk this out with someone. Who though?


“That's enough fruit pie Momo.”

Katara sighed. She leaned in close to whisper into his ear. “Aang,” she said a little more forcefully this time. “Wake up.”

Aang sprung to his feet. “What? Who?”

“Shhhhhhh,” Katara pleaded.

“Katara?” He rubbed his eyes. “What's wrong?”

“I need to talk to you.” She gestured for him to follow her. When they were what she judged to be a safe distance from the camp she turned and took in his concerned expression. “Nothing's wrong,” she assured him. “It's Zuko.”

Aang sighed. “You guys are fighting again?”
“No, that's the problem. We're not fighting.”

“That seems like the opposite of a problem.”

“What I mean is, he's been acting weird.”

“Well you know… It's Zuko. He is kind of weird. There's nothing wrong with that.”

Katara bit her lip. “I think he likes me.”

“We all like you Katara. You're the best.”

She rolled her eyes. “No Aang, I think he likes me like in a romantic way. He was all awkward around me this morning, and then he gave me jewelry, and then he cooked and cleaned up.”

Aang gave her a skeptical look. “So?”

*Sometimes I forget that my best friend is a monk.* “So, I think he has feelings for me.”

“Because he was awkward?”

“Yeah.”

“Zuko's always awkward.”

“Okay, but what about the jewelry?”

“He made a necklace for all of us. I think it was his way of asking if we're his friends.”

That threw Katara for a loop. “What?”

“Zuko said that when strangers offer you a gift you have to deny it three times. But when a friend does, you can just take it. That's why it hurt his feelings when Sokka didn't accept his knife. It was like declining his friendship.”

*He didn't look upset to me. Although… “That's why Toph didn't make any snarky comments.”*

“She's surprisingly perceptive when she wants to be. Which isn't often, but still,” Aang said.

“But he cooked dinner.”

Aang waited for a beat. “And?”

“You never cook dinner.”

“The only time I tried to make dinner Sokka accused me of trying to poison him! You didn't exactly love my dish either,” he complained.

“It was… interesting.”

“You both hated it.”

“Okay fine, point taken.”

“So… Is everything good?”

*I'm just worried that after the two of us were emotionally vulnerable with each other he's convinced*
himself that there's romantic potential between us. I don't want him to get hurt. “I'm not sure Aang.”
I need to be sure.

“So just ask him.”

Katara looked at Aang like he had just suggested she swim all the way to the North Pole and back.
“Just ask him what?”

“Just ask him if he likes you.”

“You can't just ask a person if they like you!”

“Why not?”

“It just isn't done!”

“Why not? Air Nomads did it all the time. Free and open communication is one of the keys to an unburdened mind. Secrets and worries weigh us down and keep us from joy and happiness.”

_He doesn't get it. He's just a kid._ “Aang, a girl can't just go up to a boy and ask him if he likes her. It's completely improper and… not done.”

“Well then don't worry about it. Like I said, I think you're way off base. Zuko doesn't seem like he even likes girl. So you should be fine.”

_Maybe he's- wait what? “What do you mean?”_

Chapter End Notes

That's part one. Part two is complete and just needs a final grammer/spelling run through, so that will be out in a few days. Let me know what you think about this chapter. Definitely not some of my best work. Ugh. Think I might be in a slump. Maybe I'll put this story on hiatus after this episode concludes and rework the whole thing. I dunno. What do you think?
Zuko looked over his shoulder. *Yep, she's staring at me again.* Katara looked away. Zuko gave up on his Firebending practice. He couldn't concentrate with that weird feeling of being watched constantly distracting him. Katara went back to pretending to practice Waterbending. It was too bad Aang was at Earthbending practice and couldn't distract her. Zuko walked over to the other teen. “Hey,” he said quietly.

“Oh hello,” she said as if she were only just noticing him. “How are you today?”

*What is going on? “Fine, yourself?”*

“Me? I'm excellent.”

“Great, so… Everything's… good?”

“Everything's great,” she said a little more forcefully than necessary. “I'm great.”

“Good... That's good.”

“It sure i-”

“Okay, what's going on?” *I am not doing this all day. “Why have you been spying on me?”*

“I wasn't... Don't be ridiculous.”

“Katara, if I did something to offend you, please just tell me. I swear it wasn't intentional and that I will do my best to correct it,” Zuko said.

“What? No, I was just... I was just trying to learn some Firebending moves.”

*What? Now I'm even more confused. “Huh?”*

“You said your uncle learned how to redirect lighting by watching Waterbenders, right?”

“Yeah...”

“So I figured, hey, why not try to invent a new Waterbending move by watching a Firebender?”
That's... actually brilliant. “Huh, well why didn't you say so? I'd be happy to show you any moves you want to see,” Zuko offered.

“Great! Can you start with the basics? How do you make a flame? And don't just show the mechanics, I want to know how it works.”

“Okay.” Zuko adopted a stance. “The most important component of Firebending is your stance. You have to stay rooted to the Earth.”

“Like an Earthbender?”

I never really thought about it like that, but I guess she's right. “Yeah. The Earth is full of heat. There's magma right under our feet, not to mention the heat of the sun that the earth absorbs into itself everyday. By staying rooted to the Earth you allow yourself to draw upon that heat to strengthen your inner fire.”

“That part doesn't seem particularly applicable to Waterbending. But keep going,” she said.

“Well breath is the next most important thing.”

“Like in Airbending?”


“And the third thing?”

“The third thing is the move itself.” Zuko slowly showed the different components of the most basic Firebending move. “Draw in the heat that exists all around you. Let it become fire.”

“Draw in the heat? The heat in the air?”

“Well it comes from the sun, but I guess it is in the air, yes. Let it come to you and-” Zuko went through the move faster this time and conjured forth flame. “Do you want to see it again?”

“Yes.”

Katara had Zuko repeat the move several times until he was bored and tired. But he didn't complain. He saw the look of intense concentration on her face and was fascinated by it. If there's anyone in the world who can figure this out, it would be her. “Need it again?”

“Hold on.” Katara went through a sequence of motions similar, but not quite identical, to the move Zuko had shown. His eyes widened in shock and amazement as he saw condensation form in the air wherever her hands passed through until she was holding a small puddle.

“That's amazing!” Zuko and Katara jumped.

They turned around and saw that Aang was watching them, with Toph standing next to him looking intrigued. “Hi guys,” Katara said.

“That was incredible,” Aang shouted again.

“Heh, Katara's a Firebender,” Toph said.

“Do you think I could teach you some Airbending moves,” Aang asked giddily.

“I don't see why not,” Katara said.
“Let’s go!” Aang grabbed her hand and the two ran off laughing.

Zuko chuckled and shook his head. “I’ve never met anybody like him before.”

“Jealous?”

*Of the ability to be constantly finding new sources of joy and delight in this terrifying painful world? Yeah, I guess I am.* Zuko opened his mouth to reply, but Toph had already grabbed his hand and was pulling him towards where she and Aang had been training earlier.

“Where are we going?”

“I’m teaching you how to Earthbend.”

…

*Don’t move Sokka. But my nose itches. Don’t move Sokka. Just a quick scratch! No! Is all well with you pupil,* Master Piandao said between strokes of his brush.

“My nose itches.”

The Master shook his head. “Go ahead.”

Sokka sighed with relief as he alleviated the terrible itch. “Ahhh.” Master Piandao rolled his eyes, but Sokka didn’t even care. “Master can I ask you a question?” How much longer is this going to take?! *Probably shouldn’t ask that one.*

“Why am I painting you,” Piandao guessed.

“Well, yeah actually. How’d you know what I was going to say? Can you read minds?”

Piandao chuckled. “No, and I never had the desire to before meeting you.”

“Thank you?” *Yeah, that wasn’t a compliment.*

“I paint portraits of all my students. I paint one when they begin training, and I paint one when they achieve Mastery of the blade.”

“Why?”

Piandao waited so long to answer that Sokka gave up on receiving a response at all. He let his mind wander until he heard the Master begin talking again. “I’m a peasant.”

“Huh?”

“I was not born into wealth. When I joined the Fire Nation army at fourteen I was the fourth of eight children born to destitute farmers.”

*I’m not sure how to respond to that.* “Well it looks like you’ve done pretty well for yourself.”

“The drill sergeant who instructed us in weapons pulled me aside one day. He told me that although I had no noble lineage or great aptitude in the sciences I could achieve prestigious standing in our nation. During battle, he said, all men are equal. The strength of your arm is what determines your success.”

“It sounds like he really inspired you.”
“He was a fool.” Okaaaaay. “The world is full of strong men and women. I once saw a man lift a whole cart of grain onto his shoulders. Do you think I could do that?” No, but I'm pretty sure that was rhetorical. “I am the greatest Swordsman in our nation. That's not a brag, it's an acknowledged fact. My skill has nothing to do with strength. A true Master of the sword is a warrior of the mind, not just of the body.”

Sokka nodded. “I think I understand.”

Piandao turned the eisel around. “Well young man, what do you think?” Who's that handsome devil? I look great! “You are a skilled painter Master,” he said. It seemed more prudent.

