The Undying Fire: Balance

by Boogum

Summary

Book 5 of The Undying Fire series. One seeks to consume the world in fire, the other to control it with bonds. When destiny calls, all Zuko and Aang can do is try their best to follow.
"Zuko!"

The prince twitched, still pretty much asleep, when something crashed into him. He yelped, eyes snapping open. A shadowy blur greeted his vision. Hands gripped his tunic and then a familiar voice babbled a string of words at him, all at lightning speed.

Groaning and conjuring flames for light (which he winced at), Zuko directed a very bleary-eyed glare at the monk now sitting on his lap. "Aang," he said, voice hoarse and his hair sticking up everywhere. "Has anyone ever told you that it's not a good idea to tackle people awake? I could have burned you, idiot!"

"Sorry, sorry, sorry, but you don't understand! I had to come and tell you now because I think I saw—well, no, I mean I don't really know if I saw him exactly because—"

Zuko pinched the bridge of his nose with his free hand. The kid was speaking too fast again. "Aang, slow down."

"—there was lots of mist and stuff, and everything was kind of blurry, and—"

"Aang!" Zuko gripped the boy's shoulder. "Stop."

"But—"

"Just stop."

Aang did.

"Now breathe."

Aang did that too. Some of the tension eased from his body and he relaxed more against Zuko.

"Okay." Zuko guided his flames to light the candle on the small dresser, then lifted Aang off his lap and plonked him on the bed. "Now tell me what's going on. Slowly."

Aang leaned forward, eyes bright with excitement. "I think I saw Roku!"

"You serious?"

"Yeah! I was in this misty place, right? And it looked heaps like the Spirit World. Like heaps. And Roku, or at least a guy who looked a lot like Roku, was standing there in the mist and he called my name."

"Wait, how did you get to the misty place?"

"In my dream!"

Zuko scrunched his nose. "That's it? You dreamed about a person, who may or may not have been Avatar Roku, and he called your name?"
Aang pouted. "When you say it like that, it doesn't sound so great."

Zuko just groaned and flopped against the mattress, throwing his arm across his eyes. "I can't believe you woke me up for this."

"Hey, this is serious! What if I really did see Roku?"

"And what if you were just dreaming? Maybe you just saw what you wanted to see."

Aang went quiet. Zuko raised his arm slightly, peering out from the gap to see the boy sitting with slumped shoulders and a dejected look on his face. Oh geez.

Repressing a sigh, Zuko removed his arm from his face and sat up again. "Alright, did anything else happen in your dream?"

It was like the sun came out from behind clouds. Aang grinned and once more leaned forward. "Actually, yeah! I tried to run towards Roku, but when I did the mist just got thicker and I got lost, and I kind of freaked out because no shiny thing appeared this time to help me find Roku again, but then this deep voice was all, 'Come, Avatar Aang', and I turned and was like floating above the ship, and then the world just kind of whooshed forward, except I think I was actually going south, and—"

"Aang. Breathe."

The boy laughed a bit sheepishly and rubbed the base of his neck. "Right. Sorry."

Zuko shook his head in reluctant amusement. Aang made a big show of taking a breath and then told the rest of his dream, thankfully with actual pauses and less meandering. He explained that he sped over the ocean until he came to this little trio of islands. One of them was quite big and looked populated. Then he heard the deep voice again, saying, "Come", and the dream ended.

"I've had a lot of weird dreams," Aang said, "but I don't think this was a normal one. It felt like a message from the spirits. It felt real."

Zuko frowned. "You didn't recognise the islands?"

"Nope. Never seen them before in my life."

"Maybe they're part of the Fire Nation."

"I don't think so. I've actually travelled quite a bit in the Fire Nation … well, at least a hundred years ago. Anyway, like I said, when I was doing that whooshy travel thing, it seemed like I was heading south."

"But there's only the Southern Air Temple and the Southern Water Tribe south of here, and they're both more to the east." His brow creased. "Unless …"

"What?"

"Yuzo and Shizue. I'm pretty sure they said the fire healer tribe lives on an island in the far southwest."

Aang's eyes widened. "Do you think?"

"I don't know, but I think we'd better call a meeting. If you're right and your dream is the work of spirits, this will change our plans."
"Then let's call a meeting!"

Zuko latched onto the back of Aang's collar before he could dash off. "I meant let's call a meeting when everyone is actually awake."

"But—"

"Aang, it's not even dawn. Let them sleep."

*Let me sleep*, he wanted to add. He and Katara had stayed up really late the previous night, and firebenders were *not* night owl-cats. Frankly, Zuko was exhausted.

Aang drooped like a wilting flower. "Fine. I guess it can wait a few hours. But I'm not going to be able to sleep now."

"Try."

"I can't. I'm too awake." He twisted to face Zuko, smile flashing. "I know, we could—"

"No." Zuko, who still held the back of his collar, picked him up by the fabric and carried him towards the door. "I'm tired. I need sleep. You go try sleep."

"But—"

Zuko dropped him on his feet outside the cabin. "Don't come back unless the sun is up." Then he shut the door on Aang and collapsed face-first onto his bed. A tired flick of his hand snuffed the candle.

"Hey, Zuko—"

The prince just groaned and clamped his pillow over his head.

oOo

The meeting was a shambles. Those who had been requested to attend gathered in the mess hall and took their seat around one of the long tables. Zuko's mum, Yuzo, Atsuo, and a still recovering Shizue were quick to confirm that Aang had dreamed of the Ito Islands, home to the fire healer tribe. Then everything went downhill. One of the biggest issues was that some people, including Shizue, doubted whether the dream could be trusted.

"Shūrin knows how to manipulate energy," Shizue reminded them, "and not just the energy within humans either. Remember, she was able to put an ancient spirit to sleep. She also knows the Avatar has lost his connection to his past lives. This could be a trap."

"Or the spirits sent me a message and this is what I need to do," Aang retorted.

"Yes, but if it's from Shūrin—"

"We don't know that!"

The two kept bickering back and forth, others joining in with their own concerns. Zuko frowned as he listened. There was no doubt that travelling to the Ito Islands would be dangerous. The tribe were not welcoming to outsiders, caring only about maintaining secrecy. Even without the Silencers—and there were plenty of them—Shizue informed that many of the tribe were highly trained warriors.

"Going there would be suicide," Shizue said frankly. "We have no idea how deep Shūrin's control is
over the tribe. We all know she can control those bonded to her, not to mention she could be heading there herself. It would be better to stay away."

"I have to agree," Hakoda said, folding his arms across his chest. "It sounds like a lot of risks to take just for a dream."

Aang flushed. "It wasn't just a dream! I'm telling you that the spirits want me to go to the Ito Islands! This is how they communicate with me! This is how it works!"

Katara squeezed his shoulder, then looked up at her dad. "I know you're worried, Dad, but Sokka and I have been travelling with Aang for a while now. This stuff happens sometimes, and it always works out when we follow whatever instructions are given. Right, Sokka?"

"I guess," he said with a shrug. "Never made it any less dangerous, though. Remember the swamp?"

"That was Huu who attacked us," Aang pointed out. "The spirits just wanted to bring me there so I could see a vision of Toph and find the airbender sanctuary."

"Wait." Toph perked up a little. "You had a vision of me?"

He rubbed the base of his neck. "Um, yeah. I needed an earthbending teacher, and the swamp showed me a vision so I'd know you were the one."

"Did you have a vision of any of your other teachers?"

A blink. "No."

"Knew it." Toph stretched out her legs, looking far too smug. "Even the spirits know I'm the most important."

Zuko rolled his eyes. "Toph, this really isn't the time."

She shrugged but continued to look like a smug cat-fox.

"Anyway," Aang said loudly, shooting a frown at Toph, "the point is that now I know I need to go to the Ito Islands if I want to reconnect with my past lives. That's what the dream told me."

"Or it's a trap," Shizue responded.

Aang made a frustrated sound, complete with throwing his hands up in the air and going a bit red in the face. This time it was Zuko who gripped his shoulder in a calming way. He could see the poor kid was about to blow.

"Look," Zuko said, glancing around at everyone gathered, "regardless of how you feel about the dream or the Ito Islands, Aang is the Avatar. The dream came to him. He thinks following the voice will help remove his block. Maybe we should just trust him on this."

Aang looked like he wanted to hug Zuko.

"Blind trust is a little hard to give when lives are at stake," Hakoda said, still frowning.

Zuko looked down, stomach twisting. He remembered the Water Tribe warriors who had been killed on Wu Yao's island. Of course Hakoda would be wary. All the rules of battle had been changed now that mind control and energy bonds had come into play.

"There are other places Aang could enter the Spirit World, right?" Suki said. "Iroh mentioned the
swamp and the Northern Water Tribe oasis."

"I did," Iroh allowed, "but I'm inclined to go along with Aang. The spirits work in mysterious ways, and I find it difficult to believe Shūrin was able to communicate with him through a dream, regardless of her abilities. Perhaps this is just what's best for Aang."

"For what it's worth, I agree with Gram—Iroh," Ty Lee chimed in, elbows propped on the table. "Shūrin is super scary and powerful, but she doesn't have a bond with Aang, and it's her bonds with people she seems to rely on."

"See!" Aang said, rounding back on the naysayers. "It'll be fine."

"It will not be fine!" Shizue retorted. "Even if the dream is as real as you claim, the Ito Tribe is not —"

Ursa placed a hand on Shizue's arm. It was like the instant soothing of a storm. Shizue went silent and stared at her questioningly.

"Do you feel that strongly that you are meant to go to the Ito Islands, Aang?" Ursa asked. Aang nodded.

"Then that is what you shall do."

"Ursa!" Shizue's eyes widened. "You know the tribe won't—"

"Yes, it will be risky," Ursa cut in before Shizue could get going again, "but that does not make it impossible. What we need is a plan."

Sokka sat up straighter. "A plan?"

Ursa and Iroh exchanged a glance. Both had been relatively quiet during the meeting, but there seemed to be a mutual understanding between them now.

"We split up," Iroh said. "A few of us will go with Aang to the Ito Islands and—"

"What?" Katara exclaimed. "You want us to split up?"

"I'm afraid separating was always inevitable," Iroh responded. "Remember, it is crucial that we stop Fire Lord Ozai before the comet arrives."

He went on to remind them how Aang, as they all knew thanks to Avatar Roku's warnings, was supposed to be the one to defeat Ozai, but right now Aang couldn't access the Avatar State. There were three concentrated points of spiritual energy that they knew of: the Spirit Oasis, the Foggy Swamp, and the Ito Islands. Aang had to go to one of them if he wanted to get his abilities back. Unfortunately, the Spirit Oasis and Foggy Swamp were too far by boat. No one would make it for the eclipse invasion.

"The Ito Islands are closer, but there still isn't time to sail there and back to the Fire Nation," Ursa said, shaking her head. "Flying is the only option."

And that meant limited room on the saddle.

Katara tried to argue, saying it would be safer for everyone to stick together, but Iroh was firm in his response that the eclipse wouldn't wait, nor could they. Sure, the eclipse would only offer them a small advantage, but that was still better than nothing when invading the capital. Plus, their allies
were already on the move to get to the rendezvous point.

"We need to be there," Iroh said simply. "We have no choice but to sail straight for the Fire Nation."

Mai looked him dead in the eyes. "And if Baldy gets held up on the dangerous islands?"

"Ideally, Aang and those who go with him will join us before the eclipse. If they can't, we will have to fight on our own."

A grim pause.

Katara's fingers curled into her palms. "And who's supposed to go with Aang?"

"That is what we need to discuss."

Needless to say, the meeting went on for a long time.

oOo

The mood was sombre as everyone dispersed from the mess hall.

"Are you sure about this, Ursa?" Shizue asked with a frown. "It's bad enough we're taking the Avatar back to the tribe, but Zuko as well? I thought you wanted to keep your son safe."

"It seems foolish, doesn't it?" Ursa glanced across the deck to where Zuko was talking with Aang. "I tried to hide him from the tribe for all these years and now I'll guide him to them myself."

"It would be better if he stayed on the ship with the others."

"No." Ursa turned to face the other woman. "Even if Shūrin is targeting him, he's the only one strong enough to go against her. We can't afford any mistakes. This world needs its Avatar."

"Then you think she will go back to the tribe?"

Ursa shook her head in a helpless gesture. "I don't know. I just feel that this is how it's meant to be."

Shizue raised her eyebrow. "You just feel?"

"I guess you could say I'm more in tune with things now."

Both eyebrows went up.

Ursa scratched at the back of her hand, lowering her gaze. "There were … effects from being possessed by that spirit."

"What? Why didn't you say anything? We have to—"

"It's fine. Plus, I don't think this can be fixed."

Shizue's brow creased.

Ursa smiled and touched the other woman's arm. "Don't look so troubled. It really isn't so bad. I talked to Iroh and he said a similar thing happened to him after he travelled to the Spirit World. It's like a heightened sense. I just get a feel for things now."

"And what do you feel?"
She glanced towards her son. "That Zuko and Aang's destinies are tied. We shouldn't separate them."

Shizue frowned but said nothing.

"Honestly, the one I'm more worried about is Azula," Ursa admitted. "I don't think we should leave her behind."

"You aren't seriously suggesting we take her with us?"

"She's … fragile. If I leave without her, I worry she'll react badly."

Shizue sighed. "Fragile or not, you know that girl is a danger to herself and to others."

"Perhaps, but she is my daughter." Ursa's voice softened. "I failed her once, Shizue. I don't want to fail her again. I certainly don't want to send her back to Ozai. She will be better off away from him."

"Then you'd better convince everyone that it's in their best interest to let her go with you."

"I know, but somehow I don't think that's going to be easy."

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Katara sat on a crate in one of the more secluded parts of the deck, foot swinging slightly as she glowered at nothing. Soft footsteps approached.

"You got pretty fired up back there," Suki observed, stretching her arms above her head before taking a seat next to her.

Katara hunched into herself more. "Are you going to tell me I'm being too emotional as well?"

"No. I get why you're mad."

They were both quiet for a moment, just staring out at the ocean.

"I'm not really mad," Katara mumbled. "I just don't think it's a good idea to split up again. We're stronger together. We've always been stronger together. I mean what if something goes wrong, but we're not there to help?" She clenched her hands hard on her lap. "We've had so many close calls."

"It's hard to be the one left behind," Suki agreed. "With a war like this, though …" She shook her head and her tone grew distant and a little sad. "Sometimes there isn't a choice. Sometimes necessity forces you to fight away from those you care about."

Katara sat up straighter, glancing at Suki's profile. "Like you and the Kyoshi Warriors?"

A nod.

"I'm sorry. You must miss them."

"Every day," Suki admitted. "They're my friends, my sisters, my family. The Kyoshi Warriors are everything to me."

"So, why did you decide to come with us?"

It was something Katara had often wondered, though she'd never figured out a tactful way to ask. She hadn't wanted Suki to get the wrong idea and feel unwelcome.
Suki let out a breath. "Because I knew it was the right decision. I love the Kyoshi Warriors, I love being their captain, but this war has been going on for a hundred years. In the same way I knew I had to leave Kyoshi Island, I knew when I ran into all of you again that I couldn't go back to protecting refugees either. Not this time." She frowned at her lap. "I guess you could say I just realised I could make a bigger difference if I followed you."

"Well, for what it's worth, I'm really happy you came with us. I like having you around."

Suki smiled. "Thanks. I like being with you all as well."

"Especially Sokka?" Katara nudged her in the arm.

Suki's smile tightened a bit, though it was only for a split-second. "Well, he is cute and funny, and he's a really good kisser—"

"Ugh, gross. I didn't need to know that."

"Hey, you went there first."

"Lesson learned. I will never tease you about my brother again."

Suki laughed.

The two girls settled into silence again. Katara leaned forward on her palms, once more swinging her feet a bit. Try as she might, she couldn't stop thinking about the meeting—or, rather, the fact she hadn't even got a choice in saying where she would go. The adults had decided she would remain on the ship and somehow that had been that. Zuko and Aang had seemed to just accept it as well. Though, if she were to be honest, it was more Zuko's acceptance that bothered her. After everything they'd been through together …

"I hate this," she muttered.

"Hrm?"

"I really don't want us to split up. I mean, I get why they have to limit the number of people who go with Aang, and I get that they don't want to bring too many outsiders to the tribe, but I can fight. I can help."

Suki's mouth twitched. "Are you sure it's the splitting up part that's bothering you? Sounds like you just want to join Team Bison and Spirit Mumbo Jumbo so you can rush into danger with them."

"You know, you really don't have to use my brother's labels. I think this might be one of his worst."

"I dunno. It's kind of catchy." Suki poked her in the ribs. "And don't think I don't realise you're trying to change the subject."

Heat touched Katara's cheeks. She should have known she wouldn't be able to escape the conversation. "Okay, fine," she said heavily. "I want to go with them. Shūrin is targeting Zuko, not to mention we only just got him back. And Aang? He almost died in Ba Sing Se. I watched over him every day he was in that coma." She frowned at her hands. "I'm not used to being apart from them. I don't want to be apart from them."

Suki squeezed her shoulder. "They'll be okay."

"Will they?"
Katara had always been known as the optimistic one, but there had just been so many close calls. Not to mention there were things she had done to protect her friends that made her own heart seize and shiver. Even now, she remembered how it had felt to bend Ursa's blood—the heady pulse of power and control, the sickening ease of it all.

She could have stopped Ursa's heartbeat with a simple twist of her fingers.

But that wasn't what scared her. What really kept her up at night, waking from nightmares in cold sweats and with her heart thumping, was the thought of what would have happened had she not been there. In Ba Sing Se, on Wu Yao's island, all those desperate moments. The simple truth was that, without her, Zuko and Aang probably wouldn't be alive right now. Ursa would likely still be possessed.

How was she supposed to let them leave?

When Katara voiced these concerns, Suki went quiet, expression pensive.

"You know one of my biggest regrets?" Suki said softly.

"What?"

"I wasn't there when Sis died."

"Sis? You had a sister?"

Those were the wrong words to blurt ("I'm sorry" would have been much better), but Katara was stunned. Suki had never mentioned anything about a sister or family. Fortunately, the older girl wasn't offended. She just shook her head, a sad smile touching her lips.

"Not blood-related. Mum died when I was young, and I don't know who my dad is. But Sis … she took me in. Raised me."

"How did she …"

"Die?"

Katara nodded.

"Pirates. They used to come sometimes, raiding for rare goods and snatching people with blue eyes."

"Blue eyes?" Katara blinked. "Why people with blue eyes?"

Suki balled her hands into fists. "The Fire Nation had bounties out for waterbenders. Kyoshi Island has history with the Southern Water Tribe, though as far as I know, no one on Kyoshi is a waterbender. But sometimes this still happens. She pointed at her own eyes, which were bright blue.

Katara swallowed against the sudden dryness in her throat. Oh no, oh no. She did not like where this story was going.

"So, when I was eleven, these pirates came to our village. Sis was the captain of the Kyoshi Warriors then. I wanted to fight beside her, but she said I was too young and that I'd just make myself a target." Suki closed her eyes. "A lot of the warriors were killed that night. Sis … her body was never found."

"I'm so sorry."
It was all Katara could say, even as her fingers worked their way to the necklace around her throat. She'd had no idea the people of Kyoshi Island had suffered such raids.

Suki played with her tunic. "A part of me used to hope she was still alive out there—maybe injured or kidnapped by the pirates—but as the months passed, I realised she wasn't coming back. Deep down, I think I'd always known." A small exhale. "The thing is, I doubt it would've made a difference if I'd fought at her side. I just hate that my last memory of Sis was the two of us arguing. I hate that I'll never know what really happened, that I never even got to bury her."

"You wanted closure."

"Yeah, I wanted closure."

Katara pulled Suki into her arms. The girl returned the embrace briefly before pulling back.

"You're probably wondering why I'm telling you all this," Suki said with a wry smile. "I guess what I'm trying to say is: if you feel that strongly about sticking with Zuko and Aang, then make it happen. Fight for your place at their side. We don't know what the future will bring, but at least you'll be there with them. At least you won't have regrets."

"You're right." Katara stood up. "I can't give up so easily."

Suki smiled and gave her a light push to her back. "Then go get your spot on that saddle."

Katara took a few steps only to pause, glancing back over her shoulder. "Suki?"

"Yeah?"

"I think your sis would be really proud of you. You're one of the best warriors I know, but more than that, you're a great friend."

Surprise glinted in Suki's eyes and then she laughed. "Stop it, you're going to make me blush."

Katara just smiled at her warmly before dashing off down the deck. Time to get that spot on Appa's saddle.

oOo

In the end, eight—or nine, counting Momo—were to head for the Ito Islands. Ursa, Shizue, Aang and Zuko were a given. Yuzo and Atsuo would also be accompanying, and Katara and Azula were the last minute additions. There had been some unhappy murmurs about Azula joining them, but then (as Ursa had rightly pointed out), if they felt Azula couldn't be trusted that much, taking her back to the Fire Nation would be a worse decision.

Not everyone was happy about Katara going either. Hakoda had tried to get her to reconsider, but she'd won herself allies in Aang, Zuko, Yuzo and Atsuo. Ursa had clinched the matter by saying she owed Katara her freedom and wasn't about to turn the girl away if she really wanted to come. They would make it work.

So the eight packed up their things and made their goodbyes. Katara hugged her dad and brother tight enough to hurt her own ribs, but her heart was at peace when she settled on the bison with the others. This was the right decision. Her family would be okay, and she was going to make sure Zuko and Aang would be okay as well.

"We'll see you at the rendezvous point," Iroh said.
Aang nodded and gripped the reins. "Yip, yip!"

Then they were flying and leaving the ship far behind.

Chapter End Notes

Kyoshi Island just kind of confuses me because the Kyoshi Warriors all look so young (Suki is the captain and she's only 15 or 16). So I tried to read up any outside facts about it, but it's all "the island never had much problems before Zuko came looking for the Avatar" blah blah.

Then where are all the adult warriors?

Like, there are a few adults around, but also not really. It's weird. So here I've delved a little into my own headcanon for Suki and the island's history itself.
Ursa tied the grey cloth around Aang's head so his arrow tattoo was covered. His airbender attire had also been replaced with a tunic and pants in greys and dullish reds, which had been found on the ship and adjusted to fit his small frame. "Remember, you can't let anyone know you're the Avatar," she warned. "You're going to be Kuzon, Lee and Ruolan's younger brother."

"Hear that, Zuko?" Aang said with a grin. "We're brothers now."

Zuko gave him a distracted smile before shifting his attention back to his mother. "What about Appa? Won't that be a giveaway?"

"Not at all. The Ito Islands are actually home to a herd of air bison."

"What?" Aang practically floated in the air. "There are flying bison there?"

She nodded.

Aang gusted in a blur of colour to dangle over Appa's face, trying to hug as much as he could. "You hear that, buddy? You're not the only one! This is amazing!"

He continued to chat with Appa and Momo, his delight as warm and bright as the sun.

Azula frowned. "So, Zuko and I will be twins, and the bald brat will be our younger brother. What if people notice the family resemblance between us, Mother?"

"They won't."

"How can you be so certain?"

Ursa spread her arms. "Look at me."

It was an invitation to see how haggard and thin she had become. Her beauty had been ravaged by sunken eyes and jutting bones, and in that the traces of her which could be seen in her children were indeed barely recognisable. She went on to assure them that no one would think to question the lie too much. The easier truth to swallow was that Shizue and Ursa had found a Free Walker (Lee) and brought him and his family back to the islands with them. Yuzo and Atsuo, of course, would act as if they had run into them and decided to peaceably return.

Katara bit her lip. "Um, I understand why we can't be ourselves and all, but is it really necessary to make Zuko my husband?" Colour darkened her cheeks. "Couldn't I be a cousin or something?"

"I wondered that as well," Zuko mumbled, his own face heating.

"I'm afraid that won't work," Ursa said frankly. "We don't want to stretch the connection too much. It would be different if Katara could be a relative of Yuzo's, but everyone in the tribe knows his family."

"Or what's left of it," Yuzo muttered, even as he translated for Atsuo. "Shen's my only living relative."
Katara lowered her gaze. "Oh."

"I didn't think it would be a problem," Ursa said. "Aren't you two dating?"

"Dating?" Katara squeaked, going bright red.

Zuko, meanwhile, had choked on his own spit and fell into a coughing fit. Atsuo leaned over and patted him on the back, though his mouth twitched a little as if he was trying not to laugh.

"I get the feeling I mistook the situation," Ursa observed. "I'm sorry. I just assumed …"

"We're not dating," Katara managed to get out. "We're just—we're just friends."

Azula snorted.

Zuko shot his sister a frown. She raised her eyebrow and glanced between him and Katara. It didn't help that Yuzo, Atsuo, Aang and Shizue looked just as sceptical. Zuko's face got even hotter. Even the tips of his ears felt warm. Geez, everyone had really thought he and Katara were dating.

"We're not in a relationship!" Katara and Zuko insisted, then exchanged an awkward, blushing glance.

"Well, you'd better get used to the idea of being in one," Shizue said bluntly, "because you're going to be acting as husband and wife while we're on the Ito Islands. That's the only way she gets in without the tribe wanting to imprison her on the spot."

Katara bit her lip and once more glanced his way. Her cheeks were still flushed, and he knew by the warmth radiating from his own face that he looked much the same. "Is that okay with you?" she asked.

"I don't mind if you don't."

"I'm okay with it."

Ursa clapped her hands. "Then it's settled. Now just don't forget your covers and hopefully this will be enough to get us through."

"And if it's not?" Azula questioned.

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that."

oOo

The Ito Islands were hidden behind a veil of fog. Shizue explained how the surrounding sea was rough, full of jutting rocks, and giant sea serpents. There was also a passage that was by no means an easy feat to navigate. In short, most people who dared to sail this far never made it to the main island.

"How did the tribe settle here then?" Katara asked. "How do any of you even leave? I mean, Silencers are always going back and forth, right?"

"There is a legend passed down in the tribe that the fire healers who fled the massacres were led here by an ancient spirit," Ursa explained. "It took them through the waters to where they could be safe, and it has protected the tribe ever since. We ask for its blessing every time we leave."

"And we have sea charts that show the safest path," Yuzo put in.
Ursa smiled. "That too."

Aang twisted around to face them, reins gripped in his hands. "What kind of spirit? What's its name?"

"The legend didn't say, but when you spoke of your dream and the voice that called to you, I wondered if perhaps you had heard the Ito Tribe's guardian. Perhaps the legend is true."

Zuko's brow creased. If the legend was true, that meant the spirit had helped Shūrin as well. He wasn't sure what to think about that.

"Look," Shizue said, gesturing ahead as the wall of fog began to lessen. "We're here."

They broke through the misty shroud and came into a sphere of sunlight and clear skies. Zuko's eyes widened. He and Katara leaned over the saddle, stunned at how the three islands below were perfectly contained within the mist.

"Wow," Aang said in open wonder. "It's like we're in the eye of a storm."

"Isn't it?" Ursa smiled at their reactions, though Azula just sat with her left arm limp at her side and doing her best to appear unimpressed. "The fog has always been there like a barrier. It never clears, never encroaches. We're not even sure what creates it."

Zuko continued to peer over the saddle as Appa drew closer. The three islands were positioned like a triangle. One was small, a mere blip of rock and shore that had a few scraggly bits of vegetation on it. The next one was round, had no real beach, and was covered in a forest. Then there was the biggest, which—at least from their aerial view—was a pattern of grassy plains, forests, and cliffs. A small river could be seen tracing a path and breaking off into smaller streams like silvery veins.

"I can't believe this place has been here the whole time," Katara murmured.

Azula smoothed a wrinkle from her tunic. "I'm more concerned with what kind of greeting we'll receive."

"Looks like we'll soon find out," Shizue said, eyeing the group of people waiting for them on the high, grassy plain, which Appa was fast approaching. "The welcoming committee is already here. I guess the sages sensed us coming."

Atsuo's hands moved to form words, his expression tense. Yuzo signed something back and rubbed his shoulder in a reassuring gesture.

"Something wrong?" Katara asked.

"He's anxious," Yuzo explained. "We did run away from the tribe after all. That's usually a punishable offence."

"I thought having Ursa and Shizue with you meant there wouldn't be any problems."

"There shouldn't be—at least nothing major." Yuzo shook his head. "Don't worry about it. Atsuo always panics last minute."

His boyfriend gave him a light whack on the arm for that comment, though all he earned was an unrepentant grin.

Zuko swallowed and focussed his attention on the group of people below them. There were about
thirty of them, all dressed in hooded outfits of browns and greens to blend in with the grasslands and
trees. Their faces were covered by wooden masks. Some of the warriors had bows in their hands,
others grasped swords or spears. Then there were those who held no weapon, perhaps firebenders or
chi blockers.

His heart thumped uncomfortably fast. He really hoped his Mum and Shizue were right that the tribe
would buy their lies.

Appa slumped to the grass not far from the group, letting out a tired rumble. Aang praised him for all
his hard work and jumped off his perch. Zuko and the others joined him on the ground and faced the
warriors. It took all of Zuko's self-control not to shift into a defensive stance. The masks gleamed in
bronze-gold paint and had been carved to look like some kind of beast with two jutting, lower fangs.
Hardly a welcoming sight. His instincts screamed threat, threat, threat.

Ursa stepped forward and placed her fist to her palm, lowering into a bow before the masked warrior
at the head of the group. She offered a formal greeting and began to explain the story of how she and
Shizue had found a Free Walker and his family, though she'd barely got into it before the warrior
held up a hand to silence her. Zuko's heart thumped faster and there was a tense moment as the group
of eight—or ten, including Momo and Appa—all glanced at each other.

Had they been discovered already?

The warrior removed the mask, revealing an older woman with reddish-brown eyes and rather
familiar features. Zuko couldn't place why she looked so familiar until Atsuo made a strangled
sound, drawing his attention. The woman and Atsuo looked almost identical. Same nose, same
eyebrows, same jet-black hair.

Atsuo signed something to her. She gave him a long, hard look before she sheathed her jian sword
and turned her back on him. It was like being slapped with cold. Even Zuko cringed at the obvious
snub.

"This way," the woman said in a clipped tone. "The sages are waiting for you."

There seemed to be no choice but to follow. The warriors had them surrounded, and though Zuko
glanced at his mum as if to ask if this was really the best idea, all she did was nod. Mindful of the fact
they had roles to play, Zuko stuck close to Katara, Aang and Azula as they began to trek for the
forest. The unmasked woman was still in front and had not bothered to look back, not even at Atsuo,
who just looked crushed. His shoulders were so slumped it was like he might sink into the ground.

Zuko leaned closer to Yuzo. "Who is that woman?"

"That's Chiyo, the Head Warrior of our tribe. She's Atsuo's Mum."

"His mum?" Katara said, eyes widening. "But she completely ignored him."

Yuzo's gaze flickered to the stocky woman striding at the lead. "Chiyo is probably mad that he left.
No doubt she considers his behaviour a betrayal and a dishonour to their family."

Atsuo hunched more into himself, shoulders creeping up to his ears. Yuzo seemed to realise he was
only making things worse, as he was quick to sign an apology and what looked like reassuring
words. The two continued to talk to each other in their silent language.

Zuko left them to it and focussed on keeping his expression calm, despite the nerves tingling under
his skin. He really didn't like being surrounded by so many masked people with weapons.
They entered the forest and soon came to a stone archway that overlooked a path leading farther into the trees. Katara nudged him and pointed out how the beast's face that adorned the masks was the same as the one etched onto the archway.

"Hey, you're right," Aang said, joining them by the archway and tilting his head from side to side. "It doesn't look very happy, does it?"

Zuko pressed his palm to his forehead. "Making it look happy would defeat the purpose of why they use this creature on their gates and warrior masks, A—Kuzon."

Aang shrugged. "Well, if it were up to me, I'd want my mask to look happy."

A choked laugh came from one of the warriors near them, who must have overheard the comment. Aang grinned and tried to strike up a conversation with the person. Katara, meanwhile, had turned to Ursa and asked what the creature was meant to be and why it was so special. His mother said it was supposed to represent the Ito spirit guardian.

Zuko's brow furrowed as he glanced at the unnerving masks all around him. Now that he thought about it, he was sure he had seen that beast's face before …

Chiyo led them into an underground passage, much to Appa's displeasure. Those who could bend fire lit the way. Eventually, they came to a pair of stone doors, again etched with that strange creature. Chiyo knocked twice, paused, and gave a final knock. The doors groaned and rumbled as they were pulled open from the other side. Then Zuko could only blink.

This was no small village. There were three levels to the main cavern—at least that he could see—all connected by bridges and stone steps. Dome-shaped houses and buildings dotted everywhere. Light filtered in golden streams from the small openings in the cavern roof, but there were also gleaming crystals jutting from the rock and torches fixed into sconces. At the far end of the cavern, steps rose up and up to what looked like some kind of two-storeyed temple.

"I don't know why, but I was expecting something smaller," Aang said, scratching his cheek.

"All of the tribe lives in these caverns," Yuzo explained. "The caves keep going, but we mostly stick to this area. It's safer that way."

Zuko continued to look around curiously as they headed for the temple. People bustled about—men, women, and children—but they stopped and stared now. Whispers hummed. It was difficult to tell whether the tribe was intrigued by the sight of the newcomers or just distrustful.

By the time they reached the temple steps, many of the warriors had separated off down other paths. Only a dozen remained, including Chiyo. Small, pillar-like structures cradling fire led in two rows to the entranceway. The temple itself was simple with an image of the sun and two more of those strange creatures carved over the door.

"Shota, you remain with the bison," Chiyo said in her clipped way. "The rest of you follow me."

"He has a name, you know," Aang said with a frown. "It's Appa."

Chiyo gave him one of those long, hard looks. The silence got awkward.

"Don't mind my brother." Azula had moved to stand behind Aang and now placed her hand on his shoulder, no doubt to give him a warning pinch. "He's a little overprotective of the fluff ball."

Aang stared at Azula's hand, then laughed a bit nervously. "Uh, yeah."
Chiyo said nothing and walked up the steps to enter the temple. The warrior who had stood on her left guided Appa off to the side, while everyone else was left to go inside. Incense hit with a faintly floral scent. Seven people sat on cushions at the opposite end of the room. These had to be the sages. The seven wore red robes and were a mixture of women and men—some silver haired and wrinkled like old parchment, others who looked to be around their forties.

Zuko glanced at the walls and saw they had been etched with murals, most featuring people creating energy bonds. Definitely a temple for fire healers.

"So, you have indeed returned."

It was the man seated in the middle of the row of sages who had spoken. His voice was as frail as the thinnest of rice paper. He looked like he was withering away as well—a small, hunched thing with only tufts of silver hair left. His eyes drooped a little as if he were about to fall asleep, but when Zuko caught his gaze, it was to find himself trapped by piercing, pale gold eyes.

Ursa stepped forward and bowed low. Shizue gestured at the others with a hand behind her back for them to do the same. Once the bowing, introductions and formalities were out of the way, Ursa explained their cover story in a calm, respectful tone. Shizue was then called upon to add her input. Finally, the wizened leader of the sages, An Dung, asked Zuko and his "family" a few questions. Zuko was glad that his mum had prepared him for such an interrogation; he had never been a good liar, especially not when put on the spot.

"You seem a bit young to be married," an elderly lady named Cam observed, looking between Zuko and Katara.

"Lee turns seventeen this year," Ursa offered.

"Oh?" Her gaze drifted to Katara in question. "What about you, Kana?"

"I, um, actually turn fifteen tomorrow."

"You do?" Zuko and Aang blurted.

Both boys froze as they realised their mistake.

"I mean of course Kana's birthday is tomorrow!" Aang declared with a huge smile. "I totally knew that. How could I ever forget my favourite sister-in-law's birthday?"

Zuko resisted the urge to facepalm. This was getting more and more painful. Fortunately, Katara didn't miss a beat.

"You forgot my birthday, Kuzon?" She made a show of pouting, then turned to Zuko. "And what's your excuse, hrn?" A teasing smile curved her lips and she pressed herself against his side, poking his cheek with her finger. "A good husband would remember his wife's birthday."

Pink bloomed under her fingertip. "I … uh …" He cleared his throat. "Sorry?"

Azula rolled her eyes. "Newlyweds."

That one muttered line seemed to satisfy Cam. She smiled indulgently at Zuko and Katara and wished them a happy marriage and plenty of children.

"Er, thanks," Zuko mumbled with a blush. "I guess …"
A few more questions were tossed at the group. Then Taiyo, a thin man who looked to be the youngest of the sages, chose to speak up. "Fascinating as this all is," he said, "I admit I'm curious to know where Lady Ursa and Shizue have been these past three years. It is strange that we received no word from either of you."

Ursa didn't even twitch. "Perhaps that is a discussion for after. Lee and his family are surely tired and need to be settled in. Don't you agree?"

"Indeed, indeed," Cam said, and her gaze shifted to Atsuo and Yuzo. "Besides, there are other things we still need to discuss."

The two boys grimaced. That sounded like Ito Tribe sage code for deciding on a punishment.

With that decided, Zuko, Katara, Azula and Aang were prompted to bow again before they were dismissed and ushered off by three warriors.

"Where are we going now?" Katara asked.

"To your new home," one of the warriors said. "I hope you'll like it."

oOo

Aang settled on one of the cushions in the main living area and helped himself to some fruit. Momo scampered over to join him. "I thought that went pretty well," Aang declared in between mouthfuls of pear.

Azula raised her eyebrows. "You really are an idiot."

His brow furrowed.

She rolled her eyes in a rather dramatic way. "They're suspicious of us."

"Huh? But they let us in. They even gave us this house."

"And now there are warriors lingering outside. You think that's because they have nowhere else to go?"

Katara rubbed her arms as if to chase off a shiver. "It's like Ba Sing Se all over again."

"Pretty much," Zuko muttered, collapsing on a cushion next to Aang. "We'll have to be careful."

Aang looked sadly at his half-eaten pear. "You think they'll turn on us like Long Feng did?"

Azula let out a small snort. Everyone stared at her.

"I'm sorry, I just find it pathetic you even fell for Long Feng's traps."

"Hey, we knew he wasn't trustworthy," Aang retorted. "We just—"

"That makes it even more pathetic."

Katara pursed her lips. "You don't get the right to judge. We all know what you did in Ba Sing Se."

Azula's eyes flickered with something sharp. "Well, at least I wasn't a fool who got caught in other people's schemes."
"No, you just went around starting revolutions and betraying everyone who got near you."

"I did what was—"

"What was what? What was necessary?"

Azula's eyes narrowed.

"You know, I can understand why you got rid of Long Feng. I can even understand why you started the revolution, but Sokka and Smellerbee told me what happened with Jet." Katara shook her head, her voice hardening. "What was your justification then? Did you tell yourself his death was necessary as well?"

"You don't know anything, peasant."

"I know he cared for you. I also know you killed him."

Azula's fingers twitched as if resisting the urge to curl into fists; her expression, however, was ice smoothed on stone. "I gave Jet the choice to surrender. He refused."

"So you just killed him?"

"That fool was consumed by his hate for the Fire Nation. It was an obsession. I knew he wouldn't back down, and I still had a city to conquer."

"Well, it was all for nothing because you still lost in the end." Katara's voice got tarter. "Oh, and let's not forget how you tried to kill your own brother after he healed you. You're lucky we even—"

"Okay, okay." Zuko stepped between them, not liking the dark glint growing in his sister's eyes. "We all remember what happened in Ba Sing Se, so let's just leave it there."

A sharp smile suddenly curved Azula's lips. "Why? Worried I'll hurt your precious peasant?"

"You wish," Katara retorted, raising her chin. "You wouldn't even be able to touch me."

"Is that a challenge?"

Aang cleared his throat, albeit a bit hesitantly. "Um, maybe we should—"

"Oh, be quiet," Azula snapped. "If I want your opinion, I'll ask for it."

"Don't talk to him like that!"

"Or you'll do what? Shout at me some more? Go ahead. Blow all our covers while you're at it."

Zuko pinched the bridge of his nose. He had might as well be invisible for all Azula and Katara were taking notice of him. Worse, their argument was only escalating.

"Katara, can we talk?" he muttered, grabbing her arm.

She protested a little but didn't resist his light tug. Soon, he was closing the door to one of the bedrooms, shutting them both in. Aang would just have to deal with being alone with Azula for a bit.

"Your sister is infuriating!" Katara exclaimed. "And why did you pull me away like that? You make it look like I'm the one in the wrong!"
"Sorry. I didn't know how else to get you two to stop fighting." He shrugged. "She doesn't exactly listen to me."

"That's because she's a horrible person."

Zuko didn't refute the claim. Katara took this as a sign to continue to rant about how much Azula was the worst. When she was finished, she was breathing hard, her cheeks a little flushed, and had her hands clenched.

"Better?" he asked.

A rueful laugh escaped her. "No. I don't think it'll matter how much I vent, she'll still make me angry."

"My sister tends to have that effect."

Katara sighed and sat on the bed. "She's just so unapologetic. It was easier to ignore on the ship. I can even admit I felt a bit sorry for her, but now …"

"I know." He joined her on the bed. "But she has helped us."

Quite a lot, actually, and not just back on Wu Yao's island or with Ty Lee. Azula's lying skills were far superior to his. Katara and Azula had made a good tag team back in the temple.

"I'm not saying she can't be helpful," Katara allowed, "but sometimes she drives me crazy. I just don't understand how someone can be so callous. It's like she doesn't care at all about others—not their feelings, not if she hurts them, not anything."

"She's always been that way."

"If by perfect you mean cruel and manipulative, then yeah."

He lowered his gaze, picking at the blanket with his fingers. It was a moment before he spoke.

"Mum says we should try to be patient with her."

Katara scrunched her nose.

"I know, I know. Easier said than done, but I think Azula actually has got better."

"Are you kidding? You heard the way she was talking back there."

He picked at the blanket more agitatedly. "Look, I know she's not an easy person to be around, but I … I almost gave up on her before. After Ba Sing Se, I really thought that was it. I thought there was no hope for her. But then all this stuff with Shūrin happened and she … I do think Azula has changed. Maybe only a little, but she's trying."

"Well, she has a funny way of showing it."

"I wasn't much better when I was still hunting Aang." He looked her in the eyes. "You hated me then—you know you did—and I'd be the first to admit I deserved it. But I'm different now. Maybe … maybe Azula can change as well."

Katara lowered her gaze. "You know, I actually thought the same when I visited her on the ship. One of the reasons I tried to help her was because she reminded me of you."
"Of me?"

