Reluctant Hero

by PAW_07

Summary

"It was an accident." That was what Zuko had said to his crew when he used an element he hadn't been meant to. Air. But... he wasn't the Avatar. The Avatar was supposed to be in the Earth Kingdom, hidden by its walls. That is unless the old Avatar had died long ago. AU-ish.

Notes

Disclaimer: Avatar is not mine. I own nothing but the OC's and plot line.

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BOOK ONE

Of flame and fire and blood and hate
Arose a monster at the world’s gate,
But lost in his musings he did not see
A hero rise from the ashes like an epiphany;
Though afraid of himself and afraid of his goals
Our dear reluctant hero is alone in the cold.

“...”

“It was an accident.”

That was what he said, his traditional pony tail whipping in the salty air; his one good eye so wide that it made his scarred eye seem like the normal one. He was so scared, terrified, that he froze up as if a water-bender had attacked him from the inside, chilling his blood. Agni, nearly the whole
crew was on deck, pulling in a collective breath and holding onto it after those words; he could feel heartbeats through the metal deck. Though, how bending could be accidental (a folly of an unknown stance and a concealed chi) was beyond everyone that had witnessed it, including the prince who had performed the act.

… But it had happened.

And there was no taking it back or denying the fate that came with it, not with his two crewmates spread on the deck as proof.

So Zuko continued to stand there, eye wide, inner world crashing down as if the ship was sinking with only him on it. His sparring partners, Shen and Keiji, could only stare in a flabbergasted manner as their helmets rolled across the deck. The two of them had been catapulted across the deck by what could only be discerned to be air-bending - their bodies were actually in the air for a good half a minute before they collapsed on the deck in a heap.

At least they thought it was air-bending. It was impossible to be sure; none of them had ever seen that specific art in action, as the Air Nomads had been wiped out almost a century ago.

Iroh, who had been enjoying his second cup of tea during Zuko's morning practice, actually dropped his cup at the sight, staining his lotus tile while the rest of the brown liquid dripped off the small table and to the metal decking below. He had to blink once before the shock wore off. He hadn't just seen that, had he? Slowly, the old Master rose to his feet, ancient joints feeling numb as he walked up to his nephew, warily placing a hand on the prince's shoulder. He could feel Zuko trembling.

"Prince Zuko, what just happened?"

"Nothing," the young man retorted in a rush as he turned to face his uncle. His voice hitched as he struggled to keep separate from the situation, from what he had just done. He was of royal blood. He did not air-bend! His father was already ashamed of him. He had scarcely been given the chance to try and retrieve his honor by either defeating a dragon or by discovering if there was any truth to the rumor of surviving Air Nomads. Air-bending would nullify that, along with whatever honor he had left.

Swallowing and trying to gather his self-control, the prince repeated, "Nothing happened, uncle."

The old man smelled the flavor of panic as if it were the sweat which was beading off his nephew’s muscles. He tightened his grip near Zuko’s collarbone, his intuition gripping the situation a little more efficiently now that his heart had dropped back into his ribcage. He had seen that, hadn’t he? Yes. He would not deny this and he couldn't let Zuko either. Iroh's mind and body might have been allowed to falter for the past few years but not to the extent that he didn't perceive what had just happened. He knew what had just happened.

The spirits were never subtle when it came to fate.

But how could this be? Iroh had laid siege to Ba Sing Se for six-hundred days trying to get to the Earth-bending Avatar. A horrendous battle had ensued when he’d finally broken down the wall. The same wall where Lu Ten - brave, brilliant, foolhardy Lu Ten - had died a decade later at as they gave it a second try. The Dragon of the West had failed not only himself and his nation, but his son as well.

Had the death of his son been for nothing? Had the Earth Avatar been dead this whole time?
Then again, the time period fit down to a shivering splinter - give or take a week. The Earth Avatar had probably died of the burn wounds he had received from the fierce battle with dozens of fire-benders. Then who was pretending to be the Earth Avatar right now? Who were the walls of Ba Sing Se guarding in a stubborn show of defiance? Who was playing the part of false prophet, keeping the Earth Kingdom full of artificial hope?

No, that wasn't important right now. Zuko was. The boy looked scared; the crew was petrified, everyone was uncertain and confused. A tactical General knows he must gather his men when the line is broken or risk losing the battle.

Calmly looking over the Navy men, Iroh spoke, waving his free hand, "I think we are done with training today, gentlemen. Return to your usual duties. I must have a talk with my nephew."

The prince quickly shook off the old man's touch, growling like a dragon that had just been threatened. "There's nothing to talk about, Uncle. Nothing happened! I'm going to my room to meditate. Don't disturb me."

Zuko's legs couldn't keep pace with his heart as he all but ran to his quarters once he was out of the older man's sight. He slammed the door shut behind him and allowed his body to slide down the metal surface, struggling to control his breathing. Eyes closed, he fought to regain his composure - only to curse inwardly when his mind betrayed him by replaying the scene over and over again. He had air-bended and there was only one plausible answer to how.

He was the Ava-Avat…

No.

The current Avatar was alive and well, hidden in the walls of Ba Sing Se as a cripple. It was stress. He had been placing energies so often into thoughts of the Air Nomads that he had actually believed he had performed one of their arts. Nodding to himself, Zuko rose to his feet. He'd prove that it had been a fluke, a stirring moment of sea-madness. Nothing more.

Striding across the room to the tapestry bearing the emblem of the home he had been banished from, the young man closed his eyes and took in a deep breath, trying to recall the feeling that had come over him on the deck. Gradually becoming aware of a feeling almost like a current of air crawling under a door, Zuko opened his eyes. Expecting to see nothing, or at least for the fabric to be up in flames, the air caught in his throat at the sight of the tapestry flapping against the wall in time with his breaths. As soon as he stopped breathing, the heavy fabric flopped limply back against the wall.

