Avatar Zuko

by AbbyStaffysGeek

Summary

100 years ago the air nomads were killed along with the then avatar, the only survivor was an especially gifted with the spirit realm airbender boy. Two more avatars passed without consequence and now a new avatar, Prince Zuko of the Fire Nation, has arisen- But he's incredibly conflicted over his new destiny...

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Iroh was alone in his chambers on the ship when he got Pakku’s letter, luckily as he didn’t want to raise suspicions in his nephew as to who he was corresponding with. The honest answer would have labeled him a traitor and any lie would still make it difficult for Zuko to trust him from then on. And Iroh simply couldn’t bare hurting his nephew, the only true family he felt like he had left, basically his son at this point. Well, Iroh only knew he was a better father to the young man than his brother, Firelord Ozaii, would ever be. Not that Zuko had realised that yet but… In time perhaps.

The letter was from Master Pakku of the Northern Water Tribe, a bitter but good man, who was a fellow member of the White Lotus, and had also been at the last meeting of all the masters 4 years ago. Every 4 years the masters tried to meet up on neutral ground and usually they only had one topic of discussion: the avatar. Ever since Iroh joined he’d been constantly updated about the search for the mysterious, possibly dead, person who could bend all the elements but no one, even his determined nephew, had any idea of where to look. Not even what nation the avatar would be in; they could be a very old airbender, one that managed to escape the massacre of their people and stay secret for 100 years, or possibly a pretty old waterbender, perhaps a middle aged earthbender, or even, the worst case scenario, a young firebender. The problem was no one knew, there were rumours and gossip but it was impossible to determine, especially with the avatar relics having been destroyed along with the Air Nomads.

The firebender took a break from his tired musings to open the letter, clearly from Pakku due to the dried out water tribe paper and the man’s distinguished handwriting. It read:

General Iroh,

Your last update was most concerning. After 3 years of ruthless searching you and your nephew have found nothing. All I know is that none of my waterbenders here are the avatar, though that doesn’t rule out the possibility of it being a waterbender from somewhere else, perhaps the swamps or, unlikely due to the raids, it could be a Southern waterbender. Stay in contact but at this point I would guess our search is futile, but if you do find the avatar please reign in your nephew, the young prince is rash and you put too much faith in the boy.

Yours sincerely, Sifu Pakku.

Iroh sighed sadly at his fellow master’s mistrust of Zuko, it was not misplaced but still upsetting. Yet Iroh still got the feeling that Zuko, confused as he may be, would help greatly in the avatar’s quest to bring balance to the world, when the time came...
Chapter 1

Prince Zuko’s ship sailed roughly in the waters in between the Earth Kingdom and Southern Water Tribe, there was a large storm in the air and yet the young firebender was above deck, determined to practice his firebending to distract himself from a sad fact: he had turned 16 today and he still didn’t have the avatar or his honour. And that fact made the prince seeth, Azula was only just 15 as of a few weeks ago and she had everything he could ever dream of; honour, respect, their father’s love and, if Zuko never reclaimed his honour, she’d predictably become the firelord when their father died. So Zuko was angry and stressed and he was beginning to feel hopeless no matter how much he tried to hide it. Part of him, the part he shunned, hoped he’d give up and just try to make a life for himself in the colonies, maybe meet someone and rest. He had the money to do it, but he was too determined, he’d never stop his search unless he was either successful or dead.

So that’s why he was practising firebending katas at night, in a storm, outside on a ship that was in much too rough water for anyone, especially Zuko, to be safe. Yet he stupidly persevered through his fear and struggled against the wind that threatened to toss him overboard.

Then, after his step was just slightly off due to the rain splattering distractingly in his eyes, his one good eye felt it more though, an especially strong gust threw of his balance and blasted him through the air and, in the midst of flailing limbs and screaming, Zuko felt an airy feeling flow through his core, a small tingle that stretched across his chi like a protective, but excited, blanket. And suddenly, another force pushed him back to the ship, carrying him a good 6m across and then up so he landed upon the deck surprisingly lightly, and then the feeling vanished completely, leaving him scared and confused.

He took his near death experience as a solid excuse to go back inside the ship, and beelined through his crew, most of whom were drinking copious amounts of alcohol but tried to hide it when Zuko passed them, and headed towards his Uncle’s chambers where the old man was predictably brewing tea.

“Prince Zuko! What brings you to my chambers?... And why are you soaking wet? Please don’t say you were out in that storm, nephew, it’s incredibly dangerous! A man who dies a reckless death holds no honour in life.” Said his Uncle, shaking his head in apparent disappointment that was actually thinly veiled concern.

“Sorry, Uncle. But I had to practice and it’s easier on the deck” Iroh’s nephew sat across from him and, not particularly weirdly, didn’t even sip the jasmine tea his kindly Uncle passed him. But the young man had seemingly only come to see him so he could sit and shake, perhaps he was ill? He was pale and shivering...
“Are you alright, you look a little shaken.” Ventured the older man, softly patting Zuko on the shoulder in comfort, knowing he wouldn’t react kindly to him checking his forehead for his temperature due to the scar the boy’s cruel father had left there.

“I’m… Something strange happened whilst I was on deck… No. It’s fine, it was nothing, just my mind playing tricks on me. Good night, Uncle.” Zuko got up abruptly and swept out the room, worrying his uncle even further, and he shut himself in his room without another word to anyone.

“What happened was just luck, I was scared and tired, it’s not like I… Did that.” He tried to convince himself, muttering quietly as to not arouse suspicion from the crew despite being in a pretty much soundproof room. And eventually his denial worked, though it took several hours and no sleep to calm down, he realised how preposterous it was. Him airbending? Impossible, he could already firebend and the only person who could bend more than one element was the avatar, the very person Zuko was chasing after.

The next few days were inconsequential, no advancements in the prince’s search for the avatar and, after several rather annoying conversations, Zuko even managed to convince is uncle he was neither sick or insane, something he’d expected would take much longer. All in all, things on their little ship were as good as was possible for the Prince, until the incident of course. Zuko swore the universe was out to get him some days.

He’d been pacing about his bedroom, thoughts of capturing the ever elusive avatar on his mind as usual. The firebender had been doing his breathing practices, they helped keep him calm and his thoughts organised, but he noticed the Fire Nation Flag he’d placed upon the wall was rustling, almost as if it was moving with his breaths. Of course, that was ridiculous, it was probably just swaying from the movement of the ship against the waves. To settle his mind Zuko held his breath for a second, and the flag went slack and became completely still.

Almost as if a sabertooth moose-lion had been placed upon his shoulders, Zuko fell to his knees and struggled to grasp any sense of reality, breath escaping him and never coming back. He was tempted to scream, or sob, but his resolve, and useless denial were too strong and so he just laughed crazily, desperately, staring down at the metal floor beneath him and shaking uncontrollably.

“I’m… Not… Ha… Hahahaha!” He felt his sanity seeping out of his skull and realised he had to calm down, flames were already flickering at his fingertips and he definitely didn’t want anyone to walk in to check on him whilst the young Prince was in his current state.
“Everything is fine.” Zuko told himself, nodding as he spoke to try and make himself believe it more. “It was just a flag, swaying with the ship. I had nothing to do with it, not even slightly. And, even if I did which I don’t, I was probably just bending the heat in the air. Yeah, that can probably happen. Everything is totally fine”.

And with that Zuko picked himself up off the floor and splashed cold water on his scarred face, he definitely couldn’t airbend. That was ridiculous because that would make him the avatar, the person he’d been trying to capture for three years. If it was him then he’d be a traitor to his nation just by simply existing. But… His mind wasn’t eased, he was too het up about the entire thing to just let it go and keep searching. He had to be completely certain, if he could bend water, the opposite to fire, then he’d be, without a doubt, the avatar. And as much as it sickened him to try and bend such a lesser element he still had to be sure.

“Captain, set our course for the Southern Water Tribe.” Zuko ordered once he’d left his room, knowing it had much less defence than its sister tribe in the North and they were much closer. Of course, most if not all of the waterbenders there had been arrested for crimes against the Fire Nation, though what those crimes were Zuko had no clue, so he wouldn’t be able to see a true master and try copying them, but he assumed the tribe would at least have some waterbending scrolls he could look over.

Then he could put this entire ‘am I the avatar?’ situation to bed.

He hoped.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed! Next chapter will be out next week! :))

Comments and kudos are greatly appreciated!
Katara and her brother, Sokka, had been fishing for only a few hours now but she was still feeling a strong urge to throw him overboard and go back to the village, saying he was tragically eaten by a saber toothed seal-whale and she simply couldn’t get to him in time. Yet, sadly, Katara had morals that prevented brother-murdering, though as time wore on she was starting to question those very morals.

“See, Katara, to catch a good fish you need three things: good, meaty bait, a sharp stick and a strong throw! It may be difficult for you, since you’re so used to doing the girly stuff with Gran-Gran, but after learning from me you might even catch something!” Sokka proclaimed, flaunting his harpoon before leaning over the side of their small fishing boat and staring intently at the water’s surface for any ripples.

Rolling her eyes at her brother’s idiocy, Katara turned to her side of the boat and noticed a grey sheen slipping between the waves, it was clearly a fish and, despite not having her own harpoon, she wanted to show Sokka and his sexist butt just how great girls could be at fishing. With more concentration than it should have required, the young waterbender focused on the water and tugged at it, creating a hovering orb of liquid with a confused and frightened fish swimming about inside. Ecstatic, Katara called for her brother’s attention:

“Sokka! Look! I caught one!” She smiled, trying her best to motion towards the floating fish without accidentally letting the water bubble fall apart.

“Now’s no time for your games, Katara, look, I’ve almost got one.” He muttered with agitation, still scanning across the ocean’s depths for some tasty aquatics for them to take home.

“No, I caught one, just-” She tried to move the sphere of, what must have been extremely cold, water so it was directly in front of Sokka’s face so he couldn’t deny its existence but she lost control just as it flew slowly over his head and burst, soaking her annoying brother and causing him to lose sight of the fish he’d just began to focus on.

“Katara! Why is it whenever you use your water magic, I’m always the one who gets wet?” He asked, annoyed and now staring accusatorily at his sister.
“Hey, it’s waterbending, not magic! And it’s not my fault, if you’d just listened to me for once I wouldn’t have had to move it over your head in the first place!” Katara defended, crossing her parka-bound arms and glaring at her brother as he barely seemed to pay any attention to what she was saying.

“Ugh, this is why I wanted to leave you at the village! You just messed up dinner for a bunch of people in our tribe!” Sokka said, even though the village had enough seal jerky to last them for the next 8 months and, despite the rather disgusting taste, they were pretty nutritional.

“You’re so insufferable sometimes! Ever since mum died and dad left for war I’ve had to do everything whilst you messed around playing hero all day! I do all the chores, look after the children, help out Gran-Gran and I even wash your dirty socks! Have you got any idea how bad those things smell?! Because I sure do!” Katara ranted angrily as they kept floating along, seething with rage she’d been building up over time, so wrapped up with her own frustration induced emotions that she didn’t even notice the icebergs she was cracking all around them as she spoke, her very words pulling them apart.

“Katar-” before Sokka could finish his warning the ice closest to them burst apart suddenly, sending the water they were sailing in into disarray as they got caught up in a swirly mix of dangerous tides, their small fishing boat getting dragged through even more broken icebergs until it was all Sokka could do to stop them from crashing into the nearest thing at any given moment.

They careened through the violent waters haphazardly, barely avoiding death and the total obliteration of their boat for a good 30 seconds before getting thrown onto a sheet of ice near an especially large, round glacier with a bluish tint. The boat the siblings had been in got destroyed within seconds of Sokka stopping steering and the two were now stranded without food, water or anyone they didn’t currently want to shove into the icy depths.

“...I did that..?” Questioned Katara in bewilderment, surveying the scene of catastrophe around them and almost smiling at how powerful her bending had been, but then she got distracted by said glacier that they were now directly facing. It had a strange, almost spiritual, feeling to it and Katara, despite having been in these waters many times before, had never noticed it before. Almost like it hadn’t wanted to be found until that moment...

“This is just great; no food, no drinkable water, no- hey, what’re you looking at?” Sokka asked, now also noticing the peculiar ice structure before them.

As the pair stared, somehow stricken speechless by something they’d usually label as mind numbingly boring in their South Pole home, the iceberg began to glow from the middle, a vaguely blue human shape coming into their vision that Katara reacted to immediately, snatching her brother’s whale bone club and rushing towards the glacier much to Sokka’s displeasure.
“Come on, Sokka! They’re alive in there.” She spoke with confidence and sincerity even though she had no real way of knowing if whoever was in the iceberg was still alive—usually frozen people didn’t breath, after all.

“Ugh, wait up! And you shouldn’t open that thing, it could be dangerous. And it’s not like you’re gonna break through to the middle anyway, it’s much too bi—” Sokka started, getting cut off when Katara’s third strike of the bone club let out an almighty crack and the ice broke apart before their eyes, a young boy of no more than 12 falling out and directly into Katara’s waiting arms, as if she’d known exactly where he’d fall.

The kid had a much different appearance to those from the water tribe that screamed foreigner, his complexion was paler, his head bold, his clothes orange, thin and yellow and he had blue arrow tattoos on his hands and head. The arrows seemed very familiar to Katara, not like she’d seen them before but more like she’d heard a story about people with arrows on their skin that she couldn’t quite think of.

“Is he—” Sokka got interrupted, once again, before he was able to finish his question as the boy’s hazel eyes slowly fluttered open and he started muttering something inaudible, making Katara lean forward.

“What is it?” She asked both curiously but also softly, seemingly ready to rush the kid off to a medical tent the moment the situation arose. Katara had always been very motherly that way.

“I… Will you go penguin sledding with me?” He chirped abruptly, surprising the siblings with his sudden energy and vigor.

“Umm, sure? I guess.” Replied Katara, confusion lacing her features.

“Awesome! Hey, I’m Aang and… Where are we?” He asked, still chipper and easily pulling himself to his feet… Without using his hands… Almost like he’d used the wind around them to propel himself upwards…

“You… You’re an airbender, aren’t you?” Exclaimed Katara, breaking in a large smile at the realisation, finally another bender!

“Yep! Why?” He smiled, now picking through the ice back towards the center of his iceberg, easily
jumping 4.5 feet at a time to reach his destination.

“I’m a waterbender! Well… Almost, I’m not very good at it yet…” Katara admitted, clapping her hands and looking down at the frozen floor beneath her sadly.

“That’s okay, you can just one of the other waterbenders in your village to teach you, right?” Aang asked, pausing in his trek to turn back to the teenage waterbender as she stood, shoulders slumping, in unhappiness.

“No, I can’t, you’re looking at the last waterbender in the whole Southern Tribe.” She frowned, but looked up at Aang who had traveled back so he could place a comforting hand on her shoulder. Had her massive parker not been so insulated and thick she might have even felt the pressure.

Sokka, who had felt far too ignored in the bending conversation, was making his way to where Aang had been going before turning back to Katara, and let out a high pitched shriek upon seeing what lay in the middle: a huge, fluffy, monster that was completely asleep and had been snoring so deeply that Sokka was perturbed as to how he didn’t hear it over the rushing of the waves.

“Katara!” He yelped, scrambling back, away from the beast, only for a flying-monkey-thing to leap at him and smother his face with it’s small, furry body.

“What’s wrong?!” Called Katara, clambering over to where Sokka stood attempting to wrestle the monkey off of his face.

“This… This thing just attacked me! And there’s a massive monster down there! The 3 of them are working together, Katara! We need to get out of here” He said, marching along to the edge of the ice, dragging Katara with him, before jumping back when he almost slipped into the water.

“By the way, Aang, the paranoid one is my brother, Sokka. And thanks to all of his screaming you already know I’ Katara.” The waterbender introduced them and then pulled Sokka back towards the middle of the iceberg, where Aang was now happily fawning over his pets.

“You know” Aang started, having noticed how Sokka had had to stop at the water’s edge, “I could always give you a lift back home on my flying bison, Appa, if you two are stuck.”

Katara considered the offer, she was going to say yes (of course she was, Sokka could swim back to
the village if he wanted) but a question was nagging at her mind too persistently for her to simply let it go, even for the time being.

“Aang… How are you here? We thought all of the airbenders had been wiped out 100 years ago by the Fire Nation, along with the avatar.” Aang seemed to ponder this slightly before shaking his head in disbelief.

“No way! I’m here, and I last saw the avatar just a few days ago at the Air Temple, she was healthy as ever! And why would the Fire Nation attack us? I have friends in the Fire Nation, they’re good people.” Argued Aang, sitting atop his bison, Appa apparently, and giving Sokka and Katara a questioning look.

“But… What about the war?” Katara questioned, frowning at the possibility of the Air Nomads, and by extension the avatar, being around but in secret and not helping against the Fire Nation, it seemed simply impossible. Especially since Aang was entirely clueless about the whole ordeal.

“What war?” Asked Aang innocently and sincerely, tilting his head slightly in confusion.

“He’s kidding, right? Right?” Said Sokka, also climbing aboard Appa despite not seeming too enthusiastic about their traveling arrangements.

“Aang, for the last century the Fire Nation has been taking over more and more of the globe, starting with completely destroying all of the Air Nomad civilisations. They’ve sieged cities, raided villages and captured benders. Aang, the only way you could not know about the war is if you’ve been in that ice since before it began… Aang, I think that you’ve been in there for a hundred years.” Katara explained, feeling physically pained as each of her words seemed to pierce the young boy like sharpened knives.

“Wha- No, the avatar I knew, Arianna, she’d never let this happen. Even if she… The avatar after her would’ve done something, right? They couldn’t have just disappeared after she passed.” His mind was heartbreakingly made up and his heart was exceedingly stubborn. Katara, who was now also onboard Appa, reached over and gave him a comforting pat on the shoulder, that he barely seemed to notice.

“According to Gran-Gran there’s been no official avatars since Arianna, but there have been rumours… Maybe the avatar is around but in hiding, waiting for the right time to strike else they’ll be killed by the Firelord? Just… Don’t give up hope yet, okay, Aang?” She comforted, almost convincing herself just as much as Aang. She truly wanted to believe that the avatar was still out there, and would come save the day, bring balance like they’re supposed to.
“Okay, Katara… But, for now, I want to think about something else. How about we get back to your village, huh? Then we can go penguin sledding!” Aang’s expression morphed into one of excitement as he yelled ‘yip-yip’ and Appa simply plopped into the water like a rubber duck, most definitely not flying like he was meant to. Katara laughed good-naturedly whilst Sokka complained, more driven by fear of the unknown than annoyance.

Yet underneath his cheery facade Aang was thinking about what the monks had told him, and he realised his and the avatar’s fates weren’t unbound quite yet, no matter what Katara said...

Chapter End Notes

I'm really enjoying writing this so I hope people enjoy reading, comments and kudos are greatly appreciated, see you next week!
Zuko had ordered his crew to stay pretty far away from the Southern Tribe, definitely out of sight and hidden behind some ice. Everyone on board had been rather perturbed by the prince’s actions, it had seemed, and he didn’t really blame them. Usually he wasn’t one to be patient, to hide and wait— that was usually more of his Uncle’s forte. He also hadn’t given anymore commands since that, saying he was going to bed early and didn’t want to be disturbed under any circumstance. Zuko had then waited about an hour, laying in his bed silently for most of that time, and was now getting changed into his disguise.

It was slightly altered from his usual one, due to the extremely cold weather in the South Pole, but the main feature (the blue mask) was the same as always. He was slightly anxious over wearing heavier clothing than usual as he was going for stealth, but even in a black parka he could be light-footed as ever— it was an unusual skill of his. Zuko also put on gloves with grip and opted to leave his dual broadswords behind, since the villagers would be much less skilled with weaponry and it seemed dishonourable to challenge them, especially when he would be the one in the wrong in this particular scenario. He did, however, take his Earth Kingdom knife inscribed with never give up without a fight just in case. The prince was also planning on not using his firebending, revealing who he was would be less than good and he honestly just didn’t want to melt a Tribe full of mostly children and the elderly.

The young man then slipped down a deserted corridor of his ship, the opposite direction from where he could hear his uncle and the crew having their music night, and took a small boat out into the thankfully calm sea. He wasn’t too experienced with such small boats but, having spent three years at sea, Zuko was still able to navigate the icy waters with relative ease.

It was the dead of night when he docked, the village was completely darkened except for a few lone lanterns in the middle, and there was no one to be seen. The village itself was pathetic, just a dozen icy huts, each one indistinguishable from the others, and no guards to speak of. One hut, that might have been at the head of the village though it was hard to tell as all the buildings were so lopsided, seemed to be a little larger than the others and the pelts covering the door seemed to be from a rarer animal than the other pelts. Zuko decided it was his best shot at where they would keep sacred waterbending scrolls, and looked in cautiously. The only person in there was an elderly woman, who was fast asleep in bundle of fabrics, and her only furnishings were pelts and a single chair, no scrolls, not even a painting!

He checked the rest of the Tribe just to be safe, and found nothing except a lot of heavy sleepers. He had been about to leave when he thought he saw a figure in the distance, dressed differently from the blue parkas, hiding behind one of the further out huts, one Zuko had pegged as a guest ‘room’ though he thought it unlikely that these people had many guests in the South Pole. Still, he had to respect the savages’ courtesy. The prince might have slipped away then, but the figure noticed that
he’d seen him and came forward, their hands up in a show of truce. Having no other options aside from run and let the person create a ruckus as they chased him, he let the figure approach.

“What are you doing here?” The figure was a child, a boy, and, to Zuko’s surprise, he was whispering as to not wake everyone else in the village and alert them to the firebender’s presence.

“I just needed some waterbending scrolls… I wasn’t going to hurt anyone.” He replied quietly, altering his voice slightly as he spoke. He had a bad feeling he’d be seeing this kid again.

“Waterbending, huh? My new friend, Katara, she needs a teacher too. But there’s this war so she can’t properly learn her bending yet and I guess… Neither can you.” Said the boy softly, talking about the war as if it was something brand new and tragic. He had also incorrectly assumed that Zuko was a waterbender, as that was the only logical reason Zuko would need a waterbending scroll. Though, if the prince really was the avatar (which was completely impossible, he was sure) then the boy would be right to think he was a waterbender.

“Ugh, yes… The war.” Zuko decided not to correct the kid, since he figured being a waterbender was the only excusable reason for breaking into a village and attempting to steal from them.

“But you were looking around for a while, so you probably didn’t find any. Even if there were any here they couldn’t replace a true master, that’s what Katara needs at least. Today we were playing about, I only just met her you see, and she did some waterbending- she’s really powerful but she needs some… Direction. Sokka said that was ‘ironic’ coming from an air nomad but…” The air nomad trailed off, and Zuko was glad to have the mask to cover up his shocked expression. Instead he just nodded as calmly as possible and quietly pondered why the kid would be giving a stranger so much information, maybe he needed to vent and talking to someone without a face was easier? Zuko wasn’t sure. But he wasn’t going to stop the kid now.

“I thought all the air nomads were gone.” Stated Zuko, trying to keep his voice steady and probably failing, but if the boy noticed anything he didn’t mention it. Instead he just nodded sadly and sat down on the icy floor, a gesture of wanting to talk more, Zuko assumed.

“Yeah… Apparently… But I’ve been trapped in ice for a hundred years, I’m trying to stay strong and be happy but… I’ll never see my friends, the monks, Giatso, Arianna… Any of them ever again…” The boy muttered, his voice cracking a little and making Zuko’s much too kind heart feel sympathy for the child. The firebender also recalled who Arianna was, the avatar that Sozen had killed at the beginning of the war, Zuko had always assumed she’d been 20 at least, but now he was starting to think she’d been younger, maybe just a child. A little feeling tugged in the back of his mind but, afraid of what it might reveal, he swatted it away.
“You knew the avatar?” He asked quietly, sitting down across from the boy so they were on more equal ground, though Zuko was still a good bit taller.

“I didn’t just know her, she was one of my best friends. The other kids didn’t think it was fair for us to take part in their games when they found out she was the avatar and I was, according to the monks, ‘the avatar’s spiritual guide, our fates bound, our lives intertwined’. But now Arianna is gone and the new avatar has disappeared, the Fire Nation are taking over and I just don’t know what to do.” He relayed sadly, head bowed but Zuko could still see the tears welling up in his eyes.

“Why don’t you find the avatar?” Suggested Zuko, mostly on impulse as it had been his answer to everything for the last few years. Need your honour back? Find the avatar. Want your crown back? Find the avatar. Your best friend died and you were frozen for a century? Find the avatar.

“I… I could do that! Maybe that’s what the monks meant, maybe my destiny wasn’t with Arianna but the new avatar, whoever they are. And whilst I search the world I can take Katara to the North Pole to learn waterbending! Erm, do you want to come too? There’s room on Appa.” The boy immediately perked up, shooting to his feet in a simple display of airbending that almost made Zuko fall over.

“I can’t… Good luck.” Zuko offered, getting to his feet as well and slipping back into the night and towards his boat (the boy waved excitedly as he left, before seemingly rushing off somewhere, probably to prepare for his new mission), it was still pitch black outside and it offered a good cover. The sea was still calm and the absence of challenge in the water gave Zuko a good little while to ruminate peacefully.

A plan was starting to form in the young man’s mind, a stupid, reckless plan but a plan all the same, which was impressive for someone usually incapable of thinking ahead. The boy and his friend would be traveling to the North Pole, where they would most certainly find waterbending masters and scrolls. Zuko needed those things to determine if he was really the avatar, which he was sure he was not, so it would be in his best interest to go too. And, when he knew for sure that he was just a firebender with a much too vivid imagination, he would be with the kid that was his best lead towards the avatar that he’d had in 3 years of ruthless searching. A win-win situation either way, plus, if he was the avatar, then his uncle would be forced to either capture him or become a traitor. And Zuko just couldn’t do that to the old man.

He’d have to do this alone.
Okay so all the comments I got last time literally lit up my life, everyone who reads this is officially AMAZING!!!!!

Also, I'M HAVING SO MUCH FUN WRITING THIS, like I'm posting once a week but I've already written up to Chapter 7 and it's really awesome because I just feel so enthusiastic!

Comments and kudos are greatly appreciated, they give me life and hope etc :))

Also, you can come scream at me on Tumblr @AbbyStaffyIsGeek13 if you want <3
Aang had never meant to drive apart two siblings, but as dawn slowly approached he marked the 2nd hour of Katara and Sokka arguing, and it didn't seem to be coming to an end anytime soon.

“Katara! There’s no way I’m letting you go to the North Pole with a guy you just met! Dad told me to protect you, and that means you have to stay!” shouted Sokka for what must have been the 8th time, their conversation kept repeating itself and neither relative seemed willing to give up.

“But my bending is a part of me, Sokka! I need to learn how to master it and I can’t do that here.” Replied the waterbender, an hour ago she’d been screaming as loudly as her brother but she seemed to have cooled off and was now using reason and logic, though her tone was slowly slipping back into a higher decibel.

“But you leaving is selfish! You can’t just leave your tribe, your family, can you?” asked Sokka, making full use of the method he called ‘guilt trip’.

“I need to do this!”

“No you don't!”

“I'm going, no matter what!”

“Then how will I protect you?!”

“Why don't you just come too?!” Aang finally yelled, slamming his staff onto the ground as to make enough sound to shut up the squabbling siblings.

Aang had actually been considering bringing Sokka before the pair even started their argument, or heard about Aang’s plan. It made sense that when bringing balance to the world, which was the avatar’s purpose, after all, you’d need someone from each element and a nonbender to even it out a little. Sokka seemed a perfect fit, if he and Katara could get along long enough for the three to get any work done.
“Wha- No! The village needs me, and Katara, here.” He stated stubbornly, pouting his lips and crossing his arms in protest.

“No, we don’t. The world needs the two of you more than we do, we’ll get by once you’re gone.” said an elderly woman, who Aang had been introduced to as Gran-Gran, whilst walking towards the three and shoving two sleeping bags into Katara and Sokka’s hands, not even noticing the stutter of argument Sokka was trying to give.

“Really, Gran-Gran? Oh, thank you!” cheered Katara with a smile, dropping her new sleeping bag into the snow so she could give the older woman a hug. Gran-Gran tutted slightly but still wrapped her arms around the girl, smiling sadly.

“Are- Are you sure? What about the fighting, and the fishing, and the hunting, and the-” began Sokka, now more het up than Aang thought he would be.

“We will be okay, your job now is to help Aang find the avatar.” said their grandmother, also pulling Sokka into the hug.

“But dad said-” He started, before Katara shoved him in the ribs and he gave out a pained yelp.

“Dad would understand. Maybe we’ll even see him in our travels.” Katara suggested, immediately perking up her brother who then rushed off for supplies.

Sokka was amazing at packing, Aang decided. Within 30 minutes Appa was packed with plenty of food (though most of it didn’t look too appetising to Aang), some weaponry, a few sets of spare clothing, hairbrushes, maps and all the money the tribe could offer (which was a pathetically small amount but the trio were grateful nonetheless). Hopefully wherever the avatar was they accepted water tribe currency. Of course, the maps were unnecessary since Aang had his own back from his journeys with Arianna. The three were just about to leave, when one of the young girls signalled an alarm of sorts by blowing a horn.

The entire village was thrown into a sudden panic, Katara helped their grandmother indoors and Sokka rounded up his ‘warriors’, meanwhile Aang tried to decipher what was going on by talking to the girl who’d blown the horn. She was stood atop the largest hut, though the difference from the other buildings was minute, and was pointing wildly at something in the distance.

“What is it?! The Fire Nation?” Aang asked after climbing up next to her, squinting at what looked
like no more than a red dot.

“Yes! A soldier is headed our way, probably a firebender who’s going to melt our homes!” she rambled hysterically, not unlike how most of the other children were acting. But one detail did strike Aang as odd.

“Just one firebender?” He doubted the Fire Nation would ever only send one person, no matter how skilled they were. Something wasn’t right.

Aang quickly rushed away and to where most of the village had huddled, facing the fast approaching stranger. Aang could see him more clearly now though his features weren't exact: he was wearing red garments embroidered with gold (not armour), he had a sheathed sword slung across his back but he wasn't wielding any weapons, he also had a shoulder bag across his arm and was dragging a very large, (and heavy looking) sack, his hair looked freshly, and messily, cut short and, though Aang could only tell as the guy got closer, he had a large burn scar across the left side of his face. The man, who looked more like a teenager than a grown soldier, stopped advancing when he got to about 15 feet away from the small crowd of villagers. Sokka, who was wearing what passed for armour in the South Pole, or was just everything that had been left when the adult men went to war, had painted his face like a shark (it did look pretty cool, Aang had to admit), he walked closer to the guy until there was only 5 feet separating them. Sokka spoke first.

“Get out of our village!” he yelled, apparently not very threateningly because, even when he raised his bone club and boomerang, the man dressed in red didn't even flinch.

“I'm not here to hurt you.” He stated simply, raising his arms to show he wasn't going to attack. Aang noticed he was a good inch shorter than Sokka but didn't doubt that he'd probably be the one to win in a fight.

“You've already hurt us! You've already taken so much from here, leave before you can't anymore!” threatened Sokka taking one step forward, yet the other stayed rooted in place, simply looking Sokka up and down.

“I didn't do that. The Fire Nation did, and that's why I'm here, I want to help.” said the guy, crossing his arms now and glaring- much like Sokka had been doing earlier.

“Well we don't want your help, ashy scu-” began Sokka, raising his bone club even higher and bringing it down as if to strike, before Aang jumped between the two and blocked with his staff.
Aang felt a strange familiarity with the stranger, like a bond of trust had already been formed. A gut feeling that they should hear him out. The airbender usually got these feelings from the spirits, guiding him. And who was he to ignore them?

“Sokka, stop! Let's hear him out, he's not even drawn his weapon yet. What's your name?” mediated Aang, turning to the man in red who shifted his gaze from Sokka to the boy in front of him.

“I'm Lee.” Lee didn't elaborate but he wasn't shooting fire at them either, so Aang counted it as a win.

“You said you want to help us?” The young boy asked, peering at Lee's face to see if his spiritual connections were going to nudge him in the right direction in this situation.

“Yes, my country has hurt the world. I want to help you find the… avatar… And restore balance.” He seemed uncomfortable with saying avatar, perhaps he'd been stuffed full of so much propaganda even when doing the right thing he still felt inclined to the Fire Nation ways? But Aang didn't dwell on it too long as Katara chose that moment to speak up.

“Aang, Sokka, a word?” She spat, glaring at Lee for a second before dragging the two boys of to one side and whispering to them. “How does he know we're looking for the avatar? Something fishy is going on here.”

“Why don't we just ask him?” Aang suggested naively.

“What?! Are you crazy? He's Fire Nation, he'll just lie!” insisted Sokka, turning for a second to glare daggers in Lee's direction, though the firebender hadn't moved an inch in the snow where they'd left him, despite the dozen eyes from the village staring fearfully at him.

“Look, I think we should trust him. He's not attacked and… I've just got this feeling.” Aang admitted, giving the siblings a pleading smile until they broke.

“Well… A man's instincts are important…” deliberated Sokka, biting his lip as he thought.

“Okay, fine. We let him explain himself, we ask him some questions, and then figure out if he can join us.” Said Katara finally, going back towards Lee with a frown carved across her face.
Lee shifted a little as they came over, looking more nervous than he had before. Aang supposed he was just nervous that he wouldn't be accepted, which was understandable. But Aang was already ready to bring him along, though it was probably easier for the airbender to trust him since, unlike Katara and Sokka, he'd only been aware of this war for a day.

“How do you know about our search for the avatar?” interrogated Katara with a snarl, staring at Lee angrily, he wavered slightly but didn't break down.

“I had a dream. Your young friend over there was there and he told me to come to the South Pole, so I'm here.” Lee explained, and Aang didn't doubt him. His unprecedented abilities with the spirit realm made him frequently appear to people he knew or would know in their dreams, sometimes giving them advice. He never meant to, it was just a subconscious thing. Of course, he'd never directed anyone to go as far as the South Pole before but there was a first time for everything.

“Hmm, even if that's true, why would we even want your help, ash-breath?” Questioned Sokka, actually going as far as to poke Lee in the chest, which Lee immediately swatted away angrily.

“I can fight, soggy-savage, I'm a firebender and-” he reached for the large bag he'd been dragging along through the snow and, whilst Sokka immediately flinched back, probably afraid that it would explode or something, opened it. Inside was a massive heap of gold, gems and jewels, sparkling in the thin sunlight. “-I have money.”.

Lee smirked at Sokka's gobsmacked face and fastened his bag up again. Katara shifted slightly but gave Aang a nod, very clear as to what she meant. Aang smiled too at that, though more brightly as he jumped in place, rushing up to Lee so quickly that Lee's smirk turned into a startled expression.

“Welcome to the team, Lee! You're just in time, we were just about to leave. There's plenty of room on Appa, but be careful not to step on Mo-Mo when you get onto the saddle. Also, I'm Aang, this is Katara and that's Sokka, hopefully soon we'll have the avatar with us too. Are you ready to leave?” Aang beamed and, while he seemed rather off put by Aang’s sunny personality and enthusiasm, he nodded briskly and tried to lug his bag stuffed with treasure up to Appa.

Sokka ended up helping and together they reached the saddle, Katara climbed up after saying another quick goodbye her and Sokka’s people and Aang, who was simply excited to find the avatar and bring peace and harmony to the 4 nations, pondered the journey ahead of them. Hopefully, once they were done, the world could have balance once more.
“Yip yip!”

Chapter End Notes

Hi! Really enjoying writing this so I hope you enjoy reading it :))
Comments and kudos are VERY appreciated, they give me life and hope etc <3
See you next week! :))
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It wasn't that Sokka hated Lee, more that he didn't trust him. But the problem with that was he kept expecting to be double crossed and yet Lee wasn't doing anything bad, or evil. In fact, the most suspicious thing he'd done since the 4 of them had left the South Pole was, seemingly from the dark circles under his eyes, not gotten any sleep. And that contradicted everything Sokka knew about the Fire Nation, they were meant to be heartless, cold, ruthless murderers and yet Lee was being the least annoying of anybody on Appa. The only time the guy had even used his firebending was the night before when Aang couldn't properly see his map due to it being too dark. Lee had barely even spoken in the 24 hours they'd been flying.

“Aang… Are you completely sure you're not lost?” Asked Katara for the seventh time, though her concern was well warranted. They'd been flying or a full day and they hadn't seen so much as a glimpse of land.

“I'm sure! My map is very clear, the Southern Air Temple should just be a few hours away by now.” Reassured Aang, looking back from his perch on Appa’s head to give Katara a bright smile, yet Lee seemed surprised.

“Well… Yes, but the temple has a secret avatar chamber that might give us clues and… I'd really like to see my home again…” Aang trailed off, turning his attention back to steering whilst Sokka and Katara shared a worried look. Lee looked guilty, though for what reason Sokka couldn't be sure, maybe from making Aang sad? But he had a feeling it was something else.

The four kept going in silence after that, except for the chatterings of Momo and the occasional yawn from Appa. Sokka was busy worrying about their food supplies, the village had offered as much as possible and it should have been plenty to get the three of them at least to mainland without starving to death, but now Lee had shown up it would last them significantly less time. And though the firebender had, admittedly, been helpful by bringing so much money (since they didn't have much Water Tribe currency and they couldn't even be sure if people in the Earth Kingdom would even accept money other than their own), it would have also been helpful for him to bring himself some food. As if on cue, that's when Lee started talking.

“I'm sick of Water Tribe food.” He complained frustratedly, throwing his seal blubber bap onto the
ground of Appa’s saddle and sulking. Apparently his silence had made him irritable, which was just
perfect.

“Yeah?! I'm so sorry, your highness, what did you bring to eat? Really sorry, but you're gonna break
your teeth if you try chowing down on that gold.” Sokka scowled, he would not stand for anyone
insulting his meat. But he did feel a pang of regret when Lee winced slightly, though he didn’t know
what he could have said that would upset someone who seemed as thick skinned as Lee.

“Humph, never thought I'd miss tea so much.” Lee muttered, quietly enough that he doubted the
man had meant for anyone to hear him. But, despite being in the far corner of Appa’s saddle, the
wind still managed to carry his words right over to Sokka’s listening ears.

“Urgh! Would you two just shut it?! Some of us are trying to sleep!” Moaned Katara who, true to her
word, was curled up in the blue sleeping bag Gran-Gran had given her.

“Sorry, Katara, but you'll have to get some rest later; we've arrived!” Announced Aang, who was
pulling Appa into a decline and seemed to be bursting with energy despite having spent basically the
entire 24 hours of their flight steering.

Just as Aang had said, they were approaching the Air Temple. It was ruins, sure, but aside from a
few charred parts it seemed to be in pretty good condition for a place that was supposedly obliterated
by the Fire Nation. There were clearings and buildings, statues and balconies, even a big courtyard
of poles and a bakery. And that was just what Sokka could decipher from a distance. Both he and
Katara were staring in awe whilst Aang smiled with a tint of sadness, nostalgia clouding his vision a
little, Sokka presumed. Lee was the only one who seemed unimpressed, bored even, though he was
scanning the place meticulously, probably to look for any sign of life. Unfortunately, it was clear that
no one had lived there in a century.

“Home” Aang breathed once they'd landed and departed from Appa’s back, Momo in tow. The
young boy cheered excitedly whilst he rushed around, airbending so he could be faster and more
agile. Sokka stared with wonder, a tad embarrassed to admit how cool the place looked and how
great it was to have new, refreshing scenery around him after about 16 years in the South Pole.

“This place is incredible! Just look at the architecture, these designs!” Katara smiled, mesmerised by
the structures around her, as she ran her hand along the base of a statue.

“Hey! That's Giatso, my old friend! We used to have so much fun together.” Reminisced Aang,
moving over to Katara so he too could stare in bewonderment. Lee and Sokka followed suit.
Sokka looked at the statue for a few moments before getting bored, and left to explore on his own. He ended up near the poles he'd seen earlier when flying, and now noticed that they seemed to be for some sort of game. The water tribe boy then walked over to a half crumbled wall, where he saw something truly depressing.

“Hey, Lee? Katara? Can I talk to you one second?” Sokka called hoarsely as he tried to avert his eyes from the sight in front of him.

The two benders gasped when they saw what Sokka had wanted to talk to them about, the decayed corpse of a century old Fire Nation soldier. Katara covered her mouth in horror and Lee just winced and turned away from it, crossing his arms.

“We need to tell Aang.” Decided Sokka, thinking it best to just rip off the bandaid so Aang didn't get his hopes up for his civilisation’s survival too high.

“Umm, sure. Okay… Aang! I… I need to show you something.” Said Katara unenthusiastically, her voice cracking, but as Aang approached she got cold feet and, instead of showing him the skeleton, she waterbended some snow to land on it and on Sokka and Lee, though Sokka chose to assume the latter two were accidents.

“What is it?” Asked Aang innocently, surveying the scene before him. Lee was literally steaming, the snow melting off his body whilst he snarled angrily at Katara, and Sokka stood trying to get the snow off of himself without also turning into a furnace.

“Umm, just a new waterbending move I learned. Cool, right?” Lied Katara, hands clasped behind her back whilst she smiled down at Aang.

“Yeah, awesome! But that's enough practicing for now, I want to show you this: an air-ball court!” Aang gestured to the field of poles behind him and, wanting to keep the kid happy until his heart was ripped apart by the knowledge that his temple had 100% definitely been attacked by Fire Nation troops, Sokka decided to indulge him.

“Great! How do you play? I'd love a turn.” Said Sokka, immediately regretting his words when he saw Aang’s mischievous smile.

Apparently the aim of the game was to get your ball through the other person's goal. You weren't
supposed to fall off the pole you were precariously standing on and, honestly, Sokka was pretty sure only an airbender would have any amount of success. Yet he tried anyway, seven times in fact, and he fell seven times. After his final go, and his thirtieth bruise since Aang was merciless when it came to air-ball, he gave up, not wanting to be embarrassed by a twelve year old any longer.

“Aww, really Sokka? I was having fun- and I've got a whole bunch of moves I haven't tried out yet. Please keep playing?” Pleaded Aang, using puppy dog eyes that Sokka was more than used to from Katara.

“Nope! No way! I have enough bruises on my butt to last me a lifetime.” He said, shaking his head, before Lee snickered from where he was leant against a broken slab of wall. “Oh really, Hotshot? You think it's so funny, huh? Why don't you try then, hmm?”

Lee rolled his eyes but climbed up the pole all the same, making sure to bump into Sokka’s shoulder as he passed him, and gave Aang a slight nod. Aang whooped excitedly at the prospect of a new opponent and prepared for his next shot. Lee got into a stance and, when the ball came hurtling towards him, didn't fall flat on his face like Sokka had every time, instead he leapt out of the way with springiness that shouldn't have been possible and landed lightly on the pole closest to him, though it was still a good distance away. Everyone else gasped, having expected the firebender to lose immediately.

“So, you said that: 'in the case of player A getting a goal and B not falling off the pitch, B gets to take a shot', right?” Asked Lee, getting thrown the ball from Katara and taking aim with a dangerous smirk.

“Y-yes…” Admitted Aang, taking his own stance, legs apart and hands open, ready to block.

“Okay then.” And with that the firebender set the ball aflame and threw it with such ferocity that Aang leapt aside on instinct, meaning Lee got the point as the ball hurtled into the middle of the goal. “See, Sokka, it's not that hard.”

Sokka grunted angrily but let the matter rest for a moment, since as time wore on he was becoming more and more eager to leave the Air Temple and get to the Earth Kingdom. So the four departed from the pitch and kept exploring, until Aang led them to a sealed chamber with an intricate lock on the very fancy door that led into it. It seemed to have multiple chutes and each was beautifully carved, so Sokka tried the obvious solution: he attempted to break it down. The young man ran into the massive door full force and went splat as he collided, not even budging it slightly.

“Uhm… Anyone have the key?” Sokka asked, letting Katara pull him up from his sprawled position
on the floor as she seemed to suppress a chuckle of amusement.

“The key is airbending, see:” Aang informed them bubbly, though Sokka would have rather been
told that before he launched himself at it, and the young airbender then let out two simultaneous
bursts of air and allowed the mechanism to do its thing. “This is the chamber of the avatars, Arianna
was meant to go in here when she was ready but… I don't know if she ever got the chance.”.

They all waited solemnly for the door to open, and when it did they were greeted with an incredibly
dark room, a problem Lee quickly solved without double crossing them. Seriously, couldn't Sokka
catch a break today? All he wanted was for his immediate impression of firebenders to be proven
correct. Once the room had been sufficiently lit up by the glowing flames dancing above Lee’s palm,
they saw hundreds upon hundreds of statues, all arranged in a pattern. Firebender, airbender,
waterbender and then earthbender- the one closest to them being a firebender.

“Avatar Roku” murmured Lee, looking at the statue in awe, seemingly unaware of the three people
staring at him in befuddlement.

“How did you know that? There's no name card.” Said Katara after inspecting the statue, Lee
jumped slightly at her comment but managed to regain his composure.

“Fire Nation history class.” He stated, but there was a peculiar edge to his voice. And Sokka had a
feeling the Fire Nation, the people who hated the avatar and had even (according to some of the
soldiers that came back from the war before his dad left to fight) issued a decree that any Fire Nation
citizen who found themselves or someone they knew to be the avatar had to turn said person in for
treachery, would ever teach their students about past avatars.

Sokka had been so busy focusing on Lee that he hadn't noticed Aang and Katara go down a side
corridor until he heard a loud cry from Aang, one of desperation and sadness that both he and Lee
immediately responded to, rushing towards the sound and disregarding what they'd previously been
doing. They found Aang huddled over crying in front of a completely decayed Air Nomad corpse
that looked saddeningly similar to the statue of Aang’s friend, Giatso. Katara had her arm around the
young boy and was whispering soft comforts has he sobbed, and blocking his view of the dozens of
Fire Nation remains surrounding them.

“So it's true... The Fire Nation... They did this... I really am the last airbender...” Aang cried into
his hands, and Sokka moved around to his side to help his sister comfort him. Lee, predictably,
looked incredibly uncomfortable and just stood awkwardly behind the three as he waited for Aang to
calm down.
“I’m… Sorry for my forefathers’ actions… But- the avatar might still be out there somewhere… So…” Tried Lee apprehensively, tossing a flame he'd created on the edge of his thumb between his hands in his nervousness.

“They’ll also be able to airbend.” Realised Katara with a smile, nudging Aang who'd managed to slow his tears enough to properly register the waterbender’s words.

“So… I'm not the last one?” He asked, hope gleaming in his eyes as he looked to Lee for confirmation, who only stuttered uncomfortably.

“May- maybe not..?” He said, averting his gaze to the ground as Aang seemed to have an epiphany.

“Okay then, we've got to stop wasting time. Our search for the avatar starts now.” Aang decided, his voice still shaky but determined as he wiped his eyes and left the hall.

They all made their way back to Appa in silence except for Aang’s occasional snifflies and a few chatters from Momo who Sokka hadn't even really noticed was with them as they explored the temple. Katara was periodically asking whether the airbender was alright, which he never answered properly, and Lee was trailing behind, seemingly lost in thought.

“How about I steer Appa tonight, you could do with some rest and I think your maps are a little outdated and… Shrivelled.” Offered Katara, to which Aang nodded before laying down and dozing off into a fitful sleep above his orange blankets. Sokka climbed into his sleeping bag beside him and Lee went over to his far corner and curled up beneath his blood red sheets, yet he was still awake when Sokka drifted off.

Chapter End Notes

For any North American readers this was updated early but technically it's 1am on Friday in England, so....

Also I hope you like this chapter! The gaang and Zuko are together (well, Zuko is part of the gaang now) and I love writing their interactions so I hope you enjoy reading them!

I've planned SO many chapters so far for this fic and written up to 15 (btw, by chapter 15 there are 47000 words) so I hope You're in for a long ride :))

As always hits make me happy, kudos give me love for the Earth and comments are literally my life force!
See you next week :))
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Iroh hadn’t seen his nephew in over a day; it was currently the morning of Thursday and he’d seen Zuko on Tuesday evening, before the young firebender claimed he needed an early night and went swiftly to bed. Of course, Iroh had been worried on Wednesday morning too, but he had noticed his nephew getting progressively tireder and grumpier over the past couple of weeks and figured that perhaps he just needed a day or two of solitude and rest. But by now the crew were getting cranky, they’d been docked a few miles from the Southern Water Tribe for too long without any orders from Zuko and the cold was probably getting to them, as was the shorter days and less firepower because of that. In short, Iroh had no choice but to intrude on his nephew, though to be truthful he did that very often.

The retired General knocked on Zuko’s door and, after a few moments of silence, attempted to open it. It was, unsurprisingly, locked but Iroh had a key- just in case. After a little fiddling with the old, rusty key the metal door swung open, revealing an empty room. More than just being empty it was also neat, or as neat as his nephew was capable of. His closet was closed and all of his clothes were hung up in it, though their seemed to be less garments than before. The small side table with his few belongings had been emptied, even the paicho cards Iroh had given the young man for his 14th birthday and the boy had disliked so much. Zuko’s Fire Nation flag still hung on the wall, but it looked like it had been torn down and then put back up. His nephew's dual swords, that were usually displayed proudly on one of his room’s steel walls, had also vanished. Even the Prince’s bed, that was usually little more than a pile of screwed up sheets until the janitor came in, had been messily made to the best of Zuko’s ability and a rolled up scroll had been placed upon the pillow. Iroh was afraid of its contents, yet he unrolled it anyway and read:

To Uncle,

I have found a new means by which I can find the avatar, but it requires me to go alone and change my identity for a time. Yet, however this turns out, by the end I am certain I will know the identity of the true avatar. I promise that you, and the crew, are safer without me. Please tell them I’ve left you in charge and feel free to take the ship anywhere, but DO NOT reveal my disappearance to anyone from the Fire Nation, it will only end badly. I am sure.

Don’t come looking for me.

Prince Zuko.

As he read Iroh steadied his breath, unsure of what to think. He was worried, of course, but about
more than just Zuko. If his nephew came across the White Lotus, or basically anyone who wasn’t Fire Nation, he’d be at their mercy, and whilst Iroh trusted Zuko could take care of himself against most threats, benders like Bumi and Jeong Jeong were far out of the young man’s current league. Without Iroh there to dissuade his fellow masters they’d happily capture or, much worse, kill (hopefully not, as it was not the White Lotus way) anyone who was trying to hurt the avatar. Yet, Iroh also feared for the avatar, if Zuko was as successful as he seemed confident then his nephew might ruin the world’s last chance at peace.

Deciding nothing could happen until Zuko was found, Iroh wrote a series of letters to the White Lotus members, they went like this:

Dear fellow master,

I am Iroh of the Fire Nation, a Grand Lotus, and my nephew is looking to capture the avatar. Enclosed is a sketch of young Prince Zuko, if you come across him keep an eye on him or, if the situation is dire, take him into custody with as little violence as possible. He’s simply lost and needs guidance, so do not hurt him and immediately send me a message if you find him.

Yours faithfully,

General (Prince) Iroh.

—

“Okay, we're approaching an Earth Kingdom market. I don't see any Fire Nation ships in the docks but we still have to be vigilant. Also, Lee and Aang, you two need a change of clothes.” Katara turned to the confused benders and brandished two Earth Kingdom outfits, one for each of them.

“What?! Why? I'm not changing into anything other than Fire Nation clothes, it would be disrespectful to my country!” Spluttered Lee angrily, shaking his head and scowling.

“And… I like my clothes, they remind me of home.” Argued Aang much more calmly, looking at the clothes is Katara’s hands with distaste.

“Look, I know you don't want to wear them, bu-” Began Katara kindly, before getting interrupted by
her brother.

“But, you two are super obvious! The Earth people will notice Lee because they hate him and will probably gawp at Aang because he's an airbender. Which reminds me, Aang, you need to wear this hat to cover your arrow.” Sokka snatched the clothes out of Katara’s arms and basically threw them at Lee and Aang, ignoring the disgruntled looks from all of his companions- bar the animals.

“Fine.” Lee spat, beginning to get changed.

Lee, apparently, didn't particularly care if people saw him bare chested. He pulled off his soft, loose, crimson shirt revealing shockingly toned abs and almost perfectly clear skin, aside from his facial scar, of course. Katara couldn't help but blush and turn away despite her very prominent platonic feelings for Lee, since she was a teenage girl who only knew one guy around her own age, and that was Sokka. She expected, and hoped, that her brother would make some sort of joke about Lee in this situation that would keep her mind busy, but he was strangely silent. Perhaps now he'd seen how muscley Lee was he was afraid of making him mad? But Sokka didn't usually have that much common sense. Yet, other than his really great abs, Katara had also noticed Lee looked thin, had Gran-Gran seen him she would have forced him to down at least 5 bowls of penguin-chicken broth every night, as well as two rounds of dessert. She made a mental note to force feed him some cake or something.

The waterbender was broken out of her musings when Aang caught her attention by smiling up at her, newly dressed in a light green top, brown trousers and a simple beige hat. He looked like a beggar child, but if anything that meant people would pay even less attention to him. Katara turned back to see Lee had also changed, and Sokka was still staring at him silently for some reason. The firebender looked wealthier than Aang, at least, he had a shirt the colour of dead nettles an with a dark belt tied around his waist. His bottoms were also dark in colour, almost black as were his boots (not that he had changed them). One of the boots, Katara noticed for the first time, had a slight bulge in its side that was almost impossible to see. Lee’s entire outfit also had gold accents, showing class, Katara assumed, which would help the amount of gold they had seem less suspicious.

“Well, are we going? I want to be in these clothes for the least time possible.” Said Lee moodily, and only then did Katara notice they'd landed a little outside the market.

“Ye- Yes! Let's go!” Sokka stuttered, he seemed to force his enthusiasm a little, but seemed to genuinely perk up once the four entered the market and the wafting scent of meat hit his nose.

“So, we get food and some extra clothes- but that's it. Understood?” Asked Katara, glaring at the boys in front of her. Lee had brought a lot of gold with him, but they might need that later so they couldn't go throwing it away on anything unnecessary. That said, she wasn't worried that Lee would buy anything they didn't need, Katara was much more anxious over her brother and Aang who were
both eying the stalls closest to them eagerly. “Ahem, understood?!”

“Yes, Katara.” The two replied meekly, bowing their heads but giving one last longing glance to their respective stalls as they walked away.

The edge of the market, nearest to the forest and where they parked Appa, had most of the merchants that were selling clothes. Katara, being refined and decently civilized, didn't want to only own three sets of clothes and five pairs of underwear for the rest of their journey. Luckily it seemed that Lee was even more adamant about this than she was, he hated Earth Kingdom clothes but decided that if he were to wear them he'd at least buy good quality outfits. Sokka took this desire to not be wearing what Lee called ‘rags’ (he actually looked extremely well dressed in the clothes Katara had found for him) and decided to help him get new clothes. Eventually the firebender was dressed simply yet stylishly, so that no one would notice him outright because of his outfit but, if they did look closer, would say he was very well dressed, which seemed to be Lee's style. Katara only allowed any of these purchases since 1) Aang was good enough at bartering that they weren't too expensive and 2) Sokka also got Lee a black cloak and hood to help him hide his scar- which was necessary.

“Sorry… About the, uh, clothes. I'm just not- Anyway, I can just ration my food for a while to make up for it.” Offered Lee as they walked closer to the harbour, the food stalls now surrounding them. Apparently now he'd gotten over his Fire Nation stubbornness and indulged the fashionista in Sokka for a while, he realised that maybe new clothes weren't the most sensible thing to buy.

“It's okay, we bought so much expensive stuff for you that they discounted our three's new stuff until it was practically free. Plus, it is your money. And you're probably used to nice, expensive things being from the ‘richest nation in the world’ and all, even the Fire Nation’s beggars probably dress like Water Tribe Chiefs. But anyway, you don't need to cut down on anything to make up for it, we've got so much money now that you could've probably bought that entire stall and it would've barely made a dent in our funds.” Katara reassured the firebender, giving him a small smile before moving onto the next food cart.

Once they'd bought food the four adventurers decided to take their new stuff back to Appa and then window shop for a while since it was barely even midday and to find the avatar they had to actually look around the places they went. Aang was all for this, though his excitement might have just been to try and cover up that he had bought a whistle that didn't even work behind Katara’s back. Sokka wanted to take more than just a few bronze pieces with them, Katara refused. And Lee didn't really care either way, after all of his complaining earlier he seemed to have retreated back into stony silence like when they first met him.

The small group wandered around merrily for a while, Aang and Lee careful to keep their bending under wraps, until they came across a tanned man in peculiar clothing yelling about his wares outside a durable and elegant, though it was still pretty scuffed up, ship. Aang, of course, was immediately enthralled.
“Hi, Mister!” He smiled happily, going straight up to the guy despite Sokka’s best effort to gesture otherwise.

“Hey, Kid. Come, come, see our crew’s incredible wares!” He advertised, guiding Aang on board the ship and allowing Katara and the others to follow.

Despite the exterior looking like it had seen better days, the inside of the ship was magnificent, if a little strange. Ornate and assumably rare objects surrounded them, successfully capturing both the waterbender’s and the airbender’s complete interest. Sokka, however, was also intrigued but kept looking from his little shelf of goods, to a green reptile-bird to Lee, who was glaring at each member of the crew suspiciously and looked ready to pull out his sword. Yet Katara didn’t focus on the two of them for too long since she came across a weathered scroll with a Water Tribe symbol on the clasp, and inside were real waterbending forms.

“Oh, spirits… A real waterbending scroll?! How? Where did you get this?!” She shrieked delightedly, gently stroking the parchment with an unbelieving smile. A scroll would never replace a master, but it would definitely help her with her waterbending until they reached the North Pole.

“Well, Missy, we got it from some guy up North at a very reasonable price- free!” The crew laughed uproariously, Katara barely noticing as she was still entranced with the scroll and what it could mean for her training.

“Wait a second… A battered ship… Creepy reptile-bird… Suspiciously acquired merchandise… You guys are pirates!” Exclaimed Sokka, breaking Katara out of her trance and causing Lee to reach for his sheathed sword once again (still strapped to his back threateningly). Aang, on the other hand, seemed perfectly content to be surrounded by pirates and was still happily browsing the ship.

“We prefer ‘high risk traders’, and I wouldn’t call my ship ‘battered’” said who Katara assumed to be the Captain due to his hat, before giving them all a wicked smile that Lee met with a vicious glare.

“So, what do you want for the scroll?” Asked Katara, figuring that her need for bending training was more important than the damage to her morals from doing business with pirates.

“Sorry, girl, I’ve already got a wealthy buyer in the East of the Earth Kingdom, so unless you have 500 hundred gold pieces right now then you have to kiss that scroll goodbye.” Said the captain, plucking the parchment out of Katara’s hands and putting it back on the shelf.
Aang whispered that he could barter, and they'd get her the scroll, but she took his kindness and used it as a distraction. Whilst Aang bartered pointlessly with the two bronze pieces he had left, Katara looked around carefully for spying eyes and slipped the scroll into her satchel as sneakily as possible. She supposed they could have bought it fair and square, they had all of Lee’s gold, after all, but if they spent 500 pieces of it on one scroll they would barely have 10 pieces left. Plus, stealing something that had already been stolen wasn't too bad, two negatives make a positive and all that. So she took the scroll and hurried everyone off the ship.

“Why did we have to leave so soon?” Asked Sokka, jogging to catch up with Katara’s power walk. Aang was hopping alongside her easily, though he was using discreet airbending to keep up. Lee wasn't even trying to be fast, he was walking behind the three of them and kept looking back at the pirate ship, his fingertips brushing over his scabbard.

“I just don't like being around pirates, okay? Besides, it's getting late, we shoul-” Before Katara could finish her sentence a spear lodged itself in the ground next to her, and when it missed its apparent mark (which seemed to be Katara herself) there was an angry roar from behind them, that Lee was already running towards as he pulled his sword out of its sheath.

Or, actually, it was two swords, that he held expertly as he rushed towards the pirates, recklessly and idiotically. The firebender, even without using fire, could probably fend off three of the pirates, maybe four, but there were at least twenty with their weapons raised at him. Katara, who was still embarrassingly new to waterbending, realised she wouldn't be much help in a fight and that the only way they survived this was if they ran away, preferably back to Appa. Sokka seemed to agree since he started shouting at Lee.

“Lee! Get back here! We can slice up pirates later!” He yelled before running up to where Lee was fighting the three closest pirates successfully. He even managed to make a nice, big rip in the biggest guy's fancy looking coat.

Even from where she was standing, and getting protected by Aang who was hitting projectiles out of the air and off target with his staff, Katara could see Lee's eye roll as he disarmed his opponents and backed off to join up with the rest of their group. The waterbender could hear Sokka yelling about being more careful but also about how cool his swords were and ‘can I hold them?’.

Despite the dedicated attempts from the pirates to follow them (even destroying a cabbage cart that was in their way), they managed to escape back into the woods (barely) and saw that they still had hours until sunset. Whilst the others did their own thing for a short while, Katara stroked the scroll in her pocket, excited to try out some real waterbending forms.
Okay, just a note on the order of events in this fic: THEY ARE NOT THE SAME AS IN THE SHOW. I basically reworked the entire map so the gaang, for example, run in with pirates before they go to Kyoshi.

Also, Sokka was 100% checking Zuko out.

Zuko, btw, I feel is very likely (being royalty who spent 80% of s2 complaining about having to be a peasant) to get annoyed about his clothes.

You guys also get a double upload this week, since I feel these two chapters (the second of which will be uploaded tomorrow) are basically part 1 and 2 of the same chapter, so look forward to that! :))

As always comments and kudos are beautiful, as are all of you, and I hope you enjoyed this chapter!
Zuko was seriously sick of being wet. He’d decided to fake an identity, managed to lie about his intentions and had left his Uncle behind, but if Katara accidentally blasted water at him one more time he’d happily throw away all of his progress and arrest all three of his companions. Except, he’d been travelling with them for over a week now and he was beginning to develop a soft spot for the rag-tag group, which was confusing since he was only meant to be there to either find out if he was the avatar or capture the real avatar- not to make friends.

“Come on, Lee! Hold it a little higher, I have to get this right.” Ordered Katara, once again shifting into the position her scroll was depicting as Zuko held it up for her to see.

Both Sokka and Aang were not helping, since Sokka blamed Katara for their trouble with the pirates and Aang couldn’t stay still long enough to help out. The young firebender, however, had not been too harsh on Katara for her actions as, though stealing was dishonourable, he was doing much worse in comparison by constantly lying to his ‘team’. He was also able to immediately become dry whenever the waterbender soaked him, which was a handy tool that at least Sokka didn’t have access to. But the real reason he’d agreed to assist Katara in learning waterbending was so he could memorise the forms and try them out later on, when everyone else had gone to sleep. It wasn’t like one night of no rest would affect him much anyway, it would probably surprise the group more if he actually looked like he’d had a good, fulfilling night of sleep in the morning.

“Katara! Maybe you should take a break, it’s almost sundown! We need to think about getting some sleep.” Sokka advised loudly from across the stream they were camped next to; they’d decided to move further into the forest after their whole debacle with the pirates.

“And?! I’m pretty sure my bending is stronger at night anyway, and I need to practise!” She yelled back, but she was looking exhausted and frustrated. Zuko quietly wondered whether that was how he usually looked to the rest of them.

“Katara, you need to take some time off. The monks always said ‘the lighter the spirit, the easier the bending’, so if you’re tired it’s more difficult.” Katara seemed to soften a little at Aang’s words and motioned for Zuko to lower the scroll, which was good since the Prince was getting a cramp.

“Fine. But in the morning I’ll be practising first thing, I’m not going to give up until I’ve learned this stupid ‘water-whip’.” She warned, getting the scroll from Zuko and putting it carefully at the bottom of her pack, Sokka breathed a sigh of relief.
“Finally! All that splashing was making it hard to concentrate on the important stuff- meat!” He brandished 5 skewers of some sort of fried meat and passed them around where they were now sat surrounding a campfire Zuko had lit earlier, keeping two for himself.

“Sorry, Sokka, I’m a vegetarian. I’ll just have this cabbage we got from that merchant before is cart got, uh, destroyed by angry pirates…” Said Aang, leaping up to Appa’s saddle and grabbing some vegetables.

Zuko started eating his food, that was better than Water Tribe slop but was still much too bland for him, and noticed that Katara and Aang had also picked up some supplies for tea, for some reason. The teapot was nowhere near as fancy as his uncle’s, but was prettily patterned with bluebells and white roses. He got hit by a such a sudden wave of homesickness that he actually choked on his meat (lamb-beef?) and had to steady himself. The others stared at him worriedly which he just brushed off, sitting back up properly.

“Why did you buy a tea set?” The Prince asked, regaining his composure and looking at Katara expectantly, yet she just seemed surprised.

“Actually… That was me. I figured since our journey is gonna include a lot of bending practise it would be good to keep a clear head, which tea helps with… Plus it was really pretty…” Explained Aang, twiddling his thumbs with a pleading smile and puppy-dog eyes that Zuko was ashamed to admit he was weak to. Katara and Sokka, however, had practise, it seemed.

“Come on, Aang, you know that wasn’t a necessary. We can’t return it now but from now on you can’t buy anything without my permission, okay?” Katara sighed sternly and Aang nodded sadly, yet Sokka still seemed a little annoyed.

“Really, Katara? You’re disappointed in him for getting a tea set when you stole a massively expensive waterbending scroll from pirates?!” He said, not incorrectly, but Katara still seethed at the comment.

Before she could respond Aang rushed between the two siblings, now holding the teapot and juggling a bunch of cups to distract them. Understanding almost immediately, Zuko grabbed the stuff from the air bender as Aang rambled to Katara and Sokka about something they were clearly too annoyed to care about. Zuko then, just as Aang had surely intended, threw cold water from the teapot all over Katara before she could react, her anger immediately replaced with shock.
“Wha-” She sputtered, wiping water out of her hair loopies as she looked at Zuko.

“You drenched me so much this afternoon; you deserve it. Plus you stole from pirates and put us all at risk. Now it's past sunset, we've eaten dinner and we're all ready for bed, so you and Sokka can deal with this argument in the morning, okay?” Katara nodded, still annoyed but also ready for bed so she crawled into her sleeping bag and closed her eyes.

Everyone else, excluding Zuko, also got comfortable and, by the time the full moon was high in the sky, they were all asleep. The Prince checked all of their faces carefully and quietly for signs of consciousness, Sokka was snoring as always, Aang was drooling a little and Katara kept mumbling sleepily, a sure sign that she was dreaming. So the firebender took it as an opportunity, he, still dressed in Earth Kingdom clothes, strapped his dual swords in their sheath to his back in case of trouble and pondered taking the waterbending scroll. On one hand it would help him with the accuracy of the katas but on the other hand there were too many disadvantages. If he tried to take the scroll from Katara’s bag he was more likely to wake her up, or if one of them woke up before he returned they’d see the scroll had disappeared and assume Zuko had betrayed them and stolen it for himself, probably to sell. And, to be honest, the scroll wasn't mandatory for waterbending, he'd seen Katara perform earlier and, though she couldn't get the move right, he didn't need to be perfectly successful to figure out if he could waterbend, he just had to make the water move.

So Zuko left everything else behind and moved downstream, following the water until he found a decently large clearing in the middle of the forest, the stream running right through it like a scar. It was pretty in the pale moonlight, tranquil, but he worried that the clearing, though almost completely covered overhead with a canopy of branches, was very open to attack. He pushed those thoughts aside though, and began to work.

First Zuko tried the movements Katara had used to warm up, forward and backward motions that had made the waves roll at her command. Yet when Zuko attempted it, he just shot flames along the water’s surface, causing a billowing of steam. He growled frustratedly and tried again, if he was firebending accidentally that didn't prove anything. After a few more goes he moved onto up and down motions, meaning to drag the water up into a tall wave like Katara had earlier- again, he just summoned fire. The firebender thought back to what Katara had said when she'd been explaining waterbending to Aang, movement was supposed to be fluid, strong and heavy, you were meant to let the energy flow through your limbs like liquid, pushing your weight around your body. This was unlike firebending where you had to use your breath, which was a completely different method. So Zuko tried it Katara’s way, instead of focusing on his breathing and core he focused on his muscles and blood, energy circulating and confined, yet fluid. He tried the water-whip motion, and when he thrust his arm out and felt the rush of chi he saw exactly what he'd been afraid of: the water sloshed up into a small tower, about as tall as Aang, and stayed there, twitching to be free, the water janky and certainly not skillfully bent but bent all the same.

Zuko let the water fall, and it rippled back down into the stream easily, calmly even, completely unlike his state of mind. He was completely frozen, unmoving and in shock, unable to construct a thought for the fear of his entire world collapsing all around him, burying the Prince under the
Before, when he had airbended, it had still been reasonably easy to stay in denial after the initial shock. But now he was unequivocally, most assuredly, the avatar and he had been his entire life. The last three years of his life had been for nothing and if he ever returned home he'd probably be locked away for the rest of his life, not that he blamed his father, he was now a traitor after all, on top of being a banished failure. Somehow, after what must have been half an hour of standing still, he managed to disassociate bending more than one element with being the avatar, so eventually he managed to push the ‘a word’ out of his head so far that he could pretend he was just a bender of at least three elements without being a traitor and therefore without passing out from shock.

Being back in denial, Zuko planned to make his way back to camp, but he was still very shaken up and didn't even notice the people coming at him until it was too late. He heard a small shuffling behind him before he was hit with incredible force on the right side of his head, whatever the weapon had been it was definitely metal and heavy, leaving a cut/bruise on the side of his head that began pouring an alarming amount of blood. After the sharp pain struck him he immediately crumpled falling to the ground ungracefully as the edge of his vision began to darken and his mind grew fuzzy.

“Hey, this is the feisty one!” Snarled a pirate happily, poking at Zuko’s head with the side of his boot, causing intense waves of pain to emanate from his new injury.

“Ha, yeah. This is the one that ruined my coat! Let's kill him, Captain!” Recommended another pirate with a gruff voice, his tone laced with anger as he kicked Zuko’s right side, definitely cracking a few ribs. The young man grunted in pain.

“Later, for now he'll be good bait for his friends, won't you, sonny?” Laughed the Captain, also kicking Zuko in the ribs as he tried (and failed) to push himself up onto all fours.

With pain shooting through his torso and an ache pounding in his head, it didn't take long for the firebender to pass out, everything fading to black as the pirates yelled about around his weak and shivering form.

Katara blinked awake, feeling newly refreshed in the early hours of the morning. Early meaning almost 5am, since she was extremely excited to learn more waterbending and perfect the water-whip, of course she would probably have a difficult time waking up her companions but Lee at least never seemed to sleep, so at least she could get him to help again. Katara also had to apologise for yesterday, she’d put her friends at risk and that wasn't okay, and then she'd gotten incredibly grumpy for the rest of the day simply because she was having unexpected difficulty with her bending. After a few moments more of ruminating over the previous day, the waterbender untangled herself from her
sleeping bag and went to wake up Lee, only to see his blankets in the far corner of their campsite were empty, and both him and his swords seemed to have disappeared.

“Aang! Sokka! Lee is gone!” She called, earning a mutter of concern from Aang and a sleepy groan from her brother.

“Huh? Where?” Asked Aang, sitting up and rubbing the sleep from his eyes, his face in an expression of concern.

“I don't know! Not here, and he didn't leave a note!” She replied hotly, annoyed that the situation was interrupting her training and afraid that Lee had run off and betrayed them. She checked all of their stuff and found only Lee’s swords to be missing, even the scroll was still safely tucked into the bottom of her pack.

“Do you think he's in trouble?” Questioned Sokka warily, now seeming more awake but still tired at the early hour- the full moon was still visible in the sky and the sun was yet to even peek over the horizon, though the east did seem dully brighter than the rest of their surroundings.

“I don't know, but we need to find him.” She stated, her face marred with annoyance whilst Aang and Sokka looked simply concerned and confused respectively.

The three searched around for a few minutes, Sokka checking unsuccessfully for tracks and Aang claiming the trees were too thick to see Lee from the air. Katara tried to think logically, but couldn't figure out Lee’s intentions. Had he just gone for a walk and gotten lost? Did he run off to help the pirates? Had he just been spying on them this entire time? She hoped it was the first one, but she wouldn't know for sure until they located the mysterious firebender.

“Guys! Look!” Called Sokka, pointing up to what looked like a green dot in the slowly brightening sky, but she guessed it was a bird. “It's the pirates’ reptile-bird, I'm sure of it!”

Sokka had always had great eyesight and deductive reasoning, so he was probably right, still, Katara was reluctant to agree simply because it would mean whatever situation they were in was completely her fault, and guilt was not her favourite emotion.

“We need to follow it then, come on!” Decided Aang, getting onto his glider and sneakily tracing the bird's movements downstream as Sokka and Katara followed on foot as quickly as they possibly could.
Aang landed a few meters away from the edge of a clearing, landing silently before the siblings and explaining that he hadn't gotten a good look at the clearing since that would put him in danger of being spotted. The three then creeped even closer to where the pirates were until all that was in between the two groups was a fairly large boulder. Katara could hear laughing and shouting, and the sound of blades being sharpened. The combination was unfairly terrifying. Sokka was the one to look around the boulder to try and spy Lee, he looked for a few moments before turning back to his sister and Aang with a grave expression.

“Good news: I found Lee. Bad news: he's unconscious and tied to a tree. He doesn't look good at all, actually, he's got a bloody wound on his right temple (at least it's not his scar's side) and he's super pale. He's still got his swords but his hands are tied behind his back and he's also tied to the trunk of an oak-birch as well as that, plus his feet are tied together. But I don't think they know he's a bender yet; there are no scorch marks in the clearing and you'd think if they knew he was a firebender they'd use metal, not rope, to tie him up.” Relayed Sokka, worriedly peeking back at Lee every few moments.

“So… What do we do?” Asked Aang anxiously, frowning up at his companions. Katara felt similarly but she needed to stay strong, despite being less than two years older than Aang.

“Well… We aren't going to beat them all, but Aang and I can distract them whilst Katara goes round the back and rescues Lee, then we all run off back to Appa.” The plan seemed vague at best and pretty shaky as a whole but it was the best they had so Katara went with it.

Just as Sokka had said, Katara ventured around the back of the pirates, careful not to make a sound despite being sure there was too much noise in the clearing for the pirates to even hear each other, let alone her. When she was just about to go out into the open, Sokka and Aang leapt out of their hiding spot and drew all eyes (and weapons) to themselves, causing a massive commotion that Katara took full advantage of. Lee's head wound looked worse up close and, though it probably wasn't as bad as it looked, there was a scary amount of dried blood on his face, and the injury was oozing even more. He was also completely silent, still breathing but deadly still. Deciding she should clean him up to avoid a potentially fatal infection, she poured her water pouch over his forehead and gently hovered here hand over his skin, surprising even herself when the water began to glow. It was the most incredible feeling, she could sense the damage and felt the water stroke over each tear, mending and numbing Lee's forehead. Katara let out a small gasp, amazed, and saw Lee's strangely golden eyes (she'd never noticed before) begin to flutter open even though his head was nowhere near completely healed and her waterbending seemed to be losing power, like she couldn't heal him anymore at that moment.

“Katar- Ugh… My head…” He groaned, struggling in the ropes surrounding him before wincing; Lee still seemed to be on the cusp of passing out, which was when Katara remembered their other friends were still battling pirates.
“Yeah, it probably hurts a lot. I'm going to go help the others, you stay here and rest- you're in no condition to fight right now.” Said Katara softly, doing her best to untangle Lee's bonds before leaving him to join the fray.

Aang was dealing with three guys, one of them being the pirate with the ripped coat, and was hopping onto each of their heads easily as they tried to swat at him with their blades, only hurting each other in the process. Sokka was trying to dodge attacks from the first and second mates (from the looks of it at least) but was not equipped for a sword fight with no armour, a bone club and a boomerang. Three other people were advancing on Katara too, who, with newfound confidence from helping Lee, tried the water-whip once more, and this time it was successful, hitting the pirates away. Unfortunately her new waterbending form wasn't going to help as a dozen pirates advanced on her, Sokka and Aang, driving them back into a group and forcing them back to where Lee was still slouched against a tree, though the firebender seemed to be at least partially conscious. The three dithered, looking to each other for ideas before a massive swirl of airbending descended upon the clearing, picking the dust up into a cloud and blinding the pirates, who immediately started swinging their weapons at each other, trying to hit Katara's group, out of pure instinct. Sokka and Aang seemed to figure this distraction was good enough to go rushing over to Lee.

“This? Buddy?” Fretted Sokka gently shaking the firebender until he gave a small murmur of acknowledgement.

Mm’kay… Jus’ lemme…” He slurred, attempting to push himself up but crying out with pain and folding in on himself, hands protectively over his right side as he hissed, though this also seemed to hurt him until he just curled up on himself, barely awake anymore.

“What if we…” Aang started, grabbing one of Lee's arms and motioning for Sokka to do the same, but when they tried to drag him to his feet he whimpered and went slack, breaths light to stop himself from feeling the pain too intensely.

“Sorry! Sorry! Okay, umm, sorry, Lee, but you aren't really awake anyway…” And with that Sokka threaded his left arm under Lee's knees and his right supported his torso as carefully as possible, before Sokka lifted the firebender up properly into a bridal carry and Lee only winced in response, probably too out of it to do much more.

“Are you sure he isn't too heavy…” Katara began, looking back at the pirates who were still struggling through the dust cloud.

“Hey, I'm stronger than I look. And he's surprisingly light, remind me to feed him some extra meat when he wakes up. Anyway, let's get back to Appa and leave this place.” Katara and Aang nodded
in agreement and they made their way back through the forest, Lee curled up in Sokka arms until they made it back to the campsite and Sokka laid him carefully on the back of Appa’s saddle.

“Well done with that airbending by the way, that dust cloud? Really good idea.” Complimented Katara as they packed up camp, the sun now slowly rising in the east and giving them clear idea as to which way they should head.

“Yeah, I guess… But I didn't do anything, I didn't even feel myself airbending. It was like someone else did it.” The young boy admitted, biting his lip as he carefully packed their new teacups into a padded saddle bag.

“Well… It had to be you. Maybe you've just progressed so much that now you can do it reflexively? I'm not sure, but tonight I found out something about my bending too… I'll show you up on Appa, let's just get out of here.” Said Katara, leading them up to where Sokka was trying to tend to Lee’s injuries pretty unsuccessfully, Katara planned to showcase her new healing abilities when they were up in the air, but at that moment she just wanted a five minute break from doing stuff.

They had a long way ahead of them, after all.

Chapter End Notes

My second update of the week! I hope you enjoyed it :))

Now, I think Zuko’s thought process here was a tad confusing so I'd like to clear some things up. Basically, at this point Zuko realises he's the avatar but doesn't accept it, and sure as hell doesn't ever want to acknowledge it. You can probably figure out from the psychology of this character why that is, but you also need to realise that Zuko will acknowledge (in his own mind) that he can bend multiple elements. He is just purposefully ignoring that the very fact that he can bend multiple elements means he's the avatar.

Honestly I don't blame you if you think that makes 0 sense.

Also, I'd like to point out that at this point Zuko has his mid S2 hair, but by about Chapter 15 he'll have his S3 hair.

As always comments are absolutely AMAZING, as are you, and kudos are pretty sweet too :)
Zuko awoke with a slight twinge of pain down his right side and a pounding in his head, yet he still felt more well-rested than he had in weeks. In his sleep induced haze he could still blearily make out that he was on the back of Appa, not laying on his usual spot on the saddle, and was surrounded by Aang, Katara and Sokka- all of whom were unaware he'd regained consciousness. The last things the Prince could recall were pirates, then Katara and then… Airbending that he'd purposely done to save these people. Hopefully they hadn't realised that was him.

“Shhh, Katara! He's waking up.” whispered Sokka as loudly as if he were half-shouting. The three all went completely silent and Zuko figured it was time start talking.

“Hey..?” He greeted, trying to push himself up to a sitting position with his arms but Sokka and Katara pushed him back down into a laying position.

“You probably shouldn't have do that, pirates cracked your ribs and I tried to heal them- I can heal with water now by the way- but I'm not sure how well it worked…” Explained Katara quickly, not really surprising Zuko since his uncle had told him many stories of different bending techniques. Some waterbenders could heal, some firebenders had lightning etcetera.

“Well, I'm fine, barely even hurts.” He grunted simply, swatting their hands away and pushing himself up so he was properly looking in the three’s surprisingly worried eyes.

“Okay… But maybe you should still take it easy for a little while-” started Aang before Zuko interrupted.

“I said I'm fine. What's wrong with you people?!” He asked aggressively, before being struck with the realisation that these guys had been away from the war, especially Aang, and had probably not dealt with someone getting injured and not dying. Even in the South Tribe raids, the people had only ever been captured or killed- no wonder the group didn't know how to properly deal with people getting hurt.

“Well I'm so sorry that we didn't want you to break even more ribs, hotshot, next time we'll just leave you for the pirates to deal with. You know, it would have been a lot easier, if I wasn't so muscled and strong then we would have had to leave you anyway- since, for your information, we had to carry you back here.” Replied Sokka angrily, crossing his arms and pouting.
... Fine... But I swear I'm okay.” Zuko said, much more quietly than before since he did kind of regret being so hostile when these people were trying to help him. “And why didn't you just leave me to the pirates? Saving me just put you all at risk, and you already had all the money and stuff with you.”.

The firebender’s words elicited silence from his companions who were now staring at him intently. Being a little overwhelmed by the attention, Zuko turned his head and looked over at the skyline they were flying over. They were still in the Earth Kingdom and it seemed to be midday, if he had to guess he’d say he'd been unconscious for about a day and a half, so by now they were probably plenty far enough from the pirates.

“Lee, we saved you because we weren't just gonna let you die. We didn't even think of leaving you behind.” Said Aang kindly, and it seemed that the others agreed. Zuko had no idea how they'd managed to sort of trust him enough to save his life in a week and a half where he'd barely done anything to help them except giving them money.

“... Oh…” Was all the Prince could reply before Katara coughed slightly.

“Yes, well, ummm, guys, I think Appa needs a rest and there's a village there so…” She said, gesturing to the sloppy movements Appa was making as he flew over a small Earth Kingdom town.

Aang quickly leapt over to Appa’s head (using airbending, of course) and started steering him down to what seemed to be an empty river. They landed with a bump that would’ve probably been pretty painful for Zuko had he not been mostly healed by Katara and had he not had such a high pain tolerance at this point. Once the four had landed, they rested for a few moments in the paradise that was being on land and not being attacked, before they heard a large crash like a landslide.

They immediately looked at each other and Katara and Aang began running towards the noise whilst Sokka attempted to help Zuko to his feet. Yet the Prince easily jumped up on his own and began running too, the others seemed to slow their normal pace so that he could keep up but Zuko was fast and really not that hurt, so he easily overtook them whilst they tried to be accommodating for him. The Prince arrived at the source of the sound before the others and hid behind a rock, careful to stay light on his feet as to not alert the maker of the noise to his presence. Said maker was a teenage earthbender, maybe a few months older than Zuko though he looked older, who was seemingly practicing his bending. Unfortunately, Zuko’s companions didn't seem interested in stealth and ran heavy footed directly in the teen bender’s line of sight.

“Hi! I'm Katara, who are you?” Greeted Katara cheerfully with a bright smile, waving at the earthbender who, once he'd noticed their group’s arrival, gasped in fear and ran off, earthbending a pile of rocks so they blocked their little gang from following. “Huh? I just wanted to say hi.”.
“Maybe you still can, looks like he went towards the town. Perhaps he can help us?” Suggested Sokka, leading the way around the large stack of boulders and towards the town.

Upon entering the town it was clear that the place had been ravaged by the Fire Nation, a fact that made Zuko unendingly grateful to Katara for forcing him to get Earth Kingdom clothes and extremely glad he also had a cloak to obscure his appearance with. His swords were still strapped across his back, which at least gave him some form of protection since he sensed it would be unwise to firebend in this place. Of course, he could always air or waterbend… No, he pushed that thought out of his head with as much force as he could muster. The town looked stable enough; buildings in the Earth Kingdom seldom crumbled on their own, but there was a definite air of melancholy draped over the inhabitants. Plus, a building that looked like it had once been the town hall had a large Fire Nation flag hung above the entrance.

“I think the guy went in there.” Sokka pointed at a small house sandwiched in between two other small house. It might have been a shop of some kind, but the windows were too dirty to tell.

“So… We just knock?” asked Aang, looking like he was about to jump over to the rundown door with airbending but immediately getting stopped by Katara grabbing him.

“Aang! This place is crawling with Fire Nation, it would be best if we didn't use our bending—especially you and Lee.” Katara warned quietly, offering a cheery smile to an elderly Earth Kingdom woman who was looking at the four of them intently.

Once she'd walked off, Katara led the way to the door and rapped against the wood three times, waiting a few moments before a weathered woman answered the door, slightly startled by her visitors. Not that anyone paid her much attention bar Zuko, since their stares were fixed on the young man behind her, the earthbender from before. He was quietly wiping down the counters of their grime, but when he saw their visitors he looked around fearfully as he'd scouting the exits before regaining his composure.

“You! You're an earthbender.” Pointed Katara, overcome with her success and being a little too loud. The woman quickly ushered the group in and shut the door, before the man jumped to his defence.

“No, I'm sorry but you must have mistaken me for somebody else.” He said, and Zuko was ready to leave it there and let him get on with his life, unfortunately the others had different ideas.
“No, we saw you practising earthbending.” Argued Sokka, mimicking earthbending movements on a way that really should have been stupid but was actually pretty amusing, not that Zuko would admit it.

“Haru! Really?” Gasped the woman, assumedly Haru’s mother, whilst her son looked to the floor dejectedly.

“Wait, what's wrong with being an earthbender?” asked Aang innocently, fidgeting with his hat as if were itchy. He probably wasn't used to having to cover up his arrow.

“Yeah, Haru looked pretty cool.” Said Sokka, making himself at home by jumping up onto one of the tables and swinging his legs.

“Earthbending isn't allowed here” Explained Haru shortly, frowning sadly.

“But earthbending is a part of you, just like waterbending is a part of me- denying it, well you know what people say happens if you deny it. What could be worse than that?” Asked Katara, worrying Zuko as to what was said to happen to deniers.

“What could be worse than a few fairy stories!? The Fire Nation could take Haru away! Like they did with his father.” Haru’s mother broke out in emotion and her eyes began to well up, causing the Prince to take a little step back since he was not too skilled at dealing with his own feelings, never mind others’.

Haru stepped forward and enveloped his mother in a hug, rubbing her back as Zuko and the others stood in shocked silence. The firebender had always thought the benders his nation had arrested had done something bad, that they were criminals, yet it sounded as though Haru could be arrested simply because he was an earthbender. There was no way his father would allow this, was there? Pushing his doubting thoughts out of his mind, Zuko stepped forward and coughed awkwardly.

“Sorry to… Interrupt but-” He was interrupted by a knock in the door, which Haru and his mother instantly paled at.

“Fire Nation, quick! Act natural!” advised Sokka after jumping up to peek through the curtains. Him, Aang and Katara all rushed into incredibly unnatural positions whilst Zuko decided to just hide under a table, knowing his scar would at least raise suspicion even if the soldiers didn't recognise him.
Zuko spied on the scene, watching as the soldiers marched around the room roughly, ‘accidentally’ knocking over a crappy ornament (the only luxury Haru’s family seemed to own) before demanding money for the taxes. Haru’s mother protested that she’d already paid that week, yet her argument was immediately rendered invalid by the soldiers saying it had doubled, threatening the woman with fire in the palms of their hands and almost causing Zuko to challenge the leader to an Agni Ky, yet he restrained and allowed himself just to smoke in quiet anger- hoping the literal smoke would dissipate without notice.

“And you foreigners, I hope you’re not planning to stay for too long- the price for visitors is… Steep.” The main guy cackled before leading the others out, leaving those remaining in the room to shudder with relief and anger. Mostly anger from Zuko.

“What do you four want?” Asked Haru’s mother with a sigh, squeezing the bridge of her nose as she shut the lid of a basically empty moneybox.

“We're really sorry, ma’am, but we could do with some information and a place to rest for the night, you see-” Began Katara, making a placating gesture as she tried to calm down both Sokka and Zuko who were fuming (one literally) at the mistreatment of Haru and his mother.

“We're searching for the Avatar! Have you seen them?” Asked Aang, interrupting Katara and causing Zuko to inadvertently flinch. His mood seemed a little dampened by what had just happened and yet his enthusiasm for their quest was unwavering, and was threatening to make Zuko feel very guilty. Which made no sense, since even if he could fire, air and waterbend that didn't 100% mean he was definitely the avatar- or at least that is what he tried to tell himself.

“The- No, they've either disappeared, died or have already been captured. I’m sorry, but no one has seen them in a hundred years.” Haru said, shaking his head. “But we can help with the other thing; we have a barn just outside the town you can use for the night.”.

They made their way to Haru’s barn, Haru in the lead, and muttered quietly among themselves until arriving. It was fairly large, big enough for them and Appa to rest comfortably in even it was pretty dirty with splintered wood and strewn pieces of straw scattered about the floor. Zuko was beginning to feel scarcely okay with his less than decently clean surroundings to say he’d been living in a meticulously clean ship surrounded by finery and beautiful clothes just 2 weeks ago. Whilst Aang went to fetch Appa, the rest decided to discuss their plans with Haru, who Katara had labelled as trustworthy.

“We are looking for the Avatar, so they can end the war and bring balance. Aang is… Spiritually gifted, you could say, and thinks it's possible.” Explained Katara, whilst Sokka began to prepare the
four of them some food.

“Plus, eventually our search will bring us to the North Pole where Katara can learn waterbending.” Added Sokka, pulling out some suspiciously grey looking meat.

“But, the Avatar could be anyone. How will you even begin to find them? They could even be Fire Nation.” Questioned Haru, causing Zuko to freeze as he tried to push down any avatar related thoughts.

“Well… Right now we're just looking around blindly, asking around wherever we go. And if the avatar is from the Fire Nation… Who knows what we'll do. Will their nation immediately capture/kill them or would they use them to win the war once and for all? ” Said Katara, clearly pondering their options and losing hope by the second.

“They'd kill them. Or they'd keep them barely alive for as long as possible, torturing them, hurting them until they went into the avatar state and they could kill the avatar once and for all, no rebirths. Even if they were one of their own… They've made their thoughts about the subject very clear- if you're the avatar and a Fire Nation citizen, then you're a traitor.” Muttered Zuko loudly and angrily, standing facing away from the others and clenching his fists, feeling a little tug of violent power in the back of his mind that he forced himself to ignore.

“Lee..?” Asked Sokka surprisingly softly, Zuko just grunted in response. Once certain he'd cleared his mind enough, he turned back to face them with a neutral expression masking his features.

“I need air, your mother said there were some chores we could do whilst we stayed here?” Zuko said, trying not to take any notice of their increasingly worried stares by averting his eyes.

“Uh, yes, you could come with Katara and me to-” Haru started nervously, looking between the firebender and the Water Tribe siblings.

“Great. Let's go.” He interrupted, pulling the hood of his cloak up and sweeping out of the barn quickly.

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They were walking back to the barn, Zuko hadn't spoken much whilst they'd been fishing (which Katara was incredibly good at, and gave her a chance to practice her bending) and Haru and Katara were having their own conversation whilst Zuko lagged behind, feeling awkward as the third wheel but better than he would have had he stayed with Sokka and Aang and all their, probably prying, questions.

“The Fire Nation got here about 8 years ago, and 5 years ago they began taking earthbenders. My Dad and some others tried to defend themselves, tried to rise up but they were taken too. And now I'm the only one left, everyone thinks I'm a non bender. Like your friends.” Explained Haru, his features downcast. His words also reminded Zuko that they'd never told Haru about his and Aang’s bending, which was probably for the best judging by the guy's opinion of firebenders.

“But, your bending is a part of you. Like breathing. Even repressing just a little part of it is unnatural, and being torn away from your home because of it is cruel.” Katara laid her hand on Haru’s shoulder and they paused in walking- almost causing Zuko to bump into them.

Katara’s message was resonating uncomfortably well with Zuko, and he found himself admitting some hard truths. Not that he was the avatar, he would keep denying that until he died, but that airbending and waterbending could be helpful to him, make him better at protecting himself. And that, despite how angry he was at himself for it, he enjoyed airbending; it made him feel light and free and unbound, like a massive burden had been lifted off of his shoulders. Which was strange, since whenever he wasn't airbending the knowledge that he could actually added to the huge burden that was almost constantly crushing him. Plus, he'd never felt completely whole with firebending now that he thought about it, he always felt like there was so much more to learn no matter how much he mastered it. So he'd learnt blades, which had a different, more satisfying and complete feeling to them when he’d practised them, probably because they weren't a form of being.

The Prince’s musings were interrupted by a cry of help from about 200 feet to the left, that Zuko immediately picked up on and began running towards, Katara running alongside him and Haru following closely behind. They got to what looked like a half collapsed mine, that an elderly and half-starved looking man was buried under, crying out for someone to save him. Yet, with no water in sight, fire being more destructive than helpful in this situation and Haru being unable to earthbend lest he be arrested, Zuko couldn't see much they could do to help.

“Don't worry, we'll get you out!” Yelled Katara, grabbing at the smaller rocks to no avail whilst Haru dithered a few feet away. Zuko decided to give Katara a hand, not thinking it would help the man at all but also wanting to do something to at least try and save him.

“It's not working!” He pointed out eventually, the pain in his ribs now more noticeable from trying to wrestle with heavy boulders, making his usually fantastic endurance barely even okay.
“Haru, please! You can help him!” Plead Katara, looking up at Haru with hopeful eyes that Zuko already knew the guy wouldn't be able to resist.

So the firebender struggled to his feet, gripping his right side as pain blossomed there once again, causing Katara to rush over to him worriedly as if he were about to keel over. It wasn't that bad, but he had to admit the care etched into her features was pretty refreshing. Meanwhile, Haru raised his arms and, with seemingly little effort, caused the boulders to rise from the ground and shoved them to one side, freeing the old man who, after he'd thanked them profusely, stumbled off back towards the town.

“Haru! That was amazing!” The waterbender girl praised enthusiastically, beaming at Haru who blushed before either of them realised Zuko was still with them.

“Umm, what's up with your friend?” Haru asked, moving towards them before noticing Zuko’s even paler features and how he was gripping his side as if he was in pain, which he was.

“Oh, right, Lee! I told you to rest, I swear if you re-broke your ribs after all that effort I put into healing them I'll sick Appa on you.” She threatened with a glare, though there was no venom behind it.

“Yes, the prospect of being eaten by a fluffy herbivore is completely terrifying” He replied coolly, annoying Katara into poking him rather aggressively in his bad side, causing him to let out a pretty unmanly whimper of pain and lean heavily on the nearest thing- Haru.

“I swear, you're almost as bad as Sokka, now let's get back to the barn- I don't think you broke your ribs again, you probably just aggravated your earlier injury, but that still means you have to go rest.” Katara ordered sternly.

Zuko merely nodded along, a little distracted by how much he was trying not to blush from leaning against a really attractive guy's abs. Great, another thing to repress.

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On their way back to Aang and Sokka, Zuko noticed something pretty daunting- a bunch of posters he hadn't seen when they'd originally entered the small Earth Kingdom town. They were fliers offering rewards for turning in earthbenders, and big rewards at that. The kind of money that would
seem impossible to these poor townsfolk, which reminded Zuko of the old man they'd saved, who'd seemed so hungry, his clothes tattered and what little grey hair he had was wiry and uncombed. The money he could get from turning in Haru would probably be able to tempt him out of his morals about protecting the guy who saved his life. And, if not, Zuko figured they were better safe than sorry.

When they got back to the barn, and after a scolding from Sokka which was rendered mute by the fact that the pain in his side had worn off after about 10 minutes and hadn't even been that intense, Zuko claimed he was going to rest and went into the back corner of the barn. He proceeded to place a human shaped pile of hay under his blankets and, thankfully out of sight of the others, he changed into all black and put on his Blue Spirit mask. Then, just as the sun began to dip beneath the horizon, he snuck out of the barn and through the town, easily slipping through alleys and over deserted streets, until he saw two Fire Nation soldiers.

He followed them until they got to a ramshackle little cottage and knocked, at which point Zuko jumped out and tackled the bigger one, a woman who could have probably crushed Zuko’s skull with her bare hands. He, without speaking, made quick work of her, elbowing her in the side and sweeping her legs from beneath her, dodging an attack from her mace before he spun and kicked her in the face as she fell, leaving her unconscious before she even hit the floor. The next soldier was even easier, the Prince snapped his spear in half before he even swung it and twisted his wrist until a loud snap rung out, then Zuko grabbed one of his shoulders and the back of his head and pulled him right down into a knee. The crack as he broke his nose even made Zuko wince in sympathy, but he still left the two soldiers unconscious on the ground and broke into the house they'd been heading to.

The man was stood cowering in a corner, having heard the commotion outside, and looked about ready to run off. Zuko hadn't really considered how he'd get the guy to keep quiet about Haru, but since he'd already beat up those guards outside he figured he might as well go with intimidation.

“I'm the Blue Spirit.” He began menacingly, unsheathing his swords as fancily as he could and brandishing them, at this point the man already looked ready to die of fright. Good.

“Please, Spirit! Don't hurt me!” The old man wept pathetically, surprising Zuko and making him glad to have covered up his face. Apparently the old man actually thought he was a real spirit- he could work with that.

“You saw an eartbender today. Tell no one and I won't hurt you.” Zuko promised threateningly, cornering the man and, quick as lightning, pressing one of his blades across his throat.

“Yes! Yes, of course, Spirit! Please, I didn't even tell those soldiers, I just told them I had information they'd be interested in, just don't kill me! Don't curse me! Don't-” He continued to plea annoyingly until Zuko had had enough and, in one swift movement, hit the man in the head with the hilt of the
sword in his other hand (the one that was not pressed against the elderly man's jugular) and knocked him out cold.

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Aang woke up the next day reasonably late, his dream filled with happy memories of the Air Nomads that left a bittersweet feeling in his mind. But his slumber had been uninterrupted and for that he was thankful, especially considering how he'd had to stay up late so many nights previously to steer Appa or keep watch. Sokka was still asleep and Lee, who was also awake but didn't look like he'd gotten any sleep (which wasn't unusual in the slightest) was sat on Appa's saddle and seemed to be brewing tea, an action which Aang didn't expect from the firebender. On the other side of the barn, Katara was quietly conversing with Haru. Deciding to let Sokka sleep and that Lee looked a little too grouchy to have a civil conversation with, Aang decided to speak with Katara. His decision, of course, had nothing at all to do with wanting to gauge whether or not Katara and Haru were building a ‘romantic’ relationship. Nothing at all to do with that.

“What're you talking about?” The airbender asked cheerily after making his way over to them.

“I was just saying how we have to leave, but we can help Haru get his dad and the other earthbenders out of Fire Nation prison first.” Explained Katara, to which Haru shook his head calmly.

“You guys have your own mission, I'll get my dad out on my own. Well, I'll gather some other earthbenders to help and maybe alert the Earth Kingdom military to all of the prisoners that could be helping in the war effort, but you guys need to do your own thing.” Haru argued convincingly, making Katara eventually nod in agreement.

“Then we should probably get going now, Aang, you get Lee and I'll wake Sokka.” Decided Katara before saying a quick goodbye to the earthbender and making her way over to Sokka’s sleeping form.

Once they'd gathered all their stuff they made their way through the outskirts of town, trying to avoid notice and find a good place for Appa to take off. Just as they left the last building of the town behind, Aang noticed what looked like a fresh poster, several of them in fact, pinned to a tree, he guessed there were more inside the town too. They bore the image of the blue masked person he'd seen at the South Pole, and though he probably should have felt uneasy about a masked man seemingly following them, there was a familiarity about him that he just couldn't shake. So the airbender shoved any of his concerns aside and kept quiet, feeling like he should get all the information before mentioning it to the others.
Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed this! Zuko is my son in Canon and in this btw, he's just... So beautiful :)

Comments and kudos are VERY appreciated, I am grateful for each one!
Aang was scourging a field near the ocean with his friends, looking for daisies to make flowers crowns out of. The only one not joining in was Lee, who was sat up on Appa playing with Momo, who had taken quite a liking to the firebender. Even Sokka was searching the field, though he said he was doing it out of force (Aang was pretty sure he just wanted to put some daffodils in his hair). The airbender was just about to grab another flower, when he noticed a club like Sokka’s lying unattended on the floor, its shaft cracked and old.

“Guys! I found something!” Aang jumped up and rushed over to the Water Tribe siblings, before presenting his find to them.

“Oh spirits… It couldn't be?” Katara gasped questioningly to her brother, her eyes wide.

“I- I think it is.” Sokka pulled out his own club and compared the two, aside from his being newer and more intact, they were identical. “This is a South Pole weapon!”

The two stared at the weapon before turning to each other and sharing a bright smile, cheering with enough joy for Lee to come over curiously.

“What are you yelling about?” He yawned halfway through his question and rubbed his eyes, seeming paler than usual. Aang distantly wondered of instead of looking after Momo like he’d said, Lee had been trying to catch up on sleep. Which was fair, since the firebender clearly needed it.

“Our tribe was here! Maybe our dad too, let's look for other signs of them.” Sokka suggested, immediately beginning to search the field with much more vigor than before.

The four searched for a while, before Katara called that she'd found something and directed them to a few charred, blue arrows scattered in some long grass.

“There must have been a fight here between our tribe and the Fire Nation- let's check the docks for ships, they might still be here.” Sokka sounded hopeful, which Aang was glad for, and followed the older man towards the sea, now managing to see the different ships up close.
Luckily there were no Fire Nation ships, mostly just fishing boats and a few Earth Kingdom ships that seemed to be docking for supply runs. Then, at the very end of the line of sea vessels, a small Water Tribe ship sat seldom to the others near an abbey.

“That's a South Tribe ship! Is it Dad's?” Asked Katara excitedly, rushing up to the boat and seemingly wanting to hug it.

“It's- it's not Dad's.” The siblings visibly deflated at Sokka’s conclusion, and Aang struggled to think of a way to comfort them.

Yet apparently there was no need, as at that moment he sensed someone approaching from behind them and they all jumped into fighting positions, their attacks pointed towards a Water Tribe man with a heavily bandaged chest and arms.

“Well, I may not be your dad but-” The man was interrupted by squeals of delight from Sokka and Katara, who trapped him in a suffocating hug.

“Bato!” They cried, not bothering to key in either Lee nor Aang as to who exactly Bato was.

“Erm, who?” Asked Aang with a bit of a forced smile, feeling uneasy.

“This is Bato! He's our dad's friend- is dad here?!?” Questioned Katara, pulling out of the hug and looking at a now frowning Bato expectantly.

“I'm sorry, kids, your dad and the other warriors had to move on. I was left here after I got injured- but in the next few days I should get a letter telling me where they're stationed so I can meet up with them. You two are welcome to join me- oh, and your friends, of course.” Offered Bato kindly, eliciting squeaks of happiness from the siblings.

“Yes! Oh, and these guys are Aang and Lee.” Sokka agreed, adding in the two benders’ names as an afterthought and only increasing the worried feeling in Aang’s gut.
Sokka felt so excited, his energy was buzzing at the surface as he entered Bato’s room, the inside looking exactly like the inside of a South Tribe ice hut. It even had several pelts, spiritual artifacts and a couple of scrolls on the walls with pictures of the old waterbender; Katara was paying special attention to those.

“Ah… Pelts.” Said Aang sadly, avoiding the fur on the walls and instead beginning to look at an old warrior relic: a platinum wolf helmet.

“Please don't touch that, it's ceremonial.” Ordered Bato as he added a few more flames to the fire.

“So… You and dad have been traveling around the Earth Kingdom?” Asked Sokka a tad awkwardly, sitting down on one of the rugs.

“Y- yes. But for the last few weeks I've been here, healing from my burns… Your friend seems to have some experience with that.” Bato nodded towards Lee, who was sat nearest to the fire, his eyes widening slightly at the mention of his scar.

“This is nothing compared to yours.” He replied gruffly, tapping the floor.

Bato only sighed in response, and Sokka unconsciously shuffled closer to the firebender who was now sulking. They conversed for a good while about their tribe and their travels, Aang staying strangely quiet, until Bato reached a story about their dad.

“So then me and Hakoda began ice-dodging, he was-” Started Bato, making hands gestures to emphasise his points.

“Wait, what's ice-dodging?” Asked Aang, tilting his head and getting a laugh from Bath in response.

“It's a coming of age ritual in our tribe! Fathers take their sons and- well, I'm sure Sokka has a great story about it.” Sokka felt himself lose excitement, getting reminded of how his father had had to leave for war before he was old enough.

“Umm, Dad left before he and Sokka could go ice-dodging.” Mentioned Katara, leaning over and squeezing his arm supportively.

“Oh… Well, then we'll do it tomorrow.” Suggested Bato, lifting Sokka’s heart and forcing a smile
onto his stubbornly glum face.

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That night Aang went outside for some fresh air, feeling uncharacteristically hurt by how close the three water tribe people were. He could have just tried talking to them about it, which was usually his go to idea, but he really didn't want to spoil their fun.

“What're you doing out here?” Asked Lee, coming up from behind and shocking Aang out if his thoughts.

“Just… Getting some air.” Replied Aang, sitting down on the beach and looking out to the ocean. Surprisingly, Lee joined him. “What about you?”.

“I, uh, I saw you leave and I was… Worried.” Mumbled Lee, seemingly honestly but still like he was hiding something.

“Anything else?” Aang asked, not prepared to actually get a response if Lee’s previous behaviour was anything to go by.

“Well… Bato. The Fire Nation hurt him. But he still feels bad for me and it’s… Annoying. I don't want pity, especially from someone who's clearly been hurt worse.” Admitted the firebender, flexing his fingers before creating a little twirl of flame in his left palm, lighting up their dark surroundings.

“Lee, why do you you always look so tired?” Asked Aang, having just gotten a new idea as to what could be causing his friend's lack of sleep.

He looked up startled for a second, before sighing tiredly and pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Nightmares… I mean- they're mild, not too bad, but still… Undesirable…” Muttered Lee, proving Aang’s guess correct, whilst still swirling the fire in his palm.

“You know… We're always there for you.” Promised Aang, placing a hopefully comforting hand on
He let out a quiet, humourless laugh in response but still turned to Aang with a smile, though it was more if a grimace.

“You too.” Replied Lee, eliciting a few of the negative emotions from Aang that he'd forgotten he'd been experiencing whilst talking to his friend.

“Well… Katara and Sokka will probably be leaving soon, what with their dad coming back and stuff…” Aang frowned deeply, looking down at his lap as he contemplated what he'd do without the siblings.

“Ha! Good one, no way those two are leaving you behind. They care about you too much.” Assured Lee with a genuine laugh, and Aang only just noticed the older boy hadn't yet shaken off his hand.

“You really think so? How do you know?” Asked Aang enthusiastically, hopeful that the firebender was correct.

“Well you see, I'm an impeccable judge of character, I have been studying their interactions with you, Jupiter is clearly southward of comet Milo and: they said so themselves after you left the room.” Responded Lee, assumably sarcastic until at the end he sounded honest, and Aang let out a whoop of joy.

With a smile on his face, Aang reentered Bato’s room with Lee and began listening to some of the South Tribe stories they were telling. Only a few minutes later did a postman show up at their door and offer Bato a letter, to which they all cheered but Sokka and Katara, apparently for the second time, declined Bato’s invitation for them to go meet their dad.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I felt like this chapter was short and crappy so I'm posting what I hope is a more interesting chapter tomorrow.

Honestly this one ate away at my soul to write, mostly because I realised after I’d written, like, chapter 20, that I needed a chapter somewhere with Bato so that Sokka and Katara’s storyline with their dad didn't seem rushed. Meaning I wrote this a couple of
days ago, and really just don't like it. And hey, if you do, cool! I'm glad it wasn't as big a 
disappointment as I think it it is.

Also I've been trying to deal with my perspectives and keep them reasonably balanced, 
not focusing on one character too much. Except that's hard because I naturally lean 
away from writing for Katara simply because I don't relate to her all that well, but then I 
feel like I'm not writing enough for her and squeeze her in more, so maybe she's now 
getting too much attention? Idk, tell me in the comments.

Anyway I'll see you all tomorrow, and though I didn't like this one, I hope you enjoyed 
it and would be incredibly thankful for any kudos and comments! :))
Sokka had an uneasy feeling in his stomach, and it wasn’t just from questionable meat and almost 2 full days of flying that he’d spent arguing with Aang about where they should go and what route they should take. The young airbender wanted to go off course to go to Omashu for real reason aside from messing up their postal service, and also wanted to fly to some island with massive fish. The island they would pass over anyway, so Sokka had agreed to go there once they reached it, but Omashu was too far out of their way and so Sokka had had to put his foot down.

“Please reconsider, Sokka?” He pleaded, eyes shining and lip pouted in sadness- it almost broke the teenager and yet he stayed strong and turned away.

“I'm sorry, Aang, but no.” He said as sternly as he could, looking at Katara and Lee for support.

Unfortunately neither seemed to be on his side: Katara was melting under Aang’s convincing puppy dog eyes and Lee was biting his lip and was somehow, even with one of his eyes being surrounded by a burn scar and the other having a dark bag underneath it, managing to look even cuter than Aang. The firebender’s resolve has clearly deteriorated and with the way his gold eyes were now staring at Sokka he figured he might give in too. Because Lee’s eyes weren't just golden, they were like refracted sunlight and a hundred glowing hearths, kind and homey and, unfortunately for Sokka, beautiful despite Lee being a firebender. He wondered quietly whether all Fire Nation citizens had such pretty eyes that he was half convinced had had their irises forged from the surface of a star, but he pushed that thought out of his mind and tried to focus on what was currently important- his instincts.

“We aren’t going to Omashu, and I don't think we should fly over this bit of land. There's a town with Fire Nation troops just there, and Appa is pretty noticeable, maybe we should travel on foot through these woods.” Sokka turned away from all of them and pointed down to the edge of the forest they were about to travel over.

“Why? I'm sure we can sneak past that town without them noticing us, even if we're in the air.” Asked Katara, who was probably just reluctant to walk after getting to fly on the back of a bison for a couple of weeks. Girls got lazy so quickly.

“Yeah! And Appa isn't that noticeable, are you buddy?” Aang began ruffling Appa’s white fur and got a tired but appreciative roar in response.
“He’s a 2 ton, flying, fluffy monster. Come on, Lee, you love stealth, at least you have to agree with me, right?” Sokka pleaded with the scarred young man who shifted uncomfortably.

“I don’t know, Sokka… Walking doesn’t really sound like fun…” He muttered, turning his gaze to the floor as Sokka sighed incredulously.

“Seriously?! Come on! My instincts are telling me we should go on foot, okay?!” He said one last time, trying out his own brand of puppy dog eyes and finally eliciting some grunts of approval from his friends.

“Fine.” Spat Katara, crossing her arms and glaring at the ground like it was the embodiment of the Fire Nation, which it wasn’t since they were still in the Earth Kingdom.

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“Walking sucks!” Complained Aang, airbending himself a ball of air to ride and zipping around the other three until he annoyed Lee enough that the firebender blasted flames at him, causing him to jump up in surprise and lose his air-scooter.

“Unless you’re gonna make one for all of us, you don’t get ride around happily on a ball of air whilst we’re all forced to walk.” Stated Lee, possibly even moodier than usual as he glared at the ground.

Sokka simply rolled his eyes at their moaning, knowing his instincts had told them to go on foot for a reason. That was, until Katara joined in.

“You know who is to blame for all this? Sokka’s instincts. Maybe you should complain to them.” Suggested Katara with a smirk.

“Good idea! Sokka’s instincts, my feet are tired!” Aang moaned once more, but this time he had some levity threaded into his tone.