She nodded, then let out a small sigh. "But after hearing her talk about Jet and all that happened in Ba Sing Se, I just don't know anymore …"

He was quiet for a moment. There was a heavy, wriggly weight in his stomach. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"Is it … is it because of Jet that you got so mad before?"

A light flush touched her cheeks. "Why would you think that?"

"It's just, um, you were so adamant in Ba Sing Se that we should stay away from him, but then you seemed pretty upset when you found out he died, and with the way you talk about him now, I just wondered if …"

"If what?"

"If you still had feelings for him."

Katara's eyes widened. "Is that what you think? That I have feelings for Jet?"

"I, uh, heard you used to have a thing for him."

"Did Sokka tell you that?" She scowled at a random point on the wall as if seeing through it to her brother's face. "I bet he did. That gossiping little …"

"So it's true?"

She blanched. "What? No, I just … Jet was just …" A heavy sigh. "Okay, yes. I had a crush on him. Back then, I hadn't met many boys around my age, and he was attractive, charming. He made me feel pretty. He looked after all these kids and he seemed so brave …"

The wriggly weight in Zuko's stomach got more unsettled. It sounded like she had really admired the guy.

She frowned and drew patterns on her knee with her finger. "Jet was the first boy I kissed. The only boy I've kissed. I really liked him, but then he tried to trick me into drowning an entire town of people. Her fingers curled into her palms. "I wished I'd never met him after that. I still do."

"Then … you don't have feelings for him?"

She shook her head. "I got over that crush a long time ago. I think now I'm more just … I don't know. Sokka said Jet went to Ba Sing Se to have a fresh start. Maybe he actually wanted to change, maybe he could have changed in time, but instead he—"

"Met my sister."

They both went quiet.

"I heard he fell in love with her," Katara said softly. "That's how she manipulated him. She used his feelings for her against him. Some might say it's poetic justice after what he did to me, but I can't get any satisfaction from it. She killed him, Zuko. She killed him and she doesn't even seem to care."
His brow creased. "I'm not sure if that is the case. Azula isn't always easy to read, and she definitely is lacking when it comes to empathy, but she said she gave him a chance to surrender. That's kind of a big deal. Azula never offers mercy to anyone."

Katara scrunched her nose. "You really set the bar low for her, don't you?"

"I grew up with her. I learnt not to expect much."

"That doesn't make her behaviour okay."

"No, I know. Believe me, I know." His frown deepened. "But I think … I think I'm also beginning to understand her a little better. Maybe."

She sighed and rested her head against his shoulder. "Then you're doing better than me. I'm not sure I even want to understand her."

"Sometimes I don't either," Zuko admitted. "Like I said before, I'm not denying it's hard to be around her. I feel it too. Honestly, sometimes when I look at her all I see is lightning. I see the way she smiled when she tried to kill me."

Katara stilled and looked up at him.

"But she is trying. She put herself at risk to protect me, lost the use of her arm and everything. I can't … I can't not give her at least a chance. I mean you all gave me one." His mouth curved a little, if a bit sadly. "And I don't think I would have made it on my own."

Blue eyes held his for a moment. Then she simply slipped her hand in his and nestled back into his shoulder. "Well, how can I argue with that?" A beat. "But if she tries to hurt you again, I'm not holding back."

He laughed. "Fair enough."

Chapter End Notes

Had to split this one because it was getting a bit long.

On another note, the AtLA world kind of confuses me because it doesn't seem to acknowledge how seasons work in terms of hemispheres, but whatever. In the case of this story, Katara's birthday is summer in the northern hemisphere and winter in the south (which makes her born in winter).
A welcome feast was to be held that night. Shizue came to collect them and act as their guide. Much to Zuko, Azula and Katara's relief, she also brought with her a stash of warmer clothes for them all to change into since the shift from summer to winter had not been easy on any of them. The Ito Islands' climate was relatively temperate, but it was still cold in the caves. Only Aang turned his nose up at the clothes.

"I don't need those," he said frankly. "I don't even like wearing all these layers." He tugged at his grey undershirt, which had long sleeves.

"Well, right now you are supposed to be a firebender named Kuzon, not an airbender who doesn't feel the cold." Shizue thrust his bundle into his chest. "Get dressed."

"But it's got fur on it."

"So what?" Azula said, already doing up the ties to her fur-lined tunic.

"I'm an Air Nomad. We just … we don't wear things like this."

Shizue folded her arms across her chest. "If you don't wear it, it'll look suspicious."

"But—"

"No buts."

Aang looked to Zuko with pleading eyes.

"You can't force him, Shizue," Zuko said in what he hoped sounded like a confident voice. Even he had trouble standing up to her sometimes.

"People will think it odd if he doesn't wear something thicker," she pointed out. "Do you really want to draw more attention to yourselves?"

Katara placed her hand on Aang's shoulder. "We'll just have to take that risk. It's not fair to force him to do things that go against his culture."

Aang smiled up at her.

"So sentimental," Azula said with a roll of her eyes. "It's just a bit of fur."

"The monks taught us that—"

"Yeah, I really don't care." She cast a glance at her brother. "I expected Miss Bleeding Heart to behave this way, but you should know better than to encourage him. You know what happens when you let compassion outweigh logic."

Zuko's fingers curled into his palms. "Just leave it, Azula."

"You know I'm right."
"And if I did everything your way, you wouldn't even be here. You would have died in that throne room!"

They stared at each other for a tense moment. Then her lips curved into a sharp smile and she held her hands palm up. "Fine. We'll do it your way. Just don't blame me if things go wrong." She stalked out of the room without another word.

"She is so aggravating," Katara grumbled.

Zuko sighed. "But it's true that people will think it odd." He turned to Aang. "We won't force you to wear the fur, but you're still going to have to wear some layers and act like you're cold, okay?"

Aang nodded. "It's habit to bend the air around me, but I can stop doing it." He must have done so then as he immediately started shivering and huddled into himself. "Ohh, that's cold. How do you guys deal with this all the time?"

A laugh escaped Katara and she pulled him into a hug, warming him with her own body. "We can't have you freezing. Let's find you some Air Nomad friendly layers."

Shizue just pinched the bridge of her nose. "All of you always have to make things more complicated, don't you?"

oOo

The feast was held in a large cavern that opened up to the stars. Low tables of food had been set out and people sat around them on cushions. Zuko and the others had been seated at a table of honour near the front, though warriors always lingered close. It was easy to spot the ones on duty thanks to the creepy masks they wore.

"I still can't see M—Ursa," Zuko said, correcting himself at the last second. He leaned past Aang to look at Shizue. "Isn't she coming?"

A frown creased her brow and she glanced at the high table where the sages sat, though An Dung, the head sage, was missing. "She said she'd meet us here."

"Hey, there's Atsuo and Yuzo," Aang said, and waved energetically at the two boys as they headed for a table a couple of rows down from them.

Yuzo gave a half-hearted wave back, but Atsuo kept his gaze fixed down, shoulders slumped. He looked like he wanted to sink into the stone.

"I'm guessing they didn't get let off that easily," Katara said with a frown. She was seated on Zuko's right, close enough that their arms often brushed.

"Actually, the sages chose to let them off with community service work," Shizue responded, "but Chiyo is not so forgiving."

Aang scratched his cheek. "That's Atsuo's mum, right?"

A nod.

"I hope he'll be okay," Katara murmured.

Zuko just frowned. Azula also said nothing and continued to sip her drink from where she sat on Katara's other side. He wondered if she, like him, was thinking of their father. Ozai had never been
The feast continued. Several performances were put on for their entertainment. Aang was delighted by a group who put on a fire dance, which he claimed was pretty similar to a dance that had used to be performed during the Sun Festival back in the Fire Nation a hundred years ago. One of the tribesmen farther down their table must have heard the comment, because he stared at Aang as if the kid had grown an extra head. Zuko elbowed Aang in the side.

"Or so I heard at school." Aang laughed nervously and rubbed the base of his neck. "I went to school, you know."

Azula sighed and placed her cup down hard enough to draw attention. "Really, Kuzon? With the way you talk sometimes, people wouldn't think you've studied anything except how to be a noisy brat."

"Hey!"

She smirked.

The tribesman smiled at their antics, seeming to accept the explanation, and went back to talking to his neighbour.

Zuko met his sister's gaze, almost tempted to mouth a thank you at her. She merely gave him a cold, unimpressed look and resumed eating. Well, he supposed that was to be expected. She was still in a mood with them for ignoring her earlier advice.

Two girls who looked not much older than him began to sing a song, accompanied by a woman playing the guzheng. Zuko rested his chin on his palm as he listened. The melody was haunting and flowing, nothing like the rigid, boring things he'd been forced to play in school, which had always been about the greatness of Fire Lord Sozin and the Fire Nation. Instead, the song reminded him of the ones his mum had used to sing when he was a child. A breath escaped him. No, it was one of her songs. She'd even taught him and Azula how to play it.

Azula stiffened and cast a quick frown at the trio. Perhaps she had recognised the song as well.

Ursa entered the cavern with the stooped sage, An Dung. She parted from him at the front, joining Zuko and the others at their table in the space next to Azula. An Dung went to sit at the head table with his fellow sages. The bruise-like shadows under his mother's eyes seemed darker and there was a strained look about her, but she still smiled when she caught his gaze.

"Is everything okay?" he asked.

"Everything's fine, Lee. Please enjoy the feast."

His hand balled into a fist on his lap. It was so frustrating having to pretend not to be her son. There were so many questions he wanted to ask her, like where she fit within the tribe and how she'd even ended up married to his father and living in the Fire Nation with a Silencer for a handmaid. It was obvious that the Ito Islands were her real home. Everyone knew her here. They called her Lady Ursa and treated her like she was someone important, even though her banishment had stripped her of any royal privileges and title.

"Ah, I've always liked this song," Ursa said, looking towards the trio of performers.

"I don't think much of it," Azula said coolly.
"That's a shame. I seem to recall you said you were a rather accomplished guzheng player. I was hoping we could play together sometime." His mother's gaze shifted to him. "You as well, Lee. I know you play a few instruments."

"I ... I do," Zuko managed to get out.

Katara glanced up at him. "You do?"

He nodded. Where his father had only wanted him and Azula to focus on bending and learning war tactics and politics, his mother had encouraged their creativity. Dancing was banned in the Fire Nation, but she had pushed them towards music and art. She'd also often taken them to the theatre. Azula had always grumbled about it and had eventually stopped joining them, but Zuko had secretly loved those times when they had all played music together, watched theatre shows, or painted pictures. His best instrument was the tsungi horn; however, he could also play the dragon flute (which he'd picked up because he thought it had a cool name) and, albeit not as well as his sister, the guzheng.

"Of course I'd love you all to play some music with me," Ursa said, including Aang and Katara in her smile.

Aang offered that he could play the dizi, but Katara admitted she didn't really know how to play any instruments.

"That's okay, Kana." Ursa smiled warmly. "I can teach you."

Colour dusted her cheeks. "I'd like that."

Azula just rolled her eyes. "Music is a waste of time. When you're faced with an enemy who wants to kill you, it's not like you can defeat them with a song."

No one really knew how to respond to that. Ursa just looked sad, and all Zuko could do was frown at his lap. His sister's words could have been their father's. It was like hearing him speak through her.

"Not everything has to be about war and defeating your enemies, Ruolan," Aang murmured, also looking sad. "The mo—"

Zuko suddenly clamped his hand over Aang's mouth. The last thing they needed was for him to start spouting Air Nomad monk wisdom for everyone to hear.

"Hey," Aang complained, pulling his hand away. "I was talking."

"I know, Kuzon, but you should really finish what you're eating before you speak."

Aang's eyes widened. "Oh, right."

Zuko resisted the urge to facepalm. He knew he wasn't much better at remembering to maintain their fake identities, but still. He'd thought Aang would be better at this. In the end, it almost always fell on Azula and Katara to save them.

"I believe what young Kuzon was trying to say, Ruolan," Ursa said softly, "is that music is good because it uplifts us and moves our emotions. Don't you feel something listening to this song?"

Azula's eyebrows inched higher on her forehead. "Why would I? It's just a song."

Tone and demeanour were sharp, but Zuko remembered the way she had stiffened earlier. His sister
did feel something, whether she wanted to admit it or not. Even she couldn't erase memories.

oOo

It was a relief to escape from the feast. Quite a few people had come up to speak to them during the more informal part, but for all the celebratory food and smiles, a part of Zuko had felt like he and the others were being tested somehow. It was like everyone in this tribe was just waiting for them to make a mistake so the warriors could come down hard in stabby, burning wrath.

When he said as much to his mother, she laughed and said that was exactly what was happening.

"People don't trust outsiders easily here," she warned, then leaned in closer to whisper in his ear. "Don't let your guard down too much, not even in your home. There will always be eyes watching and ears listening."

He paled. "Er, that might be a problem then."

She raised her eyebrow in a silent command for him to explain. Very quietly, he told her about the arguments and general carelessness they'd already displayed within their little cave house. A frown creased her brow, but all she said was that they should be more careful from now on. Their priority was to get Aang's abilities back. Until then, they couldn't afford to take unnecessary risks.

"Live the lie," she concluded. "That's the safest thing you can do."

She wished them goodnight once they reached their house and promised she would come find them the next day when she got the chance. In an undertone, she added that after three years of being away with no explanation, she had her own suspicions to alleviate. Shizue was in the same boat.

"We'll do what we can, but I'm afraid our assistance will be limited," Ursa said. "You might have to work this out on your own."

"Don't worry, Lady Ursa," Azula said, enunciating each part of her title with cool precision, "we're used to being left on our own."

A flicker of pain passed over Ursa's face, but she only inclined her head slightly and once more wished them goodnight. Then she and Shizue continued down the rocky path.

"Don't you think that was a bit much?" Zuko muttered at his sister.

"What? I was just stating a fact." She smiled before she turned her back on him and entered the house.

He ran a hand over his face, smothering a sigh.

"You okay?" Katara asked, moving to stand next to him and rubbing his arm in a soothing gesture.

"It's just my sister. She's been in a mood all evening and keeps taking it out on M—Ursa."

"Hrm, someone else I know used to do that too when he was in a mood. Hey, Kuzon, you remember when Lee here used to get all moody at us?"

Aang had been happily snuggling with Appa and Momo, but he turned to them now. "Oh, yeah. That sucked."

Heat crawled on Zuko's cheeks. "Well, sorry about it."
Katara laughed at his disgruntled tone, though her expression sobered a second later. "Look, I don't like your sister or her attitude, but I think maybe she's just trying to work through her own things."

That was probably true. Just because Azula had always been better at restraining her emotions didn't make her automatically good at coping. In fact, he knew from the breakdowns he'd witnessed and what he felt when he connected with her energy that there was a lot of deep-rooted turmoil festering inside her.

"Come on," Katara said gently, tugging on his arm. "Let's just go inside and get some rest."

He allowed her to steer him to the door, though they both paused to tell Aang, or rather Kuzon, to come inside with them.

Aang jumped down from Appa. "Gimme a sec. I wanna see if they'll let Appa out now. He really hates being shut up like this."

He dashed off to one of the lurking warriors, who seemed a bit startled to be approached. Two other warriors were soon roped into joining the conversation. Eventually, Aang came back with slumped shoulders.

"Let me guess," Katara said, "it was a no."

"They said I can let him outside tomorrow, but tonight he has to stay in here. Something about precautions and newcomers, blah, blah, blah." Aang dragged his feet over to Appa and flopped against his furry face. "Sorry, buddy. I tried."

Appa let out a low rumble.

In the end, Zuko had to practically carry the younger boy inside the house. Most people, as he pointed out to a protesting Aang, did not prefer to sleep in the cold with an air bison and lemur when they could be inside, on an actual bed, with a fire to warm them.

"But Appa doesn't like the caves and—"

"Appa is a big boy bison. I'm sure he'll survive one night." Zuko suddenly frowned. "And no sneaking out later to sleep with him."

Aang pouted. "How'd you know that was what I was planning?"

"Because I know you." Zuko gave his back a slight push. "Now go get some rest. You can see Appa again in the morning."

Katara covered her mouth to suppress a giggle.

"What?" both boys said.

"You two are more like father and son than brothers."

Zuko pulled a horrified face, but Aang seemed to see the funny side in it and decided to call him "Dad" for the rest of the night until forced to bed. It didn't take a genius to figure out that Aang only did it because he knew how much it irritated Zuko.

oOo

"Why did you put that idea into his head?" Zuko complained once he and Katara were alone in their room.
Following his mum's suggestion to "live the lie", it made sense for a married couple to share the room with the one bed. Plus, even Katara agreed that putting her and Azula together was an argument waiting to happen. That did mean Aang and Azula were left to share the other room, but neither seemed to care all that much: Azula because she disliked them all equally, and Aang because he was such an easy-going, sunny person.

"You mean about the dad thing?" Katara said as she tugged the tie loose from her hair. "I'm sorry but it's true. You do act like his dad sometimes."

"Well, you act like his mum."

She shrugged, not denying it.

His eyes followed her movements as she ran her fingers through her unbound hair to remove any tangles. It was oddly mesmerising.

Shaking his head slightly, he turned away from her and removed his overcoat and tunic so that he was left in his undershirt and trousers. She also stripped out of her bulky layers and moved to slip under the furs. (Aang had made a fuss about those as well, but Shizue had managed to get him some koala-sheep wool blankets instead, which while not as warm, still did the trick.)

Zuko joined her under the furs, careful to keep a respectful distance between them. It was Katara who stomped all over that by snuggling against him. An icy touch brushed against the exposed skin on his neck and legs, and he lurched back.

"Your hands and feet are cold," he protested.

She laughed and pressed herself even closer, tangling her legs with his and sneaking her icy hands under his shirt. "Then warm me up."

His heart stuttered. Even his scarred eye widened. "Um …"

The cheeky smile she flashed him made his heart pound even more. It didn't help that he was all too conscious of her hands on his bare skin, especially since the cold shock was fading.

Pulling himself together, he grabbed her arms and eased her hands out from under his shirt, then shifted his hold to cover her hands with his own. It only took a bit of concentration to let warmth radiate from his palms. He did the same for her feet, except the warmth seeped from his legs. Perk of being a firebender was that he could make heat emanate from any part of his body if he really wanted.

"Oh, that's nice," she said happily, closing her eyes.

"All you had to do was ask. You didn't have to put your cold hands and feet all over me."

"Mm, but where's the fun in that?"

He nudged her with his foot for that comment, earning a slight twitch of her lips. Her eyes, however, remained shut. Zuko watched her in the soft glow of the fire for a moment, still holding her hands, until tiredness made his own eyes close. It wasn't long before they were both fast asleep.

oOo

"Happy birthday!" Aang beamed and thrust a bowl of winter fruits under Katara's nose. "I made you breakfast!"
"You cut up some fruit," Azula said dryly. "I hardly think that's an achievement."

Katara pursed her lips at the other girl. "It's still a nice gesture, but I guess that's something you wouldn't understand."

"I'm nice to those who deserve it."

Zuko snorted. "Must be a short list."

"Exactly. Not many deserve it."

He shook his head, knowing well what his sister was like.

Katara glowered at her a moment before raising her hands in a resigned gesture. "You know what? I can't be bothered dealing with you right now." She turned and gave Aang a hug. "Thanks for the breakfast."

"You're welcome, though if I'd known earlier that your birthday was today, I would have prepared you something better."

"I'm perfectly happy with this."

He beamed again.

Azula made a show of rolling her eyes. "I think I just lost my appetite."

Katara's temple twitched. "No one asked you."

"I know." An almost sweet smile.

Zuko placed his head in his hands. This was even worse than when Mai and Katara had used to clash all the time.

"What about you, Brother?" Azula said, shifting her attention to him. "Did you give a nice birthday gift to your wife this morning?"

He raised his face from his hands. "Given that she was still asleep when I got up this morning, no."

"Ah, I see. You two had all your fun last night."

Katara choked on a slice of mandarin. "What?"

"Oh, so you did?"

"No!" Zuko and Katara retorted, both red-faced.

Azula actually laughed. "You're too easy." She stood up. "Anyway, I've had enough family for one morning. I'm going to go explore, see if I can find anything interesting."

"You sure you want to go alone?" Zuko asked, pulling himself together.

"Why? Offering to join me?"

She said it archly, like she didn't expect him to follow through on an offer to spend time with her. Maybe she had a point as well, for even he was surprised when the words slipped from his mouth.

"Do you want me to?"
Something flickered in her expression, slicing through the haughtiness in a ripple of hesitancy. She plastered on one of her sharp little smiles. "Oh, I wouldn't want to steal your time today. It's your wife's birthday, remember? You should spend it with her."

Katara huffed something under her breath, but Zuko just continued to stare at his sister. He hadn't forgotten what Katara had said last night about Azula's snide attitude and the comparison with his own past behaviour. He also hadn't forgotten what his mum had told him.

"Try to be patient with your sister."

"Mum wouldn't want you to go alone," he said, not quite meeting her gaze. "Plus, we … we haven't had much time to just … catch up."

The hesitance was back in her eyes, however slight. Then she turned away. "I think I'll pass."

Zuko watched her leave the house, not sure if he was sad or relieved. Everything in him felt like a weighty, tangled mess.

"You tried," Katara said, leaning over and placing her hand on his knee. "And to be honest, it's more than she deserves."

He sighed. "I guess …"

The three of them continued to eat their breakfast. Aang was full of chatter. He explained how he'd run into the warrior he'd befriended during their trek to the caves yesterday, who had agreed to take him and Appa to the surface so they could meet the bison herd. He had wanted to go earlier, but his warrior friend had chores to finish up.

"I can't wait," Aang said, practically bouncing up and down on his cushion. "I hope she comes soon."

As if on cue, there was a tap at the door. Aang bolted over to open it. He grinned hugely at the warrior, who was sans mask and standing with her fist still raised as if to knock again. She was older, maybe in her early twenties, and had her black hair pulled into a topknot.

"Min!" Aang exclaimed. "You made it!"

She lowered her hand. "I see you're as energetic as ever, kid."

"Can we go see the bison now?"

"That's why I'm here." Her gaze drifted past Aang to where Zuko and Katara were still sitting around the low table. "Morning. You two interested in meeting the bison as well?"

Zuko and Katara exchanged a glance, then both nodded at Min.

"Alright," Min said with an easy smile. "Let's get going."

oOo

The herd of bison had made a home for themselves in the higher cliffs of the island, nestling together in the crevices and blending in with the clouds. Appa rumbled happily and took off to greet them.

"Hey, wait!" Aang cried. "Appa!"

Appa didn't even look back.
"Oh man." Aang pouted, shoulders slumping. "He was supposed to fly us up."

Katara laughed. "What did you expect? This is the first time he's seen other bison."

"Still. Now we have to walk. Walking sucks."

Min snorted. "Come on, kid. Some walking might help get a bit of muscle on those skinny legs of yours."

"Hey, I have nice legs."

"My arms are bigger than your legs."

This was true and had Zuko and Katara both trying to suppress smiles.

As they began the steep trek, Min explained that most of the tribe didn't bother to go up to the cliffs. The climb was by no means easy and the bison weren't exactly tame.

"What do you mean they're not exactly tame?" Aang asked.

"Just what I said. I don't know how you got Appa to be so well-mannered. Even the bison I've managed to befriend are still skittish. They'd never let strangers pet them, let alone anyone ride them." She nudged his shoulder. "You'll have to tell me your secret."

"My secret, huh?" Aang laughed a bit nervously.

Katara pointed up at the sky. "Look, Appa is coming back."

Sure enough, Appa swooped down towards them and landed on the slope. He gave a low rumble but didn't sound so happy now. Momo, who had been perched on Katara's shoulder, fluttered over to chitter at him.

"What's wrong, buddy?" Aang asked. "Were the other bison mean to you?"

Appa huffed a breath and made more low rumbles.

"Aww, I'm sorry."

Min leaned towards Zuko. "Your brother can't actually understand air bison, can he?"

Zuko shrugged. "No idea."

Aang turned to face them. "Appa's sad 'cause the bison are acting all wary of him."

"It could be because he's carrying your scents," Min mused.

"Should we keep going up then?" Katara asked. "Wouldn't that just unsettle them more?"

"Ah, it'll be okay. We'll just keep our distance, but perhaps we can catch a ride on Appa this time."

Judging by the gleam in Min's eyes, it seemed she was more excited by the prospect of flying than actually introducing them to the herd. Nevertheless, they all piled on Appa and flew up to the cliffs. Most of the bison stayed in their little crevices or just growled warily. A smaller one was curious enough to come over and give them a sniff, but it was hardly the joyful meeting Aang had been hoping for. He had gone very still and quiet.
"You okay?" Zuko asked quietly.

Aang gave a little shrug. "It's just different, I guess." His lips curved into a sad smile. "It's always different . . ."

Zuko wordlessly wrapped an arm around him. Aang leaned into the contact but said nothing further. When Katara suggested they head back, no one protested.

The day passed in a relatively uneventful way. Zuko and Katara stuck with Aang, who wandered around hoping that he would feel something to point him in the direction of the spirit who had called him to the islands. He got nothing.

"Maybe it's wherever people go to try sense other fire healers," Katara said.

She was probably right, but they were in no position to go demanding entrance to that place. Zuko figured they'd just have to sneak in at some point, but best not to do that on their second day. The tribe were still too much on high alert.

At one point they bumped into Atsuo and Yuzo, who wished Katara a happy birthday but otherwise couldn't stay to chat since they had to go do their punishment work. This put Zuko in mind of the fact he still hadn't got a gift for her. It had been troubling him all day.

"Something wrong?" Katara asked.

"Huh?"

"You're frowning."

"Oh. Um, just lost in thought."

She let the matter drop. Even so, he continued to watch her and fret about what would be a good gift. It didn't occur to him to wonder why he cared so much.

That night they had dinner with Yuzo, Shizue and Ursa. (Atsuo, unfortunately, had not been allowed to join them.) Ursa had also brought some instruments for them to play. Azula excused herself from the music with a headache, but Katara seemed to enjoy having his mum teach her to play the guzheng. She also fruitlessly tried to make sound come out of a bamboo flute. This amused Zuko to no end.

"No, like this," he said, taking it from her and showing her the proper technique.

She tried again and this time got a tremoring note to come out. "I did it!"

He smiled and showed her a few more tips.

At some point, Ursa left to go check on Azula. The little party started to die down then. Aang continued to muck around on the instruments and tried to cajole a reluctant Shizue to play with him, but it wasn't long before Yuzo was standing up and saying goodbye.

"You're leaving already?" Aang said with a pout.

"It's late and I have a hot boyfriend to cheer up." A wink. "Chiyo thinks she can punish him by
keeping him isolated, but I've been sneaking into his room for years."

Aang went a bit pink. "Oh."

"I might not catch you tomorrow, but I'll keep an ear out for anything useful."

"Thanks," Katara said, "and tell Atsuo I'm sorry he couldn't make it tonight."

Yuzo nodded, wished her happy birthday one last time, and took his leave.

Zuko's heart thumped a little at the birthday reminder.

*Do it now*, his mind urged.

"Um, Ka—na …"

She laughed at his almost slip up. "Yes, Lee?"

"Can we, er, talk?"

Her eyebrows inched up her forehead. "We are talking."

"I mean alone."

Soft colour dusted her cheeks. "Oh. Sure."

They stood up and entered their bedroom, leaving Aang still trying to cajole Shizue. Zuko was conscious of the moisture gathering on his palms. His heart thumped faster. For some reason, this felt more nerve-wracking than any of the stealth missions he'd done as the Blue Spirit. It didn't help that she just stared at him expectantly. He coughed to clear his throat.

"Um, so it's your birthday today."

She laughed a little. "I know."

His face heated. "Right. Well, um, I wanted to get you a gift, but I didn't really know what to get you, and then I saw, um …" He gave up on trying to explain and instead reached into his tunic, offering her a small gift wrapped in cloth. "This is for you. From me." A wince. "I mean obviously it's from me because I'm giving it to you now, but …"

Ugh, why couldn't he stop talking?

She smiled and, mercifully, stopped his flow of words by taking the gift from him. "Thank you. Is it okay if I open it now?"

He nodded.

She unfolded the cloth, revealing a wooden comb painted with a delicate design of flowers. Her mouth formed a small O.

"I noticed last night you were combing your hair with your fingers, and then I saw this in the market today and I thought of you, and um, yeah …" He rubbed the base of his neck and looked the other way, his face hot. "If you don't like it, I can take it back tomorrow and exchange it for something else or—"

"I like it."
"Wait, you do?"

"Of course. It's beautiful, and it's just what I needed. I accidentally left my comb on the ship."

He sighed in relief. "Good. That's good. That's really good."

She smiled and stepped closer, leaning up on her tiptoes. Her lips brushed his cheek, close to the corner of his mouth. Everything in him thudded to the sudden pulse of his heart.

"Thank you," she murmured.

He exhaled a bit shakily. "Um, no problem."

They both paused as their fake names were called.

"We should go back," he said.

She nodded and placed the comb down, then walked with him out of the room to join the others.

oOo

Everyone had finally left or gone to bed. Azula stood in the main living area, which glowed faintly with light from the smouldering fire in the centre of the room. A guzheng lay on the low table. No doubt Mother had left it on purpose.

She walked over and touched the strings with her right hand, soft enough not to make a sound. In her mind, every song she had been taught replayed. She knew which strings to pluck, when to pause, how to craft it all together to make it perfect.

She had been perfect then.

Her lips twisted and she raised her hand, blue flames blossoming from her fingers.

"Are you really going to burn it?"

She flinched and twisted around to see the Avatar watching her, cradling the lemur in his arms. "What's it to you?"

"It would be a waste, don't you think? It's such a nice instrument."

"Well, I find it offensive."

"But you used to play it, didn't you?"

"So what?" Her tone was steel and sharpness. "I used to do a lot of things."

He stepped closer to the glow of the fire. "Hrmm, will you play for me then?"

She blinked. "What?"

"If you're going to burn it, will you at least play one song for me?"

Azula blinked a few more times.

"Just one," he repeated, then smiled. "I think that's what the guzheng would want."

"Really? Because I doubt it wants anything. It's not alive. It's an instrument."
"Maybe it doesn't breathe or have a heart, but we can give it soul with our hands and the memories we create while playing it." He shrugged. "Or that's what the monks used to say."

Azula raised her eyebrow. "Do you actually believe that rubbish?"

He just smiled a bit sadly. "Will you play me a song or not?"

She was tempted to blast the guzheng then and there just to shut him up. It would be satisfying to see his friendliness shatter, to remind him that she was not someone who could be approached so casually. There was a monster in her bones, in her soul. It gnashed its teeth for release, complaining that she had been forbearing with these fools for far too long.

But Mother seemed to think she could be more than a monster. Mother kept saying she just had to try.

Azula's lips twisted even more. The blue flames pulsed brighter, bigger, but then she glanced at the stringed instrument and saw herself as a child, heard the songs she had used to create. All those memories …

The fire snuffed out in her closed fist. Her voice was harsh when she spoke. "One song."

He smiled and settled on a cushion with the lemur, watching her expectantly. She swallowed and sat down in front of the instrument. There was no way she could put the nail picks on without assistance, but the fingernails on her right hand were long and strong. It would have to do.

She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. Then she released the breath and started to play.

Her fingers were sure, the strings plucked with perfect precision. But her left arm remained limp at her side. She couldn't hush the strings properly, couldn't do anything too complicated. Every strum was a reminder of her limitations, her imperfections.

A choking thing formed in her throat, tight and constricting. She kept playing, even as her breathing sharpened and her eyes narrowed in frustration. A smaller hand joined hers on the strings and picked up the part, albeit poorly, that would have been assigned to her left hand. She glanced up and met the Avatar's eyes.

Grey eyes that were so similar to Ty Lee's.

"What are you doing?" she hissed.

"Helping."

"I did not ask for your help."

"I know, but I wanted to give it to you anyway." His mouth curved into a small smile. "That's what friends do, you know."

She removed her hand from the strings. "You are not my friend."

"I could be."

Her fingers twitched, itching to bunch into her palms. He really was like Ty Lee. Same openness, same easy friendliness, as if it didn't matter that she had once pinned him down with the intention of hurting him to the point where he couldn't be a threat to the Fire Nation anymore. He had forgiven her for the hurt she'd caused him, and he made it clear in every smile, every word.
She raised her chin and looked him coolly in his Ty Lee eyes. "I played you a song. You can go now."

"But—"

"Go."

Her tone was clipped and demanded obedience. The Avatar sighed and stood up, dragging his feet as he scooped up his lemur. He glanced over his shoulder at her.

"You don't have to do everything on your own, Azula," he said softly. "I just want you to know that. Oh, and your playing? It was really nice."

Azula did not watch him leave, nor did she acknowledge him. Instead, she cradled blue fire and glared at the instrument on the table.

When morning came, the guzheng was still there.

Chapter End Notes

Headcanon time. I like to think Zuko is actually a pretty creative person. I see him being skilled at art and music, and this would have been encouraged by Ursa. However, he would have suppressed all that part of himself during his banishment because he was trying to do what his father wanted, and Ozai had always thought such things a waste of time. Also, we all know Zuko was in super angst, self-punishing mode during his "I have to get my honour back" days.

Azula on the other hand, is someone who I think would be naturally gifted at music (as in can read notes and pick up instruments easily), but she didn't allow herself to have a passion for it. As a child, I think she was much faster to deny herself things if she perceived that their father didn't really approve.

Also, if anyone has issue with the fact Aang ends up using koala-sheep wool blankets, I'll remind that he's vegetarian, not vegan, and shearing is actually beneficial for domesticated sheep.
"What are you sighing so dramatically about?"

Sokka jumped at the sound of Mai's voice. "Geez, don't sneak up on me like that."

She didn't bother to respond to this comment and instead leaned against the railing next to him. "So?"

"So what?"

"What's eating you? There's obviously something."

He frowned at his hands. "Promise you won't laugh?"

"No."

He gave her his most unimpressed look. "Sometimes I wonder why we're friends."

Her lips curved into that little twitch-smile, though it was gone a second later. "I won't laugh."

Sokka continued to frown at her, but then he sighed and slumped more against the railing. "I miss boomerang."

"Wait, this is about your boomerang?"

"You said you wouldn't laugh."

"I'm not." And it was true there was no glint of humour in her eyes. "I just didn't expect that this would be what's troubling you."

"Hey, that boomerang was my first weapon. Dad made it for me when I was a kid and everything. It's saved my butt so many times. It was even what …" All the defensiveness seemed to deflate out of him, and he moistened his lips. "It was what helped me save you back on that drill."

She averted her face, showing him the unscarred side. "Oh."

Their hands were close on the railing. His fingers inched a bit closer, pinky almost brushing hers, but he pulled back at the last second. A small breath escaped his lips and he fixed his gaze on the ocean. "I just … that weapon was mine, you know? It was my thing. I'm not a bender, I don't really stand out at all compared to all of you, but I knew how to use that boomerang. I was good at it." He shook his head, shoulders slumping. "But now it's gone. I just … I feel like I have nothing. I feel like I'm nothing."

And that was frustrating. It was like all the doubts and insecurities that had plagued him in Ba Sing Se were bubbling back up again.

Mai pressed her fingertip hard into the creases between his eyebrows.

"Hey!" He rubbed at the spot.

"You know what that was for."
"Uh, no I don't. Here I am trying to have a serious conversation with you, and you just decide to poke me in the head."

"That's because you're being dumb."

He opened his mouth to retort, but she placed her fingers to his lips.

"My turn to talk."

He swallowed, conscious of how her skin brushed the hypersensitive part of his lower lip.

"You've always been more than a guy with a boomerang, Sokka. You're smart. You pretty much planned the whole counterattack against Azula in Ba Sing Se, not to mention all the strategies you've come up with for the eclipse. And you are a good warrior. I've seen you fight plenty to know that."

His eyes widened a fraction. He'd never heard her give so many compliments—not to anyone.

She removed her hand from his mouth. "So don't say you're nothing. A weapon doesn't define you. Boomerang or not, you're still you, and …" Faint colour touched her cheeks. "I like that guy I've got to know. I like being with you, even if you do make dumb jokes sometimes."

It felt like his breath had got lost somewhere in his throat. "You like me?"

Her eyes widened like a startled deerfox. She stepped back and looked the other way, though not before he caught the way her blush darkened. "I mean as a friend. Obviously."

"Right." His heart stumbled a little on its rhythm. "Obviously."

Nervous tension. Awkward tension. Her explanation lingered between them, flimsier than a cobweb. It would be so easy to tear it down. The truth already stared at him from the tawny eyes that snuck glances his way and the memory of an almost kiss on a beach.

He swallowed again. The space between them suddenly seemed charged, little ripples of sparks tugging him closer. When the sea breeze ruffled her hair, his fingers itched to trace the path of the short black strands that caressed and cradled her face.

"Mai, I …"

She turned more towards him. Scarred. Beautiful. His gaze flickered to her lips, then back to her eyes.

Thunk!

Both teens flinched. Jee and Bato's voices rose up in a swift scold at some poor sod from farther down deck, but Sokka didn't pay attention to their words. The moment had been shattered, and with it came all the sinking weight and wriggling knots in his stomach.

Suki. His girlfriend was Suki.

"I should go," he mumbled.

She didn't stop him, and he knew he should be grateful for that. It would be dangerous to keep toeing this line with her. Yet when he glanced over his shoulder, meeting her eyes for one poignant beat, the weight pressing down on him only seemed to get worse.

He had to go, but everything in his heart whispered stay.
"And that's how you fully paralyse a person with chi blocking," Ty Lee declared with a broad grin, even as her volunteer, Tomoki, groaned at her feet like a limp fish. "Any questions?"

Hands immediately shot into the air. Almost everyone had gathered in the mess hall for Ty Lee's lesson. She'd explained how not even Shūrin was immune to chi blocking, which had resulted in a request for her to teach anyone on the ship who was interested. There was no saying what the future would bring. No one wanted to be bonded and controlled by the ancient princess if they could help it; they'd all seen what happened to her victims.

"Um, does it come with an unblock technique?" Tomoki ventured. "I still can't move."

"Oops. Sorry, cutie."

Ty Lee returned him to full mobility and then got everyone to split into pairs so they could practice doing the basic motions (though without actually attempting to chi block). She walked around and gave pointers. Suki and Sokka ended up being partners, which would have been fine had he not been finding it increasingly more uncomfortable to be around her. His chest felt heavy and his stomach was a wriggle of knots. The worst part was that she had done nothing wrong. It was all him and his stupid, muddled feelings.

Involuntarily, his eyes scanned the room and found Mai standing off to the side. She'd come to the lesson in a show of support for her friend, but it seemed she had no desire to learn chi blocking. Toph soon joined her and the two girls started chatting.


He blinked. "Sorry."

They kept practicing. Ty Lee came over and praised them both for picking it up so quickly, though she did notice that Sokka's approach was a little different to what she had taught.

"I learnt some techniques from Shizue," he explained with a shrug.

"Really?" Her hand latched onto his arm and she flashed a quick smile at Suki. "Sorry, gorgeous, but I'm going to borrow your boyfriend for a bit. I'll find you a new partner."

Sokka and Suki barely had time to blink before he was whisked off. He offered some feeble protests, which were ignored, and soon found himself acting as Ty Lee's assistant. It actually wasn't so bad. Shizue's style was much more aggressive than Ty Lee's, and that allowed for a bit of variety and blending of the two. Not everyone, after all, could be as evasive and acrobatic as an airbender.

"Of course chi blocking isn't something you can master in a few weeks," Ty Lee warned them at the end of the lesson. "This is a skill that takes precision and speed. I'll teach you what I can, but in most cases you'll be safer sticking to your weapons or bending."

Sokka couldn't argue with that. Her warning was exactly why he'd continued to rely on his weapons even after learning from Shizue. Powerful as chi blocking could be, there was no room for mistakes and he was by no means a master. It was best to view the skill as a "just in case" thing for now.

Suki came up to him afterwards, bumping his arm with her own. "You've been holding back on me."

He didn't respond. His gaze had sought Mai again, and he was too busy wondering if he should approach her or not. They hadn't talked much since their little moment on the deck. In fact, he was
pretty sure she was avoiding him. Logic told him this should have been a good thing, should have made it easier. But he missed her. Missed her dry humour, the way her lips twitched when she was trying not to smile …

"Sokka?"

"Huh?" He blinked at Suki. "Oh, sorry. What were you saying?"

Some of the brightness faded in her eyes. "Nothing. It doesn't matter."

He tilted his head in question but didn't push further. She'd tell him if it was actually important.

"I'll see you later," she said, patting him on the arm.

"Er, I thought you wanted to get some extra training in after this. You know, the two of us."

"Changed my mind. I think I'll just practice some more on my own."

"Are you sure? I can—"

"It's fine." Her lips curved into that teasing smile he knew so well. "A girl needs her alone time as well."

"Oh. Okay."

She smiled again, then walked off.

An arm suddenly came around his shoulders, and he jumped a little as he found Ty Lee next to him. "Oh, cutie, you messed up."

"Huh?"

She nodded at Suki's retreating back. "Aren't you going to follow her?"

"But she said she wanted to be alone."

"Actually, what she said was her dummy boyfriend is making her feel like she doesn't mean anything to him, so she'd rather not spend time with him right now." Her lips quirked. "You're the dummy in this situation, by the way."

His eyes widened. "W-what? How can you even know—"

"Trust me."

"But—"

"C'mon, cutie, I thought you were smart."

He frowned and once more thought over his conversation with Suki. She hadn't seemed that upset. She'd even smiled flirtatiously, though now that he thought about it, he supposed her smile had been a bit strained.

"Are you sure?" he had to ask.

"I'm basically a girl whisperer."

"Girl whisperer?"
"I'm good with girls. Reading between the lines, figuring out what they want." She wiggled her eyebrows. "Keeping them satisfied."

"Oh."

A beat.

Wait, was she saying what he thought she was?

She tugged him closer by the arm she had slung over his shoulder. "Anyway, my point is that Suki isn't too happy with you right now. So, what are you gonna do?"

"You said I should follow her …"

"Wrong. I asked if you're going to follow her. That's a completely different thing."

His nose scrunched. Ty Lee was confusing.

"Look, I know something is troubling you," she said more gently. "Your aura is normally such a lovely orange colour, and while it's exciting to see some bright pink in there, there's also a lot of muddy blue."

The look he gave her couldn't have been more flat. "Come again?"

