Ozymandias, King of Kings

by Think_of_a_Wonderful_Thought

Summary

After that fateful Agni Kai, Ozai makes a different call. Branded as a traitor and banished to a prison camp, Zuko learns how cruel the Fire Nation can be to its citizens. Three years, a water tribe raid, and an unexpected meeting with a gang of over-enthusiastic idealistic children puts Zuko back in the spotlight. The revolution is coming and it wants another poster boy, but Zuko is not willing to lend his face to the cause.

Notes

Hi guys, I had this idea in my head all day and I had to write it out. I kept wondering what would have happened to Zuko if he hadn't been sent off in search of Aang, and this is what I ended up writing. Please let me know if you enjoyed it and if you think it's worth me continuing.

General warnings for the crappy treatment of prisoners and Ozai being a terrible father and a horrible ruler.
There's a very brief reference to suicide in this chapter and also mentions of starvation/ hair loss due to malnutrition. Please don't read if these will upset you.

See the end of the work for more notes.
The hand that mocked them

Reveille sounded out five minutes after dawn, booming through the barracks and startling men from their sleep with wide, miserable yawns and hastily cut off curses. Zuko was already awake; he had been for several minutes. He lay on his pallet and took several deep breaths, trying to finish his meditation, despite the cacophony around him. Strictly speaking, the wake-up call was just whatever racket the poor private on morning duty could conjure up with a mess tin and the husk of an old brass bell. To call it a proper military reveille would be to give it delusions of grandeur, but Zuko had never been able to shake the habit. He groaned and rolled over, trying to catch another few seconds in the warm bask of the sun, soaking up the power and stirring up the faint embers of his chi. He had fought hard and dirty to get a bunk near the window, and he took every moment he could to make it worth his while. He spent so much time out of the light of Agni’s face; he had to make do with what he could get.

The clattering outside came to an abrupt halt, and Zuko immediately rolled himself out of bed, landing with a heavy thud, and only a slight stumble. He had been more graceful, once, but he was grateful that he could still climb in and jump out of the upper bunk with few problems; most of the other thirty or so men in his barrack hut couldn’t say the same thing. The other inmates were all out of the door and assembled in the main courtyard in less than five minutes. There’d been no need to dress; most of them slept in their clothes. The nights got cold up in the mountains, and their thin uniforms provided very little protection against the chill winds that stole into the barracks through the cracks in their thin walls. Zuko, like most of the other veterans, those who had had been in camp long enough to wrangle a good pair of shoes, slept in his boots. He had inherited them from an old navy captain who had found his escape at the end of a stolen length of rope. They hadn’t fit too well at first, but he’d grown. Zuko was taller than some of the men, now.

The air was cool in the courtyard and Zuko shivered as he forced himself to stand at attention for the blessing of the Fire Lord. Mist twirled across the hard earth beneath his feet, and twisted up around his boots, as his mouth mindlessly spewed the traditional, obsequious refrains in dull chorus with the men around him. The duty officer hurried through roll call and then ran through a few notices: production was up by six percent; the army had taken control over another village, near Gaipan; Princess Azula was to tour the south islands with a company of imperial firebenders. Zuko tuned them out and stared up at the sky. He doubted that any of the announcements had any truth to them, at all. Information was a currency, and one far too precious to hand out to traitors and other criminals. The sky was thick with clouds, but Zuko could feel the power of Angi radiating from just behind them. It would be a hot day; the mist would probably burn off by mid-morning, and the earth would be baking underfoot by early-afternoon. Zuko tried not to dwell on the prospect for too long; it wasn’t as if he’d get to see any of it. A low moan rang around the assembled men and women, and Zuko snapped his thoughts back to the duty officer. Breakfast had been cancelled, again. That meant they would be straight to work. A tall, dark-haired woman near the front grumbled mutinously, but she was quickly silenced by a blow from one of the privates. Once upon a time, Zuko had screamed and cursed at the unfairness of it all, but he’d long since found that the pain of an aching stomach was easier to handle than the pain that came from drawing the attention of the guards.

A few sharp commands from the shift leaders had them all forming up into their groups. Zuko was in group two, not that it made the slightest bit of difference. They all did the same job. Zuko hurried over to the muster point and hunched over against the side of the well. He pulled his boots more snugly onto his feet, and rearranged the padded straw in the toes, as he waited for the rest of his group to form up. He ran a hand through his hair, navigating the manacles around his wrists with practised ease. It was getting long again, he realised, as his fingers brushed through the thin, brittle strands. He wondered how much longer he could get away with it at this length, before the guards
took notice. It had been a while since the orderlies had last brought out the shears; they hadn’t needed to. The last few months had been lean enough that most of the inmates’ hair had taken to falling out without any aid. Zuko, as in many things, seemed to be the exception—his own hair was just patchy.

That was, however, one thing that he couldn’t really blame on the soldiers. It wasn’t as though the starvation rations were entirely intentional. There’d been an unexpected eruption in one of the volcanoes around the Fire Nation capital at start of the last spring. The Fire Sages had done their best to keep the main islands safe, but there was only so much they could do—not even Avatar Roku had been able to tame a volcano. The strong trade winds had carried the ash cloud all the way to the mainland and smothered most of the fields, killing crops and choking farmers indiscriminately. It wasn’t bad enough to declare a national emergency, but it was close. Belts had been drawn tighter and tighter as food had grown scarcer and scarcer. For Zuko and the others, that had meant one meal a day and a few half-arsed apologies from the quartermaster. Twenty men had died, but that hadn’t bothered the soldiers too much. No one cried for the death of a criminal; well, not until the coal quotas came in, and every work hour counted. Then, Zuko knew, the soldiers would care very much indeed.

A quick check at the gate for him and a handful of others, to make sure their chains were still secure, and then the assembled groups were allowed through. The extra security was supposed to hinder them, should they try and run, but they were really just a way for the guards to punish those who were too disobedient. Zuko had managed to escape on two separate occasions. The first attempt had earned him quick and brutal retribution from the officer on duty, but, once that was complete, they had let him stay free. After he got away from them a second time, the chains had gone on. It had been over a year since Zuko had even looked at the camp boundary with anything more than idle interest, enough time that the soldiers who had been in charge back then had long since moved on to different postings, but the chains had stayed on. Zuko quite honestly believed that no one in the camp even knew where to find the key.

The inmates walked out of camp in six straight lines, through the heavy gates and out past the boundary perimeter. The guards pushed and shoved at them to keep them in formation as they stumbled along on the rocky track, one hundred and two skinny men and women in thin shoes and grey rags. Well, one hundred and one, Zuko noted dispassionately; but four had lost their newbie last night. The inmates plodded along with grim faces, keeping pace automatically, still trying to shake away the cobwebs of the night’s sleep. Technically, they weren’t meant to start work for another hour. Technically they were meant to have been fed a regulation portion of rice and a cup of water at breakfast. Technically they were supposed to have been woken just before dawn and herded to the shrine to greet Agni, for a mandated five minutes of worship. But rules were only followed when it suited the guards; the coal quota had gone up and they were low on workers, the quartermaster had fucked up the last food order, and most of the officers preferred a few more minutes sleep to any kind of religious observance.

Camp regulations also mandated that all inmates were to be watched at all times by four guards, armed with swords, and another who could firebend. Fire Nation military guidelines stated a strict five to one ratio of soldiers to all prisoners, for the safety of military personnel, but in Zuko’s experience, they were rarely enforced in camp. There was no point; none of the prisoners had the energy to step out of line. Therefore, as they trudged out to work in the cool morning air, the prisoners were instead watched by three bored privates, with truncheons and cattle whips at their belts. They were an effective enough threat to keep the inmates in line. They didn’t even need the firebender; Zuko hadn’t been able to channel his chi into fire in months, and he knew it was the same for the other firebenders. It was laughable in a way. Benders were supposed to be blessed by Agni; they were the pride of the Fire Nation, considered indomitable in the face of any foe. Yet, here they were, brought low by poor nutrition and too much time in the dark. Zuko smiled grimly at the
thought; here was the true Fire Nation, in all of her unvarnished glory.

Zuko had been raised to believe in the magnificence of the Fire Nation, of the honour and courage of her army, the resilience and ingenuity of her workers, and the benevolence of her nobility. His childhood had been spent in ornate palaces, playing tag through the corridors of power, with Generals and Admirals as the smiling parents of his close friends. To him, the Fire Nation was the centre of civilisation, the pinnacle of what humanity at its finest could achieve. He had been so very naïve. The Fire Nation was nothing more than a bunch of pirates and warmongers, pillaging the lands of those weaker than them and killing anyone who stood in their way. Three years in camp, far removed from the glory of Caldera City, had shown Zuko a thing or two.

Zuko, lost in his thoughts, stumbled over a rock and nearly tripped, righting himself at the last minute. One of the guards rewarded him with a cuff about the head, and he had to duck his head to hide the fury in his eyes, lest he be hit again for insubordination. It was possible, of course, Zuko considered, that he was misremembering, that he was looking back on his childhood through rose-tinted glasses. If he’d ever tried to play in the halls of the palace, his father would have had him beaten as an embarrassment to the Royal House of Azulon, and all those kindly Generals and Admirals would have simply nodded sagely and extolled the virtues of discipline in children. Could he Zuko honestly say that he hadn’t noticed any of the signs, even back then? Or had he really been so desperate to be liked that he’d ignored things that seemed so plain and obvious to him, all these years on? The only other children he’d ever really known were always Azula’s friends, first and foremost, loyal to the beautiful prodigy princess. They’d been forced together, the royal children and the offspring of shrewd nobles looking to get a head start in the political power plays of the next generation. The same children had only begun to show an interest in him when became Crown Prince, and even then only until their parents realised exactly which of his children the Fire Lord favoured. If Zuko had been any savvier, he might have seen that as his first warning, like the earthquake before the tsunami. But he had always been an oblivious little brat. He’d thought his father loved him. He’d thought that the Fire Nation was good.

But, Zuko thought, sighing deeply as they approached the entrance to the mine, like all children, he’d learnt. It had taken one hell of a lesson from the Fire Lord, but Zuko had always been a slow learner, too preoccupied with turtleducks and flowers and the softness of his mother’s smiles. He’d needed to be harder, to survive the real world, and so his father had given him a truly formidable wake-up call. Zuko shuddered as his face seared in remembered pain, and shook himself to focus back on the present. He walked over to the pile of pickaxes and hefted one over his shoulder, wincing as his back creaked in complaint.

Zuko took one last deep breath as he stood at the dark gaping, entrance to the mine, letting the last of Agni’s rays soak into him and energise his chi. The further he went into the darkness of the mine, the less he could feel the power of his element. At first he had been ill every time he went to work, the darkness draining him and sapping his energy, but even that sensation had faded over time to just a dull sense of emptiness that sat low in his gut. Zuko had certainly toughened up; he’d had to. With half his face scorched off to brand him a traitor and a writ of banishment thrown after him, as he was tossed out the door, Zuko had been cast unceremoniously into the harshness of the real world and told to suck it up. He’d arrived at the camp delirious with fever; his burn had become infected on the ship from the capital. Zuko had pulled through, by the grace of whatever spirit liked to fuck with him so much, and had awoken hurt and confused and all but blind in his left eye to a whole new reality. The prison camp was a cruel, unforgiving place and it had had no patience for crippled children or mercy for traitors. The process had not been easy, but Zuko had learnt. He was far from the pampered prince that he once had been.

A sharp order from the shift leader pulled him back from his thoughts, and he took his place on the mechanical lift that would take them down to work. The initial descent into the mineshaft always felt
to Zuko like he was crossing a threshold, stepping into another world where there was only dim light and the clinking sound of metal on rock, where even the light of Agni was a distant memory. The platform moved slowly, but all too soon, it reached the bottom, and the men swarmed off. With a quick nod to the shift leader, Zuko fell into the rhythm of the working day, heading down into the darkness to take his spot at the coalface. It was hard work, but he was used to it. His blisters had turned to callous years ago, and, as he’d grown, his muscles had turned to tough sinew from the harsh manual labour. In the darkness of the mine, he was no longer the banished prince, the traitor who had shamed his father and turned his back on his country. When he stood with the other men, coated in coal dust, and numbing his mind with the repetitive swing of his pickaxe, he was nothing and no one special, he was just Zuko. Down in the bowels of the earth, away from the scorn of the guards, where it was too dark to see the hate-filled expressions of his fellow inmates, he could pretend that that was enough.
A shattered visage lies

Chapter Notes

Hi guys, thanks so much to everyone who read chapter one, and a special thanks to all
of you lovely people who left kudos/ commented/ bookmarked. I wasn't sure whether or
not to keep going, and I'm thrilled you all liked it enough to let me know your thoughts.
So, I decided to carry on!

I hope you like chapter two!

This chapter is a bit darker. TWs for violence (against prisoners and larger scale military
violence) and references to hunger/starvation. Please check the end note for specifics.

Zuko sighed heavily as he glared at the dinner queue stretching out tortuously far ahead of him.
There were at least thirty others fidgeting in front of him, rubbing the fatigue out of aching muscles
and bickering idly to drown out the groaning of their stomachs. By the time that Zuko got to the
front, the orderlies would be scraping the last servings of jook from the side of the pot.; he’d be lucky
if he got half a bowl of the tasteless sludge. Usually only those too afraid or infirm to jostle for a
position near the front, or too new to know any better, languished at the back of the line, and starved
for the privilege. Zuko frowned and let out another deep sigh. Normally he would be somewhere
towards the front; seniority did have some perks, and he had long since learnt how to shave crucial
seconds off the walk through camp to the mess hall. Also, he fought like a feral cat owl with a score
to settle. It had been a long time since Zuko had been forced to eat camp scraps.

There was a very good reason no one was ever late to meals, Zuko seethed to himself, as the
orderlies serving the food paused the queue to go and collect bowls from the inmates who had long
since gulped down their own meals. Zuko occupied himself during the brief interruption by glaring
over his shoulder, silently fuming at the figure standing hunched at the very back of the queue. Shao:
two months into his sentence and still causing problems. If Zuko had still been able get his chi to
spark, and were it possible to firebend through sight alone, then his gaze would have seared the man
on the spot. It was his fault that Zuko was still on his feet and starving, rather than sat at one of the
utilitarian mess tables, bowl empty and stomach full.

When the cry had gone up for the end of the working day, Shao, the unmitigated idiot, had
abandoned his pickaxe- and, apparently, his brain- down in the mine. The whole of his work group
had been held back, forced to stand to attention, whilst he went back down to retrieve it. As a
consequence, they’d been at the back of the procession for the walk back to barracks, and were stuck
at the end of the line for dinner. Neither the guards nor the inmates had been happy about the delay,
and it was actually quite impressive that Shao was still standing after the beating that he’d taken. The
guards had been particularly enthusiastic in punishing him for his error, and they had certainly turned
a blind eye as he was tripped and shoved by the other inmates. Zuko hadn’t joined in with the others
on the way back, but he hadn’t exactly gone out his way to stop them. A month’s grace to learn the
camp rules, to get a feel for what the guards would let slide, and to discover what would happen if
they didn’t, was more than enough in Zuko’s book. Shao should have known better, it was that
simple.
A flurry of activity drew Zuko’s gaze to the front of the line, and he tried to ignore the dull feeling that had crept over his anger as he stared at Shao. It was just hunger; there was no room in the mess hall for pity. There were a few more exceedingly painful minutes of waiting, whilst the dirty dishes were given a cursory wipe with a damp rag. Then, finally, they were back up and running. Zuko hissed in irritation, and tried not to think about the slowly dwindling slurry in the pot, or the way that the swiftly encroaching sunset signalled that the mealtime was coming perilously close to its end.

The line inched forwards again, and Zuko bit down a howl of frustration. They had been given breakfast that morning, something that had become an occasion in and of itself, but somehow it had only served to make Zuko even hungrier. He’d barely finished inhaling the bowl of rice he’d been given, before his stomach was howling at him, demanding more. Zuko knew he’d been stupid that morning; food was to be parsed out and savoured, not gulped down like some ravenous pig chicken. If he’d have saved something for later, had had something in his pocket to tide him by at the worst points of the day, when he was dizzy with exertion and his vision swam with black spots, then Zuko might not have felt quite so bad. But he hadn’t, so he knew there was no use dwelling on the subject— if wishes were ostrich horses, and so on – but it was easier said than done.

When he was younger, such frustration would have made Zuko spit sparks, a childish habit that not even his father’s beatings could break him of. He’d never been good at hiding his emotions, not like Azula, and his fire had reflected that lack of control. But malnutrition and deprivation had stolen the power from Zuko’s body and chi, and prison life had taught him the necessity of restraint. Zuko had learnt to smother the embers of his rage and his humiliation with a heavy blanket of apathy. His frustration wouldn’t last for long; it wasn’t a strong enough feeling and it would float away like ash in the wind the minute that he had food in his stomach. There was no real fire in Zuko’s fury, not anymore; it was safer that way.

Tortuously slowly, the line dwindled down to the last few men, all from Zuko’s group. He himself was near the back, and so was one of the very last to have a chipped wooden bowl slapped into his hands, with more force than was entirely necessary, by one of the orderlies. As he’d predicted, there was just over a spoonful there for him to eat, and it was dry, slightly crusted and strewn with black specks where it had been burnt onto, and then scraped off, the side of the pan. One look at the orderly’s face was enough to quell any thoughts that Zuko might have had about complaining, had he thought it would do him any good at all. Instead, Zuko hurried to his table and sat down, his elbow jostling against the man to his right as he bent his head low over the bowl and messily began to scoop up the sludge with his fingers. By the time he was finished, the bowl had been licked clean. Zuko had long since become indifferent towards most of the indignities that were heaped upon them in the prison camp, but being reduced to eating like an animal was one thing that still made him flush with shame. If his mother were to see what he had been reduced to…Zuko shut down that thought with iron will, and glanced up around the table. Now that his stomach was somewhat sated, his brain could focus on the rest of the inmates around him. There had been a strange tension in the air all day, one that made Zuko’s skin itch, and it didn’t seem to have been appeased by the mass consumption of jook.

Meal times were one of the few occasions where the inmates were able to talk freely, without a shift leader or a guard bearing down on them for being out of place, or working too slowly; that was probably why they were granted so few of them. Usually, the mess hall at dinner time was filled with a chorus of voices, men and women arguing and bragging and telling maudlin tales of their days of former glory, talking over one another and fighting to be the loudest, to be heard saying anything, by anyone. But the normal mealtime rowdiness had been tempered by something, reduced to a buzz of low level murmuring. Zuko rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck, trying to shake the icy feeling that was creeping up his spine. He was probably just being paranoid. Besides, it wasn’t like he would be able to do anything about it anyway.
Someone sat down heavily on the bench to Zuko’s left and he flinched, startled. The burn had reduced the vision in his left eye to dull, blurred shapes, and it had stolen a good portion of the hearing in his left ear, too, but Zuko had learnt to compensate with lightning fast reflexes. Most people in camp knew not to approach him from that side, but apparently there were some exceptions. Zuko spun to face the intruder with fury in his eyes, his heart beating a tattoo in his chest. The other man frowned, and lowered his eyes in apology. Zuko sighed, running a hand through his hair. There was nothing to worry about, it was only Jee. The other man was relatively new to camp, and there were many theories circling as to why he’d been sent there, including one rumour of some truly incredible insubordination in the North Pole. Whatever the reason, Jee had kept tight-lipped about it, leaving him open to wild speculation and vicious imagination. Yet, despite the secrecy, Zuko somehow found himself trusting the other man, anyway. There was something in his military bearing that spoke of integrity and honour, and Zuko gravitated towards it like a moth wasp to a flame.

“Something’s wrong,” Jee whispered, bending his head closer to Zuko’s and enunciating clearly, a concession to the constant, distorting ringing in Zuko’s left ear.

“What?” Zuko asked gruffly, his voice crackling slightly from disuse and coal dust.

“The guards are on edge,” Jee replied tightly, “something’s going on.”

“They’ve been like this all day,” Zuko remarked cautiously. “There’s a chance it’s nothing. We could be due an inspection?” Jee hummed in agreement, but his eyes were still tight with tension. Zuko frowned, trying to ignore the niggling little voice in the back of his neck that was getting louder and louder in warning.

A couple of men were still eating, those who had lost teeth to age, or illness, and were still methodically masticating the thick jook between pale, anaemic gums. Zuko looked up and slowly let his gaze drift around the room, his good eye lazily observing, and analysing, everything. The guards were holding themselves to strict attention, as they supervised the meal, but their eyes kept flickering around the room, their gazes stark and nervous when they made eye contact with one another. Damn it all to Koh, Zuko thought grimly, he’d sensed that something had been disturbing the guards all day. Jee was right; something was going on.

Casting his eye about the room, he spotted Kaori a couple of benches away. She looked up and met his gaze questioningly, her own eyes tight with tension. He glanced at the nearest guard and raised his right, and only, eyebrow in question. She shook her head minutely, shrugging as she looked down at her hands. Zuko frowned; Kaori usually had the best information on the goings on of the soldiers. It was one of the best-kept camp secrets that she was sleeping with the corporal who cared for the messenger hawks. It was completely of her own volition, but it was enough of a scandal that one or two people around camp had managed to figure things out. Kaori kept the whole thing quiet, for obvious reasons, but she was usually willing to give Zuko a heads up if something serious was about to go down. The fact that even she was in the dark was not reassuring, at all. It suggested to Zuko that whatever had alarmed the soldiers was either a very recent development, or a very serious one.

Zuko cursed under his breath, and turned back to meet Jee’s grim expression. They sat quietly as the anxious murmuring grew around them. Suddenly, the mess door flew open, admitting an ashen-faced and trembling private. The young woman all but ran over to the officer on duty, hand clutching a small slip of paper which was bearing a very large, red wax seal. Zuko had last seen those littering the desk in his father’s study. Military despatch: warning of enemy movements. Zuko’s heart froze for a moment before the shock set in and set it pumping again. He swore violently, and his eyes met Jee’s in terrible understanding. The enemy was near. The war had come looking for them.
Zuko was just about to swear again, when the ground beneath him started to tremble. Tiny pebbles skittered along the floor, clattering against the metal legs of the mess tables, as a steady rumbling sound built from deep beneath their feet. It was nothing like the earthquakes of Zuko’s childhood in Caldera City, or the rockslides that tumbled through the mountain passes just beyond the mine. They were chaotic and frantic, the sheer power of nature. This, Zuko realised, as he watched the rocks skitter towards the back of the hall in tidy, controlled lines, was something else entirely.

“Earthbenders!” The cry went up from the sentry, just as the first projectile struck the wall of the mess building. A deafening crash set both of Zuko’s ears ringing, as the heavy rock burst through the thin wall and exploded into a cloud of dust and debris. Then the screaming began. The inmates scrambled for the doors, but were pushed back into the centre of the room by white-faced soldiers. A high-pitched whistling filled the air, followed by another crash, as rock struck the camp again. It was further away, out towards the soldier’s barracks, but the impact vibrated through the ground. The lights in the mess hall went out, plunging the room into darkness. Zuko swore, and ducked under the table, grabbing Jee as he went. More rock came crashing through the roof, directly above the cooking pot. Zuko gagged as two of the orderlies went down, heads smashed before they even hit the floor. There was a surge of bodies and a mad scramble for the doors, as the inmates screamed in terror. Zuko glanced around through the dust that was steadily saturating the air; a few others had had the same idea as him, and were crouched under the thin metal of the mess tables, faces grim and drawn. The ground beneath their feet vibrated again, as another rock came crashing down onto the camp.

A shout went up by the door. The soldiers had started hitting out at the inmates with their truncheons, trying to keep the doors shut. One man went down, clutching at his nose, but the panicking mass surged forwards. The soldiers panicked and threw open the doors, letting the crowd of stampeding prisoners spill out into the main courtyard. Through the hole that the attack had made in the side of the building, Zuko could see flashes of bright orange dance across the darkness of the night sky, as the firebenders started to fight back. Jee swore viciously beside him, as fire danced across the ground outside, finding the patches of dry grass that littered the camp, and catching. Zuko’s heart dropped to his stomach. What did the imbeciles think they were playing at? They were going to start a wildfire if they weren’t careful. Didn’t they know the first fucking thing about their own element? The sounds of screaming and sobbing were almost overwhelming, echoing off the tall mountains around camp. Zuko shook his head, making himself focus through his rising panic. He cursed again, if the fire got to the coal mine, they were all dead. He stood a better chance against the earthbenders.

The inmates continued to flood out through the open door and into the courtyard, and Zuko darted forward to join them, but Jee stopped him suddenly with a strong hand on his shoulder. He shook his head, eyes wide, as he shouted something into Zuko’s bad ear. Zuko shook his head, unable to hear what he’d said through the cacophony of screams and pounding feet and the constant fucking buzzing in his ear. Then Jee grabbed him, pointing one finger firmly towards the doors, where the last few inmates not cowering under tables were stumbling out into the night. Zuko frowned in confusion, his hearing vaguely making out a series of wet thuds, and then came a noise like the first rainstorm of the summer. It was the sound that came when the dark clouds had gathered and hung low in the sky, just before the lightning clashed and the thunder rolled; it was the sound of the heavens opening and letting their power loose on the earth.

Zuko flinched as Jee pushed him down to the floor. Small, razor sharp pieces of rock went flying over their heads with extraordinary speed. Zuko hid his face in the earth and prayed to Agni as fiercely as he had when he’d been on his knees before his father in the Agni Kai arena. Just like then, it seemed as if there were no possible way for Zuko to get out alive. The barrage couldn’t have lasted for more than a minute or so, but to Zuko, it felt like a lifetime. He watched through the doorway as countless bodies fell to the attack, as inmates he’d known for years scrambled for cover, only to trip into the path of one of the rocks, and go crashing down to the ground, screaming in agony.
Then, finally the barrage stopped, and Zuko dared to lift his head. It was like waking up into a nightmare. The courtyard outside was slowly beginning to fill with thick, grey smoke, and the ground beneath him felt warm to the touch. He looked over at Jee, and their eyes met in grim agreement; the fire was spreading, and quickly. They needed to get out immediately, before it got to the mine. Zuko looked around him, as best as he could. There were about thirty others left alive in the mess hall, cowering under tables. Some were clutching at blood stained clothing, sobbing through gritted teeth in fear and pain. Zuko weighed his options. If he left the relative safety of the mess hall, there was every chance he would walk straight out into the path of one of those deadly missiles. If he stayed put, he would definitely face the dire. His fingers traced softly against his scar. Taking a deep breath, Zuko made his decision.

He inched out from under the table, and was relieved that Jee followed right behind him.

“We need to get out,” he said, mustering up what little authority he could remember from his former status, trying to project his voice as well as he could. The people stirred, muttering amongst themselves, but no one moved. Right, Zuko reminded himself, he was still the traitor prince, after all. Why should they follow him anywhere? He felt the dull wash of disappointment wash over him; every man for himself was hardly a new state of affairs. He went to turn away, but was pulled up short by a high pitched whistle from the man beside him.

“The fire is spreading,” Jee’s voice rang out across the hall, echoing with authority and conviction, “when it reaches the mine, the coal will burn, and it will burn hot and fast.” A few men blanched at the realisation, but only a couple moved to stand. Jee pulled himself up to his full height, looking every inch the former officer, and Zuko felt some of the old fire reignite in his chest. The prisoners didn’t deserve what was happening to them. It wasn’t fair.

“If you don’t leave now, you’ll die!” He didn’t know where he’d found the courage, or the breath to shout so loudly, but his words flew out him in a bellow, and the crowd flinched back from him. Zuko knew that they were afraid, he was terrified, but he hadn’t survived the camp only to die by his own fucking element. He glared at the others all as they waited precious seconds deliberating. Slowly, far too slowly, another ten or so men joined them. The others stayed put. Zuko could feel the sheer force of the power in the flames that were roaring around the camp, spreading out with terrifying speed. Even if he had his firebending, he knew there was nothing he could do; the sheer energy in the fire was overwhelming.

“You are going to die!” Zuko screamed at them, panic rising in his chest as they all refused to move. Jee grabbed his elbow, pulling him towards the door. “The fire will kill you. Do you understand that?”

A woman looked up at him, meeting his eyes for the first time. Her face was dark with soot and dust, and there was a large gash across her forehead, steadily trickling blood down over her temple, but her eyes were calm. Zuko froze, transfixed in horror, and then Jee was pulling him away, out of the door.

The air outside was hot and heavy with thick, black smoke. Jee dropped to the floor, dragging Zuko down with him, and they started crawling towards the back of the camp, away from the mine and the growing sound of crackling flames.

Zuko coughed thickly, as he scrambled along, hands and knees searing with the heat of the ground. He almost laughed at the stupidity of the situation, a hysterical feeling building up behind his ribcage. He was a firebender, running away from a fire. Why was it that it was always his own element that managed to hurt him the most? His head was starting to grow heavy and confused as the smoke grew thicker around them. He coughed again, pushing forwards with a determination to survive that he
didn’t know he’d had in him. A dull thud sounded next to him, as Jee’s blurry form toppled forward, and lay still. Zuko let out a grunt of frustration, and he flung an arm out, his hand grasping around fabric and clenching tight. Inch by tortuous inch, he crawled forwards, hauling Jee’s dead weight alongside him. Then, suddenly, Zuko was pitching forwards, tumbling down a sharp slope, his body bouncing faster and faster as it thumped against the hard rock of the mountainside.

Eventually, the ground evened out, and he rolled to a stop, bruised and winded. He lay on his back, in the clean air, panting and gasping. A hacking cough rose in his chest and then he was on his side, wheezing. His hand groped wildly, searching for Jee, but he just grasped at empty air. Alarmed, he tried to sit up, but it was too much for his battered, exhausted body to handle. His vision blurred and then he keeled over, completely unconscious.

Chapter End Notes

TW for violence: fire and explosions, bending used to simulate bombing/gunfire. There's an ambush and some characters die. Also there is a brief mention of violence against a prisoner by guards- I know this pretty much canon for fire nation soldiers, but I want to give up the warning anyway.

I hope you enjoyed reading, please drop me a comment to let me know what you thought!
Zuko came slowly, pushing his way through the dense, smoky fog that smothered his thoughts, like the choking smog of an erupting volcano. The ground was hard beneath him, and small rocks and shells pushed rudely into his bad cheek. He cautiously tested each of his limbs: right hand, left hand, right leg, left leg. All were fine. Zuko sighed in relief. It wasn't the first time he'd been beaten unconscious, and there was always the risk that he might wake up without the use of something important. Again.

He forced his eyes open, one lid at a time. His bad eye felt tighter than usual, and he blinked away grit as he waited for his vision to clear. The world swam into focus, and he let out a long, rasping cough. His chest felt raw, like he'd been breathing glass shards, or - a voice chimed up from the back of Zuko’s mind- like he'd been breathing smoke. Then it was like a damn had opened and the events of the night before came flooding back to him, in a searing flash of orange and deep, sooty black.

Zuko started upright, and pain shot through his arms, he glanced over his shoulder, and his heart sank. He had been lying face-down on unyielding, tightly packed earth, his hands bound tightly at the small of his back with intractable stone cuffs. that could only mean one thing: earthbenders. The fucking earthbenders had taken him. They hadn't even bothered to remove the metal chains, and had simply bound him with stone on top of the existing manacles. The metal bit harshly into his wrists, pressing deep on bone.

Zuko winced and tried to roll some of the stiffness from his shoulders, as he took in his latest prison. He was in a kind of pen; there sad a plain earth floor surrounded by a fence made of tightly packed bamboo. It was dark, the roof covered by a thick piece of canvas which stretched tightly over the bamboo, like a sail, and blocked out the sun. Dust danced in the thin, pale pink sunbeams that filtered through the gaps in the walls. There was no bucket or water trough in sight, so Zuko assumed that they weren't being held for long.

It was dawn, and Zuko had woken with the sun,as always. In the dim, early morning light, he could vaguely make out a dozen or so pale, unconscious faces. They were all marred by thick steaks of soot, or slowly oozing streams of blood. There were a few men from his work group; Hikari, a woman from hut four; six or so men that Zuko knew by their faces only; and one of the firebenders- a man chained, like Zuko. Less than twenty had been captured so far. Zuko shivered; there were so few.

He wondered, vaguely, if there were any others who had made it out of the camp last night, any
others who could have escaped the grasping hands of the Earth Kingdom and made it to freedom. It was a heavily optimistic thought; the camp had turned into an inferno. Still, there was always a chance. If they’d made it through the smoke, they could have slipped into the mountains, and waited out the Earth Kingdom search parties there. There was no sign of Jee in the small cell and Zuko prayed that the other man was among them. If not, then the only man who'd been halfway decent to him in that spirits-forsaken hell hole had been lost to the smoke.

A light breeze twisted its way through the bamboo, and Zuko shivered. He racked his brains for any memory of how he got there, but everything was just a blur of smoke and heat. Someone must have found him unconscious and helpless, after the battle, and dragged him to a cell. Although, why they had bothered to create a prison, why they'd bothered to take him alive, rather than bending body into the earth, was beyond him. The thought of what the earthbenders might want with a bunch of Fire Nation convicts was hardly pleasant.

Zuko sighed, and shifted awkwardly, trying to alleviate some of the pressure on his shoulders. The bastard who had bound him had clearly done it in a hurry, Zuko's comfort not even an afterthought in the process. Zuko knew that he should be grateful that he hadn't been killed on the spot (a mercy rarely extended to crippled Fire Nation brats) but he couldn't help but seethe at his own discomfort. He had had enough of that at the hands of his own nation, why the fuck was he meant to take it from someone else’s?

Slowly, the sounds of a waking camp began to filter through the thin wooden walls- rough cursing in strange accents, the scrape of flint on flint, and then the low whoosh of flames. Zuko pushed down a shudder at the sickening smell of smoke that trickled in through the gaps in the bamboo. Flashes of the night before assaulted his mind, and he gritted his teeth against the memory of the roar of the inferno and the sickening thud of rock piecing skin. Zuko breathed steadily, waiting as the urge to vomit slowly passed.

The sun slowly crept higher into the sky, banishing the lingering darkness of dawn, and the other prisoners slowly groaned their way awake around him. Zuko felt the pulsing power of Agni’s light move higher above him, tantalisingly concealed behind the thick canvas. A thin cut had opened on his forehead, and a small trickle of blood was meandering its way down his good cheek. He let out a bitter laugh. It was just his spirits damned luck; he'd escaped from one hell only to end up in another, from the routine, familiar horror of the camp, to the ominous, unknown terror of an Earth Kingdom cell. Zuko coughed out another huff of laughter, and titled his head back as far as he could, imagining that he was basking his face in the warmth of Agni's light. Whatever fate awaited him, there was at least some consistency between the Fire Nation and Earth Kingdom: both kept him firmly out of his element, hidden away out of the sun. Perhaps the spirits had a sense of humour, after all.

Shuffling and groaning filled the dark cell, grating at Zuko’s tightly wound nerves. He forced his hands out of their tight fits, and slowly inhaled and exhaled through his irritation. Starting a fight to appease his frustration would not do anyone any good. Zuko slowly fell into meditative breathing, and gradually his temper cooled. He tentatively allowed his thoughts to wander. There was nothing he could do until someone came for him, and he had to be ready when they did.

Grotesque image after grotesque image began to infiltrate his mind, reminding him of all the hideous things that the earthbenders could do to him. His mouth felt parched as he sucked in heavy, measured breaths, and his thoughts flittered from one scenario, to the next, fanning his anxieties like bellows to a bonfire. What did the earthbenders want with them? Why had they attacked the mining camp? And, of course, the biggest fear of all: what if they found out that he had once been the Fire Lord’s son? It wouldn't matter to them that Zuko was dishonoured, that he'd been branded, disowned, and declared a traitor; blood was blood, and the Earth Kingdom had a lot of reason to despise his. Zuko
shivered and cowered into his corner; he had never been patient, and waiting for the axe to fall was intolerable.

Hours passed, and the sun steadily climbed to its height in the sky, oblivious to the way that Zuko’s nerves were clawing impatiently at the last remnants of his temper. At least, Zuko hoped that the sun was oblivious; if not, then Agni truly had forsaken him. He let out a hiss of anger, his frustration echoed in the rapid pounding of his heart, the fluttering beats clamouring a painful rhythm of fear and uncertainty. Just when he thought he couldn’t stand the waiting any longer, the sound of heavy footsteps came pounding towards the cell. Then Zuko found himself wishing fervently that they’d be left alone a little longer.

“This is the last one, Captain,” boomed a gruff voice from just behind Zuko. He started, shaken, and fell inelegantly onto his side. Just ahead of him, the gate slammed open, flooding the room with a bright light that made spots dance across his good eye. As he was blinking away the dark smudges through heavily watering eyes, a man was thrown into the cell, landing on the floor with a dull thud. The door slammed shut almost immediately, and Zuko shuffled into his corner, his good eye wide and wary.

With a loud groan, the figure shifted, leaning to the side to hack out a wad of blood and saliva. Zuko caught a glimpse of a pale face, and he shrunk back; it was a soldier from the mining camp. Zuko would know a guard anywhere, even if his uniform was torn to shreds and almost unidentifiable in the dark.

The soldier was a thin, reedy boy, no more than a year out two older than Zuko. Zuko didn't know his name; he hadn't been one of the ones to watch out for— the ones who would hit without reason, or extend shifts long into the night, just to punish the prisoners when they started lagging from fatigue. Back at the camp, he hadn't been worth bothering about, but Zuko was starting to wish that he'd paid him more attention. A guard was still a guard, and Zuko was trapped in a cell with one.

The soldier curled himself up against the bamboo, and Zuko judged him docile enough to relax around. Zuko’s eyes slipped from the guard and peered further into the darkness, as his heart slowly sank with a terrible realisation. The earthbender had said that the guard was the last prisoner. That meant that Jee wasn't coming. Zuko was a realist, he knew what that meant. There was never any real chance that anyone would have made it past the mountains. His earlier fantasy had been just that.

He pressed his back firmly against the questionable security of the fence, and contemplated his next move. The earthbenders had been collecting prisoners, bringing them together, but Zuko didn't know for what. He'd have to wait and see. He frowned, and his fingers twitched in irritation, sparks just out of the reach of his impotent chi. The camp may have taught him how to wait, but he had never been a patient person. Sweat trickled ominously down his spine, and he fixed his eyes firmly on his hands. Around him, the quiet grunting and shuffling of his fellow prisoners filled the air, sounding too loud in the small prison.

“You're going too far, Yung!” A sharp voice sliced through the air from just behind Zuko’s head. He flinched, as the eyes of his fellow prisoners snapped towards him, all of them alert to the potential threat in close proximity.

“Don't tell me how to do my fucking job!” Zuko flinched again, this time at the sheer venom in the growled reply. The other prisoners shifted too, the air suddenly charged with terrible anticipation.

“The Chief won't like it,” the first voice hissed back, an edge of desperation creeping into his words.

“Fuck the Chief!”
The soft click of the lock gave a moment of brief reprieve, and then the door slammed open, ricocheting off the fence behind it and sending a shudder through the bamboo. A large, heavily-muscled man came striding in, a deep scowl hiding behind his thick beard. He was dressed in Earth Kingdom green, and he had a large knife strapped at his belt. Zuko’s mind flashed back to a warm afternoon many years ago, and to a gift and a message from his uncle: never give up without a fight. He shuddered and hunched into himself as much as possible, as the man stormed past him. Some fights just weren’t worth starting.

Another man bustled into the room, stepping into the open doorway and blocking the only escape route. Zuko gave him a quick once-over, but almost immediately returned his gaze to the bigger man. He knew how to identify a threat.

The big man- Yung, Zuko assumed- stood in the centre of the room, regarding the prisoners with a malicious smirk. He turned slowly, pivoting on his right heel, eyeing then all one by one, like a tigerdillo stalking its catch. The prisoners had been sat in relatively companionable silence all morning, but suddenly the quiet seemed oppressive and dangerous, like the calm of a dry beach before a tsunami. Zuko shrunk back into the shadows, and Yung shot a cruel smile at him. He hunched his shoulders, despite his screaming muscles, and bowed his head, fiercely hoping that he'd be passed over for whatever new game was going to be played.

“That one.” Zuko flinched, and raised his eyes in dread. He found himself blinking once, then again, in sheer disbelief. For once, the spirits had granted him a reprieve from their torments; Yung was pointing at the young guard. Relief washed through Zuko, and he let out a breath that he hadn't realised he'd been holding. He knew that he should probably feel guilty for such selfishness, but all he could feel was the overwhelming gratitude that, for once, it wasn't him in the firing line.

The young guard rose slowly to his feet, mouth fixed in a tight, professional line, his shoulders set. Zuko was impressed at the man’s fortitude, but it was clearly a mask. No stiff upper lip could hide the way that his legs trembled as they stumbled towards the doorway, or the terror that gleamed in his eyes as they flickered about the room. The soldier's gaze met Zuko’s for one brief, terrifying moment, and Zuko’s heart all but stopped. His identity was hardly a secret, the whole camp knew who he was and what his father had done to him, even if they didn't know why. Zuko’s providence would be a valuable bargaining chip for the guard. Everyone knew that happened to Fire Nation soldiers in the Earth Kingdom; it would only be a matter of time before the screaming started, before the guard traded anything to get it to stop. Zuko wondered how much longer he would have, before he too was dragged away by Yung’s viscous grin.

In the end, it took about half an hour, by Zuko’s estimation, before the first piercing scream echoed through wooden walls of the prison. The guard was tougher than he'd appeared; he'd held out longer than Zuko had expected. An hour or so later, after the sun had begun it's slow decline towards the horizon, and the guard was deposited back in the cell. He was thrown to his knees, and he immediately crumbled to a shivering, bleeding mass in the centre of the room. The door was slammed shut behind him, and he let out a low groan. Zuko flinched at the crash of bamboo colliding, and took a few deep breaths. The earthbenders would be back for him soon enough; there was no use panicking until they did.

The guard groaned once again, and the other prisoners shifted uncomfortably in their own spots against the walls. Something had changed in that awful hour, as they’d sat listening to howled screams and distant sobs. The boundary between prisoner and soldier had blurred. It was as if some silent consensus had been reached between them all; whatever hell they’d found themselves in, they were all in it together.

Hikari slowly stood up, and was almost immediately joined by Asao, one of the men from his work
The two of them inched forwards, as if approaching a wounded animal, and cautiously helped the guard to lean against the bamboo. They moved awkwardly, hands bound tightly behind their backs with stone cuffs, but they managed to manoeuvre the guard into an upright position. He gasped a few sharp breaths, his shoulders quivering, as Asao held him steady with his shoulder. Zuko averted his eyes. The room fell silent as the guard found his breath.

“So…” a coarse, scratchy voice chimed up from the corner of the cell, “what did they want to know?” Zuko snapped his head up sharply, aghast at the insensitivity, even as a dark part of him was desperate to ask the same question. He peered into the darkness, to see who had spoken. The other firebender (Zuko had never learnt his name) was wringing his hands tightly, an embarrassed, but determined look on his face. Zuko suddenly realised that perhaps he wasn’t the only one with reason to fear the exposure of his identity.

“Not… much,” the guard replied through short, gasping breaths, the words whistling out from behind tightly clenched teeth. He looked up and, seeing the ashen faces of his fellow prisoners, nodded to himself, seemingly coming to a decision. “Gaoling,” the guard hissed out, painfully. Then he let out a bitter rasp of laughter. “What we knew…about the Avatar.”

Zuko all but growled in fury. The fucking bastards were asking them about Earth Kingdom towns and children’s stories? Gaoling might have had some significance to the war, he supposed, but the avatar was long gone. What was the point of torturing anyone over ancient history? Unless, of course, the earthbenders were just toying with them. He shook himself as Hikari’s voice broke through the quiet room.

“What else?” she asked gently, kindly, sounding almost like a mother. Zuko turned his face away, abruptly.

“The war,” the guard stuttered out, between gasps. “The camp.” He coughed once, and it sounded almost like a sob. “Who…who we were keeping there.” Zuko’s gaze shot back to the guards face, and their eyes met; something inexpressible was shared between them in that moment. “I didn’t…say anything,” the guard completed, his eyes still holding Zuko’s captive. Whatever the reason was, mercy, kinship, the last lingering thread of patriotism and a need to protect even a traitorous disappointment of the Royal House from the enemy, the guard hadn’t given him up. Zuko’s chest constricted painfully, and he forcibly tore his gaze away from the soldier, and back to the ground.

A bitter laugh tumbled from the guard’s lips. Then, suddenly, he was sobbing, his head resting on Hikari’s shoulder as if he were an infant once again. “I don’t know…anything about…the war,” he cried piteously, “I’m just…a cabbage…farmer’s…son. I was only…conscripted…this year.” He collapsed, bent double, and fell into deep, racking sobs that shook his body.

The chi stirred gently in Zuko’s stomach for the first time in years. A smouldering fury pressed against his ribs, and he felt something spark deep within him. The young guard had been tortured for information he didn’t possess, about a war he never should have been a part of. So what if he’d been a fucking Guard? Zuko wasn’t that petty, and he’d learnt a lot about blame at the end of his father’s flaming first. It wasn’t the guard’s fault, not really. He was just the scapegoat. It wasn’t fucking fair. It wasn’t fucking right. Few things in the world were, Zuko knew. He knew it like he knew that the sky was blue, or that fire was hot, but, for some reason, this particular injustice rankled more than usual. The guard just looked so fucking vulnerable. Zuko wondered if he himself had ever seemed that young.

The room fell silent, and the guard’s sobs slowly quietened into shallow, level breathing. He’d cried himself to sleep, or passed out- either way, he was dead to the world. Zuko stilled and tried to breathe in careful, measured breaths; he was trying to fan the faint spark of his chi into some kind of
flame. Something, anything that he could use as a weapon, or a way to escape.

There was a bright flare in Zuko’s gut, but the rush of glee he’d been expecting was quickly squashed by dread. What if, by some miracle, he were able to firebend? He had no control, he’d never been good at bringing the fire to his will. It would escape him, it would break loose and burn the cell to cinders with everyone inside it. The events of the night before rushing to the front of his mind, and the smell of smoke flooded his nostrils. Zuko immediately doused the small flicker of his chi, feeling sick. Besides, he reminded himself, as he buried his head in his hands and tried to breathe through the urge to vomit, it wasn’t as if he'd actually be able to firebend. He’d tried, and failed, in far more dire situations in the past.

Less than ten minutes later, the spirits decided that whatever brief reprieve he'd earnt from their torment was over, and the door once again slammed sharply open. Within seconds, the earthen cuffs had crumbled from Zuko’s wrists, leaving him sprawled and aching in an ungainly heap. He could vaguely see, out of the corner of his good eye, that the others were receiving similar treatment. All except the unconscious guard. There was no need for Zuko to panic, not just yet. A pair of large boots filled his vision, as he rolled onto his side. The boots were scuffed and worn with use, yet utterly devoid of dirt, despite the dusty earth; they left Zuko’s ribs throbbing as they collided once, twice, again, with his side.

A rough hand grabbed Zuko’s upper arm, yanking him to his feet, as he struggled to breathe through the pain in his stomach. Zuko hissed sharply as his arm was forced behind him; his shoulders had been locked, muscles cramping, for hours, and his arm didn't want to bend in the direction that it was being made to. He struggled in the man's grip and was rewarded with a sharp cuff around the head. A heavy hand landed on the back of his neck, pushing his head down and forcing his gaze firmly on the ground.

“Move,” the gruff voice ordered, giving Zuko a rough shake. “Chief Hakoda wants a word with you all.” Biting back a groan, Zuko complied. His brain puzzled over the command, as he was shoved into line with the others, earthbenders barking at them left and right. Hakoda, Zuko thought - as someone collided with his back, sending him stumbling forwards- that was a water tribe name, not Earth Kingdom. What the hell was going on?

Zuko’s heart pounded as they were marched firmly forwards and out of the cell, the ghost of the grip around his neck keeping his eyes low. As they walked, signs of the organised chaos of a military camp began to creep into his limited field of vision. A pair of boots left drying in the sun; the ugly black streaks of long dead campfires, burnt into the ground; and, worst of all, the tell-tale canvas of tent after military-issued tent. Zuko’s heart began to beat even faster, and he swore under his breath. There were so many tents. This wasn't a small scouting party, as he'd first assumed; this was an army. Had the war really crept so close to their insignificant little mining camp, without Zuko being any the wiser?

Finally, after the haphazardly pitched brown tents had lapsed into lines of ordered blue, the line was pulled to a halt. Zuko risked a glance up, and saw a huge, navy blue tent spreading out in front of him. It had been pitched horizontally, at the head of two orderly lines of smaller tents. Zuko knew immediately that this was the heart of the camp, and that they were going before the senior officer. This Chief Hakoda was the man in charge of things. Zuko just couldn't figure out why the main tent was Water Tribe blue, and not Earth Kingdom green. The last he'd heard, the Northern Water Tribe had all but declared themselves neutral, and the Southern had been decimated by decades of raids. Had so much changed in only three years?

There was a sharp order, mangled by his bad ear, and then a hand between his shoulder blades propelled him through the open canvas flap and into a large tent. He landed on his hands and knees
with a low hiss, his fellow prisoners shoved down alongside him. Only hard-won experience held him back from turning around to snarl at whoever had pushed him. Zuko knew better, and he didn't want to give anyone a reason to look at him twice.

A pair of fur-rimmed boots planted themselves right in front of his face, and scuffed lightly at the dirt. Zuko froze where he knelt, not daring to look up and draw attention to himself.

“So these are the only survivors? Your tactics were brutally efficient.” The boots turned slightly, addressing someone standing far off to Zuko’s right.

“Don’t look at me like that, Hakoda.” Zuko’s blood chilled as Yung’s voice echoed through the tent. “The mission was to cut off coal supplies to the Fire Nation auxiliary corps east of Caldera City.” Yung’s voice was flat and deadly, the barest hint of challenge in his tone. “We achieved that.” Zuko shivered, he sensed that he was kneeling in the middle of some ongoing power play.

“By setting the whole damn mine on fire!” The first voice was dry and sarcastic, replete with the kind of authority held only by experienced officers. Zuko assumed that the voice and the boots belonged to Chief Hakoda himself. “Thank Tui and La that we managed to get out of there without losing half our men,” Hakoda continued, “most of my warriors were still in the officers quarters when you decided to try and flatten the place.”

Zuko frowned at the dirt floor. The events of the night before were sounding more and more like a planned, targeted attack, which made little sense to him. As far as he'd known, the Earth Kingdom were all but on the brink of surrender, holding out in Ba Sing Se and a few other scattered strongholds. But it seemed as if the chaos and slaughter of the night before had been deliberate. If so, if was an intensely aggressive act, and not one of an army on the brink of defeat. Zuko felt as if he had spent three years adrift in his Uncle’s beloved spirit world. What could possibly have caused so much change in three short years?

“If you hadn't been taking so long, we wouldn't have needed to interfere.” Yung let out a low growl, and Zuko flinched, cowering further into the ground. “I apologise for diverting from your plan, if it put your men at risk-” Yung snarled, sounding entirely unapologetic “-but it was necessary.” Heavy footsteps came pounding towards Zuko, as Yung stepped almost toe to toe with the fur boots. “The soldiers in that camp knew we were coming for them, it was only a matter of time before they realised you were already there.”

“And this thanks to your mysterious informant?” The sarcasm in Hakoda’s voice was blistering. Zuko would have been impressed, were he not entirely confused, and in fear for his life. “And where is he now?”

“With the healers. He-” Yung coughed in embarrassment “-he inhaled a fair amount of smoke.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Hakoda remarked archly. “Anyone remotely useful is either injured, dead, or as useless as this bunch of Fire Nation scum.” The boots turned back towards Zuko, and he tried very hard not to think about the open tent flap behind him. He wouldn't make it two steps to the exit, before someone took him down. “Did that soldier at least tell you anything useful?” Hakoda sounded tired and disapproving. Zuko assumed that the chief had not been the one to order the torture, but that was not enough to ease Zuko’s fears. It might have been Yung that gave the command, but Hakoda hadn't stopped him.

“He had no idea about Gaoling, or the drill.” Yung replied tightly. “It seems like the Princess is keeping that information from general circulation.” Zuko stilled at the mention of his sister. Apparently the ‘news’ that was handed down to them in camp was as specious as he'd thought. Azula wasn't off on some tour of the South Islands; she was in the Earth Kingdom, doing something
to aid the war. Zuko had never hated his father more than in that moment, not even when the man had struck him down and burnt half his face off in front of the entire fucking Court. Azula was a liar and a bully, but she was his little sister. She was far too young to be out fighting their father's battles.

He shook himself, as he realised he'd zoned out of the conversation going on above his head. That was dangerous, and he knew better. He had to keep his wits about him, to figure out exactly what was going on, if he wanted to make it out of the tent alive.

“...necessity, Hakoda! This is war. What did you drag the rest of them here for, if not to do the exact same thing to them.” Yung’s voice was tight with frustration, as if only respect for the chain of command held him back from barking out at the chief. There was a long pause, and Yung’s feet shuffled back a step. Zuko did not want to know what the earthbender had seen in Hakoda’s expression, in that moment. However whatever Hakoda had been about to say in reply was cut off by a sharp knocking on the wooden pole at the tent entrance. The tent flap snapped open, and a hoarse voice broke through the air.

“Sorry, sir. The smoke… I…” Zuko knew that voice. He curled his hands into fists and tried to breathe through the sick rush of shock and betrayal. “You got my message, sir-” the voice broke off, coughing “-I wasn't sure it would get to you. I had to leave a tool in the mine to get away from the group and I didn't have time...” Zuko felt the others stir besides him, and he knew he wasn't the only one who recognised the new man's speech. It was Shao. The lying bastard had been working for the enemy all along; he'd never really been one of them. The realisation hurt more than Zuko ever would have thought.

“We did. Good work, soldier,” Yung replied approvingly, his boots cutting past Zuko to stand at the tent entrance. “We received the alert that the camp guards were aware of our presence in the area, and we acted immediately.”

“And that was all, sir?” Shao broke into another fit of coughs.

“Why don't you sit down, son?” Hakoda suggested quietly, and the scrape of a wooden bench against the dirt floor cut through the air. Zuko kept his eyes firmly on the ground, but his heart was pounding with nerves. “You had another message?” Hakoda’s spoke calmly, but firmly- the epitome of a leader.

“Yes sir, I mean, Chief.” Shao broke out into another coughing fit. “I was trying to warn you.”

“About what?” Yung’s voice was grim and alert.

“About him.” Zuko’s blood turned to ice, as a horrible sense of inevitability washed over him. This was it; he'd known it would come the minute Shao had entered the tent. He didn't have to look up to know that Shao was pointing straight at him.

“That's Prince Zuko, the Fire Lord's son!”

Zuko had been expecting to hear them, but Shao’s words still made his heart skip a beat. It was like someone had poured iced water down his back. The room was silent for a long, long moment.

“You're sure, soldier?” Yung sounded very quiet and very controlled. Zuko kept his eyes firmly on the floor.

“Yes sir, it was common knowledge round the camp.” Shao coughed again. “I took a whole month to verify the information. It's true.”

“It's him,” Yung voice was small and disbelieving.
“Well isn't this interesting?” Hakoda remarked archly. “What would the dead Crown Prince of the Fire Nation be doing alive and in a prison camp?” The boots were walking in a circle around Zuko’s bowed form. “Look at me, boy.”

A hand shot out and grasped Zuko’s chin, forcing his head up. His first glimpse of Hakoda was not what he had expected. The chief was a tall man, and he displayed his tightly packed muscles behind loose blue clothing. He looked now like an elite warrior than the savage barbarian Zuko had imagined. His eyes were a deep blue and shone with terrible intelligence.

“You're the Fire Lord's son?” Hakoda asked, ponderous. He tilted Zuko’s head to the side, examining his scar closely. Zuko flinched. “Not what I was expecting.”

The chief held out a weathered hand and, when Zuko just looked at it with wary confusion, tutted and grabbed his upper arm, yanking him to his feet. “Take the others back to the cell.” There was a shuffling behind him, as Zuko sensed his fellow prisoners being pulled to their feet and ushered out of the tent. But he couldn't look away from Hakoda’s gaze. He was utterly transfixed with horror.

“I think His Royal Highness has an interesting story to tell us.” Hakoda smiled at him, a promise of something indecipherable in his expression. Zuko shivered, and let himself get pulled further into the tent. One way or another, he was going to have to talk to the chief.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading, I hope you enjoyed!

Next chapter the angst should abate a little, and we'll get our first glimpse of Sokka!

Please leave a comment /kudos if you enjoyed, and let me know what you think!
These lifeless things

Chapter Notes

Hi guys, thanks so much for sticking with me!
I hope you'll enjoy the next chapter!
TWs for violence and reference to torture. I think that's about it. Please let me know if you want me to tag for anything else.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Sit down.”

It was an order, not a suggestion, but the tone was surprisingly mild. Zuko’s head shot up at the unexpected civility. Hakoda was wearing a painfully diplomatic smile, but his eyes were like ice. He gestured with a quick sweep of his hand towards the back of the tent, where a selection of cushions and furs were arranged in a small group. There was a gap between them, perfect for a map to be rolled out and poured over, although any maps, or other indicators of strategy, had been swept away long before the enemy prisoners were brought before the chief. Zuko throat tightened at the realisation that he was in the war room. He shrank further into himself and hastily moved to sit. Yung spat on the floor, and stormed over to pour himself something strong smelling from a pitcher on the sideboard. The pungent scent of alcohol bit through the room, and Zuko flinched. Hurrying over to the seating area, he settled to his knees on a soft fur, and tried to swallow down his panic.

Hakoda’s eyebrow twitched, as if it wanted to shoot up towards his hairline, but he was too much of a diplomat to allow such an obvious reaction. Zuko noted the man’s professionalism, but his stomach still felt like he’d swallowed lead. This was not the welcome that he had been expecting, and he knew it was only a matter of time before the veneer of civility disappeared, and the true colours of the Chief came out. He watched out of the corner of his good eye as Shao surreptitiously slipped out of the tent, leaving him alone with the Chief and Yung. The bastard was already a spy, perhaps he was a coward, too.

“I feel like I should offer you a drink, Your Highness,” Hakoda’s voice was calm and level, but it cut through Zuko like a blade, “apparently we’re entertaining royalty.” Zuko focused his eyes on the floor, and tried to ignore the slightly sarcastic undercurrent to the words. Did the Chief not know that Zuko was no longer a prince, that he’d been tried, convicted and banished as a traitor in full view of half the nobility of the Fire Nation?

“A fucking drink, Hakoda?” Yung snarled from the corner, startling Zuko from his thoughts. “He’s the Fire Lord’s spawn, and you’re treating him like some honoured fucking guest!” He took a large swig from his goblet, and strode over to the furs. He threw himself down next to Zuko and leant in close, smiling a little as Zuko flinched. “What’s that, brat? Are you scared of me?” His mouth was close to Zuko’s bad ear, so the words came through clearly enough that Zuko could hear the threat barely contained within them. He flinched.

“Yung.”

“No, Hakoda. You don’t get to claim him. One of my men brought him in. He’s ours.” Yung’s attention left Zuko as he turned to face Hakoda. Zuko took a shallow breath, and managed not to slump with relief as the attention moved away from him. He’d learnt how to hide his happiness and
his relief at a very young age. He had never been comfortable being the centre of attention, and his father had not liked that his son and heir visibly relaxed whenever he was ushered from his father’s presence. It didn’t look very well before the rest of the Court, apparently.

“And it was our intelligence that led to his capture, Yung. I shouldn’t have to remind you that this was a temporary partnership and that it was our plan that you dragged off course.” Hakoda was still standing, but it wasn’t that that made him tower over Yung in that moment. His voice was calm and steady, but as firm as iron, as he spoke again. “You will, of course, continue to have our support as allies against the Fire Nation, but do not make the mistake of thinking that, just because we needed your aid once, we will do so in future.”

“So that’s how you want to play this? He’s the Fire Lord’s son, Hakoda!” Yung slammed a hand firmly into the floor, and Zuko flinched a good foot backwards.

“According to your informant.”

“Manik is an honest man,” Yung declared loudly, “if he said this boy is the Prince, then he’s the fucking Price.”

Zuko had to repress a bitter smirk at the idea that a man who had lived for two months as Shao, the fire nation rebel, when he was apparently an Earth Kingdom soldier called Manik, was anything remotely approaching honest.

“Well, are you?” Hakoda addressed Zuko so suddenly that it took him a good half a minute to realise that he’d been spoken to. He’d been enjoying the temporary reprieve from their focus, but apparently that was at an end. Zuko wondered how long it would be before the violence broke out.

“What?” Zuko’s voice was low and hoarse when he finally gathered up the wherewithal to reply.

“Are you the Prince?” He sat down opposite Zuko, and regarded him shrewdly. “You see, I’ve been fighting this war for a long time, and I remember the day that I heard the Crown Prince of the Fire Nation had died. Word was he’d gone up against his father, made a play for the throne, and lost the fight. Just another crazy Fire Nation royal, desperate for power and too stupid to wait until his dad had burnt himself out trying to conquer the known world.” Hakoda was watching Zuko steadily, a hint of challenge in his blue eyes.

Zuko took measured, shallow breaths as he tried to stay calm. He knew that the true story would have been mangled beyond all truth before it even left the walls of the Fire Nation palace, let alone the borders of the kingdom. Rumour was like a plague, it spread faster than any man could hope to control, and it hit the poor and the rich without prejudice. It didn’t sting, Zuko told himself sternly, that people thought he’d died. It didn’t burn that they thought it was his own fault.

“But if you are the Prince,” Hakoda continued, as he studied Zuko closely, “it makes me wonder. If you had really turned traitor, why weren’t you killed? Why would a loose end like you be allowed? The Fire Lord’s insane, but he is a sharp strategist.” Hakoda leant forward, and caught Zuko’s chin in a vice-like grip. “I want to know why the Crown Prince wound up in a spirits-forsaken place like that mine, when the rest of the thought he was dead.”

Yung’s intake of breath was sharp and sudden, as if a sudden realisation had sidled up beside him and chucked a bucket of icy water over his head. Hakoda let go of Zuko's chin, and Zuko curled into himself; he didn’t think that that could mean anything good for him.

“You think he was a plant?” Yung asked, cautiously. “You think the Fire Nation left him there for us to find? You think that whole death story was a cover up?”
Zuko almost snorted at the ludicrousness of the suggestion. Did they honestly think that his father would allow his son, the heir to the throne, to waste away in a prison camp on the off-chance that he might one day stumble upon a questionably useful source of information? Okay, admittedly, that would be something his father might do to a common citizen, but certainly not to his son and heir.

Hakoda shook his head, eyeing Zuko as if he were a riddle to be solved. “I don’t know what I think, but I know that something here is not right.”

“Then what are you saying?” Yung was already frustrated and growing worse as time ticked on without any clear answers.

“I’m saying that I’d be very interested to hear what this boy has to say for himself.”

There was a long pause, before Yung reached over and grabbed Zuko’s shoulder. He shook him hard enough that his teeth clacked together. “Well, are you going to answer the chief, boy?”

Zuko froze, and then nodded his head minutely. His eyes were entirely focused on the tight grip on his shoulder, and his mind replaying the screams that had been torn out of the guard from the prison camp. Zuko didn’t want to be hurt, but he knew he’d have very little choice in the matter. He never did. He’d play along with their interrogation, even if it would only be a matter of time before things got bloody.

Hakoda reached over and grabbed Zuko’s chin again, forcing his eyes away from the hand on his shoulder.

“What were you doing in that camp?” he asked calmly, as Yung’s grip tightened.

“Digging for coal,” Zuko replied, honestly. If his response was a little sarcastic, it was because he couldn’t help himself. Hakoda released his chin, and sat back with a tut.

“Funny,” Yung replied, and then backhanded him, hard, across his unscarred cheek. Zuko tumbled with the blow and fell to his side, both his ears ringing.

There was a good yard or so of chain dangling between his manacles, long enough to allow the prisoners to swing a pickaxe, but just short enough (and cumbersome enough) to hinder any attempts of escape. It had been pressed against Zuko’s chest all day, with his hands held in stone cuffs behind his back, but it had been hanging loose ever since the earthbenders had released the Fire Nation prisoners and marched them to the main tent. It was also what Yung grabbed hold of, as he stood, dragging Zuko to his feet alongside him. He wrapped the chain a couple of times around his fist, pulling it tight, until he and Zuko were almost nose to nose. “Now we can do this one of two ways, boy,” he growled, and Zuko did his best not to flinch. “We do this the Chief’s way; we sit down and have a nice little civilised chat. I might only need to hit you a few times, to keep you honest, you know.” Yung smiled widely, and yanked on the chains once, firmly, pulling Zuko into a hunched half-bow, as he leant over to speak in his ear. “We do this my way? Well, I think we both know what that means.” He released the chain and stepped back; the sudden loss of tension sent Zuko sprawling forwards onto his hands and knees. “So, what’s it going to be?”

Zuko glanced up at Hakoda, but the other man’s face was hard as rock, his lips pressed into a thin line of displeasure. The chief didn’t like it, but he’d let it happen. Zuko forced himself to sit back down, and bowed his head as he took a few deep breaths, trying to calm himself down.

“Well, I asked you a question,” Yung pointed out, and Zuko made himself take another steadying breath. “What’s it going to be?”
“The Chief’s,” Zuko answered quietly, since Yung seemed to be expecting some kind of answer. He wasn’t sure if his choice would actually be taken into account, but he wasn’t going to chance Yung taking his silence as another excuse for violence.

“Then answer the question,” Hakoda cut in. “What were you doing in that camp?”

Zuko took a quick moment to gather himself, and then answered quietly, “I was banished.” That was common enough knowledge in the Fire Nation; he didn’t feel like he was giving away too much of himself, if he said that.

“So you are the Prince?” Hakoda’s voice was completely emotionless; there was no way for Zuko to read him. He didn’t know what the safest reply would be. If he said yes, there was a chance they’d just kill him outright, it wasn’t like he was much use as a political hostage. If he said no, he’d be a useless prisoner, another mouth to feed, and too expensive to keep alive. In the end, he decided that it didn’t really matter, whatever he said, they’d be able to figure out the truth easily enough; Zuko had always been a terrible liar. A strange calm washed over him, at that realisation, and he only barely quashed the sudden desire to laugh.

“I used to be,” he replied quietly, making sure to meet Hakoda’s eyes.

If he’d been expecting some kind of dramatic reaction, he would have been disappointed. Hakoda merely peered at him, thoughtfully, before nodding in acceptance. He sat back to study Zuko from across the cushions.

“You’re working for the Fire Nation.” It wasn’t a question, it was a statement. Zuko scoffed, and answered anyway.

“Only until recently,” he said, eyes still locked with Hakoda’s. He licked his lips; they felt incredibly dry. Some dull part of his mind registered that he hadn’t had any water all day.

“You were their spy?” Hakoda asked quietly. “But something changed?”

“I was digging their coal—” Zuko snorted in derision “—and then you set it on fire.”

He expected the slap that came from Yung, but that didn’t mean it didn’t hurt. He sat back up from where he’d fallen, and met Hakoda’s eyes again as he waited for the chief’s next question.

“You seem fixated on coal.”

“I was mining it for three years; it’s hard not to be.”

Yung slapped him again, but this time Zuko stayed down.

“Are you done being funny, boy? Tell us the truth!” Yung snarled at him. “Or do I have to start getting creative?” Zuko nodded tightly, staring at the floor as he breathed through the pain and slight dizziness. There was nothing funny about this, at all.

“I am telling the truth,” he bit out through gritted teeth, as he forced himself to look up. “My father branded me a traitor and then banished me. I’ve been in that camp for three fucking years. So no, I don’t know anything about the war, or what the Fire Lord is up to, but I can tell you a whole fucking lot about coal.”

“You little shit,” Yung hissed. He raised his hand to hit Zuko once more, this time his fist closed tightly. Zuko flinched and braced himself for the impact, but Hakoda spoke up before Yung threw the punch.
“Don’t.”

“What?” Yung asked incredulously. “You believe this bullshit.”

“Why banish you?” Hakoda asked, completely ignoring Yung. “Why not just kill you?”

Zuko sighed, suddenly feeling very tired. He let his mind flit through a few possible responses, but decided, in the end, to just go with the truth. He was too tired and his head swimming too much to come up with anything creative. He also highly doubted he’d leave the tent alive, so it would be nice if at least two people outside of the Fire Nation knew the truth.

“It was an Agni Kai,” Zuko finally admitted, his voice low and hoarse, “an honour duel. With fire.” He glanced at the two men, to see that they understood. “I… well I wasn’t expecting it to be him. I hadn’t…well.” He paused, his heart pounding. He’d told this story to a few prisoners before, those curious enough to ask and intelligent enough to believe him. He hadn’t expected that it would be so hard to talk about it to these men. Taking a deep breath, he began again. “I lost. Badly. I didn’t even fight.” Zuko took another deep breath against the thumping in his chest. “He…” He couldn’t get the words out; it had been three years and Zuko still found it all but impossible to confess that his father had tried to kill him. He coughed and shook himself. “ Didn’t die though. Means Agni intervened.”

“The Sun spirit?” Hakoda’s voice sounded more than a little incredulous.

Zuko nodded tightly. “Duel’s in his name, his honour. You lose but you survive, it’s because he wanted you to.” He huffed out a laugh, and met Hakoda’s sceptical gaze. “My father couldn’t kill me after that, the people would riot. Interfering with Agni’s mercy is probably the only thing left that could make the Fire Nation revolt. But it’s perfectly reasonable, perfectly honourable, to banish a traitor.” Zuko knew that he sounded bitter, but he didn’t care. It hadn’t taken him long in the camp to realise that his father’s ruling was really just a very slow death sentence. Zuko wasn’t supposed to have survived the camp; that he’d done so for so long was really down to spite and the primordial instinct to fight for life.

“Then why tell the world you died?”

Zuko shrugged. “Wishful thinking?”

Yung scoffed. “I can’t believe you believe this crap, Hakoda.”

“I think it’s an incredibly convenient little story.” Zuko’s heart fell at the cynicism in Hakoda’s voice. He’d been telling the truth! Why didn’t they believe him?

“It’s the truth!” he bit out, meeting Hakoda’s eyes squarely. The chief just shook his head, his expression grim and heavy as lead.

Yung drew his fist back, once again, and Zuko flinched. This time, Hakoda let the punch land.

After a few more hours of pointless questions, none of which Zuko could provide satisfactory answers to, they finally decided to leave him alone. He had a bloody nose and what might have been broken ribs, by the time that they finished with him. He was honestly surprised that he left the tent alive, particularly as Yung had been getting increasingly irate with his responses. It wasn’t that Zuko had been obdurate; it was just that they didn’t like what he had to say. Hakoda might have accepted that he was the Prince, but that only served to make him more confused. To him, Zuko had to be working for his father; there was no way that the Fire Lord would have let a traitor live. It was almost funny; they were so wrapped up in this picture of the Fire Lord as a tyrannical despot that they thought there were no lines he wouldn’t cross. Zuko knew better. His father had never been
stupid, even if he was a sadistic prick. Still, that particular line of questioning had gone on for far too long for Zuko to find their incomprehension amusing.

As soon as Hakoda decided to call it a night, a couple of burly men in blue water tribe outfits rushed in to drag Zuko’s limp form out of the main tent. They marched him a few yards, and then deposited him in a significantly smaller one, directly in front of the campfire. There was a dark blanket laid out on one side of the room, with a bowl of some kind of soup and a clay cup filled with water lying on top. One of the men followed behind him in to the tent, and Zuko stiffened, but the man only moved past him to sit on the other side of the room. It took a good few minutes of Zuko peering at him from the corner of his good eye, before he finally allowed himself to relax a little. The guard simply sat there, watching him back, his hand on his dagger and his eyes watchful. Tentatively, Zuko lowered himself onto the blanket and, after a nod from his new guard, set about eating the food.

His manners were as revolting as they had been back in camp, the night before- which now seemed so long ago to Zuko- but he was ravenous, so he didn’t care too much. He gulped down half the bowl in a matter of seconds, glad to have something in his aching stomach, but he took his time with the rest. The soup was lukewarm and salty, peppered with some kind of aromatic spice. Zuko couldn’t place it, but his taste buds had probably shrivelled and atrophied from years of burnt rice and jook. The guard watched him closely, an odd expression in his eyes, as Zuko slowly sipped at the rest of his meal, and then, once done, settled down on the blanket. It was disconcerting, to say the least, but Zuko knew there was nothing he could do about it. If he was going to be killed, he suspected Hakoda or Yung would have done it back in the tent. For some reason, they still wanted him alive; the guard was there to watch him, not execute him. Still, it was difficult not to focus on the sharp blade in the tight grasp of his captor, only a few feet away from him. Eventually, of course, pain and exhaustion won out, as the adrenaline that had been pumping through his body all day finally ran out. Zuko’s eyes drifted close one final time, before he collapsed into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed!
I know I promised Sokka, but I promise he's coming next chapter. This scene ran away with me and got a bit too long, so I decided to post this chapter on its own. Pacing wise, it just made more sense.
Chapter five is all but written though, so I'll try and have that up by the end of the day.

I'm sorry Hakoda is being a bit ruthless at the moment, he will chill out, I just really don't see him casually accepting that the Fire Lord's son is not on his dad's side- not without Sokka there to vouch for him and a prison escape, that is. So he's just very skeptical right now. Also, I don't want Yung to be the big bad, but he is pretty ruthless in canon, he's totally up for killing people until Aang shows up, I think he'd be the kind of man to do some nasty things, if he thinks it's necessary to win the war.

As always, please leave a comment or kudos if you enjoyed, or to let me know your thoughts!
The heart that fed

Chapter Notes

Hi guys, I promised that this chapter would be up today, and it is!
It's a bit longer than the others, but a lot happens to Zuko this time!
TWs for reference to abuse/violence- mainly in reference to what happened last chapter and to Zuko's childhood (because Ozai is a grade A dick and a truly terrible parent).
Um...I think that's about it.
Please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next day, Zuko woke with a start, as the first rays of dawn were beginning to creep over the horizon. There was a different guard sat in the tent with him, and Zuko found it intensely disturbing that he’d slept through the shift change. He could have had his throat slit in his sleep, and he wouldn’t have been any the wiser. The guard poked his head out of the tent, and called out to someone in a low voice. Zuko’s bad ear was always far worse after a night’s sleep, so he couldn’t make out what was said. He bristled, and pushed his back up to the canvas of the tent, dragging the blanket around his shoulders.

A few minutes later, another water tribesman arrived and pushed two bowls of rice into the tent, along with two cups of very strong tea, and two pairs of rustic-looking chopsticks. He nodded briefly at the guard, sent a questioning look at Zuko, and then disappeared back outside. Zuko reached over and pulled his breakfast slowly to himself, watching the guard for any signs of disapproval. When the man only grunted and started to shovel rice into his face, Zuko decided he was safe enough to do the same. The chopsticks felt clumsy in his hand, but the knack came back quickly enough, as he methodically shoved the grains into his face. He paused, once the bowl was half empty, and took a long drag of the tea. The water was too hot, he noted vaguely; the leaves had been scalded. Still, he drank it anyway, and finished his rice quietly. He wanted to be well fed and ready for when the next round of interrogation began.

As soon as he was finished, the guard collected their bowls and dumped them just outside the entrance to the tent. He also reached up to pin the flap open, letting in the faint, early-morning light. Zuko supposed it was some kind of signal, alerting whoever was meant to collect him for Hakoda, that he was already awake and ready.

As the hours crept on, however, and no one appeared to haul him off for questioning, Zuko’s nerves began to grate. Another tribesman appeared around midday, and lunch was delivered with the same calm protocol as breakfast. By mid-afternoon, Zuko felt ready to throw up from the horrible anticipation; the whole day he’d been straining the limits of his (already terrible) hearing to try and figure out what was going on beyond the canvas of the tent. To his utter frustration, there had been nothing unusual at all, and he had only been able to make out the general buzz of a camp: the low grunts and guffawing laughs of men bantering amicably with one another, and the methodical clang of steel against steel as they took turns sparring. The normality of the whole thing, the friendly atmosphere just feet away from where Zuko sat, waiting to be dragged off and tortured, made him feel sick. So, when another armed man appeared at the tent flap, Zuko was almost grateful that he would be taken for interrogation, as long as it was a break from the tortuous waiting. However, much
to Zuko’s surprise, the man wasn’t there to collect Zuko at all, but rather to change shifts with his
current guard. They did so with a quick exchange of nods, as Zuko curled up in the corner,
completely confused as to why he had been left alone for so long.

Nothing continued to happen as the day slowly slipped into evening, up until dinner the arrival of
dinner, just as the sun was once more dipping low in the sky. There was too much food for Zuko to
manage, after eating two full meals earlier in the day, but he gave it his best shot; he didn’t know
when they’d feed him again. His guard gave him a strange look, as he forced down a few mouthfuls
of the stew, but if he found anything odd about Zuko’s behaviour, nothing was said. As Agni’s face
finally disappeared over the horizon, and the moon rose in his place, Zuko was able to relax slightly.
Snoring rattled through the air, signalling that the rest of the camp had gone to bed, and the guard
pulled the tent flap tightly closed. Zuko lay down on his blanket, trying to ignore the shaking in his
hands. He had no idea what was going on, or why they’d left him alone all day. Let alone why
they’d fed him; even the guards back at the Fire Nation camp had been loath to do that.

When Zuko did fall asleep, he slept badly, and he woke up frequently. At some point he gave the
whole thing up as a bad bet, and just lay there in the dark, his heart pounding from nerves and his
stomach cramping from the sheer volume of food he’d packed in it. When he wasn’t trying to fight
down the panic grasping at his chest, he was resisting the urge to throw up. There was a metallic
taste in his mouth, and his guts rolled ominously every time he moved. Zuko tried to keep as still and
quiet as he could, but the more he did so, the sicker he felt; it was a very long night.

At some point, he must have dozed off again, as he woke up at dawn the next day, the urge to vomit
blissfully gone. He was certain that, with a day’s rest behind him, he’d be called up for interrogation
once more, but the hours trickled by with the same steady monotony of the day before, punctuated
only by meals that were delivered, with military regularity, to the tent entrance. The next day was the
same, and the day after that, until almost a week had gone by, and Zuko had seen no more of the
camp than his tent, and the brief snatches of bedding rolls and weapons racks that he’d caught when
he was let out- under guard, naturally- to take a piss in the cover of the dunes. It was bizarre, and it
was not what Zuko had been expecting. Gradually, he began to let his guard down a little, finally
believing that, whatever Hakoda wanted from him, it wasn’t another series of poorly answered
questions and stuttered, useless explanations.

On the sixth day, however, the calm that Zuko had been lulled into was broken by the loud shouting
of angry, male voices. His ear was ringing badly again, so Zuko couldn’t quite make out what was
going on, but he could feel the tension in the air. The camp was silent, apart from those two voices,
and there was a stiffness to his guard’s frame that set Zuko’s teeth on edge. Something was finally
happening, and Zuko didn’t know whether to be relieved or terrified. The days of three solid,
relatively nutritious meals and access to the square of sun that shone into the centre of the tent had
done Zuko a world of good, but his chi still felt sluggish and dull. Zuko knew, with grim certainty,
that there wasn’t any chance of him defending himself against the men, should it come down to that.

“What’s going on?” he asked Bato, his guard for the day. Despite his best efforts to stay quiet and
aloof, sitting in a tent for days on end had driven Zuko to the point of distraction. Talking to the
Water Tribe men was never the most riveting, or even reciprocated conversation, but it was better
than the silence.

“Mind your own damn business,” Bato growled, and looked back down to the net that he’d been
tying. Then, after a moment, he put it aside, and huffed. “It’s about you, if you must know.”

“Me?”

“What, you thought the chief had forgotten about you?” Zuko kept silent, and Bato grinned. “Hoped,
more like, I’d say. Well, you’re not stupid, I’ll give you that.”

“What’re they—”

Bato cut him off before he could continue. “Yung thinks you’re his, the Chief disagrees.”

Zuko frowned at the small stretch of camp visible beyond his tent flap. It had been dull, yes, but the last week or so as Hakoda’s prisoner had been infinitely better than the day he’d spent as Yung’s. Also, he suspected he wouldn’t last very long out of the Water Tribe’s custody. He hadn’t heard any mention of the other prisoners, those few men and women that had escaped the fire at the mine, but he had his suspicions as to what had happened to them. It was expensive to keep feeding prisoners, and they had probably been pumped days ago, for whatever information they might have had. If they were no more use, there was no point keeping them, and there was no way they’d be allowed loose to tell the Fire Nation who had been responsible for the loss of the mine. Yung was not someone who seemed to care too much about the sanctity of life. Zuko bowed his head and sent up a prayer to Agni. There was nothing more that he could do.

“Yeah, kid,” Bato replied, watching him shrewdly, “you know which side your bread’s buttered, don’t you?” He picked his net back up when Zuko didn’t respond, and went back to his work, mouth set in a thin line.

A few hours later, one of Yung’s men approached the tent and whispered something to Bato. The man nodded, and indicated for Zuko to follow him outside. Zuko’s heart plummeted. So, this was it, he was being turned over to Yung. To his mounting horror, he was dragged over to a large stone block. He’d doubted that he’d be seeing the next day, but this was far worse than he’d been expecting. Firmly convinced that he was about to lose his head, Zuko tried to struggle and drag his feet, but Bato just scoffed, grabbed him by both arms, and all but carried him over to the block.