“Yes, and you know what? I’m sick of carrying this heavy pack. Do you know who should carry it for me? Sokka’s instincts.” Joked Katara, smiling at Aang and Lee who both let out slight snickers. Which, as annoying as it was, Lee scarcely laughed and, even when it was at him, it still made a warm feeling bloom in Sokka’s chest whenever it happened.
“Har har, very funny, Katara, but-” Sokka started, before getting interrupted by a yowl of terror from Momo as he got snapped up into a trap.

“Don't worry, I can get him down.” Promised Aang, about to airbend himself up the tree to undo the trap.

“No, that'll just take forever, let me.” Offered Sokka, throwing his boomerang so it sliced through the rope Momo was suspended on and then came back to his hand- just as always.

“What about the others?” Pleaded Aang with his doe eyes, gesturing at the four other traps that were hanging from the tree.

“Ugh, fine.” This time Lee replied, getting into a stance and easily shooting four small bursts of fire that burnt through the ropes and dropped the, scared but safe, animals to the ground.

The four kept walking a while after that, Momo now sat on top of Aang’s hat for safekeeping and Appa still behind them, crushing several trees as he walked. Luckily the lack of flying seemed to be giving him rest, so at least if they had to make a quick getaway Appa would have enough energy to fly them away. But, even if that wasn't the case, Sokka was still feeling extremely proud of himself just for suggesting they should walk and, therefore, keeping them out of trouble and the Fire Nation’s grasp.

As if the universe hated him, that's exactly when Sokka accidentally stumbled into a Fire Nation camp.

“Sokka…” Murmured Aang, all eyes on Sokka and the troops seemingly frozen in shock as they tried to comprehend what had just happened.

“ATTACK!” One yelled, presumably the leader, before everyone charged all at once.

Lee seemed completely shocked, but once he'd been charged at by 5 soldiers he quickly flicked up his hood and drew his swords, unfortunately also firebending as he fought. Katara waterbended some liquid, probably water, out of her pouch and tried to defend herself too, Aang helping. Yet Sokka barely had time to pull out his bone club before five new people, led by a teenage guy with dark, spiky hair (like Lee’s but not as shiny or soft or thick looking). They began taking out guys as if it were the easiest thing in the world, though their leader did most of the work and their true
advantage seemed to be their element of surprise. Soon every firebender, except Lee, had been taken out and were now lying on the floor, unconscious.

“Get the last one.” Ordered the leader, pointing at Lee with one of his weapons, a metal pole with a sharp hooked end. Lee, being Lee, brandished his swords and pointed his stance at the guy, his blades literally smoking.

“Wait! No! He's with us, Lee, put your swords away!” Katara tried to mediate, giving Lee a glare that he rolled his eyes at but still obeyed, sheathing his swords. The other guy seemed much more reluctant, but after several more moments and a viscous look directed at the firebender, he too stopped fighting.

“Alright. I'm Jet, and these are my freedom fighters. You'll forgive us for being a little hostile towards your ‘friend’ since he is part of the nation that killed our families, burned our villages and took over the world.” spat Jet, sharply nodding his head towards Lee without looking at him, causing two of his people to position themselves either side of the firebender.

“Um, it's fine. We understand, it took us a while to get used to him too, I'm Katara, that's Aang and that is my brother, Sokka.” Katara introduced them with a blush, and almost caused Sokka to puke because of the icky oogies his sister's interactions with Jet were giving off.

“Yeah, and we're looking for the avatar, have you seen them?” Asked Aang, getting straight to the point and jumping directly in front of Jet so that the guy stepped back in shock before chuckling.

“Avatar huh? No, they've been gone for a century- now it's up to us to fight against the Fire Nation’s tyranny.” Replied Jet, patting Aang on the shoulder before turning to Katara with a suave smile.

“Thanks, by the way, for helping us out back there. You really helped us out… Wait.. Oh…” Thanked/rambled Katara with another blush, she was beginning to resemble a tomato.

“I should be thanking you, we've been scouting that camp all day waiting for a distraction, and then you guys crashed in and gave us everything we needed to take them out.” Jet smiled but Sokka was sure he heard a cutting edge to his voice.

“I don't know, he only took out, like, twenty soldiers.” Muttered the water tribe boy, not loud enough for Jet to hear but with the necessary volume for Lee to pick up.
“Yeah, I took out twice that.” Lee bragged, causing Sokka to chuckle and the two fighters on either side of Lee to shove him in the back. “Hey!”.

Luckily Lee did not get a chance to attack the two and turn five pretty skilled fighters against them since Aang grabbed his arm and dragged him forward.

“Come on, Lee! Jet is gonna show us his tree top base!” Aang said excitedly, pulling on Lee as he stuttered something about probably not being welcome, that Jet waved away with an icy tone.

“Of course you're welcome, Lee. In fact, I'm sure we can find you your own room to stay in.” Jet assured, his smile now bordering on demonic and Sokka was certain they shouldn't trust him.

“Actually, I think my friends and I should get going. My instincts are just telling me we should head off, surely you can understand that, Jet?” Asked Sokka, hoping to make his voice just as cutting and venomous as Jet's was when he spoke to Lee, yet the freedom fighter didn't seem even remotely put off.

“You're relying on instincts, Sokka? In my experience that's what gets people killed.” Jet stated simply, before leading them all to an even thicker patch of woods, that had four ropes hanging down.

Jet motioned for everyone to grab one, but since there were only four some people were forced to grab onto people who were actually holding a rope. Aang opened up his glider and flew up in his own, causing the freedom fighters to whistle in admiration. Then Katara got pulled into Jet's arms and she grabbed around the back of his neck, now definitely more tomato than human. The rest of the fighters grabbed the other two but waited to tug on them and shoot up, seemingly having been silently ordered to keep an eye on Lee. Sokka gripped the last one and grabbed Lee's waist, who gave a short ‘hrumph’ of protest, pulling him into his side before tugging the rope. Being pulled up through the air without enough warning caused Lee to instinctually loop his arms around Sokka and squeeze as tightly as he could from fear of falling. Thanks to this, Sokka almost let go in surprise, but didn't and they managed to reach the top safely. At which point, Lee punched the water tribe teenager in the shoulder angrily before stalking off after the rest of the group, only to be followed by the freedom fighters that Sokka was now certain had been assigned to guard the firebender.

“And this is your room, Lee.” Said Jet, shoving Lee into a room that was basically a dark, wooden cupboard full of cobwebs with a stone bed. “I hope you don't mind, but since we have a shortage of rooms we've had to give you a room very near the guard hut. So there will constantly be fighters
outside it, but they're not here for you, I promise, they're just regularly positioned here.”.

Lee clearly did mind, if the fiery look in his eyes was anything to go by, but he stayed quiet, though his skin was smoking. Katara shot him a pleading look, before smiling over at Jet.

“I'm sure he understands, right, Lee?” She asked, her hands clasped together. Meanwhile, Aang was messing about with a couple of the fighters (The Duke and Pipsqueak) and showing off his airbending.

“Of course, Katara. But, it would be a shame if, you know, the guards accidentally startled me and caused me to, I don't know… Burn this entire place to the ground?” The firebender threatened, wringing his hands as he glared at Jet and blew a faint flame from his lips.

Sokka was at least thankful he'd kind of veiled his threat, but Jet now seemed angrier than ever. They left Lee in his room and made their way to their much nicer room. It was also made of wood, but their beds were actually soft looking with patchwork blankets and fluffed pillows. A few lamps hung from the walls and lit a homey glow across the meek but cosy furniture. There was also clearly room for a fourth bed, but neither Katara nor Aang seemed to pay any mind to that, too wrapped up in their trust for Jet and the prospect of sleeping in real beds. Sokka made a silent vow to leave this place first thing in the morning.

“We'd love for you to join us at dinner tonight, maybe we could help you with your search? We have a lot of members from all over the Earth Kingdom, if the avatar was out there we'd have someone who knows something.” Offered Jet, squeezing Katara's shoulder seemingly kindly.

“We’d love to, Jet.” She answered softly before Jet left.

Sokka sat quietly for a few minutes, letting Aang and Katara discuss just how amazing Jet was, before being sure Jet and the others were no longer in hearing range. He then cleared his throat and motioned for Aang and Katara to get closer, just in case.

“I don't trust Jet. Did you see how he was treating Lee? I think he's bad news.” he said quietly, only to be responded to with gasps of shock from his friends.

“You're just being hard on him, of course he's a little on edge around Lee- firebenders killed his family and burned down his village, after all.” Katara retaliated on Jet's behalf, girls truly were controlled by their hormones. “Now, stop with all this nonsense and get ready for dinner, you smell
like rotting penguin-seal meat.”.

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“I'm sure you'll excuse Lee, he was exhausted and couldn't join us. But rest assured that we already took some food to his room.” Explained Jet once they'd all sat down. It was clearly a lie, since the only time Sokka had ever seen Lee asleep was when he'd been literally knocked unconscious, and even that hadn't lasted as long as Katara had thought it would.

“It did look like he could use some rest…” Admitted Aang, probably thinking about the large bag under Lee's good eye.

“Yes, and since we'll be leaving tomorrow he could do with some sleep.” Responded Sokka, deciding not to elevate the situation since he was beginning to think Jet was more than just untrustworthy, he actually seemed a little on the crazy side.

“Oh no, you can't leave yet. I have an important mission for Katara and Aang, and a special one for you too, Sokka.” Jet brought up, his expression full of fake genuinity.

Aang immediately agreed to the mission without asking what it was and then began asking people about the avatar, to which he actually got some information.

“Wait, Longshot, didn't you-” Started someone called Smellerbee, turning to an archer who Sokka was yet to hear speak. He simply blinked in response and yet several of the freedom fighters began to mutter in understanding.

“His mum was a medic in the army, you see, and she once saw a guy, an earthbender that she treated, have his eyes glow blue, she was sure of it. Of course that was about 17 years ago now, but apparently he lived past that injury. His name was…” The one called The Duke explained before pausing, Longshot breathed slightly and they carried on. “He was called Neto, Longshot’s mum treated him in his early twenties. He might still be around.”.

Aang whooped in joy, jumping up in happiness and dancing across the table in celebration; they finally had a lead. Sokka was at least thankful for that, but knew this only meant they owed Jet even more and there was no way he'd be able to get them to leave tomorrow morning.
The next day, Sokka stood quietly with Jet and a few others as they waited for a Fire Nation scout to pass through the forest. The sooner they helped Jet, the sooner they could leave, so Sokka was doing his best to help out in this ‘special’ mission. And perhaps he'd even get evidence proving that Jet's friendly facade was fake, but from the way Jet had been expertly lying so far he doubted he'd be successful.

The Water Tribe boy waited patiently, his club planted deep into the trunk of a tree and hoping to feel a vibration soon, so that he could deal with the scout and get back to see what Lee was up to. Just then, he felt something and called for the others, all of which immediately jumped into position. Yet, Sokka could only see an elderly man, Fire Nation yes, but just a civilian.

“Wait! Jet, false alarm! It's just an old man!” Sokka yelled, and yet the freedom fighters, their aggressive leader included, still charged at the man with unbridled rage.

Sokka ran to catch up with them, and attempt to pull them off the old guy they were now beating into the ground, yelling at and stealing from.

“Fire Nation scum!!!” Jet shouted, grabbing the man’s cane and breaking it in half over his knee. He then gripped his collar and pulled him up violently, fright painted all over the man's face as clearly as if it were written in ink.

“Stop it, Jet! It's just an old man, stop hurting him!” Ordered Sokka, prying the man from Jet's firm grip and ushering him away before getting decked by an extremely livid Jet.

“And?! He's Fire Nation! He's the enemy!” He argued, stamping his foot on the ground and looking murderously into Sokka’s blue eyes.

“He was an unarmed, harmless, old man! There was no reason to attack him!” Sokka’s words were followed by a glaring contest, that Jet broke away from in anger.

“Make your own way back to the base, and change your attitude on the way there.” He stated, clenching his tanned fists, and walking away from Sokka with his fighters.
Sokka made his way to Lee's room when he got back to the base, having decided that there was little chance he'd be able to get through to Aang or Katara at this point. Upon arriving he wished he could say he was surprised by the scene that was playing out before him.

“Let go of me you assholes! You'll be sorry when I'm done with you!” Lee yelled, wrestling with about ten guards (maybe fifteen) whilst being drenched in... Blood?!

“Oh yeah? What ya gonna do, ashbreath!” Replied one, punching Lee in the gut. Surprisingly, the firebender didn't turn him into soot and instead headbutted him.

“What's going on here?! Why are you covered in blood!?” Asked Sokka, rushing forward and making his presence known. About a dozen fighters turned to look at him and one spoke up, covering Lee's mouth.

“Your ‘friend’ tried to kill us! Said he'd been waiting for a chance to turn us ‘Earth Kingdom trash into ash’. OW! He bit me!” He accused, hitting Lee upside the head, yet the firebender barely even seemed to notice and front kicked him to the stomach, knocking him down. Sokka seriously doubted Lee had said that, since he was pretty sure the scarred teen hated rhymes.

“I did none of that! They were talking about how I'd ‘get in the way of their plans’, they're going to flood the village! And this isn't blood, it's-” Lee began, before one especially big guy hit him over the head with a painful looking rock and knocked him out.

Sokka’s eyes widened, and he took several steps back, but the crowd still charged him and, being incredibly startled and extremely outmatched, as well as attempting to protect Lee's unconscious body as he fought, they took him down easily, knocking him out as well.

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Zuko blinked awake blearily, and immediately began to seethe in anger. He was currently getting dragged through the woods by two guards, both of which were armed. He remembered everything, including the part where he got knocked unconscious for the second time in, what was it, a week and a half? Not the most dignified thing that had ever happened to him, but at least this time he didn't
have broken ribs to go along with his concussion. The Prince surveyed his surroundings quietly, not wanting to alert the guards to his consciousness before it was necessary, and took in what he'd need for his plan. He had his hands tied together behind his back, the rope was strong but it could still be cut. Both of his arms were being held by guards, who he assumed to be non-benders since they hadn't simply encased his wrists in rock.

In front of them, Sokka was also getting dragged along but he was conscious, well at least they realised he was conscious. The guy holding him was also in possession of Zuko’s swords and Sokka was unarmed. The firebender managed to spy at one of the guards who was holding him’s side, and strapped to it was Sokka’s boomerang and club. Speaking of the Water Tribe boy, he didn't seem too injured at all and could probably fight, though he was probably shouting his throat raw under that gag. Zuko, however, still being perceived as incapacitated, was not gagged but was still covered, head to toe, in the blasting jelly they'd coated him with before knocking him out, preventing him from firebending.

To most, they would've probably seemed screwed. Yet, Zuko had been trying out this new thing recently, ever since he'd joined Aang and his group, called ‘thinking ahead’. So that's what he did, and he managed to concoct a plan.

His legs being limp until that point, Zuko managed to surprise his guards by planting his feet on the ground and, whilst praying to all the spirits he could think of, kicked the sandy dirt up at his captors. Just as he'd hoped, this was paired with airbending and created a dust cloud big enough to obscure them from sight. They yelled for backup but, in their confusion, had lessened their grip on the Prince's arms and allowed him to pull free, letting him enter phase two of his newly conceived plan.

He knelt down quickly and grabbed the knife from his boot, hands still tied behind his back, the knife had still been hidden there and not confiscated probably because his guards had assumed that having both firebending and two big swords meant that someone wouldn't have any reason to hide extra protection in their shoes. He cut through the bonds on his hands as if they were butter and leapt at one of the people who had been holding him, who was now regaining focus after being startled by Zuko’s trick. The firebender jumped high enough to plant one foot on the man’s chest and then stepped the other one onto his head, jumping over the guy and landing, elbow first, onto his companion’s skull. That one dropped immediately and Zuko snatched Sokka’s club off of him and thwacked the first guy in the side of the head, knocking him out too. Time for part three of his plan (and he had to give it to Sokka, plans were super helpful).

Zuko rushed at the last guard, the one holding Sokka and looking around frightfully, and grabbed his wrist before he even knew what had hit him. The Prince then yanked the arm with as much force as he could possibly muster, probably dislocating something if the screech of pain the guard let out was any indication. He then placed his knife to the man's throat.

“Where. Is. The. Dam?” He snarled threateningly, pushing him down to his knees and glaring a hole
right through his soul.

“A- a few mi-miles East…” He stuttered pathetically, a sentence that Zuko responded to by slamming the man's head into the ground. The firebender might have felt sympathetic to the new head injuries he'd given to the guards, but by knocking him out before they'd both embarrassed him and given him a killer headache.

The threat now dealt with, Zuko cut through Sokka’s bonds too and contemplated leaving the gag on- he was a lot quieter, after all. But he decided that might put a little tear in their budding… Friendship? So he undid it and Sokka looked at him thankfully.

“Thanks, hotshot, that was so cool! You just kind of beat them all up, I didn't really see much of it since I was facing the wrong way but from the screams of terror I'd say you did a pretty good job. But… Why didn't you firebend?” Sokka asked at last, leading the way through the woods after they had retrieved their stuff and tied their guards to a tree.

“I'm covered in blasting jelly, it's flammable so I would have lit myself on fire.” He explained gruffly, rushing to keep up with Sokka’s impressive pace.

“Wait, so can firebenders’ fire actually burn firebenders? I always assumed you guys were immune since it was magic and…” Began Sokka, before realising Zuko had stopped dead in his tracks and was now staring at him with an expression that was best summed up by the word ‘seriously?’ “What is it?”

Zuko, completely taken aback by how dumb Sokka was acting, raised his hand slowly and then pointed at the left side of his face, to which Sokka visibly paled.

“Oh, Spirits, I'm really sorry, I-” He began to apologise before the firebender simply shook his head and kept walking, not wanting to talk about the origins of his scar.

“Not important. Point is if I firebend I’ll probably light myself on fire, and that will hurt. A lot. My fire doesn't touch my body but it does stay pretty close to my skin, and even the heat could set me alight right now.” Zuko said from in front of Sokka, now slashing away branches with his swords easily.

They kept going for a little while before they found an actual path, it was thin and old but it was there. And now they had two options.
“Do we go to the town or the dam?” Asked Zuko, turning to Sokka who was deep in thought.

“I’d say our best chance at saving the people from Jet's plan would be evacuating the town, but you go up to the dam and try to stop him there. I'll head to the town and get them all out- I'll find some way to get them to trust me.” Sokka explained, before running down one path whilst Zuko ran down the other.

He went as quickly as he could, even using whatever airbending he could muster (which, when not in a life or death situation, was not a lot), the only thought on his mind being to save the townsfolk. He reached a small hill overlooking the dam just in time to see Katara encase Jet in ice, pinning him against a tree whilst she yelled angrily.

“Why, Jet!!” She asked, looking close to breaking out in tears of betrayal.

“They're the enemy, Katara! Why can't you understand?! I thought at least your brother would but-” He began, fighting against his frozen prison.

“Where is my brother?!!?” Katara yelled once more, squeezing her fist in a way that seemed to make Jet lose some of his air flow. Was she using the ice to… Slowly crush him? Zuko made an oath to himself that he'd only ever get into a fight with Katara if the choice was her or his uncle. (Zuko could never fight his uncle).

“Katara! He's fine.” Zuko called, rushing up to meet them and earning shocked looks from all three.

“He's okay?” Her relief caused her to lose some grip on Jet, allowing him to breathe once more. He took this as an opportunity to whistle, causing everyone's attention to be drawn back to him.

“What did you just do?!” They all yelled, almost simultaneously as Katara once again squeezed the ice so that it started choking the ‘freedom’ fighter before them.

“What- had to- be done-” He struggled to find his words with so little oxygen but managed it.

“Maybe Sokka got there on time?” Suggested Aang hopefully, but his optimism was crushed by the sound of explosions.
Aang looked crestfallen as the water broke free of the dam and cascaded down onto the town, seemingly drowning the helpless inhabitants. For the second time that day, Zuko made a silent prayer to the Spirits but this time wished for Sokka to have been successful. Several terrifying seconds later, Sokka walked up to them with a smile, which only brightened when he saw Jet pinned against the tree.

“Sokka!” Aang and Katara shouted in relief, running forward to hug him, Zuko, however, held back. Physical affection hadn't been his thing for a while now.

“Don't worry, the townsfolk are safe, I warned them about the dam and they all got out okay. At first they didn't trust me, but then one guy stood up for me: this one old man that Jet beat up.” Sokka explained, smiling at Aang and Katara’s relieved and grateful expressions as if they were a stack of gold.

“Wha-” Jet began, but Katara covered his mouth with ice and glared daggers at him.

“You're pathetic. You pretend to be fighting the Fire Nation but really you're just destroying anything in your way to revenge. The Fire Nation hurt you, I can understand that, but that's no excuse to attack innocent people. Maybe you'll figure that out by the time you thaw out.” And with that Katara walked away, the other three following closely behind, and together they made their way back to Appa.

Though, before they took off, Zuko decided it would be best to wash off the blasting jelly he was coated in, since he kind of looked like he was covered in dried blood and was severely missing his firebending. He also shoved down his most recent memories of airbending, ashamed that he'd allowed himself to indulge in such things when he was definitely not the avatar.

Chapter End Notes

Yay! A chapter I actually like! :))

Jet's an ass, but ah well.

I hope you enjoyed this one, comments and kudos are ALWAYS deeply appreciated, my love for them spreads throughout the very core of my being :'}
The group had finally passed through the first massive chunk of land in the Earth Kingdom, and now, three weeks after they’d begun their journey, they were flying over water once more. Though, they were in no way out of the Earth Kingdom yet; the sea they were travelling over was also Earth Kingdom and, if they travelled far enough north, they’d end up over Earth Kingdom land once again. Or at least that’s what Sokka had tried to explain to Zuko, who already knew all of it since he'd spent three years scouring the globe for the avatar- but he chose not to mention that, not wanting Katara to throw him overboard.

“We should be almost there!” Promised Aang, who was sat on Appa’s head with Katara. Sokka was sat on the saddle with Zuko and they were meant to be in control of the map, but neither could figure out where Aang was taking them.

“Are you sure, Aang? We've been flying over water for days.” Asked Katara, who was in the middle of some sewing and looked pretty concerned as to their whereabouts.

“Yes! I went to this island a whole bunch of times with Arianna, the Great Koi are incredible to ride!” He said happily, patting Appa’s head.

“What island is this anyway? There are three different ones on this map!” Complained Sokka tiredly, he was currently without pants since Katara was fixing them. Zuko was trying ignore that detail and was instead focusing on how mind numbingly slow Appa was flying.

“Kyoshi Island, of course! It's-” Aang began explaining, turning to face where Sokka and the Prince were sat.

“It's Avatar Kyoshi’s home island, she was the Earth Avatar, the avatar before Roku, the first and only ever recorded lavabender and… What?” Zuko had interrupted Aang and was now receiving confused stares from his companions.

“How do you know any of that?” Asked Sokka, gazing at the firebender intently.

Zuko hadn't really considered that. How did he know who Kyoshi was? He'd never heard of her, he was sure of it, and even if he had why would he feel compelled to interrupt Aang in his explanation?
It didn't make any sense unless… No. He couldn't think about that right now.

That was when the Prince realised he'd been silent for a few moments too long and decided to cough awkwardly and redirect the conversation.

“So you came here with Arianna?” He asked, hoping Aang would be too wrapped up in talking about his old friend for anyone to be able to address Zuko’s blatant avoidance of Sokka’s question.

“Oh, yes. We came a few times, only once after she realised she was the avatar though. The monks thought it would be good for her to visit the homes of past avatars… Though they never did allow her to go to the Fire Nation… I guess they knew a war was brewing…” Aang trailed off and Zuko immediately regretted triggering him to talk about Arianna and his old home.

“Hey! At least the, uhm, those Koi thingies are fun! Right?” Sokka attempted to lighten the mood and Aang did perk up a little, nodding with a small smile.

“Okay, if you're all done discussing where we're going, could we please figure out how to get there? Since, sorry, Aang, we're definitely lost.” Katara’s voice broke them out of their musings, but she had lost concentration on the sewing and her stitches were now unravelling quickly in the sea breeze.

“We know what we're doing, Katara! Just let us men do our work and you do your girly sewing.” Argued Sokka sexistly, to which Zuko averted his gaze and allowed Katara to chew him out.

“You men?! You're a twelve year old, an emo and a guy with the mental capacity of a two year old! (That one is you, Sokka!). And ‘girly sewing’? What does that have to do with anything?! You know what, you can fix your own pants!” She threw Sokka’s pants at his head, and crossed her arms, turning away from him. Zuko scowled at the emo comment, but couldn't really argue.

“Hey! I can't wear these, they have a massive hole in them!” Protested Sokka, putting his arm through the hole and burning with either anger or humiliation, Zuko couldn't tell.

“Don't worry, Sokka, where we're going you won't need them. Look!” Aang finally pointed at an island, it had a fairly small town in the middle and had beaches around the edge, reminding the Prince of Ember Island.

Appa floated down to one of the beaches, which was seemingly deserted, and had a sparkling ocean
on the edge, calm waves constantly lapping at the golden, sandy shores. Aang let out a cheerful laugh and then stripped down to just some shorts, immediately running into the beautiful waters. Katara took this as an opportunity to practice her waterbending, standing at the water's edge and forming shapes with the salty liquid, one of which being a rather disgruntled looking Sokka. Speaking of the Water Tribe boy, he was currently sat on a rock, trying to sew up his pants and realising that it was not as easy as Katara made it look. Hopefully this experience would give him more respect for his sister, but Zuko had to admit that Sokka could be a real numbskull sometimes and would probably need more than 20 minutes of sewing to change his opinions. The Prince, meanwhile, had found the most shaded place (slightly to the left of a large palm tree) and was using it to sit quietly and lean against his pack, fiddling with the Lotus Pai Cho piece his uncle had gifted him.

“Katara! Look!” Called Aang, swimming in the water and occasionally using airbending to propel himself upwards.

After a few moments, a large blue fin joined Aang, causing him to whoop in celebration and clamber onto its back. The massive fish (a Great Koi, Zuko assumed) swam around frantically, trying to throw Aang off, but the young boy stayed firmly on place and eventually the Koi gave up and just dived in and out of the water, making Aang look even more impressive. But then a dark, much larger, fin cut through the water, its scales black as night and shining threateningly in the mid-morning sun.

“Aang!” Katara screamed in warning but the boy only smiled and waved, not noticing the sea monster at the side of him.

“Aang!” Zuko joined in, but he realised that wasn't working and so instead tried some firebending. He shot flames up into the air so that they formed letters and those letters created a pretty clear warning: MASSIVE SEA MONSTER.

Luckily even Aang could understand something that blatant and immediately yelped in shock, nervously looking over the side of the Koi and noticing the massive fin. The airbender shot himself up off the back of his fish and landed almost on solid land, rushedly swimming the rest of the way back to shore with the sea monster following closely behind.

Aang immediately got pulled into a hug by Katara as soon as he was safely on the sand, but Zuko, for many reasons, didn't join them; one of which being the rustling in the trees. The firebender lit his palms, not bothering to hide his bending since whoever was there had probably already seen him shoot that warning to Aang, and was about to call for the others when he was grabbed from behind. Being absolutely determined not to get another concussion, he fought against whoever had gotten him and tried to tear off the gag and blindfold they forced onto him in his confusion, he could hear his companions make their own noises of shock and anger as they were grabbed too, and Zuko attempted to fight back but was not given the chance, his arms and legs being immediately bound.
Soon he could feel himself get strapped to a tree, probably the large palm tree he'd been relaxing under earlier, along with the others either side of him.

“Who are you?! Take off the blindfolds too you cowards!” Ordered Sokka after his gag had been removed, Zuko still had his but it sounded as though the others had had theirs taken off. Which Zuko got to see for himself when they removed his, and everyone else’s, blindfolds. “Where are the men that captured us?”

Zuko almost wanted to hit himself in the head at Sokka’s stupidity, as they had clearly been beaten by the female warriors in front of them. They wore heavy looking green dresses and darker green armored vests, the women also sported white face paint that pushed Zuko into a memory that was certainly not his own. In the memory he was a middle aged woman, muscled and battle hardened, clearly, and she was applying white makeup to her face as well as red eyeshadow. The Prince immediately recognised her as Kyoshi, even though he had never seen her before, and was unable to breath for the entire time he was seeing her.

“There were no men who captured you, only us, the Kyoshi Warriors.” The leader’s stern words dragged Zuko out of his flashback and he realised he was panting heavily behind his gag, and beginning to sweat.

“What's wrong with the firebender?” Asked another one of the Warriors, her voice a little squeakier than her leader’s so Zuko assumed that she was younger.

“Nothing. Now why have you-” Started Sokka angrily, fighting against his bonds before Katara kicked him- apparently her legs hadn't been tied together.

“I'm sorry, I think there's been some confusion, we're not here to hurt your-” Began Katara with a mediating smile, before she was interrupted.

“Not here to hurt us?! Then why did you bring a firebender with you? Kyoshi Island has managed to stay neutral in the war so far, and firebenders only mean fighting.” Said the leader to Katara, who only gulped in response.

“I'm very sorry, I've been here before and I didn't anticipate that things would have changed. We're on our way to the North Pole, so my friend Katara can learn waterbending, and along the way we're looking for the avatar. We only stopped off here so we could rest a little, look around for the who we think the current avatar is, Neto we think, and so… I could ride the Great Koi.” Explained Aang truthfully, reminding Zuko (who was still trying to regain a stable breathing pattern after his Kyoshi flashback) that they were meant to be looking for a guy called Neto, who Zuko was pretty sure died 16 years ago. Which was just fantastic.
“Suki, I think the boy is telling the truth… He does seem to be an airbender.” The younger warrior spoke to her leader, Suki apparently, who gave a short, interrupting nod.

“Fine, but I want to hear him speak.” Suki glared at Zuko, who figured glaring was preferable to stabbing, and untied his gag with a level of violence he didn't expect from just untying some cloth. “Will you hurt our people?”

“No.” He replied, too busy considering his memory of Kyoshi to even feel vaguely threatened by the murderous look in Suki’s chocolate-brown eyes.

“Fine. Let them go. The mayor will want to speak to them.” Ordered Suki’s as her warriors began cutting through the group's bonds.

The warriors then led them towards the town, though they allowed Aang to retrieve his clothes first, and kept an especially keen eye on Zuko. Said Prince was becoming increasingly infuriated with being singled out as the threat from their group, since it had happened with both the Freedom Fighters and the Kyoshi Warriors. Really it was just insulting- they expected him to be evil. But to be honest, the firebender was finding ‘right and wrong’ to be a little confusing at the current moment, so he was just trying to go with the flow… Did that make him evil? Zuko wasn't sure.

Their town really was like Ember Island, except it had a greener colour scheme and a large statue of Kyoshi in the center. The buildings, unlike most of the ones Zuko had seen so far on his journey with Aang, Katara and Sokka, weren't in disrepair and actually seemed pretty nice. The inhabitants also didn't immediately look at him with disgust, though that was probably because he was still dressed in Earth Kingdom attire. But how they were staring at him was actually more annoying than if they were seething with rage at his appearance, because instead of being angry at him they were staring at him with pity, their eyes fixed on his scar.

“How long do we have to stay here?” Zuko muttered to Aang gruffly, his voice was soft enough that nobody else seemed to hear.

“Come on, Lee! This place is fun, why are you in such a rush?” Aang asked, there was some concern in his expression that Zuko brushed off. He didn't deserve concern, and he shouldn't be pitied, he deserved his scar- no matter what his uncle had tried to tell him. The firebender’s father had been right to punish him, he'd been unforgivably disrespectful after all, and even then his father had still given him a chance to regain his honour… And he'd screwed that up on an inconceivable level.
They kept walking until they reached the bottom of the statue. It was beautifully crafted and carved, and now knowing exactly what Kyoshi had looked like in her prime Zuko was also impressed by how well they'd managed to copy her likeness. The only fault was the fact that, up close, it was easy to tell that she could do with a new paint job, since her colours were faded and the white paint on her face was now a cracking grey. At her base, which was inscribed with: *Avatar Kyoshi 1200-1430 AZ*, a well dressed man was stood (probably the mayor), he seemed tired and like he was anticipating having to face 10000 spirits single handedly.

“So… Suki tells me you're an airbender, a waterbender, a firebender and a non-bender, all searching for the avatar together? Who you believe to be an earthbender named Neto?” The mayor sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose, and Zuko couldn't find it within himself to blame the old guy, he probably hadn't expected to deal with this sort of stuff when he got elected.

“Yes.” Replied Katara, who had taken it upon herself to be the speaker of the group, which made a lot of sense due to her ability to be mediating (when she chose to be).

“That's a noble, if useless, quest and I'll allow you to rest here for a few days- as long as you don't make trouble. Speaking of which, there are a few conditions I'd like you to agree to.” The mayor paused, looking to Katara for agreement.

“If it would make the citizens of Kyoshi Island feel better about our presence, then we're happy to oblige.” Agreed Katara with a polite bow.

“Thank you. For one, we would appreciate it if you could wear the clothes of your homeland, I don't want my people to be tricked by your appearances. As payment for allowing you to stay, we would also like it if you could help clean up around here. And we'd also be honoured if you'd join me and the Kyoshi Warriors for dinner tonight.” He requested, and Zuko managed to find suspicion in all three conditions. For one, the mayor was specifically asking them to change into their own attire because currently Zuko didn't appear to be Fire Nation. Though, in regards to the mayor's other conditions there were admittedly less ways to interpret them.

“Yes, we can do all of those, thank you for your hospitality.” Thanked Katara, before leading the four of them back to Appa to fetch their stuff.

Zuko was actually happy to change back into his own clothes, the red making him feel like he was back home. Aang also seemed more comfortable in his Air Nomad outfit, and with his arrow fully on show. Zuko also took off his cloak (though really it wasn't any specific nation so he could've worn it) because the island was incredibly warm, meaning they'd probably reached the equator and were therefore about halfway to the North Pole. The Prince also noticed how long his hair had gotten, growing out tousled and messy- though he wasn't yet able to get it back into a ponytail. Sokka and Katara had no need to change, since they had been wearing Water Tribe clothes for the entire
journey, but they did remove their parkas since the heat was also getting to them.

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“Are you sure we have to stay here?” Asked Zuko as they unpacked into their new room. It had 4 beds and a bathroom, and definitely seemed nice enough (especially compared to Appa’s saddle and Jet's prison cell) but he was still uneasy. Something about Kyoshi Island was giving him avatar vibes, not that he was the avatar just… He pushed those thoughts out of his mind, fearing what would happen, or what he’d realise, if he pondered on them for too long.

“Yes! Neto is an Earth Avatar so he might be drawn to the home of another Earth Avatar. Plus, Appa needs rest and this place is fun!” Aang smiled convincingly, even though Appa was still full of energy.

“You know, I agree with Lee, this island seems a little off.” Argued Sokka as he unrolled his sleeping bag onto his new bed.

“You’re just mad that those Kyoshi warriors beat you up.” Katara rolled her eyes at her frowning brother and sat on her bed (which was as far away as was possible from Sokka’s).

What followed that was a lot of sexist protesting from Sokka that Zuko tried to ignore, until he realised ignoring it was giving him plenty of time to think about avatar stuff he definitely didn't want to think about.

“Fine. I'll prove it to you, those girls only beat me because they cheated and snuck up on me. I'll go fight them now.” Sokka grumbled, stalking out of the room in a huff.

“Okay then… Do you guys want to join me? I promised those girls we walked by earlier that I'd show them so airbending tricks. They were super impressed!” Aang bragged, and somehow spiralling into a void of self hatred and confusion was beginning to sound more desirable than an afternoon of watching a twelve year old show off to a bunch of little girls, but luckily Katara saved the Prince from both options.

“Actually Aang, right now we should do what the mayor said and help clean up this place, I was thinking we could start by repainting Kyoshi’s statue.” Katara began to suggest with a smile that quickly morphed into a frown.
“Sorry you guys, but I promised!” He apologised insincerely before grabbing his glider and jumping out of their third floor window, his expression still cheerful.

“Ugh. At least tell me you’ll help out?” Sighed Katara, turning to Zuko who was more than ready to distract himself with anything that came along.

“Sure, let's go.” He agreed, his tone neutral as he left their room and went towards the main square.

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Apparently Zuko was terrible at painting, which made sense considering he'd never done it before, but Katara seemed to be regretting her decision to bring him along due to his incompetence. She had now ordered him to just paint the back of Kyoshi’s dress since it was all one colour and was such a large space that it should've been almost impossible for Zuko go outside the lines. Though really his inability to paint wasn't entirely his fault, since the loss of 90% of the sight in his left eye meant he had basically no depth perception. A few of the townsfolk had joined in on the two benders’ task, all of which were avoiding Zuko and giving the Prince no one to talk to (not that he'd usually mind, but he was currently in the midst of some sort of crisis where if he was left with his own thoughts for too long he would probably begin to hyperventilate), until Sokka trailed up to the square miserably.

“Hi…” He greeted, his usual tone replaced with one of defeat and melancholy as he leaned against the freshly painted base of the statue, turning his blue clothes brown. He had also gained a black eye at some point.

“Hey.” Zuko replied, attempting to reach for the unpainted bit of space just around Kyoshi’s belt. He was failing pathetically but at least he was trying.

“I talked to the Kyoshi Warriors…” Sokka began sadly.

“And..?” Zuko asked, pausing in his chore to turn and face Sokka.

“Suki beat me up. Twice. Okay, it was three, no four, times.” He admitted, expression like a kicked puppy.
“What? You want me to go burn down her dojo? Sorry, Sokka, but you definitely deserved to get some sense knocked into you.” Said the firebender, tilting his head at the Water Tribe boy.

“Wha- No! But-” He stuttered, a sulk covering his usually pretty handsome face.

“Sokka, girls are just as strong as guys, sometimes stronger. My sister-” Zuko halted abruptly, realising he'd spoken about his sister despite having tried to keep all personal details about himself to the minimum.

“You have a sister?” He asked understandably, and Zuko chose to ignore him.

“Just go apologise to Suki.” He sighed, trying to wrench all thoughts of Azula from his brain as he stalked off, purposefully kicking over bucket of paint as he left.

The Prince figured Katara wouldn't miss his presence anyway.

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Zuko arrived back in their room to find it predictably deserted and just how he and Katara had left it. He made his way to the bathroom to scrub the paint off of himself, it had thankfully avoided his clothes but had covered the firebender’s forearms and even gotten on his right cheek and splattered his hair. Getting it off left his skin red and raw, not that he really cared about that since, compared to his scar, it was basically nothing.

After that he found himself with nothing to do for three hours except wallow in his own solitude and devolve into a bundle of nerves. He just couldn't shake the unease that had rooted itself as deep as the marrow of his bones, that he was sure came from being on Kyoshi Island. So he decided to take his uncle's advice and brewed some calming tea, of course he was terrible at brewing tea, but just the making process had managed to relax him ever since he'd had to leave his uncle behind.

Once he'd brewed around 10 cups of tea, ranging from an awfully bitter jasmine to a disgustingly sweet white jade, he decided to try one of his uncle's other favourite methods of relaxation: meditation. He sat crossed legged in the middle of their room, atop a red mat he'd had in his supplies, and lit three candles in front of him. Zuko had previously locked the door and shut the curtains, so now all that was left to do was clear his mind. This was easier said than done, but having lived a lot of his life pushing everything that upset him as far out of his mind as was possible; by now he was
exemplary at it.

He spent several minutes in silence, controlling his breath and feeling the air around him, letting his chi spiral with his core. And, as if he were falling asleep, he felt himself doze into a trance, the darkness behind his closed eyelids transforming gradually into surroundings. First Zuko saw a young man dying on a battlefield, he instinctively recognised him as Avatar Neto. He was badly injured, the blue light in his eyes fading until he was completely still, unmoving in a pool of his own blood. The Prince realised that this man had never realised he was the avatar and the thought made his gut rise to his throat.

Then his surroundings changed again so that he was looking at a Water Tribe man of about 60, with greying hair and an unwavering crazed look in his eyes. This was Avatar Malta, Zuko could tell, and he was fighting against Fire Nation soldiers- he was in the middle of a raid. Malta had also never known he was the avatar, there being precious little earth for him to bend in the South Pole, and so was turned insane as the years wore on, slowly becoming the village crackpot. The longer the young firebender watched the scene before him, the more dire it became, ending with Malta getting pelted with arrows, and bleeding out in mere minutes from a dozen different injuries.

Next Zuko was looking at a young girl, no older than thirteen with an arrow tattoo on her forehead like Aang’s, he could have guessed she was Avatar Arianna even without inherently recognising her. She was also in the midst of a battle, fire raining down on the Southern Air Temple as she tried to protect her people. Zuko was forced to watch as she slowly inhaled too much smoke, choking and collapsing on the ground as the Prince tried furiously to reach her, calling for help- but he made no sound and soon Arianna was engulfed in a blanket of fire.

His vision changed again, this time landing him on an active volcano as he watched an old man, Avatar Roku, fight against the lava and ash alongside another man, Zuko recognised him not because of avatar powers but from the tapestries back at the Fire Nation palace, Zuko’s great grandfather: Firelord Sozin. The roaring in his ears made their voices difficult to make out, but their exchange was pretty clear as Sozen left Roku to die, flying away atop his dragon as the avatar died much like Arianna had, choking on ash and smoke.

Zuko expected the next scene to be like the others, full of death and tragedy, caused by the Fire Nation, yet he was suddenly back in his room on Kyoshi Island, covered in sweat and and blinking rapidly. But all was not back to normal, as in front of him sat, cross legged, Avatar Kyoshi in all her glory.

“Hello, Avatar Zuko.” She greeted calmly, her voice strong and booming even without her raising it.

Zuko was a little too dumbfounded to form an intelligent sentence in response so he just sat staring at her. She was taller than he’d expected, easily over 6’8 (probably much taller), and had a stern,
unmoving air about her. It was also impossible for Zuko to guess her age under that face paint, so she could've been 20 or 200.

“...Uhhhhhh…” He breathed unable to command himself to make any other noise.

“I'm here because you've been denying your identity, as well as your destiny.” She said, her expression completely neutral as if she were simply talking about the lovely weather they'd been having recently.

“I… I'm not the avatar.” He protested weakly, finally vocally voicing the sentence he'd been repeating in his head for weeks now.

“Yes you are. The three before you died almost inconsequentially, leaving you with a war to end. You were chosen for a reason, not a reason I can fathom, but a reason all the same.” Kyoshi sighed, finally showing some emotion.

Zuko decided to endlessly spiral into a void of confusion and anger later, being a little preoccupied by what was basically a warrior goddess in front of him.

“Even if I am… You can't really expect me to fight against my own father?” He asked quietly, looking down at his lap as to avoid the crushing gaze Kyoshi had directed at him.

“Yes, I can. Do you know why I'm the past life who's speaking with you? Because they needed to send someone who could ‘knock some sense into you’, figuratively of course, but still. I'm not going to coddle your poor, weeping soul as you cry about how you never wanted this burden- Roku can do that when you meet him, I'm here to tell you that you're the avatar and nothing can change that. If you don't fight, and then kill, your father the world will wither under the Fire Nation’s tyranny and crumble. So either you accept your fate and do something or everything you hold dear will be destroyed.” She threatened, staring him down until the Prince could feel his resolve collapse in on itself.

“What do you want from me now?” Zuko asked, exhaustion lacing his tone, not wanting his ‘destiny’ and choosing not to agree to it.

“Right now I just want you to go to an island not too far from here with a village on it that's being terrorised by a spirit. You'll learn where you need to go from there. The village is called Senlin and should be on your map. But now I must leave, I can only appear for a short period of time and even
then it's only because this is my home island and we're so close to the solstice. Goodbye, Avatar Zuko, and consider telling your friends who you are.” Kyoshi faded from sight after that, glowing blue for several seconds before vanishing from sight and leaving Zuko alone on the floor with some crushing new knowledge about himself.

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At 8pm that night the group were meant to meet at their new room to get ready for dinner with the mayor and the Kyoshi Warriors. Aang was worried as he walked over for a few reasons: 1) Katara had been slightly sharp with him ever since he'd left her and Lee to show the girls some airbending tricks, 2) Sokka had walked by him with a black eye and a defeated expression a few hours ago, and 3) he hadn't seen Lee for hours. Though that last one was quickly rectified.

Aang walked into their room expecting to be the first to arrive since he was pretty early, yet when he opened the door he found Lee kneeling in the middle of the floor on a red mat, staring at nothing and frozen in place. In front him were three smoking candles that had clearly run out of wax a while ago.

“Uh… Lee?” Aang waved his hand in front of the firebender’s face, finally causing him to blink and look at the airbender.

“How long have you been here?” Lee's voice was scarily quiet and hoarse, like he'd been screaming, and the look on his face was far off and unfocused.

“A minute, are you okay? Did you get hit in the head again?” That brought Lee back to reality, causing him to scowl and struggle to his feet.

“No, I did not get hit the head, Aang. I just… It's nothing. What are you doing back here already, I thought you weren't meant to come until 8 to get ready for the mayor's dinner?” Lee cleared his throat and regained some composure, though he was still pretty out of it.

“Umm, it's 8 in ten minutes, Lee. Are you sure you're feeling okay?” Aang asked worriedly, reaching up to check the firebender’s temperature only for him to get his hand swatted away.

“I'm sure. I just… Didn't realise how late it was getting. I'll go get ready.” Lee mumbled, heading over to the bathroom and slamming the door behind him. Within seconds Aang heard the sound of the shower running and decided he should also sort himself out.
A few minutes later Sokka and Katara came through the door, the former excitedly explaining something to Katara who was politely nodding. Sokka had some smudges of white paint on his face and Katara’s hair was a little dishevelled- though still beautiful, from working on the statue. It seemed like she'd waterbended all of the paint off of her.

“So then Suki showed me how to do a triple-spin-kick! I only fell over 16 times before I sort of figured it out!” Sokka bragged happily, rubbing some more of the makeup off with his sleeve.

“That's great, Sokka.” Smiled Katara, probably just glad her brother had gotten past his sexist attitude. “Hey, Aang, is Lee in the bathroom?”

“Yes, but he's been acting really weird, and—” Aang began before the water was cut off abruptly and Lee walked out with his dark hair sopping wet and falling in his face, and dressed in some surprisingly fancy Fire Nation clothes, worthy of royalty even.

“Hi. I didn't realise you were back already, the bathroom's free.” He pointed out before crouching down and clearing up the candles he'd left on the floor. Sokka and Katara just shrugged, before Sokka went into the bathroom to freshen up as well.

“Thanks for telling me you were leaving the statue painting to me, by the way.” Snapped Katara sarcastically to which Lee flinched slightly but didn't turn back towards her.

“Sorry, Katara, but I promise you I would have much rather been painting a statue.” He said darkly, stowing the candles away and beginning to wash a tea set he’d also left out, emptying what must have been almost a dozen cups of cold tea down the drain.

He didn't speak after that so Aang chose not to bring up the firebender’s wellbeing to Sokka and Katara until later, after dinner at least.

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Dinner with the mayor went as was expected, though it ran on for longer than Aang had thought so he'd conveniently forgotten to check Lee's health afterwards and the next morning he was similarly occupied with several girls praising his incredible airbending. Katara, however, seemed especially moody and was uninterested in what Aang was doing, instead opting to gather supplies whilst the
Sokka was training with Suki again, and seemed happy to do so. They had gotten closer, which Aang thought was sweet but did bring up some unpleasant feelings in regards to his current relationship with Katara. Lee was just wandering around the island and moping, which was his forte so the airbender figured it must be enjoyable for him. And Aang himself was going to do the most fun, daring thing of all: he would ride the Unagi, the sea monster that had attacked him yesterday. But first, he wanted to get Katara to watch.

“No. I’m busy too busy to watch you get yourself killed, Aang.” She replied harshly when he asked, gathering apples in a small sack.

“I won’t get hurt! It’ll just be a fete of incredible courage!” He promised, trying to pull Katara to the coast by her arm but she shook him off.

“I’m still too busy, Aang. We can’t stay here forever, and no one here has any information about Avatar Neto, so we should be leaving soon. And we need supplies, so if you’ll excuse me.” Katara stalked off grumpily after that, making Aang wonder for a second if she could be jealous of all the attention he was giving to the other girls, before deciding Katara couldn’t possibly think Aang would ever like another girl as much as he liked her.

Zuko was walking around the edge of the island for the third time that day, still trying to swallow the knowledge that he was the avatar. Of course, he’d been aware before, he’d just not acknowledged it and he certainly hadn’t accepted it. But it was a little difficult to deny who he was now his past life had shoved it in his face and basically told him to get a grip. Yet he had no grip, he actually felt like he was constantly falling into an abyss of turbulent emotions, which was putting the Prince a little (a lot) on edge.

It was on his third walk around that he saw Aang in the water once again, though this time he was ignoring the Great Koi and actually seemed to be waiting for the… Unagi. Zuko literally hit himself in the head and rushed up to the end of the beach, recycling his trick from the day before and writing a message out of fire: GET BACK HERE, YOU STUPID KID! Unfortunately, Aang paid no mind to his warning and instead just waved at him happily.

But the smile was quickly washed off of his face as the water around him began to churn, a black fin appearing from the depths and circling him. There was a cheer from the crowd of onlookers, but
Zuko knew Aang wouldn’t be able to deal with this monster on his own. Fortunately, Katara chose that moment to rush into the beach, stopping right next Zuko and looking fearfully at the Unagi.

“He’s in the water, getting surrounded by that monster, isn’t he?” She asked, her voice simultaneously concerned and angry.

“Yes.” Zuko replied simply, ready for whatever orders she was sure to give him.

Katara sighed and grabbed the firebender’s arm, dragging him into the water before she began swimming, Zuko trying to keep up. But her waterbending gave her an unfair advantage so she was at the Unagi’s side long before him, and used her bending to get its attention. The firebender had to admit she'd vastly improved ever since she'd stolen that scroll. She managed to draw it away from a terrified Aang, but not before the Unagi managed to swipe at the airbender and push him underwater. Zuko dived in after him, letting Katara deal with the monster alone, and swam deep into the sea until he finally spotted Aang, unconscious and drowning. The Prince dragged him back to shore, only to place him behind a rock and realise he wasn't breathing.

Zuko began to panic, trying to remember how to help someone who's got water in their lungs. The answer struck him in the form of Katara hitting the Unagi with double water whips before she propelled herself onto its head: waterbending. Zuko positioned himself correctly and tried to mimic what he'd been doing back in the woods before those pirates had attacked him. It felt almost impossible without it being midnight on a full moon, but he managed some messy and exhausting waterbending, pulling the water out of Aang’s lungs so that the kid could once again breath. As soon as Aang was no longer dying, the water he'd been bending dropped as though he'd only been able to control it because Aang was in trouble, which he was fine with since a moment later Katara rushed towards them (seemingly having not seen what Zuko had done) and enveloped Aang’s still barely conscious form in a hug.

Zuko decided to leave the two of them be.

“We are sorry to leave, but we must continue travelling so that we might find Avatar Neto. Goodbye!” Katara waved at the town before climbing on board Appa where Zuko was already waiting, having packed their stuff back up and being more than ready to leave Kyoshi Island.

“We hope to visit again soon, maybe with the avatar next time!” Zuko almost chuckled at the irony in Aang’s words, since, being the avatar, he'd been there this time too. He hated being the avatar,
don’t get that wrong, but he figured he might as well enjoy the one amusing aspect: everybody's cluelessness.

“Bye!” Said Sokka, smiling particularly at Suki who quickly squeezed him in a hug and kissed him on the cheek, making the Water Tribe boy blush and causing a slight, uncomfortable feeling to rush through Zuko mind that he swatted away quickly.

And with that they flew away. Zuko waiting for them to be high in the sky before he mentioned how they would need to go to Senlin.

Chapter End Notes

Hey! A new chapter, are you proud?

Technically I'm late since it's Saturday in England and I'm a dumbass, forgetful bitch, but, ah well.

Hope you enjoy, comments and kudos are VERY appreciated :’))
“Senlin?” Asked Katara with a quizzical look, clearly unsure as to why Lee would want to go to such a seemingly insignificant town- Aang felt the same.

“Yeah, it’s supposed to have spiritual, uh, stuff going on. And the avatar is supposed to be the bridge between our world and the spirit world, right?” Said Lee, not meeting Katara’s gaze.

Aang was confused about their course of action after Lee’s suggestion, since they'd been travelling together for almost a month now and he had not betrayed them, but he also hadn’t really proved he could be trustworthy other than not killing them in their sleep. The airbender already trusted him because of a deep, spiritual feeling he had, but he figured Katara and Sokka might still be apprehensive to go a bit out of their way just to go to a mysterious, apparently haunted, island. Yet, the boy was pleasantly surprised.

“Okay then, spirits, avatar- sounds legit. According to the map, it should be just a little to the west from here.” Sokka nodded at Lee, who seemed startled that Sokka was on board with his plan so easily.

“... Uh, yeah.” Lee agreed, actually looking… A little disappointed? Why would he be sad that they trusted him enough to travel to a scary island with him? “Are you sure? It’s a bit out of our way and it’s kind of a weak lead…”

“We trust you, and if it’s a bust we're not going to blame you; so far this entire trip has been one failure after another.” Comforted Katara with a kind smile, patting Lee’s shoulder, before climbing up onto Appa’s head to steer.

About 2 hours later a small island came into view, not at all like Kyoshi, it was mostly wildlife and had a tiny section lit up. Aang assumed that that section was the village of Senlin, though it looked pretty ramshackle like it had been destroyed and rebuilt several times, and asked Katara to land a little outside of it since something felt… Off about the woods. Sure enough, when they landed, Aang stepped out and realised that a large chunk of what had been a forest was now in splinters, completely destroyed and charred down to nothing. No wonder the spirits were restless here; their home had been destroyed!

“No…” Aang basically whispered, standing on the clearing and surveying the atrocity that had
befallen these woods. “Who would do this?!”

“Fire Nation.” Sokka said, pointing at the burns littering the ground and the ash covering almost the entire clearing.

Aang felt terrible. The avatar would have stopped this, Arianna would have stopped this but he’d run off and left her to die- unknowingly but still. And now he couldn't even find the new avatar to guide, the person who was supposed to deal with this kind of stuff. Because now this forest was gone forever, and there was nothing he could do about it.

“Aang, look!” Katara gestured towards something on the ground that Aang had just assumed to be broken chunks of trees, but on closer inspection they were acorns. “They're everywhere, so one day this forest will grow back, okay?”

“Okay.” the airbender sniffled, not even realising he'd been crying until the the tears reached his chin. He still didn't feel good about it but he was a little more hopeful.

Meanwhile Lee look extremely uncomfortable, guilty even. Aang assumed it was because his nation had been the one to destroy the forest, but there was some deeper issue that Aang couldn't diagnose. He never had gotten round to asking the firebender what had been up with him on Kyoshi, which he was now feeling guilty about. If something was bothering Lee Aang should be there to help him in any way he was able.

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Zuko and his three companions entered Senlin with as little ruckus as possible, not wanting to antagonise the villagers. Well, the firebender would have been more than happy to make them enemies if it meant they got to leave earlier, but he chose not to tell his group that since he had technically been the one to suggest they come here. Though he actually wasn't the one to suggest it originally, that had been Kyoshi, and the only reason he even brought it up with his group was because he was completely terrified of his past life and didn't want to enrage her. But, again, he didn't tell the others that since they'd either think he was crazy or figure out he was that avatar.

“Who goes there?!?” Called a villager frightfully, he was holding a lit torch despite the sun only just setting. The man was of only around thirty but he looked closer to fifty with his greying hair and tired expression.
“Uh.. Hi! I'm Aang, an airbender, and-” Aang began as cheerily as he could manage before he got abruptly cut off.

“An airbender?! Really? Are you the avatar?” Asked the man hopefully, suddenly looking 10 years younger.

“Um, no, sorry.” Aang apologised, though he seemed reluctant to from how pleading the man's eyes had become.

“Oh… I just thought… You see, our village is being terrorised by an angry spirit: Hei Bai, ever since the Fire Nation destroyed the forest. Each night Hei Bai takes someone, seven have been captured so far and if you were the avatar perhaps you'd be able to help us before the Winter Solstice.” He explained, and Zuko pitied him but was not about to charge an angry spirit- avatar or not.

“Well… I can still help you! I'm very spiritually gifted, maybe I can reason with Hei Bai. But what happens on the Winter Solstice?” Aang offered, and Zuko was about ready to start smoking with how annoyingly open to danger Aang was- he had a feeling he'd be forced to do some avatar stuff to save him.

“The Winter Solstice is the night where the veil between the spirit world and our world becomes so blurred that it disappears. It's a couple of days away but if it happens and Hei Bai is still at large… Our little town won't stand a chance. Do you really think you can stop him?” The man explained, beginning to lead the four to the center of the village. Zuko, who was still dressed in his Fire Nation clothes since he figured he now had bigger problems than ‘ah, scary firebender!’, was raising a few eyebrows but most of the people seemed too preoccupied with thought of a bloodthirsty spirit kidnapping them to worry about one little firebender.

“Yes. I think I can.” Aang gulped slightly and Katara and Sokka shared a look that showed how clearly not okay with Aang’s decision to ‘reason’ with a spirit they were, but neither said anything.

Zuko, Katara and Sokka were inside a small hut whilst Aang stood outside, waiting for Hei Bai to show up. It was now dark outside and the sun had set a few minutes ago, so tension was high.

“I'm not sure if he can do this.” Admitted Katara, staring at the airbender worriedly.
“He’s just a kid.” Agreed Sokka, turning Zuko’s guilt for letting Aang do this alone from a 5 to a 9.

“Yeah, but he's smart, he's powerful. He can do this.” Zuko was trying to convince himself more that the others as he too watched Aang wait for the spirit.

Almost an hour later Zuko had begun to think that Hei Bai wouldn't show up at all, that there was no need to worry. But then a massive, six legged, spirit with completely black and white skin emerged from the remaining forest, straight towards Aang. It was huge- bigger than the houses around it, and its scream, it was awful. A sonic blast that tore apart buildings and left the village as rubble. Hei Bai was slowly making its way towards Aang who was yelling for it to calm down and was failing miserably. Then the spirit began grabbing at the young airbender who, to his credit, did manage to avoid his blows, until he was caught by surprise and trapped in one of Hei Bai’s hand/claw things.

“He can't do this.” Zuko admitted, pushing Sokka (who seemed about to do exactly what he was planning to but without avatar powers) out of the way and running straight at the spirit.

The Prince blasted some fire at Hei Bai but only annoyed it, causing him to swipe Zuko away before heading into the dark, definitely haunted, forest. Predictably, Zuko ran after it, despite the calls from Katara and Sokka to not do something so stupid. He followed it for as long as possible, what felt like hours, before collapsing from exhaustion at the bottom of a wooden bear statue.

The next morning Sokka had been planning on going in after Aang and Lee, until Katara grabbed his ear painfully and yelled at him not to be such an idiot.

“I'm just as worried as you are! But getting ourselves captured isn't going to help anyone. Maybe Aang can still reason with Hei Bai?” She suggested, sat a short distance outside of the forest just in case Aang or Lee miraculously walked out.

“What if he can't, Katara?” They'll be trapped in the spirit world forever, and tonight someone else will get taken and tomorrow it'll be the solstice and we'll all get captured!” Sokka yelled at his sister, he too was just outside of the forest but he was standing as if about to charge into the confines of the trees and challenge thirty spirits.

But he stopped in his shouting when he noticed the tears leaking from Katara’s blue eyes,
immediately feeling terrible and crouching down to put his arm around her.

“I don't know what to do, Sokka! They're gone and I can't do anything to help them.” She wept, causing her brother to well up a little too.

“It's okay, we'll… Figure something out…” Sokka silently prayed that Aang and Lee were okay.

—

Zuko woke up feeling a little strange but otherwise healthy, in the middle of a forest. He remembered the events of the previous night and mentally hit himself for allowing himself to pass out. Usually he could go for ages without sleep, so what was up with him now? Deciding to figure that out later, he headed deeper into the forest to find Aang. Despite it being day, the trees made the forest shadowy and dark, forcing Zuko to firebend himself a torch- but it didn't work. He tried again, still no fire. The Prince looked down at his hands worriedly before turning back to the clearing he'd woken up in; planning to practice some katas to see if he managed to produce even the smallest flame, but he was met with a jarring sight. He could see his own body sat below the bear statue, in a sort of trance, which Zuko guessed could only mean one thing- he was in the spirit world.

He mentally cursed Kyoshi before realising no one could hear him and doing it out loud. Then he just had the few small issues of having no idea how to re enter his body, needing to save Aang and not being able to bend. At this point he could seriously do with a plan from Sokka, or a water whip from Katara or an optimistic outlook on his situation from the airbender he was currently having to save. Actually, he'd probably even settle for a book entitled ‘A Guide to the Spirit World’.

Fortunately for him, that book arrived in the form of a massive, blue, glowing dragon landing right in front of him and causing him to make an undignified squeak of fear. He, for some reason he still wasn't aware of even though he'd had all those flashbacks on Kyoshi, instinctively knew the dragon to belong to Avatar Roku. Having very few options, Zuko gave into what the dragon seemed to be signalling and climbed onto its back, allowing it to take off and being pretty shocked by how much faster than Appa it was.

The presence of a dragon also incited guilt and shame in him, the dragons now being extinct mainly due to his family: Sozin starting the trend of hunting them and his uncle killing the last one years before he was born. And yet here he was, riding one to an unknown location.

They travelled across the sea until they reached an island and the dragon flew straight into a temple (both it and Zuko easily phasing through the walls) until they were in a Fire Sage chamber. The dial
The light that had been travelling across the wall hit the statue of Roku in the middle of the room. Then his dragon nodded at Zuko and curled up next to his master’s statue’s feet.

“... Wait... You want me to go to a Fire Nation temple?! I can't do that! I've been banished, it's bad enough being a traitor because of something I can't control but to choose to betray my father?! I would never.” Zuko ranted angrily, pacing up and down the chamber. The dragon only growled and looked up at its master’s statue, nodding slightly, before crawling back over to Zuko.

The Prince took this as a sign to get back on its back and they flew back to Senlin, and back to Zuko’s body- still sat at the bottom of the bear statue.

He felt more comfortable in his own body but was still shook up from his spirit adventures, so when he noticed the setting sun all he really wanted to do was curl up and sleep. Yet he pushed forward and ran back to the edge of the forest, almost getting there before Hei Bai noticed him. The two were just on the edge of the forest, and Hei Bai was probably visible to the villagers but Zuko was still hidden behind some trees. The spirit looked ready to tear the Prince apart, which Zuko wasn't on board with, so he tried desperately to think of how Aang would solve this problem, figuring the young airbender was more equipped to spirit matters.

“Wait, you're mad that your forest was destroyed? Well, it's not gone forever. The kid you kidnapped, Aang, he was upset too... I was a bit sad as well, my people burnt it down and this stupid avatar empathy for plants and stuff has made me soft I think... But it's not gone forever, there are acorns everywhere so one day it will grow back, I promise. Okay?” Zuko prayed that he wouldn't get eaten, but his words actually seemed to calm the spirit, and Hei Bai transformed into a docile, though very large, panda who slowly plodded into the village.

This time Hei Bai didn't attack anybody, instead some bamboo shimmered into existence behind it and the captured villagers, as well as Aang, began to climb out. Wanting to seem like a victim, Zuko went up behind the bamboo and then climbed through it too, so it appeared as though he'd been trapped with the rest of them. Then Hei Bai walked off and Zuko got trapped in a surprising hug by Sokka.

“You didn't die!” He congratulated, grabbing onto Katara (who was hugging Aang) and pulling the both of them in so it became a group hug. Zuko carefully unpeeled Sokka’s arms from around him and offered the three a nervous smile. Aang, however, had a completely genuine smile and seemed about to burst with excitement.

“Guess what! Whilst I was in the spirit world I had this strange vision... But the important part is a dragon appeared and took me to this avatar temple, I think it was built in honour of Roku since he had a statue there. I think we're meant to visit it! On the solstice.” Aang explained, and Zuko tried
not to imagine all of the awful ways he could kill his past lives for putting him through this.

“You got a real message? Incredible!” Praised Katara with a bright smile, bringing Aang in for another hug.

“There is one little thing though… The temple is in the Fire Nation…” Aang admitted quietly, and the Water Tribe siblings gasped whilst Zuko just sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose.

—

Iroh fidgeted with his Lotus Pai Cho piece as he walked around the Earth Kingdom market. He was still trying to find his nephew, and had so far had little progress, until he saw a poster on a tree.

It had clearly not been issued by the Earth Kingdom authorities, but it was there all the same. It had a picture of Zuko, a decent likeness and his unmistakable scar that burnt an angry welt of anger on Iroh’s mind, though the description didn't really fit: Part of a band of robbers, originating from the Earth Kingdom and a non-bender. Skilled with swords and travelling with three others.

On the tree there were three other posters surrounding Zuko’s, two were apparently Water Tribe and one was a child wearing a hat, a suspected airbender. Iroh wasn’t sure what to think, but he tore the posters down and lit them aflame, now knowing he was at least on the right track.

Chapter End Notes

Hello! New chapter, are you proud?

It's 2am currently and I forgot to post this earlier but... Ah well.

Comments and kudos are the dual keys to my heart, and might just help levitate my writer's block for chapter 26 ;))
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I really don’t think we should be doing this, Aang.” Said Zuko for the twentieth time as they continued travelling west towards the Fire Sage Temple.

“But a dragon told me to come here on the Solstice.” Argued Aang, not even looking back at Zuko at this point, too busy steering.

“Yes, did a dragon send you a message, Lee?” Asked Katara sarcastically, Sokka might have said something similar but he was fast asleep and snoring in his sleeping bag.

Zuko wished he could argue that ‘yes, a dragon did send me a message!’ but technically that message had been the same as Aang’s and he’d chosen to ignore it, opting to not betray his father. Which left him with no choice other than going to the Fire Nation, unless he was willing to throw himself off Appa before they got there, of course. Which he had been considering, but had decided not to since his corpse would probably get washed up on a Fire Nation shore (which was just his luck) or he might not even get to hit the water's surface; Aang would probably swoop down with Appa to save him. So the firebender was screwed.

“Look, I just have a bad feeling okay… Instincts?” He tried, still wanting Aang to turn Appa around so they could head back to the Earth Kingdom.

“Instincts? You're pulling a Sokka? What's made you so desperate?” Katara raised her eyebrow at the nervous firebender, who looked at his shoes shamefully.

Zuko decided maybe it was time to try a half truth, as painful as it was to admit, if he wanted to get out of going to the Fire Nation.

“I was banished, okay? Going to the Fire Nation would make me a fully fledged criminal and fugitive from my country.” He admitted, not looking at his companions but instead fiddling with a loose bit of string hanging off of his red shirt.

“… Oh… But won’t chasing after the avatar with us do the same thing?” Asked Katara, and damn Zuko hadn't considered that she might think of that.
“... Yes, but they don't know that I'm doing that.” The Prince responded, proud he'd thought of something so quickly but realising there was little chance he'd be able to get out of going to the Fire Nation at this point.

“Well don't worry then! We'll make sure they don't realise you came back.” Aang promised happily from Appa’s head, in a seemingly even cheerier mood than usual after his run in with Roku’s dragon in the Spirit World. He was probably just glad to have a strong lead from a source that actually had a good chance of knowing the avatar, or at least their whereabouts.

“Unm, Aang, that might be an issue... Yip yip!” Katara yelled, causing Appa to suddenly ascend even higher into the clouds (going completely out of sight), whilst pointing at a line of of Fire Navy ships that curved a barrage in the sea. Unfortunately Zuko recognised who controlled those specific ships.

“They belong to Commander Zhao! Can we please turn around?!” He asked one last time, really hating Zhao and in no rush to get him on their trail.

“Who's Commander Vow? And we're too close to turn back now!” Aang said, keeping on going through the clouds. Luckily Zhao’s ships didn't seem to have noticed them yet, but Zuko really didn't feel like tempting fate.

“It's ‘Zhao’ and he's not a very nice person! He's also really high up in the Fire Nation Military.” Zuko explained quickly, noticing the commotion had also woken up Sokka.

What the Prince failed to mention was his many run ins with Zhao, and the real reason that he didn't want to bump into him in the Fire Nation: he'd immediately reveal his identity as royalty. But what information he did give managed to scare the others to an amount which they'd also be apprehensive to meet the guy.

“Okay, so what's our plan?” Katara questioned, before everyone looked to a still considerably bleary-eyed Sokka, who blinked at them in confusion.

“Hey! I only just woke up, why do I have to think of a plan?” He asked tiredly, having taken offense at everyone's expectations of him.

“Because you're the plan-guy, now think of something!” Ordered Katara, who frequently kept
looking over the side of Appa’s saddle to keep an eye on Zhao’s ships- Zuko was doing the same.

“Uh, fine, okay, we should probably just keep going through the clouds until we're out of seeing distance of those ships, and then we'll… Think of a way to sneak through that temple place Aang was talking about earlier.” Sokka’s plan was sure to get them all captured but, without any other ideas, Zuko decided it was better than nothing.

—

10 minutes after they'd flown over Zhao's ships Sokka gave them the all clear to descend out of the clouds, since they were out of eyeshot. And if Sokka couldn't see them, Zuko doubted they'd be able to see Appa.

But the firebender was too busy preparing for when they were in the temple to worry about Zhao for any longer. He couldn't wear his blue spirit mask without revealing that he'd been the one talking to Aang at the South Pole (and then he’d have to explain why he was trying to steal a waterbending scroll despite being a firebender), so he would have to settle for just wearing his cloak. Since he didn't get to sixteen before he was banished, it was also doubtful the Fire Sages would recognise him on sight (since sixteen was when the crown prince began taking private lessons about their country’s history with the Fire Sages) but his scar might raise some suspicion to who he was. Unfortunately, that couldn't be helped.

Aang, Katara and Sokka were all planning on just wearing their own clothes, hopeful that they’d manage to avoid all threats to their safety- Zuko wished he could admire their optimism yet instead he could only view it as stupidity. At least Aang had agreed to wear a hat to cover up his arrow, but even getting him to agree to that had been a chore. Katara equipped herself with several pouches of water and Sokka had both his club and his boomerang at his side, and so they had both decided they were ready. The Prince doubted Aang had any armour of any kind in Appa's saddle bags so he figured they'd have to manage without that. In conclusion, they were severely under equipped and about to get arrested.

“Okay, the temple is in sight.” Sokka pointed to a building in the distance, and surely enough it was identical to the one Roku’s dragon had taken him to, and Aang obviously thought so too.

“That's it! What do think we'll find there?! A clue to Avatar Neto’s whereabouts? Or maybe he's there waiting for us! What if Avatar Roku gives us some guidance?” Aang rambled excitedly, leaning so far over Appa's head that Zuko was half convinced he'd fall off and have to airbend himself back to safety.
“There's only one way to find out.” Katara said nervously, wiping her brow as she peered at the temple.

A few of Zhao's soldiers were also positioned on the outskirts of the temple, worrying Zuko as to where Zhao himself was hiding, but they had a blind spot in their defences that Appa managed fly through unnoticed. He then landed on the roof of the temple slightly behind a chunk if wall so that he was out of sight and Aang, Katara, Sokka and Zuko himself all jumped off of the bison’s back, Momo in tow, and headed towards the entrance by climbing down the side of the building, figuring it would be easier to sneak through on foot than it would be if they were flying around on a fluffy monster that was meant to be extinct.

“Okay, there are two entrances. We want the one with only two guards.” Whispered Sokka as they scaled the building, Zuko was climbing down down first and saw the doors the Water Tribe boy had mentioned.

The Prince almost laughed at how easy it was, he dropped to the floor silently, alerting nobody to his presence, and flicked up his hood. He unsheathed his swords as quietly as possible and snuck up behind the two guards who were meant to be protecting the door. They were a man and a woman, who were arguing about something, and Zuko simultaneously knocked the both of them out by hitting their heads together with as much force as he could muster. They both dropped to the floor without so much as a whimper and before the others had even finished getting down the side of the building, he'd managed to gag and bind both guards, shoving them behind a painfully thorny looking bush.

“Woah, you're good at this.” Breathed Sokka, impressed as Zuko gestured for them to go in before him. Zuko only nodded in response but, as Sokka would have been able to tell if the temple had had better lighting, Zuko did blush at the praise though he mentally kicked himself for it.

Despite having let the others go in front of him, the firebender still felt compelled to push to the lead since they seemed completely clueless when it came to stealth. Aang was light on his feet, sure, but his breathing was loud and he kept whispering and giggling to Katara. Said girl was staying mostly quiet and her footsteps, though noticeable, could have been worse, but her real issue was the sound of her water in the pouches at either of her sides was easily recognisable as out of place in a Fire Temple. And even though Sokka was good at spotting guards before they spotted them, his footsteps were so loud Zuko was considering carrying him just so the slightly older teen didn't draw all the soldiers to their location. So Zuko went first, either guiding them past sages and guards or knocking out said people before they noticed them.

That was, until, one sage snuck up on them whilst Zuko was busy dealing with a couple of firebenders and caught Katara’s attention.
“Wait! I'm on your side.” He claimed quietly, arms raised above his head. “I am Fire Sage Kaja. Why are you here?”

The four looked at each other and, even though Zuko was mentally sending them the message ‘let's knock him out and tie him up like the others’, the rest of his group seemed to kind of trust him. So Zuko held his tongue and just tried to keep his scar hidden, which wasn't too hard thanks to the shadows, his cloak and his trend of naturally trying to face people with his unscarred side.

“... Why would you help us..?” Asked Katara, tilting her head and keeping her voice soft.

“I assume you are allies of the avatar before the Fire Nation? So am I, the Fire Sages were always meant to be. So I will help you in any way I can.” Kaja responded, his words low as he gestured for the four to follow him.

“We are, we need to go to the chamber with Roku’s statue. We got a message… It's a long story, but we're hoping for some guidance on the location of the current avatar.” Aang explained, his voice louder than Zuko would have liked but not too bad.

“I can take you there. I am glad to see another Fire Nation citizen is also on the avatar's side.” It took Zuko a second to realise Kaja was talking to him, and when he did he just pulled his hood down lower and grunted.

They kept walking for a few minutes, Zuko occasionally stepping out of the shadows to fight guards, until they came to the chamber door. It was beautifully carved and crafted, and reminded Zuko of the one at the Southern Air Temple that had to be opened with airbending. Only this one had 5 little hatches and seemed more heavy duty, as well as being red and gold in colour. All five of them stood staring at the door for a few moments, probably all thinking of different ways to open it.

“This door takes five firebenders or a fully realised avatar to open it.” Explained Sage Kaja with a sigh.

“Well, we only have two firebenders and no avatar. Unless…” Sokka got an idea and began grinning wildly, searching through his pack.

“Uh, Sokka, what are you doing?” Asked Aang, trying to see what Sokka was working on but failing until Sokka brandished five small bags.
“They're flammable! If we set them off all at once they should explode, just like firebending, and open the door.” Sokka theorised, placing a bag in each of the hatches before gesturing at Zuko.

The Prince was about to set them all alight, before Kaja turned at the wrong moment and noticed his scar. The Sage's eyes widening in shock, Zuko did the one thing he could think of to protect his identity and shoved Kaja against the wall.

“That scar-” The Fire Sage began, getting interrupted by being slammed into a wall and the group’s gasps of shock.

“This scar is none of your business. A training accident, nothing more, got it?!” Zuko snarled quietly before releasing the sage and immediately firing at the door. His group’s budding questions were immediately blown away by the five subsequent explosions and the ringing of alarms throughout the temple.

“It didn't work! But why?! It looked just as powerful as firebending.” Said Sokka quietly, looking disappointed by his plan’s failure.

“... You're right! It does look just as powerful as firebending. Sokka, you're a genius!” Katara smiled excitedly, praising her brother and leaving the other four confused.

“Has the definition of genius changed in the last 100 years? Because Sokka’s plan didn't work.” Asked Aang hurriedly, the guards’ footsteps sounding louder by the second.

“No, but it looks like it did!” She explained briefly, but Sokka seemed to understand his sister.

“I get it! We hide and Sage Kaja says we got into the chamber, then the rest of the sages open it to get us out and we go in. Momo can even crawl under the door and make it look like we are moving around in there with his shadows!” Sokka explained the plan before grabbing Zuko (the non-bender had been awfully grabby recently, the firebender noticed) and rushing behind a column.

Katara did the same with Aang and, seemingly obeying Sokka, Momo slipped beneath the chamber's door. Zuko silently hoped that by the time they got in there the sun would've already set, and Zuko wouldn't have to experience whatever Roku had in store for him. A few moments after they'd hidden, several guards and four other sages appeared.
“Come quick! The intruders have gotten into Roku's chamber!” Lied Kaja with impressive genuity.

“But how?! Why?!” Asked one sage worriedly, beginning to inspect the door.

“I don't know! But look, the scorch marks on the hatches and-” Kaja motioned to Momo’s shadow, to which the others gasped and got into position.

“We'll capture them for Commander Zhao, he should arrive soon.” The name Zhao sent a shiver of fear through Zuko, the icy chills as deep as the marrow of his bones, but he didn't have time to wallow in his worry as soon the sages had opened the door.

The four that weren't Kaja gasped in shock, their confusion buying the Prince and the others time to charge past them, Aang pushing them back with his airbending and Katara doing the same with her waterbending, and they dove straight into the chamber, the doors slamming shut immediately after they'd gotten in. So then the four sat before Roku's statue, and just as he looked up Zuko saw the light hit the past avatar’s chest, and Zuko cursed the spirits that they couldn't have been just a little bit later. On the bright side, judging by the commotion outside it seemed the sages were unable to open the chamber back up, so at least they were safe for a while.

“Umm, the light is on Roku but nothing’s happening. Now that I think about it, what should be happening?” Sokka pointed out, staring at the statue in confusion.

“I don't know what's supposed to happen, actually, but why don't we look around to see if there's any hidden clues?” Suggested Aang sheepishly before checking around the base of the statue.

The rest followed suit, Zuko included, taking their own little piece of the room. Katara and Sokka checked around the entrance so Zuko made his way over to the back of the chamber, behind Roku's statue, so he was facing away from the rest of the group. He scanned the wall for a few moments, admiring the lovely design, before he felt a warmth wash against his spine and he was left leaning against the wall as to not fall over from the sudden shock. The firebender turned around, expecting to see the chamber but now with Roku's ghost, only to be presented with his father's throne room.

Zuko felt pure terror grip his heart and yank it out of his body, he was completely frozen and unable to move… Until he felt a gentle hand on his shoulder. The touch freaked him out to the point where he managed to regain some sense and he grabbed the person’s wrist and twisted, expecting to break it. Instead after a certain amount of pressure it was like the hand just disappeared and Zuko, who was already on the verge of hyperventilating, backed away in shock, and would’ve hit the wall of Roku's chamber had that not also disappeared. The Prince turned again and saw whose hand had been on his shoulder: Avatar Roku's.
“Hello, Avatar Zuko.” He greeted calmly, and Zuko had to repress a sigh of relief at it not being his father- because he should rather see his father than this guy, shouldn't he?

“Why did your dragon tell me to come here? And what is this place, I doubt you teleported me to my father's throne room” Asked Zuko tiredly, completely done with being the avatar and especially done with people addressing him as such.

“Fang was just guiding you here so that I might have an audience with you. This vision, by the way, is completely in your head and for your friends nothing has changed- I'm not sure why we're here exactly, I would've thought you would perceive it as somewhere nice, your place of longing perhaps. But I don't know why you'd want to be here; it clearly terrifies you.” Roku pondered thoughtfully for a few moments whilst Zuko stewed angrily in silence.

“You don't know anything about me.” He replied snappily, but there was a lot of different emotions in the Prince’s tone that he decided not to think about.

“I do, Avatar Zuko-” He began, his voice comforting but filled with pity.

“Don't call me that! Prince Zuko is fine, or just Zuko, or even Lee… Just not that.” Zuko snarled at the avatar and turned away, vowing that he wouldn't speak again until Roku disappeared.

“You can't deny who you are, Zuko. You're a powerful avatar and, most unfortunately for you, have been cursed by your predecessors failures, mine included, and must now end a one hundred year war.” Said Roku, his words dripping with regret and sympathy, that Zuko did his best to ignore.

“I'm not going to betray my father.” He responded finally, unable to stay quiet and just wanting his conversation with Roku to end as quickly as possible.

“Your mere existence is treachery to your nation by your father's logic. For the world to have balance you'll need to let go of your attachment to him, and embrace new bonds you've formed and old ones too. Your relationships with your friends, your bond with your uncle, your… Mother.” Roku explained, seemingly unjarred by Zuko’s hostility.

“Don't. Mention. Her. And my being… Me isn't my fault, choosing to fight my father would be. It's different.” Argued Zuko, he was becoming increasingly annoyed by Roku and was contemplating throwing a fireball at him.
“I don’t think you’re ready. But you have until the end of Summer to get there, that’s when Sozen’s comet will arrive and the Fire Nation will win the war. Do you really want that?” Asked Roku, now much sterner than before.

Zuko thought about it. Did he want the Fire Nation to win? He wanted his country to be safe, but he’d seen some of the people his nation had hurt and felt sympathy for them. He had watched his great grandfather kill the man in front of him and then commit genocide against a bunch of peaceful airbenders. He was aware of how the raids tore apart families and took lives. He’d even seen scenes from battlefields. The war hadn’t only hurt the rest of the world, it had hurt him too, his cousin had died, his mother had left and he’d been shunned by most the world because of his position in the Fire Nation. The Prince realised that he actually didn’t want the war, but his loyalty to his father was stronger than that want, and sure, maybe he didn’t like how the Fire Nation were taking over- but that didn’t matter. What mattered was respecting his father and his nation’s plans.

“You have much to think about, and I think you’ll make the right choice in the end. But for now, you will need help getting out of my chamber. I can offer my assistance… If you will accept?” Offered Roku, walking around so that Zuko was facing him.

“They’re going to know about… Me, aren’t they?” Asked Zuko sadly, feeling defeated and even more tired than usual.

“Yes. Kyoshi did recommend that you tell them the truth. But no one else should find out that you’re the avatar, not yet. And Zuko, if you ever need guidance I am always here, okay?” Zuko looked up at the old avatar and nodded, then everything went dark.

—

Aang couldn’t find any sort of clue and soon the light would move off of Roku, meaning they’d miss their chance. The airbender just couldn’t understand what had gone wrong; they’d followed the dragon’s instructions and yet nothing had happened, they’d gained no new information and their trip to the Fire Nation had been a complete failure- just like the rest of their journey so far. Aang was even considering just giving up and taking Katara straight to the North Pole, making no stops for the avatar, and then staying there for the rest of his life. But Aang pushed that idea out if his mind, not wanting to let Arianna, or his current friends, down.

“Uh, guys, Lee hasn’t moved in a while.” Sokka pointed out, motioning to the firebender who’d been standing stationary, staring at the back wall for a few minutes now, which did strike Aang as odd.
“Lee?” Called Aang when the firebender didn't respond to Sokka himself, but Lee still didn't reply.

Getting worried, the airbender walked over to his friend and tapped the back of his shoulder, hoping he'd turn around and tell him to get off. Yet Lee remained still and silent, even his breathing shallow and barely audible. His skin was also so warm Aang was beginning to think he had a fever. Too concerned to care about Lee's boundaries anymore, Aang gripped his shoulder and forcefully turned his body so that he was facing him and–

And…

His eyes… They were blue. Not just blue but glowing, light emanating from his eye sockets as the firebender stared blankly into the distance, not even blinking.

“His eyes… They're blue…” Aang trailed off, but Sokka and Katara (who were still on the other side of the room) heard him.

“What?! No, Lee's eyes are gold.” Corrected Sokka, moving over to where Aang was staring in shock at Lee, before squealing and jumping back himself upon realising their friend's eyes really were blue, and glowing.

“Wha- Ah?!” Katara also gasped when she came over, visibly paling at the sight.

They stared for a short while before Sokka tentatively waved his hand in front of Lee's newly sky blue eyes, gaining no response before Katara quickly swatted him away. The firebender stayed motionless until Aang spoke.

“He's the avatar.” Aang said quietly, completely dumbfounded.

“What about Avatar Neto?! Or, any logic we can grasp?!” Questioned Katara frantically, letting her confusion take over.

“Well I'd guess Neto either died sixteen years ago or never existed in the first place, just some ploy from Jet or a fairy story from Longshot’s mum. But the blue eyes… They don't 100% mean–” Sokka was interrupted by Lee suddenly opening his mouth and beginning to speak.
“Aang, guide Zuko to his destiny, like you would have done for me.” Lee’s lips were moving but it wasn’t his voice, instead it was… Arianna’s… He was definitely the avatar, Aang decided, in the midst of his turbulent emotions.

“All of you, trust him, help him and teach him. Zuko needs you all, continue in your journey to the North Pole, stop the Fire Nation before the end of Summer.” This time when Lee spoke it wasn’t just Arianna’s voice, it was hundreds, maybe thousands, of different voices. They radiated power and control, but Lee trembled as the words left his mouth.

Then, without another word, Lee stepped forward, pushing past Sokka and Katara easily and strolling straight towards the door, seemingly unfazed by the statue in his way. That was probably because before he reached it there was a massive flash of blue light, and Lee was no longer Lee, he was now a flesh version of Avatar Roku, who swiped his hand and the statue crumbled at his feet. Then Roku carried on towards the doors, blasting them apart with a powerful wave of firebending that he followed up with shooting flames at the guards and sages (bar Kaja), sending them flying as easily as if they weren’t even there.

“We should probably follow him.” Suggested Katara weakly, pale as a sheet (not unlike her brother) before she charged after him, jumping over the unconscious bodies littering the floor. These bodies included a new man, with sideburns and a more prestigious seeming uniform, probably Commander Zhao, thankfully he too was unconscious.

They ran after Lee/Roku until he’d blasted his way to roof where they’d parked Appa, and the avatar quickly lost steam and crumpled, glowing weakly before becoming Lee once more. It was at that moment that the sun finally dipped completely beneath the horizon, signalling the end of the Winter Solstice.

Sokka hoisted Lee up off of the roof and carried him to Appa, Aang and Katara following closely behind, before Appa set off without the usual ‘yip yip’ command- probably fearful of the fire that was slowly swallowing up the temple. Fortunately, once they’d set off Aang saw the people they’d passed inside had managed to evacuate before they’d been burnt alive. Unfortunately, now everyone would know that the avatar had returned, but at least they didn't know who it was.

Chapter End Notes

Hi! So they know now... :))

Was it too early? Maybe, but for the rest of the plot to work they need to know about him (also I couldn’t think of a way to write this chapter without them finding out
sooooo)

I really hope you enjoyed this, and I'd be super touched (not in the weird way, get your minds out if the gutter) if you left comments and kudos for me! ;})
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sokka was completely blown away. Lee, or Zuko or whatever, was the avatar, meaning everything he knew about the firebender just got turned on its head. What made it worse was Sokka’s idea of the avatar until that point: he’d thought they’d be a 30-40 year old badass who had mastered all 4 elements and was just sat somewhere waiting for their little group to find him, after which they’d all go to the Fire Nation and he’d blast the palace to smithereens, ending the war. Sokka has not expected the avatar to be a 16 year old firebender who hadn’t even completely mastered fire and they hadn’t seen do any other bending. On that note though, Sokka previously has been unable to fathom that the avatar might be from the Fire Nation, and yet here Lee was.

“Do you think he… Knows?” Asked Aang, who was looking at the sleeping firebender- he’d been passed out ever since his Roku stunt a few hours ago.

Katara was also asleep, having gotten the least rest on Kyoshi and then refusing, like Sokka had, to go to sleep in Senlin until Aang and Lee got back. But Sokka has had a nap before they went to the Fire Nation, so he was well rested enough to be on watch with Aang.

“I don't know. I mean, if he knew he was the avatar then why would he come with us to ‘find’ himself?” Sokka pointed out, before quickly looking over Appa’s saddle to make sure they weren't getting followed. Their group had flown out of the Fire Nation a little while ago, but it was better to be safe than sorry. Especially now that ‘Zhao’ guy would be after them.

“That doesn't make any sense, I guess.”Aang sulked, beginning to fiddle with a piece of string. Apparently Katara had taught him cat’s cradle.

They sat in silence for a few more minutes, systematically checking if they were being followed and making sure Lee didn't, well, do anything destructive that avatars could do. The firebender was fidgeting in his sleep a lot, probably a nightmare, and Sokka contemplated waking him up- but he didn't get a chance. Out of nowhere, Lee suddenly sat up, gasping for air, and looking like he'd just crawled out of the darkest corner of the spirit world, when he noticed Sokka and Aang he stopped panting and regained some composure as well as fixing his scared expression into a glare.

“What?” He snapped rudely, leaning against the side of Appa’s saddle but keeping the blankets they’d put over him on his legs.
“... Ummm, do you remember what happened?” Asked Aang, as placatingly as was possible.

Lee thought for a second, before his eyes widened and he sighed dejectedly.

“I'm guessing Roku did something.” He said sadly, averting his gaze and looking over the side of Appa.

“Yes... Hey, Avatar.” Lee winced at Sokka’s greeting, clearly put off by the word: ‘avatar’, which was a shame since it was a pretty good descriptor for the moody firebender.

“Can we not use... That word?” He asked, pushing his dark hair out of his eyes and shaking a little.

“Okay... How about your real name, Zuko?” Zuko looked like he wanted to argue with Aang’s comment, but he also seemed too tired to try.

“Roku said that too?” He questioned, now rubbing his temples.

“Yeah... Well, actually, you said that but you voice was replaced by all these other voices, it was pretty terrifying to be honest... But anyway... Why lie about your name?” Sokka was actually curious, if they couldn't recognise Zuko by the scar, it would be doubtful they would recognise the name.

“I... Just did... Sorry...” Zuko apologised, still not properly looking at them and definitely hiding something, but Sokka laid off a little, deciding to figure it out later.

“Did you know you were the ava-, you know, before we got to the temple?” Asked Aang softly, the kid was pretty good at dealing with feelings, Sokka had to admit.

“I... I airbended before I went to the South Pole... And I did it a few times on purpose after that like when we’d been kidnapped by Jet... And before those pirates... Captured me, I did a bit of waterbending. Then on Kyoshi... Kyoshi appeared...” Zuko explained, still shivering to a degree that Sokka was considering lending him his parka, even though the Water Tribe boy was almost certain his chills had nothing to do with the cold.
Sokka noticed how Zuko never explicitly said ‘yes, I am the avatar’ or even ‘I knew, yeah’, instead the firebender just described things only the avatar could do. It was a little… Worrying…

“So… What's our plan now? We don't really need to find Neto since, you know.” Sokka pointed out, and Aang actually seemed to perk up whilst Zuko’s look of dread only seemed to increase.

“Our plan should be what we were going to do with Neto; I'm going to teach Zuko airbending!” Aang beamed at Zuko and Sokka, the former of which visibly deflated but nodded slightly.

After that Aang and Sokka decided to let Zuko rest, figuring he'd need his energy for later.

Chapter End Notes

I decided to give y'all this eency little chapter which is basically just the immediate aftermath- do with it whatever you will!

Comments and kudos are VERY appreciated, you're all beautiful peeps :))
Zhao sat waiting in his Chambers, planning his next actions. His fleet, by pure luck, had been at the Fire Temple when it had been invaded by 4, apparently teenage, intruders. While Zhao hadn't gotten a good look himself, his troops had reported two Water Tribe members (at least one of which was a waterbender), a hooded figure with two swords (whether they could bend was unknown), and, most importantly, an airbender. The airbender was apparently young, only twelve or thereabouts, but Zhao hadn't seen the child himself; he hadn't been present when they initially broke in and had been knocked unconscious by Roku before he could see them leave the chamber.

Which was interesting, because if Roku left the chamber that had to mean one of the 4 intruders was the avatar, and Zhao had the best lead in a hundred years. That entitled Prince stood no chance.

“Commander Zhao, urgent message from the Firelord!” One of Zhao’s soldiers burst in, hastily bowing before he spoke.

Zhao took the letter, carefully opening it, and began to read. The handwriting clearly wasn't that of Firelord Ozaii, but it was signed in his name.

Commander Zhao,

You and your troops were at the Fire Sage Temple when it was intruded by the avatar and their three Companions, all of which are enemies of the Fire Nation. I'm looking past your failure in allowing them to escape your grasp as an act of pure mercy on my part, and I'm giving you the opportunity to rectify your mistake. I put you, now Admiral Zhao, in charge of finding and capturing the avatar. Their group, however, can be killed or captured, I don't particularly care as long as they're gotten rid of.

Firelord Ozaii.

Zhao smiled at the letter, a smug feeling blooming his chest, as the soldier continued to look at him warily.

“Umm, Commander-” He began, pulling Zhao out of his thoughts.

“It's admiral now.” He snapped with a scowl, causing the soldier to jump back. I fear and bow his head. “Now, tell the captain to set our course- we're going to find the avatar. Oh, and let's find that
banished prince’s ship too, I’m excited to see his reaction to all of this.”

“I hate everything about this.” Complained Zuko, who was sat on a stone ledge at the edge of a large field Aang had landed them in. He was in his Fire Nation clothes, and had his signature brooding look smeared across his face, but he had agreed to learn airbending.

“The other airbending pupils usually used to begin their lessons with a little more positivity, but we can work on it!” Aang beamed, convincing Zuko to just turn himself over to his father, surely even that would be better than this.

“Well I’m not the other airbending pupils.” The Prince grumbled, kicking a stone in false boredom.

“No! You’re not, you’ve got some great raw talent judging by some of the stuff you did before you even had a lesson.” Aang praised, still smiling, whilst he set up some targets, assumedly for Zuko to airbend at.

“You mean the stuff I did when either my life was in danger or your guys’ were?” He asked, raising an eyebrow as Aang continued to struggle with the large wooden targets.

The airbender had chosen this particular field since 1) there was lots of room, 2) no Fire Nation and 3) there was a small market a few miles away for Katara and Sokka to shop at while they practised (where they’d been for the last hour). Yet he had not considered the challenge it would be to set up some wooden targets- perhaps it would have been easier with Zuko’s help but… Ah well.

“Aww, you care!” Aang basically sung, causing Zuko’s face to redden.

“No! Death is just… Messy…” He frowned and went to cross his arms, before realising he’d already crossed them.

“Sure.” Aang winked cheerily, finally putting up the last target so that they were in a vague circular shape and Aang was in the middle.
“You done?” Zuko questioned apprehensively, beginning to detest himself for not throwing himself off Appa when he had the chance.

“Yep! This exercise is easy, though usually new students would start out using airbending gates but, since we don't have those I figured we'd just have to try a different tactic: let's see how much air you can bend at something and with how much force! Just to see if it's your technique that needs improvement or if it's so something else!” Aang explained excitedly, rushing over to pull Zuko off of his ledge and dragging him to the middle of targets.

The firebender grunted slightly, scowling at the floor, but decided he might as well get it over with. After all, out of all the elements, air was his second favourite. So the Prince got into a stance, that he assumed Aang approved of since the airbender didn't correct him, and readied himself to blast air. He breathed in, like in firebending, but instead of focusing on the heat within his core he focused on the air around him, and pushed out with his right hand at the nearest target. In his defence, Zuko did manage to airbending, but instead of a gust of wind it was more like an autumn breeze that barely even made the target shudder. Yet Aang still clapped excitedly.

“Well done!” He congratulated, leaping over to give him a hug, that Zuko immediately pushed away.

“What? That was terrible!” He exclaimed, confused as to why Aang was acting as though it was an incredible achievement.

“No it wasn't! You airbended and you haven't even had any training, that's impressive! Plus, now I know what's holding you back; your technique is pretty good, especially for a beginner, and you have the talent to to be powerful, where you're lacking is peace of mind.” Aang critiqued, with a curious gaze at Zuko that was making the Prince incredibly self conscious.

“Hey! What do you even mean, peace of mind?” He asked, shoving Aang (lightly) away and clenching his fists.

“Airbending isn't just about the bending, there's a spiritual side that's incredibly important. To airbend properly it's useful to at least have freedom of mind, even if peace isn't quite possible. So to get better it would be helpful if you focused on feeling free, unbound, okay?” Aang advised as if it were the simplest thing in the world.

Zuko, however, had no idea how to do that. The Prince had never really felt free, even when he was
younger he constantly felt pressured to be a better firebender, a better prince, a better son. He’d even been almost literally trapped, staying in the palace everyday, except when he was really young and got to go to Ember Island a couple of months a year, but even then he didn't have a choice in it. Then he got banished and he felt trapped outside his home, even if he had the rest of the world at his disposal. And now he had to be the avatar, he had to ‘save’ the world, where was the freedom in that?

Despite all that, he still tried again. He got into a stance once more and did the same as before, but it was just as weak as it had been the first time. This time, however, Aang didn't applaud.

“Hmm, were you focusing on feeling free?” He asked quizzically, inspecting the arm he'd used whilst trying to airbend.

“What if I don't know how it feels to be free, okay!?” Zuko snarled, pulling his arm away and crossing it with the other one, glaring at the ground.

“... How can you not know how it feels to be free?” Aang had a pitying look in his eyes that Zuko absolutely detested.

“Maybe not all of us got raised playing about in the beautiful temples with other little kids, and then got to go out on little field trips to the other nations whenever we wanted, okay!!” The Prince stormed off after that, leaving a crestfallen Aang surrounded by wooden targets on his own.

Zuko found himself a little outside the field on a small patch of forest. He really needed advice, but unfortunately he’d left his uncle at the South Pole and just stormed away from the wisest 12 year old in existence. Which, admittedly, wasn't the best idea he'd ever had but also wasn't the worst by a longshot. He figured he could also turn to his past lives for advice, apparently Roku was there for him whenever he needed him, but currently he had decided all of his past lives were jerks and wouldn't talk to them thanks to mere principle.

But he still needed advice, because he felt so, so empty. Like there was a gaping chasm in his chest that he couldn't fill, and it had been there before: when his mother left and when his father banished him, but now it was worse than ever. He felt defeated, like crying constantly, and also conflicted. Because part of him said he deserved to feel like this, he was betraying his nation, his family, his father. But another part of him was screaming that he should fight, that he was stupid for feeling so
awful. He hoped those two sides were the prince side and the avatar side, because otherwise he was going crazy.

He tried, desperately, to embrace what Aang had been talking about, to try and feel free but it was such a foreign concept. Freedom was the power to act however one wanted, and Zuko had no idea what he wanted, it was confusing, and difficult, and-

His thoughts were interrupted by a rustling in the bushes and three incredibly familiar voices, he looked up from where he'd placed his head in his hands and sighed quietly. And then gasped much more loudly when a lemur, who he later recognised to be Momo, jumped at his face and almost clawed out his eyes. His sound of shock easily led the closest voice to him.

“Hi.” Sokka waved, sitting down next to the Prince who had opted to look away from him and sulk.

“Hey.” He muttered back, still refusing to look him in the eye.

“So… I heard that you ran off, and then Aang had to come find me and Katara terrified that he'd triggered the only hope for the world to disappear forever.” Said Sokka, causing Zuko to feel a pang of regret at upsetting Aang.

“I didn't run off, I walked away quickly.” The firebender protested weakly, looking at the floor and beginning to count the individual blades of grass.

“I'm sure you did. But why did you walk away quickly, again?” Asked the Water Tribe boy, lightly manoeuvring Zuko’s chin with his index and middle finger so that the Prince was forced to face him. Zuko was not amused by Sokka’s humouring of him, and was even annoyed that the normally goofy boy was trying to act serious whilst even Zuko could tell that he was being childish.

“Because I'm only any good at airbending when someone is in danger, the rest of the time I don't feel ‘free’ enough to do it properly.” Zuko explained weakly, deciding honesty was his best option.

“Well… I'm sure we can figure out a way to fix that, come on!” Sokka smiled and grabbed Zuko’s arm, dragging him up to his feet.

The firebender considered being petty and refusing to walk, not wanting to try airbending again, but decided against it because Sokka had proven twice now that he was capable of carrying the Prince
when needed. So he walked on his own, though he was partially getting dragged by Sokka, back to the field. The Water Tribe boy had called for the others, and so they were all converging, and Momo had positioned himself on Zuko’s shoulder and seemed reluctant to get off.

“‘You didn't disappear forever!’” Aang looked like he'd been crying and Zuko was beginning to feel even guiltier, to the point that he didn't even immediately throw off the airbender when he jumped at him for a hug.

Katara, meanwhile, looked angry (for good reason) but didn't shove an icy shard through his eye so he counted that as a win.

“How could you just run off? You need training if you’re going to save the world!” Zuko tried his best not flinch when she said he had to save the world, he probably failed but decided to move past it.

“Okay, I feel like emotions are running high right now, but I have an idea that can be both relaxing and help with Le- Zuko’s airbending.” Sokka walked between Katara and Zuko, both of which being about to start a fight, and therefore preventing violence between the two.

Sokka’s idea, apparently, was a group bonding session where they all sat in a circle (it was more of an oval) and shared the moment in their life when they'd felt at their most free. Zuko had initially argued that ‘weren’t you listening, I've never felt free!’ but unfortunately, Sokka’s mind couldn't be changed and he'd just told Zuko to draw inspiration from the others. The Prince had, of course, rolled his eyes, but also didn't want to incite Katara’s wrath so had agreed.

“Okay, me first. I felt the most free when I was seven, dad had just taken me out hunting and was teaching me how to gut a dolphin-seal. At that moment, when I managed it, I thought I could do anything.” Recited Sokka with a small smile, before turning to Aang who had cheered up considerably.

“Okay, it was just after I invented the air scooter and before Arianna had been told she was the avatar, we were racing and I remember feeling so happy and, well, free.” Aang beamed, and then looked to Katara.
“I actually think now is when I have the most freedom I've ever had; I'm out in the world trying to find a bending teacher- it's invigorating.” Katara said happily, finishing her piece much too quickly for Zuko’s liking and causing everyone to turn to him.

“... Umm, guess...” Zuko searched his memory desperately for anything, and, surprising even himself, managed to find something. “When my sister and I were really little, she was only just 5 I think, and she had her friends over. It was before she... But anyway, we were playing this game kind of like hopscotch, where you jump from square to square only the squares slowly got further and further apart and were surrounded by water. Whoever got the furthest without falling into the water won, and Az- my sister probably only invited me to join because she thought I'd lose. Because she won at everything, even then, but she wasn't as... About it. But then I won, I even got further than her gymnast friend, and she didn't blast fire at me, and my mum- she was proud of me too. It felt like, for once, I had more than one person on my side.”

Zuko momentarily forgot he had promised himself that he wouldn't share private information, then he realised his mistake and decided to shut his mouth before any more details about his childhood, his sister, or his mother slipped out. The others were now staring at him so he turned his head slightly and coughed awkwardly, breaking them out of their stupor.

“I... Think I have an idea!” Exclaimed Aang, jumping up and then forcing Zuko, who was becoming increasingly sick of people touching him, up as well, before dragging him over to the targets again.

“This again?” He lamented, looking at the targets sadly.

“No, remember back at the Southern Air Temple? You were really good at air ball, super agile for someone who ‘couldn't’ airbend. Only now we know that you can airbend, which means you were probably doing it then without even meaning to. Same for when you were younger with your sister...” Aang started explaining as he dragged the targets into different positions, Sokka and Katara helping him.

“Wha- You can't possibly believe I've been accidentally airbending since I was like 6, can you?” He interrupted, not helping them rearrange the targets because he figured his day (read, life) had been hard enough without lugging big slabs of wood around.

“It's possible.” Aang shrugged, and the siblings nodded in agreement.

Soon they'd set up the targets, all twenty of them, so that they were in a wavy line and they slowly got further away from each other, until they were a good 15 feet apart at the end. The targets
themselves were only a couple of feet wide and a foot thick, making the task Zuko was sure they'd set out for him that much harder.

“Okay, your goal is simple: jump across the tops until you reach the last one, like so.” Aang explained before jumping on top of the first target, and propelling himself across to the others with some easy airbending, it wasn't until the last ones that he even seemed to concentrate all that hard.

“See, easy, your turn.” Sokka gestured for Zuko to start, but the firebender frowned.

“Oh sure, it's so easy, why don't you have a go?” Zuko smiled in mock sweetness at his companion who just shoved him forward.

“Not today, hotshot, this is an airbending exercise.” Unfortunately Sokka was too smart to fall for his bait, leaving Zuko with no other choice but to climb on top of the board and try.

The first five he was fairly sure someone could do without airbending, and so he did those quickly, but as soon as he had done those 5 he felt compelled to keep going, really getting into the swing of it not even needing to think about what he was doing all that much until he had reached the last target, surprising himself and the others, though they still clapped.

“You did it! See, no one could've done that without airbending, you have it in you!” Complimented Aang as Zuko dropped down from where he was standing.

“I thought we always knew that, why does me being able to complete a stupid course change anything?” The Prince questioned grumpily.

“Do you even realise how much airbending you had to do for those last few jumps? I think your problem before was you were overthinking it.” Commented Katara, seemingly over her annoyance at the firebender, before turning back to targets and staring at them as if she were impressed.

“Yeah, your problem wasn't that you couldn't feel ‘free’, it was that whenever you tried to think about it you focused too much on all the times you felt trapped.” Added Sokka, patting Zuko on the shoulder with a smile.

“So, what? The way I need to practice airbending is by… Not thinking about airbending?” He questioned, incredibly confused by his companions’ advice.
“Basically.” Said Aang as if it explained everything. It did not.

Then the other three began to pack up and Zuko, who still had Momo clinging to his shoulder for some reason, went over and sat up on Appa’s saddle. He was anxious, to put it simply, his airbending training had officially begun and they were scarily close to the edge of the Earth Kingdom, soon to be at the North Pole. Zuko began to fidget with his hands to relieve some of his built up nervous energy: he spun one finger around over the palm of his left hand. After several minutes of this he looked down and saw, startling him greatly, that he'd created a miniature, very messy, tornado in the palm of his hand.

Chapter End Notes

I'm uploading this slightly early since I'm busy later, so I hope you enjoy!

Zuko has started his airbending training! You'll see it further progress in upcoming chapters, him managing to use the glider etc :))

Also, Azula wasn't always evil! She was a young child too once, give her a little bit of a break (I don't know if you'll hate her or feel bad for later on in this fic, depends how you view her arc in the show)!

Comments and kudos bless my heart, as always, thanks for reading! :))
Chapter 16

Katara’s excitement was quickly building as they neared the very edge of the Earth Kingdom, her waterbending training was closer than it had ever been in her entire life. In fact, within minutes they would land in their last stop of the Earth Kingdom and then be straight off to the North Pole.

And, Zuko’s airbending training, after the first little hiccup, had been going surprisingly well- she had often seen him airbending a little tornado in the palm of his hand out of the corner of her eye, something he'd been practicing since a few weeks ago when he started airbending. Though, he didn't seem to be consciously practising it, more like whenever he got nervous he'd start doing out of habit. Which was worryingly often if Katara was completely honest, and Sokka had noticed too, it seemed, and had taken to starting up a conversation with the firebender whenever he began creating the little whirl of air (that was progressively getting neater and spinning faster).

Currently, Katara was steering Appa whilst the others slept; it was nearing 3am and for some reason her sleep schedule had screwed itself up, making her stay up all night and then sleep in the day. She wasn't sure why, but she noticed Zuko had a similar problem and seemed unable to sleep in the day despite constantly looking exhausted. Curious about the avatar’s sleeping habits, at that moment Katara decided to look back at Zuko to see if he was actually unconscious or really did stay up all night (like she'd guessed). He was underneath some blankets so it was difficult to tell, but he was asleep, she was sure, yet he was also fidgeting a lot, and tossing and turning- probably nightmares.

The view of the coast interrupted her thoughts, the usually blue sea shining black in the moonlight. It was the last part of the Earth Kingdom and the sight caused a bright smile to spread across the waterbender’s face, as she steered the bison down to the sandy shores. Sokka had been very clear that they had to make this last stop for supplies, otherwise they wouldn't have enough to last themselves until they got to the North Pole. The following morning they would go to the nearest market, then Aang would probably make Zuko do some more training, and then in the early evening they'd set off.

“This place isn't Fire Nation occupied, but they're also not very aggressive towards the Fire Nation since most of their fighters have gone to war and they don't want to trigger an attack.” Explained Sokka, he seemed well rested and ready for the journey ahead, whilst Aang was distracted by Momo and Zuko looked like he could pass out at any second.
“Great, can we just go now? I'm sick of the Earth Kingdom.” Zuko complained warily, rubbing his eyes and leaning against the market stall Sokka was looking through.

“Sorry, Hotshot, but we still have some very important shopping left to do.” Following this sentence, Sokka proceeded to shove twenty more useless things into his pack, and both the waterbender and firebender let out long sighs.

“Don't worry guys, there's no rush! We have until the end of summer to defeat the Fire Nation and save the world, that's like 7½ months away!” Aang beamed and the others stared at him in bewilderment.

“Umm, Aang, that's not very long…” Commented Katara worriedly, only just taking in how much they had to get through in such little time.

They walked in silence after that, the mood tense until Momo scrambled from Sokka’s head around to his back, causing him to squeal in surprise. Aang snickered at this and Zuko rolled his eyes, only to get jumped by Momo seconds later.

“Aww, Momo likes you two best! You're like a little family!” Coed Aang, tilting his head and watching as Sokka and Zuko both blushed furiously and turned away from each other.

Katara assumed the firebender would throw the lemur off or give him to Aang or Sokka, but instead he allowed him to stay nesting in his growing dark hair until the end of their shopping trip and they went back to Appa at the coast. Katara thought there'd be a flock of people at the beach, since, despite the cold weather, it was still a pretty nice place. Yet, curiously, people seemed to be moving away from the beach, hurriedly as well, and Sokka, probably being the most observant of their group, quickly made a suggestion as to what was going on.

“Something, or someone, must be attacking the beach; we’ve gotta go help.” He called, rushing forward whilst the others immediately followed.

Upon arriving, the fleet they saw was terrifying; massive, metal ships towered above them as civilians ran to safety. All together there was about 7 of them, three on either side of the main, big one that Zuko was looking at fearfully. A few troops had gotten off board and were now waiting at the beach, spouting flames at anyone who was left to be burned, but whoever their leader was hadn't shown himself yet.
“Zhao.” Whispered Zuko, answering the question of who was in control here. The firebender looked surprisingly pale and even gulped, before gently setting Momo down on the floor as if he were getting ready for a fight, which he probably was.

More soldiers came out until the group of four were facing 50 armored firebenders, but Katara supposed it could be much worse. Then, the guy she presumed was Zhao from his regal posture and the way Zuko started staring him down angrily, stepped out too, standing in front of his men and smiling cruelly. He scanned their faces, from Aang (who he looked particularly happy to beat up), to Katara and Sokka (both of which he glimpsed at with vague disinterest), before his eyes settled on Zuko, who he regarded with genuine shock- even stepping back a little.

For the moment of peace she had, Katara pondered why Zhao looked so startled at seeing Zuko. The firebender had said he was banished, surely it wouldn't be too surprising for an enemy of the Fire Nation to be against said nation. The waterbender pondered whether or not Zhao knew Zuko himself was the avatar, but decided against it since it seemed unlikely. Another reason for the older firebender’s bewilderment could be if he and Zuko were related, which might be a possible reason for Zuko’s discomfort too, but their features didn't seem similar enough. Sure, they both had dark hair but that was usually a given with firebenders, Zuko’s eyes were a shiny yellow whilst Zhao’s were muddy brown, the larger man was bulkier and Zuko was lithe, they had different complexions and there didn't seem to be a familial relationship between the two, to put it simply.

“Well, well, well.” Zhao smiled sinisterly once he’d gotten over his initial reaction, a menacing glow burning in his irises.

“Shut it!” Yelled Sokka, raising his boomerang and brandishing it at the fifty trained firebenders.

“Stay away from these people!” Ordered Aang with surprising force for a twelve year old.