She giggled and removed her arm from around him. "You look just like Mai when you give me that expression."

His heart stirred a little at the mention of Mai's name, though his expression did not change. "I don't speak auras, Ty Lee. I don't believe in auras."

"Most people don't," she allowed with a shrug, "but I can see them, and yours is telling me that you're scared."

"Scared?"

"To admit the truth. To be honest about your feelings."

His gaze skittered to where Mai and Toph were now heading out of the mess hall. "I …"

The silence dragged.

"It's okay. You can tell me. I won't judge."

He frowned at his hands. "I'm not really scared. I just … I feel guilty."

"Because you don't like Suki in that way anymore?"

"No, I do. I do like her. She's amazing and beautiful and funny and—"

"But then there's Mai."

A breath whooshed from his lips. "How did you know?"

"I'm a bit of a boy whisperer as well." She winked.

Sokka once more frowned at his hands. "Alright fine, I do like Mai."
There. He'd said it. It was out there now and couldn't be taken back.

Ty Lee let out a delighted shriek and clapped her hands. "I knew it!"

"Hey, not so loud."

"Sorry." She sobered immediately. "So, you're feeling guilty because you like both of them?"

"Yes. No." He groaned and clutched at his hair. "I don't know. Everything is so confusing. Suki is my girlfriend and she's been nothing but amazing to me, but Mai …"

Mai was special. Mai had become his best friend and so much more. He couldn't imagine not having her in his life.

"Talk it out," Ty Lee prompted. "It'll help you sort through your feelings."

He sighed and sat down on one of the benches. She joined him, hugging one leg to her chest so she could rest her chin on her knee. The two of them were the only ones in the mess hall now. Sokka took a moment to gather his thoughts.

"I guess … I guess I just feel like I'm not allowed to like Mai. I was already dating Suki when we started to get close, and I tried my best to shut those feelings down because I didn't want to do that to Suki, but the truth is …"

"What?"

"I'm not sure I ever really loved Suki." He swallowed, fingers curling into his palms. "I like her. I'm not saying I don't, but when I ran into her again at Half Moon Bay, I was still trying to get over Yue …"

"Yue?"

"My first girlfriend. I thought she was the one. It was love at first sight and it all happened so fast, but it was perfect. She was perfect." His voice took on a weighty tone. "But during the siege of the North, she … she gave up her life to become the new Moon Spirit."

Ty Lee's eyes widened. "Wow." A blink. "I mean, I'm so sorry. That must have been so hard for you. It's just … wow. Your first girlfriend turned into the moon."

A sad smile was tugged out of him. "Crazy, right?" He exhaled and shook his head. "The thing is, for a long time I blamed myself. I couldn't let go of the guilt, and I couldn't let go of her. So when Suki turned up in my life again and still seemed interested in me, I didn't know what to do. I was confused, guilty, but I also liked being around Suki. I … I guess I wanted to try. I wanted to try move on, and I thought it was what Yue would want for me as well."

"So you agreed to date her?"

He nodded. "Suki chose not to travel with us then, but I accepted that. We knew we'd meet again eventually, and I was still busy helping Aang. I had no idea I'd end up …"

"Falling for Mai."

He let out a heavy sigh. "Yeah."

Ty Lee made a humming sound, tapping her finger to her chin. "You said you don't think you've ever really loved Suki. Does that mean you love Mai?"
"I-I, well, um …" Warmth spread all over his face.

"I'm going to take that as a maybe."

He covered his face with his hands. "Okay, maybe yes. Maybe I do. But it just crept up on me, you know? I didn't plan for this! I didn't plan to have all these feelings!"

"Hey, hey. I get it. Love is pretty uncontrollable."

His shoulders slumped. "Yeah, well, now I just feel like a big jerk. I don't want to hurt Suki. I owe it to her to—"

"See, that right there is your problem."

He blinked.

"The only thing you owe Suki is the truth. You rushed into a relationship with her when you weren't sure of your own feelings, and that's totally understandable. No judgement here. But love isn't stagnant. It can't be forced either."

"Then you think I should break up with her?"

"I think you need to make a decision. If you really want to be with her, then fine. Forget Mai. Work on what you have with Suki." She placed her hand on his shoulder. "But don't stay with her out of a sense of obligation. Don't force yourself to love her if you've already given your heart to another. That'll only hurt you both."

He went quiet for a long moment, staring at his hands.

Ty Lee nudged him with her elbow. "Hey, wanna see something cool?"

"Er, what?"

She whipped out her hand from her pocket and suddenly a little marble was spinning round and round in the space between her hands.

Sokka stared. And stared. Then his lips twitched and laughter bubbled free. "That's Aang's trick."

"Yip!"

Geez, she even wore the same stupid grin as him when she did it.

"He taught it to me before he left," she explained. "Even let me borrow his marble. He also promised to teach me how to make cakes with airbending when he gets back."

"Sounds like he's not teaching you very useful skills."

The happy brightness in her eyes dimmed and she let the marble drop into her palm. "Who says they're not useful?"

All he could do was blink. She was kidding, right?

"Shūrin taught me how to use the wind in ways she thought useful. I can make ships go faster, I can hurt people. If I really wanted, I could even use this marble to kill someone. One wind-powered hit to the head, and bam! You're dead."
His eyes widened. That was some creative thinking.

Ty Lee sighed, shoulders slumping. "But I don't care about those things. I want to learn other stuff."

"I get that, but I mean ... there's a war going on."

"Just because there's a war going on doesn't mean that fun has no place in this world. If anything, I think it's even more important."

The corner of his mouth lifted a fraction. "No wonder you and Aang hit it off so well. He says the same thing. Used to drive me nuts."

She smiled, though the expression seemed softer and more for herself. "We do get along well. I've never met someone so in tune with me."

"Maybe it's an airbender thing?"

A shrug. "Maybe."

Silence settled between them, natural and comfortable.

"Hey."

"Hey."

There was an awkward pause. In the background, he could hear Bato and his dad giving directions to someone near the starboard side.

"A little more to the left," Bato said. "No, my left! My left!"

Sokka would have normally smiled or made a joke then, but the mood didn't feel right. Not for what he was about to do. "Suki, I—"
"I think we should break up."

His jaw dropped. "What?"

It was what he had been about to say himself, but still. How unexpected.

"I like you, Sokka," she said, meeting his eyes frankly. "I like you, and I want to give you a chance. But I can't keep pretending I don't see how you really feel. Our relationship can't work if your heart's not in it."

He lowered his gaze. "Oh."

"You admit it then? You admit you don't want to be with me?"

He wished for her sake he could have said no, but that would be a lie. "I think it's more that I can't be with you now," he confessed. "You're amazing, Suki. You're funny, beautiful, one of the best warriors I've met. I'd have to be crazy not to like you, but …"

"You love someone else."

A hesitant nod. "I'm sorry. It just … happened."

She sighed. "Figured as much. It's Mai, isn't it?"

"Wait, how'd you—"

"You're really not subtle."

He groaned and slapped his palm to his forehead. "I'm so sorry. You must think I'm a total jerk." He peeped at her from between his fingers. "But why didn't you say something earlier if you knew?"

"Like I said, I wanted to give you a chance. And even if I had my suspicions, I didn't know for sure."

"Oh."

Another awkward pause, this one longer.

"For what it's worth," he murmured, "I really do think you're an amazing person."

"Thanks, but it's fine. I'll admit I wish you could have been honest with me sooner, but it's not like I'm blaming you. We went our own ways, you moved on. It happens." She let out a breath and glanced at the dark waters all around them. "Besides, if I had to lose you to someone, I guess I'm okay with it being her."

"You are?"

"She's good for you. Even I can see that."

Their eyes met, and he was once again struck by how strong and mature Suki really was. In another life, perhaps he would have even fallen in love with her—at least had Mai not come into the picture. It wasn't like he was blind to the connection between them. The attraction and sparks were all there, but the depth of those feelings were more like a nice lake when compared with the ocean he'd discovered with Mai. There was no way he could ignore that.

"Well, that's all I wanted to say," she said, and turned to leave. "Goodnight, Sokka."
"Wait."

She glanced over her shoulder, one eyebrow rising.

"I know we just broke up and all, but I hope we can still be friends. Uh, that is if you want to. You can also tell me to throw myself in an ice hole if you'd prefer. I'll understand."

Her lips curved a fraction. "We can do friends."

Sokka smiled in relief and watched her until she passed from his view. He was sure things would still be a bit tense between them for a while, but he really did hope they could make it work as friends. Suki was a girl worth knowing.

oOo

"Come, Avatar."

Aang's eyes snapped open. He could still hear the deep voice, still feel the insistent tug on his spirit. As if in trance, he pushed the blankets off him and stood up, dislodging Momo in the process. The lemur chittered in protest. Not that Aang noticed. He was already walking towards the door.

"And where do you think you're going?"

Azula's voice slipped through his ears, oddly distant. The command to find the one in his dream was so much louder, so much clearer. It spoke to his soul.

"Hey! I'm talking to you!"

Blue flames blossomed to light above her palm. Aang didn't even twitch and simply opened the door and made his way out of the house. A part of him was conscious of her following, even demanding him to stop, but he couldn't. The voice was calling him and he had to follow.

"Oi!" A warrior stepped in front of him. "You can't just—"

Aang blasted him back with wind and kept walking. Shouts followed. More warriors tried to stop his path. Suddenly, blue fire surged in a wall around him. Azula had stepped in to help, even as she called him an idiot and demanded he tell her what was going on. Except his mouth didn't want to work. It couldn't. Everything was a haze—her, the warriors, the caves, his own thoughts. It was like he was dreaming, like his consciousness wasn't quite connected with his body.

"Come."

The command tugged and tugged. His feet were bare and his toe caught an upraised bit of rock, skin splitting and dribbling blood. He barely noticed the pain.

"Idiot, what are you trying to do?" Azula hissed in frustration. "Can't you see there's too many of them? We have to—"

Her body juddered, words faltering as she took a hit from behind. The shock of seeing her fall was enough to snap him out of his trance.

"No!" he cried.

The next moment he was being taken down by a series of rapid jabs. Chi blockers. He collapsed onto his back, heart thudding like a frantic drum. He couldn't move, couldn't resist. Then the pointed tip of a jian sword came into view. He swallowed, gaze following the length of the double-edged
blade and up to Chiyo's face.

"Well, well," she said coolly. "Looks like someone has been lying to us."

"Wait, I can ex—"

"Save it for your trial." Her eyes were as cold as the touch of death. "That's if you even get one."

Fear pulsed through his veins. Oh no. He really had screwed up everything.

Chapter End Notes

A wild cliffhanger has appeared.

More seriously, I just want to touch on the whole Sokka, Suki, Mai thing in this chapter, or rather Suki's reaction. I do see her as being a girl who has a lot of respect for herself and also a lot of maturity. That's why I couldn't imagine her getting mad at Sokka or petty/jealous at Mai, etc. I think she would understand why things went down the way they did. It would upset her, sure, but I don't really feel her affections were engaged enough to warrant serious heartbreak and hurt. (And even if it did, she would still be pretty mature about the whole thing.) She likes Sokka and wanted to see where their relationship would take them, but at the end of the day there are other fish in the sea and I feel she would move on pretty quick from a guy who didn't like her back the way she wanted. Plus, she actually does like and respect Mai.
On Trial

There was an awful sense of familiarity in being bound and forced to kneel on a hard stone floor. Zuko gritted his teeth, heart pounding. Everyone was there with him, even Yuzo and Atsuo. They'd all been taken by the warriors and brought in front of the sages. The middle cushion on the dais, which belonged to An Dung, was empty.

"If we get out of this alive, I'm going to kill that cover-blowing brat myself," Azula hissed, shooting a glare at Aang.

The tip of a jian blade touched her chin. "I thought I told you no talking," Chiyo said, and dug the blade in just enough to draw blood. "Do it again and it'll be the last thing you say."

Azula's eyes narrowed. Still, she remained silent. Only an idiot would push their luck with Chiyo. The head warrior stood at the front of their line with her sword unsheathed, ready to subdue or execute. Judging by her hard expression, she wouldn't care if it came to the latter. She didn't even seem to care that her son was now awaiting judgement.

An Dung, frail and stooped as ever, emerged from one of the shadowed side passages of the temple and took his place at the centre of the sages. His piercing gold eyes swept over them, lingering on Zuko and Aang. Then he glanced at Chiyo. "Thank you for gathering them here."

She bowed slightly and moved to the side, though her sword remained unsheathed. The other warriors surrounding them did not relax their guard either.

"You all know why you're here," An Dung said, eyeing the group with an unreadable expression. "The punishment for entering the tribe under false pretences or abetting outsiders to do so is death. We have never made an exception."

Ursa bowed as best she could while bound. "Please allow us to explain, Head Sage."

"Oh, you will explain. To bring outsiders here is one thing, but the Avatar?"

Aang winced, shoulders slumping even more. No doubt he was beating himself up for getting them caught, though it sounded like he hadn't been in control of his body at the time.

"I would not have brought him here if I didn't think it necessary," Ursa responded. "You know I would not."

Taiyo formed a steeple with his fingers, peering down at her from the dais. "And what reason can you offer us that made it so necessary?"

"Because he was summoned." She held her head high, unflinching. "The guardian spirit of our tribe called the Avatar here."

A few murmurs and whispers broke out.

"Is this true, Avatar?" An Dung asked.

Aang nodded and explained his dreams, along with the strange trance he'd gone into that had made him attack the warriors when they'd tried to get in his way. "I really don't want to hurt any of you or expose your tribe. I'll even help you maintain secrecy if that's what you want. But there's something here that's calling to me. I heard its voice, I felt it near, and I think it can help me regain what I've
lost."

More murmurs and whispers. The sages exchanged a few words in hushed tones, too quiet to hear. Zuko's heart pounded and pounded. So far things seemed to be going okay—the sages were at least listening and considering—but Chiyo still watched them like an executioner biding her time. Her sword gleamed in the firelight.

"Let's say you are telling the truth," An Dung said, fixing those piercing eyes back on them. "Let's say the guardian spirit called the Avatar here. That does not change the fact this boy lied and tricked his way into our tribe, and you all helped him."

Aang hung his head. "I'm sorry. I didn't want to lie."

Ursa was far less apologetic. "What choice did we have? I knew you wouldn't let him in if we told you he was the Avatar. At best he would have been imprisoned."

"And yet granting him entry was not for you to decide, Lady Ursa."

She swallowed, losing some of her boldness.

"The Ito Tribe has survived this long because we have strictly adhered to the laws put in place by our forebears. You chose to risk all of that because a boy had a dream."

"He's not just a boy!" Katara exclaimed, unable to stay silent any longer. "He's the Avatar, and the world needs him!"

Zuko cringed, waiting for the inevitable retaliation, but there was only a glint of dark humour in the old sage's eyes. In all of the sages' eyes, in fact.

"Oh, the world needs him, does it?" a woman with grey streaks threading her hair responded. "And where was the world when fire healers were being hunted and killed? Where was the world when our kind were snatched from their homes and forced to heal until their energy dried up and their bodies gave out?" Her expression hardened. "Better yet, where was the Avatar?"

Katara opened and closed her mouth, flailing for the right defence.

"That is all in the past," Ursa put in smoothly. "Perhaps the world did turn on fire healers once, but that does not mean we have to turn our backs on it now. The Fire Lord must be stopped. Avatar Aang can do this, but right now he needs our help. He needs our guardian spirit's help. I know he was summoned here for a reason."

"Of course you would say that, Ursa," Taiyo said with a faint sneer. "We all know how much you hate your husband, especially after he forced you to abandon your children. Plus, given your ancestry, it's no wonder you decided to assist the Avatar."

"Ancestry?" Zuko blurted before he could stop himself.

"Avatar Roku is my grandfather," she explained.

Zuko's jaw dropped. What the heck? Why had no one ever told him that? How had such a thing even been kept secret? He glanced at his sister and saw a mirror of his shock. It seemed she had not known either.

"Regardless of what you think, Sage Taiyo, my grandfather has nothing to do with this," Ursa said. "I brought Aang here because it was the right thing to do. He is destined to bring balance to the
world, and it seems our guardian spirit is now a key in helping him to do that." She looked at each sage challengingly. "Would you really go against the wishes of our guardian spirit?"

There was a tense pause. The sages glanced at each other and once more spoke in hushed voices. Zuko couldn't claim to be the best at reading body language, but it seemed to him that some were being persuaded to their side, however reluctantly. Perhaps there was hope in salvaging this mess after all.

"What of the others?" Cam, the elderly female sage, asked. Gone was the friendliness from the other day; her eyes were sharp like a hawkfox. "These three claimed to be the Avatar's family, yet that can't be true."

"Kuzon is a fabrication," Ursa admitted, "but the others are who they say they are. Lee, Ruolan and Kana simply took the Avatar in when he needed their help. I was the one who convinced them to act as his family. I also persuaded Yuzo and Atsuo to go along with our story when we ran into them."

Zuko tried very hard not to show his surprise. His mother had lied. Why had she lied? Surely there was no point trying to maintain the pretence now?

An Dung stared at Zuko piercingly for a moment. "Is that so? What a coincidence that the Avatar should find himself with a Free Walker for a friend just when he needs to enter our tribe."

"Or perhaps it's fate," Ursa suggested. "We were all brought together, all led back here. Is that really so strange? Were you not the one who told me our lives are shaped by destiny?"

There was a story behind those words, and not a very happy one judging from the faint bitterness that edged his mother's voice. Zuko hoped he'd be able to ask her about it later. For now, he bit his tongue and watched as An Dung turned to his fellow sages for what seemed to be the final deliberation.

The seven talked for a long time. Eventually, they reached a decision and An Dung once more faced them with an unreadable expression.

"The Avatar will be allowed to stay," he declared.

Zuko let out a big sigh of relief. Thank goodness.

"Lady Ursa and Shizue, however, must face the consequences for breaking the law." His eyes hardened. "We are disappointed in you, Shizue. A Silencer should have known better. As for you, Ursa, do not think that your status will spare you this time. You had no right to bring the Avatar here without first gaining our approval, regardless of how necessary you thought it. You even encouraged these children to deceive us."

Ursa bowed her head. "I understand."

Shizue also bowed, back stiff and emotionless.

"Wait," Zuko said, glancing from the sages to the two women. "What consequences? What are you going to do to them?"

"That is no concern of yours."

"Of course it is! They both—"

Azula nudged him hard with her elbow and mouthed at him to shut up. He didn't understand. Then
his mother caught his gaze and shook her head. Reluctantly, he closed his mouth, throat tight and defensive words still threatening to spill out. It was so hard to stay silent. He had never been good at playing passive spectator.

"Will they be okay, though?" Aang asked in a small voice. "You won't hurt them, right?"

"They will live."

An Dung's answer was not comforting. The fact Ursa and Shizue both looked even grimmer did little to assuage the knot of unease building in Zuko's chest. Yet his mother had made it clear he shouldn't interfere. He had to trust her judgement … right?

The trial was formally closed and the order given to take Ursa and Shizue away to the prisons. Zuko's heart lurches as he watched his mother get hauled to her feet. She looked so frail, so thin and emaciated. It made his chest seize and his heart beat in erratic skitters.

"Wait!" he burst out. "You can't—"

A jian sword entered his vision, the sharpened tip pointing at his face. "Don't push your luck, boy," Chiyo said coolly. "Be grateful for the mercy you have been extended. If it were up to me, you'd all be joining them."

"Even your own son?" Katara exclaimed, eyes widening.

Chiyo glanced at Atsuo, and something about the hard glint in her gaze made it clear she wanted him to read her lips. "I might as well have no son."

Raw pain twisted Atsuo's face. It was horrible to watch, like witnessing a heart be pierced and gouged. Zuko wanted nothing more than to rush to his friend's defence. He knew the pain of being rejected by a parent, just as he knew Atsuo did not deserve such treatment. Nor was he the only one bothered by Chiyo's response. Yuzo looked furious, while Katara and Aang seemed more horrified than anything. Only Azula remained calm.

"I'll be watching you all," Chiyo warned them. "One misstep, one hint that you have lied to us about your intentions, and I guarantee there will be no mercy offered next time. I do not care if you're minors. I will end your lives myself."

Zuko swallowed. The threat felt very real when she was pointing a sword at his face.

She layed at them a moment longer before stalking off to follow the warriors who had taken away Ursa and Shizue. He was soon grabbed by his arms and yanked to his feet. The chains were removed. He rubbed his wrists to ease the tenderness as he watched the others also get released from their bonds.

"You're free to go," one of the warriors said. "I suggest you return home. There's been enough excitement tonight."

No one moved.

Azula huffed and grabbed her brother's arm. "Come on. There's no point standing around here."

"But Ursa and Shizue," Aang said in that same small voice. "They're—"

"There's nothing we can do for them," she responded sharply. "You'll only make things worse if you try."
Zuko didn't hear what was said in response. Instead, he glanced up at the dais to where the sages were making their own departure. An Dung met his gaze, piercing and unreadable.

"Hurry up, Lee."

This time he didn't resist when Azula tugged him towards the door.

oOo

The mood was sombre when Zuko, Aang, Katara and Azula returned home. Yuzo had taken Atsuo to stay with him, which was probably for the best, but the trial had left an unshakeable weight on all of their hearts. Aang was taking it especially hard. He huddled on the floor, face hidden against his knees, and apologised over and over even as he berated himself for the trouble he had caused. The hiccupping catch in his voice told them he was trying not to cry.

"Hey," Katara said, kneeling next to him and wrapping her arms around him. "It's not your fault. You were in a trance. You couldn't control what you were doing."

"But I should have been able to." Another hiccup. "I keep messing up. I keep losing control, and then things go wrong and people get hurt, and now … now Shizue and Ursa are …"

Zuko gritted his teeth. "Nothing bad is going to happen to them. I won't let it."

"Oh, really?" Azula said, raising her eyebrow. "And what do you plan to do?"

"I don't know, but I'll think of something."

She laughed without humour. "Typical."

"Well, do you have any ideas?"

There was a beat of silence as they stared at each other. Then she looked off in the other direction. "Not yet."

He almost snorted. "And here I thought you were supposed to be the one who always had a plan."

"At least I know how to think before I act. After what happened with Father, I would have thought you'd know better than to speak out of turn, but you're still the same over-emotional, impulsive idiot."

He flinched, struck by the low blow.

"Did you even realise they were looking for an excuse to give us a harsher punishment?"

"Of course I did, but—"

"Really? Because if I hadn't made you shut up, you'd be in that prison as well. Maybe we all would." Open scorn glinted in her eyes. "Frankly, you're all as bad as each other. It's like the concept of consequences doesn't even exist to you."

Katara glared at her. "Well, we can't all be as unfeeling as you. Some of us actually care about others."

"Oh, of course, because I'm just a monster who doesn't care about anyone, right?"

Zuko's brow creased. There was something too brittle about Azula's tone. Even her expression was
like ice put under too much pressure: cold, harsh, yet riddled with vulnerability. For some reason, he thought back to the night she'd told him their father was plotting to kill him—the way she had taunted and wounded because, as he had later come to realise, actually admitting she was worried for his safety was something she didn't know how to do.

He let out a deep breath. "You're not."

She twitched, glancing at him. "What?"

"You're not a monster." He held her gaze, wanting her to see his sincerity. "And … thank you for looking out for me tonight. For all of us."

Her eyes widened a fraction.

"You're thanking her now?" Katara said, staring at him like he'd grown an extra head. "After all she just said?"

"Because she's right. Arguing with the sages wasn't the best option, and"—his gaze flickered back to his sister—"she knows I tend to say too much when I get upset."

"That's true," Azula said. "You never could hold yourself with any decorum once you got started on one of your outbursts. It used to be funny to watch when we were children, but not so much when our lives are at stake."

"No need to rub it in," he grumbled.

Her lips curved a little. Not a sharp smile, as he was used to, but smaller. Softer. The sight was enough to make him blink. How many years had it been since he'd seen her make an expression like that?

Katara removed her arms from around Aang and stood up, facing Azula. "Fine. Maybe you were helpful tonight, but you don't have to act so smug about it."

"It's not my fault I'm the only one here who seems to be able to use my brain."

Katara's eye twitched.

Recognising the danger signs of a temper about to blow (and knowing his sister was probably riling her up on purpose), Zuko stepped behind Katara and placed his hands on her shoulders. She was tense like a band pulled too tight, but as his thumb moved to brush caressingly against the exposed skin on the back of her neck, the stiffness eased out of her.

"Whatever," she muttered, and turned to Aang. "Can you still sense the spirit?"

He sat up straighter, eyes a bit puffy. "Not anymore."

"Then do you at least remember where you sensed it?" Azula asked.

"Honestly, my memory of that whole experience is kind of foggy. I didn't really know what I was doing at the time."

Azula's lips pursed. "I noticed."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to drag you into that." He brightened. "But thanks for coming after me and trying to protect me. That was really nice of you."
She wrinkled her brow. "Of course I had to go after you. You're the only reason we're here, and I would have never heard the end of it had I let you go off on your own."

"Even so, it made me happy."

She just stared at him like he was a rabaroo that had started talking. Zuko almost smiled. Trust Aang to find a way to throw Azula off her game. The kid had a knack for getting under people's guard with his friendliness.

Aang got to his feet. "Anyway, I wish I could remember more of what I sensed and heard while in that trance, but I can't." His shoulders slumped again. "I'm really sorry."

"Enough with the apologies," Azula said with an impatient roll of her eyes. "So things didn't go to plan thanks to your little trance expedition, but it's not like it was a total waste. We know the spirit is definitely somewhere on the islands. Perhaps it will summon you again, perhaps not. At the very least, you can talk more openly to people now about finding it."

"That's true," he said, brightening. "I don't have to hide who I am anymore. Maybe it'll be easier now."

"Lucky for some," Katara mumbled. "The rest of us have to keep up our act."

Azula raised her eyebrow. "And yet you two don't seem to mind too much."

Zuko blinked, suddenly conscious of the way Katara was leaning against his chest, and how his own hands had moved to lightly skim her arms. He even had his chin propped on the top of her head. (She was, as he had discovered thanks to their position, the perfect height for it).

Blushing, he pulled back from her. "Maybe we shouldn't talk about this now." He lowered his voice. "People could be listening."

"Perhaps there's still hope for you, Brother. You actually said something intelligent."

"Ha ha," he muttered, rolling his eyes. "Look, I'm serious. I don't think M—Ursa would have said all that unless it was for a good reason, so … let's just trust her."

It wasn't like he didn't have a million questions either—about why she'd lied, about the fact Avatar Roku was his great-grandfather. But while it was one thing to talk vaguely about their plans and frustrations, it was quite another to openly admit they were living a lie straight after being pardoned. He didn't trust the walls or the tribe.

Azula was of the same mind, despite her teasing. "There's nothing we can do tonight anyway."

Katara chewed on her lip. "I just wish we had a way to know that Ursa and Shizue are okay. I'm worried."

"Maybe … maybe they'll just be imprisoned?" Aang offered. "That could be punishment enough, right?"

The older three said nothing. Zuko could still remember the ominous words An Dung had spoken.

"They will live."

"Let's just get some sleep," he muttered.

He didn't want to think about this anymore. It made his gut a mess of anxious knots.
They said their goodnights for the second time and went off to their separate rooms. Zuko crawled back under the furs with Katara, but instead of immediately snuggling into him as she usually did, she lay facing him with a concerned look in her eyes.

"What?" he said.

"You'll tell me if there's anything I can do for you, right?"

His brow furrowed in question.

She moved closer, cupping his cheek with her hand. "I know you've been putting on a brave face for Aang's sake."

That was true enough. The kid had been so upset and full of self-blame after everything that had happened that Zuko hadn't wanted to add to it by letting the full extent of his own distress out.

"But it's just us here now," she whispered. "And if we're quiet like this, no one will hear …"

His heart quickened a little, only getting faster when her thumb grazed his lips. He wasn't sure if it was an accident or not. Their faces were close and her eyes had never seemed softer. It did odd things to his stomach, like hybrid butterflies had somehow escaped and now fluttered amidst the knots tangling up his insides.

She held his gaze, warm and patient, allowing him to make the next move. Whatever that was meant to be. He inhaled a shaky breath, unsure of what he wanted. Every gesture, every glance, felt weighed with something more. It made him nervous. Made him confused. His heart stuttered a beat of anguish and worry, yet his pulse whispered of possibilities.

It was too much.

Something shifted in her expression, and she removed her hand from his face so she could instead wrap her arms around him. "Is this okay?"

A small breath escaped. Like a house of cards folding, he pressed his hands into her back and pulled her closer, burrowing his face into her neck. His eyes slid shut as he breathed in her scent. "Yeah," he said softly. "This is fine."

She trailed her fingers through his hair, even as all the confusing flutters and throbs settled down in him again. Of course he wasn't stupid; he knew what it had all meant. But he was glad she had not pushed him all the same.

Maybe one day he would be ready to act on those feelings, but not tonight. Not like this.

oOo

Golden flames rippled around like an endless shield. The sage knelt on the floor, head bowed. "You were right," he said. "It did not take long for them to expose themselves. We caught the Avatar tonight."

"And did you do as I asked?"

"Yes, I made sure the Avatar and his companions were not executed. Lady Ursa and Shizue had to be punished, of course. We couldn't let them all go free. It wouldn't look good."

"No matter. Those two are useless to me anyway."
He glanced up at the figure who controlled the flames. "May I ask why you're helping these children?"

A smile. "Because I do not wish the world to be without its Avatar. His role, whether you like it or not, is important."

"And the other boy? Wouldn't it be easier to—"

"Patience, friend. Just do your part and everything will work out like I promised."

He dipped his head in another bow. "As you wish, Shūrin."
The next day, the four of them decided to split up. Zuko was determined to check on his mum and Shizue, and for that he needed to know more about the prisons and who was guarding them. Since Azula didn't trust him to get the information on his own, claiming he would miss something, the two of them had left earlier to meet with Atsuo and Yuzo. Katara and Aang were to go spirit searching.

Only a month ago, Aang would have been ecstatic to know he would be spending most of the day with Katara. The thought of it being just the two of them would have made him blush and his stomach flutter. Learning that she liked Zuko, however, had put a definite puncture in those feelings. Frankly, experiencing his first heartbreak had sucked. It had really, really sucked. But now he was relieved to find that the hurt had dulled enough to let him enjoy being around her (and Zuko) again. Maybe he smiled a little too hard sometimes, maybe he laughed a little too much, but the sting wasn't so bad. He was moving on.

So when he noticed she was using a new comb and learnt that Zuko had given it to her, he just blinked. "Wow. You guys are serious then?"

Now it was her turn to blink. "What?"

"The comb."

Her brow furrowed. "What about it?"

"He gave you a comb."

"I know. It was my birthday the other day, remember?"

Aang blinked a few more times. "Okay, I'm guessing the Water Tribe doesn't have this tradition, but didn't he explain it to you?"

"Explain what?"

"The meaning of that gift in the Fire Nation."

Her frown deepened. "No …"

Aang was shocked. Had Zuko just assumed she would know? Was that why he hadn't told her? Well, best to fix the confusion now so they were both on the same page. Aang could do that much for his buddy.

"It's a pretty special tradition. See, when a guy gives a girl a comb in the Fire Nation, especially a nice one like that, it means he wants to grow old with her—as in be together and get grey hairs together and all that. It's basically like an offer of marriage."

Colour bloomed on her face. "W-what?"

"It's true. Kuzon—the real Kuzon, I mean—told me all about it. He liked this girl who lived down the road from him, and he said he was going to give her a comb as a promise that they'd get married."
"Wait, wouldn't you have been even younger then?"

"We were seven." A beat. "But he was sure she was the one."

Katara just stared at the comb she was holding. "Are you sure this is a real tradition? Maybe Kuzon just—"

"It's real. Trust me."

She pressed her hand to her flushed cheek. "But why would … we're not even …"

"What?"

"We're not dating," she said softly.

Aang's eyes widened. "Wait, you actually aren't?"

"Why does everyone keep thinking we are?"

"Uh, maybe because you guys are all over each other."

Her blush spread in deepening waves. "We are not."

"Are too."

He should know. Seeing them all snuggly and sharing in those little touches and looks had used to stir the most unpleasant of feelings in him.

Katara put the comb away. "Well, it's not what you think. We just … he just … I mean we haven't even …"

Aang's eyebrows crept up his forehead.

She pressed her hands to her cheeks again, trying to ease the heated pink. "It's not what you think, okay? Anyway, we shouldn't be talking about this here."

"Oops, you're right."

She sighed and finished putting up her hair. "Let's just hurry and find that spirit."

oOo

They ended up at the temple. Aang wasn't in a rush to see the sages again, but trying to question the other tribespeople hadn't got them very far. Plus, temples were usually pretty spiritual places. He hoped that he might discover something.

"Where is everyone?" Katara asked, once they were inside.

Aang shrugged. The whole place stunk of incense, but the dais with the seven cushions was empty. "Hello?" he called. "Anyone here?"

A shuffling sound came from one of the side passages. Cam soon emerged, soft-footed and cradling flames. "Ah, the Avatar."

"Hi." He waved.

She snuffed the flames. "Why are you here?"
He tugged at his collar. "Um, well, like I said last night, I'm looking for the spirit of these islands. I was hoping you'd have some suggestions about where I might find it …"

"I do not."

"Um, okay." He bit his lip. "Then maybe you can—"

"No."

Katara frowned. "You didn't even hear what he was going to say."

"I don't have to. The answer will still be no."

This was too much for Katara. She planted her hands on her hips. "Don't you think you're being unfair? Aang hasn't done anything to you or your tribe."

"Aside from lie and cheat his way in, you mean."

Both Aang and Katara flushed. This old sage was not making things easy for them. Unfortunately, no amount of apologising or pleas could budge her either. She had no time for liars and seemed to think that he should be able to figure things out on his own.

"Come now, Cam. There's no need to be like that."

The new voice had them all turning to see Taiyo step out from the same passageway, well-groomed and sleek as ever.

Cam pursed her lips. "Excuse me?"

"The Avatar is a child. Don't you think some allowances should be made? It's what we decided last night, isn't it?"

Aang brightened. "Then you'll help me?"

"Why not?" Taiyo said with a shrug. "None of us have actually seen the guardian spirit. Consider me curious. Besides, your presence makes the tribe uneasy. The sooner you get what you need, the sooner you'll leave."

"Um, thanks … I think."

Cam just made a scoffing sound and turned her back on them. It seemed she hadn't been persuaded by Taiyo's explanation. Still, Aang had found a sage willing to help. He couldn't complain.

oOo

"How much farther?" Katara asked, moving closer to the fire Aang was cradling.

Taiyo had taken them deep into the temple—deep enough that Aang was sure they were no longer in the building but had merged back with the cave system. The tunnel he led them down was narrow, sometimes rib-grazing, and the rocks overhead got lower and lower until the sage was as bent as an old tree which had been shaped by the wind. There was no light except for the flames he and Aang conjured.

"Hey," Katara said, louder this time. "I asked you a question."

"I know." Taiyo aimed his flames to light up a fissure in the wall ahead. "But as you can see, we
have reached our destination."

She frowned. "You want us to go in there?"

"That's right."

Her eyes skittered from the fissure to the sage. "What's in there anyway?"

"You ask me that now?" He laughed and walked forward, climbing through the gap without another word.

"Guess we should follow," Aang said with a shrug.

"Wait." She pressed her hand to his chest to hold him back. "I know he said he'd help us, but this place gives me the creeps. I mean how far into the caves are we now? And listen."

Aang glanced around at the shifting shadows. "What? I don't hear anything."

"Exactly. There must be no one around us."

"Avatar? Kana? Are you coming?"

She clutched her coat tighter to her chest. "I don't know about this, Aang. I don't know about him."

"Ah, I'm sure it'll be fine. Besides, we've come this far."

"No, wait—"

He grabbed her wrist and tugged her forward so she wouldn't get left in the dark. As soon as he got close to the gap, which now glowed with light, something brushed against him like an exhalation of air. Except it wasn't air at all. Prickles and shivers crept over every inch of his skin.

"Woah," he breathed.

Her fingers plucked at his sleeve. "Woah what?"

Aang quickly scrambled through the fissure and blinked as he found himself in a chamber and staring at what could only be described as an abyss. It was just a hole of endless black. Flames flickered on torches all around it.

Katara took one look at the abyss and then rounded on Taiyo, water streaming from her hands. "What is this? Why have you brought us here?"

His eyes widened a fraction. "You're a waterbender."

"That's right I am." She manipulated the water into ice blades. "And trust me, you do not want to make me mad."

"Kana, wait!" Aang held an appeasing hand towards her. "It's okay. You can relax."

"But he brought us to some creepy hole! He's probably planning to push us in!"


"Aang? What's he talking about? What is this place?"

Aang closed his eyes, pulse throbbing as shivers rippled over his skin. "This is it," he breathed. "I
can feel it. I can feel everything."

"Feel what?"

"Energy." He opened his eyes and smiled widely at her. "This is the centre. This is where spirit energy flows."

She faltered in her stance. "You mean the place Yuzo mentioned?"

"Exactly."

Taiyo tilted his head. "Yuzo told you of this place?"

Aang clamped his hand over his mouth. "Oh no. Is he going to get in trouble for that?"

"Normally he would for sharing our tribe's secrets with outsiders, but I guess it doesn't matter now that I've brought you here myself. I'll let it slide this time."

Aang exhaled in relief. The last thing he'd wanted was to get the older boy in trouble again.

Silence settled for a moment. Katara guided the water back into her flask and glanced around at the chamber, then back to the abyss.

"Well, Aang?" she asked. "Can you sense the spirit?"

"No. Just a lot of energy." He stepped closer to the edge. "You think it's down there somewhere?"

"If you throw a rock down that hole, you will never hear it hit the bottom," Taiyo said grimly. "I wouldn't recommend jumping in unless you have a death wish."

Aang paled and inched back to a safer distance. "No jumping. Got it." He glanced up at the sage. "So, do you have any suggestions then?"

"You're asking me?"

"Well, you guys are the ones who use this place, right? I heard it helps you sense other fire healers. What do you normally do?"

Taiyo frowned. "This place is more connected than most. You feel it, yes?"

"Yeah. It's pretty intense."

"Well, we sages connect with that energy and use it like a boost to extend our sensing skills. Nothing more, nothing less."

"Huh. So it's sort of like what I did with the banyan grove tree."

"Perhaps …" Taiyo wrinkled his brow in obvious confusion.

Aang settled on the floor in lotus position. "Alright, then I'll try meditating and connecting with the energy. Maybe I can break through my block."

Katara placed her hand on his shoulder. "I'll keep watch."

"Thanks."

Taiyo simply folded his arms and leaned against the wall. "Then I shall also keep watch."
He got a wary look from Katara for that comment, but Aang didn't have the time to waste fretting about whether they could trust Taiyo. Instead, he pressed his fists together and closed his eyes. He focussed on the points of energy he could feel, trying to picture them as threads he could grasp. He focussed on all that he had lost, all that he was meant to be.

"Everything is connected," he whispered under his breath.

A deep inhale, a deep exhale, and then he reached out with his spirit and took hold of all the humming strands of energy. Power pulsed in a sudden influx. It was lightning in his blood, in his soul. It sizzled and flared and jolted its way into every inch of him. His body jerked, barely able to contain it all.

"Avatar Aang."

A shaky breath escaped him. "Are you … are you the guardian spirit?"

"Come."

"Okay, but come where? Where are you? Tell me how to—"

"You know what you need to do."

"But I don't! I've been trying to find you and—"

"To find what you have lost, you must first let go of all that holds you back. Abandon fear. Abandon your anchors."

"W-what?"

"Trust in faith. Trust in yourself."

Aang's eyes snapped open as the connection slipped through his fingers. It was only then he realised that he was shaking. Katara's arms were around him, blue eyes swimming before his star-blurred vision.

"What happened?" she asked. "Are you okay?"

"I think …" He licked his dry lips, heart thudding. "I think I need to jump. I think I need to go into the abyss."

oOo

Wind danced over the long sweeps of grass. Zuko shielded his eyes from the sun and glanced up at the bison circling overhead. Appa was making happy rumbles and swooping and soaring with a few of the other air bison. It seemed he'd finally made friends with the wild herd.

Azula made a tsking sound with her tongue. She was sitting on a rock, legs crossed, and had her lips pursed like she was sucking on lemons. "What's taking them so long?"

"I'm sure they'll be here soon."

"Soon isn't good enough." Her expression soured even more. "I hate waiting."

He raised his one good eyebrow. "I thought you prided yourself on your patience."

"Correction. I hate waiting when there is no reason for it."
Zuko sighed and went back to gazing out over the cliffs. Momo was not far from him, hopping around after bugs. Zuko's brow furrowed as the minutes dragged. He tapped his finger against his leg. He folded his arms, then a few seconds later unfolded his arms. He started to pace.

"Stop fidgeting!" Azula snapped.

"I'm not fidgeting."

She gave him an unimpressed face.

"I'm not," he muttered, turning away from her.

Though of course he knew he was. He had never been the paragon of patience either. What the heck was taking Aang and Katara so long? Hadn't they all agreed to meet here at this time?

The seconds kept dragging. Azula sighed loudly. "I never imagined this is what my life would come to. Here I am stuck on an island in the middle of nowhere, bored out of my mind with my brother."

He paused, standing with his back to her. "Is it really so bad?"

"What?"

"Is it so bad?" He glanced over his shoulder and met her gaze. "Being here with me?"

An emotion too fast to name flickered in her eyes. They stared at each other for a long moment. All the memories they shared flowed between them—the sad, the quiet, the almost happy, the painful. Their relationship had never been normal. They had never been allowed to be normal.

Azula broke eye contact first. "You tell me. Is it so bad?"

He turned more to face her. "You're not supposed to answer a question with a question."

"I just did."

"I asked you first."

"Like that matters."

He almost smiled. "You used to do this when we were kids as well."

"And you always got mad."

"You were a brat."

"You were an idiot." A beat. "And you still are one."

Zuko gave her a flat look, but the smile that lifted the corners of her mouth didn't have any sharpness. It was the soft, small one she'd used to give him sometimes when they were just stumpy-legged children building sandcastles or chasing waves on Ember Island. It was an echo of a time and a sister he had once thought lost.

He let out a small breath. "It's not."

She tilted her head in question.