It was less than ten yards away, but it felt like ten miles. Zuko tried, one last time, to make a break for it, but Bato just rolled his eyes, tightened his grip, and told him to stand still. Zuko’s heart almost hammered itself out of his chest, as the Earth Kingdom man pulled something out of his jacket. Zuko’s breath was locked somewhere in his chest, and he couldn’t breathe in or out; he was trapped in some strange, airless limbo by his utter terror. However, to Zuko’s utter confusion, the Earth Kingdom man didn’t pull a knife or hatchet from his jacket, but rather a sturdy looking chisel and a large hammer.

“I’ll get them right by the manacles, if I can,” he said to Bato. With a hum of acknowledgment, the water tribesman guided Zuko’s left wrist onto the block and held it steady. Zuko let himself be moved about like a ragdoll; he was entirely limp with relief. He stared blankly, barely comprehending, as the Earth Kingdom man chiselled through the chain, at the link closest to the cuff around his wrist. When the metal finally broke and fell apart, Bato moved over to his right wrist, and the process was repeated, until the chain fell completely loose.

“Thanks,” Bato muttered, as other man put his tools away. The Earth Kingdom man gave him a brief nod, and left without another word.

Zuko stood standing in the middle of the camp, staring at his wrists in awe. It was the first time in years that he hadn’t felt the weight of the chain between them, and he felt lighter than he’d ever thought he could. It was strange. The manacles were still around his wrists, there was no way to remove them without either the key, or a lot of tedious and careful work with a chisel. The latter also brought with it the very real risk of someone slipping and cutting his wrists open, so Zuko accepted that he’d have to keep the cuffs. Still, the absence of the chain felt incredibly liberating.

“Why?” He asked quietly, turning to Bato.
“Because we’re packing up camp and heading out to sea.” Bato scowled and indicated to the chain on the floor with a jerk of his chin. “You go overboard with that thing on you, and you’re not coming back up.” He fixed Zuko with a flat look. “The Chief wants you alive.”

They didn’t return to the tent, but instead helped to douse fires and roll up sleeping packs, as blue clad men hurried around them. Apparently when Bato said they were moving out, he meant immediately. After a good half an hour of fetching and carrying, Zuko took a quick break, and wiped at his forehead; he looked over to where he knew Yung’s camp had been, but there was no sign of the brown tents, or the bamboo prison. He forced down the tension prickling at his spine, and turned back to the work.

The camp was struck in a startling short amount, considering its size, and soon the last of the boxes and bags were being ferried over to three large ships moored a little way down the coast, just offshore. It was the first time that Zuko had seen a Water Tribe ship, and he was a little disappointed. From the stories he had heard from the army brass in his childhood, he had imagined colossal vessels three times the length of a Fire Nation cruiser and made of strong wood, glistening with thick, iron-like varnish. Instead they just looked like ordinary schooners: wooden and breakable, with a few dark blue sails to separate them from ordinary merchant crafts. Zuko couldn’t comprehend how such fragile boats and such small crews could have done so much damage against the Fire Navy, but appearances were always deceiving.

As Zuko stood staring at the ship, Bato reached over and grabbed his elbow.

“We’re up,” he said, simply. “Come on.”

They had to wade out a little bit before they could board, but Bato’s hand was kept firmly around his elbow at all times. It was probably meant to keep him from running away, but it held Zuko steady against the breaking waves, so he was actually grateful for the steadying presence. When they were waist deep in water, a small row boat picked them up and ferried them over to the main ships. Zuko had managed to haul himself onto the small boat without any help, much to Bato’s surprise, but he knew enough about buoyancy not to accidentally capsize the boat. Then there was a rope ladder and a short climb onto the ship, Bato following on his heels.

Once on deck, he came face to face with a group of very pissed-off looking tribesmen. They moved aside to let him pass, as Bato shoved him forwards through the group. As the last men stepped aside, Zuko’s stomach dropped. There in front of him, and frowning sternly, stood Hakoda.

“There you are,” he said to Bato, as the two briefly clasped arms. “I had just finished telling everyone my expectations for this journey.” He frowned, and glared out at the men assembled before him. “But I’ll say it again, seeing as some of you didn’t hear my properly the first time.” The men shuffled around him, but Zuko kept his eyes fixed on the chief. “The Prince is coming with us.” Hakoda announced firmly, his voice like ice. “He is our prisoner, and he will not be harmed.” Zuko frowned in confusion, but didn’t dare speak up. There was a low grumbling of irritation around him that made his heart race. “Do I make myself clear?” Hakoda asked, and he was absolute; his tone left no room for argument. Zuko shivered, but he couldn’t help but feel oddly relieved. Whatever Hakoda had planned for him, he hadn’t left him with Yung, and he was offering him some kind of protection against the crew. That was oddly reassuring.

Their Chief’s word was final, and if any of his men did have a problem dragging along their enemy’s former Crown Prince, then none of them said a word. A nod from Hakoda, and Bato was pulling Zuko back through the crowd and to a cabin below deck, where he was left alone. He settled on a narrow wooden bed, and tried to process the events of the day, as the pounding of feet echoed down from the deck above, making him feel incredibly claustrophobic. The minutes dragged on slowly,
until a loud clang shook the ship and the anchor was raised. Almost immediately afterwards, there was a sharp snap, as the sails caught the wind, and then they were moving.

A few days later, and Zuko was already missing dry land. His cabin was tight, and uncomfortable, and being at sea made him feel nauseous. The men found it hilarious, but it wasn’t the roll of the waves that had him rushing onto the deck to hurl overboard, every few hours. The last time he’d been on a ship, he’d been half-dead and delirious with fever, but he still remembered the darkness of his small cabin, the burning that spiked through his cheek, and the sickeningly sweet smell of infection. By the end of the first day, he had to force himself to breathe through his panic, just to get himself over the threshold of his cabin. He knew that it wasn’t the same, but as soon as he was alone in the dark, feeling the pitch and roll of the ship beneath him, he was thirteen years old again. When the darkness settled around him, and he closed his eyes to sleep, he felt like he was going to die alone in the night, shamed and disgraced and loathed by everyone. When he did sleep, the nightmares jolted him awake long before the break of dawn.

He lasted another week, growing increasingly clumsy and fractious as his sleep grew scarcer and more disturbed. It all came to a head one morning, when he tripped over a length of rope and swore loudly, simultaneously messing up the tacking manoeuvre and calling half the crew incompetent bastards. He was rewarded by a clip around the ear from the boatswain, and a dressing down in front of the scowling crew. A few hours later, just as the cook was doling out dinner, Hakoda pulled him aside. It was the first time that Zuko had seen the Chief since they’d set sail, and he didn’t know what to expect. He’d thought he’d be getting at least a beating, but instead all he got was a very chilly - and chilling - reminder that he was their ‘guest’ on the ship, and that they could ask him to disembark whenever he outstayed his welcome. All of this was told to him on the edge of the forecastle deck, staring out into the vast expanse of the ocean. Zuko took the hint.

That night, he raised the white flag and slept on the deck, below the stars. He didn’t have any more nightmares, and so he just stayed above deck for the next night, and the night after that. No one forced him back to his cabin, although he did overhear the men bitching about having to spend the night in the cold when they were standing watch. That, at least, gave him a small glimmer of childish satisfaction.

The morning after Hakoda had taken him aside, he suddenly found himself at the receiving end of a long list of barked orders from the boatswain. It was hard work, but it took Zuko’s mind off the memories crawling around at the back of his mind. The men looked at him as though they expected him to faint, or start to cry, at any minute. There were even a few whispered taunts about the ‘royal brat slumming it with the rest of us’, but Zuko was no stranger to hard work, and so just got his tasks done quietly, and didn’t give them the satisfaction of a reaction. He’d learnt to keep his head down at the mine, and it was a skill that served him well on the ship, too.

Zuko had been a pampered child, he knew that very well. He’d been a Prince, and the fourth in line, at that; he’d had all the privileges of his position, and none of the responsibilities. Of course, he’d lived in terror of his father and the painful consequences of breaking his ever-changing list of rules, but he knew that plenty of other children had it worse than he did. He’d never starved, and he’d never slept under the stars unless he’d chosen to. Even then, he’d gone to sleep with imperial guards keeping watch over him until he woke. So yes, he might once have been a ‘royal brat’, but not anymore. Three years in the prison camp had knocked all of that softness out of Zuko. He’d learnt how to go hungry, how to keep going long past the point of exhaustion, how to fight for the basic necessities of survival. He’d honed the ability to fade away, first discovered out of fear of his father’s fists, into an art form. But, most of all, Zuko had learnt how to work. He had no qualms whatsoever about helping to haul in a catch, or clambering up the rigging to help secure a sail. He was fed three solid meals a day, and left pretty much to his own devices, so it was a better deal than he’d had as a prisoner of his own people.
Hakoda remarked on it, one day, when they’d been at sea for a few weeks. He had followed Zuko up onto the poop deck, and stood watching him as he pushed a mop up and down the wood. The humidity was high, and Zuko was already sweating, despite the early hour. If it was also something to do with the close presence of the chief, then he wasn’t going to admit to it.

“You’re not afraid of a bit of hard work, are you?” the chief asked, almost approvingly. Zuko wiped his brow with the back of his hand, and shook his head.

“Not really.”

“I’m starting to believe that you were telling the truth about that mine.”

“Because I was clearly lying about everything else?” Zuko couldn’t keep the sarcastic response down.

“Were you? I’m still not sure I believe your story.” Hakoda leant back against the rail. Zuko held the mop handle tightly to his chest, creating a thin, and entirely useless, barrier between them.

“I don’t know what else you expect me to say,” he admitted blankly. “I told you I just want to be left alone. Why can’t you just believe that?”

“The Fire Lord’s son living a quiet little life?” Hakoda scoffed. “I don’t believe that. You’re up to something, and I’m not letting you out of my sight until I figure out what.” He raised an eyebrow, and Zuko had to turn away from him, glaring out to sea until the frustration slowly eased to a manageable level.

When he turned back, Hakoda had gone, and Zuko set back to cleaning with a vigour born of frustration. Because that was the problem, it didn’t matter what he did, or said, he was still the Fire Lord’s son, and there was no way that the water tribe could forget it. He was allowed the run of the ship, but there was always a pair of eyes following his movements. He was allowed to clean and do grunt work, but never anything that allowed him access to a knife or a spear. His chains had gone, but his manacles still remained. Although he might no longer be in prison, he was still the Water Tribe’s prisoner.

After that meeting, Hakoda seemed to leave him alone, as, increasingly, did a lot of the crew. There were still a handful who sent a whispered insult his way whenever he passed, but, as the days wore on, even they became more and more infrequent. Slowly, the ship seemed to settle into some kind of routine. Days turned into weeks, and soon they’d been at sea for almost a month.

The first glimmer of excitement came when they passed a nearby harbour, and the order came to drop the anchor. There was a whole lot of activity involved, and it took a good hour for the ship to be ready. When they did weigh anchor and row to shore, Zuko was left on the ship, with a rotating watch of warriors to make sure he didn’t try and run. The thought was tempting, but Zuko wasn’t stupid enough to think he’d ever make it to shore. They were only in port for a few hours, before the oars came out and they took back to sea.

Zuko sat at an oar, pulling in time with the others, and feeling the ache grown in his legs and shoulder blades. As he worked, he could hear a murmured rumour moving through the crew about a sky bison and some earthbenders who could move sand, but Zuko’s bad ear was not able to catch the full story. The few snatches that Zuko did hear were garbled at best, so he had no real way of knowing if he’d heard correctly, but he could have sworn that one of the men had mentioned the avatar. He tried to put it out of his mind, and move on, but the thought niggled at the back of his head. The soldier who’d been tortured by Yung had said that he’d been questioned about the avatar, as if he were a living person, rather than a semi-mythical being. Zuko shook his head in confusion.
There was no way that the avatar could be back again. His grandfather and his great-grandfather had both searched for the avatar for years; if he was going to be found, it would have been done years ago.

Zuko frowned, and shook his head again, as if the motion might jog some faint memory, or fact, from the depths of his brain. As a child he’d loved reading stories about the ancient avatars and their exploits. He’d read all about Avatar Kyoshi and Chin the Conqueror, cried at the tragedy of Avatar Kuruk and the face-stealer. There’d been a room in the palace, filled with scrolls just about the avatars, and Zuko had spent hours of his childhood there. Of course, he hadn’t known that the library was forbidden to all but the Fire Lord, and one day his grandfather had found him happily perusing the scrolls. Apparently a locked door was meant to stay that way, and a young Prince was not meant to know how to pick locks. After his father was done with him, it took Zuko a full week to gather the courage to go back to the library door, only to find that his grandfather had ordered a guard posted there at all hours. It didn’t matter too much, as Zuko had read most of the scrolls by that point. It had seemed unfair that he’d been punished for the lock though; if a Prince wasn’t supposed to know how to pick a lock, then how had Lu-Ten been able to teach him?

A harsh cry rang through the air, and the oars were pulled up out of the sea, for the final time. Zuko was snapped abruptly from his memories, as the men lay down their oars and hurried off to lift the sails. He chided himself for being an idiot; there was no point dwelling on the past, or on half-remembered stories. The avatar was long dead, and the spirits had all but forsaken the world, leaving it to suffer the violent whims of Sozin’s line. Zuko stood up, shaking the tightness from his shoulders, as he rushed over to help tie off a loose rope, which had been snapping wildly against the mast. The boatswain saw him and shouted another series of orders his way, and soon Zuko was caught back up in the ordered chaos of the ship, all thoughts of the avatar forgotten.

It was a few weeks before they made port again. This time, Zuko was allowed to go to shore, a small concession he seemed to have earned by being a relatively docile prisoner. He was still under guard, and the tall spear held in Bato’s right hand, as he escorted Zuko through the bustling market, was a reminder of that fact. Still, any break from staring at the same deck for days on end was a relief for Zuko, and the strong scent of spices wafting over the air, and the press of the crowds around him, reminded him a little of home. He hadn’t been allowed out of the palace very often, but every year, just before the Fire Festival, his mother would take him out to look at the carved spirit masks, and let him eat fire flakes straight from the bag. He had to shake himself from the nostalgia, when Bato sent him a questioning look. There was no need to dwell on the past; he had been a different person then. He was no longer a child, and he was pretty sure his mother was dead.

Still, being out in the world once more had brought parts of the old Zuko trickling back to the surface. He felt alive, in a way that he hadn’t for quite a long time. He was looking longingly at a pair of dual Dao swords hanging outside the blacksmith’s forge, and trying to ignore Bato’s unimpressed glare searing into the unburnt side of his face, when he heard the faint giggling. Two young girls, barely old enough to be out of their parents’ sight were hiding under the flower cart a few yards away. Zuko turned away in embarrassment, convinced that they were laughing at him, when his good ear caught an excited whisper. The Kyoshi warriors were on the move and were heading to Ba Sing Se to support the Earth King. Zuko frowned; he was sure Kyoshi was neutral. Had been neutral. He shook his head, so much of the world had changed whilst he had been hauling coal for the army, hidden away in a dark pit like the embarrassment to his family that he was. He no longer knew who was allied with whom.

Bato seemed to realise that Zuko’s attention was no longer on the swords, and awarded him a firm shove between the shoulder blades to get him moving through the market. Zuko wandered through the maze of tents and wagons, idly noting the twisting route that Bato took him on. He almost laughed, but managed to restrain himself; was the man deliberately trying to lose him in the market?
If he got lost, there was no way he’d make it back to the ship on his own. Zuko smiled softly to himself as he glanced over at a man selling brightly coloured beaded necklaces. If he was about to be abandoned and left to his own devices, he could definitely think of worse places to end up.

It seemed, however, that Bato had a few things to do, all of them relatively dull and administrative: the cook needed some rice and some preserving salt, one of the ropes had started to fray and needed replacing, and the lamp oil was running dangerously low. In short, Zuko had been dragged along on a supply run. A dull suspicion began to niggle at the back of his mind that perhaps he was being kept off the ship for a reason, but he found that he didn’t really care. Cabin fever had been gnawing at the edges of his nerves ever since he had been forced aboard; Bato’s shopping trip, however dull and perfunctory, was a sorely needed respite.

Although it took a good couple of hours to get through the market (Zuko suspected that Bato was deliberately stalling for time), it still felt far too soon when they turned a corner and found themselves back at the market entrance. Zuko didn’t even mind that he’d been acting as a pack mule all afternoon. Back at the first stall, Bato had made a big show of hefting the heavy sacks of salt and rice over to Zuko, instructing him to carry them. Zuko had done so, barely repressing a smirk as he’d hauled both sacks over his shoulder as if they were holding feathers. Bato’s expression had been priceless, his jaw hung wide open, as if he’d expected Zuko to topple over from the weight and embarrass himself in front of the whole market. Well, Zuko hadn’t been carting coal for three years for nothing; he was scrawny, but he was strong. He hadn’t been allowed to touch the oil or rope, as those conceivably could have been used as weapons, but he probably could have managed those too. After a few hours of walking, however, Zuko’s shoulders were getting a little sore; by the time they got to the ship, he was more relieved than he’d thought he’d be to drop the packs off at the quartermaster’s stores.

Once he’d dropped off the goods, he headed back out into the sun. Back up on deck, the crew were quieter and more alert than usual, which put Zuko immediately on edge. Something had happened whilst they’d been shopping for necessities. Zuko immediately knew that his original theory had been right; he’d been kept out of the way for something important. Perhaps someone had visited the ship, or some news had been delivered that might have given Zuko a hint as to the goings on of the war. Not that Zuko particularly cared about the war, of course; as far as he was concerned the whole lot of them, Fire, Earth, Water, or whatever, could tear themselves to pieces, as long as they left him alone. Unfortunately, Hakoda still didn’t seem to trust that he wasn’t some very, very dedicated spy, and so the crew went to great pains to keep him in the dark about anything directly related to the war. Still, as the cry to weigh anchor went up, and the oars rhythmically slashed into the water, pulling them from the inlet and back out to sea, Zuko heard a few whispered snatches of conversation. The Fire Nation were heading to Chameleon Bay and therefore, apparently, they were too.

The journey to the bay was far less eventful than Zuko might have imagined, considering they were sailing to put themselves directly in the path of the Fire Navy. The crew were a little quieter for the first day, subdued at the thought of an inevitable battle, but they soon picked up again, masking wariness behind false cheer. If the banter was slightly more barbed than usual, no one said anything, and slowly the ship returned to her usual workings. If there was one thing that Zuko had learnt about sailing, it was that it was dull. Very dull. Travelling by the power of the wind took far longer than the steam-powered ships that used to ferry his family over to Ember Island for their annual royal holidays. Several times their small fleet got stuck in the doldrums, and they had to row their way through until the wind picked up. Luckily, there was always something to do on the ship, and Zuko only had to endure odd snatches of inactivity. He hated doing nothing, always had, and he found a horrible restlessness in being at rest.

One night, as Zuko lay tossing and turning on the deck, unable to sleep, he had been convinced that he saw a huge creature fly above them. He’d lain there, frozen, convinced that they were going to be
sunk by some aggrieved spirit, but the night watch hadn’t raised an alarm. He didn’t mention it the next morning, for fear of being called spirit-touched, and by the time the sun had reached its height, Zuko had all but decided that he’d been dreaming. Being at sea for so long, he’d decided, had clearly been doing things to his mind.

It was a relief then, that it was only a couple of days later when the cry went up from the look-out: they’d reached Chameleon Bay. It was much sooner than Zuko had expected; he hadn’t realised that they’d been so deep into Earth Kingdom waters already, but he supposed that was the point of keeping him in the dark. What he didn’t know, after all, he couldn’t report to his apparent Fire Nation contacts. Surprisingly, he was allowed to stay up on deck as they came in to the bay. There was no sign of the Fire Nation anywhere, and Zuko hoped that it would stay that way.

As they sailed right up to the beach, and stumbled onto the beach with wobbly sea-legs, Zuko allowed himself to be ushered off the ship and put to work pitching tents for all the men. A couple of scouts left to check out the surrounding area. It was a little galling when the rest of the men spent a good half an hour relaxing and walking about the beach, catching up with those who had been on the other ships. Zuko struggled with the awkward canvas, and it took him a painfully long time to figure out how the first tent went up; it had been a lot easier taking them down at the last camp. Eventually the other men came to help him, and were far quicker with the process than he was.

Within a few hours, the camp was set up and some freshly caught fish were baking away above the campfire. The raucous singing of the men had turned from the work songs that helped everyone row or haul a sail in the same rhythm, to a strange mix of heartrending ballads of lost love, and gleefully explicit, bawdy numbers that made Zuko’s right ear turn a little red. He had been given his own tent, to which he quickly retired. Although it was pitched directly opposite the watch tower, it gave him a sliver more privacy than he’d had on deck of the ship, or back at the first camp. Zuko had been instructed to sleep with the tent flap open, so that he could be watched at all times, but at least he wasn’t trying to fall asleep with an armed warrior less than three feet from his bedside. As a compromise, it wasn’t the worst that Zuko had made.

Life at Chameleon Bay continued in much the same way as ship life had, only now Zuko was performing tasks without the swell of the sea sending him stumbling about the deck. There was a certain degree of irony in the fact that Hakoda seemed convinced he was still a prince, and yet allowed the tribesmen to order him around like he was their servant. He chopped wood for the campfire, and he fetched and carried water from the freshwater stream that ran close to the bay. It was dull and repetitive, but Zuko consoled himself with the fact that at least no one was hurting him. He had three meals a day, and it had been months since his stomach had ached from hunger. He was also spending as much time out in the sun as he had on the ship, which was a blessing that Zuko kept very quiet about; he didn’t want them to start locking him in the dark the minute that he upset them. His skin was starting to develop a light tan, and his nails had stopped splitting and flaking at the slightest pressure. In short, he was healthier than he’d been in a long time, and he felt stronger than he ever had before.

It was only a few weeks after their arrival when something disturbed the quiet calm of the established routine. There had been no ship sightings, and the watch placed on the only road within two miles of the bay hadn’t sent out an alarm. In short, there was no physical way that he could have got there, besides dropping in from the sky, but, all of a sudden, one afternoon, there was a teenage boy in the middle of the camp. It was strange, the boy didn’t walk like an intruder, but as if he belonged amongst the men; he even wore Water Tribe colours, and had his hair in one of their styles. Zuko ducked out of sight, watching to see what the men would do, but they didn’t notice the boy until he was well into the camp. Instead of raising the alarm, the men embraced the boy like an old friend, and let him straight in to see Hakoda. Zuko, who hadn’t laid eyes on the chief in three days, despite the small size of the camp, and who wouldn’t have been granted an audience so quickly, even if he
offered to spill the deepest secrets of the Fire Nation, was a bit surprised by how easily the stranger
got access to the main tent. There was an excited buzz in the air, and Zuko listened carefully to the
other men, until he could piece together the boy’s story.

Two years. It had been two years since the Chief had seen his son. Zuko hadn’t seen his own father
for over three, and he counted that as a blessing. He couldn’t even imagine how much someone
would have to love their father to come chasing him down after two whole years apart. It was
bizarre. It was also bizarre watching the way that the camp seemed to brighten in the presence of
their Chief’s son. It was like a sudden rain in the height of summer, when all the plants open up their
leaves to rejoice in the unexpected blessing of life-giving water, and for a little while, everything is
bright and colourful and alive. The men seemed cheerier, they laughed loudly and easily, and a
couple of them even broke out cups of some kind of moonshine, passing them around to the others
with wide smiles. Unfortunately, the guards weren’t too caught up in the merriment to forget about
Zuko, and soon enough he was being pulled out of his tent, and set to chopping wood for the
evening’s fire.

The axe was not the sharpest (they wouldn’t trust him with anything that could be used as a weapon)
but it did the job, and Zuko soon found himself lost in the repetitive action of splitting wood. He
might even have been able to disappear into the work completely, if not for the fact that the wood
pile gave him a direct line of sight across the camp, to where Hakoda and his son were happily
catching up together. He couldn’t hear what was said, but he could see the easy, open body language
that they shared, and, every now and again, a bright laugh rang through the camp from Hakoda’s
son.

It was strange. Zuko had come to respect Hakoda, had even begun to trust him a little, at least that he
wouldn’t hurt or mistreat Zuko for any arbitrary reason, or allow his men to do the same, but he was
still very much wary of the older man. Hakoda was a chief and a warrior, and he made it very hard to
forget both of those facts. When he was with his son, however, he was a completely different person.
He smiled and he threw his head back in laughter, he ruffled his son’s hair and kept pulling him in
for warm hugs, uncaring that his men were seeing him be so open and loving in public. It was a
strange experience for Zuko, and unsettling. His own father would never have been so openly
affectionate to either him or Azula, even if he had felt any kind of affection for them. It would have
been considered weak, and that was one thing the royal family could never be.

Zuko put down the axe for a moment, eyeing the water bucket alongside him, as he contemplated a
quick break. Strictly speaking the water was meant to be there for when the axe needed sharpening,
but Zuko often used it to cool down when the heat got a bit much for him. Deciding he could wait a
little longer, Zuko instead took a moment to watch as Hakoda’s son preened in delight under his
father’s attention. There was something both reassuring and bittersweet in the fact that not everyone
was like the Fire Lord, that some parents genuinely loved their children. The son laughed loudly, and
dramatically wiped tears from his eyes. Zuko looked away, and concentrated on the way that the axe
thrummed in his hands with each crack against the wood.

“Who are you?” A startled voice blurted out. Zuko looked up from the wood pile to see the chief’s
son stood right in front of him, flushing. His eyes wouldn’t meet Zuko’s and were instead looking
somewhere far above his head. “I mean…what are you doing here?”

“I’m chopping wood,” Zuko pointed out, pointlessly, indicating to the pile of wood with his axe. He
knew that he wasn’t doing anything wrong, and was in fact exactly where he’d been told to be. He’d
been making the effort to toe the line as closely as possible while in the presence of highly trained,
well-armed warriors who had very little incentive to keep him alive, beyond a few-months-old
warning from their chief. Hakoda had noted that Hakoda had not refreshed his ‘don’t harm the
prisoner’ warning, once they were back on shore. He wasn’t sure what that meant for him, but he’d
been treading on eggshells ever since. So, in short, Zuko wasn’t leaving his task until one of the men came and told him to; if Hakoda’s son wanted Zuko to do something else, he could damn well get his father, or one of the other men, to make him.

“Yeah… gotta be getting that wood in, right?” The other boy’s voice teetered slightly on the hint of desperation, a bit strangled, pitched very high, and layered with lots of forced camaraderie. Zuko didn’t like the false cheeriness of it; it set his teeth on edge.

“What are you talking about?”

The boy flinched, and all but curled into himself, as his face flushed bright red.

“Just...” Zuko frowned as the other boy squirmed in discomfort. “I’m Sokka, by the way.” Zuko simply stared blankly at the other boy. Yes, he knew that, it was hard not to when the whole camp had been shouting the name around all afternoon. Sokka just flushed even more at Zuko’s silence. “Just. Forget I said anything, okay?” Sokka blurted out in a rush. He started walking backwards and waved his hands quickly in front of his face, as if trying to waft away smoke. “I won’t bother you again. I was never here.”

“…okay.”

“Right. Great. No problem.” Sokka started backing away even quicker, his eyes looking anywhere but Zuko. “Good luck with the wood... chopping... thing.” He disappeared behind the main tent with one last wave.

Zuko frowned and swung the axe down against the wood with a little more force than was entirely necessary. He imagined that the look of him, with his horrific scar, was probably a bit much for the Chief’s son to take for too long; no doubt the boy was as pampered as Zuko might have been, were the Fire Lord not a tyrannical despot. No wonder Sokka had all but run away from him; he was disgusting. He leant down towards the water bucket next to him and dunked the flannel into it. He ran the damp fabric over his face and then wrung it out down the back of his neck, sighing deeply with relief as the cool water trickled down his warm skin. He thought he heard a garbled cry from somewhere over by the main tent. He snapped his head round abruptly and thought that he heard a sharp ‘eep’ noise. He waited for a few long moments, but there was no further sound other than the softly breaking waves. He shook his head and heaved the axe over his shoulder once more. It was probably just his bad ear playing up again.

His next meeting with Hakoda’s son was just as strange as the first. It came a little later in the day, when lunch had been cooked, eaten, and cleared away. The younger boy sought him out where he was helping to gather more seaweed for the chief’s latest invention. From what Zuko could gather, it was some kind of booby trap that would keep the Fire Navy out of the bay. He hadn’t been furnished with the exact specifications, but he thought that a shit ton of seaweed probably wasn’t going to do anyone any real damage. Zuko, however, also knew that he was not a particularly good strategist, and he trusted that the Water Tribe knew what they were doing. They’d lasted this long against the might of the Fire Nation Navy which was not something easily done; if these strange inventions had been their strategy thus far, it had clearly been working.

Sokka stood at the edge of the water, a silent statue against the backdrop of the bay, as Zuko worked in the breaking waves. His guard, Arrluk, was nowhere to be seen, so Zuko could only assume that Sokka was his replacement. Zuko tried not to bristle under the attention, but it was a little bit galling that the Water Tribe had left a teenager to watch him. It wasn’t like he was going to do anything, but it was the damn principle of the thing. He bent down to grab another handful of the thick, brown seaweed.
“So you’re the Fire Lord’s son?”

Zuko started and dropped the armful of seaweed that he’d been carrying. Sokka had approached the shoreline from his left hand side, and he hadn’t seen the other boy out of his bad eye.

“Can you not do that?” he hissed angrily, glaring at the younger boy, as his heart beat ferociously in his chest.

“What?”

“Come at me from that side.” Zuko bit down on his anger, and said in a much quieter voice, “I can’t see out of that eye. You surprised me.” It was always dangerous telling others so blatantly about his weaknesses, but it would be far more dangerous for Zuko if Sokka did that the next time that he had an axe in his hand. Zuko did not want to think what the warriors would do to him, if he killed their chief’s heir because he startled easily.

“Oh. Sorry.” Sokka looked genuinely contrite, so Zuko let it go with a curt nod. The Water Tribe boy didn’t seem like he was going to say anything else, so Zuko bent back down to the water. He could feel Sokka’s eyes burning into his back as he worked. He lasted a good few minutes before the itching feeling at the back of his neck got too much to bear, and he whipped round to glare at Sokka.

“What?” he asked, all but shouting. “What do you want?”

“I asked my dad about you. He told me where they found you.” He paused and looked Zuko up and down with his father’s piercing gaze. “I’m trying to figure out what kind of Fire Nation crazy you are.”

“You know,” Sokka continued, with a nonchalant twist of his hand, looking far more confident than he had earlier in the day. “Are you with the wacky blue fire and the throwing lightning at everyone, or are you all with the ‘fire is dangerous and the Fire Lord is a messed up dictator’? You know, which kind of crazy.”

Zuko flinched at the mention of blue fire. There was no doubt who Sokka had met on the road, especially if his sister was out and about in the Earth Kingdom.

“The Fire Lord is a messed up dictator,” Zuko said bluntly, and turned his back on Sokka. “He needs to be stopped, or he’ll burn the whole world to the ground trying to rule it.”

“Well, that I can get on board with,” Sokka replied, and then quickly rushed to clarify himself. “The stopping your evil dad thing, not the burning the world. That would be bad. Very bad.” Zuko rolled his eyes, a small grin pulling at the edges of his lips. It had been a long time since he’d spoken so casually to someone else, and it was nice to do so with someone his own age; for a moment, it was like they were equals, rather than Chief’s son and his kind-of hostage. It was nice. Sokka beamed like he’d just won a prize.

“You should tell that to my dad, you know,” he said amiably, shooting Zuko a shrewd look. “It might help him to trust you. He thinks you’re on the Fire Nation’s side.” Sokka blushed a little, and looked up at the sky. “He warned me to stay away from you.”

Zuko snorted. “Figures.” He turned back to the sea, and started scooping up more of the thick, brown seaweed. “They’re never going to trust me, so why should I bother trying to convince them.” He peered at Sokka from the corner of his good eye. “Last time I tried that, I got my ass kicked. I’m not offering myself up for another round.”
“What do you mean-” Sokka’s question was cut off by a sudden shout from the shore.

“Sokka!” Arrluk had returned, and was stood on the rocks, waving frantically. “Your father wants to see you. It’s urgent.” The grin slipped from Sokka’s lips and lost itself in the soft foam of the breaking waves. In less than a second, the young teenager had assumed the bearing of a warrior. His face was drawn and his eyes were shone a cold and icy blue. It was a change from the slightly goofy boy that had been embarrassing himself a few hours before.

“I’m on my way,” he shouted back, and then gave Zuko a quick grimace of apology, before running off towards the shore. Figuring that he had enough seaweed and far too little information, Zuko decided to follow him.

At the shore, Arrluk stood with his arms folded, watching Zuko wade out of the shallows. As soon as he drew level, the man quirked an eyebrow at him.

“You done?”

Zuko grunted an affirmative.

“Convenient timing, there.” The man frowned, but Zuko just stared at his feet as he sidled past the man, keeping a decent distance between the both of them.

“Why’s that?” Zuko asked quietly, as he started making his way back towards the camp.

“Can’t you hear the alarm? Watch spotted them on the horizon, less than five minutes ago.” Arrluk’s voice was tight with some dark emotion. He held out a hand pointedly, as a dark grey flake floated softly into it. More soon followed, as ash began to fall from the sky, like dark rain. Arrluk fixed him with a glare, and pointed out towards the horizon, where a few dark silhouettes had started to assemble. “The Fire Nation are on their way, Your Highness. Guess they’ve finally come to claim you.”

Chapter End Notes

Yay! Sokka’s arrived! And he has a crush! Zuko is an oblivious little bean.
So my headcanon is that Zuko is demisexual/ panromantic, and not because I’m projecting at all. I just think his relationship with Mai is based on years of knowing each other, and the fact that they are like the only person who is honest with the other. Also the date with Jin was just awkward...
So if Zuko seems a little oblivious at first, it's because he really doesn't think about Sokka that way...yet.

Hope you enjoyed and that you think Sokka is in character!
Please let me know your thoughts and leave kudos if you liked!
The camp was silent when Zuko walked back into it. Arrluk was following closely behind him, a looming presence just over his right shoulder, keeping him from running. There was a large meeting in the centre of the camp, around the dying fire, but the men had cut off all conversation the minute that Zuko had appeared. Hakoda stalked around the fire, directly towards Zuko, his eyes narrow and his shoulders tight with fury. Zuko took a step back, and Arrluk dropped a heavy hand on his shoulder. The rest of the men were watching carefully, taking their cue from the chief. Hakoda stopped half a foot in front of Zuko, and leaned forward, bringing them almost nose to nose. Zuko forced himself to meet the chief’s eyes.

“You know anything about this?” Hakoda asked him; his voice was low and thrummed with a heavy threat. Zuko swallowed tightly, and tried to push down the fear that was gnawing away at his stomach. He hadn’t done anything wrong; there was no need to be so nervous. From the corner of his eye, Zuko saw Sokka step forward, moving a few paces behind his dad’s right shoulder. He was watching the two of them with wide, serious eyes.

Hakoda reached out and grabbed Zuko’s chin; Zuko’s eyes instantly snapped back to meet the chief’s.

“You know what?” Zuko asked. He had to force the words through the tightening in his throat and the sudden dryness in his mouth.

Hakoda’s eyes narrowed and the grip around his chin tightened.

“Don’t play dumb,” he ordered, and Zuko fought back a wince at the fingers pressing deep bruises against his jaw bone. “There’re four Fire Nation ships heading straight for us. What. Do. You. Know?” The last four words were spat in a low growl that made the hair on the back of Zuko’s neck stand up. Hakoda and the Fire Lord looked nothing alike, but in that moment, Zuko saw his father standing before him.


Hakoda ignored his son, keeping his eyes locked on Zuko’s.
“Nothing,” Zuko replied quietly. His voice was firm, despite the shakiness that threatened to creep into it. “I don’t know anything.”

The hand around his chin tightened, and Zuko winced, forcing back a cry. The grasp was hard enough to bruise, and it was tightening.

“Dad,” Sokka said again, stepping forwards, and putting a hand on his father’s arm. “Dad, c’mon- he said he didn’t know anything.”

Hakoda scowled at Zuko once more, and then released his jaw and stepped away from both boys. The rest of the men in the camp were silent, their attention fixed on their leader. There was no trace of the earlier merriment on their faces; they were deadly serious and utterly focused. Hakoda looked around at them all, before letting out a frustrated sigh.

“Damn it,” he cursed, shooting a glare out to sea. “They’re earlier than we were told to expect.”

Sokka’s eyes kept flickering from his father, to Zuko, and then out towards the ships on the horizon. Zuko kept quiet as the chief debated what to do; he seemed to have been forgotten for the moment, but he didn’t know how long that would last. An iron band settled somewhere in his sternum, pulling his chest tight.

Hakoda looked out to sea, and then around at his men. He eyed them all appraisingly, before letting out a sudden string of orders. The men sprang into action immediately, rushing to complete the various tasks that their chief had assigned. Zuko watched, chest compressing until it was painful just to breathe. Sokka turned to his father, and asked what he could do to help. It was only when the chief had finished telling his son to join the other men, that the band in Zuko’s chest finally released the strangle hold that it had around his lungs.

“You’re going to fight them?” he half-asked, half-gasped, in disbelief.

The Water Tribe were outnumbered four ships to three and goodness knows how much man to man. They honestly weren’t intending to stand and fight? They didn’t even have any waterbenders amongst them. It would be a massacre.

Hakoda turned to look at him with a stony glare.

“You,” Hakoda said finally, after a good half a minute of silent assessment, “can stay out of the way.”

“But you’ll be killed!” Zuko blurted out, aghast at the thought of what the warriors were about to do. He didn’t exactly hold a lot of affection for his captors, but that didn’t mean he wanted to see them all dead! There was no way they could survive against the Fire Navy.

Hakoda smiled at him then, but it was not a kind expression; his smile was tight and grim, concealing something very dark and very unpleasant.

“We know how to kill Fire Nation soldiers, boy,” Hakoda told him quietly. “Or did you think that that camp of yours just set itself on fire?”

Zuko shuddered at the memory of those horrible flames, as they seared across his mind, and forced himself not to flinch away from the chief. He wanted to point out that the fire had been started by the barely competent firebending guards, that the tribesmen had had Yung and his earthbenders on their side, and that the soldiers at the camp were either fresh recruits or disgraced officers, languishing in a hell-hole on a terrible wage and entirely unprepared for a flash raid. He wanted to say that the men on the ships would be better trained, better armed, and better prepared. He wanted
to scream that the two situations were incomparable, and that Hakoda’s men would die. Still, he held his tongue; he knew that no one would listen to him anyway.

The Chief seemed to read something in Zuko’s expression, because he only scoffed and grabbed him by the elbow, leading him further into the camp.

“You can sit tight in here until we’re done,” Hakoda told him firmly, as he pushed Zuko unceremoniously into a tent, and pulled a length of rope from a pouch at his belt. Zuko didn’t have time to object or plea, as the chief forced his hands behind him and tied them tightly to the central pole. The rope was tight and well oiled, and it bit into his lower arms, just above the metal cuffs on his wrists. He tested it a couple of times, but he was bound tight. “You’re staying here until we’re done with this mess. Don’t even think about trying to run off,” Hakoda stated quietly, as soon as he’d finished with the knots. Zuko barely repressed his flinch at the older man’s warning, as he sank to his knees. Hakoda shot him one last, very stern look, and ducked out of the tent.

The pole pushed uncomfortably into Zuko’s back, and he winced; trying to find a comfortable position to sit in. He had no doubt that he’d be stuck there for a few hours, at the very least. That was assuming, of course, that the warriors actually made it out of the battle alive. If not, then he was stuck there indefinitely, until someone (probably the approaching Fire Navy) found him, or dehydration took him—whichever came first. Zuko tried to force down the panic clawing at his chest. He was tied up and unarmed; he couldn’t change anything. Whatever was going to happen would happen; he would just need to wait it out. He knew that panicking wouldn’t help anything, but some primal instinct flared up at the back of his mind, urging him to get away, to find safety. His breath came in sharp pants, and he tugged uselessly at the ropes. They held fast, and he succeeded only in giving himself a nasty friction burn. He slammed his head back against the pole in frustration, as angry tears threatened to prickle in his good eye. Panicking might not help him, but he couldn’t stop himself from freaking out.

The tent flap was left open, giving him a view of the camp and the bay beyond it. Zuko rolled his head to the side and tried to focus on that, as his vision swam uncomfortably before him and his heart beat frantically in his chest. The camp looked ethereal; ash fell heavily in the air, twisting in mesmerising patterns and painting the sand black, like the volcanic beaches of his childhood home. Zuko’s breath struggled out in thinner rasps. He had experienced the Fire Navy coming into port before, standing stock still and silent behind his father, at whatever military celebration the royalty had deigned to make an appearance at, but he had never realised quite how foreboding that choking faux-rain could be. It tumbled through the air, twisting and turning on the sharp sea breeze, as the men of the tribe bustled around the camp with a terrifying efficiency, preparing for the oncoming battle.

If Zuko had thought that the threat of the approaching ships would have made the men nervous, or frantic, then he’d been terribly wrong. If anything, the tribesmen became quicker and more precise, their every move ruthlessly efficient, as they sharpened weapons and readied their ships for battle. At least, that was what Zuko assumed they were doing. The ships were moored somewhere off to the right of the camp, and Zuko couldn’t see them from his position. In fact, he couldn’t see very much beyond the campfire, the opposite row of tents and, behind them and out to sea, the looming shadow of war ships.

Painstakingly slowly, his breathing settled, and a dull calm settled over him. He watched listlessly through the flap of the tent, as the Water Tribe readied themselves to face the Fire Navy. Someone brought out some kind of war paint, and the men set about decorating their faces with streaks of grey and white. There was something vaguely ritualistic about the action. Zuko felt voyeuristic, but he couldn’t bring himself to look away. The men continued on, unbothered by his gaze, as they bustled about the camp.
It was early evening, by the time they were finished, and the camp outside his tent was deserted.
They’d left him alone. Zuko’s heart leapt and he felt the ropes around his wrists once again, trying to find a weakness in the knots. Hakoda had told him not to try and escape, but then they’d done a stupid thing like leave him alone and unguarded; the Fire Nation had put those chains on him for a good reason. He was annoyingly resourceful and he would not let any opportunity to escape pass.

He cast his eye about the tent, but there was nothing sharp enough to cut through the ropes, even if he could somehow manipulate them into his hands.

He had just decided to put his back against the tent pole and try and work it up and out of the heavy sand to free his hands, when something made him pause. He strained his good ear past the faint rasps of his own breathing, and could vaguely make out the pounding sound of heavy footsteps and scuffed sand.

“Is this really necessary, Dad? I don’t think you need to worry about him,” Sokka’s voice came floating towards him, and Zuko let out a hiss of frustration. He’d been too slow, and he’d missed his chance. He leaned forwards as far as he could, and peered out of the tent flap. Sokka, Hakoda, and Bato were walking into camp, heading towards him. “I trust him, and you need every man that you can get,” Sokka continued, as they stepped into the camp proper.

“And I’m telling you to drop this, son,” Hakoda replied, shooting a quick glance towards Zuko’s tent. Zuko huddled back against the pole, until the chief’s eyes moved back to his son. Then he leaned forwards once again.

“Dad-” Sokka was cut off by his father, as the chief reached out, pulling his son to a stop alongside him. The older man placed firm hands on Sokka’s shoulders and met his eyes squarely.

“No Sokka, you need to trust me. This is not up for negotiation.” Hakoda’s voice was firm and unyielding; it was the first time that Zuko had heard the man talk to his son as a chief and not as a father. Even when Hakoda had given giving the boy permission to fight with the rest of the men, the order had been delivered with pride and care. This was something different; this was the chief that Zuko had come to know. He watched the two of them with bated breath. Hakoda raised his hand and, for one terrible moment, Zuko thought that he was going to hit Sokka. He gasped loudly, and flinched back. He held his breath, waiting for the inevitable crack of a slap, but none came. Hakoda’s hand merely stroked Sokka’s cheek once, very gently, as his son tentatively nodded his understanding.

Zuko let out his breath, as he felt a phantom heat prickle across the scar tissue on his left cheek. His father’s growl echoed faintly in his ears and… He forced that memory away with practised stoicism, clenching his fists until his finger nails bit into his palms, grounding himself in the present. He shook his head, as if memories were cobwebs to be brushed away, and made himself focus on the scene before him. He had no doubt that the Water Tribe men had heard his gasp, and he needed to know what their attention would mean for him. Hakoda turned, as if to head towards Zuko’s tent, but before he could take a step, a high-pitched whistle pierced the air.

“Incoming!” Bato’s call rang through empty camp, and Zuko cowered back, bracing himself against the pole, eyes screwed shut, as he waited for some kind of bombardment. A few seconds later, when nothing had hit, he cautiously pulled his eyes open and leaned forward, peering out into the camp. He took one look at the scene before him, and immediately closed his eyes so hard that he could see white spots behind his eyelids. Then he opened them again, blinking furiously. The scene was, unfortunately, still the same.

There was a huge, hulking beast hovering a few feet from the ground in the centre of camp, a small boy perched on its back. Something about the animal was oddly familiar, and Zuko’s mind flashed
back to that terrifying night on the way to Chameleon Bay, when he’d been convinced he’d seen a spirit fly above them. It was the same creature.

Suddenly, the boy atop the beast leant forwards to speak to Sokka, bringing himself further into Zuko’s line of vision; Zuko’s mind stuttered to a halt, and he sucked in a sharp breath. The child had a blue arrow on his head. That was impossible. The practices of the Air Nomads was strictly controlled information in the Fire Nation, but Zuko knew enough to know what that tattoo meant. The boy was an airbender. He blinked furiously, and closed his bad eye, just to make sure that it wasn’t his terrible sight playing tricks on him. To his utter lack of surprise, and mounting horror, the boy was still there, that bright tattoo still boldly decorating his head. Zuko frowned. This had to be some kind of joke. There was just no way this kid could be an actual airbender, was there?

The camp was silent and empty, apart from the gathering outside his tent; the rest of the men were already on the ships. When the boy spoke, his voice rang clearly through the still air.

“Katara’s in danger,” he said simply, speaking directly to Sokka, eyes wider and more serious than any boy his age’s had any right to be. “We need to get back to Ba Sing Se, now!”

“What?” Sokka yelped, voice high in his panic. “Why? How do you know?” He asked frantically, one hand grasping at the weapon in his belt, as he stepped towards the massive beast.

“I saw her. I had a vision,” the boy replied quickly, his eyes wide and voice pitched high from more than just youth. “We’ve got to go, right now!”

Sokka nodded tightly, and then turned to his father. “Dad, I…”

“No, Sokka,” Hakoda replied, his shoulders rigid, and voice tight with concern. “Go and find your sister. We’ll be fine.”

Sokka studied his father for a few seconds, looking incredibly lost, before the older man pulled him into a tight hug. Ash fell upon them, settling on their shoulders like snow, as they held each other tightly.

“Go on,” Hakoda repeated sternly, as he finally broke the embrace, and pushed Sokka towards the beast.

“I love you, Dad,” Sokka gasped, voice tight with emotion, as he stared at his father. It was as if he were trying to absorb as much of the chief as he could before he left. Zuko wondered if he was trying to imprint his father’s face in his memory. Two years, after all, was a very long time. Who knew when the two might see each other again? It had been longer than that since Zuko had seen his own father, of course, but he was unlikely to ever forget what that man looked like. Even if the Fire Lord’s face wasn’t splashed across Fire Nation propaganda, across coins and official seals and insignia, there was no way Zuko would ever escape it; it was his father’s face that he saw in his all-too-frequent nightmares.

“I love you too, son,” Hakoda called to Sokka, as the younger man hurried into the main tent. His voice cracked slightly on the last word, and Zuko’s heart clenched painfully. There was once a time that he would have done anything to have heard those words from his own father. If there was one thing that Zuko knew with adamantine certainty, it was that, once upon a time, he would have gone to the ends of the Earth for just the slightest sign of affection from his father. All that had changed three years ago. He hated the man with a passion that stole his breath, with a fury that terrified him on the brief occasions that it reared its head. The Fire Lord had burnt him, had consigned him to a long, torturous death in the camp, and had spent the vast majority of his childhood beating and berating him for his innumerable and intolerable inadequacies. His father never had, and never would
love him. In fact, Zuko suspected that the man wasn’t even capable of that emotion. He knew that now, although it had taken permanent disfigurement and disability to teach him the lesson.

Zuko shook himself, as Sokka emerged from the main tent at a run, now carrying a bag over his shoulder. In less than a minute, Sokka had jumped onto the animal’s back, aided by an unnatural gust of wind that made the hairs on the back of Zuko’s neck prickle. The beast let out a loud yawn, and, with a quick order from the boy, it started to rise into the air. There was another strange gust of air, and suddenly the falling ash was swirling around them in some form of cloak as they rose higher into the sky. Zuko couldn’t help but stare in disbelief. There could be absolutely no doubt about it, that boy was an airbender: a living, breathing, airbender.

Something clicked in the back of his mind, and then Zuko’s brain seemed to catch up with what he’d just seen; it was if some kind of dam had been broken, allowing his thoughts to spill forth. The child was an airbender: an airbender that Sokka seemed to know. What the hell? That was impossible; all the airbenders had been killed by his great-grandfather, hadn’t they? A dark thrill raced through Zuko’s mind; whether it was fear or hope, he couldn’t tell. Were there more airbenders out there? Were they helping to fight the war? The thought was incredible. How could the Fire Nation not know about them? Or did they? Had this revelation come out whilst he was locked away in the camp, scrambling for scraps and slowly starving? Or, worse than that, had the Fire Nation known all along? Was the existence of airbenders yet another secret kept closely guarded by the Fire Lord and the military elite, something kept away from the masses to ensure the continued belief that the Fire Nation was all-powerful and unassailable? Zuko felt sick; he wouldn’t put such a thing past his father- or any of his relatives, for that matter.

He didn’t have long to ponder the revelation. Hakoda and Bato began to make their way over to his tent, as soon as the beast was out of sight. Hakoda ducked inside and fixed Zuko with a look as sharp as the blade that hung at his hip.

“You didn’t see that. Do you understand?” he asked in a very quiet voice. A chill ran through Zuko’s body, freezing any and all questions on the tip of his tongue. He nodded quickly, eyes fixed firmly on the dagger on Hakoda’s belt- the dagger that the chief’s hand was straying dangerously toward. Zuko flinched when Hakoda’s fingers landed on the hilt. His eyes flew up to meet Hakoda’s, and he read the terrible indecision in them. Zuko closed his eyes as he waited for the Chief to make up his mind, and tried not to flinch when he heard the dagger slide free. He knew, with a horrifying certainty, that the chief was going to kill him. He’d seen too much; it was dangerous to keep him alive. Clearly the airbenders were a secret, and not one that Zuko could be given the chance to keep. He cowered back against the tent pole, tugging frantically on the bindings around his wrists. It was no use, they were too tight. He was going to die.

“Chief,” Bato’s voice came from outside the tent. Zuko flinched violently, and his eyes snapped open. Hakoda had stepped back into the entrance to the tent, looking vaguely ill. With no more words spoken, he clapped Bato on the shoulder, and set off from the camp at a light run. Zuko watched Bato like a hawk, in case the other man made any moves to come in and finish the job.

After what felt like an eternity, but was probably only a few minutes, Zuko finally allowed himself to slump back against the pole. His muscles ached from holding himself so rigid, and his whole body was shaking as the adrenaline pulsed through him. He’d come within a hair’s breadth of disaster, and he had no idea what, in the end, had held Hakoda back.

It was only when he finally gathered the courage to look out through the tent flap that Zuko got his answer. The Fire Nation ships were in the bay, almost on top of the camp. He could make out the hulking frames of four large battle ships as they moved further towards the shore. At some point during the earlier preparations, the tents opposite Zuko’s own had been taken down, giving Zuko an
unobstructed view of the bay. He had no idea why the Water Tribe had only taken down some, not all, of the tents, but he guessed that it had something to do with hiding their true numbers from the approaching enemy. Zuko huffed out a slightly hysterical breath, as if the element of surprise would do anything against a Fire Navy trebuchet.

There was a deadly silence to the air, like the calm before a storm. Zuko peered out of the tent, as the ash fell heavier and heavier from the sky, the ships drawing further into the bay. Then, suddenly, there was a blinding flash and a booming explosion, and water sprayed high into the air. The sound of screeching metal rang through the bay, as one of the ships began to list dangerously to starboard. A wailing alarm broke out and fire began flashing in warning signals to the other ships. The ship had hit a mine, Zuko noted, as he watched the whole thing with a sense of horrified detachment. One of the propellers had gone, the hull had been breached, and the ship was going down.

Zuko took back every ungenerous thought he’d had about the seaweed-mines. Within minutes of the explosion, the ship was listing dangerously close to capsizing, slowly turning in a long, languid arc, as the other propeller spun desperately away to itself. Men and women tumbled about, as the deck tilted at a sharp angle. Some fell overboard, others seemed as if they were jumping. A pungent smell hit the back of Zuko’s throat and made his eyes water, it was difficult to breathe through the horrific scent. He forced himself to only inhale through his mouth, but it was only a slight help to the burning in his throat and nose. If it was that bad even as far away as the shore, he could only imagine what the smell was like to the people on the ship.

Screams pierced through the air, as the siren slowly died, warbling into silence, as more and more of the crew fell into the sea, their heavy armour pulling them down under the waves. Unlike the huge landmass of the Earth Kingdom, the Fire Nation was made up of hundreds of tiny islands; most children learnt to swim as soon as they learnt to walk. No one, however, could swim in full armour. The soldiers dropped into the water and sank like stones.

Zuko stared with wide, aghast eyes. The ship was half submerged, and had drifted into the path of one of the other vessels, which had stopped its engines and thrown ladders over the side of the ship, to try and pull as many of the stranded crew as possible out of the waves. The other two ships were continuing onward, drawing further into the bay. Zuko peered out, looking for the water tribe ships, but they were hidden outside his field of vision. Surely they couldn’t still be beached on the sands?

Another explosion crashed through the air, and then another, and then another, each one closer than before. Foam sprayed up and over the ship, hiding the initial damage from Zuko’s view. When it finally cleared, his heart clenched at the sight. One of the ships had turned slightly to starboard, trying to take a central line through the bay and into the mouth of the river. It had drifted directly into three separate mines. The ship was taking on water faster than fire catches. It went down in under a minute. No one jumped overboard, there wasn’t time. The ship slunk beneath the waves, water gurgling up around it, and descended into the depths. Zuko gagged, feeling incredibly sick. How many men and women were trapped in that sinking hunk of metal, desperately trying to escape from doors that were sealed tightly by the pressure of so much water. He gagged again.

Two boats down, and the Water Tribe hadn’t even taken to the water. Zuko let out a deep breath. He wasn’t sure if he should be relieved or horrified. This was a massacre, but not from the side that he’d been expecting. Bato grunted quietly from the front of the tent, as if in agreement. Zuko started violently; he had almost forgotten that the other man was there, he’d been so transfixed by the steady decimation of the fleet in front of him.

“We aren’t a warlike people,” Bato said quietly, his body still turned resolutely out to sea, just to the side of the tent’s entrance. “We don’t like having to kill. But we will.” He let out a deep sigh. “The Chief is incredible; we wouldn’t have lasted this long without him.” He turned slightly, tilting his
head so that he could catch Zuko’s good eye. “But he isn’t soft. He’ll do what he has to, to keep him
and his safe.” Zuko nodded tightly in understanding. “Then just keep your fucking head down,”
Bato snorted and leaned back, giving Zuko a view of the bay once more.

It was carnage. Only half of the fleet was left afloat, and only one boat was still making any
semblance of an attack. They had turned to port and were making for the edge of the bay, as if to
skirt around as close to the sandbanks as they dared. It seemed, to Zuko’s untrained eye, as if the
highest concentration of the mines was in the centre of the bay, a mile or so from the shore. Once the
ships had entered the bay and navigated between the two headlands, they’d found themselves
tripping Hakoda’s booby trap. The navigator of the last ship seemed to have worked out the same
thing, and was leading his crew away from the devastating explosives. The ship was drawing nearer
and nearer to the shore, when the Water Tribe made their move.

Three boats came flying out of the mouth of the river, carried by the strong tidal currents of the
estuary. A desperate order rang through the air, and then a flaming barrel of pitch flew from a hastily
loaded trebuchet. It was heading directly for the lead ship, where Hakoda stood defiantly at the bow.
A steady command from the Chief, and a quick adjustment of the sails, had the Water Tribe dancing
out of the path of the projectile, and then they were in close to the ship and setting about it like ants
on a picnic. Grappling hooks flew through the air, tangling in the metal railings of the ship, as Water
Tribe warriors clambered up and onto the deck.

Zuko couldn’t make out much of the fighting, but fire flashed across the sky like lightning, and the
clang of steel upon steel echoed through the bay. Men and women screamed out in anger and fear
and fury. The ship looked huge compared to the three Water Tribe boats, but the battle was swift and
merciless. There were still Fire Navy officers running about the deck, flinging fire haphazardly,
when a shrill whistle rang through the air. The Water Tribe broke off (or quickly ended) whatever
fights they’d been engaged in and hurried back to their boats, cutting the grappling lines behind them
as they went. The Fire Nation soldiers seemed frozen in confusion, not quite believing that the battle
was over so quickly, but the Water Tribe boats sailed away from them, back into the mouth of the
river. A disbelieving, but very loud, victory cheer rose up as the wooden boats retreated upstream.

It didn’t last for long. A few minutes later, there was an almighty bang, and the cheer turned to a
chorus of screams, as an explosion ripped through the ship. The ship shrieked and split in two,
directly down the middle. A few soldiers managed to shrug off the armour and swim for shore before
they got pulled down by the wreck, but they were not many. Three ships were down, and the odds
had more than evened.

The Water Tribe boats came back down the river, one breaking off and aiming to weigh anchor by
the camp, the other two hugging tightly to the sandbanks on the west side of the bay, as they headed
out to chase down the final ship. In all the confusion, it had tried to retreat, and was slowly trying to
twist its way back through the maze of mines. Zuko didn’t expect that it would get very far.

Bato stiffened, and Zuko’s eyes instantly snapped back to the shore line. A few soldiers had made it
to the safety of a sandbank. They were standing waist deep in the rolling waves, where they
struggled to catch their breath. They were close, closer than the reinforcements from the Water Tribe
boat in the process of anchoring further down the beach. Zuko’s breath caught in his lungs. It was
just him and Bato. Then the men were wading through the water and into the shallows, looming
closer and closer to the camp, rising out of the sea like avenging spirits. Bato’s hand tightened firmly
around his spear. Zuko squirmed against the ropes, but there was still no give. He hoped that Bato
was enough to fight off the ten or so men making their way up the shore; he very much did not want
to die trussed up like a pig chicken.

Bato turned to look at Zuko, as the soldiers began to fan out across the beach, holding one finger up
to his lips, his eyes bright with warning. Zuko would have scoffed were he not half-frozen with terror. As if he would be stupid enough to draw anyone’s attention. Bato slunk from tent to tent, back pressed tightly against the canvas, as he waited for the men to stumble into camp. Then, with a roaring battle cry, he jumped out and speared one straight in the gut. The soldier fell like a stone, all protective armour abandoned in the desperate swim for shore. The cry alerted the others, and soon Bato was fighting half a dozen men, swinging round in a tight circle. The Fire Nation soldiers were exhausted and terrified, but they still had the greater numbers. Zuko could hear the cries of the other water tribesmen as they were running up the beach, but Zuko seriously doubted that Bato could hold out long enough for the reinforcements to reach him.

A shadow loomed suddenly at the entrance to his tent, and Zuko lost sight of Bato behind the hulking frame of the Fire Nation soldier standing before him. They both froze, each as shocked by the appearance of the other.

The man was middle-aged and broad-shouldered, his hair in a peasant’s cut and the faint traces of ancient, faded tattoos lining his knuckles. He was carrying a short sword, the kind given to non-commissioned officers, or privates who could do more with a blade than just swing blindly and hope. He was clearly not an officer, but Zuko would bet good money that he could do a lot of damage with that thing, nonetheless. Zuko flinched back against the pole, trying to hide scar, as the man moved further into the tent.

“Well what’ve we got here?” The soldier finally remarked, voice mocking. “A prisoner of the barbarians?”

Zuko kept his head turned away, his eyes fixed solely on the floor.

“Just what have they been doing with you?”

The soldier dropped the sword to a low guard as he inched towards Zuko. A hand reached out and grabbed Zuko’s chin. Zuko winced as fingers found the bruises left by Hakoda, only a few hours before. The hand forced Zuko’s face around, so that the soldier could get a good look at him. As soon as he did, the hand dropped away, like it had been burnt, and the man’s eyes widened with shock. He stumbled back a few steps.

“You’re Fire Nation?”

Zuko nodded tightly. He couldn’t deny that; his colourings were distinctive. His skin was too pale, hair too dark, and his eyes too golden for him to be anything but. He was the descendant of two ancient, noble bloodlines and the former Crown Prince; he didn’t think that anyone could look any more Fire Nation than he did.

“But you’re dressed like them.” The soldier was looking at him with increasing suspicion. “And… is that…a traitor’s mark? But you’re just a kid!”

Zuko winced. The water tribe had given him new clothes many months ago, his camp clothing having been singed to rags and painted black and red with soot and dried blood. The new clothes were simple, just a dark blue shirt and trousers and some canvas shoes, but they were enough to make anyone suspicious; they didn’t look Fire Nation. Zuko knew that he looked like a conspirator. Besides, the mark on his face was exactly what the soldier had assumed, was exactly what his father had wanted people to see when they looked at Zuko. It was why the Fire Nation branded traitors so visibly, for situations exactly like this.

Shouts increased from outside and the clang of steel on steel rang heavily through the air. Other
water tribesmen were joining the fight. There wouldn’t be long left before the last of the Fire Nation soldiers were routed; it was now or never. The soldier made a snap decision and pulled out his knife, cutting through the ropes that bound Zuko’s hands together. Then a strong hand grabbed his elbow, pushed him out of the tent and started yanking him away from the battle, towards the dunes that led to the main road inland.

“I don’t know what the hell is going on here, but I am not leaving one of our own with those barbarians,” the man hissed to Zuko, as he dragged him away from the sounds of the battle. “You can explain it to the Captain when we get to the rendezvous point. This is so far above my fucking paygrade.”

“No!” The shout came hurtling towards them, closely followed by the hulking figure of Bato. Zuko felt his heart stutter. He wasn’t sure if it was relief or fear; Bato had survived. Zuko froze as the Fire Nation soldier spun around and shifted his sword unto an offensive position. He didn’t know what to think, or to do. He didn’t want to go with the soldier, and face whatever punishment would fall upon him the minute they realised that he was the traitor prince and therefore decidedly not where he was supposed to be. But nor did he want to face Bato’s wrath and the almost certain death that Hakoda had waiting for him, when the battle was finally over with.

Bato lunged closer, dragging his left leg slightly. Blood was trickling from a wound in his upper thigh, but he kept on his feet.

“You thought you’d run off, did you?” He snarled at Zuko, aiming his spear at the soldier’s chest. “Fuck, Hakoda was right about you. You were a fucking spy all along, weren’t you?”
Zuko said nothing, staring, as the solider steadied his sword, his eyes tracking the spear point. Bato painfully shifted his stance. The soldier’s arm was still tightly holding Zuko’s elbow, and he used the pressure to force Zuko back slightly, half a step behind him.

“A spy?” the soldier hissed to Zuko. It sounded very much like he was panicking. Thank goodness, Zuko thought sarcastically. At least he wasn’t the only one.

“I’m going to kill you, you know?” Bato told them calmly, advancing calmly forwards; his spear was held steady, even though his leg was visibly trembling. The soldier’s sword tracked Bato’s every move, waiting for an opportunity to strike. “You’re not getting away from us. You think I’m letting you get back to the Fire Lord?” He scoffed, and spat a bloody streak on the sand. “I’ll send you back to your father in pieces, you little shit!” Bato’s words were sounding more and more strained as he forced himself to stay upright, the side of his pants growing darker and darker as blood seeped from his wound.

“What?” the soldier hissed. He stepped backwards and away from Zuko, recoiling as if he’d touched a flame. He looked from Bato to Zuko, and then his eyes focused on Zuko’s burn. Zuko could tell the moment that recognition hit; the man’s eyes widened with revulsion and fury, and then the sword was pointing straight at him, instead. “You’re the traitor Prince!”

Zuko scrambled away from the man, frantically moving backwards until his head cracked painfully against something solid. He’d hit the woodpile. The soldier advanced on him. Zuko tried to dart around, but then a hand caught his shoulder and sent him flying back against the wood. All the breath was forced from his lungs in one painful jolt, and he gasped for air. The man’s eyes burned with a fury and fervour that Zuko had not seen in years. Some slightly hysterical part of Zuko reminded him that this was the third attempt on his life within the span of a few hours.

“Filthy fucking traitor,” the soldier hissed, and brought the point of the sword up to Zuko’s throat. Zuko forced a deep breath into his lungs, and tried to slow his careering thoughts for long enough to find an escape. If the man were only a foot or so closer, Zuko could get a knee in to his solar plexus -
maybe have a chance to get away. He grasped blindly around, and his fingertips caught on a hefty tree branch. The sword drew back to strike a killing blow, and Zuko seized his opportunity, grabbing hold of the branch; he swung wildly and collided with the man’s right knee. There was a sharp cracking noise and the man let out a ragged scream, dropping his sword as he crumbled to the floor. He stayed there, swearing and sobbing, clutching at his very misshapen knee, until a spear embedded itself in his chest. Zuko dropped the snapped branch, and lunged to pick up the soldier’s sword. His eyes snapped up, and he faced his next opponent.

Bato pressed the spear firmly into the soldier’s chest, waiting ten long seconds, until he was sure that the soldier was dead, then he turned his eyes to Zuko. The two of them stared at one another. Zuko held the soldier’s sword ready, just in case Bato decided to make good on his earlier threat. He was out of practise, and his technique would be rusty, but Zuko had always been good at swinging a sword (or two); he knew, with an unflinching certainty, that he could do enough damage to take out an injured man, Water Tribe warrior or not. He didn’t want to, he’d always hated and feared violence, but he would if he had to. The camp had taught him to be ruthless, and Zuko did not forget a lesson learnt.

They stood for a long moment, each staring the other out. Suddenly, a yell of warning came from across the camp; they both turned to see a stream of fire heading straight for them. The memory of the mining camp burning around him rushed into Zuko’s mind, and he nearly froze in pure panic. Then, some long-buried instinct snapped into action, and he spun around and threw his hands up in a very basic block. The fire was weak and the flames cool compared to what he’d grown up having flung his way by tutors and sparring partners, but it was still fire. Zuko flinched as the heat came racing towards him, but, just as the flame was about to hit, his chi stirred desperately inside him and his block held. The fire split into two harmless streams against his forearms and flickered off to the sides.

“You’re a firebender?” It wasn’t a water tribesman, but rather the shocked voice of soldier who’d thrown the flames. He raised his arms in an offensive stance, as he rushed towards them.

“Lieutenant! There’s a firebender here!” The soldier didn’t live to say much more, as a dagger buried deep in his neck. Zuko took off almost immediately, heading for the safety of the dunes, and the possibility of freedom. A foot stuck out in front of him, and he tripped, flying forward and inhaling a mouthful of sand. As he sat up, spluttering, a hand tightened around his throat. The sword lay uselessly at his side, and he found himself gazing up into the eyes of his attacker: Hakoda. He’d come from Zuko’s left; Zuko hadn’t seen him.

“Where do you think you’re-” Hakoda’s voice was cut off by a loud yell, and another soldier came racing towards them. His eyes were bright with an almost barbarian rage, and he let out a rough cry as he swept his arms back in a familiar pattern. The arm fell from Zuko’s throat as he and Hakoda jumped apart, leaning away from the fire whip. The flames flew harmlessly past them, but Zuko’s heart clenched tightly at the force of their energy; they were far hotter than before. This was a different firebender, a better one.

The soldier let out another ragged cry and came barrelling towards Hakoda, all sense of strategy gone, replaced by a near-animalistic violence. Hakoda had fallen awkwardly on the sand as he’d twisted away from the flames. His sword had flown from his hand and landed a few feet away. There wasn’t enough time; he wouldn’t get to it before the soldier was upon him. Zuko didn’t know what instinct compelled him to move, but then his own sword was back in his hand, and he swung it out, as the soldier ran past him, heading straight for the chief. The aim was wild and his stab erratic. Zuko was no marksman, not by any means, having long since lost any accuracy and depth perception along with the sight in his left eye, but his sword struck something. A shudder went through Zuko’s arm, as the blade sank into flesh. The soldier let out a strangled cry and stumbled a few steps to the side, as he sank to his knees, gasping for breath. Zuko’s sword had gone straight into
his left kidney. It was a fatal wound; he’d be dead within minutes.

Zuko staggered backwards, staring at the man before him, as he lay dying on the rapidly darkening sand. It took Zuko a moment to realise that the quickly expanding stain was the soldier’s blood, and then he stumbled back even further. It was not the first time that he’d seen a dying man, but it was his first time striking the killing blow. He was vaguely aware of the faint sound of a last few wretched cries, as the man gurgled himself into silence. He promptly turned to the side and vomited, collapsing to his hands and knees in the soft sand.

Chapter End Notes

More specific TWs:

So guys, what do you think? The water tribe are scarily good at sea warfare- who’d have thought?
I'm not making Hakoda into a villain here, I promise! But he wasn't expecting Fire Nation ships to arrive so soon after they had. He thinks something dodgy has to be going on, and (in his mind) the only variable is Zuko, who he still doesn't trust.
Also, to him, he thinks protecting the Avatar is the only chance they have against the Fire Nation, he just can't quite bring himself to kill a kid his son's age over it. But he gets dangerously close...
Zuko gets some of his firebending back! Also, he gets to have a bit more agency. He's saved Hakoda's life and that's going to change a few things. Next chapter we'll see a bit more of dad!Hakoda, but is it just a touch too late, when Zuko's already started to compare him to Ozai in his mind?

So next chapter is the fall out, and the arrival of the Gaang! I promise it will be a hell of a lot lighter than this!
Please leave kudos/ comment if you enjoyed, and thank you for staying with me so far!
I met a traveller from an antique land

Chapter Notes

Hi guys, thank you so much for being patient with me! I had this all written out and then completely changed my mind on where I wanted this chapter to go and that meant full-scale rewrites. I hope that it's been worth the wait! Thank you to everyone who left kudos/bookmarked- I'll reply to all your lovely comments this weekend, I promise! It's a little bit longer to make up for the wait, so I hope you enjoy!

TWs this chapter for reference to war/ dead bodies/ canon injury. Other than that, this one is remarkably more upbeat.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The beach seemed eerily quiet, the final sounds of the battle sliding away from Zuko, hidden behind the odd buzzing that was filling both of his ears. Hakoda pulled himself to his feet, and walked over to where Zuko was crouching and dry heaving onto the sand. He put a hand on Zuko’s shoulder, pulling him to his feet, and dragged him back towards the camp. The Water Tribe men were crying out a loud victory cheer, but it seemed distant and far away to Zuko’s ears. Everything seemed fuzzy and detached, like none of his senses were working properly.

Hakoda dragged him over to the campfire, and plonked him down on a thick log that served as a bench. Zuko stared directly into the dull ashes, as Hakoda said something high above his head. He tried to focus on the chief’s words but the odd buzzing made everything distorted and strange. Then, there was the sharp chill of steel against his throat, and his mind snapped back into focus with a speed that nearly sent him reeling.

“You with me now?” Hakoda asked, his dagger pressed firmly against Zuko’s neck. Zuko flicked his eyes up to meet the chief’s, every sense trained on the blade resting dangerously close to his carotid artery.

“You were trying to run away,” Hakoda told him seriously, and Zuko nodded, very reluctantly and very carefully. The sharp edge of the blade tickled against his Adam’s apple. He shuddered, and tried to fight down the panic rising in his chest. “But you saved my life.” The blade left his throat, and Zuko’s eyes snapped to the chief’s. Hakoda was staring at him as if he were some incredibly complicated puzzle. “You weren’t trying to go back with them.”

“Why would I want to do that?” Zuko choked out an incredulous laugh. He hunched his shoulders and folded his arms tightly around his chest, trying to hold back the tremors that threatened to rattle through him.

“Why would you indeed?” Hakoda asked quietly, stepping back and sheathing the blade. He sighed and stared down, his face inscrutable.

Zuko didn’t move, but just sat watching the chief with a burning intensity. He could feel himself shaking from more than just the biting sea breeze; he hunched into himself even further, his fingernails digging sharply into his arms. Hakoda sighed again, and then moved to sit on the opposite side of the fire.
“Alright,” His voice was quiet and low, like he was speaking to a spooked komodo rhino. “Alright, I’ll leave it for tonight.”

Zuko didn’t reply, electing to stare even more intently at the ashes in the fire pit. They sat in silence for another few minutes, the roaring sound of the after-battle celebration growing around them. Finally, Hakoda cleared his throat, breaking the silence once again. “That was your first kill, wasn’t it?”

Zuko flinched violently, and wrapped his arms even more tightly around himself. He didn’t want to talk about this, particularly not with a man who still couldn’t bring himself to trust Zuko - even after Zuko had saved his life. He didn’t want to have such a personal conversation with a man who’d taken a dagger to him twice in the space of a few hours. Even his father hadn’t gone after him with that kind of frequency; well, barring a couple of very specific incidents of Zuko’s ill-advised, and never-again repeated, rebellion.

“No,” Zuko admitted softly, after a long moment, bringing his eyes up to meet the Chief’s, “it wasn’t my first.”

“No?” Hakoda looked alarmed, as he looked Zuko up and down from across the empty pit. “Didn’t look like that to me.” He graciously didn’t mention that Zuko had thrown up all over the beach, but Zuko was past caring about being embarrassed about things like that. Besides, it was the truth. Zuko had killed before. Perhaps not in the conventional, stick a sword in a man’s chest type of way- Zuko had to force down the urge to vomit once again, as the image of blood seeping into sand flashed into his mind- but there were more ways than that to kill a man. Take the last bowl of food when there are others starving; fight for the extra blanket, or the better pair of boots; let someone else take the beating, or the extra shift, or the punishment detail- Zuko had learnt them all. It was a much crueler kind of killing, to murder by inaction and indifference, but Zuko had mastered it, as had anyone who made it through their first few months in the camp. It was the only way they’d been able to stay alive.

Hakoda spoke again, but Zuko deliberately ignored him, staring at the ashes at his feet. He didn’t want to think about what he’d done. Even as a child learning the dual Dao, swordplay had seemed more like an art form, something to perfect for perfection’s sake, rather than something that could be used to hurt or harm. Zuko didn’t want to think about what he’d just done, what his mother would… No, he told himself, he wasn’t bringing her memory to a sordid scene like this. A woman like his mother did not belong amongst blood and the violence.

Hakoda sighed sharply, the noise startling Zuko from his thoughts, but the older man just heaved himself to his feet, and headed off towards his still-celebrating men, shaking his head. Good, Zuko thought to himself. If saving the man’s life had earnt him anything, it was five fucking minutes of peace. He trained his eyes to the floor and tried to blot out the world around him, as Hakoda barked out orders to his men. Within minutes, water tribe men were rushing past him, heaving bodies and broken weaponry away from the camp. There was no need to wash away the blood or ash; the tide would do that soon enough.

As Zuko stared at his feet, flashes of the battle raced viciously across his thoughts. Too many things had happened in too short a time. There’d been that airbender boy - which, honestly, was just too terrifying a thought for Zuko to properly process - and then the battle and the soldier and the failed escape attempt and… Zuko let out a sharp, hissed breath as his mind stumbled onto a startling realisation: he’d firebended. Abysmally so, granted, but he’d done it nonetheless. Maybe it hadn’t seemed like much, but his chi had reacted to the flames, and it had protected him. Zuko allowed a very small smile to dance across his lips. He doubted, of course, that he’d be able to throw any fire, but it was a sign that Agni hadn’t completely forsaken him. Perhaps, with a little time and a little training, he might be able to get it back.
His smile slipped slowly away as reality slammed back into him with its usual brutality. Of course, even if Agni’s blessing did extend to giving him full use of his chi, he still wouldn’t have any control over it; he barely remembered the lessons of his youth. The most recent exposure that he’d had to firebending had been the low level stuff that the guards at the camp had been able to do and he doubted if he’d even be able to remember much more than that. There were plenty of advanced moves that he hadn’t even got around to learning, back in the palace. Who knew how much he didn’t know? With Agni knew how much training and effort, he might be able to get a campfire going, or heat up his food, or not be at risk of his life next time someone got a little bit flame-happy in the vicinity of a huge fucking mound of fuel, but Zuko wasn’t holding out hope for much more than that.

He sighed quietly to himself, and tried to force his thoughts to something more useful—like what the chief would want to do with him, now that he’d actively tried to run away. Zuko didn’t know if he wanted to wait around to see what punishment Hakoda would dish out for the escape attempt, particularly if a blade to the throat was the reward for saving his life. Wondering if he might find another opportunity to make a run for it in the aftermath of the battle, Zuko forced his eyes up for a quick reconnoitre of the camp; his heart sank at what he saw.

He didn’t know how long it had been since the chief had finally left him, but the night was drawing in, and the moon shone brightly in the sky. The camp was busy and the men alert and still on-edge from the battle. Three men stood watch at the edges of the camp, as the others hurried back and forth, spiriting away any remaining traces of the slaughter. Nearby, a small group of warriors were standing around a small pile of the remaining bloodied bodies. Zuko didn’t want to watch, but he found that he couldn’t look away as the men dragged the corpses onto the sandbanks (where the water was at its deepest) weighed them down with canvas bags full of sand, and tossed them into the bay. He stared blankly as the dark water splashed up and body after body sunk to the depths. The man he’d killed would be among them, one amongst countless others left nameless and without proper funeral rights at the bottom of the ocean. Zuko shivered, and tore his eyes away.

Out to sea, one Fire Nation ship remained anchored just next to the headland. It was flying Fire Nation colours, but Zuko knew that it was clearly manned by the Water Tribe. It would be a bit of a coup to add a Fire Nation boat to their fleet, but he suspected they’d hand it over to the Earth Kingdom army; the flimsy-looking Water Tribe ships had seemed much quicker and agile. Zuko shook his head, and forced himself to look away from the bay and the ghastly ghost-ship. It was strange how tranquil the sea looked as it glistened in the moonlight, how peaceful the waves sounded as they washed hypnotically against the shore. Such gentle beauty concealed so many bodies, and washed over so much pain and anguish.

As soon as the morbid clean-up was done, the camp fell into full celebration. Thankfully, most of the men seemed content to leave him alone—something for which Zuko was infinitely grateful. He didn’t think that he could bear it if anyone came over to gloat about the Fire Nation defeat. The men were drinking heavily and singing loudly, saluting their victory. Someone took up a beat on the side of a wooden crate, and soon all the men were drinking and dancing, stumbling round and laughing drunkenly as they tried to move their feet in intricate patterns. Zuko frowned at the ugliness of it all. It was not his first brush with the ghoulish ceremonies of triumphant slaughterers. As a child, he had sat in full regalia at a good many celebratory banquets, listening to some weathered General or Admiral recounting the glorious deeds of the Fire Nation and the bravery of her soldiers. The elaborate feasts and stately dances had been nothing more than a civilised veneer for an ugly truth, though; there was no glory in the senseless slaughter of battle, only blood and death. The water tribe celebrations were much more spontaneous and unvarnished, but they served the same purpose. Zuko turned his face away; he still thought it distasteful to try and hide horror and violence behind noise and light and music. He didn’t want to be there, sat in the camp, amongst the increasingly raucous celebration. He just wanted to be somewhere quiet, somewhere safe, where no one would bother him
and he could just quietly get on with his life.

Someone lugged a load of wood towards the fire pit, and Zuko flinched back, but the warrior just gave him a wide, slightly mocking grin. The man lifted up a small flask and drizzled a strong smelling liquid all over the kindling. A quick strike of metal on flint, and the fire caught with a whoosh that Zuko felt in his very bones. The strong smell of burning kerosene cut through the air, and Zuko turned his face away. Agni, it stank. It was also quite a dangerous way to set a fire, and the skin on the back of Zuko’s neck began to prickle. He didn’t want to be around the warriors if they were already getting a little reckless.

More and more men streamed over towards the fire, attracted like insects to the bright light. It was enough for Zuko to call time. Drunken older men did not usually mean good things, in Zuko’s experience, particularly not in large, testosterone-filled groups. Zuko slunk away through the growing crowd, and quietly slipped into his tent. A few moments later, he felt another rush of energy and a chorus of too-loud laughter. Zuko peered out to see a few of the men pouring alcohol straight onto the fire and he immediately ducked back into his tent, with a low curse. At least they were on the beach, he reminded his pounding heart; the sand would stop the fire spreading too far, if it got out of hand.