“Oh, I have no interest in these people, Firelord Ozaii will have the entire world under his control soon enough anyway. No, I care about the avatar.” Replied Zhao with surprising composure as he let his gaze fix to Aang, who (like the rest of their group) flinched at the mention of the avatar. They’d hoped the avatar’s return would stay secret for a while- but no such luck. Though, what could they expect after their scene back at the Fire Temple?

“Us too, haven't found him yet- we'll be sure to tell you when we do though! Not.” Said Sokka, thinking quickly which Katara appreciated. Sure, Zhao might know they had connections to the avatar but he didn't need to know they’d already found him.

“Now you see, I know that's a lie. Because at the Fire Temple 4 intruders went into Roku's chamber,
you two Water Tribe scum, a cloaked figure and an airbender. Then, the avatar exited the chamber, meaning one of you must be the avatar. Or at least you're working with them, since I suppose three of you and the avatar could have been at the Fire Temple.” Zhao smirked, stepping forward from his troops with a threatening stomp.

Unfortunately Katara couldn't think of a good escape plan for this situation, and the others seemed similarly baffled. Their only saving grace was that, for some unknown reason, Zhao hadn't yet attacked them and instead there remained 30 feet of distance between their two groups. The waterbender had considered getting Aang to call for Appa (who was probably still in the trees near the beach where they'd hid him) but as soon as the airbender made a move they'd probably be attacked, and, on top of that, under rain from so many firebenders Appa might not manage to get far enough away before he got scorched to ash.

“You're wrong, Zhao, we don't have the avatar with us.” Zuko spat with ill contained fury as his clothes literally began to smoke. Katara found it strange, however, that Zuko had not spoken up to this point, since his temper usually led to him doing (and saying) rash things.

“You really think I'd trust the words of a banished prince?” The silence that stretched out after Zhao’s question was deafening. Everyone froze, Katara’s heart dropped for a second and she could feel herself being swallowed up by feelings of anger and betrayal. She prayed it was a lie.

“I- You, I…” Stuttered Zuko helplessly after the period of quiet had reached its most suffocating. He was shaking badly, flames jumping from his fingertips like sparks, even seemingly tinted a little blue.

“Really, Prince Zuko, I would have expected the Firelord’s son to be more articulate. No wonder your father-” The commander's tone was brimming with mock politeness and infuriated even Katara who was currently ruminating over the thought of drowning both firebenders.

“Shut up! You don't know what you're talking about!” Zuko snarled, his hands completely engulfed in fire now as he clenched his fists. The Prince was still shaking, almost violently now, but the rustling of his clothes didn't appear to be because of that.

Actually it seemed to be… Airbending. Katara internally cursed the spirits, because as much as she felt like stabbing Zuko through the eye with an icicle at the moment, if he was found to be the avatar because of (seemingly) accidental bending, then they'd lose their mystery advantage, and Zuko certainly didn't seem equipped for that. If the look in his eye was this dangerous when three people found him out to be a prince, she could only imagine how badly he'd handle it if he was revealed to be the avatar to the entire Fire Nation. Scarily, the way Zuko was currently looking was making the waterbender expect him to go full avatar state (which she'd only heard about in Gran-Gran’s stories but still knew enough about to know it was bad). Katara sighed, trying to think of a way to divert the attention off of the firebender so that he didn't do something stupid and life threatening, luckily Aang
actually succeeded in this.

“Fine! You got us, Commander Zhao, I'm the avatar!” Aang claimed bravely, impressing Katara and shocking everyone else enough that they stopped paying attention to Zuko. The lie, though easy to prove wrong since Aang could not bend multiple elements, was apparently believable enough to fool Zhao and his forces.

“I thought it would be you, airbender, and it's Admiral now. Attack!” Shouted the admiral, probably only waiting that long to specify who the avatar was, before his troops rushed forward.

Katara swiped with her hand and some of the soldiers at the back were snapped up by the sea, but the ones closest were clearly going to outnumber them. The three benders got into stances, whilst Sokka grabbed the bison whistle from Aang and began desperately blowing into it. In the minutes it took Appa to get there, Katara fought for her life, dodging attacks and using her still pretty limited waterbending to block hits from all sides. She still got minor burns all up her arms, and her parka would be charred for the rest of her life, but she wasn't killed.

Aang was having an even harder time, yet the blows aimed at him were not lethal since they wanted to capture the 'avatar' alive, but he had the brute of the attack on him. His real issue was his airbending allowed him to block and dodge, but it didn't hurt the soldiers anymore than just pushing them back a few feet, so the enemies were piling up.

Sokka and Zuko seemed to be working together against almost as many people as Aang, but Zuko was having a difficult time due to also having to block Sokka from attacks the other boy couldn't dodge or deflect with his boomerang, which the firebender clearly wasn't used to, being a probably very selfish, cruel, Fire Nation prince and all. But they were working reasonably well together, although even that adequacy wasn't enough to fend off the troops forever.

Luckily, just as all four of them were about to be defeated, Appa swooped down, coolly trampling a couple dozen soldiers, and allowing them a few seconds to grab desperately onto him before he took off, rising vertically as quickly as possible but still getting pelted with fiery hits, causing the flying bison to whimper in pain as Aang and Sokka tried to comfort him. But they still managed to escape, just barely, and were all pretty shaken, especially Zuko who Katara immediately tore into as soon as she had composed herself and they were a safe distance away from Zhao’s fleet.

“You're the son of the Firelord?!” She practically screamed, bringing her negative feelings about the firebender back up to the surface whilst he had the audacity to turn away from her quietly. “Look at me, traitor!”.
“Hey, hey, I dislike it as much as you do but you need to calm down.” Sokka tried to placate his sister with limited success, but Katara did shut her mouth long enough to give Zuko a chance to defend himself.

“... Yes, my father is Firelord Ozaii. I'm his first born and, had I not been… Ba-banished… I would have been the next Firelord.” Zuko revealed quietly, not daring to look at Katara’s piercing, lightning blue eyes.

“What?! So in twenty years time you would have been the one commanding the destruction of the world?!?!?” She yelled, causing everyone on board Appa to flinch at her volume.

“Well… Probably not twenty since my father would only be 65 at that point and, judging by my forefathers, would probably still have at least another twenty years left of his reign. Unless he passed the throne onto me prematurely, but giving up power is not my father's forte…” He explained in barely more than a mutter and leaving Katara to seethe in rage.

“Uhh, buddy, I don't think that's the part she wanted you to focus on…” Mentioned Sokka, still sounding way too annoyingly friendly with Zuko despite his lies.

“It's not! And are you two just okay with all this? He's the freaking Prince of the Fire Nation! The same nation that killed Mum!” Katara exclaimed, stamping her foot so hard she mentally apologised to Appa who had probably felt it through his saddle.

“Of course we're not all hunky-dory with it, Katara! But imagine how drastically he must have betrayed the Fire Nation for their only option to be banishing their crown prince.” Argued Sokka, persistently on Zuko’s side for some reason but making a valid point.

“Yes!” Agreed Aang, maybe thinking his vote of confidence in the firebender would help sway her opinion. He was, unfortunately, right.

“Actually… You probably want honesty now, right?” Asked Zuko sadly, turning back to the others and looking emotionally deflated, not that Katara felt any sympathy for him (she did).

“Yes!” They all replied in exasperated unison.

“I got banished by my- my father, because I… Well, one thing led to another… That's not really
important… Let's just say it was because I disrespected him. I was stupid, honestly, I should have just kept my mouth shut and not… The point is I spoke out of turn and got banished and stripped of my honour. The only way I could regain my honour and crown was if I… Managed to capture the avatar.” Zuko admitted, obviously leaving out multiple details, before he looked to the others for judgement.

Before Katara could even spit out a single word about how annoyed she still was, Sokka spoke up.

“What did you say that got you banished?” He asked coldly, staring Zuko down.

“Wha- It really wasn't important. I was thirteen, and I went to a War Council even though I wasn't supposed to. My uncle let me in, and I was meant to stay quiet, just observe and learn so I could be a good firelord one day. But one of the generals… He explained his plan to use a bunch of the newest recruits as cannon fodder, sacrificing them for no other reason than being too lazy to think of another plan. I… I told him it would be immoral, that those soldiers had dedicated themselves to our country and didn't deserve to be killed off like that. Anyway, that was considered disrespectful to my father since it was his war chamber and so then he… He banished me, immediately, on the spot.” Zuko explained, a little too much self loathing in his words for Katara to keep herself from feeling bad for him.

“So... You did the right thing! You tried to save lives and you were unfairly cast out by your own father! Sure, then you had to capture that avatar but since that's you it's a mute point.” Aang exclaimed brightly, squeezing Zuko’s arm but not relieving any of the discomfort in his expression.

“Yeah, we can't exactly judge you for needing to capture the avatar anyway, since honestly, we can't tell definitively what you would have done had you found the avatar and them not been you.” Said Sokka, with less stern chill in his words and a forgiving attitude that she blamed Aang for giving him. Though said attitude seemed exclusive to their firebending companion for some reason.

All three looked to Katara for her thoughts, and her anger folded.

“Fine, you're not the most evil person on the planet. But if you ever dare lie about anything again, I swear you'll wish the Fire Nation had captured you today.” She threatened, actually making Zuko gulp and, satisfied with the outcome, she smiled sweetly and relaxed her posture a little.

“Okay… Then you should probably know I left my uncle in the South Pole and he might be looking for me. Hopefully not to arrest me, I don't think he'd do that but…” Zuko started apprehensively.
“You know what, Buddy? That sounds like a tomorrow problem. For now let's all just get some rest, okay?” Advised Sokka, before tucking himself into his sleeping bag, causing the others (bar Katara) to follow suit.

“I'll take first watch.”.

Chapter End Notes

Hello my beauties, I'm back with another chapter! I binge wrote a whole bunch of chapters to upload weekly now I have classes again, so I'm a tad tired out. (Still hope this was good though).

They know! At last, no more secrets... Except the entire Blue Spirit palaver but what can you do? :))

Next chapter is the longest yet (I think)! And they finally get to the North Pole, so I hope you enjoy that!

Also, I got inspired and now want to write a vld/atla fic, but even if I start writing it it won't affect this fic's upload schedule in any way, don't worry :))

As always comments and kudos are blessings to my soul, and each one is super appreciated! Thanks for reading :))
“How much longer?” Asked Katara boredly, leaning over the edge of Appa’s saddle as the beast swam easily between large sheets of ice, no destination in sight.

“I don’t know, Katara, but if we keep going North we should find it.” Replied Sokka annoyedly, scanning one of their maps and not looking at his sister as he spoke.

Zuko was also sick of travelling- and of ice. What people don't tell you about avatar journeys: they include a seriously boring amount of travelling. Sure, there are a couple of exciting and/or terrifying adventures along the way, but an astounding 85% of time is spent just travelling with almost nothing to do. To try and stave off falling asleep simply from the lack of stimulus he was getting while conscious, Zuko played with his miniature tornado, he'd even figured out how to slowly make it bigger (though he couldn't try out the extent of that whilst on Appa).

“Wait… Look!” Aang called a few minutes later, pointing at a bunch of ships emerging from an icy fog. There were definitely waterbenders on board and that very fact made Katara squeal in delight, fixing her slumped posture and looking at the ships excitedly.

The ships were nowhere near as large or metallic as Fire Nation ones, these were actually closer to to big wooden boats. The mist they exited from seemed to have been artificially created by the waterbenders to cloak them whilst they figured out whether or not their little group was a threat. Zuko assumed from their lack of attack that they'd decided that maybe three teenagers, a preteen and a flying monkey on a fluffy herbivore weren't about to attack the entire Northern Water Tribe. The ships moved closer to them until one of them was by their side and a middle aged waterbender called down to them.

“Who are you?” They asked, more confused than angry. “Is that a… Sky bison?”.

“Yup, and I'm an airbender, those two are from the Southern Water Tribe and he's-” Started Aang happily, gesturing to himself and then the others.

“Wait! You're an airbender? Wow, Master Pakku and the Chief are going to want to see you, but Master Pakku first- if his judgement is good you can see the chief. Ummm, come on then.” The waterbender, a man with a similar haircut to Sokka, interrupted, nodding at the other ships to escort them.
They rowed for a short while, but without the fog the edge of the Northern Tribe became visible, waiting for them. It was beautiful, Zuko had to admit, large buildings crafted from ice glinted in the midday sunlight, their designs so intricate he could only imagine the work the waterbenders must have put in. The weather was clear, no snow drifted down despite the intense cold and the sun shone brightly. There were also few people to be seen, which made sense since most of them would be doing some form of work or practising their bending at this time.

The waterbender who'd spoken to them, Vokku apparently, led them through the streets and towards the impressively large palace, before veering to the left and guiding them to what seemed to be a bending school, which was also very large, and had pupils littered around it. Most were eating lunch, the younger ones were throwing (well, bending) snowballs at each other and anyone over thirty seemed to be a guard.

Said guards were staring intently at their group, but seemed more interested in Aang. The firebender thanked the spirits that he'd had the forethought to wear his cloak, and wrapped it more tightly around himself to hide his red clothing. He also considered flicking up his hood, but decided against it since it would only make him stick out even more and he seriously doubted anyone here would recognise him.

Vokku continued to lead them towards this ‘Master Pakku’, heading towards the center of the building before stopping in front of some beautiful double doors.

“This is Master Pakku’s chamber, he'll want to hear from you all before you go to the chief. Uh, he may seem a little mean but he's a good man, so yeah, good luck.” After that Vokku waved and walked hurriedly off, leaving them to see Pakku on their own.

“Well… I guess we knock..?” Aang suggested, before knocking three times against the door, and hearing a man's voice from within.

“Enter.” He, probably Pakku, sounded annoyed by their intrusion but still invited them in, so Sokka and Aang pushed open the doors and all four entered the room.

Pakku was sat in the middle, having just placed a bowl of food at his side, and was facing them with a cold look. Altogether in the room there were 8 guards standing against the wall, 4 with spears and 4 weaponless, though those guys were probably waterbenders. Their surroundings were beautiful, clearly expertly created by a true waterbending master, and the ice that created them was as clear as polished glass.
“Master Pakku, we—” Katara bowed before she began speaking politely, a small smile on her lips as she attempted to contain her excitement from meeting a master. Unfortunately, she was interrupted.

“Prince Zuko, guards! Arrest him!” Commanded Pakku sternly, glaring at the firebender angrily as Zuko jumped into position, blocking the nearest spear with his swords before kicking fire at the row of waterbenders who hadn’t yet reacted to Pakku’s order.

Then the master himself rolled his eyes, stepping forward and turning the ice under Zuko’s boots to melt, then freezing it again. He also bended some water so that it wrapped around his wrists and bound them tightly behind his back. His waterbenders, after their initial shock from the Prince’s wave of fire, did the same to his companions whilst they were still trying to explain the situation to Pakku. Then they took some fabric and gagged them all, leaving them without voices and at the master’s mercy.

“Well, when your uncle sent me that letter drivelling about how his poor nephew was ‘confused, lost, please, don’t hurt him, just bring him back to me’ I never thought I’d be the one to run into you. When Iroh said lost I certainly didn’t think he meant you might end up on the other side of the planet, but now you’re here I should probably alert Iroh, but until he gets here you will be staying in the dungeon, Your Highness. And you three, what are two Southerners and an… An airbender? Doing with this piece of work?” Pakku seemed to take pleasure at having Zuko in his custody, but was genuinely confused about the others. The master nodded his head and in response his guards took out their gags, but left Zuko’s on. (Probably afraid he’d breath fire at them or something).

“Plah, look, we know he's the Prince of the Fire Nation, which sucks, but you can't arrest him- he's the avatar!” Explained Sokka, who looked incredibly unbalanced with his feet trapped in ice.

Zuko was getting better at not wincing whenever people said avatar, but he still shuddered a little (though he figured he could just blame that on the intense cold). Pakku’s reaction, however, was one of amusement and he immediately broke into a grin.

“Yes, of course he is.” He laughed sarcastically and shook his head, before motioning for the guards to gag them again.

“Wait, no!” Katara melted her wrist restraints, soaking the back of her parka as a result, and shielded her face from the gag with her newly free hands. “He can prove it! He can bend both fire and air!”.

Pakku looked disbelieving, understandably, but considered Katara’s request for a second. Meanwhile, Zuko (who really wasn’t used to the cold) began shivering as he tried to heat himself from the inside. Apparently having both your hands and feet encased in ice was extremely cold.
“Fine, unbind him, but if he tries anything his uncle will get him back, just without his hands.” Pakku threatened calmly, before melting the ice trapping his feet and making the water shove him forward so that he landed on his knees.

The master also freed his hands but left him to untie his own gag. He was shaking from the cold but still struggled to his feet, and lit both his hands with a ball of fire, immediately warming them up. The fire made everyone in the room gasp and the guards got into attack positions, but Zuko quickly extinguished his flames and began airbending. He figured he might as well make the tornado he'd been practicing, and spun his right index finger and middle finger over his left palm until a whirl of air settled there, and Pakku looked satisfyingly shocked. Feeling more confident, and like showing the old man up, zuko kept spinning his tornado until it grew to about a foot and a half high, at which point everyone was bewildered (his group included since they'd only ever seen him make a small one) but he decided to keep going anyway, really getting into the swing of it. He took his left hand out from under his project and added it to increasing the volume of air from above with his right hand, now making large circles in front of him with both hands until the tornado was the size of Katara. The Prince could have left it at that, he'd certainly proven his status as the avatar, no matter how much he disliked said status, but he figured if he had to be the avatar he might as well have a little fun with it. So he stepped into the eye of the tornado and let it grow around him, shifting the air into a swirling pattern with all of his force whilst still keeping it tightly wound. Then, still feeling like showing off, he let it spin and crouched down, lighting tiny dots of flame and letting them be carried around by the air, and he kept lighting the dots until it appeared that he was being surrounded by rings of fire.

“Okay, Zuko, I think you've proven it, could you stop showing off now?” Asked Katara once she'd gotten over her awe and had enough time to get bored by his antics. Or perhaps she was just worried the fire would begin to melt the floor.

“Fine.” He replied, slowing the whirl and extinguishing the fire whilst the waterbending guards and Pakku were still frozen in shock.

Katara had finished freeing Aang and Sokka by the time they’d regained their senses and actually seemed capable of having a coherent conversation. Pakku pinched the bridge of his nose before shaking his head a little and looking at Zuko with tired eyes.

“Impressive, Pri- Avatar Zuko. I… Must notify the chief of your arrival, and there will probably be a welcoming feast in your honour. I assume you're here to learn waterbending?” The Master said, asking the question Zuko really hadn't been looking forward to answering. Because yes, that was his purpose for being at the North Pole, but even if he was having some fun with airbending he still didn't like the idea of learning waterbending.
“Ye- yeah, me and my friend need a master.” Zuko gestured vaguely towards where Katara and the others were standing, and Pakku nodded.

“I will train you personally, be here at dawn. But for now, Kedocik will take you to the guest rooms, get ready for tonight.” Pakku seemed to have aged 10 years in two minutes but still left the room hurriedly, leaving them with the guards.

—

Sokka was trying not to stare as Zuko got changed, which was difficult for some reason, and was putting on his ‘good’ parka. Really it was the same item of clothing as his ‘normal’ parka except he didn't wear it as often. Katara was similarly wearing her ‘better’ parka and Aang was borrowing a coat since his Air Nomad clothes were incredibly thin and light- good for airbending, but bad for the cold. The outfit Zuko was currently putting on was the one he'd worn when they first met him, and stuck out as blatantly Fire Nation, so Sokka was partially worried someone might try to arrest him again.

“How do we have to go to this feast again?” Moaned the Prince, finally decent, with a scowl on his face.

“It's in your honour! Why wouldn't you want to go?” Questioned Aang as he jumped up and down on his bed.

“Everyone there will know… You know.” He grumbled, sulking as he sat down to lean against his headboard.

“That you're the avatar? That's funny, since you seemed perfectly happy to show off to Master Pakku.” Katara rolled her eyes and began adjusting her necklace in the ornate mirror near her bed.

“Well yeah, otherwise he was going to put me in a dungeon until my uncle came to collect me! Like I was a disobedient child! I wanted to wipe that smug look off of his face. Besides, that was only a roomful of people, this is hundreds.” Zuko glared at Sokka’s sister annoyedly, crossing his arms.

“Master Pakku was only doing what he thought was best, and, considering you're the Prince of the Fire Nation and you showed up on his doorstep, I think telling your uncle on you was merciful.” She snapped hotly, quick to defend her new master.
“Guys, calm down, when they come to collect us for the feast I don’t want them to see you two killing each other. No matter who wins they'll still probably cancel the feast and then I don't get any of that beautiful Water Tribe meat I've been missing!” Sokka began drooling at the thought of food and his two companions were too busy rolling their eyes at him to keep arguing.

They waited another few minutes doing their own stuff; Sokka shaved the basically non existent fuzz on his face, Aang kept playing about on the bed, Zuko started doing his stress tornado again (that was the name Sokka had coined for it, and thankfully this time the firebender wasn't making it any bigger) and Katara seemed to be practising her posture and pleasantries in the mirror. But soon there was a quick rap on the door calling them to come to the ballroom.

“Greetings, Avatar Zuko, Aang, Sokka and Katara, I'm Mikayleia and I'm here to escort you to the welcoming feast.” The woman bowed politely before gesturing for them to follow her. Despite being closest to the door, Zuko really dragged his heels and was the last one out, directly behind Sokka.

Mikayleia led them to a beautiful ballroom, truly incredible. It arched high and sparkled with an orange hue as the sun setted calmly in the distant sky, its warm light penetrating the icy walls. There were 5 extremely long tables set up vertically and one horizontal one that stretched almost the entire width of the room, it was up on a ledge and only had its far side occupied. What looked like several important people sat on it, looking down at the rest of the room, and there were four empty chairs a little right of the center. Though not the exact center since that seat seemed to be occupied by the chief, who was staring at their group curiously as they entered.

“Please, everyone, stand to welcome the Avatar, finally back after 100 years, and his friends: our brother and sister from the South and an airbender!” The chief stood up and raised his arms, and the rest of the hall followed his example, including, Sokka eagerly noticed, a stunning young woman to the right of the chief, her hair white as a butterfly-dove and her skin clearer than a summer sky.

They made their way through the tables and towards the head table, Zuko clearly ignoring the seat meant for him (closest to the chief and right next the beautiful girl) so Sokka occupied it instead. On the left side of the chief sat Pakku, who was pointedly ignoring their arrival and was instead talking with another master. As soon as the four had sat down they were delivered platefuls of food.

“Uh… Hi.” Greeted Sokka nervously after he'd shovelled down an acceptably large helping of food and had gotten too entranced in the girl’s deep blue eyes to keep eating.

“Hi, I'm Princess Yue.” She smiled at him kindly, tucking her hair behind her ear and giggling a little at his awe.
“Oh… A princess, huh? That explains the… Uh… I'm Sokka…” He stuttered, whilst Katara snickered in the background. Without turning away from Yue, he elbowed his sister in the ribs and kept smiling dumbly.

“You're from the Southern Tribe? What's that like?” She asked sweetly, blushing a little at Sokka’s admittedly bad flirting.

“Oh, you know, it's nowhere near as nice as this. Just ice huts and a couple dozen people, but it's home.” He replied, getting hit with a slight pang of homesickness that Yue seemed to pick up on, placing a reassuring hand on the young man's bicep.

“You know, there will be a dance in a few minutes- it's tradition, I'd be honoured if one of the avatar’s companions asked me to dance…?” She smiled at Sokka’s sudden redness, and looked over to a group of people who, as soon as she glanced, began playing a lively tune Sokka recognised from his Tribe. The Water Tribe boy also distantly wondered if there were so many of these feasts that Yue just instinctively knew when the band started playing or if her looking at them had been a command for them to begin, whichever it was, Sokka couldn't find it within himself to properly care.

“Su- sure.” He nodded enthusiastically and took the Princess’ hand, leading her to where the servers had collapsed the middle three tables and there was new space free for a dance floor.

This song wasn't really the touchy type, being nowhere near a slow dance, and Sokka was reluctant to do anything that could cross Yue’s boundaries anyway. The pair joined in with the dance, Sokka not really following the proper movements but making Yue laugh so he didn't really care, but some of the other guests were looking at them strangely, though Sokka got the sense it wasn't just because of his weird dancing. To test his theory, Sokka began doing the normal steps he'd learnt from his parents dancing when he was younger (the two tribes shared a lot of music), and, as he'd suspected, the strange glances continued. Yue also seemed to take notice of the staring as she stopped smiling and gained a more regal air about her, before leading Sokka away from the dance floor.

“I'm really sorry, but I can't do this right now- there are just too many people.” She apologised once they were suitably far away from the crowd of dancers.

“It's fine, you're a, uh, princess and all, but… Uh, would you want to do an, um, activity together tomorrow… There would be less… People…” Sokka blushed furiously at his own failure of flirting.

“An activity, huh? Well, who could say no to that?” She chuckled before squeezing Sokka’s arm
tenderly and walking away, glancing back at his beaming face a few times as she left.

Sokka wandered back to the head table in a state of elation, collapsing into the chair that had previously been Aang’s (before the airbender and Katara went off to dance) and was right next to where Zuko was currently sulking.

“Your new girlfriend had to leave?” He asked emotionlessly, not even turning towards the Water Tribe boy but probably being able to sense his intense good mood.

“Wha-?! She isn't my… I don't know what- Yeah, she had to leave.” He spluttered before conceding, and finally managing to take enough notice of the firebender to tell he was in worse mood than usual.

“That's rough.” He comforted blandly, still not properly looking at Sokka.

“Hey, are you okay? Did you want to dance too?” Sokka asked as kindly as possible, though he wasn't sure if someone as Zuko as Zuko was would ever be upset about something so trivial.

“Doesn’t matter, no one here would want to dance with me anyway- they all hate me.” He replied coolly, and Sokka was about to disagree until Zuko motioned towards the Northerners, most of whom were throwing regular, quick, fearful glances Zuko’s way.

“Well, they don't know what they're missing out on. Come on.” Sokka stood up and pulled the firebender with him, who immediately turned red and, for once, it wasn't from anger.

“I.. I couldn't- you.. You're girlfr- It's stupid.. I'm not.” He stuttered uselessly as Sokka dragged him determinedly towards the other dancers, who parted for them helpfully. Though, they only did it out of fear.

“Come on, this song is easy-” Sokka was immediately interrupted by the band switching from their lighthearted jazz to a slower tune, exactly perfect for a slow dance. “Welp, I guess we're doing this now.”.

“Wha- But, I, uh, I can't…” He spluttered, now even his ear (singular, his left one was already scarred red) tinted pink with a heavy blush.
“You can’t dance?! But you’re a prince!” Exclaimed Sokka, to which the firebender bowed his head in embarrassment.

“I can dance, my mother taught me when I was really young, it’s just… Well… To teach me she always took the lead so I can’t, uh, lead…” He muttered, and Sokka repressed a snicker because ‘oh spirits this cool, emo, badass also had an embarrassing mum and gets flustered!’.

“That’s fine, I’ll lead. So you put your hands around my neck, not to strangle me, okay? And I’ll just…” Sokka gripped Zuko’s waist with both of his hands and began to sway, an uncomfortably warm feeling blossoming in his chest as Zuko, who could not have been more awkwardly flustered by this entire situation, somehow became even redder.

“Thanks… This is… Not totally awful…” He muttered, barely even audible but making Sokka shine with pride anyway.

Katara woke up the next morning feeling more excited than she ever had in her entire life. Today she would begin to learn waterbending properly, she’d have the best master in the North Pole and she’d finally be able to use her bending to significantly assist her team. Plus, last night she'd gotten to dance with Aang who, despite his usually pretty childish demeanour, was a kind, thoughtful person who Katara honestly really enjoyed spending time with. And, in addition to all that amazing stuff, she’d also gotten some great blackmail material on both Sokka and Zuko. Things were really looking up for the waterbender.

“Wake up!” Zuko ordered, and Katara noticed he was already dressed and sat at a table, and was looking like he hadn't slept a wink, which wasn't unusual.

“I'm already up, Zuko! I'm too excited too sleep in!” She defended herself, properly getting out of bed and heading towards their bathroom to get changed.

“And why do we need to get up? You two are the only ones going to waterbending training at sunrise.” Muttered Sokka sleepily from under his covers.

“You are going to warrior training and Aang is meant to be going to see the Northern spiritual leaders.” The firebender replied simply.
Katara being in the bathroom, couldn't see what happened next, but she assumed from Sokka's whimper of pain and a complaint about his hand, that her halfwit brother had made a rude gesture from under his covers and Zuko had somehow hurt him for it. The next few minutes past quietly until Katara was ready, and then she and the Prince left their room and headed for Pakku's waterbending school.

Once they arrived they went around to the back and found Pakku there with 10, strangely only male, waterbenders that Katara disregarded. The master was instructing a few teenaged students on their technique when he turned to his newest arrivals.

“So, you're here. I should tell you not to expect any special treatment just for being the avatar, but apparently it's too late. This is a closed practice, no student of mine, even the almighty avatar, is allowed to bring their girlfriend along.” A the few students behind Pakku snickered at their master's words, whilst Zuko and Katara spluttered in shock and outrage.

“Wha- No, we're not dating, Master Pakku. I'm here to learn waterbending.” Katara corrected him as politely as she could though her voice was an octave higher than usual. Again, the boys laughed.

“Well then, I'm afraid there's been a mix up; here at the Northern Tribe we don't teach women waterbending.” Pakku replied coolly, barely even reacting to the look of fury that spread across Katara’s face.

“What?! How could you not?! Surely there are female waterbenders here!” She yelled, her anger shutting up some of the snickering waterbenders but not deterring Pakku.

“Yes, and they learn how to heal with their bending. Now, I have work to do, so you should get to the healing huts where you belong, I'm sure they'll agree to teach you despite your bad attitude.” He sneered, even having the audacity to make a shooing gesture with his hands.

“That's completely unfair! I don't even want to learn waterbending and I have to, yet the girl who's been waiting for this opportunity her entire life gets told she can't because of something so stupid?! If you don't teach her, you don't teach me.” Zuko ranted for her before walking away, a fire in his eyes (luckily not literally) and only then did Katara notice how stiff he'd been ever since the morning, how tense he'd been.

The firebender clearly hated the idea of waterbending, he'd said so himself, yet he was doing it anyway because the entire flipping world depended on him. And here Katara was, endangering that
same world by triggering him to abandon his training. The planet would survive if she didn't learn
waterbending, it wouldn't survive if Zuko didn't.

“Wait! He didn't mean that.” Katara called, trying to block out Pakku and his waterbenders who
were treating this like some sort of show. “Zuko, come back. You need to do this.”.

“Fine.” Zuko replied gruffly, turning back to them and glaring at them all. It was at that point Katara
realised that perhaps Zuko didn't care about her enough to sacrifice his training, and the world too,
just to defend her, but was instead using her problem as an excuse to get out of waterbending.

Then Katara stalked of, vowing to get her own back, but for the moment being just heading towards
the healing huts. She would learn waterbending, she would, but for now if she couldn't do that she'd
at least try and learn something to do with her bending. And when the time came she'd wipe the
smug smile off of that sexist bastard’s smarmy face.

——

Zuko thought he'd been sick of Katara when she was practicing waterbending with her stolen scroll
and splashing him, but these other students of Pakku’s were absolutely soaking him- on purpose.
He'd been ‘waterbending’ for 2 hours, or at least trying to, but the stupid waterbenders kept
‘accidentally’ bending streams of water at him.

“What's your problem?!?” He snapped again at the nearest waterbender, an 18 year old who was
perfectly bending his stream into a spiral. The water was evaporating off of the firebender easily, but
his anger was still incredibly present.

“I'm so sorry, Avatar, my hand slipped.” He apologised sarcastically before laughing with his
buddies, who Zuko imagined were slowly dying as he cut them to pieces with his swords.

“That's the fourth time in the last two hours that your hand has ‘slipped’, with the other ‘slips’
threatened, trying his best glare, before turning back to the ice he was failing to bend, only to get
doused by what felt like 10 waterbenders only half a second later. “Okay, that's it!”.

Zuko turned back to them and let the steam rolling of off him slowly turn to smoke, before lighting
his fists aflame and aiming a blast of fire at the three nearest benders, who only just managed to dive
out its way. He distantly heard Pakku yell something, but the pounding in his ears was too loud to
register it properly, so he moved onto the next bender and, instead of throwing fire at him, just
derked him, hearing the satisfying crack of a broken nose. The Prince was about to strangle the next
person, or maybe try out his theory about bending a person's air out of if their lungs, but his wrists
got encased in ice before he could, and he was forcefully turned and pulled down so that he was
facing Pakku on his knees and had his hands fixed in front of him on the floor.

“How dare you firebend at my pupils?! After we've shown you such hospitality!” Pakku yelled, his
usually sneering persona replaced by one of fury as Zuko had to look up at him.

“They started it! They kept bending water at me for no reason!” The firebender didn't care if he
sounded like a wimpy child; he was angry and this was unfair.

“Water doesn't leave a mark! Fire does, but you'd know that, wouldn't you?” Pakku sniped, and his
pupils laughed properly now, even the one Zuko had broken the nose of earlier.

“Shut. Up.” Zuko muttered, desperately trying to stave off memories off his scar’s origins.

“You have argued with me, attacked your fellow pupils and you've insulted my tribe’s traditions.
Someone needs to teach you some respect.” Pakku snarled, grabbing Zuko’s face and twisting him
so that he couldn't stare at the floor, poking a finger at his scar as the waterbenders kept laughing at
him.

And suddenly he was thirteen years old again, facing his father in an agni kai he thought he'd at least
be able to try at. Standing totally alone and terrified, the people in the crowds laughing as the Prince
stood frozen, happy to see a child fight their father. But Zuko refused to fight his father, he couldn't
do it. He was terrified and devastated and felt betrayed by the only parent he had left. But he had to
tell himself that no, you betrayed him, you spoke against him, you deserve this. But despite that Zuko
still begged for mercy, crying desperately and pleading, promising his loyalty as he told himself that
his father would never kill him, he just wouldn't. Sure, he was a mediocre firebender and an
outspoken prince but he loved his country and he'd never purposefully anger his father.

The Prince knelt and apologised through his sobs, hands out in front of him, before looking up to see
his father with nothing more than disgust and loathing in his golden eyes. He raised a fiery hand to
Zuko’s face, smiling at the horror in his son’s expression, and pressed the flames over his left eye,
that at least the younger firebender had closed. The pain that followed it was indescribable, searing
hot and engulfing his entire being, threatening to make him pass out as he screamed. And he did
black out at some point, but he wished he hadn't because when he awoke he was already on a ship
heading out of the Fire Nation with his uncle at his bedside to explain what had happened. So the last
time Zuko had seen his father he'd been searing off his face, and now whenever the Prince tried to
picture the Firelord all he could see was that look of contempt lit by the fire he was using to scar his
child, to scar Zuko.
The firebender snapped back to reality when the ice encasing his hands had melted and the fury, the desperation, the overwhelming sadness, threatened to break out and Zuko struggled to his feet, more hindered by emotion than anything else, and, without paying any mind to what anyone around him was saying, he grabbed Pakku's beard yanking it down to his level. The Prince, without properly looking at the man, hit him so hard in the side of the face he was pretty sure he broke his jaw, and then pushed him across the courtyard with a blast of air that was almost fire, but he refrained.

Zuko turned around to storm off, without anyone attempting to prevent him, but as he walked and stewed in his emotions he felt himself... Unravelling? It was difficult to explain, and he couldn't properly think anyway, but his body kept getting racked with waves of power, strong and brutal and... Dangerous. Uncontrollable.

He stumbled through the different streets, completely unsure as to where he was going, but moving all the same. Eventually he ended up in a sort of garden he could barely focus on, but was much warmer than the rest of the North Pole, and he collapsed to his knees at the side of a pond in the center. Zuko stared at his reflection, watching as his eyes flickered from normal to completely glowing and blue, as he himself tried to reign in the avatar state. The Prince tried to calm down, sobbing into the pond and not even noticing the two koi fish, but it was in vain. He couldn't get rid of it completely, no matter how much he hated that part of himself (though focusing on that hatred actually seemed to make it harder to stay himself), but he could at least try to hold it off. He refused to go into the Avatar State.

Katara left the healing huts at sunset, still extremely angry about Pakku's mistreatment of her but planning to confront him when Zuko wasn't there to throw away his avatar training. But as she started storming towards where she hoped Pakku would be done with his lesson (so she could kick his ass five ways to Sunday), Aang and Sokka appeared from around a corner.

“Hey, Katara! We were just looking for you- where are you going?” Aang caught up with her and she give him a short nod, before going back to having an expression of righteous fury. “Uhmm, Katara? Are you okay? Didn't waterbending practice go well?”

“It went fine, Pakku said he didn't teach women waterbending, so I'm going to teach him how to get beaten up by a girl.” Katara snapped back, clenching her fists.

“Girls are good at beating stuff up.” Lamented Sokka sadly, trailing behind the benders.
“What are you talking about?” Katara asked hotly, more than a little annoyed Sokka had made this situation about his problems but at least slightly glad that he'd gotten over his sexist attitude.

“It's Yue, she seems interested in me but ugh, for some reason she thinks we can't be together. And honestly, it's really hurting my feelings.” Complained her brother, staring at the floor as they got closer to Pakku’s school.

“Just go back to cuddling with Zuko, I don't have time for this.” Katara replied, ignoring Sokka’s splutters of protest and forging ahead only to find the school abandoned.

She turned on her heel and instead marched up to the palace, neither Aang nor Sokka trying to stop her as she broke down the doors and stormed into where the maid had fearfully said Pakku was speaking with some of the other masters and the chief.

“Pakku. I demand you train me.” Katara interrupted the conversation the masters were having without regret, and everyone in the room stared at her (bar Sokka and Aang who instead stepped back).

“I don't have time for this, girl, go back to the healing huts where you belong.” He ordered, immediately turning back to the chief and increasing Katara’s rage. The old man winced slightly as he spoke, and had bandages around his jaw, that the waterbender girl ignored.

“Fine. I challenge you to a fight, I don't care if it's not custom. Either accept or admit you're afraid to fight a girl. Shuǐ juédòu.” She challenged, before storming out to the courtyard and ignoring her friends’ warnings about how she could never beat Pakku because she didn't care, she just wanted to fight him.

Pakku came out moments later, looking preoccupied but getting into a stance nonetheless. Katara too got into a stance and sent a stream of water at the old master, which he froze and turned into ice darts, sending them straight at the female waterbender who created herself a frozen barrier and then shot two columns of water at Pakku, which he sent back at Katara, breaking her barrier. Several people were watching now, and Katara was determined to give them a show; she used a jet of water to shoot herself into the sky before shooting discs of frozen water at the old man, knocking him off balance.

“You have some talent, little girl.” He snarled, regaining his stance and wrapping a vine of liquid around Katara’s torso.
“But you still won’t train me, will you?” She replied, struggling for breath before kicking a wall of ice in his direction and causing him to lose grip on her.

“No.” He said, finally managing to trap her wrists properly, after several more blows from each of them, and preventing her from bending anymore.

He began walking back towards the palace when he noticed Katara’s mother's necklace on the floor, which Katara hadn't even been aware she'd lost. He picked it up and studied it slowly whilst Katara yelled for him to give it back, terrified he’d take it as a trophy for beating her or something. But instead he just turned back to her with unbridled wonder in his eyes.

“This is the necklace I made for Kanna it was our engagement… But she left before the wedding…” He almost whispered, taking the necklace back to Katara who was staring at him in bewilderment.

“But… Kanna is my grandmother… How…” Her thought was interrupted by a terrified guard bursting into the courtyard, looking like he'd run a mile.

He looked barely even conscious and was panting heavily, clearly terrified but still managing to form words.

“Chief! Please, the Fire Nation is here!” Warned the guard, kneeling to the chief who had also chosen to watch the ‘shuǐ juédòu’ as Katara had coined it.

“Everybody, stations! Sokka, Aang, fetch my daughter, she'll know where to go. Pakku, ready the waterbenders. And everybody, look for Avatar Zuko!” Ordered the chief sternly, staying cool under pressure but with a definite edge of fear.

“Wait, where's Zuko?!” Asked Sokka hurriedly through the commotion, and Pakku turned to him directly.

“At 9 this morning he stormed out of my lesson, seeming... out of it. He hasn't been seen since.”.
Oooh, we're in the final stretch of 'book' one!!!(only all three books will be in this one fic, so not really separate...)

Sorry for the cliffhanger, I guess you'll have to wait till next week ;))

Also, I SERIOUSLY HATE PAKKU! Like, I think I made him even more of an ass in this fic but I want to elaborate on why I despise him in the Canon show: he NEVER gets over his sexism properly. Right, so, Katara duels him and holds her own, but ultimately loses, yet he acknowledges that she's very good but STILL REFUSES TO TEACH HER. Then, he's about to leave and sees her necklace, at which point they all realise that Katara is the granddaughter of his ex-fiance of sixty years who HE STILL HAS UNREQUITED FEELINGS FOR!!! Ugh, had Katara not been Kanna's granddaughter Pakku would have never even partially gotten over himself istg.

Point is, I have a lot of emotions regarding that.

Also! Zuko's getting good at airbending, if you didn't notice, but is still pretty crappy at waterbending... Meh.

And I just kinda had to add shippy stuff, since I'm me, but I also wanted to lighten this chapter up with some fluff. Also, just in case you're wondering, both Sokka and Zuko are bi, with Zuko having a preference for guys and Sokka not really having a preference.

Anyway, I really hope you enjoyed this chapter and I would LOVE if you could comment and leave kudos, each and every single one warms my heart :')
Chapter 18

3 Days Earlier:

“General Iroh, one of Admiral Zhao’s ships is requesting to board us.” Informed one of the crew with a short bow to the old general. Iroh nodded at the man and got up, preparing to speak to Zhao and taking quick note of his status change..

He’d been expecting the Admiral’s arrival, ever since he’d managed to track Zuko’s movements. The young firebender had gone from the pirates, to an earthbending town (where a young man had successfully driven out the invading firebenders, and Iroh was impressed), to Kyoshi Island, to Senlin, to the Fire Sage Temple (he was extremely disappointed in his wayward nephew for putting himself so at risk), and to the very edge of the Earth Kingdom. To go this route Zuko would have had to pass through lots of area that Zhao had his troops stationed in, and knowing the Prince (and after observing the havoc him and his new companions had managed to wreck across the Earth Kingdom) it was unlikely Zuko had kept a low profile and stayed out of Zhao’s way.

Iroh’s nephew also seemed to have gone almost exactly North, making the general presume the firebender was heading to the Northern Water Tribe, and would have already arrived. Yet, several hours before he’d been notified of Zhao’s arrival, Iroh no longer had to presume since a letter from Pakku was delivered, it read:

Iroh,

I don’t know how to say this- I barely even understand it myself but… I found your nephew. He’s actually, it’s better if you see for yourself. I’m sorry for the rush, but you must get here immediately, it’s of the utmost importance.

Pakku.

The letter was more of a note and had clearly been written hurriedly judging from the scrawled handwriting, Pakku usually wrote so… The point was it was worrying Iroh and his care for his nephew was causing him to feel just as anxious as he had whenever his son, Lu Ten, had been in battle. So he’d immediately ordered the captain to head for the Northern Water Tribe, against the man’s wishes.
“Hello, Admiral Zhao. To what do I owe this pleasure?” Greeted Iroh politely, bowing to the Admiral once he'd boarded.

“Your nephew, is actually the reason for my visit. He has stirred up trouble and is working with the avatar, would you believe?” Zhao replied with a frown, staring Iroh down, yet the general kept his calm exterior intact.

“Really? He left this ship several weeks ago to go undercover so he could better capture the avatar. Do you think he’s genuinely joined him now, or could his allegiance with the avatar still be a cover?” Asked Iroh easily, looking Zhao straight in the eye.

“He has clearly become a traitor, which was just a matter of time since he was banished. I’m here to recruit you in my fight to stop him and capture the avatar- if you’ll accept?” Zhao offered, putting out his hand for Iroh to shake.

The general considered this offer, if he was to accept then he’d have to help Zhao chase down his own nephew. Of course, Iroh would never actually hurt Zuko, it would all just be a ploy. And during the ploy he’d be able to keep an eye of the Admiral, and possibly protect the Prince with more effectiveness.

So Iroh shook Zhao’s hand with a short nod and a little, devious smile.

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**Present Day:**

“What do you mean no one’s seen him all day?!” Yelled Sokka as he, Aang and Pakku all rushed towards the palace, Aang and Sokka to find Yue and Pakku to rally his waterbenders.

“There was an… Incident at class this morning, some things I said might have been a little… Harsh, but I never thought he’d completely disappear!” The master defended as they reached the palace steps, Pakku quickly blurting out commands to the guards.
“What kind of incident could make him storm off and not come back all day?!” Asked Sokka ludicrously, following as Pakku started heading up some stairs.

“Umm, Sokka? Are you forgetting that Zuko kind of ran off during our first airbending lesson? This isn't exactly a new thing for him.” Mentioned Aang, doing very little to calm Sokka’s nerves.

“Yes, well, the avatar might have been slightly more justified this time… It's why I didn't stop him from leaving- I couldn't really fault him.” Admitted Pakku a tad sheepishly, now making Sokka also want challenge the guy to a ‘shuǐ juédòu’ despite the boy not being a waterbender.

The three carried on running for a short while until Pakku broke off to see the rest of the waterbenders and the remaining two kept going to where the master had informed them Yue’s room was. Finding her was even easier than expected since, when she heard the commotion, the Princess had begun making her own way out of the palace and ran into the two boys in the hall.

“Thank the spirits, we found you!” Sokka breathed a sigh of relief, glad at least one of the people he cared about was safe.

“What's going on? I can see it snowing black outside.” She tried to speak calmly but her eyes kept darting around frantically, in response Sokka placed his hands on her arms to steady the Princess.

“The Fire Nation are here, but they've not attacked yet.” Explained Aang, his tone much more soothing than Sokka’s would have been.

“The Fire Nation?! Oh spirits, okay, they won't attack until morning I don't think; they know waterbenders are more powerful at night and that they're more powerful during the day. Plus, this close to a full moon? They wouldn't dare if they have any sense.” Yue explained quickly, beginning to sprint (despite her long dress) towards the palace doors and leaving her companions to follow.

“So we're safe?” Asked Sokka, trying to hide his panting as his endurance quickly diminished.

“For now. But we'll be safer when we get to the Spirit Oasis, there we can think of a plan.” She replied, getting into the street and turning a corner towards the edge of the city. The sun had completely set by now but they still had a good 10 hours of night, which Sokka was endlessly thankful for.
“Umm, one other thing, Yue, Zuko is kind of… Missing…” Sokka notified the Princess apprehensively, his words causing her to halt in her tracks and turn around to face him, looking devastatingly shocked.

“What?! Oh, spirits! What if he’s been captured? What if he ran off? What if he's injured?” Yue cried, and Sokka realised she’d voiced all of his current worst fears.

“Guys, I'm sure Zuko is okay- right now we need to get to the Spirit Oasis.” Aang quickly became the voice of reason as the other two began to spiral.

Yue went back to running, leading them through the rest of the city until she'd reached the back edge of her home, and was stood before a large gateway. It was guarded by two men, who both looked like they’d only just arrived, and was locked, but this didn’t seem to deter the Princess.

“This is the most spiritual place in the entire North Pole and it can only be opened by bowing and asking entrance. Unless someone inside didn't 'lock' it after they entered, let me-” Yue explained, kneeling down to bow before her eyes widened in surprise. “It's… Already open… Someone must be inside.”

She whispered the last part, bringing her index finger to her lips and waiting for the the others to nod in understanding. Sokka raised his club and readied his boomerang in preparation, sure that on the other side of the strangely lively gateway (it was covered by an astounding amount of plant life considering they were in the coldest place on Earth) there would be a Fire Nation soldier, or maybe several soldiers.

Well, Sokka was half right, because the figure in the middle of the garden, seemingly looking into the beautifully translucent pool that resided in the center, was definitely Fire Nation. It was also most certainly Zuko, which Sokka knew despite not properly being able to see his face due to his messy dark hair covering it as he leaned over the water. The firebender was also shaking violently despite the garden being a comfortably warm temperature and him being dressed in a red parka. Zuko was also breathing, which wouldn't be strange except he was doing it loudly enough for them to easily hear from across the garden, and as though his throat was closing up.

“Zuko!” Sokka called in relief, at least glad the Prince wasn't dead.

Yet his call garnered no response; Zuko didn't even turn to look at them and instead kept appearingly staring into the pool. Sharing a worried look, Yue, Aang and Sokka all made their way to the firebender’s side, treading as lightly as possible, and crouching down on either side of him, still unable to properly see his face.
“... Avatar Zuko..?” Asked Yue softly, and Zuko seemed to grip the grass beneath his fingers even tighter.

“Hey, buddy.” Tried Sokka instead, speaking quietly but still trying to keep his tone light. “Could you look at me for just a second?”

Zuko weakly turned his head to look at the other man, exhaustion resting in each of his features—except his eyes. They were half closed, sure, and his good one had a dark bag underneath it, but that wasn't what Sokka was focusing on when he gasped in shock. Zuko eyes were flickering from their usual mesmerising golden, to completely pale blue, and the firebender seemed to be losing control. Sokka also spied beneath his eyes, where there were dried tear tracks and he was becoming increasingly pale.

“Hey, Zuko? Would you like to hear about the first time I went penguin sledding? It was…” Aang kept talking with forced calmness, wrapping his arm best he could over Zuko who went back to staring at the surface of the pool, though Sokka doubted the Prince was registering anything Aang said.

The Water Tribe boy took this opportunity to lead Yue away from Zuko, who Aang was clearly looking after, so they could discuss the situation.

“That's the avatar state.” She whispered when they were about 10 feet away from the two benders.

“Yeah… He's never been in it before.” Replied Sokka fearfully, remembering when Zuko transformed into Roku but knowing that that had been different.

“He's not in it now- not fully at least. I think he's fighting against it.” Yue suggested, glancing back at the Prince who was still shaking as Aang tried to distract him.

“Okay, so what should we do?” Asked Sokka, figuring the Princess educated on spirit matters would be more equipped to decide what to do.

“Well… Zuko would be much more powerful with the avatar state, he might give us an extreme advantage against those Fire Nation ships.” The young man immediately disagreed, Zuko clearly didn't want to go into the avatar state, and he sure as as Hell wasn't going to make him.
“But think about it, the avatar state can only be triggered accidentally if the avatar feels upset, or threatened, or angry, right? So it can protect them? Well, Zuko ran off this morning after some sort of ordeal with a bunch of waterbenders and Pakku, so they must have been the ones to trigger it. Meaning if he were to use that power against anyone it would be them, and probably the North Pole as a whole. I'm not even sure if he'd go after the Fire Nation fleet.” Sokka argued quietly, not wanting Zuko to overhear even though said firebender didn't seem able to properly focus on anything.

“You're… Right, he probably would do that if he went into the avatar state. Though he may also fight the Fire Nation- but that's not definite. For now it's safest to keep him as himself, otherwise we might all be in danger.” Decided the Princess, nodding at Sokka before moving back over to Zuko and Aang, Sokka following her.

Unfortunately, getting Zuko to stop flickering between the avatar state and himself was much easier said than done. His normal self seemed exhausted by the mental strain of fighting against what was probably over a thousand past lives to the point where him passing out was a real danger, especially since then the avatar would totally take over. Plus anything they said barely even appeared to register with him, meaning they couldn't talk him out of it, so Sokka was becoming increasingly worried that the only way this would go would be Zuko folding and then probably destroying everything in his path.

“We still need a plan to deal with the Fire Nation ships; our military is good but we could really do with some extra help.” Mentioned Yue, barely even audibly, whilst she pointedly avoided looking Sokka in the eyes as he played with Zuko’s hair in a way that he hoped was comforting.

“What if we got some spirits to help?” Suggested Aang pretty intelligently, since they were sat in the most spiritual place in the North Pole.

“I suppose… There are the moon and ocean spirits, they are kindly to waterbenders and I think they'd want to protect us. Of course, someone would have to find them.” Said the Princess thoughtfully, ruminating over Aang's idea.

“I can go into the spirit world and get them- I'm good at that kind of stuff. As long as someone protects my body whilst I'm gone.” Decided Aang, standing up and brushing himself off.

“Sure, we'll not be going anywhere. But you should probably try to get back before sunrise.” Advised Sokka, as Aang sat back down in a more comfortable position and began meditating.
“I’m glad you took my advice to wait until sunrise to attack, Admiral Zhao.” Iroh thanked, impressing even himself with his acting skills as he pretended to be a loyal and helpful general to the man he had every intention of throwing into the ocean at some point.

“Yes, but you and I, and a couple of my best firebenders, have an important mission- we will be sneaking into the Spirit Oasis as soon as the fight begins at dawn.” Informed Zhao, smiling at the slowly setting moon; it would be time for attack in just an hour.

Iroh readied himself for whatever stupid plan Zhao had managed to concoct that would no doubt get them all all killed, before he smiled at the younger man with polite curiosity.

“Really? Doesn't that seem like an unnecessary risk? We could just go in after we have already taken control.” Suggested Iroh, praying to the spirits that the admiral would just light himself on fire.

“No. We need to go in before tomorrow night so we can get the advantage even on the full moon. You see, General, the moon and ocean spirits, Tui and La, give the waterbenders their power. And both spirits took mortal forms thousands of years ago, according to a book I read in the spirit library. We, or rather I, must kill them so we can win this fight. Just imagine it: I will go down in history as ‘Zhao the Moon Slayer’.” Explained the Admiral, opening Iroh’s eyes to the true depths of his stupidity.

Because if Zhao killed the moon spirit then not only would waterbenders be affected, but so would everyone else- including firebenders. They needed the moon to bring balance, yet Iroh doubted Zhao was smart enough to comprehend that.

“Admiral Zhao, I feel obligated to inform you that the moon also benefits firebenders.” Iroh began, speaking as calmly and placatingly as he possibly could, reminding him of how he would speak to Zuko whenever the Prince was about to do something… Inadvisable.

“Are you disobeying me, Iroh?” Interrupted Zhao with an angry snarl. “Because that would make you just as traitorous as that no-good failure of a nephew of yours.”.

Iroh bit his scathing tongue, and willed himself not to punch the admiral and blow his cover. Yet it was extremely difficult since the other man did just insult Zuko, which Iroh would not stand for if it was unfounded. The general took a calming breath and began brewing himself some tea, bowing his head to Zhao in the process.
“Of course not, Admiral. I was simply voicing my concern and advising you, but clearly you are the best educated on the moon spirit, so if you think we should kill it then I shall obey.” Lied Iroh, planning to save Tui and his nephew from whatever trouble the young firebender was in.

Katara sat next to Pakku, a man she still wasn't that keen on despite his connection with her Gran-Gran since he was still the same sexist ass he had been yesterday, at a table with a bunch of other waterbenders. The sun had just risen and the fighting had begun, but these dozen were about to be given an important task.

“You have all been chosen to defend the civilians during this attack, currently they've all been evacuated to the outskirts of our city but will still need protection whilst everybody else fights on the front lines, understood?” He informed them sternly, before sweeping out of the room and assumedly towards the main battle.

Katara readied herself for a fight (despite only being in defence) and followed the men right to the very back of the city, where women, children and the elderly were all crowded round listening to the battle fearfully. Several babies were crying and so were their families, all of them clinging to each other as Katara felt her heart squeeze uncomfortably in sympathy, with a touch of envy. Because she was alone: her mother was dead, her dad was off at war, her tribe was on the other side of the planet and even her brother and friends seemed to have disappeared. It might have even been enough for Katara herself to well up herself had she not been to hell bent on protecting these people.

The young waterbender broke off from the group and scouted for places people might try to sneak up on them through, since a small attack whilst everyone was distracted with the major battle seemed probable. As she looked around she saw a gateway in the distance, covered in plant life despite the icy weather, but she had the feeling it was supposed to be there, and two guards had positioned themselves in front of it anyway. Eventually Katara settled herself in an alley- it was secluded from everyone else but still within earshot if several people were yelling and had perfect, secretive access to both the weird gateway and the evacuees.

She stood there, ready for attack, for about 30 minutes, before she noticed anything unusual. Momo, who had jumped on her shoulder when Aang had run off with Yue and Sokka, started chittering nervously and pulling at her ear, looking behind her at a rubbish bin. She rolled her eyes at the lemur’s fear, sure it was nothing, but humoured him anyway since she didn't expect an attack so early after sunrise (it was barely 10). Katara went over to the bin, turning her back on the alley opening, and found a polar-rat which she jumped back from in a mixture of shock and disgust.
She was just about to get back into position, when a gloved hand moved over her mouth and her hands got cuffed together within seconds, whilst she struggled against the person's grip and several men laughed at her distress. She was turned to them, biting the hand over her mouth and causing him to free her jaw and whimper, but he still kept hold of her arms.

“Well, well, well, General Iroh, I'd like to introduce the avatar's waterbending companion.” Zhao smiled at one of the men with him, a shorter, older guy who seemed to be second in command. He returned the admiral’s smile but it didn't go to his eyes, which seemed steely with hatred for Zhao—similar to how Katara herself felt about the guy.

“Well, well, well, General Iroh, I'd like to introduce the avatar’s waterbending companion.” Zhao smiled at one of the men with him, a shorter, older guy who seemed to be second in command. He returned the admiral’s smile but it didn't go to his eyes, which seemed steely with hatred for Zhao—similar to how Katara herself felt about the guy.

“It took a second but then it clicked: Iroh was Zuko’s uncle, and he didn't seem to be truly with Zhao, which meant he was trying to protect his nephew. Which… Katara found herself struggling to comprehend, Zuko, who was always such a loner, who she was pretty sure had nightmares every night, had this guy looking out for him, risking his life to protect him.

“You're Zuko’s uncle?” She asked, trying to keep the conversation with Iroh going.

“Unfortunately yes, I was most disappointed when he ran off in the South Pole to help the avatar. Luckily now I have a chance to make things right. Admiral Zhao, please let me keep hold of the prisoner- I don't think any of these men will manage to keep her bound, the imbeciles.” Requested Iroh, his lying almost flawless except for the cues he kept giving Katara.

Zhao allowed the general to take hold of Katara, and he left her cuffs on but his grip was soft—extremely easy to pull free from. Then Zhao began leading them towards the strange gateway, for some reason knowing exactly where it was, and then hiding when it finally came into sight so that the two guards didn't spot them and call for help. The waterbender then noticed that the guy who’d originally grabbed her and the one that had been laughing at her were both wearing Water Tribe attire, and they easily walked into view and began speaking with the guards, catching them off guard enough that they easily knocked the two waterbenders out.

“Li, Mun, you two guard out here, General Iroh and I will go in.” Zhao ordered to the two soldiers, who were hurriedly tucking the unconscious bodies of the waterbenders out of sight.

Then Zhao bowed to the gateway, muttering something, before gaining a smirk.
“Looks like someone’s already in there.”

Sokka was still trying to keep Zuko calm when Aang returned from the Spirit World, making great time since they still hadn’t been attacked, yet still a couple of hours late to their sunrise deadline.

“Sorry! But I found out that Tui and La aren’t in the Spirit World at all: they have mortal bodies.” Aang was smiling, probably glad neither Sokka, Yue nor Zuko had died whilst he’d been gone, and he pointed at a black and a white koi fish that were circling each other in the pool.

“That’s great Aang, but how does that help us? If they’re fish then they can’t really do all that much.” Said Sokka weakly, really getting worried about Zuko who still hadn’t spoken and was now slouched limp against his side, his eyes barely open as they flickered between gold and blue, now staying on blue much longer than gold.

“I think it means we need to protect them, or t least that’s what the creepy face stealer told me.” Replied Aang thoughtfully, to which Yue nodded and smiled down at the fish, completely disregarding the face stealer comment.

If given the chance, that would have probably when Sokka would’ve suggested some sort of plan to protect all four of them and the fish-spirit things. But he was interrupted by Zhao bursting into the Spirit Oasis, a smug smile on his face as he marched towards where they were all sat at the water’s edge, luckily Zuko was facing away from him but Sokka doubted that would last for long. Shortly after Zhao, another Fire Nation man came in, Katara in his grasp. The man surveyed the scene and fixed his eyes onto Sokka and Zuko, before letting go of Katara.

“Enough of this, we're not killing the moon or ocean spirits.” Said the man determinedly as Katara, who had also been uncuffed by now, ran towards where Sokka was staring at the stand off.

“Iroh? How dare you defy me! You're just as traitorous as that stupid nephew of yours! I'll kill you, then the spirits, then your nephew and then the avatar!” Zhao yelled, turning to Iroh with fury in his eyes. Sokka had barely regarded that Iroh must be Zuko’s uncle when the firebender in his arms suddenly went tense.
“Uhhhh.” Sokka tried to get everyone's attention, but they were all too focused on the arguing firebenders to notice that Zuko’s eyes were now an unchanging, solid, glowing, pale blue.

He stood up, still not facing Zhao or his uncle, but now visibly in the avatar state to all their friends. Katara gasped, probably since she had no clue any of this was going on, and Aang and Yue simply looked scared and tired, expecting this but hoping against it. Zuko himself was expressionless, but he had an air of danger that made Sokka shuffle back, almost slipping into the pool.

“Awww, look, he wants to defend his uncle, well, let him try- it’ll give me a chance to give him a scar matching the one his father gave him.” Mocked Zhao whilst chuckling menacingly, getting into a stance facing Zuko’s back only to get shot in the side by Iroh, barely managing to dodge the flames that licked up against him. Sokka took it as a free second to feel endless sympathy for Zuko, and vowed to do something about it later- after no one was possessed or in danger of death.

“Hey, Iroh, I really don't think that's necessary.” Squeaked out Sokka, figuring Zuko would not be able to keep his identity secret in this state anyway.

Iroh looked understandably confused, until Zuko turned to face the two and both gained unbelieving expressions. The avatar raised his arm, and Zhao got pelted with a fire blast of such fury that Sokka was surprised he was still in one piece, even though he didn't seem to be breathing. Then, Zuko walked calmly out of the Oasis, leaving a trail of fire as he broke down the gateway and trampled easily over two unconscious guards who looked suspiciously Fire Nation despite their Water Tribe clothing. Sokka, Katara, Aang and Iroh all followed him, Yue staying behind to watch over La and Tui. Sokka was just beginning to hope that maybe Zuko was only going to fight off the Fire Nation ships, since he began walking straight towards the shore, but he was unfortunately proven wrong when Zuko began collapsing the icy buildings he passed, making Sokka silently plead that the civilians had been evacuated.

As he went Zuko began forming a cyclone of air around him, slowly lifting him off the floor, that had fire shooting around in the spiral. It was, in short, absolutely terrifying, and made running after him a lot harder since he was much faster.

“Zuko’s the… Avatar?!” Asked his uncle in bewilderment, genuine care in his eyes as he watched his nephew slowly destroy parts of the North Pole.

“It’s a… Long story.” Muttered Aang, running as fast as he could now since that was the only conceivable way to keep up with the avatar. “I’d follow him in my glider but the air currents up there are too strong, he's really messing up the stratosphere.”.
Eventually Zuko got to the very edge of the North Pole, and was a good 50ft in the air in the middle of his fiery cyclone. He was in between the Fire Nation and the waterbenders, and both groups decided ‘oh, shit’ and backed off a little. Pakku, who they could see vaguely in the distance, seemed to order his men to completely retreat, probably figuring they'd all die otherwise. Which was a good call, since, though it was almost impossible to see, Zuko raised his arms and crossed them, causing massive tentacles of water to break through the hulls of the Fire Nation ships and turn to ice, before dragging the vessels underwater.

He then, raised his arms again, higher this time, and pulled up a massive wave, a wall of water taller than the entire North Pole City, so much water in its volume that the sea bed became empty, all of the liquid being taken, and the ruined Fire Nation ships that lay on the bottom of the ocean were now visible. By now Zuko’s cyclone had made him at least 200ft high, and all of the waterbenders had made themselves scarce at the far right of the city much like Sokka and the others were at the far left, all of them staring at Zuko in anticipation. The wall of water stood unmoving for a terrible minute, its stillness even more threatening as each current struggled to obey gravity, before Zuko pulled his hands to his chest and the water raged against the North Pole, its tips becoming ice that demolished buildings, and completely wiped out the palace and bending school. As if that wasn't enough, Zuko took what must have been the front three quarters of the city’s ruins and pulled them out to sea, decreasing the city’s size drastically and making the waterbenders and their group extremely glad they were on the very outskirts and had only been splashed a little and not drowned.

When the dust cleared, Zuko’s cyclone extinguished itself and began to unravel, making Aang, who was luckily not as figuratively or literally frozen as everyone else, swoop in now the winds had died and catch Zuko as he fell, the avatar state fading from his eyes as he went limp, before Aang brought him back to their little group of four. The Prince was unsurprisingly unconscious, and immediately getting wrapped up in a hug by his uncle who seemed endlessly thankful that Zuko was unhurt, to the point that he began crying tears of relief.

“Uhhhh, don't worry, by the way, everyone evacuated to the very back of the city before Zuko… Destroyed it…” Mentioned Katara weakly, looking ready to pass out as she took in the massive damage around her, the sea filling up the chasm left by Zuko completely obliterating most of the North Pole..

“Do you think the chief will mind that Zuko… Tore apart and then washed away most of his home?” Asked Sokka, knowing the answer but still hoping against it.

“He might be a tad annoyed.” Mentioned Iroh, Zuko still wrapped tightly and safely in his arms as he gave the group a teary smile.

Chapter End Notes
Hi! New Chapter, this is basically the end of book one but the next chapter is also sort of be book 1... Either way, by 20 book 2 will have begun!

Also, off topic but still, INFINITY WAR!!! I won't spoil it, don't worry, but I've seen it twice and it was cinematic gold.

Anyway, I think I managed to explain most of the stuff in this chapter but I think it's important to reinstate how Zuko’s avatar state fought both the waterbender and the firebenders, since they both hurt him. I think it puts across how he is right now on his journey; not quite on either side and instead just going along with his friends.

Whatever your interpretation, I hope you enjoyed this and I'll see you next week! Comments and kudos are always extremely welcome! :))

P. S. How did I do at writing Zuko when in the avatar state? Was it okay? Was it exciting?
Chapter 19

Zuko woke up with a pounding sensation behind his eyes and quiet mutterings all around him. He decided to open his eyes immediately, seeing no point in delaying what would hopefully be an informative explanation as to how he ended up in this mess.

“You're awake!” Both Aang and Sokka exclaimed relievedly when he made a small sound of consciousness and sat up a little.

The Prince was immediately surprised by his surroundings and half convinced he was back in the South Pole, since, though the room was made of ice, it was a messy structure and had nowhere near the elegance of Northern design. But he was definitely in the North thanks to the three waterbending guards at the door (more like flap) of his room. Katara was not present, which was probably a good thing since there were already an uncomfortable amount of people in the reasonably small room.

“Umm, what… Happened?” Zuko asked tentatively, afraid of what the response might be by the death glares he was receiving from the waterbenders.

“Well… What do you remember?” Questioned Sokka, glancing at Aang before speaking.

Zuko tried to recall the latest events and started working through them. He'd gone with Katara to the waterbending class… But she'd not been allowed to participate… Then he'd spent a few hours barely even managing to bend water, whilst those guys had been splashing him with annoying frequency… Then he'd gotten mad, he'd blasted fire at them and broken someone's nose, which Pakku got angry at him for… Pakku then said… And Zuko had been upset, he ran off to some garden where he realised… He was going into the avatar state… He held it off for a long while but then everyone else showed up and, it's a little blurry but, he… Destroyed the North Pole. Of course he did.

“This is probably just a dream I had, but did I wash most of the North Pole away to sea after completely wrecking it?” He asked, and Sokka nodded whilst the waterbenders’ glares intensified.

So he'd demolished one tiny city, that wasn't so bad? Well, the firebender knew it was terrible and on top of that he also sunk those Fire Nation ships, which meant he'd probably killed… Hundreds, maybe even thousands. Guilt was threatening to encompass him when Aang next spoke up, and he was beginning to feel like crying.
“But don’t worry! Everyone got evacuated!” He assured the Prince, doing very little to ease him.

“Yeah! You only killed a few hundred Fire Nation soldiers and Zhao!” Sokka attempted to cheer him up and instead worsened Zuko’s misery to the point where he just layed back on his bed and covered his face with his sheets.

From under his blankets he heard what sounded like Aang pinching Sokka and a mutter or two from the guards, before everyone went silent and a rustle betrayed the fact that the door had just been opened.

“Is he up yet?” Asked his uncle tiredly, a heavy sadness on each of his words.

“Yeah.” Zuko replied for himself, pushing the covers off his face and sitting up, before seeing a smile light up Iroh’s usually cheery face.

The older man immediately rushed forward and hugged him, pushing past everyone else and probably expecting to be pulled away from moments later, per usual. Yet Zuko hadn’t had a proper hug in months, and he’d missed his uncle sorely, more painfully than he’d willingly admit, so he wasn’t about to push the older man off, instead he hugged him back and pressed his face into his shoulder, feeling thirteen again as his eyes actually began to well up.

“Um, would you excuse us?” His uncle clearly wasn’t going to take no for an answer, and everybody left the room reluctantly, allowing Zuko to stop holding back and openly sob into his uncle’s comforting embrace.

“I’m- I’m so sorry… I- I left you and I li- lied, and… I mess- messed everything up… I betrayed the Fire Nat- Father, but I didn’t mean to… And now I feel guilty ab- about destroying this place for so- some reason…” Zuko kept crying, his shaky apology muffled by his uncle’s parka.

“It’s okay, everything is going to be okay. I- I need to tell you something: I’ve been against the Fire Nation for years now. And I don’t blame you for any of this.” The firebender explained softly, rubbing circles into his nephew’s back.

Part of the Prince wanted to yell at his uncle, he’d willingly betrayed their home and was a traitor who he should be ashamed to be related to. But a much, much larger chunk of Zuko didn’t really care, Iroh was always there for him and right now that’s what he needed, there was no point pushing
him away now—especially when the young man hadn't quite finished crying out all the bottled up emotions he'd been holding in for months.

“I'm scared, Uncle.” He admitted quietly, feeling the gaping chasm inside him fill a little as the older man hugged him even tighter.

“That's okay, a man without fear is a fool.” His uncle comforted kindly, thankfully not going into a long speech.

“I don't know what to do. I don't even know what I want to do.” He complained, sniffling a little and hoping the parka Iroh was wearing was too thick for him to feel the dampness of his snot and tears through.

“I always wanted you to carve your own destiny, Zuko. But now… You need to pick who you are, and I'm afraid the world might not allow you to be both the Fireprince and the avatar. I hope you choose to bring balance back to the world, but I can't force you.” He said, and Zuko pulled away a little so he was actually facing his uncle with his bleary eyes and devastated expression.

“You think I should be the avatar?” He asked, his voice smaller than it had been in years; he'd always thought his uncle would be disappointed by his being the avatar, maybe not angry but definitely not happy about it. And yet, here he was saying he should embrace this part of himself.

“Yes. I think you need to carry on travelling with your friends and learn all 4 elements— I even know a king who might be able to help you with earthbending, but you need to do whatever you think is right.” Advised the firebender, placing a grounding hand on the Prince's shoulder.

Zuko didn't know what was right. But he also knew he loved his uncle, and he cared about his friends, plus the Fire Nation hated him, so it only made sense for him to try doing what they all wanted.

Katara spun on her left foot, swiping ice through the air and trapping her tenth opponent of the day as easily as she had the others, whilst Pakku applauded her.

“Well, Lynn, at this rate by my age you might be able to fight off a sea sponge. Does anyone else want to challenge Katara?” Pakku mocked the other waterbenders with a smile and gave Katara a
When no one else offered to fight her (not even the especially sexist older masters) Pakku ended the class and turned to Katara. He had been much less rude ever since he'd found out who her grandmother was, and, while she disapproved of the fact that his sudden turn in nature was not caused by the knowledge that women could be strong but instead by his fifty year old unrequited feelings, she was glad to be given a chance to open up the road for the female waterbenders after her. So she'd been training with him none-stop for the four days Zuko had been comatose so far, and had advanced astronomically.

“Good work, it's almost a shame the avatar has woken up and you'll have to leave tomorrow.” The master mentioned, looking like he was trying not to roll his eyes at the look of glee that washed over Katara’s face.

“Zuko is okay?! Thank the spirits!” She basically cheered, not particularly caring that that meant the chief would be forcing them to leave soon, though she was confused about how they'd carry on his training. “But how will he learn waterbending?”. 

“Well, I suppose he will have to get used to calling you Master Katara.” Pakku smirked whilst Katara felt herself rise onto another plane of existence.

“Really?! But I've barely been trained and-” She began rambling, afraid that she wasn't yet ready.

“You have progressed ten times faster than any student I've ever taught. You are perfectly equipped to teach the avatar, really I suspect the most difficult part of your job will be getting him to cooperate; not the actual waterbending.” The old man chuckled at his own joke, reminding Katara of why she still had a somewhat negative opinion of the guy.

Well, at least that answered one of Katara’s questions, and made any residual unease about having to leave the North Pole disappear. You see, after Zuko had destroyed their home, the Chief said that the day after he woke up their entire group would have to leave- unless Zuko went back into the avatar state and brought their city back. Since that wasn't going to happen, they'd be heading off to the Earth Kingdom the next morning.

“So, once we leave will you begin rebuilding this place?” Asked Katara, frowning a little at the state of disrepair around her and how Pakku’s current school was little more than a demolished wasteland.
“I'll set some of the other waterbending masters to the task. I, on the other hand, shall be heading off to the South Pole with some others to help our sister tribe rebuild itself.” He explained, his ulterior motive of seeing her grandmother again obvious but she disregarded it, happy her tribe would be getting some assistance after all these years.

She left Pakku to go see Zuko, feeling guilty about not being there when he'd awoken and wanting to see how he was doing. Katara was also interested in whether or not the firebender could remember things from the avatar state, or if he was totally unaware of what had happened. She reached the hut he'd been in but found it empty aside from a cleaner.

“Excuse me, do you know where Avatar Zuko is?” Questioned Katara politely, trying to ignore how the elderly woman flinched at the mention of the Prince. Not that the waterbender could blame her.

“His uncle took him to practise firebending a few hours ago, over by the rubble that used to be a library full of waterbending scrolls.” Said the maid saltily, sweeping a patch of the floor and then spitting on it in anger, before sweeping again.

“Oh-kay then. Uh, thanks.” Katara backed away from the woman quickly with a forced smile, before heading to where she was pretty sure the library used to be.

At first she thought she'd gone the wrong way, since she couldn't see any fire or feel any heat. Yet after she'd gotten closer she could clearly see Zuko and Iroh, and they were both doing a strange movement where they moved their hands across their own bodies: down from palm to shoulder, shoulder to gut, gut back up to their other shoulder and shoulder to their other palm. The weird part was the lack of flames, and that Zuko looked calm and rested.

“Uh, hi, am I interrupting something?” She greeted, giving the pair a little wave and causing them to open their eyes. Zuko’s eyes were a tad pink, like he'd been crying heavily, but she ignored that and instead focused on the genuine smile he offered her.

“Oh, hi, Katara. No, you're not interrupting anything. I think I've got it.” He assured her, brushing his dark hair out of his face and nodding at his beaming uncle.

“Yes, I was just teaching Zuko how to redirect lightning- a fitting technique considering I developed it after watching waterbenders. Though it is dangerous, and I would not recommend doing it unless it's absolutely necessary.” He said the last part sternly, and Katara got the sense that this man had been present for a lot of the Prince’s reckless behaviour throughout his life.
“I promise. I'm too tired to actually try it now anyway, besides, it's not like there's a bolt of lightning I can jump in front of… Unless-” Zuko began thinking, which was never a good sign in Katara's experience.

“I will not zap lightning at you, Zuko.” Denied the older man, shaking his head and giving his nephew's back a kindly pat.

Zuko sighed but nodded, before claiming he was going to go find Aang. As soon as he'd left Iroh turned to the waterbender with a serious look on his face.

“I must ask you to help my nephew on his journey, he's very conflicted and needs assistance, okay?” He requested, looking Katara straight in her eyes.

“Uh… Of course, but we don't really have a plan for when we get to the Earth Kingdom-” She admitted, her current ideas extremely limited.

“There's a king you can go to. King Bumi of Omashu, he's not in control of the entire Earth Kingdom but he's a master earthbender as well as being incredibly trustworthy. I'd recommend you go to him- which brings me to my next point: as much as I want to, I will not be joining you. It would only disrupt Zuko's avatar journey, so I will need you and your friends to be there for him.” He explained, a tint of sadness in his voice as he tucked his hair back.

Katara already knew that her, Sokka and Aang would all stand by Zuko no matter what- it's not like there could be an even larger revelation than him being heir to the throne to put them off him anyway. Plus, she cared about the guy despite his brooding tendency and inability to be honest the first time. So she nodded sincerely at Iroh, and began mentally preparing herself for the journey ahead.

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It was nearing midnight when Sokka finally found Yue; he'd been searching ever since Zuko had woken up that morning to say goodbye and yet she'd seemingly vanished. In the end he located her on one of the only intact bridges, looking up at the moon with a sad smile on her face. She didn't even turn when Sokka began to advance on her, instead the Princess just chuckled lightly and began speaking as softly as the moon's vague silvery glow.
“I always loved the moon. Father said it was part of my nature: when I was an infant I was born deadly sick, the healers said I'd die. So my parents took me to the Spirit Oasis and put me in the pool, then my dark hair turned white and my eyes opened. The spirits had healed me.” She explained, leaning over the side of the bridge and allowing Sokka to make his way to stand next to her.

“They must have realised how special you would be one day.” He replied, also looking up but focusing on the stars, not the moon. They were a million different lights piercing the black veil of night, and Sokka fondly remembered being on watch with Zuko a little after Kyoshi and how the firebender had known all of the constellations. Sokka knew about half of them from his mother, and it had felt good to learn the rest.

“Sokka, the reason I became so distant after we met for that ‘activity’ has nothing to do with you- I was already engaged, and I simply liked you too much to keep seeing you.” Yue revealed, pulling down her collar to showcase an engagement necklace that Sokka gasped at.

“What?! No, this guy, whoever he is, he's not your soulmate-” The young man began ranting, disbelieving what he was hearing.

“I know.” She replied quietly.

“You can't marry him- wait, what? You know he's not your true love?” Sokka asked, turning to the Princess who still had a crushingly devastated look resting in her beautiful eyes.

“Yes, but you aren't either. You want someone else.” She said calmly, but as she blinked a little tear started to roll down her cheek, and she let it.

“No! I- I really like you, Yue. You deserve to be with someone who cares about you.” Sokka tried to argue, lightly wiping Yue’s tear away but she just grabbed his wrist weakly and intertwined their fingers, before finally looking up at him.

“Sokka, you'll realise your true feelings in time, for now I just want to let you know that I won't be marrying the man who gave me this. When I first got engaged I thought it was for the good of the tribe; in the midst of fear and uncertainty my people need an heir to the chieftain, and who better than the son of a well respected general? But now, especially after Katara dealt with Pakku, I realise that my people don't need an heir to feel safe- I should be enough. It's time for them to learn how to rely on a woman, and they will have to since I'm all they're getting. One day I'll get married, but it will be to someone I choose.” She spoke genuinely, and rested her other hand on Sokka’s cheek, wiping away one of his tears.
The Water Tribe boy couldn't think of what to say— he had no idea who Yue thought he was in love with (Suki? But Yue had never even met her) but she clearly didn't want to be with him, for some reason she was sure it would end in heartbreak. And Sokka could respect that, no matter how painfully it stung and so he nodded tearfully, just wanting the Water Tribe princess to be happy.

—

Azula sat upon her throne, well, it wasn't her actual throne— that seat was back in the Fire Nation, instead she was sat on an almost perfect replica she'd had placed on her ship that was currently heading North East as she began her search for her brother, uncle and the avatar. She'd been ordered to do this by her father, Firelord Ozaiii, as a special mission after Zhao had recently proven himself to be an imbecile and both Iroh and Zuko had been named traitors. The Fireprincess suspected her mission would take her only a few weeks, since Zuko had never been as skilled a firebender as her, her uncle was old (though admittedly powerful) and, according to Zhao, the avatar was but a child.

With her royal entourage in tow she was sure she'd at least manage to successfully capture both Zuko and the avatar, and then she might use the two of them to trick her uncle into surrendering.

“Princess Azula, we should be able to Dock at Makapu shortly, but the tides currently won't allow us to—” Began the Captain incessantly, causing Azula to crush the grape she'd been about to eat in frustration.

“The tides won't allow us, hmm, Captain? Let me ask you a question: who controls this ship?” She asked, borderline sweetly with a dangerous edge of threat.

“You do, Your Highness.” He replied with a bow, staring at the floor for longer than was necessary.

“Am I the tides, then?” She questioned, trying to bore her eyes into the pathetic man’s cowardly soul.

“Umm, excuse me, Princess Azula?” He dared to look up slightly, confusion clouding his otherwise terrified eyes.

“You said the tides wouldn't allow us to dock, yet you also say I am in command of this ship. And I command you to dock now, anything less is treachery. I will take pity on your disobedience for now, but I warn you that when I toss you overboard the tides will not show the same mercy as I do,
understood?” Azula got up and looked down on the Captain’s bowing form, on his knees and shaking, and she laughed, kicking him in the ribs lightly. “Get to it then, Captain.”.

Chapter End Notes

Hmmmm, Azula gonna be bringing the heat...

Iroh and Zuko reunion! But Iroh can't go with him... :((

I hope you enjoyed this chapter! It was mostly just aftermath and tying up loose ends but I hope it was still good.

Yue and Katara, just, demolishing sexism left and right.

I wonder who Sokka has feelings for...

I would really appreciate comments and kudos, thanks for reading! :))}
“Are we completely certain that this is where we should be going?” Asked Sokka worriedly, scanning the map with a frown despite this being the one time they weren't lost.

“Yes! Iroh said King Bumi would help us with Zuko’s earthbending training, and to get to Omashu this is the fastest route.” Replied Katara as she skimmed through some scrolls she'd picked up in the North Pole.

“And the town we'll be stopping off in will be on our side for once! No Fire Nation- um, no offence, Zuko.” Added Aang, giving the sulking firebender a sheepish smile.

The Prince had actually been in a worse mood than usual ever since they had all woken up two hours prior (though knowing Zuko he probably hadn't gotten any sleep at all) and it was only worsening as time wore on. At first Aang had presumed he was just sad from leaving his uncle behind, which was understandable, but they'd been flying without Iroh all of the day before without Zuko being nearly this grumpy.

“I just don't know, you guys… My instincts are telling me this is a bad idea.” Argued Sokka with a pleading voice that Katara didn't respond to.

“I think we should listen to Sokka, his instincts weren't wrong about Jet.” Zuko supported Sokka, though he was still frowning, and Aang might have begun to lean to their side had Katara not spoken up with an exasperated sigh.

“Well guess what? Appa is getting tired and stopping off in that town will be the calmest day or two we'll have in a while, so unless Sokka’s instincts can fly us the rest of the way to Omashu then we'll have to rest there, okay?! And don't pretend you're on Sokka’s side, Zuko, you just want to postpone your earthbending training for some reason!” Ranted the waterbender, shutting both her brother and the Prince up, and quelling any desire Aang had previously had to be on their side.

About twenty minutes later the coast of the Earth Kingdom came into view, and with it the sight of a small town. Thankfully the town, as Aang had mentioned earlier, really didn't have even the slightest hint of red in the entire place, and was therefore free of the Fire Nation. They landed Appa on the beach in front of where several Earth Kingdom soldiers stood, waiting to greet them, and the four climbed off of Appa and walked up to them.
Greetings, Avatar Zuko, Sokka and Katara of the Southern Water Tribe and Airbender Aang! I am General Fong.” Greeted the man who was clearly in the lead; he wore silver and green armour, and bowed to them politely.

“Thank you so much for your hospitality, General, we are excited to stay in your town for a couple of days before heading to Omashu for Avatar Zuko’s earthbending training.” Katara smiled at the General and ignored the way Zuko was glaring at everybody in sight, and how he kept shuddering at the mention of him being the avatar.

“About that… I heard about what happened in the North Pole-” He started, beginning to lead the four towards the town.

“Sure, he destroyed most of it but that’s water under the bridge.” Interrupted Sokka, probably guessing that General Fong was going to try and arrest Zuko or something.

“Exactly! I don’t think he needs earthbending training- he’s powerful enough to defeat the Fire Nation today!” Exclaimed Fong, turning around to see their shocked faces.

Zuko seemed ready to throw up, or break someone’s nose (it was hard to tell). Sokka looked completely bewildered, and was struggling to compose a sentence. Katara looked similar to her brother, only she had managed to restrain her surprise a considerable amount. Aang himself was incredibly worried, because sure, Zuko was really powerful, but he hadn’t been in control at the North Pole, and he hated the avatar state.

“Umm, excuse me, what?” Asked Katara, attempting to properly compose herself but failing miserably.

“Avatar Zuko took out an entire fleet, and most of a civilisation, singlehandedly! He could easily destroy the Fire Nation capital if he could control the avatar state!” He tried to convince them, but everybody seemed wary.

“I’m not going to destroy the Fire Nation capital! And I’m definitely not going into the avatar state, I’m not ready and I’m not doing it!” Yelled Zuko, stepping up to the General and pushing him back a good few feet with a jab to the sternum.

“Please, a war is going on, people are dying, you could stop all of that death a lot sooner than if you
waited until you mastered all 4 elements.” Fong pleaded, and Aang began to agree.

Sure, Zuko wasn't completely prepared, but Aang hated the thought of people dying, and wished the firebender could put a stop to it. That in mind, Aang pulled a little on Zuko’s green sleeve (he was back to pretending to be from the Earth Kingdom), and pulled the Prince away from the others before he began speaking to the angry teenager quietly.

“Zuko… I know you don't want to, but if you mastered the avatar state… Just think of how many lives you could save, children, parents, benders, non-benders. Please, just try?” Aang pleaded, noticing how the Prince’s resolve seemed to crack as he bore his puppy-dog eyes into the young man’s soul.

“Fine.” Zuko grunted, crossing his arms and sulking at the ground as Aang gained a smile and pulled him back towards the others.

Zuko hated being the avatar. Okay, fine, sometimes he had fun with the bending- but that was bending, not massive avatar magic. The avatar state, however, was so deeply avatar exclusive that he'd decided to never go into it again, though technically he never decided to go into it the first time. Yet Aang, with his stupid hopeful voice and big eyes, had made him agree to try. And, not only that, but he'd also be doing this for the express purpose of taking down his father, which he was not ready to do.

“Hey, you okay?” Asked Sokka, sitting down next to where Zuko was brooding quietly, waiting for General Fong to finish planning his different methods of getting Zuko into the avatar state.

“I'm fine.” Zuko replied gruffly, in a terrible mood and most decidedly not fine.

“Look, you don't have to do this if you don't want to. I know Aang wants you to, but he's not going to blame you for backing out.” Sokka placed a hand on the firebender’s shoulder, and he found it strangely comforting.

“I- I can't refuse now.” Zuko sighed, pushing his hair out of his eyes and trying not to flinch as his hand brushed against his scar unexpectedly.
“We… We know about that by the way.” Admitted Sokka softly, still not removing his hand from the Prince’s shoulder.

“You know about what?” Zuko asked, shifting to properly look at the other man.

“You scar… How you got it—Zhao told us whilst you were in the avatar state—” Sokka began kindly, the pity in his voice angering Zuko and causing him to push the teen away, both figuratively and literally.

“Zhao is a liar!” He snapped, standing up and looking away from Sokka who flinched a little at Zuko’s volume.

“I don’t think he was lying about this, buddy.” He said, still sympathetically, annoying Zuko even more but also adding a little warmth to his chest—because Sokka cared.

“It doesn’t matter, now I have to go.” Zuko regained a normal volume and sighed a little, pinching the bridge of his nose as he headed towards where Fong, Aang, Katara and some soldiers were waiting.

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“Okay, firstly we have this tea that should give you more energy.” Fong offered Zuko a cup of sweet smelling tea that was probably a lot worse tasting than it looked since his uncle had never forced it down his throat.

The firebender was sat in a room filled to the brim with fancy cushions and five other people altogether. It was now midday and Zuko figured he had no other choice except to gulp down the tea, shuddering at the putrid taste and attempting futilely not to gag. He got most of it down though and waited for the effect to kick in, half expecting to go full on avatar any second. Yet nothing really happened, though he did begin to feel a little jittery and started tapping his leg, before jiggling his entire leg, before feeling so restless that he just got up and began pacing up and down the room.

“Uhh, I don't think it's working like it's supposed to.” Aang pointed out, as Zuko paced, whilst Fong sighed.
“Maybe that's a good thing, I'm not sure putting him in the avatar state is going to go well…”
Mentioned Katara, grabbing Zuko’s arm and forcing the firebender to sit down next her.

“But… It could save lives!” Pleased Aang, not really giving Katara a chance to explain her side before interrupting her.

“But in the North Pole he could have easily killed all of us!” She argued, still holding onto Zuko’s arm but almost painfully tightly now.

“Can we stop mentioning that?” He muttered, pulling his arm away from the waterbender and beginning to make a tornado in his hands to relieve stress.

“I don't want to be a part of this; I'm going to go find Sokka.” Katara stormed off with a frown, leaving Aang apparently conflicted.

—

The next attempt to make Zuko go into the avatar state was an hour later, and was basically just meditation. The firebender chose not to do this one properly, however, since last time he meditated he ended up getting a visit from Kyoshi. Unfortunately, the others noticed his act.

“Why won't you at least try?!” Yelled Fong, dragging Zuko up by the collar and spraying spit in his face.

“I am trying! I just don't like meditating!” He said, shoving Fong off of him whilst Aang tried to make the peace.

“You've been against this all day- why?!” Shouted the General, ignoring Aang and making such a racket that Zuko was sure even the Fire Nation could hear him.

“You're asking me to destroy my home!” Zuko admitted loudly, his fists lit aflame as all of the soldiers gasped in shock.
Aang looked about ready to face palm and Fong might've even attacked had Sokka and Katara not come rushing out of one of the buildings (probably having heard the commotion) and also began speaking.

“I think we all need to calm down.” Mediated Katara, raising both of her arms and standing in between the Prince and the General.

“You brought a firebender into my town!” Accused Fong correctly, raising his hands into an attack position.

“Technically he's also an airbender and can sort of waterbend.” Brought up Sokka, only to get a massive boulder earthbended at him.

Zuko dived onto Sokka and pushed him out of the way, rolling with him skillfully as to take the brunt of the force before landing on top of him. A short distance away, Aang and Katara had begun attacking Fong, so Zuko decided he'd have to go help them.

“Are you hurt?” He asked first, not wanting Sokka to have a concussion or something.

“Ummm… Nope.. No, I uh- I don't think so…” Sokka stuttered, his face really red for some reason.

Zuko decided it was good enough and got up to join in the fight, sending a fiery blast right at Fong who was trying to hit Aang with a massive rock. Aang was easily dodging but still looked scarily close to getting crushed. Once he had the General’s attention Zuko had to decide how he'd beat him up, and decided on just blasting fire at him until the man crumpled. This tactic worked pretty well, until 10 more soldiers entered the mix.

“We might have a problem!” Admitted Katara as she slashed water at three of the men, her voice beginning to tire.

“Let's just get out of here!” Yelled Sokka, now back on his feet and blocking a non-bending soldier with his boomerang.

“I've already blown the bison whistle, Appa should be here any- there he is!” Called back Aang over the commotion, before using the hand that wasn't blasting air at two earthbenders to point at the sky.
Appa landed, trampling several people, and giving them enough of a distraction to rushedly get onto his saddle before he flew away, not fast enough to avoid several boulders but strong enough not to be brought down.

“Sorry I forced you to try this.” Aang apologised sadly, feeling tremendously guilty as he watched Zuko pick rubble out of his hair sulkily.

“It's- it's okay. Got my mind off... Stuff at least.” Zuko replied quietly, crossing his arms and looking down at his lap.

That caught Sokka and Katara’s attention, and they halted in arguing over the correct course to look at the firebender worriedly.

“You've been in a bad mood all day, what's up?” Asked Sokka, his tone laced with concern that didn't seem to improve Zuko’s mood in the slightest.

“It's stupid.” He replied quickly, very clearly extremely upset.

“If you care about it then it's not stupid.” Aang comforted softly, gaining a little glance from Zuko, who sighed.

“What... today is the 3 year anniversary of my father banishing me...” He admitted sadly, no longer crossing his arms as much as he was hugging himself- which was just upsetting.

The three were completely lost for words; how do you respond to that? The thought of your parent doing something so cruel was just devastating, but they also knew Zuko’s dad had done so much worse.

“How did you get that scar?” Asked Katara, gaining a flinch from the firebender.

“Why does it matter?” He responded defensively, giving the waterbender a weak glare.
“Because I have a feeling it's the three year anniversary of you getting that too.” She said quietly, and again Zuko sighed, visibly deflating.

“Ye- yeah, it is. The day I got banished, well I didn't tell you the whole story. After I spoke out against the general's plan, an act of disrespect, I had to participate in an Agni Kai- a fire duel. I didn't think… I thought I'd be fighting the general, but since I had spoken out in my father's war chamber I had to fight… Him. I refused, I love my father, I respect him, I- I just couldn't fight him. It was an act of cowardice, my father gave me this scar as punishment and then stripped away my honour and banished me.” Zuko explained sadly, making a weak tornado with his hands before extinguishing it with a clap.

“That's… Awful! How could he do that to you?!” Exclaimed Sokka loudly, standing up in frustration, his eyes filled with even more hate for the Firelord.

“He was right to do it! I was a failure of a Prince and now I'm a traitor! A crappy traitor at that, who can't even seem to betray him correctly! I destroyed a fleet of Fire Nation ships, I obliterated the North Pole- what he did was merciful!” Zuko yelled back, standing up now as well and staring Sokka down.

“No. It. Wasn't. You deserve better! Your parents shouldn't hurt you, they should protect you!” Argued Sokka stubbornly, not backing down.

“It doesn't matter now, anyway, it's done! Now I either have to kill my own father or I'll get killed, or tortured, or something worse and so will all of you!” He responded, reminding Aang of the stakes.

They all waited in silence for someone else to speak, to relieve tension, but nobody did for a good few minutes whilst they stewed in the dark atmosphere. Eventually, Sokka crumpled.

“That's not going to happen. The Fire Nation aren't going to capture you- we won't let them.” He promised softly, any anger draining out of him as he collapsed back into a sitting position.

Zuko didn't properly reply outside of a nod and sat down too, leaning back against the saddle and closing his eyes as if to shut the rest of the world out.
I hope you enjoyed this chapter! We're officially in book 2.

I adore your comments and kudos, see you next week :))
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Okay, we have to get past those mountains to get into Omashu, but there are Fire Nation soldiers guarding them so it might be difficult to fly over them.” Sokka informed the others, scanning the map and then looking up to the cliffs they had to somehow get past.

It had been three days since they'd gotten away from Fong and most of the residual tension had seemingly dispersed, though Zuko was still in a royally bad mood most of the time and Aang still felt pretty guilty about the whole ordeal. Now Appa had landed a little way into a forest as Sokka attempted to find a way to Omashu, and the others were not being helpful in the slightest.

“Okay, maybe you won water-air-fire but I think I'll win-” Started Aang cheerily, ignoring Sokka, as he sat in a circle with Katara and Zuko.

“Aang, Zuko only won that game because he can switch elements! He has a totally unfair advantage!” Grouched Katara, splashing some water at Zuko’s smirk that he still wasn't skilled enough to block.

“Hey! I could've won with just firebending, you're just a sore loser!” He exclaimed, blasting air at Katara and causing her hair to frizz up messily.

“Well let's have a decider! Whoever can name the most cities in alphabetical order wins.” Suggested Aang, cracking his knuckles only to gasp in pain. Zuko laughed at that and Sokka spared a long enough glance to see the firebender smile, it was small but genuine and made his heart- nope, not thinking about that.

“That's not fair either, I grew up in the South Pole without any knowledge of the different cities!” Argued Katara, crossing her arms and pouting.

“Sokka knows loads of cities and he's also from the South Pole.” Pointed out Zuko, no doubt annoying the waterbender immensely but making Sokka smile a little as he was still trying to concentrate on his map.

“Yeah, but that's because he's constantly looking at maps and stuff.” She grumbled, gesturing towards her brother.
“Speaking of maps, I need help over here. Whilst you guys were having fun I've been trying to figure out a route to Omashu.” Sokka turned towards his friend, sister and… Zuko, and pointed annoyedly to the center of the map. “We're here, Omashu is there, and a whole bunch of Fire Nation Soldiers are there. See the problem?”.

They all looked at the map blankly for a few seconds and then at each other, before shrugging. Katara then glanced up at the mountains in question and made a measuring motion with her hand.

“How about we could sneak through on foot?” She asked, looking back at Sokka.

“Unless there's some magical passage through the mountains, then no.” Replied Sokka, wiping his brow before beginning to study the paper before him even more meticulously.

He did that for a few moments, before he was interrupted by Zuko tearing the map from his hands and making a shushing gesture.

“There's someone here.” He whispered, his eyes darting around the surrounding trees as he sat extremely close to Sokka, not moving back to his original position on the other side of the saddle.

Everybody stayed quiet until they began to hear… Music? Singing? And Zuko’s serious front melted into confusion and he gained a softer, cuter expression- damn, Sokka had to stop letting himself think that way. Then, once the singing sounded just a few feet away, a bunch of strangely dressed travellers burst forward from forest, waving happily at Appa and their little group.

“Hello there! What's up with you guys?” Asked the leader lazily, still strumming on his banjo quietly but, thankfully, no longer singing.

“Uhh…” Muttered Sokka, completely bewildered by the singers and the entire situation in general.

“Hi! I'm Aang, that's Katara, he's Sokka and he's-” Began Aang with his usual chipper nature, jumping down from Appa to meet the weird group- though who was Sokka to judge?

“Hey, you're an Air Nomad, we're nomads too!” Exclaimed the guy, sounding half drunk but harmless so the others descended from Appa as well.
“Cool! Hey, do you know a way to Omashu?” Asked Aang, taking the responsibility out of Sokka’s hands.

“That’s crazy! We were just singing about a path to Omashu! Through the Cave of Two Lovers!” Replied the Nomad, making a big hand gesture when he said ‘Cave of Two Lovers’.

“Not to be confused with the Cave of Three Lovers!” Mentioned a female nomad happily, to which the leader nodded.

Sokka knew he was going to regret asking, but, being basically out of options, he did anyway.

“What's the Cave of Two Lovers?” He sighed, hating the smile that spread across the man's face.

“The best way to explain that is with a song! A 1, a 2, a 3 and-” He counted his group in and they all prepared their instruments, whilst Sokka began to regret every decision he'd ever made.

“Two lovers, forbidden from one another
A war divides their people, and a mountain divides them apart.
Built a path to be together.” They started before halting slightly.

“... Yeah, I forget the next couple of lines but, uh, then it goes-” Said the leader quickly, before breaking back into song.

“Secret tunnel!
Secret tunnel!
Through the mountain!
Secret, secret, secret tunnel! Yeah!” They finished happily, smiling at the applause Aang and Katara gave them.

Sokka and Zuko, however, simply rolled their eyes at the nomads’ antics and silently agreed to just brave the Fire Nation troops.
“Hey, this is exactly what we need! Would you show us through the tunnel?” Asked Katara politely, shooting the nomads a pleading look that was barely even needed. Why was it always the most useless people who were the most willing to offer help?

“I'm not sure this is the best idea…” Began Sokka, feigning indecision.

“Why not? You said ‘unless there's some magical passage through the mountains’ we wouldn't be able to get to Omashu, this tunnel sounds exactly like a ‘magical passage’.” Quoted Aang annoyingly and innocently as Sokka silently cursed his past self.

“Then it's settled! You guys get to come with us, let's go!” Said the leader, motioning for them to follow him as Sokka searched for a bridge to throw himself off.

They reached a large hole in the side of a mountain, not too far from a Fire Nation base Sokka noted, and the nomads (the leader of which who was apparently called Chong) stopped walking. The tunnel in front of them was extraordinarily dark and Sokka was pretty sure that if someone went in there without a torch they'd never find their way back out.

“Well, here's the tunnel.” Chong smiled, pulling out his banjo once more and beginning to strum it casually, making Sokka miss the days of getting chased about by pirates. “To get through we have to trust in love.”.

Sokka mentally cursed, because he was way more reliant on fact than feelings and did not want to get swallowed up by some magic cave for that. He was brought out of his musings by the loud sound of the nomads beginning to sing again, and the harsh voice of Zuko telling them off for it.

“We are literally right next to a Fire Nation base! What are you thinking making such a racket?!” He scolded reasonably quietly, but it was too late as moments later the sound of rushing footsteps heading towards them could be heard.

“Everybody, into the tunnel!” Called Katara, rushing in stupidly but getting followed by everyone else (even Appa who lumbered through the entrance surprisingly quickly), and, not wanting to be
turned to ash by a bunch of firebenders, Sokka also ran in after her.

They sprinted as far down the hall as they could, before voices became audible at the entrance of the cave. They seemed to have a short argument that basically boiled down to: ‘let's not go in there, bad curse etcetera’ (making Sokka feel super enthusiastic about the whole endeavour), before they blew up the entrance and left their group in pitch black.

“Damnit! Does anyone have a torch?!” Yelled Sokka into the inky blackness, stumbling forwards and trying to reach out to anyone.

“Right here.” Zuko replied snarkily, two flames erupting on his palms just in time for Sokka to see that he was about to crash into the firebender. Zuko rolled his eyes and the Water Tribe boy seriously hoped that everyone just assumed that the heavy blush settling on his cheeks was just from the weird, fiery lighting.

“Hey, cool fire! We've got fire too!” Said Chong, as the female nomad (who, like all of the other nomads, was thankfully way less talkative than Chong) hit 10 torches to the ground and lit them all at once, causing Sokka to rush forward and extinguish them.

“We don't know how long we'll be down here or what will happen! We have to save the torches, everybody, umm, except Zuko, grab a torch.” Sokka ordered sternly, grabbing one for himself as he spoke.

“Okay, does your song say which way we go to get to Omashu?” Asked Aang sweetly, looking around at the large, encompassing walls and staring at how the tunnel split into three.

“We gotta trust in love.” Informed Chong once again, just as unhelpfully as the first time, making a heart shape with his fingers.

“Or we could not be idiots and actually live to see the sun again? I'll make a map of everywhere we go so that we'll be able to find our way.” Sokka planned, grabbing some paper from his pack and beginning to walk into the middle tunnel.

He led the way in that direction for about half an hour, ordering Zuko to walk right next him so he had enough light to see his map and for no other reason aside from that. (Side note: how on Earth did Zuko’s hair smell so nice when he’d showered in the exact same pond water everyone else had?!). They found another few crossroads and Sokka always chose to go through the middle, but it wasn't
getting them very far and then they ran into a passage that only had two exits.

“Hmm, well, I would say we go back and start over. Maybe this time we go left at that first-” Started Sokka, absently scratching his temple as he thought.

“Shh, can you hear that?” Asked Zuko quietly, gesturing for everyone to shut up, succeeding in even quieting the nomads. Then again, when you have two handfuls of fire people tend to listen to you.

Sokka, when concentrating, did notice that there was a faint crumbling sound, and something that seemed to be clawing against stone. The boy focused even more and realised it was coming from straight above them.

“Everybody, dow-” He began to shout, grabbing Zuko around the waist and pushing him out of the way of some crumbling rubble just as it would have fallen on top of him.

Once they'd both landed heavily on the ground, Sokka turned to see Aang do the same with Katara just before she would’ve been hit. Soon the stone had created a mound between the group, Sokka, Zuko, Momo, Appa and the nomads on one side, and Aang and Katara on the other.

“Sokka! Zuko! Can you hear me?” Called Katara faintly, sounding worried.

“Yeah, we're fine!” Sokka yelled back before realising he was still on top of Zuko, and the firebender had had to extinguish one of his hands to avoid frying Sokka.

The boy blushed and got up, offering to pull up Zuko too, who looked strangely pinkish in the warm light. With the oogie feeling in his chest subsiding, Sokka decided it was time to focus on the problem at hand and turned towards the new, massive barrier between them and the two benders.

“Okay, I guess we'll just have to make our own ways out. Do you two have torches?” Asked Sokka loudly, his nerves beginning to eat away at him when Katara took several long moments to reply.

“Yeah, 2 of them! I'm sure we'll be fine, they'll last about, hmm, 4 hours? Bye!” She yelled, before her and Aang presumably began making their own way out.
Zuko’s fire had seemed a lot brighter than the torch Aang was currently holding, though maybe that was just because Zuko had had two hands full of flames. But the torches were adequate in lighting their way, though their last one would be running out in about an hour and they didn't seem any closer to finding their way out. Until Katara stumbled across a massive stone square walkway, with a massive chamber on the other side.

“Maybe this leads to the way out! Come on!” She called, clearly relieved that they had a chance of not dying inside a weird tunnel, running into the chamber with Aang following close behind.

The room was huge and beautiful, carved in a way that made Aang think an earthbender must have designed it. On one wall was a sculpture of a man and a woman kissing, and on the other there was large, old writing. Katara studied said writing closely, scanning the words meticulously before turning to Aang with a pensive expression decorating her face.

“The writing is old, and in an earlier form of our language maybe, but I think it basically says: ‘love is brightest in the dark’. Either that or it's ‘flirting glows dimly’, but I'd guess it's the former. But then there's smaller text about these two lovers, Oma and Shu, who were in warring towns but fell in love anyway, and I think they used these tunnels to meet each other. They were the first human earthbenders, learning from the badger moles, until Shu died in the war between their towns and Oma used her bending to stop the fighting. She brought the two towns together and created a city, which they named ‘Omashu’ after the couple’s love.” Explained Katara, running her hand softly over the text as though the stone were delicate.

“Okay, so, how does that help us, exactly?” Asked the airbender, studying the kissing sculpture and then looking back to Katara.

“Well… Think about it, Chong said the way through this place was trusting in love, there's a sculpture of two people kissing and an old message also about love. So maybe… The way we figure out the path out of this place is if we… Kiss.” The waterbender explained, setting of alarm bells in Aang’s head, screaming: ‘DON'T SCREW THIS UP’.

“Kissing?!” He ended up exclaiming, his voice an octave higher than usual and reflecting his current excitement.

“Well… Yes.” She replied, looking extremely flustered whilst Aang attempted not to implode.
“I mean, uh, yeah, if you want. If we're going to die otherwise-” Started Aang, trying to feign indifference as to not make Katara feel too embarrassed, yet he failed miserably.

“What's that supposed to mean?!” She asked angrily, putting her hands on her hips as Aang dithered pointlessly.

“Umm, no! I was just saying that if it's the choice between kissing you and dying than I'd rather kiss you, er, yeah.” He rambled, trying not to focus on Katara's deadly gaze.

“Well, I guess we'll both have to die then.” She decided, sauntering off whilst Aang cursed his stupidity with a thousand different words he'd heard Zuko mutter under his breath during airbending practice.

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“If they sing one more song I'll slice them each in half and then feed their remains to Appa, except their hearts which I'll hang over the entrance of this stupid cave.” Muttered Zuko to Sokka, remembering when his sister had threatened the Palace guards with a similar punishment when she'd been 8.

They'd been wandering aimlessly for about four hours, and his arms were getting tired from keeping them in a stiff position so that his flames could better light the way. Sokka’s map had been decidedly useless, and eventually the young man had conceded that the tunnels must be changing- though he had no idea how.

“Usually I'd disagree with that method but right now I might be on your side.” Whispered Sokka back, pinching the bridge of his nose as Chong started up yet another rendition of: ‘a cactus, a boy and a broken elbow’.

“We are never going to get out of here at this rate.” Grumbled Zuko, so sick of the nomads that he was considering learning earthbending just so he could drop a boulder on them.

“I wonder how Aang and Katara are doing, they must be almost out of light by now.” Wondered Sokka, no longer using his map but still incredibly close to Zuko’s side for some reason.
“Them? They’re probably drooling all over each other, but still not admitting they like each other.” Scoffed the firebender, stretching out his arms above his head and noticing the ceiling had strange holes in it.

“What?! No way Aang and Katara are a- a thing! How would you even know that?!" Sokka cried, clearly oblivious to the chemistry his sister and the airbender shared.

Zuko rolled his eyes and kept walking, taking note of each strange hole in the walls until they came across such a big one he had to mention it.

“Sokka-” He started, grabbing the other man’s arm as he kept walking when the Prince stopped.

“The weird holes? Yeah, I've been noticing them for a while now but nothing seems to be coming out of them so-” Interrupted the non-bender, also stopping to look at the gap in the wall.

Sokka was cut of by a strange crumbling sound, similar to what they'd heard earlier before the roof had caved in, with a scratching sound to go along with it. The two boys shared a fearful look before they began running, only to be stopped just as they reached Appa and the nomads by a massive creature breaking down the wall. It was a badger mole, Zuko had heard the legends, they were meant to be big, earthbending, herbivores with bad eyesight. Yet this one didn't seem to have any issue finding their group, and looked straight at Zuko and Sokka.

“Well, I think they're herbivores.” Muttered the firebender, seriously hoping the badger mole wasn't attracted to the heat of his fire.

“Great, but it can still kill us without eating us!” Sokka whispered loudly, before smiling at the beast that Zuko was pretty sure couldn't even see them.

Just when the Prince was about to suggest they attack, that he might be able to burn the creature to a crisp before it crushed them, three more badger moles burst out of the surrounding walls with an almighty crack as the stone broke apart. They all stared at Zuko intently, and, just to test his theory, he moved a few steps away from Sokka to see if they kept focusing on him, which of course, they did.

“Maybe they can tell you're the only bender and so you're the biggest threat?” Suggested Sokka, looking increasingly worried as the badger moles began to advance on Zuko.
Zuko stepped back a little more, trying no to breath too much as he decided what to do. No way he'd win against 4 badger moles but he might be able to scare them off. Yet, apparently, he had no need to figure it out since he spied Sokka grabbing Chong’s banjo, taking it easily as the nomad was in a state of shock and didn't even seem to realise it had gone missing. The Water Tribe boy then strummed it, drawing all attention to himself as Zuko gasped in shock.

“Erm… Badger moles!
Badger moles!
Please don't, uh, kill us!
And go back to your holes?” Sokka sung terribly, well, his voice was half decent but the lyrics had literally no flow.

Yet, this didn't seem to bother the badger moles who cocked their head to the side and lost their hostility.

“Did that actually… Work?” Asked Zuko quietly, making his way over to Sokka, who was now surrounded, and giving him a disbelieving look.

“Um, of course it worked! Now, do you think these guys can help is get out of here?” Asked Sokka thoughtfully, probably beginning to think of a very dangerous idea.

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“We have a few minutes left of this torch at best.” Katara frowned in the dim light, looking at the floor as she seemingly gave up getting out.

“Umm, Katara? I just wanted to say, before we, you know, get trapped in here for the rest of our lives, that I'm really sorry for what I said earlier. I never meant that you weren't awesome, or pretty, or kind, I just-” Aang begun apologising, scratching the back of his neck.

“Don't worry, it's fine, I overreacted. I shouldn't care whether you want to kiss me or not, and really we should have just done it back there because now… Well now we're going to die, slow, dark deaths as we become dehydrated.” She reconciled with a weak smile, the torch in Aang's hand
flickering, soon to go out.

“We could always… Kiss… Now. It's worth a, um, shot…” Aang suggested, turning red; not that it mattered with such poor lighting.

“Well… I guess.” Katara leaned forward, still a little taller than Aang but not having to duck down at all, when just before their lips met the torch went out completely, and a blue trail lighted itself on the ceiling.

The two gasped and pulled away from each other, Aang severely disappointed about missing out on the kiss but happy that there seemed to be a way out. They began following the lights, almost holding their breaths in anticipation, until they finally saw the light at the end of the tunnel, and burst out into a field.