“We will leave this here to dry. Now-”

“Can I see the other portraits?”

Piandao paused. “Of my former students?”

“If you don't mind?”

Piandao shook his head. “I don't mind.”

Piandao led Sokka to a door made of dark wood with birds carved into it. Piandao opened the door without any fanfare. Sokka was bowled over by the sheer number of portraits. Even keeping in mind that many of the students had been painted twice there was still an impressive number of portraits. “You taught so many…”

“Each of these children, well some of them were adults when they came here, but most arrive as children, was unique in their own way. Some were particularly clever. Others were more agile than most. A few had the speed of a hungry cobra-rabbit. Strength, creativity, forethought, and dozens of other skills are represented by these faces. But the one thing they all share is a passion for the blade and a willingness to work hard to achieve Mastery. I am remembered for my military feats, which will still be taught in schools long after I am gone, but it is the contents of this room that I consider to be my life's work. These children are my legacy.”

Sokka moved further into the room. He saw a portrait of a pimply girl with a giant gap-toothed grin. He saw a boy with a cunning look, a girl who radiated smugness, a boy who looked like he was holding in a laugh, a girl with dreamy poet's eyes, a boy with a smudge of grease on his cheek, a girl with a nose that had been broken more than once, a boy with downcast eyes, a girl who was almost snarling. Sokka came to a sudden halt in front of a picture of a boy who couldn't have been a day over six years old. His look was one of trepidation. This child was far too young to be so nervous. Furthermore, Sokka was sure he knew him from somewhere.

“I see you found the young prince.”

Sokka felt like his blood had frozen inside his veins. “Prince Zuko,” he whispered. “You…”

“I was his teacher, yes.”

Sokka's mind whirred as he put all of the pieces together. “He's your student that died recently.”

“Yes.” Piandao's voice was suffused with such anguish that it took Sokka's breath away.

“You cared about him a lot.”

“I knew him from the time that he was six until he was thirteen. I remember the first time I ever saw
him. He was just a little boy hanging so tight to his cousin's hand the poor lad had a big bruise on it. He would sneak out at night to the training yard to do extra practice. He was so eager to prove himself at all times. His first lesson after his cousin died and his mother left he arrived with hollow eyes. He did not cry, nor did he smile. For over a year afterwards it was like he was a ghost of the boy I knew. All he did was train and study. All of the life had gone out of him. Then, at the most gradual pace, bit by bit he returned. One day he arrived at the gate for his lessons with a smile on his face. The boy I thought I had lost had returned to me.”

Sokka did the math. “Then he was banished.”

“Yes,” Piandao said softly. “I received a letter from General Iroh telling me what had happened, and that was that. He was just gone.”

“I'm sorry.” Once again Sokka knew his words were insufficient. “You cared about him alot.”

“He was the most promising student I ever had.”

“What did happen? Why was he banished?”

"What was your offence?"

"Cowardice."

Piandao stared at the portrait. The little boy in it had an unmarked face, but more than that he seemed as of yet uninfected by the rage that the Zuko Sokka knew was so beset with. “Most people don't talk about it for fear of rousing the ire of Fire Lord Ozai,” Piandao said.

“The Fire Lord isn't here,” Sokka said in a voice soft enough for Piandao to pretend he hadn't heard if he was so inclined. He wasn't.

“Prince Lu Ten desired to follow in his father's footsteps and have a military career. He was a good lad, studious and driven. He believed that in order to be the best commander possible he needed to be an expert in all the combat forms the men under him would be using. That way he would know how best to utilize their strengths and accommodate their weaknesses. The prince knew his father and I were old friends and asked Crown Prince Iroh to arrange for him to train with me. I agreed to meet the boy. On the day he arrived he brought his cousin with him, a six year old boy who was so nervous when he first encountered me he couldn't say a word. But this little boy had just as much drive as his grown cousin did. He never complained when a task was difficult or draining. He might become frustrated when he felt he wasn't making as much progress as he should, but that only made him that much more determined. He never quit.”

Sokka realized this was going to be a very long story, even if it only covered the highlights of seven years of Zuko's life. He didn't care about the time it was taking though. *I never even thought to consider what Zuko might have been like as a kid. This is fascinating.* As the story went on though and they got closer and closer to the inevitable banishment Sokka felt dred settle heavy and thick in his gut. He wanted to ask Master Piandao to stop, but he didn't.

…

“Do you think we should check on him,” Katara asked as she practiced her newest move.

“I'm sure he's fine,” Zuko said as he practiced his own adapted move. “It's only been a week.”

“How long does it take to master the sword?”
“Years.”

“We don’t have years,” Katara pointed out.

“No, but the solstice is still a month off. Sokka knows the timetable. The first lesson is the most difficult to finish. It's more about the philosophy of the sword than anything else,” he explained.

“Philosophy?”

“Sure.”

“There's a philosophy to swords?”

What do you think we've been doing for the past week? “There's a philosophy to everything.”

Katara conceded the point. She looked at something in the distance. “They're still experimenting with the pieces of that rock. You know I half expect Toph to invent another type of bending. She's only twelve. Imagine what she'll be doing when she's twenty, when she's thirty, forty, fifty and sixty. The possibilities.”

She sounds like a proud mother. I suppose she has the right. If anyone is a mother to those kids it's her. She's the same age as my sister. It's too much for one person. It isn't fair. “Imagine what you'll be doing,” Zuko told her.

“What do you mean?”

“Do you think any Waterbender has ever done what you're doing right now before?”

Katara was quiet for so long Zuko thought she had abandoned their conversation to focus on her bending. “Zuko can I ask you something?”

“Sure,” he said in an absent minded tone. He moved his fire from one hand to another.

“Do you like me?”

“Hm, sure. Who wouldn't?”

“No, do you like me?”

The fire flared up and disappeared. “What?!”


“Nothing, I swear.”

“Then why are you laughing?”

“No reason, I swear! It's just kind of a funny idea is all. Me being attracted to you.”

“What's so funny about it?”

“Nothing!”

“You just said it was funny!”

Yep, I'm dead. Goodbye cruel world. Just engrave my tombstone with a warning about pissing off
Waterbenders and I'll be satisfied.

“Aren't you going to say something?!”

“It doesn't have anything to do with you.”

“The fact that the idea of someone being attracted to me is apparently hysterically funny doesn’t have anything to do with me?”

“No, what I meant was… I'm just not attracted to… There's um… You're not…”

“I forgot. I'm a filthy Water Tribe peasant.”

“No! That isn't it.”

“Then what is it?”

“I don't... feel that way. I don't get those kinds of feelings. I never have before that is.”

Katara scoffed. “You don't like girls?” Her face dawned with a sort of comprehension. “Oh. You don't... like girls. You're... You're gay?”

Zuko sighed. “No. I don't think about people in that way, men or women. I just…” He shrugged.

“Oh. Oh.” These next few minutes are not going to be pleasant for me. Oh well. In for a copper, in for a silver. “Well that's okay.”

“I'm glad you approve,” he said in a dry voice.

“No, really. It's not like it's your fault.”

What is that supposed to mean? “Okay.”

“It's not like you chose to be in the situation you were in. You came out of it remarkably well adjusted all things considered. So you won't get any judgement from me, none at all.”

Is she talking about what I think she's talking about? “Hold on. You think that the reason I'm asexual is because I was raped,” he hissed.

Katara flinched at that last word, an action which hurt almost as much as her assumptions did. Just shut up. Just walk away. Remember what uncle said about your temper. “It makes sense that an experience like that would mess a person up. You don't have anything to be ashamed of, really.” Walk away. Walk away.

“So not wanting to have sex is messed up?”

“No! I just mean... Men are supposed to get married and have families, you know?”

“Get married to women you mean?”

“Don't you want to be a father one day? I see how you are with Toph, you'd be a good dad.”

Isn't it strange that the genuine complimentary statement hurts more than all the rest of it combined. “You know what, I think we need to walk away from each other right now.”

“I'm sorry. I'm doing my best here. I don't know anything about this stuff. I'm sure there's some kind
of… I don't know, like a treatment or-”

“Katara, shut up!”

Katara flinched. “Okay, it's clear you don't want to talk about this right now. I'll give you some space, and maybe later when we're calmer-”

“You just told me that a completely innocuous and essential part of who I am is a- a- a side effect of one of the worst things that ever happened to me. Do you have any idea how hurtful that is? I know I have issues. I know that I'm too angry and prideful and suspicious and a million other bad things. But there is absolutely nothing wrong with me being asexual!”

Katara looked away. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you, but clearly I have. I shouldn't have-”

Zuko didn't let her finish. “Yeah, you shouldn't have,” he snapped. “Just leave me alone.”

…

Aang didn't know where Toph and Zuko had gone off to, but he knew a perfect opportunity when he saw one. The camp was deserted except for Katara, who was studying her Waterbending scrolls. Aang exercised caution as he approached. “Hey Katara,” he said.