He sat in the dark, watching the shadows dance across the canvas, and wondering what to do. No one was posted outside. Either Hakoda had suddenly decided he was safe, or they were all too drunk to care that he might escape in the night. Part of him considered doing just that, but even as the idea festered in his brain, he couldn’t bring himself to go back out amongst the men. The loud and drunken celebrating was a warning bell, sounding ominously of a potential threat that Zuko didn’t feel up to facing. He was too tired, and he didn’t want to attract any attention. He would wait until it quietened down a bit, and then he would make a run for it. Zuko lay awake all night, tossing and turning, waiting for the best opportunity to get away, but none presented itself. The men were up long past the break of dawn, their songs carrying on well into the night, and there were men still talking outside his tent even as the sun began to rise in the sky.

At some point, the adrenaline must have worn off and Zuko must have passed out into a deep sleep, because the next thing he knew, he was startled awake, and light was blazing in from the thin gap at the entrance to his tent. A loud, panicked, and very familiar voice called out from the middle of the camp.

“Dad!”

It was Sokka.

“Dad, we need you help!”

Zuko rushed over to the tent flap and peered out into the camp, as the Water Tribe men began to stumble groggily from their own tents, bleary eyed and miserable-looking. Sokka was standing in the middle of the camp, holding the young airbender boy in his arms, the huge, furry, flying monster at his back. Two girls stood alongside him; the taller one was dressed in water tribe blue and she bore a startling resemblance to Sokka. Zuko assumed that she must be the sister, Katara, that Sokka had been so concerned about the day before. The other girl was tiny, so small, in fact, that she looked barely old enough to be away from her parents unsupervised. Her feet were bare and her clothes simple, but she carried herself with a poise that spoke of higher breeding. The children were towered over by a tall, gangly man and another strange creature that looked a little like an Armadillo Bear, only without the shell. The man was peering about himself curiously, the only one of the group that didn’t seem particularly panicked.

“What is it?” Hakoda came rushing in from the far side of the camp, dragging one arm through the
sleeve of his shirt. “What’s happened? Are you okay, is Katara-” He cut himself off as he came to a stop in front of his children. He took in the both of them together, and some strange emotion flashed across his face. Stepping forwards, he opened his arms for a hug, looking shocked when the girl in blue stepped away from him.

“Aang’s hurt,” she said curtly, her face angled away, as she refused to look at her father. “He was shot by lightning. I managed to heal him a bit with spirit water, but he’s really hurt. He’s not waking up.”

Hakoda didn’t seem to have heard anything past the word ‘lightning’.

“What do you mean? Lightning? What in the name of Tui and La happened?”

There were bedding rolls lying about on the beach, where the men had crashed after the night’s drinking, none of them having been bothered to put the rest of the tents back up after the battle. Sokka kicked a few rocks out of his way, and gently lay the boy down on one of the blankets, his father trailing agitatedly behind him.

“He was shot down, it hit the middle of his back-” Sokka stepped back, as the warrior’s sometimes-medic, Sesi, rushed forwards, kneeling down alongside the boy. “Katara’s tried healing him, but…”

Katara knelt down alongside the man and the two of them exchanged hurried whispers. Finally, Sesi rested a gentle hand on her shoulder, rocking back onto his knees to declare that the boy was not in any immediate danger. The children slumped with relief.

“What’s going on?” Hakoda demanded, turning to Sokka. “Are you okay? Who did this? Were you followed?” The questions tumbled from his lips with startling intensity and focus for a man only minutes from his bed.

Sokka ran a hand over his bedraggled-looking wolf-tail, and brushed a few stray strands of hair from his eyes. He let out a deep sigh, and turned to his father, when a low moan whimpered out from the injured boy. Sokka spun around immediately, eyes bright and alarmed, as his sister leant over the boy. With a wave of her hand, she drew some water from a pouch at her hip. Zuko started at the sight of her bending; he hadn’t thought there were any waterbenders left amongst the Southern Water Tribe. She swirled the water between her palms, and then laid her hands gently against the boy’s back. The water glowed a bright blue as she swept her hands in slow arcs over the wound. The boy twitched and then sighed gently, his body relaxing as she healed him.

Zuko had never heard of anyone being able to heal with bending, and he was absolutely fascinated. He stared at the strange, flowing movements of her hands, as the glow passed again and again over the boy’s back. It was incredible, and utterly hypnotic. After a few minutes, she sat back on her heels and swept the back of her hand across her forehead, looking exhausted.

“That’s all I can do for him right now,” she told the other children quietly, as they huddled around her. “He needs rest.”

“He’s going to be okay, though…right?” Sokka asked, his voice tremulous and his eyes bright.

“Twinkletoes?” The shorter girl scoffed. “He’ll be fine. He’s tougher than he looks.”

“That’s right,” Katara agreed; her eyes were tired, but smiling. “He just needs time to rest and heal.”

“Can someone please explain to me what’s going on?” Hakoda interrupted them, his face still quite green, but his eyes alert. He had been remarkably patient whilst Katara worked, looking almost as awestruck by the healing as Zuko felt.
A loud gasp cut through the air, before Sokka could reply, and the assembled group all spun around to see the last of the new arrivals, the thin man, smiling excitedly at one of the more intricately tied nets. He held it aloft, beaming at his weird pet all the while, and exclaiming his joy at the craftsmanship. The strange bear sat on the sand and howled in reply.

“Who is that?” Hakoda muttered to his son.

“That’s the Earth King,” Sokka replied in an arch whisper. Father and son shared a long look, before Sokka shrugged. “He has a pet bear.” They watched for a few moments as the apparent sovereign of the Earth Kingdom as he rushed about the camp, looking fascinated by everything he saw.

“What happened in Ba Sing Se? Hakoda asked, turning back to the injured boy. Sokka’s face darkened.

“You might want to sit down,” Sokka said, slumping to the floor, his back against the monstrous flying beast, as the other children followed suit.

The men gathered around, blocking Sokka from Zuko’s view, as the young man began to tell his tribe all about a secret earth bending force called the Dai Li and a plot to overthrow the Earth King, of fake Kyoshi Warriors and a Fire Nation coup. Zuko felt a mounting sense of dread, which he could sense was shared by the Water Tribe men. Had the last bastion of the Earth Kingdom resistance really fallen to a bit of simple trickery and dress-up? Sokka kept pushing through the story, with a few chipped in comments from his sister and the other girl, but his voice stuttered when he got to the part about some crystal caves. Katara took over; taking a deep breath, she hurriedly told them of a terrible battle against the Fire Nation Princess, her friends, and the Dai Li- a battle where the Fire Nation Princess had fired lightning at the airbender.

“Azula?” Zuko whispered to himself. He had always known that his sister was a little unhinged; hell, he thought the same thing about himself, if perhaps his particular streak of crazy was a little different. It would be laughable to expect them to be normal, raised by a father like theirs, but he had never imagined her to be capable of so much pain and cruelty. To generate lightning took absolute calm and control over mind and emotion; Azula had struck to kill the boy with complete indifference. Zuko swallowed down the lump in his throat. Three years was a long time, she wasn’t a child anymore, and neither was he. It shouldn’t pain him so much that she’d become their father’s perfect successor.

The camp fell into silence as Katara finished explaining the escape on the giant furry beast, which apparently had a name: Appa. Zuko sat back on his haunches as he peered out from behind the tent flap. He regarded the injured boy, trying to figure him out. Judging by Hakoda’s reaction the day before, Zuko had assumed that the boy was supposed to be a secret and an important secret, at that, if Hakoda had been willing to murder a prisoner in cold blood to keep it. But, judging by Katara’s story, Azula had known he was an airbender when she’d fought him, it would have been impossible not to, seeing as his sister had apparently shot the boy straight out of the air. But that didn’t make sense! Who was keeping the boy a secret from whom, and why?

He gritted his teeth in frustration, and his clenched fists flashed hot and bright. It was enough to startle him, and he glanced down at his palms, actually surprised not to see steam rising from them. His few moments of distraction had cost him, and when he looked up, the thin man (who Zuko struggled to believe was the supreme, if usurped, sovereign of the Earth Kingdom) sidled over, and shook hands with Hakoda.

“I’m indebted to your children, and their friends,” the Earth King said with a smile. “Without them, I’d be imprisoned in my own palace or worse, and the Avatar would surely be dead.”
“The Avatar?” Zuko hadn’t realised he’d spoken aloud, until half the camp were staring at him. The Earth King’s head turned to look at the airbender boy lying prone by his feet. He had no subtlety whatsoever. Hakoda sighed, and rubbed a hand over his face. His eyes were rimmed red, and he kept squinting up at the sun. There was something amusing in the ludicrousness of the situation, although Zuko was too much in shock to really process the fact. He waited a long moment to see if anyone laughed, if someone was going to jump out and reveal the whole thing to be a huge, if unfunny, joke, but no one did. Fuck. If that meant what Zuko thought, then the boy lying injured on the beach was the Avatar. The living, breathing Avatar – which was just impossible! He’d have to be over a hundred years old, and the boy didn’t look a day over twelve! Hakoda’s face grew even more drawn, and Zuko gulped loudly. This changed everything. The Avatar was alive, or at least mostly so. And perhaps not even for very long. It was like something out of a bad joke. A banished Prince, the Avatar and the Earth King meet in a Water Tribe camp… Zuko had to swallow back a slightly hysterical laugh.

One of the warriors moved forwards and pulled Zuko from the tent. He stood on slightly shaky legs, staring openly at the unconscious boy. The camp was quiet around them, no one quite sure what to do, before the short girl cleared her throat and spat loudly on the ground.

“Who’s the new kid?”

“That’s the Fire Lord’s son,” Hakoda told them all grimly, watching Zuko through narrowed eyes. “Sokka, we should probably move this conversation to the main tent. Katara—” His daughter turned her back to him before he was able to finish his order. Zuko flinched. That was a level of disrespect he would never have dared to show his own father. Hell, half the time, growing up, he’d been fucking terrified to even breathe too loudly in his father’s presence. But Hakoda just let out a deep sigh, and ran a hand over his face. He still looked slightly green, and Zuko felt a shameful thrill of satisfaction that the man was still suffering for the night before.

A few of the men followed Hakoda and Sokka into the main tent. Bato was, to Zuko’s shocked surprise, among them. He moved behind them with a slow, dragging limp. Katara watched his progression with a deep frown on her face, looking between her water bag and the unconscious kid (Avatar!) lying on the floor. Zuko watched Bato closely, but the man didn’t even look his way. Zuko would have to be careful, if the older man held a grudge for that injury, Zuko could find a knife in his back in the middle of the night, regardless of whether Hakoda wanted him alive.

The departing men left a low buzz of chatter in their wake. Zuko sank to his knees and sat on the cool sand outside his tent. Katara had turned her back very firmly on him and was fluttering about the unconscious boy like a mother pig-chicken. It was a little disconcerting. Zuko didn’t think he’d ever seen anyone fuss so much over another’s injuries. But, then again, this was, apparently, the Avatar, and he was supremely important to their cause. A few of the men fixed Zuko with stern glares as they saw where his attention was focused, but Zuko just fixed his jaw and glared right back at them. He had killed a man to save their chief only the night before, there was no way in hell that he was letting them dictate who, or what, he could look at.

The boy moaned again, and shifted slightly, revealing more of the gruesome wound. The burn on Zuko’s own cheek prickled in sympathy. He shook his head and let out a low, slightly panicked breath. “The Avatar?” he whispered to himself, trying to force down the rising hysteria, as the thought truly began to sink in. This was worse than learning the boy was an airbender. To know that he was the avatar too? That just didn’t make sense. How could he be alive, and why wasn’t he well over a hundred by now? Or had there been a whole cycle of avatars in the last century and no one had noticed? That just seemed impossible. Unless maybe they had, maybe the Fire Nation had been fighting against him all along, and the Royal Family had kept it hushed up. But that seemed ridiculous. But how the hell could the avatar be over a hundred and still not look a day over twelve
and where the hell had he been for the last century? Zuko shook his head and tried to calm his racing thoughts.

As Zuko took deep breaths, the other young girl suddenly turned towards him, and cocked her head questioningly. They stared at each other for few seconds, before she started to make her way over to Zuko. As she neared the tent, Zuko could see that both her eyes were glazed over with a thin film. She was blind. Something that felt worryingly close to sympathy panged deep in his chest. He thought she’d veer away at the last minute, but instead she kept on a straight path directly towards him. It was almost as if she knew exactly where he was. It was a little unnerving.

It didn’t get any better when she waltzed straight up to his tent and plonked herself down on the sand beside him. Her gaze was fixed blankly over his left shoulder, but her focus was very clearly on him. His mouth went very dry and he reminded himself to take deep, calming breaths. This was not, he told himself firmly, any weirder than finding out airbenders existed, or that the Avatar might actually be alive, or any of the other unbelievable things that had happened to him in the past few days. It was entirely possible she had some sight, like he did in his left eye. There was no reason for the hairs on the back of his neck to be stood so firmly to attention.

“So you’re the guy Sokka wouldn’t shut up about yesterday?” She asked, finally, after she’d studied him for a few, long seconds.

Zuko started slightly. “Um…I mean, I really… don’t know.” Had Sokka been talking about him? He hadn’t thought they’d had enough conversation for him to make an expression, but then again, Zuko supposed, how many banished, presumed-dead ex-Prince’s did a boy from the Southern Water Tribe come across on a daily basis? Particularly ones with hideous, repulsive facial scars? Perhaps Zuko had made an impression, after all.

The girl hummed thoughtfully to herself, before nodding decisively. “I’m Toph,” she said loudly, sticking out a hand for Zuko to shake. Dirt was ingrained in the lines of her palm, and her nails were encrusted with mud and torn into jagged lines. Zuko reached out and shook the proffered hand firmly. He was hardly one to judge; his own palms were no better. There were dark, pitted marks where coal dust had stained his callouses, and thin lines of black where dirt and dust had trespassed into many of the shallow cuts and blisters he’d earnt over the years. No matter how many times he washed, they wouldn’t disappear; they’d been healed into his skin.

“Zuko,” he replied gruffly. Her handshake was like a vice, and he shook his hand out the minute she released him.

“So…you’re the Fire Lord’s kid?” She asked, with a quirk of an eyebrow. She didn’t seem hostile, but Zuko knew better than to judge by appearances. He eyed her warily, and then let out a stuttering sigh.

“Yes.”

“Sokka said you wanna see him taken down?” She asked again, her voice challenging.

Zuko looked away, feeling her sightless gaze burning into him.

“Yes.”

She watched him silently, and then let out a low whistle.

“You’re telling the truth.”

Zuko let out a bitter laugh. “Yes,” he all but hissed. “Not that anyone else believes me.” His voice
sounded hoarse, and it cracked in the middle. It was stupid. He shouldn’t be getting so upset about that fact. But, it was just unfair. He’d killed a man for Hakoda only the night before, and he’d been rewarded with continued hostility. He still didn’t know what the chief had planned for him, especially now he knew the identity of the Avatar. Hakoda had almost put a knife through his heart just for knowing that the boy was an airbender, Zuko didn’t want to think what this latest revelation would earn him. He shivered, his mouth suddenly feeling very dry.

Toph looked up at him in concern.

“You’re heart’s beating really, really fast,” she noted. “What’s wrong with you?”

“How can you know that?” Zuko asked, as he tried to take deep breaths and not panic any more than he was already.

“I can sense your heartbeat through my earthbending,” she told him quietly. “That’s how I knew you weren’t lying. People’s heartbeats always speed up when they lie. Well most people, anyway.”

“You can sense my heartbeat?” Zuko let out a choked bark of laughter. “So that’s how you knew where I was?”

“Well yeah, I can feel the vibrations in the Earth. It’s how I see.” She frowned slightly, kicking at the sand with her foot. “Sand is weird, though, it makes things fuzzy.”

“You can see with your Earthbending?” Zuko asked in awe. He didn’t know that humans were able to do that. “Like a badgermole?”

“Yes,” Toph replied in surprise. “How did you know they could do that?”

“I read about them once,” he said defensively.

“The Fire Nation has books on Earth Kingdom animals?”


“Ah.” Somehow Toph found that fact a little less than reassuring. Zuko kicked himself. He was not very good at talking to people, and he always managed to say the wrong thing when he tried.

“Yep.” Zuko flushed and rubbed at the back of his neck as an awkward silence fell between them. He’d clearly messed up a perfectly friendly conversation by saying something weird again. He looked up at the ceiling of the tent, begging Agni for inspiration.

“So any idea what they’re talking about in there?” Toph asked suddenly, nodding in the direction of the main tent that the chief and his advisors had disappeared into.

Zuko snorted and let out a startled laugh. “They’re not letting me anywhere near their war plans if they can help it.”

“Why not?” She asked curiously.

“People don’t usually tell their prisoners all about their plans- particularly not people they think are their enemies.”

“In my experience,” Toph remarked with a thoughtful look on her face, “they actually kinda do.”

Zuko didn’t know what to say to that.
“But you’re not their prisoner, are you?” Toph asked tentatively. “Sokka said his dad rescued you from prison.”

Zuko just hummed noncommittally. He thought it prudent to keep quiet about the technicalities of the whole thing. If Sokka really thought that his father was keeping Zuko fed and watered out of the goodness of his heart, then Zuko was not going to challenge those delusions, and if Hakoda wanted to go around pretending that Zuko were some kind of honoured guest, in front of the children, then Zuko was not going to complain.

“They’ve been talking for a while,” Toph commented idly, after another awkward silence.

“What?”

“Sokka and his dad. They’ve been talking for a while.”

“Not really…” It hadn’t been more than half an hour or so, from Zuko’s judging of Agni’s position in the sky. His father’s war councils had sometimes lasted days at a time and he doubted that things were all that different on the other side of the war. It would, however, be prudent for the chief to hurry along the plans a bit. If Ba Sing Se really was under Fire Nation control, then half the Fire Navy would be sailing up the river within the day, ferrying provisions and additional men to help support the occupation. He glared at the main tent, as if his displeasure alone would encourage them to get a move on.

“Sokka’s usually quicker than this.”

“What?”

“When he makes the plans. He’s usually quicker.”

Zuko turned to her, almost raising his good eyebrow, before he remembered that she wouldn’t be able to see it.

“So Sokka’s your strategist?” She nodded, and leaned back against the canvas of the tent, resting her arms behind her head. She was the picture of casualness, as if she wasn’t discussing the strategy of the Avatar’s travelling companions with a potential enemy. It was a little unnerving how relaxed she seemed about the whole thing.

Out of the corner of his good eye, Zuko noticed Katara tense, as she leant back from her charge to better listen in to their conversation. That was interesting; at least one member of the group seemed to have a healthy level of distrust for strangers. Keeping his eye focused on Katara’s back, Zuko pressed a little further.

“So you’re not involved in the plans at all?”

“Meh, Sokka knows what he’s doing. He’s the brains of this operation. I’m the brawn.”

“You’re travelling with the Avatar, and you expect me to believe you’re the brawn.” Zuko looked her up and down. Her handshake had been particularly strong, and she was, apparently, a powerful Earthbender, but the Avatar was the Avatar. Katara rose to her feet and started stalking towards them.

“I’m the Earth Rumble Champion and the greatest Earthbender in the world. I’m training the Avatar. You think I’m not strong enough?”

Zuko shook his head no, and then remembered she couldn’t see him. “No, I’m sure you are,” he
quickly stuttered out. He had no idea what the Earth Rumble was, but he didn’t want to piss off its champion. “It’s just…”

“Toph!” Katara hissed sharply, planting her feet a yard or so in front of them, hands on her hips and expression stern. “What are you doing? He’s from the Fire Nation.”

“So?”

“You could be putting us all in danger- putting Aang in danger!” Her voice was tight with anger and fear.

“Relax Sugar Queen, Zuko’s not like that.” Toph, however, was the picture of casual indifference.

“So now he’s Zuko to you! He’s the Fire Lord’s son!”

Zuko kept his eyes firmly focused on Katara’s hands and on the flask of water at her hip. If she went for him with her bending, he wouldn’t stand a chance.

“It’s not like he’s a threat, your dad wouldn’t keep him here if he was.” Toph all but yawned as she spoke.

Zuko wisely did not comment on the ridiculousness of that statement. Hakoda did think he was a threat, and that was precisely why he wasn’t going to be allowed free anytime soon.

“My dad doesn’t know Aang like we do, he just sees him as the Avatar, he doesn’t realise that he’s just a kid that needs to be protected.”

“If Chief Hakoda thought I was a threat to the Avatar,” Zuko cut in -speaking as steadily as he could as he tried to shake off the memory of a knife pressed against his throat- “then he would have killed me before he left me this close to him with so little supervision.” Zuko nodded at the few warriors milling about the camp. They were keeping an eye on the teenagers, but it was obvious that most of them were still only half-aware, suffering from their exploits the night before. It was the one thought that he was clinging onto; the chief wouldn’t have left within a hundred yards of the avatar and alive, if he thought Zuko could do any immediate damage. Still, Zuko said the words to reassure himself as much as Katara. He did not like how close he was coming to knowing just too much to be allowed to live.

Katara let out a noise like an angry cat-owl, glaring down at him furiously. “My dad doesn’t kill people!” She hissed and drew herself up to her full height. “My people aren’t murderers, like you Firebenders!”

Zuko snorted, the thought of the countless corpses resting just out to sea lying heavy at the back of his mind. How naïve were these children? They were at war. Did they honestly think that the chief of the Southern Water Tribe had coasted through the last few years of all out slaughter without ever having taken a life? It was sickening, Zuko thought, and more than a little insulting. Something bitter and vicious and caustic rose in his chest.

“Where do you think that came from then?” Zuko asked grimly, gesturing to the warship floating in the bay. “You think the Fire Navy just leave those lying around?”

“What-” Zuko cut her off before she could continue.

“There was a battle last night,” he told her quietly, looking down at his hands. “The chief and the rest of the warriors took down four Fire Navy battleships. What do you think happened to their crews?” He looked up and met her gaze firmly. She looked aghast, her face pinched and horrified.
"You're a liar! How could you say something like that?" Her eyes filled with heavy tears, and she turned from them, her hair braids clicking together as she spun around and stormed back over to the Avatar’s side. Her shoulders were set in a ridged line, and it was clear that she was furious. Zuko watched her leave with a sense of grim detachment; she’d started things by calling him a murderer, and he knew how to finish a fight.

“That wasn’t all that smart,” Toph told him with a sharp look. “Sugar Queen can hold a grudge. And she didn’t want to hear all that stuff about her dad.”

“I wasn’t lying,” he reminded her quietly.

“I know.”

The silence between them felt heavier than before, and Zuko stared awkwardly at Katara’s back. Her shoulders were hitching slightly, as if she were forcing down sobs. Zuko flinched and tried to ignore the painful tendrils of guilt that were starting to claw at his chest. He hadn’t been in the wrong, he told himself firmly. She’d needed to know the truth.

Toph let out a long sigh and dragged herself laboriously to her feet.

“I should probably check she’s alright.” She looked down at Zuko and gave him a weird half-smile. “Nice talking to you Sparky.” She walked over to Katara and the two of them were soon engaged in some kind of hissed argument. Zuko strained his ears to listen, but the noise of the camp and the ringing in his ear made it impossible to eavesdrop. He sighed, and gave up. He sighed, and gave up. He pulled himself to his feet, fully intending on finding some chore or other to earn his keep, but was quickly and curtly told to sit back down by one of the warriors. Cautiously, keeping an eye on the man’s sword, Zuko planted himself back on the sand, and waited for someone to tell him to do otherwise.

The morning drew on, and Zuko found his stomach rumbling. It was strange, he noted idly, that his body had once again grown accustomed to three meals a day. There had been times back in camp, where he’d counted himself lucky if he got that many in a week. He shuddered at the memory of the gnawing emptiness that raked at his insides. That had been when he was locked up in a cell and being punished for some misdemeanour, imagined or otherwise, and the guards had wanted him desperate and obedient, but still alive to go back to work once they considered him suitably cowed. He wondered how much longer the chief would keep feeding him, now he had another five people and two beasts to cater for. Zuko knew all too well where he stood in the camp hierarchy, and it didn’t bode well for him.

Around midday, when Agni was at his height in the sky and steadily baking the sand white hot to the touch, the men finally emerged from the tent, Sokka firmly at his dad’s side and face surprisingly solemn. The two of them strode into the centre of camp, and stood around the campfire, waiting for the rest of the group to gather. The Earth King hurried up to join them, and gazed nervously out at the sea of faces clustering around him. Zuko was pulled to his feet by a nearby warrior, and shoved into the growing assembly. Clearly they’d suspected he might make a run for it whilst the camp was distracted. Zuko hadn’t been about to, as a matter of fact, but only because the thought had already crossed his mind and deemed impossible. Two failed escape attempts in less than a day would be more than Zuko thought the chief could tolerate.

Hakoda cleared his throat, and slung a strong arm around Sokka’s shoulders. Zuko flinched at the action, but Sokka only smiled up at his dad. The first part of the announcement was essentially what Zuko had expected; they were moving from the bay, it was too dangerous to stay where they were, in light of the fall of Ba Sing Se. The Fire Navy would be heading up the river in droves; if they stayed on the beach they’d be sitting turtle-ducks. All as expected.
The second part of the announcement, however, took Zuko completely by surprise.

“We’re splitting up,” Hakoda informed the group at large. “Aput will take our ships and lead the men to gather allies for the invasion.” Zuko frowned at that, he had not heard anything about an invasion in the past few months of his captivity, and he’d been keeping his good ear open. “Luckily, we took down that Fire Nation ship last night,” the chief continued, nodding to where the battleship was floating out to sea. “We were going to hand it over to the Earth Kingdom army, but seeing as the Earth Kingdom is now in Fire Nation hands, we should probably use it for ourselves.”

A quick rumbling of agreement spread through the crowd, at the suggestion. The Earth King frowned, and blushed slightly at the reminder that his capital city had been completely overrun only the night before. He shifted awkwardly and coughed, taking over the next part of the speech from Hakoda.

The men fell silent as the Earth King stepped forwards. He haltingly, but with growing enthusiasm announced his desire to learn more about his kingdom. He professed his regret that his ignorance had allowed his country to fall into the hands of the enemy, and vowed that he would not be silent to the needs of his people any longer. It was an admirable speech, and Zuko would have felt some kind of respect for the man, had he not immediately declared his intention to travel incognito across the Earth Kingdom with his very conspicuous bear alongside him. It would have been laughable were it not so utterly ridiculous.

What the Earth King could possibly expect to find on his journey, Zuko really had no clue. It wasn’t exactly like he could do all that much to help anyone, and he seemed painfully naïve as to the world outside of his palace walls. Zuko knew all too well just how vulnerable that would make the King. He had no doubt that the man would end up surrendering and admitting his identity to the first friendly-looking village he came across; the man looked like he had no idea how to go hungry, or how to look after himself. Would he even know how to get himself a job, let alone how to work for a living? Besides, the King was dragging that ridiculous beast along with him. Agni only knew how much that thing ate. Zuko shook his head in exasperation as the young King waved a jaunty goodbye and headed for the road, full of the excitement of a new adventure. Zuko snorted; he gave him a week, tops.

Hakoda waited until the Earth King had disappeared into the dunes, before he continued on with his instructions. The men were set to striking the camp, and they hurried to do so with the same efficiency that Zuko had come to expect of them.

He lost sight of Sokka and the others as they disappeared behind Appa-the-flying-monster’s hulking frame. The camp was busy around him, and no one seemed to be paying too much attention to their prisoner; Zuko saw his chance. Moving swiftly and certainly, but not so fast as to draw anyone’s attention, he slipped through the camp, heading for the dunes he had just watched the Earth King disappear into. He had almost made it to the edge of camp when something struck hard against his right ankle and he tripped, collapsing onto his hands and knees in the hot sand.

“Do I need to tie you up again?”

It was Hakoda, once again, who had thwarted his escape. Zuko pushed himself to his feet and spun around. The chief was regarding him with a slightly amused expression, one eyebrow raised in disdain. Zuko hissed in frustration, and felt his chi flare up briefly in response.

“What do I have to do for you to just let me go?” He asked bitterly.

“You’re the Fire Lord’s only son,” Hakoda reminded him sternly. “I can’t just let you go.”
“Why not?” Zuko finally exploded and the whole camp froze, turning to look at him. He flushed bright red under all the attention, but he was far too frustrated to go quietly. “What can I possibly do to make you trust me? I fucking saved your life. That has to mean something?” He pointed at Hakoda with one slim finger, his good eye narrowed until both his eyes were fixed in a glare.

“You did,” Hakoda acknowledged, “and you have my gratitude. But I still can’t just let you go.” The chief frowned and grabbed hold of Zuko’s arm, ignoring the flinch that ran through the boy’s body as he was dragged back to camp. “You want me to trust you? Then stay with us and do as you’re told,” the chief told him sternly. “Stop trying to run away every time we turn our backs.”

Zuko stayed silent as the chief dragged him back to the rest of the men. The man’s temper was hard to judge, and he had no idea if he would get a piercing look, or the edge of a blade, if he spoke up again. It was, Zuko realised, very much like living with his own father had been.

“Put him on the ship and don’t take your eyes off him,” Hakoda ordered one of the warriors. He ran a hand through his hair, and turned to face the rest of the gawping camp. “We need to set sail within the hour. Stop standing around, and get a move on!” Zuko strained against the arms holding him, as he tried to keep himself from being dragged onto the ship.

Hakoda spun around and fixed him with a look that could freeze fire.

“You’re going on that boat, if I have to chain you up and drag you on myself, is that clear?”

Zuko glared at him defiantly. “Yes, sir,” he all but spat, as the water tribesman holding him dragged him bodily from the camp and down to one of the rowboats.

Once on board the ship, Zuko found himself under the watchful eyes of two glaring water tribesmen and Sokka himself. He was furious at the chief- and at himself for getting caught again. He was certain that the spirits had it out for him; his every endeavour seemed doomed to failure. They were gathered at the stern, and Zuko had planted himself at the railing, staring firmly out to sea, his back to the hulking metal of the ship.

Countless men and women had died on this ship, only the night before. Their restless spirits haunted the waters of the bay, denied final rites that would see them properly into the spirit world. Zuko didn’t want to be trapped on a ship with their ghosts, particularly when his own were already playing havoc in his mind. It had been bad enough being at sea on the wooden water tribe ships, let alone on a Fire Nation vessel; surrounded by metal and the stench of soot, the memories of that horrific voyage to the mining camp were already hammering at his nerves. If they tried to take him below deck, Zuko was sure he’d lose his mind.

“Maybe it’s for the best?” Sokka offered awkwardly, moving to stand next to Zuko at the rail. “The Fire Nation are going to be all over the Earth Kingdom now. At least with us, you’ll be safe.”

Zuko clenched his teeth and his fists and forced himself not to react.

“Well…safer I guess…” Sokka amended, philosophically.

“Until your dad decides I’m too dangerous to keep around and he has me tossed overboard, I guess.” Zuko kept his gaze out to sea, but he could see from the corner of his good eye, as Sokka flinched at the acerbic tone.

“I promise you, he won’t do that,” Sokka said earnestly. “I don’t know what you’ve been through in that prison or anything… but, my dad’s a good guy, you’re safe with him.”

“Last night he was ready to cut my throat for being a spy,” Zuko growled, turning to face Sokka
fully. “So don’t even fucking try it.”

“He what?” Sokka all but shrieked, his face paling dramatically. “Tell me that’s an exaggeration!”

Zuko set his shoulders and turned out to sea, studiously ignoring Sokka’s reaction. Behind him, he could hear more and more men boarding the ship. There was a great cacophony when the avatar’s flying monster landed on deck, mostly from Katara, as the men carefully unloaded their precious cargo and took him down to a safe cabin within the ship. Zuko wondered if the avatar would be given the captain’s quarters, or if they would go to Hakoda. Zuko hoped that they wouldn’t shove him in the brig, but hope was dangerous for a person in Zuko’s position.

It took a surprisingly short amount of time for the men to load the ship and stoke the engines enough to get the ship moving; they had clearly used a coal-burning steam-ship before, and they sailed it as if they had built it themselves. Zuko didn’t know why he was so surprised; it wasn’t as if the ships had to be powered by firebenders, just that they usually were. Within a few minutes they were skirting the edges of the bay and heading out to sea, in completely the opposite direction to the water tribe ships. A sudden thought crept up alarmingly from the back of Zuko’s mind.

“What was all that about an invasion plan?” Zuko asked, turning back to Sokka “Why are we on this ship and not with your dad’s fleet?” The other boy looked subdued, and let out a soft sigh before answering.

“We’re taking the fight to the Fire Lord,” he replied with a strange intensity. “We’re sailing into Fire Nation waters, so we need a disguise.”

“We’re what?” Zuko hissed in disbelief. They weren’t that recklessly stupid, were they? “Are you crazy? You’re going to get me killed!”

“Hey this is dangerous for all of us, you know?” Sokka’s tone turned a little stern as he continued. “But you might be able to help us, show us how we can take down your dad. I know you didn’t exactly sign up for this, but we’re not trying to be your enemies here, Zuko.” His voice and his face were earnest, which just made the inexplicable feeling of betrayal that crawled up in Zuko’s chest even worse. He didn’t know why he’d expected something different from Sokka, why he’d thought he could trust him; he was the chief’s son through and through, after all.

“Don’t fucking talk to me,” Zuko hissed, his hands glowing hot against the rail of the ship. He stayed there, staring out to sea long after Sokka had given up trying to talk to him and had left him to his thoughts. The ship chugged further and further away from the bay, until the cliffs were little more than a dot on the horizon. Zuko let out a ragged breath as the last glimpse of land dipped from his view. A quick glance up at the stars confirmed all that he needed to know. Sokka hadn’t been lying. They were heading straight for the Fire Nation, and there wasn’t a Koh-damned thing that Zuko could do about it.

Chapter End Notes

Well there we go- I hope you enjoyed this!
Toph is badass and incredible and I love her and Zuko bonding.
Zuko and Sokka have their first kinda-fight. Zuko's just in a bad place and Sokka
doesn't really get that dad!Hakoda isn't chief!Hakoda and war is not very nice. Things
will get better, I promise.
This will by no means be a Katara-bashing story by the way, I just really don't see her casually accepting a firebender, particularly Ozai's son around Aang, when he's just nearly been killed by said firebender's sister. She's protective and Zuko's a touch defensive.
I hope Zuko didn't seem too OOC this chapter, but he did just kill someone, and no matter how he rationalises it, that's kind of a big deal- he's not coping nearly as well as he'd like to think.

Next chapter we get more group bonding and Zuko *finally* gets the Water Tribe to trust him. A bit.

Please comment/ leave kudos if you enjoyed and let me know what you think!
Chapter Notes

Hi Guys,

So sorry this has taken me so long to get out, but it's a long one, in payment for all your patience. Thanks for sticking with me so far!

TWs this chapter for reference to child abuse and Zuko's terrible childhood, unhealthy eating patterns, and panic attacks/flashbacks. Ozai is a terrible human being.

I hope you enjoy! Please comment/leave kudos if you do!

The first few days aboard the ship were distinctly uncomfortable for Zuko. It wasn’t that he was being beaten, or starved, or treated with anything other than casual disdain, but Zuko felt constantly on edge. He knew, logically, that being forced against his will on a floating hunk of metal headed straight for his father, with a bunch of men who had been openly hostile to him, probably had a lot to do with it, but Zuko couldn’t shake off a constant sense of unease. It was completely illogical, too. The men, for the most part, had left him alone and seemed content just to keep a half-watch on him as he went around at his relative leisure.

It was strange being so idle. There was substantially less work to do on the Fire Nation ship; the vast majority of the work was done by the helmsman and the engine crew. Unlike on the Water Tribe ships- where there had been sails to furl and unfurl, and oars to man through the doldrums- there didn’t seem to be much for Zuko to do on their latest vessel. The men didn’t want him anywhere near the wheel, or near the engines, and that meant the vast majority of the work was taken out of his hands. He’d been given a mop and bucket on the first day, but the men soon realised that swabbing the steel decks only made them slippery and hard to patrol. He’d been abruptly ordered to leave the cleaning alone, and to just stay quiet and out of the way. From that point on, he’d mainly roamed above deck and thanked Agni that they hadn’t put him to work in the boiler room, seeing as firebenders could handle hotter temperatures for much longer than non-benders. Whatever the reasoning of the tribesmen, he was relieved. He did not want to go below deck and spend hours feeding coal into a sweltering furnace- even the thought of the heat on his face made him feel nauseous.

It wasn’t just the heat that made the boiler rooms so sickening though; Zuko adamantly refused to go below deck. The billowing smoke of the chimney and the roll of the waves was enough to send him into a spiral of horrible memories; he was not going to go below deck and bring back the worst of them. Zuko had therefore taken to sleeping above deck, although he had found a little hollow between the chimney stacks where it was at least a little warmer; it also had the added benefit of keeping him out of the way of the rest of the crew. The entrance to the nook was hidden between two pipes, which he was just thin enough to slip through; there was no way any of the men were following him in.

Through the thin gap was a space about four feet long and two feet wide; it was quite a tight squeeze, but it was open to the sky. With the lower chimney at his back, Zuko kept warm through
the night, even without a blanket, and the constant heat radiating up from the constantly-burning engines helped relax his constantly aching shoulder-muscles. It also made him almost impossible to see, unless someone were to climb up onto the stacks themselves and look down on him, or to squeeze through the pipes and squash into the small space alongside him. It was safe- or at least as safe as Zuko could get on a ship filled with very angry men with very sharp weapons. Once he was hidden away in the little space, he felt like he was able to breathe. Zuko had no delusions that the men weren’t entirely aware of exactly where he was sleeping, but at least none of them had tried to stop him slipping away to his hideaway, come nightfall.

His refusal to leave the deck however- Zuko eventually admitted, after a few days of an achingly empty stomach- had brought with it rather a large problem: food was only available in the mess hall, and the mess hall was below deck. Zuko hadn’t eaten since they’d boarded the ship, and his stomach was aching with hunger. He hadn’t eaten the night of the battle either and he’d thrown up most of his previous meals from that day on the sandy beach.

On the third day out to sea, he finally managed to swallow his terror and join the others in the mess hall for lunch. The trip down there was bad, bad enough that Zuko almost turned around and sprinted for the safety of the open deck. The further he got from the fresh air, the more the sweet, sickening smell of infection rushed up from the depths of his memory to fill his nose and make him gag. When Zuko finally made it to the hall, the men sneered at him, as if they thought he’d finally mastered his pride, rather than crippling anxiety, to join them deep in the bowels of the ship. Zuko didn’t care; he served himself and sat down in under a minute. He ignored the acerbic comments directed his way, too busy balancing the fine line between eating as quickly as possible to get back under the open skies, and not stuffing his stomach too rapidly when it was over three days empty and churning with nerves. It didn’t help that the standard military-issue metal benches in the mess hall and the standard military-issued food was reminding him unnervingly of life in camp. He kept half-expecting a guard to walk in and knock him senseless for some spurious reason or other. If it wasn’t the fact that he had a full bowl of jook before him, and the fact that he had an entire table to himself, pariah that he was, Zuko would have thought himself back in the camp and waiting for the bell for work to begin.

By the time he finished, he was nearly shaking with anxiety. He washed the bowl in a bucket of hot, soapy water as he’d observed the other men doing, being careful not to splash too much. He then raced out of the hall as if rabid komodo-rhinos were on his tail. If the men thought that he was too prideful or rude to sit with them, then that was fine by Zuko. He imagined that they wanted his company even less than he desired theirs, and he was far more concerned with avoiding a full-blown panic attack in their presence, than he was in making friends. He made it back above deck without throwing up, and so avoided the sneers of the men; it was a huge relief that they mainly left him alone, but he didn’t want to give them any further reason to despise him.

After the turmoil of the morning, the rest of Zuko’s day was blessedly quiet- he even managed to get in a bit of meditation. He had been trying, when he had a few moments alone, to trigger his Firebending once again. His meditative breathing came naturally after the years of practise he’d had at the mine, when it was often the only thing between his explosive temper and a good ten minutes at the end of the Guards’ steel-toed boots. The night before, Zuko had even managed to get all the lamps on the stern deck rising and falling in time with his breathing, and had been startled out of his exercises by the alarmed shouts of the men on watch-duty. Thankfully, the men had put the strange phenomenon down to an odd breeze, but Zuko had decided to only practise during the day from that point on. Unfortunately, as nice as all the breathing was, Zuko had not yet been able to generate any fire of his own. It was if whatever ignited his chi was just…missing, like there was something empty and dead inside him. It was like trying to coax a flame from wet kindling: nothing happened.

It seemed like nothing less than the sheer terror he’d felt back during the battle would coax any fire
Part of him contemplated asking the Water Tribe men to attack him, but he had no doubt that they’d be more than enthusiastic to try and run him through with spears, particularly if he then started generating uncontrollable streams of fire. Zuko was not keen on tempting fate; the spirits had not been particularly kind to him thus far, and he doubted they’d start anytime soon.

A loud laugh broke him from his thoughts, and Zuko started, losing the rhythm of his breathing. He was sat on the stern deck, facing out to sea. The sky was dark, and the lamps had already been lit. It was a lot later then Zuko had realised. He pulled himself to his feet, groaning loudly at how stiff his muscles were; he’d been sat in the same position for hours, letting the cold seep into his bones. He stretched his arms out, watching the Water Tribe men around him carefully. The deck was mainly empty, and the few who were standing about in the chill evening air were staring miserably down at the hatch that led below deck. A warm glow broke up through the gaps in the metal, and Zuko could make out the muffled sounds of cheering and singing. Zuko sighed, there was no way he was going near the celebrating tribesman; a large part of him, however, was relieved at the excuse not to have to brave the mess hall for dinner.

He looked out to sea, sighing again, and watched idly as the sun slowly sank lower in the sky. It was oddly mesmerising. Less than five minutes later, Zuko saw Sokka poke his head out from the hatch, and he let out a soft groan. His somewhat peaceful moment was broken; Sokka had come for his nightly chat.

Although the men had thus far been content to ignore him, the children were a different matter. Toph had sought him out on no less than five separate occasions, pinning him down with her unnerving accuracy, wherever he had sequestered himself on some empty part of the deck. After the first time, when she’d approached him from his left and scared the ever-living shit out of him, she made sure to loudly announce her presence with some obnoxious comment or other; Zuko was quietly touched at her consideration. Whenever she’d sought him out, it was mainly to talk at him, telling him about her exploits as the greatest Earthbender in the world (which Zuko found himself actually believing) and how she came to be travelling with the Avatar and his friends. Zuko strongly suspected that she’d spent a great deal of her life being told to shut up and stay quiet; he was happy that she, at least, had managed to overcome that- Agni knows he hadn’t. Zuko had quickly decided that he liked Toph, and that he didn’t mind her visits; he was happy to listen, and she seemed happy to talk.

Sokka, in direct contrast, kept trying to engage Zuko in conversation about the Fire Nation and the war, and about Zuko’s life. He didn’t seem to understand that Zuko had nothing new and interesting to say about his country, that he didn’t know the slightest damned thing about the war, or that he had no intention of sharing the bitter details of his life with someone only a couple of conversations away from being a total stranger. Still Sokka persisted. It was odd, and Zuko did not like it. The resultant small-talk was stilted and filled with lots of painful silences while Zuko quietly panicked, trying to come up with answers to Sokka’s fast-paced questions. Zuko didn’t know how to talk to someone his own age, or really anyone at all, for that matter. It was awkward, and humiliating. The whole experience was made even worse by the fact that Sokka would keep giving him these (utterly confusing) sad and incredibly earnest little smiles. Zuko didn’t know if it was another technique to get him talking about things he had no actual information about, or if Sokka just genuinely wanted to be his friend.

Zuko pulled himself from his thoughts and let out a sigh as Sokka hurried over to him with a bright smile on his face. The nightly conversation was just as stilted as all the others, so Zuko had no idea why Sokka seemed so keen on making it into a tradition. Sokka leant against the railing and launched into a monologue almost immediately. Zuko sighed and stared out to sea as Sokka chatted amiably about his day; there’d been some kind of mayhem with Momo, the Avatar’s pet lemur, and a box of ball-bearings from the Stores. Sokka kept grinning brightly at him, his eyes warm and friendly. He’d been looking at Zuko since that first day on the ship, when Zuko had told him to fuck
off and leave him alone. It made Zuko feel distinctly uncomfortable.

Sokka finished his story, laughing loudly, and wiping tears from his eyes. Before he even got a chance to start another, Zuko cut him off.

“Why do you keep doing that?”

“What do you mean?” Sokka replied, looking confused. The smile slowly faded from his face as he caught Zuko’s grim expression.

They were stood at the railing of the ship, alone. The two watch-men were currently standing at port and starboard, and everyone else was below deck enjoying some kind of entertainment night. Zuko didn’t know the exactly what it was in aid of and he didn’t care. The laughter had been growing louder and more raucous; someone had picked up a Tsungi horn and was murdering the chorus of *The Bard and the Fisherman’s Daughter*, so Zuko was glad he’d stayed well away.

Zuko glanced at Sokka, and then out to sea. The wind whistled through his hair, and he fought back a shiver. “Smiling at me like that.” He said, finally. “It’s weird.” Sokka flushed, and looked away, his mouth in a strange twist.

“Ah…sorry.” He muttered, running a hand across the back of his neck. “I’ll…um…I’ll stop.”

“I mean…” This was the awkward part. Zuko had always struggled to talk to other people, and he was never sure of the best way to just ask people questions. He wanted to know why Sokka was still hanging around him, but he had no idea how to phrase it without pissing off the chief’s son. He didn’t want this budding *whatever* to just be another way to pump him for national secrets that he didn’t have.

Zuko rubbed a hand across his eyes, and then glanced at Sokka. “I’ve told the chief Agni-knows-how-many times that I don’t actually know anything. Acting like my friend won’t get me to tell you information I just don’t have.”

Sokka turned to face him. “You think that’s what’s going on here?” He had the audacity to look a little hurt.

“Isn’t it?”

“No!” Sokka looked repulsed. “I was just trying to talk to you man-” he stopped and ran a hand agitatedly across the back of his head “-you looked a little…”

“What?”

“Lonely.” Sokka looked back out to sea, his cheeks flushed bright red. Zuko swallowed heavily and fixed his own gaze on the crashing waves.

“Oh.”

Zuko shut his mouth at that. There wasn’t much he could say. Of course he was lonely, but he’d been lonely for years and that had never mattered to anyone before. Why should Sokka suddenly care?

He stood in silence, his gaze firmly fixed out to sea. The sky was a heady mix of deep pink and orange where the sun hung low on the horizon, making the water gimmer like the diamonds that had adorned his mother’s jewellery many years ago.
Eventually Sokka broke the tension. “I told you, we’re not the bad guys,” he sighed, and turned to face Zuko with another of those painfully earnest looks. Something clenched tightly in Zuko’s chest. “I’m not trying to, like, interrogate you or something, seriously!”

Zuko scoffed.

“I’m not man, honestly. I just want to get to know you!”

“And I’m sure your dad has nothing to do with that…”

“Hey!” Sokka exclaimed, his hand clenching tightly on the rail for one brief moment. “My dad just wants to help you.”

Zuko snorted, sneering at the hurt expression in Sokka’s wide eyes. “Yeah, I’m sure he was ‘helping’ me when he and his buddy broke my nose and beat the shit out of me.” He snorted once again. “Nothing to do with all the useful Fire Nation secrets I must be hiding!” There was a moment of appalled silence, before Sokka all but yelped in shock.

“What?” Sokka’s voice was weak and strangled; he was actually looking a little green. “You’re saying my dad…tortured…you?”

Zuko flinched at that word, and frowned. “That’s a bit extreme. He just had this Earthbender kick the crap out of me for a few hours.”

“Fuck.” Sokka actually looked sick. Zuko frowned and looked away. It wasn’t like it was Sokka’s ribs that had been pounded.

“Don’t act so surprised,” Zuko said tersely, keeping his eyes anywhere but Sokka’s. “Unless you honestly thought your dad could fight a war without getting his hands dirty.”

“No,” Sokka’s voice was quiet and subdued, but it carried an undercurrent of something else. “He was building bombs on the beach, and I know all the Fire Nation weaponry piled back at the bay didn’t just float in as flotsam.” His voice was grim and very flat. “It’s just…”

“What?” Zuko asked tersely after a moment of silence.

“You’re just a kid.”

Zuko looked up at the sky. They were heading further West, sailing closer to the Fire Nation.

“I’ve not been a kid in a long time,” he finally admitted, his voice much more gravelly than he had perhaps intended.

Sokka scoffed, his voice harsh. “You’re what, like a couple of years older than me?” His hands clenched tightly on the railing. “It’s not right.”

“I’m the ex-Crown Prince of the enemy nation,” Zuko reminded Sokka archly, suddenly feeling very old. “It would be stupid for your dad to let that go.”

“But…” Sokka’s face was twisted up in an expression of horror, and Zuko felt himself getting irrationally angry.

“Come on! Don’t act so fucking shocked! It was just a beating! You can’t tell me your dad has never smacked you around before!” Zuko sneered in disdain, but his face quickly fell into a frown as he looked at the other boy.
Judging by Sokka’s aghast expression, perhaps he could do just that. Fuck.

“Shit…Zuko…that’s not… I mean. Fuck. Of course he hasn’t.” Sokka stuttered, his eyes wide and glassy. “He’s my dad! What kind of monster would…?” Sokka trailed off, looking a little green.

Zuko flushed and deliberately avoided making eye contact with the other boy. Fuck, this was embarrassing.

It wasn’t as if he honestly thought that all parents were like his father, but surely… once or twice, right? He’d seen the way Hakoda was with his children, and he’d seemed like a loving father, but Zuko’s own father had been able to keep most of his disappointment hidden until they were behind closed doors; it had been uncouth to do otherwise. There was no way that the chief just let his kids get away with stuff, was there? Or maybe there was. Zuko knew that his father was an exception, not all parents went around permanently branding their kids, or trying to kill them. It wasn’t as if Zuko couldn’t recognise that his father had gone too far, too often, and for things too variable and inconsistent to actually be punishments, rather than just his father exercising his temper and frustration on an easily available (weak) target. But… Zuko had just assumed that most kids got thrashed at some point in their lives. Even Azula had been punished on the odd occasion her behaviour was anything less than its usual perfection. Had Hakoda, the fucking terrifying, ruthless warrior, honestly never laid hands on his son?

“Well,” Zuko said roughly. The conversation seemed to have gotten away from them very quickly. How had they gone from Momo the disruptive lemur to nearly opening the can of worms that was Zuko’s fucked-up childhood?

Sokka just stared at him for a few long moments, before he nodded slowly. Within minutes he’d turned the conversation back to something called boomerang-ice-sculpting, which was apparently something Sokka had invented all by himself. Zuko let the other boy’s chatter wash over him as he tried not to over-analyse the earlier conversation too much. He really tried- it was just… the minute that he’d started thinking about the Fire Lord, every horrible memory from his childhood came rushing back into his brain. His heart started beating much more heavily in his chest. He tried to control his breathing, and forced himself to listen to the pattern and cadence of Sokka’s words, if not to the actual substance.

Eventually, when a good half an hour had passed and both the sky and sea were pitch-black and shimmering with starlight, Sokka finally pulled himself to his feet, and fixed Zuko with an indiscernible look.

“It won’t happen again,” he said quietly. “I promise you.”

Before Zuko could stutter out a reply, the other boy had disappeared off below deck. The sound of shouting and singing escaped out across the deck for the brief few moments it took Sokka to lift and then disappear beneath the hatch, leaving Zuko alone for the night.

After that, Sokka made a point to spend a good few hours a day talking to Zuko, only he stayed very clear from any subjects relating to the Fire Nation, the war, or to either of their families. Instead, Sokka told him all about the Southern Water tribe, about his Gran-gran and their neighbours, and ice-fishing, and tales by the fire in the winter when the sun only shone for a few brief hours. It was strangely… comfortable. Zuko found himself relaxing about the other boy, willing to admit that perhaps Sokka hadn’t been trying to subtly interrogate him, after all.

A few days after that horrible conversation with Sokka, and after almost a week and a half at sea, Katara finally came looking for Zuko. Up until that point, she’d been avoiding him with almost as much energy as her brother had put into seeking him out. He was sitting out on deck, as per usual,
trying to meditate. It was not going too well, considering the Water Tribe men kept glaring at him and making mumbled comments under their breath as they passed, which kept snapping him out of his trance. So when Katara came storming over towards him, Zuko was almost, almost, grateful for the distraction.

She stopped a few paces away from where he was sat, her hands firmly on her hips and her ice-blue eyes blazing.

“Listen,” she began sternly, without any pre-amble, “I don’t like you, and I don’t trust you, but Sokka seems to think you’re worth bothering with. He says I should talk to you, and I trust my brother.”

“Great,” Zuko replied with a scoff, pushing down the strange feeling that rose in his chest when she mentioned Sokka. “So glad I have his good opinion.” He pulled himself to his feet, trying to ignore the way her right hand drifted down to the flask at her hip when he moved. “Is that all you wanted to tell me?”

She stared at him for a long moment. “You’re really rude, you know?”

“I’m a prisoner,” Zuko remarked dryly. “Am I supposed to be licking your boots now too?” He squashed down the scathing voice at the back of his head that reminded him that he probably would do just that if she demanded it of him. Zuko was no idiot, and pride had long since become nothing more than an irritating hindrance to survival.

“You’re not a prisoner.” Katara’s voice had softened slightly, although her hand stayed right by her water flask.

Zuko nodded to the cuffs still wrapped around his wrists. The tribesmen had removed the chain between them out of necessity, but the manacles themselves remained. It was a fitting reminder of his place amongst them.

“Tell that to your father.”

“You don’t like my dad, do you?” Katara asked in a softer voice, her eyes fixed on the metal around his wrists, a thoughtful look on her face.

Zuko studiously remained quiet.

“I don’t much at the moment either,” she said softly, a guilty admission. Zuko did his best not to heave a sigh. He really didn’t want to hash out the complicated family disputes of the water tribe chief and his only daughter, but he didn’t know how best to extricate himself from the conversation. He ended up standing silently, as he tried not to crawl out of his own skin from the awkwardness.

Katara moved a couple of steps closer, still out of arm’s reach of Zuko, but close enough that she could speak quietly, without being overheard.

“You’re afraid of my dad,” she told him, her eyes watching his expression closely. He bristled in indignation, but she spoke quickly, before he could stutter out a denial. “I can tell. Besides, what you told me on the beach that day? That was true, wasn’t it?” She looked up to meet his eyes squarely. “My dad really has killed people.”

Zuko watched her closely, but there was no sign of the hysterical girl that had adamantly refused to believe him that day on the beach. He nodded slowly, once, and she let out a long sigh.

“I thought so,” she all but whispered. She wasn’t looking at him anymore, but out at the calm blue
expanse of the sea. “He’s been away so long, I guess…deep down…”

Zuko crossed his arms over his chest and shifted his weight from foot to foot.

“I suppose I just didn’t want to believe it,” Katara said finally, turning back to Zuko. Her eyes were red, but she wasn’t crying. She left him not long after that, and he tried not to feel too relieved at her absence.

He didn’t sleep well that night, or for the next few for that matter. He was tormented by a vague sense of dread that wouldn’t seem to leave him alone, especially when he closed his eyes to sleep. The days were, actually, for once, surprisingly okay, barring his thrice-daily stints of utter panic when he forced himself below deck for meals. Although Zuko was loath to admit it, the constant little visits from both Sokka and Toph were strangely…nice. He had never really had friends his own age before; for some strange reason, they seemed to actually want to spend time with him. Zuko didn’t fully understand it, but it was better than being alone with his thoughts, because that was the real reason that his nights were so disturbed. The minute Agni’s face dipped below the horizon and the others headed for bed, all the anxiety and fear he’d managed to force from his mind came rushing back.

Zuko sighed, and hunkered down in the small sanctuary he’d made for himself, wrapping his arms around himself to fend off the early morning chill. It was nearly three days since Katara had approached him, and he had only had a few hours of snatched sleep since then. He couldn’t ignore the rising panic that they were heading further and further towards Fire Nation waters. Try as he might to distract himself from how utterly fucked his situation was, his thoughts kept returning back to the Water Tribe men, the unconscious Avatar, and the fact that the ship was getting closer to his father than Zuko had ever wished to be again. He sighed, and rested his aching head on his knees. Fuck…he was so screwed.

He slept fitfully for the rest of the night, grabbing a few minutes here or there. Eventually, Zuko was dragged blearily from a half-doze by the first stirrings of Agni on the horizon, and he knew he wouldn’t get back to sleep again. He blinked owlishly, trying to gather his thoughts into some vague semblance of coherency, and sluggishly pulled himself to his feet. He was exhausted, but he knew that he couldn’t spend the whole day hidden away, much as he would like to. People would wonder where he was, and it never ended well for him when anyone was forced to come looking for him.

Zuko slipped from his hiding place and wandered aimlessly over to the bow of the ship. He leant heavily against the railing, watching as Agni’s face climbed steadily up over the horizon. As the first faint rays of early morning sun painted his face, bathing him in a faint glow, something almost like peace descended over him. Sokka found him there a while later, still calmly watching the progression of the sun across the sky. The air was crisp and cool and a sharp breeze was whipping up the air, rousing the waves into frothy, roiling collisions, and making the deep-red flag high above the ship snap and twist.

“What are you thinking about?” Sokka called out as he slowly came to stand on Zuko’s right.

“You should run up the yellow and black flag.” Zuko replied, after a minute or so, staring up at the flag.

“What?”

“The yellow and black flag,” Zuko repeated, hugging his arms against himself to ward off the growing bite of the wind. “There’s got to be one on the bridge somewhere. It’s regulations.”

“Er, sure…” Sokka said hesitantly, staring at Zuko with a mix of confusion of wariness. “We can do
that, buddy. The yellow and black flag! Why not?” He smiled in what Zuko assumed was meant to be a reassuring way, nodding his head a touch too quickly. “And we’d be doing that because…”

“It’s a code,” Zuko told him quietly, his gaze still focused on the red flag billowing high above the ship. “It tells other ships that you’re on an urgent mission and that you have orders not to stop.”

“Won’t that just attract attention?” Sokka frowned.

Zuko turned to face Sokka. “Would you rather get boarded by the next Fire Navy ship we pass?”

Sokka gulped. “Good point.” He looked at Zuko with a strange expression in his eyes, before something seemed to dawn on him. “What if they’ve changed the code since you learn it?” He asked shrewdly. “What if that flag means ‘come on board we’ve got plenty of seal-jerky for everyone’?”

Zuko shot him a look that could set ice on fire.

“That’s a bit arrogant. I mean, how many people have to know about that code- the whole navy, right? If, like, a single person defects they could tell everyone the military’s super-secret code.” Sokka gesticulated widely, a look of derision on his expressive face.

“But someone would still need a Fire Navy ship to actually use it.” Zuko smiled thinly. “And who could possibly capture a Fire Nation ship?”

Sokka snorted. Then, after a long moment, he raised an eyebrow at Zuko. “Why are you telling me this, anyway?” He asked slowly. “You should just tell my dad yourself.”

Zuko laughed bitterly. “And you think he’ll trust me? He’ll probably think I’m selling you out.”

Sokka winced, and looked at Zuko with a pained expression. “He’s not that bad.”

Zuko did not respond to that; they weren’t having that conversation again. Sokka heaved a sigh.

“Alright, fine.” Sokka acquiesced eventually. “But if it pays off, I’m telling him it was your idea, just so you know.” He pushed himself to his feet with a groan, and stretched his arms high above his head, fingers linked together. His shoulder muscles were more defined than Zuko had originally thought; he hadn’t expected that the slightly-awkward teenager would be any good at throwing that boomerang of his, but the muscles in Sokka’s arms suggested otherwise. Zuko tried to fight back the blood rising to his cheeks. He had to stop underestimating people; it was getting embarrassing.

Sokka shot Zuko a quick glance over his shoulder as he walked away, and the small smirk on his face suggested he’d won some kind of victory. Zuko tried not to let the thought discomfit him too much; he’d undoubtedly discover what that was all about in due course.

Later that afternoon, Zuko noticed a couple of the men high up on the ship, changing the flag. He smiled softly to himself, relived that Sokka had taken his advice seriously. At least there was a slight protection against possible confrontation with the rest of the Fire Navy.

The faint sense of reassurance fell when, just before the final watch change before nightfall, Bato
limped up on deck, followed by four other men, all carrying a huge bundle between them. Zuko watched Bato warily, as the other man had still not taken revenge for his injury out on Zuko’s hide, and it would be stupid for Zuko to let his guard down around the other man until he did. However Bato didn’t so much as look at Zuko, instead calling to everyone to come and find some Fire Nation armour from the huge bundle that was then dropped onto the deck. Apparently it was Sokka’s idea, and the chief had immediately agreed to it. There was a bit of grumbling from the men, but they were not brash, un-blooded warriors desperate for every fight that came their way; they could see the sense in a disguise.

Zuko slunk in amongst the men, careful not to appear too hasty, but also not willing to be left with the dregs of whatever the warriors left. He got a few dark looks from the men around him, but he adamantly refused to meet their eyes as he deftly picked through the piles of red shirts, trousers, breast plates, and helmets. He had fought and won against men their size and bigger for far less back in the Fire Nation camp; he knew how to pick his battles, and well-fitting clothing was too valuable to compromise on. In under a minute, he had managed to select a few things in his approximate size and darted away to his make-shift room to change. He hadn’t bothered with any armour, and so it was easy work to change out the old, vaguely pungent, blue clothes that he’d been wearing for a good few weeks, for the simple red tunic and trousers, and a pair of solid boots. The fabric was much thinner than the water tribe garments, and Zuko had to fight back a shiver as his exposed arms prickled in the night air. He gritted his teeth and huddled up against the chimney stack; he’d suffered through far colder winters with far worse clothing. At least his boots were well-fitting and warm.

Barring the grumbling from the Water Tribe men at the uncomfortable uniforms, the next few days were relatively quiet. So quiet, in fact, that it put Zuko on edge. He had sat around and meditated as much as he could, and had chatted with Toph and Sokka whenever they ‘happened to pass by’. There’d been no sign of the Fire Navy out to sea, and Zuko had even managed to get some sleep. Things were almost pleasant, which meant that something bad was going to happen soon; nothing nice ever lasted very long for Zuko.

It was late afternoon on the fourth day after they’d changed the flag that it happened. Zuko spent the morning with Toph, Sokka and, rather oddly, Katara. Things had been incredibly awkward, until Sokka pulled out a box of fire flakes that he’d found in the Stores; he’d challenged the others to try them, swearing that he was immune to spice and could out-eat them all. It had been an absolute catastrophe. Sokka had swallowed a full handful and then started howling for water, Katara had gone bright red and downed half of her water flask after just one or two, and Toph had masterfully kept the tears from her eyes as she forced down flake after flake; she only stopped when she’d eaten just a couple more than Sokka. Zuko had watched them all, smirking, as one by one they admitted defeat, and then he’d calmly eaten his way through the rest of the box. He loved fire flakes; they reminded him of visiting the Fire Festival with his mother, back when he was small and his life had not been quite so awful. Sokka’s expression, as Zuko had cheerfully munched his way through what was, to him, a rather under-seasoned batch of the Fire Nation snack, had been hilarious. It had been the best morning that he’d had in a very, very long time; Zuko should have expected that it was all about to go wrong.

Zuko was alone when the men came for him; the others having all gone their own ways a few hours before. Katara had gone off to treat the Avatar (gifting Zuko with a tentative half-smile), Sokka had gone to feed Appa, and Toph had said something about an arm-wrestle with Bato to settle a bet. So Zuko was sat alone when the two men found him. They grabbed him by his elbows and yanked him to his feet. His mind spun in confusion and panic as they hauled him over to the hatch. He tried to dig his feet in, but he found no purchase on the wet steel of the deck; they dragged him below deck with little effort and a lot of cursing. Zuko’s stomach sank as they pulled him down a long corridor, draped with red banners, to the First Mate’s quarters. They knocked once on the door before opening it and pushing Zuko inside.
Hakoda was waiting for him. He was sat, exuding authority in a Fire Nation Captain’s uniform, behind a suspiciously empty desk. Zuko’s guards let go of his elbows and then left the room; the door clanged ominously behind them.

The chief indicated for him to step up to the desk, his eyes tracking Zuko’s every moment. Zuko obeyed instantly, trying not to shake as the air stuttered into his lungs with his shallow, rapid breaths. Oh Agni, he was terrified, and he hated himself for his terror. Sat behind that desk, eyeing Zuko like he was fucking prey, the chief looked just like the Fire Lord had done before he’d really laid into Zuko. Zuko’s breath hitched, and he clenched his fists tightly to try and conceal the shaking in his hands. Was that what the chief had dragged Zuko here for? A beating? There were two guards outside the door, and the chief had that fucking dagger at his belt; Zuko couldn’t run.

He tried to calm his breathing before he hyperventilated. He knew that he wasn’t standing before his father, but his mind kept tripping back over memories, reminding him what was coming to him, what he was meant to do. He wasn’t allowed to look scared, that was the rule. He was supposed to be contrite and quiet and accept his punishment, grateful that someone had taken the time to correct him. Zuko stared forcefully at the floor, and swallowed down a shudder. He was supposed to be silent and still, but how was he supposed to do that when he could barely breathe?

The Chief cleared his throat, and Zuko snapped his eyes back up, keeping a close watch on the man’s expression. He didn’t look angry, but that didn’t mean a fucking thing.

“I suppose you know why I asked to see you?”

“Yes, sir.” Zuko nodded. He didn’t, not really, or at least not specifically. He could think of a hundred different reasons why he might have pissed the chief off, but he had no idea what it was that had finally pushed the man over the edge. It didn’t matter anyway; Zuko had rarely ever understood exactly what he’d done to earn his father’s punishments, but he’d learnt that it was safer to just agree and take them.

Hakoda stood up suddenly, and Zuko flinched back a couple of paces. He was painfully aware of the three feet between him and the cabin door. Hakoda looked at him for a long moment, and then slowly sat back down in his chair, watching Zuko as if he were a wounded Armadillo-lion. Zuko didn’t know why the chief had stopped himself, but he was relieved and pathetically grateful.

“It was your idea to raise that flag,” Hakoda told him quietly. Zuko blanched, but he didn’t dare lie to the man; he nodded. Hakoda sighed. “I thought so. Sokka’s not a very good liar.” He sighed once again. “The watch spotted another Fire Nation ship during the night,” Hakoda told him, and Zuko’s breath caught in his chest. How had he missed that? “They didn’t even hail us,” Hakoda continued, his eyes watching Zuko intently, “I suspect we have you to thank for that.” He leant forwards and rested his hands on the table, keeping them in plain view. Zuko’s eyes snapped to them, watching them for any sudden movements, and the Chief let out a deep breath.

“My son tells me I’m blinded by prejudice,” Hakoda said steadily, a hint of amusement in his voice. Zuko flinched, his stomach dropping to the floor at the sheer disrespect that Sokka had shown his father in giving him such criticism. Hakoda sniffed. “He tells me that I should trust you.” Zuko’s eyes darted to the floor as he felt the weight of Hakoda’s gaze on him. He had no idea what the man expected him to say.

“Sir,” he offered after a few long moments of silence. Hakoda sighed again. Zuko felt the walls of the cabin inching closer around him, and the air seemed to be getting thinner and harder to breathe.

“Look at me,” he ordered quietly, and Zuko immediately snapped his eyes back up to the Chief’s face. “I’m not going to hurt you,” Hakoda told him with a faint hint of exasperation. “I’ve ordered
my men to do the same.” Zuko was itching to cross his arms over his chest, to offer some kind of barrier between himself and the chief’s unwavering attention, but he didn’t dare do anything so disrespectful; he didn’t trust the man’s promise one bit. “Do you believe me?” The chief asked quietly.

“Yes, sir,” Hakoda sighed again. “I doubt that.” He looked Zuko up and down, and then stood up from the chair.

Zuko flinched back, but then forced himself to step forwards again. He wasn’t going to be a coward about it. He could take a beating, he reminded his pounding heart; he’d done it before and no doubt he’d do it again. There was no reason to be so afraid. Hakoda stepped out from around the desk, and Zuko froze completely.

“I saw you this morning,” Hakoda said quietly, moving to stand in front of Zuko, just out of arms reach, “with Katara and Sokka and Toph.” Zuko’s heart began pounding even harder.

“Sir?”

“I don’t like you being around my children.” Hakoda stepped towards the door; Zuko froze, waiting for the blow to fall. “I don’t like it, but I trust them.” He opened the door and gave Zuko a piercing look. “They trust you, and so I want to trust you. Don’t give me a reason not to.” Hakoda’s voice was quiet and steady. Zuko flinched, and nodded very quickly; he didn’t trust himself to speak. The Chief indicated towards the door with a nod of his head. “You can go.”

Zuko didn’t waste any time; he all but sprinted from the room and up onto the deck. He made it to his hideaway and slipped in between the pipes before his legs collapsed from underneath him. He knelt, hunched on all fours, gasping for breath as the adrenaline surged through him. That had been close, too close. He didn’t know how it was before the panic finally abated, but Zuko supposed it must have been a good while, considering how dark the sky had become. He pulled himself onto his knees and shuffled over to the chimney, putting his back against the warmth. His hands still shook, and he pulled them close to his chest. He was exhausted and he fell quickly into a troubled sleep, promising himself that he would stay the fuck away from the chief’s kids for as long as the journey lasted. He was not giving the chief any reason to consider him a threat.

Zuko’s new resolve lasted for a good few days. He had sequestered himself in his hiding place and hadn’t even ventured out for meals. His stomach was aching, but he’d gone for longer without food before. He could wait a bit longer, at least until the chief’s anger had had time to properly abate. Zuko was painfully aware of just how far he’d pushed the chief. Hakoda had said that he wasn’t going to hurt him, but Zuko had heard that one far too many times before. It was safer to just wait out the man’s temper, out of sight and (hopefully) out of mind. No one had ever cared where Zuko was when he was a child as long as he was quiet and unobtrusive; they’d only ever bothered when he wasn’t somewhere he was meant to be, or when he was actively hiding from a punishment. So far, Zuko had only ventured out of his sanctuary for a few quick trips to the head, and to get water. Even then, he’d just found the nearest bucket of rainwater and scooped up a few mouthfuls; it tasted vile, and slightly brackish; but Zuko had had far worse.

Eventually though, his common sense won out; he knew he had to eat. On the evening of the third day, Zuko finally left his hiding place. He made it down to the mess hall and ate with surprisingly little fanfare. The hall was mostly empty and the few men eating there seemed distracted; Zuko was more than happy to slip by them unnoticed. When he made it back up on deck, he was confronted with the cause of all the unrest: the Avatar had woken up.
The Avatar was huddled up with his friends and the Chief on the bow deck, although Agni only knew what they were discussing. The rest of the men were clearly trying to eavesdrop on the conversation, but had enough respect for their Chief to not be too obvious about it. Zuko didn’t even try; there wasn’t chance he’d ever be able to hear anything from his hiding place, even if he had two working ears, and he wasn’t about to get too close to the group. Zuko wasn’t stupid. Even if he wasn’t actively avoiding Hakoda, Zuko wouldn’t have gone anywhere near that conversation. He was hardly about to engage the world’s most powerful bender, the link between the human and spirit worlds, in a casual conversation, even if said being was, to all intents and purposes, a kid. What exactly was he meant to say to the boy? “Hi, I’m the great-grandson of the man who massacred all your people, my father wants you dead, and my sister tried to kill you”? He’d be lucky if the avatar only pitched him overboard and left him to drown, Airbending-pacifist or no.

So Zuko kept in the shadows, and listened to whatever snatches of gossip he could make out from the water tribesmen roaming the deck. Over the course of the evening, he’d picked up a fair amount, enough that he thought he could piece together a bit of the truth, anyway. From what he understood, the boy was quite upset that the world considered him dead, and refused to see it as the strategic advantage that it was. He wanted to fight the Fire Lord, but he didn’t want anyone getting hurt in the process. Zuko didn’t know what to think about the Avatar. On the one hand, he seemed to be just nothing more than a child with very powerful bending. On the other, he also came across as a bit of a brat. It probably didn’t help that it was for his sake that they were on a ship steaming closer to the heart of the Fire Nation, which less than endeared him to Zuko.

With the Avatar awake, Zuko had been expecting a closer watch put on him, as Hakoda doubled up on the security around the ship. He had been expecting a stern warning to keep away from the boy, and a few thinly veiled threats as to what would happen if he didn’t. What he had not been anticipating, however, was that the Avatar would actively seek him out and yet, the day after the Avatar awoke, that was exactly what happened.

“Hi!”

Zuko started so badly that he cracked his head against the chimney stack behind him. He hissed and rubbed at his head, searching for the source of the noise. A yelped apology sounded from high above him, and Zuko’s eyes drifted up. The kid was crouched at the top of the metal wall opposite him, a good eight feet in the air. Zuko stared at him, trying to control his pounding heart, as the kid stepped off the side and gently floated to the ground. Right, Airbender, Zuko reminded himself. The boy winced and stumbled slightly as he landed, his hand flying to his back. The Avatar winced, before he turned to Zuko and smiled brightly, in a way that Zuko definitely did not find disconcerting. The boy then sat down, cross-legged, facing Zuko. Between them, they filled what little space was available in the nook, and there was less than a foot between their knees. Zuko carefully sat back, adjusting his feet in case he had to try and make a run for it—not that he’d really be able to in the little space available.

“You’re really hard to track down, you know?” the Avatar said, bright smile still painting his face. Zuko felt sick. “I’ve been wanting to talk to you for ages!”

“You have?” Zuko managed to get out, trying not to think about the fact that he was talking to a semi-mythical being. He tried to remember that this was the kid that Sokka had told him about, the one who liked penguin-sledding and wouldn’t so much as eat meat, but it was very, very hard.

“Yeah,” the Avatar replied brightly. “I’m Aang, by the way.”

“Zuko.” This was okay, Zuko could do this. He was definitely not hyperventilating at the potential wrath of a twelve-year-old.
“I know,” the Avatar said; his smile was still firmly in place. “Sokka really likes you.”

“Oh?” Zuko took a few deep breaths.

“He said you’re the Fire Lord’s kid,” the Avatar continued, his tone suddenly much grimmer.

“I was.”

“Oh, yeah, he said that too,” the Avatar actually blushed. “I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“You didn’t.” Zuko told him very quickly.

“Oh good!” The bright smile was back. “So…I mean…I just wanted to say hi, really.” He rubbed at the back of his head, and then winced as his hand met the sharp bristles of his new hair. Zuko nodded blankly, watching the kid closely.

“Hi,” he eventually replied, with an awkward wave of his hand. He had no idea what he was meant to say; nothing in his rather colourful history had prepared Zuko for this situation. He tried to muster a smile for the extremely powerful boy offering an olive branch, but he suspected it came out as more of a grimace. Agni, but Zuko was bad with people.

“Okay...” the Avatar replied awkwardly. “I’ll um…I’ll leave you alone then...” Zuko nodded once again, trying not to feel too relieved when the kid pulled himself to his feet with a grimace, and slipped out between the pipes and onto the deck.

As soon as he was alone, Zuko let his head fall into his hands. He strongly suspected that he’d just alienated the bridge between the human and the spirit worlds, as well as embarrassing himself beyond all earthly ken. He swore loudly, and let out a faint, slightly hysterical laugh. If there were any chance of the spirits easing off on him, he suspected he’d just fucked it up beyond all belief.

The pervasive fear of spiritual retribution followed Zuko through the night and into the next morning. It was therefore just Zuko’s luck when, just before noon on the morning after he may or may not have morbidly offended the Avatar, that the cry went up from one of the men on watch that they were approaching a Fire Nation ship. He watched, heart in his mouth, as the other boat sounded its horn once in greeting and set course in their general direction. Zuko’s stomach dropped into his new boots. The other ship grew closer and closer, until, just when Zuko thought they were minutes away from being boarded, the other boat swiftly changed its course once again, giving them room to pass unhindered. A firebender on the bow deck sent up a few flashes of fire; they’d seen the flag, and were letting them go. Zuko gasped in a deep breath, his knees feeling very weak; it could have ended very differently, and Zuko had not been ready to witness another battle. Perhaps he had not incurred the wrath of the spirits after all.

Later that day, the cry went up from the watch that they were near land. By early afternoon, they had pulled into port. Hakoda was up on deck as soon as they weighed anchor, organising the men for shifts of shore leave and co-ordinating with Bato. The Chief spotted Zuko almost instantly and put him under the watchful eye of the helmsman, telling him, in no uncertain terms, that he was not going to shore. Zuko didn’t need the guard detail, he’d had no plans to run blindly off into Fire Nation territory, but he couldn’t deny that the thought had crossed his mind.

Zuko ended up sat with his back to the tower. The air was frigid where it bit into his exposed arms, and the harbour stank of a cloying mix of salt, mildew and fish. It was uncomfortable, but Zuko stayed where he’d been put, doing his best to ignore the scowling helmsman who clearly had better things to do than babysit a prisoner. Zuko was trying to fight down his own annoyance; he’d been actively avoiding the chief for days, convinced he was one wrong move away from a beating. In the
end, the only thing that the man had done upon seeing him was put him under watch. Zuko strongly suspected that he’d worried and starved himself for days over nothing, and he was more than a little frustrated with himself.

No more than a half-hour later and Zuko was pulled from his self-admonishment by a familiar voice. “Hey,” Sokka said, walking over to where Zuko was sat. He shared a nod with the helmsman who wandered back up to the bridge, leaving Zuko under Sokka’s watch.

“Hi,” Zuko said awkwardly, his eyes dancing around for a glimpse of Hakoda; Zuko was pretty sure he’d gone ashore with the first group of men, but he couldn’t be too careful.

“You’ve been avoiding us,” Sokka commented lightly, sliding down the wall to sit beside him. Zuko didn’t say anything. It was true; he had been.

“Is it Aang?” Sokka asked tightly. “He thinks he upset you.”

“What? No!” Zuko stuttered out in shock. He’d been quite certain that he’d come out the worst of that conversation.

Sokka watched him shrewdly for a long moment and then nodded. “Thought not. So, what is it?” Sokka raised an eyebrow. “Did I scare you off with my super-manly eating of fire-flakes?” He winked, startling a smile from Zuko. Then his face turned deadly serious. “Or did my dad say something to you?”

The smile fell off Zuko’s lips. “Ah.” Sokka’s expression turned dark as the clouds gathering above them. Zuko winced. “I told him the flag thing was your idea. Thought that might help.” Sokka’s eyes were tight and angry. “Apparently not.”

“He didn’t tell me to stay away from you,” Zuko said, honestly. He picked idly at the lace on his left boot. “He said he wanted to trust me and not to give him a reason not to.”

Sokka turned to look at him fully. “And you interpreted that as ‘disappear like a spirit for a week’?”

Zuko shrugged. “It wasn’t a week.”

“Tui and La, have you even been eating?”

Zuko shrugged again, casually. It wasn’t really a big deal. Sokka ran a hand through his hair. “Look, we were going to go out for dinner, but why don’t we just go down to the mess now, you and me? Huh?” He smiled widely, but there was something twisted in it. “A man’s gotta eat, you know?”

“Sure.” Zuko didn’t move.

“Alright,” Sokka sighed after a few minutes. “You win.” He shifted a bit to get more comfortable, and then turned to Zuko, launching into a long description of everything he’d been up to since the morning that they’d last spoken.

Halfway through another story about Aang and his newfound issues with hair, Sokka cut himself off. The wind was whipping up around them and the sharp smell of ozone filled the air. That smell
always reminded Zuko of his father. He’d been trying to listen to Sokka, trying his best to push back the insidious memories of his childhood as the crack of lightning and of his father’s palm across his face crept up from the dark corners of his brain. Sokka turned to look at him with wry accusation.

“You’re not even listening, are you?”

Zuko stared at him blankly, unsure of what to say. He had been listening, but he doubted Sokka would believe him. The air felt charged and a light drizzle began to fall from the dark sky; there was going to be a storm.

“I was…” Zuko began, but was cut off by a sudden cry of alarm from the stern deck. Both boys looked up in alarm. Another yell went up.

“Stay here, I’m going to see what’s happening,” Sokka told him urgently, jumping to his feet and setting off to the other deck at a run.

Zuko waited a few moments and then followed after Sokka. There was a crowd assembling out on the deck and Sokka had already joined them. Zuko had only taken a few steps towards them when he heard what the men were muttering about- the avatar had disappeared!

Zuko’s stomach dropped to his shoes. He made a break for his nook, but he was stopped by a rough hand grasping onto his shoulder.

“And why are you running away?” It was Bato; Zuko gulped. The man shook him harshly. “What did you do?”

“Nothing!” Zuko objected loudly. “I didn’t do anything!”

“I knew that flag would come back to haunt us!” Bato growled, pulling Zuko along the deck to where the chief and his children were gathered. Zuko struggled uselessly in his grip. “That was your signal, wasn’t it?” Bato growled. “That was how you let them know the Avatar was on board! Where did they take him?”

Zuko couldn’t help it; a small but incredulous laugh broke from his throat. Just what level of espionage did the Water Tribe honestly think him capable of? It was absolutely ridiculous.

“Chief!” Bato yelled, as he hauled Zuko up to the group. “I just found this little shit trying to run off again. He’s guilty as sin, just look at him.”

Hakoda looked at Zuko blankly for a few moments, before turning back to his children. “The Avatar ran off, Bato, it wasn’t him.”