Horror captured him as if a spirit had wrapped its claws around his throat, his father's whispers of disgrace echoing through his mind. Stumbling back from the tapestry, as if to escape the truth, Zuko unexpectedly slammed into something that was decidedly real.

His head couldn't turn fast enough, his heart seeming to sink into the frozen ocean as steady hands rested on his shoulders, keeping him on his feet and facing weary golden eyes - eyes which were saying the thing he needed to be a lie: Avatar.

Iroh sighed, whispering, "My nephew… We need to talk."

Before the young prince could stop himself, the proud and immovable royal dropped to his knees, losing the contents of his stomach as the truth hit him hard like a punch to the gut. His mind teetered on the edge of oblivion as he realized what he had just lost by gaining this curse: his honor, his country, his throne, his home, and himself.
Zuko retched again, revolted by his own skin.

Chapter End Notes

I can hear some people hissing, be it because they don’t think the time line makes sense or because they think that I won’t have any Aang in this story. Well, duckies, worry not because you are wrong on both accounts. Aang will make an appearance and not as a ghost. How? Well, you’ll just have to wait and see. Secondly, for those of you that are putting too much thought into this, BlueLucied kindly put together a timeline.

Official Timeline (Spoilers):
Year 20-30- The Water Tribe Avatar is unknowingly (or knowingly) captured and killed by the Southern Raiders. Avatar Quiang is born.
Year 83- First siege of Ba Sing Se, Avatar Qiang dies, but his death is hidden by Long Feng and the Dai Li. Zuko is born.
Year 87- Aang is reborn.
Year 93-95 - Second siege of Ba Sing Se. Lu Ten's death.
Year 97- Zuko's banishment.
Year 98/99- Year of story.
Zuko's back faced his uncle as he laid on his futon, shame tightening every muscle to the point of soreness. Not only had he air-bended in front of his uncle but he had relieved his stomach contents on the old man's shoes as well. He hadn't meant for such an action to occur but the world had started to close in on him as his hope was drained away by a single defining moment.

He was not the Avatar. He couldn't be. The Avatar, as proclaimed during the war's beginning, was an enemy of the Fire Nation. It didn't even matter if the Avatar was from the Fire Nation either because, as the Fire Sages had revealed, the old Avatars could voice their opinions from the spirit world and consul the living Avatar.

Avatar Roku was proof enough of that, denying the Fire Nation their rightful claim to the war until after his death.

The prince pulled himself a little more into a ball, trying to do so as discreetly as possible. It didn't matter though, Iroh's body weight shifted at the end of his bed as the old man placed a hand calmly on the prince's leg. The elder fire-bender had been sitting there for the last hour after he had helped Zuko to his bed and cleaned up the mess. Zuko felt ashamed for even having the old General do such a lowly thing. Iroh shouldn't have had to clean up his mess, yet he had.

"Zuko? Is your stomach still bothering you? I can head down to the cook if you need something?" Iroh said calmly, leaving his hand in place on the boy's skin just to let the teenager know that he was there.

Swallowing, the prince stated in a dull tone, "No. I'm fine."

Fine, thought Iroh. Well, it could have been worse. Finding out that one was a tool to the spirit world could not be an easy thing … especially when such a revelation revealed that his last three years of hardship were now inconsequential. It also meant that … Lu Ten's death was meaningless.

Iroh looked away from the teenager that refused to gaze in his direction. No, he would not blame Lu Ten's death on Zuko. Zuko was not at fault for anything.

"Are you sure?" he added wearily. Iroh could just feel the tension in the boy's frame but he did not blame his nephew for feeling that way. In fact, he knew Zuko was not the only one. Right now, he could also feel Lieutenant Jee's inner flame flickering down the hall. The crew needed answers now or he risked there being a mutiny. "I do not want to unsettle you with difficult questions, but I fear it must at least be spoken about, Prince Zuko."

The boy's legs shifted as if he'd rather run away, but slowly the teenager's muscles went slack as he grumbled, "Nothing happened."

Iroh shook his head, a stray gray hair falling downward as he added, "Denying it now will only make it harder later. We must speak of this or risk a mutiny if the crew doesn't have any answers. They are good men but they are also just that, men. They have fears just like …"

"Fears!" yelled the boy as he tried to pull his leg from his caretaker's grasp as he sat up to glare at the old General, tears threatening to spill from his good eye. "Why should they be the one's unsettled. The air-bending hadn't come from them! They are not enemies of their homeland!"
They're not a freak! I just want this forgotten. I want everyone to pretend it never happened."

A frown pulled at the General's face making him look older than usual, his voice taunt, "Prince Zuko, you and I both know, as well as the other benders on this ship, that a bender cannot deny their bending. Maybe for a few weeks or even a year, but it's like entrapping a part of one's soul … Doing so will only lead to madness."

The prince, unable to retort or even offer any words to refute, looked away in shame, a single tear rolling down his cheek as he swallowed hard.

Sliding a little farther onto the bed, his russet robes blending in with the silk sheets of his nephew's bed, Iroh reached forward and wrapped his arms wearily around the prince. He worried that he would be pushed away like usual. Zuko did not push him away though. So the old man pulled the boy closer, pressing the youth's head into his should so the teenager could weep his tears without the shame of anyone seeing them. And there they sat, a small wetness forming on Iroh's shoulder though not a single sob escaping the proud prince. The General just rubbed Zuko's shoulder knowing that the youth was in indescribable pain.

Zuko had lost everything he thought important in one second, in one false step.

Only after a few moments passed did Zuko pull away. His eyes were puffy but not even a streak of wetness adorned his cheeks, those shameful tears having been buried in the older General's uniform. Zuko could only swallow, unable to look at his comforter.