"Being here with you. It's not bad. I'm actually glad we can spend this time together."
Surprise glinted in her eyes, visible this time. He had broken script. In their family, being honest about feelings or even the slightest bit affectionate towards each other wasn't encouraged. Not after Mum had left. Zuko felt that rustiness as well, the words awkward and clunky on his tongue. It took all his resolve to stay facing her, to not look away or tag on an insult.

"See, this is why I hate you sometimes," she murmured.

"What?" Hurt made his voice rougher. "That's how you respond? I was trying to say something nice to you!"

"I know. You're a nice person, Zuzu. It's what you do."

He frowned.

"Mother used to tell me to be like you, you know. She'd say, 'Why can't you be more like your brother? You should try to follow his example. Try to be kind.'" A broken little laugh. "But how was I supposed to do that? How can I ever be like you when everything in me just … isn't?"

"What?"

It was all he could say, more an exhalation than a word. He stared at her as if seeing her for the first time.

"I thought I could try. I thought I could please Mother if I do it properly this time, but I'm not like you. I'll never be like you. You can stand here and say you're glad we're spending time together, but I tried to kill you. I wanted to kill you." Her eyes were hard yet they were also too brittle. "Why? Why don't you hate me? Why don't you want to hurt me? How can you just let it go? What is it that makes it so easy for you?"

He stood there in shock, unblinking, unmoving.

"Say something!"

His eyes slid shut for a heartbeat before he moved to sit next to her on the rock. She stiffened but didn't lash out. That was a good sign.

"Sometimes I do hate you," he admitted.

Her gaze snapped towards him.

"I have nightmares of lightning. I spent days barely clinging to life because of you. You've hurt me, hurt my friends. You burnt Mai's face."

"Then why—"

"Because you've also helped me. You've helped my friends. When Shūrin tortured you, you didn't give her my name. When Aang went off in that trance, you put yourself in danger to protect him."

"I just did the pragmatic thing."

"No. No, you didn't." He held her gaze. "We both know there were other choices you could have made. Choices that wouldn't have got you hurt."

Her shoulders stiffened and she averted her face. Silence settled between them.
"Look, I won't pretend you haven't done terrible things," he said quietly. "I won't pretend it doesn't make it difficult sometimes either, but it's not like you're the only one. I once burned Suki's village. I kidnapped Katara so I could use her as bait. I've threatened and hurt so many people over the years, and all because I thought that was what I had to do."

"Is this the part where you say we're not so different after all? Because it's not very convincing."

"No, I'm saying that our pasts don't have to define us. I'm not perfect. I'm not inherently good. I just choose to be better than what I was, or at least I try."

"And you think that's all I have to do?" she asked a bit tauntingly.

"I think you're already doing it."

The little flicker of surprise was back.

He leaned back on his palms, gazing up at the sky. "You wonder why I don't mind spending time with you? It's because I'm not so sure you're the same girl who shot lightning at me. I think maybe … maybe you're changing, and that actually makes me happy."

"Why?"

Her voice was hushed, smaller than he'd ever heard it.

He met her eyes. "Because you're my sister, and I want to be your brother."

Again, they just stared at each other for a long moment.

"Lee! Ruolan!"

Azula stood up quickly. "Looks like Yuzo wants to talk to us."

She was marching down the slope before Zuko could respond. He sighed, a little disappointed they'd been interrupted, but a part of him was also relieved. It was hard to be open with her, hard to be vulnerable. It just wasn't their way. Still, if he could change, if she could change, then maybe their relationship could change as well. Maybe they could make this work.

oOo

By the evening, Zuko had a working plan to sneak into the prisons thanks to the information Yuzo and Atsuo had provided. Unfortunately, he also now had an Avatar-sized problem on his hands. The kid, as Zuko had learnt the moment they'd all met up together, had it in his head that he had to jump into some crazy abyss. Katara had managed to drag him away, claiming he should consider other options, but the idiot was still set that death jumping was the way to go.

"Aang," Zuko said bluntly, "if you dive into that hole, it will kill you."

"You don't know that."

"It's basic science. You jump. Gravity makes you go splat."

"Gravity doesn't scare me."

"Well, maybe it should!"

Aang made a frustrated sound. "I'm telling you that this is what I need to do. This is what the spirit
told me to do."

Zuko folded his arms, staring down at the boy from his greater height. "So it said those exact words, did it? It said, 'Hey, Avatar, go jump in the big hole.'"

"Well, no, but I'm pretty sure that was the gist of it."

"Oh, you're pretty sure, are you?"

Aang puffed his cheeks out. "You know, I really don't like it when you get all sarcastic on me."

"And I don't like it when you say you want to jump into death holes, yet here we are."

"It's not a death hole!"

"It's a giant, might-as-well-be-bottomless hole! That sounds like a death hole to me!"

The two boys glared at each other.

Katara stepped between them and placed her hand on Aang's shoulder. "Aang, we're just worried. You have to admit that what you're saying sounds pretty crazy."

"Fine! I admit it sounds crazy, but I'm telling you that this is it! This is how I'm going to get my Avatar stuff back!" He looked up at her earnestly. "You've always believed in me before. Can't you trust me now?"

She bit her lip.

Zuko glanced between them. His eyes widened as she continued to worry her lip between her teeth. "No. No way. You're actually considering letting him go?"

"He is the Avatar."

"He wants to jump into a death hole!"

"Well, maybe it won't be a death hole for him. I mean, crazier things have happened, right?"

"And what if he's wrong?"

Aang frowned. "Um, guys?"

"And what if he's right?" Katara said, either ignoring or not hearing this interjection. "He says he felt lots of spiritual energy there, he heard the spirit, and at this point what else have we got to go on?"

"Even so, this isn't a second chances kind of thing. If he's wrong, that's it. He's gone. Are you willing to risk that?"

"I know, I know, but what—"

Azula cleared her throat. Katara and Zuko both paused to look at her.

"Just thought you should know that while you were playing worried mummy and daddy, your bald brat ran off."

"What?" Katara shrieked.

Zuko swore multiple times, realising with a sickening lurch of his heart that she was right. Aang was
nowhere in the house. "Why didn't you stop him?" he demanded, rounding on his sister.

"Airbenders are fast. And, frankly, if he's that determined to throw himself into an abyss, I say let him. He's the worst actor out of all of us anyway, and that's saying something with you around, Brother."

"I can't believe you!"

Azula took a sip of her tea. "You sure you want to linger here glaring at me?"

Zuko did not. He settled for making a frustrated noise and dashed out of the house with Katara. They had to hurry. Aang would no doubt be boosting it all the way to the death hole on those scrawny legs of his.

"Aang," he gritted out under his breath. "If you dare jump into that stupid hole, I swear I'll find a way to haul you back up so I can kill you myself."

oOo

Aang stood before the abyss. His heart thudded in a frantic beat against his ribs and his mouth felt too dry. He swallowed. "This is fine," he murmured. "This is what the spirit told me to do."

He took another step forward, toes sticking out over the edge. Yikes, it really did seem bottomless down there. Just endless, endless black. If he took the leap, he'd definitely be abandoning all anchors just like the spirit had suggested. There was no way he could airbend himself up from this kind of drop.

He exhaled and slapped his cheeks. "Okay, Aang. You can do this. Just think of it like jumping off the top of the air temple. No sweat. It'll be fun."

He glanced down into the abyss. His throat bobbed. Okay, it didn't look so fun, not even for him. The problem was that he knew he couldn't turn back. It didn't matter if this whole thing seemed insane. It didn't matter if his hands were clammy and his pulse stuttered like it didn't know whether to stop or thunder right out of his neck. He had to take the leap. He had to fix whatever had gone wrong inside him so that he could be what he was born to be. There was no room for fear anymore.

"Trust in faith. Trust in yourself."

Aang inhaled deeply and spread his arms as if about to take flight.

"Aang, no! Get away from there!"

He glanced over his shoulder and smiled at Zuko. "Sorry, but I can't let you stop me. This is what I have to do."

Then he jumped.

Chapter End Notes

They say bad things come in threes (or in this case, cliffhangers). I have no excuse, but I will likely get the next chapter written by the end of the week, so … yay?
He'd been too late.

Zuko sat in front of the abyss, still as a statue, and let his body go numb. It was how he felt anyway. The thread was gone. Aang’s door of energy was gone. The boy had jumped, Zuko had panicked and raged, and then … nothing.

No bond. No Aang.

Katara kept trying to say there had to be an explanation. She reminded him that Aang had been called to this place, that the spirit had said this was how he’d get his lost abilities back. She said Avatar stuff didn't always make sense at first.

"I don't care about Avatar stuff!" Zuko shouted. "I don't want to even hear that word now!"

"But he—"

"Just don't. Don't try to make this better. Don't tell me it's going to be okay, because all I can think is how much I kept saying he had to overcome his block. I kept saying the world needed him, that the world needed the Avatar." Grief spilled out of his shattered numbness, burning his eyes and wetting his cheeks with tears. "I pushed him. We all pushed him, and for what? So he could throw himself into some death hole?"

"I don't think he—"

"I don't care!" His chest hurt so much, as if a wall was crushing his lungs. "This is wrong. It's all wrong, and now I can't feel him anymore. I can't, I can't …"

Words failed as he shuddered for breath and his throat got too constricted by the choking lump that had formed. Katara wrapped her arms around him. She held him so tight that it hurt his ribs, but he didn't mind. He clutched her back just as desperately.

"He's alive," she whispered.

Zuko shook his head, not really disagreeing but unable to agree either. Everything in him ached with loss.

She pulled back and took his face in her hands, meeting his eyes. Her own were just as bright with tears. "He's alive, okay? I know it."

"Then why did the bond vanish?" His voice broke. "He's always been there within me. I keep trying and trying to connect with him, but I can't. I can't."

Her thumbs brushed away his tears. "I don't know why the bond is gone, but I do know Aang is still out there. He has to be."

"How? How can you be so certain?"

She took his hand and placed it on her chest. "Because I feel it here."
The steady beat of her heart thumped against his palm. He swallowed and met her gaze.

"He's not gone," she continued. "He's going to come back to us. Trust me. Trust him."

Zuko's breath caught in his throat. She was amazing. He had never met anyone so full of faith and optimism. The sheer conviction in her eyes made all his fears seem so insubstantial. It made hope bloom again in a tiny bud.

Without a word, he pulled her tightly into his arms. Her hands stroked his back, light and soothing. He sighed into her hair and closed his eyes.

"What did I ever do to deserve you?" he breathed, so soft it was the merest exhalation of words.

"Hrm? Did you say something?"

He held her even closer, taking comfort in her warmth and scent. "It's nothing. I just … I'm sorry I yelled at you, and I'm glad you came. I'm glad you're here."

"Me too." A beat. "You'd be totally lost without me."

She meant it as harmless teasing—just an attempt to lighten the mood—but his whole body resonated with the truth of that statement. He really would be lost without her.

He pulled back and looked into her eyes. They were such a beautiful colour, like flecks of ocean and sky interwoven. Before he'd met her, he'd never known blue could be so warm. He'd never known he could come to love the colour so much.

His hand glided up to her cheek while the other remained loosely on her waist. "Katara," he whispered.

"What?"

"Thank you. Truly."

He pressed his forehead to hers, eyes sliding shut again. Their breath intermingled for a few heartbeats before he pulled back and got to his feet. She glanced up at his extended hand.

"Come on," he said, "we can't stay here."

"What about Aang? Shouldn't we wait for him?"

"He'll come back to us when he's ready. We just have to trust him, right?"

The corner of her mouth curved a fraction. "You're right." She took his hand, letting him help her to her feet.

They were still holding hands when they left the chamber.

**OoO**

Zuko set out for the prisons later that night. Azula, for all that she would have liked to join him, had conceded that stealth was more his forte than hers. It didn't help that she only had one functioning arm. As such, she settled for telling him not to screw up and then sat on her preferred cushion to wait. Katara sat on the opposite cushion and kept giving her sidelong glances.

"What?" Azula snapped after several minutes of this.
"Nothing."

Silence continued. So did the glances.

She narrowed her eyes. "Spit it out if there's something you wish to say."

Katara shifted on her cushion, one hand fidgeting with a loose lock of hair. "I just …"

"What?"

"No, it's nothing. Forget it."

Azula raised her eyebrows. Miss Bleeding Heart's cheeks had gone a bit pink, which meant whatever she wanted to say made her embarrassed. "Is this about my brother?"

"I said forget it!"

Ah, the blush had darkened. Right on target then.

"We're probably going to be here for a while," Azula observed. "I can't say I'm fond of your company, but talking would be more interesting than sitting here in silence. Well, for the most part."

"Do you ever say anything that isn't an insult?"

"Oh, don't act so self-righteous. You know you don't like me either."

Katara did not argue this point. Instead, she sighed and traced a random pattern with her finger on the low table. Her mouth twisted as she struggled to get words out. "Is it … is it true that in the Fire Nation you ...

The silence dragged.

Azula's eyebrows rose even higher. "It hardly needs to be said, but I can't answer your question if you don't tell me it."

"Well, you're not making this any easier when you keep looking at me all judgey."

"You flail. I judge. Just spit it out."

Katara sighed loudly again and pressed her face to her hands, perhaps in a poor attempt to hide the blush spreading all over her cheeks. "Alright, alright. I heard this morning that—"

There was a knock at the door. The two girls exchanged a glance of mutual wariness. Without a word, Katara got to her feet and headed for the door. Azula followed her, cradling flames behind her back just in case their visitor intended trouble.

"Who is it?" Katara asked.

"It's us."

Us sounded like Yuzo and Atsuo.

Katara opened the door. Azula snuffed her flames in her fist as she realised it really was just the two boys. Rather than greet them, she headed back to her cushion and left Katara to do the social niceties. That didn't stop Atsuo from giving her a silent hello once he was inside. He was always friendly with her—had been ever since he'd healed her while they'd both been Shūrin's prisoners. It had used to
bother her a little, but not so much these days.

Yuzo and Atsuo stayed for a while to talk. Katara told them about what happened with Aang, which had both boys calling him crazy and making many concerned opinions. Still, Miss Bleeding Heart also seemed to be Miss Hopeful Speeches, because she was quick to come to Aang’s defence and claimed it would all work out.

"It had better," Yuzo said frankly. "Coming here would have been a waste of time otherwise. The sooner we leave, the better. Can't wait to get away from this toxic place and that woman."

Atsuo frowned and his shoulders slumped a little. *That woman* was probably his mum.

Katara placed her hand on his arm. "She's still not talking to you?"

He shook his head.

"I'm sorry."

He just shrugged as if to say it couldn't be helped.

"What's her problem anyway?" Katara asked. "Why is she so … you know, her?"

Atsuo signed how his mum had always been pretty strict, but that had only got worse when she'd been made Head Warrior. It was like she felt he had to be perfect—no broken rules, no mistakes, no exceptions. Plus, she'd hated the fact he hadn't wanted to follow in her footsteps. Fighting and training to become a warrior had never interested him. He'd just liked being a healer.

"What about your dad?"

He shrugged and admitted he had no idea who his dad was. The relationship clearly hadn't lasted, or maybe the guy was dead, or maybe he just didn't want anything to do with them. Either way, his mum was the only family he had now.

"Still seems harsh," Katara said with a frown. "I just can't believe she's treating you this way. I mean, she's your mum."

"Not all parents love unconditionally," Azula muttered.

It was something she and Zuko had both learnt very quickly about their father. Mistakes were punished, kindness was almost non-existent, and respect was only offered if one was seen of worth. She'd used to take pleasure in knowing she was the only one who could get their father's approval, but now she tried not to think of him at all. Just the thought of returning to the Fire Nation made it feel like there was a ball of dread lodged in her chest.

Father would be much harsher than Chiyo if she ever met him again.

Atsuo met her eyes with open sympathy. It was like he'd read her inside and out, like he'd pieced together her thoughts in one blow. Azula didn't much like that. She stood up and declared she'd had enough of their company for one night. Exposing her vulnerability in front of Zuko was one thing, but she had no desire to do it in front of these people.

oOo

It wasn't hard to get to the prisons. Zuko was good at stealth and he had done his research. No, the hard part was accepting that he couldn't free his mother and Shizue on the spot. There were no
visible injuries on either women, but he didn't like the stiff way Shizue moved. His mother was even worse. She'd been resting on the floor when he'd first turned up, had taken way too long to sit, and now seemed frailer than ever.

"What have they done?" he demanded as he crouched in front of her cell, hands curled tight around the metal bars. "Did they hurt you?"

"It's nothing," Ursa said, but it was obvious she was trying too hard to be dismissive.

"Shizue?" He looked to the neighbouring cell, urging her to tell him the truth.

"Forty lashes to the back."

His stomach clenched. "I could heal—"

"No," Ursa cut in. "They'll be bound to notice and then they'd know you'd been here."

He lowered his gaze, gritting his teeth.

She placed her hands over his. Her touch was a shock of ice. "Listen, I'm glad to see you, but you shouldn't have come. It's too dangerous."

"It's fine. I still have some time before the patrol comes back. No one will know I was here."

"And what if they come back earlier? What if something happens to mess up your plan?" Her lips curved into a sad smile. "You're too reckless, my love. You always were."

He frowned and covered her hands with his. "You're cold."

"They don't let us have fires," Shizue said in a flat tone. "All part of the punishment."

His grip tightened on his mum's hands. She was so thin. Being stuck this deep in the caves with no heat couldn't be good for her, especially since it was winter. "Are they doing anything to take care of you?"

"Don't worry about me. What matters is you and your sister are safe."

He swallowed against the sudden lump in his throat. "Is that why you did it? Is that why you lied?"

"If the sages had learnt the truth, the punishment would have been far worse. They would not have forgiven Shizue and me for keeping you from them for so long. They would have wanted to make you theirs, no matter what it took. As for Azula, she would be considered too much of a threat. I couldn't risk it."

The explanation did nothing to ease the heaviness in his chest, nor did the dark circles under her eyes or her subtle shivers.

"I hate this," he whispered. "I hate seeing you like this."

She reached through the bars and stroked his face. "That's why you shouldn't have come. It only hurts us both."

He closed his eyes and leaned into her touch, not caring that her skin felt like ice.

"Go now," she said, pulling back from him. "We'll be okay. We'll survive. Just make sure Aang—"
"Oh. You don't know."

He quickly told her what had happened.

Shizue's brow furrowed. "It can't be good that the bond was severed. The Avatar is not a fire healer, and a life bond like yours is only cut when one or both die."

"That worried me too," he admitted, "but Katara is certain he's alive. I want to believe her. I want to believe in him."

"I do not think we need to fear," Ursa murmured. "There is a power at work here that we cannot see, but he was guided by it. We must trust that this is all a step towards him realising his destiny."

Shizue did not look impressed. "I find it hard to believe the world will be saved by a child who likes to play with marbles."

Zuko almost smiled. "He showed you that trick?"

"He showed everyone. We were on that ship for a long time."

His lips did twitch into a smile then. Trust Aang to go around showing people his dumb bending tricks.

Ursa touched his hands again, drawing his attention. She once more encouraged him to leave before he was caught. She didn't think the risk was worth it. It was best to keep their heads down until Aang sorted out his side of things.

"I don't want to leave you."

"You must." Her thumb stroked the back of his hand. "I have been through worse than this. Trust me, Shizue and I will be fine."

He closed his eyes briefly. "Fine. I'll go for now, but at least let me help you with this."

He clasped her hands, allowing heat to emanate from his palms to warm her. It wasn't enough, of course. Not for Shizue when he did the same for her either. That was the worst part about all of this. It hurt to see them cold and in pain. It hurt to know there was nothing more he could do, not unless he wanted to bring more trouble upon them.

"I'll come again tomorrow night," he whispered.

"You'd better not," his mum responded.

He gave her a look that made it clear she couldn't change his mind.

"Stubborn boy." She stroked his cheek again. "Do me this favour. Keep yourself safe."

"I'm good at this, Mum. You really don't have to worry."

She laughed in a bit of exasperation. "Your uncle is right. You're going to turn all my hair grey with your stubborn recklessness, and even then I'm sure you'll be saying, 'It's okay, Mum. You don't need to worry.'"

"Uncle said that?"

That was kind of offensive. Zuko had been trying really hard to curb his impulses and think things
through before taking action. It wasn't his fault bad things kept happening. Sometimes risks had to be taken. Sometimes he was the only one who could take action.

His thoughts must have showed on his expression, for she smiled and ruffled his hair. It was something she'd done when he was a child, and it brought a small blush to his cheeks now. He was almost seventeen; his hair was not for ruffling … even if he did kind of like it. There was affection in every careless touch. He had missed that.

"Your uncle loves you, as do I." Her voice took on the Mum Tone. "And that's why you'll turn me grey if you insist on being stubborn and make me worry so much."

"I don't want to do that to you." He touched her dark hair and met her eyes. "But I'm worried about you too, and Azula is as well, so you have to let me check up on you for both of us, okay?"

Something shifted in her expression. "Azula said she was worried about me?"

"Not in those words, but close enough. You know her."

"I see."

He bit his lip. "Actually, um, I think you were right about me needing to be patient with her. She hasn't been so hostile these days, and I think … I think she's beginning to see that Father was wrong. I think she's trying to change."

She smiled softly. "I'm glad. I had hoped that being away from his influence would help her."

His frown deepened. "About that. There's something I've been wanting to ask you."

"What?"

"Why did you marry him? Why did you even leave this place?"

She pulled back from the bars as if retreating into a shell. "An Dung would say it was my destiny."

"Your destiny?"

"The tribe needed a spy in the palace. Someone close to the Fire Lord. Someone who could move freely and not be viewed as a threat. I was chosen because my father was Avatar Roku's son and it was known that Fire Lord Azulon was looking for a wife for Prince Ozai. It didn't matter that my father married a fire healer and moved to this place. It didn't matter that my grandfather was viewed as an enemy to the Fire Nation. My blood was still considered noble, second only to that of the royal family. All I had to do was pretend I believed in Sozin's vision."

"That was really all it took?"

"Failure was not an option. I did what was necessary to ensure your father would not wish to marry any other woman."

A frown tugged at his lips. He'd grown up in the palace long enough to know that was code for Things Best Left Unexplained.

"Why are you worrying about this, my love? It happened a long time ago, and regardless of what I feel for your father, I do not regret giving birth to you or your sister. If given the choice, I would do it all again if that meant I got to keep you as my children."

"How can you feel that way after all you must have gone through?"
She leaned forward to cup his cheek through the bars. "Because I love you. I love you both." A final stroke of her thumb. "Now go before the guards return."

Zuko didn't argue this time. He left his mother and Shizue with promises that he would come back the next night. Maybe if they were really lucky, Aang would have returned by then so a jailbreak could happen. He definitely didn't want to dwell on what it would mean if they were all wrong about trusting Aang's judgement.

_He has to come back. He has to._

The words were an echo in his heart. It wasn't because Aang was the Avatar or they could actually do with his help. Zuko just wanted his friend back. He couldn't imagine a world without Aang's bright smiles and cheerful chatter. He didn't want to imagine that world.

oOo

*Ding. Ding.*

The chime was gentle yet piercing. Aang opened his eyes with a clawing gasp. He was flat on his back, his whole body aching, lungs screaming for breath. It felt like someone had punched a hole through his ribs and snatched something precious from him. Tears pricked as he struggled to comprehend the phantom wound of loss. Physical pain he could handle, but this …

This hurt like a blade to the soul.

Gingerly, he sat up and looked around. He was sitting in water, though it was shallow enough to only submerge his hands. Mist cloaked everything else. His heart quickened and he pushed himself to his feet, staggering and creating little splashes. "Hello!" he called. "Anyone here?"

No answer.

Panic squeezed his chest. This was too much like that misty place of nothing he'd been trapped in during his coma.

"Hello! Guardian Spirit? Roku?"

He tried to run, but his legs trembled like jelly and he collapsed onto his hands and knees. Water dripped from his face. He wasn't sure if it was from the splashes or tears. For a moment he just stared at his frightened reflection, watching it ripple and distort.

"Avatar Aang."

The deep voice seemed to come from everywhere.

He scrambled to his feet. "Hello? Who's there?"

"This way."

Aang was about to ask where "this way" was meant to be, but then he caught sight of a stone pedestal in the distance, cradled by a circle of light. He approached it as swiftly as his wobbly legs would allow. On top of the white stone lay four items: a clay turtle, a pull-string propeller, a wooden hog monkey, and a wooden hand drum. His heart got lodged in his throat. These were the Avatar relics. These were the four toys he had chosen out of thousands, which had convinced the monks he was the reincarnated Avatar.
"What ... what's going on?" he asked.

"This is where it all began for you."

The mist parted in a rush. Colours and shapes formed, showing him the Southern Air Temple where he had grown up. Aang's heart ached as he saw his old friends and mentors. They were so real, seemed so close, as if he could just reach out his hand and touch them. Before he could test this theory, the scene changed to those days of increased isolation and study. The other kids had stopped playing with him, the older monks had turned stricter and stricter. Gyatso was the only one who seemed to care about his feelings.

"Why are you showing me this?"

He didn't want to relieve these memories, because of course he knew what happened next. The monks had tried to separate him from Gyatso and he had chosen to run away. He had fled from his responsibilities and ended up trapped in an iceberg for a hundred years.

"Perhaps you should ask yourself. Why did you run?"

"I was scared. I didn't want to lose Gyatso."

"You were scared of losing your friend, yes, but that is not the real reason."

He stared at his feet, insides squirming. "I ... I didn't want to be the Avatar. I just wanted to be a normal kid."

"From the moment you took your first breath, you were not like the other children."

"I know." Aang closed his eyes. "I know I can't run from my duties anymore. The world needs me."

"Knowing is not enough."

"W-what?"

"If you truly wish to reclaim what you have lost, you must prove yourself worthy. You must prove you are ready to take up the mantle of being the Avatar."

"I thought I did that when I jumped into the abyss."

"That was only the first trial, and one you may still yet fail."

"But I jumped. I'm here."

"To be reborn, one must first taste death. One must be willing to lose everything. Are you ready to lose everything, Avatar Aang? Or will you turn back to protects the bond you cherish?"

His eyes widened and he clutched his chest. "Zuko. That's what happened! Our bond is gone!"

"For now, yes. And if you keep going forward, it will be severed permanently."

"Why?" He glanced around at the mist, seeking any trace of the voice's owner. "Why does it have to be cut? Zuko has helped me so much! He's saved my life and everything!"

"Indeed, he has done much for you. Yet how can you be born anew when your spirit is anchored to him? How can you be an Avatar when you are too scared to walk on your own?"
"I'm not too scared. I'm just …"

"Then let him go."

Aang swallowed. "There's no other way?"

"There is not."

Everything in him seemed to plummet as if the weight of mountains was pressing down on him. He didn't want to give up his bond. He cherished the closeness he shared with Zuko, cherished the comfort it gave him to know they were always connected. Just experiencing this temporary separation was bad enough. He didn't want to be stuck with all the loss and crushing aloneness that had been carved into his soul.

But then maybe that was the problem. Maybe the voice was right. Zuko had become like his Gyatso, and right now he had to choose which bond was more important: the one he shared with his friend or the one he was supposed to share with his past lives.

Aang let out a breath. "Okay. I'll do it. I'll let go of the bond."

Saying the words ripped new holes of grief and loss into his soul, but he had already come this far. Plus, he still remembered what Zuko had told him at the Eastern Air Temple, back when he'd struggled to unlock the final chakra because of his attachment to Katara:

"You're not going to lose her, Aang. But if you keep trying to make her your anchor, a part of you will always be controlled by your attachment to her. Look at what's happening right now: you have the chance to master the Avatar State … but instead you're holding yourself back because you're scared that you'll find yourself alone again. You're just running away."

Blunt as those words had been, they were true. Katara was still at Aang's side, albeit not in the way he had hoped. Aang had to be brave again now. Losing the bond did not mean he would lose Zuko. This was just another part of moving forward.

He had to learn to walk on his own.

Jaw clenched tight, he marched into the mist and left the pedestal and the images of the Southern Air Temple behind. He did not look back.

Chapter End Notes

I've mentioned before this story was outlined pre-comics and LoK, so all the Ursa backstory and stuff has nothing to do with this fic (as you can see). No Ikem or anything like that to be found here.
The water had turned black and as cold as ice, striking him with a knife's sharpness. Aang's throat bobbed as the dark liquid crept up his legs, up his waist, getting deeper with every step. Soon, he was tilting his head back so it wouldn't get in his mouth.

"Um, you don't really expect me to go under, right?" he called to the voice that had been guiding him.

Now he was no expert on water, but he was pretty sure you weren't meant to swim in stuff that was black as pitch. Not to mention he couldn't bend. He guessed he'd passed into the Spirit World when he'd jumped into the abyss, which was fine since he'd been hoping to make it here, but that also meant no waterbending.

"Hey!" he called a bit louder. "You there?"

No answer.

His heart thumped faster. For all that he'd determined he had to learn to walk on his own, just like the spirit had advised, that didn't make it any easier. Or maybe it was because a part of him instinctively knew that once he went under the water, there would be no going back.

"To be reborn, one must first taste death. One must be willing to lose everything. Are you ready to lose everything, Avatar Aang?"

He closed his eyes, his entire body pounding with the pulsing flow of his blood. It was thunder in his ears, in his chest. It pulsed and pulsed with life, with a need to preserve that life.

But he had come this far.

He had come this far and he had to trust that this was all part of the plan. He had to trust that the voice had guided him here for a reason.

"I can do this," he whispered.

He took another step forward, then another step. The water swallowed him in black. It was like sinking into endless night—no moon, no stars, no light or life at all. Panic seized his chest but he did not resist. He embraced the darkness, the cold, the soul-piercing shivers.

He let the water pull him down, down, down.

"Are you afraid, young Avatar?"

The voice came from all around him, yet it was not the same that had spoken to him before. This one was smooth and feminine.

Yes, he thought in answer. He could not speak unless he wanted to get a mouthful of water. Yes. I'm afraid.

"Yet you still surrender yourself to me?"
I have to.
"Why?"

This is what I was told to do.
"Is that all?"

What?

"All you have shown me is that you can follow orders. I wonder, is it bravery to walk into death's embrace because you are told to, or is it just stupidity?"

Hey! That's not fair! It's not like I didn't think about what I was doing.

"Then why did you come?"

Because …

He reflected on all his thoughts and feelings—why he had jumped into the abyss, why he had agreed to sever his bond with Zuko, why he had let the water take him. Fear had made him hesitate at every point, had whispered for him to turn back, but he had kept going.

He had known.

Because this is the only way. Because I've already failed the world once and I refuse to do it again. Because I'm the Avatar and I have to make myself whole again, even if that means facing death itself!

Light glimmered from the depths. Two eyes like massive rubies. "Humans often mistake water as being the element of life, but water is and has always been the element of change. Change does not come without sacrifice. It is the chill of winter that paves the way for spring; it is the death of all that is weak and unnecessary."

I understand.

"Then prove your conviction. Let your anchors and your old self die so you may be reborn and the Avatar this world needs can live again."

Aang closed his eyes. In his mind, he could see the boy who had run from his responsibilities. The boy who had never wanted to be the Avatar. Even after unlocking the seven chakras and accepting his destiny, he had been so quick to fall into old habits. Now he understood why he had failed. Knowing he was the Avatar wasn't enough. Accepting that he had to bring balance wasn't enough.

He had to act. He had to change.

Aang opened his mouth and let the black water rush in, let it slip its way down his throat and fill him completely. It wasn't choking. It wasn't even that unpleasant. This was nothing like drowning. Instead, he felt like he was being returned to the womb, back to the dark depths where all life took seed.

Ruby eyes glinted brighter and he caught a glimpse of a shadowed form, almost like a turtle with the head of a snake. Then his heart slowed, his thoughts unravelled, and all he could think and breathe was water.

oOo
It was the strange chime again. Aang opened his eyes to blurry bunches of pink and white. He blinked. The bunches were still there, but now his vision was beginning to settle and he could see that they were blossoms. One of the petals came loose and landed on his cheek, soft as snow.

He sat up. The water was gone. Instead, his hands and legs brushed against green shoots and dirt. Trees brimming with blossoms encircled him like a giant crown, and every breath filled him with the scent of freshness and new life.

"Okay," he murmured. "I think I just stumbled from winter into spring."

"That is correct."

He jumped and cried out as the green thing appeared out of nowhere. It kind of looked like it had the head of a lizard, aside from the antlers, but at the same time it was such a weird combination of animals that he didn't know what to call it. It walked on two legs, which were furry and hoofed like a goat's. It had tiny arms and little clawed hands, and it had a long tail like a lion. It also wasn't much bigger than his hand.

"Um, who are you?"

What are you would probably be too rude of a question to ask.

"I'm the green dragon," it responded in a rapid-fire voice.

Aang blinked. He'd seen pictures of dragons. This was definitely not a dragon. "Okay …"

The lizard thing pointed a claw at him. "You embraced the waters of change and have been reborn; however, as of now you are like a seed that needs to take proper root, a koalalamb that must learn to walk, a, a …"

"A rabaroo that hasn't learnt to hop?"

"No!" The lizard threw its little hands up dramatically. "Why would you be a rabaroo?"

"Er … because they're kind of spring-like?"

"Don't be ridiculous." A forked tongue flicked out in what Aang thought was an unnecessarily rude gesture. "Rabaroo. Don't make me laugh."

Aang repressed a sigh. Spirits were always mean to him.

"In any case," the lizard said, "you are still a work in progress. That's why you're here. You dig?"

"Er, and what am I supposed to be, er, progressing?"

The lizard slapped its forehead with its tail. (Aang guessed a facetail was the only thing it could do since its tiny hands could barely reach its chin.) "Change is a process, sonny. You don't just get to forge yourself anew and that's it. You gotta work at that change. You gotta stay true to your conviction, and that means putting in some nice roots so you can stay grounded."

"Great." He tried not to let his shoulders slump.

"Giving up already?"
"No! No, of course not. It's just … I'm an airbender. Being grounded has never come naturally to me."

"Excuses."

"Hey!" He puffed his cheeks out. "It's not excuses! It's true!"

"So all the other airbenders were as flighty as you, were they?"

"Well, no, but …"

"Didn't think so."

"Well, most of them were old!"

A sharp claw poked him in the leg.

"Ow." Aang rubbed the wounded spot.

"You are full of excuses." Another poke.

"Hey, that hurts!"

"Good." Three more pokes. "Get it in your head that your natural element doesn't control you or your choices. Besides, you're not just an airbender. You're the Avatar."

"But—"

"You. Are. The. Avatar."

Aang gulped. The tiny lizard thing was kind of intimidating. "Okay, okay. I get it."

"Then say it back to me."

"I'm the Avatar."

"Louder."

"I'm the Avatar!"

"Yell it for the hills."

"I'M THE AVATAR!"

"Good. Now pick me up."

Aang blinked. "Huh?"

The lizard thing smiled, baring two rows of razor-sharp teeth. "Pick me up, Avatar Aang."

"Um, okay."

Given the size of the little spirit, it didn't seem like a difficult request. He carefully took hold of its tiny waist and pulled.

And pulled.
And pulled.

The lizard's smile widened. "Maybe you should try two hands."

Aang did so with no result (aside from his face going tomato-red from strain). It felt like he was trying to lift a mountain.

He groaned and fell back, hands throbbing slightly. "This is impossible!"

"Is it? Or are you just weak?"

"I'm not weak!"

"Then why can't you pick up little old me?"

"Because little old you is somehow super heavy! There's no way I can lift you! I can't even budge you!"

A tsk. "Disappointing. You really are the weakest Avatar ever. Maybe I should call you the Weakatar."

Aang scowled off to the side and folded his arms. "Well, now you're just being mean."

"I'm stating a fact."

"You tricked me! You made it seem like this would be easy, but it's not!"

"Life isn't easy. Not everything will come naturally to you, not everything will go your way, and sometimes what appears to be the simplest of tasks will be the most difficult."

Aang's shoulders slumped. "I do know that, but—"

"No buts! Now if you wish to progress, you need to complete my test."

"You can't be serious!"

"Oh, I am." A sharp-teethed smile. "I'll be over here whenever you're ready to try again."

Aang flopped against the grass with a groan. He almost missed the creepy death water.

oOo

"Land!" Toph threw herself onto the ground and used her bending to burrow in and hug the dirt. "Sweet, sweet land!"

Mai peered down at her. "I thought you were fine on the ship after Zuko settled your seasickness."

"It's still not the same."

"Clearly."

Leaving the earthbender to it, Mai joined the others and headed to the area where they were to set up their base of operations. The letters Iroh and Hakoda had exchanged with their contacts suggested their allies were not too far off. No doubt in a few days, this place would be crawling with warriors and Earth Kingdom soldiers.

"Can't believe we're here," Ty Lee murmured, coming to stand next to her.
"What, in this dirt dump?"

She shook her head. "No, I mean we're home. I just … I didn't think when I returned that it would be like this."

"I know what you mean."

Mai was not prone to sentimentalism. She had never thought she was attached to the Fire Nation, but being back on home soil and knowing she was preparing to fight her own people was a strange feeling. It wasn't quite dread, wasn't quite sadness, but it wasn't pleasure either.

"You think Azula will join us as well?" Ty Lee asked.

"I doubt it. Even if she did, she'd just stab us in the back and turn us over to the Fire Lord."

"You don't know that. I think she actually—"

"Look, we've been over this."

"But—"

"You can have all the hope you want, but that doesn't change the fact she's a cruel, manipulative person. I'm not even sure she sees people as people. To her, we're all just tools to be used and discarded."

Ty Lee bit her lip. "I know it seems that way, but you weren't there when—"

"I don't care." Mai averted her face so only the scarred side could be seen. "I will never trust her. I will never be her friend."

She walked off before Ty Lee could say anything else, her back rigid and movement stiff. Frustration prickled under her skin like an itch that couldn't be scratched. She was so tired of hearing about Azula, so tired of feeling pressured to give the girl a chance. Mai had given enough chances. She would give no more.

Rather than stick with the others and help put up tents, she went off on her own and threw knives at a tree. She was still doing this when Sokka eventually found her.

"What?" she said as she wrenched the knives from the trunk.

"Just wanted to see how you were going. I saw you head off earlier, and when you didn't come back …"

"I'm fine."

He folded his arms across his chest. "Doesn't look like it with the way you're gouging holes into that tree."

"Maybe I don't like this tree."

"What did it do? Leaf at you funny?"

Her nose scrunched. "Was that meant to be a joke?"

"What if I say yes?"
"I'd say you're getting worse."

He tried to look dignified for all of three seconds before he gave up and unfolded his arms. "Okay, yes. I admit that one could have been better."

She rolled her eyes and threw another knife.

"Hey." He touched her shoulder. "I'm serious, though. What's going on?"

His tone wasn't a demand. It was an invitation. Even the way he looked at her was a silent statement of, *I'm here. I'm listening. You can tell me.*

She turned away, mouth a tight line. "It doesn't matter."

"Look, I won't push you if you don't want to talk about it. I'll leave right now if that's what you want, but I … I'm just worried. I don't like seeing you upset."

Her gaze darted to his in surprise.

He smiled and pressed his finger to her forehead, just like she always did to him. "Plus, that internal monologue of yours is pretty loud."

*Thud, thud.* Her heart pounded a little louder, a little faster. She tucked her knives back into the mechanisms hidden within her sleeves and raised her eyebrow. "Think you know me so well, do you?"

"Actually, I do."

"Then what am I thinking now?"

"You're annoyed about something. You tend to twirl your knives when you're bored, but you gouge holes in things when something is really bothering you. I don't think you're annoyed at me otherwise you'd have told me to go away already."

Her lips twitched. "True."

He frowned. "You can talk to me about it, you know. You always listen to me. The least I can do is listen to you."

She sighed and looked down at their feet. "I'm just … frustrated, I guess."

"About what?"

"I don't know. Being back in the Fire Nation, listening to Ty Lee go on about how she thinks Azula has changed. I swear if I have to listen to one more"—she put on a higher voice—"'You just have to give her a chance, Mai', I'm going to scream."

"Wow. You do a really good Ty Lee impression."

She jabbed him in the chest. "Tell anyone and I'll kill you."

He laughed, holding his hands up in an appeasing gesture. "Got it. Your secret is safe with me." The amusement quickly faded from his eyes. "But, yeah, I can see why that'd be frustrating. Azula is kind of …"

"Pretty much. Of course Ty Lee doesn't get it. She seems to think Azula not being completely
horrible those few times is reason enough to trust her again. She thinks once the others get back that we can all be friends again." Her hands clenched and unclenched. "But I'm not like Ty Lee. Azula burned my face and hasn't shown any remorse for it. Frankly, I don't care if she changes or not; I don't want anything to do with her."

"You have every right to feel that way."

Her eyes met his. "Really? You're not going to tell me this will revoke my membership from the Second Chances club?"

"Remember when we were in Ba Sing Se and you were the one who said we needed to stay and make that truce with Azula? I thought you were so brave then. I still do. But that doesn't mean you have to forgive her now, and it definitely doesn't mean you have to be her friend." He brushed a stray lock of hair from her cheek. "I won't think any less of you either way."

Thud, thud, thud, thud. The skittering beat of her heart brought warmth to her cheeks. His gaze dropped to her lips then back to her eyes, giving her that look. She'd seen it enough to know what he wanted. They'd been tiptoeing around this look and all the feelings fluttering between them ever since that first time on the beach, but especially after Suki had broken up with him.

Not yet, had seemed to be the mutual agreement. It wouldn't be right.

But here his eyes whispered now, and her heart thrummed a thundering yes.

"Bet I can guess what you're thinking," she murmured.

"What?"

She leaned forward and pressed her lips to his. It was a butterfly-wing's kiss, light and teasing. She pulled back, checking to make sure she'd read him correctly. The faint colour on his cheeks and the dopey smile on his lips told her she needn't have worried.

"Yeah," he said, "you're definitely a mind reader."

Their eyes met and they kissed again, arms wrapping around each other. Needless to say, it was a while before they returned to camp.

oOo

"Alright there, sonny? You haven't moved in a while."

Aang scowled at the little lizard thing now reclining on a rock. "I'm thinking."

"Oh, thinking."

His shoulders inched closer to his ears. Dealing with this spirit was like dealing with Toph during earthbending training. The tone it used made everything sound like an insult.

"Well, maybe if you gave me a hint," Aang grumbled, "I'd—"

"Nu-uh, no way. No freebies for you. Besides, I did give you a hint."

His eyes widened. "You did?"

"Of course, though whether you can figure it out is another matter entirely. I'm beginning to think you're not only the Weakatar but also the Stupidatar."
Aang gave him an unimpressed look. "That joke isn't getting any funnier."