“In the middle of a storm? Hours after we pass a Fire Nation ship?” Bato asked incredulously. He shook Zuko’s shoulder harshly, making his teeth clatter together painfully. “C’mon chief, you don’t believe that was a coincidence?”

“Zuko didn’t do anything!” Sokka protested, rushing forwards to put himself between his father and Zuko. “This is just…Aang. He does stuff like this sometimes.”

“Sokka’s right,” Katara replied, stepping up to her father’s side. “I was just telling dad. Aang thinks he has to save the world on his own. He’s gone off to try and ‘regain his honour’; he wouldn’t listen to me.”

Hakoda nodded once, and Bato let go of Zuko’s shoulder, shoving him to the side with a look of utter disdain, still radiating distrust.
"We have to go and find him," Sokka said curtly, his eyes darting between Zuko, Bato and his father. "He left Appa, we can use him to find Aang." Katara nodded, and rushed off to start loading up the Avatar’s beast.

“You want to split up?” Hakoda replied, an undercurrent of pain in his voice.

“We have to.” The drizzle had turned into a full-on downpour. “You work on the invasion plan. We’ll meet up ahead of it. When Aang’s ready.”

“And what about Sparky?” Toph asked, pushing herself into the centre of the group. “Zuko,” she clarified, when they all looked at her blankly.

“He’s coming with us,” Sokka declared firmly. “Aang will have gone into the Fire Nation; we can use his help.”

“No way!” Zuko exclaimed, panic jolting through him; he wasn’t heading off randomly into the Fire Nation.

“You’d rather stay here?” Sokka asked him curtly, spinning around and fixing him with an unreadable look.

Zuko didn’t know what to say, quite frankly throwing himself overboard sounded like the safest option, even if they were middle of a storm. Did he go with the kids, off to Agni knows where, on a hunt for an errant, extremely powerful child in the midst of a tantrum? Or did he stay on the ship with the rest of the men and trust in the continued kindness and benevolence of the Water Tribe? It wasn’t really a choice at all.

“I’ll come with you,” he sighed. At least away from the watchful eyes of the warriors, he might have a better chance of slipping away or…something.

“Absolutely not!” Hakoda’s eyes were icy, and his voice cracked through the air like a whip.

Katara came rushing back, the Avatar’s beast ambling along beside her. The rain hitting the deck was growing harder and faster. She helped Toph into the saddle, as Sokka turned back to his father.

“Dad,” Sokka shouted over the growing rumblings of the men. His voice was sterner than Zuko had ever heard it. “We’ll be fine. Between Katara and Toph’s bending and my boomerang, we’ll be safe.”

“No Sokka, this isn’t up for discussion!” Hakoda commanded, as the wind howled around them.

Katara heaved herself up into the saddle. “Sokka, come on!” She yelled, and the heavens seemed to open entirely. Rain and hail clattered down onto the deck, soaking and stinging them in equal measure.

“Dad, I told you, he’s not a threat!” Sokka tried again, his eyes flitting frantically between his father and Appa.

A strong gust of wind hit them from the east, sending the boat listing to the side, and Zuko crashing back against the rail. Appa howled mournfully.

“Sokka!” Katara yelled, leaning over Appa’s head to shoot her brother a frantic look. “We have to go now, or the wind will be too strong for Appa to fly!”

Sokka sent one last pleading look at Hakoda’s immovable expression, before scrambling up into the
saddle. He looked plaintively at his dad, trying one last appeal.

“Dad, please-“

“No!” Hakoda yelled over the wind. A sharp crack of lightning broke across the sky, illuminating him in a flash of brilliant light, as the wind whipped his hair around his face. For one terrifying moment the Chief of the Water Tribe disappeared and in his place stood the Fire Lord, menacing in the dark red armour of his country. It was only a matter of seconds before the thunder rolled across the sky and the illusion of his father dispersed, leaving only Hakoda in its place, but it was enough. Zuko flinched back against the rail.

Katara cried out a sharp order, the words lost on the wind, and Appa began to ascend. Acting more out of instinct than anything else, Zuko bolted for the beast and grabbed hold of one of the saddle bags as the creature bounded up into the air. He scrambled for purchase as they rose abruptly into the sky; flinging his left hand out blindly, ignoring the way the wind whipped sharply past his face. He could hear angry and panicked shouts below him, but they were fading very quickly as the beast shot higher and higher into the sky. His scrambling fingers found the edge of something solid; Zuko mustered his energy and hauled himself up into the saddle, tumbling inelegantly over the side. He fell on his stomach, gasping for breath. He allowed himself a few moments, before he dared to glance up. Sokka and Katara were staring at him in utter shock.

“What? What was that?” Toph chimed up from where she was sat, an iron grip on the side of the saddle.

“Zuko just jumped onto Appa,” Katara said blankly, “from about five feet away.”

“That was…” Sokka stared at Zuko with wide eyes, before he broke into a loud laugh. “That was incredible!”

Appa rose high above the cloud line, breaking past the growing storm and into the open sky.

“Dad won’t be happy you just did that,” Katara added softly.

“Who cares?” Toph replied with a bright smile. “I bet you looked pretty badass, Sparky.”

The adrenaline still pumping through his body was enough to distract Zuko from the fact that he was hundreds of feet in the air, actually flying, as his heart beat madly with exhilaration. Zuko looked from Toph to Sokka, before collapsing back against the saddle, a relieved smile bursting across his lips. Sokka smiled back at him, as Appa let out a yowl and sped off in search of the missing Avatar.

Chapter End Notes

Well there you have it. The whole-team field trip with Zuko has officially begun! Sokka is trying his best to flirt and Zuko is oblivious as fuck. Hakoda is also trying his best, but the damage has kind of been done. Zuko sees him as a nicer version of Ozai, and that is going to take a while to repair.

Zuko just needs a hug and a lot of blankets and for his Uncle to feed him cups of tea. I promise there will be less angst and more recovery from this point on. Also, eventually
Zuko will get a clue as to why he's getting all these warm fuzzies when he looks at Sokka.

Katara is not as naive as I think fanfiction sometimes portrays her; she's optimistic and believes the best in most people she deems to be 'good', but she's not completely unaware of what her dad's been up to. It's not like she hasn't seen violence before. She just wasn't really ready to think about her dad that way last chapter, particularly when she was seeing him again for the first time in years. Zuko has really bad timing.

Again, I hope no one was too OOC in this?

I gave Zuko his little moment of acrobatic awesomeness at the end, because I refuse to believe that any version of Zuko, au or canon, wouldn't take the chance to perform a horrifically dangerous stunt on a poorly thought out whim and not pull it off magnificently. Also he needed a badass moment after he spent so long gazing listlessly out to sea this chapter.

Also I stand by my belief that any sane person would be slightly freaked out on first meeting Aang. He’s this all-powerful bender who can literally split the Earth *coughs*Kyoshi*coughs* but he’s just a really kind and smiley person who wants to be friends. I feel Zuko is well within his rights to be a little unnerved at a surprise visit.

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed. Please let me know your thoughts!
Legs of stone

Chapter Notes

Hi Guys!
Thank you all for sticking with me so far and for commenting/ leaving kudos.
This chapter is a bit less angsty- I think...

TWs for panic attacks/ referenced injury due to panic. Um reference to abuses/the terrible parenting in the Fire Nation.
I think that's it. If there's anything I've missed please let me know!

This was going to be half of a bigger chapter, but then it ran away from me. I should hopefully have chapter 10 out later this week, as I’ve got most of it half-written already.

Anyway, I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“No.”

“You can’t just say ‘no’ without listen-”

“No!”

“Zuko, c’mon!”

“I said no, Sokka!” Zuko all but growled, as he threw his hands into the air in exasperation. “I am not going into town with you.”

“But-

Zuko turned away from the conversation and stormed deeper into the darkness of the cave, as far from the others as possible. They were standing at the entrance, in an awkward huddle, exactly as they had been for the last ten or so minutes. He let out a shallow breath that came out as more of a hiss. He’d been debating the idiocy of a trip into town with Sokka for a long while, and he prayed to whatever spirit that might finally take pity on him, that the others would see sense and listen to him. The sound of retreating footsteps echoed behind him, as Sokka moved to join the others. Faintly, Zuko could make out a higher-pitched voice say something to the others, but with his back turned to them, that didn’t really help him to identity the speaker; it could have been either of the girls, or Aang, or even Sokka- if he was stressed enough to go up a register.

They must have taken his gesture as a sign that he was done with the conversation, because when Zuko finally turned back a few minutes later, they had left him on his own. Zuko let out a hiss of frustration, and sat heavily down against the cold rock of the cave wall. They were stupid. So fucking stupid. He’d tried to explain exactly why running headfirst into a Fire Nation town as an earthbender and two members of the Southern Water Tribe was beyond dangerous, even before you added the fucking Avatar into the mix, but they hadn’t listened to him. They were planning to get disguises- as if they wouldn’t give themselves away by their accents, or their manners, or their complete ignorance of Fire Nation culture. Agni, Zuko didn’t even know if they had money. He
rubbed his hands wearily across his face and let out a huff of bitter laughter. *This* was how the Avatar had been fighting against the Fire Nation- with half-baked plans and dangerous overconfidence?

He rested his head on his arms, and turned his gaze towards the bright entrance to the cave. On the surface, he understood the logic; they’d lost two of the food bags to the storm, and none of them (Zuko included) knew the Fire Nation flora well enough to forage, or the terrain well enough to hunt. If they were going to eat, they’d have to go shopping. Still, Zuko thought that going straight into town in broad daylight was just asking for trouble. Sokka had attempted to talk him round, had tried to get him to go along with them, but Zuko had drawn the line at that. He’d pointed out that he was quite the recognisable figure in the Fire Nation, what with having been a *Prince* once-upon-a-time. If they wanted to risk their lives, then that was their call; Zuko was not walking into town with a hugely recognisable traitor’s mark on his face and hoping that no one would notice.

A slow trickle of water was making its way down a stalactite somewhere to Zuko’s right, dripping steadily down to splash against the floor a few inches away from his foot. He sighed. It would have been nice if they’d at least tried to listen to him, rather than just dismissing his concerns outright. The Avatar had just casually waved his hand and told Zuko he was being paranoid when Zuko had mentioned that the huge brand on the side of his face was kind of an identifying feature. Paranoia: that was what the Avatar thought Zuko’s necessary caution was. A bright blast of fury rose in Zuko’s chest and, in the dim light of the cave, his clenched fists started to smoke.

The trip was not really turning out like Zuko had anticipated when he’d made that mad jump away from Hakoda and his men. Zuko had been expecting a long and arduous search for the Avatar. He had been half-hoping that the boy would have made for the colonies; that way, when they finally landed, Zuko could have slipped away in the confusion and headed…somewhere. It was not, perhaps, Zuko’s best thought out plan, but he hadn’t really had time to plan it out all that much. The next morning, once the storm had broken and the first rays of Agni’s light had just begun to reflect amber and gold off the glimmering sea, their little search party had found the boy. The Avatar had been lying on the obsidian beach of a tiny, volcanic, *Fire Nation* island, thus ruining any plans Zuko might have had for spiriting himself off into the Colonies.

The reunion had been short, sweet, and entirely bereft of any kind of admonition for the young boy who’d run off in the middle of enemy territory, in the middle of the night, and in the middle of a storm. That had been the first thing that set Zuko on edge. The next had been when he very politely asked Sokka to drop him somewhere nice and quiet in the Earth Kingdom, whilst they went about their plan of invading his father’s capital city, only for his request to have been met with shock and disbelief. Zuko had not taken that too well. The icing on the cake had been when Sokka had very carefully explained that there was no time to take a detour that long, that there was a schedule to stick to, and that Zuko wouldn’t be safe in the Earth Kingdom anyway, now that it was ostensibly under Fire Nation control. That had pushed Zuko over the edge.

The ensuing argument had not been pretty, he’d accused them of keeping him prisoner *again*, and they’d got a touch defensive in return. Zuko had lost, of course; they had the numbers, the transport, the supplies, and the power. They’d finished the argument by stating that Zuko was free to leave whenever he wanted to, and then flown off further into the Fire Nation, binding him closer to the safety of their flying escape route than before. He’d settled into stony silence and pointedly avoided eye contact with anyone for the rest of the day, through the night, and well into the next morning. Of course, a few hours past dawn and Sokka had awoken ‘starving’ hungry; that was when Katara had found that they’d lost a couple of food bags to the strong winds, and Toph had suggested they stop at the nearest island. That had prompted yet another argument that Zuko had, once again, lost.

Closing his eyes, Zuko growled in frustration. He didn’t understand why they were so painfully
unaware of how utterly conspicuous they all were. Maybe it was different in the Earth Kingdom, or wherever they had been spending most of their time of late, but the Fire Nation that Zuko had grown up in was nationalistic, xenophobic, and utterly intolerant of anything or anyone that did not fit into their rigidly regimented society. Zuko had been one of those: the ones that didn’t ‘fit’. So had the poets, and the artists, and the other free-thinkers that he’d endured that miserable camp with. They’d all been Fire Nation born and raised; if they didn’t fit in, how badly would the Avatar stand out?

Thankfully, Zuko wasn’t left alone with his thoughts for too long, as the group returned within the hour, carrying with them bags full of red clothing. Of course they hadn’t brought any food, Sokka explained when Zuko noticed the lack of the thing-they-had-gone-out-for-in-the-first-place. The disguises were, according to Sokka, how they were going to get to the food. Zuko swore very loudly at that explanation, glaring as an awkward-looking Avatar and a disapproving Katara unloaded the bags and passed around garments. The Avatar was loudly declaring that he used to swap clothes with his friend Kuzon, back when he wanted to go around the Fire Nation incognito, rather than as a visiting monk. Zuko tuned him out; he had heard enough of the Avatar’s reminiscences about a Fire Nation that had disappeared with his great-grandfather’s comet and the genocide of the Avatar’s own people.

The girls and the Avatar disappeared off to get dressed, leaving him with Sokka; Zuko didn’t ask the other boy where they had found the clothes, and he really didn’t want to know. He didn’t have any massive qualms with stealing, but taking things from regular Fire Nation citizens just seemed a little…wrong- particularly when they already had perfectly serviceable outfits from the ship. He might not want to walk around in army-issued clothing, but it wouldn’t hurt him to do it. Zuko clenched his fists, and pushed down the frustration that had been gnawing at his nerves since the day before. The only reason they needed civilian clothing was so that the Avatar could go waltzing around the Fire Nation ‘incognito’. It seemed a rather weak reason to steal from people who hadn’t done anything to hurt them. Still, Zuko pushed the feelings down; he knew better than to keep criticising his captors.

“Here-” Zuko was startled from his thoughts by Sokka’s voice. The other boy was standing shirtless, with a dark red cloak in his hand. He shoved it towards Zuko. “Peace offering.” Zuko looked at him appraisingly, trying to figure out Sokka’s angle; Sokka, to Zuko’s surprise, simply blushed and looked away. “We thought you could wear this,” he muttered, shaking the fabric in his hand, “the hood might-”

Zuko slipped the cloak over his shoulders; the material was thin and the weave loose, so it wouldn’t do very much to keep him warm, but the Fire Nation tended towards the higher temperatures anyway, what with all the volcanic activity. The hood was very deep and, when he lifted it, it fell almost over his eyes.

“Wow,” Sokka commented brightly. “You can’t see your face like, at all, man!”

Zuko quickly pulled the hood down, trying not to feel too slighted at the joy in Sokka’s tone. He knew his burn was unsightly; he didn’t need Sokka to remind him.

“You can come into town with us now, right?” Sokka asked brightly, as he pulled on his own red tunic. “No one will suspect a thing.”

“No,” Zuko replied harshly, although he kept the cloak around his shoulders. Sokka looked deflated. “You don’t think the guards will be suspicious of someone walking around with a hood over their face.”

Sokka blanched and then blushed bright red.
“Okay…you may have a point.”

“This is why you need to let me go,” Zuko added quietly. “I’m a liability; I’ll get you caught.”

Before Sokka could reply, the others came filtering back in. They hadn’t taken long to change, but Zuko knew that they were hungry, and hunger could be a damn powerful motivator. Katara distracted them all- the Avatar particularly, Zuko noted- as she paraded around in her new outfit, whilst Toph removed the soles from her fancy new sandals so that she could see properly. Zuko prayed to Agni that Sokka had forgotten what they’d been talking about and it seemed, for a short while, as if he had. They were all ready to go out, when Sokka suddenly returned to their previous conversation.

“You’ve got to come with us, Zuko!” His little smile was soft and vaguely hopeful. “There’s a shop that has kebabs! I’ve been dying to try one- we can get them together!”

Zuko sighed. He didn’t want to repeat this argument again. Sokka’s face fell.

“But, we got you the cloak!” the Avatar cut in brightly. “I’ve got a disguise too, see!” With that, the Avatar tied a headband around his forehead, hiding the tip of the blue arrow that peeked out below his hairline. Zuko sighed deeply; he couldn’t believe he’d been afraid of this child.

“…And if you lose that?” Zuko asked tightly. “Or I come with you and my hood falls down in the middle of the town square?”

“Then we run away,” the Avatar said breezily.

“Come on Zuko,” Sokka cut in quickly. “What are the chances that someone will recognise you, you’ve been gone for years?”

Swallowing down the itch of fury that caught at the back of his throat, Zuko sucked in a deep breath. He could feel phantom sparks dancing across his palms.

Spinning around, he pierced the Avatar with his gaze. “You said you used to have a friend from the Fire Nation?”

“Oh…yeah….”

Zuko strode forwards, right up to the Avatar, and pointed to the burn on his face. “So you know what this is, don’t you?”

The Avatar shuffled his feet and looked away. “It’s a…traitor’s mark.”

Zuko stepped back, crossing his arms over his chest; the Avatar had known and had still encouraged Zuko to wander into the middle of town, had still pretended like Zuko was the one in the wrong for having a modicum of caution. Zuko had to take very deep breaths; he was not going to smack the bridge between the spirit and human worlds upside the head. Sokka looked between the two of them in wary confusion.

“Please tell me that doesn’t mean what I think it means.”

Aang looked at Zuko, but on realising that Zuko wasn’t about to speak, he quietly began to explain.

“It’s for when people do something bad, really bad, like betray the Fire Lord bad. It’s to let everyone know that they’re banished from the Fire Nation.”
Sokka continued to stare at Zuko in shock, a look of dawning horror falling across his features.

“That means...your dad—”

“It means I can’t go wandering into town on a whim,” Zuko hissed, cutting him off. “It means I shouldn’t be anywhere near the Fire Nation.” He glared at the Avatar. “The minute anyone sees this—” he pointed sharply at his face—“they’ll call for the guards.”

“But—” The Avatar went to continue, but Sokka stepped forward and put himself in front of Zuko.

“Maybe not the best time, buddy.”

Whatever passed between Sokka and the Avatar in that moment, Zuko couldn’t tell, but the rigid set of Sokka’s shoulders suggested it was something very serious.

“Alright, Zuko,” Sokka said after half a minute or so, looking over his shoulder to meet Zuko’s eyes. “We’ll pick you up some food, okay?” His expression was rueful, but his eyes were sad. “We’ll eat back here. We can have a picnic or something.”

The others filed out very quietly after that. Toph gave Zuko a light punch on his arm as she walked past, which Zuko assumed was meant to be in solidarity. Or she was pissed at him. Sometimes it was hard to tell with Toph.

Zuko waited until a few minutes after he had stopped hearing the fading beat of their footsteps and then he gave into his frustration. He turned his face to the ceiling of the cave and let out a hoarse, animalistic shout of anger and pain and humiliation. It echoed back at him from the walls of the cave, making his bad ear ring and sending him dizzy. He collapsed onto his knees and put his head in his hands, waiting for the nausea to pass. He sat in silence for a few minutes, taking deep, calming breaths. He practised reciting the opening verse of Love Amongst the Dragons, as his mother had taught him too whenever he got like this as a child. After another few minutes, something settled within him, and he sat back on his heels, and strained his good ear for any sign of the others. It would be just his luck if Sokka had doubled back and caught him in the midst of a breakdown.

There was a loud yowl from outside, and Zuko started. It was just Appa, he realised, quashing down the child-like instinctive terror that rose at the back of his mind. It was just Appa. He tried to control his beating heart, as he resisted the urge to just run away. He was fine. There were no monsters skulking in the shadows of the cave for him to fear; even if there were, it would still be far more dangerous for him to blunder off blindly into Fire Nation territory on foot, with only the clothes on his back, than it would be to face them. Appa yowled again, and a terrible thought entered Zuko’s head. They’d left him with the transportation; he didn’t have to go anywhere on foot.

His stomach churned once again at the thought of stealing the Avatar’s flying monster, but necessity twisted his arm a damned sight harder. He slowly pulled himself to his feet and walked up to the entrance of the cave. There was no way that he could stay with the Avatar, he told himself; the boy was an imbecile, and a callous one at that. He didn’t seem to care that being around Zuko put his friends at even greater risk of discovery, nor did he seem to care that Zuko didn’t want to go along with their merry band of misfits. Zuko peered outside, checking to see if the others were on their way back, before he set off towards where Appa lay dozing. His stomach jolted again at the sight of the beast, but he steeled his nerves. It would really be best for everyone if Zuko just quietly disappeared.

Zuko slowly and carefully climbed up the side of the beast, making sure to keep his hand holds on the saddle, and not to grab any of the animal’s fur. It wasn’t even as if he’d be leaving them all stranded, Zuko thought as he climbed; Appa had found the Avatar easily enough even in the midst of a storm, so there was no reason why he wouldn’t be able to do that again. Clinging onto that thought,
Zuko hauled himself up onto Appa’s back and swung himself into the saddle. He picked up the reins, and then immediately dropped them; his stomach felt like lead. Why did this feel so wrong? A few months ago and he wouldn’t have thought twice about stealing the Avatar’s pet and flying off to safety. He’d have taken the animal and their packs and thanked the spirits for handing him both the means to escape and such useful supplies. There had been no room for sentimentality in the prison camp, and it had been survival of the fittest, the meanest, and the most ruthless. The world wasn’t nice and sometimes people had to do not-very-nice things to just survive it. The Avatar would have to learn that lesson eventually; Zuko didn’t need to feel guilty for being the one to teach him.

Besides, Zuko reminded himself sternly, he’d spent the past few months as a prisoner of Sokka and Katara’s father. He’d saved the man’s life, helped them pass unhindered through Fire Nation waters, and had done his damnedest to be the most acquiescing and unthreatening ex-son-of-the-enemy that he possibly could have been. Wasn’t he owed something for all of that? Steeling his resolve, Zuko picked up the reins and flicked them once, as he’d been taught to do when learning to ride ostrich-horses as a kid. The beast stirred and grumbled loudly. Zuko froze, but the beast didn’t move.

“Come on!” He hissed down at it, flicking the reins once again, but it just threw its head back with an unimpressed yowl.

Zuko sat there for a few moments, staring blankly at the uncooperative beast, and then let out a slightly hysterical laugh. Of course, it was just his luck. Trust the spirits to find new and creative ways to make him miserable. Not content to make him the son of the worst father in the history of fathers - or to let him survive three years of near-starvation and perpetual exhaustion and a fire, only to then immediately become the prisoner of his father’s enemies - the spirits had now decided to cut off Zuko’s means of escape. What better torture, he acknowledged bitterly, than to show him everything he wanted, but to keep it just out of his reach?

Zuko allowed himself a few minutes of misery. He knew that he was sulking, but his only witnesses were Appa and the spirits, none of whom had much care for his dignity; if he pouted, no one was going to judge him. Appa grumbled beneath him, and settled back to sleep, proving the point. Zuko frowned. The beast –sorry, sky bison- had been flying for most of the night, perhaps it just needed to rest? Of course, that didn’t help Zuko’s time frame; Sokka had said he would bring food back for Zuko, which meant that they could be back any minute. Maybe if Zuko took off a few of the bags, made the load a bit lighter, Appa might feel a bit more inclined to fly? Deciding that it was better to chance it than to sit feeling sorry for himself, Zuko slid over the side of the saddle and jumped to the ground. Appa watched him half-heartedly, one eye resting shut.

It wasn’t hard to decide what to take and what to leave. There were bags of spare clothing: water tribe blue and earth kingdom green- they could go. A bag with flint and kindling- Zuko would need that until he finally managed to make his firebending respond properly. Some salt for preserving meat and some fish hooks- definitely going with him. The last bag was huge and heavy, filled with some sort of canvas material that Zuko assumed was for night’s the Avatar and his friends had to sleep somewhat-rough. That was the first thing that could go. Zuko had been sleeping under the stars for the past few weeks and had done so for months on the Water Tribe ship; he wasn’t afraid of braving the elements. He stepped forward and grabbed the bag, ready to heave it down from Appa’s side.

“Aang?” Katara’s voice rang out loudly, echoing against the walls of the cave.

Zuko flinched back from Appa and spun around. At that moment, Sokka and Katara came rushing back into the cave, gulping in heaving breaths; Toph followed close behind them. Sokka bent over, leaning his hands on his knees as he gasped for air. As soon as he had stopped wheezing, he looked up to where Zuko was standing (incriminatingly) beside Appa.
“Aang’s missing!”

Zuko’s mind was racing, trying to come up with some kind of reasonable solution as to what he was up to, when Sokka’s words finally hit him.

“What?” He looked around at the frantic faces. He couldn’t quite believe what he was hearing.

“Again?”

Toph snorted.

“It’s not funny Toph!” Katara glared at the small girl. “He could be in trouble.”

“Again.” Toph noted drily, with a nod in Zuko’s direction.

“What are you doing here then?” Zuko asked, stepping away from Appa. He sent a quick glare at the bison, as if warning it not to give away what he had been trying to do only minutes before they turned up. “Shouldn’t you be out looking for him?”

“In a Fire Nation town?” Sokka exclaimed, throwing his right arm out in exasperation. “We tried our best, but we didn’t know where he would be and the guards were looking at us suspiciously. We didn’t want to draw any more attention to ourselves, or Aang.”

“We thought he might come back here,” Toph added, looking around the cave.

“We didn’t.” Zuko looked around at them all, trying not to say ‘I told you so’ and hoping that they’d all just go away. With the Avatar missing (again), Zuko might have some more time to figure out how to make Appa fly.

“Well we should probably stay here, in case he comes looking for us.” Sokka suggested, his breathing still heavy. “We’ll take turns heading back into town to look for him. He can’t have gone far.”

“Yeah Katara,” Toph added brightly. “The whole town would know if they’d caught the Avatar. He’ll have just wandered off after a butterfly or something.”

Zuko thought it was telling that neither of the Water Tribe siblings looked like Toph was joking.

The rest of the day was spent in a state of nervous anticipation. By mid-afternoon, and after fifteen scouting operations that came back empty, the others had worked themselves into a state of utter panic. Sokka had gone from ‘let’s wait for Aang, he’ll be back any minute’ to ‘let’s storm the nearest army stronghold with only a boomerang and a couple of teenaged benders’ and Katara and Toph were right there with him. It was oddly nice to see that the Avatar had such devoted friends. So when the boy turned up at nightfall, smiling brightly and completely oblivious to the panic he’d caused, Zuko was as furious as Sokka, if only for the stress he’d caused to his friends. Then, of course, it came out about where he’d been all day.

“A school?” Sokka yelled, his face almost as red as his tunic. “You’ve been in a school?”

“We thought you’d been captured!” Katara stepped up beside her brother, her hands on her hips. “We’ve been worried about you all day!”

“Not cool, Aang,” Toph added, for once actually looking furious.

“Guys!” the Avatar yelped, stepping back and waving his hands frantically in front of him. “I didn’t have a choice!” He winced. “The clothes I got in town? It turns out they were a school uniform!” He
indicated to the jacket he was still wearing. “The guards saw me wearing this and accused me of playing hooky- I couldn’t just run off, that would have been even more suspicious!”

The others stood silently for a minute or so, and then Katara whirled around to look at Zuko. “Why didn’t you tell us he was dressed in a school uniform? Isn’t that something we should have known?”

Zuko stared at her blankly. “…I didn’t know it was a school uniform?” He replied tentatively.

“Really?” Katara hissed with derision. “You’re the Prince of the Fire Nation and you don’t know what their school uniforms look like?”

Zuko blinked at her. “…I always had tutors.”

Toph snickered and Katara threw up her hands in exasperation. Zuko didn’t add that there was no way under Agni that his father would have let him attend a school, even one of the fancy ones that most of the nobility sent their children off to. Even if it weren’t very much not-the-done-thing for royalty, his father wouldn’t have dared allowed Zuko to mix with students his own age, to let anyone see how mediocre the heir to the throne was at Firebending, or to expose his sub-par intelligence. No, Zuko had had a handful of tutors, the bite of the cane, and the constant threat of his father’s displeasure to teach him. Then he’d been banished and thrown in a prison camp, thus ending his academic education for good.

“Don’t think this conversation is over, Aang!” Sokka shouted, turning back to the Avatar- who had been trying to sneak away whilst the attention was focused on Zuko. The Avatar’s- no Aang’s (there was no way Zuko could think of him as the Avatar when he looked so much like a scolded child) - shoulders sagged, and he turned back round.

“It’s way after dark. You aren’t telling me that you were in school all that time?” Sokka looked eerily like his father. Zuko pushed that thought very far down in his brain.

“No…” Aang replied quietly. “But I made some friends. We were playing hide-and-go-explode!”

Zuko absolutely did not burn with envy at that. That was one game among many that he had never played as a boy. There were too many valuable antiques in the palace for him or Azula to risk breaking with childish games.

A child. The Avatar was a child. The realisation came crashing into him like a flying tackle, knocking the rigid stance of fury and disdain he’d formed earlier out from under him. Zuko couldn’t be angry with a child for acting like a child, could he?

“We’re leaving right now!” Sokka exclaimed loudly, bringing Zuko’s attention back to the matter at hand.

Appa let out a loud huff and opened his eyes to glare at Sokka.

“Alright, buddy,” Sokka replied, glancing at the beast warily. “We’re leaving first thing tomorrow.”

“But Sokka, I think I can help them!” Aang’s eyes were wide and earnest. “They’re the future of the Fire Nation and they’re just so…uptight.” He wrinkled his nose, looked mortified. “I had to bow to the teacher today. Who does that?”

“Well I kept getting into trouble for everything,” Aang added, rolling his eyes. “I didn’t know the Fire Nation pledge thing, and then they gave this pop-quiz and they said the Air Nomads had an army, which we didn’t!”

Zuko slowly closed his eyes in dismay. A child, he reminded himself. This boy is a child.

“You didn’t say that to them, did you?” He asked sharply, interrupting Aang’s monologue.

“Um…maybe?” At least the Avatar had the good grace to look sheepish.

“Way to not draw attention to yourself, Twinkletoes,” Toph commented drily. “Bet they loved hearing that.”

Zuko ran a hand over his forehead, and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Aang, buddy,” Sokka began in exasperation. “You’ve gotta learn to keep a low profile. Openly debunking Fire Nation propaganda probably isn’t something people just…do.” Sokka glanced to Zuko for acknowledgment and Zuko shook his head vehemently. He’d known people thrown into the mining camps for less.

“But it’s wrong!” Aang shouted suddenly, silencing them all. “They were acting like there was this huge battle with an army, but the monks were peaceful. They didn’t want to fight.”

“We know Aang,” Katara said quietly, walking over to lay a comforting hand across his shoulder.

Zuko looked away; he’d grown up believing the bullshit about an Air Nomad standing army on the brink of launching a full invasion on the Fire Nation. He’d probably still believe that crap now, had it not been for one night, when he was about eight when he’d stumbled upon his very, very drunk grandfather in the palace gardens. Zuko had been out of his bed past bedtime and had resigned himself to a thrashing, but his grandfather had instead made him sit down beside him and listen to his liquor-laced ramblings. If there was one thing the men of the Fire Nation royal family had in common, it was that they all had terrible fathers. Fire Lord Azulon had been just out-of-it enough that he wanted to rant about the failings of his dear-old-dad, and had told his young grandson all about Fire Lord Sozin’s deep, dark secrets. That night was one of Zuko’s worst family memories, at least of the ones that didn’t include fists or flames.

“This is why we can’t stay!” Sokka sighed heavily, after a long moment of silence. “It’s too much of a risk.”

“Besides, you’re still meant to be learning earthbending with me,” Toph added casually. “Can’t do that if you’re stuck in class, can you?”

“It could be really helpful, though,” Aang continued to object. “I’ve been finding out loads of stuff about the Fire Nation.” He beamed and started rummaging around in the bag at his side. “Look, I got a picture of the Fire Lord!” He pulled a scroll out of his bag, unravelling it as he held it up to the light of the fire. Zuko flinched back. Seeing his father’s face as he stood, banished and fugitive, in a cave on Fire Nation soil, was just too much. Aang, oblivious to Zuko’s discomfort, held the picture up and squinted between it and Zuko’s face. “You look just like him!”

Zuko tried not to gag at the suggestion.

“I agree,” Toph chimed quietly from the back of the cave. Katara shot her an exasperated look that
wafed entirely wasted.

“That’s Ozai?” Sokka asked, pulling the picture out of Aang’s hands to take a closer look at it. Katara leaned in to get a better view.

Zuko flinched again. In all his years, even in the prison camps where disdain for the Fire Lord had been as common as sharp cheekbones and frost-bitten fingers, he had never heard anyone refer to the Fire Lord by his first name. It was unthinkable. Fear of the throne was ingrained so deeply that even those who actively rebelled against it wouldn’t dare disrespect it in such a way.

Oblivious to the discomfort that his causal display of utter disrespect had caused, Sokka pondered the picture, and then handed it back to Aang. He stood for a moment, considering, and then glanced between Katara and Toph. Katara looked thoughtful, whereas Toph looked bored.

“Nope, still leaving in the morning.” He finally declared, crossing his arms, and looking every inch like his father.

“But—”

“No, it’s a bad idea.” Sokka looked down at Aang unyieldingly. “One wrong move and you’ll get caught. We’re relying on the element of surprise, and we won’t have that if everyone knows you’re still alive.”

“But—”

“We’re on a tight schedule, Aang, you know we only have a few weeks before the—”

Sokka was cut off by Toph’s huff.

“Yes, we know. You don’t need to remind us of the schedule every five minutes, Sokka.”

Aang heaved out a dramatic sigh and wandered over to pet Appa.

“Fine then, I guess I won’t hear all about the secret river that goes straight into the Fire Lord’s palace…” Aang looked mournfully away into the distance. “We were going to learn about it in school tomorrow…”

Zuko raised his eyebrow.

“I do like the sound of a secret river…” Sokka replied thoughtfully, rubbing at his chin. Even Toph and Katara looked intrigued.

“Are you stupid?” Zuko bit out, his eyebrow still high on his forehead. “A secret river straight into the Fire Nation palace?” The disbelief lay heavy in his tone.

Sokka blushed bright red. “What? Their might be one?”

Zuko looked at him flatly. “There isn’t.”

“But how do you know for sure?” Aang cut in, challenging.


Sokka blushed brightly, but rallied magnificently to give Zuko a quick grin and a wink.
“Guess we’re leaving first thing tomorrow then.”

First thing tomorrow did not mean the same time for the others as it did for Zuko. He woke up as soon as Agni rose in the sky; the others were still snoring. Whilst he waited for them to drag themselves out of their dreams, Zuko sat at the mouth of the cave and practised meditating. His breathing soon fell into the familiar rhythm of in-hold-out, as he fell into a light trance. He didn’t know how long he’d been sat there, when he felt a sudden spark low in his gut. Trying not to let the excitement overtake him, Zuko continued to keep his breathing slow, steady, and measured. Slowly, ever so slowly, he fed that spark with more and more air. He felt almost like a child again, back when he had learnt how to light fire at will and not just when Azula called him names and his temper got the better of him. Finally, when Zuko felt he had control, he pushed the spark out, and felt his chi flare brightly. Slowly, almost too afraid to look, Zuko peeled his eyes open and looked down at his hands. There, cradled in his crossed palms, was a small orange flame.

It was no bigger than a candle light, and something a child of eight would have been ashamed to call firebending, but to Zuko it was possibly the most beautiful thing that he’d seen in his life. Even his bad eye could make out the light in his hands, although it was no more than a dim blur. Exhilaration flooded through him, and Zuko let out a sharp, bark of ecstatic laughter; he’d actually done it! He’d created fire once again. Agni hadn’t forsaken him!

Although, once he’d managed to create the fire, the next challenge was holding it steady. It was harder than he’d remembered and it felt more dangerous, like his chi was resting in his hands and he was responsible for protecting it. Zuko felt as if he was holding something very precious and very fragile, like a small turtle duck; it was reliant on him and him alone to keep it safe and to keep it steady. He kept feeding his chi with slow, even breaths, his attention solely focused on the delicate flame between his palms.

“Where’s Aang?” Katara was right behind him when she spoke. Zuko startled so badly that he lost the grasp on his breathing and the feeble flame in his palms flickered out. He stared at them desolately, feeling a terrible ache in his chest, like a small life had just been lost.

“Where’s Aang?” Katara repeated, as she stepped in front of him and blocked his view of Agni. The bright light of the morning sun shone lit her from behind, making her look ethereal, almost spirit-like. “You’ve been here all morning. Have you seen him?”

“What?” Zuko asked, completely confused. He’d thought they were meant to be leaving first thing. How long had he been sat there?

Katara put her hands on her hips. “How could you have missed him? You’ve not moved for hours!”

“He must have snuck past him,” Toph commented loudly from a few yards behind Zuko. Her voice was heavy with irritation. “Twinkletoes is light on his feet. He got past me.”

“You were fast asleep and snoring!” Katara seethed. “He was sat right here.”

“I was meditating.” Zuko objected, hauling himself to his feet; he winced at the pull on muscles that had been locked in place for hours in the cool morning air.

“So you didn’t hear him?” Katara asked bitingly. “Or see him?”

“Ah, Sugar Queen-” Toph chimed up warningly. “You do know he’s almost completely blind and deaf on his left hand side, right?”

Zuko flinched. He hated people knowing about his weakness like that. But it wasn’t like he’d told
“Oh!” Katara’s hands flew up to cover her mouth and she looked completely mortified. Huh, apparently she hadn’t noticed that his left eye never focused properly, or that he had to turn his head to the right to listen to what people were saying to him, if there was a lot of background noise. “I’m so sorry!” Katara cried, looking like she was about to burst into tears.

“It’s fine,” Zuko said awkwardly, his eyes flickering down at the floor. Katara’s breath hitched, and he swiftly decided to change the subject. One experience of a crying Katara was enough for him in this lifetime. “So, the Avat- I mean, Aang’s gone missing. Again?”

“Yep,” Toph bit out, popping the ‘p’ sharply.

“Is there some kind of competition?” Zuko growled, perhaps a touch too loudly.

Toph snorted and Sokka let out a startled laugh from the cave behind them.

“With Aang, quite possibly,” Sokka acknowledged, coming out to join them at the mouth of the cave.

Zuko sighed, and rubbed his hands over his face. “He’s gone back to the school.”

“Yep,” Toph replied, popping the ‘p’ once again.

“He’s going to get himself killed,” Zuko said quietly.

No one contradicted him.

A few hours later, just after lunch- some questionable looking meat-kebab that Sokka had bought from town- Aang showed up back at the cave.

“I need your help!” He cried out, skidding to a dramatic stop, dust flying up in the air behind him.

“There you are!” Sokka exclaimed. “We’ve got to go right-”

“The school want to talk to my parents!” Aang’s exclamation cut Sokka off and left a ringing silence throughout the cave.

“…What?”

“I got into a fight with this kid. And now the school want to talk to my parents. Like right now.” Aang was breathing very heavily for a master airbender; he was panicking.

“What?”

“I know, Sokka, but I need you and Katara to pretend to be my parents and come and talk to the school so that I don’t get into even more trouble!”

“No way,” Sokka said angrily. “We’re leaving right this minute. You snuck out on us, Aang. Again!”

“I know Sokka,” Aang cried. “I know, and I’m sorry, okay!” He sighed. “But we can’t leave now, it’ll look really suspicious and my headmaster hates me.”

“I don’t care! We’re leaving-you won’t have to see him again!”
“It’s not that simple Sokka. He said if I didn’t show up, then he’d get me sent to reform school, which he said was actually the coal mines!” Aang bit his lip. “What if that’s where they’re sending kids who misbehave? Like Haru and that prison rig! We have to do something!”

Zuko’s stomach dropped and his breath froze in his lungs. He hadn’t just heard that, had he? He was vaguely aware of the others talking around him, but his ears were ringing too loudly for him to properly tune in to what they were saying.

“We’ve got to leave,” Zuko hadn’t realised he’d spoken until his clipped words cut over Aang and Sokka’s conversation. “Right now.”

“Hey Zuko,” Sokka asked quietly, stepping closer to him. “You okay?” Sokka reached out to pat his shoulder, but Zuko flinched badly. Zuko’s back slammed against the wall of the cave, painfully. The sharp rock scraped through the thin fabric of his shirt as he slid down into a squat. His breathing came in short, sharp gasps. Sokka jumped back, as if he’d been burned, and put his arms in the air.

He wasn’t going back there. Not for some stupid kid who didn’t know when to shut up. Some clueless kid. Zuko tried to gulp in a breath, but it caught in his throat, and sent him into a series of coughing, rasping breaths. He couldn’t go back there again. He wouldn’t survive. Not a second time. Not when he’d escaped. It would kill him. Even if it didn’t then they would. His father would. He couldn’t do it. He wasn’t going back there!

“Oh, okay, buddy,” Sokka replied gently, kneeling down a yard or so away from Zuko. He kept his hands down by his sides and moved very slowly, as if he was approaching a spooked komodo-rhino. “No one’s making you go anywhere.”

Zuko snorted, and it definitely didn’t come out as a sob. Wasn’t that the whole point? He’d been made to go with the water tribe to chameleon bay, and then he’d been made to get on that ship and then he’d been made to follow the stupid fucking Avatar into the fucking Fire Nation. Choice hadn’t really featured anywhere.

“Okay,” Sokka tried again. “Do you want to…stay here?”

“No!” Zuko’s heart started beating even faster at just the implication. “No, we can’t-”

“Hey, hey, it’s alright,” Sokka replied. “We’re going to get on Appa right now, and we’re going to fly away from here. We’ll go somewhere safe. Okay?”

Zuko nodded emphatically. Aang said something about the school and the headmaster, but was shushed immediately by both Toph and Katara. The group went eerily silent after that, hurrying to pack up with a startling efficiency, as if Zuko hadn’t just freaked the fuck out in front of them. Sokka had caught some fish, casually talking Zuko through the process, and then Katara had cooked them over the fire whilst Toph

After a few minutes, Aang shot Zuko a concerned look.

“What’s up with him?” He whispered to Katara. She gently told him to leave the matter alone until later. Toph hit him in the arm.

Later that evening, when they had found an empty expanse of beach to land on, several islands away from the school and the bastard of a headmaster, they finally asked him about it. They had been dancing around the subject all afternoon, chatting casually amongst themselves as they set up camp, as if Zuko hadn’t just freaked the fuck out in front of them. Sokka had caught some fish, casually talking Zuko through the process, and then Katara had cooked them over the fire whilst Toph
regaled them with one of her Earth Rumble bouts with the Boulder. Zuko thought the guy sounded like a wimp, and Toph had him almost smiling by the time they’d eaten and she’d finished her story. So that was the moment Katara decided to ask him what had happened earlier. Zuko sighed. After dinner chat, it seemed, was the time to discuss trauma.

Zuko sighed again and looked up at the sky. They’d put the fire out as soon as the food was cooked, not wanting to draw any more attention that was necessary. The smoke had almost dissipated and the night was clear; he could see so many stars.

“You said the headmaster threatened you with the camps?” Zuko asked quietly, after a few long minutes. He looked over at Aang, who nodded slowly. “I was in one. A camp, I mean. It was a prison.”

Sokka didn’t look surprised. Zuko knew that Hakoda had already told him that much.

“When?” Katara asked quietly.

“Until your dad raided it and burnt it to the ground,” Zuko said grimly. He looked back to the stars, forcing away the horrible memory of the thick, acrid smoke. “A lot of people died.”

Katara flinched, and looked away.

“It was…bad.” Zuko acknowledged. He cleared his throat gruffly. “When you said the headmaster threatened you… I…panick- I mean… I didn’t want to end up in one of those again.” Aang listened through his hesitant explanation.

“But you don’t think he was really sending kids there, do you?” He asked cautiously.

Zuko sighed and shook his head. “I doubt it. That’s not the kind of place you send kids.” They sent you, a horrible voice chimed up from the back of his mind, and he squashed it down viciously. He’d been a special case, hadn’t he? Fire Lord’s orders. Zuko tried to smile as he turned back to Aang, but he suspected it had come out more as a grimace. “He was probably just trying to scare you.”

Aang nodded, and quietly let the matter go. Sokka smiled sadly at Zuko and spent the rest of the night at his side telling terrible jokes and lamenting the lack of meat in his diet. Every now and again he shot Zuko a searching sideways look, but Zuko really didn’t get the humour. Sokka just redoubled his efforts, getting louder and more ludicrous as he pushed for a laugh. Eventually, even Sokka had to admit defeat, and he left Zuko’s side with a disappointed huff and a wail of lament.

Toph shot him a disdainful look as he left, before she stormed over and took his place at Zuko’s side. They sat there for ages, long after everyone else had gone to sleep. Their silence was companionable and unforced. Zuko found Toph’s presence soothing and grounding; she was solid somehow, reassuring and absolute - the true embodiment of her element.

“Still awake, Sparky?” She asked eventually, a while after Sokka’s snores had begun to rumble through the night air.

Zuko just snorted. Of course he was; she knew that.

“Yeah, I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep either,” Toph scowled, shifting in place on the sand beside him. “Not when Snoozles is making all that racket, anyway.”

Sokka was not really snoring all that loudly, and Toph herself could trigger earthquakes with the strength of her own nocturnal wheezing, but Zuko chose to let it go.
“I didn’t know they were cuffs,” Toph admitted quietly, out of the blue.

“What?” Zuko said startled.

“Around your wrists,” Toph continued, her sightless eyes fixed on his hands. “I didn’t realise they were cuffs.”

“Oh…” Zuko shifted awkwardly, glancing down at the manacles. “What did you…”

“I don’t know,” she snorted self-deprecatingly. “Bracelets or something? I could feel they were there, I just never wondered why.” She shifted her head forwards, so that her long hair was covering the side of her face. “Where they from the camp?”

“Yeah…” Zuko swallowed heavily.

They sat in silence for another minute or so. Zuko didn’t know if Toph was waiting for him to speak, or if she was equally as uncomfortable with the awkwardness as he was, and not sure how to move on.

“I can take them off.”

That was…that was not what Zuko had been expecting her to say.

“What?” He absolutely did not croak at her.

“You heard me Sparky,” Toph told him dispassionately. “I’ve been practising bending metal. I think I can take them off without cutting you up.”

“You think?”

“I know.” She held herself with the pride of the master earthbender that she was, daring him to doubt her.

Zuko sucked in a deep breath, telling himself that he wasn’t trembling. Then he held out his wrists.

“Please.”

A bright smile broke across Toph’s face and she let out a delighted little bark of laughter.

“All right, get ready Sparky, cos you ain’t seen nothing like this.”

She stuck her hands out in front of her and then with a careful twist of her fingers, the metal around his right wrist snapped and fell to the floor. A few seconds later, the left followed suit.

Zuko stared at his wrists. There was a band of very pale, very calloused skin where previously there had been hard, unyielding metal. It was strange, he thought, as he held his hands aloft and admired them by starlight, how light they felt. It felt odd. He’d been desperate to lose the chains ever since they were first placed on him, but now they were off, his skin felt weird. Something sparked and crawled on the exposed callouses, making him feel wrong. He started scratching at the wrists and stretching out his fingers, shivering at the alien sensation. Toph turned towards him in alarm, and he forced himself to take a deep breath, sitting on his hands to resist the temptation to claw at his own skin. It was just the newness of the air on his wrists, he reminded himself, an overstimulation of the nerves. It would pass. A similar thing had happened when they first put him in chains. His brain had panicked with the ‘oh fuck: trapped!’ feeling of cool iron against his skin; he’d torn a couple of fingernails out clawing at the locking mechanism. Zuko was not about to repeat the experience.
“You alright there Sparky?” Toph asked after a long moment.

It took him a good few seconds longer than it ought to have for him to gather his thoughts well enough to reply.

“Yes.”

Toph very politely did not mention the hoarseness in his voice, or the fact that she could no doubt already hear the hitch in his breathing. He didn’t want to cry again. He’d cried enough for one lifetime already.

“Told you I could do it!” She beamed. “You should know better than to doubt the greatest earthbender in the world.”

Zuko’s laugh came out sharp and gasping; it was as much a sob as it was a laugh, really. Toph grinned brightly at him, before tentatively reaching out and giving him a light punch to his shoulder.

“We’ve got your back now, Sparky,” she told him seriously, and it was one of the most reassuring things that Zuko had ever heard. She was four foot nothing and yet she was more fearsome than an angry catgator. He let out another sob/laugh, and Toph seemed to decide it was time to call it quits, before he got any more emotional.

She pulled herself to her feet, and cracked her knuckles loudly.

“I’m going to bed,” she told him, as she let out a jaw-splitting yawn. “Night, Sparky.”

“Toph…” Zuko called out as she turned away from him, towards her stone tent. She paused, and stood very still. “…Thanks.”

“Get some sleep, Sparky,” she told him softly, and continued on to bed.

Only when she was out of sight and (hopefully) hearing, beneath a thick layer of stone, did Zuko give in to the prickling in his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Another chapter down!

So this was originally going to include The Painted Lady, but there was too much plot for a couple of thousand words and this chapter was long enough as it was.

Zuko has officially passed from wary of the awesome power of the avatar to just pissed off at Aang. He'll get passed it- he's already started to. But for a guy that was never really able to be a kid, he keeps having to remind himself that Aang isn't being malicious he's just trying not to be forced to grow up to fast. That's something Zuko can get, and he doesn't really want to push Aang to have to do that too soon either.

I was rewatching season 3 and that headmaster threatening to send Aang to the mines really surprised me- I'd forgotten that happened. Maybe because I was picturing chapter 1 Zuko in my head at the time and I felt very protective of poor baby Aang.

Also rewatching made me realise how often Aang just up and disappears in this show. It
stressed me out, so I had to make a point.

Sokka keeps trying to flirt. Zuko is still oblivious. Dude, the guy all but asked you on a date. Come on... Anyway, Zuko won't stay oblivious for long. Next chapter some stuff will start to click...

Toph is badass. That's all folks.
I had the metalbending scene in my head from the moment I had Bato get the chain off Zuko. This has been waiting a while to get out.

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed. Please let me know your thoughts?
After his outburst at the cave, Zuko did his very best to pretend that nothing had happened. Of course he knew that the others wouldn’t forget so easily; they’d all seen him in a crying, desperate panic, but Zuko had come through a lot of things in his life by just pushing through and pretending everything was fine. He hoped that the others would be too polite or awkward to mention anything to him and, for the most part, he was right. Aside from a few glances and hushed questions to check in on him, the others seemed mostly content to pretend that the whole thing had never happened. It was a strange sensation, not to have every weakness and vulnerability preyed upon, but it was pleasant. Zuko knew all too well that Azula would never have let such an obvious bruise go un-prodded.

It certainly helped that the next few days, after Zuko had forced them all to pack up and flee, were spent mainly flying. Between Aang’s continual attempts to drag Appa off course to investigate anything that vaguely caught his eye, and Sokka’s increasingly fraught efforts to keep them on track, Zuko was able to slip into the background again. It helped. He felt less panicked, like he had time to get his head back in order. Zuko was not comfortable at all with being the centre of attention, or the focus of any attention, for that matter. He’d always felt more at ease in the background, in the shadows, so of course, it was his spirits-damned luck that he’d been born a prince. Still, Zuko sat in the back of the saddle and let the others move around him, unobtrusively taking the time to get his head back on straight.

It wasn’t as if the others didn’t try to talk to him at all, whilst they flew, but it was polite and slightly stilted- admittedly as most conversations with Zuko tended to be. After a few minutes of awkward exchanges, they would mostly trail off and leave Zuko to his own thoughts. Toph, as in all things, was the exception- she sat at his side in silence for hours, seeming to take comfort in his quiet presence. She’d softly admitted to him- in the still darkness of one of the long nights when Zuko couldn’t bring himself to face the nightmares in his dreams- that flying made her completely blind. Without the earth beneath her feet, Toph couldn’t see a thing, and that terrified her. He could certainly relate. Zuko’s own nerves, however, were not caused by the actual flight, so much as by the knowledge of their eventual destination.

They had been flying over cluster after cluster of small islands, and were heading closer to the heart of the Fire Nation with each passing day. Zuko had given up attempting to persuade Sokka to turn Appa around and head for somewhere quiet and safe. He’d more or less accepted that he was along for the ride, and that the spirits definitely hated him. In theory, Zuko knew that he was no longer a
prisoner, and certainly not thought of as such by the others, Toph removing his manacles had been as clear a point as she’d needed to make. Still, it was hard for him to feel entirely comfortable about the travelling arrangements, seeing as he had very little choice in the matter. Still, Zuko did what he did best and tried to roll with the punches. He could manage his frustration and his anxiety, so long as he had calm and quiet to do so. Unfortunately, his ragtag group of travelling companions did not do calm and quiet.

“Are you sure you’re not lost, Sokka?” Katara asked for what felt like the hundredth time that morning. Zuko rolled his eyes up to the sky, and prayed for patience.

It was nearly a week since Toph had bent the manacles off his hands, bringing him into their group. They were flying over one of the largest islands they’d come across in days, which was a very large warning sign that they were getting closer to the heart of the Fire Nation. Zuko tried very hard not to think about that.

“I’m not lost, Katara!” Sokka grumbled with a long-suffering expression. “We just need to follow this river until-”

“I’m hungry,” Aang groaned loudly from behind Zuko’s left shoulder, where he had been snoring for the better part of the last hour.

“There’s fruit in my bag, Aang,” Katara told him absent-mindedly, her gaze still fixed on the map that was lying on Sokka’s lap. “Are you sure it isn’t this river?” she asked, pointing to something far off in the top corner. “Are you sure you’re not lo-”

“We’re not lost!” Sokka shouted, flapping his hand and shooing Katara away from where he sat holding Appa’s reins. “Just let me navigate okay? I know what I’m doing!” Zuko sighed and rubbed at the bridge of his nose.

Aang peered over the side of the saddle, squinting at the ground below them. “This does look kinda familiar…”

“I agree,” Toph chimed up, smirking to herself. Zuko winced.

Sokka’s shoulders tensed and he spun around to fix them all with a stern look.

“Listen, I know where we’re going. There’s a river around here which we follow north until we hit this island shaped like a spear point.” He huffed. “Just trust me.”

Aang shuffled forwards, accidentally knocking into Toph, who fell sideways. Her arm flew out and hit Zuko’s bicep, which she immediately grabbed hold off and hung to for dear life.

“Sorry,” Aang murmured to her, as he shuffled over to look at Sokka’s map. Toph nodded quickly in reply, but she was white-faced, and her grip was white-knuckled around Zuko’s arm. He was almost positive it would bruise. He sighed and took a few deep, calming breaths.

“That doesn’t look like a spear to me- it’s not pointy enough.” Aang remarked, leaning over Sokka’s shoulder. “More like an upside-down heart.”

Sokka took a deep breath. Katara shuffled forwards very quickly and coaxed Aang away from Sokka’s side.

“Come on,” her arm went around his shoulders as they moved back past Toph and Zuko. “Leave him alone before he explodes!”
“But I’m hungry…”

“There’s fruit in the bag!” Zuko didn’t know how she managed to stay so patient with Aang. His own blood pressure was rising steadily, and he was sure if he breathed too quickly, he’d spit out a few sparks.

“There isn’t. It’s empty!” Aang wailed pitifully, and clutched at his stomach over dramatically.

There was a long moment of silence.

“Sokka!” Katara yelled suddenly, and her brother yanked so sharply on the reins that Appa shot ten feet up in the air and yowled loudly. Zuko’s bad ear rang with the sudden volume. A flock of nearby birds screeched and scattered to the winds, madly flapping away from them. Sokka spun around, as his sister pitched him a scorching glare. “Did you eat the rest of the fruit?”

“No!” Sokka’s voice was ridiculously high-pitched with outrage. Zuko rubbed at his forehead. “I ate some of the jerky and left the rest of it with the fruit in your bag, for Aang.” He glared at his sister in turn. “Like you told me to.”

“That was for Twinkletoes? Oops,” Toph muttered quietly in Zuko’s right ear; she was still clamped determinedly to his side. She tightened her hands for a brief moment. “Don’t say a word Sparky,” she warned him under her breath. Zuko sighed.

“Right. So it just magically disappeared?” Katara hissed in frustration. “Next thing you’ll say Appa ate it all!”

“Well maybe he did!”

Appa growled plaintively. Zuko sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose with his left hand; his head was killing him.

“Hey!” Aang chirped from just behind Zuko’s shoulder. Zuko felt the sudden rush of air as Aang sucked in a deep breath, no doubt about to launch himself into the sibling argument with all the power of his airbender’s lungs. Zuko flinched pre-emptively. Why the fuck couldn’t they all just shut up and sit quietly?

“Stop!” He hadn’t realised that he’d spoken, let alone that he’d yelled, but Zuko found himself the centre of attention, with all the others staring at him in shock. His palms were smoking slightly, and he shook them out, flushing. He did not miss, however, the way that Katara’s eyes tracked the movement, her own hand close to her water flask. “Um…” Zuko floundered, searching for a way to recover. “I meant… why don’t we stop…flying…for a bit.”

The withering look that Toph shot him told him that she very much knew he hadn’t meant to say that, but she still nodded in agreement.

“Good idea, Sparky. I could do with some good, solid earth beneath my feet again.”

“And we can pick up some more food,” Katara agreed with a glare towards her brother. “Not that we’d need to if-“

“Alright!” Sokka cut her off sharply, and bent his head over his map. “There’s a town about an hour away. We can stop there.” His voice was tight and carefully controlled, refusing to rise to Katara’s jabs even when he knew he hadn’t done anything wrong. Zuko wished that he had that level of self-restraint. Every argument he’d ever had with his sister had ended up with her winding him up until he lost control and threw some pitiful fire- which she would easily block. Then there’d be the
inevitable wrath of his father and, after, Azula would be straight back to it, mocking him over the
bruises and for being the failure in their father’s eyes. She’d had always known exactly how to get
under his skin.

At least his outburst had brought about one change for the positive. After they’d agreed to stop for a
while, the group fell into a stony silence. It lasted for a good forty minutes or so, and Zuko thanked
Agni for the blessed quiet. Eventually, Aang let out a soft exclamation and pointed off into the
distance. Zuko followed his movement and saw, further down the putrid brown river, a small town
floating in the middle of the water. Aang and Katara shared a long look, brows furrowed in concern.
Sokka cleared his throat softly, and quietly encouraged Appa to start the descent.

They landed amongst some very large rocks, on the east bank of the river. It was easy enough to hide
Appa and the Avatar’s lemur under some heavy moss. Within a few minutes they had left the
animals safely hidden and clambered down the rocks to take a proper look at the town before them.
As they neared the bank, Zuko’s heart sank.

The water before them was dark brown and it moved thickly, lapping unctuously at the bank far
below them. Scrap pieces of metal, canvas and other detritus twisted in the sluggish current, dancing
idly along the surface like untethered buoys. The smell coming off the water was vile, and it turned
Zuko’s stomach. The river was polluted- horrifically so. It wasn’t hard to figure out the reason why,
either. A mile or so from where they had landed, a huge monstrosity of dull, grey steel loomed across
the breadth of the river, forming a hulking dam from one bank to the other. Smoke billowed thickly
from several chimneys, all painted deep black from soot. Zuko could almost taste the coal on the air.
There was a large red insignia daubed on the front of the building, visible even from a distance; the
symbol of the Fire Army. Zuko shuddered, and turned back to the others. It was a military town,
there was no point going any closer.

“Looks great!” Aang chirped up from the vantage point he’d claimed on one of the high rocks. “I
mean… I guess.”

“It doesn’t smell all that great, Snoozles,” Toph remarked to Sokka, wrinkling her nose in disgust.
“You’re sure we want to stop here?”

“Why wouldn’t you?”

The others spun around suddenly at the strange voice, but Zuko quickly flipped the hood of the cloak
up and over his head, and turned his back to the stranger, hoping that his face had gone unseen.

The man had spoken from a few feet below them, but quickly clambered up the rocks to stand next
to their group.

“Who are you?” Sokka asked tensely.

“My name’s Dock,” the voice said with strange certainty, as if that explained everything that Sokka
wanted to know. His voice was crackly and musical, exactly as Zuko imagined a kindly old-man
from a spirit-tale should sound. It did not put Zuko at ease. “That’s my town, over there,” the man
continued blithely, oblivious to the tension in the group. “Seems to me like a group of you young
folk might like a tour of the place.”

“We’re just looking to buy some food,” Aang said with a friendly smile. “Do you know somewhere
we can do that?”

“I know just the place!” Dock replied. “I’ve got a boat down here, if you want to follow me into
town?” Zuko didn’t have to see the man to know that his whole face had lit up with delight. He
Aang’s stomach rumbled, and he quickly agreed on behalf of the group. Katara politely made introductions. When it came to Zuko’s turn, she hesitated slightly and then moved past him without giving Dock his name. It wasn’t very subtle, but it was better than her telling the truth; Fire Nation names fell into strict groupings, and his was one reserved solely for those of the nobility. His name would make Dock suspect something, at the very least, and that was a risk they could not afford to take. Zuko gritted his teeth and prayed to Agni that the omission would somehow go unnoticed, but it was to no avail.

“Who’s this then?” Dock asked as he strode forwards, moving to put an arm around Zuko’s shoulders. Zuko flinched and stepped aside before the arm could land. His fists felt warm and he shook them out, hoping that the tendrils of smoke that escaped them went unnoticed by the others. Dock laughed heartily, and turned to face Zuko.

His first glimpse of the man was not exactly encouraging. His back was hunched with age and he was painfully thin. His clothing was faded, and old; Zuko could see the tell-tale signs of patching and reworked stitches where it had been repaired and sewn back together over and over again. His heart dropped. He didn’t have high hopes for there being much spare food available in town. A dark, cynical part of his brain suggested that Dock had offered to take them into town just so that he could rob them of what little they had, and leave them stranded in the middle of the river. He kept a wary eye on the man. Any of them could easily beat him in a fight, if it came to it, but Zuko didn’t want to let things get that far.

The others however, apparently didn’t share his reservations- or his concerns- and happily followed Dock down the bank, towards a spindly little boat moored just downstream. Zuko tried to slink back and hide up in the rocks, but Dock kept turning around as they walked, asking them questions about their journey, and what they were doing so far away from home without their parents. Sokka and Katara fielded the inquiries masterfully, coming up with some story or other, but the whole exchange didn’t give Zuko any chance to slip away unnoticed. In no time at all, they had reached Dock’s boat, and Zuko had no choice but to climb aboard along with the others.

“Doesn’t say much, your friend, does he?” Dock asked merrily, staring at Zuko, as his thin arms strained to punt them along the river bed. He leaned over, nudging Sokka in the ribs with his elbow in what was presumably meant to be a friendly manner.

“He’s shy,” Sokka replied blithely. Zuko folded his hands deeper in the fabric of the cloak, just in case they started to smoke once again.

They finally reached the town harbour, although that was, in Zuko’s opinion, a very generous description for a few rotten planks of wood and a slimy, mildewed rope. Zuko clambered out of the boat and looked around the place with a heavy heart. The town was a mess. The buildings and the people were bent and dishevelled. Clothing was ragged and thin, and there was an air of neglect that permeated the place almost as strongly as the rotten, fetid smell coming up off the river.

Dock talked them through the town with a cheery expression and a carefree tone, but Zuko could see the strain in his movements, and in his eyes. As they walked, Zuko peered out at the town from under his hood, trying his best to look as insignificant and unthreatening as possible whilst remaining painfully aware that he was a hooded stranger in the midst of these people’s homes. He cursed vehemently under his breath, and stared daggers into the back of Sokka’s head as they kept moving further into town.

They were given the guided tour of the town, as if they were honoured visitors, rather than the teenage fugitives that they really were. The others were strangely relaxed about the whole
experience; Zuko supposed that one would have to garner a certain level of nonchalance when traipsing around the world with the Avatar as one’s friend, but he found it hard to accept their lack of concern. Every one of his instincts was screaming at him to get away, to hide, but he knew that he’d only draw more attention to himself if he bolted straight for the hills. He just needed to keep quiet, keep his breathing steady, and try and get through the damned tour without attracting any attention.

It was easier said than done, though. Eyes tracked their movements through the streets, and Zuko felt hostile gazes from the prickles on the back of his neck. The town was wary of strangers, and justifiably so. Ever since the army had moved in and placed a factory upstream- Dock explained, as they passed the drawn and scowling faces of the local people- the town had been slowly starving. Fish and other sources of food had long since departed from the area, driven away to fresher waters. They had been a fishing town, and they no longer had anything to support their economy. No wonder the people were so unfriendly, Zuko thought to himself, they were probably terrified of yet another shoe dropping on them. Zuko hunched further down in the confines of his cape and revised the route they had walked in his head- in case they needed to make a quick exit. Dock however didn’t lead them into some dark bark alley, but into the centre of town, to an incredibly crowded little square which was surrounded by empty shops.

Sokka and the others stepped up to the nearest shop to wait for the owner, and Zuko sidled off into the shadows to get a proper look at the town around him. He took a couple of deep breaths, trying to calm himself, as he realised quite how many people were out and about. Reminding himself firmly that no one could see beneath his hood, he leant back against the wooden wall of the shop, and looked at the people in front of him. As he watched, a young boy slipped through the crowd, his hands darting into the pockets of the more oblivious adults. Zuko followed the boy’s movements; every time the child’s hand dipped into a pocket, it came back empty. Disappointment and frustration lined the boy’s face. The boy eventually landed a prize and scurried off into the shadows. Zuko watched flatly as the boy’s final mark put his hand in his pocket and let out a low moan, realising he’d been robbed.

Zuko snorted in disgust and pity. He knew the depths to which his country, to which his father could sink, so he didn’t know why he found himself surprised by the state of the town, yet somehow he did. The Fire Nation was killing itself, slowly poisoning and choking and starving the people within, and yet they had the audacity to claim they were the greatest of all the nations. It made Zuko sick. The people of this town were desperate, but they were still surviving- for now. The shops were still seeing trade, although it was dangerously slow. The locals hadn’t resorted to eating the fungi, or boiling the hippo-cow leather of their sandals to make soups. Not yet, anyway. But a few more months and they would. Zuko knew hunger intimately, and he knew that this town was on the brink.

A loud exclamation behind him brought Zuko’s attention snapping back to the others. Sokka was holding up a couple of clams, both oozing a thick brown sludge, his expression a picture of disdain. One look from Katara and he put them down, picking up a couple of insipid looking fish in their place. Zuko sighed at the looks of disgust on Katara and Aang’s faces; he knew exactly what they’d be eating that night. Zuko noted in wry amusement that their shopkeeper was Dock; at least the man’s scam had been to secure their trade by bringing them to his shop, rather than to try and rob them in a back alley. Whilst Dock wrapped the food and handed it over to Katara’s safe-keeping, Sokka sidled up to stand by Zuko’s side.

“Hey Zu~” Sokka quickly cut himself off. He knew better than to use Zuko’s name in public. “We’re um…we’re gonna head back to Appa now,” he continued, in a low tone. “If we’re here any longer, Katara will never let us leave.” Zuko shot him a wry glance, and a wide grin broke across Sokka’s face.

As if cued by the spirits, a small child ran over to them, and gently patted Katara’s arm.
“Can you spare some food?” His voice was shrill with youth, and it rasped slightly, as if he were barely on the right side of recovery from illness. His hair was shaggy and matted, and his eyes were dull and reddened. Were they in the capital city - Zuko knew from the few excursions he had gone on beyond the palace walls with his mother, as a young child – anyone begging would have dropped into a full bow, perhaps even burst into tears. The boy next to Katara looked only minutes away from doing the same. Zuko’s heart clenched at the sight; desperation looked the same wherever one went.

Katara unwrapped the package and handed over one of the fish. Zuko was a little disgusted at himself for the immediate flash of panic that he felt. The money that had bought the food was not his and the fish had not been bought for him, though he knew that he would have a portion of the meal that it made anyway. Even so, he couldn’t help but feel the immediate rush of possessiveness that he felt over a few scraps. He’d fought hard and dirty over far less. But still, it was a starving child. He felt even worse when the boy ran immediately to help an ill relative, holding up the food like some grand treasure. Zuko looked away, letting the hood shadow his face even more as he swallowed down his bile. He sickened himself. Sokka looked at him questioningly, but Zuko avoided his eyes as they started to make their way back through town.

Later that night, back in the camp and eating a surprisingly tasty stew, Zuko sat and listened to the others bicker and plan around him. The incident with the child had shaken Katara, and she wanted to stay and help the town. Sokka was insisting that they didn’t have time to stop, that their schedule was too tight, and that they would do more to help the people of the town by stopping the Fire Lord than they would to feed the children for a mere couple of days. Zuko was inclined to agree.

The problem with short-term fixes was that they were just that: short term. It was all well and good for Katara to go through the town healing the sick and handing out food parcels or whatever, but what would the people do as soon as she left? They’d be back to starving and falling ill from polluted water within a few weeks. They might even end up resenting her, the girl who had brought hope, only to abandon them soon after. Zuko knew all too well that, after a certain point, continual drudgery and struggling became habitual. Brief moments of joy only made it that much harder to return to a life of simple endurance; once one had been reminded that there was another way to live, an easier way, it was exhausting to have to go back to the slog of deprivation once again.

“And what do you think, Zuko?” Katara cut across his train of thought, as she spun around to face him. “Do you think we should just abandon these people?”

Zuko’s thoughts must have been written across his face, because her own expression turned aghast.

“You do!” Zuko winced as she stormed over to him. “These are your people! Don’t you care?”

“I…” Zuko trailed off. He had no idea what to say. It wasn’t like he wanted things to be the way that they were; he wasn’t completely heartless- admittedly unlike the vast majority of his family. “I… well…I…”

“Oh forget it!” Katara hissed, turning away from him and continuing her argument with Sokka about scheduling. Zuko had never been good with words, and he was never able to properly explain himself, so he couldn’t help but feel a little stung at being so casually dismissed. He sighed heavily and sat down by the fire, staring deep into the flames. He pointedly ignored the way Toph’s sightless gaze was fixed on him.

In the end, Katara finally capitulated, and they all agreed to leave the next morning. However, when the time came for them to head off, they stumbled upon an unanticipated problem: Appa had fallen ill. They should really have seen it coming; they had left an animal close to polluted water. Sokka surmised that the bison must have drunk from the river and caught goodness-knows-what from the pollutants washing down from the factory. Aang was beside himself with worry, especially as Katara
said that her waterbending healing wouldn’t be any help. Zuko didn’t know anything at all about animal biology, but he did know that a purple tongue was not a good sign - for man or beast. Back in the mining camp purple lips or a purple tongue were usually signs that illness had set deep in someone’s chest, and that they were struggling to get oxygen into their blood. No one ever lasted more than another day or so, not when the sickness had set in that deep.

The others swiftly decided to head back into town; this time Zuko followed without comment, although he did hide his hands in the folds of his cloak, hiding the way they shook from anxiety. He would have gone, even if Sokka hadn’t pointed out that it would look incredibly suspicious if Zuko, the strange hooded figure who had followed silently behind them the entire day before, were to suddenly disappear. Zuko knew that, above all else, they needed to find medicine for Appa and that required all hands on deck for the search. If their only mode of transport were to die, Zuko would be trapped in the heart of the Fire Nation with the Avatar, the children of the Chief of the Southern Water Tribe, and the champion of the Earth Rumble. It didn’t really matter if he got caught in town, if Appa died, he’d be equally as screwed.

As soon as they got into town, however, Zuko was taken aback by the change in the air. The people were happier, and their eyes were alight with something almost akin to hope. Children played ball games and the adults even smiled at them as they walked down to Dock’s shop. The old man was only too happy to tell them the latest news. It seemed that overnight someone had delivered them food, and some of the sick had begun to heal. Zuko’s gaze cut over to Katara, and he eyed her shrewdly from behind his hood, but she looked as stupefied as the others.

Sokka sidled over to Zuko’s side, as Dock continued to talk excitedly with Aang.

“This seem strange to you?”

“This part?” Zuko scoffed, and Sokka let out a quick laugh.

“You make a good point.”

As Dock explained to them, the townspeople believed that they had been blessed by the spirit of the river, the Painted Lady, and were loudly blessing the spirit for the unexpected aid. Zuko had seen too much of the world to not believe in spirits, although he did not think that they were ever altruistically benevolent. For one to suddenly up and feed a whole town, out of the blue, the day after the Avatar and his friends came to town, seemed just a touch too coincidental. Unless, Zuko supposed, the spirit had felt ashamed for not helping the town out sooner, now that the Avatar was around to cast judgement. But, again, Zuko doubted that, spirits were capricious things, and he doubted they would be easily cowed by the judgement of a twelve-year-old mortal boy, bridge between worlds or not. It was far more likely there was a more mundane explanation for the sudden largesse.

Zuko turned back to Sokka, who immediately made a ‘wooooo’ noise, waving his hands in a grandiose mockery of spirit-power. Zuko snorted out a surprised laugh, and Sokka beamed warmly at him. A few hours later, and Zuko began to regret that small gesture of encouragement. Sokka had spent nearly every spare moment since making strange spirit-noises with Aang. By the time they called time for the day, Zuko had had it with the stupid impressions. He was not in the best of moods, feeling nervous as it was out and about in the Fire Nation, and the constant whooping from Sokka and Aang had been grating at his nerves. He knew it was probably just their way of channelling their worry about Appa, but Zuko had reached the limit of his patience.

As they made their way back to camp in the early evening, Aang and Sokka lapsed into silence. Zuko was utterly convinced that they’d walk back to find the Avatar’s companion dead. They’d spent the vast majority of the day in town, looking for anyone who knew anything about an illness that brought about a purple tongue, hoping that someone would have a remedy to hand.
Unfortunately no one seemed to have heard of the malady, and the hunt for medicine had failed miserably. Zuko had all but resigned himself to a distraught Avatar and a long walk the rest of the way to the Fire Nation capital, but he didn’t voice those thoughts. Aang looked worried enough as it was, without Zuko’s pessimism making things worse. Zuko was therefore incredibly surprised when, on their return to camp, Appa was completely fine and munching away at the mossy blanket with which he’d been covered all day. There was no way Appa could be fine after so short a time, not when he had been so ill that morning. Although his tongue was still bright purple, Appa was bright-eyed and alert. Something about the whole thing felt very off, and it set Zuko’s nerves on edge. None of the others seemed concerned, taking Appa’s ‘illness’ at face value; Zuko tried to tell himself he was just being paranoid, that he was just experiencing a spill-over of anxiety from having been out and about so publically in the Fire Nation. He spent most of the night staring into the fire, trying to meditate, and ignoring Sokka’s worried looks.

When the last rays of the sun had finally disappeared below the horizon and the stars were shining brightly in the heavens, the finally fell silent- save for Toph’s snores. Zuko quietly slipped away from his seat by the dying fire; he needed some space from the others, in order to think. His chi was stirring restlessly, like it was desperate to fly straight out of his body. He breathed deeply, trying to calm himself down as he walked away from camp. As he breathed, he focused on bringing a small flame to light between his palms. It was much easier to conjure up a small flame than it had been the last time; his chi wanted to make the fire, it wanted to listen to him. Still, Zuko kept the light small and low as he walked, concentrating solely on keeping his bending under his control.

He wandered aimlessly for a few minutes, traipsing through the sharp inclines of the rocks around him. It was dark, the moon hidden behind a thick cloud, and Zuko was glad for the small fire to stop him from tripping over tree roots or random boulders. He didn’t know what he was looking for, but suddenly, he seemed to find it. As he rounded a corner, he found himself in a clearing only a few yards wide and deep. He stopped immediately. At far side, a small pool glimmered silver in the light of the stars, the water as clear as crystal. A sharp breeze rustled through the air, and the cloud that had been obscuring the moon shifted. Zuko’s hands fell to his sides, and the flame between them died; the last traces of the light dissipated in the night air, leaving him bathed solely in moonlight. Zuko walked over to the pool, as if compelled by an otherworldly power. He stared into the depths and his reflection stared up at him grimly from the still surface. It was strange, he thought, that water this pure lay hidden, so close to the pollution of the river. He sat down at the edge of the pool and trailed his fingertips along the surface, the ripples blurring the face that stared back at him. The water was freezing, and Zuko shivered at the sensation.

“Something interesting?”

Zuko flinched at Sokka’s sudden interruption, falling backwards away from the water.

“Shit, sorry!” Sokka exclaimed, as he hurried over to Zuko’s side. “ Didn’t mean to scare you.”

“You didn’t,” Zuko grumbled. Sokka raised an eyebrow at him.

“I woke up and I couldn’t find you,” Sokka explained. “I was worried you’d run off on us.” His words were teasing, but his voice betrayed his anxiety; he’d really thought that Zuko had left.

“And go where?” Zuko scoffed and turned back to the water. “It’s not like I can just go wandering through the Fire Nation.” The grotesque brand shone up at him from his reflection. “I’m not exactly hard to recognise.”

Sokka sat down by his side and they stared at each other in the reflections of the water.

“You were firebending,” Sokka remarked quietly, and Zuko froze.
“That a problem?” He asked defensively, curling his shoulders forwards.

“It’s just the first time I’ve seen you do that, man,” Sokka said rubbing at the back of his head. “I didn’t know that you could.”

Zuko snorted softly to himself. As far as most of the Fire Nation was concerned, what he could currently manage was an insult to the very concept of firebending.

“You, um,” Sokka began slowly, staring at Zuko’s reflection in the water. “Maybe you could show Aang some stuff? He needs a teacher.”

Zuko let out a bark of bitter laughter. “Trust me, Sokka; he doesn’t want me teaching him anything.”

Sokka opened his mouth, about to contradict him, but something in Zuko’s expression must have told him to leave the subject well enough alone. Instead they sat in silence and watched the breeze send ripples across the surface of the water. The night air was cool against Zuko’s skin, and he wrapped the cloak more firmly around his shoulders.

“Do you ever think about what life will be like… after all this is over?” Sokka asked quietly, staring up at the moon. “What you’ll do once Aang defeats-” he cut himself off.

“My father?” Zuko said in a voice that was barely more than a whisper. Sokka looked down at his hands and nodded. “No,” Zuko replied honestly. He hadn’t thought about a life after the war, because thinking like that was far too dangerous. If he allowed himself to think that there might be a way out of all of this crap, a future where he could have a nice, peaceful life without his father in the world, he’d drive himself mad. He knew better than to dwell on the absurd. Aang was a kid, even if he was the Avatar; Zuko didn’t see any way that he would survive a confrontation with the Fire Lord. The best that Zuko could hope for was a chance to slip away into obscurity somewhere in the Earth Kingdom, where he could spend the rest of his life looking over his shoulder and flinching at the sight of flames. No, Zuko shook his head softly. He tried very hard not to think about the future, if he could help it.

Zuko watched in the pool as Sokka turned to face him, a strange expression on his face.

“Who’s next in line? After your dad…”

“Azula.”

Sokka swallowed heavily.

“Ah. Not you, then?”

“Spirits, no!” Zuko’s laugh was incredulous. “I’ve been banished, remember?” He gestured harshly at his burnt face. Sokka didn’t react, but the water reflected the compassion in his eyes.

They sat in silence for a long while. “When Aang-” Sokka began tentatively- “I mean, when all this is done…” He took in a deep breath, looked at his hands. “You would be so much better…” Zuko frowned in confusion, and Sokka let out a deep sigh as he rolled his eyes up to the moon. “I mean… as Fire Lord.”

Zuko sat in silence for a few minutes, pondering the thought, before letting out a bitter laugh. “As if they’d want me,” Zuko finally huffed out, his fingertips gently tracing the burn on his cheek.

Sokka let out a soft exhale, and his forehead crinkled up. Zuko watched in the water as the sharp lines of Sokka’s profile leaned closer. Sokka rested a gentle hand on his shoulder, and gently turned
Zuko to face him, ignoring the slight jolt of surprise that ran through Zuko’s body at the contact.

“They should,” Sokka told him firmly and seriously, his eyes earnest and soft. He leant even closer to Zuko, his breath hot against the skin of Zuko’s unmarred cheek. Something deep stirred in Zuko’s chest.

“I-” He turned to face Sokka, breathing out shakily. Sokka leaned in closer until they were nose to nose, Sokka’s deep blue eyes fixed firmly on Zuko’s. Then Sokka’s lips pressed gently against Zuko’s own, and he blinked in surprise. The touch was brief and gentle, and something twisted painfully in Zuko’s chest. Sokka leant back slowly, his eyes searching Zuko’s face. Whatever he read there made flinch back sharply, his eyes bright and face flushed with humiliation.