"Uncle … I can't be the Avatar. I-it's just too much. Is there a way to disprove it? Maybe, I just can use another bending or I was just moving the heat in the air. It doesn't mean I'm the Avatar. Please Uncle," whispered the youth with a desperation Iroh hadn't seen on the boy's face since the day he had receive the scar.

Unable to deny the teenager his pleading want, even though he knew there had never been a documented case of a double-bender or hot-air bending, the General placed a hand on Zuko's shoulder as he met the young man's gaze.

"There is only one way to know for sure, my nephew, and it may place a calmness in the crew as well. Though there are no documented cases of someone that can use a second element, only the Avatar can use the element that is the opposite of his own and for that matter a third. If you cannot water-bend you may not be the Avatar," he stated calmly though he doubted such a test would prove anything.

Swallowing harshly and making his Adam's apple bob, the prince spoke in a tired voice. "Then there is a chance my honor is not gone?"

Iroh tried not to frown, the words tasting bitter in his mouth as he whispered, "Yes, your honor. Now, rest nephew. It will be quite a trip getting the Northern Water Tribe."

The prince blinked, his body already sagging in relief and emotional exhaustion. "The Northern Tribe, but the Southern Tribe is only a few days' time away?"

The General nodded, a sadness creeping into his eyes. "Yes, that is true, but there are no more water-benders in the Southern Tribe. Our people made sure of that, my nephew. Now, I must go speak to the crew."

Lieutenant Jee hadn't exactly seen what the prince had done being that he had been speaking to the
helmsman, but he had noted the two fire-benders' bodies that had rushed up into the air only to fall with a sickening crunch. Thankfully, there weren't any broken bones but some large bruises did prove that the situation did, indeed, occur. His crew might have been small but at least that allowed him to read them well. Uncertainty was filing down the ranks and there'd be a mutiny if some qualms were not answered quickly.

It seemed as if General Iroh knew this as well. His conversation, though seeming to drag in the beginning, was over quickly with the Fire Nation prince. Now came the moment of truth.

As Iroh walked up to him, Jee wasn't sure if he wanted the truth. For if Zuko was the Avatar what would he do? Kill the boy? Remove him from the ship? Join him and follow him faithfully as he had done for the past three years? He really didn't get to dwell on it though when Iroh stalled in front of him, the faint odor of tea and sickness coming off his person. Had the young prince expelled his worries in more than one way? Probably, if the wet spot on the General's shoulder was any indication.

"Lieutenant Jee, I see that you have been waiting for me," Iroh stated in a serious tone, his hands going behind his back.

The navy man nodded, showing a quick bow of respect before he continued, "The crew is growing rebellious. I need answers Prince Iroh, or I might not be able to keep the crew under control."

His next words were hard, harder than the Lieutenant ever thought they would be for him to say. He had, at first, pitied the boy and detested him for his quick temper, but now he worried for Zuko. He did not want to have to abandon the scarred prince. Swallowing, Jee decided promptly to leave the boy live if it were true instead of killing him, "Tell me … Is he the Avatar?"

The Dragon of the West suddenly looked tired, a frown forming as he dissected the best course in answering this question. Finally, choosing his focal point, he looked Jee dead in the eye and stated, "Zuko does not know and I do not either. The only way we can truly tell is if he can bend his opposite element, water."

"Water-bending," stated the other in a surprised hiccup. "But what about the air-bending?"

"My nephew denies it. He claims it must have been something else, maybe heat in the air. Water-bending, the exact opposite of fire-bending, is the truest way to tell if Avatar Qiang really died that day at the walls of Ba Sing Se."

The old navy man swallowed as he counted the number of years since Avatar Qiang's long disappearance behind the city's walls, recalling the claims of him now being a cripple. Had those rumors been planted so the new Avatar could be born and survive? If so … Zuko's birth fit, almost perfectly. Jee actually felt his stomach drop, his lips feeling dry as he spoke, "The timing is almost perfect, but Prince Zuko could be right about the air being hot. He had been practicing all morning."

"That he had," added the tea drinker as he nodded his head.

"So, what should we do? Get a bucket of water?" Jee said, not knowing what else to say.

Shaking his head, Iroh looked up at the sky. The days were short in the poles and the moon was already being revealed in the dusk. The royal's words were heavy, "He needs to see water-bending so he can try and reenact it. To do that, we must go to the Northern Water Tribe. Even if I had scrolls currently with me, it would still not have the fluidity that is needed for a water-bender and that is something that can only be witnessed."
Jee's knees nearly gave out, "W-what? You want us, alone, to attack a whole nation?"

Despite the nature of the conversation, Iroh chuckled and patted the other man in the shoulder, "No, no, old friend. We merely need to observe one water-bender. Remember that the water tribes depend on fishing for a large amount of their diets. We merely must find one ship with a water-bender."

Lieutenant Jee, not knowing what else to say, merely nodded, "That seems easy enough. I'll tell the helmsman to change course."

Once out of Iroh's line of sight, the sea man groaned. There was no way this was going to work, for that matter be easy. They'd probably have to start a small war.

Chapter End Notes

Dang… we missed Katara in the Southern Water Tribe. Anyway, I love that lame-ass chapter title. This was a short chapter, but I update faster when it comes to short chapters. Besides, the more in depth I get into the story, the longer the chapters get. For now they'll be around two thousand words and will steadily grow into larger chapters unless I feel supremely lazy. Not much happened in this chapter except for some Zuko/Iroh bonding which I love, and Lieutenant Jee got some story time. I have a strange obsession with the crew actually. I mean, really, Zuko and Iroh have been with these people for three years. Certainly some personal ties have formed. I will try to dissect that in this story later.
And for those of you that think this is turning into Aang's adventure without the Aang, just see how far south this situation goes and how quickly. Zuko could care less about Avatar duties. He just wants his honor. Not that Northern Water Tribe understands that. Was that just foreshadowing? I don't know, but I can tell you this, since I have a few chapters typed up there will be an update every week probably on Mondays until I run out of my previously seven typed chapters. See you then.
Revisions March 2015
Arnook, Chieftain of the Northern Water Tribe, stared across the length of the great hall. People were laughing, performing small water-bending feats at the tables, and whispering about rumors that had dragged themselves through the icy waters and to their frozen shores: usually through pirates.