She smiled at him. “Hi Aang. I had an idea for another adapted Waterbending move.”

“That's great!” I’ll let her finish this before I bring up Zuko. I want her to be in as good a mood as possible. “Can you show me?”

They practiced for a little while. Aang was in the middle of trying to create a funnel with water the same way he did with air when Katara spoke up. “I know what you really came over here to talk to me about. You want me to make up with Zuko.” Busted. Oh well, here goes.

“But you don't want to?”

“I do want to.” Well that's good.

“So then what's the problem?”

“It's not about what I want. He wants to be left alone, and I need to respect that. People's boundaries have to be honored.”

“But how are you going to repair your friendship if you never talk to each other?”

“Some things are more important than friendship.” More important than friendship?!

“Like what?”

“Like feeling safe and comfortable. If you violate a person's boundaries you make them feel vulnerable, and you prove that you don't really respect them. Toph taught me that.”

“She did?”

Katara sighed. “I saw Zuko teaching her how to swim the other day. At first I was furious, because I offered to teach her so many times and she always turned me down flat.” More like you hounded her about how much fun she was missing out on and what a valuable skill and great exercise it is. “But then I realized that the reason she didn't want me to teach her is because I was always pestering her about learning. I didn't respect her boundary, and so she didn't trust me to teach her. Realizing that
hurt, but it also taught me an important lesson.”

“To accept people's limits?”

Katara nodded.

That makes a lot of sense. “Monk Gyatso once told me that there were lots of different kinds of loves, but that most of them fit into two categories: selfish and selfless. When we have selfish love for someone or something we want to lock that person or thing away so no one but us can touch it. When love is selfless we relinquish control over the object of our affections so it or they can flourish with or without us. You love Toph, and so you wanted what was best for her, but by relinquishing control of her you're allowing her to decide for herself what path she wishes to walk.”

“That’s beautiful Aang,” Katara said.

Aang beamed.

“Plus no one can tell Toph what to do anyway and I was just banging me head against the wall by trying,” she pointed out.

Aang laughed. Yeah. There's that too.

Katara sighed. “I wish Sokka were here.”

“Yeah, I really miss him.”

“Things just aren't the same without him here.”

“I know what you mean,” Aang said. “Where's the sarcasm? The funny jokes? The world is a little less colorful when Sokka's not around.”

Katara sighed. “Yeah.” After a moment of quiet contemplation she spoke again. “So we're in agreement he can never know we said all that.”

“Absolutely.” Aang gave an emphatic nod.

“His ego is swollen enough,” Katara added.

…

“So,” Toph said as she dried her hair. “You and Sweetness still aren't talking to each other?”

Zuko sighed. “Why do you call her that?”

Toph smirked. “Because it's funny. Why does it bother you? I thought you were angry at her.”

“I'm always angry,” Zuko muttered. That's certainly true. “Hasn't done me much good.”

“Still,” Toph said.

“It's just a little misunderstanding,” Zuko said as he tied his robe. “Anyway, I don't want to talk about it,” he said before she could start questioning him again. “It’s… personal.”

So you'll tell Katara about personal stuff, but you won't tell me? Toph didn't let on to her hurt feelings and pulled one of her pieces of space rock out of her pocket. “When most Earthbenders bend they reach out for the rock and they… apply force to it? I'm not sure what the exact description
would be. It's like when you push or throw something. You're not applying equal force to every part, and you don't choose the exact dimensions that are affected.”

Zuko tilted his head. “If I kick in a wooden door I don't choose where it splits open. I just kick and let the natural faults in the door help me.”

“Exactly! But what if… What if you could see where the door was weakest and apply all of your force to just that area? No door would ever be safe again! A lot of Earthbenders think skill means going bigger and bigger, but when I developed Metalbending I was focused on the smallest pieces. I think that's the trick.”

“Uncle always said precision will win out over strength every time. But how small can you go?”

“I'm not sure. I can sense that there are... components inside the earth. I don't know what they are. I don't think they have a name, because no one has ever been able to perceive them.”

Zuko hesitated. “What do they do?”

“They…” How do I describe it? It's so hard to explain something you only just found out existed and know next to nothing about.

“You'll figure it out,” Zuko said, almost as if he could sense her frustration. “If anyone can then you will. Katara predicted this by the way.”

What? How? She doesn't know anything about Earthbending. “She predicted that earth was made up of a bunch of smaller pieces?”

Zuko chuckled. “No. She predicted that you would discover another new type of bending.”

“She said that?” Oh. Katara really does believe in me. She always claims she cares about me and supports me, but I never believed her because my parents said the same things. I know they were lying. But I guess Katara wasn't.

“She said she couldn't even imagine what kind of amazing discoveries you'll make one day.”

Toph blushed. “I…” Toph was ashamed to realize a single tear had welled up in her eye.

“Are you okay?” Zuko sounded on the verge of panic. Good ol Sparky. “I'm sorry Toph. I didn't mean to put pressure on you or anything.”

“You doofus.” She punched him in the arm.

“Ow,” he said.

“Don't be a baby. It's an expression of love.”

“Well then I love you too.”

Ugh. Too many emotions.

Sokka almost lost his footing when he entered the camp and was ambushed by a small Airbender glomping onto him. “Sokka you're back,” Katara shouted with delight.

“Not quite,” Sokka said as he extracted himself from Aang. He looked at Toph. “What's their
“I don’t know. They missed you or something. I didn’t care,” she insisted. 


“He’s off meditating,” Toph said.

“What was it like learning from a Master? You were gone such a long time,” Katara said.

“It’s been good. But I’m not finished yet. In fact today I get to make my own sword!” And it will be the coolest sword ever! Everyone will be so jealous! ‘That’s why I’m here. I need your help’

“I’ll go get Z-” Toph started to say.

“No don’t bother him,” Sokka interrupted. He would certainly be difficult to explain to Master Piandao. “It's mostly your help I need Toph.”

Just as Sokka expected, getting the meteor to Piandao's estate wasn't difficult with an Earthbender’s help. Piandao was waiting for them at the gate. “I see you brought friends.”

“They're just helping me with the heavy lifting.”

“Would you like to make introductions?”

Right. Duh. “Master Piandao, these are my friends Kuzon, Tsuki and uhhhh…”

“My name is Mizu and I am honored to meet you Master Piandao.” Katara executed a perfect Fire Nation style bow. “You are a legend.”

“And you are too kind to an old man. Come in, all of you, and have something refreshing to drink. You must be exhausted after pushing that enormous rock up this hill,” he offered.

“You have our thanks,” Katara said. “But we have to get back before our other friend starts to worry about us,” she explained.

“In that case, Saku you can get right to work.”

Aw man. But Sokka knew better than to complain to the Master. Sokka had observed Piandao make several swords and knew he could complete the task. Nevertheless, Master Piandao's gaze fell heavy on Sokka as he went through the steps. By the time he was finished he was worn out and exhausted. Although he was covered in a sheen of sweat that made him feel gross and uncomfortable he felt a swell of pride in his heart when the Master inspected his work. The black blade glimmered.

“Beautiful,” Piandao declared at last.

“Thank you Master.”

“You should be proud.” I am. I spend so much time trying to prove myself. Now I have proof of what I can do that I can wear on my back and hold in my hand. “I know you must be eager to return home and show your family the progress you have made. But I hope you will return soon to complete your training.” I would love- Sokka froze. After Aang meets Avatar Roku on his home island we're going to the capital city, and after that, if we are successful, the war will be over. I’ll go home and probably never see Master Piandao again. I'm the first student he agreed to take on in three years and I'm just going to disappear from his life. I can't do that to him. Especially not after everything he's been through. “Is something wrong Saku?”
“I’m sorry master.”

“Oh? What are you sorry for?”

“I lied to you. My name isn’t Saku. I’m not from the Fire Nation. My name is Sokka, and I’m-”

“From the Water Tribe,” Piandao finished in a nonchalant tone. “I’m aware. It's one of the reasons I agreed to train you.” Sokka’s eyes widened and his jaw dropped. “Catching flies?”

“You knew?!”

“Of course I knew. Boomerangs are unique to Water Tribe culture. You told my servant you fought with a boomerang when listing your weapon proficiencies. You also almost revealed that your sister is a Waterbender but swiftly recovered. Thus I deduced that you are from the Northern Water Tribe,” Piandao said in a smug tone. He looked quite amused.

“Actually I’m from the Southern Tribe.”

“Really? I was under the impression that there are no more Waterbenders in the south.”

Just one. “I don't understand Master. You’re Fire Nation. Do you… Are you not loyal to the Fire Nation anymore? Is it because of what the Fire Lord did to his son?” Sokka shivered at the memory of the way Piandao's voice almost broke with grief when he relayed the tale.

“The way of the sword does not belong to one nation, but to all who are willing and able to learn the philosophy of the blade. I love my country, but I do not love this war. I do not love what this war has done to the people of all nations, mine and yours included. Your people have done nothing to me that I should hold against you. If anything is surprising it would be that you are willing to learn from me.”