“Sorry. I-”

Zuko sat still as a statue as Sokka slowly backed away from him, leaving him alone by the water. Zuko felt a little dazed. He reached up a hand to his lips; the ghost sensation of Sokka’s kiss still lingered on them. He looked back into the pool, utterly confused, and stared at his reflection as the pale light of the moonlight shone reprovingly down on him.

Zuko didn’t head back to camp until the early hours of the morning; he’d sat by the pool for hours, his brain replaying the kiss over and over again. He didn’t quite know how to feel about it. It certainly hadn’t been unpleasant; it had just…taken him by surprise. He’d never really thought about anyone that way, and he certainly hadn’t expected anyone to ever think about him that way—especially not after his father had mutilated half his face. Then Sokka had… Zuko didn’t know quite why Sokka had done what he’d done, but he still felt horrendously embarrassed by his own reaction. He’d just sat there like a gaping fish. Spirits, but he’d acted like an idiot.

He groaned under his breath and slapped a palm against his forehead as he slowly and shamefully slunk back into camp. Making his way to his sleeping-spot, Zuko noticed that Katara’s bed lay empty. He frowned and paused where he stood. Somewhere beyond the boundary of the camp, a branch snapped sharply. Zuko headed immediately towards the noise- what if they’d been recognised in town? Were they being attacked? He picked up a heavy branch from the Fire Pit, holding it out in front of him like a sword, as he tiptoed over to the source of the sound. He paused, his back to the large rock at the entrance to camp. Taking a deep breath, he spun around the rock, ready to face whoever or whatever was intruding on the camp. He almost tripped over the figure making their way into camp, and took a few steps back to avoid collision. There, looking as shocked as he was- face painted and a large hat clutched in her hands- stood Katara.

They regarded each other for a few long moments. Finally, Katara titled her head at him, and he cautiously followed her away from the camp. He made sure to tread lightly, and to remember the path that they were walking. Katara finally stopped about a hundred or so yards from camp. She crossed her arms and turned, defiantly, to look at him. Something in the set of her expression put him on edge almost immediately.

“Look,” she began sternly, her eyes blazing. “I know what we all agreed, but I couldn’t just leave these people alone. They need help.”

Zuko said nothing, and just raised his good eyebrow at her.

“I thought you’d understand. These are your people! How can you not care? What kind of person are you?”

Zuko blinked at her. She was right. What kind of man was he, if he so quickly turned his head to the suffering of his people? Because she was right about that too; they were his people, regardless of
what his father decreed. Not because they were born from the same bloodthirsty nation that he was, but because they struggled, and strived, and lived in squalor and deprivation. They’d been shaped by their desire to survive, forged from adversity, just as he was. It just made it all the more sickening that Zuko’s every impulse told him to run and hide and stay away from the worst of it.

“I don’t—” he stammered and let out a growl of frustration. “I know they need help.” His mind replayed the conversation with Sokka over and over in his head. Sokka’s suggestion that Zuko would be a better Fire Lord for his people popped up dangerously at the back of his mind. Zuko shook himself, and focused back on Katara.

“So what’s your problem?”

He sighed in frustration, and gestured to the ridiculous outfit she was wearing.

“I just don’t understand how dressing up as a spirit and running about in the middle of the night is meant to help anyone?”

“If it gives them hope, it’s better than doing nothing!”

“You think they’ll thank you?” Zuko growled at her. “What happens when Appa gets better and we leave them, huh? They’ll go back to starving and mustering up scraps to survive!” Zuko clenched his fists tightly. “They’ll think their beloved Painted Lady abandoned them!”

“So what?” She hissed at him. “You agree with Sokka? You think unless we can help everyone then there’s no point even trying?”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying!” He let out a deep sigh of frustration. This was coming out all wrong. His mind was whirring and his thoughts were all confused. He was exhausted and frustrated as it was. He tried to piece his thoughts together, but his brain kept- incredibly unhelpfully, flashing back to Sokka and the feeling of his lips against Zuko’s. After a few minutes of silence, Katara let out a huff, and turned her back on him, ending the conversation.

“Right, well come find me when you work out what you are saying,” she told him bitingly, storming past him and back into camp. After a few minutes, Zuko followed, his fingers tightly pinching the bridge of his nose and his head aching with confusion.

The camp was silent the next morning. Zuko was exhausted and his head pounded; he’d barely slept all night. Judging by the bags under Sokka’s eyes, he hadn’t had a good night, either. He could feel Sokka’s gaze on his back, as he sat quietly and meditated in the early morning sun. Zuko cast a prayer up to Agni, asking for a bit of guidance but, as per usual, the spirits were silent on anything that might actually give Zuko help. Thankfully, he wasn’t forced to speak to either Sokka or Katara. The minute that Aang awoke, he went straight to Appa’s side. He was beside himself with the fact that Appa’s tongue was once again purple, but Katara at least had the decency to come clean. She explained to Aang that she’d been feeding the bison berries to make it look like he was sick and that there was no need to worry. Aang looked relieved and a little betrayed. Then, shooting a glare at Zuko, Katara went on to reveal her late-night philanthropism as the Painted Lady. Sokka was less than thrilled.

“You think there’s going to say thank you?” he asked his sister, echoing Zuko’s words from the night before. “Katara, as long as that factory is there polluting the river, none of their problems are going to just disappear.” He sighed heavily. “You’ll help them for a little while, but that’s it. If we stay here much longer we’re going to lose our chance to take down the Fire Lord. That’s the only thing that would actually help these people!”
Katara agreed very begrudgingly, but only after wringing out an agreement that they would make one last visit into town, so that she could check up on the people she had been healing.

The trek into town was tense and silent. As soon as they got their feet onto the dock, Katara went off on her own to check on the progress of her patients. Toph and Aang headed off to find Dock, leaving Zuko and Sokka alone together. They stood in silence for half a minute or so, whilst Zuko internally panicked. When Sokka eventually turned to talk to him, Zuko surrendered to cowardice, and hurried off after Aang and Toph.

He had been expecting to see them back in the main market square. However, when he got to Dock’s shop, they were nowhere to be found. Zuko cursed loudly. Of course. Why would the spirits give him a hand and make this the one day that Aang didn’t go missing? He combed his way through the square for about half an hour, keeping his good eye peeled for either of the youngest (and shortest) members of the group, but staying within eyesight of the shop, just in case they happened to return. He was anxious as anything and convinced that the locals were starting to scrutinise him too closely. Panic coursed through him, and he was just about to head back to the dock when a loud shout tore through the air.

“Hey!” The bellow came from right by Dock’s shop. Zuko glanced around quickly, convinced that the Avatar had done something to get himself in trouble- again.

Muffled cursing and the sound of a scuffle echoed through the sudden silence. A small crowd was gathering in front of Dock’s shop and Zuko pushed his way to the front of it. When he got there, Aang and Toph weren’t in sight, but the actual picture wasn’t much better.

There, in the middle of the crowd stood the young boy that Zuko had seen picking pockets in the square the other day. Staring down at him, face bright red with fury, stood a soldier, a corporal, from the factory, his armour glinting bright red in the sunlight.

“You little shit!” He snarled at the boy in front of him. “Thought you’d try and pick my pocket, did you?”

The boy stood frozen, eyes wide and glassy, his fingers still outstretched where they had been just about to dip into the soldier’s bag. Zuko noted, from the corner of his good eye, that Sokka had shoved his way through the crowd to stand at Zuko’s right shoulder.

“Fucking brats,” the man snarled again, and raised his hand. The boy flinched back, but the soldier grabbed his arm, holding him in place. His thick fingers wrapped completely about the boy’s spindly wrist. The man adjusted his grip and then raised his other hand once again.

Zuko was moving before he’d even realised it.

“Leave him alone,” he ordered gruffly, walking up to the boy’s side. The soldier eyed him from head to toe, taking in the skinny build hidden behind reams of fabric, noting the hood. He scoffed.

“You little shit!” He hissed, reaching out and yanking on the soldier’s elbow, forcing his arm down and breaking his grip on the boy’s wrist. He let go suddenly and the larger man toppled forwards, pulled off balance. The boy stumbled backwards a few steps, rubbing at the bright red mark on his arm.
“Run.” Zuko kept his good eye fixed on the soldier as he spoke, but he heard the boy’s footsteps as he scrambled quickly away, his feet thudding against the wet wooden walkway, as he shoved his way back through the silent crowd. The soldier slowly pulled himself to his feet, glaring hotly at Zuko.

Zuko slowly shifted his left foot backwards, bringing his arms up and in front of his body as he settled into a stance. The soldier watched Zuko much more warily than he had before, acknowledging the threat.

“What the fuck do you think you are?”

Zuko didn’t reply. The crowd was whispering quietly behind him.

“Are all you backwater peasants as stupid as each other, or something?” The soldier snarled at Zuko. “You just assaulted a member of the Fire Army. Do you have any idea what you’ve just done?”

Zuko let out a huff of unamused laughter.

“I’m gonna kick your ass, kid,” the soldier warned, “Then I’m gonna rip that fucking hood off your head and drag you up to see the Captain. See what he thinks about you assaulting one of his men.”

Zuko’s heart skipped traitorously at the thought of being caught and exposed, but he flexed his fingers and shifted into a firmer stance. He wasn’t going to be able to run from this one; he’d have to fight. Fortunately, that was something he was pretty damn good at. In the darkness of the hood, he bared his teeth in a feral grin. “You can try.”

The soldier lashed out quickly, a punch to Zuko’s solar plexus so badly telegraphed that Zuko was able to slip straight around it. As he moved, he landed a jab to the man’s kidney; he folded immediately, bent double and gasping for breath. Behind him, Zuko could hear the crowd’s whispering, and the soft sibilance of it crawled up the back of his spine.

“Fuck!” The soldier swore, pulling himself to his feet. He glared at Zuko as he sucked in a few gasping breaths. He clasped one hand to his side and reached down to his boot with the other, pulling out a thin, sharp knife. Zuko’s eyes snapped to the blade and he watched the man’s movements with a sharp focus. His mind raced through his options. He didn’t want to remove the hood, but his peripheral vision was atrocious as it was, what with his bad eye. He didn’t need a hood obscuring his sight even more, but he just couldn’t risk revealing his identity to a Fire Nation soldier, especially not in front of a crow of already too-interesting witnesses. Mind made up, Zuko kept his attention firmly fixed on the soldier in front of him and prayed to Agni that he wasn’t about to get stabbed.

A slight shift of the corporal’s left foot, and Zuko knew that he was about to lunge. Zuko pushed his weight to the ball of his left foot, ready to jump out of the way, and make a grab for the man’s wrist, when a loud bang tore through the air. The noise rippled through the town; the wooden supports of the walkways shook ominously, and the people assembled behind him screamed and scattered. Zuko’s bad ear rang horrifically. He stumbled slightly, and Sokka rushed to his side, his boomerang aimed at the soldier- in case he’d thought to take advantage of Zuko’s distracted state.

Thankfully, the soldier hadn’t seemed to notice. Instead of continuing the fight, he turned from Zuko and looked up the river, mouth gaping wide in shock. Zuko took his shock as the gift that it was. Within seconds he’d grabbed the man’s arm and twisted the knife from his grasp. He threw the blade into the river, before turning his own eyes towards the source of all the panic. To Zuko’s horror the hulking form of the factory was on fire, and falling piece by piece into the river below.
He and Sokka exchanged a long look. There was no doubt that this was Katara’s work. In unspoken agreement, they headed straight back to camp, dodging through crowds of panicked locals as they went. They found Toph out by the dock looking tense and worried. Apparently Aang had given her the slip about half an hour before, and she had been waiting for them ever since. Then people had started running and she had been half-terrified she was going to get trampled. She was almost spitting mad by the time they found her. They quickly filled her in on what had happened, and her face went white with fury.

The three of them raced back in record time, panic and fury fuelling Zuko’s strength as he punted them along on the little fishing boat. They skidded back into camp only to find Katara and Aang looking very pleased with themselves. Toph growled and stormed over to Aang, not even halting her stride as she started yelling at him.

“You said so long as the factory is there, nothing we do here will really help these people,” Katara said with a grin, ignoring Toph’s diatribe, as she looked at Sokka and Zuko’s stony faces. “So we got rid of the factory.”

“And probably made things about a million times worse for all those people,” Zuko finished grimly.

Katara’s smile slipped off her face, and she looked to her brother in confusion.

“Think about it, Katara,” Sokka all but growled. “Who do you think the army is gonna blame for the explosion? They’ll think the locals attacked them!”

Katara’s face fell, and she raised both her hands solely up to her cheeks in horror.

“Oh no… you’re right!” She spun around and looked at Aang, who was still busy being chastised by Toph. “We’ve got to go back into town, right now!” Toph fell silent, and Aang looked at Katara in worried confusion.

“And do what?” Sokka asked tiredly, running a palm across his face. “Tell all the angry firebenders that we’re really sorry but we’re the ones who blew up your factory.” He snorted. “If we ask them nicely, do you think they won’t try and arrest us?” He let out a hollow laugh. “Maybe if we explain we’re on a tight schedule to try and sneak the Avatar into their capital city?”

“You’ve made your point, Sokka,” Aang said quietly, walking up to stand by Katara’s side. “But we can’t just leave these people alone.”

“Then what do we do?” Toph said grimly, cracking her knuckles.

A little while later, they found themselves at the edge of the rocks, looking down at the town below. As expected, the army were holding the local people responsible, and were heading straight for the helpless town. A handful of soldiers were heading downstream on jet skis. It seemed as if they were the only soldiers left alive. Zuko supposed that they must have been out on patrol and not in the factory when the explosion hit, as he knew far more men than that would have been garrisoned at the factory proper. He wondered if Katara and Aang knew how many people they had just killed in destroying the factory, but somehow he doubted it.

With a roar that echoed off rocks lining the river banks, the jet skis reached the town and growled to a stop. Time was up. Zuko followed Katara and Sokka down to the riverbank, as they bickered over what they should do. Even from across the river, Zuko could hear the angry voice of the soldier in charge echoing across off the rocks. The soldiers were holding the people of the town responsible for all of Katara’s actions. The food that she had given them had been stolen from the army supplies and was marked with the military insignia. She had left vats of rice marked as Fire Army property lying
casually about on the docks- it was damning evidence. Katara winced and bit her lip as they watched from the safety of the riverbank.

Then things erupted into chaos. The soldiers in town started flinging around fire and launching grappling hooks, tearing and burning the town down around them. Zuko froze as he felt the energy of the fire hit home after home. Thankfully the wood was wet, and it didn’t catch immediately. It bought them a little time. It was lucky, then, that Aang and the others moved so quickly. Within minutes, Katara was dressed in her Painted Lady costume once more and she, Aang and Toph had planned an elaborate bending display to make it look as if a wrathful spirit was coming to lay waste to those who dared attack the town. Sokka was, quite masterfully playing strange eerie music on a wooden whistle, as Katara whipped up an ominous looking mist and set out across the bay to face the soldiers.

It was impressive- Zuko thought to himself, as Katara gestured and sent jet skis flying into to the air to crash against the tall rocks lining the sides of the river- how quickly and efficiently they were able to concoct, and enact, such detailed and precise acts of bending. Were it up to him, he would probably have just taken down the soldiers as quickly and efficiently as possible; he had no doubt that Katara could have made a tidal wave to sweep the army into the depths of the river. It was a grotesque way to plan an attack- drowning- particularly for a firebender, but it would have been the simplest way to go about things. He pointedly did not say anything to the others though. Aang had a thing about the sanctity of life, despite the explosion he’d helped create at the factory, and Zuko suspected that it was easier to conjure a sprits from a bit of trickery and careful bending than it was to persuade Aang to allow them to kill the soldiers.

In a startling amount of time, the soldiers turned tail and ran, leaving the townspeople alone to bless the Painted Lady. Sokka and Zuko took turns punting the little boat across the river to the town, bringing Toph along with them. The people were ecstatic, whooping and cheering at the fact that the army had left them alone. It was kind of nice- Zuko had to admit- to see the people so happy. Then, in the midst of all the celebration, Dock recognised Katara. Surprisingly, instead of the mob that he was expecting, the people grudgingly accepted that they’d been helped by a waterbender. With a bit of coaxing from Sokka and Dock, the men and women of the town slowly accepted that they would need to help themselves, and that no spirit was going to magically come to their aid.

Katara offered to help them clear the river, and she and Toph went to work immediately, separating muck and pollutants out from the clear water. Slowly, ever so slowly, the river started to turn blue once again. Zuko and Sokka stood off to the side, watching them work. Zuko had finally mustered up the courage to speak to Sokka, when a small voice chimed up at his side, derailing his train of thought.

“Thanks, mister.”

It was the boy that he’d rescued from the soldier, standing sheepishly at Dock’s side.

“Oh…uh,” Zuko began awkwardly. “It was nothing…”

Sokka muffled a laugh and Dock raised an eyebrow.

“Didn’t look like nothing to us,” he said soberly, and nodded his head in a quick bow of thanks. “I think someone needs a few lessons about other people’s property,” he remarked drily, casting a wry look at the boy who squirmed awkwardly, “but that soldier was gonna do some harm.” He nodded once again. “So thanks.”

Zuko bowed his head in acceptance, his mouth dry and his breath a little shaky. He didn’t trust himself to speak. Dock gave him a quick once over and then ushered the boy away into a house.
across the way, leaving Sokka and Zuko to their own devices. Zuko stood a little dumbstruck, not quite sure what had just happened.

Finally, after what felt like hours, Sokka turned to Zuko.

“Hey man, look…” Sokka rubbed the back of his neck, flushing bright red. “I’m…uh…I’m sorry about last night.”

“Oh…” Zuko blushed, feeling incredibly awkward. “I mean. You don’t…I’m…” He bit his tongue and closed his eyes in mortification as he struggled to find the right words.

“I… well I misread the signals, I guess…” Sokka said, purposefully avoiding Zuko’s eye. “So… I’m sorry.” He sighed. “I meant what I said though. You’d be good for them.” Sokka turned away, about to walk off. Zuko took a deep breath, clenched his fists and stared down at the wooden boards beneath his feet.

“Don’t apologise,” he said hoarsely. Sokka turned round in surprise, his eyes wide and hopeful. They stared at each other in silence, the laughs and shouts of the townspeople filling the air around them. Something twisted in Zuko’s chest, and he smiled softly from beneath the hood of his cloak.

“Zuko…”

Zuko froze. Across the way, Zuko swore that he saw Dock start, and shift slightly towards them, listening in. His blood ran cold, and he shook his head softly. Sokka seemed to realise his mistake, and he bit his lip.

“Later,” Sokka promised, and Zuko nodded quickly, his heart pounding. They both pretended that they didn’t notice Dock’s speculative gaze follow them as they walked off.

After that, Sokka was even more desperate to leave town, yet the clean-up operation seemed to drag on and on. They ended up staying in town until the water of the river ran clear and blue once again, and the air from upstream blew fresh and crisp. Aang and Katara would not stand for anything less. When they did finally leave, huddled on the back of a disgruntled Appa, Zuko was exhausted and ready for the day to be over.

He hoped they’d done some good back at the town, but the chances were another company of soldiers would be back in no time at all. That particular point of the river had fast moving currents and was perfect for powering the arms factories so badly needed for a country at war with the world. Once the dust settled and the army found someone willing to risk the wrath of a river spirit in the hopes of a promotion, there’d be another group of soldiers settling in and rebuilding the dam across the river. Maybe the townspeople would be treated well the next time around, but Zuko didn’t hold much hope.

Aang was, of course, delighted with their efforts, and utterly convinced that all of the town’s problems had been solved with a little bit of theatre and some careful bending. He went on and on about it for most of the afternoon, and into the evening. They finally landed in a clearing in the middle of a forest far to the north of the ‘rescued’ town. Sokka left to try and catch something for dinner, leaving the others to listen to Aang tell Katara how great she was over and over again. Zuko headed over to sit by Toph and they both sighed deeply, in complete understanding of one another. Zuko was increasingly realising that the Avatar, far from being a supreme being of supernatural power and wisdom, was actually a pretty dumb kid. Of course, he had all this ancient airbender wisdom, but he just didn’t understand the real word.

A bit later in the evening, Sokka came back to camp with his kill dressed and hung over his shoulder.
Aang looked appalled and kept shooting Sokka aghast glances all through the rest of the butchering and cooking process, even once Katara had taken over. He then left to scavenge up his own dinner from the local vegetation. Now, Zuko didn’t really care if the Avatar wanted to eat vegetables in exclusivity—each to their own and all that— but he really didn’t want to end up anaemic from a lack of proper diet. Not again. Zuko had been malnourished and starving for too long to turn down a meal of any kind and he was a little irritated at Aang’s high and mighty approach to food. He wasn’t even sure if Aang even knew the plants that he had rustled up into a rough broth. He didn’t know whether to respect the Avatar’s adherence to the customs of his people, or whether he thought he was a fucking idiot. It was a very fine line, particularly when Aang kept shooting Sokka dark glances all the way through dinner.

When they had all finally eaten, Sokka pulled out his map, and started running through their schedule. They’d lost three days to the detour back in the town, and he was biting his lip in concern at whatever deadline he was working to.

“How are we looking, Snoozles?” Toph asked, yawning loudly and stretching her arms high above her head until they cracked. “We still on time?”

Sokka scoffed. “Not at all.” He folded up his map and ran a weary hand over his face. “We can make some time up if we all cut a few hours off our sleep every night.” Toph groaned and Sokka winced sympathetically. “I know, I know. I’m not happy about it either! But if we lose any more time then the whole invasion plan will be ruined!”

The rest of the group fell silent at Sokka’s proclamation. Katara even looked a little guilty. Whatever plan they had in place must be serious. It wasn’t some half-hearted idea formed in Sokka’s mind and indulged by Hakoda and the other men. They were actually planning an invasion of the Fire Nation. Fuck. Zuko’s stomach dropped to his feet. He cleared his throat gently, but it sounded far too loud in the quiet of the camp. The others all turned to face him.

“So, this plan?” He began awkwardly. “You’re seriously going to invade the Fire Nation?”


Sokka then promptly began to fill Zuko in on the Water Tribe’s grand plan to take out the Fire Lord and strike a blow to the heart of the Fire Nation in one fell swoop. Zuko’s heart sank lower and lower as Sokka blithely continued to explain exactly what they planned to do once they sailed up to the Great Gates of Azulon. Zuko internally swore more and more vehemently, trying to keep his silence. The coup de grace came, however, when Sokka’s declaration of just when all of this was supposed to go down.

“The day of the black sun?” Zuko spluttered, as soon as Sokka revealed their ‘ace-in-the-hole’. He sucked in a ragged breath, forcing down incredulous laughter. “Are you being serious?”

“What do you mean?” The smug self-satisfaction had faded from Sokka’s voice, leaving only dread that weighted his words like lead.

“The day of the last full solar eclipse went down as one of the worst days in Fire Nation history.” Zuko said softly. “You think the Fire Sages didn’t notice that the sun disappeared and everyone lost their bending?” He scoffed. “The eclipse gets tracked. It gets prepared for. You’ll be attacking when everyone is on high-alert.” Sokka’s face had paled considerably. Zuko took a deep breath and met the other boy’s eyes squarely. “Sokka, my father will have planned for this for years, I promise you that. He’ll see this coming a mile off.”
“But they won’t have their bending.” Sokka argued faintly. “We still have a chance-”

“They’ll still have weapons, Sokka.” Zuko’s voice was sharp as steel, as he cut him off.

“Fuck.”

“Yeah.”

“We have to tell dad,” Katara spoke up in the dreadful silence that followed. “We’ve got to call this off.”

“I know,” Sokka muttered and swore under his breath, as he shuffled urgently through the papers of his schedule. “I don’t know where he’ll be until the rendezvous.” He swore again. “Dad said something about a group he was working with, some people who could pass on information…” He finished rifling through his papers, and threw them on the ground, clenching his fists in frustration. “But I don’t know how to get in contact with them!”

“But-” Aang cut in suddenly, looking panicked. “We have to go through with the plan! I have to stop the Fire Lord, and this way I won’t have to hurt anyone!” He turned to look at Sokka with appealing eyes. “You promised!”

“I know, Aang,” Sokka sighed heavily, running a hand across his face. His eyes looked haunted as he spoke, and they stared straight into Zuko’s with the weight of terrible knowledge. “But if we don’t call this off now, a lot of people are going to die.” Aang swallowed heavily, and blinked back tears from his wide eyes, looking every inch like the twelve-year-old kid that he was.

“We’ve got to go looking for your dad,” Toph said quietly, after a long moment. This time there were no further objections.

Zuko only hoped that they weren’t already too late.

Chapter End Notes

Right! So a lot of stuff just happened...

Sokka and Zuko!!! The pool scene is one that I've had in my head for ages, but it was going to be a few chapters away. Then it just felt like it fit in this chapter- Sokka has waited long enough! I may have to tag this as slow burn...

This is basically how I saw Painted Lady going down with Zuko in the mix, he doesn't really want to rock the boat, but he's also got a good heart and he cares too damn much. He's practical enough to agree with Sokka, that short term fixes aren't going to help, but he also doesn't feel like he can just leave them. It's a difficult one, and something he's not entirely finished grappling with. Also Katara and Aang just tear down a factory in that episode. I had completely forgotten that until the rewatch!

None of these kids have any chill whatsoever.

Anyway, Zuko will come around to the Gaang's way of seeing things. Our boy just needs a little wake up call to truly embrace the revolutionary zeal. And boy is it
coming...

Please let me know your thoughts! Next chapter is all about swords and secrecy and incredibly awkward flirting.
The lone and level sands

Chapter Notes

Hi guys, it's been a while...

I know I promised this back in November, so sorry that it has taken so long to get out. Between work and the holidays (and the fact that this chapter just refused to write itself) it's taken me forever to get this finished.

But it's a super long one! So hopefully that will make up for things?

TWs this chapter for referenced physical abuse, vomiting, flashbacks and panic attacks. Nothing too graphic this chapter, but please drop me a line if I've missed anything, or if you want me to flag anything specific going forwards.

Hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If finding a commandeered Fire Nation army vessel in the middle of the ocean sounded difficult in theory, then it was all but impossible in practice. Zuko and the others had been searching for over a week and they hadn’t found a single clue as to where the chief might be. It was hardly surprising; Hakoda and his men were expert warriors and they knew better than to attract too much attention in enemy territory. There were no handy wanted posters, no burning buildings or terrified citizens left behind after raids to help Sokka track a course. It was like chasing smoke, or trying to track shadows. If only the invasion they had planned hadn’t been doomed from the start, Zuko had concluded after the third day of fruitless searching, they would have probably stood a very good chance of pulling it off. That same day, Sokka had torn his schedule to shreds and given it for kindling for the camp fire; Zuko was not alone in his frustration.

They had stopped in at least four of five different towns, all of which Sokka had judged to be big enough to have a military garrison of some form or other. As far as Sokka was concerned, the main priority was finding his father and calling off the invasion before it was too late. Zuko had thought that knowingly going where the Fire Army would be was very stupid, but he had been forced to concede that it was probably the only way to get information. That wasn’t to say that he had been jumping for joy about heading deeper into Fire Nation territory.

At the first town that Sokka had brought them to, Zuko had stayed back with Appa, adamantly refusing to go anywhere near a Fire Army outpost. He had been quietly panicking away to himself, debating whether or not he should take Appa and run for the Earth Kingdom, when a Fire Army patrol had walked right past the clearing where Zuko, Appa and Momo were not-so-well-hidden. The soldiers had hung around for a good few minutes, taking the mickey out of each other and working their way through a pair of noxious cigarettes, before they had finally gone away. Zuko had been scared shitless. He had been entirely defenceless, without a weapon, sat propped up against a flying bison whose picture was gracing wanted posters from the southern islands to fucking Ba Sing Se. When the group had returned later with dinner, several stolen changes of clothes and absolutely no information, Zuko had informed them that he would be accompanying them on any future excursions.
After that, they had fallen into a kind of routine. Whenever they reached a town, Sokka would stake out a bar, or a shop, or a drinking fountain until anyone in uniform wandered by. Then, bold as brass, he would wander over with Toph and loudly start bemoaning the fact that he was too young to enlist, lamenting that he wanted desperately to show the stubborn Earth Kingdom and the barbarian Water Tribes exactly why they should surrender to the glory of the Fire Nation. Even Toph thought he sounded ridiculous. Still, it usually got the military personnel talking and, after a while, Sokka would be able to twist the conversation back to Water Tribe raids and how dangerous they were and had anyone heard of anything like that in the area, recently? Toph would be standing by for the minute that Sokka’s questioning got a bit too obvious, ready to drag him away from suspicion. After a week of this dubious espionage, Sokka had gained a crash course in Fire Nation racism and a whispered rumour that a Water Tribe raid had claimed seven whole fish and a barrel of ale from the quartermaster’s stores on Kirachu Island, only the week before. Toph had dragged Sokka away before he’d even tried investigating that one any further.

A full week of unproductive sleuthing later and Zuko was beginning to get frustrated. He didn’t see how they would find Hakoda before the agreed rendezvous—particularly not if they were intent on visiting every town in the Fire Nation that might have hosted a passing battalion sometime in the past five years. Zuko sighed and leant back against the saddle, trying to ignore Toph’s bruising grip around his left bicep. He had to try and be more optimistic; it wasn’t as if he had any better ideas. Still, he couldn’t help but feel a familiar sense of dull hopelessness at the thought of repeating every all over again the next day.

The town they were currently flying over—latest on Sokka’s list of potential leads—was called Shu Jing. Zuko studied the town outline from his bird’s-eye view. As far as he could tell, the only vague connection to the military was a large castle a few miles out of town; a castle that wasn’t flying any military banners and looked, to all intents and purposes, to be either privately owned or entirely unoccupied. Zuko sighed once again and mirrored Toph’s grimace of annoyance, as Sokka started to enthuse that this was the town for them and that this time they’d find a lead. Sokka was trying hard to keep the others motivated and he didn’t need Zuko’s natural pessimism making things more difficult. So Zuko kept his lips sealed and his thoughts to himself.

A few hours later, the sun had long since set and Zuko was lying on the top of a low hill, staring up into the night sky. It was late and a cool breeze blew across his skin, pricking goose bumps up along the backs of his arms. The campfire had long since gone out and the air was rapidly growing chilly, but Zuko didn’t care. He was staring transfixed at the sky. Or more specifically, he was staring transfixed at the meteors falling from it like burning rain. They were beautiful and ethereal, as if the stars themselves were tumbling down from the sky, or like the moon goddess herself had let loose a multitude of floating lanterns, just to watch them dance across the heavens. Of course, Zuko knew better; he knew that the meteors were essentially space debris flashing past them at incredible speeds. There was nothing magical or spiritual about them; they were just pretty rocks. Still, there was something nice about taking the moment, in allowing himself to stare up at the stars in wonder and let his awestruck mind ponder the vastness of the universe. It was oddly pleasing, Zuko thought, that not all of nature could be brought to heel by bending; some forces were still too strange and powerful for humans to comprehend.

“Wow,” Aang chimed up from somewhere to his far left, startling Zuko from his train of thought.

“Yeah,” Katara sighed, gently. “It’s incredible.”

“Meh.” Toph waved a dismissive hand, purposefully almost clocking Sokka in the face. “Seen one nothing, seen them all.” Sokka let out a low groan of dismay at the joke; she had said the same thing no less than three times within the last hour.
Zuko fixed his eyes upon the sky. He could sense Sokka’s gaze burning into the side of his face, but he chose to ignore it. The moment felt too…heavy somehow. He didn’t want to taint such an incredible event with, well with the…whatever…that was going on between him and Sokka.

They hadn’t spoken about that night, about the…kiss…since that awkward morning back at the river village. With the revelation about the fucking stupid invasion plan and the hunt for Hakoda, there hadn’t quite been time. Aang was constantly demanding reassurance from his friends in the wake of the changed plans and what time Sokka had to spare away from his maps and charts and schedules was usually spent with Aang at his side. Zuko had started to think that Sokka just wanted to chalk the kiss up to the madness of the moonlight and forget that it had ever happened. Zuko wouldn’t really blame him, after all. He knew his face was off-putting; he’d relied upon that simple fact to get him through three years as a skinny teenager in a prison camp. If it had driven Sokka off as well, well Zuko wouldn’t exactly have been surprised.

Besides, Zuko had kind of been avoiding Sokka, anyway. Every night for the past week he had spent as little time in camp as possible, heading off to ‘gather firewood’ or ‘scope the perimeter’- which really just entailed him wandering around just out of sight of the others and trying not to have a panic attack. Because, try as Zuko might, he couldn’t get one thing off his mind: Hakoda. Or, to be more specific, the memory of a blade at his throat and a whispered threat “I don’t like you being around my children.” As much as Zuko wanted the others to find the Chief and call off the doomed invasion plan, he wasn’t exactly jumping for joy at the idea of seeing Hakoda in person. Not after he’d quite literally jumped ship and run off with the man’s children… and the Avatar. Fuck, Zuko was screwed enough already; even in the extremely remote eventuality that Sokka didn’t regret the kiss, Zuko didn’t think it would be very sensible to encourage Sokka any further. It was easier that way, and safer in the long run. Still, lately, whenever Sokka turned a beaming smile on Zuko or cracked some truly appalling joke, Zuko found himself wishing that maybe Sokka didn’t regret the kiss, after all. So, Zuko had taken to avoidance.

Zuko let out a soft sigh, and breathed out through his nose. It wasn’t very sensible to let his mind wander off on flights of fancy. He needed to keep his mind in the moment, or he would drive himself crazy.

Out of the corner of his good eye, he noticed that one of the meteors was burning brighter than the others, crashing through the sky at a furious pace. It would burn out soon, Zuko knew. Nothing that burnt that bright lasted very long. He watched the meteor as it got lower and lower in the sky, certain that any second it would fizzle out: a sad ending to a marvellous phenomenon. He frowned up at the blazing light, staring until spots danced across the vision in his good eye.

Any second now, it would fizzle out. Disappear suddenly into the dark of the night, as if it had never even existed. Except… the meteor wasn’t stopping. Instead it seemed to fall quicker and quicker through the sky, coming closer and closer towards them. Zuko sat up in alarm. Fuck, it was going to hit them. This was the end. He knew it was a fucking omen… He braced himself, waiting for the inevitable collision. He closed his eyes as a searing heat soared overhead. Katara let out a scream of alarm and Zuko’s eyes popped open. He wasn’t dead; the meteor had passed over them, mere feet above their heads. He spun around and watched as it finally crashed down to earth a few hundred yards from where they were sat. The force of the impact had created a deep, smoking crater, and flames were beginning to lick at the dry grass around it.

“Fuck!” Zuko growled, rolling to his feet and backing away from the crash site. The fire was spreading quickly.

“We’ve got to do something!” Aang yelled, running past Zuko. Katara and Toph were hot on his heels.
“Right!” Katara yelled, pulling water from the nearby creek and launching herself full at the flames. Toph stopped a few yards from the fire and stomped heavily, collapsing the ground into around the blaze into trenches. Aang quickly joined her and they soon had carved a deep gorge around the fire, stopping it from spreading any further across the grass.

Zuko stared at the blaze in dim horror. This was out of control. He had to do something. He could feel the pulse of the fire’s energy, and it was overwhelming. He reached out both his arms, fighting against the rising panic in his chest, but he couldn’t get a grasp on the flames, they were too wild, too powerful; he wasn’t strong enough to fight them. Just like last time. Fuck, it was going to happen again. It was happening again. The sharp smell of smoke filled his nose and then he was back at the mine, crawling over the scorching ground, flames licking at his heels. No, he was crying, cold stone beneath his knees as he howled in agony, the smell of burnt flesh filling his nostrils and…

“Hey, you okay?” Sokka’s voice pulled him back to the present. Zuko stood still for a few long moments, gasping in a few deep breaths and pinning his mind to the present with an adamantine will. Finally, he nodded shakily at Sokka; the other boy shot him a wry, knowing look.

“Seems like they’ve got it covered,” he commented casually, though Zuko could make out the edge to his words over the roar of the fire, could see the downward turn to his lips in the flickering glow of the flames. Sokka wasn’t okay, either.

“Yeah,” Zuko acknowledged quietly, forcing himself to breathe through the tight band around his chest.

“Wish I could do something,” Sokka confessed quietly, kicking bitterly at the grass beneath their feet. “Stuff like this happens and it just reminds me how useless I am.”

“You honestly think that this is any better for me?” Zuko asked grimly, as the Avatar shot about, raining water and earth down onto the quickly dying flames. “I’m a firebender.”

“So? You can still bend!” Sokka’s tone was as bitter as Zuko had ever heard it. “I bet you could do something.”

Zuko let out a low growl of frustration, but the challenge stung. Maybe he could do something to help. Maybe he just wasn’t trying hard enough. He reached out once again, feeling for the energy of the flames and trying to force his chi to smother them, to shut them down. They didn’t even need to struggle to break free of his pathetic control. His focus slipped and the flames surged back, blazing even stronger. Katara let out a sharp cry of alarm and Zuko flinched back, surrendering the firefighting to those who actually could do it.

“See!” Sokka exclaimed. “What fucking use am I? I can’t bend anything!”

“And what use is bending anything if I can’t control it?” Zuko spun around, fixing Sokka with a frustrated glare. “But-”

“Don’t even try to pretend that you know anything about it, because you don’t!” Zuko’s chest was heaving, his chest tight with panic. Those flames had been so strong.

Sokka’s face fell and he let out a quiet huff.

Yeah, you’re right.” He turned and looked over at the others, as they put out the last few errant flames with quick and efficient bending. “What do I know?”
It only took another few minutes for the others to finally finish their work; Zuko and Sokka stood in silence throughout, watching the whole process. Sokka let out a few customary congratulations and then sat quietly to himself for the rest of the night. If any of the others had noticed that their friend was out of sorts, they didn’t say anything about it. Although, Zuko had noticed Katara shooting her brother concerned glances as they settled down for the night.

It was a bad night. Zuko struggled to sleep and when he did finally manage to drift off, a few hours before dawn, his dreams were occupied by the memory of roaring flames at his back and thick, black, choking smoke filling his lungs. He woke up gasping for air, the minute that dawn broke over the horizon.

Later that morning, they headed into town. The whole group was quiet and on edge, Katara kept sending concerned glances at her brother. It wasn’t a long walk as far as distance went, but the awkward silence made it seem as though it would never end. Zuko kept his head down and his eyes on the ground in front of him, his thoughts tripping over themselves in an attempt to force back the memory of the night before.

The sharp scent of burned meat filled his nostrils and Zuko sneezed, violently. A few feet ahead, Sokka turned around, laughing. Zuko looked up for the first time, shaken from his thoughts. They were nearing the outer limits of the town, and the buildings were in full view. The houses were short, squat and simple structures with terracotta roofs and plain white walls: simple, utilitarian and exceedingly non-military. Zuko sighed; he suspected this was going to be a long day.

Just ahead, one of the houses threw open the back window and billowing smoke and bellowing voices rushed out into the open air.

“I told you the fire was too high, but would you listen?”

“Oh calm down, your mother won’t be here for hours. I’ll nip to the butchers later- they’ll have another joint.”

“With what money, huh? You think coins just drop out of the sky, don’t you?”

Zuko forcibly tuned the argument out as they continued on into town. Soon enough they had wandered into the main square and the sounds of the fight were long behind them.

“Lovely place,” Toph commented drily.

“Yeah, the people seem great,” Sokka agreed with a grimace.

“Hey, maybe they’re just having a bad day,” Aang cut across, admonishingly. “I’m sure the rest of the people here are friendly.”

Zuko cast his eye around the square; it wasn’t an encouraging sight. There were a good many stores around, of course, shopfronts all shouting in painstakingly painted characters about the clothes, jewellery, bread, spices, meat, armour and so on that they had to sell- all of which were the finest in the Fire Nation, or your money back. There were even a few nicely dressed families rushing in and out of them, all with heavy bags and upturned noses. It didn’t look like the town was doing too badly; certainly not compared to some of the places they’d been recently. Even so, there was a weighty sense of dilapidation about the place.

At the weapons shop just to their left, a merchant waved one of the fine families away from his establishment, a brilliant smile painted on his lips. The young master of the family had clearly just been to purchase his first sword, judging by the bright grin on the boy’s face and the carefully
wrapped parcel that his father was keeping out of arm’s reach. The merchant was all beaming smiles and polite bows of thanks as the family walked away. The minute they were out of sight, however, his posture sagged; his shoulders slumped and his face crumpled like a broken marionette, his forehead sinking into a deep frown and his lips drawing thin and tight. He looked tired and drained, even though it was only a few hours past dawn. Zuko turned and gave the man a more thorough once-over with his good eye. On closer inspection, the merchant’s professional clothing, whilst still red and not obviously patched, looked washed out and faded. The shoes on his feet were thin-soled and looked uncomfortable for standing around in all day.

No, Zuko judged quietly to himself, this town was not quite as prosperous as it would like to appear. Whilst that actually increased the likelihood of a military presence, he didn’t think the people would be all that willing to help a bunch of strange, clearly foreign-looking children.

“Oh look, there’s a weapons shop!” Katara exclaimed following Zuko’s gaze. She turned to Sokka with a bright grin. “Why don’t we take a look?”

As Katara had just finished cooing over the jewellers across the square and the delicious smell of freshly cooked bread from the backers a few shops down, her sudden enthusiasm for a weapons shop was a little suspect.

“We don’t really have time, Katara,” Sokka sighed, but his eyes were bright with longing, rather than dull with fatigue, for once. “Toph and I should probably start asking around…”

“We can give ourselves an hour,” Zuko found himself agreeing with Katara. “We can try and get a better feel of the town.” The dual dao swords he’d spied just inside the shop were definitely not swaying his opinion on the matter, either.

Katara turned to look at him with outright shock. He thought, vaguely, that this might be the first time he’d actually agreed with her about something.

“But…” Sokka argued.

“We’ve not stopped for days,” Aang commented gently. “We need a break, or we’ll just burn out.”

“But…” Sokka attempted again.

“Hey, if Sparky and the Sugar Queen agree, then it has to be a good idea.” Toph smiled widely and shoved past the others, walking straight into the shop. Zuko paused for a moment and then gave a mental shrug, following her in.

“Good morning!” The merchant exclaimed, jumping up from behind his desk and plastering back on his salesman’s smile. “What can I help you with today?”

“We’re just looking,” Sokka replied quickly, hurrying in behind Zuko. Katara and Aang followed on his heels with small, knowing smirks. Zuko suspected this was some sort of plan that the two of them had concocted. A deep sense of unease flooded through him, and he began to regret agreeing with Katara- even if the dual dao were absolutely beautiful and needed to belong to him.

The others browsed around him, but Zuko only had eyes for the dao. He stood and stared at the blades for an indecently long period of time. Had he been raised differently, Zuko was pretty sure he would have been drooling. If he listened very carefully, he was sure he could hear them pleading with him to take them away from this awful shop and run them through some proper katas.

Somewhere over his right shoulder, he was aware of Sokka trying a frankly ridiculous number of weapons out for size, but the lure of the dao was too great for him to pay Sokka’s antics any real
attention. It was only when a sickening crash echoed through the shop that Zuko was jolted out of his reverie. He turned around and felt his jaw drop at the sheer mess that the others had made. Sokka was lying in an ungainly heap in the middle of the floor, trapped under a flail so large that the chain had wrapped around his torso twice, the spiked head resting worryingly close to his face. He smiled sheepishly up at Zuko. Zuko slapped a palm to his face.

“What are you doing?” he grumbled, stepping away from the dao to examine the mess. He had half a mind to leave Sokka stranded on the shop floor, but he wasn’t entirely evil. Instead he heaved a sigh and set about helping Sokka to untangle himself from the incredibly deadly weapon he had just dropped on himself.

“I was just trying it out,” Sokka grumbled back. “Seeing how it felt. I thought I might try something new.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean why?”

“You have your boomerang, don’t you?” Zuko asked. His brow furrowed in confusion, as he tried to figure out just how the chain had looped back over Sokka’s shoulder.

“Well yeah,” Sokka conceded, “but Katara and Aang suggested I try something else.” Zuko finally managed to find some slack in the chain and Sokka was able to wriggle loose. Sokka gave him a quick thumbs up in thanks. “I was thinking,” Sokka continued, “that if I can’t bend, I can at least still fight.”

Zuko frowned. So that had been Katara and Aang’s grand plan? Okay, so Sokka could get excited about sharp, pointy, lethal bits of metal as much as any teenage boy (Zuko pointedly did not think about how long he himself had spent staring at the dual dao), but why was he trying a flail of all things. Zuko was pretty certain that no one had used those for anything other than wall decorations since the days of his great-great-great-great-great grandfather, and for a very good reason.

“Is that really the best idea?” Zuko hedged quietly, trying not to stare for too long at the fucking flail.

“What do you mean?” Sokka’s bright grin was slowly starting to droop. Zuko tried to ignore the painful twinge that gave his gut.

“Learning a new weapon in the middle of a war?” Zuko said gruffly, gesturing to the pile of spears, clubs, bows and daggers that Sokka had abandoned in the corner. “Wouldn’t you be better practising the weapon you already know?”

Sokka frowned and looked down at the floor. “You’re probably right.” He glanced up and met Zuko’s eyes for a brief second, before looking away. His tongue darted across his lips. “I just want to be useful, you know?”

Zuko didn’t really know what to say to that; he’d never been very good at comforting people. Instead he just grunted awkwardly and shifted from foot to foot as Sokka cast one last longing look around the shop. Finally, the other boy heaved out a great sigh, and called the others over, getting ready to leave.

The merchant who had beaming joyfully as Sokka had tried weapon after weapon, hurried over, an intensely worried look on his face.

“Is everything okay young sirs?”
“Yeah,” Sokka replied. “Just realised I probably shouldn’t get something I don’t know how to use.” He gave a wry shrug. The merchant’s eyes widened in alarm.

“What about you, sir?” The merchant turned to Zuko, trying his very best to hide desperation behind a professional smile.

“No.”

“I saw you looking at the dao there earlier, sir. They’re a fine choice and beautiful blades, if I do say so myself. Could I convince you to try-”

“No.” Zuko cut the man off again, deliberately forcing his eyes away from the dao. He couldn’t exactly be a hypocrite about this. One fumbled battle with a stolen sword aside, Zuko had not practised with a blade in years; he had no idea of his level of skill, and walking around with swords strapped to his back would only draw attention.

“If it’s a matter of training, there’s a master swordsman in the town,” the merchant continued. “Master Piandao is always happy to take on new students.” The man’s voice wavered slightly on that last line, and Zuko strongly suspected that that was indeed a lie. Spirits, but why wasn’t this man leaving them alone?

“We don’t have time,” Zuko stated harshly. “We’re just passing through town.”

“All the more reason to learn to protect yourselves, young sirs.” The merchant’s eyes were so bright, they were almost glowing.

“Thanks,” Sokka said with a small, forced smile. “But we really are just passing through.”

“Well, if you change your minds, boys.” The merchant sighed and ran a hand through his hair, idly rubbing at the bald spot growing on his crown. He headed over to the doorway of the shop and beckoned for them to follow him. “Master Piandao lives up in that castle.” He pointed to the hill just out of town. “He’ll train you up good and proper, tell you everything you need to know.” Then his face broke out into a grin once again. “Then when you’re done, you come back to me and we’ll see if you still like the look of those dao.” He shot Zuko a knowing look.

“Right, will do,” Sokka agreed with a polite smile. They took that moment to escape, ducking past the man and out of the doorway as quickly as they could. They headed over to the small fountain on the other side of the square and settled down around it whilst Katara and Aang refilled their water flasks.

“Well that wasn’t at all suspicious,” Zuko remarked grimly, after a few moments. The others all looked towards him, faces matching pictures of disbelief.

“What was suspicious about that?” Aang exclaimed, stoppering up his flask and turning back towards the group. “He just seemed like a nice, helpful man.”

“He was trying to keep us there,” Zuko acknowledged quietly. “He really didn’t want us to leave.”

“He needed the sale,” Toph snorted cynically. “Trust me- I’ve known merchants act waaaay more pushy than that!”

“Then why was he so insistent about us going to see that Master?” Zuko asked.

“He wasn’t insistent,” Sokka drawled, “it was just a suggestion.”
“Maybe you should go and speak to the master, Sokka,” Katara suggested suddenly. “I mean, you were so excited about learning a new weapon, and the best person to teach you anything is a master.”

“I guess…” Sokka rubbed at his face. “But we don’t really have time…”

“Well…” Aang began, shooting a quick glance at Katara. “You were probably going to go to the castle anyway, weren’t you?” His eyes lit up, and Zuko’s stomach sank. “What if they’ve heard some news? Your dad could have sailed right past them for all we know!”

“In the creek?” Zuko deadpanned. “A Fire Navy warship?”

“It’s a possibility…” Sokka remarked, rubbing at his chin. “And I should probably check it out.”

“This is ridiculous,” Zuko slammed his palm against his forehead. “You can’t seriously be going along with this? What happened to finding your father? To stopping the invasion?”

Sokka’s face fell. “Yeah, you’re probably right.”

“Sokka,” Katara cut in suddenly. “You’ve been working non-stop for days, and…well… we aren’t any closer to finding dad. Maybe you need a break.”

“A day or two won’t hurt, right?” Aang cajoled, smiling brightly up at Sokka.

“Well…maybe…”

“I can’t believe this!” Zuko growled, throwing his hands up in the air. A young couple who had been making their way over to the fountain suddenly veered off in another direction. Zuko planted his palm firmly on the bridge of his nose and took a few deep, calming breaths. “If you want to learn to swing a sword so badly, I’ll teach you. Your dad can teach you. When we find him. Which is what we should be doing. Right. Now.”

“It’s not about that,” Sokka argued, but he wouldn’t meet Zuko’s eyes. “I did want to go to the castle, anyway. It has a great view over the surrounding area-”

“So does Appa.”

“Ah…well.” Sokka conceded the point.

An awkward silence fell over the group.

“It’s your call, Snoozles,” Toph finally said, cutting through the tension. “Do you think we can spare a couple of days?”

“Fine,” Sokka agreed after a few moments. “I’ll go.” He whipped round and pointed a very stern finger at Aang. “But only to find out what they know about dad. I’ll be a day or two, at most. If I haven’t found anything by then, we’re back on the road.”

Zuko almost growled in frustration.

“This is not a good idea-” he cut in urgently, but trailed off at the look on Sokka’s face. The other boy clearly knew the risk that he was taking; he had also clearly decided that it was worth it. Zuko swore.

“Right-” Toph cracked her knuckles and started striding off across the square- “let’s go!”
Aang followed quickly after her. Sokka waited back, fiddling with his pack and shooting surreptitious glances back at the still-seething Zuko. Katara made to follow after the others, but stopped when she sensed her brother wasn’t following. She glanced over at Zuko, rolled her eyes, and then set off across the square, hurrying after Toph’s heavy footsteps. Zuko lingered at the fountain. Sokka was being stupid. This was so fucking stupid. He needed to listen.

“I don’t think-”

“I need to give you something,” Sokka cut him off, grabbing him by the arm and pulling him along and into an alley a little way to the left. Zuko watched warily, as Sokka reached once again into his pack. He pulled out a small satchel and held it out to Zuko. Zuko had seen it before; it contained all of Sokka’s plans and information- their schedule, the invasion plans, maps, the lot of it.

“What?”

Zuko was almost entirely certain that his mouth was gaping open, his jaw somewhere probably closer to his knees than his nose. His thoughts had stumbled to a halt; all careering together in an ungainly pile and completely failing to compute whatever Sokka was trying to communicate to him.

“What?” he asked again, numbly.

“I need you to hold onto these. Now I’m not saying there will be, but... but if…” Sokka swallowed heavily and met Zuko’s eyes, his voice dropping to a surreptitious whisper. “If there is something weird about this Piandao guy, I don’t want these anywhere near him. This stuff is too important to fall into the hands of the enemy.”

Zuko snorted incredulously, glancing pointedly down at his own hands. He was the son of the fucking Firelord.

“You are not the enemy,” Sokka told him firmly and thrust the rolled up papers into Zuko’s left hand, grabbing onto his right and holding it tightly.

“This is such a bad idea,” Zuko spat out, trying to ignore the pounding in his chest and the feel of Sokka’s palm against his. “What if this is a trap? I know what happens to prisoners here, Sokka.” He glared at the wall, unable to meet Sokka’s eyes as his breathing grew more and more ragged.

“Besides, we don’t have time. The eclipse is weeks away.”

“Zuko-“

“No! Listen!” Zuko growled, and felt Sokka’s hand tighten around his. “Look I get you feel shit after last night- you’re not the only one! But-”

“Hey,” Sokka replied, his hand tightening around Zuko’s. “Listen. I know it sounds stupid, but I- I think I need this.” He sighed, his gaze dancing around the walls of the alleyway. His hand tightened around Zuko’s once again. “Katara was right. We’ve been at this for days and we’ve got nothing. I think we could do with a break. And…well I kind of need a win right now.”

Zuko let out a strangled hiss of irritation. Not thinking about the warmth of Sokka’s hand and why hadn’t he let go and-

“Fine. You want to waste time, that’s your call. But when this all goes wrong, I am not coming to your rescue.”

“Don’t worry,” Sokka’s lips twisted in a wry smile. “I’ll come back in one piece.”
“You fucking better.”

Zuko hadn’t meant to say that out loud, and he felt the heat rise in his cheeks.

Sokka’s eyes lit up and he beamed at Zuko. Zuko bristled slightly and looked away; he was all too aware of the fact that they were still holding hands. Sokka simply let out a low chuckle, and stepped closer, resting his other hand on Zuko’s arm. Sokka kept inching closer until they were almost nose to nose. Zuko’s breath caught in his chest and then stuttered out in little flurried gasps. He stood completely transfixed, as Sokka leant forwards, his eyes burning and-

“What’s taking so long?” Toph’s irritated voice cut through the air. Zuko and Sokka leapt apart, backs crashing into the opposite walls of the narrow alley.

“Urgh,” Zuko said awkwardly, “we should…”

“Yep,” Sokka agreed, a dark blush blooming across the tops of his cheeks. “One second.”

They hurried out of the alley a minute later and quickly spotted the others; Katara was tapping her foot in irritation. They’d crossed back over to the fountain and were standing very close to the entrance of the alleyway. Agni, Zuko hoped that they hadn’t heard the conversation. But, judging by the wicked grin on Toph’s face, she definitely had.

“Come on boys,” she cackled, grabbing hold of the edge of Zuko’s cloak and dragging him away from Sokka.

“I can walk on my own,” Zuko grumbled, as she dragged him along through street after street, her quick steps keeping a good distance between them and the others.

Toph cackled. “Oh, I know Sparky.” Her steps didn’t waver as she pulled him along through the twisting back streets. “But I think Snoozles needs some time to get his head on straight.”

“I don’t know what you’re…”

“Oh I think you do, Sparky,” Toph smirked and let out another wicked cackle, taking a perverse delight in his discomfort. Zuko remained diplomatically silent as they made their winding way through town. As they walked, he slipped the papers that Sokka had gifted to him into his own pack.

He forced himself not to look back over his shoulder at the other boy. Zuko had thought that they’d mutually agreed to forget about that moment by the pond, and he’d been fine with that. Kind of. Maybe. But then… what had that been back there? He had been sure Sokka was going to kiss him again and Zuko…well…Zuko had wanted him to. What the fuck was that all about? His head hurt. He didn’t really have the brain space to think through all of the implications, not when his mind was screaming at him- over and over like a fucking siren- that this Piandao was bad news, and that Sokka was walking into a trap. In the end he just surrendered, and just let himself be pulled along by Toph.

Their undignified traipse through the streets ended abruptly at the edge of town. Toph stopped abruptly at the base of a very steep hill, and released her vice-like grip on his robes. Zuko craned his neck back, following the slope up to the very top of the hill and the building perched on top of it.

The ground level view made the castle seem a lot more intimidating than it had from Appa’s back. Resting high above the town, the imposing structure cast a deep shadow down onto the path below. The walls were built from strong, pale stone- piled high- and they stood cold and aloof in the morning sun. Zuko let out a long breath. Sokka would be fine, he told himself firmly. They had Toph and Aang with them. If the worst came to the worst, they could just punch a hole through those seemingly impenetrable walls and have Sokka out in minutes. It would be fine.
“Wow.” Aang remarked, craning his neck to look up at the fortress, as soon as he and the siblings caught up. “That’s one biiiiig castle.”

“Thanks, Aang,” Sokka said faintly, his own eyes tracking up and up and up from the base of the hill to the top of the castle walls.

“You don’t have to do this,” Zuko muttered quietly in Sokka’s ear. Sokka flinched and shook his head once, sharply. He swallowed and took a few deep breaths, before squaring his shoulders and forcing a blindingly fake smile across his lips.

“It’ll be fine,” he drawled, walking a few steps backwards up the slope. “Don’t worry about me!” With an attempt at a wink and a jaunty salute, Sokka spun round and made his way up the steep slope; he didn’t slow his pace until he had reached the door to the castle.

From the distance and with his poor vision, Zuko almost missed the moment that the door opened and another figure stepped out to greet Sokka. Zuko held his breath, unable to tell one blurry man-shaped blob from another, but they didn’t seem to be fighting. Zuko only hoped that Sokka was convincing enough to get through the door and not end up getting himself stabbed on the welcome mat. After a couple of minutes, the man stepped aside and let Sokka in. The heavy wooden door clanging ominously shut behind them, and Sokka was swallowed up by the castle. Zuko let out deep breath and sent a quick prayer up to Agni.

After that it was a waiting game. They retreated further away from the hill and from the town, until Aang spotted a small wooded area that they could hang around in. It would keep them out of sight, if anyone were keeping a lookout for any suspicious activity, but it was also close enough to the castle that they could hear if anyone sounded an alarm. For all Aang was painfully naïve about many things, he was a child fighting a war; some habits were simply ingrained.

A few yards in from the tree line, they stumbled upon a clearing. With a silent but unanimous consensus, they decided to stop there. They all barely acknowledged one another, as they found comfortable spots on the grass to settle down on. Toph had immediately lain flat on the dry, dusty grass and gone to sleep. Aang had initially sat cross-legged on the grass, meditating, and Katara was busying herself laying out a blanket to lie on. Zuko was glad that no one was trying to be chatty. He was pretty pissed at Aang and Katara for encouraging Sokka in this stupid scheme, for making the other boy feel like his only worth to the group was how well he could hit things with a pointy stick, and he didn’t want to have to talk to them.

Morning turned to afternoon with a languid insouciance, minutes stretching into hours, as time often did when Zuko was unoccupied and his thoughts restless. Aang had long since given up trying to meditate. Instead, he had started running through what looked to be airbending katas, as Katara watched on. Toph was still asleep. Zuko didn’t really know how to occupy himself, either. He had tried to meditate, as Aang had done, but his lungs felt too tight and his head too busy for him to calm his mind and his breathing. The minute he closed his eyes, his brain threw up image after image to tear at his anxieties: Sokka bound and terrified, held at sword-point; Sokka in camp uniform: gaunt and pale, bruised and beaten; worst of all, Sokka still and silent, lying on a cold stone floor as blood pooled thick and dark beneath him.

Zuko forcibly steered his thoughts away from that particular path, and gave up on meditation entirely. Katara and Aang had joined forces and were moving in perfect synchronisation through some fluid dance that Zuko knew was a waterbending move. Toph hadn’t moved at all.

Zuko smoothed the folds of his cloak around him, his fingers ghosting over the edge of the bundle of papers that Sokka had given to him. He still couldn’t understand that. He knew that Sokka trusted him, but the ease with which the other boy had handed over their entire strategy and battle plans took
Zuko’s breath away.

He didn’t know quite what was going on with Sokka. He knew the other boy felt something for him, something more than mere camaraderie or friendliness. Still it was a unique experience for Zuko, and he couldn’t quite figure out how he felt about it in return. The kiss had startled him, certainly, but Sokka had definitely been leaning in for another earlier and… and… Zuko had wanted it. Physical contact had never been something pleasant for Zuko, outside of the hugs from his mother, cousin and very occasionally, his uncle. But they had been a long time ago and time and experience had taught Zuko to associate touch with pain. Still, when Sokka had crowded him earlier, he hadn’t felt fear, so much as anticipation. He hadn’t known what was going to happen, but he’d wanted to find out. He hadn’t been scared of Sokka; he had felt alive. Was that normal? Was that what people were supposed to feel?

He shook himself and sighed, heading over to the treeline and fixing his gaze on the hill in front of him. Just in case something happens, he told himself. Sokka might send up a signal, or something. The castle cast a shallow shadow in the midday sun; it looked cold and deadly, despite the heat. Sokka was in there all on his own. Best case scenario: he was trapped in a fortress with a master swordsman who could eviscerate him in the blink of an eye. The worst case scenario didn’t bear thinking about. Zuko settled back against the tree, letting the rough bark scratch into his shoulder. Agni, but he hoped Sokka was okay.

Eventually Katara decided that it was time for lunch, and roped Aang into a search for kindling. Zuko sighed deeply, and wrapped his arms around himself. He contemplated keeping his watch going, but common sense told him that there was very little point. If Sokka were in any immediate danger, they would have heard something by now. Besides, he knew he couldn’t avoid the others for ever. By the time he had pulled himself away from the treeline, a small pile of wood had appeared in the centre of the clearing. Zuko took a seat on the ground a yard or so from Toph and watched Katara as she busied herself with stacking the kindling into a small pyramid. It was oddly therapeutic, watching her work, and it helped him to keep his thoughts from more unpleasant things.

After a few minutes, she started rooting around in the small bag on her hip. She pulled out a small knife and laid it out on the floor. She went back into her bag, rooting deeper and deeper as her movements grew more and more frantic. Finally with a sharp cry of frustration, she upended the bag over the clearing floor. Small parcels wrapped in pale linen, loose coins, and strips of jerky tumbled out onto the grass around her. Katara stared at the mess around her, her brow creased. Suddenly, her bright blue eyes welled up, and she let out a shout of frustration. Zuko instinctively backed away, edging towards where Toph. He was not good with anyone crying, let alone women. He had no idea how he was meant to react. Toph sat up suddenly, rubbing at her eyes.

“What’s wrong, Katara?” Aang asked, masterfully stepping up to the plate. He edged closer and put a tentative hand on her shaking shoulder. Zuko’s shoulders slumped in relief.

“I forgot the flint,” she all but whispered. “I must have left it back with Appa. How could I be so stupid?”

“Hey.” Aang cut in quickly. “You’re not stupid; it’s just a silly mistake. People make them all the time.” He smiled warmly at Katara, even though his own eyes were looking a little too wide for him not to be panicking himself. Zuko felt his respect for the boy shoot up.

“You were right, Katara,” Toph said in an oddly gentle voice. “I think we all need a break. We’ve not stopped for days and none of us are properly sleeping.”

“I know-”
As Toph had been speaking, Zuko had been breathing deeply, sinking into the patterns of his chi and coaxing a gentle flame up into his palm. If a fire was all they needed to cheer Katara up…well that one he could manage.

He carefully fell to his knees and crawled over to the fire. Bringing his hand up to the pile of kindling, he let the small orange flame catch on the twigs and strips of bark; after a few seconds, it caught, and small flames began to lick at the edges of the wood. Letting a small, satisfied smile push its way onto his lips, Zuko sat back on his heels and let the energy from the bright flames course through his body. It was strange feeling, a mix of both his own energy and that contained within the scraps of bark and wood, but it was strangely comforting nonetheless.

He slowly realised that the others had fallen into silence around him. Peering out of the corner of his good eye, he noticed that Katara looked a little stricken, whilst Toph had a considering pout on her face. Zuko swallowed heavily, and reminded himself to keep his breathing steady. He picked up a log and fed it into the fledgling fire, as if he had done nothing untoward. As if he hadn’t just bent fire in front of them for the first time.

“Thanks!”

Zuko startled at the cheery exclamation from Aang.

“Um… you’re welcome.” Zuko coughed awkwardly, pulling himself to his feet and brushing his hands together to rid them of the light layer of ash.

“That was really cool!”

Zuko winced at the sheer delight in the Avatar’s voice.

“Can you teach me how to do that?” Aang continued on blithely. “I’ve only really had one firebending master and it didn’t go all that well… but I hadn’t even thought about asking you! You can teach me all about firebending and then I’ll be a master of all the elements- like a proper Avatar!”

“No!” Zuko and Katara exclaimed at exactly the same moment. Katara blushed, and refused to look at Zuko, focusing her attention on Aang.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea? Remember what happened last time you tried to bend fire? Besides, you’re still learning how to earthbend, aren’t you?”

Aang frowned at her in disappointment for a long moment. “You still don’t trust Zuko, do you?” His face was heavy with grave disapproval. “That’s what you mean.”

Despite the fact the Avatar was all of twelve, there was a weight and a gravitas to his disappointment that made the hair on the back of Zuko’s neck prickle.

“It’s not that…” Katara began.

“It is.” Zuko cut across her, not really wanting to get into another discussion about his loyalties, or whether or not he could be trusted. He took a deep breath and forced down the rising irritation in his chest; they were just children, they didn’t understand. “But it’s doesn’t matter. I can’t teach you, anyway.”

Katara and Aang spun around to face him at that, and Toph cocked her head in his direction.

“That’s basically all the firebending I can do at the moment,” he admitted quietly, gesturing to the low fire crackling and popping away at his side. “I have no idea if I can even remember the katas, let
alone if I can do them.”

Katara’s shoulders slumped in obvious relief, and Zuko tried not to feel too stung. Sokka hadn’t flinched at his firebending. He’d liked it. But Sokka wasn’t here right now; he was off in a fortress with a master swordsman.

Aang frowned for a long moment, before a bright grin split across his face once again.

“Well, why don’t you teach me what you know?” He beamed, coming to sit by Zuko’s side. “It’s not like I’ve got much to work with already. Even knowing how to make a flame would be better than nothing!”

“No,” Zuko shook his head before Aang had even finished speaking. He stood, pointing to the fire as he continued his explanation. This was important; he needed Aang to understand him clearly.

“Fire is dangerous, Aang. What happens if you lose control? I can’t help you rein it in.”

“But-”

“It’s dangerous.” The crackle of wild fire reared up once again, from his memory. This wasn’t up for discussion.

Aang dropped to his knees, extravagantly. “Please Sifu…”

Please, Father.

“No!” Bile rose in Zuko’s throat. His clenched fists were starting to smoke; he looked down at them in alarm, before opening his palms out and shaking the sparks from them. “You see!” He turned to Aang. The fire flared bright and hot by his side. “If I still can’t learn control, how am I supposed to teach it to you?”

He hadn’t realised that he had been shouting until the words had left his lips, leaving a ringing silence in their wake. Sparks danced across his fingers, and his heart was pounding painfully in his chest. Aang flinched away from him, refusing to meet his eyes. A heavy pang of guilt ran through Zuko. He hadn’t meant to shout, he’d just been frustrated and Aang wouldn’t let it go and… Zuko trailed off. Agni, he sounded like his father. And with Aang on his knees and flinching and…

His stomach churned, guilt giving way to nausea. He bolted for the trees, stumbling through the foliage, until his stomach finally rebelled. His knees gave out and he ended up hunched against a tree trunk, heaving. Finally after what felt like hours, he collapsed backwards and ran a shaking hand over his face. The sharp spike of acid prickled his throat at burnt the back of his nose. Tears prickled in the corner of his good eye, and a high pitched whine was buzzing in his bad ear. He was exhausted, and his hands were shaking.

It took a while for him to calm down, but he finally managed to slow down his desperate sobs. As his breathing calmed so, slowly, did he. He had no idea how long he’d been outside, but the sky was already dark above them. Zuko allowed himself a few more minutes to come back to himself. He had to go back and apologise. He knew that. But what was he supposed to say? He had been worried about Sokka, he had been frustrated that the other boy was making stupid decisions and confusing him and… No, that wasn’t an excuse for losing his temper. There wasn’t ever an excuse for that.

Shaking himself, Zuko forced his recalcitrant limbs into action and levered himself to his feet. His knees felt weak, but he forced one foot in front of the other until he got back to the clearing. He lingered on the tree-line, mustering his courage. He shifted from foot to foot, awkwardly until Katara finally spotted him. She narrowed her eyes at him and turned away, but she didn’t reach for her
water flask, so he took that as a sign of encouragement. He wandered up to the fire, taking deep, steady breaths. He didn’t want his panic to overwhelm him with a fire so close. If he wasn’t careful, he’d make it flare and scare them all over again.

Toph and Aang were sat by the fire, Toph warming her toes. They had been chatting quietly, but they fell silent as soon as Zuko walked towards them.

“I’m sorry,” he began hesitantly, pitching his voice to address Katara too. A log popped on the fire behind him, spitting sparks up into the cool evening air. “I got angry and I lost control. Fire is a dangerous element and I need to be more careful.” He bowed to each of them in turn.

No one replied. The silence grew more and more cloying as time drew on. Zuko felt a warm blush grow up the back of his neck. They didn’t want his apologies, he realised. And why should they? After how he’d behaved, after who he’d behaved like? He’d done it; he’d driven them away. He knew he’d fuck things up eventually, so he had no right to be surprised. He nodded tightly to himself and sucked in a sharp breath. He would go back there straight away. Maybe if he was lucky, Appa would give him a lift to another island, somewhere with a bigger port, where he could fade into the background until he could find a ship to the colonies. If not, well, he would manage. He would have to. It was probably for the best that Sokka wasn’t around, in the end; it would just complicate things even more.

Turning to head out of camp, Zuko reached into his pack for the bundle of paperwork that Sokka had trusted him with. He would muster his courage and hand it over to Katara. He could do that. He wasn’t that much of a coward.

“You missed Sokka, you know?” Toph spoke suddenly and Zuko froze in his steps. “You’ve been gone for hours.”

“He’s okay?” Relief flooded through Zuko at Toph’s words.

“Oh yeah,” Toph’s tone was arch, a smirk twisting at the corner of her mouth. “He’s learning how to swing a sword- he’s golden.” She scoffed loudly. “He thinks that this Piandao guy knows something, but he doesn’t want to push too hard.” Zuko hesitantly turned around, as she kept talking. “He’s staying there overnight, said he’ll give it one more day. If he doesn’t get anything by then, we’ll leave tomorrow.”

“Oh…” Zuko shuffled his feet and ran a hand through his hair. “That’s…um… that’s good.”

Toph raised an eyebrow and continued on with the same arch tone. “He wanted to go looking for you-” Zuko swore his heart stopped pumping for a moment at Toph’s words “-but I told him you needed to brood on your own for a bit.” She scoffed. “So, are you done?”

Zuko froze, really not sure what was going on. Toph was talking to him like a friend…she hadn’t told him to leave, hadn’t thrown rocks his way until he scrambled his way out of their clearing and their lives.

“Um, I-”

“Aren’t you going to sit down?” Aang asked; his voice was shy and tentative. “Katara’s making dinner soon.”

Letting out a shaky exhale and barely daring to hope, Zuko looked between him and Toph. She smirked wryly and patted the floor at his side.

As soon as he was sat, Aang turned to him, and bowed, making the sign of the flames with his
hands. Zuko nearly choked on his own spit.

“What are you doing?”

“Apologising.” Aang replied, his head still lowered. “I shouldn’t have pushed things earlier. You asked me not to and I didn’t listen. I’m sorry.”

Slowly, barely daring to breathe in case he shattered the tentative peace, Zuko stuttered out a quick, but suitably formal acknowledgement. Aang looked up, a bright smile on his face. Zuko felt himself returning it, surprised beyond all reason at how the evening had turned on a dime.

Toph yawned. “Now you’re done being idiots, can we focus on something actually important.” She waved a nonchalant hand in the air, almost thwacking Zuko in the chest. “I’ve got a cool metalbending trick to show you,” she grinned wickedly, and reached into her tunic. “Who wants to see me juggles knives?”

An hour or so later, which Zuko and Aang had spent trying to hide every sharp object in a hundred-yard radius from a cackling Toph, Katara passed round the bowls for dinner. She handed Zuko’s to him with only a small scowl and a muttered “apology accepted”.

The next morning, Zuko was already awake to welcome the dawn, worn and exhausted after a night with little sleep. He had spent the night on the tree line, propped up against the body of some ancient evergreen in a sort of half-doze, his good eye trained on the faint silhouette of the castle walls against the starry sky, and his thoughts drifting. He hadn’t dared let himself fully drop off. The creeping black tendrils of memory had been clawing away at the back of his mind, and Zuko knew better than to give them free reign over his dreams. He had spent hours sat like that, just watching as the trees around him cast flickering shadows in the pale moonlight and sinking into meditative breathing.

Finally the sun was high enough in the sky that the ethereal blue haze of dawn had faded into the pale light of morning. Zuko sat up from the tree and cricked his neck. If the others weren’t up by now, he wasn’t going to feel guilty for waking them. He was restless after the long night, and he needed to feel the fire stirring in his veins. Breathing in deeply, Zuko coaxed his chi to ignite, revelling in the feel of the energy surging through his body. With the next exhale through his nose, he forced the flames down to his fingertips, watching them flicker and dance across his knuckles and twist and turn between fingers. After a few minutes, he shook out his hands, extinguishing the flames.

Drawing himself to his feet, he inched over to the trees and picked as many leaves as he could carry. Moving back to his spot, he sat back down and dropped two small handfuls in a rough pile before him. Slowly picking up the first leaf, Zuko sucked in a deep breath, and set fire to the corner. He had always failed at this exercise as a kid. Control had never been something he was particularly good at. It had always felt as if he had too much emotion, too much anger, too much fear, too much...everything, bubbling up inside of him. His fire had always been harsh and hot and furious, but it had always burnt out quickly: flash in the pan rage- impotent, ineffectual rage- that left him exhausted and frustrated and empty. Zuko sucked in a deep breath once again, and forced his concentration back to the leaf in front of him. He could do this.

The flames were obnoxious and stubborn; they didn’t want to listen to him. They wanted to burn, to eat up the fragile leaf, to take in all that extra energy and grow and spread and burn. It took a lot of effort for Zuko to hold them back. It was an entirely new exercise to anything he had attempted since recovering his fire. The first few attempts failed miserably, and he was almost halfway through his pile before he managed to even halt the flames.

Prince Zuko of the Fire Nation would have given up ages ago, would have lost the grapple against
his own power and have been left shivering, as the pale, cooling ashes disappeared in the wind and the unavoidable crash of a cane came down across his shoulders. Prince Zuko would have failed. But he was not that child anymore. He picked up yet another leaf and started again. If the camp had taught him anything, it had taught him patience. These days he knew how to hold back, how to sit and wait, and how to hold onto his reserves for when he most needed them. As he continued to breathe, deeply and meditatively, Zuko fought the eagerness of the flames and forced them to follow his will. He was doing it. Finally. With every exhale the flames crept slowly forwards, dancing delicately across the pale green surface of the leaf, painting it a deep, charred black. Zuko smiled; he was in total control.

“That’s amazing!”

Zuko started, and the flames surged forwards, racing forwards to claim the last half an inch of unburnt leaf, before flickering out. Zuko swore and dropped the smouldering stem to the ground.

Aang was standing a foot or so to his left, on his bad side. Agni only knew how long the boy had been waiting there, watching him. Zuko bristled, feeling distinctly uncomfortable.

“I—” Zuko turned to look at the young Avatar. “I was just practising.”

“It was really cool though.” Aang’s smile was bright and beatific. “You were there for ages. I didn’t realise fire could burn that slowly.” Aang bounced on the balls of his feet, looking enthralled and… curious. Zuko felt his stomach drop.

“I meant what I said last night,” Zuko said lowly, fixing the boy with a stern glare. “Fire is dangerous. I’m learning to control mine.” Aang only smiled wider. Zuko brought a hand up to his forehead. “I am not teaching you how to do that.”

To his surprise, Aang only nodded solemnly.

“I understand,” he acknowledged. “I…well you’re not the first person to tell me that.” He shuffled his feet, eyes flickering between Zuko’s face and the ground.

“Hey!” Toph’s voice cut across their conversation. “It’s time for practise, Twinkletoes!”

The young Avatar, not renowned for his love of conflict, jumped upon the excuse like a Raven Eagle on a squirrel toad. He ran off, leaving Zuko to watch as his pile of leaves slowly scattered on the morning breeze.

Zuko heaved out a sigh, and headed over to help a half-awake Katara build a fire. It was easier to light than it had been the night before. It seemed that with every day his strength was increasing, every time he reached for his chi, it reacted quicker and more accurately. Katara shot him a cautious, but grateful look, and something strange jolted in Zuko’s chest. She had deep bags under her eyes and she still had leaves trapped in the braids of her hair. He doubted he was the only one who had been avoiding sleep all night.

The rest of the morning plodded on slowly. Katara showed Zuko how to prepare breakfast and he repaid her by not commenting on how similar the porridge was to the slop they used to serve back in camp. It was edible, so he wasn’t complaining; not that he would have done if it wasn’t.

Toph and Aang had broken for breakfast, but had been right back to work the minute that Toph had finished her second helping. They were working on fine control, Toph emphasising the grounded stance and steady, slow movements necessary for precision and detail. It was fascinating, and Zuko found himself drawn into the lesson. Toph’s feet stomped and slid over the grass and minute,
exquisitely detailed figurines sprung up from the dirt at her call. It was incredible, and it stole the
breath from Zuko’s chest. Toph had boasted often, and loudly, that she was the best Earthbender
alive and Zuko hadn’t had any reason to doubt her. But this…this was something else. This was…
this was sunbeams dancing over the crashing waves, the soaring green flames of a sage’s solstice
fire, the roiling ooze of magma from a freshly erupted volcano. It was sublime. Zuko couldn’t help
but look at Toph with newfound awe; her power and skill were incredible.

The exercise continued until the early afternoon when Katara insisted that they stop for lunch. Aang
collapsed to the floor in relief, clearly bored by the need for stillness and patience that Toph had been
trying to drill into his flighty little skull all morning. Toph rolled her eyes, and started stomping at the
ground, erasing all evidence of the morning’s practise. Zuko’s stomach flipped weirdly at the sight of
such incredible artistry disappearing into the dirt once again, but it was stupid to leave such obvious
evidence of high-level earthbending just lying around in the middle of the Fire Nation. Suddenly,
Toph paused in her clean-up, one foot still raised in the air, ready to stomp. Slowly, she put it down
and tilted her head. Her brow furrowed as she listened to something only her impeccable ears could
hear. Katara and Aang exchanged a tense, worried look over the camp fire.

“It’s Sokka,” Toph said grimly. “It sounds bad.”

They didn’t even bother to pack up camp. Barely stopping to grab their bags, they set off at a dead
run, clearing the tree line and reaching the slope to the castle within seconds. At first Zuko couldn’t
hear anything but the pounding of feet, the ringing in his ear and the sharp rasp of his own breathing.
But as they ran further up the hill, he began to make out the sharp ringing of steel on steel and the
rasp of a blade against stone. There was shouting too, the faint sound of Sokka’s voice high and
panicked on the wind. Toph had been right: it sounded bad.

Katara set her shoulders and pushed ahead with a wild yell. Zuko gritted his teeth and focused on his
own breathing, forcing the chi through his body to lend his legs what extra power he could muster.
Something swept by on Zuko’s left and he startled. It was Aang. The avatar raced ahead of the
group, his airbending lending a boost to his steps that sent him streaking ahead of them. Katara called
out to him, urging him to wait for them, but he wasn’t listening. Zuko swore loudly and picked up
his pace, racing after Aang as quickly as he could.

When they finally got to the castle, Zuko’s muscles were screaming. Aang had already knocked a
hole through the outer wall with his earthbending, and was nowhere in sight. Zuko waited a tense
few seconds until Katara and Toph caught up with him, taking the chance to flip his hood up and
over his head, and then they breached the castle together. The sound of crashing blades was almost
frantic now, and a low, sickly feeling of dread coagulated in Zuko’s stomach. No one was speaking
any more, but Zuko could hear Sokka’s muffled yelps and cries with every ringing blow of steel.
Zuko cast a silent prayer to Agni to let Sokka hold on just a bit longer. They raced down corridor
after corridor, Katara leading the way, as they headed further and further into the bowels of the
building, Sokka’s cries growing more and more frantic. Then, rounding one last corner, they came
to a staggering halt in a small courtyard.

Sokka was stood in the middle, his chest heaving and his arms trembling as he held his sword in a
basic duelling stance. The tip of the blade was pointed at a tall figure- a man, adorned in a long, deep
red robe and caped in shadow. The stranger’s hair was dark, almost as dark as Zuko’s, and it was
tied in a perfect topknot. Zuko couldn’t help but notice that not even a strand of it had fallen out of
place during the fight. Sokka’s own bangs were loose and pasted haphazardly across his forehead
with sweat. He looked exhausted; Zuko doubted he could last much longer.

Off in the corner there was another man, this one heavyset and with greying hair. He wasn’t
intruding on the fight, but he didn’t take his eyes off Sokka. Zuko quickly catalogued the threat, but
as long as he stayed over in the corner, he wasn’t the biggest concern. For now, that was the master swordsman eyeing Zuko like a hungry catagator; Sokka never would have stood a chance. Zuko sent up a silent thanks to Agni that they’d arrived in time. Only- Zuko cast his eye around the courtyard and couldn’t see anyone else around- where the ever-loving fuck was Aang?

“You fight very well,” the man addressed Sokka directly, ignoring the sudden arrival of three other teenagers in the courtyard. Zuko snapped his eyes back to Sokka’s trembling form. “You’ve learnt a lot.”