He wanted to frown at that, caring little for the despicable, dishonorable creatures, but they served their purpose and that was enough for him. Pirates offered just enough access to the war torn world to tell him when danger was heading their way. Apparently, there was a small Fire Nation steamer following the southern current towards their location. It was a lone ship and certainly was not cargo drudged; the hull wasn't sinking much into the ocean's belly. It was atypical and slightly unnerving, but it was still only one ship.

He doubted that one ship would bother his people's fragile peace.

Besides, there were bigger problems that needed attention: like the Avatar. The Earth Kingdom had scourged the colonies for the Fire Nation Avatar. The toys to identify the child had been destroyed so other tactics had to be used such as scribbling crystals and fortune bones to help look for a heavily inbound spirit. They found many benders, of course, some haunted by spirits of all sizes and glamour while other children just seemed to be old souls. They even found a few fire-benders from time to time that fit the criteria but most were quickly disregarded. It swiftly became apparent that if they did not find the Fire Nation Avatar soon he (or Arnook supposed it could be a she) would hit the age of sixteen: when the Avatar's energies started to peak. If the Fire Nation didn't kill him outright, they'd abuse his power as long as they could or at least keep him barely alive so the next Avatar could not be born.

Sighing, the man recalled his anticipation when he had first heard of a small boy from the Southern Pole that showed promise in being the next Avatar because the child seemed to recall details from the last Air-bending Avatar's short rein. The youth even had heavy spiritual energies as well but he was not the Avatar.

Regardless, the boy or girl (soon to be young adult) had no ideas of his or her fate as the Avatar, and if the new Avatar wasn't found soon…

Arnook looked over the expanse of the great gathering as they did every month to celebrate the full moon and the bountiful lives the moon and the ocean offered them. Despite the air of celebration, he worried for his people. Part of him wished to be more active like the Earth Kingdom, agents like the Dai Li (known for their experience with the spirit world and their somewhat troublesome leader Long Feng) and other great Masters wandering the landscape in secret as they checked out every spiritually heavy fire-bending child they could touch. The Earth Generals recommend that the Northern Water Tribe not suddenly interfere; such actions would put the Fire Nation on edge, so they were left to wait silently, waiting for when the Avatar would be found and trained.

His land's hope felt empty when he thought of how long this war had lasted yet when he'd look to his side and see his beautiful daughter he knew the spirits had not yet abandoned them.

…
The spirits had abandoned him as a child and now they were asking a price of him he could not pay: his honor, his nation, his crown.

Had they not taken enough? Had the spirits not gotten their pound of flesh from him? Had they not dragged him to the point of hopelessness which had made him wondered if it would, perhaps, be easier to lie down in a ditch and die? He was tired, he was broken, and he just wanted to go home.

The teenager closed his eyes at the thought, trying to recapture a scent or even a highly detailed memory of his homeland's landscape. He held onto it as long as he could before it started to fade, thoughts of his burdens drenching over him like cold water … especially when he heard a whisper.

Quickly sitting up, his heart pounding, his eyes wide, Zuko looked around for the whisper's origins. His room was empty as it had been every single time he had heard the whisper in the past few weeks. Regardless, he slowly got to his feet, nearly jumping out of his skin as his bare feet made a slapping noise on the floor. He swallowed, cursing his lack of stealth, and gently crept to the door. He took in a breath and held it, fingers reaching for the locking mechanism on his door.

He flung it open, skidding into the hall with a bending kata ready… nothing. He quickly turned the other direction, ready to attack. Nothing, again.

The teenager grunted, a collection of smoke rolling out of his nose as he stood there not wanting to go onto the deck to check for the noise's origins, because he knew the ship wasn't moving and there was only one reason for that. Swallowing, he slowly reentered his cabin ignoring the question in the back of his head as to where the whispers had been coming from for the past four weeks. He hadn't told Uncle about them or even truly recognized it as a problem because he knew that if he did… he would truly know what those whispers were about and where they were coming from.

Sitting on his bed, Zuko slowly reached upward and pulled out his phoenix tail and put it into a top knot so it would seem less threatening. He also denied himself his usual uniform with gold lining: the sign of royalty. Instead, his reach headed for the corner of the room where a helmet and uniform laid; a mere soldier's uniform. Slowly, he picked up the helmet and stared at the lifeless eye-holes. He felt ashamed for what he was about to do, for pretending to be a mere foot soldier. Then again, he had to try and blend in when they finally attacked the water-benders. He could not afford to stand out or let the water tribesmen realize who he was. If they did, his father would have his head before the summer solstice. The crew, though far more loyal to Uncle than him, would just let him slip away into solitude where he could hide from existence, never able to regain his honor.

He swallowed at the thought. He was never one for absolute seclusion, being raised in the palace with dozens of servants. The ship and its crew members had barely been able to chase off the fear of smothering desolation in the beginning. Part of him now wished he had shown more respect toward his crew, but if Uncle's worries were realized… he'd never get the chance.

Choking down his nervousness and a strange whisper in the back of his head, Zuko started to put on his armor, alone. Foot soldiers required no assistance getting dressed as a prince would.