“We lived!” Aang exclaimed, jumping onto his air scooter and rushing forwards, happy to be out of the tunnels.

“Okay, but where are-” Katara started worriedly, before she was cut off by half of the side of the mountain breaking open and revealing 4 badger moles, each seated with their companions, and Appa and Momo following shortly behind.

“Hi!” Shouted Sokka from on top of the lead badger mole, with Zuko sat next to him.

They descended from the animals and rushed over, waving the nomads (who were not interested in accompanying them to Omashu) off. Then they began to retell their adventures within the tunnels.

“So then we found out that ‘love is brightest in the dark’ literally meant we had to turn off all the lights!” Explained Katara jubilantly, smiling wildly at their success.

“Well duh.” Zuko rolled his eyes with a frown, crossing his arms and leaning slightly against Sokka, seemingly naturally.

“Yeah, what did you think it meant?” Sokka teased, his voice hitching a little for some reason.

“Anyway, I'm gonna go check on Appa.” Katara choked out whilst blushing similarly to Aang, before heading off towards Appa.
“I'll go help her, but, hey, thanks for not letting me get crushed by a bunch of badger moles. That entire experience was complete Hell, but it was a little less torturous with you.” Thanked Zuko genuinely, offering Sokka a smile before patting his arm lightly and a tad awkwardly, and then heading off towards Appa.

Sokka had become incredibly flushed, to the point that Aang wondered if he was feverish and tried checking his temperature, to which the older male barely blinked.


“Wha- um, yes, I'm fine. Totally. Thanks.” He replied, not properly focused before he too wandered over to Appa and the others, not even telling Aang about how they'd gotten out of the tunnels.

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Azula and her royal entourage were about 60 miles Southeast of Omashu, where she was searching for her uncle—who she assumed would at least be with Zuko too, if not the avatar. She had picked up Iroh’s trail at some Earth Kingdom General's port-she could have taken over the town but chose not to, opting instead to tail her uncle. The Princess wasn't sure why he was going in that exact direction, but figured he had good reasoning and she'd have to be careful.

“Princess Azula, our scouts have searched the area and your target seems to be just South of the Omashu mountain range, extremely close by. We also suspect that he set up a distraction for our troops on those mountains, since two soldiers reportedly heard hippies singing as they-” Explained one of her men, his voice annoying Azula to no end.

“I don't care. My uncle is close? I'll go get him and then I'll question him as to how he evaded the Fire Nation.” She stated, not even looking at the guy as a small smile crept onto her face and she started heading towards the ex-general’s location.

“How do you plan to capture him? He’s-” The same man spoke again, and Azula considered burning out each of his eyeballs and tearing out his tongue for his impotence.

“Skilled? Cunning? So am I, more so than he is. If he was with my pathetic brother I might try to trick them, but he'd see right through that. We'll just have to overpower him.” She decided, ignoring the slight whimper of protest that escaped from the soldier’s mouth.
They travelled for about 20 minutes before they came across a small campsite at the edge of a forest, a pot of tea over the fire still steaming.

“Hello, Azula.” Greeted her uncle politely, gesturing for her to have a seat.

“You want me to sit with you? What a pity, I came here to fight.” She replied with feigned sadness, to which Iroh shook his head regretfully.

“Yes, yes, I know. But I always believe it's polite to show kindness to your victim.” Iroh frowned, placing his cup down before brushing himself off.

“Then I guess you're out of luck.” She got into a stance with a smirk, enthusiastically anticipating burning her uncle to a crisp.

“No, you are.” Iroh replied, now with his own smile, before blasting a stream of intense and sudden flames at her.

She ducked and rolled, before yelling to her soldiers to get him, and they dithered unhelpfully, barely even able to avoid the constant blasts of fire from Iroh. Said man had run deeper into the forest, and had left the trees behind him charred and cracking. Azula burnt away what foliage was left and ran after him, eventually coming to a mostly intact tree that had a message written on it: bye, she growled in frustration and searched for any clues that would point her to her uncle’s whereabouts but came up unlucky; everything past that point was untouched.

There wasn't a trace of him in the entire forest, and even his campsite had been completely unhelpful. Azula blamed the failure on her men, they were utterly incompetent and she needed a better team. A smaller, more skilled group of advanced individuals...

She wondered what Mai and Tai Lee were up to.

Chapter End Notes

Yup, it got gayer...
I hope you enjoyed this chapter!!! :))

There's more Azula and she'll be coming up later on too...

Also: The Angst™ is approaching, I hope you like it ;)!

Comments and kudos brighten my soul!!!

(P. S. Are any of you having issues with the Tumblr app? I am...)
Azula marched into the circus, thanking the spirits that it was currently so close to Omashu, and looked around for her old friend. Said girl was currently in a handstand, and whooped excitedly at the sight of the Princess.

“Azula! It's been so long” She cheered, rushing forward back onto her feet and hugging the firebender, before getting firmly pushed away.

“Why, Ty Lee, how did a general’s daughter end up in the circus?” She asked in mock sweetness, ignoring the uncomfortable look on the gymnast’s face.

“It's just my calling, you know? Here I feel like myself, free and happy- my aura has never been pinker!” Explained Ty Lee, doing a backflip as if to prove her point.

“Really?” Said the princess, silently beginning to figure out how to get Ty Lee to help her. “Well, I have to ask you to leave this place to come and help me capture my brother, uncle and the avatar.”.

Ty Lee dithered uncomfortably, and Azula tilted her head at the girl’s distress, finding it amusing that she could even consider not helping her.

“Well… I'm sorry, Azula, but this is my home now, this is my life now. I can't help you.” She replied eventually, a satisfying cloud of fear in her eyes.

“Well then,” Azula bit back her fury and realised a way to force Ty Lee to join her, that would surely work. “I'd love to see your performance before I leave.”.

“And here is the fabled city, of Omashu!” Presented Sokka as they rounded a corner, gesturing towards what should have been an impressive Earth Kingdom city.
Except it wasn't, it was a smoking, half crumbled, Fire Nation city, with at least a dozen guards blocking their path to the front entrance. Their only saviour in this entire situation was that they were positioned on a hill far enough away from the city that it was unlikely they'd be spotted.

“No…” Muttered Aang sadly, staring at Omashu in heartbreaking shock. Katara patted his arm gently, and Zuko wondered silently what they'd do now.

“We need to get out of here, otherwise those soldiers will find us.” Warned Sokka, preparing to gather their belongings and get back on Appa, who they'd hidden back in the forest.

“No! We have to find Bumi!” Argued Aang stubbornly, adopting a fiery resolve Zuko wouldn't have expected from the usually cheery airbender.

“I'm sorry, Aang, but it's just too dangerous- Zuko will just have to find a different earthbending teacher.” Comforted Katara kindly, yet Aang paid her little mind.

“This isn't about earthbending! Bumi is my friend, and he's in there, so we are going to save him.” He decided sternly, and Zuko found himself nodding.

“Okay, but we can't get past those guards without attracting the attention of everyone inside. Plus, if any of those Fire Nation people see me they'll know exactly who I am.” Zuko began thinking about ways to invade Omashu, and, to everyone's pleasure, Aang immediately brightened up.

Zuko kept thinking whilst the others grabbed some mediocre disguises: Aang wore his hat and Earth Kingdom clothes and Katara and Sokka put on brown cloaks. When the Prince figured out the safest option he realised he'd have some explaining to do… Unless…

“Hey, I'm going to go and distract the guards- disguised, don't worry, Sokka- I'll meet you all back out here.” Zuko explained vaguely, picking up his pack and beginning to head towards where he hoped there'd be an Eastern entrance to the city.

“What?! You can't actually believe we're gonna let you go in there alone, can you?” Asked Sokka, exasperated beyond belief and looking close to handcuffing the two of them together to prevent him from running off.
“Just... Trust me, okay? It would probably take a while to explain.” He pleaded, giving the others his best dose of puppy-dog eyes, despite it not being his usual persuasion tactic.

After a few moments of stern silence they finally nodded, unenthusiastically but agreeing all the same. So the firebender rushed off, sprinting around the outskirts of the city and staying out of sight of everybody. Soon he reached an appropriate blind spot in Omashu’s defences and he threw off his Earth Kingdom clothes, quickly getting into his Blue Spirit costume and starting to run once more. He got to what looked like a sewage tunnel, but decided it was an adequate entrance to the city and climbed in, glad his mask was covering his nose.

Once inside he began walking down, the opposite direction to where the disgusting water was flowing. An idea sprung into his head, and instead of lighting his way with fire (since it was surprisingly bright down there) he began waterbending the sewage away from him, accidentally letting a little slip through his hold and not doing it skillfully in the slightest, but keeping himself pretty much clean and practising all the same.

This discovery that, after some pretty basic instruction from Katara, he was able to bend water sluggishly and with little precision but was still able to bend it, caused him to figure out a way to keep up his Blue Spirit masquerade: he’d only waterbend in this persona. It lined up with Aang’s idea of the guy, as well as throwing everyone else off his scent since ‘if he was the Blue Spirit, why would he waterbend? It's his least favourite element’. This in mind, he forged ahead.

It didn’t take too long for him to arrive in what seemed to be a basement to a large building, possibly even the Palace. Wherever he was, he had to create a big enough distraction that the nobles his father had undoubtedly placed in command of Omashu wouldn't notice his companions sneak in to see Bumi. Figuring he might as well go big or go home, he decided he'd capture the guy in charge.

“When will Zuko's distraction happen?” Asked Aang impatiently, hating having to wait around whilst his friend was imprisoned by the Fire Nation.

“I don't know, but knowing him it'll probably be big.” Replied Sokka, who was currently sharpening his boomerang and looked incredibly worried, though the airbender doubted his anxiety had anything to do with the bluntness of his projectile.

Aang was about to inquire as to the cause of the non-bender’s stress, when alarms began blaring inside Omashu, audible even from their hilltop, and every single guard rushed back into the city,
leaving them with a clear path inside.

“I guess he did it, let's go!” Called Katara, running forward and leading the other two into the city, once inside not even gaining a second glance from the frantic soldiers around them.

The three (and Momo) headed towards the prisons, Aang now directing them, until an Earth Kingdom citizen jumped out from an especially ramshackle building and stopped them in their paths.

“Quick! Get in here!” She advised hurriedly, her eyes darting around to watch for any troops that might run into them.

Figuring she might have information, Aang followed her back into the building and found it to be much larger than it appeared on the outside, and a lot fuller too. What must have been hundreds of people huddled inside: babies, children, adults, the elderly- what was likely most of the people of Omashu. They all looked thankful for their group's arrival, but there was still a lot of fear in their expressions.

“Please! Travelling around out there is dangerous; if the soldiers see you they'll find any reason to arrest you!” Explained the woman, who, on closer inspection, seemed to be of about 60 and was wearing the colours Aang remembered from a hundred years ago: the uniform of a royal earthbending guard.

“Where is King Bumi? Please, we need to find him!” Asked Aang, not really replying the woman's previous warning and eliciting silent shock from the people of Omashu.

“He- he has been captured. When the soldiers arrived he just… Surrendered.” Explained the earthbender, seeming troubled.

“Wait, this guy just gave up? Then why would Iroh think he's a good fit to be Zu- the Avatar’s earthbending teacher?” Wondered Sokka out loud, to which he was quickly answered.

“King Bumi is the most powerful earthbender on the planet! And… You know the avatar?!” The woman questioned, looking Sokka right in the eye as he trembled slightly under her gaze.

“... Yeah… Look, where is your King being held?” Asked Katara, speaking up and turning everyone's attention to her.
“We don’t know, not in the prison at least- we already tried looking there.” Sighed a different person, a general from the looks of it.

They all stewed silently whilst Aang desperately tried to piece together where the Fire Nation would keep Bumi, but he kept coming up empty handed. The airbender took a deep breath in to clear his mind, and tried to think without his bias towards Bumi. They were all in danger, had no idea where Bumi was or what Zuko was up to or when the firebender’s distraction would end; they had to escape now.

“Okay, currently the guards are distracted so we're all escaping the city.” Decided Aang, surprising even himself at his willingness to leave Bumi behind.

“We can't just leave our King!” Protested several of the citizens angrily, though there was some selfish longing in their voices.

“This might be your only chance to get out, I think Bumi would want you to save yourselves.” Said Sokka loudly, speaking over the voices and arguments, and speaking with such clarity and firm belief that the people began nodding.

Aang and the female earthbender, who turned out to be called Bonelle, led the citizens out of the back exit of the broken building, ending up right next to one of the walls surrounding the city. Aang’s heart paused when he spotted a guard tower right above them, but kept on beating when he realised it, like all of the city’s outer defences, was devoid of soldiers. Which, to be honest, was pretty terrible set up on the Fire Nation’s part. Then again, they'd only just taken over Omashu so they probably hadn’t had time to sort out a good system for, well, whatever Zuko had done.

Upon reaching the edge of Omashu, the earthbenders all joined together to create a massive staircase out of the city, and then began guiding everyone over it.

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Zuko really had to work on his plans. Because, while yes he had successfully taken the apparent leader of Omashu, General Ukano, hostage, he hadn’t really planned for anything after that. He’d snuck into the man’s room through his balcony window, glad he had the cover of darkness to obscure him, and had quickly pressed his knife to Ukano’s throat and threatened to kill him if he was attacked.
To this, General Ukano’s wife sounded the alarms (as he'd hoped) but hadn't laid a finger on him. Meanwhile, Ukano was too afraid to speak lest Zuko sever his jugular. This was all pretty good… Until Mai had shown up.

Because, just as was his luck, his old childhood… Girlfriend? (They'd been 11 and 10, so he didn't think it really counted as a relationship) was obviously the daughter of the guy he was threatening to kill. And, as if the universe wanted to guilt trip him, she had run in holding her baby brother.

“Please! Let go of my husband and we'll let you escape with your life!” Lied Ukano’s wife, who Zuko recalled was named Michi, as Mai passed her the child and looked about to throw knives at the Prince.

“No you won't.” Replied Zuko simply, glad Mai wouldn't be able to recognise his voice since she hadn't spoken to him since before his voice had broken.

They stood in tense silence, only the sound of each of them breathing could be heard, no one daring to make a move. Zuko really hadn't thought this through. Mai was still staring pointedly at him and he still had his knife pressed threateningly to her father's throat- they were at a standstill. But if the girl wanted to kill him she could, easily even, she'd just have to risk the life of one of her parents.

“Why are you doing this?” She asked blandly, still not backing down. Unfortunately Zuko had no good response to this other than the truth, which was a crappy idea. So instead he chose to imitate Katara.

“Because the Fire Nation took my mother away- you're all evil scum and deserve to die.” He lied, though his mum really was gone… Okay, now was not the time to think about that.

Without removing the knife from Ukano’s neck, the Prince shifted slightly and bended water at Mai’s hands with his free hand, successfully freezing them after she'd only thrown three knives at him. The first two he dodged when he shifted, but the third sliced into his thigh annoyingly and he let out a short grunt of pain (though his adrenaline seemed to numb his injury), pressing the knife even closer to Ukano’s neck and drawing blood, causing the other teen to back off slightly.

“Where is King Bumi?” He asked, not really sure what to do now and making stuff up as he went. Maybe if he could get to the others they could help him?

“4th floor of the Palace, eighth door on the left.” Replied Michi quickly, before her daughter could
“Here’s what’s going to happen: I’m going to see King Bumi, and you’re going to let me. Once I’m inside his cell I’ll give you back Ukano, no one attacks or he dies, got it?” He said, backing towards the door, unopposed.

He kept going, getting followed by Mai and several guards, until he reached the correct room. He motioned for them to open the metal door and then dived in, pushing Ukano away from him and shoved the door shut before any of Mai’s knives could hit him. He then welded the door shut with firebending and turned to see who he assumed to be Bumi, an old man with out of control hair, his head sticking out of a metal… Coffin? Not that it mattered, judging from his hysteric laughs this guy was definitely alive.

“Bumi?” Asked Zuko a little tentatively, having previously imagined Bumi more like Pakku than an older version of his uncle cross with Aang on cactus juice.

“Yes! Spirit, who are you?” Questioned Bumi maniacally. Once Zuko had determined from the apparent silence outside that this room was soundproof, he answered.

“I'm Zuko and I- uh, I'm the… Avatar. My uncle, umm, Iroh, said you could teach me earthbending, so I have to free you. Has Aang shown up yet?” He explained, looking for a way to free Bumi.

“Hello, Zuko! I'm glad to hear Aang is okay! I can't teach you earthbending, goodbye!” He smiled, then made a shooing motion with his head.

“What?! Well, ugh, we'll figure this out later, first we have to get out of here.” Zuko decided, figuring Aang would have an easier time deciphering what Bumi was talking about.

“Can't, I'm staying. Because a good earthbender always relies on neutral chi- but you already know about that.” Said Bumi kookily, still not making any sort of sense.

“What?!” Exclaimed the firebender, taking his mask off now so that the king could see his ridiculous expression.

“Neutral chi is where you choose to do nothing- which is what you're doing. You're not properly fighting against your father, but you're not on his side either. You are in the middle, choosing to do
nothing for either side. A good earthbender is a master of neutral chi, a person who listens to the earth, this is the kind of person you must find to teach you.” Explained Bumi, still not making a whole lot of sense but a little more clear, though the amount of information he had about Zuko was a tad daunting.

Figuring if he didn’t get out now Mai and her father would get into the cell, Zuko decided to leave Bumi where he was and escape by himself- he’d explain this all to Aang later. He spied around the cell for a way out, his eyes fixing on a small window with glass, probably there because the Fire Nation people had been too arrogant to think an old earthbender had any chance of escape. He used his firebending to shatter the glass, and then jumped out of the window, using airbending to slow his fall as best he could, though he still hit the floor with pretty painful impact that definitely worsened his leg injury.

Upon landing he ran towards the city’s exit, mask back in his bag and adrenaline numbing the pain from the knife in his thigh. Unfortunately, said pain was starting to set in more intensely than before and he was pretty sure he'd lost a decent amount of blood. At least the guards were still in disarray and not attacking him, but he wasn’t sure how long that would last. Thankfully, once he’d properly gotten out of Omashu he saw a large group of Earth Kingdom civilians off to the left, and made his way to them just in time for his injury’s significance to properly set in and for him to collapse to the ground, unable to walk due to the pain.

“Zuko?!” Called Sokka, who was apparently at the back of the crowd and could now see where Zuko was bleeding, pretty pathetically, on the floor.

“Hi.” He groaned, wincing as he attempted to move his leg and trying not to look at the wound.

“What the hell happened to y- oh spirits!” He yelled, probably seeing the prince's leg that, seriously? How much blood? Had Mai hit an artery or something?

“It's just a little knife.” He tried, as Sokka pulled him up until he was being mostly supported by the non-bender, except for a little weight that was on his right leg.

“Yeah, a knife, you idiot!” Sokka yelled, dragging him along until they got to the middle of the crowd, where Aang was.

The young airbender sighed a breath of relief, and rushed towards them, before seemingly noticing the blood, and weakness etcetera and gaining a look of concern rivalled only by the one Sokka was displaying.
“What kind of distraction did you do?” He asked, going on Zuko's other side to help him walk.

“Uhhhh, it's a long story.” He replied, no longer even supporting himself and letting the others basically carry him along.

“Well, with the rate you're shuffling I think we have time.” Muttered Sokka, frowning slightly and making Zuko's insides squeeze uncomfortably.

“I… Umm… I'm the Blue Spirit, this vigilante thing and I wear a mask and I do… Stuff… Anyway, I basically went and threatened to kill the Fire Nation general. Then they got all the guards, but his knife-throwing daughter also showed up and she, well, you can probably guess. After that I managed to see Bumi, but he said he didn't want to be rescued and that my earthbending master had to be someone who 'listens to the earth', whatever that means.” He explained, beginning to wish Katara had taught him how to heal with water.

“What?!!?” Yelled both Aang and Sokka simultaneously, staring at him incredulously as he tried to avert his gaze, which basically meant staring at the ground.

Strangely, however, they were reacting to two completely different things.

“You got stabbed in the leg and still had a conversation with a crazy old king before you figured that 'hey, maybe I should go find my friends'?!?” Screeched Sokka.

“You're the Blue Spirit?!” Exclaimed Aang at the same time, and Zuko found himself a little speechless.

He'd talk about it more later.

—

“Mai, how lovely to see you again.” Greeted Azula, smiling at her old friend. “I need your help.”

“Anything to get out of this place.” Mai replied with as close as she came to smile, before she was
crushed by a seemingly relieved hug from Ty Lee.

Chapter End Notes

Technically I'm late since it's 00:16 here in England, but I'm pretty close sooooo...

Another chapter! I hope you like it, even though it's definitely not my best chapter... \_

I feel kinda lazy since (even though you've had regular updates) I haven't written any new chapters in like three weeks... Won't affect my schedule but I should get on that soon...

Instead of writing, I was watching the Shadowhunters TV show and reading the books (not in that order). I'm literally in LOVE with Malec so if you enjoy that pairing hit me up with a prompt, cos I'd be happy to write anything (besides smut) for them! :))

Anyway, thanks for reading and comments and kudos brighten my soul!!!
Appa flew easily over a thick swamp, the clear daylight making the ride pleasant as their group of four sat happily, just messing around being friends- something Zuko wasn't used to but was really enjoying.

“Okay, I spy with my good eye, something beginning with the letter ‘S’” Said Zuko, smiling at the thoughtful looks on his friends' faces.

“Sokka!” Guessed Sokka excitedly, with such a bright smile that Zuko considered letting the non-bender win.

“No, sorry.” He apologised, crossing his arms as Aang and Katara kept thinking.

“Swamp?” Asked Katara, pointing over the side of Appa at the greenery below them, but again Zuko declined, shaking his head.

“Ooh, how about saddle?” Questioned Aang brightly, to which Katara and Sokka shook their heads in synchronised amusement.

“Aang, Zuko would never be dumb enough to pick the same thing you had last time.” Said Sokka, to which the Prince let out an awkward cough. “You did, didn't you?”.

Everyone began laughing, and after a few moments Zuko joined in, glad to feel safe and happy for once.

So of course, everything immediately went downhill.

Appa began to shake violently, and the group were thrown about haphazardly, before the great beast started getting dragged down into what seemed to be a tornado. Aang and Zuko shared a knowing look, before they began using all the airbending they could muster to try and unwind the stubborn twister, to no avail, and soon they were all thrown overboard to plummet on their own. The firebender fell straight towards some painfully sharp looking branches and, having had to spend the
last few days healing from a knife in his leg, wasn't particularly excited to get impaled again.

So he blasted air and attempted to fall closer to the softer appearing trees, succeeding but still getting the wind knocked out of him when he finally hit the floor, though there was barely a scratch on him so at least that was something. The Prince was surrounded by roots and vines, the inside of the swamp being a good deal darker than it had seemed from up in the sky, and Zuko was forced to light one of his hands to avoid stumbling around dumbly.

He began exploring, using one of his swords to slice through any especially annoying plants (sorry, spirits), and trying to find the rest of his group. Thankfully, after a few minutes he heard distant… Laughing? Well, it was a human so he headed towards the sound, only to be met with the sight of a strange girl standing on a large log, a good way away. She had very dark hair that covered her face messily, a white dress and was stood with a… Flying boar?

“Hello?!” Zuko yelled, garnering no response other than even more laughter. Becoming annoyed, he ran towards the little girl, only for her to disappear completely.

He took a deep breath in, steadying himself and trying to convince himself that this couldn't be another bad memory or flashback or whatever uncle used to call them, because that hadn't happened in over a year and he was certain he'd never seen that girl before. He kept walking, hoping he could forget about the girl altogether.

A few hours later nightfall was approaching, and Zuko had not seen the child again, so he was feeling more confident and less like hyperventilating. Yet his friends’ location was still completely unknown, until he heard a voice.

It was definitely female and sounded familiar, hopefully Katara, but as soon as he got just a little closer the true identity behind the voice presented itself like an icy rod straight through his heart.

His mother.

Zuko turned around, knowing she'd be behind him, waiting for him to look at her.

“Hello, Zuko.” She greeted with a warm, teary smile that threatened to tear apart Zuko's heart.

“Mum…” He basically whispered, afraid to get closer in case she disappeared- it was like a scene from one of his nightmares.
“I've missed you, my little turtle duck.” She giggled a little, a droplet sliding down her cheek as she rushed forward and encased her son in a tight, fulfilling hug.

It was perfect. Just how Zuko remembered his mother's hugs: warm and safe, her fingers drawing little shapes on his back whilst she whispered how amazing he was, a whiff of lavender and honey coming from her hair and her long, dark locks always getting a little in his face, but he never complained, too wrapped up in his mother's caring embrace to feel even remotely uncomfortable.

“Are you really here?” He asked softly, knowing he'd hate the answer but still needing to hear it from her.

“I wish I was.” She muttered right into his ear, squeezing him even tighter as the tears began to properly fall and he buried his face in her shoulder.

She stayed for a few more moments, before almost evaporating, leaving him empty handed and full on sobbing, trying desperately to calm down but no longer managing to bar the emotions pouring out of him. His mother, his father, his sister, the avatar, his friends, his life, everything… It all hurt so much. He stayed there, kneeling on the floor and wailing, unable to stop and without a friend in sight.

Sokka had never been in a swamp before, but he'd always had an innate feeling that he'd hate everything about them. He was, unsurprisingly, correct. The non-bender had been searching through the trees for hours now, looking for the others without any success other than finding Momo clinging to his back about an hour after he'd fallen from the sky and had almost gotten impaled by a tree.

He wasn't too worried about his own situation, figuring he could always eat Momo if things got too bad, but Sokka felt crushed by worry for his companions, endlessly terrified for their safety despite them probably being better equipped to survive than he was, being benders and all.

He was about to change direction, maybe head towards where the trees seemed to get thicker and the vines wrapped around their trunks more tightly, when he heard a surprising person begin speaking.
“Hi, Sokka.” Greeted Princess Yue, appearing before him after he blinked.

“Uhh… You should be in the North Pole…” He muttered, tilting his head as he tried to figure out how she'd gotten all the way out here, found him inside the swamp and then appeared in the blink of an eye.

“I am.” She replied simply, making Sokka question literally everything and struggle to contain his confusion.

“So you're… Not here?” He asked, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“I am here. Well, a manifestation of me from deep within your psyche is.” Great, that completely cleared the entire situation up.

Sokka slumped down and lent against a tree, and Yue moved to sit across from him, a small, sweet smile dancing on her lips.

“What the hell is going on, Yue?” He questioned, figuring a proper explanation couldn't make this any weirder.

“I'm someone you've ‘lost’, but really I'm only appearing before you to tell you something you already know, but are denying.” She explained, making Sokka fear that he'd transformed into Zuko for a second, with all the talk about denial.

“I'm not denying anything.” He said with false confidence and his best attempt at a dashing smile, that not even Momo seemed to believe.

“You like Zuko.” She replied with a cheery smirk, before vanishing before his eyes and leaving the non-bender with, well, confusion and denial.

Damn it, he had become Zuko.

—
Aang glided between the trees, using his glider to slip between branches and having a pretty fun time altogether, though he was slightly concerned for his group’s wellbeing. Yet they could handle themselves and he was doing everything in his power to find them, so there wasn’t really all that much he could do.

He had been flying for a couple of hours when he heard a familiar roar, that of a sky bison, and he dived towards who he assumed to be Appa, only… It wasn’t.

He recognised the bison: it was clearly Shako judging by his shaggy coat, large eyes and strong, muscular frame. It was, most undoubtedly, Arianna’s bison.

Aang landed about twenty feet away from Shako, steadying himself as he tried to comprehend how Arianna’s bison could’ve gotten all the way out here, and still be alive. The airbender picked his way through several broken chunks of trees, silently wondering if Shako crash landed, before he looked up again and saw… Arianna.

She was just how he’d remembered her: twelve years old and a couple of inches taller than him, her head shaved at the front and long, chestnut hair cascading down her shoulders whilst she smiled with bright, green eyes. The arrow tattoos were identical to his, though they were technically a few months older than his, and she had the orange flower in her hair that Aang had given her what seemed like only months ago, but was actually over a century ago.

“Arianna?” he mumbled, shocked out of his mind and wondering if he was dreaming, or dead, or even hallucinating.

“Aang! I’ve missed you! Why the glum face?” She asked, concern lacing her tone as she moved forward, rootling around her orange robes before pulling out a tissue.

“I’m not crying…” He muttered, still completely shaken by Arianna’s sudden appearance.

“No, silly! I was going to show you that airbending trick you’ve been trying to teach me to cheer you up, look!” She exclaimed, bending the air around the tissue so that it folded into different shapes, from a great koi to a dragon.
Aang found himself laughing and rushed up to her, watching as it shimmered and formed a badger mole, clearly not actually there.

“You're not real.” He stated sadly, upset but not too surprised as Arianna let her tissue go and looked at him properly.

“Hmm, I guess, but I'm not gone. I'm sort of here now, and every time you talk to Zuko you're kind of talking to me… Well, that's probably pretty weird for you to think about. It's even a bit strange for me, and I'm the one living it! Or, not living, I suppose.” She rambled, not once letting her bright expression fade, even as she herself slowly began disappearing.

“Good bye, Arianna.” He waved, turning away from her and then looking back, to see the same dishevelled surroundings but no avatar or her bison, in fact, Shako had been replaced by a snoring Appa.

Aang smiled sadly at his bison, patting his muzzle to wake him and planning on finding his current friends, but vowing to always keep the girl who was like a sister to him in his heart.

Katara took another swig of water—her drinking water, not the bending water, and carried on trekking to what she hoped was the center of the swamp, looking for her friends worriedly. They'd been separated for a few hours now, and the sun had almost set, only increasing her anxiety and amplifying the hope that they'd found each other by now and were looking for her, like she was looking for them.

The waterbender heard a soft rustling in the distance and she spun on her heel, somehow sure a person had made the noise and not just some animal.

“Who's there?” She called out, the quiet daunting as her eyes darted around, unpicking the surrounding trees.

“Katara?” Said someone who Katara recognised instantly, even before they appeared just a few feet in front of the shocked waterbender.
It was her mother, in all her beautiful glory— a spitting image of the young waterbender, even wearing her necklace. Katara felt inclined to rush forward, to hug the woman and weep into her shoulder, but she was frozen. After a few minutes her mother, who had been waiting patiently for her to speak with a small smile on her face, faded out of view and left Katara completely alone, wondering whether or not she'd imagined it.

She blinked away the tears in her eyes and strode forward, stubbornly refusing to break down despite the sadness that ached in her chest as she thought of her mother's smiling face, and compared it to her expression the last time Katara had seen her… No, now wasn't the time to think about that.

Almost an hour later she saw a familiar silhouette on the sky and cried out for help, which got Appa’s attention and he dove down to meet her, with an emotionally exhausted looking Aang and Sokka on his back.

“Katara!” Exclaimed Sokka relievedly, rushing forward to hug his sister and surprising her, though it was still very comforting.

“Hi, guys. Uh… Have you noticed anything… Off, about this swamp?” She asked curiously once Sokka had stopped crushing her and she could once again breath.

“Yes.” The two boys replied solemnly, motioning for her to join them on Appa.

“I saw Yue, then she said something really stupid and then she disappeared.” Explained Sokka, not really looking at the two benders as he spoke.

“And for me Arianna appeared.” Admitted Aang quietly, his ecstasy at seeing Katara alive and well clearly having faded.

“Oh spirits, Aang, I'm so sorry.” She tried to comfort him, knowing all too well how heartbreaking it was to see a dead loved one.

As far as she was concerned, Sokka got off lucky; she and Aang had had to face death and grief and he'd, apparently, not. Yet she also found herself envying her older brother, wishing one of her ex boyfriends (not that she really had any if you didn't count Jet or Haru, which she didn't) had come to tell her a bad joke or whatever Yue had said. And the waterbender could only hope Zuko had been similarly lucky.
“Where's Zuko?” She asked as Appa arose into the branches once more, and they began surveying the ground. Not that it was easy due to the thick foliage.

“We don’t know, he's not at the outskirts of the swamp, at least, so he’s probably in the center, hopefully waiting for us with a cup of tea and a bored expression.” Sokka said the last bit quietly and so that Katara doubted he’d meant for anybody to overhear, but she brushed away her concern; too worried about more important things at the moment.

They searched until long gone after the sun had properly set, and finally saw what seemed to be fiery light emanating from beneath some trees. Sure it must be Zuko, Aang guided Appa towards the orange glow, only to see upon landing that it was actually several people all sat around a campfire. Though it was too dark to properly see their faces, Katara was thankful they didn't seem to be hallucinations and began speaking.

“Um, hello?” She greeted quizzically, unsure as to why a bunch of people were out in this terrifying swamp, and how they seemed to actually be having fun.

“Hello!” Called one of the men, and on closer inspection she could see he was wearing nothing but leaves and was covered in mud.

“What are you doing out here?” Asked Aang, stepping forwards and probably also noticing the peculiar appearance of the people.

“Why, we live here, what-” Began a different person, extremely calmly for someone who clearly lived in a haunted swamp.

“What?! How in the world can you live here?! It's horrifying!” Yelled Sokka, interrupting the person and earning a chuckle from the woman closest to them.

“Maybe to an outsider, but we know the swamp means no harm- it connects all of us, even the dead.” Katara could swear she looked right at her when she said that and looked away a little awkwardly.

Well, at least she wasn't going crazy, but they still had to find Zuko who, by now, was probably beginning to think he was insane.
“Hey, you haven't seen another guy around here have you? Tiny bit shorter than him, dark hair, golden eyes… Firebender?” Aang asked politely, bringing all attention to the young airbender.

“Yes! He shot fire at us so now Huu is fighting him.” Explained the woman, pointing to a bunch of dense trees, which they all began to run towards.

Sokka cut them through a path with his club/machete thing (it really had a lot of uses, Katara had to admit), and they kept going until they could hear Zuko’s voice yelling.

“I swear if he's been stabbed again.” Muttered Sokka with a sigh, reminding the waterbender of how, just a few days ago, she'd had to heal the reckless Prince.

They pushed through the foliage and found a small clearing that had been burnt into existence, and in the center Zuko stood fighting furiously, hitting a massive swamp monster thing with fiery whips.

“Zuko!” Called Sokka, somehow sounding relieved that their friend was fighting a large plant beast.

Zuko didn't reply, instead blasting a ball of fire straight at the thing's head, and blowing it clean off, to which the rest of it unravelled and revealed, who Katara assumed to be, Huu. The firebender looked a little too out of it, and readied another blast of fire (probably to throw directly at Huu) before Aang rushed forward and grabbed his arm breaking his concentration.

“Wha-” He began, a look of relief and slight confusion on his face when he saw that they were all there.

“You're okay! And please don't fight Huu, his people seemed pretty nice.” Said Aang brightly, pulling a scarily unsteady Zuko over to them as the older boy seemed to try and shake off his daze.

“His… People?! How could anyone live here?!” He asked, less comedically than Sokka had and with more intense rage and sadness. “There's a massive swamp monster that attacks you!”.

So Zuko… Wasn't talking about the visions? Oh right, he's not been told they're a regular part of the swamp and probably just still thinks he's crazy.
“And the visions of people you've lost are also pretty freaky, but apparently they're normal here.” Mentioned Katara, hoping calm down the pretty unstable looking Prince.

“... Normal? I, uh, I'm done with this. Let's go.” He said tiredly, pushing past the others and ignoring Huu, who began wishing them good travels.

Appa flew out of the swamp with ease, and they noticed that sunrise would be pretty soon and so decided to try and get some rest before they stopped off in the next Earth Town, which would hopefully be in just a few short hours. All except Zuko, who stubbornly decided he'd keep watch, even though it really wasn't necessary and he was clearly the most exhausted out of all of them.

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Iroh rode his ostridge-horse around the outskirts of the swamp, looking up just in time to see a bison flying through the moonlight and away. The old general smiled softly, glad that even if he couldn't directly interfere with Zuko’s avatar journey, he could at least watch his nephew from a distance.

Chapter End Notes

I mean... Angst? What did you expect? There's more where that came from...

I hope you enjoyed this chapter! Just a couple more until the Melon Lord herself comes into play, and next chapter should hopefully be fun even without her (it's a chapter I haven't based on an episode though, so it might not be so good...)

Ah well, thanks for reading and I'd really appreciate any feedback, see you next week! :))
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Zuko ran through the Palace halls, desperately trying to get away from something, he just didn't know what. He kept going, leaping over spikes that grew from the floor and threatened to skewer him, but eventually tripping over as the carpet dragged his left foot down, unbalancing the Prince. He lay on the blood red floor, raising his hand to his face to brush away some of the hair that had fallen in his face but being terrified to find that the carpet truly was blood, or at least looked like it, and was now sticking to his forearms.

Zuko gasped and tried to scratch it off, but something hit him from the side and suddenly he was on his old ship, in his chambers as the boat was tossed around during that violent storm from when he was thirteen and had only just been banished. The firebender attempted to steady himself, gripping uselessly at the metal wall for support, until another large wave threw him across the room, landing facing a cracked mirror. The boy in the reflection was almost identical to him, except he didn't have a scar.

Suddenly the world swerved around once again and he was in the reflection, but now he was kneeling in front of his yelling father, surrounded by cackling nobles and a few silent sympathisers. Zuko looked up at the Firelord, already crying heavily, and screamed as he placed a fiery palm to his face, even smelling the burning flesh as it was seared.

The surroundings twisted again, throwing him next to his sister as she spoke of how their father was going to kill him. He clutched the blankets on the bed in fear, only for them to wrap around his wrists and trap him, pulling him down into a suffocating reality where he screamed out for help but nobody came. Until, after a few moments of dark terror, a single spotlight lit up and there stood his mother, looking at him sadly as he begged for her to save him, to help him- but she just pulled up her hood and walked away.

He screamed even more, sobbing and yelling until his throat felt raw, before his uncle slipped in from the shadows and untied him. Zuko hugged the general, so thankful to him, but then felt a dampness across his waist and pulled away from the embrace, to see that his uncle, who was still smiling kindly, had been stabbed through the middle with one of the prince's own dao swords, by Zuko. Only the other Zuko had glowing blue eyes and a blank expression.

The firebender attacked him furiously, blasting as much fire as he could muster, even spiralling out tornadoes at his clone, until several people- past avatars, pulled him back. They angrily shouted about how he was a failure, a problem, and everyone he cares for would die.
Zuko turned around and swung at them too but was met with the sight of his fire burning through the forms of Sokka, Aang and Katara, all of which cried out and pleaded for him to stop.

The Prince collapsed to the ground, watching as his only friends faded away and he was left on the floor of a great expanse of nothing, that was quickly replaced by a metal cell building itself around him and trapping him within, the iron tearing at his flesh everytime he attempted to escape. Lying, bleeding, on the metal floor, Zuko looked up at the entrance to see his father, who was sporting an identical expression to the one he’d had all those years ago at the Prince’s first, and so far only, agni kai. Zuko begged for him to free him, to help him, to heal him- but his father only sneered and shut him in, alone and in pain for the rest of eternity.

—

Sokka sat peacefully on watch as the others slept. Usually at night it would be Katara or Zuko guarding them, sometimes both, but tonight he had been stubborn in his decision to stay up all night and watch over them. This was for several reasons: the first being that he was in desperate need of some alone thinking time; ever since the swamp and his vision of Yue the night before he’d been in dire need of contemplating over his feelings regarding Zuko, and that was difficult in the day time when he was helping out Aang and looking over maps.

The non-bender had also seen how Katara needed more rest, especially ever since she’d started teaching their resident Prince waterbending. Said firebender was also constantly exhausted and, especially after whatever had freaked him out in the swamp, had been incredibly jittery and his refusal to sleep had increased tenfold, meaning Sokka had, of course, felt even more inclined to take over watch duty.

Sokka was brought out of his tranquil musings by a scream, lost in the wind so that it wasn’t quite loud enough to wake Aang or Katara, but still catching the non-bender’s attention enough for him to shoot up from his comfortable position and rush to the other side of the saddle, where Zuko was sat up and panting, sobbing even and rushedly leaned over the side of Appa, apparently to throw up.

Sokka placed a supportive hand on his back, and, when the Prince was no longer expelling his stomach contents, Zuko fell against Sokka’s side tiredly, still crying but more quietly now.

“Hey, buddy, breathe. What happened?” He asked quietly, tentatively checking Zuko’s temperature to see if he was ill. For once, the firebender didn’t hit him away, instead he just hugged Sokka’s torso more tightly and kept quiet. “Nightmares?”.
Zuko still didn't reply, he just stayed as close to the non-bender as physics would permit and Sokka tried to comfort him, gingerly removing his own parka and wrapping it around the firebender, who was trembling an alarming amount.

“Okay- I, uh, I think you should try and get some sleep; you look really tired.” He tried, rubbing a little circle into Zuko’s shaking back.

The Prince made a soft mumble of disagreement, but was still clearly extremely exhausted just from the fact that he was still hugging Sokka, something he would never do if he were in his right mind.

About 30 minutes later Zuko was properly asleep, and seemed a lot calmer than he had before. So Sokka carefully unpeeled himself from the avatar’s weak, sleepy grasp and stroked the boy’s hair off of his forehead, feeling a tug on his heart as he watched him sleeping with dried tear tracks down his cheeks.

Maybe he did like Zuko, just a little bit.

—

Zuko blinked awake the next morning, the terror of his last nightmare having faded and him wondering what had happened during his sleepy daze between his two bouts of unconsciousness, and why the second one had actually been relatively peaceful. He snuggled a little more into his blankets, them feeling thicker and warmer than usual, and quietly considered how he’d slept for so long since, judging by the bright light threatening to sneak under his eyelids, it was way past sunrise when he usually instinctually woke up.

“Mmmmm” He mumbled softly, stretching a little under his covers and pulling himself up, squinting his eyes in the midmorning sun as he searched for his friends.

“Zuko.” Said Katara sternly, who was standing a little away from him with her arms folded. On her left side stood Sokka and on his left side stood Aang.

“... Hey..?” He greeted, confused as to Katara's tone and beginning to remember what had happened last night.
“You said your nightmares were mild.” Damn, Aang's disappointed tone physically hurt to hear.

Right, he'd had his, uh, bad dream, and woken up, thrown up and cried for half an hour, all whilst cuddling up to Sokka like an emotional toddler. This might be a little difficult to explain.

“That one was worse than usual-” He started, pushing himself up so he too was standing and felt less like he was getting scolded.

“Nope! Not listening to your lies, this is an intervention. You are dealing with your emotional trauma, now!” Decided Sokka for him, his stubbornness clearly coming from care and warming Zuko’s heart a little, but mostly annoying him.

“I'm fine-” He started, again almost immediately getting interrupted.

“Nah uh, we're staying in this Earth Town for the next week to carry on your air and waterbending training, and during that time we're all going to see Madam Leora.” Argued Katara with a small frown, her glare scary enough to stop the firebender from protesting any further.

“Who is Madam Leora?” He asked instead, figuring he wasn't going to win an argument with these three.

“She's a chi-rebalancer! She talks through issues, dreams, does acupuncture- look! This is her flyer.” Aang excitedly, passing him an advertisement for Madam Leora and Zuko struggled not to screw it up and throw it away.

“So she's a therapist?” He asked boredly, now turning to Sokka and Katara since he didn't think he'd be able to go against Aang's hopeful expression.

“Kind of? Not completely but-” Began Sokka, not really looking Zuko in the eye as he spoke.

“Look, I appreciate your concern, but therapists aren't my thing. My uncle tried to get me to go to one when I was thirteen, he said it had helped him with his son’s death, but it didn't work for me.” He said, reasonably politely, but the others were adamant about not taking no for an answer.

“Sorry, Hotshot, you're doing this, and so are we, got it?” Sokka folded his arms and stared the firebender down, and Zuko crumbled under the stern gaze.
Zuko was severely regretting giving in to his friends’ demands as he sat waiting on a bamboo armchair for Katara to be done with her session with Madam Leora. Sokka and Aang had already seen her, and had left with teary eyes and small, content smiles. Yet this wasn't calming the Prince’s nerves and he still had an overpowering urge to sink into his chair and never come back out again—unfortunately he doubted the group would let him off the hook that easily.

The firebender looked up to the door as he heard the telltale squeak of it opening, revealing a slightly worn out but overall happy looking Katara. Zuko, figuring he might as well just get it over with, pushed past the waterbender in angry silence, before entering Leora’s room.

It was nice, or would have seemed that way had Zuko not been so on edge. It had pelts scattered around and scented candles on every surface, giving the entire place a homey glow. There were two seats on the mahogany floor: a velvet armchair and a long sofa, with several light blue pillows scattered on top of it (clearly embroidered in the Water Tribe). The actual furniture seemed to be of Earth Kingdom construction, and sported the seal of the Beifongs so it was definitely of high quality. The room, in keeping with its trend of having stuff from each nation, also had a tea set with a Fire Nation emblem and some wind chimes that couldn't have been more clearly from the Air Nomads.

“Please, Zuko, take a seat.” A woman, assumably Madam Leora, gestured for Zuko to sit on the sofa as she perched on top of the armchair. She was a very old woman, with wrinkles stretching across her face and black hair made up of mostly dark grey, but she had a jovial kind of spirit about her: young and caring. Leora also wore deep purple robes that contrasted beautifully with her dark skin and—okay, it wasn't time to become a fashionista or an interior designer or whatever, he was just stretching this out longer than was necessary.

“Fine.” He replied gruffly, taking a seat across from her and folding his arms.

“Okay, how was your day?” She caught Zuko off guard there; he'd been expecting an immediate in depth study of his childhood trauma, not a normal question.

“It was okay.” He replied, trying not to let his worry for what was surely yet to come seep into his
“Really? My day has actually been pretty tiring. Four clients showed up this morning without any warning, begging to be seen since their friend was having trouble. And, on top of all, that they expected me to trust a firebender! Can you believe it?” She recounted sarcastically, looking Zuko straight in the eye.

The Prince looked away, already disliking Leora and about ready to just stalk off, consequences be damned. But instead he gathered his reserve.

“Fine. It was pretty crappy: I had a really bad nightmare, made a fool of myself, got scolded by a twelve year old and then forced to come here. Happy?!” Spat the firebender, literally letting a flame pass over his lips as he spoke.

“Yes. I don't want any lies between us. But don't worry, I'm not going to make you tell me about your worst memories like I did for the others (they actually seemed stable enough to deal with them). I'm just going to guide you through some relaxation, if you want to talk to me about your issues, however, feel free to.” Leora’s voice took on a softer tone as she pulled her legs up onto the chair, crossing them and placing her hands on her knees.

Zuko nodded unenthusiastically, still certain this was all a ploy to get him to reveal his darkest fears and most intense memories.

“Okay, first I'd just like you to pass me your palm.” She breathed, her eyes closed but one of her palms now out and waiting. The firebender resisted the urge to scoff, but still passed his left hand, knowing that in case of attack he'd want his right, dominant one free.

She trailed her thumb across his knuckles, still not opening her eyes, and sent a somehow warm chill across his nerves. Leora hummed a soft tune as she worked, making Zuko's eyes inadvertently fall closed. This went on for a few, confusing but mostly tranquil, minutes until she let go of his palm and his eyes snapped open from the shock.

“Wha-” He began, staring at the old woman incredulously as she chuckled.

“Ah, don't worry- that was just the boa ritual. To see what essence your soul most aligns itself with, Avatar. Though, funnily enough, you seem to actually fall within what many presume to be the weakest alignment, omeg-” She began, before getting abruptly cut off.
“What? How can you possibly know that I’m… I'm me?!” He basically yelled, even more enraged by the bored look Leora offered in response to his outburst.

“The Avatar? Well, I suspected as soon as you came in here and then the boa ritual revealed it for sure. Now, onto the next practice.” She announced, leaning forward and lighting a few more candles, their overall scent now a little overpowering.

“Now, this is about restraint. I’d like you to tell me about your happiest memory, without affecting these candles at all.” She said, making the task seem much simpler than it actually was. Zuko’s firebending was naturally tied with his emotions, so that he frequently smoked when angry or made little sparks of fire when annoyed, so this seemed almost impossible- especially with so many miniature flames in one room. Yet he decided to try.

“Fine, once when I was little my mum, uncle and cousin took me to a Fire Nation zoo to see a bunch of animals. I was only six at the time and they were all adults at that point, though maybe Lu Ten was a teenager… I don't know. But I was terrified of all the large animals and even the medium sized ones, like the bears, and I thought my mum and uncle would act like my father would when I got scared over stupid things and hur… But they didn't, they said it was okay and let me play with the turtle-ducks instead. And when we left my mother ordered a whole family of turtle-ducks to be taken to the pond in our pal- house.” He explained, not meaning to give so much information but doing so anyway.

“Good.” Complimented Leora once he'd finished speaking, before she softly blew out the candles in front of her.

“Are we… Done here?” Asked Zuko tentatively, hoping to leave but not thinking he'd get to.

“Almost. Now, please tell me about your friends.” She requested, completely composed as the Prince desperately tried to piece together the meaning of any of this.

“Well… They're really nice. Like, I got kidnapped by pirates and they rescued me without a second thought, I lied to them for ages yet they still forgave me, I destroyed the North Pole and they still stuck by me… They're good people. Aang is just a little kid whose entire culture was destroyed along with his best friend but he's still super cheery all the time, Katara is so strong and powerful but she’s not afraid of being sad, and Sokka always tries so hard at everything and he's so smart even if he doesn't have any bending…” Admitted Zuko, going a little fuzzy inside as he thought about how kind his friends had been to him.
The firebender blinked away the growing moisture in his eyes and huffed, looking away from Madam Leora and instead at one of the remaining candles. The elderly woman chuckled once again and got up, heading towards the door.

“Wait… What?! We're done? But I still have several traumas to work through!” He protested, not wanting to stay but feeling pretty cheated since everyone else had seemed so content after their sessions.

“Exactly, and I couldn't cover all of them in one day, especially without forcing you to give up details you aren't ready to explain. Instead I figured I'd show you that: 1) no matter how bad of a day you're having it's still possible to relax, 2) your past isn't completely pain and misery, and 3) you have friends that really care about you and you can talk this stuff out with them.” Said Leora, opening the door to allow Zuko passage out, which he accepted blearily.

Sure, he knew his friends cared about his well being etcetera but he'd never really considered… Asking them for help before, as stupid as that sounds. And yet, when he walked into the waiting room and saw them all looking up at him, concern painted across their faces, he knew that they would be there for him and, maybe when, or if, he was ever ready, they'd be there to listen.

Chapter End Notes

So... Angst? Comfort? I hope you liked it! :))

This is obviously Divergent from the series as none of this happened in any shape or form, but I still hope it was enjoyable (plus there won't be a 'Zuko Alone' chapter so I guess this can be a stand in).

Also, my Malec heart is swelling so now I'm considering an avatar au... Like an idiot *shruggy face*

As always I love kudos and comments, see you next week! :))
“Okay, we've rested, trained, now it's time to properly start searching for an earthbending master for Zuko!” Announced Katara with as much confidence she could muster, looking out to the town below Appa, that was labelled Gaoling, and hoping a teacher would just appear out of nowhere.

“And you really think this is the best place, Aang?” Asked Sokka dubiously, peering at his map before looking back to the young airbender.

“Yes! I meditated on what Zuko said Bumi told him, about an earthbender who ‘listens to the earth’, and I felt a strong, spiritual tug in this direction.” As Aang explained the reasoning behind his decision to come here, Katara attempted not to think about how doomed they were, and tried to have faith in Aang’s, apparently very good, spiritual senses.

Which was especially tricky when, in all honesty, Aang had never demonstrated these supposed abilities. Sure, according to Sokka he'd gone into the spirit world at the North Pole and Katara naturally trusted Aang, but she was still finding it difficult to believe the airbender could just meditate and magically know where Zuko's earthbending teacher was. Wow, with all the skepticism she wondered if she was turning into Sokka.

“Great. But are we sure I'm ready to learn earthbending? I mean, I barely know any waterbending and my airbending could be better…” Argued Zuko from where he was sat weirdly close to Sokka, looking over his shoulder at the map.

“No way! Your airbending is great! Last lesson you almost mastered how to use a glider!” Protested Aang happily, shooting the frowning firebender a bright smile.

“Yeah, and your waterbending is better than you think.” Katara chipped in, pretty sure Zuko just didn't want to learn earthbending and was thinking of any excuse to avoid it. Though she wasn't entirely sure why.

After that they flew in silence for a few minutes, before Aang gracefully landed Appa just outside the town they were looking to enter.

“Okay, so what's our story? Do we tell them Zuko's the avatar? Do we let them know he's Fire
“Nation?” Asked Sokka, looking to the others as they descended from the bison.

“No,” Zuko started, shaking his head tiredly “that'll just raise mistrust and suspicion. I'll just wear my Earth Kingdom clothes and say I'm an earthbender in need of training. That is, if we find a master.”.

So that's exactly what they did; they wandered around for hours, trying to find a teacher. They came across several earthbenders but most were too busy to help out, and told them their own masters had just been their parents. Katara was about ready to call it a day and just take Zuko over to the river to practice his forms all over again, when Sokka had the, admittedly bright, idea (after he spent two hours deciding whether or not to buy a bag) of asking other teenagers and kids where they were getting trained. Which led to a helpful discovery:

“Oh, yeah, I'm one of the students at Master Yu’s earthbending academy! He says if I get him three new students he'll give me the next belt!” Explained a six year old girl named Lindry, who was smiling brightly up at them, even though she'd been originally phased by Zuko's scar.

“That's great, Lindry! Could you show us to Master Yu’s academy?” Asked Katara kindly, figuring it was worth a shot.

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Apparently it was not worth a shot, which Katara realised too late watching Zuko's first lesson. Yu was clearly more interested in money than actual earthbending, and had the rather unorthodox teaching style of letting eight year olds blast rocks at each other. Judging by what happened at the North Pole, the waterbender figured this was not a method that resonated well with the Prince.

“I don't think that's the right person.” Muttered Aang quietly, gaining nods from the siblings before he leapt down to where Zuko seemed to be trying not to burn off a child's face.

“Earth is my new least favourite element.” Decided Zuko gruffly, kicking some dirt and eliciting a muffled snicker from Sokka.

“Yes, well, you still need a teacher, but where to find one…” Katara mumbled the last part, looking around for possible answers. And, lo and behold, said solution offered itself in the form of two male teenagers.
The waterbender motioned for her friends to eavesdrop, and they all went quiet—allowing them to overhear what the boy was saying.

“The Boulder is going to crush it tonight! I can't wait!” Exclaimed the first excitedly, making large hand motions as he spoke.

“I know, right?! Earth Rumble VI is going to be the best thing this century!” Replied the other with equal enthusiasm, and Katara quietly found herself amused since, no matter what ‘Earth Rumble VI’ was, it wouldn't be difficult for it to be the best thing this century when the last 100 years had been plagued by war.

Brushing aside any reservations she had, Katara marched forward and gained the boys’ attention, intent on asking them about this ‘Earth Rumble whatever’.

“Hi, what's Earth Rumble VI?” She asked as politely as she could muster, ignoring the looks of amusement the two were giving her.

“It's none-ya.” Stated the first, turning to his friend.

“None-ya business!” Finished the other, to which they both started laughing and walked off.

“I'll go get them.” Muttered a literally smoking Zuko, who Katara immediately denied.

“Don't worry, I can get them to tell me.” She insisted confidently, waving to the others lightly before following the rude boys around a corner.

Katara followed them easily, trying not to bristle at how they laughed, and called out to them, deciding to give them a chance before pulling a Zuko. Yet, when they just made fun of her again, she figured they were a lost cause and encased them both in ice, tempted to laugh at their fearful expressions.

“Let us out!” Cried the first one, who'd turned as red as a knight-robin either from anger or embarrassment. Either way, Katara still found it amusing.
“Tell me where Earth Rumble VI is!” She ordered, technically making no promises regarding their release.

“Fine there’s a flyer in my bag.” The second one nodded towards where a discarded sack lay on the floor near him, apparently unaffected by her ice (she had become pretty precise).

She rooted through the bag, careful to avoid any of the disgustingly gross things in it (seriously? A seemingly three month old, half eaten cake?) and eventually found a screwed up poster. Just as promised, it was for Earth Rumble VI, which was, unsurprisingly, a wrestling/earthbending competition. There was a date (today), time and place at the bottom so Katara pocketed it, deeming it useful. The waterbender then turned back to her captives.

“Thank you for the flyer, if you had just shown it to us when we asked instead of being rude then you wouldn't currently be getting a bad case of frostbite somewhere I'd rather not name. Think about that whilst you thaw out.” Katara chucked before walking off, ignoring the desperate pleas for help from the boys and heading back towards her friends.

As the sun set they all headed towards where the bending tournament was supposed to take place, and entered using the flyer as a ticket. Aang noted upon entering that the room was a large cavern, with a rocky stage in the middle, then a deep gap, and then rows of seats for the spectators, all lit by beautiful glowing crystals. Sokka led them all to the first row of seats, which was strangely devoid of other audience members, and they sat down. On the stage two fighters were getting prepared, and seemed to be practicing before their first round.

“Why do you think no one else is sat down here?” Mused Sokka, stretching back and then suddenly getting almost crushed by a massive boulder one of the fighters threw his way. Thankfully, Zuko had pulled the non-bender out of the way just in time for him to survive. “Oh.”.

“Maybe we should move…” Suggested Zuko quietly, still holding onto a (for some reason Aang couldn't figure out) blushing Sokka’s arm.

Before Aang could respond to Zuko’s idea, the lights in the audience dimmed so the focus was on the fighters who were now on full display, with a presenter in between them.
“Welcome to Earth Rumble VI! Our first match of the night: a fan favourite contender, a mean fighting machine, the one, the only, The Boulder! And up against him, the Hungry, Hungry Hippo!” Announced the presenter with a flourish, pointing to each fighter before exiting the stage.

“The Boulder says, you're going down, Hippo!” Shouted The Boulder, before charging forward.

He jumped over one of Hippo’s strikes, before sending his own wall of rock and slamming it into his opponent, knocking him off the stage in mere seconds.

“What about him for Zuko's earthbending teacher?” Suggested Katara, which Aang briefly considered before shaking his head.

“Bumi said his teacher had to listen to the earth, and that guy just seems to be listening to his big muscles.” The airbending frowned slightly but kept watching as The Boulder kissed his biceps.

“Oh my spirits! The Boulder is incredible! Ahhhhhhh!” Screamed Sokka, who stood up on his seat and cheering whilst Zuko rolled his eyes.

The next four matches ended similarly, The Boulder beat each other earthbender, then he'd flex his muscles and then Sokka would scream out compliments. Eventually the fighter seemed to have won; he’d beaten all the others and the presenter had now brought out the championship belt, yet, apparently not.

“Now, time for the fight you’ve all been waiting for: The Boulder vs our longstanding champion, a master earthbender in her own right, The Blind Bandit!” His words elicited a roar of approval from the crowd, and a small girl walked onto stage.

She was only about Aang's age and was dressed in signature Earth Kingdom green, though the fabric seemed to be of a higher quality than any of the other fighters’ outfits. She had dark hair falling over what appeared to be grey eyes from the slight glimpse Aang could register from that distance.

“She isn't really blind, is she?” Questioned Katara quietly, whispering into Aang's ear but he was too distracted by the other girl to blush at the waterbender’s close proximity.
“I think she is.” Observed Aang, almost certain as ‘The Blind Bandit’ made her way to the middle of the stage.

“The Boulder has some reservations about beating up a small, blind girl!” Announced The Boulder, to which his opponent laughed merrily.

“What? You scared, The Pebble!” She teased with a smirk, making the other earthbender scowl.

“The Boulder is now over his reservations, and is ready to beat you to a pulp!” He shouted, and the audience clapped appreciatively.

“Whoo! You go, The Boulder!!! Crush her!” Yelled Sokka, before getting elbowed in the side by a very annoyed looking Zuko, who also had a concentrated expression spread across his face.

“Guys… I think that's the girl from my swamp vision.” He admitted, and Aang's focus on the girl immediately tripled.

The match started and The Boulder threw several large chunks of rock at The Blind Bandit, which she sidestepped easily. Then the male earthbender moved to step forward and raise a wall of earth so it could push her away, yet she sent a trail of rock at his unbalanced foot and pushed him into the splits, causing him to release a yowl of pain. Then, with movements unlike Aang had seen from any other earthbenders, she sent a spike of earth at him and shot him off the stage with incredible ease.

“And the winner, once again, is The Blind Bandit!” Announced the presenter, gesturing to the girl whilst everyone, bar their small group, cheered appreciatively. “Would anyone like to challenge our winner for this bag of gold and the championship belt??”.

Aang considered his options as the crowd fell silent; he needed to talk with this girl since she had been in Zuko's vision and also literally listened to the earth. But the only conceivable way to talk to her would be to fight her, which, not being an earthbender he couldn't do. He looked to Zuko helplessly who only shrugged in response and kept watching the stage.

“Really? No one will fight this child?” Asked the presenter mockingly.

“I will.” Decided Aang, figuring he might as well try to talk to her, and walking up to the center of the stage.
“Do you people honestly want to see two little girls fight?” Teased the girl, earning a roar of approval from the audience before she turned to him.

“Actually, I don't want to fight; I just want to talk.” Said Aang quietly, facing the girl and learning for definite that she was blind.

“Well, that makes one of us.” She quipped, sending a boulder the airbender’s way, which he leaped out of the path of. “Someone's light on their feet.”.

Aang kept dodging, trying to touch the ground as little as possible, until eventually on reflex he sent a blast of air powerful enough to knock the girl off of the stage. Upon her defeat the entire crowd went completely silent, before they abruptly into loud applause and the belt and gold were presented to him. However, Aang ignored his prizes and rushed after the girl, who was now walking away with a sour look on her face.

“Hey, I still need to talk to you!” He called half desperately, worried the true master for Zuko was about to leave.

“Just leave me alone.” She replied annoyedly, leaving through a gap in the wall before closing it back up.

Aang tapped on the rock a couple of times before giving up and making his way back to the stage, where his friends were waiting for him. Sokka was wearing the championship belt and kept making amusing poses, which Zuko was trying not to snicker at, whilst Katara waited for him apparently worriedly.

“I'm pretty sure that ‘The Blind Bandit’ is meant to be your earthbending teacher.” Aang told Zuko the next morning as they stood in the middle of the Earth Town, trying to figure out where to go next.

“That's great except we don't know who she is, where she is and I don't think she wants to help us.” Replied Zuko with a frown, crossing his arms and sulking.
That pretty much stumped the airbender, but he refused to give up hope and searched the square they were positioned in with his eyes, hoping his gaze would just just stumble across an answer. Surprisingly, it did, in the form of the two boys from the previous day who'd told Katara where the tournament was taking place.

“Hi! We need to talk to you!” He called, running up yo the boys who flinched at the sight of Katara.

“Hey! Stay away from us!” They ordered fearfully, still staring at Katara as if she was a monstrous spirit. Which, as someone who really cared about the waterbender and thought she was beautiful, Aang found extremely annoying.

“We just want to know who ‘The Blind Bandit’ is.” Zuko cut in, stopping Aang from trying to defend Katara and, for once, actually keeping them on track.

The boys relaxed slightly at hearing another voice and turned to Zuko, before jumping back once they saw his scar.

“Uhhhh…. Ahem, no one knows.” Said the first one with a slight awkward cough, regaining his wits and dialling back his fear.

“Well, I guess you should start knowing.” Replied Zuko threateningly, beginning to unsheath his swords. Great, the reckless, scary Zuko was back.

The boys once again flinched back, somehow even more terrified than before and Aang was beginning to feel for the two.

“We promise! We don't know!” The second one protested, covering his face with his hands.

Sokka placed a gentle hand on Zuko’s arm and the firebender let go of his swords, whilst Katara slowly lessened her angry gaze and took on the look of a girl who'd just had an epiphany.

“I know! We're asking the wrong question! Zuko, describe how the girl looked in your vision.” Ordered Katara enthusiastically.
“Okay… She was a little girl in a white dress. Oh, and she had a flying boar next to her.” Explained Zuko with a slight pause, not looking particularly happy about the look of understanding that spread across the boys’ faces.

“Well, the flying boar is the symbol of the Beifong family, the richest family probably in the entire world, but I don't think they have a daughter.” Beifong, well at least that was a lead.

They got the address and left the boys, who made some faces behind their backs before Katara gave them another hard stare.

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Toph walked peacefully around her family’s garden, happy to have slipped away from her minders at the house. She was quietly contemplating the events of the previous night, and how the boy who had beaten her had been so light on his feet and had pushed her off of the stage not with earth, but seemingly with wind. Had she not been alone, and not so stubborn about wanting to do everything by herself, she would have considered discussing it with someone.

Just then, she felt a vibration about 20 feet away from her, and translated it to be four people, one of them definitely the boy from yesterday. The young earthbender sent a rock up from beneath them and felt as they were thrown and landed right in front of her, in what she was sure was an amusing pile of limbs. They cried out in shock, before quieting again and probably looking up at her, before they clambered to their feet. She allowed them to do this simply because otherwise her day would be extremely boring, and she wanted to savour her revenge against the boy who'd beaten her.

“What're you doing here?” She questioned, purposefully squinting her eyes even though it did nothing to help her see them, just because one of the maids had told her that's what people did when they were suspicious.

“I told you, we need to talk to you; a crazy king told my friend that the person to teach him earthbending had to be someone who listens to the earth, and we think that's you!” Said the boy, and she recognised his voice as definitely the one from yesterday. She also sensed no change in his breathing or heart rate, so he wasn't lying.

“And who is your friend?” She asked, still with a sharp tone.
“Uh, me.” One of the people, a guy, spoke up gruffly and stepped forward slightly.

“And who are you?” Toph waited for any lies, deciding to throw them out if he wasn't truthful.

“I'm… uh…” He started, and Toph felt as he swiveled on his back foot to face the others, probably because he wasn't sure what to say.

Well, in her book not lying but also not revealing the truth was just as bad as lying, so she sent the ground below them up into the air, throwing them over the fence as they yelled out once again in shock.

Toph sighed out slightly, deciding to head back inside as dinner would be soon and she didn't want her parents to send the guards to find her. At least that was over with, she hoped, but the girl also had an uneasy feeling that the strange group wouldn't give up that easily.

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About halfway through her getting ready for dinner and washing up, she heard a slight commotion in her parents' chambers as one of the butlers rushed in. Toph briefly wondered what that was all about, but in the end figured a chef had just burnt the soup or something and was about to get fired for incompetence. She didn't like this strict tactic from her parents, but had learnt long ago that nobody was going to listen to her opinions.

She went into the dining room and immediately felt that something was up- four of the chairs were heavier than before.

“Please, meet my daughter, Toph. Toph, please meet the avatar and his friends.” Greeted her father, and she could tell he was smiling proudly at the inclusion of the supposed avatar at his table even without sight.

“Hello, Toph. I'm Avatar Aang.” Lied Aang as she was guided to her usual seat at the end of the table. He was definitely the one who'd fought her the previous day.
“Hmm.” She muttered, letting the others all speak whilst the waiters served out the food.

“Please! That's much too hot for her, blow it.” Ordered Toph’s father, despite the fact that Toph was perfectly capable of blowing on a bowl of soup.

“Please, let me.” Offered the Aang guy sweetly, and the next thing she knew she felt a slight gust near her face and could no longer feel the steam.

Okay, so he was an airbender, but he'd been lying when he said he was the avatar… Something clearly wasn't adding up.

“So, how long do you envision it will take you to end the war?” Asked her father politely, whilst Toph contemplated slamming Aang and his friends out of the house.

“Well, I'm hoping to defeat the Firelord by the end of Summer-, but first I need an earthbending teacher.” He replied, again a lie but a little more genuine, leading the girl to believe it was based on some truth.

“Ah, you know, Master Yu over here is the best master in a 100 miles- he's been teaching Toph all her life.” Suggested her father, clearly bragging.

“All of your life? Wow, you must be really good by now then.” Complimented the airbender, and she felt as he shifted his chair slightly to face her.

“Unfortunately, due to Toph’s blindness, it's unlikely she'll ever become a master. In fact, she may never even get past the basics.” Mentioned her father sadly, and she tried to ignore how his pitiful words grated at her.

“Really?! But-” Started Aang, never finishing because Toph sent a stream of rock to hurt his foot, and he was too distracted by the pain to keep talking.

There was no way she'd let some avatar-wannabe reveal her secret earthbending career to the world. For the rest of dinner she sat silently, like usual, and allowed the conversation to flow around her, though she did stop Aang (rather painfully) whenever he seemed about to reveal her identity as ‘The Blind Bandit’ to the rest of the table. Curiously, none of the airbender’s friends had said much throughout dinner. She wasn't sure why but she did have a feeling it had something to do with the
gruffly spoken guy from earlier (who Aang had previously introduced as Zuko when they'd originally sat down for dinner) and she figured that that something was he was the avatar. Technically, she had no other proof than Aang was lying about himself being the avatar, but she was almost certain nonetheless.

Deciding she needed answers, when they were all guided to their sleeping quarters Toph left her own bedroom and headed towards their guest chambers, intent on getting to the truth. The earthbender went out into the garden and propelled herself upwards with a tower of rock so that she was right outside their (thankfully open) window, and snuck through. Really giving Aang's group a shock.

“Wha-” Yelped the one who had briefly introduced himself as Sokka, jumping back from the girl and falling onto one of the beds which, judging by the force it was pushing into the floor, already had an occupant.

“Ah, Sokka!” Called out Zuko, assumably pushing the other off of the bed as half a moment later a telltale vibration told her someone had hit the floor right next to the bed.

“Twinkle Toes, I want to talk to you.” She stated, facing the space where she was sure Aang stood before motioning for him to follow her, and climbing back out the window.

He followed obediently, despite some shrill protest from the girl called Katara, until they were walking through the garden together silently.

“I was born blind, but I’ve never had any trouble seeing. I see with my feet, using the vibrations through the earth to tell where things are. I can sense you, that bridge, even those tiny ants. But I am also sensitive to things like breathing and heart rate, so I can tell when someone’s lying. So I know that you’re not the avatar.” Said Toph, ignoring the slight gasps of shock the airbender let out at intervals during her speech, before turning on her heal and properly facing him (even though it made no difference to her).

“Oh, I, uh-” He stuttered pretty uselessly, and the earthbender had to restrain herself from hitting him in the face.

“I just want the truth.” Toph stated, crossing her arms.

“I- Okay, I'm sorry for lying earlier. I'm not the avatar but my friend, Zuko, is. Only it's really
dangerous for him to tell just anyone who he is since he's also the Prince of the Fire Nation. So when we got cornered by firebenders a while ago I pretended to be the avatar to keep them off his trail, and since then that's just what we've been telling everyone. Well, except the people at the North Pole, since they arrested him and we needed a way to get him out. I would've told you all this last night but you left before I could, and then I tried telling you earlier but you, uh, threw us over your fence.” Toph could, unfortunately, tell that he spoke with complete honesty. She also, on an unrelated note, found his story to be incredibly interesting and amusing, and could only imagine going on such adventures herself.

“And what? You want me to teach him earthbending?” She remarked, even though she already knew that's exactly what Aang was requesting of her.

“Yes. You could come with us! You're so talented but no one here even realises!” He tried to persuade her, and Toph heard no malice nor manipulation in his tone; he really did think it would be best for them all to go.

“My parents would never let me go. Ha, they don't even let me leave the house!” She let out a humourless laugh and tilted her head towards the ground, not wanting Aang to see the presumably sad expression on her face.

“Bu-” The airbender was interrupted by a whoosh from above them that Toph hadn't been able to sense, before they were entrapped in metal containers.

She felt around desperately, disconcerted by her inability to tell where things were, and attempting to get a sense of how much room she had. The top was too high for her to reach, and the area of the floor couldn't have been any more than a foot and a half squared.

“Hey! Let me out of here!” She yelled angrily, hitting the metal with her fist as hard as she could, yet making no dent.

“Nah uh, you two have to pay for cheating last night- we know you lost on purpose so your friend here could get the money.” Mentioned who she recognised to be Xin Fu, the presenter of Earth Rumble VI, from his voice.

Dammit, she thought silently, cursing Aang for getting her into this mess.
“They’ve been gone a while.” Fretted Katara, running her hands through her hair as she paced across their room.

Zuko was also beginning to get worried, but hoped it was all for naught and that, any moment now, Aang and Toph would climb back through the window. Only that seemed unlikely since it was nearing sunrise by now and he couldn’t even begin to fathom what two twelve year olds could talk about for five hours, even if one of them’s an earthbending champion and the other is a one hundred and twelve year old spirit guide.

“Maybe we shou-” Zuko was about the suggest they go downstairs to see if Toph and Aang had started breakfast without them, or possibly to go search the gardens, but he was interrupted by a yell from one of the butlers.

They all rushed downstairs, paying no mind to the Earth Kingdom finery they knocked about as they ran towards the front door, where they had heard the person yell. The Prince in particular was taking no care as he charged through the house, since their ‘expensive’ stuff would have been regarded as little more than trinkets back at the Fire Nation Palace.

“Please! Sir and Lady Beifong, Companions of the Avatar! Miss Toph and Avatar Aang have been kidnapped!” Cried out the butler, and Zuko snatched from his hands a ransom note written on the back of an Earth Rumble VI flyer, it read:

Beifongs.

We have your blind doorter and her frend, and you wont get them back unless you give us five hundred gold peices.

Sined,


Zuko, ignoring how the multiple spelling and grammatical inaccuracies grated at him, shoved the flyer into the worrying Beifong parents’ hands and strolled towards where all their stuff (bar his dao
swords that he'd insisted would be kept on his person) were sitting near the front door, and picked up Aang's staff.

“Uh, buddy, what are you doing?” Asked Sokka confusedly as Zuko hit the top of the stick, causing the glider parts to pop out.

“I'm going to get Aang, It'll be faster that way.” He decided, not mentioning how he hadn't quite mastered flying with this thing yet, but thinking that he was now ready.

“But wouldn't it be better to go togeth-” Protested Sokka, who the firebender ignored opting to instead run out of the door and into the garden, willing the wind currents to push up the glider so that he fly to where Aang was.

If he'd thought airbending had felt freeing before… Well, it didn't hold a candle to the feeling of ecstasy he experienced as he flew out of the Beifong residence and over Gaoling, every fibre of his being buzzing with an almost electric feeling, not unlike how his uncle had described lightning bending- though perhaps not as potent. He glided along as quickly as possible, which was incredibly fast, and looked for the entrance to Earth Rumble VI, finding it quickly and zipping through, down a dark tunnel until he got to the cavern lit with glowing crystals, with a stage in the middle and two metal containers hanging from the ceiling.

He landed quietly and considered what to do next, seeing the fighters from the other night guarding the stage but being out of their view. Zuko could attempt to free Aang and Toph, and then they could help him against these guys, but his other friends (which, by the way, he still wasn't used to thinking about how he had friends now) and the Beifongs would be showing up soon with money, and then this entire thing could have a none-violent end. Then again, since when had he done anything none-violent?

But what bending to use… Hmm, he'd already revealed that he was an airbender to the Beifongs, but that didn't mean he was the avatar unless he bended other elements too. So he decided to stick with his airbending, mostly, at least, and used the glider to get up on top of one of the containers.

The firebender realised after landing precariously on the metal case that he'd inadvertently picked Toph to save first. Figuring it didn't matter, he waterbended a slight stream of liquid out of his water pouch (silently thanking Katara for forcing him to carry it round with him) and messily cut through the lock, letting the door swing open. It was at this point that Toph’s shout of triumph alerted the earthbenders that something was amiss.

“Hey!” They cried, charging up to the center of the stage so that they were directly below them.
“Where are they?” Asked Toph, reminding Zuko that she was blind.

“Uh, right below us.” He pointed, before once again realising she couldn't see. Seriously, he should know better than this, being half blind himself.

“Thanks!” She smiled, Zuko could tell even without having a proper view of her face, and jumped down right into the middle of her old opponents.

They surrounded her, and should have completely outmatched her, but even they stepped back a little upon seeing her. It was at that moment Sokka, Katara, the Beifongs and Master Yu all charged through the entrance, only to be stopped in their tracks by Toph blasting an earthbender dressed in red right off the stage. Zuko then remembered that he was also supposed to be freeing Aang, and glided over to his cell to cut open the lock.

“Where are the earthbenders?!” He asked hurriedly upon getting out and the Prince pulling him up so that he was sat with him on top of the metal case.

“Uh, I don't think we need to join in the fight.” He muttered for once in his life, gesturing to where Toph had just easily beaten up her fifth opponent and was now down to just The Boulder and, who Zuko assumed to be at least, Xin Fu.

The Boulder, as you might expect, tossed several large boulders her way which she sidestepped and blocked easily, not even phased by how close to getting crushed she constantly was. On the sixth boulder she caught it in midair and drove it with all her force into her opponent's chest, who immediately fell off the stage.

Last up was Xin Fu, who at least seemed slightly more skilled than the rest, but also clearly stood no chance. He sent two columns of stone Toph’s way, which she drove into each other and created an outward blast of rubble, pushing Xin Fu back a good distance but not quite off the stage. With renewed vigor, and slightly less pride, the older bender went to swipe a couple of especially sharp looking crystal embedded rocks at the girl, who easily swept his feet from under him with some well placed earth as he stepped, before propelling him off of the stage with a tower of rock that shot up from beneath him.

All the while this was happening, Zuko's group and the Beifongs had been watching Toph fight with mixed reactions. Zuko, on one hand, had never been more entertained in his entire life (and was even considering using his fire to pop himself some corn like he had when he was younger) and had
decided that if he had to learn earthbending then he definitely wanted Toph to be his teacher, simply because she was such a badass. Sokka, Katara and Aang all looked extremely impressed, and were making no moves to interfere with the battle. Meanwhile, the young earthbender’s parents looked completely shocked, and Zuko had no idea if that was a good thing.

Him and Aang descended from their seats and back onto the stage just as Toph walked unenthusiastically towards her parents, reminding Zuko painfully of how he must've looked whenever he was called to his father’s chambers.

“Look, I know you must have a lot of questions but-” She started, not properly facing her parents-not that that really mattered since she couldn't see them anyway.

“What… What was that, Toph?!” Cried Mr Beifong frantically, causing Toph to flinch back a little.

“I’m sorry, dad, but this is who I am. I'm an earthbender, and a fighter, I'm- I'm not that scared, helpless little girl you think I am.” Toph admitted, seemingly genuinely, and Zuko looked away- not wanting to intrude on a family’s private moment.

“I… I gave you too much freedom! You're just putting yourself in danger, I- uh, from now on you'll have 24/7 surveillance, guards escorting you around the house. And those four are never coming anywhere near us ever again. Come on now, we're going home.” He gripped her hand and tugged the girl out of the cavern, whilst she bowed her head sadly.

“I'm sorry!” Aang called out, but even he could tell it was too late.

A few hours later they were packing up Appa, when Zuko turned to see Toph running up to them at top speed.

“Wha-” Began Katara, tilting her head at the earthbender’s entrance.

“My dad is letting me come with you guys to train Sparky over here in earthbending!” She cheered and Zuko did his best to ignore the blatant lie and the embarrassing nickname.
“Really?!?” Aang asked, also beaming from on top of Appa’s head.

“Yep, now.” She sent a large chunk of earth Aang's way, probably determining his location with his voice, and knocked him right off the bison’s head. “I want my belt back.”

Sokka unenthusiastically tossed her the championship belt he'd been wearing ever since he'd gotten it, forgetting Toph was blind, and accidentally hitting her on the head with it. He called out an apology and she and Zuko both joined the others on Appa’s saddle, ready to carry on their journey.

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“Now, you two are very different but, if you get me my daughter back from the avatar, I'll give you something you both have a lot of interest in-” With that Mr Beifong gestured to a servant and they opened up a large sack, revealing at least 2000 gold pieces to Master Yu and Xin Fu.

Chapter End Notes

Toph!!!!!!! I know you've been anticipating her arrival since practically the first chapter, so I hope I delivered! The part of this chapter written in her perspective obviously couldn't have any physical descriptions of stuff since she's blind, but I like to think I got round that with her seismic sense.

I hope to make a good Tuko brotp eventually, even though it probably won't all happen straight away since I have *sigh* plot to get through that kind of interrupts character building. I did want to link Zuko and Toph from the get go, though, through their abusive childhoods. I always thought that was an arc left unexplored in the Canon show, tossed aside in favor of *sigh* plot, but I always found it very interesting that these two, similar but also completely different, characters had elements of their past that they shared that they never really bonded over.

Also, Zukka is sliding in here because I'm still trash even when I'm screaming over the icon that is Toph Beifong :))

Comments and kudos are what give my soul its essence!!!

Next week: more Toph and a closer look at Zuko’s avatar training.
Chapter 26

Appa was flying high about a day after they had picked up Toph, and would soon be tiring. The sun was just setting in the west horizon and Zuko was just about to suggest the others sleep for the night (Appa included) and he’d keep watch. However, Katara beat him to it.

“We should probably rest a while- there’s a clearing down there we can camp in before we set off again tomorrow morning.” She suggested sensibly, rubbing some of the sleep from her eyes before yawning lightly.

Though, to be honest, Zuko himself was feeling very energetic since he hadn’t had too many nightmares ever since that last really bad one (Sokka seemed to be under the impression that it was his presence that was staving off the bad dreams, which was completely ludicrous since the firebender had definitely not been sleeping using his spare parka as a blanket- that would just be unimaginably embarrassing). Which meant he’d probably be the best one to keep watch- but again, he was beaten to it.

“I’ll stay up in case we’re attacked, but you should all sleep after we unpack.” Decided Sokka, jumping off of the bison’s saddle first and laying out his sleeping bag to sit on.

“What’s the point? If we are attacked they’ll wake us up anyway.” Remarked Toph, clapping her hands together and creating a tent made of two slabs of rock. Well, she did have a point… Maybe it was pointless to have someone stay up all night.

“The point, Toph, is to do our level best to stay safe. Sure, it’s annoying to give up a few hours of sleep but when thought of altogether it actually reflects our teamw-” Preached Katara, going into the ‘power of friendship’ speech that Zuko had never thought he’d have the displeasure of hearing, since for most of his life he hadn’t even had friends.

“Yadda yadda yadda, I don’t need one of you bozos watching out for me when I can easily take care of myself, okay?!” She spat, sitting in her earth hut and bringing another slab of rock up as a door, to shut the rest of them out, probably.

The Prince took very little offence to this since he understood well what it was like to want alone time and to take care of oneself- heck, when he’d first been banished he had shut everyone and everything out for the first six months before he even began to listen to his Uncle’s advice. Of
course, that didn’t mean he followed it. So yeah, Toph had just run away from home and was going on a potentially life threatening adventure, he’d probably be more surprised if she wasn’t in a bad mood.

“Urrgh, can you believe her?! She’s part of the group now but she’s acting like she would rather be alone! I never even said that she had to be on watch as some point, she just presumed that’s what I meant! And even if I had, so what? She should realise she can’t be a selfish brat when we’re trying to defeat the freaking Fire Nation!” Ranted Katara, not that Zuko paid her harsh words too much attention after ‘believe her?!’.

“Come on, Katara, she’s probably just a little grumpy from being tired, we all are, let’s just get some sleep and deal with this all in the morning.” Chipped in Aang softly, patting the waterbender’s arm before nudging her slightly in the direction of her sleeping bag.

Then they all sorted out camp (and swept up some of Appa’s shed fur that was in their way), Zuko doing admittedly little work, until Katara had deemed them prepared enough to sleep. The firebender allowed himself, a little tentatively, to get comfortable under his red sheets (and Sokka’s parka that was, okay fine, very cosy), but he was interrupted before he could obtain even the slightest wink of sleep.

“Guys! Someone’s coming at us! Well, a vehicle is- only it doesn’t feel like a tank: it kind of feels like an avalanche!” Called Toph, bursting out of her little hut and pointing into the distance. Zuko couldn’t see anything at first, none of them could, but after a few moments a long, metallic caterpillar-shaped thing appeared in the far off distance.

It was ploughing through trees like they were twigs and covering distance scarily easily, heading straight for them. The five of them grabbed all their stuff and jumped onto Appa, collectively deciding it was too late to deal with that thing. The bison then dragged himself up into the air, a little sluggishly, and flew south towards some mountains.

“What was that?!” Asked Sokka, propping himself up against Appa’s saddle.

“I don’t know, but we can’t take any chances. We’ll fly to those mountains and then set up camp up there- hopefully that will lose them.” Decided Katara a little optimistically if you asked Zuko.

“Good, because I don't think Appa will be able to keep flying for much longer.” Agreed Aang worriedly from his perch on Appa’s head, patting the bison’s fur and wiping it off when it shed onto his palm.
After that they all sat in silence, a slight awkward edge left from Toph and Katara's earlier argument, and all of them too tired to make conversation. Though, really, Zuko still felt reasonably good.

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About thirty minutes after she had felt the strange tank thing coming at them, Toph praised the spirits that Appa had landed on solid ground and she could now ‘see’ again. She climbed off of the bison’s saddle and wriggled her toes over the rocky surface, only stopping when she felt Katara walking up behind her.

“I'm sorry for being so… Snappy earlier, you're new so of course you don't quite get how things work around here-” Began Katara sweetly, sounding sickeningly sympathetic and like she was talking to some disobedient kid, just making Toph even more annoyed.

“I get how things work, Sugar Queen, you tell everyone what to do and then throw a hissy fit whenever someone tells you they don't need you mothering them.” The earthbender spat, creating a new earth tent as Katara gasped furiously in shock.

She then climbed in and closed it up, relaxing against the side and getting ready to go to sleep. Unfortunately, that was a difficult feat when she could hear the waterbender moaning just outside.

“Can you believe her?! She's insufferable! Why did we even let her come with us?! I bet Momo could teach Zuko more earthbending than that brat could!” The waterbender complained loudly, stomping about the campsite whilst Toph growled lowly in anger.

“Hey, Katara? Maybe you should calm down a little…We're all tired and stressed and-” Started Aang kindly, moving to stand with his stupid ‘girlfriend’.

“I'm completely calm!” She yelled, stomping her foot and causing an uncomfortable vibration to spread under Toph’s palm, that she had placed on the ground next to her.

“Uh.” Muttered Aang in quiet disagreement.
“Oh no… That sounds like something Zuko would say… Okay, you're right, I should get some sleep.” Relented Katara, letting out a yawn that would have put Appa to shame, and walking towards where the earthbender could feel Sokka setting up his and his sister's sleeping bags.

Figuring no one would be disturbing her for at least a few hours, Toph then curled up on her side and tried to fall asleep, immediately getting interrupted by the same avalanche feeling she'd had earlier. It was still in the distance, but she could feel it was gaining on them fast and didn't seem to be having any problems getting over steep little hills as it went, leading the blind girl to believe it would easily climb up the mountain they were positioned on.

“Guys! They're back!” She called, bursting out of her tent and not-so-accidentally stepping on Katara's leg as she ran towards the center of their camp.

“What?!” Replied Zuko, and Toph felt as he used his hands to properly sit up.

“How did they find us?!” Asked Sokka frantically, leaping to his feet and running to the edge of their camp, presumably to try and see their chasers.

“I don't know, but we should probably get out of here.” Suggested Katara cowardly, and Toph felt the strong urge to throw her off the mountain (though maybe that was more due to her earlier comments, not her current idea to try and preserve their safety).

“I say we stay and see who's following us.” Countered Zuko, sounding pretty sick of getting followed.

“Yeah!” Toph called in agreement, bending a couple of boulders so the levitated next to her, ready to be thrown at their assailants.

“Maybe they're nice?” Hoped Aang sincerely, but he also got into a defensive stance as they waited for the tank-thing to catch up with them.

A few moments later Toph felt a shift in the ground where the tank was, and sensed three four legged creatures jumping out in front of it, still heading towards them but even faster now.

“Oh damn… Guys, that's Azula.” Revealed Zuko like it was some massive thing, a definite edge of worry in his voice.
“Who?” Asked Katara, and, for once, Toph agreed.

“She ruthless, merciless, a fighter, skilled in firebending, probably as dangerous as my father and-” He started, getting into a stronger stance as if he had just realised this might be a possibly fatal fight.

“She's related to you, isn't she?” Sighed Sokka tiredly, shifting a little to look at Zuko.

“...Yeah, she's my sister. You guys go and I'll hold her off. Uh, don't wait up.” He told them, and Toph thought he sounded scarily close to signing his own death warrant.

“Nope, you're coming too- we can lose her, I'm sure.” Sokka lied the last part, but sounded pretty confident despite that, and seemed to grab Zuko’s arm before dragging the stubborn firebender over to where Appa was still snoring.

They all got on once again and took off, narrowly avoiding Azula and, who Toph assumed to be since there were two other four legged creatures, her two companions. This time they flew for hours, until Toph could feel the heat of the sun on her skin and Sokka began loudly complaining.

“Well now look! We've been up all night.” He moaned, attempting to lift up his arms in exasperation before promptly realising Toph was clinging to one of them, feeling pretty lost so high in the air with no way to tell what was around her.

“We'll be landing soon, don't wor-” Aang attempted to calm the exhausted non-bender, sounding pretty tired himself, but was cut off by Appa plunging downwards suddenly. “Guys! Appa’s fallen asleep!”.

Toph was sure that falling to your doom was infinitely more terrifying without any sense of sight, seeing as you could hit the ground at any moment and have no idea. So she was not ashamed that she was screaming, as were all her companions (Sokka especially girlishly), but was instead annoyed that someone hadn’t woken Appa up yet.

“Appa! Appa!” Yelled Aang in a seemingly fruitless attempt to awaken the bison, well, fruitless at least until Appa roared a great, deep yawn and pulled himself up a little, still falling but without as much speed.
About 10 seconds later they crashed into what Toph guessed were trees from the snapping wood sound and the hundred splinters that penetrated her forearms, sliding through the branches until they eventually jolted to a painful stop, and Sokka, who she had not realised she'd still been clinging to, tugged her to descend from Appa.

“Are we all… Okay?” Asked Aang sheepishly, whilst Toph finally got back onto solid ground where her feet could actually ‘see’.

“Okay? Okay?! I'm pretty sure my stomach is still somewhere near my windpipe!” Yelled Sokka, stamping his foot.

“Hey! Don't blame Aang! Appa wouldn't have passed out had he gotten some sleep the first time we set up camp, which he would've been able to do had Toph not wasted time being selfish!” Snapped Katara, stomping her way over to the earthbender.

“This is all my fault?!! How?!! I said about two sentences at that first campsite, there's no way I could've made any actual dent in his sleep schedule! And if you'd just sucked up your pride and seen that I can carry my own weight, then you wouldn't have wasted all that time arguing about it!” She responded, pushing Katara back with her palm and growling, especially angry that the others weren't defending her- not that she needed their help.

“You don't carry your own weight! Appa carries your weight, and he didn't have a problem when there were only four of us!” Shouted Aang, joining in on Sugar Queen’s complete stupidity. This time she did hear a slight murmur of disapproval from Sokka and Zuko, but it was too little too late.

“That's it, Sparky’ll have to teach himself earthbending- I'm leaving!” She decided, ignoring her heavy exhaustion and marching deeper into the woods, only focusing on a radius of about five metres around her so she wouldn't have to sense what the others were up to. She also ignored Sokka’s proper yell in her defence, figuring he was only saying anything so his little boyfriend could learn earthbending.

“You guys were complete jerks!” Accused Sokka, pretty accurately as far as Zuko was concerned, as the firebender picked some dirt from his finger nails nonchalantly and tried not to think about how
his sister was going to kill them all.

“I just yelled at Zuko’s earthbending teacher…” Gasped Aang, leaning against Appa and looking incredibly guilty.

“I-” Stuttered Katara uselessly, pushing back her hair loopies.

“We need to go after her.” Zuko chipped in, vaguely recognising that he’d been treating this entire situation (bar the terrifying return of his sister into his life) like one of those soap operas he used to watch at Ember Island with his mother.

“We can do that later, for now we need to get your sister off our trail.” Disagreed Sokka with a sigh, before he began looking around the small clearing they had stopped in.

It really was small, surrounded by pine-birch trees with a river cutting through the center, the overall land probably not even big enough to fit three Appas. Zuko looked back at the bison, trying to figure out how Azula was following them so easily, before his question was answered by the beast shaking and sending several bucket loads of soft, white fur all over him.

“She's using Appa’s shed fur to track us; we're leaving a trail everywhere we go. Stupid Spring.” Realised the Prince, brushing himself off just in time for the bison to lick him as though he were covered in honey. “Euugh.”.

“So if we wash the fur off of him… She won't be able to follow us! Great idea, Hotshot!” Sokka smiled brightly at him, and Zuko found himself struggling to push down a foreign warm flower of feeling that bloomed in his chest at the sight.

They got to work scrubbing Appa down in the river, Aang and Katara being much quieter than usual, probably from the guilt of being so mean to Toph. The firebender could scarcely even believe the two were even capable of such harshness, but he blamed their behaviour mostly on their exhaustion (that he too was beginning to feel the effects of) and the uncomfortably new situation they were all in now Toph had joined them. Once Appa was clean, Aang set about gathering all the loose fur in some bags before he turned to Sokka expectantly.

“Okay, we should lead a trail off that way and then actually go that way.” Planned Sokka, gesturing to where he was talking about whilst the others nodded approvingly.
“I'll take the glider and set the trail, you guys should try to get out of here.” Zuko told them, figuring Azula would probably kill or capture him but deciding he was too sick of running from her to not face her.

“No.” His friends all answered in unison, folding their arms and staring him down.

“But-” He tried, even though he knew they weren't going to give in.

“If you're going to be a reckless idiot and try and fight your sister, then we're coming too. Then we'll go find Toph and Aang and I will apologise to her.” Said Katara determinedly, to which Aang nodded stubbornly.

“But if we're all going to fight her then what's the point in even moving from here?” Asked the firebender, giving up in trying to convince them to let him do this alone.

“We need more room, otherwise she'll just fry us all with one blast. Let's go.” And with that Sokka climbed onto a still very tired-looking Appa, along with Aang and Katara, and threw him Aang's staff, which he opened up before grabbing the fur.

The group then set off, Zuko setting the trail, and them all quietly preparing themselves for the rough battle with Azula, Mai and Ty Lee that was coming up.

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Toph had been walking for a while, still stewing in her anger towards Katara and Aang, when she noticed a vibration a few metres away from her that she'd been too preoccupied with her emotions to notice earlier. She readied herself for an attack, noting that the thing she was sensing was fairly heavy and, from the way the pressure on the ground was being distributed, definitely humanoid.

“Raagh!” She yelled, charging at the person only to get a scream in response, and the guy stumbling backwards rushedly.

“Wait!” He called, not moving to attack her, causing her to lessen the firmness in her muscles.
“Are you going to attack me?” She asked, kind of hoping for a yes since she really felt like beating someone up, and if it couldn't be Katara then this stranger would do.

“No.” He answered truthfully, and Toph sighed in disappointment and folded her arms. “You seem troubled, would you care for some tea?”.

And with that she got roped into a tea party with a man she didn't even know the name off, but she found herself not particularly bothered- enjoying the distraction from the earlier argument with Aang and Katara.

“I know what you're thinking: ‘a little girl like me is too young to be out here on my own’.” She frowned, before the man passed her a cup of sweet-smelling tea, or at least she assumed it was tea and not poison- did poison count as an attack? The earthbender wasn't quite sure.

“I never said that.” He assured her calmly, and she heard him take a sip from his own drink and felt inclined to do the same. It was… Delicious.

“Please, you wouldn't even let me pour my own tea.” She grumbled, taking a gulp of the liquid and seriously beginning to consider if this man was some sort of tea-god.

“I poured your tea because I wanted to, not for any other reason.” He said genuinely, and she let a little smile tug at her lips.

They sat in comfortable silence for a little while after that, Toph relaxing in the tranquil morning breeze that was brushing against her skin.

“So… What are you doing out here?” She asked, now done with her drink and pretty curious.

“I'm following my nephew, I know I shouldn't but… I'm worried about him. His life has recently changed and, though he's doing the right thing, I'm afraid he is still lost in the figurative sense.” Admitted the man sadly, not intruding as to why Toph was wandering the forest on her own, yet she still felt comfortable enough to tell him.

“I'm here because I ran away from my friends. They wanted me to be helpless and need their help
but I don't need them, I can look after myself.” She vented her frustrations to the strange man, not realising the extent of her bottled up emotions until they were tumbling out of her mouth.

“You sound like my nephew- he always wanted to do everything on his own, and he tried to push away the people trying to help him. I hope he's learned how to trust in people now… But I think you can look after yourself whilst still sometimes getting help when you need it.” He advised wisely, and Toph considered that she might have to think over some things.

“Thank you for the tea, and for the conversation, I think… I think I'm going to go talk to my friends-” She decided, before getting rather rudely interrupted by the sound of a massive, fiery blast in the far off distance.

“I think that's your queue to leave, I can't come with you, unfortunately, I just… Can't. But go, help your friends and, please, don't tell anyone you saw me here. It would be… Disruptive.” He basically pleaded sadly, before getting up to leave and walking away.

“Okay, but I think you should talk to your nephew, maybe tell him you miss him!” She called, before going her own way.

Toph tried not to focus on the kind stranger whilst she earth-surfed (rode a chunk of earth across a long distance) towards where she was sure the blast had come from.

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Zuko, Sokka, Katara and Aang all waited in an abandoned town for Azula and her friends to show up, the Prince being pretty much certain they were all in for either really gruesome deaths or getting captured and mercilessly tortured for the rest of their lives.

Aang had already hidden Appa and Momo away in the woods to protect them from harm and the trail was set up, meaning they were as prepared as they were ever going to be. Zuko was steeling himself for only using his firebending, a skill that was incredibly lackluster in comparison to his sister, but also had his swords strapped to his back just in case. He wasn't exactly sure the extent of how Mai and Ty Lee had progressed since he'd last seen the two, though he knew Mai at least was incredibly skilled with knives (he had the scar in his leg to prove it) and Ty Lee was very flexible. He'd warned his friends of both of them, and had also told them to expect anything from Azula since, though he hadn't been present for the last three years of her firebending training, he was sure she could already bend lightning and the like.
Zuko's musings were interrupted by the thunderous sound of his sister's tank, and he turned to look at where Azula would be arriving. When her vehicle stopped she stepped out with a smirk, her friends in tow, and looked right at their pathetic little group (at least compared to the Princess’ squad).

“My, my, my, if it isn't Zuzu and the avatar, waiting for me. Father would be most disappointed by your company, brother, water tribe peasants? Really? Tst tst tst” She laughed cruelly, nodding to Mai and Ty Lee who started advancing.

Sokka and Aang suppressed snickers at Zuko's nickname, and the firebender attempted to control his anger and not charge right at Azula, who was clearly baiting them. They had to fight smart if they wanted to survive.

“This is your only chance to leave, Azula!” Threatened Zuko, his anger completely genuine but his confidence as fake as the leather shoes Aang was wearing (well, it did make sense- he was a vegetarian after all).

“Aww, and disobey father? I'm sorry, Zuzu, but I'm not the same disappointment you are.” She taunted, and Zuko saw red, charging for his sister with his his hands ablaze.

He distantly heard some people yell for him to stop, but he blearily ignored them and rushed past Mai and Ty Lee, both of which seeming perfectly happy to let him go straight for Azula. Said firebender was still smiling, her own hands gripping blue daggers identical to Zuko’s orange ones. The Prince swung his right fist, which she easily dodged, sending her left hand at his face- which he blocked haphazardly. Azula barely even seemed to be trying but she still walked all over him, and probably could have detained him in about three seconds flat had she not been seeming to have so much fun.

Meanwhile, Zuko could tell the others were having slightly more luck, but it could be going better on their end too. He swerved from one of his sister's fists of fire just in time to steal a glance at Mai pinning Sokka to a tree with her knives and Ty Lee doing some weird jabs on Katara and Aang, causing their limbs to go limp.

“What's wrong, Zuzu? You and your fellow criminals not good enough?” She threw a bigger blast as his chest that he had to leap back to escape from, using some airbending to jump out of the fire’s path.

Azula stared at him, her wits not quite about her for just long enough for him to surprise her with a fire-whip to her torso, that she only just deflected with a grunt. The smile on her face now gone, the
Princess snarled at her brother and let out two almighty blasts of her blue flames either side of them, trapping the two in the back part of the abandoned village, in between what seemed to be an old stable and a water tower.

“Learned some new skills, have we, Zuzu?” She asked, her voice teetering a little so he thought it sounded almost frantic, yet still calm and collected for the most part.

“Nope, I'm just getting better than you.” He taunted in response, trying not to pay attention to the danger his friends were in, his own identity as the avatar possibly getting revealed or the exhaustion that was now throbbing in the back of his skull.

Azula sent several more attacks his way, each precise and deadly to the extent that he could barely dissolve them with his own fire. By now he was sure at least Sokka and Katara had been detained, though it was hard to tell through all the fire and smoke and his own battle, and he had so many burns across his forearms just from blocking against his sister that he was fairly certain that, by the end of this fight, he would have no skin left. When all hope seemed lost, truly like they were all going to become Fire Nation prisoners, their saviour arrived.

“I can't leave you guys alone for five minutes, can I? How the hell did you even survive before I joined the group?” Yelled Toph over the commotion with a lighthearted edge to her voice that Zuko really needed to hear, before she sent two massive slabs of earth down and smothered most of the fire.

Her surprise visit, while it did little to dull the attacks Azula was sending at the Prince, did successfully shock Mai and Ty Lee who, with Aang and Toph working in unison, got pushed back a short distance. Zuko also felt more drive, and went back to firing at his sister as much as he could, though with only firebending anyone could tell he was doomed to defeat.

“No that's cheating, you can't bring in a surprise player.” His sister snickered, expertly sidestepping a spiralling attack Zuko sent, apparently now over her initial shock at his airbending (probably figuring it was nothing) and back to taunting him.

The Prince hoped his friends could now come and help him, but Azula created a new wall of fire in between them and started actually trying in the battle, pushing Zuko back into a wall until his only choice was surrender or get fried. Too stubborn to surrender, Zuko stood his ground and prepared a stance for blocking Azula's next, and probably final and deadly, attack. She grinned maliciously, a cold, happy hatred resting in her eyes, before she threw another blast at him, straight for the firebender’s chest. He swiped with his right hand, his desperation to survive flowing through the very veins of his body, and… A stream of water hit the fire mid-air, both of them turning to steam that clouded the space between Zuko and his sister.
The Prince, shocked out of his mind that he'd allowed himself to do that and bordering on a mental break down, gathered enough sanity to strike Azula whilst she was even more out of it than he was, and he directed more water (that he realised was coming from the water tower he'd seen earlier) at her, before freezing it so she was encased completely in ice, aside from her head. It wouldn't last for long, not at all, but it gave him some time.

He ran away from his sister, who was frozen in both senses of the word, and towards the others, using his own bending to create a gap in Azula's fire so that he might pass through. On the other side Katara and Sokka were back in the fight, but Mai and Ty Lee were holding their own. Toph was preoccupied by Mai, who was stood on a chunk of wood and therefore was not ‘visible’ to the earthbender, as she threw knives at Toph, which the girl found difficult to dodge due to them being metal and her being blind. Meanwhile Ty Lee was dodging everything that Katara, Aang and Sokka were throwing at her, which didn't seem too hard thanks to the three being incredibly sluggish from their tiredness. In fact, Zuko was pretty sure their entire group would be fairing at least a little better if they weren't all about two seconds from passing out.

“Guys! This is over, we're going before Azula thaws out!” He yelled, motioning for them to follow him and ignoring the shocked looks on Mai and Ty Lee’s faces.

At that moment he heard a terrifying yell of fury and figured his sister had snapped out of her stupor and was now ten seconds away from melting his face off. The Prince then ran straight towards where they'd parked Appa, trying to ignore the heat that erupted behind him and was a sure sign Azula had freed herself, and climbed aboard the bison. His friends quickly followed, Sokka helping Toph up, and then they were away, even Appa being terrified enough to bypass his exhaustion.

“Well… That was…” Tried Sokka a few minutes after they'd started flying, giving up after those three syllables and just leaning back against the saddle.

“Everyone in the Fire Nation… My father… They'll all know I'm… They'll know who I am…” He muttered, pulling at his hair as he tried to force the terrified thoughts out of his head.

“It's going to be okay-” Started Aang kindly, reaching out to pat his arm, but Zuko shoved him off.

“How can it be okay?! How?! Everything is just, it's just, it's- it's so stupid! I'm wrong! I shouldn't have been born! We're all going to die, my sister, or- or my father, they'll kill us or something! It'd be better for all of us if I just threw myself off Appa right now!” He yelled, hands over his eyes and nails digging in, happily embracing the pain that came along with the piercing of his skin.
“Hey, stop that.” Ordered Sokka, softly but firmly, whilst he tugged Zuko's hands from his face, looking right into his eyes with a seriousness Zuko had only seen from him a couple of times before. “Hurting yourself isn't going to help anyone. What we need to do is focus on our plan, okay? Learn the elements. Don't think past that.”

Zuko found himself nodding, curling up on himself whilst both Aang and Sokka hooked themselves at each of his sides, hugging him. It was pretty comforting, and the contact reminded him of his uncle, so he didn't pull away- instead he let himself feel better.

“Um, Toph?” Coughed Katara a few minutes later, whilst Zuko was still getting crushed in a group hug.

“Yes, Sugar Queen?” Spat Toph in mock politeness, crossing her arms and huffing angrily.

“I was really harsh earlier and I shouldn't have been so mean. I was just so… So frustrated, but that isn't an excuse. If it weren't for you we would all probably still be getting beaten up by those Fire Nation girls so… Thank you.” Apologised the waterbender, and Zuko saw a clear break in Toph’s resolve.

“Yeah, well, you know… Maybe I shouldn't have refused to help you guys yesterday…” She muttered in response, giving Katara a slight punch in the arm before tilting her head to her lap, managing to elicit a satisfied smile from the waterbender.

Soon after that they all dozed off, Zuko still squished between Aang and Sokka, and Toph inadvertently leaning on Katara.

Chapter End Notes

Gosh darnit I can't believe I chose this upload to be late ysvuwcis

Welp, now the Fire Nation knows about Zuko...

If you're wondering, Azula had that completely shocked reaction since she's used to everything going to plan and completely knowing those around her. Yet she never suspected Zuko might be the Avatar and so that discovery sent her reeling.
Angst and Zuko has some bad habits still, but hey, that's what development's for. Now he's leaning on his friends a little bit more and not having as many nightmares sooooo... Progress?

I hope you enjoyed, see you next week.

(P. S I adore comments and kudos :)))
Katara was abruptly woken up by the sound of several boulders crashing into each other, at only just sunrise. Personally, she didn't find this too awful but Sokka certainly seemed annoyed by the interruption to his slumber.

“Toph!” He cried at the earthbender, who was happily bending several rocks so that they fell down the steep cliff near them.

They'd positioned their campsite in a rocky quarry so that they could catch up on sleep and Zuko could begin his earthbending training, plus Azula and her, pretty damn terrifying, friends would have a hard time finding them. The quarry was also surrounded at the top by pretty thick forests full of wildlife, making them even more inaccessible.

“Sorry, Sleeping Beauty, but I've got too much work to do to start worrying about the bags under your eyes.” Toph chanted, slamming another boulder against the quarry wall. “Now, where's Sparky?”.

“Right here.” Groaned the firebender, raising a hand from under his several blankets (one of which that looked suspiciously blue) but making no effort to get up.

Due to Zuko’s lack of enthusiasm, Toph forced him to his feet with a well placed jab of rocks from under his back, which he growled at angrily

“Come on, Zuko, how can you be tired? You always get up at sunrise anyway.” Asked Aang brightly, and Katara noticed that he was completely right, and even now Zuko still looked decently well rested, so why the bad attitude?

“Fine, let's get on with it.” He muttered, brushing back his bedhead and frowning as Sokka stared at him. “What?”.

“Uhhhhhh…” Katara's brother mumbled, still staring at the firebender but now… Blushing?
“Ahem, nothing, nope- nah, ugh, noth- nothing at all, yeah, at- at, uh, all. I'm gonna go, *gulp* hunt or, uh, something.”.
Zuko did not want to try earthbending. Which, okay, he should have figured out before he'd decided to take a shot at learning all the elements but ah well. It's just that… If he could earthbend then that meant he could bend all the elements, and then it would only be a matter of time until he managed to master them all to a degree that his friends would think he was ready to fight his father. Which he definitely wasn't ready for, no where close, if it was up to him he'd never face the Firelord and would just spend the rest of his life practicing the elements is some tranquil resort on the East coast of the Earth Kingdom.

Yet here he was, stood next to the most terrifying twelve year old earthbender to ever exist and about thirty seconds away from getting forced to at least try bending a boulder.

“Earthbending is all about your stance, you bend your legs, keep your back straight, and—” Toph crouched down a little, getting into what the Prince assumed was a flawless pose, and she jutted her hand out, sending the boulder flying right to the other side of the quarry. “Okay, your turn.”

Zuko did a shoddy replica of her stance, purposefully making his muscles lax, and half heartedly attempted to move the boulder, barely even touching it. Unsurprisingly, he did not successfully earthbend.

“Are you even trying?! That was the worst attempt I've ever seen! And I can't even see!” She yelled pretty fairly, and Zuko dodged as she threw a pebble at him, almost missing it thanks to it being at his blind side.

“Hey! That's the best I can do.” He lied, lightly tapping the still stationary boulder and ignoring Toph’s sigh of disappointment.
“Then do better.” She ordered, clapping as if to say ‘do it again, you idiot’.  

Zuko muttered a few quiet remarks, getting punched in the arm for his disrespect, before he once again got into a stance. This one was marginally better than the last, but still completely abysmal with literally no chance of actually earthbending. He vaguely patted the boulder and faked a disappointed sigh when there was no movement.  

“Aww, darn, I'm so bad at this!” He lied, knowing it was clear he wasn't actually trying but not particularly caring.  

“I know when you're lying! Ugh, I'll teach you to try…” Toph muttered pretty scarily, and Zuko found himself wondering if his own worries were worth getting murdered by the young earthbender.  

She led them over to an empty patch of land and started bending rocks at him with such furiosity that he was sure he got several broken ribs before he regained his wits enough to unsheath his swords and slice apart the projectiles before they could hit him, which was extremely difficult.  

“You're meant to use earthbending to block them!” Toph scolded, not letting up on the flurry of rocks she was sending Zuko's way but instead making them go faster, until his swords alone couldn't hit them all out of the air and he had to start dodging with his airbending.  

“I'll never be able earthbend if you crush me!” He yelled, slicing a particularly jagged looking stone that had been headed straight for his neck right in half, barely even taking notice as he tried not to die.  

Toph's merciless onslaught lasted for another ten minutes, with Zuko literally almost dying well over twenty times. And the scariest part was she hadn't even broken a sweat by the end, when Katara and Aang came over to check their progress and had to rescue Zuko.  

“Toph! You can't kill the avatar!” Said Katara, her hands on her hips, and not sounding nearly as threatening as Zuko would've liked.  

“Well he's a pretty crappy avatar- he won't even try to earthbend one stupid boulder!” Complained Toph, gesturing towards the solitary boulder Zuko had left stationary.  

“Hey, I'm trying my best!” Defended Zuko, his lying much better now since he was with two people
who could actually be fooled. (Maybe he'd taken acting lessons from the Ember Island Players when
he was younger, but that wasn't important and should never be brought up).

“Maybe you need a calmer teaching method.” Suggested Aang with a sweet smile that Toph didn't
have the benefit of seeing, the airbender also placed a supportive pat of the Prince’s shoulder that he
was most grateful for.

“Urrgh, if you don’t like my way of teaching you can go teach yourself.” Spat Toph, crossing her
arms and scowling viciously in Zuko's direction.

“Yeah?! Well-” Started the firebender, about to say that's exactly what he would do and stalk off, but
he was interrupted by Katara.