Sokka didn’t reply, but the tip of his blade dipped closer to the floor; he wasn’t going to be able to hold the guard up much longer.

“Come on, Sokka, you can do better than that.” The master stared down his blade at Sokka’s quivering form. “Or is this the best the Water Tribe can expect from their warriors?”

Zuko felt his stomach churn. Sokka had been discovered! Then his brain processed what the master had said. Had Sokka really given the master his own name? A boy names Sokka, in the middle of the Fire Nation? Why hadn’t he just gone with Lee? There were plenty of Lee’s. Zuko stepped forwards. Across the room, so did Piandao’s assistant. Fuck. Zuko didn’t move again.

Sokka’s arm was shaking; he was exhausted. The master smiled and shook his head. Zuko snarled. Piandao was toying with Sokka; he could finish this fight in a heartbeat if he wanted to, but he was dragging this out. He wanted to see how long Sokka would last.

Sokka sucked in a deep breath and lunged forwards, only to have his sword swatted aside by the master. It fell to the floor with a sharp clang that sent a stabbing pain through Zuko’s bad ear. Katara’s hand flew to her hip and Toph raised her foot, ready to stomp. But, before either of them could move, something came hurtling down from the roof above them and landed between Sokka and the swordsman.

“Aang!” Katara hissed in terror, as the young boy shifted into a basic defensive stance. But Aang ignored her, entirely focused on the man in front of him.

The swordsman regarded the new arrival for a long moment, before he stepped back and slowly sheathed his sword. A quick lift of a finger and the man in the corner hurried over with a small towel and a cup of water. Zuko watched the master warily. It seemed as if the man had stopped his assault, but Zuko knew all too well how quickly masters could move. He had no doubt that if Piandao wanted to, he could have that sword out and heading straight for Aang’s heart in the blink of an eye. Zuko did not want to test the man’s speed against Aang’s ability to dodge. Avatar or not, airbender or not, steel was steel and dead was dead.

“I think I’m a little old to be fighting the Avatar,” the master smiled, turning back towards Aang.

Zuko’s heart stopped. How had the man known? As far as the Fire Nation was concerned, the Avatar was dead, right? He didn’t want to hear anything else. He was done. Darting forwards, he grabbed Aang’s arm in his right hand and caught the fabric of Sokka’s jacket with the other. He spun around and heaved, all but throwing them towards Katara and Toph.

“Run!” He bellowed and charged towards the doorway. His feet, trained by the twisting pathways of dark mines, found the path through the corridors with ease, the others following on his heels. Then they were at the hole in the outer wall and they scrambled through it, half running and half stumbling down the mountain path and back towards town.

“We’ve got… to get back… to Appa!” Sokka said through gasping breaths. His legs shook and he
looked like he might faint any second. “I asked…about ships…he said…Water tribe…he knew…”

The others just nodded in agreement. They needed to get off the island immediately. Who knew how long it would take for Piandao to spread the word that the Avatar was still alive and in the heart of the Fire Nation?

The run back through town was fuelled by pure adrenaline. Zuko kept Sokka on his right hand side, so that he could watch him from the corner of his good eye. By the time that they reached the town square, Sokka had started to lag a bit and Zuko slowed down alongside him. Sokka was gasping for breath, so Zuko let them pause for a quick thirty second break, just off the main square. But after those thirty seconds were up, Zuko forced them both back into a jog. They couldn’t hang around.

Soon they had reached the edge of town, only a few hundred feet from where Aang was waiting with Appa. Katara and Toph already climbing up into the saddle. Something was wrong. Aang was trying to tell them something. The young airbender was waving his hands and shouting something, but Zuko couldn’t make it out properly. Aang pointed behind them, and Zuko glanced over his shoulder. His blood froze. Not too far behind them, the merchant from the weapons shop was chasing after them, calling for them to stop. Zuko swore loudly; he had known there was something fishy about that man. Had he known about Aang the moment they stepped into his shop?

“Stop!” The man shouted as he ran towards them. Zuko swore under his breath and doubled his pace, feeling Sokka do the same at his side. “Wait!”

They were getting closer to Appa. They just had to make the last stretch. Thirty yards. Zuko concentrated on sucking air into his lungs, forcing his tired legs into the fastest sprint they could manage. Twenty yards. Zuko could hear Aang screaming for them to hurry up. Ten yards. Almost there. Five yards. Zuko staggered to a halt in front of Appa.

“Come on, let’s go!”

Zuko dropped to a knee, lacing his fingers together to offer Sokka a boost into the saddle. The other boy didn’t hesitate. He planted his foot in Zuko’s hands, pushing off as Zuko stood, and heaving himself upwards into the saddle.

“Wait!” The merchant was nearly on top of them. Zuko jumped, forcing his chi down through his feet and using it to boost his leap into the saddle. He landed with a jolt, and the hood slipped back from his face.

“Wait!” The merchant shouted once again, his voice hoarse from the exercise.

Aang picked up Appa’s reins.

“Please!” The man begged in desperation. Zuko turned without thinking and looked down from the saddle. The man was only about ten feet away, still sprinting towards them. He looked up and met Zuko’s eyes. The man’s jaw dropped and his face paled with horrified shock.

“Fuck!” Zuko swore, quickly moving to pull his hood back up, but he knew that it was too late. The man had seen him, he’d recognised him.

Aang turned round, quickly checking they were all in the saddle, before calling out to Appa. They were in the air in seconds, the bison sensing the urgency of the situation.

“Please,” the merchant cried one last time. He had stumbled his way up to Appa’s side and was hurriedly pulling something from behind his back.
“Here,” the man cried and threw something up into the saddle. Zuko flinched back, expecting some kind of explosive, but it was a simple package. It landed at his feet with a heavy clunk. The leather ties around the bundle fell apart to reveal a sturdy and sharp straight sword, some small parcels of what looked like dried food, and a flask of water. But nestled behind them, Zuko caught a flash of shining silver that stole his breath. There, underneath the layers of smaller parcels, peaked the handles of two other swords: the dual dao.

Zuko spun around and stared over the side of the saddle. The merchant was still standing below them, but when he saw Zuko turn, his hands quickly made the sign of the flame and he fell into a deep bow. Zuko watched in incomprehension as the man shrunk smaller and smaller, his back still bent in deference even when Zuko could barely make out his shape against the dotted rocks around him. Zuko sat back, his jaw still hanging open. Had that actually happened? That merchant had seen his face, had recognised him and had bowed to him? Spirits, was he… what did that mean?

“What’s that?” Sokka’s voice tore Zuko from his startled thoughts. The island was far below them now, and Appa slowed his pace, coasting along on a current of warm air.

Zuko looked down at the package at his feet, beating back his panicked thoughts and trying to focus on the present. Sokka had picked up the straight sword and was balancing it in one hand, testing the weight like a professional swordsman.

Zuko tried to remember how to put words together, but his mind was too busy replaying the image of the merchant bowing to him, acknowledging him, a traitor, as royalty.

Finally, he managed to stutter something out. “The merchant… he threw it to us.”

“Yeah, I saw that much,” Sokka drawled sarcastically. “Must have been on our side after all, huh?” Sokka let out a laugh, but his voice was still tight with tension. When he took a quick glance at Zuko’s face, however, whatever he saw there made his brow furrow concern. “You okay buddy?”

“Yeah,” Zuko replied quickly. He was, it was just… he was just a bit… shaken. He’d be fine. Was fine. Whatever. “Are you?”

Sokka let out a tight, incredulous laugh, but didn’t reply. Instead he jabbed the tip of the sword into the heap of assorted packages.

“I meant,” he said. “What’s that?”

Zuko followed the point of the blade and stared down into the bundle. There, nestled amongst the small, cloth-wrapped packages, lay a small tile. Zuko picked it up and examined it closely. It was circular, about the width of his thumb in diameter and painted with the image of the lotus flower. A sudden, overwhelming surge of hurt rushed through him as a single bright memory crashed to the front of his brain with the force of a speeding cart. A familiar garden, turtle ducks in the pond, the taste of chamomile tea and sweet biscuits on his lips, the relief of a kind touch spreading salve across bruised knuckles, a warm laugh, and a large circular board.

“It’s a pai sho tile,” Zuko supplied finally, his voice quiet and hoarse. Sokka looked at him questioningly. “It was my uncle’s favourite game.”

Katara and Aang had scrambled over and were rifling through the parcel with interest. Toph hung onto Katara’s shoulder with a white knuckle grip.

“Well…” Sokka began, his eyes not leaving Zuko and the tile that he was slowly turning in his palm. “What does it mean?”
Zuko frowned down at the lotus pattern, willing it to make some kind of sense, but he just came up blank. If it was supposed to be a message, he didn’t understand it, and if it was supposed to be a signal, he had no idea he could trust it. For all Zuko knew it was just a random piece from a game he had never learnt how to play and would prefer to forget.

He handed the tile back to Sokka, meeting his eyes with a deep sigh. “I have no idea,” he replied quietly, watching as the tile disappeared into a pouch on Sokka’s belt. “But that’s not important right now.”

Sokka nodded. “I know.” He swallowed heavily and turned to address the others. “What do we do now they know that Aang’s alive?”

Chapter End Notes

So, that took forever to write...

Zuko's slowly starting to find his feet with the group. The way I see it, he's a supremely awkward and undersocialised kid who has never had a chance to just be a kid. So Sokka showing interest in him is weird. But nice.

Toph also just had to interrupt at that moment. But the boys need to pine a little bit more yet. Sorry.

Hopefully Zuko's journey is realistic enough? He still is the badass we all know and love, he's just working through a fuckton of trauma. But he ran in all guns blazing to help Sokka, and he's getting super protective over Aang and the others.

The scene around the camp fire where Zuko blows up at the others... This one had me struggling a bit. So far, Zuko has been much more in control of his emotions than canon!Zuko, but he's slowly getting more comfortable with the others. As he gets more confident with his firebending, he gets better at expressing his emotions. But he's also not really learnt how to handle them properly.

I kind of wanted to reference Zuko's apology at the Western Air Temple, but he doesn't have anywhere near as much to apologise for. So Zuko gets forgiven quickly and an apology from Aang.

I know Sokka acts a bit recklessly this chapter, running off to train whilst they are up against a deadline, but honestly, I thought he was reckless for doing that in canon. The way I see it, he's just as self-conscious as the others. It's even worse now, seeing as he not only failed to help put out the meteor fire, but he's also trying and failing to find his dad. So he acts like an idiot.

Toph is forever awesome. 'Nuff said.

Katara and Aang are getting a bit better. Or at least this chapter, Sokka joins them in being a bit oblivious.

I kind of feel like Aang disappearing is a bit like Where's Waldo/Where's Wally. Once a chapter he'll run off somewhere- can you spot when?

Bonus points if you recognised that the weapons shop owner was White Lotus. He was
trying his best to tell Sokka and Zuko.

So next chapter Katara gets a shock, Zuko and Sokka pine, and Aang disappears again.

Hopefully you enjoyed- please let me know what you think?
"What the hell happened back there?" It was Toph, as usual, that broke the silence around the group.

"I don't know," Sokka lamented, throwing his hands up in the air. "One minute we were getting along fine, I was learning all about calligraphy and landscape gardening and then-boom! He just attacked me out of nowhere!"

"Landscape gardening? What-"

"Not important right now, Katara," Sokka cut her off, waving his hand distractedly.

"So he just randomly attacked you?" Zuko asked.

Sokka nodded miserably. "I thought maybe he was evaluating me, or whatever, seeing how I reacted to a surprise attack…"

Katara reached out as if to grab his hand, but he planted his face into his palms before she could.

"He just started swinging faster and faster and I could barely keep up. It didn't feel like he was holding back. Like at all. If you guys hadn't shown up when you did-" Sokka cut himself off with a shudder.

There was a long moment of silence as Katara and Aang exchanged significant glances over Sokka's bowed head.

"Did you find anything out about dad?" Katara asked quietly.

Sokka shook his head, and a few strands of hair escaped from their tie.

"No," he groaned into his palms. "I was going to, right before he attacked me. He must have figured out who I am, somehow."

Zuko leant forwards and started rifling through the packages; he wasn’t going to comment on the fact that Sokka’s idea of stealth was to use his own, easily-fucking-identifiable-as-Water-Tribe name. Now was not really the time.
“And they found out about me, too,” Aang said quietly.

Zuko sat back and stared at the young Avatar; he looked nervous. Zuko couldn’t blame him. Aang was right; Master Piandao knew that he was alive, which meant they only had time it took for their messenger hawk to make it out to the Palace before the Fire Lord knew too. Zuko shuddered. His first thought was that they should find a nice, isolated island and wait out the rest of the war there, but then he caught himself and forced back that thought alongside the dull churning in his stomach. He wasn’t going to think like that anymore. He wasn’t going to be a coward. Besides, he knew that the others would never go for it and, for some reason, the very thought of the disappointed look that Sokka would give him made Zuko feel unutterably ashamed.

“So what do we do?” Toph asked impatiently. “Do we keep looking for your dad?”

Sokka sighed and rubbed his chin as he thought. He looked tired, Zuko noted, and frustrated.

“I say we had straight for the Black Cliffs.” Sokka said after a few minutes. “It’s where dad and I agreed to rendezvous before the invasion, and it’s uninhabited.” Sokka looked at them all, waiting to see if any other suggestions followed. When they didn't, he continued. “Trying to find our dad isn't working and it is way too risky to keep searching every port, now the Fire Nation knows about Aang.”

Zuko nodded in grim agreement and realised that the others were doing the same, although with a lot more grit and resolution than he knew he felt. It was surprising, he thought as he looked over their determined faces, how easily they all bounced back from this latest catastrophe. Sokka had just been attacked by a master swordsman and they were now properly at large with likely the whole military weight of the Fire Nation on their tail, but this little group of teenagers just shrugged that off and moved on. Agni, but they were all too young for this.

Katara clapped her hands together sharply, and startled Zuko from his thoughts. “How far are we from the rendezvous point?”

Sokka smiled gratefully at his sister and took a deep breath, before glancing upwards to get the position of the sun. It was about forty five degrees above the Western horizon- Zuko could have told him that, but Sokka seemed to have a handle on what he was doing. Apparently having figured out their approximate position, Sokka’s hand drifted to the bag where he usually kept his travel plans. Suddenly, he froze.

With a jolt, Zuko realised that the bundle of papers still lay wrapped carefully and hidden in the folds of his cloak. As casually as he could, he slid them over to Sokka, trying to ignore the curious gazes of the others and the sudden heat of his cheeks.

Coughing delicately and ignoring Toph’s smirk and Katara and Aang’s confused expressions, Sokka rifled through the bundle and pulled out a very dog-eared map of the Fire Nation.

“If we make good time, I think we can be there in a couple of weeks.” Sokka traced a line over the map with his finger and then cast a quick eye over their rations. “I think with the supplies that merchant gave us, we should have enough food to see us through. Hopefully we’ll be able to avoid any shopping trips- I want us to stay in the air as much as possible.”

Zuko nodded in agreement. That sounded sensible.

“Providing this food is good to eat,” Katara chimed in, opening one of the bags with narrowed eyes. “We have no idea who that guy was. Or why he just gave us a bunch of stuff. He could be trying to poison us, or anything.”
“I think we can trust him,” Zuko blurted out.

“Just because he gave you both swords?” Katara rolled her eyes.

Zuko’s mind blanked as he searched for a way to explain his sudden trust without mentioning the bow. He didn’t know why, but he just didn’t feel like he wanted to tell the others about that, just yet. Besides, Katara did have a point. It was better to be safe than sorry… or dead from poisoned jerky. He silently acquiesced, and deliberately avoided the vicious smile of victory that adorned Katara’s face all night, even after she was forced to admit that the food was definitely not poisoned.

In fact, as the days progressed, Zuko found himself ignoring a lot of things that Katara did. And Aang. And Toph. And Momo. Fucking Momo. It turned out that Sokka’s plan, whilst theoretically sound, did not account for the fact that keeping five bored and stressed teenagers (and one far-too-fucking-energetic Lemur) cooped up in a small space for a prolonged period of time, would lead to a few short tempers. Particularly when Sokka’s punishing schedule and Katara’s tight rations kept them hungry and tired. The food Zuko could deal with; he was long-used to going hungry and knew how to control his frustration at empty stomach. What he was struggling with was the way Toph and Katara could barely exchange a civil word, and the way that Aang was trying to hide his nerves behind an endless stream of constant chatter, and the way that Momo had taken up residence in Zuko’s hair, chittering in his ear all hours of the day, and moving only at mealtimes in irritating attempts to steal Zuko’s food. A few days of this and Zuko was all but ready to make a run for it and take his chances with the Fire Army, if only so that he could get five minutes fucking peace.

He rolled over and tucked his blanket around his chin in irritation. He was exhausted, but he just couldn’t get to sleep, his mind was too active. He didn’t do well with the tension, as stupid and idiotic as it was, raised voices and snide comments set his teeth on edge. He knew, logically, that the others were friends, that they were good people and that they weren’t going to hurt each other, or him. But the minute everyone started yelling, some voice at the back of his mind told him to be on edge, to watch out, that someone was going to get hit. It was stupid, he knew, but he just couldn’t shake the feeling that he needed to stay alert in case something went bad. Even when what he really wanted to do was sleep.

They had stopped on a small crescent island, just south of the flight path Sokka wanted to keep to, and set up camp just above the tide line. It was early evening and the tide was on its way out, the waves lapping hypnotically a few feet away from where they all lay. Zuko tried to map his breathing to their gentle roar, but after only a short while, the rhythm and repetition started to grate at his nerves. He opened his eyes and glared balefully at the sparkling light of the setting sun as it reflected off the water, frowned at the soft sand and the scattered broken shells that were bathed a soft orange-pink in the fading light. The beach would ordinarily be beautiful, but the longer he stared at it, the more Zuko wanted to set the whole fucking thing on fire, or see it sink into the depths of the ocean. Everyone else was sleeping, or at least pretending to be, but Zuko was still awake, bleary-eyed and irritated.

He angrily clenched his eyes shut, begging his brain to just shut down for a little bit, to just let him rest. Agni only knew that he was exhausted enough. An hour later and still awake, Zuko finally gave up and grumpily pulled himself to his feet. Sending a searing glare at a happily slumbering Toph (her constant grunting and her droning snore had been grating at his nerves), Zuko pulled the dao from his pack and stormed off to find a place to practise. If he accidentally kicked sand up right by a sleeping Momo, well it wasn’t as if Zuko could lose any sleep over it.

He found a small patch grass not too far up the beach from where the others were sleeping. He figured he was close enough that he could keep an eye on them, but far enough that his movements wouldn’t disturb Toph’s sleep. He glared at their sleeping forms once more, before taking a few
deep, calming breaths. It wasn’t their fault his brain was broken. He just needed to run himself ragged until he burnt the adrenaline off, or his body succumbed to exhaustion- whichever came first.

Zuko unsheathed the dao slowly and found himself, once again, staring at them in wonder; they truly were beautiful. It was the first time that he had had chance to properly try them out and he spun them around in his hands, enjoying the weight and the balance. Forcing himself to be sensible, he placed them to the side and ran through a brief warm up, excitement chasing away the fog of tiredness and making a valiant effort to replace the churning nervous feeling in his gut with anticipation.

As soon as he was ready, Zuko brought the dao back out and slowly began to run through a few simple katas, racking his exhausted brain to try and remember the correct steps. In a few places he couldn’t seem to get the right combination of footwork and arms, so he kind of fluffed it a bit. He could feel the phantom lash of the cane across his shoulders and hear the roar of the master of arms berating him, from the far reaches of his memory, for taking such liberties. But, Zuko reminded himself sternly, he wasn’t in the palace training grounds anymore and he no longer needed to worry about his father’s displeasure if he got a few steps wrong. He might not be able to remember all the steps properly, but he could remember far more than he’d thought he’d be able to. Clearly the hours and hours he had spent drilling them out in the training yards was time well spent. Forcing back the dark thoughts, Zuko sank into the fluid motions of half-remembered steps and slowly felt the tension seep from his muscles as he lost himself in the exertion.

When he finally came to a stop, chest heaving and covered in sweat, it was with an almost manic grin on his face. He hadn't felt so alive in years. So what if he got the steps a bit wrong? So what if his balance was fucked up and he needed to learn how to properly compensate for his bad side? The dao were something he'd always been good at, they had always been his and his alone, and he felt so much stronger, so much more himself with them back in his hands.

He nipped down to the sea for a quick wash, grimacing slightly at how cold the water was. He hadn’t realised how late it had become; the night was bright, lit by the shining face of the bright moon. He grimaced. He’d be awake with the dawn, regardless, even if he fell asleep in the next few minutes. He’d probably only snatch a few hours’ sleep tonight. Again.

Grumbling to himself, Zuko picked his way back across the sand towards the others. He was tiptoeing as best he could to avoid waking the others, and concentrating so hard on not kicking up sand this time, that when Aang suddenly sat bolt upright, Zuko jumped so badly that he almost fell over in the sand.

“What the-” Zuko began, but Aang didn't as much as glance at him. Instead he started stumbling towards Appa. His eyes were open and unblinking, as if he were in a trance.

“Aang,” Zuko hissed again, rushing over to the young airbender. “What are you doing?”

Zuko’s ankle almost gave out as he tripped over an unexpected hole in the sand, but he still managed to reach Appa's side in time to stop Aang from climbing into the saddle. He grabbed hold of Aang’s shoulders and pulled him round so they were face to face. Aang looked up slowly and blinked owlishly once, twice, and then seemed to shake himself, his mouth crumpling into a frown.

“What's going on?” Sokka asked through a yawn, sitting up and shrugged off his blanket. Zuko sent
up a silent prayer of thanks to Agni.

“I think Aang was sleepwalking,” Zuko explained slowly, stepping back and giving Aang some space.

“What?” This time it was Katara who stirred.

“Aang's sleepwalking again,” Sokka replied.

“I saw Avatar Roku,” Aang replied slowly, still looking shaken as he wiped sleep from his eyes. “He needs me to go to his island on the solstice. He… he has something important to tell me.”

Sokka yawned once again, giving Zuko an unnecessarily clear view of his molars.

“Doesn't Roku know that we're on a deadline here?” Sokka groaned, and slumped back. “We can't afford another side trip to the middle of nowhere.”

“I know, Sokka,” Aang replied, still looking only half-awake and slightly dazed. “But what if it's important? We can't just ignore him.”

Sokka grumblingly acquiesced, but put his foot down when Aang tried to insist they should set off there and then. Zuko didn’t sleep much for the rest of the night, keeping his good ear out in case Aang decided to make another break for it. By the time dawn broke, Zuko was still awake. He gave up trying to sleep entirely and went to splash some sea water on his face. As he bent down to the shallows, he heard a faint splashing on his right, and glanced over to see that Sokka had joined him. They exchanged tired smiles.

When they were done washing up, Sokka pulled out his maps and charted the course to Roku’s island. Thankfully it wasn't too far off his planned route, so they weren't going to lose too much time. The others were up soon after, and they headed off without eating breakfast. They were all too tired to be hungry and Aang was anxious for them to get on their way.

The journey to Roku's Island took a few hours and Zuko was so exhausted that he managed to sleep for most of them. By the time that Sokka gently shook him awake to tell him they were almost there, Zuko was almost feeling refreshed. He rubbed sleep from his eyes and sat up to see their destination for himself. He watched the island grow larger and larger with the strangest sense of deja vu. This was a place he'd seen depicted countless times in historical scrolls: the volcano that had conquered the Avatar. It was huge and hulking, looming over the island below it, like a beast about to pounce.

They landed and Aang shivered, jumping down from Appa with uncharacteristic caution. Zuko watched with bated breath. He half expected the volcano to burst to life in a cloud of ash and steam, hungry to claim the life of the next Avatar that dared set foot in its domain. But it had been over a hundred years since the death of Roku, and the great volcano lay dormant. Whatever the spirit of Avatar Roku wanted with Aang, it wasn’t to lure him to his untimely demise.

Zuko shivered himself, fighting back the unease that prickled at the back of his neck. There was nothing to fear, he knew that, but the air felt charged and potent, heavy with something that set Zuko’s teeth on edge.

The island itself was deserted, an empty and desolate stretch of rock stretching out under the shadow of the volcano. There had once been a village here, full of life and energy, but all evidence that there had once been anything more than this barren wasteland had long since been smothered under heaps of volcanic ash. Whatever remained of Avatar Roku’s home had been swallowed up by churning lava and buried under countless rocks of glittering obsidian. Zuko felt cold, despite the midday sun.
On the island proper, Aang set himself up on a large rock and settled into a meditative position. The young Avatar clearly knew what he was doing, and he didn’t seem to need any help at all. Judging by the unruffled expressions on the others’ faces, Zuko guessed that this was probably business-as-usual for communing with sprits. Seeing as he didn’t seem to be needed in the imminent future, Zuko decided to make himself scarce and explore the rest of the island, preferably as far away from Aang as possible.

Zuko wasn’t stupid. He had a healthy respect for the spirits, even if he wasn’t about to call on those of his own ancestors for guidance anytime soon. He knew how powerful some spirits could be, had heard the rumours in the camp about the ocean spirit at the North Pole, and had spent a solid three years of his childhood in utter terror of plague spirits from Lu-Ten’s tales of his Earth Kingdom campaigns. So Zuko thought it was prudent if he made himself scarce when he knew that a spirit was coming out to play—particularly when the spirit in question was both a former Avatar and the bitter enemy of his own great-grandfather.

Not for the first time, Zuko lamented his long and illustrious lineage, as he scoped out somewhere relatively secluded in which he could wait out the solstice. After a few minutes walking and a short climb, he found a nice, level patch of rock about ten yards across. There was a decent bit of shade from the slopes of the great volcano, and Zuko shivered, but he knew that he would be grateful for the cooler temperature after a few minutes of what he was planning. He cast one last eye over the area, and then set about kicking away loose rocks, until he’d made himself a nice clear patch on which to practise. Then he pulled out his dao.

Strictly speaking, he knew he should not be neglecting his firebending for the new blades, but he had barely practised with them the night before, and he refused to carry a weapon that he couldn’t properly use. Also, he thought that firebending on the solstice might just draw the attention of the one spirit he was trying very hard to hide from. It wasn’t a difficult decision to make. Besides, he had always preferred his blades to his flames.

He ran through a more comprehensive warm up than he had the night before, and moved through the katas much more slowly, taking the time to hold each stance and feel the shift of his chi with each step and transition. He was startled to find that, going slowly, the katas came back to him much more quickly than they had the night before, and that he seemed to be slowly getting a grip on how to change the flow of his movements to compensate for his blind spots. Though despite the improvement in his basics, there was one glaring problem that he was struggling with: his balance. He knew he had to sort out, or there was no way he could ever hope to wield the dao.

Every time Zuko tried to spin or jump, he ended up dizzy and disorientated, staggering out of the move in the wrong direction. After a few stumbles, he remembered how to properly spot, which helped a little, but didn’t entirely solve the problem. He suspected that his bad ear was affecting his balance; it wasn’t the first time that it had done that, and the movements of the dao required him to hold his centre of gravity much lower. No doubt his brain would have to relearn another skill that he never should have lost.

After he was injured, Zuko struggled to even walk; his head swam and his vision tilted every time he shifted his weight. It took a long time for him to finally find his feet again and for his brain to compensate for whatever signals were coming from his bad side. Still, it hadn’t stopped the guards from shoving a pick in his hands and setting him to work. He had been beaten a lot back in those early days. He had learnt through sweat and blood and tears back then, and he’d do the same now if he had to. He wasn’t letting what his father did to him steal the one thing that he had been good at. So Zuko simply gritted his teeth and forced himself through the katas again and again and again, until he finally started to feel a little bit of difference.
He was dizzy and feeling a little nauseous when he finally came to a stop. He had been engrossed in his own world, totally focused on the tiny shifting of his chi that warned him when he was about to keel sideways. He hadn’t realised that someone was watching him. He quickly brought both blades up into a quick guard, flicking sweat-slick hair from his eyes to keep his vision clear, as he focused on the intruder. He let out a sigh of relief— it was only Sokka.

The other boy was leaning against a large clump of rock, his own brand new sword on his belt. He was contorting himself into some odd shape, his left hip popped out, and one hand on his waist. Zuko thought that it looked rather uncomfortable, but if Sokka wanted to give himself lower back pain, that was his call. A stray hair tumbled in front of Zuko’s good eye and he flicked it back again; Sokka’s own eyes tracked the movement and then he looked away, clearing his throat loudly.

“Toph and Katara are watching Aang,” Sokka supplied with a grin that looked a little too fixed. “We… uh-” he cleared his throat once again “we think he might be in the spirit-world for a while.”

Zuko nodded and lowered his guard, idly spinning both blades in his hands. Sokka's eyes tracked his every movement.

“You’re… uh-” he sucked in a deep breath. “You're really good… at that.” He indicated to the dao. Zuko looked down at the swords in his hands. He spun them once more.

“I'm rusty,” he admitted.

“Still…” Sokka continued, moving forwards. “You move so fast! And the way that those blades move…” His eyes were all but shining. “It's like they’re just one sword…”

“That's because they are,” Zuko told him, whipping both blades up into a basic defence position. Sokka pushed off the rock and walked towards him.

“To properly wield dual dao, both weapons have to be in perfect harmony with one another, moving as one.” Zuko slowly moved the swords into an attack position, showing the way the blades moved in tandem, working in complete synchronicity.

Sokka watched him, eyes flickering between the blades and Zuko’s face. He swallowed heavily.

“Spar with me?”

“What?”

“Spar with me?” Sokka repeated in a more normal and less squeaky register than before.

Zuko looked at the other boy and contemplated the idea. He was out of practice, sure, but he reckoned he could take Sokka.

“Alright.”

They quickly widened the circle, kicking rocks clear until they had a circle large enough to spar in. Sokka drew his sword and swung it experimentally, getting a feel for the balance. Zuko hadn't seen him fight before the doomed crash-course with Piandao, but Sokka looked like he knew his way around the weapon in his hand. This was going to be an interesting fight. Sokka grinned and licked his lower lip in anticipation.

Sokka began, lunging low and with a speed Zuko hadn't been expecting. Zuko quickly side-stepped and parried with his right blade, bringing his left around in a sweeping arc aimed at Sokka's throat.
The other boy danced backwards and Zuko followed, pressing the advantage. He launched a flurry of quick swipes aimed at Sokka's middle. Sokka parried brilliantly, his sword flashing through the air as he blocked the attacks one after the other. Zuko grinned, relishing in the adrenaline coursing through his veins. This was fun. Soon though, Sokka seemed to tire and he retreated back a few steps, drawing Zuko after him.

Zuko pointed his left sword right at Sokka's Adam's apple, with a smug sense of self-satisfaction. They were at the edge of the sparring ring; Sokka had nowhere to go. Zuko felt sure he had this in the bag, when Sokka winked. With a sudden burst of energy, he kicked out, sending a good-sized rock hurtling at Zuko's feet. Zuko stumbled, off-balance, but managed to turn his fall into a roll. He came up where Sokka had just been standing, just in time to parry a blow to his left shoulder. Zuko was dizzy from the roll, and his arm moved on instinct alone. He cursed emphatically and felt his grin widen as their blades clanged loudly and locked together.

"Fighting dirty, huh?" he asked, panting slightly.

Sokka simply smirked and with a twist of his wrist spun his sword free. He backed up a few steps and brought his sword up in a low guard with a breathless laugh.

Zuko grinned widely.

"I'll show you fighting dirty."

Sokka was going down.

The next ten minutes or so disappeared in a blur of clanging steel and spluttered curses. They were quite evenly matched: Zuko was faster and fought like a rabid street cat now that he had all but abandoned the idea of a "fair fight", but Sokka was much more creative, pressing Zuko on his bad side and deftly slipping out of danger whenever Zuko almost had him cornered.

Katara came out to check on them at one point, but left soon after with a roll of her eyes, muttering disdainfully under her breath about boys and pointy sticks.

Zuko barely registered that though. He was entirely focused on the fight; he knew that if he made a single mistake, Sokka would claim the victory. But they both were starting to tire. Sokka's arms were starting to shake and Zuko, although he had better stamina, was feeling the mental-effort he had to put in to watch for his blind side and to avoid spinning and twisting as much as possible. His attacks were starting to become predictable. He feinted low and went right for the third time in a row and Sokka's sword was there to meet his. Both blades locked. They stared at each other, virtually nose to nose, as they both gasped for air.

Zuko smiled suddenly, enjoying Sokka's sudden look of horrified realisation, as he stuck out his right foot and hooked it around Sokka's ankle, pulling sharply to the side. The other boy overbalanced and collapsed inelegantly to the floor with a startled yelp, his sword clattering loudly to the floor beside him.

Zuko barely had a moment to crow in triumph, before Sokka sat up with an evil (although slightly winded) expression on his face. He reached up and grabbed Zuko by the wrist, yanking him forwards. Instinct barely allowed Zuko to drop both dao before he went toppling forwards and landed on top of Sokka in an ungainly heap.

There was a minute or so of winded gasping.

"Ow!" Sokka complained pitifully, in a faint voice. "Did you have to elbow me in the stomach?"
“Hey, you pulled me over!” Zuko groaned, rolling onto his side and dislodging said elbow.

“Yeah, well…” Sokka huffed, turning his head to look at Zuko, his cheeks reddening as he searched for a suitable response. “You started it!”

They glared at each other for a long moment, before they both burst out laughing. They lay there, both flat on their backs, cackling up at the heavens for a good few minutes. Zuko’s laughter slowly died away as the adrenaline that had been pumping through his veins started to dissipate. He was starting to feel the ache in his muscles and the sting in his scraped palms. He was also suddenly hyper aware of Sokka at his side, of the way their arms were pressed together and the way that loose strands of Sokka’s hair were tickling against the side of his cheek.

He didn’t know why, but he felt charged once again, with a strange new energy. He rolled onto his side and froze. Sokka was staring at him, his eyes intense. Whatever words he had just been about to say vanished from Zuko’s mind, like smoke on the wind. A thrill ran up his spine and his heart started pounding, even though the effects of the exercise had long since left his body alone.

Sokka propped himself up on one elbow and slowly leaned closer to Zuko, until they were almost nose to nose. Their eyes remained fixed on each other’s. Zuko lay frozen, not daring to make a move, barely even daring to breathe, in case the slightest disturbance of the air shattered the moment. He could feel the warmth of Sokka’s breath against his good cheek. He shivered. Sokka’s eyes flickered to his lips.

“I want to kiss you again,” Sokka whispered.

Zuko swallowed thickly. He let out a shaky breath.

“Okay.” His voice was hoarse and he barely recognised it as his own.

This was new territory, uncharted waters. It was terrifying and exciting and thrilling, like the clash of sword against sword.

He held still as Sokka slowly leant forwards and pressed their lips together. The slightest touch made Zuko jump; it felt like sparks darting across his skin. Zuko let out a soft moan and Sokka chuckled against his lips, pressing closer, and bringing his hand up to the back of Zuko’s neck. Zuko unconsciously followed his lead, tilting his head and leaning further into the kiss, half-delirious with the thrill chasing through his veins.

Somewhere at the back of his mind, Zuko knew this probably wasn’t a good idea, that he had reasons why this was stupid, reasons involving Sokka’s dad and the war and practicality. But then Sokka’s tongue traced Zuko’s lower lip and all thoughts fled his mind.

After a little while, Zuko felt himself getting short of breath and he pulled back slightly. Sokka broke the kiss and leant his forehead against Zuko’s as they both gasped for air.

“Too much?” Sokka asked nervously, biting at the plump, flushed skin of his lower lip.

Zuko shook his head, eyes wide and chest heaving, and Sokka moved back to gently press another soft kiss against his lips. Zuko leant in, and pulled Sokka closer.

Not too much later, Katara once again came to find them, this time to tell them that food was ready. Thankfully they’d heard her coming with enough time to break apart and brush the dust off their hair and clothing. They both avoided each other’s eyes as much as possible, but Zuko knew by the horrible warmth blazing across his cheekbones, that he was blushing like crazy.
“Dinner’s ready,” Katara told them, looking between them with a very odd expression. “Aang looks like he’s going to be in the spirit world for a while. So I thought we should eat.”

“Yup,” Sokka agreed, still looking anywhere other than Zuko. “Sounds great, sis.”

Zuko grunted in agreement.

Katara continued to look at them strangely.

“What have you two been doing out here? You've been ages!”

Sokka flushed and coughed. “Sparring.”

“Uh-huh,” Zuko agreed, nodding quickly. “Just sparring.”

Katara rolled her eyes, but seemed to accept the excuse. She rolled her eyes scornfully once again and then started heading back to Toph and Aang. Zuko and Sokka followed, shooting each other surreptitious glances as they did, neither sure whether to find the whole thing hilarious or mortifying.

Aang was still sat on the rock, cross-legged and silent. Toph and Katara had spread some blankets on the floor and had put out several small bowls of fruit and other cold food. Toph was propped up against Appa’s side and grinning widely.

“Boys are so weird,” Katara complained as soon as they were within earshot of Toph. The young earthbender let out a loud cackle.

“Come and sit down,” she called cheerfully. “Katara’s made a picnic. I bet you must be starving after all that sparring.”

Zuko plonked himself down on Toph’s left and glared uselessly at her.

“So who won?” she asked, grin growing even wider.

“It was a draw,” Zuko replied tersely, trying not to think of the feeling of Sokka's hand running through his hair. “We both won.”

“Oh, re-”

Whatever Toph was about to say was silenced by Zuko shoving a bowl of jerky in her face. Torn between tormenting the boys and food, Toph chose the jerky, and so fell blessedly silent.

Aang stayed in the spirit world for the rest of the afternoon; barring the occasional twist or nod of his head, he sat silent and still. It was eerie, Zuko thought, to see the normally energetic airbender so silent and still. He hoped that Aang was okay in the spirit-world.

After they were done eating, Sokka (still slightly pink-cheeked and overcompensating wildly for his own nervousness) suggested that they all swap jokes to pass the time. After about twenty different variations of ‘An Earthbender, a Firebender and a Waterbender all walk into a bar’, Zuko was almost ready to claw his own eyes out. He’d never really had a sense of humour, and most of the jokes that he knew had been learnt at the camp and were on the bawdier side of not-really-appropriate-for-any-company-whatever.

The others grew steadily more and more competitive, each trying to tell the most outrageous joke. Toph shared a few she’d learnt at the Earth Rumble, which would have made Zuko feel better about telling his own, if it weren’t painfully evident that she didn’t quite understand the punchlines. Sokka
had a good few of his own, although Agni only knew where he’d heard half of them- Zuko could only hope that he hadn’t made them up. Sokka and Toph were therefore both fighting it out for first place. Katara, surprisingly, had joined in, and had even got in a few good ones of her own. Zuko sat quietly, laughing in all appropriate places and praying to Agni that no one noticed him.

After a few hours though, even Sokka seemingly inexhaustive repertoire started to run dry. Wincing slightly as his latest double entendre fell flat; Sokka turned and pounced on the next appropriate means of distraction.

“Hey Zuko?”

Zuko’s heart sank.

“You’ve barely said anything- tell us a joke from the Fire Nation!”

Katara groaned.

“No more jokes, please!”

“Do they even have jokes in the Fire Nation?” Toph asked idly, tossing up a hunk of basalt and flipping it through the air.

“What?” Zuko asked, mouth suddenly dry. “Yes, of course-

“Then share, Sparky!”

Zuko glanced between them all in sheer panic.

“Um, I don’t really know any…”

“No way! You don’t know one joke?” Toph really wasn’t letting the conversation drop.

Zuko shrugged, wishing he could just disappear on the spot.

“Well I do know one-” He finally admitted, after a horribly long and expectant pause. Sokka clapped sharply, and then rubbed his hands together.

“Excellent!”

“But it’s not…um…exactly…polite…”

Sokka let out a loud guffaw.

“I’m sure we’ll survive.”

Zuko felt a bit dubious, but even Katara was smiling at him encouragingly, so he simply heaved a heavy sigh and surrendered.

“Well,” he began. “Have you heard the one about the Fire Sage and the oyster-diver from Kyoshi Island?”

Thankfully, the rest of the joke was cut off by a sudden gasp from Aang. Zuko sent up a silent prayer of thanks to Agni, but he suspected that the great spirit simply hadn’t wanted to hear the punchline as much as Zuko hadn’t wanted to tell it.

Aang came to like he’d been dowsed in cold water, flailing wildly and gasping for breath. Katara
rushed to his side, Sokka and Toph following at a more sedate pace.

“Hey buddy,” Sokka called amiably. “Learn anything interesting?”

Aang shuddered, letting out a deep groan as he pulled himself painfully to his feet. He had been in the spirit world for a long time, and his muscles had locked, but he barely seemed to feel it. Zuko frowned; it appeared that Avatar Roku had had a lot to say.

The tale that Aang related to them was dark, a sordid look at the true history between the Avatar and the Fire Nation. Zuko had not known that Fire Lord Sozin had been at the island on the day of Roku’s death, that he had stood side by side with the Avatar against the fury of the volcano, and then had left him to die. Zuko felt sick.

Aang scratched awkwardly at the short mop of hair on top of his head. He had just finished his story and looked absolutely exhausted.

“It’s like these people are born bad,” Toph sighed. “Present company excepted, of course, Sparky.”

Zuko shrugged. He didn’t think anyone was inherently good or evil. Then again, seeing as he was the descendant of a man who had left his former-best friend to die either choking on ash or burning in lava, he didn’t think that he really got to have a say in any of this.

“No,” Aang argued, rubbing a hand over his face. “I don't think that was he was trying to show me.”

They all waited for a few moments, as Aang gathered his thoughts.

“I think,” Aang finally continued, “I think he was trying to show me the opposite.” He sighed but didn’t elaborate any further. After a moment or two, he reached back and rubbed his hands through the spikes of his hair. “And… Well he told me something else too…”

“What now?” Sokka asked, throwing his hands up in exasperation. “I don't know if I can handle any more earth-shattering revelations this afternoon!”

Aang turned to Zuko.

“It was a message for you, actually…”

Zuko gulped and braced himself. “For me?”

“Yeah,” Aang grimaced as a blush rose on his cheeks. “He... um... he said that he's um... proud... of you.” He coughed awkwardly. “And that you need to find the White Lotus.”

Zuko froze for a second or two. He blinked, opened his mouth, closed it, and then blinked again.

“He what?” Sokka asked, summing up Zuko’s feelings perfectly for him. “What?”

“I don't know!” Aang objected loudly, cheeks bright red. “I'm just the messenger here!”

“Why would he be proud of Zuko?” Toph asked. “No offence, Sparky.”

Zuko just grunted in agreement. It wasn't like he'd done anything all that special. Certainly not anything that would draw the attention of the spirit of his great-grandfather's murdered ex-best friend.

“Well you did join up with the Avatar,” Katara pointed out. “Maybe he’s happy you’re one of the good guys.”
They all considered that for a long moment. Zuko shuddered. Agni, he hoped it was that. He really hoped it was something that simple.

Sokka, however, had found something else to fixate on.

“What was that other part?” Sokka asked Aang. “You said he said Zuko need to find something: the white something-or-other.”

“Lotus,” Aang replied with a shrug, seemingly over the awkwardness of the whole situation. “I don’t know what that is though. Do any of you?”

Sokka paused for a moment, and then reached slowly into the pouch at his belt. He pulled out the pai sho tile and traced the pattern slowly.

“Lotus…” he muttered to himself.

“You think that’s got something to do with it?” Katara asked, leaning over to stare at the tile.

“It can’t be a coincidence…” Sokka held the pattern up to the fading light of the sun.

“Does it matter?” Zuko cut across Sokka’s musings, still highly disturbed by the realisation that a spirit had been paying personal attention to him, whatever the reason. “It's not going to change our plans, is it?”

“But Zuko- it’s advice from a spirit,” Aang said in alarm.

“And?” Zuko frowned. “It’s not like he gave it to you, is it?”

He watched as dawning horror fell across Aang’s face.

“So you’re just going to ignore him?”

Zuko shrugged. “What else can I do? We’re on a deadline here, we have to get to the rendezvous point before the eclipse, or all of your friends and allies are going to run headfirst into a trap.” He sighed and rubbed at the bridge of his nose. “We don’t have time to go running off on some random spirit-quest.”

“But…” Aang interjected, in complete alarm. “Avatar Roku said-”

“I know, Aang,” Zuko said quietly. “I don’t like it either.”

Mainly because he had no idea why a spirit who had every right to rain suffering down on the descendant of his murderer would choose not to exact vengeance and instead send said descendant off with a pat on the head and some benevolent advice. The whole thing made Zuko’s teeth itch, but the point was moot anyway. Even if he did somehow trust that Roku was giving out friendly advice, it was like he’d said: they didn’t have time.

Sokka was still staring at the tile as if it hid the secret to the meaning of life, but he shook himself out of his reverie and pocketed the tile once again.

“Zuko’s right,” he told Aang. “We’ve not got time to go off on another random search, and the only lead we have on this tile is back in Shu Jing, which is probably crawling with military right now.”

Aang deflated, but silently acquiesced, though not without dire warnings that they were making a mistake to ignore the advice of a spirit.
The next few days were absolute misery, so much so that Zuko was starting to think he should have listened to Aang about Roku after all. He had barely had any time alone with Sokka, and what few snatched moments they had found had been interrupted almost immediately by some problem or other that needed Sokka’s urgent attention. It felt like everything was against them. At first, as they flew further south and east, it was the heat and the scorching sun. Of course, whilst Zuko soaked up as many rays as he possibly could, the heavy humidity was draining all the others. Aang had developed a light sunburn over his shoulders and was absolutely appalled to discover that Zuko, even with his much paler skin, rarely got burnt by Agni’s rays. Then, after a few days of the energy-sapping heat, a strong wind began to pick up, bringing dark clouds, heavy and swollen with summer rain.

Sokka finally accepted that they weren’t going to outrun the rains and navigated them to an isolated looking peak on the next landmass that they happened across. They waited out the storm in a stone house that Toph had hastily thrown together almost as soon as their feet touched solid earth. It was just in time too; as soon as they were all huddled beneath the roof, a sharp crack split the air and dazzling shards of lightning danced across the sky where they had been flying only minutes before. Toph’s quick thinking had, however, been too late to save a lot of the bags, which had been thoroughly drenched by the rain in their mad dash to land. Most of their food was ruined, rainwater having seeped into the rice and grains and turned their flour into paste. Their spare clothes were ruined too, the cheap black dye of the bags seeping into their shirts and staining them in deep ugly smears. There was no way they could wear them in public.

Tempers, already fraying, all snapped at the same moment. Zuko had never been fond of blazing rows, and tried to keep himself on the edges, but found himself inadvertently drawn in when Aang suggested their run of bad luck was because Zuko had deliberately ignored the advice of Avatar Roku. Zuko had taken offence to that, and it had all gone downhill from there. Somehow the whole thing ended up with Katara in tears and Toph loudly commenting that at least if they starved to death, she wouldn’t have to listen to anymore of Katara’s lectures. After that, Sokka agreed that they’d need to make a pit stop for supplies.

They all went to bed soggy and irritated, and Zuko suspected that none of them slept well that night. He himself tossed and turned until the early hours, as he tried to ignore the chill in his bones and the sharp patter of the rain against the roof- so like the sound of stone pellets that had ripped through prisoners and guards alike. At dawn he sent up a silent prayer to Agni, asking for guidance. If Aang was right, and this spate of bad luck was karmic retribution for ignoring a spirit, Zuko could only hope that Agni would be able to show him how to undo the colossal mess that he’d made.

The next day, Sokka steered them slightly off course keeping good on his promise of a pit-stop, and brought them in range of an island confirmed as populated by three different maps. As they flew over, trying to find a safe place to land and make camp, Zuko had a good look at the island. There was a huge mountain at the centre, and a small town somewhere close to the slopes. The rest of the island was covered in thick, green vegetation. It was beautiful, but something about it made him feel strange, like he wanted to get as far away from it as he could. Eventually they found a small clearing in the forest to touch down in. They got settled quickly and set up a small fire. The giant, waxy leaves of the trees hung thick and dense around them, casting deep, ominous shadows in the light of the almost-full moon. Zuko shivered.

It seemed, however, that he was the only one pre-occupied with the strange feeling that something was wrong. All the arguments of the previous day apparently forgotten, Sokka, Toph and Katara all cheerily decided that they would head straight into town that next morning and make the shortest supply run possible, before the market got too busy. They only needed to buy enough food to last them the week or so to the eclipse, and Sokka reckoned that if they stuck to the basics, they would have enough money left to cover everything.
Katara decided to make some soup for dinner, using the last few edible scraps they could scramble together. It was vegetarian, by virtue of the fact that all their meat had been ruined by the rain, and so Aang was thrilled that he could finally share a meal with them. He spent quite a while expounding on the deliciousness of all the vegetables and the health benefits of a meat-free diet, whilst Sokka loudly complained that he was going to faint if he didn’t get any protein soon. Katara managed very well, Zuko privately thought, to not bend the rest of the soup in their faces and tell them to cook their own meals from now on, if they had so many complaints.

Dinner over, thankfully without an all-out brawl, they settled down. Zuko rubbed at his shoulders and focused on the fire before him, encouraging the flames to grow and fight back the cool night air around them. The strange sense of unease had been niggling at the back of his mind all evening; there was something in the air that made him feel nervous. He kept his eyes on the fire and tried not to think about the thick, dense forest around them. Beyond the light thrown out by the fire, the clearing was pitch black, but Zuko could swear that he could sense the scuttling of animals just out of sight beyond the tree-line. He shuddered and told himself it was just his imagination. He had been in worse places, he knew, but something about this particular island made the hairs on the back of his neck prick up and his skin crawl.

The topic of conversation wasn’t particularly helpful, either. Sokka had started up another round of ‘who knows the best joke?’ which, by virtue of either the strange atmosphere or by Katara’s insistence that if she heard one more joke she might actually kill her brother, had turned into ‘who knows the scariest story?’. Aang had started with a surprisingly bone-chilling rendition of *The Spirit in the Mist*, and then Sokka had followed with what was probably the least scary story that Zuko had ever heard. Katara’s offering, however, was far spookier. Zuko could almost hear the faint, whimpering voice and chattering teeth of the dead girl, as Katara spun her tale in the cool night air. He could see her pale blue hands and picture the blue-tint of her lifeless lips. He shook himself and tried to force those thoughts from his head. It was just a story. He moved closer to the fire, as if the warmth would push back his own memories of pale, lifeless bodies lost to freezing winds, thin blankets, and far, far too little food.

He was still lost in his thoughts when Toph sprang to her feet, head cocked and listening intently to something. Zuko had not been paying attention and so jumped about five feet into the air, flinching away from the fire and whacking into Sokka’s shoulder.

“Can you guys hear that?” she asked intently, as Sokka helped Zuko to sit back upright with a small, soft smile.

“Hear what?” Katara asked.

“I can hear screaming,” Toph told them all quietly. “I think it’s coming from under the mountain.” She pointed off to her right, into the darkness of the forest.

“Come on, Toph,” Katara laughed. “I’m sure it’s nothing. Don’t tell me you’re spooked by all of these stories?”

“I am not!” Toph complained, and stomped her foot.

Katara chuckled.

“They’re not real, Toph,” she smiled, and walked over to wrap Toph in a quick hug. “They’re just for fun.” Toph shivered and Zuko coaxed the fire a bit brighter with a subtle gesture of his hand.

“I know that,” Toph muttered, but sounded less sure of herself than before. “But I swear I heard screaming.”
Sokka chuckled softly, and turned to his sister. “That was a great story though! I can’t believe I never heard-“

He was cut off by a sharp crack from the depths of the forest, like someone stepping on a branch. It split through the night air and Zuko jumped once again, crashing into Sokka’s side for the second time that evening. He righted himself quickly- there was someone out there, hidden in the shadow of the trees. There was a further rustling, Zuko reached for his swords, but his pack was just out of reach. Before he could get to it, a hunched figure stepped into the clearing. It was an old lady, back bent with age and hair a deep grey. She was clearly no threat, but Zuko’s skin prickled. She looked around at the startled group and smiled widely.

“Hello children.”

Chapter End Notes

Well there we go...
Zuko and Sokka, my dear sweet boys. Zuko, hunni, you have to learn when Sokka's flirting with you. Sokka, please stop being so damn obvious.
This was originally meant to include the whole Hama plotline (I know, I know, I write waaay too long chapters and I need to learn to edit more), but then Sokka stumbled upon Zuko practising with the dao and I just had to write them sparring.
Aang tried to run away this chapter, but Zuko foiled him- don't worry, he goes missing in the next chapter and fucks things up in a Big Way (TM).
Toph is enjoying tormenting Zuko and Sokka way too much. I adore her.
I know the Gaang were bickering a lot more this chapter, but they're all a bit stressed. Leave them be, they're only kids.
Also Roku, please be less vague when doling out advice, you've terrified your great-grandson. Maybe that would have been a useful piece of information to lead with hmmm?

Anyway, please let me know what you think. I'm hoping to have the next chapter out in the next couple of weeks, seeing as most of it is already written- I will do my best!
Hi guys!
How are you all? Thanks to everyone still reading and hello to anyone new!

This chapter is a biggun, as in it’s nearly 16k words long, and some pretty serious shit goes down.
To everyone who told me not to apologise for the chapter length- thank you, but I feel you may have unleashed a beast now...

TWs this chapter include: description of dead bodies, including reference to child death, starvation, bloodbending (in case you thought this might go down differently), vague reference to torture and abuse, panic attacks, flashbacks and dissociation, description of tinnitus and nausea, reference to claustrophobia (see end notes if you want a bit more detail on that) and description of fire.

Phew- I think that’s everything. Please let me know if you catch anything that I've missed, or if you want me to tag anything specifically.

Hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was testament to how much of the war that the group had already seen, that they all reacted so quickly. The moment that the old lady spoke, Katara, Aang and Toph jumped to their feet and assumed basic bending stances. Zuko quickly turned his face away from the light of the fire and flipped his hood up. Sokka let out a very loud, very high pitched shriek down Zuko’s bad ear and reached for his sword. Zuko reeled backwards at the noise, falling heavily on his left elbow.

The old woman smiled softly and raised her hands in a gesture that was half-surrender, half-reassurance. The others watched her closely, shifting back into more neutral stances. Next to Zuko, Sokka took his hand off the hilt of his sword. Zuko sat up slowly and rubbed at his elbow, keeping his head turned away as he watched the woman from the corner of his good eye.

He kept his gaze entirely on her as she began to speak, not daring to look away to catch the others’ reactions. Sokka’s scream had been way too loud down his bad ear and now the fucking thing was ringing horrifically, muffling everything and making him feel dizzy. Zuko could parse through most of the conversation by the odd word that slipped through the ringing, and by what little he could make out by reading the woman’s lips by firelight, but it was not easy and required all of his focus.

It seemed that she had heard them out in the woods and was offering rooms for the night. Either that or they had been really loud and were disturbing her sleep- Zuko wasn’t really able to tell. Her wide, fixed smile wasn’t giving him too much context either. He shivered, his skin prickling in the cooling evening air. He pulled the cloak tighter around him as Katara and Aang stepped forward and blocked his view of the woman’s face.

After a few minutes, Zuko’s nerves were jangling, he was still feeling dizzy and he could sense the beginnings of a headache forming, from where he had been straining his good eye to lip-read in the
flickering light of the fire. Thankfully, it seemed that Katara and Aang had decided to take control of the conversation, and had come to some sort of agreement with the older woman. They stepped back with wide, excited smiles and headed back to their respective packs.

There was a light tap on his shoulder and Zuko startled badly, flinching away from the contact. He turned to see Sokka staring at him with wide, surprised eyes.

“Sorry, man, I called you like three times,” Sokka was enunciating clearly and speaking very slowly.

Zuko felt his cheeks heat. He hadn’t realised that Sokka was able to read him so well.

“Sorry,” Zuko mumbled in reply. “It’s my-” He gestured vaguely to his bad ear, and Sokka nodded in understanding.

“I guessed,” he shrugged. “Did you catch any of that, like at all?”

Zuko shook his head and fought back the surge of nausea that that caused. Sokka launched into an explanation, as the others quickly set about striking the camp and dousing the fire with dirt and sand. Apparently the old woman (whose name was, apparently, Hama) was an innkeeper who lived close by. She had heard them out in the woods and had offered them rooms for the night (Zuko mentally congratulated himself that he had inferred most of that correctly). The inn was close by and Katara and Aang had agreed. They were packing up camp and then they would follow the old lady back to the promise of soft beds, warm rooms and a cooked breakfast the next morning.

Zuko frowned to himself, and turned his attention back to the old lady. She seemed benign enough, but something about her gave Zuko a strong sense of unease. It might have been the deep-seated mistrust that Zuko held of all adults, or the cynicism that had been carved into him by long hours in the dark depths of the mine, but Zuko doubted she was offering to help them out of the kindness of her heart. There had to be some kind of ulterior motive at work, he was sure. After all, who would help a random group of teenagers that they had only just met?

A dozen half-remembered stories flickered through his mind, rising up from the depths of his childhood fears. There was one story that his mother used to tell him and Azula, back when his sister had been little enough to share bedtime stories with him. It was about an old witch who lived in a deep, dark forest and would catch any children who wandered off the path, stealing them away to her cottage where she would feed them to the evil spirit who lived in her chimney. The sudden thought set a jolt of fear through Zuko’s gut, and he pulled the cloak tighter, eyes narrowing on the old woman. Her gaze flickered over to him and rested on his shrouded face. Her smile wavered for a second and then was plastered back on with renewed vigour. Something heavy settled in Zuko’s stomach. He didn’t like this one bit, but then Sokka gave him a bright smile and helped him with his pack and Zuko didn’t quite know how to voice his discomfort without sounding like a child.

The walk to the inn wasn’t far at all, although it felt like miles. His head was still spinning and the fucking high-pitched whine in his ear was making him feel sick. Every step Zuko took felt like he was walking through mud, and he stumbled more than a few times. Surprisingly it was Aang who seemed to notice first, and subtly let himself drop to the back of the group, where Zuko was lagging behind. He silently offered his shoulder to help Zuko balance, and the rest of the walk became a lot easier. Even more shockingly, the young airbender was silent for once, for which Zuko was pitifully grateful; it allowed him a few quiet minutes to try and compose himself. By the time they had reached the inn, the ringing had dissipated enough that Zuko could hear a lot better and walk on his own. He let go of Aang’s shoulder with a quiet “thanks”, and the young airbender gave him a nod and a small smile.

The inn itself was, unlike the journey to it, reassuringly dull; it was a standard Fire Nation dwelling
set over a few stories, with nice, wide windows and a gently sloping roof. The lights were still on in the building, casting out a warm glow, like a beacon guiding them home. Zuko felt the tight knot of tension loosen in his stomach. Hama stepped forwards to unlock the door and then held it open for Zuko and the others, allowing them all to cross the threshold one by one. The bright kitchen just off the hall welcomed them in like old friends. There was a large wooden table in the middle of the room, and the others all rushed to sit around it, grateful for the warmth and heat of a proper house. Zuko was shattered and swaying on his feet by the time it was his turn. The inn looked so warm and inviting, and all he wanted to do was crash somewhere and go to sleep. He let out a wide yawn, startling himself; he hadn’t realised how much that walk had taken out of him.

He was just about to cross the threshold, when an arm shot out, blocking his path. Zuko stared, blinking at it for a moment in confusion, before he looked up to the innkeeper in front of him.

“Young man, I hate repeating myself,” she said, lips twisting in and out of a smirk as she spoke, making the hairs on Zuko’s arms prickle. Had she spoken? Zuko hadn’t heard her say anything. “I make it a point that I know each and every one of my customers.” She smiled, and Zuko’s blood froze. “Now I can’t do that if you’re wearing a hood now, can I?”

A gnarled hand reached out to grab at the fabric of his hood. Zuko flinched back, his hand reflexively jumping up to smooth down the fabric.

“It stays on.”

Hama’s smile grew brighter, showing more teeth. Behind her, Zuko could see the others hesitantly getting up from the table and crowding at the woman’s back, wondering what was going on.

“Now young man,” she continued sternly, “this is one of the rules of my inn. I’m afraid I can’t let you in if you don’t remove that hood.”

Zuko sighed. He was way too tired for this. He just wanted to go to sleep, and he didn’t like the way she kept pressing him. His head was killing him and it was taking far too much effort to focus on her rasping voice through the buzzing in his bad ear.

“Then I’ll sleep outside.”

If she didn’t want him in her inn, he’d just have to make do with his sleeping bag. He didn’t need a bed, anyway.

“Hey come on, man,” Sokka interjected, casting a wary look between the two of them. “There’s no need for that.” He looked over at Hama. “Is there?”

She pursed her lips, looking as if she’s swallowed a scorpion-bee. Zuko squared his shoulders and glared at her from the depths of his hood.

“I suppose I can make an exception,” Hama smiled beatifically up at Zuko and shuffled to the side to let him pass, but her hand was tight around the edge of the door. Zuko could see her fingernails clawing dents in the wood as he passed, and he could feel her eyes tracking his every movement as she welcomed them to the inn and showed them up to their rooms.

Sleep did not come to Zuko at all that night; he felt hyper-sensitive, his heart jumping with every creak of the floorboards and gust of wind. Part of him, the childish part that still couldn’t get the image of the witch from his mother’s story out of his head, was half-expecting his door to creak open at any minute, revealing the old lady armed with a Zuko-sized cooking pot and spoon. The more rational side of him told him she was far more likely to bring a knife or garrotting wire- the way that
she had looked at him had been telling. Zuko knew hatred; he knew the way that people looked when they loathed and despised and wanted to hurt and harm. He didn’t dare fall asleep under the roof of a woman who had smiled at him with so much ice in her eyes.

When Agni’s rays finally graced the horizon, Zuko was already outside, dressed and ready for the day, idling in the yard at the back of the house. He hadn’t wanted to risk practicing with the dao in the dark, with his cloak on, and slightly light-headed from a night of no-sleep. That had seemed less like an invitation to an accidental brutal self-maiming and more a full blown formal welcoming party with a feasts and official band. But, the minute the sun was out, Zuko allowed himself to pick up the blades. He quickly ran through a warm up and then fell into the increasingly familiar katas, careful not to spin and twist as much as he would like to- the one concession that he made to the state of his balance the night before.

He had been at it for almost an hour, when he heard the approach of thudding footsteps. He turned around slowly, the hilts oh his blades slick with sweat against the calluses on his palms.

Sokka was stood a few yards away, arms folded across his chest.

“What?” Zuko asked gruffly.

Sokka smiled and jerked his head in the direction of the inn.

“I just wanted to let you know that breakfast is nearly ready.” He reached back to rub at the back of his neck. “Thought you’d be hungry after all that dancing around.”

“Dancing?” Zuko hissed, aghast. He sheathed the dao and strode over to Sokka, bringing them almost nose-to-nose. “Those were katas! It’s nothing like dancing!”

“Whatever,” Sokka smirked, “and you looked very pretty doing them too.”

“I kicked your ass once, I can do it again.” Zuko reminded him sternly, though his own lips were twitching to grin back.

“Hmm no,” Sokka replied. “That’s not how I remember it going down.”

Zuko stopped fighting his own grin and smiled widely back. “Well maybe we need to refresh your memory.” He stepped closer to Sokka, his heartbeat picking up in his chest. “What if we-”

“Food’s ready!” Toph’s voice cut through the air like a foghorn. Sokka jumped and Zuko stepped back, scowling. He was really going to have a word with Toph about her timing. She was doing it on purpose, he was absolutely certain.

The two boys shared a long look before Sokka groaned, rolled his eyes and heaved a mournful sigh, before leading the way back into the inn. The others were already in the kitchen. Aang was sat at the table tossing acorns for Momo to catch. Toph, sat next to him, grinned wickedly the minute that Zuko and Sokka stepped into the room, quirking an eyebrow at Zuko’s derisive scoff.

Katara stood at the stove, stirring a large pot of something that smelt heavenly. After all that exercise, Zuko was starving. Forgetting his irritation, he plonked himself at Toph’s side, ignoring the disapproving look that Katara sent his way.

“What is that?” Sokka asked, peering over Katara’s shoulder. He reached over to the pot, only to have his hand slapped away by Katara.

“It’s porridge.”
“Doesn’t smell like porridge.”

“Hama added some cinnamon,” Katara noted, pushing Sokka back to the table with one hand, as she kept stirring the pot with the other. “She’s joining us in a minute.”

Zuko scowled down at the table, but didn’t dare say a word with Katara in charge of the breakfast bowls. The conversation passed over his head as he peered at the pattern in the grain and tried not to think about how much he didn’t want to be around the strange innkeeper. It was just for the morning, he reminded himself. Once Sokka and the others had gone to the market they would be on their way.

He didn’t know how long he had been lost in his thoughts, but all too soon the hall door creaked open and the innkeeper shuffled into the room, taking her place at the head of the table.

“Good morning, children,” she greeted and was met with a chorus of enthusiastic greetings from the others. Zuko merely grunted. Toph gently nudged him with her elbow and almost broke six of his ribs. He coughed loudly to cover up the instinctive gasp of pain, drawing the attention of the table. Katara glared at him and placed a bowl of porridge before him with almost calculated coolness. Zuko winced and bowed his head over his food, barely remembering to wait for the others to be served before diving in.

“So what are your plans for the day, children?” Hama asked, smiling warmly at Katara as she finally took her seat at the table.

“We’re off to the market,” Sokka replied in between the mouthfuls of food he was throwing down his neck.

“Oh how lucky,” Hama replied, “I was going there myself. I can show you the way!”

Aang agreed happily to the suggestion and then gracefully fielded a few questions from Hama about who they were and where they came from, demonstrating the kind of ease that came only from long experience. Zuko concentrated on the food in his bowl, and avoided looking at Hama’s face. The cold light of the morning may have banished the childish fears of witches and fire-demons, but he still felt uncomfortable around the woman. He was in the midst of reassuring himself, once again, that they weren’t staying long in the inn, when Hama suggested that they stay another night and join her for dinner. Zuko almost blurted out an emphatic “no”, but grit his teeth together instead.

“Oh, that’s really nice of you to offer,” Sokka said hesitantly, “but…um…we were kind of planning on leaving straight away.”

“Ah,” Hama’s face dropped. “Oh… I was just going to make a special dinner for you all.”

Zuko felt like all the warmth had been sucked from the room, as an icy chill fell over him.

“That’s very kind of you,” Katara said, “but we really do need to be on our way.”

“Ah, not to worry, children.” Hama smiled gently. “I suppose it won’t be the same anyway- you can’t get sea prunes this far North and ocean kumquats aren’t really quite the same.”

“Great,” Zuko said, letting his spoon clatter loudly into his bowl, as he started to get up from the table. “We’ll be-“

“Did you just say sea prunes?” Katara cut him off with a vicious glare before turning back to Hama, almost in wonder.

“Yes, dear.” Hama’s smile grew wider.
“But that can’t be, they’re from the… I mean… they’re…”

“Yes, dear.” Hama looked round the group, her gaze lingering on Zuko for just a moment too long. “They’re from the Southern Water Tribe.” Her hand swept out a hand and water flew from the jug in the centre of the table to fill her glass. Her smile sharpened. “As am I.”

Whatever Zuko had been expecting her to say, that was not it. The innkeeper, the woman Zuko had been starting to suspect was an informant for the military, was a waterbender? Katara and Sokka stared at her in slack-jawed amazement for a few moments before the questions began. Zuko slunk down into his seat and watched Hama closely as she rattled off her replies: yes, she was from the Southern Water Tribe; she had left many years ago; they were the first of her people she’d spoken to in years. He gently nudged Toph’s arm under the table and she replied with a slow, cautious nod. Apparently, Hama was telling the truth. He wasn’t sure if that made him feel more or less relieved. The trip to the market obviously postponed, Katara and Sokka slowly began to draw Hama’s story out of her. She was reluctant at first, before finally admitting that it wasn’t a nice story and that she’d been a Fire Nation captive.

Zuko stood up to heat a pot of tea. Tea was good; it was calming. He kept his hands busy filling the pot with water and setting it to warm over the stove, as Hama began to recall the Fire Nation raids in the South Pole, the abduction of the waterbenders, and the brutal response to any resistance. The group sat in horrified silence as the story unfolded, Katara and Sokka both as grim-faced as Zuko had ever seen them. Zuko turned back to his task, rifling through a series of small pots to find the right blend of dried leaves. Chamomile or jasmine, he told himself, something calming. He took a few deep breaths, filling his lungs with the soft, floral scent and trying to ignore the shaking in his hands. Behind him, Hama began talking of her own abduction, of the cruelty of the Fire Nation captors and of a prison where water was guarded as carefully as the inmates.

The pot on the stove was boiling; Zuko had left it on too long. He grabbed a towel and dumped the water down the sink, reminding himself to breath. He refilled the pot, scooping in some of the chamomile blend and setting it back on the stove. Hama didn’t want to speak in much more detail about her time at the mercy of the Fire Nation, saying only that she eventually managed to escape and somehow found herself running her own inn in the heart of the Fire Nation, with too much time and distance between her and the ice to find her way back home.

The tea was done, and Zuko set about arranging cups on a tray. No one mentioned the way that the porcelain cups clanked loudly together in the silence, as he lifted the tray and brought it over to the table. Aang took over the serving of the tea with a bright smile, sparing Zuko the humiliation and the danger of trying to pour scalding water with shaking hands. Hama’s story had brought back memories that he had been trying very hard not to think about since his prolonged stay at Chameleon Bay - memories of chains and jeers and the clawing agony of hunger cramping his stomach as he was forced down into the darkness of the mineshaft over and over and over again.

“Hey,” Toph said gently and nudged a cup of tea closer to his hands, uncharacteristically careful as she made sure not to touch him in the process. He had missed Aang putting it on the table before him, and looked up to thank the other boy, but he was not in his seat. In fact, the whole table was empty apart from him and Toph. He started badly, almost knocking the cup over. He had completely missed them all leaving; the thought was unnerving.

“Drink up, Sparky,” Toph told him. “We’re all about to head into town. You want to come with?”

Zuko just shook his head and took a fortifying sip of the tea. He almost spat it back out; Agni, it was vile - far too strong and cold to boot. He took another sip.

“You want me to stay with you?” Toph sniffed loudly and ostentatiously. “Not sure you should be
on your own.” The young earthbender, as always, danced around the issue with all of her usual tact and decorum. “You don’t look too good.”

Zuko shook his head once more, putting the cup down with a sigh.

“I’m fine.”

Toph’s eyebrow rose in eloquent disbelief, but she mercifully didn’t press the issue. Heavy footsteps clomped around above them, as Sokka, Katara and Aang rushed to get ready for the outing.

“I suppose we’re staying for dinner then?” Zuko sighed into the silence.

“Yeah,” Toph said with a sigh of her own, glaring sightlessly at the table. “Hama said she’d show Katara some waterbending this afternoon—Southern Water Tribe stuff.” She shrugged at Zuko’s inquiring hum. “Apparently it’s different than the stuff they teach in the North. Sokka wasn’t going to argue with that, he said one night wouldn’t hurt the schedule.”

“He probably just wants that dinner she promised,” Zuko scoffed. “Anything for a bit of home cooking.”

“Probably,” Toph shrugged again. She drummed her fingers on the table and her shoulders curled over slightly, making her look a lot smaller, a lot younger. “Can’t blame him for that though.”

“No,” Zuko sighed, staring down at the cup of tea between his palms and breathing in the strong, old-familiar scent of chamomile. “Guess we can’t.”

“It’s just one night,” Toph said quietly and Zuko turned to look at her properly. She was dancing a small rock between the knuckles of her left hand.

He frowned.

“Toph, are you—”

“Come on guys, hurry up or the market will be closed before we even get there!” Sokka’s voice smothered the end of Zuko’s sentence as he came rushing into the kitchen, shouting back over his shoulder as he went.

“I’ve been ready for ages,” Katara shrieked, thundering down the stairs with Aang at her heels. “It was you who insisted on finding the list!”

“Well I found it, so let’s go!”

“Everybody ready?” Hama asked, beaming as Katara gave a quick nod and bent water from the jug on the table into her flask. “A true daughter of the Southern Water Tribe,” she praised and Katara’s smile was wider than Zuko had ever seen it.

Sokka turned to look at Zuko. “You coming?”

Zuko shook his head.

“Oh dear,” Hama replied, slowly pulling a shawl over her shoulders. “I was going to lock up the inn when I left. I don’t like leaving it unattended these days, not with all the strange disappearances about town. You never know who might be about.”

Zuko sighed. “I’ll be fine.”
“I’m not going to lock you in all alone!” Hama replied, turning to fix Zuko with that terrifying, mild smile. “What if there’s a fire?”

Zuko stood abruptly, his chair falling back with a clatter.

“I’ll wait outside,” he said coldly and slipped past the others and through the front door, ignoring Katara’s glare as she stuttered out apologies to Hama for his rudeness.

Hama made a big show of locking the door before they left, her gaze fixed on Zuko the whole time. Zuko tried to tell himself that it was just a petty response to his own, admittedly ill-conceived, impolite behaviour, but he couldn’t quite believe it. There was something off about Hama; he had thought so from the start. She watched him too closely, tracked his movements with her eyes, like a predator waiting for the moment to strike… or like prey sizing up a potential threat.

Zuko let out a heavy sigh. Hama’s story had shaken him, dislodging memories he had hoped long buried and shoving them to the forefront of his mind. Perhaps he was being unfair to the woman; she was a victim of the cruelty of the Fire Nation, of the senseless violence of his grandfather’s ‘foreign policy’ and his family’s obsession with reshaping the world into their own image. So what if she was a bit idiosyncratic, if she didn’t feel comfortable around him? He was the oldest and the tallest of the group, virtually a man now, it wouldn’t be beyond the realm of possibility for her to pick him out as a threat. She’d have no reason to know he was actually the weakest of the lot of them. On top of that, he had refused to remove the hood and show his face; he was still an unknown threat. Wouldn’t Zuko be wary of someone like that, in her place?

He sighed again and paced around for a bit, restless and itching for an outlet but hands still too shaky to attempt to pick up the dao. His mind was a twisting maelstrom of suspicion and guilt. What was Hama: victim or threat, predator or prey? His thoughts kept slipping away from him, slipping back to the camp, to the entrance to the mineshaft. The deep, black pit loomed ahead of him, waiting to engulf him in utter darkness, to cut him entirely from the warmth of the sun and suffocate him in the press of heavy rock and choking air.

The urge to firebend was sudden and all-consuming, rising up from somewhere deep within him and riding on a surge of sheer panic and terror. He had to, needed to prove to himself that he still could—that his bending was still there. Because what if it wasn’t? What if he’d lost it again? His breathing was coming in sharp gasps. He was back down in the pit, the crack of metal against rock sounding around him—

He forced himself from his thoughts and cupped his palms before him, desperately trying to bring a flame into his palms. None came. His breathing was erratic now, coming in helpless, desperate sobs, as his heart beat a racing tattoo in his chest. It won’t work, a vicious voice chimed from the back of his mind, it’s going to fail—**you’re** going to fail—like always. He tried again, taking in a deep shuddering breath as he willed his chi to respond. There! A small flame flickered momentarily in his palms, before it blinked out. Zuko let out a rasping breath, and sunk to his knees in relief. He hadn’t lost it; it was still there. Agni hadn’t abandoned him again.

He sat there for a while, counting his breaths in and out. Eventually he felt calm enough to try again and cupped his palms before him. This time, the flame came as easily as the breath he took in to light it, springing up between his palms, strong and warm and reassuring. Zuko sat staring at it for a long moment, before letting it die down. Perhaps it was his brain playing tricks in the aftermath of his panic attack, but Zuko could have sworn that the flame had come to him with more ease than it had ever done before. He shook himself and pulled himself to his feet.

It was lucky that Hama lived on the edge of town, and that there were no guests creeping round that might have seen that little display of bending. It was only a small flame, not a full on fire whip or
anything, but it was still a risk if anyone had seen. Zuko was trying to keep a low profile and firebending publically usually attracted attention of one form or another.

He still felt shaky, like his head had been scrambled and his thoughts were wandering off down the wrong paths, disjointed and straying. He wanted to talk to Sokka, but he was still out. The others hadn’t come back yet, and Zuko needed to do something to occupy himself before the panic prowling at the back of his mind pounced once again. He decided to try some firebending katas, just to refresh them, he told himself. He didn’t think three years was long enough to forget them completely, despite what that insidious little voice in his head was trying to tell him.

He ran through the katas dry, breathing in the necessary patterns but not actually creating the fire. It was safe enough to do the basic routines in public; plenty of non-benders knew the katas, having been taught at school. There was always the chance that someone would come into their firebending late in life, and it was good sense that all citizens had some kind of defensive training- particularly for a country that had been at war for the better half of a century. Zuko reassured himself that it was safe enough, as he ran through a basic warm up, plenty of people kept the katas as part of their daily routine- if nothing else, they were a good workout.

Taking in a deep breath, he slid his feet into rest position and sucked in a breath. He slid his left foot forward into the first move of a simple fire punch. The first step was to see if he remembered the moves, style could come later. He breathed in sharply and took another step forward, keeping up a commentary in his head as he marked the sequence. “Slide the leg to draw the energy, punch with the right fist, left tight to the side. Force the energy out through the fist. Then swap. Right arm punch, left arm to his side. Again.” He stopped and settled back into a basic stance. That had gone better than expected, he thought to himself. There was a chance he could do this!

As it turned out, he could only remember about half of the basic firebending forms, at least the ones he could recall learning, anyway. He cycled through kicks, whips, arcs, punches, streams and pulses, as well as the basic control and dexterity exercises that he remembered. He wasn’t good, but he wasn’t as bad as he could have been. It was like he could remember the basics, what muscles to clench, the correct positions to hold and the count of the steps. But he couldn’t recall if it was his left arm or his right first, or if he was supposed to start at rest, or on the balls of his feet.

After he had worked up a good sweat and his thighs were screaming from forcing too much horse stance on unused muscles, Zuko finally came to a stop. He tried to fight back the disappointment that rushed through him. He knew it was going to be hard. What had he expected? He hadn’t used his firebending properly in years. Was he just expecting to step back into it as if he’d never been away? Of course he was going to forget things! It wasn’t even as if he’d been that good in the first place. Was he just expecting everything to rush back naturally? A small part of his mind told him that it kind of had with the dao, but Zuko could openly admit that firebending had never been his strong suit.

Still, despite his lacklustre performance, Zuko felt a lot better than he had before. The exercise had burnt away a lot of the adrenaline, but had left him utterly exhausted. He stumbled over to his water flask and collapsed to his knees, chugging back a few mouthfuls of water as his chest heaved with the exertion. He looked around carefully to make sure he was unobserved, before removing the cloak. Still roasting, he shrugged off his shirt and wiped the sweat-soaked material across the back of his neck. The sky was clear and Zuko could already feel the heat on the mid-morning sun on his arms; he’d dehydrate himself if he wasn’t careful.

Zuko could do better, he knew that, he just needed to practise more; if he just worked through the exhaustion, he’d eventually improve- he always did. Resolute, Zuko allowed himself a five minute break, counting down the seconds as he chugged back the rest of his flask. When he reached zero,
Zuko slipped his shirt back on, donned his cloak, hauled himself to his feet and slid back into a basic stance. It was time for the next set of katas; he just had to be careful to pace himself.

A while later, Zuko was not sure how long, Sokka, Aang and Toph arrived back to the inn, laden like pack-horses with bags. Katara and Hama were missing; Zuko suspected that they were lagging behind, carrying the rest of the shopping. Zuko stopped the kata mid-sequence and started stretching out his muscles, with a great deal of relief. He was done for the day; he had definitely not paced himself and was glad for the excuse to stop. Besides, the others were back, and he no longer needed to distract himself with the exercise.

Sokka stopped at the front door, fumbling for something amongst the countless bags. A few seconds later, he had pulled a key from somewhere and unlocked the front door, stumbling through to dump his bags just beyond the threshold. Zuko swallowed down the feeling of hurt that rose up in his chest at that. He’d been kicked outside like an unruly pet, whilst Sokka had been trusted with a key. Zuko watched as Aang dumped his own bags just inside the door and then joined Sokka to help Toph with hers. Sokka then shooed them all out of the hallway and locked the door behind him, tying the key on a string around his neck. He turned round, shielding his eyes against the sun and peered about the yard. Finally spotting Zuko, he ambled over, Toph and Aang at his heels.

“What?” Zuko asked gruffly, his temper surging at the sight of the key around Sokka’s neck. “Were you sent to check I hadn’t looted the place?”

“Oh,” Sokka shook himself and quickly averted his eyes, blood rushing to his cheeks. Aang squirmed awkwardly behind him. “Katara wanted to start training straight away so Hama asked us to bring the shopping back, it wasn’t… I mean…” He cut himself off, rubbing at the back of his neck.

“Are you going to let me in?” Zuko asked tightly. Sokka looked away, blushing horrendously.

“I mean…I would, I totally would…but Hama said she didn’t want anyone around when she’s not in… and Katara would kill me…” He took a deep breath, looking at Zuko pleadingly. “It’s nothing personal man.”

“It is.” Zuko scoffed. “She doesn’t trust me, but it’s fine- not like I trust her either.” He dropped to the floor and started to stretch out his calves. Sokka cleared his throat roughly.