Sokka considered this. I wouldn't have been a year ago. “I knew a kid once who, like me, wanted to fight the Fire Nation and liberate his people. But he took it too far. He wanted to wipe out a whole village just because it was occupied by the Fire Nation. Even the little kids wouldn't have been spared. I didn't have a way to stop his plans, so the only thing I could do was warn the village. Once the danger was over I left, but on the way out I saw a Fire Nation mother holding her daughter. The little girl was still shaking with fear, but the mother held her tight and was singing her a lullaby. She was Fire Nation, but in that moment she wasn't the enemy, she was just a mother. She reminded me of my own mother. Not everyone in the Fire Nation is bad. Not everyone in the Earth Kingdom or Water Tribes is good either.”

Piandao smiled. “You are very wise.”

“You think so?” Ha! Take that Katara.

“For your age,” Piandao amended.

Still counts. “So are we going to test the sword?”

Piandao laughed. “I won't go easy on you.”

…

Something is wrong with the water. Zuko had been swimming for a long time, and he knew water in a way that disgusted his father and his sister. He knew the currents and how to navigate them. He knew how to move with the water instead of fighting against it. The way the water was moving right
now was… unnatural. He leaned over and looked at the sloshing shimmering liquid. Something—A thin tendril of water surged up and smacked him in the face. Zuko scurried back. “What on—” he spluttered.

Laughter broke out from behind a pile of rocks a short distance away. Zuko sighed and went over to the rocks. Aang and Toph were rolling around on the ground, howling with delight. “Wha—What did his face look like Aang,” Toph asked.

“He looked like he didn't even believe it!”

The two kids laughed harder. “Are you done?”

Toph and Aang continued to snicker, so evidently they were not. Zuko took a deep breath and blew steam into Aang’s face, causing him to yelp in surprise. Toph started laughing harder than ever, and Aang once again joined her, apparently finding Zuko's revenge to be quite fun. “I bet Sokka would fall for it too.”

“We have to do it as soon as he gets back,” Toph loudly declared. “He'll never see it coming!”

“I thought you two were practicing Earthbending,” Zuko said. He wasn't really annoyed, but I have a reputation as a grouch to maintain. “How did you know I was here?”

“You're always here,” Aang said. “Which really annoys Katara, because this is the best swimming spot and now she can't use it because she's giving you your space,” he explained.

Zuko flinched, feeling guilty. Why should I feel that way though? I didn't do anything wrong.

Zuko shifted his weight from foot to foot. “I never told her she couldn't come here.”

Aang shrugged. “She's just trying to be respectful of you and your needs.”

If anyone else had said that Zuko would have interpreted it as a subtle dig, but this was Aang and Zuko knew he was sincere. “I'm uh… going to go talk to her,” he said. “Patch things up.”

“Good,” Toph said. “I think we can all agree this group has had enough drama to last us for a long time. Don't you think so Aang?”

Aang nodded emphatically. “I hate conflict.”

“Try not to get into too much trouble,” Zuko said as he walked away. I have no idea what to even say to her. I'm not apologizing.

“You know I'm going to interpret that as a challenge right?” Toph called after him. “Now I have to get into as much trouble as possible!”

He hoped he was far enough away that Toph wouldn't sense him chuckling. I don't want to encourage that kind of behavior… Even though I kind of do. Focus Zuko. What are you going to say to Katara? Zuko still hadn't come up with anything when he made it back to camp and saw Katara sewing one of Toph's old pairs of pants.

“Could you teach me to do that?”

Katara looked up and smiled. “Can it be that we have finally found something Prince Zuko isn't an expert at? Today is a great day,” she teased.

“Shut up,” he mumbled without venom.
She gestured for him to sit beside her. For a few minutes they worked in silence. She showed him how to do the stitches and then let him try it himself. When he made a mistake she covered his pale hands with her dark ones and let him feel the proper movements. He struggled at first, but eventually he began to understand the process. He had nimble fingers, and once they learned the proper motions they were more than capable of executing them. “You're good.”

“It's actually sort of relaxing.”

“I've always thought so,” she agreed. “But you can't tell Sokka I said that. I'd never be able to complain about doing all the sewing ever again.”

“What a nightmare,” he joked.

She snorted a laugh. “It's kind of strange being in a country where there aren't ‘boy things’ and ‘girl things’ and instead things are just things.”

“Strange in a good way or a bad way?”

Katara shrugged. “I guess that part is good.”

“Yes,” Zuko said. “The racism and ableism not so much.” He accidentally pricked his thumb.

“Oh! Let me get that.” A flash of blue had the skin smooth and unblemished again. “Better?”

“Thanks.” Zuko set down the sewing. “I know you were just trying to help. I know that you care about me, that you care about all of us.”

“I do,” she said in earnest. “I care a lot, but that doesn't make it okay for me to condemn your culture like I did. If this asexuality thing is something you have in the Fire Nation, then—”

“It's not.”

“Huh?”

Zuko pulled up his legs and rested his chin on his knees while holding his calves. “My people are a passionate people. We don't judge you for who you love, or lust, within reason, but someone who doesn't lust at all, that's a freak.”

“Oh,” Katara said. “I didn't realize…”

“I didn't even know what I was until I met someone like me when I was in the Earth Kingdom. The Earth Kingdom may be really intolerant of gay, bi and trans people, but they have no problem with asexuals apparently. It's the opposite of how things are here. It struck me as so funny that we have all these stupid preconceptions about people. Except it isn't funny at all. It hurts people, a lot of people.”

“I guess it does,” Katara whispered.

“And when you said what you did, implied that I was broken in some way, it made me feel like who I am isn't valid. Like it's just a symptom.”

“I was wrong,” Katara said. “I've had a lot of time to think and I've realized that. You're not hurting anyone. Who am I to judge you for who you are, for how you feel? My people would say it's unnatural, but in the North many believe it's unnatural for women to learn Waterbending and a lot of your people believe the natural order is my people being enslaved to yours. So maybe humans aren't really the experts on what's natural. You're right Zuko. You're no symptom.”
Zuko remembered a fight he'd had with his uncle on this very topic. Zuko recalled how he had shouted and denied while his uncle offered only unconditional acceptance. He hadn't been able to appreciate it then. He sure did now.

“Zuko? You okay?”

Zuko picked up the stitching. “Thanks.”

Katara squeezed his shoulder. “No problem, I like teaching people new things.” They both knew what he really meant, but Zuko appreciated the pretext. “You're really doing me a favor. Now Sokka is going to insist on learning just to show you up.”

Zuko laughed. “Do you think when he gets back he'll try to challenge me to a sword fight?”

Katara rolled her eyes. “All I ask is that when you finish with him he's still functional.”

Zuko burst out laughing. Maybe that was why he didn't notice the pair approaching until a familiar voice spoke. “It has been far too long since I heard that laugh young prince.”

…

Sokka double checked his packing. He didn't have a lot to bring with him, but it couldn't hurt to be thorough. Afterwards he hunted down Master Piandao to say farewell. The man was in the room of portraits, looking at the little boy he believed to be dead. Impulse, as was usually the case, overtook Sokka before reason could have its say. “If you could say one thing to him, anything at all, what would it be?”

Piandao shook his head. “There are so many things I would wish to say, I wish I had said, I wish I could one day say… It's too late for all of them.” Piandao seemed to force his gaze away from the portrait and onto Sokka. “I wish the two of you could have met. I think you would have liked each other. But there's no point in speculating on what can never be.”

*Don't do it Sokka. Don't create a problem where none existed before.* “Master?”

“Yes lad?”

“I want to introduce you to someone. Would that be alright? It won't take long, I promise.”

…

Zuko scrambled to his feet. “M-M-Master Piandao!” He quickly performed a low bow.

“You know each other?” Katara was puzzled.

“Master Piandao is the one who taught Zuko those ninja moves he used to break Aang out of prison,” Sokka said in an excited voice.

Master Piandao started towards Zuko and the young man backed away. Katara was worried the older man was going to attack her friend, but Piandao instead pulled Zuko into a fierce hug while Zuko stood there with his mouth hanging open and his hands at his sides. “You're alive.”

Zuko blinked away a tear. *I think Master Piandao was more than just his teacher.*

Piandao pulled back. “I thought you were gone.”

“No, I… Master I'm so sorry. I betrayed your teachings. I betrayed… everything. Everyone.”
“I don't believe that.”

“But it's true! I abandoned Uncle Iroh.”

Piandao shook his head. “If you were in danger your uncle would want you to prioritize your safety above all else, including him. That isn't a betrayal of him. You're alive. That means you honored his wish,” Piandao insisted.

Zuko shook his head, eyes wet. “Master-”

Piandao pulled out a knife. “This is yours I think,” he said. “I recognize it now. It belonged to the general who surrendered the outer wall of Ba Sing Se. I think you should hold onto it.”

Zuko took another step back. “It was a gift.”