“Hey, hey, guys, I'm sure you both need a breather. You know what? I'll go teach Zuko some more
waterbending, spirits forbid he's still nowhere near mastering the art, and you and Aang can go, uh,
teach Momo how to knit. Sound good?” Mediated Katara, apparently completely over her grievances
with Toph from a few days ago, which was just Zuko's luck since a bit of tension would have
distracted from him.

“But Momo can already knit.” Revealed Aang, as Toph simultaneously mocked:

“Yeah, go splash around until you feel better.” With a haughty tone, stomping her foot and marching
off, sending a little rubble over to trip the two teenagers up.

Katara was extremely proud of the firebender’s waterbending progress, though she still noted his
technique could use some work. He had gotten over his original tension about the bending, however,
and was now learning like any other waterbending pupil would be, instead of like a person who
literally had zero talent for the art and kept accidentally firebending, almost searing off Katara's
eyebrows on multiple occasions.

Yet now he was successfully maintaining two, admittedly slightly rough, water whips and was using
them with some accuracy to slash apart the wooden targets Aang had set up for him, his movements
even more aggressive than usual and a telltale sign he was in an even worse mood than usual.
“So, earthbending training isn't going very well?” Questioned Katara as nonchalantly as she possibly could, shocking Zuko into dropping the water he'd been bending.

The two stood about waist deep in a wide, clean pond, pretty far off from where Toph was noisily smashing up boulders. The Prince hadn't spoken all that much in the last three hours they'd been practicing, so Katara figured now was as good a time as any to try and get him to open up.

“I don't want to talk about it.” He stated unhelpfully, beginning to form icicles from the water and firing them with decent accuracy at the targets instead, one of the frozen knives going straight through the middle target and out the other side.

“And I'm sure Toph doesn't want to be blind, but here we are.” Remarked Katara, twirling the water at Zuko's feet so that he was forced to turn and face her.

“I already told you anyway, I'm trying my best but I'm just not good at it. Maybe I'm actually not the avatar and can only bend three of the elements.” He sulked moodily, not looking the waterbender in the eye as he began creating a miniature tornado in his palm. Great, this again.

“But are you actually trying your best?” She ventured, raising an eyebrow and putting her hand on her hip.

“Yes!” He shouted, a tad too defensively for Katara's tastes. She hummed in response, picking some dirt from under her fingernails, and splashed a wave at him.

It was about as tall as he was and, despite Zuko not being ready for it, got easily blocked by the Prince who sent back his own jab of liquid. Realising this had devolved from her just checking the firebender’s reflexes into a water fight, Katara gathered a bubble of water around herself and made it sprout several octopus tentacles, the front three of which immediately heading straight for Zuko. He dodged the first and bended the second apart, but the third struck his left side and sent him crashing into the water. Not to be beaten, the Prince then used some pretty obvious firebending whilst he was still submerged at the bottom of the pond to evaporate all the water, before he blasted a strong gust of cold air at Katara, frizzing up her hair.

“That's cheating.” She grumbled, gathering the steam and waterbending it back into water, laughing merrily as it splashed down all over Zuko.
“No, it's natural talent.” He defended with a smirk- well, at least he seemed to be in a bit of a better mood after blowing off some steam (literally).

“Mmhmm. Well, I'd say that's enough waterbending training for now. You should probably go practice ear-” She started, brushing off the water drenching her with bending.

“Airbending with Aang? Good idea.” He interrupted, before climbing out of the pond and heating the water covering him so that his clothes dried. Zuko then began walking over to where Aang was braiding Appa a flower crown.

—

Thanks to his, for once, refreshing bout of waterbending, Zuko's airbending flowed much more easily than usual. He found himself managing to glide around the quarry just as quickly as Aang could, and he could now create a cyclone around himself without being in the avatar state (though it was a lot smaller than the one he'd created back at the North Pole).

“I've taught you much- but now I'll show you my greatest achievement.” Praised Aang with a strange, old-person accent (well, the kid was over a hundred years old).

He then spun himself a ball of air and hopped onto it, digging his heal into the churning winds and riding it as it sped circles around the more than slightly confused firebender.

“This is your greatest achievement? But you do it all the time!” He questioned skeptically, noting how Aang's ankle would slightly jut in a certain direction and then that's where he'd travel.

“Well, yeah, but that's because I invented the air scooter! It's what got me my tattoos and the honour of being named an airbending master.” He explained excitedly, still perching on top of his air scooter.

Zuko failed to see how that was relevant or why he'd ever need to make an air scooter in combat, the idea that it was just for fun going straight over his head, but he was desperate enough to get out of earthbending with Toph that he nodded along to Aang's words with as genuine a smile as he could possibly muster.
“Great, uh, I guess I'll give it a go then.” He decided unenthusiastically, copying Aang's hand movements first and creating the actual ball of air.

It was harder than it looked, actually, the breezes wound into it almost having minds of their own and not wanting to be tamed into one path of circular motion. But he wrestled them into submission, and then realised he had to tackle the problem of riding the darn thing. He stared at his creation for a few moments, before noticing that the longer he left it the harder the air inside the ball was to control, and hurriedly just jumped on, hoping for the best. He managed to balance for several seconds, but was quickly dragged into a dizzying spin and tossed off, landing on the hard ground a couple of metres away.

“Urrgh.” He groaned painfully, pushing himself up with his now heavily grazed arms. Between that, the boulders from Toph earlier, Azula's fire a few days ago and the splinters from the crash landing just before that, Zuko's forearms could definitely be looking better.

“Hey! You balanced for a good while, wanna try again?” Offered Aang cheerfully and, unwilling to give up so easily, Zuko nodded his head in agreement.

They kept practicing for a couple more hours, until it wasn't too long until sunset and Aang decided that maybe he should try and teach Momo to crochet, saying Zuko had succeeded. Which, honestly the Prince agreed with; he had (eventually) managed to both create an air scooter and ride around on it for just as long as Aang could, and, was apparently, the longest time anyone could possibly keep it going for. The firebender had then been about inquire about dinner, since he'd forgotten to eat breakfast and also hadn't eaten in the midst of all the bending training. As well as that, he'd had worryingly little to eat for the last few days too, since his battle with Azula had left him more than a little shook up. Yet his question was interrupted by Katara coming up to him with a deeply worried expression spread across her face.

“Have you seen Sokka? He left at sunrise to go hunting but he's not been back since.” She fretted, eyes darting around the edge of the forest at the top of their quarry.

“No- uh, no, I haven't seen him. But I'll go look around for him, okay?” He said, ignoring his grumbling stomach.

“Yeah, okay, thanks. Whilst your gone I'll get Toph and Aang to do something productive. If you need help send up a flare with your fire or something, us three- uh two, will be watching out for it.” The waterbender nodded at him and then went over to Aang before the two of them then went to, presumably, find Toph.
Sokka was completely, one hundred percent, screwed. It was just after sunrise, and he had just idiotically stared at Zuko's freaking adorable bedhead before awkwardly rushing off under the guise of 'going hunting'. And yet, somehow, that wasn't even the worst part! He'd also managed to fall down a crack in the ground about a half hour away from their camp, and was now trapped up to his shoulders with no chance of escape outside of one of his friends randomly stumbling upon him.

He didn't even need to go hunting in the first place! Zuko's money meant they could buy plenty of preserves (that guy was so great)- he just liked going hunting because it made him feel useful in a team of extremely skilled benders. A team which, by the way, also included the hottest avatar to have ever existed (at least in Sokka’s opinion, and anyone who disagreed would get thwacked with his good, old boomerang).

And really now, almost a full day after he'd gotten stuck, he should be attempting to free himself, or at least be trying to come up with an idea that could free him. What was he doing instead? Well, technically he was doing two things, the first being remembering how beautiful Zuko had looked when he'd put his hair in that messy ponytail- Sokka’s poor heart might actually melt, and the second being making false promises to a baby animal (that he'd been meaning to kill for some delicious, though not really needed, meat) about how he would become a vegetarian and give up sarcasm if he became free.

On top of all that, though, he was also doing even more humiliating stuff, namely:

“So when it comes to Zuko I just don't what to do or how to interpret my feelings. Before him I'd always imagined I'd end up with a girl, like all the warriors in my village did, but now I don't know. I guess when I was younger I always just assumed I liked girls because everyone else did, and it wasn't like there was a guy my age for me to be attracted to. Heck, by the time I was old enough to even get attracted to people all the men in my village who weren't ancient had left! And I'm not saying I don't like women, I really did like Suki and Yue in, you know, the romantic way, but I also like guys, apparently. And, out of all the guys I could've developed crushes on, it had to be Zuko? Really?! The Prince of the Fire Nation! Not that I really care, but my tribe would! Wait, would my tribe even let me date a guy at all? Does Zuko even like me that way?! Does Zuko even like me at all?!?!” Rambled Sokka, who would've been pulling his hair out by the roots by now had his arms not been pinned to his sides.
The baby animal, who Sokka had named Foo Foo Cuddlypoops, only tilted their head at his sporadic release of words, before nuzzling their, admittedly very adorable, muzzle into the non-bender’s defenceless neck, tickling him.

“Hey! Aww, okay, you're pretty sweet. I bet you don't have to worry about any of this stuff, do you?” He cooed, smiling soppily at the little creature, until he heard a light pattering of feet close by, someone who must've been extremely stealthy to evade his excellent hearing for this long.

Sokka braced himself for an attack, going completely quiet aside from his low breathing, until a figure crept into the small clearing the non-bender was stuck in. The good news: it was just Zuko, the bad news: it was the same Zuko that Sokka had been gushing about all day.

“Thank the spirits I found you- uh, why are you in a hole?” Asked the firebender, tilting his head in similar way to Foo Foo Cuddlypoops and damn his heart might melt.

Thankfully Sokka managed to restrain his blush and, instead of focusing on how freaking beautiful Zuko looked in this lighting (seriously, Sokka? Are you on the guy version of a period or something with all these hormones?), he focused on the problem at hand.

“I fell, could you earthbend me out?” He requested, once again attempting to pull himself out.

“I, uh, I can't…” Muttered Zuko, sighing a little. “Maybe I could airbend you out?”.

The Prince then blasted several gusts of air into the hole, probably hoping the pressure would force Sokka out.

“Hey, buddy, that's not working. Sure you can't do a little earthbending?” He asked, painfully sweetly, but Zuko only shook his head and sat down next to the non-bender’s head. “Then how about you go get Toph?”.

“No, I can't, sorry.” The firebender didn't elaborate so Sokka figured he didn't want to talk about it. Unfortunately, this still left Sokka stuck in a hole.

They sat in silence for a few, probably not as awkward as Sokka thought they were, moments, until Momo leapt off of Zuko’s head and started playing jovially with Foo Foo Cuddlypoops, eliciting a slight snicker of amusement from the, up to that point, pretty depressingly sombre Prince.
“Or right, I forgot to introduce you guys, Zuko, this is Foo Foo Cuddlypoops, Foo Foo Cuddlypoops, Zuko.” Joked Sokka, glad to hear a genuine laugh from Zuko, who immediately started stroking the non-bender’s new friend.

“They're so cute, what kind of animal do you think they are?” He smiled, scratching the fuzzy creature under one of its tiny ears.

“I'm not su-” Began Sokka, getting interrupted by a loud, though relievedly far off, roar. “That's Foo Foo’s mother, isn't it?”.

Zuko nodded tiredly and stood up, getting into a stance that pointed towards the roar, lighting his hands aflame. At this, Momo lost his clutch on Zuko’s sleeve and scurried to hide on the back of Sokka’s neck, really not helping with the young man's ticklishness. A few minutes of furious charging sounds later, the biggest saber-tooth-moose-lion Sokka had ever had the displeasure of seeing burst out of the forest, heading straight for Zuko. The firebender shot at it with some flames, but got nowhere since, as Sokka remembered his mother telling him, everything in the lion family was fairly heat resistant.

“You can't use fire!” Called the non-bender, unfortunately catching the moose-lion’s attention enough for her to turn to him. At this, Sokka nudged her cub towards her with his forehead, hoping she'd just leave if she got her child back, but she only picked up the smaller creature by the scruff of their neck and placed it gently to one side, before preparing to charge at Sokka.

Zuko attempted to blow the animal of course with airbending, but he was nothing more than an annoyance and she would soon be trampling over the non-bender’s head. She was ten metres away, nine, eight, seven… Then Zuko airbended himself in front of Sokka and tried again to blow her back, but it was useless. Until, when she was less than three metres away, Zuko earthbended a wall of rock in front of them, blocking the moose lion’s path so that she crashed, and then stalked off on her own, assumably due to the pain in her muzzle.

“You can earthbend!” Congratulated Sokka happily, unsure as to why Zuko still hadn't turned back to face him and was seemingly frozen still. “Uh, buddy?”.

“You're right, Sokka, he can earthbend.” Toph revealed herself from the trees, managing to shock the firebender out of his stupor.

“You- you were here the whole time?! We could have been killed!” Zuko yelled, marching over to Toph angrily, but she only tutted.
“But you didn't, and now you're an official earthbender, so there's no point holding off on training anymore. You go back to Aang and Katara and I'll get Sokka out.” She said, smiling as if she realised the Prince looked extremely fed up.

Zuko then walked off, while Toph easily let Sokka out of his hole.

“Hey, uh, Toph? How long were you waiting in the trees?” He asked sheepishly once he was sure Zuko could no longer hear them.

“Long enough to hear you awkwardly introduce the avatar to a baby saber-tooth-moose-lion. Why?” She questioned suspiciously, putting her hand on his chest to prevent him from walking off.

“Oh, uh, nothing…” He mumbled, and Toph finally let him past, though not without saying:

“I know you're lying.”.

Chapter End Notes

TOPH BEEN KNEW.

Okay, more Zukka because I'm trash and you guys seem to like it :))

Also: TRAINING, since Zuko needs the practice god damn it.

I hope you enjoyed this chapter, any kudos or comments would be greatly appreciated!
“Guys! We shouldn't be wasting time with this!” Complained Sokka, extremely annoyed that his sister had decided it was a good time for them all to go on vacation.

“Oh, lighten up, Sokka, we might as well have some fun whilst we're training Zuko.” Replied Katara happily, holding the map (for the first time in her life) as they walked towards her destination; Appa had gotten tired of flying a few miles back so he too was walking.

“Plus, since we keep going to random locations, Azula and her friends will have a hard time tracking us.” Added Aang, who had already gone to his vacation spot and had played with a bunch of mole-things.

“What about the Fire Nation?! Have you forgotten about them taking over the world and trying to kill us?! We should be trying to stop them!” Argued Sokka desperately, turning to each member of his group for support.

“We are trying to stop them by getting me to master all the elements.” Said Zuko boredly, probably not interested in doing anything further to take down the Fire Nation due to his, uh, ties there.

“No! I mean we should be making a plan, or gathering intelligence!” Tried Sokka again, still gaining no support.

“I have plenty of intelligence on the Fire Nation, there's no reason to research stuff I already know.” Protested the firebender, crossing his arms and staring the other man down.

“Look, we'll finish up on our vacations and then we'll go look for Sokka’s ‘intelligence’, that apparently Zuko doesn't already have. But first we’re doing this- over that hill is supposed to be the Misty Palms Oasis! The most beautiful oasis in the entire Earth Kingdom desert!” Explained Katara happily, still leading the way but now with Aang eagerly rushing by her side.

They walked over the mound of sand that Katara had incorrectly labeled as a ‘hill’, Toph holding onto the non-bender’s arm as the sand made it difficult for her to ‘see’, and saw the supposed incredibly beautiful oasis. Yet all Sokka could see was a dry patch of sand, with a small bar-like building off to one side. It was nice enough, a little less boring than the rest of the desert and with
more people milling around, but definitely not the amazing oasis that Katara had clearly envisioned it to be.

“Uh, so is it nice? I can't feel that much except for a fuzzy building.” Asked Toph, snapping Sokka’s sister out of her disappointed stupor.

“It's... Dry. Come on, let's go to the bar and grab a drink.” Suggested Katara, plodding over to the small, rocky building (that housed a few customers) grumpily.

“You mean we had the option of alcohol this entire time, and you never let me drink any?!” Questioned Zuko angrily, running after Katara, possibly to burn her face off- Sokka wasn't particularly bothered.

“Nope! No alcohol!” Protested Aang, also rushing after the waterbender.

That left Sokka and Toph to follow them, with the former waving cheerily at passer-bys so they didn't get mad that their friends were currently having a loud argument about whether or not they'd be having any alcohol. Zuko was under the impression that yes they should, Katara and Aang and the bartender (who was very firm about Zuko being underage) disagreed- but this didn't deter the firebender at all. Unfortunately, in their confrontation, Aang accidentally bumped into a man at one point and the guy spilt his drink all over the hyper-active airbender, who immediately dried himself.

“Oh spirits! You're an airbender!” Exclaimed the man, before rootling round his person, apparently for something Aang could sign.

“Yes! Uh, who are you?” Asked Aang sweetly as the guy grabbed his hand and began to shake it with a furiosity that seemed almost painful, until Zuko grabbed his wrist and snapped it round, forcing him off of the airbender and causing him to release a yowl of pain.

“Zuko! We don't attack strangers that don't attack us.” Scolded Katara lightly, placing a protective arm around Aang.

“My- my apol- apologies, uh, Airbender, I did not mean to be so- uh, yeah, I was simply fascinated by your bending.” Apologised the man, clutching his wrist and smiling (though it was closer to a grimace) through the pain. “Your friend here, is *gulp* very strong.”
“You have no idea.” Threatened Zuko, unsheathing his swords slightly—apparently the firebender was really in the mood to beat someone up today.

“Yeah, calm down there, buddy. Er, who are you?” Sokka directed his question at the rather flustered, and in pain, man who had not answered Aang when he’d asked.

“Oh! Yes, right, I'm Professor Zei of Ba Sing Se University, could I ask you a few questions?” Zei told Aang, before diving into one of his many bags full of papers, dropping a few as he grabbed at them, eventually pulling out some parchment with ‘questions to ask an Air Nomad if I went back in time to meet them’ written at the top.

Sokka ignored Zei’s incessant fangirling over Aang’s culture, and instead opted to be polite and gather up the dropped papers for him, having no motive to make fun of the guy for his weird interests later, none at all. One of the sheets he picked up was a map, one of the desert Katara had made them plough through to get here, so he took notice and turned to the Professor- intent on seeing what he was up to. He also inadvertently prevented the guy from learning about the Air Nomads’ fruit tarts, which was good since the information might have led to another argument between their group over which nation produced the best deserts.

“What are you doing out here in the desert, anyway? I mean, shouldn't you be back in Ba Sing Se with all your walls and safety?” Questioned Sokka, a tad suspiciously, and causing everyone’s attention to turn to him.

“Well, I'm searching for a Knowledge Spirit’s library, which could contain information to use against the Fire Nation!” He revealed excitedly, and Sokka thanked the universe that Zuko was wearing his Earth Kingdom getup.

“Guys, I know where I want to go on vacation: The Library!” He announced proudly, beaming at his grumbling friends.

“Okay, this ‘library’ is pathetic.” Complained Zuko boredly, and Sokka had to agree- it was just a kind of tall, stone hut in the middle of the desert!

“No-” Zei stopped talking for a second as if he realised he'd just disagreed with the guy who'd
sprained his wrist and kept reaching for his swords. "*cough* anyway, this can't be the library, it's much too small; we'll just have to keep looking.".

Sokka internally groaned at that, having already been travelling for hours and being really sick of Zei. The others, however, were much more outright with their dislike for the situation, moaning loudly about how much their feet hurt every ten minutes. The non-bender prepared himself for several more hours of that torture, but found it for naught when he saw a small, but elegant, fox scurry across the sand, before entering the lone window of the stone hut.

"Wait… That's one of the spirit’s handsome fox guardians, I always assumed it was a metaphor but-" Gasped Zei, astounded by the animal that had just passed them.

"So… That is the library?" Asked Katara, moving over to the hut and knocking at one of the walls, jumping back when a bit of the roof crumbled. It was only a small chunk but still got all over her hair.

"It used to be, I- I can't believe this is all that's left!" He wailed embarrassingly, prompting Sokka and Toph to go to the side of the would-be library for a closer look.

"No, it's not! Underneath this- there's a whole building! It's massive!" Exclaimed Toph, stomping on the ground inside the hut a few times before coming back out, an impish grin spread across her face.

"Then we must go in!" Cheered Zei, clambering through the window, the only visible entrance to the library.

Katara, Aang and Zuko followed the Professor, albeit with less enthusiasm, and Sokka turned back to Appa (who was clearly too big to enter) and Toph, who hadn't moved to enter the building.

"You go in without me, books have never really resonated with me.” She said, gesturing to her eyes. 

So Sokka too went through the entrance, surprised by the impossibly huge amount of stairs. He began descending, soon catching up with the others, their path lit by Zuko’s fire. Thankfully, Zei seemed too preoccupied by his excitement about the library to notice that they had a firebender in their midst, as otherwise they would have had to make some massive explanation or reveal to a complete, and pretty darn weird, stranger that Zuko was the avatar. The stairs kept going for a while, until the sandy walls surrounding them had been replaced by shelves crammed full of books and scrolls which soon led them into a massive room.
It wasn't lit until Sokka, the last one of them to enter, went in, and torches along the walls came to life, spreading a green glow. Zuko quickly extinguished his own torch, whilst the others stared in awe at the wondrous room. It had beautiful ornate pillars and about a hundred different exits into passages lined with shelves that were stacked up at least ten feet high with massive volumes. Sokka thought it was the most impressive place he'd ever been, and itched to explore and read, but first he noticed a rustling behind him that probably had to be addressed.

Apparently Zuko heard the same noise, as they turned simultaneously to see that most horrible spirit Sokka was sure he would ever see (which, okay, likelihood was that he'd never see any spirits after this, but hey). It was huge for one thing, a massive, black, long body that slithered around the lowly lit, green room. At first the non-bender assumed it had some form of disgusting, leathery skin, but soon realised the spirit was actually covered in feathers. The thing also had wings, probably as big as Sokka imagined a fully grown dragon’s would be, and definitely out of place in an underground building where they were probably seldom used (though, the library did seem massive; perhaps there was some big room for the spirit to flap around in as he read or book-kept or whatever). The creature’s face was downright creepy: a white owl’s face that seemed almost as though it had been glued onto the rest of the thing, its beak bigger than Sokka’s head, and it definitely seemed capable of eating Toph.

“I know you're here.” Announced the spirit ominously, causing the others to turn around too.

“Uh, duh. We are looking right at you.” Remarked Zuko, rolling his eyes and crossing his arms, quickly angering the spirit. Luckily he didn't have a chance to obliterate the firebender since Zei immediately stepped up and began talking.

“It's such a huge honour to be in your library, spirit, I'm Professor Zei and-” Zei began introducing himself, bowing to the creature so lowly that Sokka worried he might pull a muscle.

“You should leave now, otherwise you'll be stuffed like an animal trophy.” Threatened the spirit, and the non-bender considered obeying- except his fear of the spirit was out weighed by his drive to defeat the Fire Nation.

“Uhm, spirit? This is a, uh, spirit library, so it must have been brought to the physical world from your world, right? Were you the one who did that?” Questioned Sokka, hoping to impress the spirit with his reasoning and ability to piece stuff together.

“Yes, and what a mistake that was. Humans only abuse knowledge for their own violent purposes. Years ago a man came in here, saying he sought knowledge, but actually intended to use it in the war! He didn't even ask my name before lying to my face!” Complained the spirit, who Sokka was
getting less scared by and more annoyed of by the second.

“Uh, what's your name?” Asked Aang as brightly as he could muster, it seemed, smiling up (a little nervously) at the spirit.

“I am Wan Shi Tong, knower of ten thousand things!” Tong announced vainly, even making the dim fire around the room flicker as he said it.

“Well, Wan Shi Tong, knower of ten thousand things, we promise not to abuse the knowledge in your library.” Vowed Katara, bowing her head slightly.

“Fine, but I require an offer of your own knowledge.” Requested Tong, and the others began grabbing things to present to the spirit.

Zei held out a first edition book, Katara took out one of her waterbending scrolls, Aang showed off a scrap of paper, that looked suspiciously like what he'd been using to write down the recipe for Air Nomad fruit tarts for Zei earlier, and Zuko pinched one of Zei’s other books from his pack to give.

“Acceptable, since you are the avatar.” ‘Thanked’ Tong at that, either knowing who Zuko was as part of the ‘ten thousand things’ or having some spirit magic that let him see who the avatar was. “You?”.

Tong turned to Sokka, who grabbed in his pockets for some sort of offering (mostly finding only dust and old chicken-turkey bones), eventually coming across a piece of string. The non-bender then tied the string into a pretty knot, and passed it to Tong, who looked at him with disgust.

“You're not the brightest, are you? Ah well, you five are given access to my library- do not abuse the knowledge.” Then the spirit left, retreating to the lower levels of the library, whilst Sokka lowly muttered that he was a hundred times smarter than him- though his voice was audible to no one but himself.

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Sokka sat, cross-legged on the uncomfortably hard floor, trying to consume as much information
from the bottom two shelves as he possibly could, whilst the others did the same but with less enthusiasm and not as quickly. Zei had left their side two hours ago to go read on his own, which left only four people to find some scrap of knowledge that would help defeat the Fire Nation. Zuko was barely any help at all, as instead of reading he was making paper gliders and using his airbending to fire them at Aang, who kept taking frequent breaks from the book he was supposed to be reading to fire them back. Katara was at least more focused than the other two, but she kept getting drawn into books that were in no way helpful to their cause.

“Hey, Zuko! Did you know that one of your past lives was left-handed, Yangchen apparently!” Katara smiled, turning her page around so that Zuko could read it.

“I always knew you were special.” Aang stated brightly, apparently paying no mind to the fact that Zuko just being himself was so incredible and- okay, back to reading.

“You realise I’m ambidextrous in this life, right?” He asked, squinting his eyes a little at the sheepish glances Katara and Aang threw to each other. “Seriously? I use two swords for crying out loud!”.

Sokka decided to ignore that and kept reading, his text was about the spiritual sides of each element and he hoped it would reveal some clue as to firebenders’ weakness. He’d already gone over four whole chapters on the alleged reasoning behind air being the only element that didn't fluctuate depending on environment (well, unless you were underwater but apparently that didn't count as ‘environment’), so he hoped he'd get to fire soon. Yet, just as was his luck, the next ten chapters were on earth and water. Theories behind how the elements worked, subsections of bending types (some ridiculous drivel about the possibility of metalbending), weaknesses, strengths, references to key events and people through the ages dating as recently as just a few years ago.

Finally, after a lot of skim reading, he got to fire. It had some similar stuff to the other chapters, and just said a lot of information Sokka already knew from Zuko for the most part. It mentioned that fire was strongest in the day (great, they’d be sure to attack at night) and mentioned that the original avatar, as in the first one ever, learnt fire before any of the other elements. The non-bender restrained his surprise at that, and decided to keep it to himself since he figured it wasn't necessary information and might screw up his group's perception of the firebenders (this perception being that they were mostly evil scum, except Zuko who was awesome). There was also a full chapter on why fire was the element most suited for combat, which Sokka didn't necessarily agree with but did understand the reasoning behind it. Yet what was most interesting was the next part, which referenced the ‘darkest day in Fire Nation history: The Day of’ and the rest was scribbled out, almost as if intentionally.

“Zuko, do you know anything about the ‘darkest day in Fire Nation History’? Apparently the date is 410BG, the 28th of July.” Asked Sokka, turning to the firebender and interrupting him from what seemed to be the final round of his and Aang’s game.
“Erm… Well, I wasn't really the best history student, my tutors were really boring… And for the first ten years of my life I figured I'd only ever be a general in the army, so it's not like anything outside of fighting was too important—” He explained sheepishly, scratching the back of his neck and crumpling up the paper he'd been throwing at Aang.

“So, what you're trying to say is: you were a bad student who never memorized things for tests?” Katara frowned and raised her eyebrow at Zuko, who shifted slightly under the gaze.

“I was a perfectly fine student! Sure, I sucked at history but I was in the top classes in theatre, Scripture, blade training and firebending, well, technically Azula had her own class above that one but she was a prodigy so it doesn't count—” He defended himself, pushing his hair back in a really adorable, flustered way.

“Should we be concerned that the avatar just listed his subjects with theatre first and firebending last?” Teased the non-bender, smiling at how Zuko blushed as though he hadn't meant to mention that.

Aang looked like he was about to say something, probably a kind validation of the Prince’s interests, but never got round to it as the group's attention was caught by a fox hurrying past, his head nodding at them as if to motion for the four to follow. Figuring the avatar, two skilled benders and his tribe’s best warrior could defeat a tiny animal in a fight if things went south, Sokka ran after the fox, following it until it led them to a massive double door, the wood old but strong.

Sokka pushed open the doors, with a little assistance from Zuko, and led the others into the room. It was massive and covered in lights, clearly a planetarium, with a large, brass dial in the center. The group walked towards it and noticed how the fox nudged at certain knobs and levers with his paws and muzzle, showing Sokka exactly what he had to do to work the thing.

“Try putting in that date you saw, what was it? 28th August 410BG?” Suggested Katara sensibly, and Sokka input the date, until with the last spin of the dial the moon spun so that it was in front of the sun.

“It's- it's an eclipse! It's literally the darkest day, I bet- I bet firebenders lose their bending on an eclipse, guys… This could win us the war.” Exclaimed Sokka, at first excitedly before speaking with quiet awe.

“So you are abusing my library for the war.” Spat Tong, shocking the non-bender into turning around.
He must’ve snuck up on the four of them whilst they were distracted by the dial. Sokka thought wildly for a solution to their new problem, realising he had to see if there was an eclipse before the comet so they could defeat the Firelord before he took over the rest of the world, but the only way to figure that out was with the dial.

“I'm done catering to humans- I'm taking my library back!” Yelled Tong, flapping his massive wings and causing a shift in the building, before it began… Sliding downwards?

Zuko ran forward and slashed at Won Shi Tong with his swords, and, while Sokka had no clue if it actually hurt the spirit, it captured his attention enough for him to focus solely on going after Zuko, giving Sokka some time figure out when the next eclipse was.

“Me and Aang will find out what day the next eclipse is, you and Zuko head back to the surface.” Ordered the non-bender to his sister, who nodded obediently and ran towards where the Prince was attempting to get away from Tong.

He tested the dial for each conceivable day, starting with the one after they were currently on up until the comet on the 30th of August. It was extremely stressful, mostly due to the building collapsing around them but also thanks to the sheer importance of the information they were trying to get. After Sokka had finished off all the days in May he was beginning to lose hope, like this massive risk they'd taken by staying in a sinking library was for nothing. But then finally, on the 10th of July, an eclipse struck.

“Yes! We did it, let's go!” Sokka shouted over the sound of crumbling as he noted the exact date and time, before following Aang as he ran out of the room.

Toph sat waited on the sand outside the library, half wishing she had gone inside despite her inability to read since outside was pretty jarring, the sand making her way of ‘seeing’, what she'd decided to coin as seismic sense, very fuzzy. She could barely make anything around her out, the library only clear if she touched it and Appa nothing more than a distorted blob in her mind’s eye.

She'd been anticipating the return of her group for hours now, and had already recited every poem she could think of to stave off boredom. Though, to be fair, she really only knew two poems and
they were both haikus, so maybe that was her own fault for not paying enough attention to her tutors.

Then, the wall she was leaning on (the front part of the library that they'd mislabelled as a hut) began… Sinking? She felt the wall sliding down so quickly turned to place her palms on it, only to realise it really was getting lower. Toph attempted to keep it up, gripping the wall desperately, but she too began sinking into the sand. She stamped her foot twice and managed to create a stable enough platform to balance on, but if she moved her hands the library would disappear under the desert with her friends inside. Even now, with all her strength being used to keep the massive structure from going completely underground, it was still moving slowly, but steadily, downwards-and she could only hope her group got out on time.

As if the universe was set against her, that's when she heard a massive roar from Appa, signalling that someone was attacking him. Had her seismic sense been working properly she would've sensed the attackers a mile off, but on the sand… It was too fuzzy- she couldn't even tell how many people were there. She tried turning around to fight them, blasting some sand their way, but it wasn't very effective and just meant she let the library sink a foot lower.

“Muzzle him!” Yelled a male voice as Appa roared once again, and someone must have listened since a few moments later all bison noises were severely muffled.

“Let him go!” She ordered, but she couldn't muster up her usual terrifying energy when so preoccupied with the library and having no good idea where the kidnappers were.

There was a bit more talking, but then they obviously left since the barely distinguishable blob that was Appa went out of her range, which had been lessened from usual by the sand.

A few minutes later, she felt two people coming up the stairs- seemingly Katara and Zuko, who upon bursting out were full of questions.

“Where's Appa? Why are you crying? Are you holding up this entire thing? Can you wait until Aang and Sokka are out before you drop it?” Questioned Katara frantically, making Toph realise that, through sheer exhaustion or the guilt of letting Appa get kidnapped, she had begun crying.

The earthbender really did want to answer the other girl, but was too exhausted from the strength and concentration she was putting into the library to keep it up. Thankfully, Zuko used his earthbending and joined her, relieving some of the weight, but he was nowhere near as strong as her in earthbending and seemed already exhausted, if his shallow pants for breath were anything to go by. Yet his contribution was enough, and together (though it was 99% her) they kept the desert from
swallowing up the library for just long enough that Aang and Sokka managed to get out. Then it really was too much and they let go, both of them collapsing to the ground.

“Zuko! Toph!” Cried Sokka, rushing towards the two and entrapping them both in a hug.

“I'm fine, Sokka.” Mumbled Zuko, sounding better than was sure she did but still completely worn out.

“I'm so sorry.” Toph whispered into Sokka’s shoulder, dreading the others finding out what had happened.

“What-” Started the non-bender confusedly, getting interrupted.

“Where's Appa?” Asked Aang fearfully, and Toph could only burrow her face deeper into Sokka’s chest.

Chapter End Notes

FRIDAY THE THIRTEENTH BITCHES

Also, I'm in a bnha pit right now so if anyone wants Kiribaku tell me cos I'm INSPIRED

But in all seriousness, I hope you enjoyed this chapter!

The bird spirit was always, for me, the creepiest of the spirits since I HATE birds and they make me fear for my existence, so I may have self projected onto Sokka a little.

I feel like this was a kinda slow chapter, all in all not my favourite to write since not much was happening? Idk. Still, soon we'll be going to Ba Sing Se!

I really appreciate comments kudos, each one makes me more Blessed™ ;)}
“He was taken by sandbenders, I couldn't see an- and I had to hold up the library-” Explained Toph sadly once she'd regained her composure, still holding Sokka’s arm.

“How could you let them take him?!” Asked Aang angrily, clearly upset by the kidnapping of his bison.

“Hey! I miss Appa too, but it wasn't Toph’s fault! She was busy, or don't you remember her saving us from getting buried alive in a sinking library?!” Defended Sokka, inching a little closer to the earthbender as if to protect her from Aang’s uncharacteristically harsh tone.

Aang nodded slightly, turning away from them and looking into the great expanse of desert. Katara worried about him, knowing how much Appa meant to the airbender who had very little of his culture left. But she also had to worry about the rest of them, who had to journey out of the desert with very few supplies, thanks to them keeping most of their rations in the bison’s saddle.

“We’ll find Appa, I promise, but we also need to look after ourselves and get out of here.” Mentioned Katara, calling all attention to herself.

“Well, the sandbenders who took him should have provisions at their base, right? Plus they'll be closer than the edge of the desert is, so if we find them we can rescue Appa and get supplies- killing two birds with one stone.” Planned Zuko intelligently, impressing Katara except for one tiny, little thing.

“We don't know where the sandbenders are though.” The waterbender hated being the bearer of bad news, especially when Aang was looking so crestfallen, but someone had to do it.

“Actually, I could kind of see where Appa went- not much thanks to the sand, but it was off in that direction.” Toph pointed northwest (judging by where the sun was currently setting lazily behind the horizon) and Zuko went over to investigate.

“There are tracks here.” He called, motioning for them all to come over.
Sure enough, there were indents in the sand, clearly from the bison’s kidnapper. Unfortunately they went far off into the distance, meaning they’d have travel a long way to get to them. At her best guess Katara figured it would take them a couple of days to find them, but they had very little water to last them that long. If she counted both her and Zuko’s bending water, their group could probably survive- but by the time they got to the sandbenders they’d be weak from thirst. Still, it was the best idea she could think of.

“Then let’s go.” Aang decided, already marching off and following the tracks, barely even giving the rest of them time to catch up.

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“I could just use my glider to get to Appa.” Complained Aang moodily about five hours after they'd headed off from the library.

“We need to stick together, plus alone you might not be able to take on all the sandbenders. Toph said she wasn't sure how many there were but it was definitely enough to take down a sky-bison.” Protested Katara as kindly as she could, not wanting to upset the airbender further.

He only grunted at this in unenthusiastic agreement, before turning away from Katara and walking even faster. Aang was currently leading their group, followed by the waterbender, then Zuko and with Sokka and Toph bringing up the rear. They were all exhausted, not only having no food and very little water, but also having just came off of a day full of travelling that ended with their almost deaths. Toph and Zuko must have been especially tired from holding up the impossible weight of the library together, no matter how good they were at hiding it. So Katara decided now would be a good time to stop and get at least a few hours of sleep, else they'd all collapse a long time before they reached the sandbenders.

“We should stop and rest here, at least until sunrise.” Decided Katara, to several muffled sighs of relief from everyone except Aang.

“No, we need to keep going-” He disagreed, crossing his arms and turning to the waterbender.

“Aang, we all want to find Appa, but we won't be able to rescue him if we're all exhausted.” She argued, doing her best ‘motherly’ voice so that he didn't protest again.
Thankfully, after a few moments of what seemed like deliberation, he gave a curt nod and sat down on the sand. Their group quickly sat with him, forming a circle that Zuko lit a fire in the middle of, due to the desert's surprisingly cold night air. Sokka passed around what food he had in his pack, some pretty old seal-jerky, and they all scoffed it down ravenously except Katara, who chose to save it for later. Then they all curled up for sleep, though Aang didn't seem as though he was going to get any rest, and Katara closed her heavy eyes.

She kept them closed but began listening closely, as she heard some slight mutters from her left where Zuko and Sokka were meant to be sleeping. Usually she'd ignore her brother's conversations, but this time she was intrigued.

“Hey, are you okay? You look pretty pale.” Whispered Sokka, clearly to the firebender, who shuffled on the sand slightly.

“I- uh, well… I-” He stuttered on response, definitely hiding something and only increasing Katara's interest.

“Are you cold? You can borrow my parka if you want, I always keep this one in my pack to sleep with in case I miss home.” Offered Sokka generously, even though Zuko was a firebender so shouldn't he be able to keep himself warm? Or did that just make him more susceptible to the cold? She wasn't really sure.

“I mean- I, uh, you- wouldn't you be cold?” Replied the Prince softly, and Katara could imagine him blushing pretty accurately if she did say so herself.

“Well *gulp*, I- uh, guess we could sh- share… Maybe?” Sokka muttered, causing his sister to stifle a laugh at their awkwardness.

They were making a big deal out of sharing a blanket, which was stupid since they were friends who'd already been travelling together for months. The two bone-heads were probably just worried about seeming gay (which there was nothing wrong with, by the way), and that didn't matter since they all knew the two of them were just friends. Katara was especially sure Sokka was completely straight, since he was always gushing about how pretty girls were etcetera, especially back at the South Pole where there hadn't even been any girls who could flirt with, so everything was left to his imagination.

“Uh, yeah, sure- if you're, you know, uhm, okay with that…” Zuko agreed eventually, and Katara peeked out of her eye just long enough to see them tuck themselves underneath Sokka’s parka.
Then Katara really did fall asleep, just like all the others already had, quieting her worries over their survival for the next couple of days.

She woke up to someone nudging her shoulder, her eyes snapping open to a bright sun rising in the distance- its light causing her to flinch away on instinct, before squinting her eyes at the person who had awoken her. It was, not very shockingly, Aang, who was now motioning for her to get up with a neutral expression. The others were also up by now, and looked ready to get moving again- except for one thing:

“Katara, could I get some water?” Rapsed Toph, and the others nodded in agreement.

So the waterbender took out her drinking water and split half of it into five different parts (her part being the smallest) and shared it out to everyone, even Momo getting a little of Aang's share.

“We need to keep moving.” Said the airbender in monotone, before he began walking off in the direction of the sandbenders.

They all followed until about noon, when the sun was at its most unforgiving and, had they been hydrated enough, there bodies would have been drenched in sweat. As it was they were only slightly moist, but even that had made them desperate for a drink. Katara's mouth had never been dryer, her lips were chapped and her bending water, despite probably being full of all sorts of muck, was sounding more and more appealing my the moment.

“That- that's a cactus! They're full of water, right?” Cried Sokka happily before he began hacking at the plant with his club, ignoring the protests from both Zuko and Katara.

He gulped down quite a bit, before passing it to Toph who looked like she was considering drinking it too.

“Wait! Let's see what it does to Sokka first!” Ordered the waterbender, throwing her brother a concerned expression.
“I feel… Quenched! This cactus juice us the quenchiest! Everyone should try, try, try it!!!” He yelled, jumping about as both Katara and Zuko hit themselves in the head and the latter of the two knocked the strange juice from Toph’s hands.

“Everyone, stop messing around! Do you even care about rescuing Appa?!!” Shouted Aang, reminding them all that he was still there and in an awful mood.

“Of course we care about Appa, Aang, we're all just tired and hot and thirsty. Look, we'll keep moving- Zuko, you're watching Sokka so he doesn't drink anymore cactus juice.” Replied Katara, as soothingly as she possibly could.

——

At sunset that night they stopped again, despite the airbender’s protests, to make camp and to drink the last of the drinking water they had, before they all basically collapsed. Sokka had been especially loopy ever since drinking the cactus juice and had been basically carried by Zuko the last mile they'd travelled, not at all helping with the firebender probable exhaustion.

Aang didn't even say goodnight before he turned on his side and closed his eyes, causing Katara to feel a well of worry rise up within her chest.

“Sweet dreams, everyone.” The waterbender said, gaining some sleepy grumbles of agreement.

The next morning they were off again, Sokka at least seeming slightly more aware of his surroundings, but their moods were worse than ever. They were completely out of drinking water and food, meaning Katara and Zuko had had to share out their bending water- which hadn't gone well.

“This tastes kinda… Swampy.” Mentioned Toph, still gulping down her share but with a grimace.

“Sorry, that's my, uh, bending water.” Admitted Katara, earning a frown from the earthbender.

“Is that why this one tastes all weird and metallic?” Asked Sokka, his voice a strange pitch and his pupils dilated but pretty much okay now aside from that.
“Actually, that one is my bending water, the one I used to free Toph and Aang from those metal containers…” Answered Zuko, scratching the back of his neck.

“Seriously?!” Cried Sokka and Toph in disgust, clearly angering the Prince.

“Hey! At least you're not dying of thirst anymore, Mr ‘I'm going to drink weird liquid from inside of a plant I've never seen before’.” Argued Zuko with a snarl, crossing his arms.

“It was a cactus! It's supposed to have good water in it, it's not my fault-” Started Sokka defensively.

“Can you all just shut up?! Appa is gone and you're barely even trying to find him!” Yelled Aang, shutting them all up very successfully until Katara noticed something in the far off distance.

“Aang, look! I think it's the sandbender camp!” She revealed excitedly, running forwards with Aang, before stopping just a little bit away.

There was a small building that looked like living quarters and about 5 sand-sailers off to one side, a few people were milling about but not too many; most of them were inside. Without a single warning Aang rushed at the camp and began yelling, barely giving the others enough time to catch up.

“Where is my bison?!?!” He yelled, livid and looking ready to kill someone.

“I don't know what you're talking about!” Protested an old-ish guy, seemingly genuinely.

“Really?! Then why do the tracks lead to your camp!” Shouted Aang, sending an incredibly powerful blast of air at one of the sand-sailers and demolishing it completely.

Hearing the sound of commotion outside, several more people ran out, all of them looking either terrified or angry.

“Tell me where Appa is!” Ordered Aang, sweeping another blast at the sandbenders who dived for cover.
“We don’t know! Father, let’s kill them—” Started a younger man, talking to the guy who’d spoken earlier.

“Wait a second, I know you! You kidnapped Appa! I remember your voice— you told you friends to ‘put a muzzle on him’!” Accused Toph, pointing at the guy (probably locating his position through the sound of his voice rather than her bending, since the sand was still messing that up).

“Give me back my bison!” Aang borderline screamed, using his bending to push the young guy against a wall, whilst he blasted another two sand-sailers with his other hand.

Katara was mad too, but some of the sandbenders clearly had no idea that someone had stolen Appa, and the guy Aang had pinned looked like he was running out of air.

“Aang, stop! Let’s talk to him— not kill him!” She shouted, managing to get enough of the airbender’s attention for him to drop the man.

“I- I’m so sorry, I didn’t know I was— I sold your bison to a trader, he’s probably in Ba Sing Se by now.” Admitted the guy, completely terrified.

“I apologise for my son’s behaviour, but please, don’t destroy our camp. We can offer you provisions, a map— even a sand-sailer if you want.” Offered the father, bowing to their group.

“Fine.” Agreed Aang sadly, he looked both guilty and disappointed and it tore Katara’s heart apart.

Yet still, they had to get moving. They took the sand-sailer and the provisions etcetera, and began heading out of the desert— Aang and Zuko using their airbending to push them along.

“I know Appa being in Ba Sing Se isn’t good news, but it has given me an idea.” Revealed Sokka to Toph and Katara, a look of excitement on his face.

“What?” Asked the waterbender, slightly worried it would be another idea like getting high off cactus juice.
“If we tell the Earth King about the eclipse, then he can send thousands of troops to the Fire Nation! We could win!” Sokka explained, and Katara found herself smiling.

Maybe there was a bright side to this after all.

—

Azula waited outside of her father's Chambers, completely unsure (for once in her life) on how to begin the conversation she would soon be having with him. Zuko, her own brother, was the avatar—which was almost too difficult for her to understand. She was good with people, she knew she was, she could easily predict what certain people would do in certain situations. Ty Lee and Mai, for example, would never betray her- they were too terrified to do so. Her uncle would always try to avoid a fight and stick up for the weak. And she'd always pegged her brother as a failure, though she'd never been quite sure if he was a traitor too.

But Zuko… He was the avatar of all things, which was so completely unexpected she'd thrown a battle she should have won easily. The Princess was meant to be the stronger sibling, she still was, but this added a whole set of variables she'd never even considered before. Would her father still want him to be captured? Or would he find more use of him if he was on their side? Could the knowledge that their Prince is the avatar spark rebellion in their Nation?

There were too many questions, Azula could feel herself losing a little grip. She breathed in, calming herself, and regained her wits before knocking on the door in front of her.

The Firelord sat mightily on his throne, surrounded by orange flames that flickered threateningly. The Princess gave a short bow, knowing her father demanded respect from her- even if it wasn't as much as he expected from everyone else, and then began speaking.

“Father, I have some news.” She revealed, unable to see her father's face through the shadows created by his fire.

“This news was important enough for you to abandon your search for your uncle, brother and the avatar? Important enough for you to waste time by travelling all the way back to the Fire Nation?” Spat the Firelord, and Azula understood his point entirely. But this situation did require her to return home for a short period.
“I figured you would want to hear this in person. During my search I began following the avatar’s sky bison, that also had Zuko on board, eventually I followed them to an abandoned Earth Kingdom Town, where they chose to stand their ground and fight my companions and I. Zuko, being a reckless, incompetent fighter, immediately ran at me and we fought for a short period of time before I noticed him use airbending. Of course, the manner in which he was using it could have just been him being particularly agile, so I carried on fighting to see if he showed any other signs of bending multiple elements. Soon, he used water from a nearby water tower to block one of my attacks, and shortly following that my companions’ stupidity caused the entire group to escape. What I’m trying to say, as you’ve probably realised, is that Zuko is the avatar.” She explained, hiding a few points so that she was not blamed.

Her father stayed quiet for a few moments, seemingly lost in thought, and Azula took the time to consider what her next move would be if the Firelord chose for her to continue looking for her brother or, as she should probably learn to call him now, the avatar. She'd lost his group's trail and would probably have a difficult time finding it again, but might be able to lure the group to her by doing something really noticeable… She wondered…

“I- I see. Then I suppose your return is excusable, considering this… News you have brought me. I will issue an order out to our people immediately, regarding this… Matter. Your mission is unchanged, capture the avatar or kill him if he's in the avatar state. That is your top priority, go after your uncle once you've finished. Understood?” He replied eventually, sounding slightly shook up—not that she could blame him.

“Oh course, father, but I will require one thing for my next plan: a drill.”.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so it's super late so I can't leave a long A/N, but I'm glad you are reading this and I hope you enjoyed this chapter. I love comments and kudos and I'll see you next week! :)) (Also, I'd really love to hear feedback on Azula and Ozai's interaction this chapter).
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was a day after they’d gotten out of the desert, and they were currently having a little break for some relaxation after the massive stresses of the past couple of days. Aang especially seemed pretty shook up after his outburst against the sandbenders and was much quieter than usual.

Everyone except Sokka was messing about in a pool at the bottom of a small waterfall, whilst the non-bender in question was looking over the maps he’d ‘borrowed’ from Professor Zei.

“Guys! Watch this: waterbending bomb!” Shouted Katara, jumping from the top of the waterfall and making an almighty splash that Sokka could barely protect his papers from. He was about to scold his sister when:

“Ha, I can do way better than that!” Called Zuko, making a similarly sized eruption of water and this time soaking not only the, now very annoyed, non-bender but the maps as well.

“Great idea guys! Let's make our only chance of finding a route to Ba Sing Se wet!” He complained, careful not to touch the paper too much incase he ripped it.

“Ohh, don't worry about it. I'm a waterbender, remember?” Smiled Katara, bending the water out of the scrolls and off of her brother, drying both as a result.

Sokka grunted slightly, not wanting to admit that she'd solved the problem, and went back to chartering a course towards Ba Sing Se whilst the others slowly gathered around the rock he was perched on.

“Okay, so according to my map the fastest way to Ba Sing Se is through the Serpent’s Pass, which begins just a mile that way.” Sokka pointed, and everyone except Toph nodded in agreement.

“So… Are we leaving now or can we spend another hour here?” Asked Zuko as persuasively as he figured the firebender was able, probably just not wanting to take down his father- but Sokka could see the Prince coming round to the idea… Slowly.
“We're leaving now, come on.” Decided the non-bender, getting up and letting the others gather whatever stuff they'd need.

Katara and Zuko refilled their water pouches for bending and everyone grabbed a bunch a drinking water. Aang also grabbed his staff and Momo (who had also been playing about in the water), then they were off. The group walked for about ten minutes before noticing three people travelling east, one of the women seeming pregnant from the large swell of her belly. As if they'd all decided as one, the five headed towards the other group.

“Hi, what way are you headed?” Asked Katara politely, probably figuring they could all travel together if these other people were also going to Ba Sing Se.

“Ba Sing Se, we'd like to start a new, safe life there.” Said the pregnant woman warmly, placing one hand to her baby bump and smiling at the man she was travelling with- presumably her husband.

“Great! We're going there too! Do you want to travel through the Serpent’s Pass with us?” Questioned Katara brightly, and Sokka was beginning to think his sister was the best one of them at communicating with other groups. Or, really, the only one who tried.

“What?! Only the truly desperate take that deadly route!” Exclaimed the woman, staring at them as if they were crazy.

“Really? Deadly, you say.” Zuko turned to stare pointedly at Sokka, who shrugged sheepishly and scratched the back of his neck.

“Wai- wait, Ying, don't you see who he is?!” Asked the man to the pregnant woman excitedly, pointing at the firebender who just looked confused.

“I- oh spirits! You're right, Than! It's the avatar!” Their small group of three gasped in shock and gained hopeful expressions.

“What?! How do you know that?!” Questioned Zuko angrily, not that three noticed his hostility through their elation.

“There are wanted posters up for you all over the Earth Kingdom! They started going up a few days ago, commissioned by the Fire Nation.” Revealed Ying, still smiling, whilst the Prince looked like he
wanted to crawl into a hole and die.

“Okay, uhm, why don't you just tell us how you three are getting to Ba Sing Se?” Asked Katara politely, drawing attention back to herself.

“Oh, we're going to Full Moon Bay- there you can take a ferry into the city.” Explained Ying, pointing to some docks a short distance away.

After a small conference between themselves, their group of five decided it would be in their best interest to go the safe way, especially in the wake of finding out that literally everyone now knew Zuko was the avatar. So they all went to Full Moon Bay, that had both a registry building crowded full of people and the docks themselves, that held a couple of ferries outside. Before they could go onto a ferry they had to go talk to some woman behind a desk, so they left Than, Ying and the other woman (who was apparently Than’s sister) to go get their own tickets for the ferry. The five waited in an annoyingly long queue until finally a witchy looking woman called them to her desk.

“Hi, uh, we need five tickets, please.” Requested Aang politely, talking for the first time in the last hour.

“Passports.” She ordered briskly, holding put her hand.

“Uhm, we don't have- we didn't know-” Stuttered Katara, feeling around her person as if she thought passports that they definitely didn't have would just magically appear.

“No passports, no tickets. And I wouldn't let that flying rat on board anyway- it could have all sorts of fleas!” The ticketmaster grimaced and made a shooing motion with her hand, but Sokka was not deterred yet.

“Wait! Uh, we don't usually like using this excuse but… He's the avatar.” Sokka gestured to Zuko, who looked a tad surprised but then just shrugged.

“Ha! I get a hundred avatars a day, this kid’s costume isn't even that good!” She laughed cruelly, pointing to a small group of Zukos they hadn't seen before.

There were about four of them, with varyingly over the top dark hairstyles, but none were dressed in red (though neither was the actual Zuko, who was still sporting Earth Kingdom clothes). A couple
had the scar on the wrong side (that Sokka struggled to suppress a snicker at) and none held dual swords—though one did have a crossbow. The ticketmaster woman also pulled out Zuko’s wanted poster, that said nothing except he was the avatar and his name was Zuko, not even including, the slightly consequential fact, that he was also the Prince of the Fire Nation.

“Well, I am the avatar—and I can prove it.” He smirked, bending a pebble next to his shoe up and tossing it against the wall, his earthbending still sluggish but pretty good considering he’d barely gotten any practice so far. Then he blasted some air at the fake Zukos, knocking them over and very clearly taking pleasure from both their screams of fear and the ticketmaster’s look of utter shock.

“I-well, I suppose you get a ticket. But no one else!” She still commanded, passing the firebender a ticket.

“Actually, I think we will be getting tickets. My name is Toph Beifong, here’s my passport and family papers. I’m blind, and these imbeciles are my escorts. That is my seeing eye lemur. I’ll need four more tickets.” Requested Toph, pulling out some dark green and gold documents and sliding them across the woman's desk.

“I, oh spirits! Uh, well, usually it’s just one ticket per passport but these papers are just, so official! Well alright then.” Said the ticketmaster, even more awed than she’d been upon finding out Zuko was actually the avatar, before passing out four more tickets.

Then they all had to wait for the next ferry, which meant they had about ten minutes to kill, which is when Sokka got grabbed by the neck by a female guard. She looked vaguely familiar but he couldn’t place a name to her, so he decided she just had one of those faces.

“Hey! Get off him!” Ordered Zuko, looking as if he was about to shoot fire at the stranger.

“I just want to check his ticket and passport.” Snarled the girl, turning the non-bender to face her.

“I- uh…” He stuttered, a little confused by the guard’s immediate hostility.

“Oh, I know your type: sarcastic, dumb jokes, boomerang-” She started listing off, not helping at all with Sokka’s confusion.

“Ugh, have we met before?” He asked, pushing himself away from her slightly.
“What? Don't you recognise me? Well, maybe you'll recognise this!” She stated with a small smile, before kissing his softly on the cheek.

Sokka immediately recognised that this was Suki, but even sooner than that felt completely guilty about getting kissed when he was becoming unfortunately invested in his feelings for Zuko, that had gone past schoolboy crush and into ‘I might want to marry him because he's so incredible and I really care about him despite his faults’. Which was also totally unfair on Suki, because if she was fine with kissing him that meant she at least has residual feelings left for him, that he really didn't reciprocate. Or maybe he could try to reignite his feelings for the Kyoshi warrior, since having a crush on a cute, smart, badass girl would be a lot simpler than the web of emotions he was directing at the Fire Nation Prince/Avatar?

“Suki!” He tried excitedly, but it sounded weird and forced, and his smile probably looked more like a grimace. “What are you doing here?”.

“Me and the other Kyoshi warriors wanted to help out with the war in any way we could, so we came here to guard the ferries and help refugees.” She explained, whilst Sokka tried not to wish the poor girl back to Kyoshi Island.

Because Suki was nice. She was kind, pretty- but he didn't think he could magically manifest feelings for her again when Zuko was less than a foot away. He probably would have thought over his problems for a good while more- but that's when the pregnant woman and her family came rushing over.

“Please, Avatar! Our tickets and passports were stolen so they won't let us through.” Cried Than, practically begging Zuko who looked a little put off by the entire situation.

“It's okay, we'll go talk to them.” Offered Aang, still without his usual cheer but maintaining his signature kindness.

“No, that ticket woman is a witch; she won't let them board without tickets, no matter how much they beg. But if we give them our tickets, that don't have any sort of identification on them to say they are ours, that woman will be none the wiser.” Figured Zuko, passing Ying his ticket whilst Aang and Katara offered up theirs too.

“But, how will we get across?” Asked Toph once the three refugees had left to board the ferry, clearly she (like Sokka) had decided to stick with the group despite still having a ticket.
“I guess we're taking the Serpent’s Pass.” Decided Aang ominously, beginning to head out of the docks.

—

This would have been so much easier had they had Appa, a fact Aang was trying to ignore thanks to his intense negative emotions over the lost bison. Because to him losing Appa was more than just losing a convenient method a transportation, it was losing his companion, his friend, one of the last pieces of home he had left. He'd met the sky bison when he was four; he could barely even remember a time when he'd been without him! The kidnapping… It hurt a lot worse than Aang wanted to admit.

But still… He'd acted awfully back with the sandbenders—hurting them? Destroying their home? Sure, he'd been angry but that didn't excuse trying to get revenge even when he knew it wouldn't solve anything, even when he knew Appa was already long gone. Gone far enough, in fact, to be in Ba Sing Se, where literally anything could be happening to him.

Aang pushed that cruel thought out of his mind as they reached the beginning of the Serpent’s Pass, reading the inscription on the sign: abandon hope. The airbender chose to stand in front of the sign as he let the others pass, not wanting them to be disheartened like he was. The pass itself looked extremely treacherous, a winding, rocky path over a dangerously turbulent looking sea, that already seemed to be falling apart without anyone travelling across it.

Just as Aang was about to follow his friends onto the dangerous path, he heard a voice calling out behind them: Suki. She was once again dressed in her Kyoshi warrior outfit and had painted her face to match the avatar her group was named for. The girl was running towards them, clearly eager to catch up, though Aang had very little idea why other than her wanting to see Sokka.

“I'm coming with you.” She stated upon reaching them, her tone strong and decisive.

“Oh, are you sure? It'll be dangerous—” Started Sokka pretty antsily, refusing to look Suki in the eye.

“Exactly- someone will need to protect you.” She teased, before beginning to walk down the pass with them, not waiting for any sort of allowance for her to go.
Not that it mattered, since Aang really didn't mind either way who went with them as long as they got to Appa soon. As if reading his mind, that's when Suki spoke again.

“Hey, why are you guys travelling this way anyway? I could understand if you were escorting a family on the ferry but couldn't Appa just fly you to Ba Sing Se?” She asked, not nastily, but her words still grated at the airbender who was already struggling to keep his grief at bay.

“Appa’s been… Kidnapped.” Replied Katara kindly and quietly, as if she didn't want Aang to hear those words uttered. It was thoughtful but still unendingly upsetting, since if they treated it some massive deal it became much harder to ignore.

“Oh no! Are you okay, Aang?” Asked the warrior, genuine concern laced throughout her tone.

“I'm fine!” He snapped, much harsher than he'd meant to- successfully quieting his friends but only increasing the heavy guilt that had been pushing against him ever since the sandbender debacle. Or, maybe, it was rooted from even earlier in his life…

They kept walking for a while after that, the path unsturdy but nothing too bad a little earthbending from Toph couldn't fix. She seemed especially happy to make Suki’s journey easier, bending her a more stable path even when it wasn't necessary. Aang was at first surprised by Sokka’s disinterest in what was pretty clearly Toph making passes at the Kyoshi warrior, who he seemed to have feelings for, but then realised that Sokka was mature enough to see Suki only had true eyes for him and he wouldn't ever intentionally hurt Toph when she was just having some fun. The airbender himself had had fun basking in the warm feeling of affection before, when interacting with Katara, and knew it could be enjoyable even if you weren't sure your feelings would ever develop into a proper relationship.

Then, suddenly, an almighty blast rung out above them and both non-benders would have been crushed by falling debris had Toph not reacted quickly and bended it aside. Everyone who wasn't preoccupied by almost getting crushed immediately looked to see where the blast had come from, and they spied a small, but clearly dangerous, Fire Nation ship off in the distance. They fired a couple more blasts at the group but Aang and Zuko deflected them, yet it was getting them nowhere.

“I know! Everyone, when the next blast hits hide behind the rocks, Zuko, you need to hit it with your own firebending so that it looks like it hit but doesn't actually hurt any of us, got it?” Sokka planned, and Zuko nodded even though the airbender was struggling to figure out how the Prince would make the trick seem believable.

Still, when they fired again the airbender leapt behind a stray boulder with Katara and allowed the
firebender to do his thing, which was apparently successful since, a few minutes later, the ship started moving away- clearly thinking they'd dealt with the problem.


At nightfall their group (plus Suki) collectively agreed that they needed rest and could finish travelling over the Serpent’s Pass the next day. Aang had mixed feelings about this decision since, on one hand, both he and his friends were tired and, even in his melancholy, guilt ridden state, he realised that they all deserved rest. But on the other hand, he was incredibly invested in finding Appa and didn't want to waste a second, no matter the reason.

“Would you like to come talk for awhile, Aang?” Katara more offered than asked, but the airbender shook his head- not wanting to snap at her again when she clearly didn't deserve it.

“I'm just going to go meditate.” He said, heading to the back of their temporary campsite.

They'd managed to find a decently wide area of land that they were camped in the middle of, Toph having earthbended the place so that it was completely safe (at least according to her it was). Over at one edge, surprisingly far away, Sokka and Suki were talking, though at one point in their conversation Sokka pulled the Kyoshi warrior behind a large rock so that the pair were out of seeing range. At the actual campsite sat Zuko and Katara, who appeared to be having a pretty inconsequential discussion since neither looked particularly distraught or elated. Toph, meanwhile, was nowhere to be seen- not that that was at all concerning, since there were plenty of boulders lying about for her to be hidden amongst, and it seemed unlikely someone would get the drop on her here whilst she was in her element.

That left Aang alone to meditate far away from everyone else, in the shadows near a bunch of, you guessed it, rocks. He sat cross legged on the floor and touched his fists together, searching to find some peace in the quiet darkness. It took longer than normal due to his heavy distress from the last few days, but eventually he got into a calm trance. He stayed that way for a little while, before he felt compelled open his eyes. When he did, instead of just seeing their lowly lit camp and the moon glowing in the night sky, he saw… Arianna. Not in the flesh, a very clear spirit version of her that was glowing blue, but she was there all the same.

“Aang.” She greeted sadly, and he bowed his head in shame, knowing that his recent actions had not been compliant with the teachings of the Air Nomads.
“Hello, Arianna.” Replied the airbender, trying not to look into the girl’s large, sympathetic eyes.

“You know, when this all started I never thought I’d have to worry about you losing hope. Zuko, well, I expected it from him, maybe the others too- but you’ve always been the light even in the darkest of places, staying cheery even when, just a few months ago, you woke up to find the world plunged into war and our culture obliterated.” Arianna sighed, shuffling a little as she too bowed her head, probably also crushed by the loss of their people.

“I- I know I acted rashly, angrily, I was just so angry at the sandbenders for taking Appa. I can't imagine what will happen if he… I don't want to be alone.” He explained tearfully, letting the liquid fall down his cheeks.

“Appa is the last piece of home you have left, I understand, but know that I’m here for you too. You’re guilty about hurting the sandbenders, getting revenge on all of them even when only a few wronged you- just know that it's okay to make mistakes like that, you're allowed to have negative emotions, Aang. I mean… Remember how I acted when the monks told me they were going to send me to the Western Air Temple?” Sympathised Arianna, at first making the distraught airbender feel better but then reminding him of a terrible, even more guilt inducing thing than what happened with the sandbenders: when he ran away.

His best friend had just been told she’d be moved to another air temple, and Aang wasn't going with her. He had to stay and could meet back up with her in four years, when she would begin to learn waterbending at age 16. But Aang hated that, Arianna hated it too, they didn't want to be kept apart but that's exactly what the monks planned to do. So, a few days before his friend had been scheduled to leave the temple, he ran away on Appa- planning to get to the Western Air Temple first. Then, well, he wasn't sure how he was going to get them to let him stay but that didn't matter; he just wanted to try something, anything, to stay with his best friend. But along the way… He'd been caught in a violent storm and dragged underwater, where this bright, blue light encompassed him and Appa. Then… He woke up to see Katara smiling down at him.

“But I've done so many bad things… Everyone, it seems, has done so many bad things. The world is in so much chaos… Sometimes it's hard to maintain hope.” He complained softly, sharing with his old friend his feelings so that she could fix them, though that wasn't very realistic.

“Aang, I want to tell you something: when the Fire Nation attacked us I thought everything was truly lost, that our home, our traditions, our culture would end forever. I died thinking that. But, one hundred years later, you're here. Against every single imaginable odd, one little piece of our home survives through you, you give me hope, Aang, for the future of the world. But, even if that's not enough, I'd like to show you something- close your eyes.” Arianna spoke with such kind determination that Aang found himself awed, and easily obeyed her request.
Upon closing his eyes he saw the inside of a ferry, Aang was pretty sure at least, and in a room were four people. Three were the group they'd helped earlier, and the fourth… Was a baby in the previously pregnant woman’s arms. The child slept peacefully whilst their family gathered round, tired and dirty but happy, hopeful even as they looked at their child's resting face.

Aang opened his eyes again to see Arianna’s blue, glowing form dissipating, yet he still managed to catch the smile on her face as she faded into nothing, replaced by the starry backdrop of the sky.

—

Sokka had been trying to avoid Suki all day, which was extremely difficult considering they'd been travelling together in a small group, on a narrow path for every second of that time. He felt bad, though, about brushing her off without an explanation since he really did care about her… Just not in that way.

Now he was stood at the very edge of their campsite, trying to figure out what to do next. He had to talk to her; he didn't want her to be left thinking he hated her or anything, but it was just so hard to talk about. He'd never thought he'd even have to talk about it, figuring, or maybe hoping more than anything else, that his feelings for Zuko would fade away over time and he'd never have to admit them.

“Hey, Sokka.” Greeted Suki, surprising the non-bender out of his musings. She didn't sound particularly enthusiastic, not that he could blame the girl after she'd been ignored all day.

“Uh- Hi, Suki.” He returned, turning to her but not really looking into her kind, blue eyes.

“Why have you been avoiding me?” She asked, getting straight to the point- Sokka could respect that, even if he didn't really want to answer it.

Deciding he couldn't keep Suki in the dark any longer, he pulled her behind a boulder and planned to tell her the truth: that he had accidentally fallen for the avatar/Fire Prince. Unfortunately, the Kyoshi warrior got the wrong idea, and must have thought him pulling her out of sight was so they could make out- because she kissed him. He recoiled, immediately, and left a look of hurt humiliation on the girl's face.

“I- I'm so, so sorry- I, uh, I should- I just thought- but, you know, I… Ugh, I'm just gonna, ah, go-”
She muttered, taking several steps back from the other non-bender and covering her face in shame.

“No, no, it's- it's okay.” He sighed, pushing his hair (that was falling out of his wolf tail) back. “I really do care about you, Suki”.

“Then… What's the problem?” She asked, looking up at him sadly.

“I… I like someone else.” Admitted Sokka eventually, pinching the bridge if his nose and leaning against the rock they were hiding behind.

“Who? Wait- I mean, you obviously don't have to tell me-” Rushed Suki, talking quietly similarly to Sokka.

“No, no, I- I want you to know… It's… Zuko.” He revealed, barely louder than a breath, but the Kyoshi warrior still heard and gasped in shock.

“Him? The avatar?” She kept her questioning to a low volume but was at a very high pitch, worrying Sokka over whether or not she could keep this secret.

“How do you know he's-” He started, knowing last time Suki had seen the Prince he'd been ‘Lee’, ah, what a simpler time that had been.

“The avatar? Please, the Fire Nation put up posters everywhere and Zuko was water and earthbending at the docks.” She rolled her eyes good naturedly and patted his arm supportively, but still seemed upset.

“Are you… Okay?” He asked, not really sure how to finish this already terribly uncomfortable conversation.

“I'm a big girl, Sokka, a little rejection isn't going to kill me. And I care about you, I want you to be happy even if it is with a moody firebender. But… Yeah, I'm a little sad, could you, um, leave me alone for a little while? I need to think.” Requested Suki with a sad smile and Sokka complied easily, nodding at her awkwardly as he left.
Then, figuring he had to get some sleep, he went over to where Zuko and Katara were talking at the campfire, taking his usual spot in between the two.

—

They woke up in the morning and kept travelling, Aang feeling much better after his conversation with Arianna. Sokka and Suki were pretty clearly avoiding each other, whilst Toph kept smiling and looking between Zuko and the non-benders- though Aang wasn’t entirely sure why.

“Guys! Look, we’re nearly there!” Cried Sokka, sounding extremely relieved, pointing at where the Serpent’s Pass ended.

“Thank the spirits!” Suki also sounded grateful, beginning to run across what little path they had left, having to jump between stones when the ground broke up.

Zuko, Aang and Suki could all get over the stepping stones easily, whilst Toph earthbended a more stable path for her, Katara and Sokka. It looked like they were almost done- and their journey hadn’t even been that bad… Until a massive, green and purple serpent reared its head from the water and roared mightily at them, sending a massive wave their way. Katara and Zuko froze it before it hit, but the force still caused extra rocks to crumble around them, so many that even Toph couldn’t block them all. They ended up having to dive into the water to dodge, Katara creating a bubble of air around them and Sokka grabbing onto Toph so that she wasn’t pulled away.

“I think I know why it’s called the Serpent’s Pass!” He called, as they watched the sea monster swim around their bubble- looking ready to pop it at any moment. “Suki, do something!”

“What?! You think just because I live near the Unagi I know how to beat sea monsters?!” She yelled back, maybe slightly angrier than necessary.

“Look, this bubble doesn't have that much air left- we need to do something!” Shouted Katara, the water around them churning as if to punctuate her words.

“Me, you and Zuko will go deal with the serpent, everyone else needs to get to safety!” Planned Aang, not wanting to lose another one of his friends.
Everyone nodded and so they got to work: Toph bringing them back to the surface, Katara creating an ice bridge to the mainland before shooting icicles at the monster, Zuko firing at the serpent's pretty terrifying red eyes, Aang jumping about on its scaly, putrid green head as to distract it and the others all escaping on the ice bridge. Except, they didn't count for one thing…

“Come on, Toph!” Called Sokka from down below, yelling at the earthbender who was still stood on the small circle of earth in the middle of the water instead of crossing the ice.

“No thanks, I'll stay here where I can see!” She shouted back, not making any attempt to move until the serpent dodged one of Katara's icicles and crashed into the rock she was standing on, forcing her forwards.

Aang attempted to keep the sea monster’s focus so that Toph could get to safety, but the girl was moving slowly and unsteadily, and was easily thrown into the water by the serpent's massive tail when she was only halfway down. She struggled against the liquid for a few moments, before it became clear to everyone that she couldn't swim, and Sokka moved to save her—but getting beaten by Suki who jumped in to save her, preventing the girl from drowning.

“My hero!” Proclaimed Toph loudly, hugging Suki and kissing her on the cheek several times, eliciting a blush from the Kyoshi warrior.

“Umm, it's me.” She mentioned (Aang only able to hear because he'd moved closer to the two to protect them as they swam to shore).

“Yes, I know.” Smiled Toph, hugging Suki even tighter.

Once they were safe, Aang refocused on the battle- pleasantly surprised by how much progress Zuko and Katara had made. The firebender’s flames seemed to be more damaging to the serpent, especially as he was aiming them at its face, but the waterbender was doing a good job of slowing it down, first with icicles and now by freezing the water around its torso. Aang joined in, using winds to push the monster back until, with all of their efforts combined, it retreated back into the depths.

The three then headed back to land, and the airbender figured he needed to say some things.

“Everyone, I'd like to apologise: ever since Appa was taken I've been in a bad mood, and I've been taking my negative feelings out on you when you've just been trying to help. I was just feeling so hopeless, like everything was lost, when I should have seen that there's hope all around us.” He
apologised, his head bowed slightly, until Katara crushed him with a hug.

“It's okay, Aang. And just know, we're going to do everything in our power to help get Appa back.” 
The waterbender promised, still hugging him- not that he minded.

“Well, actually, I have to head back to the docks, I'd say the ticket master is already gonna be pretty 
miffed that my 'lunch break’ took two days. But I wish you all the best of luck.” Suki spoke warmly 
and Aang nodded, understanding she had her own things to do.

“Suki…” Said Sokka sadly, perhaps he was upset his girlfriend was leaving?

“It's okay, Sokka. I hope I see you again, sometime. Good bye.” She gave the other non-bender a 
quick hug, one that he didn't properly return, and kissed Toph on the forehead, at least making her 
smile before she headed back towards the Serpent’s Pass.

—

“What's going on with you and Suki?” Asked Katara after a few minutes, and Sokka tried his best to 
think of a compelling lie.

“It's… Uh, it's not working out.” He muttered, trying not to look his sister in the eyes.

“What? Why?” Questioned Aang disappointedly, looking genuinely interested in the non-bender’s 
relationship troubles.

“Yeah, I was really rooting for you two!” Added Katara, patting his arm supportively. Curiously, 
Zuko made no comment on the news but did look pretty happy, giving Sokka some (if not much) 
hope.

“She just wasn't hot enough for him.” Smirked Toph, elbowing him in the side and creating a 
vacuum of fear within his heart.
“What? How would you know that? And Suki is really pretty anyway!” Protested Katara, really not getting the true meaning behind what the earthbender was saying.

“Ugh, just leave him alone, we've got more important things to worry about than Sokka’s ex.” Zuko finally grumbled, effectively shutting the others up.

But Toph kept nudging the non-bender’s side, and all he could think about was how he had to have a serious conversation with the girl about not eavesdropping on other people's conversations.

Chapter End Notes

I realise that, during these chapters and those that are coming in the future, it seems as though Sokka's entire character revolves around his feelings for Zuko. In response to this, if you were thinking it, I'd like to point out that Sokka had very slow character development in the second season of AtLA and didn't get his leadership role until later on. He will have a similar journey in this, however, for the time being I'm focusing on his feelings for Zuko since its (1) his first proper crush and (2) his bisexual awakening, which I assure you takes up a lot of your thoughts even if you are pretty busy.

Point is Sokka isn't just a love interest, please don't worry or think that I don't have more in store for him! :))

Also, I fucking love Suki she is my wife and tbh that's the reason I ship Zukka, just so I can have her for myself.

This A/N is getting long so I hope you enjoyed this chapter and I'll see you next week! Comments and kudos are always massively appreciated :))
Jet sat on board the ferry, watching as Ba Sing Se slowly came into view. It was the start of a new life, he was sure of it.

“Impressive, isn't it?” Mentioned an older man who had just appeared next to him, holding a cup of tea.

“Yes.” Jet agreed, not protesting when the man sat next to him.

It was quiet, everyone now in bed, with only the tranquil waves splashing against the ferry to accompany his thoughts.

“You seem lost.” Commented the man, who was also looking at how the city’s wall was so prettily lit against the night sky.

“Not anymore, this is my new life.” Disagreed the non-bender, clutching the ferry’s railing.

“Is that why you stole that food last night? As part of your new life?” He asked, not unkindly but still angering the freedom fighter.

“Wha- I do what I need to.” He grumbled, not looking at the other man.

“Okay.” Replied the strange refugee, and Jet could see a light smile dancing on his lips.

“You… Aren't going to report me to the captain?” He asked a little sheepishly, scared he might get thrown off the ferry for his thievery.

“I believe everyone deserves a second chance.” The man shook his head slightly as he spoke, his tone warm and full of kindness.
“Ha, sounds like you’re talking from experience.” Jet let out a quiet, humourless laugh and then focused back on Ba Sing Se, that was getting closer by the second.

“Yes, I suppose it does.”

—

Azula sat in the control room of her drill, Ty Lee and Mai either side of her, listening to War Minister Quin drone on about the feat of engineering the drill was. The Princess was barely paying attention, knowing Quin to be an imbecile, but was keeping a close watch on her two companions, neither of which having seemed particularly enthusiastic about the mission she’d brought them along on.

“-This drill is almost completely impenetrable, the reinforced steel alloy-” The man boasted, whilst Azula clenched her fists and considered killing him simply for boring her.

“So can those guys do anything to hurt it?” Asked Ty Lee innocently, actually sounding like she was interested in the drivel Quin had been spouting.

The gymnast was pointing to some earthbenders that were coming at them, who were bending large boulders, and seemed pretty miffed.

“Of course not, this drill is completely invulnerable to earthbending-” He started boasting once more and Azula held up a hand to silence him.

“If you don’t mind, War Minister, I’d feel safer if Mai and Ty Lee went out to deal with the problem. Girls?” At her words her companions nodded and jumped up, heading towards where the earthbenders were coming at them.

The two would make short work of them and then she could get into Ba Sing Se, unless the avatar showed up, in which case she’d have to capture him and then take down Ba Sing Se. Either way, by the time this day was done, the Fire Nation would have won a great victory.
“Okay, I'm going to fly ahead to try and find Appa, I'll meet you guys inside the city.” Promised Aang, receiving a hug from Katara, before opening up his glider and flying off, Momo clutching his back.

That left the rest of them to walk, well, except Zuko who had decided to just use the air scooter thing because he was sick of walking. This seemed to annoy Sokka and Katara, and had confused Toph.

“Wait… Where's Sparky? I can't feel him.” She asked, feeling around with her arms outstretched.

“He's just showing off his stupid airbending tricks that mean he doesn't have to walk.” Muttered Sokka, trudging alongside his sister.

“I'm practising, not showing off.” He protested, completely lying but knowing Toph couldn't tell when he wasn't touching the floor.

“Me too.” Smirked Katara, before firing water at him- probably intending to knock him off. But he was pretty good at waterbending by now, still nowhere near the female waterbender's level though, and managed to block it, letting the water fall to the ground.

“Ha ha, good try, Katara.” He said sarcastically, but the girl was still smiling.

“Toph, if you'd please do the honours?” She asked brightly, and Toph offered up her own smile and shot a spike of earth out from in front of him, before curving it to hit him off his air scooter. Of course Katara had known he could block a simple water attack and would let it fall, so Toph could then 'see' where he was- pretty smart.

Zuko grunted and pulled himself up off the ground, flicking the water on the floor at Katara, who just bended it back into her pouch. Then they all kept walking for a few moments, until they spied Aang gliding down to meet them, his flying quick and a little frantic.

“Guys! We have a problem!” He shouted before he'd even landed on the floor, causing Toph to jump back a little as she couldn't see that he was coming.

“Yes, Aang?” Asked Katara, seeming very focused.
“The wall, there's- there's a drill.” He panted, motioning for them to follow him before running, top speed, in the direction of the city.

They complied and ran up towards a tall hill, eventually getting to the top and seeing, in the very distance, Ba Sing Se. The walls truly were massive, just as Zuko's uncle had always told him, and seemed impenetrable. Except… There was also a vehicle, heading straight for the city, with a massive drill at the front and a Fire Nation emblem on the top- and it looked like it could destroy anything. And, upon squinting his eyes a little, Zuko could also see a couple of tanks nearing the wall, probably there to defend the frighteningly large drill.

“Wow, I can feel it now…That thing is huge.” Exclaimed Toph, digging her toes into the earth to get a better ‘look’ at the drill.

“We don’t have much time before it reaches the wall, what should we do?” Asked Katara, turning to her brother who seemed a little lost in thought.

“We should go to the wall, see how we can help from up there and think about what we're going to do.” Decided Sokka, scratching the side of his head as he spoke.

“So your master plan is to get to the top of a wall so that you can make a better plan?” Asked Toph pretty Snarky, folding her arms.

The Prince found himself conflicted for a moment, not wanting to go against his father unless necessary but also realising they had to get into Ba Sing Se to find Appa, else Aang would be a sad mess forever. But he also knew that Sokka was planning on attacking the Fire Nation with the Earth Kingdom army, and that would most definitely be going against the Firelord. So really Zuko couldn’t win either way. But still, he didn't want all those people inside Ba Sing Se to be subjected to, what the firebender had recently been realising due to his cruel sister was, the Fire Nation’s tyranny. Sure, he was still in the mindset of not directly fighting his father, but now he was starting to understand that that same father had put a lot of the world through heartache. So, after that long winded debate inside his own head over what he should do and who he should be helping, he decided that they should try and save Ba Sing Se and all the people inside.

“Let's just do it.” Interrupted Zuko, before the non-bender could think of a comeback, beginning to run towards the city.

Luckily, from where they were, the drill was off to the side far enough that they could make a
beeline towards the wall without crossing its path, which was especially good considering who the firebender worried had brought the drill. The group ran towards the city at top speed, and upon reaching the wall were taken to the top by Toph earthbending them a platform and sending it up the wall with all of them on top of it. On top of the structure were dozens of Earth Kingdom soldiers, who all turned and pointed their weapons upon the five’s arrival.

“What are you civilians doing on the wall? This is restricted for the Earth Kingdom military only!” Questioned the guy who seemed to be in charge, motioning for his men to lower their swords and the rocks that they'd bended.

“Uh, we're not civilians. He's the avatar and we're here to help against that drill thing.” Explained Sokka, pointing to Zuko who waved slightly on greeting, not liking how many people knew who he was but figuring by now, since his whole nation knew thanks to Azula and so did the Northern Water Tribe due to him, uh, destroying it, that it wasn't really a secret anymore.

The Prince lit one of his hands on fire and created a little tornado in the other to prove Sokka right, causing a lot of the soldiers to gasp in shock. The leader then motioned, pretty unenthusiastically, for them to follow him and led them to the edge of the wall, pointing down towards the tank, that was getting charged at by several earthbenders.

“You see, I appreciate your help, I really do, but we've got it all under control. No one can get into Ba Sing Se unless we let them, that's why it's called the impenetrable city, after all. What did you think it was? Nah Sing Se? Get it, because that means the penetrable city… No?” He explained, the joke awkward, but thankfully easy to ignore because if what Katara said next.

“Great, but what about that?!” She called, pointing down to where the earthbenders were fighting desperately against two figures, they were too far away to properly identify but Zuko worried it was Azula’s friends.

The leader didn't say anything, and it was all over too quickly for any of them to regain their wits enough to go after the mystery attackers. Within mere minutes most of the earthbenders were retreating or limp in the arms of their comrades, getting taken up the wall with similar platforms to what Toph used. They dragged themselves across the wall and to where medics were waiting, either with bandages for what looked like knife wounds (Zuko knew how those felt all too well) or to be laid down whilst they waited for the paralysis to wear off.

“What happened to you?” Asked Katara, even though it seemed fairly obvious to the Prince, as she bended some water over one of the limp soldiers.
“These two Fire Nation girls attacked us, one who kept doing flips hit my arms and legs and suddenly I couldn't bend anymore.” Revealed the man, attempting to move his limbs but failing.

“Ty Lee.” Muttered Zuko, to which the others nodded.

“That girl hits your pressure points, stopping you from bending from the inside.” Explained Aang to both the soldier and his leader, who looked at the group fearfully.

“With those girls out their my benders can't attack from up close…” Admitted the leader, looking terrified.

“Do you want the avatar’s help now?” Asked Toph.

“Yes please.” Remarked the man sheepishly.

“Good, because I have an idea: just like Ty Lee, we need to attack from the inside. If we get into the drill then we can mess up its mechanisms so it can't function.” Planned Sokka intelligently, a devious look in his eye.

The group of five went down to the ground and were faced with the drill, far enough away not to be spotted but still close enough to be terrified by the thing’s immense size.

“We'll go in from underneath so they don't realise we're coming. Katara, could you make a mist to cloud around us? Toph, Aang, you stay out here and try and slow it down from the outside so we have more time, okay?” Explained Sokka, to which everyone nodded and started doing their thing.

Katara created the mist and they headed underneath the drill, Zuko cutting open hatch with his own water so that he, Sokka and the waterbender could all get through. Meanwhile, Toph and Aang headed around to the back and front respectively to slow the thing down.
It didn’t take them long to come across some of the inner mechanisms, and along with them was a Fire Nation engineer. Katara bended some water at him and froze it, trapping the guy pretty successfully. Then Sokka grabbed a sheet of paper from the engineer’s belt and unrolled it, before motioning for the other two to come look at it.

“See, those are the support brackets. There are 8 altogether so if we break them the entire thing should collapse.” Predicted Sokka, slightly worrying Zuko with the word ‘should’ but he pushed past that, heading for where the non-bender said the support brackets were.

They went into the outer lining of the drill and were faced with the eight massive, thick, steel poles that Sokka expected them to somehow break. Melting it would never work and it’s not like metalbending was a thing, so he guessed they’d be doing waterbending.

“Okay, I'll bend the water to you and you do the same back, cutting through, okay?” Decided Katara, and Zuko nodded and began.

After twenty slashes they weren't even a tenth of the way through, and both were sweating from the intense heat inside the drill.

“See, we're making progress!” Encouraged Sokka unhelpfully, before Zuko gave him a scathing look. “Okay… You're making progress!”

Eventually, as in way too much time later, they got through the first bracket, which shifted the tiniest bit but did nothing to stop or even slow down the drill.

“Now what? We can't do that seven more times.” Asked Zuko, snatching the blueprints out of Sokka’s hands.

Most of it was too confusing for him to understand, never really looking into engineering, but he could see why Sokka’s plan would work- if they had enough man power. Obviously the non-bender had underestimated how thick the brackets would be which, while not his fault, had wasted a good portion of their time. So, instead of focusing on the supports, he looked at the very middle of the drill, that held the power source. Said power seemed to come from coal, but according to the blueprints there had to be a very specific amount of coal for the drill to work at all, not enough slowing it down and too much downright overheating it, frying all the systems.

“What if we went into the engine room and we just added more coal to the machine?” Asked Zuko,
pointing out the room on the paper to the others.

“It would break too slowly; the heat wouldn't increase enough immediately to stop the drill. Plus that will be the most guarded room.” Scoffed Katara, but patting the Prince on the shoulder for trying all the same. He quickly shoved her hand off, not wanting to be patronised.

“No… It could work! If we add the coal and Zuko blasts fire into it, then it should heat up quickly enough. Plus, we can take care of the guards- how many can there be?” Smiled Sokka, and when he squeezed Zuko’s arm the firebender found that he didn't mind too much.

—

“Princess Azula, while no one can, uh, stop the drill due to its perfect construction and—” Started Quin worriedly, not quite brave enough to look Azula in the eye. She tended to have that effect on people.

“Get on with it.” She ordered impatiently, seeming sick of the War Minister.

“Uh, of course, Your Highness. It appears someone is slowing the drill down from the outside. An earthbender at the back and an, uh, airbender at the front—” He explained, getting interrupted as soon as he'd revealed all useful information.

“Mai, Ty Lee, go deal with the attackers. Quin, order your men to search every inch of this thing for the avatar.” Ordered Azula, also getting up even though everything seemed to be covered.

“Uh, Azula, where are you going?” Asked Ty Lee fearfully, completely terrified of the firebender (though she hid it very well) especially since she'd almost burnt her to death at the circus.

“I'm going to go look for my br- the avatar too.” She corrected herself angrily, marching off with Quin to search the drill.

That left the two girls against the two benders, not that they were worried but still. Mai headed for the front rather boredly, having a leisurely stroll as Ty Lee jogged to her destination. The fastest way out was through the clearing hatch, that was full of rocky, muddy water that she braved simply
because the thought of Azula getting mad was more petrifying than getting accidentally crushed by rocks or drowning in a dark tube. She slid down and saw daylight surprisingly quickly, as well as being met with the sight of a small girl dressed in green causing earthy spikes to pierce through the metal and prevent the whole drill from moving.

Ty Lee jumped down, planning to chi block the girl so that she couldn't bend before taking her back to Azula or helping out Mai with the airbender, but upon landing she got her foot encased in rock. She tried putting her other foot down to pry herself out, but that one also got trapped.

“Ha, I'm glad I finally got to take you on- your friend was a cheater with her throwing knives; I can't even see!” Laughed the earthbender, encasing her completely in earth, including covering up her mouth so that she couldn't speak.

It was embarrassing and restricting, but the other girl’s break from earthbending at the drill meant that it had managed to move forwards quite a way, and was now probably almost at the wall.

Aang was blasting a constant stream of air at the front of the drill, probably not doing much to slow it down but bending the currents so that they spun in the opposite direction to the drill, reducing its destructive power. The machine hadn't moved more than a couple of inches ever since he and Toph had started working, so whatever she was doing must have been very effective. Unfortunately, the drill had been pretty close to Ba Sing Se since they'd begun, and any lapses in their methods to slow the drill down could be enough for it to get to the wall.

Just then, the knife-throwing-girl, Mai as Zuko had called her, ran up to him and threw several blades his way, that he had pause from airbending to block with a gust of wind. But she just kept throwing more and more weapons, and being on the defensive meant that he wasn't doing anything to stop her and the drill kept inching forwards. Eventually, terrified because the machine (that he'd now been forced to move out from in front of) was barely a metre away from the wall, he spun the next set of blades into a twister and sent them back at her, causing her to leap out of the way for once. Then, whilst she was unbalanced, he struck her in the side so that she hit against the metal of the drill, knocking her out.

The airbender felt bad about it, he really did, but she'd be fine and she was trying to attack him, anyway, it was only self defence. But despite all that, before he could turn back to drill he heard an almighty crunch and saw that it had managed to move forward, and was now digging into the stone wall. Deciding he couldn't do anything from the front now, Aang used his glider to get over to Toph, hoping he could at least help her.
“Okay, according to the blueprints the engine room should be the room after this next corridor, so when I open this door that's when we'll have to fight.” Warned Sokka, before mouthing ‘1,2,3’ and slamming open the door, letting Zuko go first.

The Prince was immediately pelted by ten different fiery blasts that he dissipated with ease, before twisting his wrist slightly and flicking, letting a tornado grab up three of the guards. Meanwhile Sokka used his boomerang to hit two guys consecutively on their heads and Katara used her water whips to slam two other guys into each other. Then Zuko took some inspiration from her and created fire whips, hitting a couple of soldiers in the chest. The waterbender then sent almost a dozen icicles at the last guard, pinning him to the far wall with his clothing, before Sokka stuffed some fabric in his mouth so that he couldn't call for help.

“Okay, Zuko and I will go in, Katara, you keep watch.” Ordered Sokka, doing a pretty good job of being the leader as far as the Prince was concerned.

The pair then went into the engine room, basically a hot, metal cupboard with a massive vat of coal in the center and two engineers in a lot of protective clothing tending it. Zuko rushed forward and knocked one out with the hilt of one of his dao swords, then knocking the second out with a well placed air blast that slammed him into the wall.

The firebender began shooting flames into the coal pit after that, ignoring how hot he was and how little air seemed to be left since it had been replaced by thick smoke. Sokka piled in several chunks of coal and eventually they felt a large jut, kind of like they'd hit something.

“Was that… It?” Asked Zuko, not breaking in his firebending but turning his head to Sokka, who looked pretty concerned.

“No… I think the drill hit the wall. Can you hurry that up?” He mentioned worriedly, wiping the sweat off his brow. Zuko was also soaked through by now and covered in soot, his long hair sticking to his forehead and the back of his neck uncomfortably.

“I don't know how, it might take longer than we realised even with my firebending.” The Prince replied, really hating how the intense heat across his palms was beginning to burn.
“Wait… I've got an idea! Okay, so back at the Spirit Library I read this book about the science of bending, and it mentioned the components of fire. For a fire to survive it needs heat and fuel, which firebenders produce, and also air, that's in the environment. Which is why fire can't be sustained underwater, because there isn't any air—” Explained Sokka, sounding a little too excited and not quite urgent enough.

“Great, but where are you going with this? We're kind of on the clock.” He interrupted sharply, and Sokka nodded.

“Right, right, sorry. Okay, my point is unlike other firebenders you can also airbend, meaning you can add extra air to you fire to make it bigger and hotter.” Revealed Sokka.

“Okay, so I just need to firebend and airbend?” He wanted to make sure, since, knowing his track record with trying new firebending moves, he would probably end up blowing himself up.

“Basically.” The non-bender nodded, and Zuko complied, immediately noting how his fire got hotter and bigger.

After that it was only a few moments before the machines around them began steaming, things started smoking too outside of the coal, and a few sparks began shooting out of the wires.

“Okay, I think that's enough, let's go.” Zuko decided hurriedly, grabbing Sokka’s arm and dragging him into the corridor where similar things were happening with the machinery lining the walls.

The three, now Katara was back with them, ran for the exit, knowing Azula would be showing up at any moment. Yet, since the universe obviously hated their group, Azula burst out of one of the doors in a particularly tiny corridor and stopped them in their tracks.

“Zuko.” She stated, a cold, murderous look in her amber eyes.

“Azula.” He replied, definitely feeling as aggressive as she looked evil.

Zuko was really considering blasting a massive ball of fire at her, but realised they were currently in a very small space where the fire would likely end up injuring all of them, not just her. So instead he lit himself some fire daggers and swung at her, with her returning the strike with her own, blue flame knives. Thankfully, since neither could pull off big, powerful blasts of fire or even precise blasts due to their environment, they were forced to just use the daggers (whilst Katara and Sokka took as many steps back from the fight as possible as if they tried to help they could easily injure Zuko). The close
combat fighting with what was basically just really hot knives meant they were on much more equal ground, and for once in his life Azula wasn't completely obliterating him in the fight.

Unfortunately anyone could see that the battle wasn't going anywhere, and the victor would probably just end up being the one with the best endurance. So, whilst the Prince’s left knife was pushing against both of Azula's, he unsheathed one of his swords and swung that too, surprising his sister who was then forced to back up into a wall.

“Now, I don't think this is very fair.” She spat, her expression livid, as she threw as large of blasts of fire as she could,

(about the size of apples), which Zuko blocked with his swords, both of which he was now holding.

“Zuko! Down!” Yelled Katara, and the Prince obliged as a pipe burst right above his head, filling the room with steam that would have probably scolded him had he not moved.

Yet the steam did present a good opportunity, as they were now obscured from view and had a better chance of surprising Azula and getting through to the exit. The Prince took several steps back and grabbed onto Sokka and Katara, pulling the two forwards. He then nodded to Katara, who seemed to understand, and waterbended the steam into a wall of water that pushed Azula back before she had time to react, and the three then ran through the exit.

They kept running until they'd gotten to the hatch they'd cut into the floor, and they jumped through it, rushing around to the front of the drill to see if it had worked. Thankfully, the drill head had stopped spinning.

“You guys did it!” Cheered Aang, smiling brightly. Toph came over with him and was also grinning.

“Yeah, but Azula's in there and she is not happy, so we should probably get over that wall.” Warned Zuko, really not wanting to face his sister when she would be able to exploit the full extent of her bending.

So they all went back up the wall, using Toph’s platform, whilst Earth Kingdom soldiers came down to round up any guards left standing. Unfortunately, as they neared the top of the structure, the Prince saw as an earthbender freed Ty Lee from an earth cocoon, and was immediately rescued from getting arrested by Mai, who grabbed her friend, and Azula who shot fire at the soldier, at least knocking him out with her blue flames but possibly doing something worse. She then left with her friends,
laying down a wall of flame so that the other soldiers couldn't follow.

“I'm... Mai must have woken up.” Stuttered Aang, and Katara squeezed his arm kindly.

“It's okay; there's no way the Earth Kingdom soldiers could have kept Azula locked up anyway.” Commented Zuko sadly, crossing arms and sulking a little.

“Yeah, well, we'll be safe in the city. And then, when we're ready, we can take Azula down.” Said Sokka supportively, nudging the firebender’s arm a little and smiling warmly.

But he still wasn't sure- his sister was very powerful, they'd barely gotten away from both their fights against her even though she'd been at a disadvantage both times. The first time, not only did they outnumber her group, she was also caught by surprise by him being the avatar. And then, this time, they'd been stuck in a tiny corridor where she was unable to use the extent of her firebending. All in all, though it didn't deter him from fighting the Princess in the future, he worried that the next time they fought it would not end well.

Chapter End Notes

Mmmmm mm so yeah, I'm not gonna lie, I sort of love Azula's character *shrugs*

Zuko is slowly feeling more comfortable in his role as the avatar and as an enemy of the Fire Nation, but he's still got a little way to go.

I super hope you enjoyed this chapter!!! If you did I'd love to see a kudos/comment because each and every one brightens my day! :))
Toph and the others had all been led from the top of the wall down to the very edge of the city, so that they could catch the train into the inner ring. Apparently, thanks to them saving Ba Sing Se from Azula, they were being granted a large house to live in in the richest, snootiest place in probably the entire Earth Kingdom. Toph, however, was not at all bothered in taking advantage of this ‘privilege’ since the city life was not for her.

Still, she walked with her friends towards the train, knowing they had to be here to save Appa and talk to the Earth King about defeating the Fire Nation on the day of the eclipse.

“Hello, I am Joo Dee, and I am here to accompany you to your new house in the inner ring. If you need anything, just ask.” Said a women, Joo Dee, cheerfully- almost robotically.

“Great, we need an audience with the Earth King.” Requested Sokka enthusiastically, as they all got onto the train in their own compartment.

“I'm sorry, but the Earth King doesn't take meetings on such short notice. Now, if you'll look to your left you'll see the west side of Ba Sing Se…” Joo Dee droned on, completely boring the earthbender and apparently infuriating Sokka.

“But we have information that's critical to the w-” Argued Sokka, clearly not getting anywhere.

“And to your right you'll see…” Interrupted their guide, not even reacting to what Sokka had said.

Soon Joo Dee’s voice just became background noise as the others discussed, quietly, their plan of action.

“Our first priority should be finding Appa.” Stated Aang, not sounding as though his mind could be changed.

“Okay, but in the meantime we also need to tell the King about the eclipse, which means we need to talk to him.” Agreed Sokka, also seeming determined.
“Plus… Ba Sing Se is pretty huge, who knows how long it will take to find Appa.” Commented Katara, to which Toph agreed since, whilst stopping the drill, she had been close enough to the city to sense how massive it really was.

“Yeah, and Azula is ruthless; she won't stop until we're all captured. So we have to be on the lookout for her.” Chipped in Zuko, being a bundle of fun and good news, as always.

The trifecta of difficulty left a sour weight resting on the group’s shoulders, making them quiet. Since the conversation had died, now the only voice filling their compartment was that of Joo Dee, who was saying nothing to lighten their spirits.

“In the outer ring we have the agriculturists, artists and craftsmen- people who work with their hands. It's very quaint, as you can see!” She explained, not that Toph could see (or even sense from inside a moving train).

“There's a guy mugging someone and several refugees going into a house that's way too small for them.” Whispered Sokka into her ear, apparently wanting to keep her in the loop.

“Great, a class system.” She muttered back sarcastically.

“Um, Joo Dee, who are those shadowy guys?” Asked Aang as brightly as he could, probably smiling.

“Those are the Dai Li, they maintain our great city’s cultural heritage and protect the citizens.” She explained, but all Toph heard was that the government was restricting poor people.

“This place is… Not how I expected it would be.” Said Katara, sounding pretty disappointed.

“Yeah, this is why I never came here when I was younger. The monks always taught us that all life was equal and this place… Goes completely against that.” Grumbled Aang, probably pouting, as they kept chugging along.

They kept going for a few minutes in silence, the others probably enjoying the view or something, until Joo Dee spoke up again (Toph was really getting sick of this woman).
“And now we enter the middle ring, a great place for shopping and most notable for housing Ba Sing Se University.” Revealed the woman, not that the earthbender was at all interested but she didn't get a choice.

“We met a professor from Ba Sing Se University once, he took us to a spirit library where we learnt information critical to the war effort!” Rambled Sokka, taking in an impressively deep breath at the end.

Yet Joo Dee still didn't respond, instead she just kept talking about how the middle ring had the most teashops in the entire city.

“Uh, Zuko? You okay? You've been a little zoned out ever since the outer ring.” Mentioned Sokka worriedly, even though Sparky could clearly take care of himself.

“What? Uh, yeah, um, I just thought I saw- it doesn't matter, Joo Dee, can someone travel between the rings after they've already moved in?” Asked Zuko, not suspiciously at all.

“Anyone from the inner ring has a special pass so that they may use the trains to travel in between rings. But I would not suggest going to the outer ring, as there is a possibility of losing your belongings.” Answered the guide, sounding much too chipper for someone who had just implied that the outer ring of her city was stocked full of criminals.

“I can handle myself.” Muttered Zuko annoyedly, probably holding one of his swords dramatically or something.

“Of course, Avatar Zuko, and now we head into the inner ring, home of you five, our government officials and the Earth King. His Palace is in the very center of Ba Sing Se and is widely considered to be the largest building in the world. You can currently see it just up ahead.

“The Fire Nation Palace is twice that size.” Noted the Prince, before gasping slightly when he realised what he'd said (which, interestingly enough, had not been a lie).

“How could you-” Started Joo Dee, for once not sounding chipper at all.
“The avatar, uh, obviously scouts out his enemies’ bases, even when he isn't yet powerful enough to defeat them.” Lied Katara terribly, likely doing some big, false grin. But apparently their guide was eager to accept any explanation and just carried on with her tour, until the train finally stopped.

The five, plus Joo Dee, then walked a few streets until they were faced with a large house, with a massive garden, that smelled like honeysuckle and lavender. It was clearly completely evil and Toph wished she could say she hated staying there but… Part of her was a tiny bit homesick for her lovely, soft bed.

“I will see you all tomorrow morning, good night!” Said Joo Dee happily, before thankfully walking away.

—

“That was awful.” Stated Zuko as soon as they'd shut their large, mahogany front doors.

Their house was unfortunately nice, though it still didn't hold a candle to the Fire Nation Palace he'd grown up in, with lush green carpets covering the floor and matching curtains draped over every window. There were several armchairs and sofas that looked very comfortable as well as a nice, open plan, kitchen and dining room just off from the living room. Tucked away at the back were two massive bedrooms, both beautifully decorated with all sorts of golden ornaments and exquisite embroideries. There was even a washroom! Something Zuko had probably missed the most after camping for months- a part of him even wondered if the soaps were scented…

“Okay, guys, I know this place is nice and smells good and isn't getting attacked by anyone, but we need to stay focused.” Ordered Sokka, though he looked about to take one of the antique axes off of the wall and like he might start playing with it.

“Yes, Appa.” Replied Aang, though he was already buried up to his shoulders in expensive-looking velvet cushions.

“And the Earth King.” Added Katara, who was looking longingly at some prettily arranged nail varnishes.

“Yes, well, it's passed sundown so I think, for tonight, we should just get some rest. Tomorrow we can start searching for Appa and think of a way to see the Earth King.” Decided Sokka, opening up
a wardrobe in the larger bedroom and being met with a whole bunch of beautiful outfits, including pyjamas.

He looked at the green clothing for a few minutes before shutting the door, and just heading into the bathroom in the blue Water Tribe tunic he was already wearing. Zuko, however couldn't exactly wear his Fire Nation nightwear in the most anti-firebender place on the planet, so he was happy to take full advantage of everything offered to him. Aang just hopped to bed in his own outfit, not seeming bothered and completely happy to just melt into the soft sheets.

“Well, I guess you boys get this room; Toph and I will bunk next door. Goodnight!” Katara smiled, before she and the earthbender left them be.

Zuko quickly washed up, having his first shower since the North Pole (which had been freezing) and thanking the spirits that he was, once again, clean. Sure, the blocks of soap and stream water their group had been using had kept them reasonably fresh, but now he felt like he'd truly washed all the swamp muck out of his pores and all the sand out of his, now pretty damn long, hair. Then he got happily into the bed furthest from the window, not afraid of getting a bad nightmare since, much to his embarrassment, he'd kept Sokka's spare parka and had now assigned it the superficial duty of warding off bad dreams. It didn't always work and most nights he'd still jolt awake at some point, but the nightmares weren't quite as bad as they used to be.

Zuko woke up first and took it upon himself to make breakfast, a task he hadn't considered might be difficult for someone who never really… Cooked. Even when he was camping with his friends he'd never made anything, since Sokka or Katara always cooked. So maybe it wasn't surprising that he burnt the toast, got egg everywhere and wasted all the bacon in the cupboard by feeding it to a starving dog-rat that had taken refuge near their house. Eventually he just poured some dry cereal into a bowl and nibbled at that whilst he waited for everyone else to drag themselves out of bed.

“Hey, Zuko. What're you eating?” Asked Sokka, coming to sit next to him on the sofa.

“Cereal.” He replied shortly, leaning back against the cushion he was sat on.

“... Why?” He questioned.
“Because I was hungry and I can’t make anything else. By the way, we’re out of bacon.” Explained the Prince, glad he didn’t have to sit through what would surely be a melodramatic speech about the importance of meat, as Aang walked in.

“Guys! We need to go question the neighbours about if they’ve seen Appa, come on!” Smiled Aang, before running into the girls’ room to wake them up.

“No breakfast?” Whined Sokka, getting up to go after him.

Everyone else got ready and, just as they were about to leave, Joo Dee showed up at their front door. She was wearing the exact same green dress as the day before and had an identical, scary grin stretched across her face. She was, apparently, coming with them, to wherever they went. First they tried zoos and pet stores, eventually getting to one that seemed promising enough but the owner denied ever coming across a sky bison.

“Okay, but where would such an animal be sold on the blackmarket?” Asked Sokka quietly, leaning over the counter winking a couple of times.

He looked like he wanted to say something, he really did, but he glanced at Joo Dee and immediately got sheepish, not even looking them in the eye.

“That would be illegal; I don’t involve myself in stuff like that. Goodbye.” He stated, shooing them off with one hand.

They went to several more places, asked people on the street even, but people either had honestly no clue or were too scared to tell the truth because of their (admittedly very creepy) guide. After lunch Joo Dee finally left them, saying that inter-ring travel was not permitted after 4pm even if you lived in the inner ring.

“Also, I have filed your request to meet with the King and it should be put through in about a month—much faster than most!” She smiled her signature bone-chilling smile.

“What?! A month?!” Exclaimed Sokka, who had been the most focused on getting to see the Earth King ever since they’d arrived in Ba Sing Se.

“Six to eight weeks, actually. Good bye!” She cheered, walking away and leaving them at their front
Whilst the others complained about Joo Dee and how horrible she was, Zuko’s attention was caught by the man in the house across from them, who was staring fearfully through the glass on his front door. The Prince nudged Katara to shut up her rant about their guide’s terrifying grin, and motioned to the man looking at them, before walking over to his house.

“Why were you staring at us?” He questioned threateningly, staring the middle aged guy down, which was not that difficult when he was barely 5’2 ft.

“I saw you with Joo Dee and I wanted to warn you.” He whispered in response, looking around the street as if he were afraid they were being watched.

“Warn us about what?” Asked Toph sharply, sounding ready to blast a rock at this guy.

“No one is permitted to speak about the war in the city, else the Dai Li…” He warned, saying the words ‘war’ and ‘Dai Li’ especially quietly.

“Got it, thanks.” Muttered Zuko, heading back to their house with the others closely following.

“Hey! We could have gotten more information from him!” Moaned Sokka once they were safely inside with their door closed.

“Yeah, and if he told us anymore he’d be in massive trouble. Look, let's just stay out of the Dai Li’s way and-” Decided Zuko, for once choosing to be responsible. Unfortunately, no one else wanted to do this.

“Guys! Look at this, I think it was posted whilst we were out!” Exclaimed Katara, holding up a green sheet of paper with gold lettering that Zuko was too far away from to make out.

“I'm looking.” Remarked Toph, crossing her arms and frowning.

“Oh, right, sorry. It says: The Earth King is having a party for his bear, Bosco, tonight and so curfew for the inner ring has been extended. If you are attending the party along with this leaflet will be your door.
ticket and which seat you will be placed in.” She read out loud, making the firebender embarrassingly scared.

“Bear?” He asked a tad high pitched, not really wanting to admit that he was slightly terrified of bears.

“Yeah… Weird.” She frowned, apparently more confused that it was just a plain bear than wondering why Zuko had started sweating quite a bit.

“Surely you mean platypus-bear?” Questioned Sokka.

“Or armadillo-bear?” Added Toph.

“Or skunk-bear?” Mentioned Aang.

“No, it just says bear.” Corrected Katara, holding the paper away from her.

“Wow, this place strange.” Noted Toph, throwing herself down onto one of the armchairs.

The firebender knew exactly what his friends would want to do: in a few hours they'd sneak into the party and talk to the King. But the Prince had other plans, namely going into the outer ring. Since, yesterday, on the train he'd been sure he'd seen his uncle- which seemed impossible since he should still be in the North Pole with Pakku (that bastard). Yet Zuko still wanted to make sure… And avoiding Bosco the bear was a plus too.

“So what? We sneak into the party?” Asked Sokka, turning to his sister and Aang.

“Yeah! That way we can talk directly to the Earth King.” Replied Aang excitedly, to a scoff from Toph.

“Sorry, you two, but that party will be full of the richest, snootiest people in the entire city- you commoners would never pass.” She commented, picking her nose as she spoke.
“What? And you would?” Laughed Katara, pushing one of her hair-loopies back from her face.

“Hey, I learned high-society manner, you guys didn't.” She argued, apparently ignoring the royalty in the room.

“Ahem, Prince here.” He cut in, reminding everyone that he existed.

“See, you two know how to use manners and stuff, you could teach us!” Suggested Sokka, not really understanding that it took years of beration to become weak willed enough to fit in with rich people.

As if to prove that he was polite enough to get started, Sokka bowed to Aang and put on a stupid accent. The airbender then did the same and it kept going, each of them bowing faster and lower until they hit heads in the middle and fell over. Zuko would like to say he didn't laugh, unfortunately that would be a lie.

“Please, Katara might get in but you two would barely even pass as busboys.” Teased the earthbender, walking over to her room and kicking Sokka (who was still lying on the floor) as she went.

She and the waterbender began getting ready for pretending to be snooty, rich daughters of a nobleman whilst Sokka and Aang nursed their new bruises. The firebender, however, didn't dress up fancily like he was supposed to be doing but instead wore his Blue Spirit outfit (minus the mask that might get him labeled as a criminal).

“Bye!” He called, hoping not to explain where he was going.

“Wait, where are you going?” Asked Sokka, rushing to stop him at the front door.

“You guys have the King thing covered so I figured I'd go search for Appa in the, uh, outer ring, since we didn't look there earlier, okay?” He lied, super glad Toph wasn't in the vicinity to point it out.

“But wouldn't it be better for us to stick together? Plus we're not allowed to go in between the rings after 4 so-” He argued logically, but Zuko wasn't paying much attention.
“I'll be fine, bye!” He said, leaving out of the door before the non-bender could protest further.

—

Once Katara had finally decided that her makeup was perfect, Toph was allowed to leave their room to show Aang, Sokka and Zuko how she looked. The waterbender came too but, upon entering the living room, she noticed someone was missing.

“Hey, Twinkle Toes, where’s Sparky?” She asked, definitely not going to be happy if he got out of going to some boring, fancy party whilst she didn't.