"Sir," cried one of the pike-masters as he slid down the ladder that led to the helm's room, sparks following him all the way down as he coasted like a crashing firework. His metal shoes quickly made a heavy impact, but his steps were quick and light as he came to a halt in front of Iroh, scope in one hand. "General Iroh, we see a small fishing party about four clicks west from our position, two small ships and about eight men. They don't appear to have seen us yet, the glacier is apparently blocking us from sight."
Iroh nodded, stroking his chin before he spoke, "Good, tell the helmsmen to remain at a distance. We must prepare for battle, but we must also attack in the next hour while the sun is still high or the water-benders will have an advantage over us," a wave crashed against the hull as if to voice its opinion, "-I mean more of an advantage over us. Now, remember, we want this to look like a raid. Show little interest in the non-benders, throw them overboard, and allow the water-benders to attack or defend at least a few times so that Prince Zuko can observe the katas."

The soldier's nearby shifted apprehensively and Iroh smiled sadly, "I hold the same worries as you my friends, but if the worse comes to worse... we will leave the ship and you will not be branded as traitors to the Fire Nation."

The navy men that were around the General quickly frowned. There had been fights and screaming matches in the quarters for days after the incident, all the men disagreeing or crying 'mutiny' for the last few weeks now, but the fights always ended the same: undecided with all the futons in the barracks crispy. It didn't have to be said aloud but all the men agreed: three years created a unit and you did not slaughter your brothers' in arms, especially when one of the people in question felt like a father figure and the other a bratty little brother that really needed a good spanking. Zuko they could probably throw overboard and just feel slight agonies over as they wondered if he was able to make it to shore or not. Iroh on the other hand, it was painful to think of betraying him, even if he did cheat at Pai Sho!

Swallowing, Shen, the youngest fire-bender on board besides Zuko, stepped forward, "What do you mean by 'we', sir?"

Iroh gave the young man a quizzical look before stating, "You don't think I'd leave my poor confused nephew alone, do you?"

Shen shook his head, part of him already knowing that. After all, Iroh didn't have to come with them on this fool hearty, probably malignant, adventure. He came by choice. He came because he loved his nephew even though many of the crew agreed that some days it seemed like the sulky prince didn't deserve it.

"But... we don't want to abandon you either, General, especially not in these water-barbarian infested lands," added Shen.

Iroh's eyes widen and then he chuckled slightly, "So you would not kill an old man and his nephew even if one of them might be the Avatar?"

The navy men looked at each other and shook their heads, the nightly fights had agreed on one thing at least: they would not kill the prince.

"No General, we do not kill our brothers for that would sully our honor..."

A small sniff escaped the old man and before Shen could do more than squeak he was being all but crushed by the General as he was hugged, the old man crying as he blubbered, "It is so good to know we have such good friends in the crew. I will be sad if we have to leave you but very happy we have met."

"Y-yeah, we love you too General. Can-can you let go now? You're crushing my vertebrae," choked the young man as he tried to glare at two older crew members over Iroh's shoulder that looked ready to laugh themselves silly. Why was the youngest guy on board always the pit of everyone's punishments?

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The sun was starting to get low, showing that it was becoming late afternoon. They had to do this now or wait until tomorrow. Neither prospect seemed pleasant because Iroh knew that this would not be ending well. He knew his nephew was hearing phantom noises and that his chi was getting frazzled and strained. Zuko had barely come out of his cabin the last four weeks so fire practice was all but forgotten and the strange kata that could only be called air-bending was completely restrained.

The few times he had spoken to his nephew about trying air-bending or even fire-bending, the teenager had all but denied both practices. He hoped his nephew wasn't too out of practice, because they were now plowing forward towards the fishing ships. The water-benders had defiantly seen them if the scurry of activity on the small water crafts was any indication … or the huge wave heading in their direction. There was defiantly a water-bender on one of the ships.

"Lieutenant Jee," stated the retired General calmly. "Get your men into attacking position."

Jee didn't even have to call out the command though as seven, not his usual six, fire-benders ran to the front to the bow simultaneously throwing flames out to greet the great wave. There was an explosive hiss, steam rising from the water and up to greet them. The non-fire-bending footmen (nearly half the ship's population) tightened their hold on their spears as they headed into the self made mist.

There was an eerie silence. The only sound granted to the nervous fire-benders was the echo of the waves crashing up against the hull. Each hard slam into the metal ship made the crew flinch for they knew that the water-tribe wouldn't have attacked first merely to run away and even if they did, someone would be left behind to protect the stern of the retreating tribe ships. Then, just as forever seemed to bow to the fog, ice crystals started to form in the air floating around the Fire Nation crew like minuscule ghostly orbs. Then … there was the crash.

The whole ship nearly bowed as a wave of ice threw itself upwards and stalled the ship's forward movements, the crew falling to the deck in a collection of surprised gasps and yelps. Then, as if a school of sharks was raiding a bleeding pearl diver, water attacks started slamming onto the deck, the number of water-benders unidentifiable given the mist still in the air. The war screams followed after with the stomping of seal-hide boots, the warriors boarding the metal ship.

Not wasting any time, the whole ship broke out in the clash of bending elements and the clang of metal weapons slamming into each other. Iroh could not eye the situation and determine the possible outcomes of the battle. He couldn't see a thing, but he could hear. His eyes becoming half masted, he focused his attention to the metal deck and the sounds it was making, swiping a non-water-bending warrior right off the ship's deck when the man came at him with a raised bone club.

These fishermen did not seem experienced if that first fighter was any indication. Then again, that idiot he just threw off could have been a young man who was stupid enough to lope unprepared into battle. He hoped that the former was true, because, listening to the number of water-seal shoes on deck, it seemed that they miscounted how many men the boats carried. At least all of the warriors weren't water-benders, but there seemed to be a fair number with how they were keeping up this fog. Speaking of which, the fog had to go or Zuko's observation would be severely hindered.