“But not to me,” Piandao said. “This is not a rejection. I accepted the gift your friend brought me. Now I give a gift to you. I do not think you should part with the only thing you have that your uncle gave you. You won't forget him anytime soon I know, but it is nice to have reminders of the ones we love. Things that make us feel even a little closer to them can be a great comfort when we are separated.” Piandao picked up Zuko's hand and placed the knife in it before folding Zuko's hand closed. “Take it.”

Zuko lowered his hand but raised his eyes. “I betrayed my father. I betrayed my country.”

Piandao’s eyes flashed with something dark and dangerous. There's rage in there. I wouldn't want to fight him for real. Katara shivered, but the darkness left as soon as it came. “You did not betray Ozai. Ozai betrayed you. He betrayed us all. The man has no honor, no principal!”

Zuko's eyes widened in shock. “He's…”

Piandao's voice softened. “I know. He is your father, your lord and your Master. But Zuko, he did not care for you, protect you, or educate you as he was meant to do. You owe him nothing.”

Zuko looked at the ground again. “He will always be my father. Even if he doesn't really care about me… I'm still his son.”

Piandao hugged him again. “Just promise me that whatever obligation you feel for him you don't allow him to endanger your life.”

“I…”

Piandao hugged his student tighter. “Promise me Zuko.” Piandao looked almost desperate.

“I promise Master,” Zuko whispered.

Piandao pulled away with wet eyes. But in a few blinks they were dry and all of a sudden shining with mischief. “I would love to see how you have improved since your last lesson.”

“Oh!” Sokka looked giddy. “Sword fight!”

Katara and Zuko locked eyes. Remember what I said Zuko. He still has to be functional after.

...Sokka lay on the ground panting. “My whole body hurts.” Sokka started to lift his hand, felt a twinge of pain, and gave up. “Ow.”
“I told you we could stop,” Zuko said from nearby where he was sipping on a cold drink with Master Piandao and the rest of the group.

“A Water Tribe warrior never surrenders.”

Zuko shrugged. “Okay.”

“I didn't know you were that good.”

“I told you,” Aang said.

“As did I if I recall,” Piandao added.

Why is everyone ganging up on me?

“Humph.”

“Come on big brother. Come have a drink.”

“Can't. Moving hurts.”

“Don't be a baby,” Toph said.

Sokka saw that Zuko was still examining the blades Piandao had loaned him for their impromptu battle. “You can keep those.”

Zuko looked up in surprise. “Are you sure?”

“Certainly. I can think of no one I would rather have them. I always preferred to use a single blade myself. Besides, the pair you made when you were here ended up underneath the sea.”

Zuko blushed and rubbed his neck. “Thank you.”

How did that happen? “Were you battling mermaids Zuko?” Sokka snickered at the thought of Zuko fighting half fish women.

“My ship exploded.”

“I like my explanation better.”

“So do I,” Zuko said. “I was on the ship.”

Yikes. Piandao placed a hand on Zuko's shoulder. “Where are you kids off to next?”

“We still have a few weeks before we need to meet up with our allies,” Katara said. “There's plenty of other islands in the archipelago to see.”

“Or…” Aang drew out the word.

“Something on your mind Twinkle Toes?”

“I think it's time for me to start learning Firebending. I've put it off long enough.”

“I thought you said you never wanted to Firebend again,” Sokka said.

“Well I didn’t,” Aang admitted. “But if Toph can learn to do something she hates so can I.”

Yeah but Toph can do anything. “Well we're in the right place. I'm sure we can find a Firebending Master somewhere around here.”
“Actually, I already know who I want to teach me. We don't have to find him. He's right here.”

Zuko looked startled. “Do you mean me?”

“Yep!”

“But I'm not a master. I'm not even good.”

_I don't know. You're pretty good._ “As someone who has fought you before I strongly disagree.”

Zuko shook his head. “I don't know.”

“If you're good enough to teach Katara Firebending moves you're good enough to teach me,” Aang insisted. “Don't you guys agree?”

Piandao raised a brow. “You taught a Waterbender Firebending moves? Intriguing.”

“I uh… got the idea from my uncle.”

“I think it's a great idea!” Toph's loud proclamation caused a nearby flock of birds to take to the air. “You're outvoted Sparkles.”

“It doesn't work that way Toph,” Katara admonished gently. “Zuko doesn't have to teach Aang if he doesn't want to.”

“It's not that. I'm just not sure that I would be a good teacher is all.”

“You're a fantastic teacher,” Toph insisted.

“I think your friend is right,” Piandao said. “You may not be a Master, but you have struggled and fought to get to where you are. I think you are uniquely suited to teach the Avatar. After all, it seems you too have decided to try and master all the elements. Your uncle will be proud.”

Zuko blushed again. “Okay. I'll show you what I know.” Zuko's complexion matched the setting sun, and for a moment they were all quiet as they watched the great orb sink lower and lower into the horizon. Piandao started to hum a tune Sokka was certain he had heard before but that he couldn't place. _Maybe I will come back and finish my training one day. It could happen._

--

Chapter End Notes

This chapter really got away from me. First I was all: "Benders learning each other's styles while Sokka is training with Piandao!" Then I was all: "Toph invents (discovers?) chemistry!" And then I went: "More emotional crap!" This is a mess. But I hope you all found something to enjoy in it.

Next up is the Beach. This chapter is obviously going to diverge from canon a lot more than any of the previous ones. Firebending lessons! More emotional nonsense! And a surprise guest star! Who could it be...
Aang’s eyes widened and his jaw dropped as he stared at the clear water, the shining white sand, and the tidal pools crowded with thriving marine life. “It's gorgeous! Nobody lives here?”

Zuko pointed to a tall mountain a short distance away. “The Fire Sages say that volcano will erupt within the next few years. No point in building a house that's just going to be destroyed as soon as you finish. After the eruption when the sages say it's safe people will come back. Until then, we have the whole island to ourselves.” Zuko started unpacking.

“Uhhhhh,” Sokka said. “What if it erupts while we're here,” Sokka asked. “It would be just our sort of luck.” *What are the odds of that,* Aang thought as he fed Appa an apple and pet his thick pelt. “I don't fancy being buried in lava.”

“There are signs leading up to an eruption. We would have plenty of time to evacuate.”

“Great,” Aang exclaimed. “So let's get started!”

Toph dug her toes into the sand and scrunched her nose. “I should probably practice my Sandbending. Everything’s fuzzy again.”

“What if it erupts while we're here,” Sokka asked. “It would be just our sort of luck.” What are the odds of that, Aang thought as he fed Appa an apple and pet his thick pelt. “I don’t fancy being buried in lava.”

“There are signs leading up to an eruption. We would have plenty of time to evacuate.”

“Great,” Aang exclaimed. “So let's get started!”

Toph dug her toes into the sand and scrunched her nose. “I should probably practice my Sandbending. Everything’s fuzzy again.”

“I'm fine. I'm the inventor of Metalbending, if those dessert jerks can figure out how to bend sand then so can I. You two have fun blowing stuff up.” Toph turned her feet and hardened the sand beneath her. She bent down and picked up a handful of the loose stuff, letting flow through her fingers. She shook her hand to dispel a few spare grains. That looks interesting.

“Okay, well let's go Aang.”
Right, fine. “You got it Sifu!”

Zuko sighed. “Don’t call me that.”

…

Sokka looked far into the distance where Aang and Zuko were… meditating. Well that looks incredibly boring. He looked at a spot a bit closer where Toph forcing the sand to obey her every command. Better it than me. Katara was reading one of the scrolls Master Pakku had given her when they left the North Pole.

“I’m bored.”

Katara didn’t even look up from her scroll. “So go do something.” She started to draw a diagram in the sand. Isn’t inventing stuff supposed to be my thing? This is so unfair.

“By myself?”

“Uh-huh.”

Sokka looked out at the clear clean water reflecting and refracting the light of the sun as the waves threw themselves against the baking sands. “Let’s go swimming,” he suggested.

Katara looked up and grinned. “Okay.”

…

“Do you feel the heat?”

“It’s hard to feel anything else. I think the sun is trying to cook me. Even the sand is blistering.”

“You have to control it. Let the heat fuel your inner fire. Direct it away from your skin and into your core. Breathe in and pull the heat to your center. Breathe out and release heat into the air. You must be the master, not the subject.”

Zuko opened his eyes and saw Aang squirming in discomfort. Well this isn’t working. Zuko stood up and tapped Aang’s shoulder to get his attention. Aang looked up as Zuko offered the younger boy a hand. Aang smiled as he took the hand and hopped to his feet. “Break time?”

We just started. “We’re going to work on your stance. Your Earthbending training with Toph will have laid a good foundation for this. But on top of loose sand isn’t the best place to start learning. We’re going up there.” Zuko pointed to the volcano. Aang gaped at it. “Let’s get going.”

“Ugh…” But Aang trudged after him without argument. It took almost hours to get to the top of the volcano and the sun was beginning to set when they arrived. “At least it’s a little cooler.”

Zuko looked at the pink and purple sky. In a way it reminded him of his childhood. Azula had been like the sun was now, powerful and intense with the whole world seeming to revolve around her, and always surrounded by a splash of pink and a darker more somber color.