“Uhh… Wha? Oh, um, Sokka says he said he was going to go search for Appa in the outer ring.” Replied Aang truthfully, mumbling a little at first- likely being flustered over Katara's new appearance.

“But why would he do that? We'll be searching again tomorrow and he could easily be caught by the Dai Li.” Fretted Katara, and Toph had to wonder the same thing.

“I agree but we can't think about that now; we don't want to be late to the King’s party.” Decided Sokka, keeping them on track before opening the door.

The two boys went their own way to spy on the party from outside, whilst the earthbender and Katara joined the line of people waiting to get in. They obviously didn't have tickets but Toph figured they could get in using her Beifong passport, since it was a notable and prestigious family throughout the entire Earth Kingdom as far as the girl was aware.

“Tickets.” Requested the bouncer-guy, thankfully wearing a stone ring so Toph could tell that he put his hand out.

“I think this will suffice.” She replied, passing him her papers.

“No ticket, no entry- next!” Damnit okay, new plan time.
“Um, please excuse my sister- you see, we hoped you'd allow us in with just our family papers as we, well, my poor, blind sister, lost our tickets.” Lied Katara pretty well, but Toph could already tell the man wouldn't be budging.

“No tickets, no entry- next!” He repeated, even louder this time, and they were forced to leave the queue.

They walked off to the side for a few minutes, both of them thinking silently about what to do next. Toph was considering just breaking into the Palace and forcing the King to see them, but she doubted the others (except possibly Zuko if he were there) would be okay with that. Then, breaking her from her thoughts, she felt someone approaching.

“What are you two doing out here alone?” Asked a man, kindly enough.

“Uh, well, our family is inside and they have our tickets so we can't get in.” Replied Katara, doing her best helpless, teenage girl imitation.

“Why, how upsetting. Please, allow me to take you in, then once inside you can find your family.” He offered sweetly, probably smiling.

“Thank you so much, uh, what's your name, sir?” Replied Katara gratefully, before all three began heading back towards the entrance of the Palace.

“Long Feng, dear.” The man said, walking straight past the ticket man without saying a word.

He skipped the entire queue, leading Toph to believe he had to be pretty high up; she was suspicious. In her experience, rich people weren't the most charitable- just look at her parents as an example. The three got inside a ballroom packed with people, a long table through the middle with an especially large weight on one end, probably where the bear was sat.

“We'll go find our family, thank you so much for your help, Mister Long Feng.” After that Katara pulled the earthbender forwards, but Long Feng didn't stop walking with them.

“Now, now, it would be impolite for me to leave you young ladies alone before I have returned you to your families.” He protested, continuing to go around with them.
They ‘searched’ the party for ten minutes, thankful that there were so many people since it made it more believable that they hadn't seen their ‘family’ yet. Finally, Toph felt a vibration through the floor of someone astoundingly light footed, and immediately recognised them as Aang. She led Katara and Long Feng over to his general area, happy that the latter stopped to speak with someone for a few moments just as they got there.

“Toph! I know you said we couldn't be here, but we snuck in with the busboys!” Exclaimed the airbender, much too loudly so she covered up his mouth.

“That's fine, Twinkle Toes, now, is the King out yet?” She asked, since she would have no idea if someone walked in wearing a crown all of a sudden.

“No, but his bear is pretty cute. Who's that guy with Katara?” He questioned, not jealously (since Long Feng was an adult and that would be creepy) but confusedly.

“He won't leave us alone, his name is Long Feng.” Explained Toph, pulling Aang to one side by the arm. “I need you to distract him.”.

“Okay, on it now.” He replied, complying immediately as he begun to walk towards the man.

Unfortunately, he immediately bumped into someone else, who from her scream appeared to be a woman, before she screeched something about her dress. Great, Aang had been here for two minutes and already spilt (from the sound of splashing liquid) something all over someone.

“Sorry! Sorry! Don't worry, I can fix that!” Promised the clumsy dork, before shooting a blast of air that completely messed up Toph’s hair but was also probably pretty successful in drying the woman off.

“Oh my! I had no idea there would be an airbender at this event!” She exclaimed snootily, her accent so posh it could put the earthbender’s mother to shame.

After that the entire party gathered around Aang to watch him perform airbending tricks, Sokka and Katara coming over to stand with Toph. Apparently it was pretty impressive since the crowd kept gasping, applauding and awing every few minutes. Then, about twenty minutes later, some old guy announced that the King would be appearing shortly, and the focus completely shifted so that the crowd went over to watch the far wall, assumably where the King would be coming from (was there
Yet, just as it sounded as though the King was moments from revealing himself, some rock cuffs surprised the girl and grabbed her from behind, covering her mouth too, and pulling her back. She curses herself for not sensing the rock and being too preoccupied with the King, vowing never to let it happen again. Soon the rock gag came off, however, and Toph sensed her friends were standing with her facing someone who felt suspiciously like Long Feng.

“Why did you take us?!” Yelled Sokka, and she could feel his feet struggling to run forwards since he was still cuffed at the back.

“You four did not have permission to be at this event. At least the avatar was smart enough to stay back.” He replied firmly, making Toph internally laugh since Zuko was doing something downright illegal right now instead of just sneaking into a party.

“But we need to see the Earth King! We have information about an eclipse that's critical to the war!” Argued Katara, stomping her foot.

“I am in charge of all military operations within Ba Sing Se; if you have information about the war I am the one to speak to.” Replied Long Feng, sounding much too proud of himself.

“So… The king is just a figurehead?” Realised Sokka.

“No, no! He has many important duties relating to our great city’s cultural heritage, much like my Dai Li agents.” He protested, not very convincingly.

“Fine, look, we found out firebenders lose their powers during an eclipse-” Started Sokka grumpily, getting almost immediately cut off.

“No talk of the war is permitted in the city. Our armies are for defense and crime control only.” Interrupted Long Feng stubbornly.

“You… You can't keep the war secret! You can't just cover everyone's ears and tell them everything outside the city is perfectly alright! We'll- we'll tell everyone!” Shouted Aang in an uncharacteristic outburst.
“So far you’ve been treated as honoured guests, but thanks to tonight you shall be watched constantly, if you speak of the war to anyone you will be expunged from the city. I understand that you're searching for your bison, it would be a shame if you weren't here long enough to find the poor beast.” Threatened Long Feng, clapping and apparently signalling for someone to approach.

“I'll lead you four to the exit.” Said a women with the exact some mechanical cheeriness as Joo Dee, whilst not quite sounding like her.

“Who are-” Started Katara fearfully.

“I'm Joo Dee of course, now come on.” She stated, definitely not being their old guide since Toph remembered voices perfectly.

“What happened to your face-” Questioned Sokka, sounding a little too terrified for comfort.

“Nothing, of course!” She replied, chipper as always, before leading them to a side exit from the building.

From there they walked home in angry silence, at least hoping Zuko was having better luck.

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Zuko was having no luck whatsoever. He'd climbed up to the train station in the inner ring, broken into the station, snuck along the railroad tracks and finally broken out of the train station in the outer ring. It had been remarkably easy, especially in his dark clothing, and he'd even managed to avoid the Dai Li. But, after an hour of tirelessly looking, he'd not yet found his uncle. Which, all things considered, wasn't that surprising since it was close to curfew and his uncle would probably be done with his job for the day by now. Yet, some places were still open, so the Prince kept up his search.

But the outer ring was massive, and no amount of limiting his search to just tea shops was helping him due to the immense number of said shops, there seeming to be one every two streets. Still, he tried to stay determined since, all things considered, things could be going a lot worse… Until he was met with a familiar face right as he left another fruitless tea shop.
It was Jet (not accompanied by his old friends), and the pair stared at each other for several long moments before either acted, the freedom fighter speaking first.

“Firebender! He's a firebender!” He yelled, taking a few steps back and drawing his two hooked bar weapons.

He successfully gained the attention of most of the people inside the tea shop, which included several guards, and stuck Zuko in a pretty uncomfortable position.

“Is that true?” Asked one of the guards suspiciously, probably considering what Jet had said to be true since the firebender did seem pretty distrustful wearing all black with two swords strapped to his back and a burn scar covering one eye.

“No! Of course not!” He protested, not fancying revealing that he was the avatar since that would call into question why he wasn't in the upper ring.

“I swear! He's Lee, a firebender who attacked me!” Shouted Jet, pointing one of his hooked swords at the Prince.

“Firstly, you were going to flood an innocent village. And secondly, how can I be a firebender when I'm an earthbender?” He asked, levitating a few pebbles next to him and thoroughly enjoying the dumbfounded look that spread across Jet's face.

“No… It- it can't be! He- he firebended! I- I swear he did, he's lying, trying to trick you somehow!” Yelled the freedom fighter frantically looking close to pulling his hair out.

“Calm down, son, he's already proven-” One of the guards tried to mediate, but he was cut off.

“He's Fire Nation! I'll- I'll prove it!” Yelled Jet, letting go of all reason and charging Zuko.

If the Prince had been any better at earthbending he might have tried to use that against the angry teenager that was hellbent on attacking him, but instead he just settled for unsheathing his own swords and using those to fight back. Thankfully, Zuko’s blades were curved so Jet found it extremely difficult to hook them with his own weapons, but he was fueled by determination and rage
and that made him a threat. Yet, the firebender was confident in his sword fighting abilities, Piandao had taught him well after all, and was sure he'd win.

Jet swung both his hooked swords to Zuko’s left side, which he blocked before doing a spin that said man was forced to back away from. Then, to gain leverage, the Prince jumped on top of a park bench, slashing down at the freedom fighter’s shoulder. The blow didn’t quite hit its mark due to Jet dodging, but the movement did leave him unbalanced and gave Zuko the opportunity to strike again, though this time he was forced back slightly as the hooks managed to catch his blades for a second. Then his opponent struck the bench he was standing on, cutting it down to an eighth of what it was before Zuko was forced to jump off and try another blow at the non-bender.

After that there were several parries and hits, Jet gaining several minor scratches until the firebender went all out and slashed so that he would have cut the other man’s head clean off had he not leant his head back, though Zuko still managed to slice the piece of wheat his opponent constantly had in his mouth in half, so at least that was a achievement. By now everyone from inside the tea shop had gathered to watch their fight, oohing and ahhing at how they pulled off different manoeuvres. Even the guards didn't seem too bothered about doing their jobs and interrupting them.

So the Prince kept going, sidestepping a blow that would have ripped his ear off and returning it with one sword aiming for Jet's face and the other targeting his left bicep. The non-bender just about blocked both, though he got a cut on his arm from it. Then he tried swinging his left arm, leaving Zuko to duck and sweep his legs out from underneath him-sending him to the ground. Before he could get back up, the firebender twisted one hooked sword out of his hand with his two blades and pinned his other arm with his foot, which was when the Dai Li (the so-called people here to protect who had just let two of their citizens have a sword fight in the street) showed up.

They used some weird rock-cuff-things to trap Jet's arms behind his back and to pull him over to them.

“No! I swear! He's a firebender!” Screamed the guy, looking so pitiful and insane that Zuko almost felt sorry for him. Almost.

The Dai Li dragged him away kicking and screaming, and the Prince happily snuck away whilst everyone was too focused on Jet to even notice what he was up to. He ran back to the train station and went along the tracks all the way back up to the inner ring (which was an astounding distance on foot), where it was almost entirely pitch black except for a few lights left on in their house. He readied himself for the questions and went back in, not really planning on telling them anything except that he didn't find Appa. After all, Toph couldn't tell if he hid the the truth- just if he lied about it.
The rock around Jet's wrists molded to the arms of a chair he was sat on, in a strange, dark room with a glowing green lantern on a circuit surrounding a Dai Li agent.

“Welcome to Lake Laogai, Jet. What seems to be the issue?” Asked the man in a soothing voice as the lantern began travelling around the circuit.

“There’s a firebender, Lee, in the city!” Shouted Jet, before a rocky gag went over his mouth.

”There is no Lee, there is no firebender, there is no war in Ba Sing Se.” The Dai Li agent began chanting, whilst Jet fought desperately against his bonds.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you liked this chapter! I like to think the rest of the stuff in Ba Sing Se will be really fun :))

I'd really love to hear your thoughts and feedback on this chapter, and who your favourite character in this fic is! I'm working on accurate characterisation so it would be an incredible help!

Comments and kudos are massively appreciated, and I'll se you all next week!
Katara woke up happily, snuggled in her comfortable bed without a single care in the world. That is, until, she properly woke up and remembered that they had to rescue Appa, sneak around the Earth Kingdom government and save the world at some point. That sort of tension, as well as the knowledge that they had a lot of downtime in Ba Sing Se whilst looking for Aang’s bison, gave her the idea to have a spa day. And, after hearing a surprisingly loud snore from across the room, she decided exactly who should come with her.

“Toph! Wake up, we're having a spa day!” Cheered Katara, jumping out of bed and opening the curtains so that mid morning light shone across their room.

“Mmm, it's too early.” Groaned the earthbender, who was still completely hidden underneath her duvet.

“Come on! It's, like, ten! Plus the guys are probably awake already.” She persuaded, and finally Toph sat up from under her covers, her hair bursting out into a worse bedhead than Zuko’s.

“Fine, but you're making breakfast.” Agreed Toph moodily, scratching her nose before stumbling out of bed, heading over to the kitchen.

Apparently Katara had no need of cooking breakfast, since Sokka had already prepared stuff for all of them- even a vegetarian meal for Aang. Thankfully her brother had also picked up more food after Zuko had wasted all the bacon and eggs, meaning the waterbender had a delicious brunch feast waiting for her of sausages, egg and bacon cobs, an apple and tomatoes. Sokka had basically the same except without the fruit and with extra meat. Zuko had a plateful of chilli that, while Katara wasn't sure why he was eating it for breakfast, he seemed to be enjoying. Toph just had simple cheese and eggs on toast, and Aang had a salad.

“So, what are your guys’ plans for today? Toph and I are going to the spa!” Asked Katara once she was finished with her breakfast.

“Oh, me and Zuko are just going to have a guys’ day, ya know?” Replied Sokka, his voice a little strange but not too odd.
“Hey, Sokka? Can I talk to you for one second.” Toph seemed to force a smile as she got up, grabbing Sokka’s collar and dragging him into the boys’ room.

“Well… That was weird, Aang, why aren’t you joining in the ‘guys’ day’?” Questioned Katara, turning to the airbender who hadn’t eaten that much of his salad.

“I’m gonna keep looking for Appa. I know you guys don’t have to- you all deserve a free day, but I just want to get him back as soon as possible.” Revealed Aang, pretty sadly but clearly still hopeful.

“We don’t have to have a free day, you know that, right? We can keep searching with you-” Offered Zuko, possibly still guilty about making no headway in looking for Appa a few days ago, when he’d snuck into the outer ring.

“No, it's really fine. You guys go have fun- I'm gonna go scope the city with my glider, bye!” Reassured the airbender, giving the two a small smile before heading out of the door.

Then Katara and Zuko waited in comfortable silence for Sokka and Toph to reappear, and when they did Katara realised her brother didn't have his hair up like usual, not usually seeing it like that. He also looked a little weary, but was smiling despite that.

“Uh… Ahem, come on, Hotshot! We have, uh, stuff to do!” He cheered pretty forcefully, before quickly pulling his hair up into a wolf tail and leading the firebender out of the door.

“What on Earth did you want to speak to Sokka about?” Asked Katara, whilst Toph was dealing with her own hair, making surprising progress despite being blind.

“Oh, you know, nothing much. Now, where is this spa place?” Said the earthbender, following Katara as she too left the house and locked up the door behind her (not that it was really necessary, since they were surrounded by rich people who had no reason to break into their house).

The waterbender showed Toph to the Fancy Lady Day Spa, apparently the inner ring’s most luxurious spa. It was free for them, due to having saved Ba Sing Se, and seemed to be a good way to relax. They got in and ordered the deluxe care package, the woman at the desk thankfully not another Joo Dee, then heading into the massage room.

“They better not touch my feet.” Warned Toph, wriggling her toes as she spoke, before Katara opened the door to the room.
There were four women there to serve them, slightly grating at the waterbender as no men seemed to be in this industry, all of which smiling warmly. The two benders laid down next to each other on comfortable beds, on their fronts, before a pair of the masseuses got to work on easing the tension out of their necks, backs and shoulders. Once that had been done, the girls were told to sit down on some plush chairs where the other two women started work on their feet, despite a few grumblings from Toph who, in all honesty, looked a little too relaxed to put up much of a fight. But, apparently, the earthbender’s feet were such dirty, callused messes that the masseuses were unable to sort them out on their own, and had to call in three extra people.

Then the girls were given facials, Katara peeking out from under her cucumber slices long enough to see Toph scare away an assistant by bending the mud into a creeping face, causing the older girl to laugh and do the same. This gave them an extra half an hour to keep the face masks on, before one of the women was brave enough to venture back into the room to take them to the sauna.

They sat in the sauna happily until their fingers went wrinkly, tossing hot water and rocks into the central pit to keep the sauna warm and misty. Then, finally, they had their makeup done and were sent on their way, it now being far past lunchtime and both of them wanting to head back to the house for something to eat.

“You know, I don't usually like that sorta stuff… Being all girly and everything, but today was actually pretty fun.” Toph smiled as they walked back, heading over a bridge.

“Well, I'm glad you enjoyed yourself- I did too, actually, more than I thought I would.” Replied Katara, thoroughly enjoying how fresh she felt and how much closer to the earthbender she had become.

“Look, girls, it's a clown!” Insulted a mean-spirited girl behind them, laughing with her two friends, who Katara turned to glare at venomously. The main girl had pretty, long, dark hair cascading down her shoulders and hazel eyes, wearing top quality fashion. But her attitude made her downright ugly.

The waterbender turned to her friend, who was facing down towards the bridge surface sadly, crossing her arms.

“Hey, don't worry about those girls; they don't know what they're talking about.” Katara reassured patting Toph’s shoulder kindly. Then, strangely enough, Toph barked out an angry laugh and turned towards the three girls.
“You think it's funny to laugh at people, huh? Well, laugh at this!” She shouted, bending apart the bridge so that the nasty friends fell into the water underneath, their clothes and makeup getting immediately ruined.

Toph then stalked off, letting the bullies screech in her wake, and Katara followed. Though not before waterbending a large wave to send the girls downstream, laughing at how they yelled out in shock as the cold liquid hit them.

“Just so you know, those girls were just being mean- you don't look anything like a clown.” Consoled Katara, walking along with Toph.

“Yeah, I don't really care about my appearance, or anyone else's, that much because I'm blind, so I never see what people look like.” Revealed the earthbender, still sounding upset and so prompting Katara to try and cheer her up.

“And that's what I love about you: you're so confident, self-assured and strong, both physically and emotionally. Plus, even if you can't see what you look like, I think you're really pretty.” Complimented the older girl, smiling even though her expression really didn't affect her blind friend.

“Really? Well, I'd say the same about you but I don't know.” Toph snorted, giving Katara a friendly punch in the arm as they kept walking towards the house.

——

Aang glided over the city, knowing there were still places he had yet to look for Appa, so, so many places. It was noon by now and he had gotten to the middle ring, which seemed like a good enough place to carry on his search. He kept up his trend of heading to pet stores (none of which yielded any results) before eventually getting to a zoo. The airbender was excited about this development, at least interested in seeing the animals even if he couldn't find Appa.

So he walked through the zoo, passing many pens but very few people. A lot of the creatures looked cramped up and sad, plus their cages were very dirty. Eventually he stopped outside a rabaroo pen where a man in zoo-ish clothes was looking down sadly at the animals.

“Umm, have you seen a sky-bison?” Asked Aang, wanting to stay focused even though currently it was these miserable creatures that he was most worried about.
“No, sorry. I couldn't fit a sky-bison in this place anyway.” Grumbled the man, sounding genuinely sad.

“Your animals, they look so… Unhappy.” Commented Aang, to which the zookeeper nodded desolately.

“There's just not enough room for them inside the city so they're uncomfortable. Which makes them grumpy so the public don't want to come see them- which means the Dai Li won't fund this place anymore so I can't expand or afford workers to keep this place clean. Which makes the public even less likely to come back. I'd love my animals to get some room; seeing them so upset breaks my heart- but there's nothing I can do.” Revealed the man, sighing and stroking the bar of the rabaroo’s cage sadly.

“You could take them outside the city, make a zoo out there! There's plenty of room!” Suggested Aang excitedly, eliciting a spark of hope in the zookeeper’s eye.

“I… I would love to, but there's no way of transporting them all out there and then I'd have to set up some pens to house them-” He protested weakly, clearly desperately wanting to agree with Aang.

“Don't worry about the first thing, I can get the animals out- I'm great with them. If you could just gather a bunch of earthbenders, uh, not the Dai Li though, I'll meet you outside the Southern wall, okay?” Planned Aang, to which the man nodded and ran off into town, to gather earthbenders.

Aang then set about freeing the animals, zooming about their pens until every last one was out. That was, apparently not a good thing though as the creatures immediately escaped the zoo and started charging through the middle ring, destroying everything from cabbage carts to small monuments (sorry miniature Kyoshi statue!). A couple of panda-hippos starting eating up a merchant's apples, several hog monkeys tore apart a dress store and a giraffe-serpent trampled a café. Everything was in shambles and Aang had to get it under control fast.

He used his glider to fly through the city, happy to note that an armadillo-rhino had broken through the (actually pretty thin compared to the out most wall) barrier separating the middle and outer rings. Aang then flew right over to the Southern gate of Ba Sing Se, where the zookeeper and five earthbenders were trying to convince a couple of guards to open the gates to no avail.

“Why would we?” Asked one, looking pretty stressed already.
“Because of that!” Aang shouted from above, motioning to where the armadillo-rhino was still on the warpath and headed straight for them.

The guards hastily allowed the beast out, closely followed by the five earthbenders and the zookeeper, who got to work creating the actual zoo. Aang then figured out how to lure the rest of the animals over: flying upwards and blowing into his bison whistle with every ounce of strength he had, airbending to it so that the sound carried further. The animals soon congregated at where the new zoo was being built, their (now much larger) pens being created around them.

Soon hundreds of people came flocking in, excited to see the animals now that they were happy and roaming about. Aang bid the zookeeper farewell, though not until after he'd been thoroughly thanked, and glided back to the house, thoughts of Appa on his mind. He’d find his bison soon, but for now at least he'd helped a lot of other animals.

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“Hey, Sokka? Can I talk to you for one second?” Asked Toph with forced cheeriness, before dragging Sokka out of his seat.

She pulled him into his, Zuko and Aang's bedroom, before shutting the door behind them. He hated to admit that he'd been avoiding the earthbender ever since the Serpent’s Pass, but the thought of facing her when she knew about how he felt about their resident moody firebender was… Terrifying.

“You know, Toph, I'm actually pretty busy and I didn't quite finish off all of my bacon-” He tried, rambling slightly, trying to get past the girl and to the door, but she pushed him back onto one of the beds (Aang's) before placing her hands on her hips.

“Oh, stop being a pussy, we both know what I'm here to talk to you about.” She interrupted sternly, and if she could see Sokka would have sworn she was staring him down.

“My ability to fry eggs? You see, the trick is-” He hoped, not actually planning to tell her what the ‘trick’ was since that was a closely guarded family secret.
“No, you scaredy-cat! Your, frankly rather embarrassing, crush on Zuko!” Cut in the earthbender, much too loudly for Sokka’s liking.

“Shhh, keep it down!” He whispered, covering up her mouth but moving his hand away in disgust when she licked it. “Eww, gross!”

“They can't hear us, otherwise I'd be able to hear you snoring at night. Look, you very clearly like him, so tell him!” She ordered, stubbornly but not at all convincingly.

“What?! Are you kidding me?! I'm not going to embarrass myself like that; I think I'd rather die!” Exclaimed the non-bender, just imagining the humiliation.

“You won't embarrass yourself, you idiot, he likes you too!” Argued Toph, stomping her foot.

“Wha-no, no way! Of course he doesn't! We're having a bro-day, he thinks I'm his bro! He doesn't like me!” Sokka protested, crossing his arms and sulking.

“Of course he does! I can feel his heart rate, remember? When you're around it's higher! Just this morning, I felt his breathing whilst he was sat next to you and it was faster than usual.” She explained, sounding awfully honest but the non-bender refused to even hope.

“That could just be due to coincidences! Zuko is too hot and smart and strong and brave and secretly nice and kind of adorably dorky to ever like me!” He disagreed, getting slightly lost in all of the firebender’s good qualities.

Toph just sighed and hit herself in the head (making Sokka regret ever teaching her about that symbol of exasperation). Unfortunately, however, she still didn't give up.

“Fine, say he doesn't like you and you want to keep your really obvious feelings secret, how are you going to do that when you're basically taking him out on a date?” She asked, crossing her arms and frowning.

“Wha-it's not a- not a date! Just- just two friends, uh, chilling and… Stuff.” He spluttered, before putting his face in his hands and sighing.
“Mmhmm, but you didn't answer my question: How are you going to keep the fact that you want to fuck him secret?” Toph questioned, somehow managing to keep a straight face.

“Spirits! How can you know about that stuff?! You're a literal child!” Gasped the non-bender, really not wanting to admit that he had no clue how he was going to keep his feelings secret whilst spending an entire day alone with Zuko.

“You learn stuff in learn stuff in Earth Rumble. Now, we have to go back to breakfast before people get suspicious, but I'd like you to know that you're being stupid and should just tell Sparky the truth.” The earthbender poked him hard in the chest, and then walked over to the door, finally allowing Sokka to leave.

Katara and Zuko were waiting for them at the breakfast table, Aang having left already apparently and Momo now finishing off his meal. Sokka forced a smile and gestured to the Prince.

“Uh… Ahem, come on, Hotshot! We have, uh, stuff to do!” Sokka cheered, not genuinely at all, before quickly scraping his hair up into a wolf tail and leaving the house.

They walked in awkward silence for a few minutes (or at least it was uncomfortable for the non-bender), Sokka leading them as they walked.

“So… Where are we going?” Asked Zuko eventually, reminding the other that he hadn't told him yet.

“Oh, well.” Sokka began, recovering his usual brightness as the firebender smiled at him curiously. “I know how you like theatre and, uh, stuff, even though you won't admit it.”

“Oh, well, that's fine then. I suppose I got these two, front row tickets, to The Broken Song, for nothing then.” He sighed, pulling the tickets out of his pocket and holding them as if he were about to rip them up.

“Okay, I really don't like theatre all that much! It was just a, uh, slip of the tongue.” Argued Zuko, clearly lying by the adorable blush that spread across his cheeks.

“Wait! No! Okay, fine, you win! I kind of like theatre and that might be one of my favourite musicals of all time.” Admitted Zuko, pouting as Sokka gained a triumphant look.
“Knew it, anyway, we're doing that first, then I found this place in the outer ring that serves really hot curry- we can go there for dinner if you want. Oh, and then we could just have a nice walk…” The non-bender trailed off, realising he had definitely just described a date and was now terrified to turn and see Zuko’s (most likely horrified) expression.

He faced the firebender slowly, only to see him looking… Happy and excited? Which, even on their own, weren't usual Zuko-emotions.

“Sounds great! Let's go.” He smiled, following Sokka as he went towards the Grand Theatre.

The two got seats right by the stage which to be completely honest, wasn't particularly difficult since not that many people in Ba Sing Se wanted to watch a play created by the Fire Nation five hundred years ago. Which, yeah, before they came here Sokka might have read up on trivia about the play in the University, which probably showed how far gone he was with his crush on Zuko. He also knew that the original script was written by the daughter Avatar Syomi (of the Fire Nation), who was apparently called Zilae. She had gotten the idea after her boyfriend went mute and her best friend went deaf (which, what kind of bad luck was that?!), leading to all three creating a proper sign language that is still used worldwide today.

Sokka didn't, however, look into how the play ended, figuring if this was supposed to be so good he shouldn't spoil himself. The play began like any musical would, loud musical numbers and bright colours, with a girl dressed in red centerstage. She sang some really uplifting, exciting songs and the narrative went on in the background- until the second act where, at the very beginning, it became clear that her boyfriend (dressed all in blue (wow this was progressive)) had gone mute. There was still music in the background but no words were spoken, at all, everything on the stage being mimed. Sokka watched in awe as it unfolded, eventually ending with the three leads hugging and kissing (oh, polyamory, good to know the Fire Nation wasn't always evil and oppressive). Everyone bowed and the audience (which was basically just five people, two of which were asleep) clapped.

“That's…” Started Zuko, looking up at the stage.

“That's…” Started Zuko, looking up at the stage. “Really good even though it's pretty weird all things considered? Yeah, it is.” Smiled Sokka, nudging him in the arm slightly and eliciting his attention.
“No, I mean yes, it’s a beautiful production, but it’s not how I always saw it. Back in the Fire Nation all of the characters were in red, and Orizi, the mute guy, ended up leaving for the war and dying in battle. But… I think I might like this version better.” He revealed, not getting out of his seat.

“Well… They probably changed it so you guys didn't think it was alright to date people from other nations. Obviously they didn't stick to Zilae’s original plan b-” He began, not really sure what he was trying to accomplish but knowing he liked Zuko better when he was smiling, not frowning.

“Who?!” Asked the firebender, confusing Sokka who'd assumed he'd know all the trivia around one of his favourite musicals.

“You know, the creator of the play? Avatar Syomi’s daughter?” Said the non-bender, really not enjoying the sour mood that had taken over the conversation.

“My theatre tutor always said it was written by this guy called Wulle Zhakere, a rich noble guy.” Remarked Zuko, really revealing the depths of the Fire Nation propaganda.

After that pretty depressing conversation, Sokka was determined to replace Zuko’s usual sulky expression with one of cheer, which was much harder than expected- which, to be honest, is really saying something.

“What do you call a penguin in the desert?” Asked Sokka as they sat down to their table at the curry serving place.

“I don't know.” He mumbled, leaning on his hand.

“Lost!” The non-bender smiled at his crush, but Zuko could barely even tweak the corners of his mouth upwards in response.

“I'm sorry, Sokka, you've tried really hard to give me an enjoyable day and I managed to screw it up-” He sighed, pulling at his long hair and looking at the table glumly.

“What? It’s not your fault your nation faked a bunch of stuff-” He tried to reassure him.
“It is when, for the past however many months, I've been defending my country despite all the bad stuff they've done, yet they aren't even capable in being honest with their subjects.” Groaned the firebender, not even paying attention to the food that had just been delivered.

“Hey, you didn't know. In fact, you didn't know a lot of stuff before you realised you were the avatar, but you aren't a bad person because of that.” Comforted Sokka as best he could.

“No, it makes me a bad person when, even now that I know all of these terrible things, I'm still not sure I want to fight my own nation. Sure, I want to protect everyone else from them but… Actually directly opposing my father? I don't know if I can.” He revealed, still not looking at the non-bender and with his face on the table, hiding it.

“Then we'll wait until you can. But, for now, I spent a good two silver pieces on that curry that you still haven't touched, so before it gets cold could you eat it?” He made the last bit lighthearted after such a heavy discussion, placing his hand on Zuko’s forearm.

“Okay, and… Thanks, Sokka.” He said, a soft smile on his face as he looked up at the non-bender, melting his poor, definitely in love, heart.

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“One picnic basket, please.” Requested Iroh happily, smiling in the mid-morning sun.

“Is this a romantic picnic? In which case can I offer our special lavender scented one?” The store owner pulled out a lilac basket, which Iroh surveyed.

“It's not a romantic picnic, no, but it is a special occasion. I'll take it.” He gave the other man ten silver pieces and took the basket, heading towards Pine Hill.

Though, before he left the stall, he noticed a moonflower wilting out in the bright sunlight and moved it into the shade, explaining how this particular blossom thrived in partial shade. Iroh then kept going, getting to a street where the most distinguished sound was that of a young boy crying. Feeling for the boy and his mother, the General picked up a banjo from a nearby market stall and began strumming one of his son’s, Lu Ten, favourite songs: Little Soldier Boy. The child found this
amusing, and started laughing before pulling on Iroh’s beard a tad sharply, the older man ruffling the boy’s own hair in response.

Then the kindly General headed down an alleyway, pretty sure it was a shortcut past that teashop that made the really bad tea. But, inside the alley, was a half starved looking man, holding a knife with a terrible stance.

“Give me your money!” He ordered, probably trying to sound scary, but his voice wavering from nerves.

“What are you doing?” Asked Iroh, seriously unimpressed by his pitiful stance.

“I'm… Mugging you?” He replied, more confused than he was threatening.

“With that stance?” Questioned the General, shaking his head. “Your legs need to be further apart and bent, otherwise your opponent can-”.

Iroh swept his feet easily and took the knife before helping the man back up. He corrected his stance and gave him back the knife, to which the man still didn't seem particularly happy.

“Someone with a strong stance is a formidable opponent- though you don't exactly seem like the criminal type.” Commented the firebender, giving his would-be mugger a concerned look.

“I'm not, I'm just a poor refuge whose mother is sick.” He revealed sadly, getting out of his stance and slouching against the wall.

It was filthy but Iroh sat with him, talking through his problems until they'd reached the consensus that the man should follow his dreams of making vases for a living, a profession the General was sure the other man would be great at. Then he left, still having to get to Pine Hill.

After he'd walked a bit further he came across several children playing earthball, and joined them for a few minutes until one of the boys accidentally hit the rock they'd been playing with through someone's window.
“I these situations it's always best to admit to your mistakes.” Advised Iroh, even though he was prepared to take the heat instead of any of these children.

“When I'm done with whoever broke my window, it won't be the only thing that's broken!” Threatened a particularly buff and scaring looking man who had just came to the window.

“But this is not one of those situations; run!” He cried, also running.

Once he felt safe enough he slowed down, ending up next a rather delicious smelling restaurant. He might have gone in, however, he noticed his nephew and that other young man he'd been travelling with sharing fond looks through the window. It was very sweet, and so Iroh left them to it, still heading for Pine Hill.

By the time he got there it was almost sunset, and he climbed up the hill in near silence except for the rustling of the wind through the branches of the lone tree atop the hill. The very same tree he'd planted six years ago upon his son’s death. Ba Sing Se had removed all other evidence of his siege apart from this one tree, probably because they never assumed the Fire Nation would allow life to grow.

Iroh lit a candle and propped up his picture of Lu Ten, beginning to sing Little Soldier Boy, and remembering his last moment with his son that hadn't been tinted by the war.

About 8 years ago:

“Come on, my son, we have to go!” Iroh told his eighteen year old son, not really annoyed or worried about being late.

“In a second, Dad, I'm just showing Zuko this thing I learned!” He replied happily, smiling down at the eight year old firebender.

Lu Ten pointed Zuko towards a wooden board he'd set up, and tossed a knife at it so that it struck straight through the center.

“Teach me! Teach me!” Requested Zuko excitedly, grabbing for the other knives his older cousin was holding.
“I don’t know, kid, these are pretty sharp-” Sighed Lu Ten.

“Pleeeeaase!” The young firebender begged, eliciting a small chuckle from Iroh.

“Okay, son, you can show him once, but then we really do have to get going- Ba Sing Se won’t siege itself, after all.” The General laughed whilst his son rolled his eyes, crouching down so that he could be on Zuko’s level.

“Okay, so you grip the handle like this, flick your wrist a little and-” Lu Ten threw again, this knife burying itself into the handle of the last one he’d thrown.

“Okay, I'll just-” The young firebender tried for himself and looked as though he were going to miss completely, but somehow his blade’s trajectory shifted near the end of the throw and it went into the very edge of the target, though nowhere near as deep as Iroh’s son’s. “I'm not very good, am I?”

The General was about to reassure his nephew, give him a hug and then bid him farewell- though he was worried about how Ozaii would treat the child without him or Lu Ten around. But his son shook his head and patted Zuko’s back himself, gaining his own kindly smile.

“You know, when I first started doing this I missed a lot of times. Like, a lot. But I got better, and I bet by my age you'll be even better at this than I am, okay?” The young firebender nodded and hugged his older cousin who gave him a quick squeeze back. “Okay, me and my Dad have to get going now alright? Don't let Azula mess with you whilst you're gone and don't touch my stuff, okay? See you in a few months!”.

Present Day:

Zuko had never seen his cousin again. Two years later Lu Ten was killed in battle, whilst Iroh had been safe and sound planning their next move. When they'd come to tell him about his son… He'd fallen apart on the spot, and hadn't been able to stop sobbing for hours, at which point he'd called off the siege and written home, before taking several months to rethink his life choices.

He wasn't doing that anymore, though, now he mourning for his lost son’s death on his birthday, whilst remembering that he now had another son, Zuko, to watch out for.
Azula felt cheated, beaten, humiliated; her drill had been destroyed by Zu-the avatar, and now she was in a forest with no way into Ba Sing Se to get to him. Her uncle was nowhere to be found and her father would probably be angry she’d wasted a drill and-

Okay, calm down. The Princess just found it so frustrating that Zuko, her screw up of an older brother, the failure that she and her father laughed at, had managed to succeed twice against her. It just shouldn't be possible; Azula could have never seen any of this coming. Mai and Ty Lee were no help either, just annoying her constantly with unnecessary questions like 'are you okay?' and 'is everything alright?'. She was already considering ridding herself of them, but for now she needed pawns.

Azula stopped walking through the forest when she heard far off voices in the distance, and motioned for her companions to do the same. The three crept forward eventually getting to a camp full of Earth Kingdom women, which wouldn't have been too surprising except for their outfits. The Princess immediately recognised them as Kyoshi Warriors from her Fire Nation 'how to attack against foreign fighting styles' class. The women were elite warriors, something she might have at least partially respected except for their Earth Kingdom origins and the fact that they specifically aligned themselves with an avatar.

Yet, they were rather well known and respected, plus they could have useful information… And with that a brilliant idea blossomed within Azula's head…

Chapter End Notes

Basically, my thought process whilst writing this chapter was 'gAY'

Zukka is my atla otp, fight me

Toph + Katara bonding is,,,, just,,,,, so pure? I wanted to include it here.

Also, Iroh needs several hugs and I offer myself (I. E. My hugs) to him.

Unrelated, but if you want you can scream with me about atla, Voltron, bnha and several other things on my Tumblr: @abbygeekford

Thanks for reading, comments and kudos are always super appreciated, see y'all next week! :))
“Sorry, Sokka, but that's terrible.” Commented Zuko, looking at the several drawings of Appa scattered across the floor. A few looked vaguely like the bison, but most resembled weird blobs more than anything else.

“What? No, this one is even better than the last five!” He protested amusingly, stabbing his finger at the newest drawing and smudging it so that it looked as though Appa had a black eye.

Zuko made an uncommitted noise in response and didn't mention that his own art skills were also completely abysmal. Aang and Katara were currently off getting a professionally drawn picture of Appa (not that they'd told Sokka that) while Toph and the firebender were sat bored at the house waiting for them to get back. The Prince felt as if there was a lot of tension in the air, though he wasn't sure why, but thought it could have to do with his and Sokka’s ‘bro-day’ a week or so ago. It had, unfortunately, deepened what Zuko had been feeling for the non-bender from just light attraction to a full on crush. He was ignoring it, of course, knowing Sokka could never feel the same way.

Thankfully, just then Katara and Aang burst through the door, carrying stacks of paper. Each sheet had a detailed drawing of their missing bison on it along with their address so that people could notify them if he was found.

“Aww, come on! I have plenty of pictures of Appa we could use-” Sokka held up his own drawings and Katara laughed out loud.

“Sorry, Sokka, but I think we need more recognisable pictures of Appa.” Tried Aang, letting the non-bender down easy.

“Yeah, ones that don't have his legs coming out if his ears.” Muttered the waterbender in between giggles.

“Those are his horns!” Sokka argued, pointing at his paper and smudging it again.

“Sure they are.” Replied Katara sarcastically, smiling at her annoyed brother.
“Don’t worry, Sokka, I think it looks just like him!” Chipped in Toph, clearly joking since she was blind.

“Aww, thank you, Toph, I tried really hard and- why do you do this to me?” He grunted the last part, crossing his arms moodily.

“Guys? Can we stay focused?” Asked Zuko, really not enjoying how he’d become the responsible one. But, alas, he was the avatar.

“Yes, anyway, we’re going to put these posters up all over Ba Sing Se, since searching for Appa hasn’t really gotten us anywhere.” Explained Aang, scratching the back of his neck.

—

They had all split up to put up the posters (Toph going with Sokka since she was unable to tell whether or not the posters were facing the right way or upside down) and Zuko had decided that this was the most boring thing their group had ever done. However, he was back in the outer ring, so he might manage to come across his uncle provided the man was in the city at all.

Zuko was just sticking a poster on the side of a bakery when he got the unsurprising urge to take a break and eat a bakewell tart, since it was past lunch time at this point and he was hungry. But, as he walked around to the front of the bakery to line up for some food, he saw a familiar face: Jet.

Of course it was him, who else would it be? Obviously not someone Zuko actually wanted to bump into. He was just about to go punch/stab him, and then ask why he wasn’t still in the Dai Li prison he assumed existed, when Jet caught on to his staring and strolled over, a confident smile on his face.

“Hey there, babe, see something you like?” Asked the freedom fighter flirtatiously, putting one hand on the wall next to Zuko’s head and getting a little too close for comfort. “The name’s Jet, what about you, handsome?”

“Uhh, don’t you remember me?” Question the firebender, way too confused to fight right now.
“If I ever so much as glanced at your beautiful face before there's no way I'd forget it.” He smirked, getting in even closer.

The Prince was now blushing from the lack of space between the two, their lips barely an inch apart and Jet's body pressed up against his own. Sure, Zuko thought he was attractive in the ‘you tried to kill me twice’ kind of way, but he wasn't actually considering letting this go any further. Though... A quick makeout session with someone who clearly had no idea who he was could drive away his budding feelings for Sokka...

“I'm actually pretty busy right now.” Muttered Zuko, even though he was finding it really hard to do the ‘good’ thing right now, maybe one little kiss...

“Aww, well, I could always help you out.” Offered Jet, not seeming too sincere as he leaned down to the crook of the firebender’s neck, kissing him.

Zuko found his breath hitching unintentionally, deciding that one make out session really wouldn't do any harm. Plus, in his defence, for a sixteen year old he was extremely inexperienced, having only kissed two people in his entire life- so really he deserved to get some attention in the romance department before he took Jet to the others to figure out what was going on. So he wrapped his arms around the other man's neck, prompting him to turn his kiss into a hickey before trailing his lips back up to Zuko’s own, where they planted themselves easily. The freedom fighter bit the Prince’s bottom lip, making him release a small murmur of pleasure and letting Jet shove his tongue into his mouth. The firebender was now completely pinned against the bakery wall, his hands messing up the other man’s hair, whilst Jet held one hand at the back of his neck and the other on his hip, furiously moving his mouth against Zuko’s. Both made little gasping breaths at vague intervals until, about ten minutes after they'd started, Jet pulled away with a smile.

“I never did get your name.” He mentioned, his lips a little pinker than usual and making the Prince realise he probably looked pretty ruffled up right now.

“Zuko.” He replied, not wanting the name ‘Lee’ to remind Jet that he was supposed to be attacking him when the firebender felt a little too lightheaded to fight right now.

“You know, Zuko, you look a little too nice to be in the outer ring.” Noted the freedom fighter, still extremely close to him but not quite pinning him anymore.

“I'm not from here; I'm from the inner ring, my friends just sent me here to put up these posters.” Explained the Prince, a little distracted from what he was saying by wondering how messy his hair was right now.
“Oh, let me see.” Jet bent down to pick up the posters Zuko had dropped as they had begun kissing, gasping at the picture of Appa on the front.

“You're friends with Aang, Katara and Sokka?” He asked, and Zuko thanked the stars he hadn't mentioned ‘Lee’.

“Uh, yeah, we met just outside of Ba Sing Se. I helped them and their other friend Toph destroy this big drill with my, erm, earthbending.” He lied, hoping it didn't sound as false as he thought it did.

“And they're looking for Appa? That's good because I think I might know where he is, come on!” Jet grabbed his hand and pulled him into a run, that Zuko obliged with only because he didn't want to do anything that might prompt the freedom fighter to remember who he actually was.

“Shouldn’t we go talk to the others first? We’ll have a better chance of finding Appa if we go together-” Tried the firebender, really not wanting to keep anything else from his friends since he had already lied to them about quite a few things in the past.

“They, uh, don't like me all that much- but I've changed, I swear, I-” He promised, panting a little as he ran, but Zuko was beginning to feel too guilty about making out with someone who tried to flood a village to do him any favours.

“No, if you've changed they'll forgive you, they're good people.” Lied the firebender, not at all sure of how the group would react to seeing Jet again.

—

Aang had been waiting for someone to knock with news of Appa for five minutes, and was already terrified that no one knew anything. His impatience had taken over his mind completely, making him half consider pacing around the room again, even though Toph had berated him for that very thing just a few minutes ago.

“Don't worry, Aang, someone will come with news of Appa soon, I just know it.” Promised Katara, placing a comforting hand on the airbender’s jiggling leg from where she was sat next to him.
“Yeah, yeah, I know- I'm just a little nervous.” Replied Aang, now moving on to tapping his fingers against the table as a means of dissipating his building stress.

“Come on, in a city with this many people someone must have seen a two ton flying bison at some point.” Reassured Sokka, sharpening his boomerang while he spoke.

Aang realised that was true, but still felt unbelievably worried about his bison’s safety- especially after that cryptic warning from Long Feng about how ‘it would be a shame if they didn't manage to find Appa’. So, when he heard a steady knock on the door, he jumped up from his seat in unrestrained excitement and pulled open the door, eager to hear news of his bison. Instead, stood at the door was Joo Dee, the original Joo Dee, holding onto a sheet of paper.

“Hello.” She greeted brightly, the terrifying smile still fixed on her face.

“What happened to you?!” Exclaimed Katara, rushing forwards and staring at their old tour guide.

“I'm afraid I don't know what you mean.” Replied Joo Dee, shifting to look down at the waterbender, never moving her pupils from their fixed position in the middle of her sickly green irises, just turning her head slowly.

“You got replaced by some other woman named Joo Dee! We thought the Dai Li had killed you!” Explained Sokka, now abandoning his lounge on the sofa.

“Ha ha, what an absurd tale; the Dai Li are our protectors. I simply went on vacation to Lake Lauogi.” She replied cheerily, her laugh robotic and almost sounding practiced. “Now, down to why I'm here- citizens of Ba Sing Se are not permitted to put up flyers or posters within the walls without express permission from the Dai Li.”

Aang felt his anger flare up inside him and didn't bother to flush it back down; completely sick of the city’s authority telling him he couldn't search for Appa. The airbender was done listening to them.

“You know what, Joo Dee?! I will be looking for my bison and putting up posters and I won't be listening to you or the Dai Li while I do it! So you can either get out of the way or I'll get my friend, The Avatar, to blast you so far out of my way that you end up back in Lake Lauogi, swimming in the deep end! Good bye!” Aang yelled, slamming the door shut in her face and panting afterwards, reluctant to admit how satisfying Joo Dee’s shocked expression had been.
“Finally! You stood up for yourself, well done, Twinkle Toes!” Complimented Toph happily, alerting the airbender to the fact that he might have sounded just a little too aggressive, if Toph was impressed.

“Thanks, Toph.” He breathed, leaning against the door frame.

“Don't respond to Twinkle Toes! It's unmanly.” Advised Sokka, yet Aang ignored him, not really caring whether or not he seemed particularly ‘masculine’.

Aang gathered his thoughts again after his outburst, furrowing his brow slightly, and attempting to figure out what they should do next, knowing the Dai Li had probably already gotten to work on taking down their flyers.

“So… What now?” Asked Katara after several moments of silence.

“We are going to find Appa, no matter what Joo Dee or the Dai Li say.” Replied Aang determinedly, his voice stern and ready.

“Yes! No more rules!” Cheered the earthbender in response, stomping her foot and bringing half the kitchen down so that there was a massive hole in their house.

Aang chuckled a little but then refocused, deciding he wouldn't stop until Appa was back and safe again.

—

Zuko led Jet towards his group's house, the two of them either avoiding or knocking out Dai Li agents they came across. The firebender had successfully sneaked the two of them into the inner ring, though it had been rather difficult with the freedom fighter sticking out like a sore thumb, and they were now just a few moments away from their destination. The Prince had already instructed Jet to stay back for a moment when they got there, giving Zuko some time to prepare his friends for seeing the non-bender again after their last… Unfortunate run in. The firebender also wanted to tell the others to keep the fact that he and Jet had already met secret, figuring the situation was complicated enough without the freedom fighter trying to kill/expose him to the rest of Ba Sing Se.
They reached the house and Zuko noticed the kitchen wall had collapsed, so he prompted Jet to fall back and when to investigate himself- getting met with the sight of his group kneeling in the rubble around their table, discussing something.

“Zuko’s here. And there's someone else outside too.” Mentioned Toph, not even looking his way whilst the others glanced up at him.

“We're glad that you're back but what took you so long? And who's outside?” Questioned Katara, not suspiciously but with some definite curiosity.

“Umm… Okay, so about that… I kinda ran into Jet-” He started trying to explain, immediately getting cut off.

“What?! Did he attack you?!” Interrupted Sokka worriedly, his voice as frantic as the others’ expressions. (Barring Toph, who just seemed confused).

“Yes, well, the first time he did-” Zuko tried once again, still not getting very far.

“You ran into him before and didn't tell us?! When?!” Shouted Katara, looking about ready to pull her hair out.

“And who the Hell is Jet?!” Added Toph, her volume seeming more thanks to exasperation and confusion than anger.

“And have you got a hickey?!” Pitched in Sokka, sounding even more on edge than before and causing Zuko to clutch the mark on his neck in shame and embarrassment.

“If you'd let me finish I'd explain! Look, first off, Jet is this guy we met who was really into killing Fire Nation people but he took it too far and tried to flood an innocent village, as well as attempting to kill me and Sokka and tricking Katara into helping with the flooding. He didn't really do all that much to Aang to be honest. Anyway, I ran into Jet a couple of weeks ago when you guys all went to the Earth King’s bear party and I went to the outer ring. He tried to tell people I was a firebender, but I earthbended and he went a little, uh, crazy and tried to kill me. Again. But I won the sword fight (there was a sword fight by the way), then the Dai Li showed up to arrest him. And this morning, I ran into him outside a bakery, when he didn't seem to have any recollection of me and said he knew where Appa was I brought him straight here.” Explained Zuko, trying not to look anyone in the eye as they undoubtedly got even more annoyed that he'd lied about something important yet again.
“And the hickey?” Asked Toph with a devious smile, the only one who didn’t seem shocked silent by his explanation. He didn’t reply, having no idea how to tell his friends about that little detail. “Don’t worry, your silence tells me everything I need to know.”

His friends were quiet while they mulled over what he had said, putting each of Zuko’s nerves on edge. He had never been so repeatedly dishonest with a group of people before in his entire life, and was struggling to see how they’d forgive him after yet another instance of him lying.

“So Jet is the one outside and he knows where Appa is? Bring him in.” Aang eventually broke the silence, gesturing for Zuko to go.

The Prince nodded and left the house, finding Jet exactly where he had left him, a far enough distance away so that he couldn’t have heard their conversation. The firebender motioned for him to follow without properly facing him, deciding to reacquire his more gruff demeanor as to distance himself from the nervous freedom fighter.

“How dare you!” Katara immediately yelled, firing several icicles at Jet so that they went through the edges of his scruffy clothing and pinned him to one of the remaining walls.

“Look! I’m sorry for what I tried to do to that village, I now realise it was wrong an-” He tried to apologise, his words strangely clear despite the fear that was definitely growing in his heart from how the waterbender was glaring venomously at him.

“Are you now?! Is that why you attacked Zuko?! Is that why you came here to trick us?!” Spat Katara, apparently disregarding the fact that Jet couldn’t remember attacking Zuko. Or, at least, Jet had said he couldn’t remember attacking him.

“I'm not here to- what?! When did I attack Zuko? All we did was ki-” The non-bender attempted to explain, getting cut off by the Prince kicking the floor so that he earthbended some rock to jab Jet's shin, distracting the freedom fighter from continuing.

He gave Zuko a confused look, that the firebender pointedly ignored, while the others all huddled round for a group discussion.

“He's not lying, well, at least he doesn't think he is. But neither was Zuko when he said that Jet attacked him.” Revealed Toph quietly, which was a volume Zuko hadn't been aware she was
“How can neither of them be lying?” Questioned Aang, voicing the exact same thing Zuko had been thinking.

“Jet's been brainwashed! Duh, the Dai Li probably did it when they arrested him. Now, you didn't actually kiss him, did you?!” Sokka spoke with his normal, loud, excitement and peered at the Prince suspiciously.

Everyone looked about to break the huddle, Katara included even though she was still clearly fuming, yet Zuko was still confused about one thing:

“Why aren't you guys more angry that I lied? Like, it's great, but why?” He asked, especially worried that they'd just stay quietly mad at him until they all died.

“Well, you should have told us about Jet immediately but, to be fair, you didn't really have to tell us about him now. You could have just beat him up again, or gone with him to find Appa on your own, but you decided to be honest.” Admitted Katara, a tad reluctantly, before patting him on the shoulder and going back over to Jet.

“Plus, it's hard to be mad at someone when you're worried they're getting taken advantage of…” Aang murmured quietly, seemingly talking for the waterbender more than himself.

Right, of course, Jet had tricked Katara with flirtatious winks and suave words and she had almost helped him kill an entire village full of people; of course she'd be scared that Zuko was getting romantic treatment from the same guy, since it meant he could be getting tricked too.

“You know where Appa is?” Asked Aang, his tone uncharacteristically stern.

“Yes, he was in this barn near the middle wall of the outer ring- I can show you if you-” Jet replied, still pinned to the wall.

“Wait a second, if he's been brainwashed we can't trust anything he says.” Interrupted Toph, to which everyone besides the freedom fighter nodded.

“We can't trust anything he says regardless.” Muttered Katara, shooting Zuko a sharp look that
seemed angry but he now knew was rooted in concern for his well being.

“Right, so we need to un-brainwash him.” Decided Sokka, already lost in thought with a finger scratching his right temple.

“What are you talking about?! I've not been brainwashed!!” Argued Jet, having about the same reaction that anyone in the world would be provided they'd just been accused of being brainwashed.

“Yes, yes you have. Now, shut up while we think.” Snapped the other non-bender, sulking a little and making Zuko feel even more guilt over his steamy ten minutes with Jet.

“We could try to remind him of stuff about him to see if it prompts his memory?” Suggested Aang pretty intelligently.

“Yeah, like murder and lies.” Added Katara quietly, again only just loud enough for Zuko to hear.

“I told you, I haven't been brainwashed!” Shouted Jet, immediately getting gagged by Toph pulling a bit if the wall over his mouth.

After that they attempted to think of things that would jog the non-bender’s memory, though Zuko was still reluctant to let Jet remember how much he hated him as it could stop the freedom fighter from helping them, since he really seemed to detest him that much for his firebender status. Eventually, Aang stumbled across the title ‘freedom fighter’ and the non-bender convulsed beneath the ice, his pupils constricting as he struggled to breath for a few moments, prompting Toph to bend away the wall-gag.

“I… They did brainwash me… You!” Jet growled threateningly and pulled against the ice, looking ready to attack. Zuko lit his palms with fire and got into a stance just in case the non-bender somehow managed to break through his bonds, yet Katara and Sokka also stepped in front of him protectively.

“Yes, me, who you tried to kill! Twice!” Yelled Zuko, more than a little annoyed that Jet was managing to be mad at him when he was the one in the wrong.

“Look, we can beat him up later, for now, do you know where Appa actually is? Or where you were taken to get brainwashed?” Questioned Sokka, regaining his sensibility.
“I, I was taken to some lake. What was it? Lake Law? Lake Lhoa? Lake Lauogi-” He replied, ignoring Zuko and struggling to recollect what had happened.

“Hey! That’s where Joo Dee said she went for vacation when she got replaced by that other Joo Dee.” Piped up Toph, referencing something Zuko couldn’t remember, but he figured it had to do with the new hole in the wall; the real Joo Dee had probably shown up whilst he was with Jet and that was when she said she’d been at this ‘Lake Lauogi’ place.

“I can show you where it is, but not with him here.” Jet nodded towards the Prince angrily, and Zuko considered turning him to ash.

“Well then, I guess you're not showing us where it is.” Spat Katara, before stomping out of the hole with the others in tow.

Apparently all of his friends agreed with Katara, which meant they needed to find Lake Lauogi without the freedom fighter’s help. Luckily, if this was the Dai Li hideout then all of their agents should know its whereabouts, meaning Zuko only had to interrogate one to find the ominous lake.

—

Aang and the others walked up to the edge of a massive lake at the inner edge of the middle ring, the Dai Li agent Zuko had threatened having said it was the correct place. Toph immediately found a passage underground and the five descended, the airbender’s desire to find Appa only getting stronger by the moment.

“Okay, the Dai Li agent I spoke with said Appa was on the fourth door to the left, down that corridor until the room marked 410, through there into another hall and then down two staircases on the right.” Directed Zuko, reading off a sheet of paper he’d had to write the instructions on.

Jet and the Dai Li agent were currently encased in rock and ice respectively back at the house, so that neither could cause any trouble. Strangely, even after the Prince had demonstrated dual bending in front of the freedom fighter, Jet had still not inquired as to whether he was the avatar. This didn’t make all that much difference to Aang’s life, but the young airbender did think it perfectly demonstrated how stubborn some people were about their beliefs, and how incapable of flowing and changing they were.
“Okay, this should be it, you ready, Aang?” Asked Katara, squeezing his arm supportively with a kind, concerned expression on her face—so different to the one of fury she had directed at Jet.

Aang nodded and Zuko melted the lock, allowing them to burst into a large room with a high window letting light in. But, the airbender paid no mind to the room, or even his friends, when he saw, so clearly in the room, Appa chained up sadly. He pushed down his anger at his bison’s treatment and ran forwards to hug him, loving the reassured roar Appa breathed out at the contact. The others each broke the chains, Sokka borrowing one of Zuko's dao swords since his boomerang wasn't sharp enough, until the bison was free.

“Appa! I've missed you so much.” Aang wept into the bison’s filthy fur, internally promising to give the big guy the most relaxing wash when they got the chance.

“Let's get out of here before the Dai Li show up, is Appa alright to fly?” Asked Sokka, stroking one of the bison’s sides softly.

“Yeah, I think he'll enjoy stretching his legs, or bending, I guess.” Said Aang, not bothering to cover up the fact that he was crying.

“Great, we're back to flying.” Complained Toph, latching onto Zuko's side as they climbed aboard a saddless Appa and fly out of the window in the ceiling, Katara using waterbending to shatter it while Zuko blocked them from the glass with airbending, pushing the shards away.

They burst out of the lake and onto some nearby land, only to be met with dozens of Dai Li agents, all looking ready to kill them.

“We showed you great hospitality, but you just had to get your bison back, didn't you? Well, you'll soon learn not to disobey me.” Announced Long Feng from the highest perch on the shore, which Appa immediately responded to by biting his leg and tossing him into the lake.

Then the group, bar Aang, descended from the bison to fight off the Dai Li. Appa knocked through solid rock to beat several while Toph and Zuko used their earthbending to block rubble and handcuffs from hitting their gang, though Toph also used her earthbending to squash a lot if the Dai Li since she was more experienced. Katara easily used the lake to her advantage, barely even needing assistance as she tore down the ranks of earthbenders as if she were born to do so. Sokka also held his own, though not as noticeably, and used his boomerang to pick off the agents that were on high ground and were bending from far away.
Soon, it was clear that they had won and they all got back on Appa to decide their next course of action. Though Aang didn't really concentrate on the discussion, since he was much too distracted by how happy he was to be reunited with his bison.

Chapter End Notes

I want to formally apologise for making this chapter have self indulgent Jetko

But actually, I'd like to argue that it wasn't pointless since I feel like Zuko would 100% make out with Jet to try and get rid of his 'unrequited' feelings for Sokka. Also, he that Jet is terrible at flirting but thinks he's great, vs Sokka being terrible at flirting and knowing it.

Zuko just doesn't flirt.

I hope you liked this chapter anyhow, and didn't mind too much about this little speck of Jetko (really it just demonstrates that Zuko's attraction to Sokka goes deeper than just his physical attraction to Jet)

Also, they had an easier time rescuing Appa this time since they were with Zuko, who canonically knew exactly where Appa was (because of the Dai Li agent)

Comments and kudos brighten my life, thanks for reading! :))
“Guys, I have a good feeling about this! If we go to the Earth King now, I’m sure he'll agree to help us!” Encouraged Sokka, looking down at his friends who were currently slouching on the sandy shore of a tiny island in the middle of Lake Laogai.

“And what makes you say that, Sokka? He'll probably believe whatever lie Long Feng feeds him.” Replied Katara wearily, stretching out one of her arms as she spoke.

“Instincts? Look, we're on a winning streak right now- what could go wrong?” Sokka was completely aware he had probably just jinxed them, but he was too interested in getting his group to agree to talking to the Earth King to worry about that.

“I'm not sure an hour of good luck can be classed as a ‘winning streak’.” Argued Zuko, seeming just as tired as the others all were after their battle with the Dai Li. On the bright side, at least, his earthbending seemed to have improved drastically, if the way he'd been blocking those rocky attacks was anything to go by (no, Sokka had not been staring).

“Can't we just escape with Appa while we can?” Asked Aang, from where he was cuddling against the bison’s side protectively- though it seemed unnecessary since the beast was still chewing on Long Feng’s boot.

“Nah, I think we should fight our way to the Earth King!” Chipped in Toph, to which Sokka smiled appreciatively; finally, someone was on his side.

“Come on, you just want to fight the Dai Li again.” Accused Katara with a knowing frown, that Toph couldn't see but probably sensed from the way she shrugged.

Sokka attempted to contemplate everyone's opinions over what they should do, figuring a leader had to take their group’s thoughts into account- even if nobody else considered him the ‘leader’. Okay, sure, they were all pretty tired from rescuing Appa and fighting Long Feng, plus they still had Jet to worry about, but something in the non-bender’s gut was just telling him that they had to talk to the Earth King now.

“Please, guys? I really think this is what we should do.” He pleaded, hopefully not pathetically,
whilst trying to give them his best ‘puppy-dog-eyes’.

“Urgh, fine, we'll go now.” Agreed Katara eventually, sulking a little.

“Okay, but how will we even get to the Earth King? His palace will be the most heavily guarded place on the planet, especially now that Long Feng knows we'll be coming.” Brought up Aang pretty reasonably, pulling away from Appa.

“...Actually, Toph and I had an idea for that.” Offered Zuko with an enticing smirk, which Toph paired with a gleeful one.

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Appa flew towards the palace, a sea of Dai Li agents and normal Earth Kingdom soldiers dressed in green stretching out, almost crowding an entire half of the Inner Ring. There were catapults, arrows and even straight up boulders all pointing their way.

“Ummm, Zuko? Toph? What exactly is your plan?” Asked Sokka nervously, probably regretting not asking sooner.

Zuko sincerely hoped he hadn't overestimated how good at fighting their group had gotten, but figured it was too late to back out now and nodded at Aang- prompting him to urge Appa onwards into the onslaught of attacks.

“We're just going to charge through.” Replied Zuko, getting into a jumping position on Appa’s back and gesturing for the airbender to throw his staff.

“What?!” Yelled Katara, Sokka and Aang in unison, to which Toph chuckled.

“That's your plan?! How-” Started Sokka, getting interrupted as a land-to-air boulder flew towards them.
Aang got Appa to duck down to avoid it, but the other four (who were standing precariously on the bison’s saddleless back) would have been hit right off the beast if Toph and Zuko hadn’t jumped. The firebender grabbed Sokka’s waist and dived into the fray below, using the glider to get down safely and ignoring the non-bender’s cries of fear. Toph did the same, only she caught herself and the waterbender with a rocky slide that led right into a group of Earth Kingdom soldiers, who fell like skittles when the girls tumbled into them.

Now all they had to do was fight, their presence on the ground and Aang still being up in the sky at least splitting the guards’ attention. Zuko and Sokka headed towards the stairway up to the palace walls’ gates, about fifty earthbenders in their way. The Prince shot two columns of fire out of his palms, creating a dangerous path for him and the non-bender to slip through whilst the guards attempted to avoid getting burned. Unfortunately, some quick earthbending extinguished the flames and forced Zuko to use his airbending to run faster, dragging Sokka along by his tan arm. They managed to dodge through most of the attacks with little more than a few grazes, but every now and then Zuko had to slow down to crumble a boulder before it squished the pair. At these moments, Sokka would swipe away the rubble with some well placed strikes of his club- but the risk of either of them getting impaled by dozens of sharpened pebbles was still present.

Eventually, they got to the stairs, which Toph had just flattened into a slope for the guards to slide down. This left the earthbender and the Prince to create an earth platform for them to ride upwards on to the first set of gates. Whilst the two did that, Aang hit projectiles out of their way and back at the literal army that was trying to keep them from the King.

“Sorry!” Called Katara apologetically, grimacing slightly as she froze a dozen guards in ice, the water that she used having been borrowed from the moat.

“We're on your side, I promise!” Shouted Sokka, tossing his boomerang at a large, burly earthbender’s nose, subsequently knocking them out.

Zuko, however, was not particularly bothered about the destruction they were leaving in their wake, instead happy to flex his firebending muscles once more. In fact, using all the elements to fight was extremely exhilarating, and was kind of making him hope there would be another five hundred soldiers ready to attack them once they entered the courtyard. He blasted open the gates with a sweltering fire blast, causing splinters of thick wood and rocky-rubble to fly out in every direction, only to get blocked from showering them by an air wall from Aang.

The group charged forwards, Appa in tow, now with less guards blocking their path. Toph sent out a series of spikes, clearing a few dozen, while Katara wrapped about ten up in a turbulent current, throwing them down the slope they’d created. Aang swept up several soldiers in a large tornado, which he created from his perch up on Appa, also sending their enemies flying. Zuko decided to go with a little more abstract of an approach, stamping on the ground to liquify it, allowing the guards to sink to their knees before he encased their top halves in ice, stopping them from being able to
Now they were at the palace doors, gold and polished mahogany looming above them like an extremely expensive mountain. Katara sliced through the door with a few quick swipes, creating an easily accessible hole right into the Earth King’s hallway, that was strangely deserted; perhaps because all of the usual guards were outside recovering from getting their butts downright destroyed by a half a dozen teenagers. They ignored the lack of resistance and got to searching, looking in every single room and finding precious little except a few handmaidens, several stacks of jewels and about twenty different shrines to Bosco the Bear, that had made Zuko shiver slightly (he was incredibly glad that none of his friends had witnessed his panicked response- they’d never let him live it down).

Eventually the group came across a beautifully lit green and gold hallway, leading to a door so fancy it could have even put his Father’s throne room to shame. Though, to be fair, the Firelord’s throne room was decorated to be intimidating, not beautiful or elegant like this entrance clearly was.

“Okay, I’ll break it down, then you all charge. Ready? And go-” Instructed Sokka, running towards the massive double doors, almost splatting against them. He would have, in fact, had Zuko not felt a tiny morsel of sympathy and blasted a large gust of air at them just as Sokka made contact, causing them to break down as though the non-bender had managed to break them

Sokka made a slight cheer at his ‘success’ before seemingly realising where he was and what was happening, and regaining his wits. The entire group (bar Toph who kept her face directed at the floor) looked up to Earth King before them, who was quite an anticlimactic sight. After all Sokka’s talk of how this guy and his support was the key to beating Zuko’s father, the man in front of them seemed impossibly useless for that role; he was a pale, thin, kind of short, glasses wearing, sickly looking adult who barely qualified as such, his baby face making him seem younger than twenty.

“Your Highness-” Began Katara, not quite placatingly but definitely more politely than what Zuko would have said. But the waterbender did also use the wrong title for the King, so it wasn't going quite as well as it could have been.

“Ah, as you can see, Your Majesty, the criminals have arrived.” Long Feng spoke up, looking significantly less drenched than he had a few hours ago, and surrounded by some especially skilled seeming Dai Li agents.

“We are not criminals! Long Feng here is the unlawful one; he is brainwashing the entire city! Plus, he’s been hiding an one hundred year war with the Fire Nation from you!” Argued Sokka furiously, pointing at the leader of the Dai Li with an accusatory finger.
“That's preposterous! See, Your Majesty, these children are lying and should be disposed of forthwith.” Long Feng smirked cruelly, and the King seemed to consider this for a moment.

“Well… It does sound pretty unbelievable. Okay then, you may put them in the dungeons… But I'd like them well looked after- they are only children, after all.” The King nodded to his advisor, and the Dai Li agents immediately encased their hands in rock, not that that would hold Zuko, or Toph for that matter, for very long.

“Really, Your Majesty? When the scarred one is eighteen and of age?” Lied Long Feng, apparently wanting Zuko to get the most severe punishment possible. “An adult committing treason should be charged with death.”.

The Prince growled at the earthbender, angry that everyone seemed to be out to get him, and broke through his bonds using almost no earthbending at all, before preparing himself to charge at the older man. The advisor immediately became sheepish, clearly a coward right down to the core, and held his hands over his face to block against the oncoming heat blast. Rock rose out of the floor with his movement, bursting through the intricately stitched carpet and tearing it so horrendously that the interior designer inside Zuko wanted to cry out. Whilst that happened, the other four Dai Li agents in the room stepped forwards in unison, looking ready to attack.

“Seriously?! I'm blind and even I know that Zuko doesn't look eighteen. Plus, he's the avatar, so you can't really arrest him.” Toph spoke up sassily, interrupting the firebender from burning Long Feng alive, and breaking through her own handcuffs with ease.

“You… You're the avatar?!” Asked the King excitedly, completely disregarding how the Prince had just almost killed his top advisor.

“He sure is, so you should probably give us a chance to explain ourselves, right?” Asked Sokka a tad sheepishly, grinning hopefully at the King whilst Toph broke through his bonds.

“Well… I suppose, since he's the avatar.” Decided the King, though he still looked pretty reluctant to believe them.

“Your Majesty, you can't possibly even consider believing these children! They are complete liars, just the other day that small one with the arrow accused me of stealing the sky bison he has with him right now! I've never even seen a sky bison before today!” Protested Long Feng angrily, looking a lot less terrified now that Zuko wasn't firing at him.
“I’ve never seen a sky bison but I’m perfectly capable of stealing one.” Mentioned Toph, raising her eyebrow almost on instinct. Or perhaps Sokka had just taught her that gesture?

“You’re right, Long Feng, they do appear to be rather untruthful…” Supposed the King, ignoring what Toph had said.

They were at a standoff for a few silent moments, in which both they and the Dai Li waited for the King to give an order. If he refused to believe them, which didn’t seem too unlikely judging by the way his Majesty was wrapped around Long Feng’s little finger, Zuko figured their group would just have to do some Azula-ish stuff and plan a coop to gain control of the Earth Armies for themselves. Though, some of his more moral friends (such as Katara and Aang) might be a little reluctant to take over an entire Kingdom, even if it was to save the world as a whole.

“Wait! Okay, so Long Feng says he has never even seen a sky bison before, right? Well, ask him to lift his cloak.” Requested Sokka triumphantly, his newfound confidence coming from a place Zuko wasn’t familiar with.

“Wha- I’m not going to disrobe!” Exclaimed the older man indignantly, clutching onto the green fabric of his clothes.

“Of course! He was bitten by Appa, so the mark will still be on his leg!” Realised Katara, gaining a smirk as Long Feng dithered under the siblings’ gaze.

After a little more convincing and a few strict orders from the King, Long Feng lifted his robe embarrassedly and revealed a bison-tooth shaped mark on his shin.

“Well, that pretty much proves that. But the entire brainwashing thing and hundred year war still seems impossible… Nevertheless, I shall go investigate what the avatar and his companions have to say.” Decided the King eventually, earning a half hearted cheer from the group. “And, if I’m lucky, by the time I get back Bosco will be done with his bath!”.

Zuko sincerely hoped not.
They all sat on a crowded train on their way to Lake Laogai, where they hoped there'd still be evidence of wrongdoing— but the firebender wasn't too hopeful. The Dai Li seemed to be master secret keepers, quiet and stealthy, and would probably have no problem erasing their base from the bottom of the lake. Because of this, Zuko spoke up.

“Guys, I actually think we should get off at the outer wall; by now the Dai Li have probably already covered up after themselves, but there's no way they can get rid of the drill in time for us getting there.” Mentioned the Prince, drawing the attention of the entire carriage onto himself and wilting slightly under the focus.

“What drill?” Asked the King, who was currently being guarded by eight different earthbenders.

“Oh, you see, when we first got here to Ba Sing Se, the Fire Nation were attempting to break through the outer wall with a drill. We stopped them but the wreckage should still be there.” Explained Katara, turning from where she'd been watch Aang and Appa fly outside the window to speak to the Earth King.

“You know, part of me hopes that you really are lying… This entire war with the Fire Nation, it sounds… Well, it sounds awful.” Admitted the King, apparently blind to the dozen passengers on the train who were gawking at him incredulously.

“Believe us, it is.” Muttered Sokka, sounding so incredibly sad that Zuko felt inclined to do something kind and comforting.

Eventually, deciding that he maybe didn't have the skill with words that his uncle did, he patted the non-bender on the soldier supportively. They stayed on the quiet train for almost an hour, nothing but the breathing around them to keep their thoughts company, until they got to the outer wall. Sure enough, the drill was still lodged inside, Fire Nation emblem and all.

“Long Feng, how do you explain that?” The King motioned to the hulking metal vehicle, a frown adorning his face.

“Why, Your Majesty, it's simply a prototype imported from the Fire Nation.” Replied Long Feng, more smoothly than Zuko thought was possible for a man about to be charged with treason. And believe him, he knew.

“The why is it lodged in the wall?” Asked Toph with a cheeky smile, an expression the advisor
didn't return.

“Dai Li, please arrest Long Feng.” Ordered the Earth King, gaining a slight pause from the agents either side of the advisor before they complied.

After that they sombrely headed back to the palace, Zuko beginning to feel the true weight of what was about to happen. Now that the King believed them, he'd be on their side, which meant he'd send his forces to go take over the Fire Nation. And while the Prince now realised his father kind of had it coming (not that he'd mentioned such a realisation to his friends) there was still a part of him that was terrified, who remembered how he'd been hurt and was scared for such a fate to befall him, or his his friends, again. Plus, there were also the Fire Nation citizens to think about- most of whom were innocent and many being in borderline poverty. They didn't deserve to be slaughtered by the Earth Armies that would be invading their home in just a few, short months. Still, it was all necessary, apparently.

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Sokka smiled as they reentered the palace, this time without protest, and gathered in the Earth King’s planning chamber. Said man seated himself at the head of an ornate looking, large table right next to his bear, Bosco, and called a servant in. Meanwhile, their group all sat down, Zuko's chair being the furthest from the bear and so close to his own that Sokka could smell the other boy’s honeysuckle shampoo. Not that he was focusing on that, though, since they had more important matters than his unrequited feelings.

“It seems that while Long Feng was in charge he hid some letters from you. Here they are:” The Earth King presented them with several letters, leaving the room so that they could read them in private.

“This one's for you, Toph! It's from…Your mother…” Read out Aang, his excitement fading quickly and being replaced by concern for the earthbender.

“What does it say?” Asked Toph, sounding normal but her fists clenching slightly.

“She's in the city, she wants to see you.” Voiced the airbender, scanning the parchment and gaining a smile from Toph.

They then moved onto the next letter, this one for Zuko even though it didn't have an address or
Dear The Avatar,

I'm sure you'll get this letter somehow, but I hope it is soon. I am Guru Patique and I can train you to master the avatar sta-

Zuko stopped reading after that, not wanting anything to do with the avatar state and terrified to go back into it, remembering how many people he'd hurt and how out of control he'd felt. At the time, back when he wasn't quite as connected to the avatar side of himself that made him care so much about things that weren't really his fault, it hadn't been too bad- but now his past lives seemed insistent on guilt tripping him over every little civilisation he demolished.

“Who was that from?” Asked Katara, concern lacing her tone.

“Just fan mail from some girl called Jee, she thinks scars are sexy and I think they're traumatic so I'm not sure we'll get along.” He lied, and if Toph noticed she didn't speak up. He then scrunched the paper up and burnt it, never even wanting to consider meeting up with this ‘Guru’ guy.

“Uh, is there anything else?” Asked Sokka after a moment, speaking to the servant who'd brought the letters in. They passed over some sort of mission report. He was extremely worried that there wouldn't be any sort of news on his dad, but was proven wrong when he began reading.

“Spotted slightly east of the Serpent's Pass, a small fleet of Southern Water Tribe warriors are stationed,” He read out excitedly, jabbing at the paper with his finger and showing Katara. “It could be dad!”.

“Led by… Chief Hakoda, Sokka! This is dad!” The waterbender basically squealed, hugging her brother happily.

“You guys should go meet him, take Appa, Toph can go meet her mum and Zuko and I can stay here!” Offered Aang kindly, probably realising at least one of them had to stay behind to help with the invasion preparations.

The siblings shouted out grateful compliments before pulling their friends into bone crushing hugs, Sokka squeezing the firebender so tightly that they could hear each other's heart beats, which seemed to have synced up. Strange, Sokka’s mum had always said that when two people where in love their hearts would beat at the same time… The non-bender almost let himself hope that it was true.
“You two are the best!” Sokka exclaimed, incredibly happy to be going to see his dad for the first time in four years. “Just don't destroy Ba Sing Se while we're away, okay?”

“He's talking to you, Zuko.” Emphasised Katara with a good natured smile, before squeezing her brother's hand.

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It was nearing sunset by now and Zuko had just waved off the Water Tribe siblings, before they had begun their journey on Appa. Toph was venturing off to find her mother, stubbornly alone, and Aang was probably back at their house, helping the Earth Kingdom soldiers deal with Jet. Apparently they were just going to charge him with some community service in the outer ring since he was still only seventeen, so at least he got a chance to better himself. Zuko quickly pushed any thoughts of the freedom fighter out of his head, them only reminding him of how humiliatingly stupid he’d been just a day and a half ago when he’d decided to kiss Jet. It was embarrassing and distressing just how much he would do to keep his affections for a different non-bender at bay…

No, the firebender refused to think about Sokka either and quickly searched the street he'd been wandering down for something to occupy him with. The place was desolate, curfew having been lifted earlier in the day but the citizens of Ba Sing Se still used to going in early. In fact, the only shop that seemed to still be occupied was a new and fancy looking teashop, ‘The Jasmine Dragon’ a sign outside read. Zuko considered his options for a few moments, before deciding that getting a quick cup of tea to help remind him of his uncle’s kind and supportive presence wouldn't do him, or anyone else, any harm.

So he wandered over to the beautiful building, some of the design features reminding him of the Water Tribes, the Earth Kingdom, even the Southern Air Temple and home, as in the Fire Nation, his home. The Prince entered a little nervously, not wanting to intrude, but immediately losing all composure when he saw who the lone figure sipping tea at the counter was.

“Uncle?” He asked so quietly he didn't think that the older man would hear him, and too shocked to move so much ass muscle.

His uncle shot round to look at him, clearly surprised and a little disbelieving, before rushing forwards to encase his nephew in a hug. It was soft and kind and encouraging and supportive all at once but… Zuko was just too caught off guard to register most of it, not even able to reciprocate the older man’s kind gesture.
“Zuko, I-I didn't want you to find out I was here like this… I knew it was a risk moving to the upper ring but I missed you, I was worried and then-” His uncle rambled uncharacteristically, for once not masterfully sculpting his words into a beautiful (though often confusing) metaphor.

“Uncle… What are you doing here?” The firebender managed to regain his voice and pulled away from the general, noting how tearful the older man had gotten.

“I wanted to be here for you, even if… I'm not supposed to interfere; it's your avatar journey and every avatar who has stayed with the master that taught them their native element has had a terrible fate. I couldn't bare to watch that happen to you… But I also couldn't just let you risk your life whilst I sat around at the North Pole beating Pakku at Pai Cho. And I would have told you all of this back after your first time in the avatar state, I really would have, but you already seemed so terrified and I didn't want to add to your stress.” His uncle explained himself, squeezing Zuko's shoulders comfortably as he went on.

The Prince felt finally relieved that he had more than a sorry goodbye from his uncle to explain why he'd been absent, but still felt unjustly treated like a child who couldn't handle the truth. That said, having Iroh back had been the one thing he'd been wishing for since he'd left him at the South Pole all those many months ago, and damned if he let his discontented feelings get in the way of them spending time together, especially when he had so much to tell the older man about.

“Okay,” He breathed out, pulling the shorter firebender into a rare 'Zuko-initiated' hug, happy to have the scent of old tea, parchment and faint lavender back in his life. “I have so much to tell you-”.

“So do I, but first take this.” His uncle interrupted, not unkindly but rushedly, handing him a small, black, satin bag. “When we're apart again, which I'm sorry to say we will be, this will always help you to get help.”.

Vague and frantic assistance aside, Zuko found the bag rather mysterious and was tempted to open it, but decided not to and slipped it into the back of his dark green pants.

“Now that that's done, what do you have to tell me?” Asked his uncle with an interested smile, sitting them both down whilst Zuko began to regale his adventures of the past few months.
Toph walked down the empty street, knowing it was well into the night from the chill in the air that persisted despite the warming months. Everywhere was so quiet, not even a peep from the rodents she was sure should have been around, even in the finest part of the middle ring. Altogether, the atmosphere was haunting and made her regret her decision to see her mum alone, but she had had her reasons. For one, the others might try to protect her, or they would insist that she should join her mother and keep out if the war… Well, probably not that second one.

Still, she was alone now and that's how it would stay, so she ventured cautiously up the steps to the house her mother was supposed to be occupying, pretty worried over the fact that she couldn't feel her mum inside; then again, it was the middle of the night so she was probably just in the wooden upstairs, sleeping on some mahogany bed knowing her. Yeah, that had to be why Toph couldn't feel her.

“Hello? Mum? I'm here, me, Toph?” The earthbender called into the empty space, beginning to freak out over the fact that the house also seemed devoid of furniture. “Wha-”.

Just then, a large, metal case surrounded her, snatching her up from the safe, earthy ground and forcing her into a dark container where she couldn't sense a single thing.

“Help! Who's got me?!” She yelled, more angry than fearful. Whoever had captured her would be sorry for getting her hopes up about her mum.

“Us.” Replied Xin Fu, probably joined by Master Yu.

Damn it.

Long Feng sat slouched against the cold wall of his damp prison cell, hating how devoid of earth his new metal age was. It was also tiny, barely large enough for him to lie down in, and only lit by the tiniest crack of light, coming from his closed food hatch. All in all, it was a depressing place to be situated after a decade of the utmost luxury.

Thankfully, however, he was sure that he wouldn't be trapped for too long- knowing that his Dai Li
agents would come to rescue him. Perhaps they'd even assist in his official takeover of Ba Sing Se, finally knocking the Earth King off of the throne for good.

“Master Long Feng.” Greeted one of his most skilled agents, who had walked over to lean against the door of his cell.

“Yes?” He asked quietly, already aware of the answer.

“The Earth Armies are still loyal to the King, but the Dai Li follows only you, Sir. Apparently your execution is designated for some time after the defeat of the Fire Nation, so we'll have you free and controlling the Earth Kingdom by then.” Explained the agent, who Long Feng hadn't bothered to remember the name of.

“Good. Well then, I suppose it's time to begin preparing…”.

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Mai entered the Earth King’s throne room at sunrise, shortly following Azula's lead. She was trussed up in some ridiculous Kyoshi Warrior outfit, makeup and all, and felt completely humiliated- but at least Ty Lee looked rather attractive in the green and gold clothing, fans at either side.

“Your Majesty.” Greeted Azula, somehow managing to sound awed and respectful despite her usual vain and condescending tone. “We, the Kyoshi Warriors, are honoured to make your acquaintance.”

“As am I to you, these last couple of days, if you haven't heard, have been rather hectic.” Mentioned the King, practically begging Azula to manipulate some extra information out of him.

“Really? Why would you say that?” Asked the Princess with false politeness, bowing deep and low on the floor.

“Yesterday afternoon, my most trusted advisor, Long Feng, was found out to be a traitor- unlawfully using the Dai Li to control the citizens of Ba Sing Se. Thankfully, the avatar and his friends alerted me of this and he's now in the dungeons.” Explained the King basically waving a 'please conquer the Earth Kingdom’ flag in Azula's face.
“Why, that sounds awfully upsetting.” Sympathised the firebender with honest sounding emotion, her lying perfect.

“Yes, but things are starting to look up now: we have a plan to defeat the Fire Nation! On the day of a solar eclipse!” Exclaimed the King excitedly, patting his bear’s head.

What an absolute idiot.

Chapter End Notes

Can you really blame me if I love sassy Azula? Really???

I hope you enjoyed this chapter! Stuff will be going down next time, so stay tuned!

Comments and kudos are my absolute life blood, so all are amazingly appreciated :))
Mai and Ty Lee stood outside the Earth King’s Palace, discussing loudly about their Fire Nation descent.

“Ugh, how long will Princess Azula make us stay here?!” Moaned Ty Lee, pouting her lips endearingly.

“We can go back to the Fire Nation as soon as we have the Avatar.” Replied Mai, frowning a little as she leaned against a golden pillar.

“Ughhhh! But that will take sooooo long!” Ty Lee practically yelled, which actually fit her personality of being a little over the top.

“Shut up! Do you want all of Ba Sing Se to hear you?!” She berated falsely, and the other non-bender offered her a small, assuring smile.

Mai spied a Dai Li agent as they disappeared from the roof, probably going to tell Long Feng about them- just as Azula had planned. She tutted to herself, by now used to the Princess’ schemes but knowing that this one was different; the firebender was more desperate, even crueller- especially to them. Somehow Mai doubted this would end well for anyone.

“Well done, girls. I think he took the bait.” Azula's voice came like a knife, cutting through the non-bender’s thoughts and alerting her that she'd shown up. The Princess smiled coldly up at the palace, likely wondering where she'd hang the Fire Nation flag.

“What will happen now?” Asked Ty Lee, much more quietly than she'd previously been talking. Her expression of worry contrasted Azula's icy anger scarily, and made Mai wonder why she'd chosen to accompany the Princess. Oh right, it was because Azula wouldn't have taken no for an answer.

“I assume I'll be arrested soon and taken to that snivelling advisor, Long Feng. I'll make a deal where he tells me where to find Zu- the Avatar, and I get him the throne. Only I will obviously betray him and take it, as well as the Dai Li, for myself. All you two have to do is stay out of my way.” Explained Azula, gloating as she basked in her glorious plan to take over the Earth Kingdom.
“Of course, Princess.” Muttered Mai, her normal sombre tone covering up the annoyance she held in her voice after being told to ‘stay out of the way’.

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Sokka sat on Appa’s head (a rare occurrence in itself) with Katara, who was steering the bison through the air towards the edge of the Serpent’s Pass, where their dad was supposed to be stationed. The waterbender could feel an uncomfortable amount of emotions churning in her gut, the excitement shining a little brighter than the rest but anger and hurt shadowing over it a little.

“Look! I see them!” Shouted Sokka excitedly, pointing towards a small fleet of ships with blue sails. They were gathered in a strategic spot with lots of cover, but were still easily noticeable to her brother’s eagle-eyes.

Katara swooped down to the small patch of rocky ground that the ships were docked at, thankfully eliciting more shock from the tribesmen than aggressiveness. The siblings descended from Appa, Sokka now looking much more nervous than he had up in the air, and they started heading through the crowd of men that were staring at them incredulously. They took of few unsure steps before their Tribe got over the initial surprise of a flying bison dropping off two teenagers into the midst of their ranks and began to smile, rubbing Sokka’s hair before he pushed them off, standing tall even though he was still only up to the warriors’ shoulders.

“Sokka! Katara! It’s so good to see the two of you again! How did you end up here?” Questioned one of the men cheerily, Katara couldn’t recall his name but she did remember that he had always been in charge of gathering seal-fox meat back in South Pole.

“Uhh, that's a long story, Runik. But we need to see our dad, do you know where he is?” Asked Sokka with a smile, still looking pretty nervous but less so thanks to the friendly atmosphere.

Runik pointed them towards one of the tents, a large one with a polar bear-lion pelt outside as well as several Water Tribe flags. Katara squeezed her brother's hand before they stepped in, both of them needing a second. As soon as they went into the tent every warrior went quiet, aside from their father and Bato who were discussing something right at the back and hadn't noticed the two yet. They paused at the entrance, until Bato looked up with a surprised face and nudged their dad, who immediately turned to look at them with wells of happiness in his eyes before rushing forwards to pull them into a hug.
“Katara! Sokka! What are you two doing here?” He muttered, squeezing the waterbender so tightly that she worried he'd crack her ribs.

“We missed you so much, Dad, we just—” Katara's heart panged slightly as she heard a small, relieved sob escape Sokka’s lips, causing her resolve to also let up. She'd confront her father over why he left them later, for now she too was happy trapped in his embrace to get too angry.

“I missed you too. But… How did you get out of the South Pole?” He asked, pulling away slightly whilst still gripping his children's shoulders comfortingly.

“Uhhhhhh…” Started Katara and Sokka simultaneously, looking to each other a little sheepishly.

Their father raised his eyebrow before shaking his head good-naturedly, then leading them outside to where the warriors seemed to be preparing for a fight.

“You two can tell me over dinner tonight, I'm sure, but for now you can help me. We are planning to ambush a few Fire Nation ships, and we need all hands on deck…” Their dad continued talking, excitedly explaining how they'd use ‘stink bomb’ things to drive the firebenders overboard.

Katara left Sokka and her dad to it, instead deciding to go practice some waterbending forms since they'd probably help in taking out the fleet.

Toph angrily pounded against her metal prison, hating how trapped she felt in the dark. She couldn't sense anything around her and she felt hypersensitive to sounds, each cracking twig scaring her more than she'd ever admit. The earthbender figured that Xin Fu and Master Yu were probably transporting her back to her parents using a wagon (if the shuddering bumps of the wooden wheels against the ground were anything to go by) which meant there'd be no earth on the vehicle to bend. But there would still be rocks outside, so she just had to get to those.

“Hey! Bozoes! I need to pee!” She yelled, increasing the ferocity of her hits against the metal.
“Well… Alright then, but don't try anything!” Agreed Master Yu stupidly, sounding as though he'd begun making his way over to her.

“Don't let her out, you idiot! She'll just escape!” Unfortunately Xin Fu wasn't completely dumb, meaning Toph would have to think of something else.

“Urgh! When I get out of here, I'll earthbend the two of you six feet under!” She threatened furiously, meaning every word even though she hadn't quite figured out the ‘get out of here’ part.

“Really? When you escape you'll do that? Ha, you might be the best earthbender in the world, but even you can't bend metal.” Laughed Xin Fu, actually giving Toph a really, really terrible idea.

She would metalbend. Sure, it sounded absurd, even inside her own head, but metal was just purified earth so theoretically… Still, it would be much harder than earthbending and she’d have to focus completely- which meant Toph had to stop the banter with her captors. For hours she struggled against the metal, reaching out with her senses to feel the earth within it, slowly making headway. The first development she was met with was how she gradually became able to use her seismic sense again, a comforting feeling to have back. The second was a slight juddering of the iron as she hit it, its vibrations becoming stronger with each of her blows. Finally, with every ounce of her concentration and then some, she managed to make a significant dent, one that wouldn't have been possible without the use of metalbending.

“Aww, yeah!” She cheered to herself quietly, not wanting the two men to hear her. Toph then broke through the metal with her fists, jumping out of new hole and thankfully landing on some earth.

She let the wagon drive away for a few moments, before sending an earth strike to impale it straight through the middle. Her former captors immediately leapt from the front of the vehicle, sprinting round to check on her prison. Upon finding it empty and with a large hole in one side, they turned slowly and probably worriedly to face her. Toph smirked at the men’s fear, glad that they were now the ones in an uncomfortable position after having had to stay in that metal box for a day. Yet… They weren't quite uncomfortable enough…

Without warning she ran forward, propelling herself with the earth under her feet and creating a rocky shield in front of her. She slammed into Xin Fu and Master Yu with ease, pushing them with her shield until they were the ones terrified and stuck in a metal case. As soon as they were in, Toph then gripped the metal and forced it closed, before hitting the side angrily.

“Take that, numbskulls! I am the greatest earthbender, and metalbender, to ever live and don't either of you dunderheads ever forget it!” She cheered, glad to feel through the metal that her two prisoners
were squished together and likely extremely fed up.

Toph then started heading back to Ba Sing Se, the city so immensely large that she could vaguely feel it through the ground even from miles away. She churned up a pile of earth below her feet, riding it as she bent it to head towards her destination.

Zuko had arrived at the Jasmine Dragon early that morning, and had told Aang about his uncle's arrival in the city. The airbender had been ecstatic about it, probably since he'd tasted the man's superb tea, but hadn't been able to visit along with the firebender since the ‘Council of Five’ were having some big war meeting, which Zuko had no interest in attending because of how his last war meeting had gone.

So far his uncle hadn't had much time to talk to him, being completely swamped with all of the customers he had acquired, yet he had somehow managed to rope his nephew into becoming a waiter. Which, really, Zuko had never thought he'd reach such a low in his life since not only was the avatar but also royalty.

“Tea-boy! The one with the scar! Where's my refill?!?” Asked an older woman snobbishly, frowning at Zuko as if he were a speck of dirt.

“Up your ass.” Muttered the firebender moodily, having no idea how he'd managed to put up with this for an entire day.

“What was that?!” Screeched the customer angrily, gripping one of her friends’ fresh drinks.

“I said: up your ass. I should have known you wouldn't hear, what with your increasing age and everything.” Spat Zuko, crossing his arms as the woman stood up furiously, knocking her chair over in the process.

Once standing the Prince realised she was a good foot taller than him, and rather wide- likely an earthbender. She was also wearing an extremely fancy green dress, embroidered with golden thread, and she was adorned with so much jewelry that Zuko couldn't even tell where her necklaces finished and her neck began. The commotion had silenced the otherwise bustling tea shop and Iroh was standing at the counter shaking his head, as if that would somehow dissuade his rash nephew.
The woman practically growled and through the cup at him, hot tea spilling out as it sailed straight towards his face. With lightning fast reflexes, Zuko waterbended the tea to splash all over the woman and caught the cup in midair, crushing it in his fist and letting the shards fall to ground.

“H- how dare-” Yelled the customer, staring down at her ruined gown incredulously as Zuko smirked and Iroh just kept shaking his head tiredly.

“I think it's time for you to leave, unless you want that to stain?” The firebender smiled as the woman stormed off digging his heel into the ground slightly and causing a little bump of earth to protrude from the ground right where the woman was walking, making her trip and literally fall out of the shop and into a puddle.

Zuko muffled his laughter before venturing behind the counter to where us uncle was waiting for him.

“Now come on, nephew, what was the point in that?” He asked, though there was an amused glint in his eyes.

“She was treating me like dirt!” Defended the younger firebender, even though it was really because she was also treating his uncle like dirt.

“Mmmmmhmm, alright then. Well, now seems like a good time to clear out the customers; it is almost sundown.” Decided Iroh, motioning Zuko towards the tea room whilst he began clearing away cups. Of course, the Prince just had to be the one to kick out all these people, didn't he?

The firebender began shooing away the old general’s customers, it being rather easy since they all seemed terrified of him after how he’d dealt with the snobbish woman. Hopefully their fear wouldn't prevent them from revisiting the Jasmine Dragon, though, since Zuko really didn't want his actions to put his uncle out of business.

After he'd cleared out all the patrons and was halfway through being forced to mop the floor (seriously? Mopping? Wasn't a lack of menial chores meant to be one of the perks of avatar-hood?) he heard a short knock on the door before seeing a letter be slid under it. The Prince checked to see who had posted it but didn't see anyone, and then picked up the letter to read it.

Dear Mushi Eryth,

The Earth King has been blessed with the knowledge of your divine brew and requests for you to
serve it to him tomorrow at sunrise, in his throne room at the Earth Palace. You are required to attend by Earth Kingdom law.

Sincerely,

Letia Jee.

“What's that, Zuko?” Asked his uncle, attempting to peer at the letter.

“Uh, the Earth King wants you to make him tea tomorrow, at sunrise.” Explained Zuko, half wondering whether or not he was similarly allowed to order random people to serve him beverages. Perhaps he could even get that vender who sold the only fire flakes in all of Ba Sing Se to give him free servings if he told her that he was the avatar…

“That's great! I must prepare, do you think he'd prefer juniberry or chamomile? Oh, I'll just take both.” Rambled the older firebender, abandoning the broom he'd been holding and rushing over to the kitchen to gather all of his stuff.

“It isn't until tomorrow, remember?” Called Zuko, chuckling slightly at his uncle's excitement before realising with a tired grunt that the general was going to get him to come too.

—

Iroh and Zuko waited in a room that was definitely not the King’s throne room for someone to collect them, the two having been guided there by Letia, who claimed to be one of the King’s attendants. Yet she had left them almost an hour ago and it was now well past sunrise, making the two royals pretty anxious.

“Perhaps the Earth King overslept? It happens to the best of us.” Guessed his uncle optimistically whilst Zuko rolled his eyes.

“I doubt that.” Disagreed the Prince, getting up from his kneeling position to check the door. “Yep, we're locked in.”.

Zuko was just about to blast the mahogany door off its hinges when a jingling sound came from the other side and it was swung open.
“Well done, Zuzu, but it took you almost an hour to check? You really are rather incompetent.” Laughed Azula coldly, standing at the door with several Dai Li agents on either side of her.

“New friends?” He asked as Iroh came to stand with him, holding off on attacking to get more information- see, Sokka really had taught him more than how beautiful blue eyes were.

“Yes, they're earthbenders but they have this murderous edge that's just so firebender; I love it.” She smiled, but her muscles were uncomfortably tense and her pupils kept twitching just a little.

“Stand down, Azula.” Ordered the siblings’ uncle, also not attacking but looking ready to.

“Why, my dear Uncle, how lovely to see you again. Sure, I'll stand down… But they won't.” The Princess nodded her head just a fraction and a good dozen Dai Li agents jumped at them.

Zuko thought he'd be fine against them; he'd already beaten them so many times and in such larger amounts. Yet, this time, they surprised him. Instead of sending a pair if rocky cuffs at his wrists and ankles they aimed towards the ceiling, quickly crumbling it and letting what seemed to be a heavy metal box fall through. It snatched up the Prince before he could even begin to react, preventing his earthbending and being made of a metal that was seemingly impervious to heat.

His uncle was quickly captured as well since he was unused to the Dai Li’s fighting style and surprised by Zuko's sudden departure from the fight. Yet the older man did give it a good go until his feet and hands got encased in rock and fused to the the earthy floor.

“Aww, that was even easier than I'd expected. Dai Li, take them to the catacombs- I have a throne to occupy. Oh, and don't free Long Feng quite yet.” Ordered Azula, turning stern and sounding as though the Dai Li were now completely loyal to her, which was the least shocking thing to have happened in the last year.

They were carted underground, before being left on their own in a much too quiet cave. The firebender couldn't see much if it through the tiny eye-gap in his metal prison, but it seemed to be lighted by hundreds of multicoloured, glowing crystals. They might have even been beautiful in any other situation.

“Urgh!” Zuko slammed his fists against the metal hard enough to bruise, not even noticing the pain through his frustration.
“Nephew, you need to try and be calm.” Advised his uncle, probably not wanting him to hurt himself.

“No! If I can get angry enough then I'll go into the avatar state and get us out of here.” He explained, realising that his uncle might not have known that was his plan.

“Oh... Zuko, are you sure you want to do that? You seemed rather upset… Last time.” Recalled the older firebender, sounding as though he'd sat down.

“I- I know, Uncle. But I ca- I can't go back to the Fire Nation. I c- I can't face him, Uncle.” The Prince sighed, slouching against the metal and sliding down to the floor, deflated.

Every nightmare, every terrified thought, every worried feeling- they'd all involved his father getting his hands on him. Last time Zuko had seen him he'd slightly misspoken and had been not only scarred but also banished. Now he was an outright traitor, something he no longer even felt guilty about; he could only imagine what his father would do to him. The firebender thought he'd be okay if he fought his father on his own terms, but getting delivered to him as a prisoner… The thought haunted even the happiest parts of his mind.

“I… See. But, Zuko, using your emotions to fuel your avatar state is risky and unsustainable. It makes you uncontrollable, destructive even- to utilise the avatar state best you must open your chakras or master all four elements or reach a milestone of some kind.” Tried his uncle, but the Prince barely paid attention after ‘risky’.

“Uncle, that will take too long, I need to deal with Azula now.” He argued, trying to concentrate to see if that would get him into the avatar state.

“Your chakras might not take too long; you've likely naturally opened most of them throughout your journey without even knowing it-” Again, Zuko didn't listen and instead attempted to heat the metal to melt it, but the warmth only spread throughout the metal and bit angrily at the bare skin on his arms.

“Ah!” He gasped, quickly airbending a blast of cool air to stop the heat, seriously not wanting anymore burn scars.

The two went silent after that, but Zuko didn't stop trying to go into the avatar state. Yet, somehow,
he seemed completely unable- perhaps he should have gone to see that Guru after all.

Aang was getting extremely worried, which was a massive understatement. He hadn't seen Zuko since the firebender had gone off to the palace that morning, and it was now well past sunset. That might not have been too worrying except the Prince had also skipped out on their agreed plan of having lunch together almost eight hours ago. On top of that, Toph was nowhere to be found and the palace hadn't called for him since yesterday, even though they said they would. In fact, the situation was becoming worrying enough for Aang to decide to stretch his spiritual muscles.

“Okay, breathe.” He told himself, attempting to focus on Zuko- it shouldn't have been too hard since he was the freaking avatar and therefore had the strongest aura out of anyone.

The airbender was attempting to astral project to his friend’s location, something he'd done before but always in close proximity. He figured after finding the Prince they could figure out what was happening at the palace and with Toph. Aang took a few more deep breaths, before a slight airy feeling carried his spirit up a little. When he opened his eyes again, Aang found himself not meditating in their kitchen, but cross legged and a transparent blue colour in some sort of metal coffin with a very terrified looking Zuko.

“Oh Spirits, Aang died.” He muttered, trying to clutch the smooth surface of his coffin.

“Uhh, you're the one in the coffin.” Pointed out the airbender, raising his eyebrows and almost immediately regretting his comment.

“Demon!” Yelped the firebender, kicking his boot straight through Aang’s intangible head.

“Zuko?! Are you okay?!” Called who Aang recognised to be Iroh, even though he couldn't see the man’s face.

“He's fine!” Promised the airbender, a lie that he hoped to prove true.

“Aang...?” Asked the general disbelievingly, which he ignored in favour of proving to Zuko that he
wasn't going insane.

“I'm not dead, or a demon, I'm me. I'm just astral projecting myself here so I can figure out where you are, but a metal coffin isn't much help if I'm trying find you in all of Ba Sing Se.” He explained, and the firebender nodded slowly, taking some of his own deep breaths.

“Right, okay, Azula told the Dai Li to take us to the ‘Crystal Catacombs’, I think they're underneath the palace. Also, Azula's taken over the palace so I doubt you'll be able to free us on your own.” Replied Zuko, seeming a little embarrassed of his previous freak out.

“Great, now do you know where Toph is?” Asked the airbender, not liking the shocked look on his friend's face.

“Toph is missing too?! Ugh. Well, she isn't with us.” He sighed, resting one palm on his forehead as he leant back against the side of his coffin-thingy.

Aang nodded and faded back to his own body, not liking the constraining feeling of flesh or the exhaustion that now swelled within his bones. He then thought about what to do next, deciding that getting Sokka and Katara back to the city was paramount, followed by finding Toph, rescuing the Earth King, Zuko and Iroh, defeating Azula and taking back Ba Sing Se. Simple, right?

He sighed to himself and grabbed his glider, figuring that it would be the fastest way to get to the Water Tribe siblings without Appa to fly him and while he was too tired to astral project again. He headed off, the wind blasting against him, exhilarating him as he made reasonably short trip to the Serpent's Pass, glad to see that the Water Tribe fleet was still there but noticing a few Fire Nation ships not that far off in the distance. He landed and rushed through crowds of warriors, all of which regarded him tiredly, before finding Sokka and Katara with who he assumed to be their father.

“This can't be good.” Groaned Sokka, brushing back his hair slightly while waiting for the bad news. Katara, however, seemed delighted to see Aang and the gloomy expression she had been wearing was immediately replaced by a bright smile.

“Zuko and his uncle have been kidnapped by Azula, who has taken over the Earth Kingdom and has the Earth King captive. Toph is also missing.” He explained, and this time both siblings looked equally negative.

“Zuko?! Toph?!” Cried Sokka incredulously, gripping Aang's shoulders and shaking them until he
felt like his head might fall off.

“Sokka! Okay, Aang, we're coming. Bye, Dad… Love you.” She said the last part a little coldly, but still forced out the words which Sokka was quick to repeat.

Their father then hugged the two tightly, and then mumbled something about how proud he was which Aang Pretended not to hear. The family then reluctantly broke away from each other, the Siblings heading towards Appa and their dad marching, club in hand, to the shore straight in front of the Fire Nation ships.

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They flew on Appa back to the city, thankfully running into Toph who was quick to recount her story.

“But how did you escape the metal prison?” Asked Katara, seeming just as completely engulfed in the thrilling tale as Aang was.

“I invented metalbending.” Replied Toph casually, stretching out on Appa whilst even Sokka broke from his nervous mood long enough to gape at the young girl.

“What?!” They all questioned in unison, Aang never having heard of a metalbender before.

“But that's old news, right now we need to rescue Sparky and Iroh.” She waved them off, but did smile slightly at their utter shock.

“Yeah, Zuko needs our help.” Agreed Sokka sternly, taking a deep breath in as the others nodded.

“The Earth King too.” Aang reminded them, even though his priority was also their friend.

The airbender took a moment to think of a plan, but was beaten to it by Sokka. The non-bender quickly revealed his plan as they flew over the outer ring. Basically, him and Toph would rescue
Zuko whilst Katara and Aang got the Earth King. The latter two of their team would then get the King safely onto Appa before joining in to help free Zuko, whose release would most assuredly be prevented by Azula and the Dai Li. It wasn't perfect but it was the best they had, and so that's what they did.

About twenty minutes later Aang and Katara were running through the palace, heading for the throne room in the hope that it would least have someone there that they could question over the whereabouts of the Earth King, even if he wasn't there themselves. Yet, luckily, upon bursting through the large doors they saw him handcuffed to the ground, in a position so that he was forced to bow his own throne. Said chair was unfortunately occupied by Azula, who was dressed as a Kyoshi warrior and smiled at their arrival. Next to hear sat, rather out if place, Bosco the Bear.

“And the rescue party has arrived, which means so has Zuzu’s. Girls, Dai Li, deal with these two. Azula ordered, blasting blue fire between Katara and Aang, forcing the pair to leap apart whilst she sauntered confidently out of the throne room, nonchalantly stepping on the King as she did so.

As soon as she'd left the room, Ty Lee and Mai pounced, as did the Dai Li. Yet it was night now, and Katara quickly froze the gymnast in ice up to her knees, making her fall over. The other non-bender then ran over to her friend's side, whilst the Dai Li kept advancing. This time Aang got to fight, swirling the four earthbenders up into a wind current and slamming them into the wall, knocking them out. Then, for good measure, Katara trapped their bodies in ice too.

“Just take the King. And, spirits, please take the bear too.” Offered Mai, who was still at Ty Lee’s side and was trying to free her from the ice.

“Thanks!” Said Aang brightly, but he sombred right up when he noticed both Katara’s and Mai’s glares that screamed ‘not the time’. Well, at least Ty Lee seemed to appreciate his cheeriness.

“Okay, now let's go get the others!”.

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Sokka and Toph ventured through the Crystal Catacombs, Toph’s seismic sense allowing her to lead the way easily.

“And you're one hundred percent sure this is right?” Asked Sokka anxiously, ringing his hands
together as he thought about possible fates for Zuko.

“Yes, Sokka! I can feel Iroh about twenty five yards that way along with some heavy metal thing, which, according to Aang, will have your boyfriend inside.” Promised Toph annoyedly, stamping slightly and clearing even more rock out of their way.

“Oh, alright.” Muttered Sokka, pretty distracted by his fear for Zuko’s safety- not the best thing when they were probably just a few minutes away from a battle.

“You don’t need to worry, Sokka, he’ll be fine.” Comforted Toph uncharacteristically kindly and softly, giving his arm a slight pat before breaking through some more rock which led into a larger cavern.

For a prison it was beautiful: a brightly lit cave full of colourful crystals, each one with a mesmerising glow. It was rather spacious too, and only marred by an ugly grey cuboid in the middle of the floor, that Iroh was sat leaning against. Toph immediately went forward and bent the metal of the prison, freeing Zuko who looked as though he’d had enough small spaces to last a lifetime, or even several.

“I think one of my past lives might have been claustrophobic.” He mumbled shakily, looking a little too pale and pretty queasy- two things that the non-bender ignored.

“Zuko! You’re okay!” Sokka immediately hugged the firebender tightly, which Zuko surprisingly returned.

“If you two lovebirds are done, we have company.” Announced Toph a moment later, just in time for Azula and a couple dozen Dai Li agents to show up.

She looked confident at a glance, and wearing a Kyoshi warrior uniform that fueled Sokka’s drive to punch her in the face whilst also distracting him over the fate of Suki. The Dai Li seemed bound by her every command, which was not good for them and even worse for the whole of Ba Sing Se. And, on top of all of that, Zuko looked like he was about to try and fight her.

“Azula! This has gone far enough.” He shouted idiotically heroically, lighting his hands on fire and glaring at his sister.

“Actually, Zuzu, I think it should go a little bit further.” The Princess smirked and charged forwards,
matching Zuko's fire with her own as they met in the middle of the cavern.

Sokka stood, transfixed by their fight while Toph and Iroh went to deal with the Dai Li. Zuko had gotten reasonably good at all the elements, especially fire and air, but was still too unused to fighting with them all at once to use them to the best of their ability. Instead he'd use one element for several moves and then go back to fire for a while, which would have been fine if he was fighting anyone less powerful than Azula. She fought with fury and deadly precision, each blast of fire narrowly missing her brother as she sidestepped Zuko's attacks. Soon they were both grazed up and a little charred, but neither ever even seemed to take a breath before throwing another blast at the other.

Meanwhile Toph was making pretty quick work of most of the Dai Li agents, swatting them like flies. Iroh was having more trouble, his mastery of fire a great offence but not too great of a defense against earthbending, causing Toph to have to break him out of rocky bonds every once in a while.

Altogether they were doing pretty well, and then their luck somehow improved. Water burst violently from the cavern’s ceiling, before trickling slower and revealing Appa’s flying form above a large hole. Aang and Katara then leapt down to help, Katara using the water to sweep away the remaining Dai Li agents. And that should have been it, they should have had Azula cornered.

Damnit that should have been it.

Sokka hadn't been paying attention. He'd thought... Well, he was a non-bender in a bending fight, there wasn't much he could do except watch out for his friends to make sure they didn't get surprised. But he should have been keeping an eye on himself, because, just as Katara crashed through the roof, a Dai Li agent behind him earthbended a sharp dagger and sent it straight towards the back of his skull, and during the confusion of all the water and fire none of his friends would have noticed.

Except one. One with avatar senses who immediately stopped it in midair.

Sokka turned to Zuko, who was sweating and looked exhausted from his tough and still on going fight with his sister. The firebender had an angry look on his face, one arm outstretched to stop the dagger and his eyes... Like in the North Pole, and in Roku's chamber, they were a solid, glowing blue. It scared him, how out of control the guy he felt so strongly for seemed. The avatar then began floating, ascending into the air and silencing everyone. And then...

Azula was as quick as a whip, shooting two fingers forwards and blasting a stream of crackling, blue electricity straight at her brother's back, causing his body to convulse unnaturally before falling as if in slow motion to the ground.
In fact, everything seemed to be moving slower than usual. There was a buzzing in Sokka’s ears where shouts and screams should have been, his body refused to move and he couldn’t even feel his own tears as they slid down his cheeks.