“Aang and I are going to head back into town,” he ventured, voice slightly strained as he stared at a point above Zuko’s head. “There’ve been some strange disappearances going on. Aang thinks it might be spirit activity.”

“Really?” Zuko hummed, pulling himself to his feet and then reaching over to touch his toes. Sokka flushed bright red and stepped in front of Aang.

“Unless…” Sokka coughed. “You don’t…um…need me to stay or anything, do you?” He smiled hopefully.

“No,” Zuko replied bluntly, standing straight and crossing his arms over his chest. “I’ll be just fine here on my own. I’ll stay off the furniture and everything.”

“Toph’s staying too,” Aang supplied, glancing between Sokka and Zuko in utter confusion.

“Oh good- I’ll have supervision!” Zuko growled. “I’m sure Hama will be delighted.”

“It’s not like that, Zuko.”

“Pretty sure that it is, Sokka.”
Sokka let out a huff of exasperation and spun around, storming away.

“There’s no point talking to you when you’re like this,” he threw over his shoulder as he went, dragging an utterly perplexed avatar along behind him.

“Fine!” Zuko shouted back, for the lack of anything better to say in the moment.

“Um…bye guys!” Aang called back to them, as he disappeared round the corner, still being pulled along by Sokka.

A long, horrible silence fell between in the space left by their absence. Zuko’s face felt warm and his chest ached with hurt at being abandoned.

“That went well.”

Zuko sat down against the wall of the inn and ignored Toph’s comment. Admittedly he’d acted like a bit of a child, but he was just so sick and tired of people not trusting him, treating him like a leper or a common criminal when he’d done nothing but follow their rules and do as he’d been told. It was getting old very fast. He’d been having a really shitty day and had been looking forward to hiding up in his room for a bit, maybe catching a bit of time just him and Sokka. But instead, Sokka was heading out again, and leaving Zuko locked out when he had the key to let him inside!

“Alright there, Sparky?” Toph asked him cautiously.

“I’m fine.” Which he was, even if his hands were shaking. He clenched them into tight fists, his fingernails cutting into his palms and took a couple of deep breaths. “I’m fine,” he repeated.

“Uh-huh?” Toph didn’t sound convinced. She looked at him for a long moment, but chose to let it go. Instead, she plonked herself on the floor next to him, carefully staying on his good side. After a few minutes, she inched slightly closer to him. Zuko raised an eyebrow and waited. After another few minutes she inched closer again, this time bumping into his side.

“Are you okay?” he asked her, with a short laugh.

“Of course!” She replied hotly and, with both incredible precision and power, punched him in the arm. He let out a hiss as he rubbed at the sore spot. Toph ignored his grumbles completely, but she didn't move away.

Zuko glared uselessly down at her, perfectly prepared to round off his atrocious day by getting into a fight with the stubborn, unnecessarily violent earthbender, when he noticed how still and quiet and small she looked. His temper went out like a doused torch.

“Toph?” He prompted softly.

“Something’s not right here,” she finally admitted in a small voice that sounded nothing like her own. “This place feels weird.”

Zuko grunted in agreement. Toph turned her face away, speaking into the ground.

“Last night, in the forest?” She took in a deep breath. “I swear I heard screaming.” She picked up a small pebble from the ground and flipped it between her hands. “I wasn't just spooked by those stupid stories, like Katara said.”

Zuko would have snorted at the child-like indignation in her voice, if not for the fact that she looked so serious.
“I swear I’m not making it up,” Toph’s voice dropped to a whisper, the pebble stilling in her hands. “And… Well… I heard it again this morning when we were heading into town, I’m sure I did.” She hugged her arms around her knees. “There are people under that mountain!”

Zuko peered at her out the corner of his good eye. A trickle of ice was working its way down the back of his spine. He knew there was something wrong with this town.

“You want to go check it out?”

Toph turned her face towards him.

“You mean…” she looked incredibly young in that moment. “You believe me?”

Zuko frowned.

“Well… uh… Yeah…” He ran a hand across the back of his neck and searched for the right words. “You can hear way better than any of us. You say you heard people screaming, then I trust you.”

Toph nodded tightly, a small smile twitching at the corner of her mouth.

“It might just be kids messing around or something,” she muttered.

“Maybe,” Zuko shrugged, forcing back the unease that he’d been feeling since they landed the night before. “But you’re right. Something feels weird about this place, and I think we should check it out.” He pulled himself to his feet, and quickly strapped the dao to his back; something told him he might need them. He looked back to Toph and his eyes slipped back to the inn behind her. He turned back around and started searching for where he’d left his water flask. There—it was by that rock.

“There’s something off with Hama too,” Zuko muttered into the folds of his pack as he stuffed his water bottle inside, confident that Toph would hear him. “I don’t know if it’s connected or anything, but I really don’t like the way she’s been looking at me.”

Toph scuffed her feet behind him.

“Okay, Sparky,” she replied quietly. “I trust you. We can check her out as soon as we get back from the mountain.” She snorted grimly. “Assuming they’re not connected…”

“Assuming.”

Zuko had never been that lucky.

A few minutes later and they were ready to go. They set off towards the mountain, the early afternoon sun beating down on their backs.

“Thanks, Zuko,” Toph whispered, as they cleared the edge of the village, and nudged him gently in the arm. Zuko grunted in acknowledgement.

They had been walking for quite a while and were near the base of the mountain when Toph let out a small gasp. She dropped to the floor and pressed a hand against the rock.

“They’re getting louder,” she told Zuko, her head bowed and hair spilling forwards to cover her face. “I was right. There are people down there.”

“Come on,” Zuko told her, and helped her to her feet. They kept walking.
The mountain loomed huge and ominous above them, a hulking beast squatting at the edge of town waiting to gobble up unsuspecting villagers. Its shadow was creeping out from beneath it, growing longer as the sun moved across the sky. Zuko shivered and pressed on.

The entrance to the cave was a roughly hewn hole, big enough for three or four men abreast. It had been a mineshaft at some point; Zuko could see the tell-tale scars on the rock where picks had flown, chipping away at the mountainside. He shivered again, staring into the deep black abyss. He forced himself to take a few deep breaths, pushing down the panic at the back of his mind. He could do this. He’d forced himself down a mineshaft countless times before. There was no need to freeze up now; not when Toph needed him. Not when there were people trapped down there in the darkness. He fought back a surge of nausea at that thought.

He had hated being trapped underground. Day after day in the darkness, the press of rock all around him, the constant threat of a collapse that would bury him forever under rock and dust. There had been a good few times, working under shoddily constructed support beams, where Zuko had pictured himself digging loose the wrong stone and being lost to the falling rock—left crippled and abandoned and starving to death, so removed from the blazing energy of the sun. Every day, stepping into that mine he had been chipping away pieces of himself, like the coal beneath his axe.

“Sparky?” Toph asked, nudging at his side.

Zuko shook himself and called up a bright flame into his palm, focusing on keeping it as steady as possible. He squared his shoulders, and started down the mineshaft. The tunnel was long and twisting, but widened once they were inside. The flickering light in his right hand cast shadows that danced among the rock around them, bouncing off wooden support beams and abandoned, rusting tools. They traipsed along in silence, the beat of their footsteps echoing against the tunnel walls. After a few minutes, Zuko started to make out a faint noise at the edge of his hearing, he swallowed heavily and tried not to think of the implications of that. The noise grew louder as they walked on.

Toph squirmed uncomfortably next to him.

Zuko couldn’t help but feel pathetically grateful that he wasn’t making the trek alone. The fact that he was dragging a child with him for moral support was not lost on Zuko, and he felt like the biggest coward in the world. When he felt Toph’s hand slide into his own, her face a fixed, expressionless mask, he vehemently promised himself that he would never, ever tell another living soul about it.

Soon, the noise grew loud enough that even Zuko could make it out clearly. They rounded the corner and faint glow appeared up ahead, getting steadily brighter as they made their way along the passage. At the end of the tunnel, was a large metal door, locked and bolted, and lit on either side with two large torches.

“Fuck,” Zuko hissed under his breath, and stepped up to the door. He squeezed Toph’s hand and took a deep breath. “Don’t follow me in,” he said seriously. “Just stay there and make sure no one’s coming.”

Toph just shook her head and took a very deep breath.

“It’s alright, Sparky,” Toph all but whispered. “I already know what’s behind that door.” She lifted her right foot and made a rueful stomp, before shaking her head. “We’ll do this together.”

Toph let go of his hand, stamped her feet a couple more times and then brought down the door with a few sharp gestures and the screech of twisted metal.

It was the smell hit him first. It was sickly and putrid, burning his nostrils and clawing at the back of his throat. He gagged and turned his head to his side, burying his nose in the folds of his cloak and
trying not to be sick. Oh Agni, this was bad. This was so bad. The flame in his palm had flickered out and, not trusting himself to maintain it properly, he grabbed one of the torches from by the door and ventured over the threshold.

There were people chained in the depths of the cave. Many were still living, eyes wide and frantic as they cried out in desperate panic. Toph rushed to them, undoing shackles and asking questions. Others, far more, were silent and still, hanging lifelessly from rusted shackles hammered into the roughly hewn walls of the cave. Zuko walked towards them, transfixed. Ragged and emaciated, they were in varying states of decomposition, the remnants of their clothing hanging off yellow skin in shredded, wispy strips.

Behind him, he could hear the villagers’ pouring out their stories to Toph. It was Hama. All of it was Hama. Every full moon, like the monster in a spirit story, she had gone hunting for villagers. She’d kidnapped them, forcing them to walk themselves into the cave with some kind of bending. Of course it was Hama; Zuko should have guessed.

Zuko’s good eye caught a flash of white in the flickering light cast out by the torch in his hand. Despite the screaming at the back of his mind, he found himself walking towards it. Mindlessly, as if he too were being compelled by some otherworldly force, Zuko was drawn further and further into the depths of the cave. There was a whole row of skeletons back here, all simply bones; anything that would have made them identifiable had long since been stripped away by time, or by the teeth of the rats scurrying here and there in the shadows. Bile rose in the back of his throat. Agni this was… This was horrific. Zuko had thought that he’d seen the worst of humanity in the dead of winter and the midst of famine. But this was something else…

He walked along the line of bones, oddly, morbidly compelled by the sheer horror of the sight. He swallowed heavily. Hama had clearly been sizing Zuko up for something. Would he have been another one of her victims, locked in the shadows, slowly starving, with the darkness and the weight of the mountain pressing down above him? Would the others have even noticed? Or cared? He reached the end of the grotesque row of bones and stopped, frozen. There, in the darkest depths of the cave, there was one more skeleton, all alone. This time, the bile rose so quickly that Zuko turned and retched, vomiting on the floor. He almost dropped the torch.

There was a chorus of screams and protests from the front of the cave and Zuko quickly forced himself back in control, turning away from the wall. He couldn’t see that again. Agni, he had thought it was bad. But that skeleton was so small…

“Zuko!” Toph’s voice called him back and he shook himself, trying to slip away from the horror behind him. Toph needed him. They could still help the living.

They saved far more people than Zuko had expected, each more emaciated and less lucid than the last. Hama had been feeding them something, apparently. Or at least, she would keep feeding her captives for so long. After a while she would just…stop. The ones who had been there the longest would be left to die as the prison filled with newer, fresher victims. Zuko supposed that she had been kidnapping a lot of strangers, perhaps the guests at her in who came without friends or family; there was no way she could have taken so many people from the village and not have been noticed. Was there?

It took a long time to set everyone free, Toph snapping the shackles and Zuko helping to catch those whose legs gave out under them, supporting them and walking them up through the dark tunnels and to the entrance at the foot of the mountain. By the time they were done, Toph quietly assuring him that there was no one left breathing down in the cave, the sun had already set and the full moon was climbing high in the sky. The prisoners cried out in alarm, clinging to each other in panic and terror.
Zuko sucked in a deep breath. They had to get the villagers back to safety; that was the first priority. But he didn’t want to leave Toph alone with so many terrified, traumatised people. That was too much to ask of her. Of anyone, really.

Just then, the pounding of heavy footsteps came racing towards them up the path. Zuko drew his dao, but quickly sheathed them when he realised it was Aang and Sokka.

“Zuko!” Sokka yelled as they approached. “Why are you...never mind! We need your help! There are people under-” He froze and trailed off into silence as he eyed the group of villagers behind Zuko. “What...?”

“It’s Hama,” Toph replied, hurrying over to Zuko’s side. “She’s got some kind of crazy bending. She’s been kidnapping the villagers and keeping them locked up in the mountain.”

“How did you-”

“I told you,” Toph hissed. “I told you all that I heard screaming under the mountain.”

“Wait,” Aang cried, tugging at Sokka’s sleeve, face twisted with horrified realisation. “Katara’s with Hama right now! We need to help her!”

Sokka froze, hand on his sword.

“Go,” Zuko urged them. “We’ll get these people back to the village. You help Katara.”

Aang and Sokka rushed off, leaving Zuko the task of transporting a group of weak, vulnerable and terrified people, through more than a mile of forest, back to their village. They started off at a slow pace, each supporting each other as much as possible, but it became evident very quickly that no one had the strength to stumble even a few yards on the rough terrain. Zuko was all set to leave the group and head into town for help when, like the kind spirits in his mother’s bedtime stories, help arrived. A large group of villagers had made the trek up to the mountain, bringing carts and wagons with them. Apparently Aang and Sokka had been talking to one of the town elders when they’d made the connection between the disappearances and the mountain, and enough people had heard them talking to think it worth sending a party up to the mountain to check, just in case. It seemed that Zuko had severely underestimated just quite how desperate the town had become. He let out a sigh of relief.

It took some quick talking (mainly from Toph) to persuade the villagers of what had happened. If it wasn’t that they had so many of the freed prisoners at their backs telling the story of Hama’s strange bending and the eventual rescue, Zuko wasn’t sure that they would have been believed. The story was just that fantastical. Soon enough, and with the kind of practical efficiency common to farmers and labourers of all nations, the prisoners were loaded up onto the carts and rushed back to the village by a significant portion of the group. The remaining ten or so villagers- all of whom, Zuko noted, were armed with swords, spears or pitchforks- stayed behind, intent on finding Hama and bringing her to justice.

“Right,” one man, who appeared to be the leader of the group, stepped forwards and addressed Zuko and Toph. “Where did your friends say the witch was?”

Zuko turned to Toph. She looked shaky but resolute as she cocked her head and pointed off into the forest, somewhere to the east. The man simply nodded, grit his teeth and set off in the direction Toph had pointed, the rest of the group following behind. Zuko and Toph hurried to keep pace at the front of the group. The men were on a mission and covered ground like stampeding komodo-rhinos. They stopped only briefly for Toph to make sure they were going in the right direction, before setting off
once again at their relentless pace. They marched on in silence, Zuko focusing on putting one foot in
the other and pushing back the horrific memories of just what he’d seen down in that cave.

All too soon, Toph froze, cocking her ear once again.

“We have to hurry!” She cried out, breaking into a run. The rest of the group followed her, racing
through the trees, until they came to an abrupt halt at the edge of a clearing.

It was like something out of a story. Hama stood in the centre of the chaos, arms out and fingers
twitching as though she were manipulating marionette strings. Katara was staring at her in terror, the
ground beneath her feet covered in frost. Between them, Aang and Sokka were stumbling towards
each other, faces twisted in horror. Hama twitched her fingers and Sokka’s arm thrust his sword out
in front of him; he was only a few steps away from impaling Aang.

“No!” someone cried out just over Zuko’s shoulder. Sokka took another clumsy step forward, blade
grazing the edge of Aang’s tunic.

Zuko drew his dao, and darted forward, desperately hoping to get there in time to deflect the blade,
but there was no need. He had just taken a few steps when everything stopped. Aang and Sokka fell
apart and backwards, both gasping for breath and shaking. Hama was frozen, arms rigid by her sides
as Katara slowly stepped forwards. Her fingers twisted as Hama’s had, keeping the old woman
bound by her own bending technique. Zuko felt sick. He had never seen anything like this before.

“Quick!” The leader of the villagers ordered, pulling a pair of shackles from his belt and handing
them over to one of his neighbours. “Restrain the witch!”

Zuko rushed to Sokka’s side as the villagers set about locking Hama’s arms tightly behind her back,
preventing her from bending. She let out a low keen and curled in on herself the moment that the
metal touched her wrists. Zuko felt a horrible rush of understanding run through him. He didn’t
know how he would react if someone were to put him in shackles once again.

“You okay?” he whispered to Sokka, crouching down beside him and doing his best to ignore
Hama’s tortured sobs across the clearing.

“I’m fine,” Sokka replied, pulling himself to his feet. “But Katara—”

Zuko stood and followed Sokka’s gaze over to the waterbender. She had slunk back against a tree
the moment that the villagers had got the cuffs on Hama, curling into herself and staring blankly at
her hands. Sokka stumbled over to his sister’s side and rested a gentle hand on her shoulder.

On the other side of the clearing Hama let out a cackling laugh. Zuko spun around to face her. She
was struggling against her captors, trying to get towards him, her eyes bright with madness.

“I thought I could teach you, Katara,” Hama howled. “But I should have known. You’re just like
them!” She smiled wickedly and Zuko froze, a strange sensation creeping over him.

It was like his limbs were being pulled from within, his arms moving in sharp jolts up to his head. He
only registered what Hama was doing, what she was making him do, as he pulled the hood down
from over his head.

“I knew it!” Hama cackled. “A Firebender!” She spat on the floor, as close to Katara’s feet as she
was able. “You’re no daughter of anyone! You’re a traitor!” She cackled again and Zuko’s right
hand flew to the hilt of his right dao.

“She can still bend!” Someone yelled. “Bind her hands!”
The villagers holding her rushed to comply, one ripping off his neckerchief and wrapping it tightly around Hama’s hands. The strange sensation left Zuko and he sagged, gasping for breath. His arms ached like he’d pulled muscles all the way from his fingers to his shoulders. His hands flew to the edges of his hood, but he let them fall; there was no point putting his hood back on now, not when everyone had seen.

“Take her back to the village!” The leader of the villagers commanded.

The two men at Hama’s side grabbed hold of her elbows and starting pushing her out of the clearing. Hama merely cackled once again, the sound sending a chill down Zuko’s spine.

“My work is complete,” she hissed, looking back over her shoulder at Katara. “Congratulations, traitor,” she said icily, “you’re a bloodbender now.”

Katara collapsed into sobs, Aang and Sokka both rushed to her side, supporting her as she wept. Zuko felt sick, his arms were aching and he felt horribly exposed. He could sense the eyes of the villagers fixing on his scar. He knew that they knew what it meant.

For a long moment, the only sounds in the clearing were Katara’s cries and Hama’s cackling laugh as she was dragged from the clearing. Finally, when Hama’s voice had trailed off into the wind, the villagers turned back to the group of children before them.

“So what now?” the leader of the villagers asked, letting out an exhausted sigh.

“What now?” one of the men asked, his voice high with terror. He had been staring at Katara ever since she’d trapped Hama with her bending. “There’s another one of them, Sadao. Another witch! We have to stop her too!”

“No, Kisho” the villagers’ leader, Sadao, replied. “I don’t think she wants to hurt anybody.” He shot a very uncomfortable glance over to Katara. “That right?”

Katara shook her head frantically, covering her face with her hands to hide her sobs.

“She’s with a traitor!” Kisho, the man who was so terrified of Katara, spoke up, his eyes darting over to Zuko with a look of revulsion. “You cannot be thinking of letting them go!”

“Look at what happened with Hama!” another villager cried. “If we let her go, she’ll just come after us!”

“Why?” Someone else chimed up. “She stopped Hama; she’s clearly not on her side! Why would she come after us, she doesn’t have a reason to hurt us?”

“Neither did Hama!” Kisho’s face was bright red with fury.

Aang cleared his throat, stepping forwards.

“In her own mind, I think she did,” he explained seriously. The villagers slowly turned towards him, silently waiting to hear what the child had to say. “Hama was kept prisoner for a long time, I think maybe it did something to her mind.”


“Yes,” Zuko replied, stepping forwards. He eyed the villagers and their weapons, silently urging the young airbender to stay quiet. He doubted Aang fully understood just how quickly the situation could turn ugly.
“I think she wanted to make other suffer, leave them to rot like she’d been left.” Zuko explained, forcing himself to meet Sadao’s eyes. He could understand that anger, the frustration and hurt at being wrongfully imprisoned, at being left to slowly die for the simple crime of existing against the Fire Lord’s wishes. “I think it drove her mad.”

“Hmm,” Sadao stepped back and surveyed the group. His eyes rested on Aang for a long moment and then flickered over to the scar on Zuko’s face. “I think perhaps it might be best for you all to leave now.” He met Zuko’s eyes once again. Zuko nodded quickly and turned back to the others.

“Come on, guys,” Sokka coaxed, pulling Katara to his side as she continued to cry. “Let’s get back to Appa.”

“You can’t just let them go, Sadao!” Kisho cried and rushed forwards with his hand on his sword. “They have a witch-”

“She’s not a witch,” Sokka objected.

“-and a traitor!”

Zuko flinched, and stopped suddenly, hands slowly sliding towards the hilts of his dao. Sadao let out a long breath, eyeing Zuko shrewdly.

“Now you shouldn’t go round throwing out accusations like that, Kisho,” he said sternly, eyes tracking Zuko’s hands as they inched closer and closer to the dao. He held up his own palms in a placating gesture, and let out a loud, tense laugh. “The lad just helped rescue our people. Including my niece and your brother-in-law.”

“But that scar- you can’t ignore-“

“A bad training accident, I’m sure,” Sadao replied firmly. “Happened to my wife’s cousin when we were at Ba Sing Se. Remember?”

Kisho looked desperately amongst the other villagers, but found no support, only stony faces and stern glares.

“And you all agree with this?”

A long moment of silence fell over the group.

“Time for us all to go home,” Sadao said, nodding to Zuko and then jerked head back in the direction of the village. The other villagers took the hint and split off, heading for the darkness of the trees.

“Traitors!” Kisho hissed, and stormed off after them.

At the same time, Zuko and the others had made their way over to the edge of the clearing, Sadao’s eyes boring holes in their backs. As they reached the tree line, Zuko turned back to face Sadao.

The other man quirked an eyebrow at him.

“Just…” Zuko began haltingly, not quite sure where the compulsion came from. “Just make it quick?”

Sadao stared him down, his arms crossed.

“She didn’t.”
Zuko swallowed heavily and nodded. He understood the need for revenge, but he couldn’t escape the fact that Hama had once been a victim, a prisoner too. He had a responsibility, as the heir of the man who had ordered her to be tortured into insanity in a hell-hole, to try and spare her any further torment. He stood quietly, staring at Sadao for a long moment, trying to remember how it had felt to be a prince of the realm, to give orders and expect them to be followed. The other man finally heaved a sigh and ran a hand through his hair.

“That scar…” he muttered, his eyes flicking up to Zuko’s face.

“Training accident,” Zuko replied stonily.

Sadao looked away, swallowing anxiously.

“Alright…” he sighed. “I’ll do what I can, but it’s not just up to me what happens now. The whole village gets a say.”

Zuko nodded in understanding. He’d done what he could, the rest, as always, would be up to the people. He turned back around to follow the group out of the woods, only to find them all clustered a couple of feet behind him. The others just looked exhausted, but Aang was staring at him, transfixed with horror.

“What did you mean, make it quick?” he asked hesitantly, with wide, bright eyes. “They’re not going to kill her, are they?”

Zuko crossed his arms and said nothing.

“But she was a victim too!” Aang went to hurry forwards, but Toph flung out an arm to stop him.

“Leave it,” she told him softly. “You don’t know what she did in that mountain.”

“But-” Aang yelped, but fell off into horrified silence as Katara shook her head.

“She’s too dangerous Aang, she won’t stop, ever.” Tears were still trickling down her cheeks, but Katara’s eyes were fierce.

“Katara, no!” Aang’s gaze flickered between the girls, looking at them as if they were total strangers. “They can’t do this. It isn’t right. Tell them, Zuko!”

Zuko winced and Sokka let out a low groan.

Sadao gasped and Zuko spun around to face the villager once again. The man was white-faced staring at Zuko’s face in growing horror and dawning realisation.

Sokka was the first to react.

“Come on,” he yelled, beckoning them to join the others at the tree line. “We need to leave. Now.”

Zuko rushed towards, his heart racing in his chest. He reached out to grab Aang, pulling the younger boy alongside him when he refused to move from his spot.

“Wait!” Sadao called behind them.

Zuko exchanged a glance with Sokka and they slowly turned round, hands reaching simultaneously for their swords. Sadao stood shifting from foot to foot in the clearing, hands flittering anxiously by his sides. Zuko slowly moved to pull his sword from his sheath, when Sadao threw himself to his knees before them.
“On behalf of my village,” Sadao stuttered, as if struggling to remember the right words, “I thank you for the lives that you have saved.” He bowed to each of them in turn and then looked to Zuko. His hands formed the shape of the flame and he bowed low, forehead touching the floor. “May Agni’s light bless and guide you,” he intoned.

Zuko stood frozen for a long moment, completely taken aback. He sucked in a deep breath and gave a shallow bow in return.

“And you,” he replied formally, completing the ritual.

Sadao stayed on his knees for a long moment, before hauling himself to his feet.

“I’ll do what I can for Hama,” he promised quietly, his eyes flickering over to Aang. He strode over to the treeline and gave one last bow to Zuko. “Your Highness,” he said softly, before disappearing into the darkness of the forest.

The group stood silent, staring at the point that he had slipped back through the trees.

“Huh,” Sokka finally muttered. “Was not expecting that.”

Zuko looked around at the others; Katara was still crying into her brother’s jacket, Toph was trying very hard to hide how shaky her hands were, and Aang was still wide-eyed with horror and disbelief.

“Come on,” Zuko told them all with a sigh. “Let’s get back to Appa.”

It was definitely time to call it a night.

They left the island as soon as they got back to the bison, all silent and subdued as they took to the air. Katara wouldn’t leave her brother’s side at the reins and Toph had curled up next to Zuko in the saddle, refusing to talk to him but also refusing to move away. Aang sat away from everyone else, softly stroking Momo and avoiding eye contact with the lot of them. Eventually, after what must have been hours, Sokka coaxed Katara into sleep. She lay down next to Toph and both girls soon fell asleep, huddled under a heap of blankets. Aang had been dozing himself, but jolted awake wide-eyed and alert, not long after the girls had passed out.

“Hey,” Zuko whispered to him, conscious of the sleeping figures at his feet. “You okay, there?”

But Aang simply turned his back to Zuko and brought his knees up to his chest, staring up at the stars. Zuko heaved out a sigh and picked his way around Toph and Katara to sit at Sokka’s side.

“Hey,” Sokka greeted, giving him a soft smile. “One hell of a night.”

Zuko grunted and stared ahead. There was a soft glow on the horizon; it would be morning soon.

“What do you think is going to happen to Hama?” Sokka asked gently.

“I don’t know,” Zuko sighed, trying to ignore the feeling of Aang’s judgmental glare on his back. “Their version of justice, I suppose.”

“Will she get a trial?”

“Probably?” Zuko shrugged. “A fair one? Who knows?” He stared down at his hands. “Once they realise she’s a waterbender, I’m not sure even Sadao will be able to sway them.”

Sokka winced.
“Do you trust him?” His eyes flickered over to Zuko. “I mean, do you think he’s going to turn us in after all?”

Zuko sighed. “I don’t know.” He felt like he was saying that a lot tonight. “That bow he did, at the end?” Sokka nodded in recognition. “It’s…um… it’s a pretty formal thing to do. It’s a way of thanking someone for a great service, to acknowledge a debt of gratitude.” Zuko rubbed at his upper arms.

“So it would be pretty dishonourable for him to turn us in then?”

“Basically.” Zuko huffed out a bitter laugh. “But when was the last time that honour meant anything in this war?”

Sokka was silent for a long moment.

“He did call you ‘Your Highness’.”

“Yes,” Zuko said softly. “He did.”

They watched the sun rise over the horizon in companionable silence, until Sokka let out a jaw-cracking yawn.

“Here,” Zuko said with a smirk, forcefully pulling the reins from Sokka’s hands. “I’ll navigate, you get some sleep.”

“What about you?” Sokka objected through yet another yawn.

“I’m fine,” Zuko said; he was too wired to sleep anyway.

“Okay,” Sokka conceded and grabbed a blanket from his pack, cuddling up on Zuko’s right, his head lolling against Zuko’s shoulder.

“Hey Zuko?” Sokka asked sleepily.

“Hmm?”

“I’m sorry I got mad at you about Hama.” Sokka’s eyes were closed, but his mouth was set in a tight frown, his forehead creased. “Thought she was safe…family…you know?”

“It’s okay,” Zuko told him and leant forward, daring to press a soft kiss against Sokka’s forehead. “Just sleep.”

Sokka let out a soft sigh and snuggled into Zuko as the sun rose higher and higher over the horizon.

Later that day, Sokka woke up with a choking gasp, half strangled by the key around his neck. Hama’s key. He threw it overboard in disgust leading out a load groan as he realised they’d left all of their purchased supplies locked up back in Hama’s inn. Wary of making any further stops, Sokka had simply pushed on to the Black Cliffs. Appa, seeming to understand the urgency of the situation, had made the whole journey in a full day and a half, without making any stops to rest or refuel.

It was lucky they’d made such good time, as Zuko wasn’t entirely convinced he could stand the tension in the group in such close proximity for much longer. Toph was trying too hard to pretend that what they’d found under the mountain hadn’t bothered her at all, but instead just kept snapping at everyone. Aang was clearly having nightmares, but refused to talk to anyone about them. In fact, he was refusing to talk to Zuko at all. Katara, meanwhile, was trying her best to carry on as normal,
plastering a bright smile over her face; her eyes told a different story. Zuko could barely sleep himself and was trying very hard not to think about how few supplied they would have to live on until they joined up with the rest of the invasion force.

When they’d finally landed at the Black Cliffs and set up camp, Katara had disappeared off, leaving Sokka to try and come up with something for dinner from the last remnants of their meagre rations. Zuko would never admit it aloud, but he felt a sudden sense of relief when Katara left the camp. He couldn’t help but think about the terrifying helplessness he’d felt when Hama had taken over his body, or the fact that Katara could now unleash the same power, if she so chose. So Zuko had allowed his shoulders to fall in relief and ignored the way that Katara had wandered off into the trees. Instead he had lit the campfire for Sokka and tried to help puzzle through how to make jook.

Zuko frowned and tried to clean his tongue with his teeth, grimacing at the sea far down below him. He had eaten, stolen a few hours of turbulent sleep and woken up to greet the dawn at the cliff’s edge, and he still couldn’t get the taste of last night’s dinner out of his mouth. Suffice to say, it had been an utter disaster. They’d left the pan too close to the flames and burnt half the food. Also, as Sokka was trying to conserve supplies, they hadn’t bothered to add any spices or flavourings, electing to eat the whole lot plain. Zuko had eaten it, of course, even after volunteering to take his portion from the bottom of the pot; he had had a lot worse at the camp, and they were hardly in a position to waste food.

Zuko sighed and looked out to the horizon. On a morning like this, he could almost forget his fear of the imminent arrival of Hakoda and the Water Tribe. So long as they brought food, Zuko thought he would be prepared to forgive a whole lot of what they might do to him. He ran his tongue over his teeth once more and took a swig of water, staring out at the dusky blue sea of dawn.

“Hey,” Katara said quietly, startling him dramatically from his thoughts. She was standing a couple of feet away, on his good side, but he had no idea what kind of a threat she had become, and he hadn’t heard her approach.

“Um, hi,” Zuko greeted, and turned his gaze back to the dim, orange glow on the horizon. He had no need to fear Katara, he reminded himself. He tried to focus on his breathing, to feel the power of the rising sun.

Katara shuffled forwards with cautious steps and then sat down by his side. Zuko sucked in a deep breath, but she simply brought her knees up to her chest and clutched them tightly against her.

“Couldn’t sleep?” she asked, softly.

Zuko almost snorted. Nightmares of rotten corpses reaching towards him, their long, yellowed nails scratching at him in the inky darkness of the mineshaft, had been plaguing him ever since they left Hama’s village. No, he hadn’t been sleeping well for a while, but that wasn’t why he was up at dawn.

Katara shuffled forwards with cautious steps and then sat down by his side. Zuko sucked in a deep breath, but she simply brought her knees up to her chest and clutched them tightly against her.

“No,” Zuko shook his head. “I always wake with the dawn.”

Katara looked over at him in confusion.

“It’s a firebender thing,” he explained. The first strong rays of sunlight bathed his face, and Zuko leant into them. “Our power comes from the sun. I can’t really sleep during the daylight.”

“Oh,” Katara exclaimed softly. “Like waterbenders with the moon…” she trailed off and shuddered.
Zuko sucked in a deep breath, reminding himself sternly that he was okay, that Katara had never tried to hurt him.

“Hama said we were most powerful at the full moon,” Katara said quietly, voice carefully void of emotion. “That’s why she was able to…”

“Oh,” Zuko whispered, his whole body frozen. He didn’t think that he’d ever be able to forget the feeling of his limbs moving outside of his control, or the way Aang and Sokka had tripped towards one another, like marionettes on strings, their faces twisted in horror and revulsion.

Katara let out a short, soft sob.

“I hate her!” She suddenly exclaimed, hands swiping at the tears trickling down her cheeks. Her eyes were blazing with anger.

“I think you’re allowed to…” Zuko said quietly, after a long moment. He turned to face her properly for the first time. He had known, deep down, that Katara wasn’t going to turn into a tyrant, wielding her new power over them without guilt, but he hadn’t really believed it until this moment.

“How could she do something like that?” Katara all but hissed. “She’s Water Tribe; she’s supposed to be one of the good guys. She was a victim, a hero!” She broke off into another sob. “So how could she become so, so…”

“Evil?” Zuko asked. Katara just sobbed louder, nodding her head.

“She was locked away for a long time,” Zuko said quietly. “Deprived of her element. Her friends and family murdered.” He shrugged. “I think she just wanted to hurt people like she’d been hurt.”

“But that’s not right!” Katara exclaimed, looking at him with wide eyes.

“No, it’s not,” Zuko agreed. He looked back out to sea, his eyes tracking the movement of a soft wisp of cloud. “But…I think I could understand why she’d want to.”

After a long moment, Katara replied in a whisper so low that Zuko’s good ear only just caught it.

“Me too.”

She sniffed loudly and rubbed at her eyes.

“I don’t want to become like her.”

Zuko knew that feeling all too well. An image of his father standing over him in the Agni Kai arena flashed through his mind.

“You won’t.”

She looked at him with wide eyes, vulnerable in a way that he had never seen her before. Agni, but he was once again struck with just how young they all were.

“You have friends, and you have your family,” Zuko told her firmly. “They’d never let you.”

“I’m terrified to waterbend,” Katara admitted suddenly. It was as if all her secrets, all her fears, had been stopped up tightly in a bottle and now, that she’d released one, the rest had no choice but to burst out too.

“Oh,” Zuko turned and looked at her again. Her skin looked sallow and drawn, bags deep and dark
under her red, teary eyes.

“Waterbending is supposed to be a good thing!” She sniffed angrily, still swiping the tears from her cheeks. “It’s a gift. It heals. It protects.” She sniffed once again. “It’s not mean to be evil. It’s not meant to hurt people. It’s not like—” She cut herself off suddenly.

“Firebending?” Zuko asked, with a grim smile. He reached up, his fingertips softly tracing the edges of his scar. Katara gulped, looking stricken. “It’s alright,” Zuko said. “Fire is a dangerous element and it’s all too easy to use as a weapon.” He sighed. “But it can be beautiful too.”

He looked down at his hands and slowly coaxed a small flame into his palms, twisting the flame into the shape of a small dragon. He’d been practising in the dark hours before dawn and his fine control was improving, but he couldn’t hold it for too long. After a minute or so, he let the flames dissipate. Katara was staring at his hands, eyes wide.

“How can you stand it?” she asked quietly. “After what happened…”

Zuko just shrugged, tipping his head back and shielding his eyes, as he watched the sun climb higher in the sky.

“It’s my element,” he said, smiling sadly as Agni’s rays caressed his scarred cheek. “It’s part of me. If I don’t learn to control it, I can’t be in control of myself.”

“But doesn’t that scare you?”

She was looking at him as if she’d never seen him before.

“Sometimes,” Zuko admitted. “But that’s why I keep practising.”

“Oh,” Katara said gently, pulling her knees up to her chest once again. A soft wind blew over them, making the beads in her hair click together. Slowly, she pulled a soft stream of water from her flask and made it dance in little globes between her fingers.

Zuko turned his gaze back to the sky and slowly slipped into his own morning meditation.

Eventually the others started to stir and Katara stood up to go and make breakfast. As she walked away, she paused, and turned back to Zuko.

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

He nodded back silently, and closed his eyes, basking in the rays of the sun, a small smile dancing at the edges of his lips.

After that, something fundamental had shifted between him and Katara. Instead of shooting him looks of thinly veiled contempt, she had started to smile at him when he joined the group for their very sparse meals. She had even offered to mend a rip in his tunic, which sent Sokka into an apoplexy, considering he had been forced by one too many sexist remarks into doing his own sewing.

Two days of the sudden shift in attitude had Sokka awake at dawn and pulling Zuko aside to ask, only semi-jokingly, if he needed to be worried about competition from his sister. Zuko’s laughter nearly woke the others. Sokka shut him up with a kiss that turned into several kisses and only ended when a half-awake Aang sneezed and accidentally sent a screaming Momo five feet into the air on a sudden gust of wind. It would have been hilarious if not for the fact that Momo landed, terrified and scrabbling, on Sokka’s head.
The new dynamic between him and Katara was nice, if not for the fact that it seemed to come at the expense of whatever rapport he had built up with Aang. The two of them hadn’t spoken at all since Hama’s capture, and Aang was doing his level best to avoid Zuko at every turn. Zuko had tied to talk to the young avatar a couple of times in the early hours of the morning, when they had both been startled awake by whatever dark images had been plaguing their dreams, but Aang had merely rolled over and put his back to Zuko. After a few days at the Black Cliffs, Aang was red-eyed and pale, falling asleep in the middle of the day, or whenever exhaustion happened to overwhelm him.

Zuko let out a deep sigh, and ran a hand through his hair, staring out to sea from his position on top of the cliff. He had no idea what to do. It was the day of the invasion and he had barely slept. He had spent the night before tossing and turning, his brain fretting over all the possible eventualities: what if Hakoda doesn’t believe them; what if it’s too late to stop the invasion; what if the Water Tribe simply cut him down on sight the minute they see him within two feet of the Avatar—or Sokka, for that matter? He had finally accepted that he wouldn’t be getting any sleep at all that night and had got up to run through some katas. It was there, in the dead of night, that Aang had found him and decided to have a debate on moral philosophy and the value of all life. It hadn’t gone well.

Aang had begun by admitting that he hadn’t been coping well with what had happened to Hama, which Zuko had graciously tried to pretend had come as a shock to him. He’d then asked whether or not Zuko truly thought Hama deserved to die, which was a difficult question in and of itself. Zuko had no idea what the right course of action should have been and, as he had tried to explain to Aang, he didn’t really think it was his decision to make. Yes, he could see that Hama had been a victim and that she’d been abused by the Fire Nation in a way that Zuko suspected he could understand more intimately than most, but Zuko could also see that she was a threat to the people of the village. He couldn’t banish the image of that tiny skeleton lost down the mineshaft from his brain, whenever he closed his eyes to sleep. Hama was capable of so much damage and clearly had had no intentions of changing. Zuko had said that he could understand the desire to eliminate a threat, but ultimately the decision rested in the hands of the villagers she had harmed.

Aang had not taken well to that, suggesting that they should have stuck around and given Hama a fair trial. Zuko had objected that there would have been no way of enforcing the trial’s outcome once they left and that Hama had been caught red handed. Even if, as Zuko had carefully pointed out to the affronted young Avatar, the village could have been persuaded to spare Hama’s life, the only other alternative would have been to lock her back away in the kind of prison she’d once escaped from. In Zuko’s mind, a quick death was probably more merciful than a return to captivity.

After a long moment, Aang had slowly and very, very carefully asked Zuko what he thought would ultimately happen when they confronted the Fire Lord. That had pulled Zuko up short. He had honestly never thought that they would get that far, not that he would ever have said that out loud. Aang had taken his silence as an answer and had left seconds after, disappearing into the darkness with the speed granted by his airbending. Zuko had retreated to the cliff edge and tried to find calmness in meditation.

It hadn’t worked. He’d been sat there for in the hours since the fight, muscles cramping in the cold night air, trying to centre himself amongst the turmoil of his thoughts. His brain kept tripping over hidden pits and tumbling down into the dark depths of countless different anxieties. When he wasn’t replaying that conversation with Aang over and over in his head, his mind turned to darker thoughts. Instead, he would picture Hakoda back in that tent and feel the press of a knife, cool and deadly, against his throat. Or he would see the chief on the deck of the Fire Nation ship, his face distorted with rage as Zuko defied his orders and jumped overboard. Then, whenever Zuko managed to reassure himself that he had Sokka and the others (hopefully including Aang) on his side now, his thoughts would descend even further into darkness. They would then turn back to prison in the mountain or to the depths of the dark, dusty mine shaft, or to the feeling of flames licking at his heels.
as he choked and desperately crawled for freedom, or (worst of all) to the feeling of cold stone under his knees, his desperate sobs ringing in his ears and the heat of the flame getting closer and closer and-

“Hey,” Katara’s voice cut through his thoughts. Zuko jumped, his heart racing.

“You okay?”

“Fine,” he answered tersely.

“I…” she trailed off, awkwardly, fiddling with the flask at her side. “Before everyone arrives… I wanted to ask if you…"

Zuko waited quietly as she gathered the courage to speak.

“Would you like me to take a look at your scar?”

Whatever Zuko had been expecting to hear, that wasn’t it. He hadn’t thought that Katara would be able to heal such an old injury, or that she would even want to try. But still, if there were any chance that she could help, it was worth a try. Also, it would be a good distraction from his rapidly spiralling thoughts. Numbly, he nodded his head and watched as she drew water from her flasks and started circling it between her hands. The light blue glow was mesmerising.

“You don’t have much vision in this eye, do you?” Katara asked as she lifted her hands to it. Zuko tried his best not to flinch back and nodded hesitantly.

“Uh…” He cleared his throat. “And my ear,” he said roughly. “I can’t hear much from there, either.”

Katara hummed softly, circling the water around the scar tissue. It was warm and pleasantly tingling; his skin pricking as damaged nerve endings responded to the chi in the water.

Minutes ticked by and Zuko started to grow concerned; he couldn’t feel anything happening. Was that how it was supposed to work? Katara’s face grew grimmer and grimmer and her brow tightened in concentration. Her breathing was heavy and laboured. Beads of sweat were forming at her temples by the time that she sat back with a deep sigh of exhaustion. Zuko’s heart sank; he should have expected this.

She turned to look at him, eyes wide and bright. “Zuko, I-”

“It’s alright,” he cut her off, voice quiet.

“I’m sorry,” she said weakly. “There’s just too much damage.” She bent the water back into her flask, with a look of defeat.

“It doesn’t matter,” Zuko lied. “It’s not really that bad. “

“Maybe if I had some more of the spirit water…” She looked as if she were about to cry. Zuko wondered how often her bending had failed her, if she was this upset after one set back. Or perhaps she had just wanted to remind herself of the good that her bending could do, after seeing so much of the bad.

“Katara,” Zuko said quietly, waiting until she met his eyes before continuing, “thank you for trying.”

They sat in silence for a while longer, neither quite sure what to say to the other. Zuko scuffed his feet in the dirt, staring at the mist drifting in on the wind and trying to ignore the churning feeling in
his stomach. Suddenly, Katara jumped to her feet, staring intently at the horizon.

“Do you see that?” she asked, as Zuko peered blearily into the distance. “It’s them!”

She let out a delighted peel of laughter and started rushing back towards the others, shouting to Sokka that their dad was there.

Zuko sat still, staring out at the horizon as the deep blue sails of the Water Tribe fleet slipped out of the mist, heading for the island. He watched as the mist finally dissipated before heading down to the shore with the others, feeling like he had swallowed a whole sack of stones.

Everything happened rather quickly after that. Zuko hung at the back of the group as Katara and Sokka rushed down to the shore line, bright grins on their faces as the fleet grew closer and closer. Zuko’s eyes were fixed on the bow of the lead ship where he knew Hakoda would be standing, watching the shoreline. He swallowed heavily, trying not to feel sick. Sokka had reassured him over and over again that he didn’t have anything to worry about, that Hakoda wouldn’t hurt him, but Zuko couldn’t quite make himself believe it.

Toph and Aang set about bending piers of stone for the ships to dock at. Sokka bounced impatiently on the balls of his feet, beaming happily as Hakoda led the men in weighing anchor. As soon as the ship was secure, the chief vaulted over the side of the ship and pulled his son and his daughter into his arms.

Zuko slipped away from their reunion and stood a good twenty yards away, watching as more and more boats came in. Every ship spewed out a bizarre mix of stone-faced water tribesmen and bizarrely dressed men and women, all of whom seemed to know Sokka, Katara, Aang or Toph in some way or another. The invasion force assembled: a rag-tag mix of inventors, warriors, benders and, swamp people. He turned back to Katara, Sokka and Hakoda, not wanting to lose track of the chief in all the chaos. They were stood in a huddle, talking animatedly with an old man who was handing Aang a new glider, flipping it open and closed and pulling at random levers. They were soon joined by Toph and an Earth Kingdom boy around Zuko’s age, or older, who was sporting a truly terrible moustache. Sokka laughed loudly and turned round, scanning the beach until his eyes landed on Zuko. He smiled widely and waved, beckoning Zuko over.

Bolstering his courage, Zuko took a deep breath and made his way over to the group. Hakoda eyed him shrewdly as he approached, mouth set in a thin line. Zuko stopped by Sokka’s side, out of arm’s reach. Hakoda looked him over, noting the dao strapped across his back with a grimace of displeasure. Zuko took another deep breath, squaring his shoulders. Sokka gave him an encouraging pat on the shoulder.

“So,” Hakoda said sternly, crossing his arms over his chest, “Sokka tells me that you want us to call all of this-” he waved a hand out to indicate the whole beach “-off?” Zuko flinched, eyes keeping a close eye on the movement of Hakoda’s hand.

“Dad,” Sokka groaned, running a hand over his forehead, “that’s not what I said.”

Katara and the others slowly peeled away, leaving Zuko and Sokka alone before Hakoda’s stern glare. Zuko took in another deep breath, taking courage from Sokka’s presence at his side.

“You have to call off the invasion,” Zuko said quietly, but firmly. “The Fire Nation knows that you’re coming. You’ll be walking into a trap.”

Hakoda raised his eyebrows and stared down at Zuko.
“So we should call off the biggest invasion force the Fire Nation has faced in years, on the day when their forces are weakest, on the say-so of the Fire Lord’s son, a boy who disobeyed my orders and ran off with my children?”

Zuko took another deep breath, forcing himself to focus on the fact that once again he was being dismissed out of hand, untrusted and scorned. He coaxed that anger up and used it to push through his fear as he forced himself to meet Hakoda’s eyes.

“Yes,” Zuko replied, “that’s exactly what you should do.”

“Prince Zuko is correct,” a voice called out from the deck of Hakoda’s ship, startling Zuko. High above them and leaning over the rail, clearly eavesdropping, were two older men. Both were balding, with what little hair they had on their heads so speckled with grey it was impossible to tell the original colour. They wore nondescript brown clothing and had long, curved blades at their hips.

“As we already told you, Chief Hakoda,” the second man said, leaning further forward over the rail. “The Fire Nation will have been preparing for this for years. Our informants have told us that the palace is all but abandoned, the army are on full alert and the nobles have all either left the Caldera or gone into hiding.”

Hakoda glanced over his shoulder and nodded at the two men.

“As you said,” Hakoda agreed.

“You already knew?” Sokka asked in confusion. Hakoda nodded again. “Then why did you bring everyone here? You’re not still planning on going ahead with the plan are you?”

“No, son,” Hakoda replied. “These men are allies of ours. They joined us two days ago to share their intelligence. By that point, it was too late to change course, so we decided to reconvene here and discuss next steps.”

Zuko let out a sigh of relief. The invasion wasn’t going to go ahead! Who knew how many lives might have been lost if they’d stumbled head first into whatever his father had waiting for them beyond the Great Gates of Azulon?

“As per our agreement,” the first man said, “we need to speak to the prince now, alone.”

Zuko swore his heart stopped beating. Was the chief really going to hand him over to some more of his ‘allies’? The last time that had happened, Zuko had ended up black and blue.

Hakoda grimaced.

“Go on then—” he began to say, waving a hand in their direction and ignoring Zuko’s flinch, but stopped short as a cry of alarm sounded up the beach.

“Aang!” It was Katara, rushing down the beach, staring up at the sky, half of the Water Tribe following close behind her.

Zuko’s stomach plummeted as he looked up over the sea and caught sight of what had everyone else frozen.

There, silhouetted against the clouds and shrinking rapidly as it headed straight towards the Fire Nation capital, was a pale blue glider. The Avatar was going ahead with the invasion.
Well, that was a bit intense.
For anyone looking for the claustrophobia detail: Zuko recalls working in the mine and worrying about rock falls burying him alive. Also, as per canon, there is a trip down into the mountain where people have been locked up in the darkness. Please be careful if any of this is sensitive for you.

As for the rest of the chapter, Hama was never going to be an easy arc for anyone... But poor Zuko.
In case anyone is wondering, or it wasn't all that clear, Hama is spying on the kids when they're telling ghost stories and sees Zuko coax the fire up for Toph, or at least she thinks she sees. She isn't certain, but it's enough for her to despise Zuko from the off. Zuko, poor mite, knows all too well what it feels like when people have a problem with him and responds in kind, plus I think Hama is definitely creepy enough to trigger the 'wicked witch!' response in anyone...or maybe I just read too much Brothers Grimm as a child.

So Katara and Zuko get their bonding moment- this was kind of the last link in the chain for me in getting the group together. In this, I wanted their bonding to be not about their mothers, but about them. Katara doesn't need to know that Zuko's lost a lot in the war, she knows the story of Zuko's banishment, but she needs to get past the knee-jerk response that all firebenders are evil and bad. Similarly, Zuko needs to get the idea that not all people with the capacity to hurt him will.

Sokka and Zuko have their first row...and then they make up. Zuko hasn't really lost the temper he has in canon, he's just learnt to handle it differently, repressing it, rather than letting it explode. Neither obviously is all that healthy.

Toph and Zuko's journey to the centre of the mountain and what they find there is basically the way I thought the cartoon would have played things, if it wasn't for kids. There is no way that Hama had kidnapped people for that long and that none of them had died. So sorry it was so dark, but that's kind of the theme of this fic...

Other than that, Hakoda's back! And two suspiciously well-informed gentlemen with an interest in Zuko have shown up. I wonder who they might be *strokes chin in contemplation*. If only that pesky Avatar hadn't gone and flown off...

Next chapter is going to kick things up a notch for our poor heroes and their long-suffering bison and may or may not feature a truly terrible title pun, depending on how late at night I end up posting!

Please comment/ leave kudos if you've enjoyed and thank you for reading!
I am Ozaimandias, King of Kings

Chapter Notes

Hi folks, sorry this took so long to get out!
Life has been a bit hectic the past few months, but the good news is I have a new job
which is *so* much better for my mental health, and things are looking a lot better than
they have in a long while.

Just to confirm, this story is *not* abandoned, nor will it be, and I promise to try and
keep the wait between chapters shorter next time.
Thank you so much to everyone who has stuck with me so far, I hope you enjoy...

TWs for: panic attacks and PTSD, and referenced abuse. Think that's it, but please let
me know if I've missed anything.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The beach was in chaos. Voices rose and fell as men hollered and bellowed to one another. Sand
danced through the air, kicked up by warriors hurrying to pick up weapons or to rush to the shoreline
for one last glimpse of the Avatar’s retreating figure. The clamour rose steadily and Zuko felt a
familiar fear rise in his chest at the sight of countless grim faces. Someone behind him swore loudly
and vehemently. Zuko flinched, his heart pounding. The noise grew louder and Zuko’s bad ear
began to whine like a scorpion bee. His breath was coming in quick gasps. Agni but what had Aang
done?

“Stop!” Sokka yelled, and it cut through the air like a whip crack, bringing the whole force to a
sudden halt. Zuko let out a shaky breath of relief at the blessed silence. “We just need to stop for lone
second and think,” Sokka said as calmly as he could. The men glanced between themselves and then
came to stand at attention in front of the chief and his heir.

Hakoda nodded approvingly at his son, and then stepped to his side. Zuko shrank back against
Sokka.

“The Avatar has pre-empted us all and launched the attack alone,” the chief stated bluntly.

“He’ll be walking straight into a trap,” one of the white-robed men warned from behind Zuko’s
shoulder. Zuko startled badly; he had almost forgotten that the two men were there.

“And if we go after him, so will we!” A voice rose up from amongst the earthbenders and those
around him grumbled in agreement, exchanging ominous looks.

“We can’t just abandon him!” Katara shrieked, from where she was stuck at the back of the crowd,
and the whole beach descended into another chaotic cacophony of arguing voices.

“Silence!” Hakoda bellowed.

Zuko flinched back, not even the comfort and reassurance of Sokka at his side was going to keep
him within five feet of Hakoda when he sounded like that. He bumped into one of the men in white
and flinched again, hissing out a stuttered apology.
“We are not going to abandon the Avatar,” Hakoda continued. He turned to his son and they shared a look of silent communication.

“The plan was always for Aang to go ahead into the palace,” Sokka told them all, his mouth pinched tightly in displeasure. “In theory…” He winced. “In theory, we could still go ahead with the plan—”

There was another roar of complaint from the troops. Zuko flinched once again. Sokka leant over to his dad and started muttering something quietly. Hakoda nodded, looking contemplative. The man at Zuko’s right shoulder seemed to take this as a signal and leant forwards to whisper into Zuko’s good ear.

“Prince Zuko, we really need to speak with you. My name is Akash and this is Wen. We represent the white—”

“—We will have to split our forces.”

Hakoda’s voice rang out, silencing the assembly and culling the opportunity for any further conversation. The man at Zuko’s shoulder, Akash, let out a hissed curse and fell silent. Hakoda continued speaking as if nothing had happened.

“A small group will go ahead and try to find the Avatar before he falls into enemy hands. The rest of the force will launch an attack on the city, providing a distraction that will let the rescue mission slip behind enemy lines.”

The assembled force shifted uncomfortably, and a few of the earthbenders looked as if they wanted to contest the plan, but one look at the hard and resolute faces of the Water Tribe culled any rebellion that might have been brewing. Hakoda’s men were all intensely loyal, experienced warriors; if the chief ordered them to walk through fire, they probably would.

Sokka let out a wry chuckle. “Looks like we’re going ahead with the invasion after all, guys.”

“With one distinct difference,” Hakoda contested gently, turning to meet his son’s eyes. “The point of this attack will be diversionary and not offensive.” He met Sokka’s relieved smile with a soft one of his own, before turning back to the assembled force. “Bluff and bluster only, men.”

“Think we can manage that,” drawled one of the plant-bedecked waterbenders as he cracked his knuckles.

The troops seemed to relax slightly at that, a chuckle even rippling through the crowd.

“Alright,” Hakoda ordered with a slight grin. “Fall out and start preparing.”

He turned his back on the group and ran a hand over his eyes as they started to break off again, picking up packs and weapons and gathering themselves into small groups. Hakoda’s grin had dropped from his face as quickly as it had arrived; he looked exhausted, his eyes tight and betraying an uncertainty that that he had not shown to his men.

“Right,” he said after a long moment. “How are we going to do this?”

Sokka frowned, stroking his chin where the first few hairs of a beard (which Zuko had been mercilessly teasing him about only the week before) were starting to come through. Katara and Toph rushed over to join them.

“Aang’s gone to the palace,” Katara told them quickly. “He told us before he took off.”
Zuko scoffed under his breath; well didn’t that just make everything alright? Aang had told someone where he was going before he rushed off straight into the tigerdillo’s lair. Hakoda, however, caught the noise and spun to pin Zuko with a look like ice.

“Something you want to say?”

Zuko’s breath hitched for a moment, and he could almost swear he was back with Yung and Hakoda, trapped in that tent, skin still black with the soot from that horrific fire. He was getting sick and tired of being interrogated by the Chief.

“No, sir.” Zuko shook his head, and pushed back into Sokka. Hakoda took a long breath and looked up to the skies, as if begging the spirits for patience.

“Right,” Sokka cut in. His eyes darted between his father and Zuko. “So we’ll take Appa and go after Aang.” He gestured between himself, Zuko, Katara and Toph. “We’ll land on the western slope of the volcano and make our way to the palace from there. The smaller the group the less obvious we’ll be.”

Hakoda spun to face Sokka, his face like thunder. “You are not walking straight into a trap, Sokka.” Zuko took another few steps back, almost bumping into Toph. She punched him hard on the shoulder for his near miss. Sokka sighed and Hakoda’s eyes narrowed to mere slits. “You’ll be staying right here with me, where I know you’re safe.”

“Dad.” Sokka looked up at his father with grim resignation. “We don’t have a choice.” He held up his fingers and started listing off points, his voice as dead and monotone as Zuko had ever heard it. “One: air is the quickest way to infiltrate the capital and we both know it. Two: only we know how to fly Appa, and now is not the time to start handing out flying lessons. And three… look…he’s our friend, dad; we can’t sit this one out when he’s in danger.”

“Then I’ll come with you-”

“Dad.” Sokka interrupted; his voice was steady and his eyes made him look as old as the wizened warriors who were watching their chief and his heir from the side lines. “We’re wasting time. You need to be with our men; you’re the only one who can lead the invasion force and you know it. Give us the distraction we need.” He stepped forward and rested his hand on Hakoda’s shoulder. “I can do this.”

Hakoda took in a deep breath and nodded tightly. “I don’t like this, Sokka.”

“I know.” Sokka turned back to face the other three teenagers. “Five minutes to grab what we need then meet at Appa-”

“Chief Hakoda,” Akash chimed up from where he had stood, forgotten, behind Zuko. Hakoda looked up and grunted in acknowledgement. “You promised us the Prince,” the man continued. Zuko’s stomach plummeted.

Hakoda scowled, staring intently at the man for a long moment.

“Fine,” Hakoda agreed, deliberately avoiding his son’s eyes. “You can take him.”

“No way!” Toph, Katara and Sokka all cried out in unison.

“Zuko’s coming with us,” Katara added, as Sokka planted a hand on Zuko’s shoulder.

“It’s safer,” Hakoda insisted. “For you and for him-”
But Sokka outright refused to listen.

“No, dad,” he shook his head, sharply. “He’s our friend; he’s coming with us.”

Hakoda’s eyebrows shot through the roof at the word ‘friend’, eyes lingering a little too long on the hand still on Zuko’s shoulder.

“Besides,” Toph chimed up, her nose planted as high in the air as her diminutive figure allowed, looking the picture of the heiress of the house of Beifong, “Zuko knows the palace. We’ll be much quicker if we have him with us.”

Hakoda scowled, but his eyes flickered in indecision as he took in both his children and the immediately protesting man in white.

“Just in case anyone had forgotten about that strategic advantage,” Toph added into the silence, shrugging nonchalantly.

Hakoda swept a hand over his face and let out a long, controlled breath.

“I’m afraid your interview will have to wait,” Hakoda said, and Akash’s face slowly drained of what little colour it had left and then slowly began to flush brilliant, irate red.

“Chief, you gave us your word-”

Hakoda winced. “Just until after the avatar has been rescued.”

“Do you have any idea how important-“

“More important than the well-being of the avatar?” Hakoda bit out and Akash flinched back as if he’d been slapped. His eyes darted back to Zuko and looked him up and down in what seemed like longing.”

“We need to discuss this;” he said with a curt bow in Zuko’s direction and then spun on his heel and stormed off, completely ignoring Hakoda. His companion, silently observing up until that point, let out a long, slow breath and, after giving a quick nod to Hakoda and a bow of his own to Zuko, followed his companion off down the beach.

“Fantastic,” Sokka said far too brightly. “We’ll pack up and get on our way.”

Hakoda looked at Sokka for one long moment, as if drinking in every bit of him, before pulling him into a tight embrace. Zuko turned away as Hakoda hugged first his son and then his daughter, mumbling into each embrace how proud he was of their bravery and how much he loved them. Zuko sidled closer to Toph and gave her a quick squeeze on the shoulder, which she gracefully allowed. Although she would never say, he knew that she missed her parents. Finally, Hakoda let his children go and instead walked over to speak to Bato and a rotund man dressed solely in plant leaves and a make-shift loin cloth.

“Right,” Sokka said urgently, tearing his eyes away from his father’s retreating back, “we need to move quickly.” His eyes were hard, if a little red and watery. “Katara fill up as many water flasks as we have- this is going to get hot. Toph- we’ll need you to keep an ear out for Aang the minute we hit the ground. Zuko- start plotting a route from the western slope through to the palace.”

Zuko stopped dead in his tracks, his head swimming for a minute. Oh Agni. It hadn’t hit him until that moment, but going with the others would mean following Aang right into the belly of the beast. He didn’t know if he could go back into the heart of the Fire Nation, to what had once been his
home. What if his father was there after all? Or Azula? Or- fuck- or just anyone with a decent pair of eyes who might manage to get a glimpse of his face? Zuko closed his eyes and sucked in a long, shaking breath.

If he did this, if he went chasing after Aang, he would be throwing himself on the tender mercy of the Fire Nation once again and praying that Agni looked favourably upon him. But if he didn’t... Sokka and the others couldn’t do this without him, he realised suddenly, not even if he told them where to start. The Fire Nation palace was built like a maze. Rather ironically, it had been designed that way precisely to deter potential invaders. It would take them a while to find Aang and get out undetected; time that they might not have. Could he really let them do this on their own? Especially when his only alternatives were either begging Hakoda to be part of the invasion force or going along with two strangers who wanted him for Agni only knew what purpose. He couldn’t turn around and say no.

“Zuko?” Sokka’s voice broke through his thoughts, startling Zuko. He brought his gaze up from the patch of sand he had been staring down at. “You okay?” Sokka’s eyes were tight with concern.

Zuko just stared blankly back at him. “No,” he answered with a bitter scoff. One shaking hand reached up to run through his hair.

“Zuko,” Sokka said gently but firmly. “I’m sorry, I’m really, really sorry to do this to you, but we don’t have any time.” He reached out and put a warm hand on Zuko’s arm, letting out a deep sigh as Zuko flinched at the contact. “I’m so sorry,” his eyes were wide and slightly frantic, but his voice was eerily calm. “But Aang is in danger and we need your help. I need you with us.” He looked Zuko dead in the eyes. “Are you with us?”

Zuko took a few deep breaths, staring at Sokka’s face and trying to focus on the shining blue of his eyes and nothing else. Some childish part of him was wailing at him that it was unfair, that he’d finally found freedom, found friends, found people who seemed to like and respect him for who he was, rather than either tolerate or disdain him for a title he had once held and a legacy he reviled. Why did he have to do this? Wasn’t it enough that he’d tried to warn Hakoda and his men? Why did the world constantly demand more of him?

“Zuko.” Katara stepped forwards and grabbed his shoulder, gently turning him to face her. Her eyes were bright and full of unshed tears. “It’s Aang.” She sucked in a deep, shuddering breath. “Please”

Zuko closed his eyes for a few seconds, trying to breathe through the panic drawing an iron vice around his lungs. There was only one choice that he could make; there had only ever been one choice. Katara was right. It wasn’t about saving the Avatar and winning the war or whatever Hakoda and the rest of his scrambled together invasion force thought. It was about Aang. About the kid who liked to dance and ride around on an air scooter, who wouldn’t so much as swat a bumble fly, who kept running away because he was shit-scared of all the responsibility the whole world kept chucking at him and expecting him to just be able to handle. Aang was more than just the Avatar; he was Zuko’s friend, and he needed help.

When it came down to it, Zuko knew what he had to do. How could he be worthy of calling them his friends if he abandoned them now? He couldn’t leave when they needed him, when he was the only spiritsforsaken being in the whole damn world that could get Aang out of that palace before the proverbial volcano erupted. He hadn’t been a child in a very long time, but what kind of man could he be if he left the young Avatar in the hands of the Fire Nation? He knew all too well the kind of mercy that his father showed to children.

“Fuck,” Zuko sighed and shoved the heels of his palms deep into his forehead. “Of course I’m with you.”
Katara threw her arms around him and swept him into a hug so tight that Zuko found himself checking for broken ribs the minute that she let him go.

“Thank you, Zuko,” she told him softly, a smile flickering briefly across her face. Then the reality of the situation seemed to fall on her once again and her eyes tightened.

Sokka clapped his hands together sharply and started hurrying them over to Appa, where they set about gathering and loading supplies. “Right, we need to move, we’ve wasted too much time here-”

“Prince Zuko,” the man in white, Akash, was running over, his colleague at his heels. “Please,” he begged as he came to a halt, “you can’t go with them. You need to come with us.”

Sokka and Zuko stopped packing and turned around. Sokka put a protective hand on Zuko’s shoulder.

“Oh yeah, and who are you?”

“We’re with the white lotus.” Akash held his hand out and showed them a flash of a pai sho tile, before slipping it away with a truly impressive bit of slight-of-hand. “I believe you’ve seen one of these before?”

Sokka nodded slowly, but didn’t take his hand off Zuko. Zuko’s eyes widened in recognition of the name, his mind darted back to the cryptic message that Aang had brought back from the spirit world all those weeks ago.

Akash smiled and went to speak again.

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” Zuko said quickly, cutting him off before anyone started getting any ideas. He didn’t care what some random spiritual ancestor of the Avatar had said; he didn’t trust these two strangers, and he wasn’t abandoning his friends to run off with them to Agni-only-knows-where. Sokka’s arm tightened on his shoulder with growing urgency; his eyes kept darting back to Appa where Toph and Katara were making quick work of loading the saddle.

“But, please. You unc-”

“I can’t,” Zuko cut the man off once more, before he had a chance to get going. “I need to go with my friends.”

Before the man could argue any further, Hakoda came hurrying over and stopped right in front of Sokka, unthinkingly interrupting the conversation. Akash threw his arms up in frustration and stormed away up the beach, once again tailed by his colleague.

“We’re setting off in ten minutes. You’ll need to get airborne as soon as possible.” Hakoda’s voice was stern and commanding, but his eyes were soft.

He turned to Zuko and fixed him with an indecipherable look. Clearly he had accepted that Zuko was along for the ride and was not going to push the matter, no matter how much he wanted to. Zuko straightened his spine and met the chief’s eyes for a long moment.

“We’ll reconvene at the black cliffs by nightfall,” Hakoda broke the gaze, turning to Sokka as if nothing had happened. “Take this with you,” he passed Sokka a small circular device. “It’s from the mechanist; it will help you keep track of the eclipse.” He held out his hand; Sokka grasped it and let his dad pull him into a hug.

“Thanks, dad.” Sokka pulled away from the hug and jumped into Appa’s saddle. Zuko hurried to
join him. “Black Cliffs. We’ll see you there tonight.” Sokka waved and smiled brightly down at his
dad until they had ascended out of view. As they climbed higher in the air, the smile slipped off
Sokka’s face and his shoulders slumped.

“What was Aang thinking?” Sokka asked, rubbing a hand over his face. Katara turned from where
she sat at Appa’s head to give him a sympathetic look. No one replied; they all knew the answer.

Katara held the reins with expert ease. It wasn’t exactly a difficult route; the Fire Nation Capital was
hardly difficult to spot, particularly with an aerial view. They flew as quickly as they dared, eating up
the miles as they grew nearer and nearer to the main island. Katara tried to keep behind the clouds
where possible, but ended up having to duck and dive behind the many mountains that scattered the
landscape around the city to avoid the notice of the many watchtowers encircling the caldera. The
constant swooping was doing nothing for the churning feeling in Zuko’s stomach and he plonked
himself at the back of the saddle, joining Toph in nauseous misery.

He thought he’d reached the level of panic where his brain sort of just… disengaged, the point where
his entire world narrowed into the breaths that he dragged into and forced out of his lungs and the
adrenaline coursing through his body. He thought it was impossible for him to be any more scared
and then it came into view: the Fire Nation Palace.

Zuko swore that his heart had stopped for a good few seconds, before some part of his subconscious
kicked it and set it beating all over again. Then suddenly the strangest feeling of nostalgia came over
him at the familiar red tower and golden parapets; this was the place that he’d grown up in. It had
never been a place of safety for him, but in its gardens he had fed turtleducks with his mother and
shared tea with his Uncle, in its training grounds, he had learnt how to wield his dao, and deep in its
abandoned passages, the ones that he didn’t think even Lu Ten had ever known about, Zuko had
found fleeting moments of calm and solitude. Perhaps that was why the strangest sense of calm came
over him when he stared at the building that had also played host to some of his darkest moments and
housed the man that had caused most of them. Or perhaps it was that Zuko knew that it was currently
empty and abandoned.

The four of them were oddly silent as Katara coaxed Appa to land on the western slope of the
mountain, far out of sight of anyone who might be looking. The minute they were on solid ground,
Toph frowned and gave a few experimental stamps of her foot. Then she crouched and planted both
her hands into the dry grass.

“There’s something under the earth here,” she told them all quietly. “Tunnels and metal. A lot.”

“The bunker,” Zuko confirmed, his voice tight. “It’s where my fath-... where the Fire Lord will
have holed up.”

“You think Aang might’ve found it too?” Sokka asked.

“Twinkletoes?” Toph scoffed, standing up and brushing her hands briskly to shake off the dust and
soil. “Not a chance. Only one in a million earthbenders would be able to sense that.” She pointed to
the ground at her feet.

“Yes, Toph,” Sokka deadpanned. “We’re incredibly lucky to have you on our side. How can we
mere mortals ever compare to your glory?”

She punched him in the ribs.

“Let’s get to the palace,” Katara said, glaring up the slope ahead of them. “We don’t have much
time.”
Zuko clenched his fists and took a deep breath as the others turned to look at him.

“Right,” he said, and squared his shoulders. “Let’s go.”

They hiked their way to the top of the mountain in a few short minutes. A quick scramble down the other side took them within reach of the roof of a nearby building. The leap wasn’t much more than three feet and even Toph made it with little difficulty. On the roof, they quickly dropped to their stomachs, crawled to the edge, and peeked over. There were still a lot of people out in the streets, oblivious to the attack heading swiftly for them. Zuko scowled; of course the common folk wouldn’t have a convenient bunker to hide out in. Perhaps it was simple hubris, perhaps the upper echelons thought that the city was so well-defended that there was no need for standard shelters in case of invasion, but Zuko highly doubted that. Knowing the ‘upper echelons’ as well as he did, Zuko strongly suspected that no one with the power to do anything for the common folk outside the palace walls had even cared enough to consider them.

“Come on, dad,” Sokka hissed under his breath, attention focused on the street below. “Start with the boom and crash already!”

They lay there for a few tense minutes, before the first claxon sounded. Sokka’s eyes lit up. Within seconds the alarm had gone up across the city. Citizens were hurrying to clear the streets as a steady stream of armoured military personnel rushed down towards the harbour, accompanied by the cacophony of the Fire Nation Capital’s early warning system.

“Let’s move,” Katara said.

Toph stood and curled her toes, shifting her weight onto her left foot as she stomped with her right. A large pillar of stone rose up from the street. The four of them rushed to stand on it and then, with a slow downward pushing motion from Toph, the block sank back into the earth and brought them all down to street level.

Zuko quickly took the lead after that. He hadn’t spent much time out on the streets of the city as a child, but they’d landed close enough to the market that he could guess at the route to the palace entrance. The palace itself was, after all, rather hard to miss. Thankfully buildings weren’t as much of an obstacle as they were as a child, and Sokka and the others followed him without complaint over rooftops and through alleyway as they worked their way through the city. There were a few close moments where Zuko barely managed to throw an arm out and flatten himself and whoever was closest to him back against a wall to avoid a passing group of soldiers. When they finally reached the palace wall, the streets were eerily deserted. It was as if everyone had long-since fled the area, like animals abandoning the lower ground ahead of the tsunami. He wondered which army was supposed to be the wave.

“This is…odd,” Sokka said slowly, as they cautiously made their way down the long pathway to the palace proper. The distant sound of explosions echoed from far off by the harbour, a presage for the violence hiding just around the corner. Zuko’s skin was crawling. The empty rock around them had never felt more ominous and imposing, even with Toph at his side. It felt like he was being watched from all angles, stripped to the bone, measured and found wanting by some unseen force. He supposed that was the architect’s original intention: to warn away any intruders. Gritting his teeth, Zuko increased his pace, desperate to get out of the open and to somewhere less exposed. He kept his eyes set on the palace doors and focused on the count of his breaths and the echo of his footsteps on the cold, impartial stones to drown out the pounding of his heart.

There were no guards on the door, not so much as a passing servant to ask what they thought they were playing at; the palace was just as deserted. For Zuko, stepping through the threshold was like being punched in the gut. He knew these corridors like he knew himself; every wall-hanging and
gilded ornament, every gleaming tile and towering pillar had been crashed into, scuffed up, slipped on or fallen against by Zuko over the years. There was even a small, slightly charred crack in one of the flagstones just outside the throne room from the one time that he and Azula had tried playing “catch the airbender” within the walls of the palace.

A small smile twisted at the edge of his mouth, as he felt himself drawn deeper into the palace- he had to check that it was still there. For some Agni-blessed reason (probably that Azula had been involved), neither the Fire Lord nor his industrious staff had ever noticed the damage; or, if they had, they had never put two and two together and found the young royal children. It was one of Zuko’s best memories: him and Azula playing together (for once without Mai or Ty Lee getting in the way), the gut-wrenching terror as the stone cracked under Azula’s misfired fire-punch giving way to uncontrollable giggling as they ran off in slightly-hysterical relief, the knowledge that no one had seen them and no one would punish them.

“Zuko,” Sokka hissed, and Zuko’s attention snapped sharply back into the present. “Where are you going?”

Shaking his head, Zuko tried to clear the gossamer memories that were still clinging in the corners of his mind.

“Nowhere,” he grunted, and turned to face Sokka. “What’s the plan?”

“I can’t sense him yet,” Toph grumbled. She stamped her foot, her head titled to the side in concentration. “No,” she confirmed, “it’s no use. We’ll have to do this the old-fashioned way for now. This place must be enormous.”

“You have no idea,” Zuko snorted. The three of them frowned, and Zuko realised belatedly that that might not be the most useful thing to say, considering they were stuck in the heart of the Fire Nation, on a time limit, with no clue whatsoever of where Aang might be.

Sokka rolled his eyes and they set off down corridor after twisting corridor. Zuko was just about to suggest they split up to cover more ground when Toph suddenly spoke up.

“Did you guys hear that?” Her hear was cocked to the side, and she was listening intently.

Zuko shook his head- he hadn’t, but that meant precious little.

“What is it?” Katara asked.

“It…it sounded like Aang,” Toph said, scrunching her forehead in concentration. “Wait- there it is again!” She turned and pointed down a hallway that led towards the throne room. “This way!”

She set off at a sprint, Zuko and the others rushing on her heels. The palace was a labyrinth, but Toph’s hearing was impeccable and she led them right to the entrance to the throne room without a hitch.

Aang knelt in the centre of the room, gazing up at the empty throne in dismay.

“Aang!” Sokka shouted and all but shoved Zuko out the way as he stumbled over to the young
“Actually,” Toph said, crossing her arms and giving a sniff of imperious disdain, “I found you. These three would have been running around until the next eclipse on their own.”

Zuko walked over and ruffled her hair. She punched him in the ribs.

“What were you thinking?” Katara asked, crouching next to Aang and pulling him, unresisting, into a hug. “We had a plan!”

“No we didn’t!” Aang said, his voice muffled from where his face was pressed against her shoulder. “Your dad was going to call the whole thing off and I couldn’t.”

“For a reason, Aang!” Sokka grumbled, throwing his hands up into the air. “You can’t just keep running off like this! My dad’s back at the harbour launching an invasion that we know is going to fail, just to buy us some time to get to you.”

“That’s not fair!” Aang blurted suddenly, pulling back from Katara and swiping a hand over his eyes as he turned to glare at Sokka. “I didn’t ask you to follow me!”

“Yeah, ‘cause we were just going to let you run off after the Fire Lord on your own, Twinktoes,” Toph snorted.

“Well that was the original plan, wasn’t it?” Aang cried, his cheeks flushed red with emotion. “You were all just expecting me to come here and…and…” He trailed off as his hitching breaths strayed closer and closer to sobs.

Zuko winced; he knew what this was about. “If he had been here,” he asked quietly, “what would you have done?”

“I…I don’t know,” Aang admitted, dropping his head, though his voice and breathing were back under control. “I just thought maybe that if I could still find him on the eclipse that I wouldn’t have… I wouldn’t have to.”

Sokka’s eyes softened slightly, but his mouth was still fixed in a disapproving line.

“Well congratulations,” he said, crossing his arms. “You’ve found exactly what we knew you’d find— the Fire Lord’s hiding out in his secret volcano bunker and the whole palace is empty.”

“Of course I’m scared of him, Aang,” he growled. “He’s down in that bunker right now, expecting an attack. He’s counting on it. You go anywhere near him and he is going to kill you.”

Aang bristled, but Katara cut him off. “Aang, please. This isn’t the only way you can stop the Fire Lord; we’ll figure it out, I promise.” She reached out a hand and Aang took it, frowning. “But the longer we stay here, the more danger we’re putting all our friends in.” Aang deflated at Katara’s last sentence and bowed his head in understanding.
“How much time do we have, Sokka?” Zuko asked, as Katara helped Aang to his feet.

Sokka pulled out the device his dad had given to him and peered at it in the dim, half-light of the throne room.

“Fifteen minutes to the eclipse,” he said. “We need to move.”

Aang sucked in a deep breath through his nose and then let it out in a gust that ruffled his still-shaggy hair.

“Right,” he said, ruthlessly squashing down the emotions of the last few minutes. “Let’s go.”

Zuko led them back to the palace doors with little effort; the palace, it seemed, was truly empty. Beyond the doors, however, they were met with an unpleasant surprise.

“Fuck,” Zuko swore as he slammed the heavy door shut as quickly as he’d opened it. “Fuck,” he swore again, for good measure.

The previously deserted path to the palace was now dotted with groups of soldiers, all either gathering themselves into strict (and quickly growing) columns or slowly wheeling catapults out into the city streets. The Fire Nation was launching a counter offence.

“We need another way out,” Sokka said, looking at Zuko.

He nodded tightly and rolled his eyes to the vaulting ceiling as he ran through a handful of possible options. He scrunched his eyes as tightly as he could, feeling the scar tissue pull tight around his bad eye. They’d have to take the access tunnels out to the palace walls. The ones that would take them out near the lake would probably be the clearest (no one had ever enjoyed the damp), but it would also bring them dangerously close to the door to the bunker, which would undoubtedly be well guarded itself. He huffed out an incredulous laugh and tried to ride the rush of adrenaline coursing through him. He snapped his eyes open with a snarl. “Fucking. Fine.”

Zuko turned and started leading the way back into the palace, the others following him in silence, perturbed by what they had just seen beyond the doors. Just outside of the throne room, Zuko stopped and pushed at a seemingly nondescript section of wall. It gave way silently on meticulously greased hinges. The servants’ passage behind it was poorly lit and very narrow, but Zuko quickly brought up a light in his palm and started down the corridor with familiar ease.

Sokka, forced to walk behind him by the cramped conditions, leant forwards and whispered into his ear with obvious glee.

“You had secret passages?”

“They’re servants’ passages, Sokka,” Zuko corrected, counting doors as they passed them. “I promise they’re not that exciting. But at least we shouldn’t run into anyone.”

When they reached the thirty-first door, Zuko cautiously inched it open and checked that the passage was clear. He told the others to stay put, pushing the door open and heading out into the corridor. A few feet to the left and ahead stood a heavy wooden door. He tried the handle, but it was locked.

For a moment, he contemplated asking Toph to just rip the lock out entirely, but he strongly suspected that would make a lot more noise than he was comfortable with, considering they were now only a few passages away from the door to the bunker.
He turned his back to the door and looked around the immediate area. There was a tall statue of Zuko’s great-great-great grandfather a bit further down the corridor and Zuko’s eyes lit up. That would be it.

He slunk along to the statue, crouched at the base and reached around the back, feeling for the tell-tale bits of metal he knew would still be there. His fingers caught something sharp and he let out a deep breath of relief. He hauled himself to his feet and made his back to the door, lock picks now firmly in his grasp.

“Thanks Lu Ten,” he whispered, as he set to work on the lock.

“What are you doing?” Sokka hissed, pushing through the hidden door to join Zuko out in the open corridor. “Why are we-” He stopped and took stock of what Zuko was doing. “Are those lock picks?”

Zuko just smirked as he found the first pin in the lock and tapped it slowly out of place.

Sokka blinked once, startled. “You know,” he said conversationally, leaning against the wall and watching intently as Zuko worked on the lock. “Sometimes I forget you were in prison.” Zuko scoffed, but kept his focus on keeping the tension steady with the strip of metal in his left hand. “I wonder how many other tricks you picked up there…”

The lock gave with a click, and Zuko hauled himself to his feet, smirking again at the look on Sokka’s face.