"Sure it is. You don't know comedic genius when you hear it."

"It's not comedic genius. You're just being mean. Anyway, if you've already given me the hint, you can give it to me again, right?"

"Nope."

"Aw, c'mon. Why not?"

"Sonny, you're the Avatar. You figure it out."

Aang sighed. "But I don't know. I've tried so many different things and nothing works." His eyes narrowed. "You aren't just messing with me, are you?"

"I would do no such thing."

He continued to peer at the spirit in suspicion.

"Look, I gave you this test for a reason. Why don't you think about that?"

Aang frowned and rested his chin on his palms. He couldn't physically pick up the spirit. Having accepted that, he'd tried to think outside the box and come up with a different solution, even reinterpret the words. But that didn't seem to be what the spirit wanted. So what was the point of this test?

He tapped his finger to his cheek. "You said a lot of stuff about roots and being grounded …"

"Mhmm."

"Was that the hint?"

A smile was all he got in response.

"Alright then. Keep your secrets."

It seemed he really would have to figure it out on his own. Still, the more he thought about it, the more he was sure it had to do with becoming grounded somehow. He just wasn't sure what that meant.

Aang's brow furrowed even more. He looked around at the silky grass and blossoms. This place was meant to be like spring. Out of the four elements, the one associated with spring was earth. He'd struggled a lot with earthbending because it was all about being steady and strong like a rock. He didn't do rock very well. His nature was more to be a leaf on the wind: to drift rather than resist, to avoid rather than confront …

"Oh," he murmured.

It was like puzzle pieces falling into place. So many of his problems had come about because he had all these duties and expectations placed on him, and he honestly didn't know how to handle that sometimes. It was hard to know the right course of action. In his heart, he was simply Aang the Air Nomad, so he tried his best to follow the monks' teachings. But he was also the Avatar, not to mention living a hundred years from the peaceful world he had known.

Where did he fit? Where did his values fit? He didn't know. Ever since he'd woken up from that
iceberg, he'd felt like he was being pulled in so many directions.

"I think I get it now," he said softly.

The spirit approached with a much more solemn expression. "Yes, I think you do."

He hugged his knees to his chest. "Is that why you kept reminding me I'm the Avatar?"

"As the Avatar, it is important for you to be grounded. There are many who will oppose you or give you advice that conflicts with your purpose. How can you weather these storms if you do not know where you stand? How can you stand firm if your own heart is at war with your duty?" The spirit shook its tiny head. "In the end, a tree that is not rooted properly must give way and fall."

Aang closed his eyes, thinking of how he'd blocked the Avatar State because he'd refused to listen to his past lives and use fire against the sea serpent. He hadn't wanted to hurt anyone—not even the sea serpent—but in the end he'd got far more people hurt (not to mention almost died) because he'd lost control again and eventually the link with his past lives. He hadn't been able to protect anyone. He'd been completely useless.

"What do I need to do?" he whispered.

"That is for you to decide. The Avatar's purpose never changes, but only you can decide what kind of Avatar you will be and where you will establish your roots."

"I don't want to let the world down again. I want to be a good Avatar, I really do." A lump formed in his throat. "But does that mean I have to sacrifice everything? Does that mean I can't be me?"

"Not at all."

"But everyone seems to tell me otherwise, that it doesn't matter what the monks say, and sometimes I'm scared they're right. I'm scared that everything I know and that's important to me doesn't belong in this world anymore." Something hot prickled his eyes. "Yet how can I give it up? I'm the only Air Nomad left. For so long, I thought I was the only airbender left. If I don't follow those teachings, who will? Who will even remember them?"

A clawed, tiny hand touched his leg. "You want my advice, sonny?"

Aang nodded.

"Think about what restoring peace and balance means to you."

"What it means to me?"

"That's right."

His brow furrowed. "I guess I just … I want everyone to stop fighting. I want the world to be more like what it was, like the one I knew. The nations weren't divided then and there was more fun and laughter."

"Then who better to guide the nations into finding that world again than a boy from a hundred years ago?"

Tears slipped free of his eyelashes. "You think so?"

"We great spirits have been aware of you since your birth, young Aang, as have we followed the lives of every other Avatar. I do not think it a coincidence that you survived all those years in the
iceberg. This world needs you, and not just because you can wield four elements or use the Avatar State. Your ways are not theirs. That makes you special."

Aang's eyes widened. "Then … then you don't think I have to ignore the monks' teachings to be a good Avatar?"

"So long as those teachings don't conflict with your duties, I don't see why you have to give up any of them."

More tears fell, but he didn't try to check them. He'd never felt so light, so at peace, not even after he'd unlocked all the seven chakras.

"Just remember," the spirit warned, "while it's good to be rooted firmly in your own values, you must also know when to bend, as does the tree to coastal winds. Be open to wisdom, be open to what the other nations can teach you, but never forget where you stand. Never forget that your purpose is to bring peace and balance to this world."

"I understand."

"Good." A lizardy smile of sharp teeth. "Then pick me up, Avatar Aang."

Aang reached down and picked the little spirit up with one hand. A frown crept onto his lips. "I'm glad I passed the test, but you actually were messing with me before, weren't you? I bet I would have never been able to do this until you allowed it."

"Wrong. You became stronger once you were spiritually grounded."

"Really?"

"Really, and don't you forget it. Change is a continuous process, remember? Humans will always have weaknesses, always be tempted into losing their way. That's why you can't forget your roots. They'll hold you firm when you need it most."

"I'll do my best."

The spirit flashed another razor-sharp grin. "You'd better, otherwise I'll have to call you the Weakatar again."

Chapter End Notes

I hope when you read "Alright then. Keep your secrets", you thought of the Frodo meme.
Sweat trickled down Aang's back. He tugged off his layers so that he was left only in the sleeveless tunic. It was too hot for all those clothes. All around him, life brimmed at its peak—trees towering to the buttery-lit sky, endless blooms of flowers. Everything was lush and full.

A song-like call came from above. He winced against the glare of the sun as a bird the size of an air temple descended. It was a deep red and fire trailed from its wings and long-feathered tail. He'd never seen anything like it.

"Avatar Aang," the spirit greeted, looking down at him through eyes that glowed like embers.

"Who are you?"

"I have gone by many names." A graceful shrug. "Most humans know me as Agni."

Aang blinked. "Agni? So you're like the patron spirit of the Fire Nation?"

"Only in the sense that those humans are the ones who wish to call upon me. In reality, we spirits do not care for geographical divisions. It is humans who broke themselves into nations."

"Huh. I guess that's true."

Agni frowned. "We are straying from the point. You know why you are here."

"I'm guessing you're going to test me so I can get stronger like the other two spirits did."

"There is no test I can give you."

"What? Then why—"

"There is no test because the power you seek is already yours."

Aang's brow furrowed. "But it's not. I can't go into the Avatar State. I can't seem to access any of my spiritual abilities."

"Do you know where your power comes from?"

"Um, it's the spirit energy within me … right?"

Agni looked skyward. "This is what happens when you get reincarnated as a human," he muttered.

"Huh?"

"You are not a mere human. You are the Avatar Spirit. That is why, even though you have not been able to access all of your abilities, you can still wield the four elements."

"Oh." Aang rubbed the base of his neck. "You know, I never actually thought about that."

"Clearly."

"But then why are my other abilities blocked?"
"Why do you think?"

He glanced down at his hands. "I … I guess it started when I didn't listen to my past lives. I got shut out of the Avatar State even though I should have been in control."

"And then what?"

"I got the Avatar State back, but I still couldn't quite control it. Then I got hit by that rock and, um, I think I died for a bit. When I got healed and woke up, everything was all messed up."

The reddish embers seemed to glow brighter in Agni's eyes. "By now, I'm sure you understand that bonds are powerful. The one you share with your past lives is exceptionally so. It is a link of power that has been built upon with each of your reincarnations."

"You're talking about the Avatar Cycle."

Agni nodded. "When you refused to use fire after unblocking your chakras, you were denying an entire part of that cycle. That is why you got shut out rather than losing control. It is one thing to fear and deny in ignorance; it is quite another to do so after enlightenment."

Wriggely knots formed in his stomach. "I didn't realise it would do that."

"Nevertheless, your choice that day weakened your connection to your past lives. Even when you overcame your fear of fire and started to bend it again, the strain lingered."

"I know." His shoulders slumped. "I could feel something was wrong. It was like there was a resistance when I tried to connect with my past lives, like we weren't quite in sync, so I couldn't have the control I'd gained by unlocking the chakras."

"Spiritual wounds are not easily fixed. On top of that, your connection was damaged even more when you died while in the Avatar State. It would have been severed completely had your healer friends not been there to save you."

Aang winced in remembrance. It was hard to forget the image of all his past lives crumbling to dust. It had haunted him for weeks.

"So, what am I supposed to do?" he asked. "You said the power is already mine, but I can't connect with my past lives anymore and—"

"You haven't realised?"

"Uh …"

"Yes, your chi was damaged and the link to your past lives blocked, but that is not the case now. When you chose to embrace the waters of change, when you were reborn and grounded yourself in an unwavering desire to bring balance to the world, the way was cleared for you."

Hoped fluttered like wings in Aang's heart. "You mean … you mean they're all here? I can reach my past lives again?"

"Indeed. You just need to open yourself to them."

Aang smiled so wide it hurt his cheeks. "Really? Then I'm going to try now!"

He sat in his preferred lotus position, fists pressed together, and closed his eyes. No fear, no doubt. There was no room for such feelings when the truth swelled within him, bright as the sun: he was the
Avatar, another link in the cycle, and all he had to do was reach out and claim what had always been part of him.

It was like coming home.

The Avatars took shape from the dust of memories, dressed in the colours of their birth element and forming a line that went on and on, seemingly endless. Their hands were linked and their faces turned towards him. Each one was smiling. At the end of the line, closest to him, Roku stood in his red robes.

"We have been waiting for you, Aang."

Tears spilled down Aang's cheeks. "Roku. I've missed you all so much. I thought I'd lost you forever."

"Never has the Avatar Cycle come so close to being broken. It hurt us to be unable to help you, yet we all believed you would find your way back to us."

"I'm sorry it took so long."

"There is no need to apologise. If anything, I should be the one apologising to you. Because of the choices I made during my lifetime, your time as Avatar has been one fraught with war and hardship. You see, Fire Lord Sozin was my best friend. If I had been more decisive and acted sooner, I could have stopped him and the war before it started. I am sorry, Aang. This should have never been your burden."

"It's okay. I've realised there's no point beating ourselves up about things we did or didn't do in the past. All we can do is try our best now, right?"

"Well said," Kyoshi praised from where she stood next to Roku. "No Avatar is perfect, just as no human is perfect. We each are born with our own strengths and weaknesses, and we will inevitably make mistakes." Her lips curved. "But that is why the Avatar Cycle is so important."

"It is?"

"The connection we share is an Avatar's greatest strength," Roku explained. "By calling upon those who came before you, you can access all our wisdom and power—hundreds and hundreds of gathered knowledge and skill."

His eyes widened. He'd never thought of it like that. "Then … it's okay to ask for help?"

Roku blinked. "Why would you think it's not?"

"I just … I thought I was supposed to do this myself. The first trial was all about learning to walk on my own and—"

"You are the Avatar. You are meant to be a leader, a guide, a protector, and in that you must be able to stand on your own and make your own judgements. But that does not mean you cannot ask for help when you need it, especially not from your past lives." A warm smile. "We have all been in your shoes, Aang. We are here to assist you."

More tears spilled down his cheeks. "I really have missed you all."

Roku offered his hand. "Then join with us again. Let our connection be reforged."
Aang smiled mistily and grasped his hand. Power, familiarity, rightness—everything that had been missing slotted back into place. Every Avatar was him, had shared the same spirit as him, yet their lives, joys and struggles were all different. And that was how it was meant to be.

Roku nodded as if to say they'd meet again soon and then he and the other Avatars faded like ripples dissipating. Except Aang knew they were not gone. They remained within him, just as he knew he could call upon any of them if he truly wished.

His smile widened and he turned to Agni. "I did it."

"I knew you would." The fire spirit spread its magnificent wings. "This may be the last time we meet in your lifetime, Avatar Aang, so allow me to give you one last piece of advice. Do not be afraid of your power. Just as fire can be destruction, it is also the heartbeat of life. Remember that you are in control. You decide how your powers will be used."

"I know. I won't hesitate anymore."

Aang knew what was at stake. He knew what had to be done.

oOo

Katara woke to Zuko's sleeping face, or at least what she could see of him through the veil of his hair. That was a first. Normally he was off doing meditation or training in the mornings. His arm was draped over her waist, loose and comfortingly warm. She was tempted to snuggle closer or brush the hair from his face, but she worried it would wake him. Unless he had exhausted himself through healing, he was like an alert polardog and tended to stir at any sound or touch.

She tucked her hands under her chin and tried to be as still as possible. He really did look cute when he slept—softer somehow, like all the cares had been smoothed out of him. It was nice. Being with him like this was nice, though it did occur to her that it was maybe a bit creepy to watch him sleep. They weren't dating and they were only sharing a bed because they had to pretend to be married. She should probably stop.

His nose scrunched a little before sleepy gold gazed back at her. Heat spread over her cheeks. She tried her best to appear as if she had not been staring at him like a creeper.

"Hi," she murmured.

"Hi." He slow blinked at her a few times before he shot up into a sitting position. "Wait, what time is it?"

She stifled laughter with her hand. His hair was sticking up everywhere, though some strands were mushed to his cheek with what looked like traces of drool.

"What?" His brow furrowed. "What's so funny?"

"You."

He looked a bit offended.

"Relax. I think it's cute."

"Cute?" He pulled a face as if the word was even more of an offence.

When she explained he'd drooled in his sleep and his hair was a mess, he blushed and immediately
tried to fix his appearance. Not that he did a good job. His hair was still trying to imitate a boarcupine.

She laughed and sat up. "Here, I'll fix it for you."

Zuko didn't resist. His hair was as soft and thick as ever, and her lips curved a little as she combed her fingers through the dark strands.

"What?" he said, tilting his head.

"Hm?"

"You're smiling." His eyes narrowed. "You're planning to do something to my hair, aren't you?"

"You don't trust me that much?"

"I've had unwanted haircuts before."

"Let me guess, your sister?"

"Who else?"

His tone was dry but his body was a bit too tense, like he really did think she was about to chop his hair off or something. That bothered her.

She let her fingers slip through his hair and clasped his face. "You don't have to worry with me, you know. I'll never do anything to you that you don't want. If you don't like something, if I ever make you uncomfortable, all you have to do is say the word and I'll stop."

His eyes widened in that vulnerable little way, as if he hadn't expected her to care about his comfort, let alone tell him that she did. Then awkwardness seemed to catch up with him and he pulled back from her touch and rubbed the base of his neck. "Sorry."

"What for?"

"Because I, uh … ruined the mood, I guess. You were trying to be nice before, and I got all paranoid and—"

"Hey, you didn't ruin anything, and you don't have to apologise either." Her lips curved. "The 'mood' is not more important than your feelings, okay? I want you to tell me this kind of stuff. I want you to be comfortable."

He stared at her with such wonder. It hurt. It hurt to think of what he'd been through to make him so dismissive of his feelings, so quick to be shocked when people cared. It wasn't right. But she was also painfully aware of the way he'd frozen the other night when she'd hinted they could kiss and find comfort in each other, of all the turmoil she'd seen in his eyes and how he hadn't said a thing. He hadn't resisted her at all. Yet when she'd given him an out, he'd almost crumpled in relief. That had been heartbreaking.

She didn't want him to feel like he couldn't say no to her. She didn't want him to feel like his consent somehow didn't matter if it went against what she wanted. His consent mattered. *He* mattered, and she wished she could get that into his head.

Holding his gaze, she took his hand and ran her thumb over his palm. "Is this okay?"

He nodded.
She reached up and trailed her fingers through his hair. "And this?"

Another nod.

Her breath ghosted over his cheek and she paused when her lips were a hairsbreadth from his skin so as to give no doubt of her intention. "And this?"

"Yes," he whispered.

She kissed his cheek, lingering a few heartbeats as she intertwined their fingers. The gentle squeeze he gave her hand was everything. Blood pounded in her ears, whispering for her to say more, do more. There was so much fluttering and humming inside her, so much that wanted to spill out. But she couldn't do that to him. It would defeat the whole point she was trying to make.

Under all that strength, stubbornness and impulsiveness, he was like delicate porcelain in her hands. He had even placed that porcelain in her hands. She knew now she could take from him what she wanted: kisses, more intimate touches—all it would require was a push on her part. But she didn't want to take. She never, ever wanted to do that to him.

If they were going to make this work, he had to be the one to initiate the next step. He had to want this just as much as her.

She burrowed her face into his shoulder, still holding his hand. There was no hesitation when his arm came around her and practically pulled her onto his lap so he could hold her close. So, so close. She could feel his heartbeat thudding like a steady drum, feel him nuzzle into her hair. It was the sweetest of torture.

"We should probably get dressed," he murmured. "We're supposed to choose our apprenticeships today, and I don't think the people here like to be kept waiting."

She hummed in agreement.

Seconds passed and neither of them moved. She smiled into his shoulder, pleased that he hadn't pulled away. Trying to understand the depth of his feelings was like trying to decode a cipher at times. The comb he'd gifted, the hugs, the blushes and little touches—they all meant something. But this right here was clear. This was a simple desire to stay close to her.

There was a thud at the door. "Get up!" Azula called. "Or at least make yourselves decent. Our friends have arrived."

Zuko blushed at the insinuation they'd been doing more than talking, but he didn't let go of Katara. Instead, he looked at her with eyes like soft, golden flames. "You ready to play married couple for the tribe again?"

"Are you?"

His thumb skimmed her cheek and he smiled shyly. "I don't mind. I'm kind of getting used to it."

Her eyes widened. He released her and moved to shrug on his overtunic and coat, leaving her sitting there with her mouth hanging open and her heart a fluttery mess.

What … what did that even mean?

"Wait." She scrambled to her feet and touched his arm. "What you just said, what—"
Another thud at the door.

Katara almost cursed. She did not need interruptions right now.

He picked up her tunic and handed it to her. "Here."

She took it distractedly.

"I'll go tell them you'll be out soon," he offered.

"Wait."

He glanced over his shoulder at her. Warmth spread on her cheeks and she found she couldn't get the words out. His brow was creased as if he was confused why she was even telling him to wait. It was obvious he had no idea of the effect his actions and words had just had on her.

Her shoulders slumped. "Never mind. Don't worry."

He left to go talk to Azula and the people who had come to collect them. Meanwhile, Katara stood in the bedroom and hit her palm to her forehead. No wonder she had so much trouble figuring out the true nature of his feelings. The boy she loved not only missed half her romantic cues but he was also oblivious enough to not notice when he made his own.

"This really is going to be torture, isn't it?" she muttered under her breath.

oOo

Chiyo stood with her arms crossed and looked the two girls up and down. "You wish to become warriors?"

"Do you have a problem with that?" Azula asked.

Katara also raised her chin. While Zuko had chosen to train in fire healing, she and Azula had decided to join the warriors since everything else seemed a bit beyond their knowledge or interest. Princesses, as Azula had stated, did not do "peasant jobs". Katara probably could have helped the tailors, but she'd done enough of that kind of work back in the South Pole. If she had to do something here, she'd rather use her combat skills.

"To become a warrior, you have to prove yourself worthy to be in our ranks," Chiyo explained.

Azula made an amused sound. "That shouldn't be a problem."

"So confident?"

"More like a fact," Katara said. "Trust me. We can handle whatever you throw at us."

Chiyo's eyes glinted with interest. "Very well. Shota, Emi! Come test our two hopefuls so we can see if they're as good as they say."

A male and female warrior stepped forward and bowed to Chiyo before facing the two girls.

"I'll take the big one," Azula offered, nodding at the man who looked to be all muscle.

"Be my guest." Katara popped the cork from her flask and gathered water to her hands. "They're both going down anyway."
The two girls glanced at each other out of the corner of their eyes and exchanged a tiny smile. For all their tense relationship, on this they were a hundred percent united. There was no way they were going to lose.

"Begin!" Chiyo ordered.

Katara grinned and got her water ready. This was going to be easy.

oOo

Fallen leaves crunched under Aang's feet and got snagged by strong gusts of wind. He was on a cliff. The land below seemed shrunken and endless, and all of it was coloured in reds, golds and browns.


This was the final element in the Avatar Cycle. Did that mean this was the end of his spirit journey?

A white tiger materialised out of a swirl of leaves at the edge of the cliff. It waited for him to approach, not giving so much as a twitch of its ears or tail. Everything about the spirit was calm.

"Greetings to you, Avatar," the spirit said in a feminine voice that was like an old oak and a gentle breeze in one. "It has been too long."

He blinked. "We know each other?"

"All of us spirits know you."

"Right. I guess you would since I'm the Avatar. Did you meet one of my past lives or something?"

"Indeed, but I knew you before you took up the role as the bridge between worlds." Her ancient eyes fixed upon him. "Once, young Avatar, you walked in this land as one of us."

His heart quickened and his mouth went dry. It was always a bit weird to be reminded that his spirit was, well, a reincarnated spirit who had taken human form. "What ... what was I like back then?"

"Powerful. Wise. You were like our leader."

"I was?"

She nodded. "Long ago, this world was one of chaos and primordial power. Spirits and humans existed in one plane with no divide and many fought in an endless war. We spirits are powerful beings, but humans are resourceful and resilient. There were some who learnt how to bend energy as we spirits do, and they used that gift to fight back by forming bonds and manipulating the very essence that connects us all."

"You mean like fire healers?"

"The fire healing you know is just a remnant of that lost art. In our time, those humans were called energybenders."

Aang's brow creased as he mulled over this. "So, what happened then? What made it all stop?"

"You did. You saw the growing imbalance, you saw that humans would inevitably be destroyed, along with many spirits, and you did what was necessary to end the war. You created the veil to separate our worlds and chose to be reborn as the Avatar."
He sat down, legs too wobbly to hold him up. "I … I really did all that?"

It seemed impossible. He knew he was powerful when in the Avatar State, but to think he'd done all that. To think he'd had the courage.

"You believed there was no sacrifice too great. I'll admit that many of us spirits did not understand your decision then, but you have since proven the wisdom of your actions. By becoming the bridge between worlds, you have protected humans and spirits for millennia. You brought peace and balance to a world that had been on the brink of destruction."

He frowned at his hands. "But the world is imbalanced again now. Humans have been at war for a hundred years, and if I can't stop the Fire Lord before the end of summer, Roku said it will be too late."

"Yes. If the Fire Lord uses the comet and succeeds in his ambition, the wounds he will create will be too deep to heal. We spirits will not escape unscathed either."

"What do you mean?"

"Humans and spirits will always have an influence on each other. Even now when the veil separates our worlds, we still exist on the same plane. We still share one energy, one home. That is why the Avatar is so important."

"Because I'm the bridge?"

"Because you are human. We spirits do not change, do not grow. We cannot grasp what it means to be mortal. You became human because you realised that you needed to experience these things if you wanted to protect humanity and foster understanding between our worlds."

His frown deepened. "Wouldn't it have been easier if I was still a powerful spirit?"

"You are still powerful. Everything you were is still what you are. The only difference is that you wear a mortal shell." The white tiger smiled. "If anything, I believe that you are stronger now."

"How can you think that?"

"Because now you know what it means to feel joy and sadness, to love and hate. You know what it means to live with death on the horizon, and this human weakness has taught you the ugliness of humanity but also the beauty. It has taught you compassion."

He brought his knees up to his chest. "Compassion, huh?"

"It is your greatest strength, or so you told me once long ago."

They both fell silent. Aang looked out over the cliff to the distant valley below. Everything looked so small from up here.

"Air is the element of freedom," he mused. "The monks taught that I need to detach myself from the world if I want freedom. It's how people are meant to find true peace and happiness."

"Indeed."

"But the Avatar Spirit chose to be part of the human world. That's what you're saying, right?"

"Not exactly. The Avatar is the bridge between worlds. You are both human and spirit, and though you may experience life as any other human, your duty is still to maintain balance. In the end, you
cannot be tied to any single nation, person or spirit."

He stood up. "I think I understand."

"Do you?"

"It's about making the tough decisions, right? I'm supposed to maintain balance, but that also means being the one to hand out justice and mercy. It means sacrifice, even the sacrifice of my own life if that's what it takes." He closed his eyes, swallowing against the lump in his throat. "If I'm too attached, a part of me will always hold back. I won't be able to do my duty."

"That is correct."

Tears rolled down his cheeks. "Okay. I get it. I get it now."

Something warm and furry bumped against his hand. He looked down in surprise to see the tiger nuzzling him.

"Your burden is indeed great, little one. But you are strong and you are brave. I see the conviction in your eyes. I do not believe you will fail."

His mouth curved into a sad smile. "It's not the thought of failure that scares me."

"I know."

Silence settled between them. Aang stood there and simply let the tears fall. Every part of his spirit journey had led him to this moment, this realisation. He understood what it meant to be the Avatar—more so than when he'd unlocked the chakras. He understood what was at stake and why he had to defeat Fire Lord Ozai. He understood everything.

But he still wished it didn't have to mean taking a life.

He still wished he could find another way.

"Perhaps there is another way."

Aang blinked and looked around. The landscape was fading, including the white tiger. Everything was turning to light.

"What?" He tried to shield his eyes from the glowing glare. "Who said that?"

"Come. I wait for you in the other world."

"Wait a minute. You're the one who guided me here. You called to me in my dream and guided me to that hole."

"Come."

"But I don't—"

The glare got brighter. Then he heard those two strange chimes and he was swallowed in light.

Chapter End Notes
Again, just a reminder this was outlined pre-LoK and comics. I am well aware that what I've written here for the Avatar's origins, etc, is not canon.

There were other things I wanted to say about this chapter, particularly the Zutara scene, but it's 4:20am and I have to get up for work in three hours (ugh), so I'm gonna skip that. Apologies if this is riddled with typos and missing words as well. I did edit it, but you know how it goes when you're tired …
Zuko raised his cup to take a drink and froze when he spotted the boy with the arrow tattoo walk inside the house. The cup slipped from his hand, spilling everywhere. He didn't notice. Tears prickled his eyes and he ran and gathered Aang into his arms.

"You little idiot," he murmured. "Do you know how worried I've been? How could you have jumped like that? I thought you had died! I had no idea what had happened to you when the bond vanished …"

Aang's feet were dangling and he was squished against Zuko's chest, but he didn't seem to mind. He clung back like a monkeykoala and made a contented little sigh. "I missed you too."

Zuko hugged him tighter. "You're not allowed to jump into death holes again, okay?"

"Okay."

"And you're not allowed to leave without telling us."

"Okay."

"And—"

"Zuko, I know." Aang snuggled into him like the baby monkeykoala he resembled. "I know."

The door to the house opened. Katara and Azula entered, holding what looked like warrior masks and talking about something. Both girls paused as if zapped with paralysis.

"Aang?" Katara said, breaking into a tearful smile. She dropped the mask and crashed into the boys in a hug, squishing Aang even more against Zuko. "I knew it," she breathed. "I knew you were okay."

"Hey, Katara."

She laugh-cried. "Is that all you can say?"

"Sorry. I'm just … I'm kind of tired."

She hugged him tighter, which only put more weight on Zuko. Not that he minded. He managed to get one arm free so he could wrap it around her as well. Then he closed his eyes, leaned into the hug, and just breathed. Aang was back. They were all together again. Everything was going to be okay.

"How long do you three plan to stand there like that?"

Azula's dry tone broke through the bubble of relief. Zuko and Katara shot his sister a frown, but Aang wriggled his way free and approached her.

"If you're feeling left out, all you had to do was say so," he said.

"Don't flatter yourself—"
Her words were cut short as Aang pulled her into a hug. She blinked. She stood there frozen for a whole second. Then her lips pursed, her nose scrunched, and she pushed at his shoulder with her good arm. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Hugging you."

"Well, stop. I have no interest in your clinging, excess displays of emotion."

Zuko bit his cheek to stop from smiling. Aang was always so liberal with his hugs, whether the recipient wanted them or not. He was a bit surprised at how mildly his sister reacted, though. Once, she would have done more than shove the kid into letting go. There was also the fact she looked a bit pink and rigid.

Azula smoothed her hair, quickly regaining her composure. "Anyway, now that the bald brat is back, we can leave, right?" Her eyes narrowed on Aang. "You did succeed, didn't you?"

He nodded. "I reconnected with my past lives and can go into the Avatar State."

"That's great!" Katara said with a smile.

"Yeah, but there's still something I have to do."

Zuko's brow creased. "What do you mean?"

Aang explained how the guardian spirit of the Ito Islands had told him to come find it. He had been planning to start searching straight away, but he'd wanted to let them all know he was back and check on everyone first. Katara hugged him again and suggested he should probably get some rest before he did anything else.

"You've been gone for days and look half dead on your feet," she observed.

"Days?"

They all nodded.

His shoulders slumped. "I had no idea."

"And that's why you should get some rest," Katara said, nudging the small of his back towards his bedroom. "It's okay. The guardian spirit isn't going anywhere."

He shook his head. "No. I don't want to muck around. The others are all waiting for us and the eclipse is getting closer. We can't keep them waiting."

Zuko's eyes widened. There was a deeper sense of conviction in Aang's bearing now. His tone, the way he stood straighter, the way he looked them in the eye with no hesitation. This wasn't a kid trying to carry the weight of the world on his shoulders; this was an Avatar who had no doubt that he could.

An ache passed through Zuko, as it only could when innocence was shed before him. But he was proud as well. He gripped Aang's shoulder and smiled. "Alright. I'll help you look for the spirit."

Aang beamed with all his usual cheer. "Thanks! Though I do wanna see Momo and Appa first. I bet they've been so worried …"

Well, perhaps he hadn't changed too much.
It rained heavily that night. Katara bent the water away from everyone while Zuko and Azula conjured flames for light. Aang was on spirit sensing duty with Momo perched on his shoulder. The two boys ended up walking side by side across the sweeping fields.

"I miss it," Aang murmured.

"Huh?"

"Our bond. I know why I had to let it go, but …" He shrugged and offered a sad smile. "I still miss it, you know?"

"Yeah, I know what you mean."

Aang had told him why and how the bond had been cut. Zuko had accepted the situation, though he was still conscious of a sense of loss. They'd always been connected before.

"Perhaps it's for the best, though," Zuko mused. "If it ever gets out that fire healers are capable of controlling others through energy bonds, I don't think the world would react well if they knew we were bonded."

"But you'd never have done that to me! You'd never do that anyone!"

"Of course not." Zuko almost smiled at how vehement and defensive Aang was getting. That was kind of touching. "But people would still be suspicious, especially given who I am."

"I don't see why."

"That's because you're you."

He tilted his head in confusion.

"I mean you haven't had a hundred years of war and prejudice engrained into you. Other people aren't so quick to trust, you know. They don't remember what it's like to live in a world at peace."

Aang got a thoughtful look on his face. "I guess that means we have to work extra hard then."

"Hrm?"

"Our friendship is proof that the nations can come together again, and it's not just us either. Think of your old crew and the warriors, think of the White Lotus. There's people all around the world trying to overcome those barriers. They want this war to end just as much as we do."

"I'm not saying you're wrong. Many are definitely sick of this war, but I still think you'll have an easier time being the Avatar if people aren't worried I'm somehow controlling you."

Aang shrugged. "Maybe, but that's just 'cause they don't know you like I do."

Zuko patted his head, half pushing him forward. "Yeah, alright. Let's just focus on finding that spirit."

"Someone's getting embarrassed," Katara murmured in Zuko's ear.

He gave her a look, which only earned a smile out of her.
They kept walking until Aang signalled for them to stop. Ahead was a cliff that overlooked the beach and the smaller island covered in forest.

"I think this is it," Aang said.

"A cliff?" Azula did not look impressed. "Do you expect us to jump off?"

"I think we do need to go down, actually."

She sighed. "You think, you think, you think. That's all I've been hearing."

"Well, I'm sorry following spirit summons isn't an exact art. It's not like the guardian spirit is talking to me now. All I've got to go on is a slight tug of energy." Aang peered over the edge. "Anyway, the drop isn't too bad."

"For an airbender," Katara said, still with one arm raised as she bent the rain away from them. "If I jump that, I'm going to break a leg or worse."

"Don't worry. I can get us all down."

Aang asked them to hold onto him before they jumped on the count of three, Momo fluttering beside them. The sand zoomed closer, but he created a cushion of air to slow their fall, allowing them to touch down with their feet on the sand. Azula was the first to break away.

"Where to next?" she demanded.

He closed his eyes and slowly turned left and right, then a whole circle. It was like watching a human compass at work. "Wait a minute," he murmured, pausing when he was facing the forested island. "Could it be?"

Zuko frowned. "What?"

"I think … I think this is the spirit."

Katara blanched. "You mean the island itself? It's not going to be another Wu Yao, is it?"

"I don't think so. This spirit has seemed pretty helpful so far."

Azula pursed her lips. "Well, what are you waiting for? Hurry up and talk to it."

"Right." Aang stepped forward so that his feet were in the water. "Okay, Guardian Spirit! I'm here!"

Silence.

"Uh, I mean it's me! The Avatar! You called me here, remember?"

More silence.

Zuko scuffed his boot against the sand. "Maybe it's asleep?"

"Or maybe this has all been a waste of time," Azula muttered. "I knew I should have stayed at the house."

Aang frowned. "No, this is definitely the spirit. Hang on, maybe I need to be in the Avatar State. That's when I have full access to my spiritual powers."
An exasperated look was all he got from Azula. Aang ignored this and pressed his fists together in meditation pose. His eyes flashed white and every tattoo glowed. The sand and water whipped this way and that as ripples of energy surged from him like gusts of air.

"I almost forgot how powerful he is," Katara murmured.

The other two said nothing and simply watched as Aang parted the sea with a sweep of his arms. Zuko's eyes widened. The island wasn't an island at all. The creature was huge—huger than any living thing he'd ever seen. It had four clawed feet, all bigger than houses. It had a mane and massive tusk-like teeth, and it looked just like the creature he had seen all over the Ito Tribe's carvings and on their warrior masks.

That was when it clicked where he had seen the face before. Back in Wan Shi Tong's library, he'd unfurled a scroll and seen this creature depicted in ink.

"Lion turtle," he breathed. "This is a lion turtle."

Aang's tattoos and eyes glowed brighter as he stood with his arms thrust out, keeping the water at bay. "Wake!"

So, it really had been asleep.

The lion turtle shifted and shook its great mane before golden eyes slid open. They were like two suns, warm and brimming with energy. "Avatar Aang," it said in a deep, rumbling voice—deep as if the very depths of the earth were speaking. "So, you finally found me."

The spirit walked closer to shore until there was no need to hold off the sea. Aang lowered his hands, letting water crash everywhere around the giant creature. Not that it seemed to care.

"Thank you," Aang said, bowing as his eyes returned to their normal grey and his tattoos ceased to glow. "Because of your guidance, I was able to regain my abilities."

"The cries of the planet disturbed my dreams. I simply knew it was time to act."

"Well, I'm grateful anyway."

The massive face loomed closer, sea water dripping from its mane. "There is no need to be so polite. Ask me your question."

Aang shifted on his feet, losing some of his confident stance. "You ... you said there was another way. What did you mean?"

Katara brushed against Zuko. "More like what does he mean? Do you know what they're talking about?"

"No idea. I guess it has something to do with what happened in the Spirit World."

The lion turtle raised one of its clawed hands. "In the era before the Avatar, we bent not the elements but the energy within ourselves." The tip of a claw pointed at Zuko. "This one, as you know, is a remnant of the humans who mastered that skill."

Zuko swallowed. "Aang, what's the spirit talking about?"

"Right." Aang rubbed the base of his neck. "I forgot to explain that bit."

He quickly told them about energybenders and how they'd used their abilities to fight against spirits
and humans before the two worlds had been separated.

"Energybending," Zuko murmured, staring at his palm and thinking of all the bonds he had forged and strange things he had done. "I guess it makes sense."

The lion turtle shifted its attention to Aang. "As the Avatar, you are expected to be the master of the four elements, but you can also bend energy itself. There lies your answer."

Aang's brow furrowed. "I … I don't understand. How is bending energy supposed to help me? And how am I even supposed to do it? I've never been able to make bonds or anything like that."

"The true mind can weather all the lies and illusions without being lost. The true heart can touch the poison of hatred without being harmed. Since beginningless time, darkness thrives in the void but always yields to purifying light."

Zuko's heart thudded like a drum against his ribs. For some reason those words resonated with him. The true heart, the true mind …

Azula grabbed his arm. "We have company." She jerked her chin towards the cliff where warriors had gathered, flickers of flames illuminating their masks.

He frowned but also wasn't surprised. All of them had known they were being watched. "They're not trying to hide, so it seems they want us to know they're there."

"I suggest we keep an eye on them for now," she said. "If they don't do anything, we won't either."

He nodded. It was sound advice. No need to start a fight.

The spirit touched its claw to Aang's forehead and an eerie glow emanated from the point of contact. "I have opened your mind to the power sleeping within you," it said, pulling its claw away, "but if you wish to choose this path, Avatar, know that it does not come without great risk."

Katara glanced between them with a worried expression. "Aang, what's going on? What's the spirit talking about?"

Aang ignored this interjection. "But it will work, right? If I do this, it will stop the Fire Lord from putting the world into further imbalance?"

"There are no guarantees, only choices and consequences."

He bit his lip. "I understand."

"Well, I don't!" Katara stepped forward. "What's going on?"

Zuko met the other boy's eyes, suspicion curdling within him. "Aang?"

Aang averted his face.

"Young fire healer," the spirit said, drawing Zuko's attention. "I sense your heart is also burdened. What question would you ask of me?"

He swallowed and looked into those timeless eyes. He had a lot of questions, but there was one that clawed the tip of his tongue. "Why did you do it?"

The spirit raised a gnarled eyebrow.
"If you really did guide the fire healers to the Ito Islands, you must have known that Shūrin was one of them. You must have known she'd already taken over another's body."

"Yes."

"Then why? Why did you help her?"

"It is not my place to judge humans," the lion turtle said in its deep, rumbling way. "She wanted to protect her kind and begged me to save them. Would you rather I'd allowed fire healers to be wiped out?"

"No, but …" His hands balled into fists. He didn't know how to express his feelings without coming across as rude. Shūrin was a parasite. She did evil, awful things. How could anyone condone that?

"Shūrin was not always the way she is now," the spirit said. "Yes, she was embittered with thoughts of revenge, yet her goal was to create a better, safe world for fire healers. She genuinely thought she was doing the right thing." He shook his head. "But humans have limits, and that is something she has never understood."

Zuko frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Time, knowledge and power have all changed her. What you see now is more wraith than human, an entity of fierce will that refuses to die."

He lowered his gaze. "But she will die if I kill Shen, right?"

"Yes."

"And … is there a way to stop her without killing Shen?"

"You already know the answer to that."

Zuko exhaled a small breath. So, his inkling had been correct. All that stuff about true hearts and purifying light meant there was a way to bend Shūrin out of Shen.

"The choice is before you both," the lion turtle said, looking at each boy. "But do not forget that to bend another's energy, your own spirit must be unbendable or you will be corrupted and destroyed. This is not the easy path. This will never be the easy path. You must ask yourself if the risk is worth it."

oOo

The warriors were blocking the way when Zuko and the others reached the top of the cliff. Rain still fell heavily and made the flames that glowed amidst the armoured bodies hiss and flicker. Oddly, Taiyo and the female sage with grey-steaked hair, Eun, were there as well. Their robes were drenched to the colour of blood.

"Are you planning to attack us?" Aang asked warily.

Taiyo and Eun exchanged a glance.

"Our orders were to observe," Taiyo said in an unreadable voice.

"And that is all we shall do," Eun responded, shooting him a sharp look before she turned a smile on Aang. "Avatar Aang, you have done what you set out to do here, yes?"
He nodded.

She gestured for the warriors to move aside. "Then by all means don't let us get in your way."

Zuko's brow creased. Something weird was going on. He remembered that this woman had not displayed any goodwill towards them during their trial; it was Taiyo who had been the one more willing to hear them out and who had led Katara and Aang to the spirit portal. So why was she all smiles now while he seemed tense?

"Er, thanks," Aang murmured. "We'll be on our way then."

They headed for the grassy fields. Taiyo's gaze caught Zuko's but he said nothing and his expression remained unreadable. No one stopped the group.

oOo

It was decided they would leave that night. The encounter with Eun and Taiyo had left everyone unsettled, though Katara was still troubled by what the lion turtle had said to the boys. She had demanded answers from both and had only been appeased when they'd promised they'd discuss it later. Right now, they needed to break Ursa and Shizue out of prison, collect Yuzo and Atsuo, and get off the islands.

Zuko and Aang ended up taking the prisons since Zuko knew how to avoid the guards and Aang could bend earth. That left Katara and Azula to collect Yuzo and Atsuo.

Fortunately, it wasn't difficult to get to the cells. Unfortunately, Taiyo and a few warriors were waiting for them.

"I knew you would come here," Taiyo said in a grim voice.

Zuko's heart thudded faster and he cast a quick glance at his mum and Shizue. "Are you okay?"

"We're okay," Ursa assured him. "They haven't done anything. In fact—"

"We just got here ourselves," Taiyo cut in, "and we want your help."

Aang's eyes widened. "You want our help?"

"There have been … troubling things happening of late," Taiyo said with a faint scrunch of his nose. "Strange orders, stranger conversations. A few of us decided to do a bit of digging and let's just say we didn't like what we found."

Zuko's brow creased. "What did you find?"

"The Unnamed One."

He sucked in a breath. "What?"

"You know her. You've met her. Ursa and Shizue told me as much."

"Yeah, but are—"

"I did warn it would be this way," Shizue said bluntly. "Shūrin has been creating her web all through the tribe. Taiyo believes she controls at least half the sages and who knows how many others."

"I meant is she here?" Zuko ground out before anyone could interrupt again.
Taiyo shook his head. "No. It seems she is using her bonds to direct her puppets from afar."

Zuko and Aang exchanged a worried glance.

"If she's not here," Aang said slowly, "then where has she gone?"

One of the bigger warriors removed his mask to reveal a square-jawed face, complete with a crooked nose that looked as if it had been broken more than once. Zuko recognised him as Shota. "We don't know," Shota said with a shake of his head. "All we know is that she is the one pulling the strings in our tribe. It seems she has always been pulling the strings."