“-ka! Sokka! Sokka!” His sister’s yells broke him from his stupor, and he realised she had swept Zuko’s lifeless body up onto a large wave of water.

The non-bender blinked slowly, noting how there were now another fifty Dai Li agents surrounding them and Iroh was yelling for them to leave, to save Zuko while he held Azula off. Toph and Aang were crying too, and were pulling him along towards Katara and Zuko. They all rode up to Appa, and only in the safety of the bison’s saddle did Sokka manage to find his voice.

“No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no! No! Zuko!” Sobs completely racked his body as he reached to grab Zuko’s limp arm. His Earth Kingdom clothes were in tatters and he looked even paler than usual, not a single breath escaping his lips.

Katara pulled out some sort of vial, Sokka didn’t listen to what it was, and made it glow brightly enough to hurt the non-bender’s tear-blurred eyes. She then turned Zuko over to his side, and Toph had to grab his arm to stop him from pulling her off him because damnit that was Zuko; she couldn’t touch him! He was hurt and- and-

But… After too many cold moments, Sokka blinked enough water out if his eyes to see with clarity that the firebender was breathing again- no longer lifeless and limp. He sobbed even harder at that, finally pulling away from Toph to crush Zuko’s slowly warming body with a hug that he never planned to break from, practically pulling the Prince onto his lap and crying into his shoulder. He felt impossibly relieved but still so, so guilty.

Chapter End Notes

I really hoped you liked this chapter!!!

Yeeash, angst, sorry :// but I HAD to do it to ya ;))

When I was thinking of the last part of this chapter, I was listening to 'say something’, so if you want to check that song out go for it!

The Zukka is... Intensifying...
I'm really sorry, but I might have to switch to a bi-weekly (posting every other week) schedule for the next few chapters, since school has started back up

Kudos and comments are absolutely incredible! They give me soul :))
Zuko stretched slightly in a large, rough and familiar seeming bed, cringing at the pain that flared up across his back. His eyes struggled to open and his limbs were so numb that it scared him, but overall he thought he could have felt worse. Still, the firebender was at a complete loss at what on earth had happened; everything leading up to what had most certainly been a very bad injury fuzzy, as though he were looking at the memories through thick glass. Once again he attempted to slide his eyelids open, this time them obeying after a little reluctance so that he could see where he was.

The sandpaper-bed was apparently familiar because it was the same used on all Fire Nation ships, and he'd spent three years lying in one similar on his own ship what seemed like years ago but was actually mere months. A red flag hung from the wall to his side and Zuko could imagine writing his name with the grime layering the iron walls of his room. All at once, the realisation of where he was and what that must have meant struck him like an ice pick being driven into his spine, causing him to shoot up to an uncomfortable sitting position. Through his increasing panic he could barely even feel the pain that lashed across his joints at every movement; the Prince’s one track mind taking over and consuming his mind with one thought: escape.

Zuko stumbled out of bed and distantly noted that he was wearing Fire Nation garb once again, though it was looser and softer than any of his stiff royal outfits. He struggled across the room and found, surprisingly, that the door was unlocked. Swinging it open, he tried not to worry about how his friends were fairing, since they too were most likely in Fire Nation custody and could have a whole host of terrible things happening to them. Katara might be dehydrating in some dry cell somewhere, Aang could be trussed up in a straight jacket a hundred metres underground, Toph might be in a dark, wooden box and Sokka - well, Sokka was a non-bender, so they might not even bother locking him up, he might already be… Disposed of.

Fear for his group spurred him onwards, until he was just below deck and could see two Fire Nation soldiers muttering together. Straining himself, he attempted to listen in.

“So, is he up yet?” Asked the much larger one, leaning against the metal wall of the corridor.

“I'm pretty sure you'd know if he was; there would probably be a welcome back party.” Replied the shorter one in a voice almost like a child’s, yet Zuko didn't register that through his confusion at their words. Were they talking about him? Why would the Fire Nation throw a welcome back part for the Avatar, even if he was their Prince?

“Damn, how long do you think he'll stay unconscious? It's already been three weeks and lightning
can't hurt that much.” Commented the first soldier, chuckling slightly.

Lightning triggered a memory in Zuko, one of pain and sadness and anger but a glimpse all the same. He was in a cavern, beautifully lit with a million glowing lights, and he was in the air, everything in the hyperfocus it was in whenever he went into the Avatar State (though, before this, that had only been once). He only got a half-second of peace before a sharp pain like a dozen sizzling, white hot knives all drove into the small of his back, everything flashing blue for a moment before darkness, and then the red of his room on the ship.

Zuko gasped despite himself, sure now that he'd been arrested by Azula, and alerted the two soldiers to his presence, them both jumping comically at the sound of him before sprinting towards the firebender. Zuko was injured but still fast, and slashed at them with a flaming whip, it completely missed its target but did force his pursuers back a little, allowing him to get topside. His plan was rather simple: jump overboard and waterbend himself to the first patch of dry land he found, then figure everything else out.

The Prince stumbled onto the deck unsteadily, his heavy footfalls and ragged breaths making enough noise for the soldiers to all turn to him, most of them too shocked to move. It was night and even the silvery light from the slither of moon in the sky couldn't wash away the shadows that obscured his captors' faces, making their already nightmarish movements towards him even more terrifying. Zuko found himself overwhelmed by his situation- he was completely surrounded and too weak to fight, and so probably about to get beaten half to death and carted the rest of the way to the Fire Nation. The thought caused him to move back from the soldiers, and made him hear their voices as though he were underwater, the sound swirling around his ears but not quite translating to actual words or voices.

He was about to do something stupid, like attempt to fight twenty Fire Nation soldiers when he could barely stand up straight, when, through his confusion, fuzzy vision and the mass of people rushing towards him, he spied a stripe of blue under one of the red cloaks and everything came back into focus.

“Sokka?” He croaked out, shocked by how damaged his voice sounded, but too relieved by the sight of the non-bender to really care.

“Zuko!” The other boy spoke with a cheery note to his tone, but there was something else there too as he closed off the distance between them and pulled Zuko into a hug.

“What-” He tried uselessly, before his muscles gave up and he was forced to collapse against Sokka’s embrace, once again managing to register how much pain he was in.
“Zuko?!” Called Katara worriedly from behind her brother, also going up to the firebender but with less hugs and more medical analysis. “He shouldn't be out of bed yet; it's much too soon. Look, he's already about to pass out! Ugh, Sokka, take him back to his room, Toph, Aang, you keep lookout whilst I deal with Zuko.”.

After Katara’s orders, Sokka dragged the Prince up into his arms properly, looking straight into his golden eyes with his own blue ones, gently shushing what was meant to be words but came out as a quiet whimper as though he were a hurt child. And, whilst Zuko didn't have the energy to reprimand him about the patronising treatment, he also felt too close to passing out to even properly care. He fell unconscious looking into Sokka’s shinier than usual eyes and hearing Toph complain about being terrible at lookout.

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Sokka was sat at Zuko’s bedside, guilt eating away at his composure like an incessant swarm of termites. He had been the one stupid enough to get the firebender injured, so he was the one also at fault for letting Ba Sing Se get taken by Azula and her stupidly attractive girl-squad. Now Zuko was lying unconscious in a room that probably triggered all sorts of bad memories for him, while the guy who put him in this mess sat at his bedside, half hoping he wouldn't wake up again so that he wouldn't have to see the fiery blame that would no doubt light his eyes when he found out what had happened.

The non-bender sighed softly and tucked the Prince in a little more, focusing on smoothing over the creases in the bed sheets rather than paying attention to the way Zuko’s chest rose and fell with every breath, since he'd done that enough in the last three weeks. He'd been at his bedside almost constantly ever since their fight with Azula, and he'd often been accompanied by one of the others, though Katara usually just came to keep healing him and Aang mostly just told their comatose friend stories from the Southern Air Temple.

“Mmm…” Mumbled Zuko sleepily, scrunching up his face a little and shifting his position so that he was on his side.

Through all of the guilt and shame and worry, Sokka still wanted to kiss the firebender when he did things like that. He saw the innocent mannerisms or the little curve in his lips and it became his primary focus, and that had happened so much in the past few weeks that he was pretty sure Toph was never going to let him live down how infatuated he'd become.

“Mmm… Sokka?” Zuko rasped out, shocking the non-bender in question out of thoughts and alerting him to the fact that Zuko was now awake, and attempting to sit up.
“Hey, hey, you- you have to rest.” He tried, gently pushing Zuko back down onto the mattress and ignoring the impulse to run his hands through the other boy’s raven black hair.

“I’m fine, just a little- okay, a lot- confused. What happened?” Asked the Prince pushing Sokka’s hands away and sitting himself up properly, the movement making him wince.

“Well…” He began, before realising he had literally no clue on how to explain. How did you tell the guy you’d fallen in love with that you’d managed to get him killed for about ten seconds? His mother used to say that honesty was always the best option, but he didn't know if he could stand to see the hatred in Zuko’s expression once he’d explained. Still, there was no point in delaying. “We were fighting Azula in the Crystal Catacombs under Ba Sing Se. You had been kidnapped but we'd rescued you and your uncle, so we thought we could beat her. I- I couldn't do much fighting, not really, it was a massive bending fight so… I would have been useless, but you took on your sister. We were winning for a while, but then… Then I got surprised- this Dai Li Agent shot some rock at the back of my head and you- you saved- you went into the Avatar State and saved my life. Except you were meant to still be going against Azula, so when you turned she- she shot light-lightning at you, and you collapsed. Katara took you up to Appa whilst your uncle stayed to keep Azula away. Then she healed you.”

Sokka found the explanation emotionally taxing, retelling everything he'd been trying to forget for weeks now. His head was bowed and he had taken to staring intently at the floor, trying to clear out his guilty thoughts with much easier to stomach ones, like why the Fire Nation was so against carpets on their warships.

“So my uncle has been arrested?” Zuko frowned worriedly, pulling Sokka back to the conversation at hand.

“Well… I think so. He stayed behind to fight Azula and an army of Dai Li Agents so I'd be pretty impressed if he managed to evade capture.” He commented thoughtfully, leaning back slightly.

“Then we have to save him, when do I fight my father?” Asked Zuko, with such a calm and matter of fact voice that Sokka didn't even comprehend the weight of what he was saying until several moments afterwards.

“What?!!! No offense, Zuko, but for months you've been against hurting the Firelord. Maybe you should think about this-” Sokka tried, any relief that the firebender was going to do what it took to save the world overshadowed by his concern for his mental health, since killing your own dad didn't come without baggage.
“I have!” He snapped, causing the non-bender to flinch back a little. He softened his angry expression at that and carried on. “I mean I have. My father… Is a terrible person. He hurt me, hurt my mother too, and brainwashed my little sister. My sister who was once sweet and young and innocent, who now thinks herself a murderer- not that she cares about that now, not with my Father’s grip on her. The one person who’s actually been like a father to me is my uncle, and he's been arrested by the Nation I was once completely devoted to serving. Look, Sokka, it's going to be hard, but I understand that my Father has to go down, otherwise… Well, otherwise he'll continue to spread pain and destruction across the Earth.”.

Sokka took in Zuko’s words for a moment, before nodding, a little too overwhelmed by the realisation that this was actually one hundred percent happening to do much else.

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“Are you sure you're okay?” Asked the non-bender for about the eighteenth time, and whilst Zuko still felt as though he'd been run over by a chariot he nodded.

“Yes, I'm just going up to the deck.” He argued, pretending that he was able to walk steadily by gripping the wall for support.

“But we could have just told you the plan in your room where it's safe!” Protested Sokka again, standing unnecessarily close to the firebender’s side- not that he minded.

“I'm the Avatar; I'm pretty sure I can survive a short walk and a little fresh air.” Zuko rolled his eyes and stopped paying attention to the other boy's further arguments, instead focusing all of his energy into climbing the ladder up to the deck.

It was now mid morning but was similarly bustling to how it was last night, only with different people on guard. Yet Katara, Toph and Aang were still there and waved at them sluggishly, before wandering over. It was then when Zuko properly took in his friends’ disguises: the Water Tribe siblings were wearing too-large red cloaks over their tattered blue clothing, making extremely unrealistic Fire Nation soldiers. Aang looked marginally better in all red, but his arrow was still on show and the trousers trailed so far across the floor that Zuko had to wonder if the boy had put even two seconds of thought into his outfit before putting it on. Toph wasn't even wearing red, though she might not have even realised that, but she was wearing a black shirt over her usual green one that looked suspiciously like his own one from his Blue Spirit costume.
“Zuko? Zuko?!” Called Katara, waving a hand in front of his face and snapping him out of his musings.

“Right, sorry. What were you saying?” He recovered, scratching the back of his neck slightly and turning all of his focus to the frowning waterbender.

“I was saying that, while you've been unconscious, Sokka made a new invasion plan that, while similar to our old one, should still work even without the might of the full Earth Kingdom Army.” She explained a little crossly, and Zuko took a precious moment to be impressed by Sokka’s strategizing skills.

“Basically, we are going to take a small group straight to the Fire Nation capital on the Day of Black Sun, where you will then fight the Firelord and we’ll rescue your uncle.” The non-bender picked up the explanation, seeming extremely enthusiastic from his near constant movement but not quite daring to look Zuko straight in the eye.

“So… Who's going to be in this tiny group invading the most well protected place on the entire Earth? Because I doubt there's anyone dumb enough to join us.” The firebender replied, liking the plan (and trusting in Sokka’s ideas) but pretty sure most people who valued their lives weren't going to be charging into the Fire Nation capital, even if it was a solar eclipse.

Aang smiled at him, and tugged his arm over to the left, dragging him over to a small group of rather burly men in full red uniforms. The one who seemed in charge had an air of familiarity that Zuko couldn't quite place- until he looked properly into his eyes.

“You must be Sokka’s father- Sokka and Katara’s I mean, obviously.” He stuttered a little as he looked up at the tall, intimidating man.

“Yes, I'm Hakoda. You must be the boy who charmed my daughter into fighting the Fire Nation at fourteen.” He said, his voice and words stern but a little playful hint of Sokka’s usual cheery spark rested in his eyes as he shook the Prince’s hand. Still, despite the man’s pretty chill nature, Zuko opted to not mention he was actually trying much harder to charm his son.

“Dad, I came because it was the right thing to do- and I hadn't even met Zuko when I'd decided to leave the South Pole.” Katara snapped a little harshly, folding her arms and glaring at the floor.

“I know, Katara, I was just kid-” Hakoda began, reaching out for his daughter's arm.
“Yeah? Well, we don't need kidding right now. I'm going to go get some actual work done.” Katara sauntered off, flicking her hair slightly and leaving an incredibly awkward atmosphere behind.

“So… Umm… Toph? Why don't we, uh, go help out in the kitchens? I'm sure Bato will be wanting some help.” Decided Aang, smiling fakely at the others before rushing off on a swirling air scooter, almost crashing into four different people in his rush.

“Seriously, Twinkle Toes? Wait up!” Toph yelled in response, before smirking and stamping her foot straight through the metal floor, allowing herself to fall below deck into what was assumably the kitchens.

Stepping cautiously over the new Toph-sized hole in the floor, Zuko moved to also get away from Hakoda and towards what was hopefully a cup of tea and some food. Unfortunately, however, Sokka grabbed his bicep before he could completely escape.

“Uh, Zuko-” He started, fiddling with a loose string on his cloak and still not meeting the firebender’s gaze.

“Sokka,” Hakoda said, causing his son to jump a little comically at the (apparently startling) sound. “Can I talk to the Avatar for just a moment?”

The younger non-bender nodded after a slight hesitation, before moving towards what seemed to be a group of warriors playing a card game Zuko wasn't familiar with. Meanwhile, the firebender attempted to quell any uncomfortable feelings he got from being referred to as just ‘The Avatar’ since, while it no longer upset him that that's who he was, he still found it annoying when people disregarded the rest of his identity, as if his only quality was that he was able to bend all the elements.

“Yes, Sir?” Zuko greeted him formally, remembering how his own father demanded complete and absolute respect… Or else.

“Please, Hakoda is fine- unless you really do have ill-intentions with my daughter, in which case you'd better stick with sir.” The older man laughed, a deep chuckle that seemed much like his son’s but with less voice cracks and more surety.

“Okay then, Hakoda…” Zuko corrected himself, looking at the hole in the floor nervously; not really
feeling up to what was probably about to be a lecture.

“I just wanted to say how proud I am of you-” Those eleven words perked the Prince’s interest right up, and Zuko looked up at Hakoda in poorly disguised shock. “What, you thought I was going to berate you? Look, I can only imagine how hard it must have been for you, a teenager no older than my own son, to have escaped the Fire Nation outskirts to-”.

“Wait! Outskirts?!” Questioned the firebender, interrupting Hakoda mid sentence. He knew of the outskirts, of course, they were comprised of the poorest villages and a few vacation islands; not where he was from at all.

“Of course… Katara told me that you were a firebender peasant who, upon realising you were the Avatar, left your home to seek out help. You went to the Southern Air Temple for guidance and that's where you met up with my children and Aang.” Okay, so Katara had told a pretty massive lie, but really she'd told a pretty similar story to the one Zuko had first come up with. All in all, he supposed it wasn't absolutely critical to tell the father of the guy you liked that you were next in line to the throne of a Nation that had caused that same man’s wife's death as well as countless others, including almost the entire extermination of airbenders.

“Yeah, right, that's where I'm from… Anyway… I've got to go, do, umm, meditation? Yeah, meditation and spiritual avatar-y things. Bye!” Zuko practically sprinted away from Hakoda, ignoring the pain that still laced his body, heading towards his bedroom for a good few hours of rest.

Katara was in a terrible mood, but she was mature enough to understand that she had to talk to her dad about it, instead of randomly yelling at him for no reason. Well… To be fair, she did have a reason for getting angry, only it wasn't related at all to what she was yelling at him for. This, she decided, had to be remedied.

“Dad?” She called, opening the door to her father's chambers with a slight creak. One thing she had to applaud firebenders’ for were how spacious their ships were; this entire vessel housed enough rooms for almost all of them to get their own quarters to sleep in.

“Yes?” He emerged from the room and shut the door behind him. He sounded slightly worn, but it had been a long day what with Zuko waking up and that sea monster that had shown up at around noon. Now it was sundown and practically everyone who had been working in the day were in bed,
about to get replaced by the night crew in a couple of hours. In fact, for now Sokka was the only one stubborn enough to still be working.

“I need to talk to you. About why I've been angry.” She began, taking a deep breath.

“Okay…” The one word responses were beginning to get on her nerves, as was the kind way he urged her to continue by calmly nodding.

“You- you left us! Me and Sokka were alone after our mum died, and you just went!” She began to rant, knowing it was better to get it all out of her system sooner rather than later “I was barely ten years old, Sokka had to be working Chief of the tribe at twelve, Dad, twelve! He wasn't ready, neither of us were ready for you to go! Sure, it was for a ‘good’ cause, what with you doing everything you could to be a soldier, to be a hero! But me and Sokka?! Dad, we didn't need a hero- we needed our dad!”.

As the words fell from her lips so did tears from her eyes, leaving her practically sobbing at the end of her speech. She lowered herself to the ground and curled around herself on her knees, her father immediately sitting besides her and wrapping her up in an embrace.

“Katara, honey, I'm so, so sorry. You and Sokka didn't deserve to be on your own like that, not after what happened to- to Kya, your mother.” He began crying as well, squeezing her into his side tighter. “Every single day I was gone, every day at sunset and sunrise, I'd think of nothing but you and your brother. Your smiles, your faces, your voices- every detail so I'd never forget, no matter how long I was gone for. I lived for the moment I could come back home and be with you again, the moment where I could be sure of your safety no matter what.”.

And with that they stayed huddled on the floor just outside his room, in the corridor, crying their eyes out as they simply held each other.

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Zuko did not, in fact, rest for a few hours- more like a dozen if the orange glow of sunset coming from above deck was anything to go by. This, he figured, probably wasn't the best way of convincing his friends he was completely healthy. Thankfully, he now felt much less achy and declared himself fit enough to go find Sokka so that they could talk about whatever had been bothering the non-bender earlier- since Zuko was sure there was something.
The firebender made his way back up to the deck of the ship, glad for his experience on Fire Nation vessels, and ended up topside, which was strangely empty aside from one figure staring out from the hull.

“Hello?” He asked into the distance, prompting the person to turn around and look at him.

Before, thanks to him facing the other way and the unfamiliar clothing, Zuko hadn't been able to tell that it was Sokka. Yet now, with his tan features beautifully lit by the orange hue in the air, the Prince was certain he wasn't mistaken.

“Ohhh, uh, Zuko! Hi…” Greeted Sokka oddly, waving a little too fast and with a hitch in his voice that didn't seem to be a voice crack.

“Hey, what's up?” Questioned the firebender, walking over to where Sokka stood at the edge of the boat, looking out at the almost tar-like sea.

“Not- uh, nothi- nothing much.” He stumbled over his response before frowning and putting his face in his hands, leaning against the guardrail.

Seeing this rather pathetic display, Zuko reached over to pat the other boy’s shoulder, but a wave in the current toppled the boat slightly and sent the firebender crashing into Sokka’s side. The non-bender caught him before they could both fall, but they ended up extremely close together.

“Why have you been acting so weirdly?” Asked Zuko, still so close to Sokka that they could feel each other's breath but not bothering to move away.

“Ugh, well, umm-” He stuttered in response, averting his eyes and blushing quite a lot, though it might have just been the lighting that made his cheeks glow pink. “Puberty?”

“No, ever since I woke up you've been distant and strange and usually I wouldn't care but I do.” Zuko rushed his words out, not really paying much mind to what was coming out of his mouth but instead paying attention to the way Sokka’s lips moved when he bit at them.

“...Why? Why do you care?” Sokka breathed out in a sigh, going back to leaning on the heavily rusted guardrail. The Prince had to bite back a comment about how he'd probably catch four different diseases from that metal and instead leant down next to him.
“Because I care about you, Sokka.” Zuko admitted, not really revealing his feelings but, as he realised afterwards, using a tone that pretty much screamed ‘I want to sleep with you in a romantic manner; please date me’.

Sokka gasped slightly and tilted his head to properly face him, likely not even knowing how his expression made Zuko’s control almost evaporate. The firebender shifted his body even closer, so that their sides were pushed together and their fingertips brushed against each other.

“I- I care about you too. A lot. More than- I’m sorry, you probably don’t want to hear this right now; you must be so angry with me…” His voice wobbled and he moved away once more, turning his hands into fists and squeezing his eyes closed.

“What?! Why would I ever be mad at you?” Asked Zuko, grabbing onto Sokka’s wrist to force the other boy to look at him.

“Because! I was the one- if I hadn’t- when we were fighting Azula- it was my fault.” Half explained the non-bender, definitely close to crying now.

“That wasn’t your fault, Sokka. You didn't blast me with lightning, you didn't make me save you; you were just trying to save me, okay?” Zuko soothed him, unpractised but adequate, he thought, moving his hand down the other boy’s arm to hold his hand instead of his wrist.

Sokka nodded after a pause, squeezing the firebender’s hand before looking back out over the water with a slightly teary smile. The sun had almost completely dipped beneath the horizon, all that was left in the sky being a red/orange slither of light just above the sea, its light reflecting over the transparent surface and turning it into a burning mirror. Zuko found himself calm, the evening air warm with a soft breeze, a beautiful boy by his side and the amazing sunset in front of him.

“... Zuko?” Asked Sokka hesitantly, his muscles suddenly tensing up.

“Hmm?” Responded the Prince calmly, not really expecting much else with any emotional weight to be revealed.

“I- I need to tell you something. I, I don't think I can keep it a secret for any longer because I- you-” Sokka paused midway and took a deep breath in, looking down at their clasped hands. “I like you, Zuko. Like, I like you like you. Which, I know, there's no way you feel the same and it's stupid and you're a guy and you probably hate me now and we can never be friends again and you-”.
At that point, Zuko shut him up with a kiss. It was simplistic but rushed, the Prince just grabbing onto the collar non-bender’s cloak and pulling him into his own lips, pressing them together so closely that neither could even mumble. Sokka froze for a good while, his lips completely still and the hands gripping Zuko’s arms completely stiff. Then, all at once, he loosened, melting into the kiss and pulling Zuko’s body into his own, so that they were completely touching. His hands then drifted down to the other boys hips, whilst the firebender clasped his own hands around the back of his partner’s neck. Sokka’s lack of experience was obvious, but Zuko guessed he couldn't say much as he’d only ever kissed two people in his entire life. And despite how the non-bender seemed new to the whole experience, his newfound enthusiasm made up for it as their kiss quickly became a full on makeout session.

“Wow.” Stated Sokka when they finally had to pull back for air, his lips definitely redder along with his burning cheeks.

“Wow?” Asked Zuko incredulously, combing through his hair with his fingers.

“Well… Yeah. I expected that after I told you about my feelings Katara would have to rescue me from drowning in the ocean, not- not that.” Explained the non-bender, now smiling widely, though it quickly wavered. “Wait? What now?! Are we dating?! I mean… You seem to like me… Right?!“.

“Yes, Sokka, I like you. And, well, I'd like to date you- unless you think we're too busy what with the fate of the world and everything-” Zuko began to ramble, the beginnings of a paranoid meltdown seeping into his mind.

“The world can go to Hell; I'm not waiting months to kiss you again. But, uh, maybe we should take this somewhere more private? It might be easier to make a- to make a relationship work if we're the only ones who know about it.” The firebender sighed in relief at Sokka’s words, nodding gratefully before allowing himself to be led back below deck, the two of them passing the night crew on their way down.

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Azula had never feared death herself; not when she was so confident in her ability to take any opponent down in combat. She had also never lost any sleep over the morality of killing, always thinking of murder as a means to an end- an end she had simply not undertaken until a few weeks ago because, in her opinion, there was always a punishment worse than death.
Killing the avatar however… Was trickier; he was Zuzu, her brother. Yet that really shouldn't have mattered to her at all, not when she would go down in history as the greatest bender to ever live, the person to kill the Avatar once and for all. She had ended the cycle, her father had never been prouder, the entire world either feared or worshipped her. Everything was supposed to be perfect and she was sure, had the avatar been anyone else on the planet, at this very moment she'd be throwing herself a parade instead of sitting alone by the turtle-duck pond.

Her mother and brother had always loved this place, she remembered, they had fed the animals and played happily without her, laughing all the while. While their mother had been teaching Zuko how to get the baby turtle-ducks to like him, she'd been practising her firebending technique tirelessly. But that didn't matter, since he was pathetic and just because their mother loved him more it didn't stop Azula from being the prodigy; the best. In fact, it had only made her despise her brother, not only for his weakness and cowardice but also for how their mother cared about him the most.

Why, then, did she feel so- so strange over Zuko’s death? There was no way it was guilt, no matter how much her heart tugged at the recollection of her brother's limp body hitting the ground, still smoking. What if…

“Ah!” The realisation made her take a sharp breath in, sitting up abruptly and making the animals that were already cowering a good distance away move out even further into the pond.

Zuko must still be alive, that's why she felt so strange, that's why there was a jittery fear splayed across every single one of her nerves. She had to kill him now, for good this time, since everyone already thought him dead and her the victor. If she didn't… Well, all her glory would surely turn to shame.

Chapter End Notes

Hi! New chapter a day early since I'm really busy tomorrow :)

Do you like this one?? Clearly the gay is Happening™ but I wanted to explain my reasoning for having them get together now. I did consider the full on slowburn of having them get together at the very end, like Aang and Katara did. However, I really wanted to write them being cute, supportive bfs and I think it fits with their characters??? Sure, Kataang got together at the very end for good reason- since Katara felt they were too busy to pursue a relationship what with the war. Yet both Zuko and Sokka had relationships before the war was over, so clearly that doesn’t bother them.

Anyway they're dating now.
Also I'm a whore for secret relationships I have no excuses.

Azula... Stuff's going on with her...

Also, THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR BEING PATIENT! Obviously you probably don't want the bi weekly schedule but I'm glad no one's been mad about it, and this more relaxed schedule has helped me destress and work on other projects whilst I'm finishing this. *Hopefully* my other projects will make my writing less stale, since writing 140k of this with no break to write for anything else was turning me a little crazy.

DON'T WORRY THOUGH, I promise this fic will be completed, I don't plan to abandon it :))

As always, if you liked this chapter I'd love a comment and kudos!
Sokka was dating Avatar Zuko, the Prince of the Fire Nation. It was… Surreal to say the least, terrifying but also extremely fulfilling? He wasn't even sure how he felt, but he did know that he wanted to kiss Zuko again, so at least there was that. Unfortunately for the non-bender, however, the blossoming new couple (incredibly new, as in two days old) were surrounded by their friends and had been for the last ten hours whilst travelling on Appa through the Fire Nation. Sokka’s dad and the rest of his tribe, as well as a few others from around the world, we're back on their stolen ship, collecting new fighters for their budding army.

“Are we there yet?” Whined Toph for the ninth time, whilst leant back against the saddle with her eyes closed.

“You know that the rendezvous is weeks away.” Sighed Katara from a few feet away from the other girl, likely sick of answering this question.

It was true; Sokka would not be seeing his dad for a good while, and they had to get to the Capital by the eclipse else all would be lost. This might have been stressing the non-bender out more, except all he had to do to calm his nerves was remember the moonlit, soft smile Zuko had given him two nights ago. Zuko, his boyfriend. Wow… That was crazy to say.

“I meant are we nearly at our first pitstop.” Grumbled the earthbender, now sitting up to frown at Katara.

“Yes!” Aang interrupted what would have probably been a snarky remark from the waterbender, pointing down at a nasty looking cave a couple of miles away from a town.

Their sight of the ground was wrapped up in misty fog, since Katara and Zuko had created a cloud around Appa to disguise him, but Sokka could still see how dark and miserable the cave looked. The town, however, seemed bright and happy- probably filled to the brim with Fire Nation soldiers celebrating the death of the avatar. They landed on the ground and the mist unfurled around them, condensing back into water which the waterbenders of the group brought back into their pouches. It was a sunny day and everything seemed calm, but there was still a very prominent feeling in Sokka’s chest, born from the group being in enemy territory.

“Wow.” Zuko spoke so softly that even Sokka, who was literally two inches away from him,
struggled to hear him. The firebender let out a soft breath before taking it back in and smiling.

“Zukes?” Whispered the non-bender quietly, nudging the other boy with his elbow.

“Oh! It's just…” He began to reply, a little flustered but seemingly not from anything to do with Sokka. He looked again at their surroundings: the vibrant green grass, the cool waves of the sea lapping against the shore behind them, the midmorning sun that lit up the sapphire blue sky like a flame lit up gemstone and even at the cracking grey cave in front of them. “I've missed this place. A lot. Terrible things happened here but… It's still my home.”.

Sokka immediately understood and squeezed his boyfriend’s bicep supportively, before turning back to everyone else to make sure they hadn't managed to destroy all their chances of beating the Firelord in the twenty seconds his focus had been elsewhere.

“Seriously? A cave? Sokka, we could just-” Began Katara in her ‘I'm so sick of my stupid brother voice’, squeezing the bridge of her nose.

“Nah uh! We're in enemy territory now, which means we need to be discreet! Camping out in caves is our safest option, along with relying on insects for fibre and only going outside if we're literally about to die otherwise. This is our lives for the next month and a half, so get used to it.” Interrupted Sokka, who was also unhappy about their campsite but understood that it was their best bet for not dying.

“We don't need to become cave people to be discreet- we just need new clothes.” Protested Katara, tugging distastefully at her tattered water tribe garments which were badly hidden under a dirty, red shawl.

“I think we look fine.” Argued Toph with a smile, which Sokka chose to disregard completely.

“Look, we can take a vote. Raise your hand if you want to get new clothes and put yourselves stupidly in danger.” The non-bender waited for the lack of hands, before being unpleasantly surprised by everyone agreeing with Katara. “Really?! Even you, Zuko?!”.

“... I miss having more than three red outfits.” He admitted bashfully, bowing his head to the floor.

“Uhhh… Zuko, maybe you shouldn't get new clothes? It might be best for you to, I don't know, stay
here?” Gulped Aang, and finally Sokka agreed with one of his friends. At least he could count on them to also be invested in Zuko's safety, even if they weren't invested in their own.

“What?! You want me to just sit in a cave all day while you four go explore my home?!” Zuko looked crestfallen, which tugged at Sokka’s heartstrings, but not as much as it had when he'd seen the firebender fall limp back in Ba Sing Se.

“You won't be alone; Toph can stay with you to teach you some more earthbending. Please just let us protect you?” The non-bender practically begged, making his blue eyes go as wide as possible and clasping his hands together.

After a few moments of stoic silence, the Prince finally gave in and agreed.

Aang was having an extremely good time in the Fire Nation. This hadn't been expected, for obvious reasons, but was true all the same. He recalled the slang from his frolicks with Kuzon (side note: did all Fire Nation names need to have a ‘z’ in them? Kuzon, Sozen, Azulon, Ozai, Azula, Zuko…) and was happily putting it into practise.

“Flameo, Hotman!” Aang waved at a passing man, not worrying about being recognized due to the hat hiding his arrow and his new red clothing. Katara had even said he looked handsome!

“Are you sure that's what firebenders say to each other? I'm pretty sure Zuko has never said that to me.” Fretted Sokka, fiddling with the hem of his new shirt. He had also bought a bag to put the clothes they’d stolen for Toph in, so she didn't feel left out.

“That's because you're not from the Fire Nation! They only say it to their own.” Aang explained confidently, greeting several more strangers with the same expression as they kept walking.

They'd decided food was the first order of business, which was astounding news to the airbender’s grumbling stomach, and were headed off to some of the food stalls. Sokka suggested that they should get Zuko his favourite, since he'd probably still be bummed out about getting left behind by the time they got back to the cave. This meant finding the spiciest dish possible, one so hot that simply smelling it burnt your throat for the next few hours. In the Fire Nation, this was easy.
“Ten orders of your ‘jagged-sun-chilli-and-broken-heart-peppers’ please.” Requested Katara politely, looking as though she were trying not to let her eyes water at the amount of spice concentrated in the air.

The vendor had just said something about how she had made this recipe, something about fusing different pepper seeds together with her firebending, when the burning smell seemingly got too much for Momo, and he scuttled out of the front of Aang's shirt and scrambled through the crowd, barely avoiding getting trampled. The airbender immediately gasped and charged after him, easily dodging the crowds of people by using some subtle airbending, finally finding Momo hidden under a discarded tablecloth about ten feet from the market.

“Hey, it's okay. I'm sure we can find you and Appa some peaches to eat whilst we sear off the inside of our throats.” Aang comforted, holding out his arms for the lemur and letting him jump back into his grasp.

The airbender was just about to turn back around to find his friends, when he saw two large shadows on the floor in front of him. Tucking Momo quickly into the front of his shirt again, he cautiously turned around to face the two figures. There was some sort of police officer, large and dressed in red and bronze in a more simplistic version of what Fire Nation soldiers wore. He had a badge glinting on his chest which matched the angry glint in his brown eyes as he frowned down at Aang, with his hands on his hips. Next to him stood a slightly taller but less buff man in dark crimson robes and wearing glasses, his skinny arms folded over his chest as he too looked down at the boy.

“We know you don't belong here.” Spat the taller man, sending a wave of fear coursing through Aang's body. Did they know he was with the avatar?

“Wha-” He started quietly, preparing to make a run for it as his eyes darted towards the market.

“If you wanted to play hookie, you could have at least changed out of your school uniform.” The officer shook his head, disappointment ringing in his tone as well as… Amusement?

“Uh, right, yeah!” Aang laughed nervously, offering up a bright smile before getting his arms grabbed and being led off, assumably towards the local school.
Toph sat patiently just outside the cave, waiting for Zuko to stop his idiotic pacing so she could beat him up a few times before lunch.

“I can't believe they'd just leave me here! Like, sure, I'm supposed to be dead or whatever but I don't want to have to stay in caves until we fight the Fatherlord!” He ranted, stomping about the ground like a herd of elephant-rhinos.

“You mean the Firelord?” The earthbender corrected boredly, about two syllables more of Zuko’s whinging away from crushing him.

“That’s what I said!” He protested, before pausing in his pacing to sit down on the ground, probably pouting.

“You're just mad because your boyfriend left you behind to be third wheel to Aang and Katara.” Accused Toph easily, picking at her toes whilst the firebender let out an indignant yelp.

She was perfectly aware that Sokka and Zuko had been dating for the last two days- it was pretty obvious even to a blind girl. Plus, she'd overheard them on the ship confessing to each other while she was spying on them. Heck, had Sokka not grown a pair and told Sparky about his feelings, Toph had planned to lock them in a closet together and wait until they had gotten far enough out of their own closets to actually talk to each other.

“Sokka and I are not- I don't know what you're thinking but-” Zuko floundered, his heart rate spiking almost enough for Toph to feel a slight twinge of regret at throwing all of this at the Prince. Almost.

“Shut up, we both know I know. What I don't know are the details- have you had sex yet?” She asked casually, smirking at how Zuko jumped at the question and shuffled back from her a few inches.

“N- no, and it's none of your busine-” Zuko attempted to regain some semblance if composure, even though Toph could tell he was mildly freaking out right now.

“Are you a top or bottom? I always figured I'd be a top when I start having sex so I'm curious-” She wondered aloud, knowing she wouldn't be having sex for years yet but also being interested in what Sokka and Zuko were going to get up to in the bedroom.
“How do you even know about that stuff?!?! You're literally twelve!” The firebender practically yelled, and Toph could just imagine him pulling his hair out right now.

“Well, how do you know about that stuff? Clearly you've never done it yourself.” She smiled at the way his heart rate picked up even further, before remembering it probably wouldn't be best to give her best friend's boyfriend a heart attack.

Because of that, she let the conversation rest for a while, giving Zuko plenty of time to get himself under control. Soon his breathing was normal again and they were both sitting in silence, one that the Prince probably found awkward but Toph found comfortable.

“So, do you want to do some earthbending?” She asked, practically feeling the relief that consumed Zuko with her question.

“Yes please.” He agreed, before pulling himself to his feet and waiting for Toph to do the same. She did, only she pushed up a column on earth from the ground to guide her to a standing position.

They set themselves up to practise, Toph with a little something in mind. Zuko was alright at earthbending by now, even she had to admit (though it was probably only because of her amazing teaching that he'd progressed so quickly), which meant she could either go over the old basics or try something new. Something that would surely frustrate the Prince and be rather amusing for her as he struggled.

“I'm going to teach you how to metalbend.” She revealed once Zuko had finished his warm up. Every lesson they had he had to do thirty pressups, only it was more like doing the plank and earthbending towers of rock beneath your hands to raise you. This, Toph decided, built character in a new pupil.

“What? I thought you were the only metalbender on Earth.” Questioned the firebender.

“I am, which means you'll be have the best teacher possible.” Toph smirked at Zuko’s groan.

“What I meant was I'm not sure if anyone other than you can metalbend.” He explained, not sounding particularly enthusiastic.

“There's only one way to find out.”
“Uh, hi, I'm... Kuzon.” Aang introduced himself to his new classmates, shifting the hat on his head a little to make sure his arrow was completely covered.

Fire Nation school was strange. Sure, the Southern Air Temple had had lessons about things other than airbending and meditation, but they were very relaxed. Aang had learnt how to write at his own pace with songs to help him remember the letters and friends his side. Their history was taught through celebrations rather than stuffy lectures. Yet, this Fire Nation school was teaching them with long lessons where they were made to stay silent and take notes. But some things were still interesting to hear about from the other side’s point of view.

“Does anyone know about the current events going on right now?” Asked their professor snappily—though she did everything snappily so it didn't make much difference.

“Princess Azula defeated the Avatar.” Answered a boy in the third row with a smile on his face after raising his hand.

“Yes. In one hundred years time she will be taught about the same way you are taught about Firelord Sozen; as a savior to our Nation.”

“But didn't she kill her own brother? How does that make her a savior?” Aang questioned after raising his own hand timidly. He knew it was a stupid thing to say when sat in front of an extremely nationalist teacher, but he didn't want the other students to have false knowledge drummed into them.

“What?!?!” The professor half gasped, along with everyone else in the room. “Where would you hear something like that?! The Avatar was not Princess Azula's brother.”

The entire class was now staring at him with wide, curious eyes. Aang decided that challenging this teacher was a terrible, awful idea- but apparently he was going to do it anyway.

“Yes, he was! He was Prince Zuko.” Argued the airbender incessantly, only to be met with blank looks.
“What?” Asked the professor, now too confused to remain angry.

“Prince Zuko, son of Firelord Ozai, older brother of Princess Azula. You must know of him- he is- was- the next in line for the throne before he got banished.” Aang explained, perturbed as to why everyone looked so bewildered.

“Kuzon, Firelord Ozai issued a report months ago that Prince Zuko had died fighting with Princess Azula against the Avatar…” Revealed On Ji from the seat behind him, looking a tad concerned for his sanity.

Aang almost couldn’t believe it: the Firelord had told his entire Nation that Zuko had died, rather than telling him about who he truly was. It made his stomach churn at the thought; how could your own parent care so little for your wellbeing? Sure, everyone in their group had been completely aware of Zuko’s less than ideal upbringing… But for it to extend out to the citizens if the Fire Nation? Ozai would rather have his subjects believe his own son was dead than that he was the avatar, heck, Ozai simply wanted his son dead. It was sickening.

“I have to go.” Aang announced to the class, standing up and hoping his skin wasn't tinted green.

“The day isn’t over yet.” Protested the teacher, but she was still too perplexed from earlier to out any real force behind it.

Aang bowed to her politely before rushing out the door, offering his classmates a smile that probably resembled a grimace more than a grin.

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Zuko was having zero luck metalbending, and it had been three hours. Toph had given him one of Sokka’s belt buckles to break apart, saying he needed the ‘experience’, but so far he'd not even dented it. The buckle was thick and iron, so his normal (though quite impressive) strength wouldn't cut it.

“I don't think this is working, Toph.” He told her, for probably the hundredth time. She only sighed.

“Look,” She began, pinching the bridge of her nose and squeezing her eyes shut, “maybe we just
need a different approach. Metalbending is basically bending the earth inside metal, since metal is just purified earth. See that sand over there? Encrusted in it will be some earth, try to bend it out of the beach. Then, once you've done that, you can go back to bending the earth in this belt buckle.”.

Zuko nodded, before realising his mistake, and gave verbal confirmation that he understood. He then trudged unenthusiastically over to the beach and planted his feet on the sand in a stance. Earthbenders could also bend sand, he knew, but he hadn't quite figured that out yet. Controlling all of those specks took a lot of focus, which he usually didn't have much of. Perhaps that's why he couldn't metalbend? Because he hadn't mastered the rest of earth yet. Or perhaps it simply was impossible for him, like he'd first suspected. Maybe Toph was the only one capable of such an advanced technique- she was a prodigy, after all, and Zuko had never been a prodigy.

He imagined his senses reaching through the sand to find earth, but it felt distant and unreachable. This was stupid, he knew, since the rocks couldn't be that far down. Trying again, Zuko attempted to just shift a little of the sand at the surface, just a few specks, and succeeded. He then thought about doing the same thing with the rocks deeper, tensing his muscles.

“I don't feel you moving the rocks.” Noted Toph, breaking the Prince's already flimsy concentration.

“Toph! Ugh, give me a sec. How far down is this earth anyway?” He asked, to which she raised her eyebrow. The firebender cursed his boyfriend for a moment for teaching her that.

“Not that far, Sparky.” She replied boredly, and Zuko gave a quiet, incredulous moan.

He attempted again, feeling through the sand down, as deep as he could feel. Eventually, a tug in his gut told him he'd found something bendable. It felt different from earth, hotter somehow- almost like he was firebending without air, which was impossible. He put this down to the rock being so far away and likely compressed, before he began pulling. Yes, it definitely felt like fire- but it was also earth. An uncanny mixture of the two. But he kept at it, feeling it flow closer and closer to the surface.

“Zuko? What are you doing? That doesn't feel like earth…” For once I her life, Toph sounded legitimately concerned.

The firebender considered stopping, letting go of this strange bending and just making them dinner or something, but it was close to the surface now and he was just too curious to give up. It became easier as the fiery earth got closer, until it practically slipped out of the surface of the beach with no effort from him at all. It was… Magma?
Or lava now, he supposed, glistening in the midday sun as it floated a few inches off of the ground. Where it had touched the sand was now crystallised and covered in soot. He pulled the lava towards himself, letting it wrap around his arm without touching it. It flowed like water, only it felt a thousand times more natural for him to bend it.

“I can lavabend.” He whispered, looking down at his arm in bewilderment.

“Well then, I guess our lesson’s over.” Said Toph, not bothering to hide her shock before she spun on her heels and headed back towards the cave.

After a few minutes Zuko followed her, dropping the lava back onto the sand and watching as it sizzled away at the grains.

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Somehow Sokka had managed to lose a twelve year old airbender in the middle of a Fire Nation market. Sure, it was several hours ago now, but the worry was still fresh on his mind. Katara was even worse off as they stumbled around, searching for the kid. They couldn't even shout his name since it might alert everyone around them that they were travelling with an airbender, and that would be about as good as telling sabre-toothed-moose-lion that you'd stolen her cub.

“What do we do, Sokka?!?!” Questioned Katara worriedly, still scanning the crowd in front of them for Aang. His sister looked on the verge of a melt down, and the non-bender really didn't blame her.

“What do you about what?” Asked a rather depressed voice from behind them, causing them to spin round in shock and crush Aang with their hugs. “Ugh, guys? This is great but I need air.”.

“Where did you go?!” Quizzed Sokka, ready to kill whoever had taken Aang away from them.

“School.” He replied simply, still looking less chipper than usual.

“Fire Nation school?!?!” Yelled Katara and her brother in unison, causing a few too many people to turn their way.
They chose to talk about it back at the cave, and headed there. It was about four o'clock by then and it was only a half an hour walk, so it would have been pleasant had Sokka’s thoughts not been swirling around his brain like socks in Gran-Gran’s washing bowl. Was Aang okay? He seemed much too melancholy. Did Fire Nation school teach him anything or was it just a propaganda machine? Did he have to consider punching a headmaster? They kept going towards their campsite until the smell of cooking fish hit them, reminding Sokka of the chilli still in his satchel which was now cold. They could still heat it up but the non-bender silently hoped it would still be as good as Zuko liked it, since disappointing your boyfriend barely two and a half days into the relationship didn't seem like the best course of action.

“Hey! You're back!” Greeted Zuko with a smile, seeming to look at Sokka just a tad longer than the other two. At that he had to fight down the urge to kiss him, and he momentarily wondered why they were keeping their relationship a secret.

“You would have known that ten minutes ago if you'd practised using your seismic sense like I told you to.” Grumbled Toph, but it was with her usual attitude so Sokka wasn't worried.

“You're just pissy because you can't lavabend.” Returned Zuko with a very hot smirk, making Sokka forget everything else he’d been thinking about.

“You can lavabend?!” Aang cried out, rushing up to the firebender and staring at him in awe as though he were a brand new person.

“Yep, Sparky’s got a new skill- but he still can't metal or sandbend.” Toph rolled her eyes and pushed Aang away from an uncomfortable looking Zuko.

“Anyway,” Katara quickly changed the subject as she began plating up the almost completely burnt fish (seriously, they were blackened) “Aang, you went to school today?”.

There was a few moments of silence as they all stared at the airbender, who'd suddenly become very entranced by his disgusting looking fish.

“Yeah.” He eventually replied, shifting the salmon-trout around his plate a little.

They were all sitting in a circle now, in the cave, with their terribly cooked food courtesy of Zuko. The firebender had also lit the campfire before sitting next to Sokka, not having a plate of his own likely because he realised how awful of a chef he was. Still, the non-bender had the urge to force
feed him a little, worried he'd get sick. But that urge was currently overpowered by his concern for Aang.

“What happened?” Katara asked softly, placing her hand on Aang’s arm comfortingly.

“It was fine, at first. The teacher was snappy but the other students seemed nice and some if the lessons were even helpful! Did you know there’s a secret river straight to the Fire Nation Palace? But then we started talking about current events like, you know, Azula killing Zuko. She called Azula a saviour and I said someone who killed their brother should not be considered heroic, but they had no idea what I was talking about. It turns out that they were told months ago that Zuko died fighting the Avatar.” The airbender explained after another stretch of quiet, now placing his plate down in front of him. The rest of them did the same.

No one in the Fire Nation, bar Azula’s group, Iroh and the Firelord, realised that their own Prince was their enemy. They were being lied to, tricked into committing treason, and with how much their society seemed to value honour… Well, it just seemed wrong. What was most wrong about this situation though, Sokka thought, was the look on Zuko’s face.

“No one here will care if my Father kills me; they don't even know I am me! My Father and sister have simplified this into black and white, where I'm the enemy just so their people don't think twice about my death.” Zuko looked frustrated to the point of tears, squeezing his hands into fist so hard that his nails must have been digging into his palms.

Sokka uncurled the firebender’s fingers, before squeezing his hand. Toph’s vaguely annoyed look from earlier was now a saddened one, and she reached from Zuko’s other side to squeeze his other hand. Since he now had no hands left, Katara and Aang just have him sympathetic expressions from the other side of the fire.

“You really won the lottery of worst dads huh, buddy?” Joked Sokka lightly after a couple of minutes, which the Prince sniffed at before leaning slightly into his side. Only then did Sokka consider if people usually called their boyfriends ‘buddy’.

There was a calm while after that, all of them opting to skip dinner except Zuko who practically combusted from happiness at the sight of Katara pulling chilli out of her satchel. Aang soon drifted off to sleep, snuggled into Katara’s side like a baby koala-otter. The rest followed soon after, none of them bothering to stay up to keep watch.
Azula stalked through the prison, glaring viciously at any guard who looked at her wrong— or looked at her at all for that matter; they weren't worthy enough to see her beauty. She was headed through the damp, cobwebbed prison to see her halfwit uncle, who might shed some light on where Zuko was hiding. Zuko was most assuredly alive, she thought, and that's what she had to focus on. She walked into Iroh’s cell and peered around it in disgust— the molded bars and grimy ceiling practically screaming disease. Still, it didn't really matter if her failure of an uncle slowly fell ill because of his putrid prison cell as long as he told her what she needed to know first.

“Iroh.” She greeted sternly, causing the ragged, grey man in front of her to turn.

“What, Princess Azula, no ‘uncle’?” He asked with half a smile that didn't even begin to reach his cold eyes. She'd always thought it strange that two eyes that were usually warmer than a summer's day could become icy just at the sight of her— the same had happened with her mother.

“Traitors are no family of mine.” She replied simply, pretending to pick some non existent dirt from her heavily bitten fingernails.

“Is that why you thought it acceptable to kill Zuko?” Questioned Iroh harshly, with such hate in his eyes that Azula was sure he could turn a whole army back from just staring at them long enough.

“Only he isn't dead, is he?” She smiled frostily, ignoring any twinge of feeling that spiked across her chest.

“You're more paranoid than your great grandfather was, Azula. You shot him with lightning; how could Zuko survive that?” He was so calm it was making the Princess freak out a little, which she wasn't used to and decided that she didn't like.

“He must be alive!” She slammed her fists against the bars, not caring about the pain since she'd taught herself to bear it years ago— with the help of her father, of course.

Azula turned from her chained uncle and gulped, before taking a breath in and facing him again. She noticed now his messy hair and tattered rags, remembering how he'd always managed to be happy with so little. She laughed aloud.

“Azula?” Iroh looked perturbed now, thanks to her sudden fit of what could be described as little more than giggles.
“It's just seeing you here, in your tiny, dirty, rat infested prison cell with no proper clothes, or nutritional food or clean water while you despair over your, definitely not dead but also not coming back, nephew and probably remembering your, very dead and also not coming back, son. And yet you always used to be able to stay bright in times of darkness, so I find it funny that now your life's do dark that the only light you could possibly muster is your burning hatred for me. It's pathetic.” She laughed again, more merrily this time and for longer.

Iroh leaned back slightly, steeling himself but she still saw how his expression shook and his breath hitched

“Zuko is dead, Azula. Give up.” He stated with ill-concealed anger.

But he can't be, she thought as she left the cell.

Chapter End Notes

Hey again, new chapter! Are you proud? :))

This is the LAST schedule update, I promise, if I don't post in two weeks time it's not because I've given up or anything, I'm just going on holiday for a fortnite in a week and might not have Wi-Fi/time to post.

Also, you might notice that Azula slowly losing her marbles faster than she did in the show. This is because I feel that Azula went insane in the show due to people diverting her expectations of them, like Mai and Ty Lee leaving her when she thought they were too scared to. So now it's really hitting her that her brother 'was' the Avatar, when she always considered him weak, and her own *feelings* regarding his 'death' are also tripping her up.

Btw I love when a kind/peaceful/caring character (Iroh) loses their shit due to an emotional outburst lol

Comments and kudos are VERY appreciated, they brighten my soul :'}
Chapter 39

There is buildup to and heavy reference of consensual sex in this chapter between two sixteen year olds. It is not graphic whatsoever, but I'm warning you just in case it makes you uncomfortable, which I can understand. This fic has not been tagged as underage, however, because Ao3’s guidelines only require it to be if the sex was graphic. Also, I live in England where the legal age of consent is sixteen, so I'm not exactly made uncomfortable by this- basically, I'm sorry if you don't like that sex is being implied but I've warned you and adhered to Ao3's rules, so there's not much I can do. I hope you enjoy the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Remember everyone, we're on a really tight schedule so we can only stay here for a day.” Reminded Sokka for the fourth time that morning after they'd landed a little outside a Fire Nation town. All things considered, they'd had a relatively easy time so far since their fight at Ba Sing Se, but Katara still found herself hoping for more than just a day’s pit stop.

“Come on, Sokka, we have plenty of time before the eclipse. Do we really need to rush so much?” She moaned as they headed towards the town for supplies.

“Yes! It's always better to be early than late anyway, plus knowing us we'll get into trouble halfway there and be stuck for a month.” Okay, Sokka had a point.

They kept walking towards the town until they came across some small, mouldy rafts and a man named Doc. He offered them a way across and Aang excitedly agreed. It was a mucky, depressing place to say the least with brown, sickly looking water and houses falling apart. The town was elevated on wooded, rotted planks and looked close to collapsing. Even the people had an air of mellow sadness, with skin paler than Zuko's and hair greasy enough to cook seal-bacon with. Their clothes were dirty right down to the seams and the children they passed had pants that barely reached halfway down their calves, and were ripped almost to pieces. It tugged at Katara’s heart how the skin hung of their faces, reminding her painfully of how her own villagers looked when it was too cold to collect sufficient food for weeks.

“This place…” Katara trailed off quietly, trying not to let Doc hear her.

“It's awful.” Zuko finished grimly, whilst playing with the hem of his red shirt. Sokka, who was sat extremely close to the Prince, placed his hand on his thigh.
“I… Always thought everyone in the Fire Nation had more money than they had morals. But this place- it's just as bad as the Earth Kingdom.” Admitted her brother, leaning back so far that he would have fallen out of the raft if it wasn't for Zuko's quick reflexes.

“What's that about the Earth Kingdom?” Asked Doc cheerily, making the group freeze.

“We're from the colonies.” Toph replied simply, before elbowing Sokka hard enough to crack a rib. Thankfully, he bit back his wince of pain.

They'd chosen to let Zuko tag along, mostly because the ramshackle town didn't look like it would have anyone capable of reading the words on a wanted poster. It was also falling apart to the point that, even if the town tried to arrest Zuko, it would probably take the measliest flame in existence to destroy the entire place. Yet there was a factory a short distance away that could prove problematic if Zuko was recognised, but he'd probably have less chance of getting noticed when surrounded by other Fire Nation citizens than he would weirdly alone on some hill with a sky bison and a lemur.

“Now, let me just grab my brother, Shop, so he can sell you some food!” Doc smiled before entering a small stall, ducking under the counter and reappearing again, only this time with a straw hat on his head. “Hello, kids, I'm Shop! So, what'll it be? Fish, clams or, get this, two headed fish!”.

“... What?! You're Doc!” Remarked Sokka in shock, before Katara could tell him to leave the crazy man alone so they could get some disgusting and probably disease-ridden fish.

“No, that's my brother. I'm Shop.” Doc/Shop grinned and held out a fish that was leaking green mucus, and suddenly Katara considered joining Aang in being a vegetarian.

Zuko ended up having to physically wrench Sokka away from his argument with Shop, after they'd wasted over half an hour going back and forth over how a new hat didn't make you a new person. All the way back to Appa and their camp, Katara just couldn't shake the feeling that she had to help the villagers somehow; so many were dying from illness and were in poverty, whilst the nearby factory turned a blind eye to innocent people's suffering. Perhaps not everyone in the Fire Nation was a murderous monster, but the leadership and much of the military were clearly indifferent to their own citizens’ struggles.

That's what made them cruel.
Never one to watch as others struggled, that night Katara decided to do something that would probably bite her in the ass later if Sokka found out. Whilst her group slept soundly in the individual, large earth tents Toph had made them all, the waterbender crept silently into the night with nothing more than a dark shawl over her stark red outfit to hide her in the shadows. She made her way out of their camp and internally remarked that they should probably have nightly surveillance since it was almost ridiculous how easy it was to sneak around under their noses. Using waterbending, Katara then glided across the stinking water with what she hoped was covert elegance, before finding herself back in the small town.

Now she just had to get to work- easy enough, right? Clearly what the villagers needed was money, clean food and water that wasn’t 90% cholera, however she simply didn’t have the resources to give them that. Yet she could, quite easily if she was careful, steal some resources from the nearby factory for them. The waterbender also figured that she’d be able to heal some of the sick children just with her bending.

Katara carried out her plan as quickly as she could, thankful that everyone else in a ten mile radius seemed to be sound asleep; she seriously didn’t want to run into any suspicious firebenders that night. Then, once she’d accomplished all she fisably could in one night, she took in her handiwork. The villagers already looked happier as they slept and there was a budding feeling of contentment residing in the heart of the place, only… It wasn’t enough.

Deciding Sokka and his schedule could be damned, Katara picked some (okay, many) purple berries that she figured were the type to turn one’s tongue violet and shovelled them into Appa’s snoring mouth. Not one to pass up on food, even when he was asleep, the bison chewed them up appreciatively between tired grunts before falling back into a deeper sleep.

Well, at least now she’d have more time to help the villagers.

Zuko sat impatiently in his messy pile of blankets, waiting for a suitable time to sneak out of his tent and beginning to curse himself for wanting this relationship to be secret. Well, he didn’t want it to be just between him and Sokka forever, they’d tell their friends at some point, but for now he couldn’t make out with his boyfriend whenever he wanted and that was almost as difficult as getting over being the avatar! Okay, so perhaps he was exaggerating just slightly.
Yet it was tricky; ever since they’d gotten together they’d had to steal quiet moments in the dead of night to kiss and talk and to do, hopefully tonight, other stuff as well… Which was what Zuko had been thinking about for most of the day, especially when Sokka had gotten all hot and bothered arguing with Shop (or Doc or whatever)- somehow his boyfriend’s ‘I’m so stressed and frustrated right now’ expression was one of his most attractive.

Finally, about an hour after they’d turned in for the night, Zuko figured it was the right time for him to sneak into Sokka’s earth tent. At that moment he decided Toph was his best friend for giving the firebender and non-bender adjoining tents, though she probably did it as part of a not-so-sneaky plot to get them in bed together. Well, Zuko hoped it worked for both their sakes.

He earthbended a doorway into Sokka’s tent, slipping through so quickly that he didn’t even have time to regard what was on the other side before closing it back up. When he did properly concentrate on Sokka, he got quite the sight indeed; the other boy was stretched out on top of some nicely arranged blankets (that Zuko was sorry to say he wasn’t paying much attention to) holding some sort of flower in his mouth. He was also not wearing any pants.

“Hi.” Zuko squeaked, pretty sure his face was completely red and not even trying to hide how aroused he already was.

“Hey.” Sokka replied a fraction more calmly after taking out the flower and tossing it aside, he got to his feet, moving up towards the firebender slowly and eventually getting close enough to rest his hands on Zuko’s hips. His grip was a little tight, betraying his nerves, but the Prince leaned into it all the same. “I- uh, there were meant to be candles but you... *cough* I figured you’d be better with those…”.

The firebender bit his lip to hide his chuckle, and wondered what they were going to do from there. Sokka still had his hands on his hips and Zuko’s arms had somehow managed to loop themselves around the back of the other’s neck. Deciding this was as good a position to start in as any, the Prince leant forwards to kiss the slightly taller boy, who immediately parted his lips receptively.

Kissing Sokka was much different from kissing Jet, who was all heat and tongue and teeth. No, Sokka’s kisses were calmer and slower, more loving somehow and a promise that he’d be safe. Yet, at this moment, Zuko didn’t really want to feel safe- he wanted to feel all the nerves and passion that came with what he hoped they were about to do. The non-bender seemed to be under the same impression, if his position when the Prince walked in was anything to go by, but he wasn’t a mind reader.

“Umm, could we...?” He trailed off, hoping he was being fairly obvious about what he wanted as he
pulled himself even closer to Sokka.

The non-bender, not an idiot by a long shot, smirked into the kiss and pulled Zuko forwards as he walked back towards the blankets on the floor, swivelling round at the last moment so that Zuko fell unceremoniously onto his back and Sokka was above him, straddling him.

“Sure.” He grinned a toothy smile, not seeming as nervous as before as he leant down for another kiss. This one was chaise and was followed by several more, each one getting lower and lower until one reached the sensitive part in the crook of Zuko’s pale neck, causing him to gasp and turn away in embarrassment.

Shifting slightly, Sokka sat up on his knees and pulled his loose shirt over his head without falter, probably having picked the garment because of how easy it seemed to be removed. He then ran his hands down Zuko’s well-muscled form, letting them rest on his thighs before spreading apart his legs carefully and positioning himself so that the non-bender was now in between the other’s legs. The firebender, who up until that point had been loosely gripping Sokka’s hair, moved to take his own shirt off but was stopped by his boyfriend grabbing onto his wrists and pushing them down onto the blankets.

“I- umm- wanted to do that…” He confessed, possibly as red as Zuko suspected himself to be at this point. The Prince nodded and allowed the other to pull of his shirt, before moving down so that his right hand pressed against the hardening bulge in his pants.

Zuko gulped. This was going to be fun.

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“Bad news everyone: Appa is sick.” Lamented Aang sadly, gesturing to the bison whose purple stained tongue hung out of his mouth. Katara decided that, from the convincingly sluggish movements Appa was going through, she should include him in her lies more often.

“Aww, no! That’s terrible!” She sighed with as much conviction as she could before turning to her brother, who was fretting over their schedule instead of eating the breakfast she’d made for him.

“Great! Just perfect! Now we’re going to have to stay here for an extra day, which will put us behind two days because of the wind speed which will-” Sokka complained, running his hands through his
hair—which seemed messier than usual but was probably just because of him running his hands through it.

“Quit worrying, Sokka, you’d think you’d be less stressed after last night.” Remarked Toph with a poorly executed wink, which made Sokka choke on his own words.

“Wait! What happened last night?” Aang asked innocently before Katara had a chance to, turning all their attention to the non-bender.

“Well- umm- uh, you see- I, uh, that is to say…” Sokka stumbled over his sentence multiple times before pausing to take a breath and looking to Zuko, who had just walked out of his tent. “We were training! Me and Zuko, I mean, to let go of tension and, uh, stuff… It’s how he got that bruise on his neck!”

Toph spat out a laugh at that, though Katara didn’t know why, and both Sokka and Zuko flushed, the latter shifting the hem of his shirt to cover a strikingly obvious mark on his neck. The waterbender wondered, momentarily, how on Earth her non-bending brother managed to land a hit on the almighty Avatar hard enough to leave a bruise, before deciding that she should not doubt Sokka’s abilities. Still strange though...

“Anyway,” Coughed Zuko, sounding a little too eager to change the topic (did he really find getting barely hurt by a non-bender to be that mortifying? Hmm, perhaps Katara should have some words with him…) “I heard you say that Appa was sick?”

“Yes, so we should probably get some more food from the village.” Suggested Aang in between mouthfuls of the lettuce he was eating for breakfast. Compared to her own meal of rotting oysters, the waterbender once again considered vegetarianism.

And so they did, heading into the small town using Doc’s (or wait, was he Shop right now?) small raft. However, something about the people had changed—hope and happiness was painted as clearly on their features as Zuko’s scar stood out on his face. They also seemed to be celebrating something, fixing old-looking red and orange ribbons around the beams that held up their houses.

“What’s going on here?” Sokka asked, apparently also having noticed the shift in everyone’s moods.

“We’re celebrating!” Cheered Doc, even though Sokka’s question had been directed at Zuko, their resident and only Fire Nation expert.
“Umm, what are you celebrating exactly?” Questioned Aang after he finished explaining to Toph about how the villagers were putting up ribbons.

“The Painted Lady, of course! Last night she visited our little town- one of the little’uns saw her, she healed our sick and left us a few gallons of clean water!” Explained the eccentric man excitedly, gesturing around as he spoke.

“Well I hope she keeps coming back,” Sokka began one they’d reached Doc’s shop, “Otherwise this town’ll go straight back to how it was.”

Katara ignored Sokka’s sigh and instead straightened herself up, staring at the small Painted Lady figure on Doc’s counter. The woman having carved wooden skin a shade unsimilar to that of most Fire Nation citizens and wearing a black cloak and red dress that were strikingly similar to the outfit she’d worn the night before.

Well then, she supposed, the Painted Lady would just have to come back again tonight.

That night Katara once again snuck out of her earth tent, and headed silently towards the village. Only this time she had painted her face with the same markings as she’d seen on the Painted Lady statue at Doc’s (or Shop’s) shop. She had also put together a hat with a veil around it, which was also a feature of the supposed spirit, and was wearing it both to obscure her own face but also to give the impression that she really was the Painted Lady.

The waterbender stole from the factory all over again, this time noting that their seemed to be a slight increase in security- likely because of her having stolen from them the night before. However, it was still incredibly easy for her to sneak through the grimy halls, avoiding the few Fire Nation soldiers she came across.

Afterwards, Katara made her way back into the village and repeated her actions from the previous nights. This time there were a few people still awake, likely wanting to see the Painted Lady with their own eyes, but she hid herself from their tired eyes with some thick mist. She took special care delivering the supplies and then sped off back to Appa, feeling a well of happiness in her chest at knowing she was helping these people. And, due to that warm feeling, Katara realised that she
couldn't leave the villagers yet- there was still so much more to do.

So, once again, the waterbender shovelled some berries into Appa’s mouth.

Katara was perfectly aware that she was lying to her brother and friends to help people that, just days before, she would have considered their enemies. Except now they weren't and they needed help so she couldn't just sit by- which is why she found herself preparing to sneak out for the third night in a row.

“Going somewhere?” Asked a teasing voice behind her, one that belonged to Zuko who was stood with his arms crossed behind her.

“I-” She began, turning around to see Aang also looking at her with a touch of disapproval in his expression.

“I can't believe you've been sneaking out at night!” The airbender cried, much too loudly in Katara’s opinion.

“Shhh! Okay, fine, I've been leaving during the night to help the villagers. How did you even find out?” She questioned, having thought her friends were the most oblivious people in existence.

“Well, today I thought you looked really tired so I was worried you couldn't sleep. I convinced Zuko to help me make you some tea and we took it to your tent… Except you weren't there. Then we found you here, walking out of the campsite dressed up like the Painted Lady spirit.” Explained Aang, touching the girl's heart with how concerned he'd been but also infuriating her since no doubt she'd now be forced to come clean to Sokka.

They stood in stubborn silence for a few moments, in which Katara considered what course of action she could take. Either she could attempt to keep Aang and Zuko quiet by guilting them with how miserable the villagers were, or she could accept defeat and they'd leave in the morning.

“Look, Katara,” Began Zuko in a scarily straightforward tone “we want to help you; we can't stay
here forever stealing supplies for the village, but we can put a permanent stop to the root of the problem.”.

“Yes,” Aang nodded, matching the glint in Zuko's eye with his own devilish smirk (it was attractive on his normally innocent face) “we need to destroy the factory!”.

The trio then headed off towards the factory, though not before Katara had kitted them all out in some disguises. She retained her Painted Lady cosplay, whilst Zuko once again adopted his Blue Spirit persona and Aang simply wore a blood red, hooded cloak. Together they must have looked quite the sight, which was fine since the waterbender created a cloud of mist to camouflage them in the inky night.

“Okay, so here’s the plan: Aang runs through the factory and knocks out the few guards, before taking them out of the building so that Zuko and I can flood the bottom of the factory. Zuko will then earthbend a small avalanche onto the top two floors to ensure the factory is completely unusable. Okay?” Katara explained once they were outside of the building they were about ten minutes away from destroying.

“Yeah.” Both boys nodded confidently, before Aang sped off inside.

His airbending made him incredibly fast and meant that, within just a few minutes, he'd dragged six unconscious guards out of the factory and had placed them carefully outside of where they'd be wrecking. This gave Katara and the Prince free reign to go completely wild, wrenching hundreds of gallons of filthy water up to churn through the halls of the factory, leaving it a mess of sodden, twisted metal. With the first floor practically obliterated, it meant that the building didn't stay upright for very long when Zuko began earthbending boulders onto the roof, causing the entire thing to collapse in on itself in a almost horrifying show of power.

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“Well, that was fun.” The firebender sighed happily as they headed back to their campsite, the light of dawn just beginning to peak over the village to shine down at them. Hopefully Sokka and Toph wouldn’t be up when they got back.

Unfortunately, though, the world simply hated Katara.
“Hello there, traitors.” Sokka looked even more furious than the waterbender could have imagined, his face twisted into an angry snarl.

“Hey, Sokka-” They all muttered quietly, looking down at the floor.

“Don't ‘hey, Sokka’ me! You've been lying about Appa being ill, haven't you?!” Sokka pointed at Toph, whose tongue was the same purple as Appa’s.

“That was just me.” Katara attempted to defend Aang and Zuko from her brother's wrath, thought it seemed in vain.

“So how long have these two been involved in your extracurricular activities, Katara?!” Sokka asked, gesturing to Zuko and Aang’s disguises and then to the girl’s own.

“Just tonight, okay, Sokka?! Ugh, I just wanted to help the villagers, is that really so bad?!” She questioned him with heavy exasperation.

“It is when you lie about it! Did you ever stop to think that there's a reason for the schedule?! That maybe we have it so we don't miss out one chance to defeat the Firelord and to save more people than we ever could by staying here forever and sneaking a few dozen people medicine that they've been living without for years. I get that you were just trying to help but you have to think about the big picture, Katara!” Sokka ranted, running his hands through his already messy bedhead.

“I was thinking about the big picture, alright?! That's why we decided to deal with the root of the village’s problems- the dirty water caused by the factory. We destroyed the factory so now the village will be fine and we can leave, are you happy?!?” Katara shouted back, shoving Sokka back by hitting the center of his chest, yet he stood his s ground and swatted her away.

“And how do you think the soldiers will react to their factory getting destroyed, huh?! Do you really think they'll just laugh it off and move somewhere else and pollute that place?! No! They'll blame the villagers!” The non-bender yelled at her, and by now they're friends had slowly backed away from them.

He was right, Katara quietly realised; the village would get the blame for destroying the factory.

“I didn't-” She practically whispered, all angry heat lost from her voice as she felt her eyes brimming
with guilty tears.

“I-” Sokka sighed, also deflating, before wrapping his shaking duster up in his arms and letting her nuzzle his shoulder quietly. “I know you just wanted to help, sis, but sometimes you need to think about all of the consequences of your actions- not just the positive ones. And right now, we still need to help that village, okay?”

Katara silently nodded, prepared for whatever they had to do.

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A couple of hours later they heard the commotion that signalled the soldiers showing up at the village, and they acted accordingly. Everyone aside from Katara rushed into the crowd of people (Zuko wearing a large hat) and screaming out in fear with them, before pretending to pray for the Painted Lady to come save them.

“You scum are the ones who took our supplies and wrecked out factory; no mythical spirit is coming to save you!” Jeered a soldier, sending a wave of fire at the crowd.

Except Katara was coming to save them, and sent a wave a water to douse the flames whilst she glided over the top of the water. Her presence was immediately met by cheers, the loudest of which coming from Sokka. She then brought thick, black clouds into existence and clouded the sky above them with them, causing a shadow to stretch over the angry soldiers.

“Who’s there?!” One asked worriedly, his breath hitching noticeably as Katara glided towards him.

The waterbender chose not to grace him with an answer, instead opting to use the water below the village to break the beams that the soldiers were supported by. They fell unceremoniously into the gross liquid before hurriedly swimming away.

“Thank you, Painted Lady!” Cheered Doc, to which Katara nodded and left herself, not wanting anyone to see how her face paint was running.

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That night they left the town, but not without the Painted Lady visiting one last time to clean the majority of the dirty water.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the hiatus I took whilst in Greece, but I hope this chapter makes up for it :))

Comments and kudos are super appreciated!
In the dead of the night, about four hours after their group had settled into their campsite, Sokka was rudely awakened by a soaring sound cutting through the air. His first instinct was to berate Aang about airbending so late and so loudly (seriously, who knew how aggravatingly unquiet air could be in the hands of a thirteen year old boy?). Yet, after blinking the hours of slumber out of his eyes and focusing on the night sky, Sokka realised that their problem was a lot worse than an insomniac airbender.

“Guys… Guys! Wake up! There’s a meteorite heading straight for that town!” Sokka yelled, kicking his friends as he rushed passed them in order to rouse them.

The comet wasn't too big, all things considered, but it left a flaming streak across the sky that prophesied destructive power. His friends, now thankfully conscious, seemed to notice this too and immediately jumped into action in the only way four massively powerful benders could.

Zuko led the charge towards the hulking meteorite, seemingly pulling the heat away from it and syphoning it off with his firebending. Toph created a massive trench for it to land in, stamping her feet to dig deeper into the earth. Aang, with the serious expression on his face that only appeared in dire situations, then began bending the air currents around the meteorite to aim it into Toph’s waiting trench- Zuko helping once it became too much for a single person to bear the strain. The non-bender watched in shock as the thing finally crashed into the earth, sending a massive shock wave his way, causing him, Momo and a few trees to fall over, but not wrecking anymore havoc. Finally, with grace he would've never expected from his sister just six months ago, Katara forced a massive spout of water from a river half a mile away to douse the meteorite, ridding it of the last of its furious heat.

“Welp, I guess that's done with. Can we go back to bed now?” Toph questioned boredly, yawning into her fist as if to persuade them.

“I suppose, but we should probably move our camp a little further away; someone from that village might have noticed all the commotion.” Recommended Katara as they began to walk back where they came, her lips pursed thoughtfully.

Meanwhile, Sokka was still frozen in shock with Momo, now upright and on his shoulder, nibbling affectionately at his ear. The meteorite had seemed like an unstoppable force in his eyes, and yet his friends had dealt with it with the nonchalance that came with eating breakfast or tying your laces. The non-bender had always known the group was powerful, full to the brim with master benders, and he'd always known that, next to them, his usefulness seemed practically non-existent. Still,
though, it wasn't until then that he managed to recognise how doomed their group would be without any single one of the benders, and how fine it would be without him.

With that in mind, Sokka finally began following his friends back to camp, hoping for a better tomorrow.

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He didn't get that much sleep after that, even though his friends fell into an easy slumber as soon as their heads hit their pillows. The group (or, more accurately, Aang and Katara) had opted to start camping normally, without using Toph’s earth tents. This was because they figured that it would raise suspicion about the presence of an earthbender, which was such a solid argument that it was difficult for the other three to argue against it.

This had two repercussions: one, Sokka could no longer sleep with Zuko curled up on his chest like an overgrown kitten, and two, the non-bender couldn't talk about his insecurities with his boyfriend privately. A lose-lose situation.

In turn, this meant that the next morning Sokka was feeling especially grouchy and was without an appetite, an extremely unusual occurrence.

“You know the worst thing about Zuko being ‘dead’ and all of us being undercover?” Asked Toph, leaning back against a stump as she chomped down one of Aang’s carrots, said boy grimacing at each clash of her teeth.

“I get to see just how much all the people of my Nation hate me?” The firebender supplied boredly, tearing apart his own food with his surprisingly sharp teeth (Sokka would know).

“No! There's no more hero worship, duh. I miss the good ol' days in the Earth Kingdom where I was offered a free foot massage at every town we rescued- now I have to settle for Sokka’s shoddy work.” The girl corrected, and Sokka felt too down to even argue that he was the best foot masseuse in the entire Southern Tribe. All he could really think was that his largest contribution to their team was his ability to keep Toph’s toes limber.

“We shouldn't do good things just for rewards, Toph. The monks always taught us that ‘a deed is only truly good if done without thought of reward’.” Aang brought up, as if he wasn't interested in
defending Sokka’s foot massaging honour.

“You were singing a different tune in Kyoshi when all those girls just couldn’t get enough of your airbending.” Katara grumbled from her place cooking breakfast, making Aang blush heavily.

“Now this I gotta hear about!” Toph decided in her usual mischievous tone, as the airbender hid his increasingly red face in his hands.

They spoke about Kyoshi for several minutes then, until finally the group noticed that Sokka hadn’t contributed anything to the discussion- not even when they told the bald-faced lie that Suki had beaten him up with her arms behind her back and her eyes closed. Though, the non-bender supposed, she probably could’ve if she'd wanted to.

“Are you sure you don't want any lizard-rat jerky? It's delicious.” Zuko asked, frowning slightly as he waved a shrivelled chunk of red meat in front of the non-bender’s face. Sokka swatted it away.

“No…” He mumbled with about as much energy as a sleeping koala-turtle.

“Come on Sokka, you’ve never missed breakfast in the fourteen years I've been alive; what's up?” Katara prompted gently, nudging his arm as he looked out of the fields surrounding them.

Off in the not-so-far-away distance, the non-bender was still able to see the smoking remains of the meteorite as it sat harmlessly in its crater. The sight made him sigh childishy, and turn away, back so he was facing his friends.

“It's just, all you guys can do this awesome bending stuff like putting out forest fires, and stopping meteorites, and flying around and making other stuff fly around. I can't fly around, okay? I can't do anything.” He admitted sullenly, now training his eyes on the dirt beneath his feet rather than the concerned looks everyone (bar Toph, whose fringe was covering her eyes) was giving him.

There was a few moments of thick and awkward silence as everyone seemed to consider their next words carefully, probably trying to conjure up a lie about how helpful Sokka had been. Yet… He just couldn’t see how he’d done anything remotely substantial in between letting the Avatar almost die for good and watching as his friends saved an entire town from destruction.

“You've done-” Began Zuko nervously, making a strange hand gesture as he gurgled out a few
incomprehensible words, like he couldn't properly communicate what he was trying to say.

“You know what?” Katara interrupted, patting the Prince on the shoulder as she took over. “I know what always makes you feel better: shopping!”.

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Sokka really did enjoy shopping, no matter what the item they were buying happened to be. And just the fact that his friends cared enough to take time out of their seriously, world endingly-dire, schedule just to cheer him up really made him glow with happiness. Then again, his group were the type to put the world at risk to help anyone, no matter how inconsequential.

“What would you like to get?” Aang asked, as if they weren't dirt-poor and having to scrape by for every morsel of food (they'd left most of their money, quite frustratingly, back at Ba Sing Se before they’d been forced to flee).

“Maybe a new weapon?” Suggested Katara kindly, guiding him by the elbow towards a store that looked like it was made to beat up other, less intimidating, stores.

“Beating stuff up always makes me happy!” Cheered Toph as she stomped into the shop, thankfully not crashing into any of the suspended battle axes (perhaps she could sense the metal in them?). “Too bad we had to leave Zuko behind.”.

At that Katara quickly shoved her hand over the earthbender’s mouth, only to pull it away again when she was licked. None of the other customers seemed to notice, so the waterbender lessened her deadly glare- it’s not like Toph could’ve appreciated it anyway. They’d left Zuko behind since, in a well populated and upper class town like this, he would be easily recognized as the same guy from the wanted posters for the Avatar. And, no matter how convincingly Aang could sell the ‘completely innocent’ routine, Sokka figured it would take more than a dose of puppy-dog eyes to explain away why they were travelling with the Avatar’s identical twin.

“How about this?” The airbender pulled him out of his thoughts as knocked into him from behind, sporting a comically massive set of armour.

“Errr, I don’t really think that's Sokka's style, Aang, or yours, for that matter.” Revealed Katara apologetically, patting the boy's iron-clad arm.
“I’m looking for something a little sharper… How about this spear?” The non-bender plucked a long spear out of its display case and attempted to jab it around a little, quickly managing to accidentally knock a shelf full of helmets off of the wall.

He then reached for some nunchucks, waving them around experimentally before hitting himself on the nose- which Toph was kind enough to laugh at loudly enough for the entire store to easily hear. After that, Sokka retrieved a mace from a bargain bin and tried to bludgeon the air to death, only succeeding in dropping the weapon on his sister's, thankfully incredibly sturdy, shoes.

“Maybe nothing in this store is right for me.” He sighed regretfully, fiddling with his boomerang as Aang and Katara continued to scour the racks for something for him.

“Don’t say that; I’m sure we can find something for you in here- how do you feel about shurikens?” The waterbender offered, reaching for the small blades and cutting her right palm open with a pained squeak.

“Like they're already taken by that evil, goth chic who helped her even more evil, psychopathic friend try to kill us.” He mourned over the loss of such a good weapon, but figured that using shurikens would probably only get himself hurt.

They sat in silence for moment after that, all thinking back through the last three hours of trying out all the different weaponry. By now it was nearing sunset, but as Sokka watched dusk’s molten glow spread throughout the store, a sudden glint caught his eye. He moved over to it with an enthusiasm he hadn't possessed all day, and stared in awe at the weapon kept behind the glass. It was a sword- long, sleek and beautifully crafted, even its hilt covered in intricate markings. The blade itself was sharper than anything Sokka had ever seen, even beating out Zuko’s magnificent jaw line, and looked deadly in a gorgeous way. Was it possible that he was also a psychopath?

“I see your looking at this sword here, it's one of a kind- created by the greatest sword maker and master that the Fire Nation, and the whole world, has ever known.” The shop owner came up behind him, seemingly with his entire sales pitch prepared.

“Who made it?” Aang asked, now also staring at the incredible sword.

“Master Piandao, he actually lives only a few streets away- in the house so big it looks like it could fit nine lion-turtles.” Replied the owner, his own breath misting on the glass case as if he too were afraid to touch it, lest the sword be damaged. Yet the blade was a masterpiece, looking so strong that
Sokka believed it could be dropped from an airship down a cavern and wouldn't get a single scratch.

“I've got it, Sokka!” Cried Katara excitedly, dragging him bodily around to face her and Toph, who was looking at the space of wall below the sword’s case. “You don't need a new weapon to get back into your groove- you just need a master! We've all had one!”.

Master Piandao, as Sokka should have probably expected from the finest sword master in the entirety of the Fire Nation, had an intimidatingly impressive house. It was wooden, which should have made it seem fragile in such a fiery nation, yet seemed like it had stood for hundreds of years without obtaining a single scratch. The doors were massive and crafted from some strong oak most likely, or possibly something more expensive, and the fancy plant carving only made it more daunting when Sokka was trying to find a way to knock. Eventually he decided to just hope for the best, and grabbed the large, brass knockers with both hands and repeatedly smashed them against the door, until an elderly man answered.

“Yes?” He greeted like a man who'd answered that door far too many times to care who was there anymore.

“Ugh, hi! I'm Sokka, and I'd like to train with Master Piandao.” The non-bender introduced himself anxiously, unconsciously wringing his hands together as he spoke.

“And what gift have you brought for the master?” He asked, once again almost robotic in his tone yet still managing to sound humanly bored.

“Uh…” Sokka quickly searched through his pockets, finding only a few pieces of lint and a bronze coin from the Earth Kingdom.

“Well then, this is sure to be over quickly. Come on in.” The man, who was most likely some sort of butler, opened one of the doors and led him inside.

Sokka was immediately taken aback by how grand everything in the first corridor looked, even though the decorations seemed sparse. Bronze skirting boards glinted on every wall and the mahogany planks that made up the floor were covered with elegant yet tastefully simple carpets of many colours, though red and gold stood out the most. Aside from that the wide hallway was pretty
unremarkable; with no extra decorations or furnishings to speak of- not what the non-bender would have expected from the richest weapons master in the Fire Nation.

They soon reached some sort of lounge, were a man looking to be in his mid forties sat back in an embroidered armchair, seemingly unnoticing of Sokka's presence in his home.

“This is So- ugh, a pupil who wishes to study with you, Master.” The butler bowed deeply to Piandao, with flexibility the non-bender wouldn't have expected from a man of his age and… Weight.

“I'm, ugh, Sokka, Master Piandao.” Sokka hastily copied the butler's low bow and scrambled to tell the man his name.

“Sokka, hmm? That's an… Interesting name…” Piandao noted thoughtfully, still looking out of one of the large, crystal windows with a pensive expression on his face.

“What?! Really? Ugh, no, nah, it's not- in the, umm, colonies! Yes, that's where I'm from and there Sokka is a totally boring, completely normal, super ordinary thing to call your kids!” At that moment the non-bender was pretty sure that the Firelord could have stormed into the conversation and he would have thanked him.

“The colonies, huh? Well, let me guess, you were the greatest swordsman of your small village and you chose to travel many hundreds of miles just for the small chance to train with me, since you believe you alone are worthy of gaining some of my expertise. Is that right?” Piandao asked, sounding partially bored and vaguely irritated.

“Kind of. I mean, I have travelled a long distance from my home village- and at the time of me leaving I was probably the best swordmaster there but… I didn't come looking for you. In fact, I didn't even know you existed until yesterday. And I don't think I'm worthy, not by a long shot, but I had to try anyway- because how else can I ever hope to become worthy?” Sokka relaxed for the first time since knocking on Piandao’s door, sighing out in relief at the honesty that easily rolled off his tongue.

The master finally turned to look at his bowing form properly, a genius glint in his harsh, grey eyes. He blinked once. Then twice. Then moved forwards.

“Well, Sokka, I judge you to be good enough to be my pupil; do not let this opportunity go to
waste.” Piandao revealed before gliding out of the room gracefully, completely ignoring the stricken expressions Sokka and butler wore before they gained their wits enough to quickly rush after him.

—I—

“I miss Sokka.” Sighed out Zuko whilst lying on some dead grass, picking it out of the ground—much to Aang’s chagrin.

“And I’m bored! What’re we supposed to be doing today, anyway?” Toph asked, kicking Katara’s leg to jump her out of her half asleep trance.

“I don’t know; Sokka always dealt with the schedule.” Katara mumbled, her face buried in the yellowing grass as she laid on her stomach.

The Prince had never felt more bored in his life, and whilst he understood that Sokka had to train with Master Piandao in order to gain some confidence in his position on ‘Team Avatar’, he could still only wish he’d been more empathetic and supportive yesterday, when the non-bender had come clean about feeling insecure. Weren’t good boyfriends supposed to be overtly kind and understanding?

“Maybe we’d feel better if someone told a joke— that’s what Sokka would do!” Suggested Aang without his usual brightness.

“It wouldn’t be the same.” Complained the earthbender, rubbing her nose as she spoke and making it sound all nasally.

“Well, if you like Sokka so much maybe you should— uh, maybe you should—” Tried Katara pathetically, now sitting up and with grass intermingled into the dark strands of her pecan-brown hair.

“She should what, Katara?” Zuko interrupted, trying to save the waterbender from anymore embarrassing floundering.

“Maybe she should marry him!” Announced Katara proudly, pumping her fist into the air and
grinning.

Toph and Zuko both groaned audibly.

“I guess the humour doesn't run in the family.” Aang shook his head regretfully and then closed his eyes, sighing deeply.

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Sword-training was a lot more artistically inclined than Sokka would have ever realised had Piandao not been making him arrange rocks, paint landscapes and write his name all day. Of course, there were intermittent sessions where he would let him spar with the butler, who turned out to be called Fat (whether or not that was just an unfortunate birth name or a cruel nickname Sokka did not know). In all of these activities the non-bender felt he'd been sub par, aside from perhaps the final sparring session where he'd successfully disarmed Fat. Overall, he figured that as soon as the day's end arrived he'd be booted from Piandao's school for master sword fighters.

“Sokka,” The master began with a deep breath, as Sokka knelt before him, anticipating the harsh criticism that would surely come before he was thrown to the curb. “I'm impressed”.

“What?!” The non-bender startled, pushing himself up off of his hands and knees to look at Piandao incredulously. “But I was terrible at everything!”.

“You weren't terrible, you just did it differently than most would have. That uniqueness is a sign of your creativity, which is arguably the most important trait for a swordmaster to have.” The master complimented calmly, despite his pupil’s stricken demeanor.

“Oh, Uh, thanks.” Sokka corrected himself back into a respectful bow, allowing the other to continue speaking.

“Which is why I've decided you're ready for your own sword.” Once again, Sokka bolted upright.

“What?!“ He repeated, making Piandao wince with his volume. “But I've only been here for a day!"
Now, Sokka was not complaining—quite the opposite, really; he had to get going soon so that they'd be in time for the eclipse, but Piandao didn't know that and he thought a master would have promoted patience.

“Yes, but you've shown great promise in that time. I also suspect you'll have to leave soon… Now, about that sword—” Piandao began, standing up.

“Can I have one of yours?!” Asked Sokka excitedly, also clamouring to his feet.

“No.” At that the non-bender pouted in a very manly way. “You must make your own”.

“Oh, then…” Sokka spoke as an idea began to strike him, a smile edging it's way onto his face. “Is it possible for me to leave and retrieve a material for the blade?”.

“I'd have it no other way.”.

Going back to their camp had been… Surprising, to say the least. He was immediately tackled into a group hug, and when he explained why he was there they'd barely let him leave.

“Guys, I love you and everything but how am I ever going to complete my training with you four clinging to me like koala-leeches?” He questioned softly, attempting to tug Toph off of his leg.

“With effort.” Zuko mumbled into the back off his neck, as he too clung to Sokka. The firebender had his legs around his waist and arms practically strangling him—still, the non-bender didn't really mind.

“I've got to get some of that meteorite from the other night.” He protested weakly, as Aang dragged him down by his left arm and Katara dragged down his right.
“Do it later.” The airbender practically ordered, his grip tightening.

Sokka groaned loudly, before spending the next minutes carefully unpicking his friends from himself. He saved Zuko for last, one because he didn't really mind having his boyfriend so close and two because he figured he'd be the hardest to get off.

The non-bender then took the group to the site where the meteorite had crashed and collected some of it with the help of Toph’s bending. After that, he went back to P iandao (group in tow, despite how much he protested against Zuko joining) to make the blade. It was a hard, laborious task, with few breaks and surrounded by heat that reminded him of how it felt to wake up next to Zuko in the morning, except not as fun. Just ten minutes in his arms were already aching, and after a few hours of pumping heat into the forge he was pretty sure his bones had melted. Yet, he still persevered.

Eventually, by early morning the next day, he held in his hand a long, black-bladed sword that glinted as he turned it. The weight felt perfectly balanced in his grip and it was easy to control and maneuver. Sokka stared at his own, personal, masterpiece proudly.

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“This ceremony is for Sokka, a celebration of all he has achieved in such a short amount of time. The sword he now holds is a symbol of his creativity and determination- the two traits that struck me the most about him. His tenacity is incredible and he, whilst perhaps not traditionally fit to become a swordmaster, is no doubt the most promising student I've ever had the pleasure of teaching. His honesty was also impressive; him choosing not to spin some lie about how he was the worthiest out there was extremely refreshing. So, I now-” Piandao’s voice boomed around the large sitting room, his words as genuine as Sokka’s words were fake.

“Wait.” The non-bender interrupted, holding up a hand and rising to his feet, his new sword still firmly in his possession. “I’ve not been honest” “He began, before getting cut off by several loud gasps from his friends. He continued: “I'm not from the Fire Nation Colonies in the Earth Kingdom; I'm from the Southern Water Tribe. I lied, and I'm sorry.”

There was a few palpable moments of silence as the group held their breaths, during which time Sokka could not bare to meet his master’s eye. Then, still silent, P iandao drew his own sword and charged at the other non-bender, slashing in a wide arc and forcing Sokka to raise his own blade in a block. He stepped back several paces, until he was just in front of his friends who, to their credit, seemed to be preparing to attack.
“Stop.” He ordered, putting his left arm in front of them whilst keeping his sword in his right hand. “This is my fight.”

His hands moved to the middle so that they could both grip the leather bound hilt, just in time for Piandao to attack once more, with several smaller slashes. They forced the boy to speeden his pace, shifting his stance every two seconds as he backed into the patio door, swerving on his back foot at the last second so that his master’s blade pierced through the gap. Sokka took the three seconds of his opponent's blade being trapped to open the other door, going outside to gain more space to move around in.

“Impressive- a last second feign.” Piandao complimented, quickly catching up to his pupil and chasing him towards the patch of trees.

Sokka quickly took a detour, easily pulling himself onto one of the decorative rocks and hopping across them to keep out of his master’s reach.

“Smart; using your increased agility against an older opponent.” Piandao nodded approvingly, before slashing the rock Sokka was balanced on in half and forcing the younger man to leap the last bit of distance into the patch of trees, stumbling a little as he hit the ground.

It almost seemed as if Piandao was complimenting and encouraging his ideas, except that was absurd since the guy was literally trying to cut him in half. The boy ignored what his master was saying (and also ignored his friends and Fat coming out to watch the fight) and simply moved deeper into the trees, cutting down branches as if they were made of paper as he ran.

“Good! Using your environment to your advantage.” The other noted, slashing through the branches with similar ease as he followed Sokka back around until they were back in the courtyard with the destroyed patio door.

At this point, the younger man was running out of options- he couldn’t risk a straight up duel and he’d used up all the tricks he could think of. Within thirty seconds Sokka predicted that he’d be in two pieces on the ground; pretty upsetting for Fat, really, since the concrete looked like it would be difficult to get blood off of. Racking his mind as he hopelessly blocked, the boy finally got an idea and kicked the dirt from the floor up, managing to hit Piandao straight in the eyes.

“Well done, obscuring my vision gives you a clear advantage.” The master, shifted his footing slightly, turning his ear towards where Sokka had last been.
Seeing what was happening, the non-bender tip toed carefully around, planning to surprise the older man from the back. Unfortunately, however, he somehow managed to step on the one stray twig on the ground, alerting Piandao to his position. Accepting defeat, Sokka braced himself for the sword through the face…

“That was very impressive, Sokka.” His master smiled at him, before removing his blade from his chin and facing it towards Fat, who soundlessly threw a sheath at him. Gracefully, he then slung the sheath on his belt and wiped the dirt out of his eyes.

“Wait… So you're not mad that I'm not from the Fire Nation?!” He asked incredulously, instead of thanking him for not skewering him.

“Please, I knew you were Water Tribe this entire time. The art of the sword belongs to all nations. Besides, ‘Sokka’ isn't really a name over here- next time go with Lee, there are a million Lees.” At that the non-bender chortled and turned to his boyfriend, who had given up his fighting stance and was now blushing furiously from embarrassment.

“Seriously? You were that uncreative?” Laughed Sokka, moving away from his master to tease Zuko, as he began scowling.

“Wait, what're we talking about?” Questioned Toph, frowning as well.

“Oh right, you don't know. Basically, when we first met Zuko he Pretended his name was Lee for, like, two months.” Katara explained with her own giggle.

“Ah yes, the Avatar.” Noted Piandao thoughtfully, causing the simultaneous thought of ‘oh shit’ to go through of their heads as they subconsciously stepped closer to the Prince in an effort to protect him- not that it was needed. “I think I'm a little too old to be fighting you. ”.

They all breathed out a sigh of relief, Sokka pounding his fist down on Zuko's shoulder as he did. They all smiled unconsciously, euphoric that after all their work their plans hadn't been ruined by a simple slip of the tongue.

“I'm glad my swordmaster isn't going to rat you out.” Sokka smiled, hugging Zuko and speaking into his shoulder.
“And I'm glad that you didn't get skewered.” The firebender breathed out, his warm words muffled by the other’s hair.

Sokka leaned away, still looking into his boyfriend's liquid golden eyes, feeling the urge to pull him in close and kiss him. He moved forwards, smiling softly, and cupped the other boy’s cheek, which Zuko leaned into happily. Moving his left hand down to the other’s lower back, he really did begin pulling him in… Until he remembered that there were four people watching and one person sensing the display of affection, and the two sprung apart awkwardly.

“Uhhhhhh…” Aang made a strange noise with the back of his throat, looking between Zuko and Sokka with such speed that the non-bender briefly worried that his head would come off.

“Well, I guess the cat’s out of the bag.” Toph laughed before patting the couple on their backs. Piandao, the horrendous traitor, chuckled at her words.

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A short while later, as they left, Fat came rushing up to them with a small gift from the master, which he advised Sokka open. When he did, a small Pai Sho tile fell out into his palm, one with a white lotus inscribed onto it. Zuko gasped.

“What is it?” Katara and Sokka asked simultaneously, taking in the Prince’s shocked face.

“I know that symbol…”.
coming up, but I promise this WILL get done. Sticking to my current posting for now.

I hope you enjoyed some Sokka development because he deserves love and it's past midnight and I just did loads of Chem revision sooooo

Comments and kudos are VERY appreciated, thank you so much for reading :))
“This is a terrible idea.” Zuko repeated for the eightieth time, sighing as he carried Katara and Sokka’s bags down to the beach, attempting to avoid eye contact with anyone outside of their group.

“Come on, Zuko! What’s the worst that could happen?” Asked Aang cheerily, bumping shoulders with him and smiling- he wasn't being forced to carry anything.

“I could get recognised, we could all be killed or tortured and then my Father will destroy the world.” He replied dryly, scowling at their three friends in front of them, who were skipping along the sandy shore without a care in the would.

“Don't be such a downer! No one here is gonna notice you- they're having too much fun!” That was fair, the Prince supposed, since currently Ember Island was being exclusively occupied by the children of war generals who were still working, probably helping with his Father's continued enslavement of the earthbenders of Ba Sing Se. These teenagers were probably too wrapped up in their own snobby lives that they couldn't have picked his face out of a line up. “Besides,” Aang continued, “You're worried about them noticing your scar, right? Well this is the Fire Nation! More than just you will have a burn scar.”.

Zuko frowned more deeply but nodded all the same, letting his long fringe cover up the majority of his face. His hair had been growing out, and now he wore it in a ponytail most of the time, so it wouldn't get in his eyes (and also because Sokka seemed to like it).

They kept trailing over the beach, until Toph decided she'd found the ‘perfect’ spot, and sat down abruptly. The group were only on the Island because it was only a slight detour from their route, and somehow they were ahead of schedule and Aang had decided they needed a break. Zuko had told them, several times in fact, that they were all idiots- but to no avail.

“Ahhhh, isn't it great to be able to relax for once?” Asked Katara, eyes closed as she leaned back against the sand on their almost deserted patch of beach. She held her hand out and Zuko dropped her ridiculously heavy bag on her chest, to which she grunted. “Hey!”

“That's what you get for making me carry it all the way down here.” He smirked as she pouted, crossing her arms and sitting back up, before he passed Sokka his bag gently.
“And why does he not get moaned at?” She bit out venomously (though without any real heat), looking at the non-bender not like he was her brother, but like he had killed her grandmother and then her puppy-cat.

“Because I'm his boyfriend.” Sokka drawled out with a smug look, holding out his arms for Zuko to collapse into, so that they were cuddling on top of his towel.

“I think I miss when you two were trying to keep this thing secret.” Toph faked some gagging, which Katara laughed at, before beginning to build a sand castle (with earthbending, which was fine since they were far away from anyone else).

“Don't be like that, Toph! Love is beautiful!” Aang practically sung, before sitting down next to the waterbender and blushing as she offered him a drink.

Zuko too, pantomimed throwing up.

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The firebender regretted everything in his life up to this point. Somehow, Sokka had managed to talk him into playing couples volleyball against Katara and Aang (even though the latter two would not admit that they clearly liked each other). And they were losing, miserably.

“Take that, bitch!” Yelled Katara, jumping up in the air and hitting the ball, slamming it down over their net before either of the boys could move in retaliation.

“How many wins is that, Aang?” The girl smiled, as if she wasn't aware of the number.

“24 to 1.” The airbender replied, similarly smug as he got into a stance, ready for their next match.

“Yes, but that 1 was when I had to go on a toilet break, so I don't think it counts.” She noted, brushing some sand off of her top and pushing her hair out of her eyes.

Around game three they'd gained a small crowd of onlookers, who were promptly scared away by
Katara’s fierce competitiveness. She was like a demon; completely dedicated to winning at any cost, perfectly happy to injure not not only her opponents but also her teammate in the process. Zuko had never realised how roughed up one could become from a simple game of volleyball. The Prince was nursing several scrapes from falling onto jagged shells (placed there by the waterbender to get him off his game) and Sokka had a quickly forming black eye from one of his sister's strikes.

“Come on, Zukes, we have to win this one! I can't let Katara hold this over my head for the rest of my life!” The non-bender pleaded with him, as though he hadn't been giving his all from the beginning.

“I don't know what to do! She's a monster!” Sokka nodded solemnly to this, patting his arm in support.

“I know- she could probably beat the Firelord with just her spirit and a volleyball, but we can't let that dissuade us! I refuse to be remembered as ‘the guy who lost to his sister’”. 

“I had to live with it growing up, I'm pretty sure you can handle it.” Zuko frowned at him, but the non-bender was too absorbed in stretching to notice. And then the Prince spent two minutes too absorbed in his boyfriend's stretching to think up a plan.

Once he'd finally managed to pry his gaze away from Sokka’s butt, he refocused on how to crush Katara into the ground. Aang was a good player too, sure, but he was only as good as himself and the non-bender, so he wasn't a massive priority. Katara, however, could have probably beaten them on her own. Zuko thought for a few moments, eyes trained on the sand in front if him, before remembering that ‘hey, I’m the Avatar’. Toph was currently using sandbending to construct the most impressive sand-structure ever, so he could also use sandbending to win at volleyball.

Really it wasn't cheating, since (despite their ‘no bending allowed’ rule) Aang has been using discreet airbending in order to add a little extra kick to his throws, so it was only fair that Zuko also use a little bending- not really dishonourable.

So as their next match began and Katara ran forwards, the Prince used his (admittedly still imprecise and novice) sandbending to trap her foot, tripping her over and causing her to crash into the net ungracefully.

“Ha! Touching the net is a foul!” Laughed Sokka, as Zuko quickly jumped out of his bending stance to whistle nonchalantly.
“No way! You used bending!” Accused the girl accurately, pointing at him with a murderous look on her face.

“Really, Karara?” He smirked at her, crossing his arms. “How could I, a simple firebender, have made you trip over from all the way over here?” He questioned, loudly enough for their fellow beach-goers (who were giving them a thirty foot radius) to hear.

“Why you little!” She screeched, tearing down the net and chasing him down, as he ran away from her.

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A few hours later, Zuko was hiding behind Sokka in an attempt to protect himself from Katara’s wrath, she had cooled down quite a bit but he was still worried she might snap. Just then, two buff guys a few years older than them strolled over, looking infinitely cooler than the Prince felt as he cowered behind his boyfriend.

“Yo, bro!” The first guy said, smiling at Sokka with a mouth full of pearly white teeth.

“Hey.” Sokka greeted, looking vaguely confused but still happy to be noticed.

“I'm Chad, and you seem pretty cool, so we wanted to ask if you'd come to our party tonight.” He then leaned in, much too close to the non-bender’s face for Zuko’s liking, “It’s an open bar.” He whispered, before patting Sokka's shoulder and moving back a little.

“Oh, uh, what about my friends?” The non-bender asked, even though the jealousy inside the Prince was trying to mentally tell him not to accept. Wasn't he the one who wanted to get stuff done?

“Your friends...?” Chad questioned, as if he hadn't noticed the four people sat around Sokka on towels, two of them glaring at him suspiciously and the other two throwing sand at each other playfully. “Oh, those guys. Well, those two are too young.” He gestured to Toph and Aang's sand fight, as if they weren't all too young to be going to a party with an ‘open bar’.

“And my sister? And boyfriend?” Sokka pointed to Zuko and Katara, who were still glaring. Chad recoiled even further away from the group.
“Boyfriend?! Ew, no. You're uninvited.” Chad spat before stomping away, his lackey in tow.

“But I didn't even say I wanted to go!” The non-bender yelled, getting up as if he were going to chase after them. Zuko quickly, lamenting inwardly about once again being the responsible one, pulled him down. Unfortunately, he didn't account for the rest of their friends.

“You wanna talk about my brother like that again?!” Katara looked livid as she got to her feet, closely followed by an angry Toph and Aang, quickly sprinting after the pair of boys who were now running like their lives depended on it- which they did.

Sokka and Zuko sat alone in silence for a while, waiting for their friends to return from their murdering, whilst the firebender attempted to start a conversation.

“Is…” The other boy tried, words not seeming to form properly. “Is everyone in the Fire Nation like that? So… Against two guys being in a relationship?” He questioned worriedly, crossing his arms over his chest. Zuko wrapped one arm around his boyfriend’s shoulders, sighing.

“No. Not everyone, I mean. Just… the high class ones- the richest ones. They don't like that their kids can't give them heirs or whatever. Most people are fine with it; back on my ship I had a guy who was dating some other guy back home, and he'd send him a messenger hawk twice a month. No one cared.” He tried to explain, squeezing his boyfriend into his side.

Sokka hummed in response, leaning against him, and putting his head on his shoulder. Zuko breathed in the salty scent of his hair, looking out over the beach as it was lit beautifully by the saffron glow of dusk.

“What about the Water Tribe? How do they feel about this… Stuff?” He questioned stiffly, a few moments of silence later.

“I don't really know… But it's like a family; we all care about each other no matter what. I don't think they'd mind.” The non-bender explained, reaching over his boyfriend’s lap to grab his hand and intertwine their fingers. “But… If you're supposed to be the next Firelord, and you're dating me, how will you-”.

“I-” Zuko interrupted, squeezing his hand tighter. He hadn't considered that he wouldn't be able to have an heir but, even now that he did, he didn't care. “I don't know if I'll be Firelord straight after
my Father; my Uncle will probably take the mantle for a while. Plus, I'm the Avatar so I don't even know if I'm even *allowed* to lead my Nation. What I do know is that we'll make it work, okay?".

He hoped he'd been comforting but still honest, and it seemed to have worked since Sokka nodded into his shoulder, breathing out slowly.

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“Please don't tell me you actually killed Chad.” Sokka pleaded when Katara and the others came back to them, her hands covered in red. They were in the Prince’s beach house, that hadn't been used in years by his father and was a perfect place to spend the night.

“No! Well, Toph tried, but this is from the wine at their party- I got it all over me when I through it at them.” Katara explained, before she began rubbing the sticky liquid off with an enormously expensive crimson satin curtain, which the firebender smiled at. “Why didn't you want to fight them anyway?” She asked, turning to him.

This was a fair question, since the Prince did have a pretty hefty record of aggressively attacking anyone who pissed him off- and those guys had definitely pissed him off. He smirked knowingly.

“I figured we could do something worse than beat them up- like destroying their house. But I guess you already did that, huh?” The three nodded, Aang flicking some rubble out of Toph’s haphazardly styled hair.

Zuko rolled his eyes and they all began preparing to sleep. Sokka set up blankets for them all in the living room, though one of the ‘duvets’ was actually just a really soft tapestry. Katara went to the kitchen to get them some food, not bothering to wash the utensils after she used them. Aang went into the back garden to feed Appa and Momo, not nearly worried enough about who could see the animals. Toph wasn't really doing anything, except using a decorative axe to destroy Azula’s old nightstand- Zuko approved. The Prince himself was collecting the paintings of his mother from around the house, putting them all in his travel sack so he'd be able to keep them with him. He also spied a one of him and Azula as toddlers, her smiling brightly as they held up an orange shell they'd found together- he put that one in the bag too.

The group then ate dinner, all of them glad Zuko had stayed far away from the kitchen, and enjoying one of their last nights of peace before the Day of Black Sun. Peace, of course, until they heard a ruckus at the door to the house. The five looked at each other (well, not Toph) and got prepared for a fight- though who knew they were there was a mystery. Sokka led them into the hallway adjacent to
the doorway, so they were out of sight of whoever was entering but would still be able to hear them.

“No, Mai, I don't care.” Snapped Azula's shrill voice, it straining to be louder, whilst their group bit back a collective gasp of shock. Something sounded wrong.

“Please, Azula, you know-” Came Ty Lee’s much calmer, though nervous, voice as someone struggled with something. Luggage, it sounded like.

“I do not need a weekend to ‘relax’, no matter what anyone in the Palace says! And don't talk to me unless I talk first, Ty Lee , let your no-good girlfriend answer for herself.” There was a sound of fire being lit, almost definitely the Princess’ doing, and Zuko presumed that there would now be a scorch mark on the wall.

“She's not my-” Came Mai’s monotone voice, though it was edged with hurt and anger.

“Oh please, I know what you two have been getting up to, unless you think I’m as stupid as you are. You should be ashamed of yourselves.” The three girls weren't moving from the doorway, thankfully, and the argument continued.

“We've not been doing anything wrong, Azula, we've just-” Tried Ty Lee, not sounding scared at least. Zuko found himself feeling sorry for the two girls, and itched to help them- he couldn't though, and he saw the same desire on his friends’ faces.

“That's Princess to you! Unless you think I deserve to be treated with disrespect, like my pathetic brother!?” Someone stomped further into the hall, probably his sister, and the Prince was beginning to get angry.

“No one mentioned Zuko-” Mai cut in, not as monotone as before and bordering on concerned.

“Don't. Don't you dare say his name, you whore! First it was- it was- was **him** ! Now it's Ty Lee! Can't you make up your fucking mind!?” Azula was full on yelling now, screeching with her voice breaking in between words. She sounded crazed. “I bet when we find him,” Zuko’s heart stopped beating at those words, “you'll join him in being a traitor, won't you!? Anything to-”.

“Shut up, Azula! Zuko’s dead! You killed him. We're not going to find him.” The firebender breathed out a silent sigh of relief at Mai’s words, turning to look at his group’s pale faces.
There was beat of silence. Then another. Nobody breathed.

“I d- I didn't-” Azula's voice, much quieter than Zuko had expected it to be, cracked before she faulted. “... Someone's here.”

The firebender’s blood ran cold, and he clenched his hands into fists, watching as Sokka gestured for everyone to back away. Hopefully they'd be able to get to Appa in the backyard before Azula fried them.

“Please, Azula, there's no one here. You need to calm-” Tried Ty Lee soothingly, as the Princess began walking forwards.

“Don't tell me to calm down! I know there's someone here, but who would be stupid enough to steal from the Firelord?” She continued moving forwards, and Zuko was at least glad she didn't think it was them- of course, she hadn't seen them yet. “Come out, little idiot. I promise I won't kill you too much.”

Their group was about to break into a full on sprint, them hearing Azula moving closer to the hall they were positioned in, when the girl herself stepped around the corner so she was facing them, her visage lit up by the blue light from the flames dancing- no, not dancing, writhing- on her palms. Several emotions crossed her expression, starting with shock and clearly becoming jubilance followed by anger.

“I knew you weren't dead!” She smiled manically, beaming so much it split her face in two and must have pulled a muscle through the sheer largeness of it.

She threw her fire straight at Sokka, causing the Prince to leap forwards and hit her flames out the way with his airbending. The Princess continued grinning, a constant snarl sounding from between her lips, reaching forwards once again- this time a burning hand headed straight for Zuko’s right eye. He moved to block it, bending some water out of Katara’s pouch to use, when his sister’s face suddenly went blank with surprise and she went limp, Ty Lee behind her with a hand outstretched. Whilst she was shocked into silence, Mai hit her her over the head with a heavy-looking book, causing her to slide the rest of the way to the floor. All was quiet.