“Zuko?”

Zuko blinked and looked at Aang. “Huh?”

“What are you thinking about?”
“Just…” She was always more skilled than I could ever be. How am I supposed to teach the Avatar when I can't even achieve the same proficiency as my younger sibling? He shook his head. “Let me see your stance,” he insisted.

Aang took his stance. It was pretty good, requiring only a few minor corrections. Zuko walked him through each stance. Aang had a firm mastery of breathing Airbender and in almost no time he had mastered the stance. All that remained was to produce fire. The idea of which made Aang drop his arms and shoot Zuko a weary look. “I… I don't think I'm ready.”

“Sure you are. You know a lot more about Firebending than I did when I first bent.”

Aang frowned. “But you are a Firebender. I'm an Airbender. This doesn't come naturally to me like it does to you.” You were a Firebender in your past life. You already know this stuff.

“You can do this. I believe in you.”

Aang bounced on his heels. “But-”

“Stop that.” He looks like he's about to take to the air. “You need to stay rooted to the ground.”

Aang released a petulant puff of breath. “But-”

“And maintain breath control. You have to keep the rhythm constant so your inner fire doesn't become too weak or too powerful.”

“That's what I'm worried about!” Aang threw his hands in the air. “The last time I tried to Firebend I burned Katara! Fire is too dangerous to just- just- I'm not ready, okay?!”

Zuko looked around. “Nobody else is here.”

“You're here,” Aang said. I'm still getting used to the idea of people actually caring if I get hurt.

“I'm a Firebender Aang. I can defend myself.”

Aang started bouncing on his heels again. “I-”

“Stop that!”

Aang recoiled. “Sorry Sifu.”

Nice going jerk. Zuko took a deep breath. “No, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have yelled at you. If you want to wait before trying to produce real fire then that's fine. We can just work on the forms.”

Aang breathed a sigh of relief. “Thanks Sifu.”

...

Katara watched her brother have an animated discussion with Toph about something while Aang sat on a rock a short distance away meditating. A casual observer wouldn't see anything different about Aang, but Katara was no casual observer. He looks distressed somehow. Katara bit her lip. She turned around and looked at Zuko practicing his stitches. “So.”

Zuko looked up. “Hm, did you say something?”

“How's Firebending practice going?”
Zuko shrugged. “Fine.”

Katara didn’t need Toph’s skills to know that he was lying. *He is an awful liar. “Really?”*

Zuko scowled. “It’s impossible to teach him anything about Firebending. He hates it.”

Katara frowned. “Toph hates swimming and you still managed to teach her how to do that.”

“She actually wanted to learn.”

*That's not fair! Aang wants to learn. He wants to master all the elements and end the war. “I don't think you're giving Aang enough credit. He's a good student. You just have to work with him.”*

“I'm trying,” Zuko insisted.

“I know you are. I'm sure it's frustrating when you try hard to help someone and they don't seem to be making any progress. But it's important to remember that the fault doesn't lie with you, or with Aang. You're both doing the best that you can,” she assured him.

Zuko paused, considering this. “I guess you're right. I feel like this is just one more thing that I'm failing at, but it isn't about me. It's pretty self-centered to think that it is. Aang has to come to Firebending in his own time, just like I did when I was a kid. Thanks Katara.”

Katara shrugged. “What can I say? I'm wise.”

Zuko grinned. “And so humble.”

“There's a difference between being arrogant and being self aware.”

“The difference being whether we're talking about you or your brother,” Zuko guessed.

*He can be taught. “That's right.”*

Zuko laughed. “Fair enough. I suppose this is a good opportunity for me to work on patience.”

“In the meantime we have this beautiful utopia all to ourselves. Looking around at all this nature, untouched by man, it's almost possible to forget about the war.” *Almost. I hope you're safe dad. I hope you found everyone and are on your way here. Please, please be safe.*

“Are you okay?”

Katara blinked. “I was thinking about my dad.”

Zuko nodded. “You love him a lot.”

*Way to bring up a sensitive subject Katara. “I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you—”*

Zuko shook his head, cutting her off. “No, I just meant... It must be difficult for you. When someone you love is in danger and you can't do anything about it... It's so frustrating.”

Katara nodded. “I try not to think about it. He's been fighting for a long time. He knows what he's doing and I should just trust him, but I know that in war you can be as prepared as it's possible to be and still...” *Don't cry. Don't cry.*

Zuko stood up. “Do you... need a hug?”
She couldn't help it. He looked so awkward and unsure of himself, standing there with his arms at such odd angles. She burst out laughing.

He scowled. “Hey! I'm trying here.”

“I know.” She hugged him. “You did well.”

“I'm not as good as you are.”

She released him and smiled. “You don't have to be the most eloquent person ever. What helps is knowing that you care. It's not being alone.”

Zuko nodded. “Your dad is proud of you. He told me so at Chameleon bay. He thinks you're brave, hard-working, compassionate and exceptional. He loves you. He'll do whatever it takes to get back to you. You'll all be together.”

Katara started crying.

Zuko looked panicked. “I'm sorry! I didn't—”

You dummy. She hugged him again. “Happy tears,” she whispered. “These are happy tears.”

“Oh. I didn't know.”

“Yeah well you're kind of dumb.”

“Thanks.”

This isn't so hard. All it took was a couple of shouting matches and frosty silences and now we're friends. Aang is going to be so proud of the two of us. Katara giggled at the thought.

“Do I even want to know?”

“I doubt it.”

Aang closed his eyes. The sun was at the top of the sky, sending waves of heat crashing down on him. I think I can feel it, the magma just below the surface. Or maybe the sun has just fried my brain.

“Zuko,” he asked tentatively.

“Hm.”

“How do the Fire Sages know this volcano will erupt in a few years?”

“They use their Firebending to sense the temperatures and volatility of the magma.”

“How do they know the difference between stable and unstable volcanoes? What's the metric for something like that?”

“They study the subject for decades.”

“Huh.” It must be difficult to become a Fire Sage. “Can the sages bend the lava?”

“No.”

“Why not?”
“It's made of molten rock.”

“Huh.” If they could they could have made this island safe for habitation. Instead of just detecting the danger they could have eliminated it entirely. “Can Earthbenders bend lava?”

“I don't know.”

“How co-”

“Because I'm not an Earthbender! Are you even trying to control the heat anymore Aang?”

Aang opened his eyes and shot Zuko a guilty look. The older boy was glaring at him. “Sorry.”

“It's okay. You can take a break.”

“I don't need a break. I want to try again.”

“Are you sure? It's fine, really. If you feel overwhelmed by all of this we can stop.”

Aang shook his head. “I want to keep going.”

“All right then.” Zuko closed his eyes again.

Aang risked making one more comment. “I bet Toph could do it. Bend lava I mean.”

Zuko chuckled. “If anyone can, she can. Now hush. Focus on the heat of the sun. Feel it all around you. It's under your feet and in the air.”

Aang closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

…

Toph sat cross-legged on the sand. She ran her fingers through the fine grains over and over again as the sun cooked her pale flesh. She felt a brief reprieve from the heat. Someone was standing behind her, blocking the sun's rays from accessing her. She dug her hand into the sand and tried to sense who it was. “Hey Sokka.”

He sat down next to her. “You're getting better.”

“Not enough.” The pieces are too small! They aren't steady like stone! They're constantly moving around! It's too much! It's too hard!

“Is that why you look so miserable?”

“Go away.”

“Toph I'm only trying to talk to you.”

“Go. Away.” Toph closed her fist around a bunch of sand and felt it compress into stone.

“Okay Toph.” She heard him get to his feet and brush sand off his clothes. “I'm always here for you if you ever need to talk to me. Okay?”

“Bye.” She scooped up another handful of sand and focused. I know you're there. I can feel you.

…
Zuko was watching Katara twist and braid the fibers of the rope into a net with intense fascination. He tried to copy her movements with limited success. “Almost,” she encouraged.

“I feel like it would be easier to just swim out there with a spear and a bag,” he said.

She snickered. “Trust me, in the long run this will be easier.” Katara's fingers kept dancing.

Sokka cleared his throat to get their attention.

“Yes,” his sister asked pleasantly.

He looked at Zuko. “Can I talk to you?”

Zuko got up and went over to the other boy. “Is everything okay?” Zuko looked over at Aang meditating and Toph playing in the sand.

“It's Toph.”

Zuko took a closer look. She was turning a frightful shade of red, but she presented no other obvious signs of discomfort. “What happened?”

“She's obsessed with this sand thing. She feels like she has to master it right now. I think this is the first time she's really struggled with something like this and it's driving her nuts.”

“I'll talk to her.”

“I already tried that.”

Zuko frowned. “Well what do you want me to do if you don't think talking will be effective?”

“I was hoping you could distract her.”

“Distract her how?”

“Dunno. I figured you would handle that part.”

Zuko rolled his eyes. “Thanks Sokka.”

Somma clapped him on the shoulder. “No problem buddy. By the way, you net weaving sucks. I say this as a friend of course.”