Taking in a deep breath, the old man lifted his arms up, fingers wide spread as he started to press heat into the air, the energy jumping from molecule to molecule making the air particles rush and bounce against one another. The reaction was dragging yet seemingly instantaneous. The fog seemed to disappear and crawl upwards with the heat, the small bits of floating ice becoming like suspended raindrops.
The water-benders on deck had to stall, surprise in their facial features. The fire-benders, not surprised by their General's actions, took this moment to strike out, flames finally having direction. Screams and grunts erupted on all sides, the deck of the ship haunted in a glowing orange light.

An older water bender with a scar running down from his lower jaw downwards into his neck froze in a stance eyeing the situation. Jayendra was a survivor, killing the tiger-seal that had given him his facial scar. Tiger-seals were quick, lurking and powerful killers. Till this day, younger men asked how he had survived the encounter since he had still been a student at the time of the attack. He merely told them that he wasn't lucky or even blessed. He was resourceful and used the elements that were granted to him. So the old fire-bender near the middle of the ship had chased away his mist, making it try to crawl away into the sky with the rising heat. No problem. The higher something is, the harsher the impact is when it comes down.

The water-bender almost smiled.

Across the deck, Zuko parred an attack from a non-bender. He couldn't help but growl, not because he was troubled by this nameless blue-clad warrior, but because the man was blocking his true target: a middle aged water-bender with blue strings traced throughout his hair like strange braids or dreadlocks. He would have went after the youngest water-bender from the ships, now that he could see them, but he needed to see perfected katas, not sloppy ones. He wasn't stupid enough to take on the supposed Master that was standing at the ship's railings but this middle-aged warrior would do.

Finally getting frustrated, Zuko pulled off a slightly dirty move: purposely starting the man's fur parka on fire. The non-bender yelped and started patting the sizzling fur with the flat surface of his weapon, backing away from Zuko and subconsciously towards the railings. The Zuko’s face meanwhile gained a look of determination and he stepped forward, grunting purposefully as he threw out a fire ball. Hair-guy immediately turned around to par the attack. His palms were flat as a whip of water met full force with the flame, the whip curling like snake to take the full impact of the fire ball.

There was a deafening hiss as the two elements canceled each other out. Zuko, though a little blind in his scarred eye, memorized the move perfectly from the shifting footstep to the flick in the wrist. Under his mask he couldn't decided if he should smile or frown at his perfectionist attitude. In the end, he really didn't get to decided, the hair-ribbon-bender must have decided that he didn't like these odds so he decided to grow a few extra arms.

Great, now he had to try and memorize that difficult looking move and not get groped by a water arm.

Jayendra's, the Master water-bender, fingers finally stalled across the way. His fingers were wide as if trying to feel as much air as possible. Then, in a challenging manner, he looked in Iroh's direction. The two Master’s eyes met and Iroh automatically frowned as the water-bender smiled. Throwing his hands up above his head, fingers still spread he chuckled before slammed his widespread fingers closed and throwing his hands down towards the floor. Iroh was only allowed enough time to look up and throw his hands over his head and face before the entire deck was rained down on in sharp, inch long, little ice daggers, piercing skin, breaking concentration, and making nearly every fire-bender on board cry out in pain or shock as the little ice daggers imbedded themselves into skulls, shoulders, arms, and any other revealed body part to the sky. The water tribesmen, for the most part, were sparingly missed.

Zuko, personally, found himself falling onto one knee as he looked at the small imbedded bodies of ice in his arm. Part of him was glad that he had had on the full facial guard unlike the pike-man...
that had been trying to help him take down the bender he mentally labeled 'Ribbons'. He couldn't remember the foot soldier's name, but he had a feeling that he would never forget the man's face either … or at least how it had been before this battle. The Fire Nation footman was now on his knees, hands covering his face as blood dripped down between his fingers. Hopefully, if the ice daggers had taken out an eye, it had only been one.

Getting back to his feet, Zuko snarled, looking around. More than half of his crew as kneeling over in some way and almost all of them were bleeding, the non-benders seemingly the worst off. The Prince, enraged that someone had so dishonorably attack the people of his nation, looked around wild-eyed for the guilty party. He nearly balked when his gaze fell on Uncle, ice shards embedded in his hands and shoulders but his face seemingly unmarred, blood starting to stain his russet robes a darker shade of red.

Something snapped at seeing his only true family member bleed like that and then something deep inside went on like a white light. It felt like the whispers. It was still and dependable and … wrong. He tried to pull away, seeking out his fire-bending desperately instead of relying on whatever that was and once he found his true bending he instinctively lashed out… no direction or control in mind.

Iroh felt it before it came. It was as if someone had just thrown a barrel of blasting jelly into a campfire, caring not if anyone was around it. He immediately cried out, "Down!" while grabbing the sleeve of Lieutenant Jee who was all but blind, blood dripping down into his eyes from the lesions in his forehead. Everyone that wasn't already down from the old water-bender's attack fell to the floor without a second thought. When the General told you to get down, you got down.

The still standing water tribesmen were not so lucky, a circular ark of flames waved outward like a ripple over a lake, the very air on fire. For the water tribesmen that weren't thrown overboard from the force alone, the rest decided to jump in anyway, parts of their clothing on fire. Zuko, the only one still standing, trembled, looking over the deck in a dazed manner before falling on his knees in exhaustion, whispering, "Angi, what was that?"

Uncle's eyes only become slits, knowing hidden in his gaze. He had bigger problems though, seeing what damage those ice daggers had done and getting out of these waters before the men in the water either got out or got back up.

A few hours later there was a stillness on the ship, as if it and its men were still trapped in the fog of floating ice crystals. That was not the case though. It was bright out as if the moon was trying particularly hard this night to mimic the sun. Not that the boy that stood in the middle of the deck cared, his limbs were all but shaking, his eyes glaring downward at a bucket of water that had been conjured before him. Usually, one would think he was glaring at his disfigure reflection in antipathy, but he was actually glaring at the water, hating the element with every fiber of his being.

A voice ended his staring though.