"The puppeteer behind the curtain indeed," Taiyo muttered. "Forbidden name, forbidden techniques. She worked hard to cover her tracks, and all the while she's been living amongst us and harvesting fire healers in search of the perfect vessel."

Zuko's gut twisted. "But then why did the sages allow us to go free? Why let Aang get more powerful when she must know we'll try to stop her?" His eyes narrowed on Taiyo. "You were especially helpful."

"I did that of my own volition." He held his hands up in an appeasing gesture. "I knew it would annoy Cam, and I was curious to see the guardian spirit. It's just a coincidence my actions fell in line with what the Unnamed One wanted."

Zuko looked to his mum and Shizue. They knew Taiyo and the warriors better than he did. "What do you think?"

"I think Taiyo would not ask for our help unless he had a good reason," Ursa responded. "We should at least hear him and the warriors out."

Shizue agreed.

That was good enough for Zuko and Aang, though the prince refused to discuss anything until the women were released from their cells. Luckily, Shota had nabbed the keys so they didn't have to use bending. Aang's earthbending tended to be on the noisy side.

"How are your wounds?" Zuko murmured, catching his mum's wrist and letting heat emanate from his touch to warm her chilled skin. "Do you want me to heal them?"

"Not yet." She smiled and touched his cheek. "We should get somewhere safer first."

"Alright."

Taiyo shot them a frown but made no comment. "This way," he said. "I know a place where we won't be overheard."

"Wait," Zuko said, pausing. "Kana and Ruolan have gone to get Yuzo and Atsuo. They'll be expecting us to meet them."

"I'll get them," a female warrior offered. That voice had to be Min. Sure enough, when she removed her mask there was the familiar smile. "We'll catch you up at base."

With that decided, Zuko and the others were ushered into following Taiyo while Min dashed off on her own. Zuko glanced over his shoulder to see her figure disappear around a tunnel. So much for the quick escape. He hoped this would all be worth it.
"No," Shizue said bluntly.
Taiyo's eyes widened in outrage. "You can't just say no."
"I just did."
"We helped you get out of prison!"
"The Avatar was going to do that for us anyway."
Taiyo opened and closed his mouth a few times before he turned to Ursa. "Surely you see why this is necessary? We can't let the Unnamed One stay in control."
"True," she said, "but I'm afraid we cannot help you either, at least not in the way you want."
"Why not?" Min demanded, sitting on a barrel with her legs spread in an unladylike manner.
"Because there isn't time. The Avatar has his own destiny to fulfil. He cannot stay here and help you remove Shūrin's puppets."
"It's true," Aang piped up from where he was sitting with the younger crowd. He rubbed the base of his neck. "Sorry. I'm kind of on a deadline."
Taiyo and his followers were not satisfied. A new circle of arguing started again.
"This is going to take a while, isn't it?" Katara muttered.
Zuko sighed and leaned forward, elbows propped on his knees and his forehead resting against his hands. "I get why they're worried, but there really isn't time to sort this all out. The eclipse is too soon."
Azula said nothing. She never did when the eclipse or returning to the Fire Nation was mentioned.
"Enough of this!" Yuzo stood up. "You think trying to show the tribe the truth is going to make a difference? You think anyone will listen? All An Dung and the others have to say is that you're lying and that will be the end of it! The tribe will think you sided with outsiders and deal with you as they've done every person who's dared to challenge the status quo!"
"That's why we need the Avatar's power," Shota explained. "If we——"
"It won't change anything!" Yuzo balled his hands into fists. "You don't know who she's bonded with, let alone who is following her willingly or who is being controlled. Fact is, if you want to stop Shūrin, you have to stop her at the source. Right now she's out there using my brother as her vessel. We already know this. So instead of talking about all these time-wasting plans, why don't you do something useful like help us get our hands on An Dung so we can find out through him where she is? Then we can go there and stop her!"
Azula leaned her chin on her palm. "That is a better plan."
Atsuo nodded and gave his boyfriend thumbs up.
There were a few grumbles, but most people accepted that the idea had merit. It was, at the very least, better than the alternative since Aang couldn't stay to be their defence. Taiyo and the others all knew the tribe wasn't friendly to challenges of authority. Going up against the big shots without
backup would be suicide.

"Do you really think you can stop the Unnamed One?" Shota asked once everyone had settled down again. "She's survived for centuries. How is anyone supposed to stop that?"

"Of course I can't," Yuzo responded, and then pointed at Zuko. "But he can. He's the one she chose to be her next vessel. He has the same aptitude as her, or at least she seems to think so, and that means he stands a chance."

Zuko swallowed as he found everyone's eyes resting on him.

"So, that's how it is," Taiyo said, casting a glance at Ursa. "No wonder …"

She narrowed her eyes but didn't push him for an explanation. Perhaps that was for the best. It seemed like the sage had picked up on their closer relationship.

"What if she ends up making the boy her vessel?" someone called out. "What then? We'll still be stuck here with all her puppets running the show. At least if the Avatar helps us now we can—"

Zuko stood up. "No. You don't have to worry. I won't let her do that."

"Confident, eh?"

"Yeah," he said, meeting the warrior's eyes. "Because she's already tried to make me her vessel once and failed."

That shut a lot of people up. Katara gave him a proud look before assuring everyone that they really didn't need to worry. It wasn't like "Lee" was going to face Shūrin on his own.

"Trust us," she said. "Trust him, and I promise your tribe will be freed from her influence."

Taiyo unfolded his arms. "Well, I guess we have a Head Sage to go interrogate then."

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, the lion turtle still pulled The Matrix "upload energybending 101" trick. I'll admit I always found that kind of lame, but eh. I'm rolling with it for this, at least in the sense that it opened up Aang's ability to energybend. He still has to figure out stuff himself.
An Dung was waiting for them in the temple. There were no warriors, no other sages. He sat stooped on his cushion like frail rice paper while incense smoke curled all around. Zuko didn't like it.

"I wondered when you would come," An Dung said with a smile.

No one knew how to respond. It was only Zuko, Aang, Taiyo and Yuzo who had gone in search of the Head Sage. (The others had stayed with Ursa and Shizue since escaped prisoners couldn't exactly go wandering around.) For Zuko, this was not how he had expected the "interrogation" to go, but then he hadn't expected Shūrin to assist Aang to get his Avatar abilities back either.

"Where is she?" Taiyo asked. "Where is the Unnamed One? We know you've been communicating with her through the bond you share."

"Can't you guess?"

Unease stirred in Zuko's stomach.

An Dung's smile widened. "No? Well, perhaps I can give you a hint. Where is the one place you must eventually go? Where in the world can she be and know all she has to do is wait?"


"Correct."

No way. There was no way she had gone to him.

"Why would she do that?" Taiyo demanded. "Does she want to expose us all? Does she forget what happened the last time she interfered with the Fire Nation?"

"Secrecy was only ever meant to be maintained for as long as it was needed." An Dung looked them each in the eye, yet his stare was as ancient and powerful as if it were Shūrin herself sitting in front of them. "This will be the end—of hiding, of fear." A beat. "Or it will be the end of her."

The fine hairs on the back of Zuko's neck and arms prickled. After all these centuries, she was willing to put herself in such a win or die situation? Had she got desperate or did she have a plan?

"Then she's at the Fire Nation palace?" Aang asked grimly. "She's waiting for us there?"

"Indeed."

Aang rushed to head out of the temple, but Zuko didn't move. He stared at the withered sage as if seeing him for the first time. "You're not being controlled by her," he observed.

An Dung's sly smile crept back. "No."

Disgust twisted its way through his gut. "How can you follow her? How can you even want to help her? You know what she does. You know how she possesses people."

"Of course I know. For many years, I was even her vessel."

"What?" the four exclaimed.
"Why should that come as a shock? I was honoured to serve her."

Aang pulled a face. "Is that why you're all …" Apparently, he was too polite to say the old man looked as if he was about to crumble to dust, so he settled for making a vague hand gesture.

"My body was not quite suited for the takeover," An Dung admitted, "but I did not mind. Some sacrifices are necessary for the greater good."

"And what about those who do mind?" Yuzo demanded. "What about Shen?"

"Ah, Shen. Such a skilled young man. He really would have made a great sage."

Horror and rage glinted in Yuzo's eyes. "You don't even care, do you?"

"Like I said, some sacrifices must be made."

"I can't believe this. Shen looked up to you." Yuzo's voice grew thicker. "I remember. I remember how he wanted to become a sage, but you helped that thing getinside him. She must have left you and switched to him."

"Actually, we tried Chimon first."

All the colour drained from Yuzo's face. "What?"

"Who's Chimon?" Aang dared to ask.

"Yuzo and Shen's father," An Dung answered. "He had this rare gift, you see, for sensing energy over distances. He didn't even need to be linked with the island. Shūrin fused with him and left the tribe to expand her search." A shrug. "But it turned out his body wasn't compatible. The bonds corrupted him too quickly."

"So you told her about my brother," Yuzo surmised, though he looked as if he was about to be sick. His fists were also trembling, little sparks flickering from his knuckles.

An Dung's smile was a slit across his face. "Shen had shown so much promise during his training, and when I learnt he had inherited your father's gift, of course I had to let her know …"

Now Zuko felt like he was going to be sick. This man had helped destroy the lives of two people—a father and son—and he smiled about it. He actually smiled.

"You're a monster," Taiyo said in wide-eyed revulsion.

"I prefer pragmatist."

"No." Yuzo advanced to the dais, his voice low and trembling with emotion. "You and that thing you obey are definitely monsters, and now you're going to pay for all you've done to my family."

Zuko didn't look away fast enough. Neither did Aang. The younger boy flinched as blood splattered on red robes and sharpened metal. Of course Yuzo had chosen a knife. Fire was too loud. Fire meant screams. But a knife could slice through all that. A knife could silence everything into choked gasps and gurgles.

When it was over, Yuzo turned to them with an expression that was like stone. Blood had splattered on his face and clothes.

"You killed him," Aang whispered.
"He deserved it."

Zuko didn't deny this. Neither did Taiyo, though he did point out that Shūrin's other followers would be bound to stir the tribe up into retaliating. Killing the Head Sage wasn't something that could be overlooked. Plus, now there was no way to force An Dung to talk and expose the truth.

"Then find someone else to speak," Yuzo gritted out. "There are others, aren't there?"

Taiyo frowned and glanced at the body. "I suppose it doesn't make too much of a difference. If he'd lived, he would have used his influence to take us all out anyway. Perhaps this is for the best."

Aang still looked pale. "Not much of a difference? He's dead."

"And he deserved it," Yuzo repeated. "He deserved to die."

The stone was cracking. All the harshness in Yuzo's features had turned brittle and now his jaw was clenched too tight, his eyes too bright. The bloody knife quivered in his hand.

"Here," Taiyo said, gently removing the knife from his clasp. "Let me take that. You don't need to hold it anymore."

Aang opened his mouth to speak, but Zuko placed a hand on his shoulder and shook his head. "Not now, Aang."

"But—"

"Leave it."

Aang bit his lip, still looking shaken, but for once he took the hint. It was a quiet group who left the temple.

oOo

With An Dung's death, there was even more need to get off the island before they were dragged into another trial. Yuzo had offered to stay to face whatever consequences came from his actions, but Taiyo insisted that he leave. As Taiyo had put it, he had failed Yuzo and his family by not realising sooner what was going on. This was his way of trying to make it better.

"You have your whole life ahead of you," Taiyo had said. "Live it. Live it with this boy who loves you"—he nodded at Atsuo—"and let us handle things here."

Yuzo had got a bit teary-eyed then, but he'd also relented. So it was that goodbyes were made and the original nine, Momo included, gathered in the open field that led up to the cliffs where the bison herd had made their home.

Zuko looked up at the sky. Morning had arrived. It was in the energy that hummed through his body, in the light that illuminated enough to require no torches, but the clouds were still a darkened cloak shedding rain. Aang found his sleeve and tugged. He glanced down at the boy, but Aang was not looking at him. He was looking at the warriors who had just emerged from the trees.

"What now?" Azula grumbled. "Don't these people know when to quit?"

Yuzo stiffened. Atsuo moved protectively in front of him, perhaps worried this was about An Dung.

"Aang," Katara stepped in front of all of them. "Go ahead and use that whistle. I've got this."
Then she stopped the rain.

Zuko's eyes widened as he watched the drops merge and sharpen. Her control was perfect, her determination unwavering as she turned her arsenal on the warriors, holding them back with a threatening wall of blades. *Go ahead, every razor-sharp tip said. See if you can get closer.*

"That's some girlfriend you've got there," Shizue muttered.

Atsuo nodded.

Zuko didn't bother to correct that she wasn't technically his girlfriend. He was in far too much awe, and he wasn't the only one. She had just stopped the rain and turned it into her weapon. She was amazing.

"Aang, the whistle!" Ursa reminded.

"R-right." Aang picked his jaw up from the ground and tugged the whistle free from his tunic. He blew on it hard, though it made no sound.

Chiyo removed her mask and threw it on the ground. "Enough of this!" She cut through the ice with her sword. "Burn or hack your way through if you have to, but don't let them escape!"

"Wait!"

Everyone turned as one to see Eun and more warriors come out from the trees. Some of the people with her were not wearing masks, but Shizue's small hiss of "Silencers" soon answered who they were supposed to be. Of course Appa chose this moment to descend from the clouds with a wary rumble.

"Quick!" Chiyo pointed her sword at the would-be escapees. "They're going to get away on the bison!"

"I said wait!" Eun continued to hold her hand up in a halting gesture. "I'm quite sure you can't have forgotten your orders, Chiyo. The Avatar is not to be detained."

"It is not only the Avatar who is trying to leave!" Chiyo hissed.

"So what? Let them go."

Chiyo looked as if she'd been slapped. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me." Eun stared at her coolly. "I said let them go. A fight now would only result in too much bloodshed."

The two women had a brief but intense standoff before Chiyo sheathed her sword. "Fine, if that is what the sages wish."

"It is."

Displeasure carved into her face, Chiyo waved a hand at her regiment to stand down. Katara waited to make sure no one else had any intention of attacking before she allowed the ice to shift back into rain and drop harmlessly. Appa took that as his cue to draw closer.

"Let's get out of here," Zuko muttered.

No one argued and quickly piled onto the saddle. Atsuo was the last to approach, but he paused
when Chiyo's harsh gaze fixed on him. Her hands moved in silent words.

"What's she saying?" Aang asked.

"She's calling him a coward," Yuzo answered in a strained voice. "She says he's hiding behind us and that, by running, he's only confirming himself a traitor. She says if he had any sense of honour in him, he would stay. He would try to prove himself worthy in her eyes again."

Aang and Katara looked horrified. Zuko tensed, wondering if the boy would be swayed. It had always seemed like Atsuo had a lot of mixed feelings for his mother, much in the way Zuko had used to struggle with his own need to earn his father's love.

Atsuo removed the scabbard from his back and threw it, jian sword and all, on the ground. His expression was grim as he signed his response. Then he clambered on Appa and all but fell into Yuzo's arms. The boys held each other close.

"I wonder what he said," Katara murmured.

"He said she can disown him if she wants because he doesn't need her approval," Shizue answered. "He said he knows he's doing the right thing, and that's good enough for him."

Zuko found himself catching his sister's gaze. Her expression was unreadable, yet he knew she had been listening.

"Yip, yip!" Aang cried.

The bison took off and the Ito Islands were left far behind.

oOo

They travelled for hours over a stretch of endless blue. So much needed to be discussed and worked through, but there seemed to be a mutual agreement to not broach any heavy topics while they were all crammed in the saddle together. Or maybe everyone was too exhausted. A lot had happened.

Zuko was on steering duty when they finally found a spit of land for Appa to get some rest. There was no source of food or fresh water on the tiny blip of rock, but that was okay since they'd packed their own supplies to last them the return trip. Anyway, the main thing was for Appa to have a break from flying.

Bison snores filled the air as tents were set up and a campfire started. Once everyone was settled around the fire, Katara reminded Zuko and Aang that they still owed her an explanation for what they'd discussed with the lion turtle. There had been a lot of stuff about risks that she hadn't liked.

Zuko glanced at Aang to see if he wanted to speak first, but the boy was too busy staring at his knees. Alright then.

"I wanted to confirm if there's a way to free Shen," Zuko said quietly.

Yuzo sat up straighter. "Is there?"

"Yeah. I should be able to bend Shūrin out of him."

"But?" Ursa said, catching onto his unspoken words.

"To do it, I'll have to open my energy to her. I'll be completely vulnerable."
Katara gripped his knee, eyes tight with worry. She didn't have to speak for him to hear her question.

"I know it sounds dangerous," he said, "but I want to try. I… I felt Shen in there. He's been trapped and suffering all this time. We're talking years. But now I know there's a real chance to free him."

"You're really willing to take that risk?" Yuzo asked.

Zuko nodded.

"Why? You don't even know him. You've never met the real him. Why would you risk all that for someone you don't know?"

"Does it matter?"

"Of course it matters!" Yuzo seemed torn, like he wanted to be relieved but felt obligated to point out the strangeness of such a decision. "Look, much as I want my brother back, I don't think even he would expect this from you."

Zuko sighed. "Like I said, I know it's dangerous. I just… I want to do this. I can't ignore the fact there's still a chance to save him."

Azula let out a soft snort. "You never change, Zuzu."

His brow creased.

"You can't just leave it, can you? You always have to put your hero foot in."

"I'm not trying to be a hero," he said flatly. "I'm only trying to do what feels right."

"Oh, I know. Just like when you were thirteen and spoke up for the 41st Division." Her voice was ice-tipped steel. "You remember what happened then? You got burned and banished, and all those recruits still died."

He flinched and averted his gaze. "This is different."

"Is it?"


Her eyes flashed. "Why? I'm only saying what you're all thinking. He can't save everyone. That's just a fact of life. Maybe it's about time he realises that as well."

Zuko curled his fingers into his palms. "I know I can't save everyone. I know not everything can work out the way I want."

"Then why do you want to take this risk?"

"Because it's the right thing to do!"

"Wrong! The right thing would be to work together to kill Shen because that's the guaranteed way to get rid of Shūrin! The right thing would be to end the threat before it gets bigger! Or have you forgotten that she wants to make you her vessel?"

Somehow, they were both on their feet. Zuko didn't remember standing. He met his sister's eyes, his breathing harsh, yet when he spoke his voice was soft.
"What if it were you?"

"What?"

"What if it were you? What if Shūrin was controlling your body? Would you still want me to kill you? Would you want to die trapped with that monster?"

Emotions slipped through the cracks of her steel-crafted mask.

He placed his hands on her shoulders. "Shen is still in there, Azula. He's alive. I can't leave him like this. I have to try."

She shook her head and took a step back, breaking from his touch. "Father was right. You really are a fool."

"I don't think so."

"It's just one man."

She said it like the words needed no further explanation. One man to be the sacrifice, one man to guarantee Shūrin's defeat.

But that was the thing she and Father had never understood.

"It's still one man who can be saved."

Their eyes met. Her jaw tightened—no doubt from all the sharp, frustrated words she was holding back. They would never agree on this. They were too different, and perhaps they always would be.

"Mother," Azula said coolly, not breaking eye contact with him. "You don't support this, do you?"

"It is risky," Ursa admitted as she frowned at him. "If you fail and Shūrin makes you her vessel, there's no saying how her power will increase. She seems to think it will give her the edge she needs to carry out her plans." Her tone softened. "But, in truth, the thing I don't like is that we will have no way to free you."

"I know," he said.

"Yet you still wish to do this?"

Zuko glanced from his mother to his sister. "I'm not afraid of Shūrin. Even if I have to make myself vulnerable to her, I won't let her bend my spirit to her will."

"You can't guarantee that," Shizue pointed out.

"Maybe it doesn't seem that way to you, but I know what I feel. I won't fail."

Azula scoffed and walked away from the camp, muttering that he was useless and one day his too soft heart was going to be the death of him. Then she'd laugh over his corpse and say she told him so.

"She didn't mean that," Ursa said with a bit of awkwardness. "She's just—"

"I know, Mum."

He'd long since come to realise that such parting shots were Azula's twisted way of saying she was
worried.

Ursa's frown crept back onto her lips. "Still, she's right this is maybe not your smartest decision." An apologetic look at Yuzo. "Sorry, I know he's your brother."

"It's okay," Yuzo said. "Besides, he's your son. Of course you don't want him to do this."

She didn't refute the point.

"Uncle said something once," Zuko said softly. "He said to be human is to not always be logical. We do things because our heart tells us it's right, because we want to believe in hope." He looked at each of them before his gaze came to rest on his mother. "Right now my heart is telling me that I should save Shen. It's telling me to have hope."

She stood up and took his face in her hands. "My son, I honestly want you to forget all about what the lion turtle told you. I would not have you put yourself in this kind of danger." Her lips curved into a sad smile. "But hearing you speak and seeing the conviction in your eyes, I can't help but be proud."

"Proud?"

"Despite how your father raised you, despite all the things you've suffered, you never lost your kindness. You never lost your desire to help those who could not help themselves."

His cheeks warmed. "I just want to do what feels right."

"I know, and for that I will trust your judgement here, even if I don't like what it involves."

"Then … you're okay with this?"

"Reluctantly, but yes. I will support your decision if you truly believe you can save Shen."

His eyes softened into a smile. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me. You'll still have to convince everyone else."

He nodded, but the important thing for him was that she had accepted his decision. Yuzo and Atsuo looked relieved as well, which was good. Part of the reason Zuko wanted to free Shen was because Yuzo had lost enough family members. If he could do this for the half-brothers, maybe it would help. Maybe it would make up for the lost years.

Zuko sat down and Katara's hand immediately found his and interlaced their fingers. The look in her eyes suggested she, like his mum, was not happy about the extra danger of his plan, but the warmth of her hand promised no objections. Not that he'd expected any from her. She never turned her back on those who needed help either.

"So, Aang," Katara said, shifting her attention to the younger boy. "Why did you want to learn about energybending?"

Aang bit his lip before his expression took on a more determined edge. "I wanted to find a different way."

"A different way for what?"

"To defeat the Fire Lord."
Shizue's brow creased. "What do you mean? Why would you need energybending to kill Fire Lord Ozai?"

"See, that's just it. I don't want to kill him."

Zuko's jaw dropped.

And that was when the arguments really started.

OoO

Aang had always run when he got upset. This time he had stood his ground. He had listened to their words and acknowledged what was at stake, but he'd also asked why justice had to mean death. If he stopped the Fire Lord from hurting any more people, wouldn't that be enough?

Shouldn't that be enough?

Zuko thought about those words for a long time afterwards. It had been easy to accept Yuzo's brand of justice. They'd all understood why he'd killed An Dung. Even if it was fuelled by revenge, a bad man had been killed who would have continued to do harm if left alive. No loss there.

Of course, it had been harder for people to accept Zuko's own wish to save Shen, and most still had reservations. But then he wasn't trying to spare Shūrin. He would kill her, no hesitation. He just wanted to save an innocent man while he was at it. People could at least appreciate the sentiment.

But what Aang wanted was different. Aang didn't want to kill if he could help it. Worse, it wasn't like the Fire Lord had any reason not to harm Aang, as Shūrin did for Zuko. The whole idea was too dangerous, too risky, and could easily end in Aang's death.

Ozai never hesitated. He never held back. It was something they all knew.

"This is not the easy path. This will never be the easy path. You must ask yourself if the risk is worth it."

Zuko sighed and glanced at the boy now curled up with Momo against Appa. No, he did not understand why Aang wanted to take such a risk, not for a man who wanted to burn the world. Except he couldn't bring himself to argue against him either. It wasn't like Aang was naively hoping for a miracle; he knew the stakes and the danger.

In the end, they were both only trying to do what they felt was right.
Moonlight rippled over the water in silvery streaks. Katara hugged her knees to her chest and listened to the waves lap at the shore in an endless song, intermingled with the snuffles of Appa’s snores.

"Couldn't sleep?"

She jumped and glanced over her shoulder, though all she could make out was a shadowy figure. "Zuko."

"Sorry. Did I startle you?"

"That's what happens when you creep up on people."

He rubbed the base of his neck. "Right."

Her lips curved a little and she made room for him so he could join her on the rock. He settled next to her, close enough so their arms brushed. The whisper of waves and bison snuffles filled the stillness.

"So, you couldn't sleep either?" she asked.

"I woke up when you left the tent."

"Oh." She fidgeted with her tunic. "Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

"It's fine."

More silence.

He bumped her shoulder with his own. "What's wrong?"

She stiffened. "What? Nothing is—"

"Katara, you wouldn't be sitting out here in the cold if nothing was wrong."

"That obvious, huh?"

"Pretty much."

She worried her lip between her teeth and hugged her knees tighter.

"Hey." His arm came around her, warm and secure. "Talk to me."

"It's just …"

"What?" he prompted gently when the silence dragged.

"Sometimes I get scared."

"Then what?"

"If it helps, I think we're all a bit scared. The eclipse is almost here, and a lot of crazy stuff has been happening."

"It's not just that."
She pressed her forehead to her knees. "Do you … do you remember how I held back Chiyo and the warriors? Before we escaped on Appa, I mean."

"Of course. You were amazing. You stopped the rain. I can't imagine how much control it took to bend it all like that without hurting anyone."

"I wasn't."

"Hrm?"

"I wasn't in control." She shook her head, face still pressed against her knees. "No, I guess I was in control, but I didn't care if I hurt them. I would have done anything to keep you all safe."

He went quiet. "And that scares you?"

"Sometimes, yeah. It's like all this power is swelling inside me, and the moment anyone I care about is in danger it all comes screaming out. I can't stop it. In those moments, I don't even want to stop it."

"I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing. You're just trying to protect the people you care about. Most would say that's normal."

"It doesn't always feel that way."

There was a frown in his tone. "You're being really hard on yourself about this. Why? You have to realise it's amazing what you've done. You're such a powerful bender. You've done things I would have thought only Aang could pull off, like when you made that spirit stop possessing my mum and —"

Her flinch was sudden and sharp.

"Did I say something wrong?" he asked.

"I don't like thinking about it. What I did then … I know it worked out in the end, but …"

"But?"

"Have you ever wondered how I did it?"

"I guess. I remember there was no water for you to control, but you bent the spirit anyway."

"I didn't bend the spirit. I bent her blood. I bent your mum's blood."

They were close enough that she felt the way he paused. She pressed her hands to her mouth in a prayer-like gesture, her body rocking a little.

"I controlled her, Zuko. I turned her into my puppet and forced the spirit to get out." She squeezed her eyes shut. "I've told myself over and over I had no choice, that the spirit didn't give me a choice, but the fact is I still did it. I did that to your mum. And I would have done more if that's what it took to keep you all alive."

There were tears prickling her eyes. She trembled and huddled into herself, trying to be smaller. Trying to escape the judgement she knew had to come.

He wrapped his other arm around her and pulled her onto his lap. He held her like her dad had used to—extra close, almost cradling—except he wasn't her dad. Her heart thumped and thumped and thumped.
"What are you doing?" she whispered.

"Does it help?"

She curled her fingers into his tunic. "I don't understand. I thought you'd not want to be near me. I thought—"

"Katara, I'm a fire healer. I can drain people's energy to boost my bending. I've even done it to you. And, yeah, if I wanted I can take control of a person and force them to do my will." His hand smoothed along her back. "I'm saying I get it. I understand."

"But you've never wanted to do those things. You've always been so insistent about not using those abilities."

"Are you telling me you wanted to bend my mum's blood?"

"No, but—"

"Look, you saved her. You saved us. Why would I ever judge you for that?"

"I don't know." She hid her face against his chest. "Because it's an awful ability. Because I'm scared I don't know when to stop sometimes. Because—"

"Katara." One of his arms came away from her and light bloomed in a soft glow. "Look at me."

She was reluctant to move. The flames he cradled were small and danced in little flickers, and it took him tilting her chin to get her to actually look at him. His touch was warm, but his eyes were warmer, like pools of molten gold.

"There are people out there who don't have any limits," he murmured, "people who might as well be called monsters, but you're not one of them. You could never be one of them."

Fresh tears burned her eyes. "Maybe so, but sometimes I don't know what this war is turning me into. I feel it growing in me—this intense need to protect, to do whatever it takes, and it's terrifying. But I also know I can't stop. I can't bear the thought of losing any of you. I can't and I won't."

He caressed her cheek with his thumb, brushing away some of her tears. "Of course not. You're a warrior, you're a healer. You're you."

More tears. "What?"

He smiled. "There's no one I'd trust more to watch my back. You're amazing, not just because of your bending but everything about you."

Heat spread over her cheeks. "Oh."

The glow of the flames did mesmerising things to his eyes. She was conscious of how she was still on his lap, of how close their faces were. His hand trailed down her jaw, her neck, fingertips brushing against bare skin. Such an innocent touch yet it sent shivers all through her.

"I'm glad you're on my side," he said softly. "I'm glad you're here with me. It's like you said, I'd be totally lost without you. We all would."

Her heart thudded faster. "You really mean that?"

"I do." He leaned in and brushed his lips against her forehead. "So don't be scared. I know you. I
know who you're becoming, and that girl? I'll always want her by my side."

If her heart had been pounding before, it was like a thundering drum now.

He snuffed the flames so he could pull her back into his arms. The darkness hid her blush, but her heart continued to drum long afterwards.

oOo

"You have such lovely hair."

Katara's cheeks warmed. She'd been sitting on a rock and fixing up her hair, but she almost dropped the comb now as she turned to Ursa. "Oh, thank you."

Ursa smiled and held out her hand. "May I?"

"What?"

"Sorry. Call it a quirk of mine. I've always liked playing with people's hair, but if you're not comfortable …"

"No." Katara's face got hotter as she realised how abrupt that must have sounded. "I mean, no I don't mind. Please, go ahead."

Ursa took the comb and examined the delicate floral design. "Pretty. You have good taste."

"Oh, um, actually Zuko gave it to me."

"He did?"

That little lift of her eyebrows spoke a thousand words Katara wished she could interpret. It made her think of what Aang had said all those days ago about the Fire Nation love tradition. Was that why Ursa raised her eyebrows?

"It was a birthday gift," she explained, trying to sound nonchalant.

"Ah."

Ursa began to comb her hair, careful not to tug too hard or damage the natural waves. Katara fidgeted with her hands on her lap. This was the first time they'd been alone together. It made her shy and awkward. Still, a little bundle of warmth bloomed in her chest, much like when Ursa had taught her how to play the guzheng.

This is what it felt like to have a mum. Katara had almost forgotten. Gran Gran was always so no-nonsense, almost curt, but Ursa … she was more like Mum. Her touch was gentle, her voice was soft, and she took her time as she combed Katara's hair, happy to indulge in the quiet moment.

"Can I … can I ask you something?" Katara asked.

"Of course."

"Um, it's just Aang told me about this Fire Nation tradition …"

She squirmed on the rock as she struggled to get the words out. This was so embarrassing. Ursa was Zuko's mum, but she was kind and didn't seem the type to dismiss or make fun of people. Katara thought she could trust her to give a proper answer about the comb. After what had happened last
night, she really wanted that answer. The things he'd said, the way he'd kissed her forehead and held her—there was so much fluttering inside her now that she felt like she'd burst if she didn't get some reassurance that she wasn't reading too much into his behaviour.

"What tradition might that be?" Ursa prompted.

"A … love tradition."

"Ah."

There it was again. That cryptic "ah".

Katara bit her lip, twisting the fabric of her dress between her fingers. "I just wondered if it's true that, um, giving a comb as a gift can be like an … offer of marriage."

"It's true."

Heat flooded her cheeks and she spun around so the comb snagged her hair. "What? Really?"

Ursa laughed. "Yes. For centuries, men and women have gifted combs to the ones they love as a promise to be united in marriage. The people of the Fire Nation are quite romantic at heart, you see."

"B-but he gave me a …"

Amber eyes twinkled. "Yes, my son did give you a comb. A pretty one as well."

She pressed her hands to her hot cheeks. Was that why he had blushed and got so awkward about it? It wasn't just shyness? He really wanted to … be with her?

The happy bubble in her chest punctured as she remembered why she'd been so hesitant to believe Aang in the first place.

"Oh, but do you think that's what he meant?" she asked. "Because he told me he noticed I'd forgotten to bring my comb, so that's why he bought me this one."

"Katara." Ursa placed a hand on her shoulder. "May I ask you something?"

A small nod.

"Why haven't you asked him what he meant by the gift?"

She was too embarrassed to admit he'd either not noticed or had hesitated to reciprocate her advances, so she kept second-guessing everything he did.

"I guess, um, I'm worried I'll ruin things," she admitted. "He's never actually, you know, told me he's interested in me in that way …"

"But you love him, don't you?"

Katara's face was burning, her ears were burning. Everything was flustered burning. "Is it that obvious?"

"Very."

She groaned and hid her face in her hands.
Ursa’s light laugh rang out and she joined Katara on the rock and pulled her into a one-armed hug. "You don't need to get so bothered by it."

"I do. This is mortifying."

Another laugh. "If it helps, neither of you are subtle."

She peeped up from her hands. "What?"

"I think you can safely assume he returns your feelings."

"You do?"

Ursa smiled. "I've seen the way he looks at you, the way he welcomes your closeness." She smoothed Katara's hair from her face. "Regardless of why he bought you that comb, you're someone special to him."

She ducked her head. "I … I always hoped so, but sometimes …"

"Sometimes?"

"I'm not sure he actually wants to be with me in a romantic way."

"Then ask him." Ursa placed the comb in her hands. "You'll get your answer. Zuko is quite straightforward if you ask him directly."

Katara bit her lip and ran her fingertip over the little flowers that had been painted onto the wood.

"You'd best hurry if you want to talk to him," Ursa advised as she stood up. "We'll be leaving soon."

"Do you really think I should?"

"Love doesn't tend to work out for those who wait." A hint of amusement flickered in her eyes. "And with Zuko, I'm afraid you'll be waiting a long time if you're hoping he'll tell you how he feels. He probably thinks he already has." She nodded at the comb.

Maybe that was true. Maybe he thought he'd told her through actions rather than words.

Katara closed her fingers around the comb. "Okay. I'll do it. I'll talk to him."

"Glad to hear."

Her brow creased as it occurred how supportive Ursa was being, like the woman really wanted them to become a couple. "Um, not that I'm complaining, but why are you so willing to help me with this?"

"You did ask."

"Oh. Right."

Ursa's lips curved and she leaned down to clasp Katara's hands. "I helped because you are a nice girl who makes my son happy. I would like to see that continue. So, you see, I'm being quite selfish."

"Oh."

Now she was blushing again. Great.
Ursa gave her hands a gentle squeeze. "But you should know that you can come to me for anything, not just matters that concern Zuko." Her lips twitched. "Even if you just want to chat and have someone brush your hair."

That little bundle of warmth in Katara's chest got bigger and bigger. She surged up and wrapped her arms around the older woman. "Thank you."

Ursa returned the hug and stroked her back. "If you really wish to thank me, take me up on that offer. I would dearly like to get to know you more, Katara."

Katara smiled and hugged her closer. "I'd like to get to know you more too."

oOo

She ended up missing her chance to get Zuko alone that morning. Ursa had given her a sympathetic look as they'd all piled on the bison, but Katara had refused to be discouraged. She didn't want to have to rush or worry about interruptions anyway.

As Appa sped ever closer for the Fire Nation, her gaze often drifted to where Aang sat up front with the reins, stiff-backed and quiet. She had tried to talk to him, but he'd said he wanted some time alone so he could think. It was hard to sit back and leave him—at first. She wanted to help. She always did. But more and more she was realising he wasn't that same kid who she'd found in the iceberg. He seemed so much surer of his destiny and was a lot more serious about figuring out what needed to be done.

"What are you smiling about?" Azula asked.

"Nothing."

Katara didn't want to explain, not here when she knew it would start fresh arguments. It was enough for her to have realised that whatever Aang's decision—whether he chose to kill the Fire Lord or use energybending—it would be the right choice.

She believed in him. She would always believe in him.

Azula made an irritable sound. "Move your legs," she fussed at Zuko, kicking his feet and shins so she could stretch her own legs out more.

With seven of them crammed in the saddle, things were a little tight. There was an unspoken rule that you had to take turns stretching your legs. Zuko, however, was not in the mood to follow the rule, or maybe he just didn't like Azula's attitude. A squabble broke out. A very petty, cranky squabble. Katara had not expected it from either of them. Azula called him "llama-giraffe legs", among other unflattering things, and he responded by calling her "stupid face". (Actually, what he'd called her was much ruder, but Ursa had said his name in that tone, and he'd corrected it to stupid face). The siblings also kicked each other and put their feet all over each other to force the other into surrendering their leg room.

It was ridiculous. It was childish.

It was the kind of dumb fight Katara and Sokka used to have when they were younger.

Maybe that was why Ursa seemed almost happy, though she did stop them when blue flames appeared from Azula's fingers. "No fire in the saddle," she said firmly.

Azula pursed her lips and glowered at her brother as if contemplating whether it was worth it to
disobey. He had this smug look on his face like, "Ha, you got in trouble with Mum." Katara bit the inside of her cheek to stop from laughing. She wasn't the only one either. Yuzo and Atsuo looked just as entertained. These were the Fire Lord's children, the royal siblings of the Fire Nation: Llama-Giraffe Legs and B—Stupid Face.

"Guys, please," Aang called from his perch. "Appa doesn't like it when people fight on him."

Zuko reined in his smug look and apologised to Aang. Azula didn't apologise. (She took advantage of her brother's distraction and gave him another kick.)

"Quit it!" Zuko snapped.

"Then move your llama-giraffe legs!"

"Guys, c'mon! Don't make me come down there."

Both siblings looked a bit startled at having Aang use the exasperated Avatar tone on them. That was Shizue's cue to order them to move if they couldn't sit nicely together.

"Children," Shizue muttered with a roll of her eyes. "I thought you two would have grown out of this nonsense by now."

Azula raised her chin and decided haughty silence was the way to piece together her dignity. Zuko looked more chastened, though he still grumbled as he brought his knees closer to his chest so Azula could have proper leg room.

"How old are you again?" Katara asked him in a teasing tone.

He flushed and his shoulders crept up to his ears. "I'm tired, I'm sick of being in this saddle, and she doesn't hold back on those kicks, okay? Give me a break."

She snorted and shifted to her knees. "Here, we can share my spot. You'll have more room that way."

She got him to scooch over and then settled between his legs with her back against his chest. A low, humming sound escaped him as he stretched out more. He wrapped his arms loosely around her waist and, as he relaxed, fidgeted with her hands—little thumb caresses or tracing aimless patterns with his fingertip. It was nice. Being close to him like this was always nice.

Azula gave her a shrewd look. Katara's cheeks warmed. Okay, so maybe she'd taken advantage of the situation to get cuddles, but so what? He was happy. She was happy. Everyone was happy.

Momo hopped onto her lap to get in on the cuddle train. No doubt he wanted pets. Zuko rested his chin on her shoulder and idly scratched behind the lemur's ears, one hand still intertwined with her own. She smiled and helped him pet Momo. As she did, contentment but also protectiveness welled within her. She cherished these moments—even the stupid fight Azula had with Zuko, because for all that it had been immature, at least they hadn't been trying to kill each other or flinging bitter words like they'd done in the past.

These were the moments the war threatened. These were the moments she was fighting to protect. The normal, the childish, the tender. She'd already lost so much to the war. She refused to lose anything else.

oOo
Their next stop was a small island that looked like a teardrop. Summer had kicked back in and the air was muggy. Everyone stripped off the bulky layers—sans Aang, who had discarded his the moment he stopped hiding his identity. The best part, however, was that the island had a pool of fresh water and even a hot spring. Katara was so relieved to bathe and wash her clothes properly.

"How is it now? Can you move it more?"

She glanced up at Ursa's voice and saw her reaching for Azula's bare arm. The burns were all healed, but the skin was still a mess of scarred tissue. Of course, the real damage lay underneath the surface.

"Does it look better to you?" Azula said shortly, snatching her arm away. "Just leave it."

Katara waded closer through the warm water. "You know, the fact you do have some movement in your fingers and wrist means there might still be a way."

Azula gave her an irritated look. "In case you've forgotten, you already tried to heal it and failed. So did Atsuo."

"I know, but if I combine my healing with Zuko's, we might be able to make a difference. It sort of boosts the healing effect when we do that."

Azula's eyes narrowed. "Why didn't you mention this earlier?"

"Sorry, I just wasn't thinking. I've only done it twice with Zuko and both times were unplanned." She planted her hands on her hips. "Besides, you haven't exactly been nice to me. It's not like I wanted to sit around thinking up ways to help you."

Azula gave a little shrug, conceding this point.

"Anyway," Katara said as she relaxed her stance, "it's worth a shot, isn't it?"

"Fine."

Ursa smiled at both of them.

oOo

The healing had gone well. Azula still didn't have perfect movement in her arm, wrist and fingers, but it was getting better. Zuko and Katara had offered to keep working at the nerve damage for her. She'd probably always have a few issues with that arm, but it seemed like there was a chance to get it at least functional. It would simply take time and some patience on her part—time they would only have if everything worked out during the eclipse.

Zuko frowned as he thought of the inevitable battle that was coming. A hand entered his vision. He looked up to meet Katara's eyes.

"Walk with me," she said.

Without a word, he accepted her hand and let her lead him away from camp. They walked until the others' voices faded and it was only the two of them standing alone, lush trees enclosing them like a shelter. He swallowed. There was a dusting of colour on her cheeks and she wasn't quite meeting his gaze.

"You must be wondering why I brought you here," she mumbled.
"A little."

"I didn't want anyone to interrupt us."

His heart quickened. "Oh?"

She looked down, fidgeting with her dress. "Aang and your mum, they told me about the tradition."

"Tradition?"

"The comb. They told me what it means when you give someone a comb in the Fire Nation."

His brow furrowed. "What do you—oh."

_Oh._

Heat spread all over his face in intense waves. "I-I didn't mean it like that. I honestly forgot all about that tradition. All I was thinking when I bought it for you was that you needed a comb and it was your birthday, so …"

"Oh." Her shoulders slumped and she averted her face. "Right. Of course. Of course that's why you bought it."

His frown deepened and he dared to take a step closer. "Are you … were you hoping that I'd—"

"What? No." Her blush was vibrant and she waved her hand at him in a dismissive gesture. "Of course not. I was just confused and wanted to check why … I wanted to …" She sucked in a breath and turned her back on him. "You know what, forget it. This was a mistake."