Zuko made a rude gesture as he walked away, which sent Sokka into a fit of giggles. Zuko shook his head in amusement. When he got closer to Toph he stopped and stood still, waiting for her to acknowledge him.

“What do you want?”

“I need your help.”

“Oh?” She tried to sound uninterested, but at this point Zuko knew her better than that.

“I need you to help me settle an academic question. Of course, it will be somewhat dangerous. We'll have to climb inside an active volcano. So I'll completely understand if you'd rather not take the risk.” Toph was already on her feet and slugging him in the arm before he even finished speaking. “Ow,” he said without any real sincerity. “Why does love hurt?”
“Come on dummy. I can only hope that something truly life endangering happens!”

“And you want this… why?”

“To upset Katara.”

Zuko sighed. Yeah, that tracks. “You wouldn't intentionally put us in harm's way just to upset Katara would you? Would you? Toph?”

She didn't answer. Which I suppose is its own answer. Oh well, I have the greatest Earthbender in the world with me. We'll be fine.

...

Toph put her hand on the stone. She let all of the nonsense fall away. The many vibrations and sounds that her world composed of stilled and grew silent as she reached down, down, down into the ground. She wished the badgermoles were here. Of course they wouldn't like it though. They preferred cool dirt, enriched with silt and minerals. They wouldn't like the heavy oppressive heat. But she found herself enjoying it. It felt good. It felt natural, familiar. She almost gasped. “There's... There's so much of it down there. It's like an ocean Zuko, but an ocean I can feel. It's not a blank space full of nothing. It's warm and rock and real. I bet I could pull it up here.” She laughed. “But then of course we would both be roasted alive.”

Zuko was quiet for a moment. She was tempted to feel his heart to try to gauge what he was thinking, but she remembered her promise. In due time he spoke his mind. “Could you turn it into solid rock? Neutralize it somehow?”

Toph considered this. “I'm not sure.” I don't know what the consequences would be if I tried.

Zuko nodded. “I can feel the heat, but not the rock. Can you feel the rock, but not the heat?”

Toph laughed. Sometimes I forget how limited everybody else's perception is. “The heat is a part of the rock. They are one and the same.”

“Huh.” She felt him reach out to touch a piece of stone next the the section she was touching.

“Maybe one day I'll be able to feel the whole world,” she whispered. It's a fanciful idea I suppose, but wouldn't it be wonderful?

Zuko touched her shoulder. “There's no maybe about it. It might take a little time, or a lot of time, but there's nothing you can't do.”

Toph's breath caught in her throat. “You're just saying that,” she accused. But I oh so badly want for you to mean it. I want it to be true.

“Listen to my heart.”

“It makes you uncomfortable.”

“I need you to know, okay?”

She nodded, and she stretched out her perception to the way his body made the floor vibrate, to the rhythm of the blood in his veins.

“There's nothing you can't do.” He isn't lying.
Aang stared at his hands. He remembered the sound of his best friend in the whole world crying in pain. He remembered the smell of cooking meat. It was a foreign and unfamiliar thing to him, and it came from his dearest friend's hands. Aang shivered. “You okay?”

Aang looked up. Zuko was standing there with a look of concern on his face. Aang had never been one to pay much attention to a person's appearance, but he found himself wondering how that burn had gotten there. Had it been an accident like the horrible day by the lake, only without any Waterbenders to heal the damage done? Had it been intentional? Who was responsible? Had Zuko lost control of his bending? Had someone else? “I'm okay.”

Zuko took a step forward like he was going to sit down next to Aang, but then he hesitated, as if he were unsure if his presence would be welcome. Aang hated that. He hated when people felt excluded. “The biggest illusion is that of separation.” The words of the guru filled his head. “Even the four elements.” Aang shook his head and pressed the heel of his hand against his eyes, trying to press down the confusion and anxiety. “Are you sure about that?”

“I was never afraid of fire before,” Aang whispered. “I knew Firebenders. I was never afraid of their flames because I knew they were in control and wouldn't let the fire hurt me.”

“Well… Things are different now.”

“Are they? Or is that just an illusion?”

“An illusion?” Zuko gave Aang a funny look.

“I thought the Air Nomads were gone, but Guru Pathik told me that the separation between the different nations isn't real. Maybe there are other Airbenders out there. Maybe I'm not the last one. If that were true, then where are they?”

Zuko sat down. “Aang… If any Airbenders survived Sozin would have hunted them down and killed them. I can't imagine how painful that must be for you, but it's the truth. That's as good a reason as there can be to fear fire I think.”

Aang shook his head. “It's all wrong. There's supposed to be balance. The four elements, the four nations, it's all supposed to exist in harmony. But even if I end the war how can there ever be balance? The Air Nomads…”

“Well… You can have kids, when you get older.”

Aang gave Zuko a strange look. “Okay…”

“They'll be Airbenders.”

“There's more to being an Air Nomad than just being an Airbender. Is someone Fire Nation just because they're a Firebender? We had a culture that doesn't exist anymore. I'm only twelve years old, there's so much I hadn't learned yet, and now I never will! I can't teach what I don't know. Really, there are no more Air Nomads.”

“You're right,” Zuko whispered.

“I just can't make sense of it! How can something so destructive be a part of the natural balance?! I'm the Avatar! I'm supposed to embody harmony between the four elements and the four nations! But even the thought of making fire makes me sick now!”
Aang looked at Zuko, all but begging the older boy to make sense if it for him. But Zuko just hung his head in shame. Aang felt his heart sink to the floor. “I wasn’t talking about you.”

Zuko laughed. It was a brittle ugly laugh, and it made Aang shiver even under the intense uncomfortable heat. “My father taught me that hate and rage fuel Firebending. All those times I fought against you I was thinking about how Avatar Roku betrayed my Great Grandfather Sozin and how you were the only thing keeping me from going home. Even when I fought with you under Ba Sing Se I was thinking about all the wrongs Azula ever did me. She's always been more powerful than me because she hates with a depth and intensity I could never accomplish. Maybe… Maybe fire is evil.”

*That can’t be right. There has to be some other explanation.* “What about your uncle? What about all those moves we invented using each other's elements? There has to be more to fire than that! There has to be something that we're missing. It's like…” *It's like fire has been corrupted. Everyone forgot what it's supposed to be like and just started using rage to fuel it.*

“Whether you're right or not it's probably not a good idea for me to be your Firebending teacher anymore.” *That's not the point I was trying to make at all.* Zuko got up. “You won't need to know Firebending on the Day of Black Sun anyway. You should just focus on Air, Water and Earth. Fire would only be a distraction.”

“But Avatar Roku said-”

“Forget about Avatar Roku!” *Uh oh. Here comes that famous temper again.*

Zuko laughed his unsettling laugh once again. “I was a Firebender. Firebenders are all evil, right?”

Aang scrambled to his feet. “That's not what I was trying to say!” *Why can't he just listen?*

“I know. I don't know why you weren't saying it though, because you should. Your people are all dead! Why aren’t you angry? I'm angry. I'm angry all the time. I don't have a reason half so good as yours. Maybe it's the fire in me that keeps me angry. Maybe if I teach you how to control fire you'll become like me, and you'll be angry all the time as well. I can't do that to you.”

“Zuko-”

“Don't try to change my mind!”

“Okay.” Aang put up his hands in surrender.

Zuko took a deep breath. “My uncle said that Fire is the element of power. The people of the Fire Nation have the determination and will to achieve what we want. But it seems to me that a lot of the time the things people want they shouldn't have. More power. Wealth. To see one's enemies suffer. To-to-to…”

“What do you want Zuko?” *I don't think it's any of those things.* “Do you just want power?”

Zuko laughed his unsettling laugh once again. “I want something I can never have. I've always been that way. I pray for the impossible.”

“What's that?”

“Home,” he whispered. “A place where I am loved and valued for who I am instead of who I pretend to be. To walk between vendors at the big festivals and laugh at the kids clutching handfuls of sparklers screaming through mouthfuls of spicy jelly candy. I want to be home. I want to not be a fugitive that has to hide my identity from my own people. I want-”
I want to go home too. But my home doesn't exist anymore. “When the war is over-”

“I'll be dead.”

Aang recoiled. “What?!”

“Azula will kill me for betraying her.”

Has he thought that this whole time? How can someone walk around thinking they're heading towards their own execution and not give any sign of it? “I won't let her do that.”

Zuko gave Aang a shaky smile. “I appreciate that, but she won't ask for your permission.”

Aang gaped at Zuko as he left. I have never understood him... And now I really don't understand him. Things will get better when the war is over. They'll get better for all of us. They have to. It can't get a whole lot worse.

...

Toph sat cross-legged on the ground and listened to the earth. The magma far beneath them whispered secrets to her. She felt the corner of her mouth tug into a smile. “I love it when that happens,” Zuko said from where he sat across from her. “Better than sunrise.”

“What is?”

“You smiling.”

Toph's cheeks caught on fire. You are so going to get it for that one. “Shut up,” she said.

“My apologies Lady Beifong. I- Ow!”