"Are you ready, Prince Zuko?" said Iroh as he stood there, bandages showing on his hands, his form still except for the wind playing with his robes and hair. The teenager almost gave him a pleading, tired look, but the old man merely nodded, a simple sentence vibrating in his head: one cannot pretend to be a fish when they cannot even swim, sooner or later they'll drown.

The teenager finally gave a solemn nod and then took the stance. It was the whip attack. He had seen more than one bender do it so it was probably an easy kata, not to mention the movements were easy. Putting his hands out, he took a deep breath and let it out, the temperature seeming to
drop, the air becoming chilly. He then whipped his wrists and slid them in a graceful arch while his feet slid upon the cold metal of the deck.

The water didn't even ripple.

The few crew members that weren't in their bunks healing (luckily none of them were completely blind) were secretly watching from the helmsman's watch tower. Technically, the Lieutenant told them to get off the deck and leave the royals to 'train'. Those who hadn't nearly become shish-kabobs didn't want to wait and hear the verdict. A collective sigh escaped them at the prince's failure, and half of them were about to crawl back down to the lower decks or mock each other at their horrendously bad skills with the water-benders but one word echoed over the wind:

"Again!"

Zuko blinked, "W-what?"

"Again… do it again, my nephew," stated Iroh in a tired voice, trying not to groan as he moved one of his bandaged shoulders.

The young man stared for a moment and did it again, his heart skipping when he was sure mist had escaped his mouth. Yet, again, the water didn't even ripple which was kind of strange being that they were on a moving ship, but Zuko secretly didn't want it to move so he was fine with its unearthly stillness.

"Again!"

His wrists flicked and his legs shifted in almost a weightless manner. Fire-bending required control and force, not almost fluid-like movements because fire was alive and it needed a heavy hand to be directed. Water-bending kata's were strange, for lack a better expression. His muscles didn't feel taut like they usually were when practicing fire-bending, but neither was there that rush of entropy like he had ran a mile and won the race, collapsing at the end with blissful spirits. Water shifted like the blood in the back of his heart. It was not unpleasant or impatient. Perhaps he could use this stance to come up with a new fire-bending form and…

A soft curse filled the air and an exhausted sigh. Zuko's eyes went wide as he stalled in the kata stance. He had been so focused on the feel of the movements that he hadn't even seen himself move it, but unlike when he air-bended, the proof was in front of him, a hovering orb of water.

A deep sadness rose in his throat almost immediately as he stared at the translucent orb that was reflecting the moonlight, and he felt his world plummet. He was the Avatar.

The strength dissipated from every limb and Zuko quickly fell to his knees, the water colliding to the deck with a splashing noise, but that echo compared nothing to the small whining that came from the prince. The teenager obliviously finally breaking down and crying, his hands over his face to keep what little pride he had left.

Across the deck, unnoticed by the crew that was now cursing silently to themselves, a pair of blue eyes went wide, a face just barely peaking over the hull onto the deck of the ship. Slowly, Shui the water-bender, lowered himself not wanting to watch the young fire-bender cry. He had grabbed onto the Fire Nation ship for the mere purpose of seeing if this was a scout ship. It was a scout ship alright, but they wanted a different breed of information: water-bending katas.

Shui swallowed at the realization. He hadn't heard much of what was being said, the waves against the hull almost too much for him to even be able to hold onto the metal walls with his ice-glove,
but he had seen all he needed to. He had seen a fire-bender bend water. He, though accidently, had found the long sought Fire Nation Avatar.

Shaking himself out of his stupor, knowing he couldn't waste any more time, the young bender let go of the hull, leaving his ice glove behind. Like a stone, the bender plummeted for the water. It seemed he was just going to dive in yet before he touched the waves, a small ice sheet formed on the ocean's surface. He bounded off the sheet like a deer over a fence, jumping for what seemed like a destination to hypothermia only to land on another small ice sheet. And so the young bender rushed forward over the water, hating that it was going to take forever to walk home when he had such time sensitive information. The Fire Nation ship was already heading south towards warmer waters… and probably to the young Avatar's execution. The ship was probably coming up to the North merely to test the young man for if they were going to abuse the Avatar’s abilities they would have at least taken a water tribe teacher with them. He had to move faster!

Chapter End Notes

I love nothing more than Zuko angst. There will be a lot of it in this first book … or, you know, the entire tale. Anyway, I would get use to strange little OCs like Shui, Jayendra and Ribbon-guy showing up. (I just love the mental image of ribbon guy aka Nguyen as you will find out). Why? Now what fun would that be if I told you? But you people that can see foreshadowing pretty well probably already know what's going to happen next, don't you? Also, I didn't make Zuko's crew into a bunch of blood thirsty cut-throats, because I mean really, think about it… they have all lived together for three years. I wouldn't kill someone I've known for three years. I also love me some Lt. Jee. Poor guy gets like one episode yet for some reason I decided to cut him up. Hmm, I must have abusive love issues. Later.
(Revisions March 2015)
Iroh watched with a deep grief as the strength dissipated from every limb and Zuko fell to his knees, the water colliding to the deck with a sickening, splashing noise. That sound was nothing though compared to the small whine that came from the prince, the teenage obliviously finally breaking down into complete misery, his hands over his face to keep what little pride he had left.

The old man had to look away, his hands becoming fists. Even after Zuko had found out he had been banished, the prince hadn't cried or made a sound like that. These tears felt like admittance: Zuko had finally given up. Three years of rigorous almost ignorant pursuit and he just gave it up.

No, he would not allow his nephew to give in for if the teenager did… Iroh didn't want to think of the heights the boy would go to reclaim his honor. This was not Prince Zuko's end.

Coming forward, his shoes almost seeming silent on the metal deck compared to the sounds escaping the prince, Iroh slowly got to his knees and placed his hands on the boy's shoulders, whispering, "Prince Zuko. Now is not the time to give into misery. This is not as bad as you might think, being the Avatar might…"

The prince's weeping merely grew louder at the title, his finger nails suddenly starting to dig into his forehead, drawing small little droplet of blood.