He caught her wrist before she could dash away. "Hey. Don't run."

"Why not?"

"Because you seem upset." He gently tugged her wrist, turning her more towards him. "Because I think it might be my fault."

"I'm not upset. I just …" She bit her lip, gaze fixed on her feet. "I don't know what you want."

"What do you mean?"

"You say and do all these things—things that make me really happy, like telling me you want me by your side—but I don't know what it means. I don't know what you want from me. Every time I think I've got it figured out, you do something to make me feel I'm wrong." She plucked at his tunic with light fingers and her eyes sought his. "What do you want from me, Zuko? Is it friendship or …"

His heart thudded faster. "I …"

"Yes?"

He moistened his lips as he stared down at her. They were close. Her body was inclined to him and he was still holding her wrist. He tugged on that wrist now to draw her closer.

"I do want you by my side," he whispered. "As a friend, as a warrior, but also …"

She inhaled shakily as he paused when his lips were a hairsbreadth from hers. Their breath intermingled and everything in him was thudding and pulsing to the beating of his heart. He'd never
kissed a girl before. He'd never kissed anyone, nor had he felt any desire to do so. But he wanted to kiss Katara. He really, really wanted to.

"Can I?" he asked.

"Yes."

He closed the last distance between them. Her lips were soft. So soft. She slanted her lips against his in a caress of silk and tingles. Then she did it again. His pulse stuttered and he pulled back.

"Too much?" she asked, biting her lip.

"No, I …" Warmth crept across his cheeks. "I just …"

"What?"

He let go of her wrist and rubbed the base of his neck. "I don't really know how to do this. I mean I've never actually …"

"Zuko, was that your first kiss?"

His face got hotter and he nodded.

"You don't need to be so embarrassed." She smiled and brushed a lock of hair from his eyes. "It's not like I'm an expert at kissing. We can figure it out together."

His entire body warmed at the thought. Together. She wanted that. She wanted him.

"Okay," he whispered.

They kissed again. It was a sweet, lingering kiss, but even then his heart pounded and pounding and pounded. By the time they broke apart, his hands were on her waist and his cheeks were flushed.

"We should head back," she murmured, unlinking her arms from around his neck.

"You're right."

He stepped back from her and they walked side by side, hands brushing until he dared to just hold her hand. Their eyes met and he smiled shyly. The way her lips curved in response sent a fresh stirring of flutters all through him. Yeah, he would always want this girl at his side.
They arrived at the base camp to find it was in full operation. The Water Tribe warriors had gathered, the Earth Kingdom soldiers had gathered, many of the White Lotus had gathered, and even a few people Aang and the others had met during their travels had come, including an Earth Kingdom Mechanist. Sokka and the guy were basically joined at the hip these days, though he peeled himself away from the inventions to get in on the welcome back hugs.

Everyone was relieved. Everyone was also tense. Aside from the fact that many were not pleased to see Azula, Zuko's group had cut it close with their timing. The eclipse was tomorrow.

"This is really happening, isn't it?" Aang murmured, once they'd all settled in and were waiting for the briefing to start. "Tomorrow we're going to attack the capital."

Zuko looked down at him. "Nervous?"

"Yeah."

He placed his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Me too."

They both fell quiet.

"I know what everyone's going to say in the meeting," Aang murmured, lowering his gaze. "They're going to tell me I have to kill the Fire Lord."

"What will you do?"

"What I have to, I guess. I'll make my case, I'll tell them that energybending is an option, but even I know the risks." His voice got quieter. "Everyone has gathered here to fight. They're all depending on me to do my part and stop the Fire Lord. I can't let them down."

Zuko's eyes widened a fraction before his expression softened into a smile. "You've changed, you know."

Aang's gaze darted to his in question.

"I used to look at you and see a dumb kid."

"Hey—"

"But now I see an Avatar." A beat. "And a dumb kid."

Aang folded his arms and put on his best grumpy, koalasheep face.

"I'm just teasing." Zuko looked around at the tents and people preparing for the upcoming battle. "But you have changed. You're not the same kid you were when we first met. It makes me glad I gave you that chance."

Aang unfolded his arms. "What do you mean?"

"When we were in that abandoned town, when I wasn't sure what to do or who to trust, you asked
me to give you chance. You said you wanted to prove you could be a better friend and a better Avatar."

"I remember."

Zuko met his gaze. "You've proven that, Aang. I know that whatever happens tomorrow, you'll make sure this war ends. I know we can follow you with confidence."

Colour dusted Aang's cheek and he rubbed the base of his neck. "Oh."

"Don't let it get to your head, though." Zuko gave a half-pat, half-push to his head.

Aang ducked away from his hand with a smile, though he sobered a second later. "Can I ask you something?"

"What?"

"Are you really okay with the fact we're going up against your dad?"

Zuko tensed. "You're asking me that now?"

"Sorry. I just … I remembered what you said when we were unlocking the chakras together, and I wondered if it's hard for you—being here, knowing what we have to do tomorrow."

Zuko sighed and ran a hand through his hair, looking the other way. "I try not to think about it."

"Oh. Then you still—"

"He's my father. I can't change that." His voice hardened. "But I do want him stopped. What he's planning, what he'll do with the comet, we can't let that happen. So I'll fight against my people tomorrow. I'll fight him if I have to, and if defeating him means he has to die, so be it."

Aang frowned. "It still doesn't seem right … or fair."

"War isn't fair, and my father brought this on himself. Don't pity him. That kind of feeling will get you killed."

"It's not that."

"Then what?"

"I just hate that it has to be this way. I hate how this war has screwed everything up. Families, nations, the whole world. It's all screwed up."

"Well, that's what we're here to fix, right? When we win tomorrow, we can start making things right again."

Aang's lips curved. "Yeah, you're right."

Zuko noticed a crowd gathering around the board with the maps and plans. "Looks like it's starting."

He gripped Aang's shoulder. "Come on. Time to try convince everyone."

oOo

"This is ridiculous," Azula muttered, resisting the urge to pace.
There had been … *resistance* when she'd gone to attend the briefing. People did not want her listening to their plans. People did not want her at the base camp at all—at least not while she was unrestrained. So she had chosen not to push the matter. She would not beg these people. She would not lower herself for them.

But it still hurt.

It hurt like the stinging lash of a whip she'd thought she'd already dodged.

"Why don't you sit down?" Ursa suggested, patting the spot next to her.

Azula remained standing and glared at the crowd. "They're going to make me stay here tomorrow."

"Perhaps, but …"

"But what, Mother?"

"Perhaps that is for the best."

Azula's fingers twitched towards her palms. "Is that what you think?"

"You've been through so much and—"

"Don't give me that rubbish. The fact is you don't trust me, do you?"

"That's not true."

Azula turned to face her mother. "Then look me in the eye and tell me why you don't think I should go with Zuko tomorrow. Why should I stay here?"

Ursa's gaze skittered to the side before meeting her eyes again. "I simply think it will be better for you to stay. I'll be here as well. We can—"

A brittle laugh. "I knew it. You're worried I'll side with Father. You're just like them."

"Azula." Ursa stood up and reached for her. "Let's just—"

"No, Mother. Let's not."

She stalked away from the tent with her back ramrod straight. There was an odd tightness in her chest and throat. Her eyes prickled.

"*What did you expect?*"

Her chest tightened even more. She gritted her teeth and forced her breathing to slow. Control. She had to be in control. Even if fire licked under her skin, even if Jet's voice hissed and pushed at the seams of her mind, threatening to shatter the precious quiet.

"*They don't trust you. They'll never trust you, and why should they?*"

She resisted the urge to clamp her hands over her ears.

"*You haven't changed. You're a lie, a fake.*"

"I have changed," she whispered.

"Liar. You're like a wolfbat pretending you're a koalasheep. You keep trying to fit in, but one of these
Her fingers curled into her palms. "What would you know? You're nothing now. You're dead."

"I know. You killed me, remember?"

She stopped abruptly. Jet stood in front of her with that familiar smile on his lips, except he was all ruined flesh and more like a reanimated corpse from a nightmare. She backed up a step, her heart pounding and pounding.

"What's the matter?" he taunted. "Don't like looking at your handiwork?"

"You're not real." She backed up another step, shaking her head. "You can't be real. You're dead. I watched you die."

"Yet here I am." He spread his arms and his smile widened even more.

Her heartbeat skittered and stuttered. None of the voices had taken physical form except her Mother, and even those apparitions had stopped. Why was he here? Why was this happening again? Her chest got tighter and tighter as if steel was clamping down on her ribcage. It was so hard to get air through her lungs.

"You're not real," she repeated.

She walked in the other direction, hoping he would disappear, but he followed like a burn-ravaged wraith. He hissed taunts in her ear about how she was wasting her time in this place. He said she'd always be a monster because, deep down, she enjoyed it. She enjoyed inflicting pain, enjoyed seeing people squirm in fear.

"Shut up," she gritted out.

"Just accept it." He blocked her path and met her eyes. "I know you. We're the same, and people like us can never fit in with people like them."

"You're wrong. I'm not like that anymore. Even Zuko thinks I've changed."

"Then why are you not with him now? Why are you the only one shut out?"

Her jaw locked with tension.

"Face it. All they're doing is trying to keep you on a leash. They want you where they can see you, they'll use you when they find a purpose for you, but they'll never trust you. They'll never let you be free."

The prickle was back in her eyes.

"Is that really what you want, Azula? To be excluded, humiliated? To be treated like something inferior just because some fools are scared you'll turn on them?"

"Shut up."

"Your own mother doesn't believe in you, yet you did so much to keep everyone safe on the Ito Islands. It's frustrating, isn't it? It makes you want to—"

"I said shut up!"
He laughed. "You know, maybe your mother is right. You should stay here tomorrow. If your father saw you, he would think you're pathetic. He would think you deserved to die."

Flames sparked from her fingers and shot out to consume him in a swell of sapphire. He laughed until every trace of him was gone.

oOo

That night, everyone gathered in their own groups. Katara caught up with Sokka, her dad, and other members of her tribe. Ty Lee and Aang were busy teaching each other games and practicing airbending while Toph, Mai and Suki sat nearby and chatted in their own circle. As for Zuko, he spent his time with his family and Shizue. Azula seemed oddly withdrawn, but then he supposed she had always been closer to their father than him. This was probably difficult for her. Or maybe she was frustrated because everyone wanted her to stay behind tomorrow; he knew it would frustrate him.

Iroh steered the conversation towards matters of royal succession. He believed that Zuko should be the one to take the throne. Zuko thought his uncle was joking. He protested a lot once he realised this wasn't the case.

"It has to be you," Iroh said, placing a hand on his shoulder. "The people are already used to the idea of you being the Crown Prince."

"Banished prince," Zuko pointed out. "Besides, the crown is rightfully yours. Father was the one who took it from you."

Iroh was not persuaded. The debate was lost when Ursa and Shizue sided with him. They didn't seem to think it mattered that Zuko was not quite seventeen and had spent the past three years banished from the Fire Nation. They didn't seem to understand the thought of becoming Fire Lord made his pulse race and his gut wriggle and churn as if butterfly-snakes had taken up residence inside. He half hoped that Azula would step in to support him, but she simply watched with an unreadable expression.

"You won't have to do this alone, Zuko," Ursa said with a reassuring smile. "We'll be there with you."

That was a small comfort. Iroh suggested they could think about making Ursa regent until Zuko came of proper age if needed, but the important thing was that Zuko should be the one to assume the throne. He was the best equipped to heal the nation, or so they believed.

"But I'm a fire healer," he murmured. "Won't that … complicate things?"

"That is why it has to be you," Ursa said. "This is a chance to make things right, not just for the Fire Nation but also for fire healers."

He frowned at his hands.

oOo

"You really don't want to be Fire Lord, do you?" Azula observed once she and Zuko were alone.

"No," he admitted.

A soft laugh. "Typical. You know, I always thought I deserved to be the heir more than you. You were never a great tactician, you did poorly in your studies, and you're way too impulsive and
emotional."
"You realise this isn't helping at all."
Her gaze met his. "You'll probably keep making mistakes as well if you become Fire Lord—"
"Still not helping."
"—but people follow you, Zuko. They follow you because they want to, not because you've intimidated them into submission. Uncle sees that too. So does Mother and Shizue. That's why they say it has to be you. That's why it should be you."

His eyes widened. "You really think that?"
"Well, it can't be me." Her tone took on a bitter edge. "I'm too much like Father, it seems."

He frowned.

She brushed past him and started to walk away.

"Hey, Azula?"
"What?"
"Um … is everything okay?"
"Why would you think it isn't?"
"Because you seem kind of … upset."

She tensed and her expression became as hard as steel, but there was a flicker of vulnerability in her eyes as well.

"You can tell me," he prompted gently. "Whatever it is."

Her mouth twisted and she tried to deflect the conversation in her usual sharp way, but something in him whispered not to let this one go. He asked her again to tell him what was going on. With further prodding, he got the truth out of her. She said their mum didn't trust her not to betray them. Pretty much everyone in this camp wanted to lock her away. It seemed like it didn't matter what she did or how much she tried to change, because people were always going to be wary of her.

"Give it time," he said. "People didn't warm to me straight away either."

"How much time?"
"I don't know."

She made a scoffing sound. "This is what I don't understand. I'm expected to play nice in order to win these people over, but if I can't persuade them to trust me, am I just expected to keep playing nice even when they want to exclude me? Where is the logic in that?"

"It's not about winning people over."

"Then what is it about?"
"Doing the right thing."
"Look, I know you're used to being able to calculate and act so you can get what you want, but trust and forgiveness don't work on a points system. It's not like one good deed will negate one bad thing you've done. For the most part you have to want to do the right thing and let people choose whether they'll trust you or not."

"Well, that seems stupid."

The corner of his mouth twitched. "I'm not saying good deeds don't help. Aang considers you his friend now, and Katara has got closer to you as well. There's also Yuzo and Atsuo, and Ty Lee has always been your friend …"

"But that doesn't mean they trust me. Not even Mother trusts me."

He bit his lip. "I'm sure Mum has her reasons for not wanting you to fight tomorrow, and I'm sure it's not because she doesn't trust you. I think … I think she's more worried about you."

"You must think I'm a naïve idiot if you expect me to believe that."

"I'm serious." He placed his hand on her shoulder. "When I told Mum I thought you'd changed, she was really happy. I know she believes in you."

Azula looked away. "Have I changed, though?"

Her voice was quiet yet the bitterness lingered like sharp stones scraping against skin. Creases formed on his brow.

"All I've been doing is acting in a way that I think will please Mother. I don't care if I have to hurt someone. I don't care if I have to lie or manipulate in order to get things done." She looked him dead in the eye. "The fact is that 'doing the right thing' means nothing to me. So if good deeds can't fix bad ones and people aren't going to trust me anyway, I frankly don't see the point in continuing to try."

He frowned. "I don't think you mean that."

"What if I do mean it? What if this is just who I am?"

Her tone was bold now, almost a challenge, but there was a plea hidden amongst all her upraised chin and hard eyes. The questions took on new words, ones she was too proud to say aloud.

*Is this who I am? Will you give me a reason to keep trying?*

He didn't know the right response. He wasn't even that good at putting his thoughts into words, but he could sense she was struggling—far deeper than she was letting on. Though he wasn't consciously trying to connect more with her energy, that didn't change they were always connected. All that swell of cold fire was right there at his fingertips, but so was the disquieting sense of sickness, of imbalance.

"I don't think that's who you are," he said slowly, "or at least not who you have to be."

She rolled her eyes. "If you're going to give me some 'you can be anything you want' speech, save your breath. I've already heard it from Mother."

"She's not wrong."

An unimpressed look.
"She's not. Only you can decide who you want to be, but …"

"But what?"

"I think you've already made that decision."

Her head tilted in question.

"You say you're just putting on an act to please Mum, but then why do you even care about pleasing her? Why put up with any of us? You could leave now. We're in the Fire Nation, and it wouldn't be hard for you to steal an eel-hound and go back to the palace. You could return to Father if you really wanted."

She gave him that steeled, calculating stare. "You're not worried I'll do it?"

"No."

"Why not? Everyone else is."

"Because I don't think you want to go back to Father, and I don't think you want to be like him either."

The steel in her expression shattered. She looked young and her bottom lip trembled. An edge of panic flickered in her eyes—the panic of realising she was about to cry in front of him. Zuko knew what would happen next. She would leave or she would say something cutting, anything to stop him from seeing her tears or thinking her weak. But crying wasn't weakness, and he also knew what she really needed right now. He had been in her shoes before.

He took two steps closer and pulled her into his arms. She stiffened all over like a statue, but she didn't fight him. They stood there like that, trying to ignore the awkwardness, the fact that they just didn't do things like this. It was difficult. She hadn't responded to the hug at all. A part of him wanted to let go, but instead he held her tighter and closed his eyes.

Tentatively, oh so tentatively, her arms curled around him. She pressed her cheek to his chest and let out a deep, deep sigh.

"Do you really want to fight with us tomorrow?" he asked.

"I think … I think I need to … for closure."

"Okay." He pulled back enough to meet her gaze. "Then stick with me."

"You know the others don't want me to come."

He raised his eyebrow. "You're actually going to let that stop you?"

A spark of her old cunning glinted in her eyes. "No. I guess not."

oOo

"This could be dangerous," Shizue observed. "You know what she can be like. You know what he can be like."

Ursa watched as her daughter talked with Aang, Zuko and Ty Lee. Toph soon joined them, and her son went red at something the earthbender said before the others all spilled into laughter. "Look at her," Ursa said softly. "She seems happy now."
"But—"

"I was wrong." Ursa turned away from the group. "I thought I could protect her if I kept her from Ozai, but all it did was turn her against me."

"Better for her to be mad at you for a while than to risk her being pulled under Ozai's influence again. Tomorrow's battle is critical. We can't risk any problems."

"No, I don't want to make the same mistakes. I failed her once. I won't do it again." Her voice took on a pained tone. "She felt I didn't trust her, Shizue. She looked at me as if I'd taken her heart and stomped on it."

"Like I said, she would have got over it."

Ursa shook her head. "No matter how good my intentions, keeping her here would have only driven her back to her old ways. We need to believe in her. We need to believe she can make the right decisions even if she's tempted not to."

A sigh. "I still don't think this is a good idea."

"I know you don't, just as I know you're not the only one, but look how far she's come." Her gaze drifted back to Azula, who was leaning close to Ty Lee to say something in her ear. The two girls shared a smile. "Seeing her like this is everything I ever wanted for her."

Silence settled between the women.

"Will you still stay here tomorrow?" Shizue asked.

"I'll only be a liability if I go." Ursa gave a self-deprecating smile and gestured at her emaciated frame. "I'm hardly battle-ready, and I was never much of a fighter anyway."

"Then I'll stay with you."

"But the—"

"I already lost you for three years." Shizue took her hand and met her gaze. "I would not be able to forgive myself if something happened to you again."

Ursa's eyes widened before her expression softened. "You know, things aren't like what they were. That pledge you made to serve and protect me—I don't expect you to keep it. I would not stop you if you wished to go your own way. You deserve to live your life as you please."

"My Lady Ursa, all I wish is to stay by your side."

Ursa's heart warmed and she gently squeezed Shizue's hand. "Very well, if that is what you wish."

"It is."

oOo

Katara snuck into Zuko's bed that night. He blushed and stuttered upon sight of her, but all she wanted was to cuddle. (Her brother, on the other hand, had definitely snuck out to do much less innocent things with Mai.) Katara complained that she couldn't sleep, couldn't stop thinking about the battle. She wanted him to distract her.

They talked in whispers under the cover of his blanket. They talked until there were no words left
except the ones that neither of them really wanted to say.

*I'm scared.*

*What if something goes wrong during the battle?*

*I don't want to lose you.*

Her hand found his. "I'll have your back tomorrow, okay?"

"And I'll have yours."

She touched his cheek, fingers skimming to find his lips. The kiss was a little more desperate this time, a little more needy. His heart pounded and pounded as their lips slanted and parted. Breath was exchanged and tongues caressed. It sent tingles all the way to his toes and made his blood hum.

He pulled back, pressing his forehead to hers. His pulse was still racing. "We should try to get some sleep. We have to get up early."

"I know."

They lay there like that in the dark before he placed a small kiss on her temple and whispered goodnight.

"Goodnight, Zuko."

She snuggled more into him and he was more than happy to wrap his arms around her. Everything would be decided tomorrow, but for now he wanted to stay in this moment. He wanted to stay with her.

Chapter End Notes

For those who may wonder about Azula's behaviour in this chapter, she's been under a huge amount of emotional stress for a long, long time. Her hallucinations did fade for a while, but the whole thing with her mum triggered everything again. So when Zuko says all that stuff, she can't keep it in anymore (especially since she really does want to be loved and not feel like she has to follow Ozai's ways.) I don't think they'll ever really be 'huggy' siblings, but they're at least getting to a healthier place with each other.
Eight Minutes

Thanks to Sokka and the Mechanist's underwater ships, it was not difficult to get past the Gates of Azulon and inside the capital. The city rallied its defence—faster than anticipated. Catapults fired volley after volley, tanks rumbled to push back and crush, and firebender and nonbender alike swarmed in to halt the advance.

But the invasion plan was not so easily derailed.

Toph stepped forward, a tiny figure in green surrounded by hulking, enemy tanks. She smiled and cracked her knuckles. "My turn."

Metal screeched as it was wrenched apart. Soldiers and bits of tank went flying. Any time flames got too close to her body, a rock wall sprouted up, courtesy of the Earth King's earthbenders who followed at her rear on clean up and shielding duty. Suki was also there, fans flashing as she fought off soldiers and helped to clear a path.

"They weren't kidding when they said you're like a one-girl army," Suki observed, pressing closer to Toph. "I'm impressed."

"You ain't seen nothing yet, Fan Girl."

"Oh?"

Toph bared her teeth in a wicked grin. "Try to keep up."

She charged forward, seismic sense rippling out from every step to paint the world—every tank, every firebender, every foe that needed to be taken down. Her lips curved more. No way was she going to hesitate this time. She wasn't afraid anymore, and she knew exactly what she had to do.

All of these punks were going down.

oOo

"Stop those catapults!"

Hakoda's cry carried to Ty Lee, who balanced on Appa's back next to Tomoki and Jee. "Get us closer," she called over her shoulder.

Sokka tightened his grip on the reins. "Alright, big guy, let's do this!"

Appa rumbled and sped for the war contraptions, swerving back and forth to avoid the fire streams and projectiles that the three couldn't block with their bending. Once they were close enough, Ty Lee thrust her hands forward in a massive blast of air. Soldiers screamed and were thrown back as the catapult came apart, caving in on itself in a heap of wood and metal.

"Feels good not to be on the receiving end of that," Tomoki said, wincing in sympathy for his fellow countrymen. "I do not miss those days of chasing the Avatar."

"Focus," Jee scolded, crafting a fresh fire shield. "This fight isn't over yet."

"Yes, sir!"

Ty Lee's eyes narrowed and she shot off another air blast, knocking over a whole line of soldiers on
the upper wall as if a giant, invisible wing had swooped down and scooped them off their feet. A second gust took care of the catapult. "How many left?" she demanded.

"Six!" Sokka responded.

"Then let's hurry." Her expression shifted into a cheerful smile. "There's a really nice custard bun shop not far from here, and I've been craving one for days."

"Ah …" Tomoki blinked and exchanged a glance with Sokka and Jee. "Is she serious?"

Jee and Sokka slapped their palms to their foreheads.

"Hey, the catapults!" Ty Lee pointed to the wall. "Let's go, let's go!"

Sokka adjusted his grip on the reins. "You heard her, Appa! Let's go!"

oOo

Sharpened metal rimmed Mai's knuckles as she dashed down the streets of her home. One of the Home Guard lunged at her, fire trailing from her fist. Mai ducked and let the knives fly. There was a rapid *thunk, thunk, thunk*, a choked cry, and the woman was pinned. Without pausing, Mai kept running and drew closer to where Iroh, Hakoda and a few other Water Tribe warriors were fighting.

"What's taking so long?" she demanded once they got a breather. "Shouldn't the signal have been given by now?"

Iroh frowned. "I'm not sure, but all we can do is focus on doing our part here and trust that Aang and his team will pull through."

Her lips pursed. "I guess."

"Looks like we've got more company," Hakoda said, and gestured to the firebenders moving in on their position.

Mai got fresh knives ready. Time for round two.

oOo

"They knew we were coming," Azula observed in an unreadable tone.

Zuko stood at her side behind the cover of a wall, teeth gritted and hands balled into fists. A line of tanks and many more soldiers, most of whom were nonbenders, barred the entrance to the palace. Yuyan Archers stood on the higher walls with their bows nocked. The whole thing was too well planned. Azula was right: their father and Shūrin must have learnt they were going to attack today. No doubt there was a spy hidden in the ranks somewhere. Worse, now the plan to sneak in as a small group was ruined.

"The eclipse is about to start," Katara muttered.

"And everyone is waiting for us to signal that we made it through," Yuzo reminded.

Atsuo signed with a deadpan expression that they hadn't made it through.

"The sass is not helping," Yuzo retorted.

Zuko's fingers dug into his palms. This was bad. Tanks were one thing, but the Yuyan Archers were
no joke. He remembered all too well what kind of damage their speed and precision could do.

"Any ideas?" he asked Azula.

"None that your no-sacrifices rule will like."

Right. He'd figured as much.

Aang frowned and stepped forward, almost putting himself in sight of the barricade. "Maybe I can do something."

"Aang, no." Katara gripped his shoulder and pulled him back. "You can't go out there."

"I have the Avatar State."

She tightened her grip. "That doesn't make you invincible."

"But it does make me stronger."

Yuzo's brow furrowed. "I thought it drains your energy faster. Isn't that why you weren't assigned to the vanguard?"

"It's true I can't stay in the Avatar State forever, but if we don't end this soon, the eclipse will pass and the whole plan is going to fall apart."

Katara was not satisfied with this answer. She pointed out it would be safer to retreat and take on the barricade with a bigger force, even if that meant losing the edge of the eclipse. She wasn't sure the risk was worth it.

"No," Aang said, shaking his head. "This ends now. There'll only be more casualties if we drag this out."

"But—"

"Katara, you've always looked out for me." He gently removed her hand from his shoulder. "But now it's my turn to look out for all of you. Trust me, okay? I can do this."

"I do trust you, Aang. It's just …" Worry coloured her eyes. "You're still just one kid."

"You're right, I am one kid. But I'm also the Avatar, and right now I have a job to do."

She bit her lip as if she wanted to argue more but knew she had to respect his choice.

"We'll back you up as much as we can," Zuko said, meeting Aang's gaze. "Just be careful of those archers."

"Don't worry, I don't plan on letting them shoot me again."

Aang's tattoos and eyes began to glow a bright white. Power rippled from him like invisible waves of energy. He bent the earth to encase him head to foot in rock and stepped out from behind the wall. Shouts started. Arrows whistled through the air and got lodged in or bounced off his armour with sickening chinks and thunks.

Katara twitched.

"Wait," Zuko said, placing his arm in front of her.
She shifted on her feet and gripped his arm. He understood her agitation; it didn't feel right to let a twelve year old go out on his own to face all those enemies. But none of them could wield Aang’s power. None of them stood a chance—at least not yet.

"I am the Avatar!" Aang yelled, his voice magnified beyond humanly possible and layered with all of the previous Avatars' voices. "I've come to stop Fire Lord Ozai and end this war! Surrender or I will attack!"

The fine hairs on the back of Zuko's arms and neck prickled.

"What's he doing?" Azula muttered. "How is talking supposed to clear a path for us?"

"He's giving them a chance," Zuko responded with a hint of pride.

Aang hadn't forgotten what had happened in the Northern Water Tribe. He hadn't forgotten the words Zuko had thrown at his face while lost to despair and anger—that an ordinary human couldn't hope to withstand the Avatar State, so it was up to Aang to wield that power responsibly.

This was a show of mercy. It was a show of honour.

"Surrender!" Aang commanded again, and streams of wind and fire swirled around him to add to his shield.

"Do it," Zuko pleaded under his breath. "Come on."

The tanks fired and more arrows were released. Zuko closed his eyes in pained resignation.

Seconds later the ground ruptured and wind blasted with howling fury. The screams and cries of alarm that followed were like knives to his chest.

Why couldn't they have surrendered? Why did it always have to be this way?

Aang stomped one foot forward and thrust his hands out. The earth growled like thunder, shaking under their feet. Everything trembled. The palace walls cracked and splintered in spider webs that rained chips of stone. Wind buffeted and fire flared in hot surges. The only element Aang was missing was water—not that he needed it. At this rate, he was going to tear the whole palace down. He had already knocked most of the archers from their posts and many of the tanks had been upturned and couldn't correct themselves thanks to the endless force of his airbending.

Katara let go of Zuko's arm. Yuzo and Atsuo's jaws went slack as they stared at the display of power. Even Azula was a bit wide-eyed.

Then the sky darkened.

The rumbling and quaking stuttered. Aang’s rock armour crumbled off him in uneven chunks, though some parts still clung in a second skin. His eyes and tattoos flickered like a candle struggling for life.

"What's going on?" Katara said, taking a hasty step forward.

Zuko's heart clenched. The sky got dimmer and dimmer and a breath of cold passed over them. "It's the eclipse."

The Mechanist had made them all "eclipse glasses" so their eyesight would not get damaged if they looked up at the sun, but Zuko didn't need to look at the sky to know that the thread that connected
him to the heavenly body had been snipped. Or so it felt. His inner fire was colder than the dregs of a long dead camp fire. There was nothing there. No spark. Nothing.

Aang's tattoos went back to plain blue. His eyes no longer glowed. All the wind and fire stopped swirling around him, leaving a boy standing alone—small, half-staggering and vulnerable.

"Aang!" Zuko dashed out from behind the wall, Katara hot on his heels, and steadied him. "You okay?"

"I got shut out. I can't go into the Avatar State." His grey eyes widened with panic. "Why? Why is this happening again?"

Laughter came from above them. Shūrin stood on the main palace balcony—the same the Fire Lord used to make speeches, though there was no sign of Ozai. Unbent flames glowed on torches near her, highlighting the pure silver of her hair and how more clumps had fallen out, leaving bald patches. She looked old and withered. "You've come so far, Avatar Aang, yet you still understand nothing!"

Aang stiffened. "What are you talking about?"

"An Avatar who can only bend three elements is incomplete! Without fire, you cannot access your full powers!" She laughed again, and the sound was like a heavy stone knocking against Zuko's chest. "Do you still think you can force the Fire Lord and these soldiers to surrender?"

The colour drained from Aang's face. "Oh no."

As if on cue, the tanks flipped back to their normal position and the nonbender soldiers, including the Yuyan Archers who had not been too injured, reformed their ranks. Zuko unsheathed his swords. Beside him, Yuzo grasped his new blade and Katara got her water ready.

"Where's Father?" Azula growled under her breath. "Why is it only that thing up there?"

"Let's find out after we …"

Zuko trailed off as the Fire Lord walked out on to the balcony to join Shūrin. Even in the dim light, the five-pronged headpiece stood out in his black hair. Zuko's chest seized up—because that was his father, and it had been three years, and all the memories were rushing back …

"Prince Zuko," Ozai greeted, his voice smooth and clear as a bell. "My son, you have done well. You have brought the Avatar to me."

Zuko's eyes widened.

"Return to my side so that your banishment may be annulled and honour restored upon you."

The words were spoken with such confidence, such ease. A year ago Zuko would have given anything to hear them as well. All he'd wanted was to have his father acknowledge him, to love him. He'd wanted that love so desperately.

But whatever his father was offering now wasn't love. It wasn't honour either.

Zuko shook his head and stepped back so that he was closer to Aang and Katara. "No."

His father's voice was like the sharp edge of a blade. "You dare to go against me?"

Zuko's heart thumped faster. There was a part of him—the part that had begged for forgiveness in the
Agni Kai arena when he was thirteen—that wanted to back down. A part that wanted to shrink and shrink until his father's eyes couldn't find him. A part that wanted to block his ears so that voice couldn't dig in and make his chest tighten and tighten like a clamp on his lungs.

He had been afraid of his father as a child. It was a simple truth he couldn't deny anymore, and that fear still lingered in his pulse, the twisting knots in his stomach, and the sweat forming on his skin.

But there was another part of him that had come too far and experienced too much to be cowed.

He found his voice.

"I didn't come here to bring you the Avatar! I came here to help him stop you!"

Silence.

Zuko swallowed against the dryness in his throat. He felt jittery and blood thundered in his ears, but the words were out. They were out and they couldn't be taken back.

"Then you have learnt nothing," his father said.

There were many things Zuko wanted to say in response. He wanted to declare that he'd learnt everything—about the propaganda that had been shoved down every child's throat, about the way the world hated and feared the Fire Nation, about all he had seen during his banishment. He wanted his father to know exactly why he had sided with the Avatar, but he also knew his actions would speak loud enough.

He tightened his grip on his swords and his expression turned grim.

Ozai considered him before shifting his attention to Azula. "Surely you do not plan to fight alongside this rabble, Azula?"

She gave an odd twitch.

"Your brother has allowed his weak emotions to skew his thinking, but you are not like that. I know I taught you better."

Her shoulders hunched but she still gave no response. That didn't stop their father from continuing to talk. He appealed to her pride and her logic. He said the same words that had moulded her into the cold, ruthless princess she had been in the past.

Azula's fingers curled into her palms and she raised her chin. "The only weak one here is you, Father!"

"What?"

He almost sounded surprised, and for good reason. She had always been the perfect, obedient one.

"You stand on that balcony next to that thing, who by the way is probably using you, and say all you can to manipulate Zuko and me back to your side." Her lips curved, though there was no humour in the smile. "It's pathetic!"

"Azula …"

The warning tone made both siblings stiffen. Zuko realised then that, growing up, she had been just as afraid of their father; she had just been better at meeting his expectations. Still, she did not back down now.
"You think that love and caring is weakness, and you taught me to believe that as well, but you're the one who's been left with nothing!" Her voice got rougher. "You didn't try to make me strong! You tried to make me as weak as you! But I won't follow you anymore, and I won't fight for you either!"

Even from this distance, Zuko could see the chilling expression that twisted Ozai's face. It was the same look he'd worn before he'd burned Zuko in that arena.

"I see your brother has rubbed off on you," Ozai observed. "You've become just as useless and emotional as him."

"Of course that's how you would see it." She glanced at Zuko and the smallest of smiles curved her lips. "But I don't see it that way. I can't after everything that's happened."

Zuko returned her tiny smile in a show of solidarity.

"Then you are just as foolish as him."

"No, Father. I just know who I am now. I know what I want, and it isn't to be at your side!" She raised her chin higher. "Your strength isn't strength! I know that for certain now, and that's why you're going to lose today! You can't even trust the person at your side!"

Shūrin smiled, unbothered by the accusation.

"How disappointing," Ozai said in a voice that could freeze bone marrow. "I see I was wrong to assume you could be worth anything."

Azula gave that odd twitch again but didn't say anything.

"The eclipse is almost over," Katara murmured. "They're probably going to attack as soon as the sun comes back."

That did seem likely. No doubt it had been Shūrin and the Fire Lord's plan to buy time with conversation. Even so, Zuko and the others didn't need the eclipse to bring their enemies down. Defeating the Fire Lord during the eclipse was mainly for the rest of the invasion force's benefit. The sooner they ended things here, the sooner they could force the city to surrender.

Except Ozai had other plans.

He turned his back on them. "I want Prince Zuko alive! Kill the spares!"

"Spares?" Azula clenched her hands. "You're calling me a spare now?"

He didn't pause as he passed out of view and went inside the palace.

Azula made a low sound in her throat, almost a growl. That was the cue to attack. Aang raised shields of rock to block arrows and pushed a line of nonbenders back with a quick, sweeping gust of wind. Zuko and Atsuo stuck close to Katara as she moved to take out a tank by freezing and damaging the cooling system. Meanwhile, Yuzo and Azula fought hand-to-hand but otherwise remained near Aang. Both had always known they would be weaker during the eclipse, but their reasons for being on the infiltration team were personal.

Still, not all of the Fire Nation soldiers had chosen to attack. Some hesitated, exchanging glances and looking towards Zuko and Azula.

Hope flickered in Zuko's chest. If they were already beginning to doubt …
"Join us!" he yelled. "You don't have to follow him anymore! We can stop this war here and now! We can end it all!"

More hesitation. Azula spoke to their sense of self-preservation by reminding them that once the fire turned back on, they stood no chance. They had already got a glimpse of the Avatar's power.

"How do we know you won't turn on us?" one soldier demanded. "How do we know this isn't a trick?"

Zuko met his gaze. "It's not a trick. If you surrender, I promise no harm will come to you."

There was a tense pause. Some of the archers lowered their bows. The hatches to the tanks popped open and soldiers climbed out. Nonbenders broke out of stance.

"It's working," Aang said, letting his rock wall slip back into the ground.

The fighting stopped and the two groups faced each other. Zuko looked up at the balcony and caught sight of Shūrin disappearing from view.

Light returned to the sky.

"The eclipse is over," Yuzo observed, and flames sparked above his palm.

"But this battle isn't." Fire thrummed through Zuko as he turned to Aang. "You ready?"

Aang nodded and stepped forward so they were side by side. "Let's do this."

oOo

The fighting sounded too distant. Ozai wasn't surprised when Shen—or whatever the fire healer's actual name was—declared that the soldiers had surrendered to Zuko and Azula. They were all traitors, all useless.

His gaze drifted to the decrepit man and the chi blocker who lurked not far behind like a shadow. Ozai would never forget the day the two had arrived in the capital. They'd carved their way through the palace guards, easily overwhelming all who had sought to stop them—easily overwhelming him. For a second he'd thought he was about to greet death, but then Shen had offered his services.

"You've seen my power. You've seen what I can do. I can make you stronger …"

The promise had been too alluring, especially since word had been received that the Avatar planned to attack with an army. All Shen wanted in return was Zuko. (And that was hardly a sacrifice.) Even without the offer of new strength, however, Ozai had known he had to play along with Shen's game, at least until he could regain the upper hand.

"Let us see if your promises are worth anything," Ozai said, meeting pale gold eyes that were just like his son's. (And wasn't that ironic: the child he'd thought the weakest was the one with the most potential.)

Shen smiled and dipped his head in a bow. "I always keep my promises. Do not worry."

"You can't even trust the person at your side!"

Ozai banished his daughter's words from his mind as easily as brushing away a cobweb. Of course he didn't trust Shen. He didn't trust anyone, nor did he need to. This was all a game of power. Though he did not control every piece on the board right now, he would make sure he did in the end.
His eyes hardened as he sat on the uppermost part of the dais, the part reserved for the Fire Lord, and waited. The truth burned in his bones. He had been born to be a ruler, not just of the Fire Nation but of the entire world.

This was his destiny.

"That was the signal, right?" Sokka said as he looked towards the palace.

Mai came to stand next to him. "Seems so."

His hand found hers. "Then I guess we just need to hold our ground now."

"Great, except I can't fight if you're holding my hand like that."

He smiled at the dry, teasing lilt in her voice and pulled her in for a kiss. "Let me have this moment. I missed you earlier."

She raised her eyebrow, but a smile lingered in the curve of her lips.

"Oh, get a room."

Both teens flinched at Toph's comment and turned to see her leaning against Appa and smothering a yawn. Suki was at her side, looking as if she didn't know whether to be amused or feel sorry for them for getting interrupted. Ty Lee, meanwhile, just grinned and cooed that she thought the exchange had been romantic. Heat rose to Sokka and Mai's cheeks.

"Do you mind?" Mai snapped.

"Nope," Toph said.

Ty Lee's tone became very innocent. "Wow, Mai, you're really pink, and I don't just mean your aura."

Sokka watched the way Mai's expression transformed into the most unimpressed and flattest of stares. He wondered how Ty Lee had survived this long; it was clear she had no sense of self-preservation. That was a look which, at least in Mai language, spelled murder.

Suki cleared her throat. "Er, maybe we should—"

"Get into position!"

They all glanced in the direction of the fountain where Hakoda and Iroh were urging everyone to hurry to their defence posts.

Sokka got his club ready. "Looks like that's our cue."

Mai caught his gaze and nodded as if to say this time they'd fight together. His heart stirred. She was so beautiful when she got that fierce look in her eyes.

Toph punched him on the arm. "Come on, Snoozles. Time to go defend Toph Fountain."

He raised his eyebrows. "Pretty sure that's not what it's called."

"Well, that says otherwise." She pointed with her thumb over her shoulder at the statue of herself
now gracing the fountain square. Ozai's statue was in crumbled pieces.

Ty Lee scratched at her cheek. "You know, I'm not too sure the citizens are going to be happy with this new addition."

"I don't know," Suki said with a hint of a smile. "The craftsmanship is very good. A perfect likeness."

Toph grinned. "Of course."

Mai sighed and declared she was going to let Zuko deal with this one. Sokka thought that was sound advice. For now, it was best to focus on not getting their butts handed to them. Their eight minutes of no firebending was up and that meant the battle was about to get much uglier.

He tightened his grip on his club. "Aang, Zuko, I hope you guys don't take too long out there."
The throne room was dark except for the flames that shielded the Fire Lord from view. Shūrin stood in front of the wall of fire, silver-haired and stooped like a gnarled tree bent to the wind. Unease slithered through Zuko's stomach as he saw the full extent of the corruption that had taken over her vessel.

How had she changed so much since the last time he'd seen her when he'd escaped with Ty Lee?

Yuzo cursed and lunged forward, but Atsuo was quick to grab him and hold him trapped against his chest before his boyfriend could do anything rash.

"What have you done?" Yuzo snarled, struggling against the tight grip. "What have you done to my brother?"

Shūrin's lips curved. "Your brother is gone, child." Her tone became as cold and dark as a void. "As for you, you should have never come here."

She raised her hand and punched a swirl of gold that threatened to engulf them like the fiery jaws of a beast. Everyone quickly put up shields. Everyone was also shoved back from the force. It was like being hit with a mountain. Zuko's head slammed against a pillar and a high-pitched ringing blared in his ears. He groaned, blinking back blurry dots.

"Did you fools really think it would be this easy?" She fired blast after blast, slamming them against the floor again and again. "I have lived for centuries, gaining knowledge, honing my skills. I have mastered the very energy of this world!"