“I didn’t learn that in prison,” he replied with a grin. Ignoring the look on Sokka’s face, Zuko leant forwards to push open the heavy wooden door and quickly checked that the room beyond was empty.

He slid the picks into his pocket as he gestured for the others to follow him. He felt slightly guilty at the theft, but he knew that there weren’t exactly getting any use where they’d been. Lu Ten had stashed countless such sets all throughout the palace, close to the best routes out to the city proper. Grandfather Azulon had had the guards confiscate every set they could find, but Lu Ten just kept planting more. He’d confessed that secret and taught Zuko how to pick locks, mouth set in fury, the first time that he’d found Zuko locked up in the storage cupboard in his quarters, his eye blackened and voice hoarse from hours of crying. He’d taught Zuko that there was always a way out, if you were motivated enough to find it.

In hindsight, Zuko suspected his cousin had been seeing someone…inappropriate… out in the main city, the kind of someone that might have made his Uncle Iroh finally give into his father’s demands to ‘properly discipline that boy’. Zuko wondered just what would have happened to his cousin it had ever got out just who had been behind the plague of lock picks and why. In the end, it hadn’t mattered; Lu Ten had gone off on campaign and had never come back.

Zuko shook himself back into the present and focused on the last stretch of the journey. They’d just broken into the access tunnel that would take them beneath the large expanse of rock that surrounded the Fire Nation palace, all the way up to palace wall. From there, Toph could break them a hole in the outer wall and Katara could get them over, or through, the lake. Once out of the caldera, they would only need to find Appa, and then they would be free and clear. Zuko took a deep breath; there were a lot of things that could still go wrong with that plan and- knowing his luck- they probably would. Even so, he took a deep breath, pulled the wooden door shut behind them and led their small group deeper into the sconce-lit tunnel, trying desperately not to think about what he found at the end of the last tunnel he’d found himself walking down.
They walked along in silence, barely breathing as they rushed down the corridor as quickly as they dared without making too much noise. If they were caught here, they were utterly trapped.

After a few minutes, they turned a corner and came face to face with a solitary figure in the middle of the corridor, not ten yards away from them. Dressed in a long, dark green robe and topped with a sharply pointed hat that tilted forwards to shadow his face, the man stood eerily motionless, frozen in surprise as much as they were. Behind him, Katara let out a horrible gasp of recognition. Zuko’s stomach dropped: whoever this was, they were bad news.

“Dai Li!” Sokka hissed in horror.

The man’s head lifted and the hint of a smile graced the corner of his lips. That was all the warning that they got.

Exploding into action, the man ran forwards, punching his arms out as he ran. Stone rose up from the floor at his command, rushing towards them in two jagged streams. Toph threw up a block and there was an almighty crash as stone met stone, sending dust and chips of rock flying into the air.

Katara and Aang pulled water from their flasks and sent it racing towards their attacker in two perfectly synchronised and symmetrical arcs. Their attacker ducked between both, dodging as the streams froze into ice before him. His face was utterly emotionless as he stomped and then spun in a tight circle, snapping his leg out at the last minute to send a storm of rock projectiles flying at them. Toph and Aang sent block after block and Katara whip after whip at him. After a minute of constant barrage, there was a small break in the assault. Zuko and Sokka, swords drawn, raced forwards. The man had one arm pinned to the wall with ice and another with rock. He took one look at Zuko and Sokka and ripped his arms from the wall, one still solidly encased in ice. He jumped and crashed his feet against the floor harshly, making the ground beneath them all shake,

Zuko and Sokka stumbled into each other; rock came crumbling down from the ceiling and then large pieces of stone were falling, forming a barrier between Zuko, Sokka and the earthbender, and Aang and the others. Toph strained to stop the flow of rock from above. Suddenly, the rapport of heavy-booted feet clattered towards them as whatever guard had been posted nearby came rushing to all the noise.

“Run!” Sokka yelled at Katara over the cacophony around them and Toph let go. With a sudden rush, the rocks she had been holding back dropped to the floor and sealed off the corridor entirely.

Within moments, the rock had settled and the tunnel fell suddenly, eerily quiet. Zuko took in a deep, ragged breath and ended up doubled over and coughing thickly, dust-filled air clogged his lungs. When he finally dragged himself upright, he found himself at the business end of half a dozen spear points.

Sokka, next to him, had his hands above his head in surrender. His sword and boomerang had been thrown to the ground and sealed off the corridor entirely.

“What happened?” a new soldier rounded the corner, shrugging on a lieutenant’s armour and buckling his belt as though he had only just dragged himself out of bed.

“You too,” said the earthbender coldly, “drop the swords.”

Zuko complied, letting his dao drop to the floor at his feet with an ominous clang. The spear tips prodded at him until he finally got the message and raised his hands above his head in turn.

“What happened?” a new soldier rounded the corner, shrugging on a lieutenant’s armour and buckling his belt as though he had only just dragged himself out of bed.

“An infiltration attempt, I think,” said the earthbender, eyeing Zuko and Sokka as if they were insects
beneath his boot. “I isolated the non-benders. There are two girls and a boy on the other side, all benders. Send a man to alert the Princess.”

Zuko’s stomach dropped; he didn’t want Azula anywhere near this mess. It seemed that the lieutenant shared his feeling; the man’s face turned the colour of tallow wax.

“The Princess? Surely we don’t need to bother her with this?” He stuttered, and his men shuffled in obvious discomfort. “Perhaps General Bujing?”

Zuko flinched; he didn’t want that man anywhere near him, either.

“Get the Princess.” The earthbender turned to face the lieutenant and looked him solidly in the eye. “The boy bent both water and rock,” he said simply and watched, calmly, as realisation dawned on the officer’s face.

“Chan,” the lieutenant ordered sharply, and an acne-scarred young man snapped to attention. “Alert the Princess.”

Chan swallowed, looking as if he were being sent to his execution, and rushed off to fulfil his orders.

The earthbender nodded and with a few, sharp moments had opened a hole in the rubble, stepped through, and then closed it again, chasing after Aang, Katara and Toph.

One of the other men, towards the back of the group raised a hesitant, shaking hand.

“Yes, Private?” the lieutenant snapped, clearly unnerved by the unexpected turn of events.

Whist the attention of most of the soldiers had left the ostensibly harmless, unarmed, non-bender prisoners, the private was staring wide-eyed at Zuko.

“Sir,” he began, stopped, licked his lips and then continued, “Sir, that’s…”

“Spit it out, soldier.”

“Sir, look at his face.”

The lieutenant turned and stared at Sokka and Zuko for a long moment before something like dawning horror began to creep into his eyes. He grabbed Zuko’s hair, using it to hold him steady as he yanked the bottom of Zuko’s shirt up to rub at his face. Zuko squirmed in the tight grip as the rough fabric scraped sharply against the delicate skin of his bad cheek. His heart was pounding so quickly he feared it would give up the ghost and stop at any moment. After a couple of moments, the lieutenant stepped back and let go of Zuko as if he were a prickle snake, ready to bite. Now wiped clean of dust and dirt, it was clear that the lieutenant recognised Zuko’s face.

“It’s you,” he said in almost wonder, before his expression tightened. He grabbed Zuko’s shoulder and grasped aimlessly at his belt for absent shackles. He whistled to his remaining men and they hurried over to hold Zuko and Sokka between them, two men for each of them: one at each shoulder, twisting their arms up behind their backs.

They were marched down corridor after corridor, snaking back towards the palace. Zuko tried to look around to figure out where they were being taken, but the guard on his right seemed to take malicious pleasure in forcing his head down over and over again. He tried summoning fire into his left palm, but felt a knife press against his back, just above his kidney, before he had even managed to make more than sparks.
They reached a heavy looking metal door and the lieutenant knocked against it sharply. A panel in the door slid back to show a pair of bored, amber eyes.

“What is it, Osamu?”

“I need entry to the bunker.”

The soldier behind the door scoffed. “You and half the army. They’ll have you for desertion if they find you in here when you shouldn’t be,” he said archly. “I’d worry more about the brass in here than the savages out there.”

The lieutenant snarled at the suggestion of desertion and grabbed hold of a handful of Zuko’s hair, yanking his head back so that the guard behind the door got a clear view of his face.

There was a clang and a muffled curse from behind the door, as the man dropped something in surprise.

“Is that?”

“Yes,” the lieutenant snarled. “Now are you going to let me in, Kaji, or do we have to wait until the next fucking eclipse?”

There was a scrambling behind the door and then a clang as the door sprang open. They were in the tunnels, Zuko knew, that would lead them to his father’s bunker. He’d been down here before on a few occasions, when the city had fallen into riot. They’d never been down there for long though; rebellion of any kind was swiftly put down in the Fire Nation.

The soldiers marched them down this new corridor at a frantic pace. Zuko couldn’t bring himself to look over at Sokka. He didn’t know what he was more afraid of: that Sokka would be angry at him for the failed escape, or that he’d be terrified and Zuko would not be able to do anything about it. He himself had locked up his feelings as tightly as he could the moment he’d realised where he was being taken, refusing to acknowledge the sheer panic and hysteria threatening to overwhelm him.

All too soon they came to a metal door set deep in the wall of stone. It was lit on either side by two sconces and the jamb shone a bright gold even in the dim light. The door slid open and Zuko felt himself pushed to his knees on the harsh ground. His head felt empty and light as he stared at the red carpet beneath him; he knew he should be terrified, but it was as though he was floating above it all, untouched and untouchable, in one perfect, frozen moment.

That was, until a single surprised bark of laughter rose from the end of the room, cutting through his serenity and bringing him crashing back to earth.

“Prince Zuko,” Fire Lord Ozai said, “what an unexpected surprise.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading, I hope you enjoyed!

Please don’t judge me for the bad pun, but honestly that it a large part of why I chose this fic name, plus I have a deep love for Shelley. Next chapter is like a quarter written, so hopefully shouldn’t be too long before I get it
posted.
Chapter Summary

I've also been asked to include a summary of where we left off, so here you go: Zuko and the Gaang helped capture Hama, and then headed off to the Black Cliffs to warn the invasion force that the eclipse was a trap. Aang, freaked out by the Gaang's reaction to Hama flies off to the capital anyway. The rest of the Gaang follow after him on Appa, whilst the rest of the invasion force launches a diversionary attack on the city. They find Aang in the middle of the empty Fire Nation palace and convince him to come back with them. When they try and make their way outside, they find their escape route blocked by soldiers. Zuko leads them on an alternate route through the palace, but just when they are almost free and clear, they run into a Dai Li. Katara, Aang and Toph get away, but Zuko and Sokka are captured. The soldiers recognise Zuko and take him into the secret underground bunker, bringing him face to face with his father for the first time in years.

Chapter Notes

Hi guys! I said I'd be back, didn't I? And look, it's not even been a month! I'm getting better at this regular posting thing...

Anyway, the moment you've all been waiting for: Ozai vs Zuko, who will win?

TWs this chapter for pretty much everything: abuse, violence- particularly of the military kind, references to starvation, claustrophobia, flashbacks and panic attacks. Please take care of yourselves and let me know if you need anything detailed before reading, or you want me to add any specific tags.

This one's another hefty 'un so please remember to hydrate and take regular naps as necessary. See you all on the other side!

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

The Fire Lord cast an imperious eye over the kneeling boys, and the corner of his mouth twisted slowly upwards. Lifting his hand, he gave a dismissive wave. With no more than that gesture, he ordered the room clear of all but the four soldiers still holding tight to the prisoners' shoulders. Zuko shuddered. His father, sat imperiously on the dais, simply took another deep sip of his tea and waited patiently as the room emptied around them. As soon as the door clanged shut behind the last of the guards, he turned his attention back to the two boys.

“I am surprised to see you,” the Fire Lord admitted, with a slight tilt of his head. “I am sure that I recall banishing you from the Kingdom, boy. On pain of death.”

Zuko shuddered again; he couldn’t help it. It had been three years and yet Zuko felt like it was mere moments since he had last felt hard, merciless stone beneath his knees, as he stared up at his father...
and begged for mercy. He hadn’t found any then, and he knew he wouldn’t now. His hands were shaking at his sides, and he clenched them into tight fists.

His father noticed his nervousness. His face twitched once again into that disdainful half-smirk that had always promised pain to the unlucky recipient, be it some poor bastard pleading his case before the court, or his terrified son in the dim light of the royal study.

He took another sip of tea, studying Zuko over the rim of the cup.

“So imagine my surprise to find you here,” the Fire Lord continued in a lazy drawl, “in the depths of my palace, in the middle of the eclipse.” He languidly uncrossed his legs; Zuko flinched at the movement. His father narrowed his eyes in irritation. “Go on then- astound me, Zuko. Why are you here?”

Zuko couldn’t have answered, even if he had known what to say; his mouth was dry as stone and his lungs felt like they were trapped in a slowly tightening vice. It was a struggle to remember to breathe, let alone how to speak. It had been three years, Zuko thought to himself, half-hysterically; how could his father still make him feel like a terrified child?

“No?” The Fire Lord’s smirk was mocking, as his eyes tracked over Zuko’s face. “Perhaps I’ll have to remind you-”

“Come now, boy, I’m sure even you haven’t forgotten your manners so easily,” the Fire Lord taunted. He leant casually to the side and deposited his teacup on the low table that had been placed, as with all things the Fire Lord might ever demand, conveniently within his reach. “When I ask you a question, I expect an answer.”

The silence in the room mocked him as mercilessly as the glimmer in his father’s golden eyes; it dragged on and on, weighing heavier on Zuko’s shoulders than the hands of the guards pushing him into the floor. He didn’t know what to say; he never knew what to say. It didn’t really matter anyway; his father wasn’t really expecting an answer.

“We have nothing to say to you,” Sokka’s voice cut over whatever threat the Fire Lord had been about to make.

Zuko didn’t dare look away from his father for even a second, so he couldn’t see the look on Sokka’s face, but he knew the other boy well-enough that he could picture the cold fury gleaming in those ice-blue eyes. The Fire Lord’s eye twitched in irritation; he was not a man used to being interrupted. Zuko flinched and his eyes flickered to the floor.

“And who are you?” His father nodded to one of the soldiers who immediately grabbed Sokka’s chin, forcing it up so that the Fire Lord could look down on his face.

The scornful laugh fell on Zuko’s bowed head like a blow. He looked over at Sokka, begging the other boy to be silent, to not draw the Fire Lord’s attention.

“A Water Tribe peasant, Zuko?” His father’s voice had dropped into something low and very, very dangerous. “I should not be surprised that three years away has not made you any less of a disappointment.”

He cast a dispassionate gaze over Sokka’s face. The guard holding Sokka’s chin tightened his grip and the other boy let out a grunt of discomfort.

“You name?” the Fire Lord demanded.
Sokka glared up at him, his eyes harder than stone and colder than ice.

“How brave,” Ozai remarked. He nodded to the guard holding Sokka’s chin.

The man yanked Sokka around to face him and then crashed the back of his hand across his cheek. The force of the blow sent Sokka crashing sideways into Zuko’s shoulder with a sharp cry of pain. Zuko flinched as if he too had been hit.

“Shall we try that again?” Ozai asked. His voice was as calm and dispassionate as if he were commenting on the weather. “Who are you, boy, and why are you here, with my traitorous son, in the middle of this pathetic attempt at an invasion?”

Sokka hauled himself up and glared up at the Fire Lord once again.


Sokka flinched into Zuko’s shoulder, and something in Zuko snapped. He had expected violence from his father, but only towards himself; he knew without any doubt that he could not sit quietly and watch Sokka be hurt. He sucked in a breath and tried to ignore the satisfied smirk that had crawled over his father’s face.

“Stop!” His voice came out hoarse and rasping, but it had the desired effect; his father turned his attention back to him, dispassionately raising a palm to halt the blow before it was dealt.

“You have something to say now, boy?”

“Wait, I-”

Whatever Sokka had been about to say trailed off into angry, muffled grunts, as the guard’s palm slammed down over his mouth, abruptly silencing him. The Fire Lord turned his attention back to his son, waiting expectantly.

Zuko swallowed, his throat convulsing painfully. Agni, but he had not thought this through.

“Leave him alone,” he ordered, although with the weakness in his voice it came out as more of a plea.

His father snorted in derision and pulled himself to his feet in one fluid motion. He made his way down the stairs of the dais in smooth, stalking steps. The Fire Lord crossed the room with agonising slowness, drawing steadily closer and closer, until he stopped directly in front of the two prisoners, close enough that Zuko could see the patterns embroidered on his robes. Zuko’s breath froze in his chest. The guards let go of his shoulder and slunk backwards, leaving their master to his prey.

“What a disappointment you turned out to be,” the Fire Lord sighed, leaning forwards to grasp Zuko’s chin. “A traitor twice-over now, boy? Begging for mercy for some enemy brat? Banishment was clearly too kind to you.” He sighed in a parody of dismay.

“It wasn’t banishment. You sent me to prison.”

The words were out of his mouth before Zuko could stop them. He had thought that particular injury long scabbed over and crushed down by years of depravation and brutality. So why was it that now, kneeling before his father, that it suddenly felt like he was thirteen once again? That he was that desperate, feverish child staring down a cruel, pointless sentence and reeling from how unfair it all was? Why was nothing ever enough, why was Zuko never good enough?
And you finally show something resembling a spine.” His father raised a delicate eyebrow. “I had hoped some time away from the palace would teach you respect, not more of this pointless defiance.” The fingers tightened on his chin as his father tilted his face further into the light, studying the scar with an air of academic interest. “Clearly you didn’t learn your lesson.”

Beside him, Sokka let out another string of muffled cries, but Zuko barely noticed. Something deep in his chest was rising up, crushing any thoughts of common sense or self-preservation. Years of repressed hurt surging forward, howling the same desperate plea for some scrap of affection, some sign that his father felt something for him other than disappointment and disdain. Somewhere, in a part of his mind that Zuko had diligently never allowed himself to acknowledge, the faint hope that perhaps his father hadn’t meant to hurt him so badly, hadn’t known how bad the prison would be, fizzled out like a spent fuse. Zuko held onto that feeling, coaxed it and let it push back the fear. He met his father’s eyes squarely and fed every ounce of his hurt and fury into that look.

“Respect?” Zuko all but spat, riding the rage and taking vicious delight in the flicker of surprise in his father’s eyes. “You challenged me, a thirteen-year-old boy, your son, to a duel! Just for speaking out of turn! You burnt half my face off!”

His father’s fingertips pressed into his jaw with bruising force. He stared down at his son with nothing but cold calculation in his gaze. A terrible sense of déjà vu came over Zuko as he knelt before his father, the cold stone pressing against his knees and that terrible blankness in his father’s golden eyes. It wasn’t a revelation, but the unvarnished truth hit him, once again, like a blow to the chest.

“You tried to kill me.”

His voice was flat. It was a statement, not an accusation. Both father and son had long since known what happened between them in the Agni Kai arena that day. Ozai smiled.

“And yet here you are.” He drawled, leaning forwards to whisper, pointedly, in Zuko’s bad ear. “I won’t make that mistake again.”

Zuko flinched, and Sokka let out a cry of alarm, suddenly struggling fiercely against the captors holding him. From somewhere in the bunker, a deep gong sounded. Both boys froze, but Ozai’s smile grew wider.

“Whatever plan you had has long-since fallen apart,” he remarked. The hand at Zuko’s chin began to grow uncomfortably warm. “The eclipse is over. You’re too late.” He looked Zuko in the eyes. “You failed.”

The grip on his face was blazing hot now, and Zuko knew, with terrifying and familiar clarity, that his father was about to kill him. He sent up a silent prayer to Agni that he would be well-received in the spirit world. Hopefully he and Sokka had bought Aang some time to escape, that had to mean he’d done something worthwhile in his pathetic life, didn’t it? Sokka was struggling even harder at his side, but Zuko knew it wouldn’t do any good. He shut his eyes.

A frantic clanging cut through the moment, as someone hammered at the door to the bunker room. His father’s breath hit his face in one deep sigh.

“Enter!” The Fire Lord ordered irritably. The hand at Zuko’s chin cooled almost immediately, and he cautiously peeled open his eyes.

A young soldier came hurrying into the room, his uniform dusty, dishevelled and entirely soaked down the left hand side. He bent into a low bow, gasping for breath.
“Your Majesty,” he wheezed out, “urgent report.”

“What is it?”

Ozai dropped his hand from Zuko’s face and turned to face the messenger. One of the guards hurried back to his place at Zuko’s shoulder, a heavy hand holding him in place until the Fire Lord was ready for him again.

“It’s the Avatar,” the soldier explained, his voice shaky even though he’d got his breathing back under control. “Your Majesty, he’s here, in the bunker.”

The Fire Lord clenched his fists. Smoke twisted from them in slow, curling spirals.

“Are you certain?”

“Yes, Majesty.” The soldier had still not risen from his bow. “He has the waterbender with him, and what we think is a team of earthbenders.”

Ozai was silent for a long moment. He looked, for the first time in Zuko’s life, entirely unsettled. Clearly, whatever he had been expecting from the eclipse, it had not been a personal visit from the Avatar- he’d looked less surprised to see his long-exiled son than to hear that particular news. Clearly, they’d done a better job of concealing Aang’s survival from the Fire Nation than they’d thought; perhaps Master Piandao hadn’t turned them in, after all?

“Who has been sent to apprehend him?”

“Princess Azula is personally leading the defence, Your Majesty,” the soldier replied. A thrill of fear rushed through Zuko; he didn’t want his sister anywhere near his friends.

Ozai hummed thoughtfully, his eyes narrowing.

“Leave us,” he ordered the soldier, who backed his way back out the door without straightening from his bow.

Ozai turned to the four men still holding both boys.

“You too,” he ordered, as he moved to sit back down on his dais. “Get out and do not move from outside this room. I will remain here until the threat has been contained.”

The men were too well-disciplined to even contemplate questioning orders, but it was clear by the looks on their faces that they didn’t approve of leaving the Fire Lord alone with a traitor.

As soon as he was released, Sokka took in a deep, gasping breath and then spat several times on the floor. He scrubbed roughly with the back of his hand at the spot where the guard’s hand had held his mouth.

“Charming,” Ozai remarked to the now all-but-empty room.

Sokka froze and pulled himself back up straight to glare daggers at the Fire Lord.

“You-

“Silence!” Ozai’s voice boomed out, and Sokka quickly shut up. “And you…” his eyes narrowed to mere slits as he turned back to Zuko. “I should have known better than to trust the water peasants to do the sensible thing and kill you, when I didn’t respond to their notification of your capture.”
Sokka let out a gasp, but Zuko ignored it and focused on his father, tracking his every move; he didn’t know why Ozai wanted them alone, but it implied his father wanted to do something unpleasant away from prying eyes.

Ozai shook his head in a parody of disappointed hurt.

“I never would have imagined that you’d join forces with them, against your own people!”

“Then you don’t know him very well,” Sokka all but growled, jutting his chin out defiantly.

Ozai ignored Sokka completely, and kept his gaze entirely on Zuko.

“I do wonder where I went wrong with you.” He hummed as if in thought. “Perhaps I let you spend too much time with your mother. She was always too soft-hearted. Too weak.” He let out a deep sigh, shook his head once more, and then stared down at Zuko with a smile so sharp it could cut diamond. “But I am willing to give you one more chance, boy.”

His voice was soft as honey and the hairs on the back of Zuko’s neck prickled in warning.

“You’re working with the Avatar- no, don’t try to deny it.” He held up a hand to prevent Zuko’s instinctive denial. “Only an honourless traitor would sink so low as to help the greatest threat to this nation infiltrate the palace. That was clearly the plan, wasn’t it? I have no doubt you’ve told him secrets of state that will lead to the deaths of countless innocent men, women and children.”

Zuko flinched, but forced himself to meet Ozai’s eyes. The horrific smile widened.

“I am willing, however, to forget all of this. In my gracious magnanimity, I will offer you a pardon and lift your exile, so that you may eke out whatever living you so choose back in the Fire Nation, as a free man.”

“And all you want in return is…?” Sokka’s voice was dry as bone.

Ozai bristled, but kept his eyes fixed on Zuko’s.

“Help me bring down the Avatar. Here. Today.” He gestured to the room around him with a sweep of his hand, ignoring Sokka’s scoff. “Find the boy and bring him back here for me to deal with. That is all I ask you to do to regain your honour and come home to the Fire Nation. What do you say, Zuko, will you help your country or die a miserable traitor?”

Zuko smiled widely, and his father returned the expression with what might, to a casual observer, look like a passable attempt at sincerity. Zuko let out a huff of disgusted laughter. There was only one answer he could give.

“Fuck you.”

Ozai’s face twisted into a vicious snarl, before suddenly becoming eerily blank. Zuko held his breath and forced himself not to flinch; this was it. His father’s hands whipped out to the side and vicious blue sparks spun into existence around them. Lightning. His father was calling lightning.

Zuko could only stare in horror as his father’s hands shot out straight in front of him, channelling two bright streams of crackling energy directly at his kneeling form. Just before the lightning struck, something heavy crashed into his side, as Sokka pushed them both safely out of the way of the bolt. A trail of sparks caught the leg of Sokka’s trousers, setting the fabric alight. Sokka slapped the fire out as Zuko hauled them both up to their feet, dragging them away from the scorch marks on the floor.
Ozai didn’t give them time to recover. He jumped to his feet and kicked out, sending a burst of flame careering towards them. Acting on pure instinct, Zuko flung his arms out and around him, sweeping up the fire before it reached its target. With a further twist of his arms, he flung the fire around his left side and that caught it for the briefest second as it it came back around on his right. With one last movement, he flung the flames, now hotter and moving faster than before, back at his father.

Zuko didn’t even wait to enjoy the shocked expression on his father’s face. Instead, he grabbed Sokka by the arm, and sprinted out the doorway. Sheer momentum and the force of surprise carried them past the men on guard. They cleared the line of soldiers and kept running. A shrieked command for the soldiers to lay chase rang out from the bunker behind them. Both boys gritted their teeth and ran harder.

The corridors of the bunker were oddly empty and just as labyrinthine as Zuko had remembered. Still, it wasn’t enough to shake the guards on their tail, and the pounding footfalls and shouts seemed to be growing louder and louder behind them as they made their way through endless identical earthen tunnels.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” Sokka panted, as they turned into yet another corridor at a flat run.

Zuko grunted in agreement. They were tiring, and quickly. They’d been subsisting on starvation rations for the past few days, and they were running on fumes. Unless they found a way out - or a decent place to hide- very soon, then they were as good as dead.

About a hundred yards ahead of them, there was a junction with a corridor leading off to both the left and right. Sokka pointed to the left option, and Zuko let out a grunt of agreement; one way was as good as the other when they were already hopelessly lost. The sound of the chase grew louder behind them and they forced themselves to pick up the pace even further, desperately trying to coax more energy into aching and quivering muscles.

Before they could reach the junction, however, a section of the wall ahead of them came smashing open in an explosion of rock. Three small figures came sprinting out of the dust cloud, heading straight towards Zuko and Sokka. Leading the charge, covered in dirt and blood streaming from a cut on her forehead was Toph, with Aang and Katara at her heels looking equally bedraggled and worse for wear.

“Aang, stop! It’s us!” Aang yelled, but it was too late. Both groups had too much momentum to stop, and they came crashing together in a tangle of limbs in the middle of the corridor.

“Sokka, stop! It’s us!” Aang yelled, but it was too late. Both groups had too much momentum to stop, and they came crashing together in a tangle of limbs in the middle of the corridor.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” Sokka yelled as he scrambled to his feet. The voices of the guards were far too loud now; they were almost on top of them.

“No kidding,” Toph shot back, but before she could say anything more, Sokka threw himself back to the floor. A stream of bright blue fire flew over their heads, searing the air where Sokka’s head had been moments prior. Zuko looked up to see a teenage girl running full pelt down the corridor towards them, a host of soldiers at her back. She was close enough that he could see the expression of shock dance over her face the moment that their golden eyes met.

Toph let out a truly vicious curse and slammed her hands down onto the ground. The floor beneath them dropped away, sending them crashing down into the room below. The young earthbender quickly jumped up and sealed the gap up with huge chunks of rock, leaving the rest of them huddled and groaning on the floor in the sudden silence of the empty room.

“That won’t hold them for long,” she told them, her mouth fixed in a grim line. “The Dai Li weren’t far behind her. We’ll have to move.”
“Which way?” Sokka asked, as he and the others slowly hauled themselves to their feet.

They were in what looked like a storage room; shelves lined every wall and there was a selection of brooms, in various states of repair, pushed up against the back wall.

Toph stomped once, her head cocked to the side, and then pointed towards them.

“If we break through there, there’s a series of natural caves between us and the open air.” She nodded to herself and then, without waiting for a reply, cracked her knuckles. She stomped her left leg and then slid her right out into a kick that sent the back wall exploding away from them and into the promised expanse of the cave behind it.

“Toph,” Sokka said, face alight with an exhilarated grin. “You are truly amazing, you know that?”

“Thank me when we get out of here, Snoozles,” she told him dryly. “We ain’t out of the woods yet.”

She was right. The caves had been left untouched by many Fire Nation architects over the years, and for good reason: they were a death-trap. The ceiling stuck out in odd places and the floor both sloped and dipped erratically, forcing them to clamber over and around countless jagged rock formations and, in more than a few places, to crawl through very tight gaps, to get to the cave beyond.

Worst of all - and the reason Toph refused point-blank to make any changes to the topography - was the lava. It was to be expected, of course, as the bunker was situated deep within an active volcano, but the searing streams of molten rock seemed to be everywhere, as if the volcano itself were actively conspiring to make their escape as difficult as possible. There was a cave where it shot up from the ground in odd, erratic bursts and another where it dripped from the ceiling in a slow, oozing flow of searing orange. They had to measure every move with careful precision or they would all end up burnt alive.

Zuko followed silently behind Toph as she led them safely through cave after cave. He was almost grateful for the constant danger of their escape route, if only because it kept his thoughts focused on where he needed to place his feet and on the crawling feeling of the walls closing in around him, rather than on the events of the past few hours. He knew, abstractly, that at some point, he was going to have to deal with everything that had just happened. He also knew that the realisation that he’d just seen both his father and his sister for the first time in years was going to hit him pretty hard, at some point in the near future. But, until that happened, Zuko let himself ride the wave of adrenaline and think about nothing more than getting as far away from the bunker as was humanly possible.

It took probably no more than half an hour for them to wind their way through the caves, but it felt like an age. By the time Toph brought them all to a stop and punched her way through one last wall to reveal daylight and blessedly clear air, Zuko had all but convinced himself that the caves would never end. He was beginning to despair that they’d be stuck down in the volcano until the lava got them, or they starved to death- whichever one came first. When they finally saw daylight, he had to force himself not to go running straight out onto the mountainside out of sheer relief. Instead, he followed Sokka cautiously through the newly-formed exit and off to the side, where a rocky outcropping provided some minimal cover for them to regroup.

“We’ve got to keep moving,” Katara said, as soon as they had all gathered. They were sprawled out on the patchy grass, chests heaving and muscles shaky from exertion. None of them had any desire to move, but Zuko knew she was right. They were on the eastern side of the volcano, facing out to sea and within sight of at least two watchtowers and the main road from the harbour to the city: they were sitting ducks. The longer they stayed there the more risk there was of being picked off by catapult fire.
“Do you think we can make it to the harbour?” Aang asked, in a very small voice.

“We can try,” Sokka said, face grim and drawn with exhaustion. Zuko shared his pessimism.

The Fire Army had rallied, supported by the secondary forces they’d seen gathering back at the palace. Judging by the debris littered along the mountainside, they’d met the invasion force somewhere along the path to the city and were pushing them back towards the plaza tower, where the fighting was still ongoing. The air was thick with smoke and countless fires crackled away to in the twisted, blackened, metal husks of what might have once been weapons or transport for either side. There were bodies, too, but Zuko forced himself not to examine them too closely. From this distance and through the smoke he couldn’t make out if they were wearing red, green or blue; he thought, perhaps, that that might be for the best.

Zuko sighed. It looked- at least to his untrained eye- as if some serious fighting had gone down. He sincerely doubted that this much chaos and damage was the result of a feint attack that was only ever meant to have been a distraction. It seemed as if the invasion had failed- just as he’d known it would.

Sokka rubbed his hands together, eyes focused as he started working his way through the beginnings of a plan.

“If we make our way to the south of the plaza tower—”

A large shadow settled over them, cutting Sokka short. As one, the four of them looked up into the sky and saw a fleet of impossible machines floating overhead.

“What is it?” Toph asked urgently. “Why did you stop?”

“They’ve got war balloons,” Sokka stated, his voice faint. “How did they get their hands on that many?”

As Zuko watched in horror, the balloons began tipping large red barrels over the side. As the first rally fell to the ground, they exploded upon impact, sending earth flying in all directions and tearing gaping holes in the invasion force. Columns of flame roared upwards from the debris and soon half of the mountainside seemed to be on fire. A strange, high-pitched whistling rose through the air and Zuko looked up to see a shell dropping directly above them. Toph let out a curse and pulled a chunk of rock directly from the side of the mountain to make a makeshift shelter over their heads. The rock caught the bomb, with mere seconds to spare; it exploded with a force that shook the ground beneath them. Everything was chaos; Zuko’s ears were ringing, and he felt dizzy, but the bombs wouldn’t stop coming. Another two crashed down on the rock above them, making chips of rock crumble down onto their heads.

“They’re headed for the submarines,” Aang gasped.

He was right; the airships had all but passed over them, leaving a trail of fiery devastation in their wake, but they weren’t turning round for another attack. Instead, they were heading out to sea, ready to unload countless more of their shells on the only method of retreat back to the fleet.

“We can’t stay here,” Zuko said, over the whining in his ears. “That shelter won’t last much longer.”

“And go where?” Aang asked. “They’re taking out the submarines. We’ll all be stuck here.”

“We need to find Appa,” Katara yelled. “He’s on the other side of the volcano; he won’t have been caught up in any of this.”

“You brought Appa here?” Aang whirled around to face her, his eyes wide with betrayal.
“It was the only way to get to the palace in time to rescue you,” Sokka insisted, before the Avatar had time to work himself into a panic. “Like Katara said, he’s on the other side of the volcano. He’ll be fine.”

“You don’t know that!”

“We don’t have time for this,” Toph insisted. “We need to get out of here.”

“We’re going to have to go around the outside,” Sokka told them. “We can’t risk going into the city.”

“We’ll be out in the open.” Zuko didn’t like their chances.

“We’ll have to be quick.” Sokka clearly didn’t either.

They set off in stony silence, picking their way across the slopes of the mountain as fast as they dared. The terrain was tough, covered in scree and tall, spiky grass. There were hundreds of animal burrows too- small but deep holes which lay, like slumbering beasts, ready to take down the next unsuspecting walker who stumbled onto them. Picking their way over the slopes was much slower going than any of them would have liked, and the heavy smoke blown up from the fires raging at the harbour was choking the air, making it difficult to breathe. Being out in the open made Zuko feel painfully exposed and the hairs on the back of his neck were prickling constantly.

Suddenly, Toph stopped. Her face was paler than bone.

“Can you hear that?” She didn’t wait for a reply. “Something’s coming!” Her voice was hoarse and crackling from the smoke. “Sounds like twenty- no thirty- animals.” She stopped for a moment to let listen once again. “Big,” she elaborated. “Big and fast.”

“Shit!” Zuko swore as his stomach plummeted into the bowels of the volcano beneath them. “They’re on komodo rhinos.” His eyes met Sokka’s for the briefest of moments and he saw in them his own terror. “We’ve got to move!”

They barely made it a hundred yards worth of stumbling steps before the cavalry found them. They came racing around the mountain from the west, the soldiers whooping and hollering to the percussion of the beasts’ pounding feet and rolling, shifting bass of their grunting and growling. Any hopes Zuko might have had of finding Appa were abruptly dashed; there was no way the bison wouldn’t have spooked and flown off at the sheer cacophony of the komodo charge.

“They’re going to run us down!” Sokka met Zuko’s eye and in one moment of silent communication, they agreed a new plan. Zuko all but grabbed hold of Aang and Toph as he flung them to the front of the group, where Zuko could see if they started to fall behind. Sokka yelled at everyone to run down the mountainside and out towards the foothills and trenches where they might stand a chance of breaking the charge.

Gravity led them speed, but the rhinos gained fast. They were near the base of the volcano, but the rhinos would be on them in under a minute.

“We’re not going to make it,” Katara yelled.

Aang nodded and, with all the true grace of an airbender, spun around and all but fell backwards down the mountainside, his hands whirling about in front of him in an intricate pattern. Within a few seconds, a twisting wind had formed in front of the charging rhinos, whipping up the loose rock and smoke into a deadly vortex that danced about, in front of, and amongst their pursuers.
It was enough to make even the battle-trained rhinos balk. They broke formation, racing in all directions to get away from the terrifying wind as their riders swore at them in a mixture of fury and alarm. Aang did yet another graceful twist in the air and was back running with the group again, his mouth set in a firm line. Zuko didn’t have the breath in his lungs to praise him, but he shot the young airbender a grateful smile.

Aang’s distraction bought them enough time to stumble the rest of the way down the mountainside. They hit the foothills at a dead sprint and kept going, twisting their way onto increasingly smaller and tighter trails in the hope of shaking off as many rhinos as they could. More and more riders dropped away, but there were still far too many following on their heels.

“What do we do?” Toph asked, through heaving breaths. “We can’t outrun them.”

Sokka shook his head. They just had to keep running.

A few minutes later and Zuko was beginning to seriously flag. Adrenaline could carry him so far, but he was exhausted, and he could only imagine what it would be like for Toph and Aang. They needed a way out, but as much as he desperately racked his brains, he couldn’t think of one. Then, over the noise of their pursuers, a new and more dreadful sound came piercing through the air: a high-pitched whistle.

The bomb fell before they even saw the airships. It crashed to the ground a few yards from them, sending the earth beneath them trembling. Zuko fell forwards and he turned it into his roll, using the momentum to spring back up to his feet at the end of it. There was another terrible whistle and another bomb fell, about a half mile ahead of them. Countless others were dropping on the foothills around them. This wasn’t a targeted attack, Zuko realised half-hysterically, they were just going to bomb the countryside to ashes and hope to take down the fugitives alongside whatever other poor innocents got caught up in the path.

It was impossible to keep running; the ground shook and trembled too much for them to keep their footing. They all stumbled to a stop, doubled over and gasping for breath as the bombs continued to rain around them.

“The rhinos are stopping,” Toph commented. “They’re turning back.”

“They don’t want to get blown to smithereens!” Katara agreed.

“They’re bombing their own people?” Sokka wheezed out in a series of aghast breaths. Then he stopped himself. “Wait, of course they are, why am I even questioning this?”

“Why would they doing this?” Aang’s eyes were bright, his expression fierce.

“Because they want us dead,” Zuko told him simply, “and they don’t care who gets caught in the crossfire.”

Another bomb came whistling down, this one landing close enough that Zuko could feel the heat from the flames, even as the explosion rattled his teeth inside his head. A large piece of rock came flying towards them.

“Move!” Zuko ordered, grabbing Aang by the arm and pulling him out of the path of the projectile.

“We need to get under cover,” Sokka said, “they aren’t targeting us specifically, we can wait this out. Toph, can you…”

She nodded tightly and cracked her knuckles.
“I got this covered.”

With a quick stomp, the rock at their feet sprang up at a sharp angle, flying up to crash against the slope of the nearest hill in a make-shift lean-to.

“That’ll hold for a while.”

They all huddled under the cover and slumped down to the ground in various states of exhaustion. Katara was rubbing at her aching feet, whilst Sokka gulped down water as fast as he could. Zuko collapsed onto his back and stared at the rock above him, taking rasping breaths as his heart slowly started to regain a normal rhythm and the bright spots stopped dancing in front of his eyes.

Another bomb crashed to the ground somewhere nearby. Their shelter trembled, but it held.

“How long will this go on for?” Aang asked.

“How many bombs do they have?” Zuko replied. “At least if they’re bombing us, we won’t be running from the rhinos.”

There wasn’t much else anyone could say to that.

They decided to wait out the bombardment under the shelter and to try and snatch what rest they could. There was no food to pass around and Zuko’s stomach howled its complaint, but he forced himself to ignore it; he had gone longer without food before and he knew he wasn’t about to starve, no matter what his stomach was trying to tell him. The others bore up with admirable fortitude; not even Sokka complained when Katara apologetically admitted that all the food bags had been left with Appa. Instead, they decided to try and get some sleep. They knew they’d have to move as soon as the bombs stopped falling and it was far better to face running for your life in the enemy heartland when you had a bit of sleep behind you. Zuko did not want to know what experience led the other four teenagers to agree that with such world-weary unanimity. After surprisingly little debate, they decided to sleep in shifts; Toph, Aang and Katara went first, whilst Zuko and Sokka kept silent vigil at the openings at either end of their shelter.

As it happened, the bombs ended up falling all night. A few hours after drifting off, Toph jerked awake, sitting bolt upright and breathing heavily. Whatever dream she’d been having, she refused to talk about it, insisting instead on taking the next watch whilst Zuko and Sokka slept. Katara had been stirred by the commotion and was in the darkest mood imaginable at having been woken. Even so, she agreed to help Toph keep watch, grumbling that someone, at least, should get some sleep as clearly she wasn’t going to be able to anymore.

Zuko was out within minutes of closing his eyes. His dreams, when they came, were full of high-pitched whistling and fire. He was running, always running, and he didn’t know who was chasing him or why, only that if they caught him something bad- something unspeakably bad- was going to happen to him. He was running down a mineshaft when he suddenly came face to face with shocked, golden eyes. Then he was on his knees, hundreds of eyes boring into him, and he knew with sudden, sickening clarity, that he’d been caught.

He let out a choked cry. He was terrified, so scared he couldn’t move, couldn’t do anything but feel the cold stone beneath his knees as he let out sob after desperate sob. This was it; his father was. He was begging, whatever words that tumbled from his lips barely distinguishable over the ragged gasp of every breath he forced into his lungs. He was going to die, he knew that. He was going to die and it was all his fault and he hadn’t meant to and...oh Agni. He was on fire, flames dancing over his face, charring his skin and burning through his hair. He was screaming and screaming and it hurt -oh Agni it hurt- and it wouldn’t stop. Someone was reaching towards him, grabbing his shoulder. He
flinched away, but the hand tightened and shook him sharply.

“Zuko!”

He couldn’t move. It was too much. It hurt.

“Zuko,” the voice repeated, shaking him again. “Come on, look at me. Please.”

Zuko let out a choking gasp, but he didn’t dare disobey an order. Slowly, gasping in pain, he forced himself to raise his eyes to the figure in front of him.

It was Sokka, leaning over and looking at Zuko with concern in his bright blue eyes. What was Sokka doing there? Slowly, the walls of the arena faded around them and Zuko shook off the last lingering tendrils of sleep. He pushed himself into a sitting position, his skin prickling with the cold sweat he always got post-nightmare. Sokka sat back, watching him carefully.

“You with us, now?”

“Yeah,” Zuko nodded, feeling the heat blazing across his cheeks as he realised that not only was everyone else awake, but that they were all watching him with identical looks of concern.

“We couldn’t wake you up,” Sokka explained. “The bombs have stopped, and we need to get moving.”

“Sorry,” Zuko muttered, rubbing at his arms to try and dispel the lingering chill. “Nightmare.”

Sokka nodded in understanding.

“Guessed as much.” He shot Zuko a look out the corner of his eye. “If you want to talk about it—”

“No!” Zuko bit out a little too quickly. “No, I’m fine. Let’s just get moving.”

“You’re as bad as Toph,” Sokka sighed, throwing his arms up in the air. “Alright, I’ve leave you alone.” After that, he mercifully let the matter drop and helped Zuko haul himself to his feet so that they could set out once more.

The night was dark and the clouds hung heavy and low, blocking out the stars and choking the moon until it shone as little more than a sickly yellow smudge against the nebulous sky. Their exhausted, staggering group made their way haltingly forwards through the dark in utter silence. There was no way of knowing how much ground they covered, but when the sky began to lighten with the promise of the oncoming dawn, Zuko make out the capital a good few miles behind them. When Agni’s face finally climbed over the horizon, Sokka brought the group to a stop.

Toph made another shelter out of thick slabs of stone. This one was much more elaborate than the previous day’s make-shift offering; it was fully enclosed and blended much more naturally in with the landscape. To anyone passing by it would look like any of the countless natural formations that littered the fields around them. The others all settled in with relief for another sleep, but Zuko’s adrenaline was still surging. As long as they could still see the capital, he knew it wasn’t safe to stop.

“We have to keep moving,” he tried to whisper only to Sokka, but ended up addressing the entire group anyway. As all of their packs and bedding rolls were back with Appa, they were forced to huddle together for warmth; it was nearly impossible to have a private conversation. The others all averted their eyes and let Sokka deal with Zuko’s neuroses. Sokka grumbled and forced his eyes open. Zuko could feel old panic rising in his chest and he knew that they needed to move, to get away somewhere, anywhere that wasn’t here. His breathing started to quicken and he slumped to the...
floor as he struggled to get air into his lungs.

“Zuko, stop!” Sokka urged, reaching over to grab Zuko by his arms. “Please!” He shook Zuko gently and forced him to meet his eyes. “You need to stop!”

“We need to keep moving!” Zuko gasped out between breaths.

“We need to rest!” Sokka’s voice was thin and curt with exhaustion. “We’re exhausted. We’ve been running for hours and we’ve barely eaten for days.” Sokka took a deep breath and continued slightly more gently. “This place is safe enough—no one followed us here. We need to rest.”

“But—"

“First rule of hunting: every good hunter needs to pace himself,” Sokka told him firmly. “If you just go running full pelt across the ice, you’ll never have the energy to get home.”

“Snoozles is right, Zuko,” Toph cut across him, rolling over and stretching her hands above her head. “No one is going to find us here. I promise. I made us a good place.”

Sokka back slumped down at Zuko’s side and pressed up against him, lending his silent support and reassurance as Zuko finally got his breathing under control. Eventually, despite the fact that beyond the walls of their shelter the sun was still high in the sky, Zuko let the exhaustion take him over and he fell into a deep sleep.

He woke up in darkness, his heart pounding, convinced that he’d been buried alive. He finally managed to gather up enough wherewithal to summon a small flame in his palm. The soft light of the flames flickered in their small shelter, dancing across the sleeping faces of his friends. Zuko let out a deep, shaking breath, and sent more energy to bolster the weak flame.

Sokka threw a hand over his face, grumbling at the light. Zuko quickly toned it down, but the damage was done. The others all starting waking up around him. He felt the heat rise in his cheeks, but decided the damage was probably already done. He pushed more chi into the fire, giving them all a proper light.

“We need to figure out a plan, we can’t just keep running senselessly,” Sokka said, after they’d all finished yawning and stretching awake. “Where should we go?”

They all looked to Zuko.

“I… I don’t know,” he admitted, rubbing at his forehead. He’d barely ever left the walls of the palace, let alone the Caldera. He knew that there were a few trading villages on the roads heading to the capital, but where those might be in relation to their current location, he had no idea.

There was a long, awkward silence, before Sokka clapped his hands.

“Right, well first things first,” he tapped his chin in thought. “We can’t keep going on foot.”

“Well we aren’t going to find Appa anytime soon,” Toph said bluntly. Huddled next to Katara, Aang flinched. “I bet he’s miles away by now.”

Sokka tilted his head slowly in acknowledgment. “Well, we’ll need transportation, then.” His stomach gurgled loudly. “And food.”

“Are there any villages nearby?” Katara asked Zuko with a gentle smile. She’d been looking at him like that since she’d seen him wake up from his nightmare. He didn’t like it.
Zuko narrowed his eyes, but nodded in reply.

“Yes, a couple.” He racked his brains, desperately trying to remember the geography that had, at times, been beaten into him. It was difficult to think when everyone kept staring at him. “

“Well that’s a start,” Sokka said after Zuko’s silence stretched on for just a moment too long. “Toph, you think you can get a feel for any buildings around here?”

Toph grimaced and pulled herself to her feet, pushing the others out the way to make room, before stomping her right foot a few times.

“I can’t feel anything,” she grumbled. “Just rock.”

“Oh, Sokka said, tapping his chin and staring up at the roof above them. “If I were on a hunt, I’d say we need to find ourselves a high point to orienteer ourselves, but I’m not all that keen on drawing any more attention than we need to.”

Zuko grunted in agreement.

“Can you remember anything else, at all?” Sokka asked him casually, but his voice was too tight to properly pull it off. Zuko was in no doubt just what a desperate situation they’d found themselves in.

“If I knew something, I’d say,” Zuko snapped, crossing his arms defensively in front of himself. “There’s no point trying to figure out where we could go, when we don’t even know where we are.”

Sokka flinched back, his face twisting in hurt, before settling into an angry frown. Zuko groaned and slammed his head back against the wall of the shelter. He hadn’t meant to snap, really, and now he’d upset Sokka. He knew he should apologise, but every time he tried to find the right words his mind went utterly, painfully blank.

The rest of the group ended up agreeing to find their way to the nearest road. From there, Zuko had tentatively offered, he might be able to figure out where they were in relation to civilisation. Sokka seemed to accept the peace offering for what it was, but he made sure to pout at Zuko for a good long while to ensure that his point had been properly made.

When they were finally ready to go, Toph sent their shelter slipping back into the ground around them with a few quick stomps of her feet. It sank into the earth with a groaning rumble that sounded way too loud in the crisp morning air. It was bright outside, and still only late morning; Zuko realised he must have woken them all after only a few hours’ sleep. It was safer to travel in the dark, Zuko knew, but at least in the daylight they might stand a chance of figuring out where they were. Zuko shivered and sent up a silent prayer to Agni that they wouldn’t be noticed, and that they’d find some kind of road or civilisation before they died of starvation, or exposure.

The fields around them were ugly, a mix of bright, verdant green and dark black patches where bombs had crashed to the earth and burnt the grass to ash. A few small fires still flickered away, burning pyres of twisted metal shells dotted about the landscape like miniature beacons. Zuko hoped they had enough time to clear the area before the Fire Watch bravely the risk of another bombardment to come and put them out. Bombs might kill you, but a grass fire would; the Fire Nation took these things seriously.

They walked along in silence, until Sokka cleared his throat loudly, forcing everyone’s attention to him.

“So, are we gonna talk about what happened yesterday?” Sokka asked, forcibly ignoring the way the others flinched around him. “We saw that Dai Li head back after you…”
Katara let out a heavy sigh.

“We were trying to find a way back round to you, but then Toph said she couldn’t hear anyone in those corridors anymore and we realised they’d taken you somewhere else. So Toph got us into the bunker.” Katara shivered. “The Dai Li found us there. He started attacking again and then…” She trailed off, rubbing at her arms as if to dispel the memory. “Then Azula arrived. We fought.” Her eyes flickered over to Zuko and whatever she saw in his expression stopped her from elaborating much further. “We had just about got the upper hand when the eclipse ended. Then Azula started throwing blue flame and we started running.”

“Until you bumped into us,” Sokka finished, rubbing at his forehead.

“Pretty much,” Toph agreed. She had found a grass stalk and was chewing it as she walked. “What about you two? We thought you’d been arrested.”

“We were,” Sokka agreed. “We broke free.”

Toph raised her fist.

“You call that a story Snoozles? I need details!” She shook her fist, in what was a surprisingly threatening manner for a tiny twelve-year old girl.

“That’s pretty much it,” Sokka whined.

Toph lowered her hand with a frown of disappointment.

“Oh, and we kind of met the Fire Lord, too,” Sokka added. This time Toph did punch him.

“You what?” Katara shrieked.

“Yeah, he’s a massive dick.”

Sokka filled them in on the rest of the story as they wandered further and further into the countryside. Zuko tried very hard not to listen; he didn’t want to think about his father until he was good and ready to open that particular can of worms. Instead, he focused on trying to work out where the fuck they were and where the fuck they were going.

Zuko didn’t know how he managed it, other than that perhaps it was his own way of coping, but Sokka kept up a constant stream of conversation for the rest of the day. It would have been admirable if not for the fact that the vast majority of it had been Sokka riffing on the different ways that the Fire Lord had gotten the stick up his ass. Zuko really hadn’t needed the mental image that had created.

They’d found themselves wandering into a forest, around the time that the sun reached its zenith. Mercifully, Sokka had taken this as his cue to start commenting on how it was lunchtime, and how he was so hungry he’d even eat a cabbage, and where was a good local cabbage merchant when you needed one these days, anyway?

They had spent the rest of the afternoon wandering down a small forest trail (which they had all been way too enthusiastic about discovering) and listening to a catalogue of all the things Sokka would eat if he could. It was early evening and Sokka had just begun debating the merits of arctic sea hen versus meat kebab when they, quite literally, stumbled upon a village.

The tree line was made up of thick and densely packed bamboo that had grown up into one tangled wall of interlocked stalks. They hadn’t been able to see the clearing on the other side until the gap in the trees suddenly appeared beside them. They surged through and found themselves stood at the far
end of some kind of yard, right behind a hefty pile of roughly chopped wood and just to the side of a large, clearly much-used well. The building ahead of them was a little run down and aged looking, but its windows shone with a bright, warming glow and a chorus of loud voices and laughter rose up from within. Stretching out behind it were clusters of smaller buildings, homesteads and outbuildings for whatever farms kept the local area fed.

Zuko found himself smiling; they’d found a village! He turned to Sokka, ready to share the success. Sokka’s attention, however, was solely focused on the building in front of him.

“It’s an inn,” he commented rapturously, staring at the building with longing. He turned to Zuko. “Think they’ll give me a meat kebab if I offer to wash pots?”

Zuko snorted, but it wasn’t a bad point, aside from the fact that they definitely didn’t want to run into any villagers whatsoever.

“They’ll have food of some sort, somewhere,” he commented with forced casualness. “I can go and—”

“No,” Sokka cut him off quickly. “We’re not splitting up. Not after what happened last time. If you go, we all go.”

Katara, Toph and Aang all looked nodded in vehement agreement. Zuko didn’t dare belabour the point. They went together.

Following Zuko’s lead, the group circled their way around to the back of the inn, keeping to the shadows as much as possible. They managed to find the back door just off from what looked and smelled like the kitchen. Peering round the back of the empty chicken coop, Zuko tried to case the building as well as he could. They would probably need to wait until the inn was closing for the night and the owner far too busy kicking out anyone who refused to ignore the hallowed rule of ‘last orders’. He might be able to pick the lock on the door, or he could try the window. Zuko’s eyes slid over to the small window almost automatically, and immediately stopped short. It couldn’t possibly be that simple, could it?

There, sat on the window frame to cool in the balmy evening air, was a plate of steaming hotcakes, just begging to be stolen. Zuko’s stomach ached just to look at them. Before he even realised what he was doing, he had started to slink forwards. A hand shot out to grab his arm.

“What are you doing?” Katara hissed, looking at him in alarm. Zuko stared down at the hand grasping his elbow and then gestured mutely to the tantalisingly close food.

Katara fell silent immediately. They needed food and she knew it. He turned back to the others, gesturing to the plate in a silent question. Aang nodded and Sokka shot him a thumbs-up. Toph hissed at them all that if they didn’t get whatever it was that smelled so delicious that she was going to crack heads.

Zuko took a deep breath and flipped his hood up over his head. He had permission for the theft, but he still needed to carry it out. It wasn’t going to be easy. There were a good couple of yards of open yard between the coop and the window. He’d have to be quick; it would only take one customer coming out back for any of the myriad uses people could find for the yard of an inn and he would be caught. A gust of wind caught the hotcakes. Zuko made up his mind very quickly. He’d spent the entire afternoon listening to Sokka extol the virtues of fifteen different cuisines. He was going to get those hotcakes for him and his friends or so help him Agni he was going to die trying.

Of course, Zuko should have known better than to invoke the spirits. He was barely two feet away
from the window when a face appeared at it, startling badly at the unexpected appearance of a teenager in the middle of his yard. His eyes flickered between Zuko and the plate of hotcakes and his face reddened quickly, realisation dawning.

“What do you think you’re doing?” the man barked, storming out the back door. He slammed it open with a loud crash. Zuko stumbled backwards and went to run, but was stopped short by the man’s words.

“Don’t even think about it! I’ve got a taproom full of imperial guards- I shout ‘thief’ and they’ll come running.”

Zuko froze where he stood, and slowly turned to face the man, his heart in his throat. He didn’t have his dao, or Sokka his sword. They were exhausted and hungry and there was no way to fight their way out of this unless they resorted to bending; Zuko didn’t want to draw that kind of attention until absolutely necessary. He hung his head in defeat.

“Where are the rest of your little friends then?” The innkeeper scowled. “Bet they put you up to this.” He put his hands on his hips and looked about the yard and his eyes landed on the exact spot the others stood hidden. “Come on out from behind there, the lot of you. Unless you’re leaving your friend here to take all the blame?”

Sokka’s head poked out from around the chicken coop. His eyes met Zuko’s and Zuko shook his head, urging Sokka to just run. He didn’t listen. Instead, he slunk slowly out to stand at Zuko’s side, the others following soon after like turtle ducklings following their mother.

“Who are your parents?” The innkeeper asked stiffly, as soon as they were all lined up before him.

It wasn’t difficult for the man to look intimidating; he cut an imposing figure. He stood well over six foot tall, with arms like tree trunks from years of hauling barrels, and legs to match. Zuko forced his breathing steady, as the innkeeper surveyed them, but the man’s face showed nothing more than righteous indignation at the attempted theft. It seemed as though, for now, he’d assumed them to be local children caught in a dare.

“Not so brave now, are you?” The innkeeper barked when his first question went unanswered. “You think it’s funny to steal, do you?” He didn’t wait for an answer before he continued. “Just be grateful it was me who caught you and not one of the guards. You three look old enough to conscript, and don’t think they wouldn’t just because you say you’re sorry!” He pointed to Sokka, Katara and Zuko in turn.

He paused in his rant for a moment and looked closer at Sokka and Katara, his forehead creasing in thought as he took in the state of their clothing and their colouring. Finally he turned to Zuko.

“Take that hood off,” he ordered.

Zuko stood frozen, refusing to move.

“Take that hood off, or, so help me Agni, I’ll come over there and do it myself.”

Zuko looked over at the others. Katara’s hand fell to her hipflask; she gave Zuko a sharp nod. He reached up and slipped the hood over his head.

The innkeeper took in his face with steadily widening eyes, the light of recognition dawning brightly within them.

“Of fucking course,” he hissed, reaching up to pinch the bridge of his nose. “This has just been my
fucking week.” He let out a sigh and dropped his hand to his side. He turned back to the others, looking over them with newly appraising eyes. “You lot are in huge fucking trouble, you know that?”

They stood silently, waiting for the man to make his move. Katara’s hand twitched at her hip flask and Toph shifted her feet. Zuko knew that, between the two of them, they’d have the man tied up and gagged the moment he even thought about sounding the alarm.

The innkeeper waited them out for a good couple of minutes, before he heaved another sigh and stepped out of the doorway, jerking a thumb over his shoulder to point them inside. “Well, you’d better come in then, hadn’t you?”

Zuko didn’t want to go into any enclosed spaces with the man, particularly if he had been telling the truth and his inn was currently filled with any number of imperial guards. It was only the man’s increasingly unimpressed stare and Sokka’s hissed suggestion— that it might be better to have whatever conversation they were going to have somewhere less open and exposed— that made Zuko acquiesce.

Thankfully the innkeeper didn’t go much further than the kitchen. He grabbed the place of hotcakes from the window and slammed them in the middle of a large, freshly scrubbed table, grabbing one for himself and indicating to his unexpected guests that they should follow suit.

Despite how hungry he’d been only minutes before, Zuko no longer had any appetite. It seemed to be the same for the rest of them; the cakes lay untouched in the middle of the table. None of them elected to sit at the table, either; instead, they chose to cluster by the doorway where they could make a hasty getaway if needed.

“So you’re the reason I’ve got half the imperial guard in my taproom?” The innkeeper said, around a mouthful of food. “Agni, give me strength!”

“We don’t want any trouble,” Sokka assured the man, his eyes flickering to the door by his side. “We just want to get as far away from here as we can.”

“Oh, I bet,” the innkeeper sighed. He wiped the flour from his hands and leaned forwards, resting his elbows on the table. “Now I don’t know much of what’s going on,” he began, “but that scar’s pretty hard to ignore. I got a cousin who has a similar one, myself.” He grinned. “Course, his was caused by a training accident at Ba Sing Se,” he trailed off, the smile fell from his lips and he pointed over at Zuko with one thick, stubby finger. “I know who you are, Your Highness, and I know you ain’t getting more than half a mile away from this town on your own. They’ve got checkpoints on every road from here to Ember Island.”

“Can you help us?” Aang asked, hopefully. The innkeeper sat back and crossed his arms.

“This one’s way above my head,” he said abruptly. “I really should turn you in,” he muttered, almost to himself. “They find out I helped you and I’ll get the camps for sure. Me and every poor bastard in this Agni-forsaken dump of a town.”

Zuko shuddered. Katara’s hand went back to her water flask, but Aang shot her a quick glance. She dropped her hand and Aang turned to look at the man with his bright, wide eyes.

“Please,” he said, his voice very young and very desperate. “Please don’t turn Zuko in. It’s not his fault. I just…” His eyes hardened and he straightened his spine, looking the man in the eye. “I did something really dumb and my friends came to help me and now they’re in trouble too. But it isn’t their fault— it’s nothing to do with them. So… So if you want to turn someone in, you can give them
me. But let my friends go.”


“And why would anyone give a flying fuck about you, kid?” he said, not unkindly.

“Because I’m the Avatar,” Aang replied, conjuring a small, spinning ball of air in his palm as evidence.

The innkeeper stared at Aang’s hand long after he’d let the spinning ball dissipate back into the air. Then the man cast his eyes up to the ceiling and let out a string of mutterings which could have been either prayer or profanity, Zuko couldn’t tell which.

“Alright, fine,” the innkeeper told them when he finally fell silent. “I know a guy who might be able to help. Comes through once a week to go to the market up in the city and takes my old barrels back to the brewery up at the Port of Sozin.” He let out a low, disbelieving laugh. “He’s due in tomorrow morning- spirits must be on your side after all.”

“So…you’re not turning us in?” Aang asked, a hopeful smile dancing over his lips.

“No,” the man sighed. “Though Agni only knows I’ll probably end up regretting it.” “And we’re just supposed to trust you?”

“Right,” Zuko snorted. “All of a sudden you just want to help us out of the goodness of your heart. What’s your angle?”

The man let out a grim laugh. “Do you really have any choice?”

He stood up and pushed his chair back against the stove, then he hauled the table over to the corner and rolled away the rug beneath, revealing the trap door to some kind of cellar. “You can hide down here for the night,” he told them, lifting the hatch to show a dark, but surprisingly spacious room beneath.

“Hang on, you were going to turn Zuko in a couple of minutes ago and now you want us to just let you lock us up in your creepy cellar?” Sokka’s eyebrows were practically at his hairline. “’Cause that doesn’t sound skeevy at all.”

“Listen, kid,” the innkeeper growled, clearly done with the litany of complaints. “You were going to steal from me, remember? And considering the circumstances, I think I’ve been pretty damn forgiving about the whole thing. So let me make this crystal fucking clear.” He glared at Sokka, stalking forwards until they were almost nose to nose. “I don’t want anything to do with you. I don’t want you in my fucking bar. I have a bunch of very drunk and very angry men who would burn me alive if they knew I’d even spoken to you.” His eyes narrowed. “I just want to keep my head down and my family alive and have as little to do with this fucking war as possible and you’ve brought the fucking Avatar and the Prince right into the middle of my village!” He stopped short, chest heaving.

Then, as if coming back to himself, his eyes flickered over to the wide-eyed, alarmed look Sokka was giving him and then over the deep purple bruising that covered most of Sokka’s face. He sighed and took a few steps back.

“Alright, look.” The man heaved a sigh of irritation, visibly trying to calm himself down. He shot a glance back over his shoulder to where the noise of the taproom was growing steadily louder and louder. “You won’t be locked up down there, there’s another way out- leads to a tunnel network that stretches underneath the city. There’s food and water down there and you can help yourselves to as much as you want. I got my own reasons for helping and that’s all your gonna get. I want you out of
my town on the first available cart and you can trust me on that much."

Zuko stared at the man for a long moment. “Toph?”

“He’s telling the truth,” she confirmed.

Zuko nodded, but just to double check, he jumped down into the cellar; it was always better to be safe than sorry. He dropped to the ground in a crouch and summoned a flame in the palm of his hand as he straightened. The room wasn’t massive, and it gave him enough light to get a good look around the room. It was filled with the expected barrels of wine and beer, and a few sacks of flour and rice. But here and there, interspersed amongst the regular supplies were the odd box of clothing and small, easily transportable wash kits and ration packs. Over in the corner, right next to the promised escape route, there was even a small stack of very official and very blank identity cards. Zuko picked one up and studied it carefully before he put it back on the pile.

“We’re good,” he called up to Sokka.

Sokka jumped down and the others quickly followed after him. Zuko stepped forward to catch Toph as she jumped and helped her to find her feet.

The innkeeper closed the door above them, with a promise that he’d be back first thing in the morning. There was a loud scraping sound as the table was put back into place and then silence. He’d seemed relieved to be rid of them; Zuko could understand why.

Zuko summoned a small flame once again and used it to light an old oil lantern handing from the wall. The dim light flickered around the room, casting eerie shadows in the dark corners. He slid down to sit on a stack of old sacking, his back against the wall. Toph, Katara and Aang came to join him as Sokka stalked about in the middle of the room, gesticulating wildly.

“Not that I’m doubting Toph’s amazing lie-detector skills, or anything,” Sokka began, as he peered around the room with ill-concealed discomfort. “But he seemed to go from ready to turn us in to offering us a way out pretty damn quickly.”

“He’s a smuggler,” Zuko told them quietly. “With what I imagine is a pretty decent side-line in getting deserters out of the capital.” He shrugged and pointed to the paper that he’d found earlier. “There’s a whole stack of blank identity cards over there.”

“So, he just didn’t want us risking his operation?” Sokka asked. “But then why’d he change his mind?”

Zuko shrugged. “I think there’re more people in the Fire Nation that support an end to the war than you’d think. Did you notice he changed his mind as soon as Aang told him who he was?”

Sokka snorted. “I still don’t like him,” he insisted with a pout. Then he rolled his cracked knuckles and started making his way over to the shelves. “But he said there was food down here, so I am willing to reconsider my position.”

After a few minutes of snooping, Sokka let out a roar of success and came back to Zuko’s side armed with a box containing a large loaf of bread, a selection of sliced and salted meat, and a large bag of dried fruit and nuts. They all set about demolishing the food with ruthless efficiency. When they were done, Sokka went back amongst the shelves, returning with a large leg of some kind of cooked meat. He slumped down on the sacking on Zuko’s good side, a massive smile on his face.

“I’m a man of simple pleasures,” he admitted, at the incredulous look on Zuko’s face.
They settled down back against the wall in amiable silence. After a few minutes, Katara wandered over to sit next to Aang.

“Are you alright?” She asked him quietly.

“What?” Aang replied with a grin that was just a fraction too wide. “Yes, I’m fine.”

“Only.” Katara continued, as if Aang hadn’t spoken at all. “What you did up there was really brave and also really stupid.” Aang’s face fell. “What would have happened if that man had taken you up on your offer? You know what the Fire Nation would do to you.”

Zuko privately thought that Aang didn’t know what the Fire Nation would do to him, not really, and that that was kind of the problem. The look on Katara’s face however, made him hold his tongue.

“I couldn’t let anyone else get in trouble for me,” Aang said softly, “not after what I did.” He pulled his arms up to hug his knees in tight to his chest.

“I’m so sorry,” he continued, his voice more quiet and subdued than Zuko had ever heard it. “I thought….” He trailed off and took a deep breath. “I don’t know what I was thinking.” He looked up and met each of their eyes, one by one. “I was scared. After everything with Hama…” Katara flinched and Aang took another deep breath. “I just wanted everything to be over. I thought… I don’t know…it doesn’t matter anyway.” He sighed and crossed his arms tightly in front of himself. “I put you all in danger and I ruined the invasion and now everyone might be dead and we’re stuck in the middle of the Fire Nation and Appa’s missing and it’s all my fault!”

“Shh,” Katara told him gently, rubbing her hand softly between his shoulders. His voice had been growing louder at the end, getting dangerously close to the kind of volume someone in the room above might hear, even through the thick floorboards of the cellar. Until the innkeeper came back, they needed to be quiet. “We understand,” Katara consoled, as Aang started sobbing.

Zuko didn’t, but he held his tongue. Part of him was still furious at the young Avatar. Aang was right; the invasion force should never have gotten near the island, let alone the city itself. They were forewarned and they knew that it was a trap; there was absolutely no reason that any of this should have happened. Agni, but how many people had died so pointlessly, on both sides? All because the young Avatar what…freaked out and had a tantrum?

Zuko sighed and stared down at his hands, desperately trying to ignore the quiet hitching sobs that he knew Aang was fighting so hard to control. Because that was where the whole thing fell down and made it so hard to maintain his anger. Of course Aang had had a tantrum, a freak out or whatever; he was a kid, a twelve year old boy forced into circumstances way over his head. The kid literally had the weight of the war hanging on his shoulders and was a spirits-damned pacifist. Zuko knew it was unfair to expect clear-headed and cold-hearted pragmatism from a boy who thought fishing was tantamount to murder. Still, Aang had been arrogant and foolish and had put them all at risk. But he was a kid; he had to be allowed to make mistakes sometimes, right? Zuko realised that his hands were shaking.

“Are you okay?” Sokka whispered in his good ear, sending a shiver down Zuko’s spine.

He turned to Sokka and let out a huff of self-deprecating laughter. “Not even close,” he whispered, a bitter smirk twisting over his lips. “It wasn’t exactly the nicest homecoming.”

“I know.” Sokka pressed his shoulder into Zuko’s.

“I never thought I’d see him again,” Zuko whispered, clenching his fists to try and suppress the
shaking of his hands. “Or survive it, if I did.”

“I know,” Sokka repeated, his voice barely more than a breath.

“He tried to kill me, Sokka,” Zuko said. “Again.”

“You survived,” Sokka told him, reaching over and grabbing his hand tightly. “We got away from him, Zuko, and he is never getting anywhere near you again.”

“You can’t promise that, Sokka.”

“Watch me.” Sokka smiled. “And speaking of getting away from him… what was that move you pulled? I’ve never seen a firebender do that before.”

Zuko shrugged, feeling the heat rise to his cheeks.

“I have no idea,” he admitted. “It’s not an official form or anything; I just reacted.” He leaned in closer towards Sokka, resting his head on Sokka’s shoulder. “I think I copied most of it from Katara’s basic kata.”

“What?” Sokka grinned in surprise. “I had no idea you could do that. Copy stuff from different elements, I mean.”

“Neither did I!” Zuko insisted. “It wasn’t exactly planned, Sokka!”

“Well I was impressed,” Sokka told him, nudging his shoulder gently. “And that doesn’t happen that easily.”

“Yeah right, Sokka.” Toph snorted from across the room, entirely unashamed at eavesdropping on what had been a whispered, private conversation. “What about that time you told that man at the crab shop you’d name your first born son after him? Are you telling me that’s not ‘easily impressed’?”

“I will have you know,” Sokka replied in a tone which conveyed both that he was very put upon and also that he did not deserve such cruel mockery from his friends, “that was the best crab I had ever tasted and I would be honoured to call my son and heir Lee the crab-catcher.” He paused, thoughtfully. “Or was Lee the man at the oyster bar?”

“They were both Lee, Sokka,” Katara said, groaning in exasperation. “And you got sick after eating both, or don’t you remember?”

Sokka spluttered for a few moments and then, in a true display of the dignity befitting the son of the Chief of the Southern Water Tribe, stuck his tongue out at his sister. Katara narrowed her eyes and soon she and Sokka were engaged in full-on sibling bickering. Zuko had long since been reassured that it was all good-natured and, that when they went at each other like rabid dogs, it was simply their way of showing affection. So he relaxed and sat back, watching the verbal sparring for the sheer entertainment factor alone.

Thus Toph, with a surprising demonstration of heretofore unseen social grace, managed to turn the conversation away from Aang’s self-flagellation and Zuko’s unrelenting family issues and into a full-on session of Katara mocking Sokka and his myriad poor life choices. Zuko thought that Sokka bore it all with good grace, playing up his outrage as much as possible for the biggest laughs. He’d managed a few barbs about some guy called Jet, but had quietly let those drop when Katara looked uncomfortable. It seemed they had all needed something to break the tension, and Sokka was more than happy to be the butt of the joke.
At some point in the night, Zuko slipped into a light dose, waking only when the innkeeper returned to the kitchen. Heavy footsteps plodded across the floor, sending showers of dust trickling down on their heads. There was a loud grunt and then a scraping wail as the table was dragged away from the top of the hatch. Finally the trapdoor slammed open and the early morning light rushed in, searing Zuko’s eyes.

“Come on,” the innkeeper urged them, “time to go.” Zuko forced his eyes open. The man was reaching down into the darkness, ready to hand them off to the dubious safety of his contact.

“What’s going on?” Sokka asked urgently.

“Shh!” The innkeeper hissed, looking over his shoulder as if expecting one of the imperial guards to come waltzing in. Zuko prayed to Agni that one wouldn’t. “The driver’s agreed to take you,” he whispered. “He’ll get you to the Port of Sozin, but you’re going to have to get yourselves on a boat.” Zuko finished helping the others out the cellar and the innkeeper quickly closed the door and rushed to put the rug and table back in place. “You’ve got to go now,” he told them urgently. “He won’t wait for you long.”

Glaring at them all to silence any more complaints, the innkeeper led them cautiously out of the kitchen and into a long hallway that ended with the front door. The sound of raised voices and bawdy laughter filtered through the thin walls from the taproom just off to their left. Clearly some of the guards had decided to make a full night of it. Zuko could make out the faint strain of one of the drinking songs that the guards back at camp had shared, as they bent over cups of pilfered wine in the dark and lonely winter nights. All that protected them from immediate discovery was the thin door separating the taproom from the main hallway and the hope that none of the guards felt the need to leave the room until they were safely on their way.

Just outside the front door, a large wooden wagon stood ready for loading. The innkeeper hurried the children round to the back where heavy doors held open on an empty containment area. The five of them all clambered up and hurried to the back, following the innkeeper’s instructions. He left them with one final hissed order to keep quiet, before hurrying back to the bar. He returned moments later and proceeded to fill the rest of the wagon up with row after row of heavy barrels, each stacked two-high and strapped down with thick cord. Within minutes the group of fugitives was completely hidden from view, and their only way out was blocked. It set Zuko’s nerves on edge and he had to forcibly remind himself to keep his breathing calm and steady. They’d chosen to trust the innkeeper and his network of smugglers; the only thing they could do now was keep quiet and let them do their job.

After another tortuous ten minutes or so, the storage area was completely filled. The doors at the back were slammed shut with an almighty thud, and the thick metal bolt slid into place with a screech, locking them in the dark.

Someone bashed the side of the wagon with a hefty thump, and then their driver cracked his whip. The poor dragon moose that was hitched up to the heavy cart let out a startled cry and lurched forward into a slow, trundling walk. Their driver didn’t introduce himself or make any indication that he had stowaways hidden amongst his cargo beyond a cursory comment, seemingly to no one in particular, that the army patrols were out in force on the roads that morning.

They trundled along in silence, wedged uncomfortably against the wooden walls and barrels alike. It was intensely claustrophobic; the only light that came to them snuck its way through the small gaps between the panelled wooden walls. The near-total darkness made everything feel closer and more airless. Whatever suspension their vehicle may once have had had long since been broken beyond all repair and so the poor rural roads jostled them painfully, sending them smashing into one another at
every painful pothole they came across. It was miserable and nerve-wracking and Zuko hated every minute of it.

They were stopped twice on the road by patrols. The first spent a torturous amount of time studying their driver’s paperwork, and even insisted that he open up the back of the wagon so that they could check the veracity of his contracts of carriage. Zuko held his breath from the moment the heavy doors were wrenched open, through the inspection (as cursory as it turned out to be) and only dared to take a breath the moment that the doors were once again locked and their driver was bid to pass through the checkpoint. Zuko knew he wasn’t the only one who had been on edge; Toph was squashed up against him and he could feel her heart hammering.

The second time they were stopped, Zuko had been prepared for yet another ordeal, but it seemed that the soldiers at the next checkpoint were far less concerned with the contents of the wagon and more with the contents of the driver’s wallet. After a few minutes and the jingling of some coins, the wagon was waved through and was making its merry way further and further away from the Fire Nation capital and out towards the northern side of the archipelago, where the Port of Sozin lay. After what felt like another few hours of painfully slow travelling, the driver let out a low cry and gradually coaxed the dragon moose to a halt. Then, with a sigh and a muttered curse, he jumped down from his seat and made his way round to the side of the wagon. He spent another couple of minutes banging and cursing, before there was a loud click; a panel in the side of the wagon, just behind Aang’s shoulders, slid free and they were suddenly blasted with fresh air and daylight.

“Fucking finally,” the driver cursed, and peered into the small compartment. “Right, out you get.”

Zuko’s eyes were stinging at the bright light and his good eye watered badly as he clambered out through the panel and half jumped/half slid his way out into the open air. They were on a narrow dirt track, surrounded by dense, green forest on either side. The wagon was parked completely in the middle of the road, but it was immediately obvious that they were in the middle of nowhere. When he finally blinked away the tears, Zuko could make out the sun high in the sky; it was mid-afternoon still, he concluded. They hadn’t been travelling nearly long enough to reach the port. He spun around to face the driver as the others were slowly adjusting to the bright light.

“This isn’t the Port,” Zuko growled.

The driver shrugged, and slid the hidden panel back into place with a click.

“This is far as I’m paid for,” he told them, scratching at the back of his head. “Someone else will meet you here for the next leg.”

“Hey!” Sokka yelped. “That wasn’t the deal!”

“Not my problem, is it?” The driver shrugged, spat once, eloquently, on the ground and then heaved himself back up into his seat.

“You can’t just leave us here,” Katara yelled, her eyes bright with indignation.

“Someone will be along any minute,” the driver told them, as he picked up his whip. “If not, there’s a hamlet about a half-day’s walk down the road. They’re usually pretty decent about not asking the kind of questions I bet you don’t want being answered.” Then with a crack of his whip, the dragon moose let out another plaintive yowl and started walking once more, pulling the wagon steadily away down the road.

“Wait!” Aang yelled, as the back of the wagon slowly drew further and further away from them.
“The hamlet! You didn’t say which way it was!”

The driver either hadn’t heard him, or didn’t care enough to reply; whichever it was, it didn’t matter. Aang’s voice was lost to the wind, and the wagon soon disappeared, leaving them stranded in the middle of nowhere. They stood around, looking at each other in horrified silence.

“Well, fuck.” Sokka said blankly.

Zuko agreed.

“What are we meant to do now?” Toph asked.

“We could just wait here,” Aang suggested, scratching idly at the by now desperately greasy mop of hair on his head. “He did get us past the checkpoints…”

“Yeah, just to leave us in the middle of nowhere!” Sokka objected. “That’s not exactly filling me with confidence, buddy!”

“Someone’s here,” Toph cut in, abruptly, just as a figure pushed through the treeline a few yards ahead of them. He was tall and thin, dressed in a long white robe; it was immediately familiar, even with the thick coat of mud soaking the hem.

“Isn’t that-” Sokka cut himself off as Zuko nodded in agreement. How had the White Lotus got mixed up in all of this?

The man was hooded, but he bowed to them in a traditional Fire Nation greeting as he hurriedly made his way over.

“My apologies for all the secrecy,” he said immediately. “We only received word of your location last night and we had to cut a few corners to get you out as quickly as possible.”

His voice was clear and rattled out with the kind of speed, efficiency and enunciation Zuko had long-ago learnt to expect from military officers. It was also achingly familiar. It couldn’t be though, could it? The last time he had seen this man, he’d been dragging his unconscious body through an inferno. There was no way he could have survived…but that voice was so familiar.

“Is that you?” Zuko asked faintly, ignoring the looks shot at him by Sokka and the others.

“It’s good to see you alive and well, too, Prince Zuko,” Jee replied, as he flipped his hood down and gave Zuko a tight, rueful grin. “You have no idea how difficult it’s been to find you.”

Chapter End Notes

So what did you think?

The confrontation between Ozai and Zuko was the hardest thing I've had to write so far, so I hope I did it justice?
Yes, Sokka and Zuko have a few snippy moments, but they're teenagers and they've been through a lot, okay? They still love each other.
Aang gets a few little moments of his own in this one. He's just realised exactly how much danger he put his friends in and is trying very hard to make up for that, bless his little cotton socks.
For everyone who's commented about Jee so far-he's alive! And he's with the White Lotus!
I've been sitting on this scene, and a couple of others from the next chapter since I first plotted this baby out. And I finally got around to writing it! Hope you all enjoyed the reveal as much as I enjoyed keeping it secret.

Hope you enjoyed- please let me know your thoughts?
And if anyone wants to chat anything Avatar, I'm on tumblr as justthinkofawonderfulthought.

End Notes

Thanks for reading! Please let me know if you enjoyed it, and if you think I should carry on.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!