“You- you saved us.” Zuko muttered out, looking at his unconscious sister, half tempted to nudge her face with his foot.
“Well, she was a bitch. Plus…” Mai seemed unable to articulate her next thoughts, and he attempted to telepathically tell her to hurry it up, since they had no idea how long Azula would stay unconscious for.

“Knowing we helped kill you wasn't a fun feeling.” Ty Lee frowned, leaning against Mai as both girls looked at the floor.

“Yeah.” Mai nodded, and Zuko kind of wanted to hug them for helping him avoid yet another facial scar.

“Oh.” The group all looked at each other, seemingly unsure of what to say next. How did you talk to someone you'd been fighting against for months?

“Well, welcome to the traitor-club!” Toph congratulated sarcastically, earning a swift hit on the back of her head from Katara.

“Do you two need a ride?” The waterbender asked sweetly, ignoring how the shorter girl scowled at her.

They did, in fact, need a ride, but a few miles after Ember Island they got off of Appa, saying they had to ‘find their own way’. Zuko was okay with this- having your ex-girlfriend and her new girlfriend with you and your current boyfriend was pretty awkward. Before they left though, Sokka did give Mai the White Lotus chip, telling her to go to them if they needed help.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I couldn't skip the beach episode I'm SORRY

Please tell me your feedback, every comment and kudos is greatly appreciated!!! :))
Azula had never felt happier. No, ‘happy’ wasn’t the right word- she felt absolutely beside herself with joy… Only she didn't know what over.

Really, she should have been completely wrecked; her teammates (useless as she called them) had betrayed her right after they’d all found out that Zuko, who Azula was credited with killing, was actually still alive. All logic pointed to her grieving over the loss of her glory for ending the avatar cycle, yet she felt strangely full now she knew that wasn't the case. She pondered over it, as she walked to the prison cells.

Her brother's death had been widely celebrated, though most were unaware of the fact that he even was her brother, so why hadn't she felt pleased by all of that attention to her accomplishment? The Princess supposed that it had just been too easy of a victory- one shot to the back simply wasn't enough to sate her desire to tear Zuko down, to show the world she was better than him. Now she had the chance to do just that; to obliterate him with everything she had and to be able to properly revel as people bowed down to the rubble in her wake.

Yes. That thought made her smile.

Azula stopped in front of the iron door she was much too familiar with by this point, studying the scorch marks she herself had made during earlier visits, ones in which she'd been in lesser spirits. Opening the door, she stepped inside with confidence and flourish that she hadn't had for the last several weeks.

“Good evening, Iroh.” She practically sung, sitting down on the plush chair she had had brought in once it became clear she couldn't sleep without first speaking with her uncle.

“Azula.” He frowned, slumped against the wall with dirtied hair straggling down his face. “You seem to be glowing today.” He complimented without meaning.

“Yes,” She agreed, because these late-night-chats with her uncle had taught her that the man wasn't worth lying to; he could always tell. “I was right.” The Princess knew she must have sounded like a smug child, but she smirked all the same and crossed her arms over her velvet nightie.
“Hmm, what about?” Iroh raised his eyebrow, keeping his tone even. He often did that, Azula noticed, not yelling unless Zuko was involved.

“I didn't kill the avatar!” She voiced her clear failure with a grin, something high and undoubtedly happy rising in her chest as she spoke. Perhaps it was knowing she'd been right all this time that had her feeling so over the moon.

“Hh-” He let out a stuttered breath, shaking his head blinking. “Yes you did, Azula, you must accept it.”

Now her jubilance was quickly being overtaken by rage and so she scowled. How dare he think she'd lie? Well, yes, she would, but not about this. News of Zuko's life felt like something she had to genuinely tell her uncle about, for whatever reason, and it irked her that he'd brush her off.

“Oh?! I need to accept it, do I?! I saw him, in the flesh. If he wasn't real, then why would Mai and Ty Lee practically orgasm on the spot and join his side, hmmm?!” She stood up, pushing her chair aside as per usual, and stomping up to the bars. Iroh didn't even flinch, just looking thoughtfully at the opposite wall as if she weren't even there. “Listen to me, old man!” She grabbed the bars, letting heat travel through her palms just a little. The man blinked.

“I'm sorry your friends left you, Azula, betrayal can be painful.” He said, not a hint of emotion threading into his tone. She stomped her foot like some juvenile.

“I do- I don- I don't care about them, they're filthy traitors, just like you!” She pulled back her hands only to slam them into the bars again, the pain clearing her mind a little from the rage Iroh was evoking. She smiled coolly at him, after regaining a little composure. “It doesn't matter, anyway, I have them back now.”

Shortly after she'd awoken back on Ember Island, Azula had hunted down Mai and Ty Lee. The girls hadn't gotten very far, and had been in an easily guessable location- Ty Lee’s sister's cottage. They'd fought, sure, but her firebending and the element of surprise quickly beat the two non-benders. Still, even with them unconscious and within her reach, something inside had told her not to finish them off- a strange pull tugging in her chest. She'd pushed it down, but hadn't killed her old allies, opting instead to use them for information.

She gazed at her uncle imploringly, “So, do you recognise this?” Azula brought a small cloth bag out of her pocket, untying the golden string and letting its contents fall onto her palm. She held out a small, circular disc of wood with a white lotus carved onto it, rolling it in between her thumb and forefinger to show Iroh the design.
“It’s a pai sho tile,” He said without missing a beat. “One of my favourites.” The man smiled.

Azula clenched her fists, before throwing the tile at her uncle. He caught it as though it were nothing, before gazing down at it lovingly.

“I will find out what it means.” She scowled.

“Then, Azula, you shall be severely disappointed.”

—

The newest town they’d come to was just as boring as the last, the thrill of being in enemy territory long since faded. Now their group had to scramble day and night to find things that excited them, and, due to Azula discovering that her brother was alive, they had to be even more careful than before. At least the masses of the Fire Nation didn't seem aware that Zuko was alive.

Aang was practically asleep as he, Toph and Sokka wandered through the market, intent on buying supplies with what little money they had left.

“We have two bronze pieces to buy food for the next week.” Sokka told them sullenly, rolling the coins around his knuckles as they walked further down the strip of stalls.

“That much couldn't even feed Momo for a day.” Toph rolled her eyes and swung her arm out in front of the non-bender, who seemed to get the message that Aang did not and dropped the money into her palm.

“What are you going to buy?” He asked her curiously, partway concerned that it would be meat.

“Well, Twinkle Toes, I'm going to buy us some more money!” She smirked and gestured across the street, where a man was playing some game by the road.
There seemed to be three cups involved, and a little rock. The man would place the rock underneath one of the cups and then mix them up, and then one of the players would guess which cup had the rock under it. If they were right they gained money, if not, they lost.

“I can use earthbending to tell where they rock is.” Toph elaborated as she started moving over, gripping onto Sokka's arm as if she needed to, as well as tripping and hobbling a little bit.

“Isn't that cheating?” Aang fretted quietly as they got closer. Toph didn't reply.

They got into the crowd around the man just before a young guy finished his turn, and the airbender got to watch as he wailed at the lost of his ten gold pieces. The man then looked around the crowd slyly, eyes landing on Toph (who was frowning and facing nowhere in particular, still holding onto Sokka's arm).

“You there, little blind girl!” He caught their attention, gesturing to the earthbender and smiling in mock innocence. “How about you have a go?”.

“But how? Like you said, I'm just a blind girl.” She shrugged, but walked forwards all the same, still gripping Sokka's sleeve tightly.

“It's not about seeing, it's about feeling! Come on, have a go.” He encouraged, so Toph let go and knelt in front of him.

Even though Aang was still uneasy about cheating, he had to admit that the faces of the audience were hilarious as Toph continued to guess the correct cups. The man who made the game looked especially funny after the last go, where he bet ten bags of gold pieces against all of their gained money and Sokka's sword (much to the non-bender's chagrin), and then lost.

“Well, if that'll be all.” Sokka waved as he grabbed his sword from the ground, running away from the small crowd. Aang followed after swiping up their new money and Toph quickly pursued them, leaving the other market goers who'd watched completely speechless.

The three then made their way back to their camp, which was about a mile outside of town, to show Zuko and Katara their gained riches, happy to see the pair hadn't destroyed anything whilst they'd been shopping. Along the way they picked up the food they'd needed, and now they had enough steak to feed a small army- which, Aang supposed, they kind of were.
“You're back!” The two benders cheered upon spotting them in the distance, rushing up to see what they’d bought. “How did you get all this from just two bronze pieces?” Questioned Katara a tad suspiciously after inspecting their bags, looking at her brother.

“It was all Toph!” Aang interrupted excited, jumping in front of the non-bender to point to the blind girl, who was smirking behind her dark fringe.

“Yeah!” Sokka agreed, moving out from behind Aang to tell Katara about what had happened.

Whilst he did that, Aang became aware of a strange energy in their midst, one that was coming from their resident avatar- who'd been pretty quiet up until this point. Zuko looked normal enough, perfectly healthy and smiling as his boyfriend explained their day, but there was a strange uneasiness about his posture; he stood with his arms crossed and hair blowing in his face, shuffling his feet nervously every few moments.

“Hey, Aang?” He suddenly spoke up, interrupting the airbender’s analysis. “Can I talk to you for a second?”.

The others didn't seem disturbed by his abrupt question, so Aang followed Zuko back further into their camp, sitting down on one of the crude chairs he’d earthbended up for them.

“What is it?” He asked politely, even though he was burning with curiosity to find out what was wrong with his friend’s aura- it felt strangely similar to back at the Fire Sage Temple.

“I had a… Weird dream last night.” Zuko admitted quietly in a strained tone, crossing his legs and looking at the ground.

Now concerned, Aang asked “Another nightmare?”.

“No, no…” The Prince didn't elaborate, so they sat in silence for a few moments.

“What then?” The airbender prompted him, tilting his head to gaze at Zuko’s downcast expression.

“My great grandfather, Sozen, I saw him as a child. And Avatar Roku… He was there too.” Both boys frowned at that, but Aang’s frown was more thoughtful than sad.
As the group’s resident spirit expert, he thought it was his duty to help the avatar with this kind of thing, only it was tricky with so little information.

“I think maybe Roku was trying to give you a message? About Sozen?”

Zuko shook his head, before brushing his hair back with an unsteady hand. “It was more like… I don't really know how to say this… It was- it was like Roku was giving me a message about himself, not Sozen- it was more like he was just a side character.”.

The firebender’s explanation left much to be desired, but Aang could already tell that whatever the message was it was important. He thought for a second, trying to figure out what to do.

“What if we spoke with Roku? You could summon his avatar spirit and then-” The airbender brainstormed, leaning back in his chair.

“No.” Zuko spoke abruptly, raising his right hand. “I mean… I can't.” Aang stared, waiting for his friend to continue, unsure of his meaning. “The spirit stuff- I've barely done any of it. I've only been full on in the avatar state twice and the only times I've seen past avatars have been around the Solstice, and there isn't another one of those until after the eclipse. I don't think I can summon up Roku, not on purpose anyway.”

Hmm. Well, he wasn't wrong, and as an avatar Zuko had never been particularly spiritual. Aang blamed his Nation, the earth and firebenders being historically the least spiritual, but also knew he should have been teaching his friend the way of the spirits as well as airbending. Truly, this was his failure. Still, he was sure he could get Zuko to embrace his spiritual side… But that would require a little road trip…

—

Toph couldn't believe that Aang and Zuko were allowed to go running off to some one hundred years dead guy’s volcano house with Appa while she was stuck getting lectured by Katara. It was so truly unfair.

“You can’t just run around the Fire Nation cheating people out of their money!” The waterbender
scolded, stomping her foot in a comical show of motherliness.

“That’s rich, considering that’s exactly what the guy was doing in the first place!” She argued, stepping towards the other girl, vaguely disappointed that she didn’t step back at the movement.

Taking a deep breath, the older girl spoke again. “You doing this is just putting us all in unnecessary danger, it’s only a matter of time until something goes wrong. You cannot do anything like this again, okay?”

The earthbender scowled forcefully, stepping forwards even more until her nose was brushing against her companion’s torso. “What? You forbid me?!” She punctuated that with a growl, her fists squeezing shut.

Katara let out an incredulous sigh, before she marched off—probably to make them dinner or something; she was always doing stuff like that. Thought she was their mother. Toph grunted and walked off too, but in the opposite direction back towards the town. Along the way, she caught onto Sokka’s collar and dragged him along with her, ignoring his protests as he seemed to drop something on the floor.

“Toph!” He yelped, eventually managing to pull them both to a holt. “I needed that! I was trying to make Zuko a gift for when he came back.” The boy groaned, taking a small step back towards their camp before she grabbed onto his wrist, preventing him from leaving.

“What were you making?” She asked a tad apprehensively, having already heard in detail from her not-blind friends about Sokka’s less than subpar artistic skills.

Sensing her thoughts, he let out an affronted sound. “I’ll have you know it looks beautiful! It’s a new cloak but with all four Nations’ colours on it, so he can wear it to all those congratulatory ceremonies we’ll have to go to when we defeat the Firelord.” He said when, not if but when. Toph smiled a little to herself.

“Fine. But don’t you want a break? We could go get more money, maybe you could even buy a little something for yourself..?” It was cruel, really, using the non-benders love of shopping against him.

“Uhhhh…” Sokka shifted his footing a little. “I’ve got other stuff to do too, I need to finalise Appa’s armour for one… Besides, Katara probably wouldn’t want us to go again…”.
“Really? You’re gonna let your little sister boss you about? Wow, and I thought you were supposed to be manly. Well, I guess if you want to sit around here sewing then you can.”

The boy’s pulse abruptly quickened and Toph felt him tense up, and she knew she’d won.

—

“So this is where Avatar Roku lived for most of his life? It’s less… Then I would have thought.” Zuko grimaced, surveying the scene in front of him, stepping delicately over what seemed to be a charred mound that was once a family’s home.

The island had a volcano on it, sure, he’d known that, but the island being a chunk of cooled lava was not what he was expecting. The place looked dead, devoid of all life aside from a few resilient weeds struggling to escape the blackened corpse of what was once someone’s shed. He bended (earth or lavabended, he wasn’t entirely sure) a path for him and Aang to get through easily as they attempted to find the center of the island, their struggle lit by the dusk in the distance. Appa had been left at the edge of the island to rest, despite Zuko’s perfectly valid argument that it’d be a lot quicker to travel by air on a bison, especially when Aang’s glider required maintenance after a particularly stressful airbending session. Brightside: they now knew that gliders were not fireproof.

“Yeah… Arianna and I came on a trip here a few- well, I guess a hundred and three- years ago. Back then the damage was a lot fresher and much more depressing!” He explained brightly, hopping lightly towards their destination.

Together, they soon reached the middle of the island, rewarded for their travel with a small tower of earth jutting out of the side of a rocky hill, that was hopefully not a mini-volcano.

“Hmmm.” The airbender considered the earth tower for a moment whilst Zuko reevaluated his decision to come here. “I think you need to sit on it.”

“What?!” The firebender exclaimed, turning away from the pathetic mound to stare down at his companion, who still looked stupidly thoughtful. “Why?!”

Moving to face him, his expression worryingly eager, Aang said “I think it’s a meditation spot- you know, a place where spiritual energy is stronger so entering the spirit realm is easier.”
Zuko pinched the bridge of nose, who knew being the Avatar would be so frustrating? (Answer?: he knew, he’d known and he should have never stopped pretending to be Lee. Then again, Roku was the one who’d screwed that up too… Maybe he should just get rid of Roku or something?). With a sigh, he began climbing up the small tower, before crossing his legs and sitting fairly comfortably at the top. Oh great, Roku had made a butt groove through his time meditating here.

“Feel anything?” Aang asked, raising his voice a little so that Zuko could still hear him from his increased height.

“Rocks.” The firebender replied in deadpan, eliciting a small chuckle from the younger boy.

Ugh, did he feel any shifts in the universal energy flowing through him? Nothing different from this morning, really, everything felt a little more visceral but aside from that it was basically the same.

Aang waved at him, breaking his train of thought. “I don't feel anything much, okay?” He answered properly, tempted to lean back and sigh but thinking better of it when he remembered where he currently was.

“Then you're going to have to make yourself feel something!” He advised, as though that made literally any sense whatsoever.

He tried to convey the stupidity of that idea through his frown alone, but Aang didn’t seem to catch on.

“Just imagine yourself as Roku, or with him next to you I guess- however you want to communicate with him. Then just… Do!”

Zuko sighed but closed his eyes all the same, trying to picture Roku in front of him. He would probably smell like burnt tea- like his grandfather Azulon- and would be breathing softly, like he was now. The wind would be blowing at his grey hair a little, causing strands to catch in front of his face, maybe covering his glowing blue eyes a little-

“Hello, Avatar Zuko.”
“I. Can't. Believe. You. Two. What were you thinking?!” Katara screeched upon seeing the wanted poster Sokka had found and shown her (traitor).

Toph heard Sokka scratch the back of his neck before speaking. “It was just a little fun; we didn't think.”

“You're completely right, you didn't think!” Katara yelled, stomping her foot. “I told you not to do this anymore, Toph, and you didn't listen.”

“Why should I listen?!” Toph argued back, sick to death of the waterbender and her stupid worrying. “You think you're our mother but you're not, so stop acting like it! Just because you tell me to do something doesn't mean I have to, Sugar Queen.”.

At that she stalked off, perfectly aware of Sokka muttering a quiet murmur to his sister, probably telling her to cool off. Then, she felt the boy running towards her, and tried valiantly to ignore his presence. She succeeded until she sat by the bay of a sale lake nearby their camp, one that she sensed was canopied by a larger sheet of earth about twenty feet up.

“Come on, Toph, you need to talk to me. Why are you feeling so on edge?” He asked kindly as he sat next to her, placing a comforting hand on her shoulder.

“Hm.” She grunted out, not planning on saying all that much. That is, until she felt movement above her.

Telltale vibrations told her that Katara, or at least someone with her same mass and shoe size, was stood on the overhead canopy. Perhaps she'd been a little hard on the waterbender- sure, it was frustrating, but she always had their best interests at heart. So she explained to Sokka, mostly for Katara, about her own parents and how the waterbender’s kindness made her feel. How she loved that she had such concern for them because it showed her love, but that her own parents’ love and concern had turned their relationship sour. How, most of all, Toph was terrified of the same happening between her and Katara.

In short, she could have never said it directly to the older girl’s face.
Several hours later, the earthbender’s rather pleasant nap was interrupted by a soft tapping on her shoulder, that caused her to reach out and grab the offending wrist.

“Sugar Queen?” She greeted impolitely through gritted teeth.

“Toph.” Katara replied, though more brightly, and she just knew she'd have to actually talk to her genuinely, in person. There was a chance, after all, that the waterbender hadn't heard her earlier ramblings by the lake.

“Look, I-” She started.

“Let's do one of your scams together; I have an idea.”

—

And that, Ladies and Gentlemen, was how the two of them got stuck in a wooden cell.

“This is all your fault.” Toph accused, absentmindedly kicking a wall to distract herself from the fear that came with being so in the dark. She couldn't sense a single thing, and sound alone was somehow scarier without the context that came with her seismic sense.

“Hey! I just wanted us to have some fun together.” She defended herself from somewhere in their cell.

Rolling her eyes, Toph kept on kicking. “Well now we're probably going to get handed off to some Fire Nation higher ups, who'll recognise us as Sparky’s group and will have enough status to know he's still alive!” She allowed herself to collapse in a sitting position, pulling her knees up into her chest.

“Hmmm…” Hummed a coldly familiar voice, followed immediately by a sharp gasp from Katara. “I suppose this ‘Sparky’ is my brother? Funny, since he can't produce lightning.”
Azula. That name was probably a synonym for ‘evil’ in some languages. Even though Toph was blind, she could still see how cruel and merciless every fibre of the firebender’s being was as clear as day.

“So… You’re the one who ordered our capture.” Guessed Katara, who sounded firm and brave despite the fact that they were probably about to be incinerated. If only they had some earth.

Azula breathed out a short laugh, even that making her sound like the kind of person who ate babies for breakfast. “Not quite, I simply requested that they keep an eye out for someone of your description. Technically I didn't tell them to do anything- I just made it obvious that denial would result in death.”

In a searingly bright flash of courage, Toph muttered “you sure talk a lot for someone with so little to say.”

Katara gasped sharply once more, and then Toph felt a soft kick to her thigh.

“Hah, I see why Zuzu puts up with you. He's such a coward that he needs someone idiotically brave in his band of traitors to even it out. I'm sure he'll come running when he finds out I've captured you.” Azula sneered, probably doing something haughty like curling her lip or picking dirt out of her fingernails (Sokka had taught her plenty about bitchy body language).

Toph then heard footsteps and a door being opened and closed, before Katara let out a sigh of relief. The full weight of their conversation with Azula only started seeping into their minds a few moments later.

“We’re the bait.” The waterbender voiced the younger girl’s thought. “If we don't get out of here, Zuko will be led right to where his sister wants him.”

“It’s not like we can do anything about that, unless you think I can woodbend all of a sudden?”

“I-” Katara muttered a little, “no, but perhaps…”

“Sugar Queen? You're scaring me.” Toph admitted once she started hearing soft pads against the
floor, as if someone was jogging on the spot. Along with that there was the sound of Katara panting.

“Maybe, hah, you can't woodbend, hah, and there's no earth or metal, hah, but there is…” There was a sharp slash, as if something was cutting through wood. “Water.” Katara gasped triumphantly, before continuing.

A few minutes later, and several chunks of wood that the waterbender had to place carefully on the floor of their cell to avoid being heard, they were climbing out of the back of the cell, back onto hard ground. The earth beneath Toph’s feet felt like a saviour, and she was half tempted to lay down and hug it- but they had more important things going on right now. It had to be almost night by then, the sun was probably on the brink of setting, so they should be able to reach Sokka before he got tempted enough to start looking for them.

They started the short trek, five minutes in before a resounding boom of an explosion told them that Azula knew they'd escaped. At that their sprint only got faster, seeing Appa in the distant and running to him like he was their only chance, which he was. Toph created a massive wall of earth to stop Azula, or at least slow her down, making sure it reached about forty metres up by thirty five metres across.

It seemed as though Aang and Zuko had only recently arrived back, and were dismounting from the bison- until they heard the girls’ frantically yelled warnings, and instead started hastily pulling Sokka up to the saddle with them. By a slither of a margin, Toph and Katara managed to propel themselves with an earthy springboard up, onto Appa’s back, seemingly seconds before Azula's extended fire whips would have incinerated them. Or at least, the earthbender guessed judging by the heat on her back. Once the group were safely in the air, they all let out a simultaneous breath of relief at the safety flying gave them.

“So,” Sokka started them off after making sure everyone was uninjured (when had he become the mother hen? When Katara agreed to do something reckless? Strike that, suggested doing something reckless?). “What the Hell just happened?”.

Katara explained everything, including all of what Azula had said. It seemed to chill Zuko to the bone, of his silence was anything to go by.

Katara finished her story on a sour note, with Azula almost killing them all as they escaped on Appa. “What about you two? Did you manage to sort out Zuko’s spirit mojo?”.

“Yes.” The Prince said bitterly. “I spoke with Roku, who's my great grandfather by the way, but most of what he showed me I already knew.”
“But what did he show you?” Questioned Sokka, pressing his boyfriend for answers.

“Well,” The firebender seemed to think for a moment before continuing. “Just the beginnings of the War. How Roku and Sozen, my other great grandfather, were best friends until they grew apart. Sozen wanted power and Roku wanted peace, and in the end neither got what they really wanted; Roku died and his earlier inaction caused the longest war in history, and Sozen might have conquered the Air Nomads but he spent the rest of his life paranoid over finding the Avatar. The obsession ate away at his final years until he was driven into a madness, shortly before he died.”

The explanation was depressing. No way to sugar coat, it just was. Plus, as far as Toph could tell, it was pointless. All they really learnt was that Zuko had some messed up family history and that two best friends could become the worst of enemies.

“Do you think…” She spoke up, voice uncharacteristically timid. “We could ever end up like Roku and Sozen?”

Her question was immediately answered by a crushing group hug, but she thought that a simple ‘no’ would have sufficed.

Minutes of silence later, Aang seemed to find his voice: “It's strange,” He mumbled, “that Roku would specifically point out your ancestry. You said he made a point of it…”

“Yeah.”

“But it doesn't change anything. So what if we know you had bad and good in your blood? You're already good so it doesn't make much if a difference.” Aang explained, sighing a little.

“I don't know, but we'll probably find out soon; the Day of Black Sun isn't too far away now.”

And on that pleasant note, their conversation ended.

Chapter End Notes
I kinda feel like this chapter is was rushed and sorta bad, but I hope you enjoyed it nevertheless!

Next chapter I think is my best written in a while though, so look forward to that. Except, I'm taking a short hiatus for Christmas- I'll put up the next chapter on the 4th of January 2019! Hopefully (if all goes to plan) I'll be able to go back to weekly posting after that :))

Kudos and comments are awesome!
The cool night hung low in the air, mist seeping around their campsite like a phantom. The crackling fire burned dully, its light swallowed by the shadows of the spidery trees, whose branches were cracked and grey. All of the group sat in a circle, shivering but not from the chilly breeze that blew at them gently. Instead, it was Katara’s soft murmurs of a worn story that seeped into their bones, shaking each of them to their very core.

“And she said: ‘I'm so c- cold’.” Her whispers were met with uneasy silence, the girls companions shrinking into each other.

“It didn't have to be that scary.” Whined Sokka, face buried so deep in Zuko's chest he must have been able to hear his heartbeat. “Why couldn't you just tell us about evil vampires or something?”

“I'm sorry I scared you all.” Katara said in a placating tone, but she smiled wickedly at her shaking friends nevertheless.

“Psh, stupid stories don't scare me, Sugar Queen.” Toph rolled her eyes, still clinging onto Aang's arm.

Conversation settled into dead silence for a few moments then, not even cricket-flies chirping could be heard in the distance. Up above laid the almost full moon, maimed through the middle by a pale cloud, one which was barely visible through the darkness of the sky. Katara shivered too.

“Hello, dearies.” A soft, female voice cut through the lingering quiet, causing their group to collectively squeak and shoot up into a standing position.

There was too little light to see perfectly, but Katara could still make out the woman before them. She was elderly; hunched over painfully, as though her spine were warped and twisted. The shadows on her face made her eye bags more severe, stretching them. Watery blue eyes studied the children meticulously, whilst a thin smile greeted them pleasantly- yet the unwelcome feeling that she looked like a corpse gnawed at Katara’s brain.
“Wha-” Sokka screeched loudly after a second of the two parties regarding each other, immediately beginning to wrench his sword out of its sheath, fumbling.

Zuko stepped forwards, “Tell us who you are or-” He lit his palm with jumping flames. “You'll be very sorry.”

The woman's face soured further, but she turned to regard Katara with a kindly expression. “I apologise, I didn't mean to scare you. I simply heard your voices and worried that, well, this forest was up to its old tricks again.” She chuckled, her misty breath pushing grey strands of hair out of her face, the thin locks billowing a little.

“What old tricks?” Katara asked, relaxing her stiff defence position. She doubted this sweet old lady would try to fight her.

“Ah, well.” The woman's face slackened, looking off into the vine strangled trees distantly. “This place, always around the full moon, snatches people up- I couldn't bare to see such a horrible fate come to such young people.”

Aang muttered something inaudible to Zuko, who nodded sagely. “If this place is so dangerous, why are you out here?” Sokka questioned, face a little pink with blush and a hand gripping his boyfriend's bicep.

The lady let out a breathy laugh that sounded hollow. “The forest only snatches up firebenders, sweetheart, like your friend there.” She explained, wrapping her torn cloak around herself more tightly. Katara hoped she hadn't been outside for too long- the woman looked as if she would crumble to dust at any moment. “Anyway, I would feel much better if you four- sorry, five- had somewhere to stay. Do you want to stay with me for a few days? I assure you, you'd all be most welcome.”

“Is that really the best-” Zuko started, his voice quiet as he looked at Katara with plea in his eyes.

“I have food-” The woman teased brightly, patting one if her stretched pockets.

Toph jumped forwards, finally freeing Sokka from her grasp. “Of course we'll stay with you! Oi, Sokka, grab our stuff!”
They'd already packed up their entire campsite into five different bags (leaving Appa and Momo to their own devices in the woods, since they probably wouldn't get kidnapped by it) by the time Katara remembered her common decency and asked for the elderly woman's name. Gran-Gran would be so disappointed.

“My name is Hama, sweetie.”

—

Hama made them a positively impeccable breakfast early the next morning, before she left to go to the market. Sokka and his sister had offered to join her, the non-bender possibly a little suspicious, but she’d adamantly refused. Now their group sat in her basement, a damp and chilly chamber even in Summer, and planned their next moves for the Day of Black Sun, which was rapidly approaching.

“It's simple: I show up and challenge my father to an agni kai, since it's the only fight that, if I win, will prove legally I have right to rule. The Firelord will die, we'll deal with Azula later, and everything will be great.” Explained Zuko, moving his red piece on their Fire Nation map to the throne room, making it knock over the melon chunk that represented his dad.

“It's not that simple, babe,” Sokka said, concentrating on their plan and not Toph and Aang's gagging. “There will be legions of soldiers protecting the Palace, stopping you from getting to do just that.”

“Plus,” Their earthbender pointed out, “How can you beat the Melon Lord in a fire duel when your firebending won't be on?”

“Spirits, Toph, have you seriously not been paying attention to any of our war councils?” Katara grumbled, fiddling with the thimble of water that represented her.

“To be fair,” Aang mediated, “none of our ‘war councils’ seem very official- last time Sokka almost got mauled by a wasp-bear whilst he was demonstrating the correct way to cut down a Fire Nation war machine.”

They all looked at Sokka accusingly, and he grumbled under his breath about betrayal.
“Look, Toph, we're using the eclipse to get in and decimate my father's forces, letting me get to him. Then I'll challenge him as the eclipse ends. If I were to kill their leader whilst he was powerless in a hostile takeover, the Fire Nation would never follow me or whoever I choose to take the throne. There will be anarchy. It's simplest to just beat him in an honourable duel.”

The silent thought of ‘if you can beat him’ hung in the air like the stale scent of death, but Sokka disregarded it to squeeze the firebender’s hand supportively.

“Well that got deep.” Toph said, lightening the mood a little as she stood up, probably purposefully squishing Sokka's butter-knife-figure with her foot.

The group split up for the rest of the day: Katara and Aang went to check on Appa and Momo, Toph and Sokka hunted through the kitchen for something to eat to ruin their appetite for dinner and Zuko said he wanted to be alone for a little while. They agreed to meet back up at Hama’s house an hour after sunset for dinner, ready to chow down on something that hadn't been made over a campfire for once.

Yet, even an hour and forty minutes after dusk, Hama’s table was still void of food and Zuko hadn't yet turned up, so everyone was getting into a bit of a state.

“He wouldn't be late on purpose, so he's probably just not checked the time. Or the sky or whatever. Unless he's dead in a ditch somewhere. But we'd know if Azula got to him, cos we'd be in cinders too. Except if it wasn't his maniac sister, and he actually just got mugged and stabbed in some dark alley. Or maybe he's sick or something, so he's passed out and slowly deteriorating, throat too sore to call out for help and just hoping we'll know to look for him-”

“I swear, Sokka, if you say one more word I'll-” Katara began to threaten, when she was cut off by the front door opening.

The non-bender, immediately followed by his friends, sprinted through the narrow hallway to the creaking door, stopping short upon realising it was Hama entering the house, not their favourite rebel prince.
She looked miles better than she had the night before, pale skin a little rosier and hair better kept, as if someone had injected some youth into her. Really, she looked years younger.

“I'm back!” She greeted them, but Sokka wasn't in the mood right now.

“Did you see Zuko whilst you were out?! He's not back yet and I'm really getting worried.” The non-bender told her, backed up by his friends’ nodding.

She chuckled. “I'm sorry, honey, I haven't seen your friend whatsoever. Now, who'd like to eat some dinner!”

Toph scowled at Hama, all lust for food erased from her mind. “Isn't it a little suspicious that you are late the same day he disappears?” She accused, getting up in Hama’s face- not a tricky fete considering the old woman's short stature.

She blanched. “I'm sorry, I don't know where your friend is. Perhaps he got swallowed by the woods- he's a firebender, right?” Hama sighed, pushing her spindly, dry hair back with the hand that wasn't holding the groceries. “Now please, we must have dinner- these ingredients are very peculiar and expensive round here, so-”

“No.” Aang also spoke up, all cheer erased from his features. “Hama, you need to tell us whatever it is your hiding.”

The woman let out a sad sigh. “I had hoped to tell you all during dinner, but now will do I suppose.”

“What were you going to tell us?” Asked Katara with a deep frown.

Hama’s icy eyes thawed slightly as they met the waterbender’s stormy ones. “Why, Katara, I'm from the Southern Water Tribe.”

As she spoke she lifted her forefinger, and water from Katara’s flask drifted out, circling the wide eyed waterbender.

—
Hama was the only other Southern waterbender, and Katara was lost for words. Their entire authentic Tribe meal passed in a haze, though the food was incredible and turned out to be the reason Hama had taken so long shopping; it had been nearly impossible to find the right ingredients.

They still didn't know where Zuko was, but at least they knew to take Hama off of the suspect list.

“How did you escape the Fire Nation prison?” She asked in awe, snapping out of her mind blown phase enough to realise how many questions she had. “I had thought the firebenders had killed all of the Southern benders as soon as they were captured.”

Hama breathed through her nose sharply. “They probably wanted the Southern Tribe to think that, the bastards, trying to ruin their hope. No, we were all chained up in some dry hole in the ground. Enough water to survive, barely, and no sunlight. Most of the other older ones died in futile escape attempts before I arrived, and the younger benders just seemed to die of despair after long enough-like that Hell hole dragged the will to live out of them. I don't doubt that I'm the only one who escaped, so I'm probably also the last one alive…” Hama wiped a small bead of water from her eyelid, which made Katara realise she was crying too, and she scrubbed at her own eyes. “Except you, my dear girl- I must show you all of the old techniques, you must carry on the Southern legacy!”

The waterbender offered her elder a watery smile and cleared her throat, “I'd be thrilled to learn from you, truly, but…” She looked to her brother with a question in her gaze.

“It's fine, Katara, go and learn from Hama- this is your dream. Whilst you get better we can search for Zuko.” He sounded brave but Katara knew how terrified he must be for Zuko’s safety. She herself was worried half out of her mind, but at least she had Hama to distract her; the rest of her companions weren't so lucky.

—

Waterbending never got old.

By now Katara was a master of the art, credited even with training the Avatar, with defeating the scores of other waterbenders her age and with fighting in a war. Each graceful flex of her muscle ripped into new power, a gushing, howling flow of tide that was just waiting to be released. Smaller
moves left that current untapped, but large moves forced her to call upon the raging ocean within herself. They said water was the element of change; of flexibility- with how she managed the tide inside herself it was easy to believe. Yet, really, she'd argue water was the element of power, of strength. It could be a massive, suffocating force that obliterated any obstacle, that covered most of the Earth.

When she pushed her waterbending, Katara had to wonder whether Zuko felt the same with every element. Or maybe each one was completely unique. Perhaps, even, Zuko didn't feel the same surge of energy unless he was going all out with the Avatar State. If so, she wondered how he wasn't addicted yet.

That much power… It was hard to think about. Hers. Toph’s. Aang’s. His own. It wasn't difficult to believe he could shake the very planet off its orbit if he wanted to. She thanked the spirits he was on their side.

“Very good, Katara, you're clearly a master in your own right- probably the most skilled of your generation.” Hama complimented her, and she paused the gushing whirlpool she’d created to hover above the meadow they stood in.

It had been a tricky fete, to create a move of her own, and such a massive one at that. She'd pulled the water from a river a mile away, and had dragged it through the air, wrestling internally with the force that tried hard to pull the liquid away from her grasp. It hadn't really been necessary, but Katara had still refused to let a single droplet touch the floor. Hundreds of thousands of gallons under her control, spinning in tight rotations above their heads, and casting a translucent blue shadow over the meadow, and the several other fields surrounding the pair.

“You can let it go now.”

She'd already stopped spinning it, so now she just took a step forwards and felt the weight of the river follow her lead. Then, muscles burning from exertion in the best way possible, Katara shot her right hand out and let the liquid mass race away, letting her grip on it lessen until it was back in the river canal, and completely free once more.

Heaving more than she realised, the younger waterbender turned to her kindly mentor. “Can you teach me more?”

Hama shook her head fondly. “My sweet girl, I can't teach you anything like that. Big shows of raw strength were never my forte, even in my younger days, but you also show great promise of incredible technique- that I can help you with.”
“Please do.” She smiled brightly, her breathing becoming even as she regarded the other.

“Waterbending is supposed to be adaptable. Firebenders scorned me for my power, saying without water around I was useless. I had believed them at the time, for in my cell there wasn't even a droplet of moisture, but eventually I realised there's always water around, if you're creative enough.” Hama explained, a glow of excitement overtaking the frosty look ever present in her wizened eyes. “Watch this, young Katara.”

Hama cupped both hands, meticulous gaps between her knuckles as she crouched down slightly in a position Katara noted for later. She then seemed to breathe out, releasing all of the air from her lungs, before shutting her mouth quickly. Once that had been done, Hama spun on her heel and rapidly brought her hands up in unison. Katara watched in shock as water sprung out of the plants, a considerable amount flowing from a radius of about two metres around Hama. She left behind a circle of shriveled leaves and faded petals, but the clear liquid showed the technique worked.

“That was incredible!” She praised, bright eyed. “If only the plants…”

“Tut tut tut, it's only a few flowers, deary.” The older woman patted her arm, dropping control of the plant water. “Now, your turn.”

It was almost sunset by the time they found a lead.

Sokka, Aang and Toph had been searching through town all day, questioning everybody they could on Zuko’s location. Thankfully no one in the Fire Nation seemed to put two and two together, that a bunch of strangers were looking someone who was identical to the Avatar. By dusk Zuko had officially been missing for over a day, and the non-bender’s feet ached from all the walking.

“We’re going to have to search the woods.” He decided, eyes drifting over to the hulking mass of dark trees, clawing their ways forebodingly out of the dry dirt. Sokka gulped.

“Couldn't we have done that during the day?” Whined Aang, though it was a fair question.
Toph barked out a laugh. “Doesn't make any difference to me, Twinkle Toes.”

The non-bender led them cautiously towards the edge of the woods, every frigid breath of wind making his skin itch. His overpowering worry for the firebender had beaten out any fear for his own safety all day, but as he glared at the trees it was anger that pushed him forwards. How could a stupid bunch of trees take his boyfriend away from him?! It just wasn't fair.

Toph stopped a hair away from a large pine-tree. “There's someone nearby.” She pointed to their left, and Sokka did note a thin trail of smoke journeying up into the sky.

They trekked over to it, hoping to find the only person in town that they hadn't already interrogated about Zuko. They found a small cottage that was falling apart- a door attached to its hinges by splinters, windows without glass and a crumbling chimney. Outside, an elderly man seemed to be hauling some bags away from it and towards the town.

“Excuse us! Sir!” Sokka called after him, racing over to walk alongside him.

“Bah,” The man spat, small pupils snapping over to regard the non-bender. “Whaddya want, kid?”

“We need help finding our friend, he's-” Aang began to explain, popping up and the other side of the man.

“A firebender? Hah, he's done for. That woods is pure evil; dragging us innocent townsfolk down to the mountain.”

Sokka blinked in confusion. “To the mountain?” He questioned, he'd seen the mountain peeking over the branches, sure, but why would all the firebenders be put there?

“Yer, at least that's where them stupid spirits tried to drag me.” The man was still walking, so their little group continued to follow him.

“You were taken by the spirits? How did you escape?” Aang asked, seeming genuinely curious.

The man rolled his eyes and finally stopped in place, one hand on his hip. “I ain't got a clue. One
moment some darned thing had possessed me, forcing my body to move towards the mountain, then the sun came up and I'd got control again. I didn't never high tail it outta somewhere as fast as I did that morning.”

They let the man go after that, considering what he'd said. If there was a spirit out to get firebenders, then it made sense for it to have taken Zuko. Except weren't spirits supposed to like the Avatar? That didn't really add up…

“We'll just have to go to the mountain.” He told the others after a minute. Aang looked at him like he was crazy and Toph kicked his shin.

“You mean the mountain with the evil spirit?!” Toph asked loudly, following Sokka as he embarked into the woods. “I can't sense ghosts! No thank you!”

“Yeah, Sokka, this is going to be really dangerous, maybe we should wait for Katara…” Aang reasoned, also trailing behind him.

“You two do what you want, but every second we wait the more danger Zuko’s in.”

He heard them sigh from behind him, but they they continued following him all the same.

—

Sokka was glad Toph agreed to come, because without her he would have been hopelessly lost. As soon as they got three metres into the suffocating forest, any residual light from the setting sun was drained away. They wandered through mist that hung idly between thick tree trunks, swatting sharp but spindly branches out of their path. Quickly, Sokka lost track of the direction, sure he'd entered the woods facing the mountain but now unsure. The way out was just as confusing; all of the full moon’s glow was lost like evaporated soup, so they could make out their immediate surroundings but everything else was a grey-washed blur. He almost felt like he was underwater.

Toph guided them, certain in where she planted her feet whilst Sokka tripped over every root. Aang simply didn't touch the floor, hovering over the tricky terrain with his airbending. Whilst the non-bender couldn't make out anything through the high canopy of black leaves other than the dim shape of the moon, Toph was able to use her seismic sense to feel the mountain without needing to look at it, which was just as well really. He carefully unsheathed his sword, partly tense with worry over an
attack but also feeling left out in the midst of his friends’ amazing powers.

Eventually Sokka found himself pushing through crumbling branches and walking straight into a wall of solid rock. He yelped too loudly in the quiet atmosphere.

Covering his mouth he hissed at Toph: “Why didn't you tell me about this?”

“I did, idiot, I said ‘the mountain's close now’, weren't you paying attention?”

“I thought you meant we'd reach a clearing and then there would be a mountain, I didn't think the trees would go straight up to the surface of the mountain!” He complained a little louder, but he was still far too conscious of the silent night.

Toph rolled her eyes and grabbed his and Aang's sleeves roughly, “Just come on already, we don't have all night!”

She led them to a gap in the mountain that led downwards into a cave heavy with darkness. In its inky realms Zuko would be, and that was enough for Sokka to go charging in. He took a step but Toph didn't, and her iron grip kept him outside the cave.

“Can't you hear that?” Sokka leaned closer to the entrance, copied by Aang, and heard minute whispers from deep inside. “They're screaming.”

The non-bender pulled back with a deep breath. “That doesn't change anything.” He said before shoving Toph off him and plunging into the darkness.

He was being stupidly reckless, of course he knew that, but with Zuko on the line… He just didn't care. Love made you stupid.

Case and point: Toph and Aang following him down the tunnel, the former directing him at every turn, the former hauling him up every time he tripped over an unexpected pebble. Ten minutes of a fairly steep decline later, a pair of chained wooden doors stood before them, lit by a torch on one side. Sokka guessed it must have a lot of fuel to burn for however long it had been since it had last been lit, and was thankful at least one part of the underground had some light. On the other side of the doors the screaming was much louder, definitely loud enough for Sokka to figure they hadn't heard the group of three approaching. With a deep inhale, Toph pulled apart the chains and Aang
blasted the doors open, causing everything to go quiet.

Inside were at least two dozen people of all ages, clothes singed and torn and dirtied. There wasn’t any light inside so Sokka grabbed the torch by the entrance, making the prisoners wince at the sudden brightness. They all looked dumbfounded that someone was here, and too relieved to describe. All at once the pale firebenders began to chatter excitedly, pulling on their manacles to inch closer to their saviours.

“Wait up, all of you!” Called Toph, and the people went immediately quiet, strained muscles limp in their bonds. “Where is the newest one of you? It should be a teenager with a bad haircut—”

Before Sokka could protest about the haircut, a ragged woman spoke up. “In the corner,” She tilted her head towards a limp figure in the shadows. “He got pretty roughed up.”

Surely enough, strung up with heavy chains in the corner of the dank prison was Zuko. He looked like he’d been dragged through the forest; clothes ripped half to pieces and stained with mud, which also caked his bare skin. The firebender’s face was far too pale and was streaked down its right side with dried blood, which appeared to have come from a nasty gash on his forehead. His head lolled forwards limply, and bruised arms were pulled up against the wall with tight metal restraints, same with his legs and the floor.

“Zuko…” Sokka whimpered, struck by the worry that he was too late and his boyfriend had already died. He cupped his dirtied cheek with one hand and begged silently that he’d awaken.

He did not.

“He’s still breathing, Sokka, he's just passed out.” Toph explained more gently than Sokka realised she was capable, clapping her hands to make the chains release Zuko into the non-bender’s waiting arms.

He was still warm at least, and Sokka could feel his chest rise and fall. Gently, help manoeuvred the firebender until he was securely in his arms, and he leant down to kiss the gash on his forehead.

“Katara can heal him when we get back.” Aang promised, patting his back and looking thoughtful. “But what kind of spirit does this?”
The woman from earlier, who was still tied up and appeared unphased by Toph’s metalbending, shook her head. “It wasn't a spirit who did this: it was a woman. Sweet old thing you'd think, but she- she did something, took control of us. Said it was revenge.”

Sokka’s brain lit up with a terrifying idea. “Hama.”

There were several sorrowful nods of agreement, and Sokka clutched his boyfriend tighter. They needed a plan, they needed to get to Hama before she hurt Katara.

“Katara…” Aang went pale, folding his arms over his chest protectively.

Toph’s eyes glimmered in the torchlight, and Sokka knew what had to do. “You two should go find Katara and Hama, and I can free the rest of these guys and take them back up with me.”

“We can't just-”

“Leave? Yeah, you can. You have to. We can't save the prisoners, Zuko and Katara unless we split up. I'll be fine, okay?” His voice left no room for argument, and the others left after Toph had released the other chains, taking the torch with them. Sokka turned to the twenty or so free and sore benders, hugging Zuko close with a shaky breath. “Let's get going then.”

Katara stood in a small clearing, domed by several pale branches and a shroud of tense silence. She held her breath, suddenly wondering if she and Hama were the only two left alive here.

“You've mastered all of my other teachings, so now-” The elderly woman raised her arms, a cold gleam in her eyes as a thin smile cut across her face. “You must learn the hardest one of all.”

She pushed down her instinct to gulp. “The trickiest Southern technique? And then my training will be completed?” Excitement bubbled in her like a choking fountain.

Hama nodded fondly. “It can only be done best on a full moon, but near one is doable too.” She
explained, voice turning firm. “It's not really a Southern technique yet, since I'm the only one who can do it, but soon it will be; once you've learned.”

Katara wrung her hands, and watched entranced as Hama’s bony fingers stretched out, and her breath stopped, before clawing the fingers back to her chest. With her motion a rat, which must have been silently cowering in the long grass surrounding them, was pulled through the air straight into the woman's suffocating grip.

Katara stepped back.

“That- that ca-” She stuttered, moving back further as her mind searched for an answer. Her back hit a tree and she was forced to meet Hama’s chilling gaze.

“ That,” Hana chuckled, dropping the stuff rodent and straightening her back marginally. “Was bloodbending, Katara, the most powerful form of waterbending to ever exist.”

Thoughts were beginning to form properly in her brain again. “It's wrong, Hama, it's- it's cruel.”

“Psh!” Hama snarled, creasing her brow. “Was it cruel when the firebenders stole me from my home? Was it cruel when they locked us up like animals? Was it cruel when they watched us die like dropping flies?”

In a soft voice Katara replied “of course”, remembering her own mother taken from her too soon, killed mercilessly by a firebender in their home.

“Then, my girl, is it really cruel to do this? To use our power to punish them, all of them, for hurting all of us?”

Part of Katara screamed ‘No’. She almost wanted to agree, to blame every firebender for all of her pain, for the destruction of her home, for the injustice of her mother's death. Yet… She couldn't. She'd watched her brother fall in love with a firebender, a firebender who'd been aggressive and reckless but cared, and had grown with just a little kindness into someone dedicated to ending the world's suffering. She couldn't let the ocean inside of her loose on innocent firebenders, on oblivious citizens who’d scarcely lit more than a birthday candle alight in their entire lives.
Her heart yelled over the part that was screaming, and it said clearly that no one deserved the pain of that scared rat. Not even firebenders, not when she'd watched Zuko fight and bleed for her safety.

Zuko. And her brain clicked the pieces together.

“You!” She turned on a shocked Hama, raising her fists. “You took Zuko! And the others!”

Hana rolled her eyes. “He's a firebender, he deserved a little roughing up, dearie, he'll just betray you in the end anyway. He's evil at heart; they all are.”

“No.” Katara muttered, letting her fists drop and facing to one side. “You are.”

She wasn't sure if it was the calmness or certainty with which she spoke, but something lit the older woman's spirit on fire and suddenly her body seized up, neck muscles filled with her own blood that felt foreign, forcing her to look at Hama with wide eyes.

The woman's expression flashed dangerously like molten steel. “Compare me to them again, sweetheart, please.” The words were drawled through a too wet mouth, and Hana squeezed her fist, letting Katara feel a pulse of the elder’s power shift uncomfortably through her body.

Letting loose a current of her ocean, Katara pushed off Hama’s control, hiding how the action almost winded her.

“Katara!” Aang's cheery voice, dripping with fear, echoed through the trees as footsteps ran towards them.

Gaining a sadistic look of cold amusant, acting before the younger waterbender could even squeak in protest, she clenched her fist once more, and Katara watched as the oxygen was pushed out if her lungs. Two just barely writhing forms were thrust from the trees, Toph and Aang landing facing each other.

“No-” She stepped forwards to save them, stop Hama, anything, but her feet felt rooted down as the elderly woman forced Aang’s head up like a puppeteer would, twisting his face to look at her with his pleading Hazel eyes.
“Perhaps, honey, you think bloodbending’s evil now,” Hama breathlessly raised her other arm, and the two under her control stood against their will. “How will you feel when you use it on your friends? To stop them from slaughtering each other?!” With that last crazed sentence she clapped her hands together, the forceful noise echoing loudly through the trees as Toph and Aang’s bodies were forced at each other, both making deeply reluctant sounds as they struggled against the bloodbending.

‘I will not bloodbend my friends’ Katara thought.

‘Not my friends’ she repeated as they got closer together.

‘I won’t’ as she took a long exhale and raised a hand.

‘Never’ and Hama’s body was forced to the floor, Toph and Aang dropped.

Even forced by her own body into the dirt, the old woman managed to smile up at Katara’s shaking limbs. “You're a bloodbender now, too, Katara.”

About twenty minutes after that Sokka showed up with half the town, and Zuko in his arms. Hama was arrested, probably sentenced to death, but Katara didn't want to hear about it. Instead, she healed Zuko as soon as she saw him, uncaring of the villagers (they seemed too thankful that she’d taken down the ‘witch in the woods’ to snitch about her being a waterbender). She was happy, for just a moment that terrible day, to watch her power do something good, as the liquid sealed up Zuko’s wounds, his eyes fluttering open as Sokka smiled like someone had just put the sun back in place.

Chapter End Notes

Me? A week late?? Noooooo, never! Hahahah ‘:/

Okay but yeah, sorry! This is here now, and we're going back to biweekly.

Hope you enjoyed this chapter! Personally I love the 'bending' part of atla sooo much, so I love exploring it. Like, I'll write an essay about this kinda stuff cos it's just my favourite. So this chapter was just a lot of fun to write, since I got to explore bloodbending and how it would feel (that's also why I include the stuff about air and
firebending making more powerful fire ten chapters ago, lol, it's cos I'm a nerd).

BTW I wrote 3/4 of this and then realised I was writing Hana instead of Hama and I blame God.

Me, a whumper who likes watching characters get hurt? It's more likely than you think. (*cough* don't count all the times Zuko has been hurt and look after by Sokka in this fic *cough*)

Anyway, that's all from me. Hope you had a nice December, even if you don't celebrate Christmas. Happy New Year! And comments and kudos are awesome!
Azula sat restlessly in the chamber, fiddling with the hem of her crimson dress and absorbing the useless information the general was spouting. For years she'd longed to attend war councils, and after her brother's banishment Ozai had allowed her to sit in and listen. By now, of course, she would give her own piece- it usually being the most valuable- and that was what pleased her father.

“Thanks to the information Princess Azula gathered whilst in Ba Sing Se, we know that there will be an attack launched on the day of the eclipse.” Explained one captain, as though that weren't common knowledge in the room; it was the reason so many high ranking officials had gathered.

A general sighed. “It makes the most sense to create a trap, perhaps letting them mow down the weaker troops and then surprising them from behind after the eclipse has started.”

“What if we fought them head on though?” Suggested a younger (50 ish) Lord. “We could set up a non-bending defence like the Yue Archers, who have experience without bending.”

“That might be less cowardly, but it's likely that the army that will greet us will be made up of a select number of elite benders, who could easily incapacitate a bunch of non-benders.” Someone else added, and all of their monotone voices were starting to do Azula's head in.

They kept on switching between ideas, the only silent two at the table being the Firelord and his daughter. She kept picking at the threading of her dress, letting her pale fingers tangle in the scarlet knots. Concentrating was boring. It wasn't like any valuable ideas were being presented anyway. Thumbing over the bitten raw nails on one hand, Azula stood up.

“Is it necessary I be here, Father? Clearly your subordinates have this covered. If it would please you, I would prefer to spend my time preparing for the battle; the eclipse is only a week away, after all.”

Ozai regarded her from his second throne, the one kept in the war chamber. He lounged upon it like a weary panther, constantly tensing as if about to strike. He wore traditional robes which draped his entire body, but were easy to throw off if combat occurred. Azula knew. She'd seen. The men around the table leaned in with ill-concealed enthusiasm in their eyes, watching the exchange as if anticipating an Agni-Kai, as if she were Zuko.
The man sniffed. “Daughter, you wish to leave? Do you understand the honour of us including you here, not of age yet and a woman?” She heard his knuckles crack, the tone of voice familiar.

“Father, I am grateful for the opportunities that you have given me.” She stood a little straighter, perfectly aware of her worth. “But it is clear that I can be more useful elsewhere.”

Ozai’s eyes slipped to the floor, a low chuckle sticking in his throat. “Very well, if you have no more information to give, you are excused.”

Azula thought of her brother, alive somewhere close to them, waiting to attack. She thought of his team and their strength. She thought of her father, unaware the Avatar still lived, still crediting his defeat to Azula.

“No, Father, I have no more information for you at this time.”

—

Iroh leaned against his cell wall, the damp creeping through his layers like icy spiders. He’d stopped shivering weeks ago.

It was lucky, really, that he’d taught himself to use firebending to warm his own body. Otherwise, in this frigid cell, he’d barely have the energy to sit upright- let alone keep up the merciless training regime he’d put himself through. Now his muscles jumped beneath his rags, the pillow he held to his stomach flush against his newfound abs.

He thought, with a chuckle, that he should have gotten back in shape years ago, back when he at least had a chance with the ladies. Now he was old and tired and sad, two sons dead in a lifetime, killed through a war his grandfather began. They said no parent deserved to see their children die before them, but, perhaps, after his siege on Ba Sing Se, this was the spirits’ way of enacting karma upon his life.

Mournfully, he pulled himself up to stand, peering through the cracks in his wall.

He used this makeshift window to keep time, and now he gathered that it was the morning of the
eclipse. Almost time then. He’d told the sweet prison guard to take a day off, and she’d told him where the prisoners he needed were. Everything was set.

Just one more hour to go.

—

Sokka lay waiting in their tent, too excited to sleep any further. Well, perhaps excited wasn’t the correct term, how about… Completely terrified? Still, though, there was some anticipation in how he felt, all of his preparation and training culminating together for this one day. The day they would defeat the Firelord and his Capital, to get justice for all the pain, hurt and-

He yowled as Zuko kicked him in his sleep, subsequently waking his boyfriend up as well.

“Wha- What happened?!” The firebender rushedly sat up, surveying their surroundings. He was still lying on top of Sokka so he hissed when the boy’s hands dug into his flesh for support.

“You kicked me. Again.” He pouted, crossly staring at his boyfriend, who relaxed back down until he was draped over the non-bender once more. “Have you got nothing to say for yourself?”

Blearily, Zuko blinked. “Mmm, you're pretty?”

That was a low blow; the Prince knew how he hated (re loved) all these snuggly compliments. He was going to have an aneurysm at 6am! What kind of death would that be? (His brain supplied a better one than getting incinerated by Azula).

“We have to get up soon, babe, the rest of the invasion force is supposed to be arriving at seven.” He tried, prodding Zuko gently in the side. The other boy only pressed his face deeper into his chest. “Aren't you firebender’s supposed to rise with the sun or something?”

Wordlessly, Zuko pointed at the orangey glow coming from the crack in their tent.
“Just cos it's only just dawn doesn't mean it isn't sunrise.”

Still, Sokka humoured him for another ten minutes, before bodily dragging him out of the tent to get ready. Zuko regained his wits and sorted himself out, slower than usual- Sokka put it down to nerves. He too would be nervous if, in six hours time, he had to kill his father. Then again, his dad was a lot nicer than the Firelord.

Speaking of his father, the rest of the invasion force was due to arrive any minute. Their plans had cut the arrival a little too close to the eclipse for comfort, but all those weeks ago Sokka had known this was their best course of action. His dad had concurred, and now all they had left to do was wait. Katara and Aang were preparing breakfast, a serious air dawning on their small group, which was only increased when Zuko and Sokka sat down at one side. Despite his nerves the non-bender still shovelled down food; they all needed the energy if they were going to pull this off.

“When is everyone else showing up again?” Asked Toph, as she fiddled with her salted pork. “No offence to them or anything, but we went on like seven different detours and we still got here early.”

That thought just made it hard for Sokka to breathe in properly. What excuse did his dad have? He'd travelled further, sure, but he had probably been much more on task than their group. Part of him wondered, with warrant, if his father had already been captured, and they were doomed to fail the invasion without him and his troops.

“Hey, guys-” Zuko pulled him out of his grim musings, pointing towards some out of place mist swirling towards the beach. “Is that weather going to slow down the invasion?”

The non-bender studied it for a moment, before his eyes flicked back to the mild weather crossing the rest of their little island.

“No,” Katara smiled, standing up. “I think that is the invasion!” Altogether they ran towards the beach, the mist slowly becoming less opaque as they neared what truly was a dozen water tribe vessels.

A few teary reunions later, they had five hours until the eclipse- four and a half before they had to get going. There was a rest period of a couple of hours until their final briefing, where their allies could
eat their own breakfasts or just pray to the spirits that they'd survive.

Toph went off with The Boulder™ and some other earthbender (including Haru), the group laughing as they made structures from the sand. Meanwhile, the rest of their group of five joined Hakoda and Bato in a makeshift Southern Tribe hut. He thought it was supposed to help them relax, but Zuko and Aang just looked more pale after seeing the animal carcasses on the wall, even though they both kept their lips sealed.

“Dad, about the invasion-” Started Katara a little anxiously, wringing her hands.

“No,” He interrupted softly, a kind smile on his face. “This is not the time to concern ourselves with the worries of battle; right now we should be preparing ourselves spiritually for the task at hand. Working ourselves up will do us no good.”

“I thought you didn't believe in the spirits’ power, Dad.” Sokka mentioned, bowing his head. He itched to go over the plans again, but he understood what his father had said to be true.

Hakoda chuckled lowly for a moment. “I do not, son, usually but- well, now is a confusing time. I might not think the spirits have the power or the drive to help us win, but sometimes it's easier, if only for a moment, to let something bigger than yourself shoulder the burdens of this world.” He breathed out a sigh. “Perhaps that is why, Avatar Zuko, everyone needs you so much in this world. A person more powerful than any other to give all their problems to- it's flawed but simpler, in a way. Even we, the ‘good guys’, are using you, a teenager, to end a war that you're barely a part of.”

The firebender looked shocked at being addressed, his eyes wide open and staring. Meanwhile, guilt began edging across Sokka's nerves because his dad still didn't have all the information. What kind of child lets their parent go into a battle without telling them everything? He quickly flashed a look to the rest if his group, Zuko nodding slightly and Aang too wrapped up in his meditation to notice. However, Katara gave him a severe glare that he noted but ultimately ignored.

“Dad, there's something we have to tell-”

“Don't-” Zuko grabbed his arm and looked him in the eye. “I have to tell him.”

Hakoda regarded them with confusion, but motioned as if telling Zuko to explain.
“I’m sorry, Sir, but I haven't been truthful. When I met you, Katara had told you the lie that I had told her when we first met; that I was some random peasant with a big heart who cared too much about the world to watch it burn. That was not the truth. I actually joined her, Sokka and Aang in their quest to ‘find’ the avatar because I couldn't figure out if it was me or not. If it turned out not to be me, I'd originally planned to capture whoever it was- as my father had ordered me to, almost three years ago. My father being the Firelord.”

Sokka gulped. The truth sounded way worse out loud, but at this point he doubted his dad could become anymore shocked, at least…

“By the way, Dad-” The non-bender spoke up, trying to avoid looking at his father's face. “Zuko is my boyfriend.”

Bato looked a little like he might faint, to be honest, and Hakoda was barely even moving to breathe. Katara had her mouth clamped shut, as though she'd decided the other two should deal with it. She was right. Scratching the back of his neck nervously, Sokka leant forwards- only to get pushed back by a concerned looking Zuko.

“Sir,” The firebender began, clearing his throat and brushing his hair back. “I'd like to apologise for lying to your children. And for letting them lie to you, even when I knew it was wrong.” The Prince took a deep breath and cautiously reached to clasp Sokka's hand, which he allowed (despite feeling like he was going to pass out from nerves). “However,” Zuko continued with more confidence. “I will not apologise for dating your son. I love him. I'd never hurt him, and he knows that. So if you have any comments, I promise I'll make you wish-”

That last part was spat out venomously, the grip on the non-bender's hand tightening. Zuko’s original short temperament reared its head, and Sokka almost worried for the safety of the Firelord; the Prince's current expression alone would probably stop his heart and demolish his kingdom.

Serenely, Hakoda finally spoke up. “I don't have any comments about that, Avatar Zuko.” His tone was even and calm, but even so Sokka felt like running away, heart beating in his ears so loudly he could barely hear his father speak. “I am concerned, though,” here it comes “as to why you felt you had to keep it a secret.”

His dad reached forwards to comfortingly squeeze his shoulder, and he raised his head from its stubborn gaze at his knees. Hakoda smiled at him with watery eyes, before pulling him closer for a hug. Sokka fought very hard not to succumb to tears, but the relief at his dad not turning him away… He was forced to sob softly into his father's supportive chest; feeling again like that little kid who'd cut his hand playing in the weapons shed, too afraid to admit he'd gone in there. That time his dad had hugged him, too.
“Ummm…” Katara finally spoke up from beside him, eyes also looking a little moist. “This is great but… Do you really not care that Zuko is Prince of the Fire Nation? Like, no offence but I was pretty pissed and you’re a little too chill for me to relax.” She admitted, and Sokka had to agree as he pulled away from his dad, scrubbing his tears hastily as he did so.

Chuckling and wiping his own eyes, Hakoda turned to his daughter, all of them ignoring how astounded Bato still was.

“I must admit that it's a… Surprise to hear from you all, since I guessed you were intent on keeping it a secret. However, I already knew. Years ago, when I first left the Southern Tribe to fight against the Fire Nation, my troops and I needed information. We went to a sacred library in the desert, Wan Shi Tong’s,” the group looked at each other in shock “and he allowed us to gather information to protect our people. We lied and said it wasn't for the war, and we were never found out.

“When I was there I read a book about Avatars, speaking of a prophecy that the next one to make their mark on the world would be of royal blood. Of course, that could've been in three hundred years and from any Nation- so I disregarded it to focus on the war at hand. Yet, when I found out Avatar Zuko here was a firebender to begin with, I assumed he must've actually been royalty. I only confirmed my suspicions recently in the Earth Kingdom, when half baked stories of the Avatar killing the banished Prince were getting passed around.”

Hakoda smiled once he'd finished, and the rest (especially Bato) looked dumbfounded.

“So…” Katara tried, shaking her head slightly.

“You knew this entire time?” Sokka finished, scratching his forehead. “But you didn't tell us?"

“You wanted it to be a secret for whatever reason, and I respect your choices.” Their father explained warmly, before turning to Zuko. “Which is also why I trust your choice to date him, Sokka, and besides; he seems like a good man.”

The non-bender is manly enough to admit that he started crying again.
Four hours later Aang was sat on top of a warship mast, which was headed straight for the Gates of Azulon. He'd learnt about them in Fire Nation school, and had given all the information he could muster to Hakoda and Sokka, the leaders of their invasion.

Earlier the airbender had meditated (apparently missing a lot of drama), asking the spirits for help. No one had replied for a while, until Arianna had appeared before him in the spirit world. It was always so jarring to see her, to hug her warm form like she was still alive, to hear her laugh as he updated her on their adventures.

“I already know, silly! I follow Zuko round everywhere, unfortunately…” She'd said with a giggle.

“Can you help us?” Aang had asked, clutching her hands. She stopped smiling.

“Avatar Zuko is more mature now.” She had mused, “More stable…” she added as an afterthought.

Aang had tilted his head in confusion, before she squeezed his wrist gently. “I mean that he should have more control over the Avatar State than he did before, if he can trigger it.”

Now, with the sea air blasting against him, the airbender thought about that. He hadn't told Zuko, partially hoping the boy would already sense it himself, but also not wanting to bring his hopes up if it proved untrue. Sighing, Aang cursed the maturity that war brung. He missed the days of laughter, where nothing could go seriously wrong in his safe bubble of childhood.

“You look sad.” Noted someone from behind him, and he startled, moving to see Katara with a concerned frown etched into her face. “Is everything okay?”

Aang sighed but smiled, looking into the waterbender’s eyes. “I was just thinking about how I missed when everything was simpler- safer. I didn't have to worry about my friends all the time.” Katara looked like she might speak up, so he waved his hand before gently gripping hers. “But seeing you reminded me that my friends are strong; strong enough to look after themselves. We've got nothing to worry about if we work together, I'm certain.”

Katara’s expression melted into something happier, and she picked up Aang’s other hand. “Sometimes it surprises me how much you've grown. How much we've all grown, even.”
They both chuckled, quiet for a moment, looking into each others eyes until the horn blew, sounding that it was time to go below deck.

“I need to go…” Katara frowned, and Aang pressed a chaste kiss onto her cheek.

“Then go. We'll see each other again soon.”

Chapter End Notes

Hope you liked this one!!! Not much happens but it's supposed to be buildup anyway~

I'm trying to stay on schedule but idk if the next few chapters will be perfectly on time; I'll definitely get them out by the Sunday of the week they're supposed to be out though :))

Comments and kudos are always super appreciated!
Everything was a blur once they'd gotten off the ship.

Zuko had barely had time to wave at Sokka, nevermind kiss him passionately, before the flurry of arrows in their direction meant he had to glide out of the way. The others, meanwhile, he hadn't even seen. He trusted his friends to deal with the army and advance to the Palace, but there was still an uneasy feeling in his chest when he left them behind.

It was too nice a day for bloodshed, he decided whilst up in the air, breeze whipping through his hair and sun shining down on the city below him. Zuko was ahead of their invasion party, so he got to watch the soldiers lying in wait for his friends. Most had ran to the beach but clearly some had been ordered to stay back; what if they had known about the invasion? The firebender tried to convince himself that it was impossible, but his sister and father (though mostly his sister) were very tricky. Taking a deep breath as he swooped over a particularly tall tower, he prayed that they'd be alright. There wasn't much he could do about them having lost their element of surprise now.

Soon Zuko reached the Palace, a garish gold structure that looked molten in the heat of the sun. Just glancing at it burned his corneas, but he still carried on forwards. He wondered briefly how such a hideously extravagant building had managed to elicit such homesickness from him. He estimated that it was only a ten minute walk from the shore to the Palace, most of it being across the town that the royal guards lived in, and his group had a good twenty minutes before the eclipse. Plus Aang was probably already around there somewhere.

Their plan was simple: Zuko was to go on ahead and find his father, challenging him to an Agni Kai as soon as the eclipse started, right in front of all the nobles. That meant his father would be forced to participate due to the witnesses, and they could set up during the eclipse whilst Azula wouldn't have the power to sneakily kill him (unless she resorted to literally stabbing him in the back which, to be truthful, he wouldn't put past her...). As all of that was going on, his friendly group of invaders would take down the Capital’s defences, preventing there from being a coup as soon as he (hopefully) won, before meeting him at the Palace to watch him fight his father. If he won they’d then have to deal with Azula, which Sokka had decided to ‘strategically figure out later’. But currently Aang was supposed to be keeping an eye on her, with his ‘amazing’ stealth skills.

Overall Zuko guessed they were screwed.

Still, as he watched his quiet childhood home, not so much as a single guard at their post, he hoped to the spirits and back that they’d survive to try again.
Toph couldn't believe she'd been given the whiny job.

Her! The greatest earthbender to ever live, mastermind of their group and complete badass overall had been ordered away from the fighting. At first she thought it was to keep her out of trouble since she wasn't even thirteen yet, but then she figured it was because the prison she had to break into was made of stone.

So at least, she thought as she sprinted over an earth bridge that she'd created to arch over the fiery line of defence, they hadn't been too patronising. Still, Toph resented that she could sense only two guards at the prison, both of which she took down easily with only a wave of her hand. Their spears were snapped like swigs and their flames snuffed out, the only trace of them the slight scent of smoke.

The other earthbenders had stayed with Sokka and Katara, so Toph was alone- not that it mattered. She could easily get around on her own, protecting herself.

Reaching through her seismic sense, she looked for Iroh- but couldn't discern his heartbeat among the dozens of others in the prison. It was strange… Usually her senses were extremely precise. Still, she figured she could just get closer to him and would then be able to figure out his cell.

Starting on the first floor, Toph walked through each corridor, careful to completely focus so that she could find Iroh. That was her one job after all: save the avatar’s uncle so that he'd be safe, even if they lost horrendously. Which they wouldn't. Surely.

When she'd reached the final floor and still no sign of Iroh, other than several unconscious guards she hadn't sensed earlier, three empty cells and a slip of paper she had no hope of reading, Toph knew he must have already escaped. And power to him, honestly, but him and his two other escapees were kind of making her look bad. Either that, or they'd already been transferred away- but that was only possible if the Fire Nation had known they were coming.

Toph suddenly got a very wrong feeling in her stomach.

But no, the bars had been bent and warped as though someone had been breaking out, and no keys
had been used to unlock the mutilated locks. Like she said, there were knocked out guards littering the hallways like dead flies. So, wherever Iroh had gotten to, which he had hopefully written on the damp paper in her fist, he had escaped purposefully to go there. As well as two others. But the earthbender didn't have the slightest clue who they could be.

Toph ran out of the prison, steadfastly ignoring the shouts of other prisoners (she had no idea if they deserved imprisonment, some of them could be murderers, after all), and headed towards the center of the Capital: the Palace. If nothing else she could at least help Zuko, provide moral support or whatever, and it wouldn't be nearly as pathetic as liberating one old man from prison.

Though, given Iroh’s own ability to escape, she probably shouldn’t write him off as just an ‘old man’.

—

About halfway to the Palace, Sokka realised that perhaps invading the Fire Nation wasn't the perfect family bonding opportunity he had hoped it would be. Katara was somewhere behind him, long water whips snaking through the crowds of firebenders, writhing between their limbs and tripping them over. Her attacks weren't particularly damaging, but she had frozen at least of few dozen firebenders in place, most of them too untrained and shocked to melt their way out. Sokka was almost insulted that the newbies had been sent to fight them.

Hakoda, meanwhile, was up front- slashing his spear through the front lines, everything a tangle of weapons and armour. The soldiers weren't thinking strategically for the most part; they ran at them with fire or swords, wildly attacking the closest target all at once, often catching each other in the crossfire. They weren't making much difference, either, since their best armoured troops were lining the outside of their invasion force, mostly earthbenders who were easily countering everything being thrown at them.

Sokka didn't really feel like he was doing all that much in comparison. Sure, so far he'd pinpointed the best places to attack in order to completely collapse the city’s defences: three canon towers only a hundred feet away, but all of the heavy lifting was being done by everyone else. Even their Souther Tribe troops, fellow non-benders, were physically stronger than him, and were easily cutting down the enemy. Meanwhile, Sokka was just sort of among them, his black blade gleaming wickedly in the dying sun, doing practically nothing aside from telling other people were to go.

Yet he figured that would change soon. They had reached the outer barrier of the Palace, fighting, while easy, had slowed down their trek however, and it was barely a few minutes until the eclipse started. If the guards were going to step up their game at any time, now would be it.
“Katara!” He yelled over the sounds of battle, trying not to wince as an archer from outside his view got a lucky shot, cutting a graze across the cheek of the swamp bender to his right.

Seeming to realize he needed her to come over, his sister slipped between two burly men with glinting spears, leaving them to deal with the firebenders she’d been occupying.

“What is it?” Katara asked, more quietly as they were closer.

As he slashed through another arrow that threatened to take out his eye, he replied “We need to get to those towers at the barrier, otherwise we'll never break through and be overrun.”

She nodded, turning to gesture at one of the three towers, her previous water whips morphing into a haphazard ice bridge. The bridge split off into three, and their father leaped up to one from his place on the battlefield before Sokka could even motion to him.

“Also,” He mentioned hurriedly, just barely pulling Katara out of the way of yet another arrow. “They're getting better. Before they couldn't land a shot to save their lives, but now they're actually being accurate.”

“So you think they have better troops now? They were saving them until we got closer to the Palace?”

Sokka tilted his head a little in agreement, halving a spear that shot down from one of the artillery towers.

“Not just that, though…” He let Katara drag him up onto the ice bridge, which was peppered with flaming arrows but still strong enough to be stood on. “They put all the rookie firebenders between the shore and here, giving us a lot of people to fight and tire ourselves out with. Then, once we reached the barrier, and as the eclipse is almost starting, they threw their non-benders at us; people who won't be affected by the eclipse and are skilled enough to actually start slowing us down. If I were going to guess, they're hoping these guys will either take us down or at least prevent us from reaching the Palace before the eclipse ends. Then they're planning to send out their powerful firebenders once it's over, to capture us when there's no chance of being caught during the eclipse.”

He finished explaining just as they reached the crossroads of the bridge, having been severely slowed down by the focus he was now having to pour into the fight.
“So what you're saying is that this was premeditated- they knew we were coming, figured out our plan and then acted accordingly.” Katara sighed, melting part of the bridge that one of the hapless soldiers was trying to climb onto.

Before Sokka could so much as put a thumbs up in agreement, he noticed the window of one of the towers glowing orange, as though its canon was being charged. He immediately sprinted towards it, trusting his sister to do the same with the only remaining tower.

He cleaved the stone door in half, its weight falling forwards and forcing the few guards inside back. They raised their weapons, one of them engulfing his arm in fire, all standing protectively around the canon behind them, which was pointed up and aimed outside the window. Another man was also behind them, firebending the thing as if to charge it, solely concentrated and using both hands. Sokka had guessed there would be something like this on the outer barrier- a nifty offence mechanism to use as a last ditch attempt to defeat any invaders. But since using it also meant killing your own soldiers (who were fighting with said invaders directly in its firing line), the non-bender had assumed they wouldn't use it until they were desperate. Which meant not using it until the eclipse was over and it seemed the only way to kill them without them escaping or to get rid of them if they won. That's why he'd planned on destroying it before the eclipse could even start, but apparently…

Sokka's blood boiled at the thought of the Fire Nation leaders letting this happen, probably planning it even. Mercilessly sacrificing their own people, young men who looked barely older than Sokka himself. In the Southern Tribe family was everything- your people were the most important people to you, and you were supposed to do anything to keep them safe. His father would never let their people die, throwing himself into the fire first, not allowing anyone to join the resistance until they were 21.

Hands still gripping his sword like a lifeline, his clenched fists becoming pale, Sokka remembered what Zuko had explained to be the real reason he was outside the Fire Nation in the first place, all those months ago. His father had thrown him out to do his dirty work, maliciously not even intending for it to be possible.

That thought in his brain, rage seeping into each of his nerves like the adrenaline rushed into his muscles, the non-bender charged.

It was almost funny that he could mull over all that information within a split second of entering the tower, letting him not waste even a moment as he brought his sword down on the closest guard. He was knocked in the skull by the flat of his blade, helmet severely dented as the poor man crumpled to the ground. From his left, Sokka felt the vague heat of a fire blast glance across his leather armour, turning to sweep the guy’s feet out from under him- a dirty trick that Zuko had taught him. The final soldier came forwards with his spear, seeming a little unbalanced and, even during his rage at the
injustice of the Fire Nation, Sokka couldn't find it in him to hurt the poor guy too much. So he lowered his swords and side stepped the spear, before turning on his heel and punching the teenager right in the nose with an audible crack.

Oops. Still, he'd be fine.

Not wasting another second that could be used for the canon to be fully charged, the non-bender rushed forwards and dragged the firebender manning it away. He was lightly burned on the forearm for his action, but that didn't matter too much once the firebender had been slammed on the head by the hilt of his sword.

Sokka gave himself a precious moment to survey the damage he'd managed to dole out in under thirty seconds, catching his breath as he did so. When he then stepped back outside the tower just as the eclipse began, he sighed in relief; if he'd not stopped that firebender dozens of people would likely been dead by now, the canon probably would have reached full charge by the time the eclipse had started.

That small slice of relief, however, was snatched away a second later when, in between the confused Fire Nation soldiers, he spied Katara hauling their father out of the tower he'd infiltrated whilst they'd still been talking. Sokka sprinted over, easily pushing past the firebenders who were still trying to summon flames, and gasped at the sight of his dad's pale face. His eyes were a little bleary and there was a nasty looking shoulder wound dripping blood down the rest of his arm.

“Dad!” He cried, not even looking at the rest of the battle, barely able to even articulate that single words.

Hakoda chuckled lowly, straightening up against Katara’s side even as the motion made him wince. “Don't worry, son, I'll be fine. I can still f.”

“No.” Both men turned to Katara, whose face looked like steel despite the watering of her eyes. “You're not fighting, not like this.”

Their dad sighed, using his good arm to clutch onto her hand. “It's my job as your father to protect you, both of you.”

“You already did that.” She said sternly before Sokka could even think to respond. “You went out into the world and risked your life for us, now let us do the same for you.”
What she says wasn't a request; it was a command. Hakoda let his head droop ever so slightly. “Okay, Katara.”

The non-bender let his focus shift back to the battle at hand, surveying the damage so far. Half a minute into the eclipse and it seemed that the firebenders, halfwits as they were, had begun to understand that their fire wasn't working and they were retreating. This let their invasion party move forwards, a few earthbenders including The Boulder™ using rocks to break down the barrier. However, more skilled non-benders were crawling out of the woodwork.

At this rate they'd break in within a few moments, but it seemed unlikely that they would all get to the Palace before the eclipse was over, to watch the Agni Kai and stop Zuko from being betrayed in the midst of it.

They needed a new plan.

“Katara, can you hold off these new soldiers?” He asked, fully aware that she could but guiltily over leaving her with such a large job. If their invasion party was defeated it wouldn't matter that they'd taken out so many guards- the stronger ones that remained might be too much for them to deal with, and it would all be for naught.

“Sure.” She nodded, blocking a flurry of arrows with an ice wall, not even seeming to notice the ease and grace with which she did it. “But what are you going to do? I thought the plan was for us to stay with everyone else until we reached the Palace.”

“It was.”

“Then…” Katara tilted her head a little shifting her grip on their father, who looked similarly perplexed.

Sokka sighed just as the gate crumbled. “Look, I'm a melee fighter it the midst of a dozen others; I can't make much difference here. But, if I can go up ahead to the Palace maybe I can offer Aang and Zuko some help. All I know is that, as we stand right now, even if Zuko obliterates the Firelord, we'll not have done enough to protect him from the people who will come for him afterwards.”

His sister and father clearly didn't like it, but neither of them argued. Then, in the middle of the battlefield they should have been fighting on, Katara pulled him in for a very brief family hug.
“Just… Be safe, Sokka.”

“I will-” He turned towards the wrecked gate, their comrades already halfway through. “But… I'm gonna need a lift to get out of range of these soldiers.”

Katara let out that sigh she did whenever she thought that she should have been the older sibling, and Sokka managed a chuckle for what he figured would be the last time that day.

Chapter End Notes

Helloooo, I hope you enjoyed this chapter! I know my last two have been fairly short, but I simply felt that this one, as it was purely action, would work better at only 3k words. I'm not sure if I'm splitting next chapter into two smaller ones yet, or if I'm doing one long one... Guess you'll find out later!

Whilst writing this I figured out I love writing Sokka's perspective most and Katara's/Aang's least... But I also super love writing Azula so idek anymore lol

Be prepared at least for CONFRONTATION in a couple of weeks, that much I know will be in the chapter :))

As always, comments and kudos are VERY much appreciated, thank you so much for reading!
Chapter 46

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

A minute before the eclipse, Zuko broke into the Palace.

And he meant broke, collapsing the floor beneath the sun bleached mahogany doors with his earthbending, and watching as the entire front entrance crumbled into rubble. Only the gleaming, golden door frame stood unmarred, his metalbending nonexistent and therefore leaving him with no other choice than to let the ten foot structure remain. The firebender sprinted into the front hall, finding it deserted except for the paintings surround him. As he walked forwards he let his hand slip marginally and splash a far too flattering portrait of Sozen, his waterbending probably ruining the painting. However, he knew for a fact from Roku’s vision that his great grandfather wasn’t that handsome.

Zuko quickly got to his father's throne room, already certain that the Firelord would be absent. Not a single guard was crawling around, nor had any servants exclaimed at his destruction of the front door; no one was here. And the Firelord was too much of an evil bastard to face him without any guards to congratulate him on his victory afterwards.

Even so, the Prince pushed open the doors and regarded the empty room, sighing heavily at the Agni Kai stage that he'd lost to his father on. The throne stood proudly across the room, its intricate flame engravings looking unclear in the dim light- closer to screaming faces than roaring fires.

Perhaps that's how it was supposed to be.

He ran a hand down his face tiredly, whilst using the other to try and summon his firebending. When no light appeared cradled in his palm, he realised he had to make a choice- either continue following their already risky plan and search for his father, likely not finding him until after the eclipse, or leave with the invasion party to fight another day.

Then Zuko remembered the screaming carvings on the throne, thinking of all those people who would suffer every minute his father was in power. It might have been stupidly reckless, but he couldn't just leave without trying to take down the Firelord.
Azula knew she hated her life when she saw her uncle outside of his cell. She was happily (okay, maybe not necessarily happily) waiting in the underground bunker to keep Zuko away before her father ever found out he was still alive. She hadn't been expecting Iroh to just show up thirty seconds into the eclipse, unarmed aside from his… Muscles? When had that happened?

He was clearly fitter, she now noticed in the split second before he started speaking. But to gain that sort of muscle he must have been training for weeks, perhaps even months. Azula was supposed to be perceptive, intelligent, perfect- how had she overlooked such a crucial detail?

“This is for your own good, Azula.” He bowed his head with a frown, and shit she hadn't been paying attention, what was he-

Suddenly, she felt a pressure against the back of her spine and her body fell forwards accordingly, totally numb. Usually, even without firebending, she'd be able to hold her own but… She had been feeling odd for weeks; stupid Zuzu, surviving and messing with her focus, he was probably laughing at her, wherever he was (hopefully the burning pit of hell, where his sub par firebending skills would be most unforgivable).

She struggled to twist her head around to see the other attacker, since her body was too limp to move of her own accord. Eventually Azula's eyes glanced up at two girls, one in pink and the other in dark red, holding hands.

“You two…” The princess sneered, which was difficult to do when practically face down on the floor. Ty Lee flinched, but Mai gripped her hand noticeably tighter and chuckled.

“How are you doing Azula? Still guilty over killing Zuko, or are you over that now he's alive?”

A gasp of outrage (that did little to lessen the uncomfortable lump in her throat) left the firebender’s mouth. “As if I’d ever have felt such weak emotions for my pitiful brother, you whore!”

Yet they all seemed undisturbed by her words now, even Ty Lee shrugging off the harsh insult. She could no longer see Iroh, still almost breaking her neck to glare at her disloyal old friends, but she heard him release a good natured laugh- as though her fury was amusing! It was so humiliating to be taken down without a fight. What had become of her?! She just couldn't-

“-think she's spacing out? What should we-” Ty Lee blathered on a moment later, Azula thought so
at least.

“Shut up!”

Without replying to her, the man turned to the other girls. “We should take her to the throne room of the Palace- it will be empty now and safe, plus Zuko will probably end up going there after he fights my brother. Or even to fight my brother…”

Iroh then gently lifted her to go over his shoulder, metal cuffs digging into her wrists… When had they been put on? The sophisticated princess thrashed around as best she could in his grip, though her limbs were still heavy from Ty Lee’s nerve strike. Her uncle easily shifted her so the movement wasn’t irritating, and began walking up towards the exit to the underground safe house they had. Mai and Ty Lee followed closely behind, muttering too quietly to be heard.

“You know,” Iroh whispered, so she was the only one who could feasibly listen. “I need to apologise for something I told you a month or so ago. You admitted to me that you’d failed and Zuko was alive, and I had believed you were simply trying to manipulate me or perhaps hurt me further. Yet you were speaking the truth, and I still lashed out unfairly at you, so I'm sorry.” Stupid kind-hearted old man, she gritted her teeth and tried to dig her chin into his shoulder. Perhaps it would hurt him, at least a little.

“You're an idiot if you think I said that for any reason other than getting your hopes up to then crush them when I actually killed Zuzu. Which I will do, old man.”

Another light chuckle came from the man and Azula scowled, vaguely wondering if biting his ear off would be beneath her.

“Somehow, Azula, I don't think you will.”

__

Sokka was sprinting ahead of the invasion party, headed towards the Palace with nothing but his sword and boomerang, glancing periodically up at the burnt orange sky. The eclipse had already begun, so in theory Zuko should have been with his father by now, preparing for their upcoming Agni Kai. All the non-bender knew was that he had to be there for his boyfriend, had to help him in any way that he could to defeat the Firelord. And if he could only do that by offering a heated kiss
before the battle, then so be it.

“Hey! Slow down, you're going the wrong way!” Sokka spun on his heel to see Aang gliding down to be beside him, a forced smile on his face.

“What are you talking about? And why aren't you watching Azula?” He questioned a little frantically in response, changing the direction of his run to follow the airbender.

Before replying, Aang jumped back up onto his glider, gripping with bone white knuckles. “I bumped into Zuko on his way out of the Palace to tell him that I lost Azula when she went underground, but he was already headed over there since his dad wasn't in the throne room. Apparently there is an underground safe house? So then he told me to find Toph since she'd be helpful, but I saw you first.”

Now, Sokka wasn't sure he had time to unpack all of that. Azula was in the wind? The Firelord was hiding? Zuko was alone? Sure, that last one had always technically been part of the plan, but the non-bender was only just realising how terrifying of a thought it was. His boyfriend could die alone by the hands of his father- plus he'd already be underground, so a grave wouldn't even be necessary!

“Hey, come on, don't freak out. Everything is gonna be fine.” Aang's soothing comforts broke him out of his trance, as he looked up to glance at the boy. He was younger than him, not counting the century below zero, yet he was being more composed. Maybe it was because he'd already had the experience of waking up to all his friends dead, so now he could deal better with the prospect of loss than Sokka could. Or perhaps he was just a spiritual monk, either way the non-bender felt ashamed.

Taking a deep breath, Sokka smiled genuinely up at Aang. “Thank you, I feel better now. We need to get Toph.”

The airbender nodded, letting a little of his own mirth show on his face. “She should be over at the prisons; she was getting Iroh.”

Sokka knew that, and yet still wasn't surprised when ten seconds later they could see a small mountain coming towards them. Where once he might have run for the hills, now he simply chuckled at his friend’s antics, pausing to let her reach them.

Toph let her earthen ride stop an inch from their noses, before flattening it back into the ground like it was no big deal, not wiping the dirt from her cheeks as she smirked at them.
“The plan's gone to Hell, hasn't it?”

“No!” Sokka defended at the same time Aang said “yes”, which just made the earthbender laugh at them.

They explained the situation to her as they travelled over to Zuko, riding on one of her earth waves to save time. Due to Sokka's amazing briefing skills, a minute later they had not only reached the Prince’s supposed location, but had also totally caught her up.

“Okay, so let me get this straight,” Toph put a hand on her forehead, frowning at them both. “We still haven’t found the Firelord and we're almost halfway through the eclipse, you're not sure if the invasion will even make it to the Palace, our best and only healer is occupied, Azula has been left to her own devices and Zuko is on his own, underground, without me.”

Toph started walking again, seemingly into a flat bit of mountain, until she earthbended it open with a casual wave of her hand. Both boys followed her lead, relying on the already lit torches to see anything in the dim cave pathways.

“Look, I know it sounds, well, bad when you say it like that, but our situation isn't too dire!” Sokka argued, wrenching a torch off of the wall to wave in front of their faces.

“What, because you still have your ‘trusty boomerang’?” She replied sarcastically, taking them down a sharp turn.

“No!” He squeaked in a very unmanly tone, the sound making him jump when it echoed back at them. “We need to be more quiet.”

“Duh, you're the one being loud, idiot.”

“Come on, guys, we need to focus and not argue.” Cut in Aang as he jumped over a tripwire.

“Okay,” Sokka amended, focusing back on the task at hand. It was just so much easier to ignore his fear for Zuko when he was trading insults with their resident earthbender (well, maybe not ‘trading’ but instead ‘being battered by’). “Toph, do you sense Zuko?”
“No, I've just been leading you down a random secret tunnel.” He couldn't see her face, being behind her and all, but he swore he could feel her roll her eyes.

Aang gulped, scratching the back of his neck. “Please don't talk about secret tunnels; I'm anxious enough without remembering that adventure.”

Before Toph could ask what on Earth he was talking about, Sokka was suddenly free falling through the ground, right into another tunnel.

—

Zuko was somehow not annoyed when someone fell on top of him, but then again that someone was his boyfriend so it wasn't too fair of an assessment. He didn't have the reflexes to catch him so they both, as well as Aang, landed in an ungraceful heap on the floor. Toph, meanwhile, ended up on both feet a metre or two away from them.

“I told you I was leading us to him.”

“A little warning would have been nice though, before you opened up the floor.” Commented Aang, slowly getting up himself.

The earthbender just shrugged nonchalantly, and Zuko directed his attention back to his boyfriend. Sokka was on top of him, face two inches from his own, staring into his amber eyes with his own perfectly blue ones.

“I'm really glad you're okay.” Sokka murmured into his ear, quietly enough that even Toph probably didn't hear him.

Zuko leant up a little to press their lips together, allowing himself this moment of weakness, before letting himself pull away. They smiled softly at each other in the musty cave, then both clambered reluctantly to their feet.

“I'm gonna guess you lost Azula?” He asked, turning to Aang who was blushing from their show of
“Ye- yeah. Umm, she's somewhere down here though, I think.” The airbender replied as they all began following Toph, who had chosen a new direction to walk in.

“We'll have to deal with her later; my father's our target.” Zuko sighed, checking discreetly to see if his flames were still off. They were, and he clenched his fists.

It was difficult to tell whether he was frustrated that his firebending still wasn't working, or thankful that they still had time before the Firelord incinerated them all. He hoped it was the latter, but there was still a discomfort that came with his most natural bending being completely absent, almost like he'd lost a lung.

They kept going, Toph eventually leading them to a larger cavern. Even two tunnels away he had felt the heat of it, pouring into his pores like steam from a sauna, and up close it would have felt like his face were melting, were he not a firebender practised in dealing with heat. His friends, however, flinched at the heat rolling in waves from the magma below them, probably feeling as though they were in the center of a furnace. Knowing they had to get across, Zuko leant down and placed both of his hands on the rocky surface they were stood on. The earth was almost glowing with how hot it was, and putting his naked palms on it nearly blistered them, yet he persevered. The Prince used his earthbending to connect with the magma, feeling it seep around as boiling liquid rocks, before digging his fingers painfully into the earth of his platform- imagining the magma rapidly cooling.

At some point Zuko had closed his eyes, and when he opened them it was drastically cooler, the only warmth coming from the steaming rock below them- magma entirely solid.

Sokka squeezed his shoulder from behind, and when he turned to regard his boyfriend he found his face glowing with pride. “Babe, that was awesome.”

“Not now, lovebirds, we've still got a while to go before we get to the Firelord. I've never met him but I assume he's in the room with the big chair and the guards? So keep it in your pants until this is done with”.

They both flushed and quickly nodded, even though Toph obviously couldn't see them, before continuing to follow her, the cavern far easier to get through now it wasn't filled to the brim with deadly magma.
As far as Zuko could guess, they reached his father's chamber with maybe thirty seconds of eclipse left. It was… Subpar, but better than nothing. There was no time for him to be wished good luck by the rest of his group, and it would have felt incomplete without Katara there anyway. Instead he saw the chamber at the end of the corridor and sprinted at it, barely regarding the garish gold designs on the needlessly intricate double doors before he slammed them open.

The look on his father's face (Azula must not have told him he was alive in order to save herself, which was kind of hilarious), seeing him alive, was enough to negate his own terror at seeing the man who scarred him again. The last time he'd seen the Firelord, the man had been stood above him with a blazing hand and a cruel sneer, expression completely ruthless as he brought said hand down on his child's face. Meanwhile, the last time his father had seen him, he'd been a cowering boy, shaking and crying as he begged for forgiveness- how the times have changed.

Now Zuko stood confidently in front of the Firelord and his dozen guards, still without firebending but with his swords strapped to his back (more a good luck charm than anything else). He had a small, slightly arrogant smile as he watched his father sit bolt upright in his makeshift throne, wearing shock like a second skin. His mouth was gaping open almost amusingly, and his fists were clenched at his sides, the picture of disquietude.

Distantly, Zuko thought he caught Sokka and Aang peering around the doorframe, but he had more important things to do right now than make fun of his father with them- they could do that later, if they lived.

“Firelord Ozai,” He was never addressing this man as his father ever again. “I challenge you to an Agni Kai, one to determine the next ruler of the Fire Nation.”

He'd done his part for now, and when Ozai reached forwards to blast lightning and no sparks appeared, Zuko mentally congratulated Sokka and Hakoda on their plan, even if it had ended up in ruins. The multiple guards had broken out into muttering, some of the braver ones glancing furtively between Zuko and the Firelord, a couple of them even moving to the sides of the room to give them space. Whilst it would be massively dishonourable and definitely humiliating for Ozai to refuse the challenge, he was nasty enough to do it and then kill all his guards so that it would be a secret.

Yet, Zuko knew that agreeing to the Agni Kai was really in Ozai’s best interests. It meant he'd get to prove his worth if he won, and would limit his son to only using firebending- greatly weakening him. Meanwhile, Zuko had to hope he was good enough to beat his father, which was seeming less likely by the moment.
After once again checking his firebending, coming up empty, Ozai nodded. “When I win your shame will be eradicated from our family.”

His acceptance meant Zuko got a good ten minutes where it would be illegal for Ozai to kill him, as per rules of the sacred Agni Kai. Still, he walked a good ten feet behind the man, preferring not to be hit in the back by lightning again, as well as being separated by the several guards from the chamber.

Once they got back above ground, the eclipse was over and Zuko could feel fire in his veins again. Unfortunately, that meant Ozai could too. Off in the distance he could still hear the battle raging on, and he could only hope that Katara and the rest could hold out a little longer- but even if they did, would they have the strength left to prevent a coup?

Zuko strategically ignored these worries that were pestering his mind, instead focusing on putting one foot in front of the other, heading towards the Palace. His father was probably trying to psyche him out by holding this Agni Kai at the same place as their last one, but he refused to let it get to him, even as they began marching down familiar corridors- one goal in mind.

The throne room was a lot more crowded than it had been twenty minutes ago when he checked it for his father, now one side of the Agni Kai stage being occupied by four people: Azula, his uncle, Mai and Ty Lee. Yet Zuko couldn't afford to offer Iroh a heartwarming reunion right now, and he didn't want to distract himself by considering how his seemingly all powerful sister had ended up in chains.

“Father, I-” Azula croaked out, sounding like she'd been crying heavily. The Prince let himself indulge in some of that big brother care he'd been ignoring, pitying his little sister's deranged state.

Ozai didn't even glance in her direction, instead strolling nonchalantly towards one side of the stage, casually throwing off his top. Zuko spared a moment to lock eyes with Sokka, who in turn gave him a wobbly smile, before he and the rest of the group joined Iroh, sharing a few mutters.

“It seems we have a larger audience than I was expecting, boy. Did you break your uncle out of prison specially?” The Firelord sneered in his brother’s direction as Zuko took his place across from him.

“Actually, Ozzy,” Iroh seemed to take joy in the old nickname, and the Prince felt amusant tug briefly at his lips. “I got out all on my own.”
“Wonder if you'll be able to do that once I kill you.” Ozai snapped back, before turning his attention back to his son, who was now twenty feet across from him.

Zuko also shed his top and swords, throwing them off to one side, before getting into a simple firebending stance. There was no doubt in his mind that the man in front of him was the more skilled firebender, with far more experience and better control over lightning. If he used any other type of bending or got help the Agni Kai would be mute, since it was a fire duel between two people, yet if the situation got really dire he might have to risk it. The dozen guards watching on the other side of the stage would rat him out, sure, but if it came to it then they’d have to just figure it out. Winning this would make him the rightful ruler, but if they had to forfeit and kill the Firelord some other way then, in theory, he could still perform a hostile takeover… But the coups would be more likely…

God, even he was getting confused by this plan’s messy remains.

Iroh coughed and stepped forwards, expression now more serious as he clenched his hands together. “As the highest ranking audience member, I shall oversee this Agni Kai. The ancient laws are in place, of course, and killing is… Allowed but not necessary to win. According to information airbender Aang has just told me, this duel is for the throne of the Fire Nation.” Iroh sighed and shot Zuko a pointed look, which he didn't understand but nodded at nonetheless.

“Now, the duel may commence.”

Immediately Zuko threw out a barbed fire whip, trusting Toph to block any attacks that went near their group. Ozai shot a much more powerful blast straight through it, splitting the whip in half and almost spearing Zuko along with it.

The Firelord was much better at long range attacks, but hand to hand he might have the advantage. He kicked a rolling flame forwards, jumping along with it to get closer to his target. The fire had no effect however, and his opponent let out a simple but devastating arc of power to combat Zuko’s increased closeness, which the firebender only barely dodged by practically throwing himself to the ground. He got up onto barely steady feet, sprinting forwards and shocking the Firelord enough to get ten foot closer, as he clapped and created a stream of flame, his movements almost closer to waterbending.
Ozai seemed shocked at the movement, and his trousers were singed at the bottom from when he'd hastily kicked out a shield. He was panting and furious now which is when it clicked for the Prince; just because he couldn't use the rest of his bending, that didn't mean he couldn't use the techniques they'd taught him to win this fight.

Now he was a little closer, Zuko charged forwards a few steps before mimicking an earthbending stance, clenching a fist as he let a concentrated blast of fire sweep across a third of the stage. Earth was a more stable element, harder to break, so even when the Firelord tried sending his own wave of fire, his son’s own blast was still too powerful to completely negate, and he was blasted backwards into the far wall.

It felt too easy, as he went forwards to finish the fight, but it wasn't hard to figure out why. Had Ozai been fighting anyone other than his pathetic son, the one he saw no potential in, he would have entered the duel less arrogantly, and would have probably started with a lightning strike. But he wanted to crush the Avatar slowly, to really show everyone how weak he was, and how right he'd been to banish him. Zuko didn't even know if the guards in the room knew he was the Avatar, but clearly his father felt some need to prove he was the best-

He was like Azula, in that way.

The Prince reached the Firelord just as the man came to his feet, hand out in front of him as though to call forth lightning. In response, Zuko readied his own redirection stance, and Ozai widened his eyes just a little at the lack of fear marring his son's determined face.

“You disobedient wretch!” He snarled, and the younger firebender barely had time to react before the hand was turned to point at Azula, still chained up on the sidelines.

The crackle of electricity ripped through the air, Zuko only just diving to save his sister in time, not letting the bolts hit him but instead rising a wall of earth. The hasty structure was blown apart by the lightning coursing through it, rocks scattering all across the room, until Toph seemed to gain enough control to plant them back into the ground with a harsh breath. Once his heart had started beating again, he surveyed the scene before him: shocked guards barely clinging onto their weapons, Aang and Sokka frozen where they stood and his uncle's body thrown protectively across Azula's, his chest still rising and falling fast enough for him to be uninjured.

“Well, Zuko, it seems you have broken the rules of this sacred duel. Too bad you managed to save the worthless girl- she's been lying to me for months.” A conceited smile stretched across his face from the thought of murdering his own daughter, and Zuko felt fury build in his core like a sun ready to blaze across a desert, incinerating all life.
It felt like every molecule in his body was vibrating with intense power, millennia of strength bleeding into his very soul. When he looked up to meet his father's eyes, he knew he'd be seeing through glowing blue orbs.

“No, you're the one who broke the rules, involving a person outside of the duel.” Either the guards were too petrified to argue with his logic or they agreed, because his statement was met with silence aside from the Firelord’s heavy breaths.

Zuko shot one hand forwards and grabbed Ozai’s neck roughly, pulling him forwards enough to be unbalanced, then he sent an earth spike out of the ground, making it hit his father right in the stomach, throwing him several metres into the air. The Firelord wheezed on the floor when he landed, raising a feeble hand ablaze with fire to strike, but Zuko snuffed it out with the most powerful blast of airbending he had ever managed, practically blowing even his friends across the room with the force of it, the entire throne room shaking like an earthquake had hit.

Never before had he felt so in control during the Avatar State, but then again never before had he felt so at peace with his life. He was strong enough to stand up to his father and sister, surrounded by a new family and a boyfriend he adored- he felt a tranquility Aang had described to him many times in the past. Like a small fishing boat managing to tame the violent seas by having its own calm stretch of water to hold dear.

Zuko glided forwards as if skating over ice, staring impassively down at his father, who was clutching his stomach and almost tearing up in pain. The Prince, no, the Avatar stood over him for a moment, then stretched one of his arms out towards his group, who were still surrounded by the rubble of the fight.

Sokka understood his meaning, and brought his swords over to him, giving him a quick, supportive squeeze on the shoulder. “You're doing the right thing.” He promised.

Zuko turned briefly to regard everyone else: from his uncle’s reluctant agreement to the shell shocked guards. He slipped one of the swords out, raising it with both hands, ready to bring it down with both hands.

“You deserve this.” And Ozai whimpered pathetically, struggling to sit up as he shook cowardly. It was an appropriate end, he thought, to the life of a man who could see his son like this and still managed to deal a life altering blow.

“No!”
Zuko was shocked out of the Avatar State by the voice, which did not belong to Aang or the Firelord, as one might assume. Instead it was Azula who had said it, and was kneeling with her hands still chained behind her, fat tears rolling down her cheeks. She was pale with large eyebags, messy hair and rumpled clothing, but she was still the little girl he'd tried to Bury in sand on Ember Island, the same kid who had almost burnt her own birthday cake when she blew out the candles and the same sister who had once cowered under the covers with him when there was a storm outside.

Azula was more cruel now, there was no argument against that, but Zuko- as her big brother- couldn't just disregard her.

“I- I-” Azula hiccuped through her sobbing, knees brought into her chest as she tried to blink away the dampness quickly covering her cheeks. “I killed a family member and it hurt even though I hated them… You sh- you shouldn't do it, Zuzu.”

And for once that name wasn't said with malice, just pain and sadness, and so Zuko lowered his sword, bringing hilt across their father's head to knock him out. Then he walked over to his crying sister, taking a deep breath as he remembered every trick she'd ever played, and pulled her into his arms for a hug, letting Azula bury her face into his neck as she sobbed loudly in the otherwise silent throne room.

Chapter End Notes

Ahhhhhhhh okay so yeah that was kinda the ending?? I'll do an epilogue in the next week or so and do my goodbyes in that chapter, since it will be the actual final one.

Idk if this was disappointing or really great in your guys' opinions, but tbh I needed to end it like this to end it at all. Originally this fic was going to be sixty chapters, but about four moths ago I decided to take it down to fifty, and I would occasionally cut out a chapter or combine them if they were short so... Here we are.

I personally like how I concluded this, tho the real happy ending isn't out yet. I think it makes sense for it to end earlier than the show did, since Zuko is with them all along and that changes things. He's more... How do I say it? Upfront with fighting, in comparison to Aang. So I feel like he'd settle for fighting Ozai sooner.

Azula is a whole other can of worms, but since her sanity started degrading sooner in this and since the guilt has been eating her up for a while, this seems believable to me. She feels hurt and pain at what she did but she still doesn't really understand why she feels like that after 'killing' Zuko, but she still doesn't want him to go through the same thing.

Is there anything specific you want me to include in the epilogue? Because rn it's pretty short and idk if there's an ending you're dying to see. Btw, *spoiler* but not really, next
chapter Zuko won't be the firelord.

Also self plug but you can follow me on Tumblr @ AbbyStaffyIsGeek, I occasionally shit post or reblog bnha stuff over there!

Comments and kudos are ESPECIALLY appreciated after this chapter, ily all lots for sticking around so long ;))
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

One year after Zuko had defeated his father, all was well.

Okay, not perfect but certainly better. Much, much better than it had been before. There was no one thing that could fix the entire world, it appeared, but Ozai going to prison was the first step- and many others had been taken too.

The White Lotus (long story) had helped them finish off the Fire Nation army, before taking over their bases so they couldn't regroup to make a plan. Only extremely high officials were arrested, everyone else given a blank slate to work from.

Suki and the other prisoners of war were freed within two days, and Zuko had almost thrown up at the gooey look on Toph’s face when the two girls hugged. If that was how she felt every time she sensed him and Sokka together then no wonder she was always so cranky. Still… It was nice to see his friends happy.

His uncle had been named as the Prince’s regent until he was twenty one, about a week after they'd imprisoned Ozai. Really Zuko was old enough to start ruling straight away, but everyone involved (especially Iroh) thought he could do with a break. They still saw each other often, after their tearful reunion, when Zuko visited his home- but mostly they conversed through letters now. Somehow, his uncle always had the more interesting tales; national tea day and a harrowing Pai Sho game against Hakoda.

Mai and Ty Lee got engaged. Zuko had thought it a little sudden, but apparently they'd been secretly dating ever since they were fourteen. He applauded their secrecy since him and Sokka got found out after barely a week. Both girls were travelling around a little before their wedding, and then after their planned honeymoon in the Northern Water Tribe they had plans to join the Kyoshi Warriors. After finding this out, Sokka had told him that Ozai should have been less sexist, since then he could have had the Kyoshi Warriors to back him up- who would've definitely beat their little group.

Azula was… Still Azula, even after everything. Zuko liked to think he would've pardoned her crimes just for her age, even without her moment of guilt, but she still needed help. He'd put her in a hospital indefinitely, a good one in the Earth Kingdom that had lots of room and nice furniture. She complained about it constantly in their letters and when he visited, but Zuko could tell she was happier than when she was at their father’s side. The first few months had been rough, yes, but she'd made some good progress. The doctors were thinking she could be discharged by the time she was eighteen, though they strongly discouraged taking her back to the Palace. You know, because of all
Toph left practically straight after Iroh had been named regent, back to the Earth Kingdom. Katara and Aang had offered to join her but she wanted some time to herself, perhaps to reconnect with her family or to regain her title as the Earth Rumble champion. She'd also mentioned something about breaking down Ba Sing Se’s walls, which Zuko really hoped she was kidding about. If not he might get called in to fight her and, somehow even though he was the Avatar, he figured that would go pretty poorly for him.

Speaking of the Earth Kingdom, it was now completely independent. All troops had been ordered out and all prisoners returned. Of course, every leader except King Bumi and King Kuei didn't trust the Fire Nation, which was a bit of an issue since the Avatar, ‘Peace Keeper of all Nations’ was destined to rule over it. On the bright side, they all adored Aang and his airbending, and were much more open to negotiations including him… Which meant Aang had been stuck there for the last six months.

Apparently he didn't mind so much though. In his letters it seemed he and Katara were having fun on their days off, Katara joining a hospital to teach the swampbenders healing magic so that the Earth citizens could benefit. The pair were growing closer, and even Katara had admitted last time they saw each other that she was becoming more… Interested, in the prospect of dating the airbender.

Which brings it back to Zuko and Sokka, who had been living together happily on the road for a while. They visited the Southern Water Tribe with Katara and Aang eight months back, before the four split in two. Sokka wanted to travel a bit more in order to set up trade routes for his tribe, since foreign relations could help get it back on its feet. Zuko sort of needed to travel more anyway so he could actually finish his Avatar training, since according to Aang he’d ‘never even properly connected with the spirit realm’. By that point Zuko had found a dragon (another long story) so travel was no big issue, and the two were free to go wherever- since the Avatar had the free reign to go anywhere, even if the Fireprince did not. Besides, they’d been sneaking around for months anyway before Ozai had been defeated.

There had been rough patches along the way. Sometimes Zuko still woke up from a nightmare screaming, and sometimes Sokka did too. They'd argued and fought and slept on separate sides of the saddle occasionally too. But without the war there to put pressure on them, the two could breathe- enjoy a normal relationship where neither felt ten minutes away from death at any given moment. It was relaxing to say the least.

Zuko remembered back only, what? Twenty months ago? Scared and alone, sneaking off his ship to try and prove he wasn't the Avatar. Ironic, really, since being the Avatar ended up being the catalyst for his new, much better life.
He didn't regret leaving that boat one bit.

Chapter End Notes

And here it is!!! Completed 100% after over a year ‘:)). This took a lot of energy and time so I’m really thankful to everyone who commented and left kudos; who told me they enjoyed this fic.

I loved writing this, especially at first. There was one week where I must have written 50k words because ALL I wanted to do was write out all my ideas. My plot outline is over 5k words and used to be even longer. After chapter 35 I lost some steam and changed my update schedule to accommodate, but there were still select chapters that I truly enjoyed writing (bloodbending chapter for example).

Some random fun facts about this process:
1) I seriously hate that I called the first chapter introduction, so now every chapter is called one less than it actually is (except this one!!!).
2) I got to chapter twenty or so and reread it all, like even at my school, which led to me giggling at my own jokes like a weirdo.
3) Even though I put the most effort into this fic, my Voltron one from a year ago has the same number of kudos here and has three times as many votes as this on Wattpad (even though it only has 20k words and 15 chapters).
4) I got this idea from a Tumblr thread, changed it A LOT and came out with this. I’d read ‘Reluctant Hero’ (another Avatar Zuko fic) beforehand, loved it but found out it was incomplete, and then had a need to do my own take to completion.
5) Not really ‘fun’ but I almost gave up writing this several times in the last few months, ultimately finishing it because I didn't want to disappoint you guys and also this is over 150k so I wasn't gonna just abandon it.
6) Most of these chapters were written with me sat in an armchair with my Poison Ivy mug full of tea.
7) Originally I didn't know what ship I'd include, but decided on Zukka because it was cute and gay (like me lol). There was a time I seriously considered making it Zutara.
8) My first plot draft included Zuko finding and rescuing that dragon.

Basically, thank you so much for getting through this, and for motivating me along the way. I don't think I'll be writing atla again for A WHILE but I've got random other stuff in the works now that this is finished. I'll probably end up writing another >100k words au with like one thing different than the original (my current plan lol).

As always (and I say this with such nostalgia at this point) comments and kudos are always super appreciated :'))

End Notes

Hi! I'm aiming for a weekly upload schedule, so expect new chapters pretty consistently!
I know I'm 10 years late to the A:tLA fandom but forgive me, please :))

Comments and kudos are greatly appreciated!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!