Zuko gasped as fire slammed into his shield and licked at his skin. She was so strong. Far stronger than when he'd fought against her on Wu Yao's island. It was taking all he had just to block her attacks, let alone stay conscious.

"But I do wish to thank you for walking into my trap." Her gaze shifted to Aang, who was on one knee and struggling to ward her flames. "Especially you, little Avatar. Now that your bond is broken with Prince Zuko and you've reforged your connection to the Avatar Cycle, I can kill you and create a new Avatar, one who will do my bidding."

Aang paled but his expression was determined. "There's no way I'll let you do that!"

"I'm afraid you don't have a choice."

"Watch me!"

His eyes flashed white and every tattoo lit up. In a rush he was on his feet and thrust his hands out, forcing her fire back at her in an intense wave. Her lips twitched and she grasped the flames and guided them around her like a coiling snake before they dissipated into mere wisps.

Zuko's heart jolted against his ribs. No way.

"You're going to have to do better than that," she taunted.
Aang growled and surged forward, air encircling him like a shield. He pounded his fist into the floor and it jolted up in a gaping maw underneath her. Fire flared from her feet and palms. The stone closed on empty space. Shūrin smiled as she loomed over them, held aloft by the power of her bending.

"Silly child." More flames swelled between her hands, getting bigger and bigger. "Why do you keep holding back? Is it because you hope to save this vessel? Is it because you're scared your friends will get caught up in your attacks?"

She threw the massive sphere at him. Wind burst from Aang, slicing through the fire like a blade. Some of the floor and pillars were already turning black.

Her teeth gleamed in a smile. "Or is it because you really are that weak?"

"I'm not weak!"

"No?" Her eyes glowed bright gold, brimming with power. It was like looking at a second Avatar. "Then prove it."

Flames blasted towards Aang in a vicious roar. He raised a part of the floor as a wall, but it was smashed through the moment her attack made contact, chunks of stone flying off everywhere. Quickly, he crossed his arms in front of him and braced himself, using a shield forged by fire and air to push back at the onslaught. His heels skidded back.

"Come on, Avatar!" Shūrin jeered. "I told you that you have to do better!"

A frustrated sound escaped him and his swirling shield pulsed bigger, trying to overwhelm her flames.

That was when Zuko realised their mistake.

They'd all been so focussed on Shūrin and trying to get back on their feet that they'd failed to notice the third person in the throne room. A person who moved like liquid shadow and had only one goal in mind.

Hina's fists struck Aang's back with swift precision. The torrent of flames immediately stopped. His body jerked and the spirit glow that illuminated his eyes and tattoos stuttered to nothing.

"N-no," Aang choked out.

Hina caught him in her arms. A knife glinted.

"Aang!" Katara screamed.

She managed to lash out with a dozen water whips, but Shūrin's fire snagged them before the blade could be knocked away. Steam hissed and heated droplets of water splattered everywhere.

Hina raised the knife.

"Stop!" Zuko cried. He struggled to his feet, rage and fear clawing its way up inside his chest. The room was spinning and his ears were still ringing, but his voice was clear. "Hina, don't do this!"

Her eyes met his. Tortured eyes that begged for release.

That was when the knife struck.
There was an awful scream. He didn't know if it came from him or Katara. Maybe both. All he knew was that suddenly he couldn't breathe, couldn't think, couldn't do anything except watch as the knife was wrenched from Aang's throat. Blood spilled. It spilled and spilled even as Zuko's heart became the heaviest of stones, sinking, sinking, sinking.

This could not be happening. Not now, not like this.

Hina threw Aang's body away from her. The bloody knife clattered on the blackened stone not far from his unmovine form.

"So much for the Avatar's destiny," Shūrin observed, touching down on the floor with her feet.

Ozai's laughter filled the hall. "Impressive. I see you do keep your promises."

Zuko's trembling hands curled into fists. His eyes prickled and his throat burned, constricted by the lump that had formed.

"I can heal him!" Katara scrambled towards Aang, half-staggering and tears wetting her cheeks. "There's still—"

Shūrin raised her hand. "I think not."

A fusion of blue, orange, and gold flames blocked the attack that would have sent Katara flying. Then Zuko, Azula and Yuzo were standing protectively in front of her in offensive stances. Atsuo had gone to deal with Hina.

"Go," Azula said. "Heal him."

"We'll buy you as much time as we can," Zuko added.

Katara nodded and dashed for Aang.

Shūrin tilted her head at the three. The glow in her eyes had faded and she looked even more stooped and withered, like a flower about to succumb to winter's chill. "Children, children, haven't you realised yet? You cannot defeat me."

"I wonder about that," Azula said, looking the fire healer up and down. "Seems to me you're weaker now."

"Always the observant one." Shūrin's lips curved. "But, you see, I am not fighting alone either."

The flames parted around the throne and Ozai stepped down from the dais. Zuko's heart thudded against his ribs.

Their father? They were going to have to fight him?

Shūrin's smile widened. "I do prefer to keep things within the family, don't you?"

Yuzo glared at her, but Zuko and Azula could only stare, tight-lipped and grim, as their father drew closer. This was supposed to be Aang's destiny. This was never supposed to have fallen on them.

"Azula," Zuko murmured.

"What?"

"I …" He let out a breath. "Thanks for sticking with me."
Her eyes met his and he wondered if she would tell him off for being sentimental, but all she did was nod. Then the fight began.

oOo

Ursa froze. "Something is wrong."

"What do you mean?" Shizue walked over, Momo perched on her shoulder.

"I can sense it. A terrible disturbance."

Shizue sat next to her and clasped her hands. "Perhaps it's nothing. Perhaps—"

"No." She pulled her hands free and stood up. "The Avatar is in danger. I know it, and I fear my children are as well."

Shizue's expression turned grim. "What do you wish to do?"

"There's nothing I can do!"

That was the worst part. The boats had gone, the bison was gone. Even if she had chosen to go with the others to the capital, she would have only been a hindrance. Having a heightened sense of spirituality did not make her fit for battle.

Shizue frowned, taking her time to speak. "If it helps, I do not believe they will lose."

"I appreciate your faith, but you and I both know things don't always work out the way we want. Look at our own lives. Look at what has happened during the past three years."

"Yes."

Ursa's shoulders hunched at the simple answer.

"But in all the time I've spent with your son and the Avatar, I have learnt one thing."

"What's that?"

"They can make the impossible possible."

Hope fluttered in Ursa's chest. "You believe in them that much?"

"Don't you?"

She frowned and examined her feelings—beyond the panic, beyond maternal worry—and a sense of calm came over her. A faint smile curved her lips.

Shizue moved to stand at her side. "Whatever you've sensed, Ursa, it's not over yet. Trust in that."

"You're right." Ursa's expression softened and she leaned up to scratch Momo behind the ears. "Besides, they aren't alone."

"Exactly."

oOo

There was too much blood.
Katara blinked back tears and held glowing hands over the ugly wound, but so much had been damaged. The knife had gouged an artery. Normal water couldn't fix this. She wasn't sure if there was a way to fix this. Even if she sealed up everything, he'd lost far too much blood.

"Zuko!" Fresh tears spilled down her cheeks. "Zuko, you have to …"

She trailed off as she looked up and saw flames burst and collide in explosions of heat. Zuko moved to stand back-to-back with Azula and the two worked in tandem to fight Ozai and Shūrin. Yuzo was on the ground, groaning and obviously injured. Atsuo was still struggling with Hina.

There was no one who could help. If anything, they were all counting on her.

Aang was counting on her.

Katara gritted her teeth. She had always found a way to protect the people she cared about when they needed it most. She had turned the rain into a weapon on the Ito Islands, she had forced the spirit out of Ursa, but it wasn't offensive strength she needed now. She needed a healing miracle.

Except there was no Spirit Oasis Water left.

Her hands trembled. The blue glow seemed so futile, so weak for what was needed. It didn't matter how much chi she manipulated within his body because there was too much blood and he had been dying before she'd even reached him.

"Aang," she whispered hoarsely. "Please hold on. I'll figure this out. I'll …"

Her eyes widened as she stared at the blood that stained his front, as she felt the slowed blood in his veins and how it clogged up spaces where it shouldn't.

Could she …

What if …

A shaky breath escaped her lips. His blood called to her just as much as water. Bending blood had allowed her to take control of Ursa's body like a puppeteer, but it had also saved Biyu once from internal bleeding. Could it help here?

Her expression steeled.

She removed one hand from his throat to guide her water back into the flask at her hip. There was no moon to boost her power, no guide to tell her what to do. But she was a master waterbender and she had never let such setbacks stop her in the past.

She seized hold of the blood that had spilled out of him. It took a lot of concentration to sense the impurities and even more to purify everything before she could guide his blood back inside his veins. It was gruelling work. She was conscious of the fight that continued on around her—the shouts, the blasts of fire, the muffled grunts of pain. Her heart thudded faster but she forced her breathing to remain steady. She had to focus.

"Come on, Aang."

She sealed up the last of the damage in his throat, but of course his heart wasn't working. Katara concentrated her bending on the blood inside him and forced it to pump through the organ and spread through his veins. One beat, two beats, three beats …
"Come on!" she gritted out.

He wasn't responsive. How long had he been unconscious?

Fear swelled within her like sticky claws, scraping her insides and scrabbling at her chest. It was a thick coating tarnishing her hope. Yet she didn't stop, didn't slow. She just kept pumping the blood through him and forcing his heart to beat.

There was no way she was going to lose him.

oOo

Zuko grunted as he blocked his father's attack and was shoved back several paces into Azula. She steadied him with a rough hand.

"Is it just me or is he way too strong?" he muttered.

"It's not just you."

Swiftly, Zuko swept into a low kick that fired a crescent of golden flames, and she leapt over him, spinning into a high kick that shot a circular rush of sapphire. Ozai dispersed both. A hiss of frustration escaped her and Zuko gritted his teeth. This wasn't right. Their father had always been a powerful bender, but never like this.

"You look troubled," Ozai said with a hint of amusement.

Zuko's brow creased. "Shūrin did something to you, didn't she?"

"Shūrin?"

"That thing that calls itself Shen," Azula spat. "She's boosted your bending somehow."

Ozai's eyes glinted. It was all the answer they got before he punched an intense blast of flames. The siblings combined their bending, gold and blue fusing to create a shield. Fire collided in a bone-deep boom of heat. Frantically, Zuko's gaze darted for Shūrin. She had slunk away from the fight the first chance she'd got after taking out Yuzo. He spotted her near the throne. A faint glow shimmered around her, almost gossamer-like.

"Idiot, don't—"

Azula's words were cut off as their shield was overwhelmed and flames hit with the force of burning stone. They both went flying, landing in a groaning heap. She clutched her ankle and bit her lip. Her eyes screamed pain.

Zuko's heart hammered against his ribs.

This was bad. Yuzo was down for the count, Atsuo was trying to keep Hina pinned down, Katara was healing Aang, and now Azula was injured as well. Zuko wasn't sure he could take his father on his own.

His gaze darted to Shūrin and the shimmering light. He had that same power. He could make himself stronger right now if he wanted. Stronger than his father, stronger than Shūrin. But it would mean drawing on the energy of those bonded to him. It would mean absorbing their strength like a parasite, maybe even killing them if he wasn't careful. Just the thought left him sick to his stomach.

Ozai moved his arms in a rapid, circular motion and white-blue sparks crackled and took shape in a
hair-raising hiss of energy. Zuko swallowed.

Lightning.

"I've changed my mind," Ozai said in a voice of ice and steel. "The fire healer may want you, Zuko, but I have no need for traitors. Both of you will die today!"

The lightning burst free from his fingers.

Zuko was halfway to his feet— even as his mind screamed too slow, too slow— when a blur of colour and wind stopped in front of him. Glowing tattoos, a firm stance.

"Aang?" he breathed, the name catching in his throat.

Aang caught the crackling bundle of energy and let it pass through him before he shot it off to strike inches from Ozai's feet. The explosion ripped chunks of stone up from the floor but Ozai was left unharmed.

"You missed," the Fire Lord observed.

"I didn't miss." Aang stepped forward, power roiling from him in waves. "That was your last chance to surrender."

"Me? Surrender?" Ozai laughed.

Aang did not laugh.

"Just kill him!" Azula spat. "Do it now!"

Wind swirled around Aang and he did not break eye contact with the Fire Lord. "Zuko, can you handle Shūrin?"

Zuko glanced at his father before shifting his gaze to the ancient princess. She had stopped glowing and watched them all with an unreadable expression. "Yeah."

She didn't want to kill him. Plus, even if she had regained her bending strength, her vessel was corrupted and physically weak.

"Then I'm leaving her in your hands."

Aang shot forward, fire, wind and earth surrounding him as he smashed into Ozai and rammed him right through the palace wall. Sunlight streamed through the gap; however, Zuko didn't have time to waste playing spectator as the two collided in battle in the courtyard.

He turned to Shūrin. "You failed. Aang is alive and he's going to defeat my father. You wasted all that energy for nothing."

She shrugged. "Killing the Avatar was just a bonus. The main thing was to get him out of the way so he couldn't interfere. As for your father, do you really think I ever intended to let him win?"

Zuko's eyes narrowed.

She stepped in front of the throne, stooped and frail. "I gave the Fire Lord strength because I knew that was what would appease him, but it will not last long." A smile curved her lips. "Not that the fool realises it. He thinks he can use his power to crush the Avatar and then me."
It was strange to hear someone speak about his father in such a way. She seemed to look upon Ozai as if he were a child she was humouring. Then again, she had been alive for centuries.

"You won't win either," he said grimly. "I won't let you."

"Then come and stop me."

Flames encircled his fists.

"Wait," Azula said.

He glanced down at her.

"Don't hold back. Forget about Shen, forget about your feelings. Just end this. End it now."

His fingers dug into his palms.

"You have to promise, Zuko. Promise you'll do whatever it takes. This isn't the time for your bleeding-heart ways."

Katara caught his gaze from the other side of the ruined hall where she crouched next to Yuzo. Her expression seemed to say similar words—that Shūrin was too dangerous, that she didn't mind if he borrowed her energy to find the strength he needed.

I've never absorbed chi for combat, he wanted to say. I could take too much. I could kill you!

But of course she knew the risks. They both did. They'd heard all his fears before.

He glanced at Hina and Atsuo—the one who had been controlled and forced to the kill, and the other who was now being controlled and had almost killed Aang. So many people hurt, so many people whose lives had been ruined by this monster that refused to die.

"Promise you'll do whatever it takes."

His eyes slid shut. "I'm sorry."

Energy filled him as he removed the seals on his bond with the girls. Cold fire and a breath of the ocean hummed through his meridian paths, making the fire that swelled from his fists burn an even paler gold. When his eyes snapped open, they glowed like twin flames.

He charged.

"That's it," Shūrin said in satisfaction. "Come closer, my vessel."

Anger and sadness choked his throat as he locked eyes with the decrepit man that housed Shūrin's spirit—anger because he was so tired of fighting and the endless demand for sacrifices; sadness because he knew he was hurting Katara and Azula with every drop of energy he snatched from their already exhausted bodies.

He lunged and punched downwards at Shūrin, flames trailing and pulsing outwards from the motion. They were bright, emotion-fuelled flames that tore a piece out of him even as he slammed her into the throne. Bone shattered. He heard the snap in her left arm with sickening clarity, but she just shoved him back with a powerful fire blast. His body flew across the hall before he twisted in the air to land in a half-crouch.

"You think those measly little bonds will be enough?" she taunted.
Zuko gritted his teeth.

"You'll have to draw on a lot more power than that. Too bad for you that your bond with the Avatar got cut."

She attacked. He ran, dodged and leapt over the blasts. He had to get closer, draw her into close combat. It was the only way now. He refused to absorb anyone else's energy—not without their permission. Not without knowing where they were or what it would do to them. Even now, Katara and Azula were near prostrate on the floor, struggling to bear the burden he was placing on them.

The lump in his throat got more constricting. His eyes prickled.

**Enough!** he wanted to scream.

But the world didn't work that way. He couldn't demand things to stop. She had made it clear that she would never stop unless he made her.

He threw himself under Shūrin's stream of flames, skimming the floor on his knees with his back bent as low as it could go, heat caressing his chest and exposed skin. The moment he stopped seeing gold, he rose up and kicked out waves of fire. She brought her right arm in a downward sweep, slicing through the flames like an invisible knife and forcing him back before he could make contact.

Zuko hit the ground with a bone-bruising thwack, rolling a few times from the sheer momentum. His shoulder struck a half-crumbled pillar. He groaned and black, blurry spots danced before his vision. Even so, he saw all too vividly Katara's face twist in pain as she curled into herself. His sister looked just as tortured.

That was him. He was doing that to them.

"You're as bad as the little Avatar," Shūrin observed. "Still holding back even though you can't beat me with the way you're fighting."

He took deep breaths to try to ease the dizziness, fingers digging into stone as he pushed himself up.

"I won't …"

"What?"

"I won't be like you."

Her head tilted. "What are you talking about, child?"

"I won't use other people's energy to make myself stronger! I won't hurt the people I care about just so I can stop you!"

He stood up and released his hold on Azula and Katara's chi, sealing it back where it belonged. Both girls gasped and slumped to the floor. There was no rush of energy within him now. He was exhausted, aching, and he was pretty sure he had a concussion. But he still faced her with his chin high and his eyes blazing—not with the golden light of energy absorption but with simple resolve.

"You're a monster, Shūrin, but I won't let you make me one as well."

She held his gaze and a soft laugh escaped her lips. "Then you've as good as surrendered."

Zuko held his ground as she drew closer, every step slow and frail. So much power was contained inside that crumbling body. Power snatched from who knew how many people. It was sickening.
It had to stop.

"Idiot," Azula choked out, reaching for him but unable to move. "Don't do this."

He ignored her warning. He ignored Katara's pleas and Atsuo's frantic head shaking as well. This was all he could do to make this madness end.

Shūrin stopped in front of him. "No more punches?"

"You want my body, right?"

She caressed his cheek. "Of course. You're my perfect vessel."

He tried not to cringe at her touch, even though everything in him recoiled. "Then let's not waste more time. You'll only be hurting your precious vessel, right?"

"True. I would rather not damage your body."

Knots twisted his stomach. Just the thought of her living inside him …

"Right. Well, your arm is broken. You can't do the stance properly now unless you expend more energy to heal it, but I can do it." His eyes hardened. "I challenge you, Shūrin. If you can bend my spirit to your will, you can have my body."

Her lips curved. "You're willing to offer yourself to me so easily?"

"Who said it will be easy?"

A gleam entered her eyes. "You did resist me once, but do you think you can do it again?"

"Yes."

He had not forgotten the guardian's words on the beach:

"To bend another's energy, your own spirit must be unbendable."

Zuko's will was strong—stronger than his bending, stronger than anything he could use to fight against her. All he had to do was make sure he didn't bend for her.

"Well?" he challenged. "Do you accept?"

"Of course. I had always planned for this."

Without a word, he pressed his thumb to her forehead while his other hand came to rest over her heart. Mind and heart, mind and soul.

Their energies linked.

It was as intense as he remembered. Just like last time, the outside world and Shen also seemed to melt away. Silver, bald-patched hair streamed into silky black. The bland features became thinner, more feminine, shifting into that of a young woman who looked not much older than him. Flames glowed all around her, bright and powerful, and from the fire were threads of gold connecting to shadowy figures—far more than the last time. The links seemed to go on and on.

He looked over his shoulder and saw his own bonds, five in total, trailing from his fire in shadowed figures. But he didn't touch the links, nor would he. This was between him and her.
Zuko met her void-like eyes. "This is the end for you."

She smiled.

He let his energy roll out from him, pushing and pushing and pushing against every bit of resistance she threw back at him. She burned brighter and hotter than pyre flames and could consume just as easily, but he was a sun.

A sun's light did not go out until it was ready.

Her brow creased and her smile faltered. Zuko's expression remained grim as he burned his way through her defences one by one. He poured everything that drove him, everything that sparked his fire, into the act: the love he felt for his mother, uncle and sister. The love he felt for Katara, for Aang and all the friends he had made, as well as the nation he was fighting to redeem and protect.

He poured his will into her until she couldn't hold him back anymore.

"How?" she said in shock. "How are you …"

Cracks formed and a new energy slithered out, gentler, almost frail.

Shen.

Zuko kept his thumb pressed hard against her forehead and his hand over her heart. She couldn't break free of him this time, for it was her mind and soul that he had locked into challenge. She had no choice but to defeat him or be consumed.

"No!" she hissed, struggling in earnest. "This isn't possible! You shouldn't be this powerful! I have forged more bonds than you. I have—"

"That's your problem." He pushed harder until she winced, until her flames flickered and stuttered. "You think power only comes from the energy bonds. You've been using people for so long that you've forgotten."

She bared her teeth in a snarl. "Forgotten what?"

"What it means to be human. What drives us to keep going forward even when it seems futile."

A scoffing laugh. "Now you're speaking nonsense."

"Then let me put it this way. I only have five energy bonds, but I would lay my life down for every one of those people. Can you say the same?"

"Of course not. It is they who should lay down their lives for me. What other human has conquered death? What other human has mastered energy as I have? I was meant to change this world! To give fire healers the status and respect they deserve! That was my destiny!"

He shook his head.

"It's true!" Her energy pushed back at him—a last, desperate attempt. "Only I can bring balance to this world! Only I can make things right! I was the one chosen by destiny!"

"You're wrong. This world doesn't need you or your warped ideas of balance. It doesn't want you either."

Her expression twisted.
"It's over, Shūrin."

Fear flickered in her eyes for the first time. He refused to pity her. She had lived long enough, and whatever had happened to her as a child was no excuse for the crimes she had committed.

The fire surrounding her shrunk and shrunk until it was replaced by his golden flames. All the threads connecting to her and the shadowy figures frayed, snapping one by one. Then the figures vanished until she was standing alone, an ageless being that was more wraith than human.

"My legacy will live on," she whispered. "You'll see."

"No it won't. I'll make sure it doesn't."

Anger flared in her gaze, but it was only for a second. There was nothing left to hold her together. She came apart like smoke and dissipated into nothing.

Zuko let out a breath and pulled his energy back into himself. The throne room rippled into focus and suddenly he was meeting a very different pair of pale gold eyes. There wasn't a trace of that disquieting void. "Shen?"

The man groaned and collapsed against Zuko's chest.

"Shen!" Hina cried.

She broke free from Atsuo's slackened grasp and tore Shen away from Zuko, clasping his face and looking deep into his eyes. "You're okay. Please tell me you're okay."

"My arm is broken and I feel like death, but I'm okay." The faintest of smiles. "Shūrin is gone. She's finally gone."

Tears spilled down Hina's cheeks and she kissed him full on the lips.

Zuko blinked and looked the other way. That was no public-friendly peck.

A sudden shout had them all looking towards the courtyard.


Zuko helped Azula and Katara to their feet, taking on their weight as he placed his arms around them, and headed with them to the hole in the wall. There they saw Ozai trapped in rock, or at least his arms and legs. Aang stood over him with his eyes and tattoos still glowing. He'd drawn water from a nearby fountain and had sharpened it into a long blade. Many people had gathered in the courtyard—Fire Nation, Earth Kingdom and Water Tribe.

"Is this what you want?" Aang yelled in a too hoarse voice, like he was trying not to cry. "Is this what you want from me?"

No one said a word. The hush was so tangible that Zuko could hear his own breathing.

"Well?" Aang held the blade over Ozai's neck. "Is this the justice you need to be satisfied? Is it?"

His shout was loud enough to shake buildings. There probably wasn't a person in the Caldera who hadn't heard him, but still no one dared to speak.

Aang threw the ice-blade on the ground. "No, not like this."
He pressed his thumb to Ozai's forehead and placed his other hand over the heart. This time, Zuko got to see what the process looked like from the outside. The fiery glow of his father's energy collided with Aang's whitish-blue and the two warred against one another, trying to colour over and consume. It was awe-inspiring yet also terrifying.

"Is this what it looked like for Shūrin and me?" he murmured.

"Pretty much," Katara responded.

They both fell silent as they continued to watch along with the rest of the crowd.

"Father is losing," Azula said quietly.

It was true. His fiery energy was getting smaller and smaller as he was overwhelmed by Aang. Soon, there was only the whitish-blue light filling each of them, and then nothing at all. The glow had faded. Ozai slumped against his bonds.

Aang stepped back and his tattoos and eyes returned to their usual colour. "The Fire Lord is defeated."

"Wait," one of the Earth Kingdom soldiers said, stirred into action. "You're just going to walk away after putting on a light show? Have you forgotten that he's the—"

"Enough blood has been spilt for this war." Aang looked the soldier square in the eyes. "I've removed his bending. Let that be justice enough."

He walked away without another glance. This time, no one stopped him.

Chapter End Notes

I'm going to try get the final chapter written before Friday, as I'll be travelling overseas and won't be able to write during that time. That said, if it doesn't happen (because this week is actually crazy busy), you can expect another update around mid May.
The five-pronged, golden headpiece was heavy. Zuko resisted the urge to fidget with it. He would never be able to forget that he was wearing it, but then maybe that was the point. He was Fire Lord now. He was supposed to rule this nation. He was supposed to heal the wounds a hundred years of war had caused.

"How do you feel?" Ursa asked.

"Overwhelmed."

Azula snorted. "You probably shouldn't tell people that, Dum Dum."

"Obviously. It's not like I'm going to shout it to the whole Caldera."

She pulled a face back at him.

Ursa stepped between them and rubbed his shoulder. "Don't worry, Zuko. We'll be right here with you every step of the way."

"That's right," Iroh said with a warm smile.

Some of the tension eased from Zuko's chest. He looked at his family and realised this was their second chance as well. A chance to just be a family. The war and all that Sozin had started had poisoned them just as much as this world, and Azulon and Zuko's own father had done nothing to mitigate that. But now they had a chance.

They could make things right.

He pulled his sister and mother into his arms. Azula squirmed and fussed, demanding to know what he thought he was doing, but he only held her tighter and told their uncle to join them. Iroh chuckled and wrapped his arms around the three of them so they were all squished closer.

"This is ridiculous," Azula muttered. "You've let that bald brat rub off on you too much."

"Probably."

She sighed but didn't pull away.

Zuko smiled and closed his eyes. The hug was awkward, even he could admit that, but it was a start. And when Shizue entered the room and raised her eyebrows at them, she got roped into the hug as well.

After all, this was a new beginning for all of them.

oOo

"Make way, make way! Fire Lord Sunshine coming through!"

All the people in the courtyard turned to stare at the young Fire Lord, whose face turned tomato-red. He tried to hunch smaller, because as much as he was royalty, he had been banished for three years.
and he was still getting used to palace life, not to mention Toph had just called him Fire Lord Sunshine. If that nickname caught on …

"Toph," he grumbled under his breath, "you can't just go around shouting that every time you're with me."

"Why? Embarrassed?" She nudged him too hard in the ribs. Several times.

He frowned. "Sometimes I don't know why I put up with you."

A demon grin was all he got in response.

"What are you planning on doing after this anyway?" he asked as they headed down an open-arched corridor. "You're from Gaoling, right?"

Her steps faltered and it was like a cloud descended over her good mood.

"Did I … say something wrong?"

She rolled her shoulder as if trying to shrug off a weight. "Nah. Anyway, I sense Fan Girl up ahead with Sweetness. Let's go annoy them."

"Hey." He touched her arm. "If something's—"

"It's nothing, alright? I just …" Her tough expression cracked and she sighed. "Ugh, fine. I'm not sure I want to go home."

His brow creased. Of course he'd heard about her home, the way her parents had treated her, and why she'd chosen to run away. He knew it had been complicated and there were plenty of valid reasons why she wouldn't want to go back.

"You don't have to," he said quietly.

Her head tilted in question.

"You could stay. Uncle likes you, I know Mum wouldn't mind, and … I'd be happy too. If you stayed at the palace with us, I mean." He rubbed the base of his neck. "To be honest, you kind of feel like family now. It'd be weird if you weren't around."

Colour dusted her cheeks. "Oh."

"But only if you want to, of course. I'm not expecting you to stay here if you'd rather go back to the Earth Kingdom or—"

She punched him in the arm. He winced.

"Has anyone ever told you that sometimes you punch too hard?" he muttered, rubbing the spot that was sure to come out in a bruise.

Her lips curved. "You were ruining it with your babbling. I thought I'd help you shut up."

He rolled his eyes. "Maybe I should rescind that offer. I don't think I want you here after all."

"Nu-uh, you already made it. No take-backsies."

"I'm the Fire Lord. I can do as many take-backsies as I want."
"I don't think the people will like you very much if you do that. Besides, it's too late. Now I know that you care." She kept jabbing him in the ribs with her elbow. "What was it you said again? That you see me as family?"

Nudge, nudge, nudge.

He placed his hands over his heated face. She really was embarrassing. Still, as he peeped between his fingers and saw the happy look in her eyes, he couldn't help the smile that tugged at his lips. She was an annoying brat at times, but she was still his annoying brat. He'd gladly put up with a few bruises and blushes if it meant she got to keep that expression on her face.

"Alright, alright," he said, forcing her arm away from him. "Stop it. Your elbow is bony."

She grinned and blew her fringe out of her face. "Better get used to it, Sunshine. You'll be feeling it a lot."

"I'm terrified," he said dryly.

She snorted and the two of them kept walking. It seemed his little family was growing.

oOo

"You really won't come?" Ty Lee asked, shoulders drooping.

Mai folded her arms across her chest as they stood in her bedroom. "I told you I have no interest in being around her."

"But Azula is different now. You have to see that."

A sigh. "Look, I'm not ready. I don't know if I'll ever be ready, let alone want to be. Too much has happened."

Ty Lee frowned at her feet, long plait hanging over her shoulder. "Is it really so impossible for us all to be friends again?"

Mai placed her hand on her arm. "I'm not saying you shouldn't be her friend. I'm not even saying I don't think Azula has changed a little. I just … it's not so easy for me to go back to how things were. Can you respect that?"

Their eyes met.

"Okay," Ty Lee said with a small nod. "I understand."

"Good."

"But you're going to miss out on the custard buns."

Mai rolled her eyes. "I'm sure I'll live."

"You sure, because I hear the South Pole doesn't have much in the way of—"

"I'm only going there with Sokka and his family for a visit. It's not like I'm moving there."

Ty Lee's lips quivered. "You're blushing."

"I am not."
Except her heated cheeks told her she definitely was. Damn it.

The half-suppressed smile crept into a grin. "You know, he is a Chieftain's son. I'm sure even your parents would come around if—"

"We are not having this conversation."

Laughter brimmed in Ty Lee's eyes. "If you say so, but judging by that pink aura of yours, I think one day we will."

"Get out."

Ty Lee giggled as she was chased out of the room.

oOo

"How's he doing?" Yuzo asked, coming to stand beside Hina.

"He's resting."

Yuzo bit his lip and a lump formed in his throat. "He's not going to live for that long, is he?"

"No. Maybe a year or two at most."

Tears prickled free of his eyes. "I hated him for so long. I wish I could take it back. I wish I had realised sooner it was Shūrin controlling him."

"You were young. It's not your fault you didn't know."

The tears continued to slip free.

She hesitated before she placed her hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry, Yuzo."

"What for?"

"I let you believe Shen had turned on you, and … I helped Shūrin to hurt you."

He touched the jagged scar on his throat. "Did you know I'd survive?"

"I hoped."

Well, he supposed that was something.

They both fell quiet and looked down at the man sleeping in the bed.

"I think I understand why you did it," Yuzo said softly. "You love him, right?"

She nodded.

"Then I guess we can leave it at that. You were trying to protect him." He looked up to meet her gaze. "Besides, I heard you looked after Atsuo as well."

"I should have done more."

He shook his head. "You did enough."

Hina was amazing. The truth of that hit him then. He couldn't imagine what it must have been like to
spend all those years at Shūrin's side—all those years being with the man she loved but knowing it wasn't really him, all those years trying to free him, all those years obeying cruel orders. Yuzo wasn't sure he could have done the same, not even for Atsuo.

He frowned at his hands. "You know … Zuko is planning to end the secrecy of fire healers. He and Lady Ursa have been trying to figure out the best way to do it."

"I heard."

"Shen will probably feel obligated to go back and help sort out the tribe, won't he?"

"Probably."

"Do you think we could persuade him not to?"

A flicker of surprise entered her eyes. "Why?"

"Atsuo doesn't want to go back, and I've never liked the place." He gave an odd shrug. "It's just … we've been forced to live how the tribe wanted for so long, and Suki was telling us about Kyoshi Island …" His voice took on a wistful tone. "It sounds nice. Peaceful."

"You and Atsuo want to settle there?"

Heat brushed his cheeks. "It was just a thought. Nothing is confirmed, and I don't want to leave Shen. Not when he's …"

Dying.

The unspoken word lingered between them.

"I'll talk to him."

Now it was his turn to look at her in surprise. "You will?"

Her expression softened as she looked at Shen. "Peaceful might be just what he needs."

oOo

"I'm going to miss these banquets," Sokka said around a mouthful of food. "I will say one thing for the Fire Nation, it knows how to do meat. I don't even know what this spicy thing is but it's delicious."

"Those are moosepig balls," Zuko observed.

Sokka choked. "Come again?"

"Because of the shape, idiot," Azula said with a roll of her eyes.

"Oh." He blushed. "I knew that."

The siblings gave him identical looks of disbelief.

"You know, it's kind of creepy when you guys do that."

This earned him identical unimpressed looks.

"Right …" Sokka picked up another moosepig ball. "I'll just keep eating."
Their attention was soon claimed by Aang, who was moving about the centre of the banquet hall to clear a space.

"What is he doing?" Azula said, scrunching her nose.

They soon found out when Aang came bouncing over and asked them to dance with him.

"We don't dance in the Fire Nation," Azula said flatly. "It got banned under Fire Lord Sozin's rule."

"Well, now's your time to learn!"

He grabbed her hand and dragged her onto the makeshift dancefloor before she could protest. Sokka whistled. "Aang is a brave kid. I don't know if I'd have the guts to do that. Not with her anyway."

Zuko considered the two. "Ah, he'll be fine."

Probably.

Sometimes his sister still got a bit fire happy when she was annoyed, but she seemed to like Aang well enough. (Or at least was willing to humour him as much as she humoured Ty Lee's more overenthusiastic antics.) That said, Zuko was a bit surprised when Azula actually did dance with the kid, though her expression seemed more competitive than happy. Maybe he'd challenged her.

Other brave souls soon joined in the dancing, mostly from the younger crowd and Zuko's own group of friends, though a few oldies were content to try their hand. Even the Mechanist was out there dancing.

"There goes your uncle," Sokka observed.

"Of course he joined in."

"He's not bad. Also, Jee has got some serious moves."

A reluctant smile. "I know. For all that dancing was banned here, my crew still did it during music night."

"Music night?"

Zuko didn't get a chance to explain, as Ty Lee came and snatched them both to dance. The boys tried to protest, but a circle had been formed and now there were arms around Zuko's shoulders, and it seemed he and Sokka had become part of the circle. There was no escaping the circle.

"What are we even doing?" he muttered, face hot with self-consciousness.

"No idea," Ty Lee said as she beamed from the opposite side of their trap-circle, "but this is fun!"

Fun. That was a word Zuko hadn't heard in the Fire Nation for a long, long time. Everything had always been so controlled and rigid, not like this weird circle dance. There didn't seem to be any rules (except that one couldn't leave the circles), yet more and more people were joining the dance. The normally grim hall had become filled with music and laughter.

Aang encouraged them to break off into partners and follow what he was doing. Zuko blinked when Suki got shoved at him. They exchanged an awkward glance before she shrugged, grabbed his hands, and guided him into copying Aang and Azula.
"Um, so I heard you're going back to Kyoshi Island," he said as he spun her.

"It is my home."

"It, uh, seemed like a nice place."

"Before or after you burned it?"

He winced. "I really am sorry about that. I was an idiot back then."

"You're right. You were an idiot then." A smile curved her lips. "But I do consider you a friend now."

"You do?"

"Are you saying you don't consider me a friend?"

He blinked. "No, no, of course I do. I just … didn't want to presume."

She laughed. "You don't need to be so—oh, looks like we're changing partners."

And with that they were being swept apart. Zuko ended up dancing with an elderly woman, then Aang nabbed him for a bit, and then he found himself holding Katara's hands. Her cheeks were flushed and she was smiling so brightly as they spun and moved, clumsily following whatever Aang was now doing with Ty Lee. Zuko's lips curved into a mirror of her smile.

"This is fun," she said in an echo of Ty Lee's earlier words.

He drew her closer with a laugh. "Yeah."

Dancing was kind of fun.

oOo

"Did you see some of those nobles' faces?" Katara giggled as she and Zuko slipped out onto a balcony. "They looked so scandalised."

"Not everyone here is willing to embrace Aang's weird dances, it seems."

She smiled and leaned into his chest, arms wrapping loosely around his middle. His hands skimmed her upper arms and their foreheads touched. Neither of them said anything. Neither made any motion to get closer either.

"I'm going to miss you," she whispered.

"No one is making you leave tomorrow."

Her lips twitched. "I can't just not go home. I haven't seen Gran Gran in so long, and there's things I need to do. Things I want to do."

"I know."

They'd talked about this. About his duties, about her dreams, about how they could make this relationship work.

His hands slipped into her hair and he met her eyes. "I'm going to miss you too, but I think you need
this. Besides, everything is going to be busy here for the next … I don't know how long. We'd barely get time to do anything even if you did stay—unless you want to start a career in politics and listen to old people argue with me every day."

"Hm, tempting. Can I splash water on them if they annoy me too much?"

He gave her a look, which earned a cheeky smile out of her, though she soon sobered again. Her hand traced an aimless pattern on his robe.

"Promise you'll write?" she asked softly.

"Of course."

"And I'll write too, and we'll meet whenever we can."

"Yes," he whispered.

They kissed.

They kissed until his heart pounded and he had committed everything about her lips to memory.

Her hand clasped his and they shared a smile before heading back inside the banquet hall. She stayed close by him for the rest of the night.

oOo

"This is going to be great!" Ty Lee declared and reached up to pet the lemur on her shoulder. 
"Momo and Appa think so too. Right, guys?"

Momo chirruped happily while Appa rumbled in his gentle way from where he sat curled up in the courtyard.

Aang rubbed the base of his neck. "You're really okay about coming with me? I mean, you have all your family and friends here and—"

"Silly." She pulled him into a big hug. "You're my friend too, and my family know I prefer being on the road."

His cheeks warmed. Ty Lee hugs were very … soft.

"Besides," she added more soberly, "I can't be the only one who had the ability to airbend dormant inside me. There have to be others out there like me, right?"

"Roku seems to think so."

"Then I'll help you find them." She beamed again. "It'll be like an adventure!"

Her smile was infectious, and a sense of peace and hope settled in his heart as he realised he really wouldn't have to do this alone. There were already two airbenders in the world now.

She leaned back from him and her brow creased. "Wait, you're not going to expect me to shave all my hair off, are you?"

"Uh, not if you don't want to."

The female monks didn't tend to shave all their hair off anyway.
"What about meat? Can I still eat meat?"

Aang bit back a smile. "Ty Lee, you don't have to change who you are just because you're an airbender. I'll be happy to teach you about the ways of the Air Nomads, but how and whether you follow those teachings is up to you."

"You really mean that?"

He nodded.

She grinned and enfolded him into an extra cuddly hug. He wrapped his arms around her and closed his eyes, even as Momo chirruped and snuggled into them. Appa must have felt like he was missing out, as he crashed into them and sent them all tumbling to the ground. Both humans were soon covered in bison slobber. Both also laughed.

It was a good beginning.

oOo

A gentle breeze passed through the garden, easing the mugginess of the day. Zuko sat next to Aang under the shade of the big cherry blossom tree. Both watched a mother turtleduck swim about in the pond with her ducklings.

"You know," Zuko said softly, "sometimes none of this feels real. I have these dreams where the war is still going on and … to be honest, they feel more real than this."

"I think that's only natural after a hundred years of war."

"I guess …"

They fell silent. It was an undemanding silence, the kind that could only be shared when two people were so comfortable with one another that just sharing space was enough. Zuko watched a turtleduckling try to get out of the pond, but it slipped back in with a little splash.

"I'm glad it's you," Aang murmured.

"Hrm?"

"As the Avatar, I'm expected to work with all the nations. I'm glad you're the Fire Lord. I'm glad I get to work with a friend."

"It's not going to be easy. Most people are relieved the war is over, but there are plenty who didn't want it to end." He sighed and tugged at a few blades of grass. "Plenty who won't like the decisions we make either."

"I know, but that's okay. I think it's all part of the balance in a way."

Zuko scrunched his nose.

"It's true."

"If you say so."

Aang laughed, though his expression soon softened into something more pensive. "The war is over and balance has been restored. That's a fact. But that doesn't mean we can just do away with everything unpleasant either. There'll always be happiness and sadness, life and death, peace and
strife. It's just up to us to try and keep all that in a balanced state."

Zuko raised his eyebrow. "You know, that was pretty wise."

"Well, I am a hundred and twelve years old."

A snort escaped and Zuko shoved Aang's arm, earning a small grin.

"I'm serious, though," Aang said more quietly. "I think there are a lot of people out there who are feeling a bit like you—who maybe don't know how to live in a world when it's not at war, who maybe don't know what to do now or where they really fit. But we can show them that. I want to show them that." He looked down at his hands. "My world, the one I know best, it was peaceful and all the nations got along and worked together. I want to see that world again."

"I think you will."

No doubt it would take a while. Too many wounds were still fresh and the sparks of conflict were not erased so easily, but the war was over. That was at least one step to moving forward.

"Yeah, I think so too," Aang said with a smile. "We just have to work together, right?"

"Together," Zuko agreed.

Chapter End Notes

I can't believe this is the end. I've been working on this since 2012 and now it's finally over. I'm still trying to comprehend it, haha.

In any case, I know this story ended up different to what some people were expecting, but I never went into this wanting to write some edgy new take on AtLA. I love the original series, I love the characters, and the whole reason I started writing The Undying Fir is because Zuko and Aang are my BroTP and I wanted more of them. So yeah, this was less about trying to be "realistic" and more just enjoying an adventure with characters I love. Hopefully, you enjoyed it too.

I will say now that there will be no sequel or anything like that. This is well and truly the end. However, I do want to thank everyone who read, left kudos, and commented! Seriously, thanks so much!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!