Toph snickered. That's what you- What on Earth? “Uh Zuko?” It feels like...

“Are you okay, what's wrong?”

“Someone is walking up the volcano.”

“Not one of ours?”

“Don't laugh, but he's made of metal.”

Zuko got to his feet and offered her a hand. She got up as fast as possible, her feet still keeping track of the man's progress. “Where is he now?”

“Halfway up. He's moving fast. He's not running, but keeping a consistent pace.”

“Can you bend us a tunnel to the outside?”

“Who do you think you're talking to?” Toph slammed her foot down and created a passage between where they were inside the volcano and its sun-dappled exterior. “I thought this island was supposed to be empty.”

He held her hand as they went through the passage. “Maybe someone just wanted to get away from it all,” he suggested.

“Are we ever that lucky?”
“No,” he admitted.

As they came out the other side Toph felt the stranger turn to face them. She felt his movements as he prepared to... do something she didn't recognize. There were very few bending moves she couldn't recognize. “Zuko.”

“Get down!” He tackled her to the ground. She felt the earth where they had been standing explode. There was no other word for it.

Toph slammed a fist into the earth and created a burrow for them to shelter in. “Come on!” Once inside she felt another explosion, one that would have collapsed the hollow they hid in if she weren't bracing it with her Earthbending.

“Are the others still on the beach?”

“I can't feel them, so they must be either on the sand or in the water. Unless they're on Appa...”

“I'll lead him away. You warn the others and help pack up camp. I’ll meet you guys there as soon as I shake him.” He did not just suggest what I think he just suggested.

“I'm not leaving you!”

“Toph, do you trust me?”

“Zuko-!”

“Please. I have a plan, okay?”

Don't do this to me Zuko. “Who is that guy?”

“I'm not sure, but he's a combustion bender.”

“A what?” Another explosion shook the walls even with Toph's reinforcement.

“I'll explain later! Just get to the others!”

Damnit Zuko!

...

Zuko ran through heavy laden trees surrounded by overripe bananamangoes that had fallen to the ground. Some of them were split open and emitting a sickly sweet odor. A lizardmonkey hissed at Zuko as he ran by, furious that his meal had been interrupted. Zuko paid no attention to it. All he focused on was putting one foot in front of the other, regulating his breathing and listening for the sounds of metal crushing undergrowth. What does he want?

Somehow Zuko figured it wasn't a good idea to turn around and ask him. A loud crunch gave Zuko only a slight forewarning. Zuko dove behind a tall papayaplum tree. The ground where he had stood was now scorched. Zuko took a deep breath and lobbed a ball of fire at his assailant. The man disrupted the blast with his metal arm. For a moment their eyes locked, and the man grinned a horrid grimace. “You're only making this harder on yourself,” he taunted.

“Who are you? What do you want?”

“It's nothing personal. I'm being paid to be here.”
“By who?”

The man smiled again. “Who do you think, Zuzu?” Azula! She's telling everyone she killed me in Ba Sing Se. Me turning up alive would be most inconvenient for her after that.

“When you finish the job she'll just kill you to keep her secret. She's ruthless.”

“Thanks for the tip.” Zuko had only a second to get out of the way of the next explosion.

He continued running. He vaulted over a downed tree without so much as a secondary thought. “Your youth and agility are some of your most valuable assets pupil. Larger, stronger, more experienced opponents may think you an easy opponent, but all of that bulk weighs a person down. It is exhausting to carry a great deal of weight for an extended period of time. If you are patient, you will be able to outrun and outmaneuver most of your foes.”

Zuko grabbed a tree branch and swung up into the branches. He saw the man approaching, his third eye standing out in brilliant definition, covered in a thin veneer of sweat. Zuko pushed the fire at him. The man once more brushed the flames aside. He aimed another blast at Zuko, but Zuko leapt down, leaving only leaves in the path of the explosion. Blackened branches fell to the ground. Zuko kept running.

*Patience, patience. Why must it always come down to the thing I'm worst at?* Zuko zigged and zagged, dodged and danced. He planned every movement at least three steps ahead. He had to, lest he be consumed in a fierce conflagration.

“Give up! What are you hoping to accomplish?!”

*Don't respond.*

“Your uncle is going to be executed! At first the princess thought to lay a trap for you, using him as bait. But if course she quickly realized you're far too selfish to ever risk your own life for another. It's a shame. They say the old man has gone mad. He cries out for his son each night.”

*Azula always lies. Azula always lies. This isn't Azula. He works for her! Same difference.*

“Even in his insanity he remembers how you abandoned him. He curses you each night for your betrayal. You're a real heartless bastard.”

*Azula always lies. Azula always lies.*

“Treachery is in your nature. You betrayed your father, your nation, your sister and your uncle.”

“Shut up!” Zuko turned around and sent a series of powerful flames at the assassin. The man batted most of them away, but Zuko's speed and force were hard to counteract. One attack caught the mercenary in the chest and sent him flying into a tree. Zuko took a moment to catch his breath. That was a mistake. The explosion came straight for him. Just like lightning. Oh this had better work. Zuko caught the explosion in his hands. For a moment he was stunned as he held the bundle of energy. He could feel it shaking, all but begging to become kinetic. It worked! I can't believe it worked! Then the force erupted.

*Typical,* he thought as the world went black.

…

Katara gasped as she saw Toph trip and go skidding across the sand. “Toph! Are you okay?”
“Some jerk with a special kind of Firebending attacked me and Zuko! Zuko led him off into the woods and sent me back to warn everyone!”

“Did he say who he was? What he wanted?”

“Who cares,” Toph shouted. “We have to go help Zuko! Come on!” She was already on her feet and brushing the sand off her bloody knees.

“You're hurt.”

Katara reached for her, but Toph smacked her hands away. “There's no time for that!”

“It'll only take a moment. You won't be much help to Zuko injured,” Katara argued.

“I'll scout ahead,” Aang volunteered.

“Me too,” Sokka said. “I'll take Appa.”

Toph allowed Katara to heal her scraped knees while the boys took to the air. “Hurry up!”

She doesn't mean to be rude. She's just worried about Zuko. To be honest so am I. “Can you sense where they are,” Katara asked.

“Not until we get on solid ground. Let's go!”

Katara grabbed her water pouch and scrambled after the younger girl. Hang on Zuko. Why do you have to be so impulsive? Don't you know how much we care about you? A nagging voice that she tried to exile from her head argued that in all likelihood he didn't. Just focus on finding him. Everything else we can sort out later.

…

Zuko blinked away the heavy darkness and coughed up a bit of soot. A rock dug into his thigh and he hissed with pain. Another blink sent reality slamming into him. The assassin was dragging him along the ground. Zuko flinched as the rough earth battered his burnt body. His hands, arms, chest, neck and face all felt raw and painful. It wasn't as intense a pain as the burn his father had given him, but it was spread over a far wider area. Not to mention his lungs felt like they'd been ripped out and cooked well done before being sewn back into his body.

“You're awake.”

Zuko couldn't summon the breath to reply, much less conjure fire. The swords he hadn't been close enough to his enemy to use until now were slung over the mercenary's back, where they wouldn't do Zuko a whole lot of good. Zuko contemplated grabbing a rock to hit the assassin with, but he knew his hands were too burnt to lift anything heavy, much less throw it.

“You're trying to figure out how to escape.”

Zuko would have loved to curse the man, but his seared lungs had other ideas. He couldn't even turn his head to glare at the man. Even if he could he would have only been glaring at the back of his head, since the man was no doubt looking forward in the direction they were going.

“There's no point. The only reason you are alive right now is because you have use to me. If you become more trouble than you are worth I won't hesitate to destroy you. I mean that in the most literal sense. I once examined the remains of a man who was in my direct line of fire. I say remains,
but there was little more than ash and a few bone fragments left of him.”

*You and Azula must get along fabulously.*

“So you might as well quit fighting and accept your fate.” Zuko laughed at that statement, even though coming from his charbroiled lungs it was really more of a pathetic wheeze. *Never give up without a fight.* “You're finally going to do what you set out to do three years ago. Well, you're going to help me do it anyway. Close enough.”

Even through the burning pain all of a sudden Zuko felt cold. *He's going to use me to get Aang.*

…

“There,” Toph whispered. *His metal foot is crushing the plants and insects that make this place their home. He's dragging Zuko behind him, and Zuko's heart doesn't sound good.*

“Is anyone else nearby?”

Toph shook her head. “Not unless you see anybody up in the air. Now come on.”

The two girls moved closer. Toph waited for her opportune moment, listening to the earth and all the little secrets it liked to whisper into her ears and feet. The man put his foot down, but the earth slid away from him. She felt Zuko hit the ground. Katara used water to shove the unbalanced man into a tree and then froze him there. Toph and Katara both ran to their friend’s side. Toph felt sick as the earth told her that her friend was hurt and in a lot of pain.

“Hold still,” Katara murmured.

Toph kept her senses tuned to the man frozen to the tree. Drops of water were falling to the earth and creating tiny craters. *He's melting the ice!*

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