Iroh bit his tongue. That was not the thing to say… despite it being the truth. Shaking off the lost feeling that was creeping into his own bones, Iroh quickly and as kindly as possible wrapped his bandaged hands around the prince's wrists and wrenched the boy's finger's from his already scarred face. He wanted to be angry or enraged, yell at the fool hearty teenager for surrendering so easily when he had taken everything with a brave face up to this point, but to actually see for the first time in years tears stain those cheeks...

Iroh sighed and did the only thing he could, he dragged the boy into a hug. Something he had thought rare in their relationship now seemed commonplace.

At first Zuko tried to venomously pull away from the embrace, but Iroh held on as if gripping to a bobcat-bat. The boy hissed and growled though, telling the General to leave him for he was no longer honorable or worthy of his Uncle's attentions. Iroh ignored those words and the commands of the boy though. It took about three minutes of misplaced loathing and his uncle's attention before Zuko finally conceding, his limbs collapsing as he laid his scarred cheek heavily onto Iroh's shoulder, tears no longer clothed.

He had no honor left.

And that was the only thought Zuko had until nearly an hour later when Uncle had dragged the forlorn teenager into his room, sitting him down for some tea. Zuko did as his uncle's old hands directed, not even complaining when Iroh covered the teenager's shoulders in a red sheet, trying to bide away the chill in the boy's soul more than the freezing temperature that came from the arctic waters.

Sitting down with a long sigh, Iroh warmed the pot with his hands and inner fire, a minute or two later forcing a cup of tea into the prince's shaking hands, not even asking if he wanted it as
The silence that followed was painful for Zuko, Uncle's own emotions reflected in the silence as they both sat there. The teenager tried to look anywhere but at the old man that had held him as he broke down. He could just imagine if his sister had been there … or his father. Zuko closed his eyes not wanting that thought added to his already heavy misery. Instead, he tried to swallow his sorrow and started to look around, praying for a distraction from the truth.

He had been in Uncle's room many times before, but he had never really sat down and just looked at it. Unlike, his own barren room, Iroh's was not lacking in decor. Fans, paintings, and items from all four nations hung on the wall. There were air-bender carvings, earth-bender weapons, water-bender furs, and fire-nation remnants of the past. There was also a cabinet piled full of scrolls and tapestry's with various images above his uncle's bed. And the masks, hauntingly eyeless masks, finally made him look away.

Iroh was well traveled.

Looking back at his tea, he stared at his reflection for a moment. He knew that this silence could carry on forever if he wanted it to, Uncle had long since proved his patience. Tightening his grip on the cup, he looked at the old man knowing there was no point in dragging out the ultimate reality of the situation. And so he stated in a sullen tone, "We should change our course for the Fire Nation."

Iroh choked on his tea, stuttering half of it onto the floor. He choked for a minute before mumbling dryly something about wasting good tea, and then his gold eyes became a shooting glare, the teenager nearly balking backwards from the intensity, "And why would you request something so foolish, Zuko? Not only are you banished, you are also the Avatar." Zuko winced at the word, but Iroh continued, "You'd either be killed on sight or imprisoned for life. Don't be so foolish!"

"Foolish!" yelled the young man, his earlier tears seeming to be burned away by the heat that was suddenly discharged off of his skin. “Foolish how, Uncle? For wanting to honor my country? There is no other way for me to honor myself or my father, but I can honor my land at least.”

"There is no honor in that, my nephew. There is no honor in death," came an almost-sad reply as Iroh's eyes seemed to sink, drowning the fire of rage in the room. A small sniff escaped the older man and raised one of his red sleeves and wiped at his eyes, his tone dripping as he stated, "It will merely make an old man very sad… I don't think I could bury another son."

Zuko's tongue found itself locked behind his teeth in a cage of teeth, his eye's going wide before becoming shamed slits as he stared at his uncle. A single tear had streamed down the keen man's cheek. The Avatar looked down at his tea, wanting to see his own reflection instead of facing his Uncle's emotions. Nonetheless, those words just kept replaying again and again in his head, in the ripples of his tea cup, and with the waves beating against the hull: another son. The words dug deeply and nested themselves in his mind. Zuko swallowed, noting how dry his lips were. He wanted to take a sip, but instead he found himself looking upward, gold falling into gold as their eyes met.

He had to swallow, his voice barely a whisper, "You don't mean that."

Iroh's voice ground like rocks on the beach, his face still doleful, his eyes moist, "Yes, I do. These last few years have been," the General stopped, not wanting to say something on the lines of pleasant to his nephew for it certainly was not that for the child, "hard, but I found my sorrow dispersing like snow to the summer's warmth. You might have thought that you needed me here to
train you, but the truth was… you were saving me. After Lu Ten died… I felt very empty, like I
had no purpose in living anymore. You changed that, nephew."

Zuko swallowed, his stomach cramping in emotions he had not known were there. He could not
fully conceive the old man being anything but blissful. Or maybe that was because, despite Zuko's
callous nature, Uncle had been with him. How could you know someone was unhappy when they
were nothing but happy in your presence? It hadn't even occurred to him: what would happen to
Uncle if he surrendered himself?

The prince swallowed again, his grip tightening on the cup once more, the liquid nearly boiling in
the cup as he spoke almost desperate words, "W-what should I do then, Uncle? I've lost my
purpose. I've lost my honor. I have lost everything."

Iroh gave a soft smile, glad he was making it through the boy's usually thick skull. "No you have
not. Do not pluck a bloom while it is but a bud. You never know what color it truly will be. We
will head for Earth Kingdom waters; there are many neutral and overlooked islands in those
waters. We will go there and we will hone your new bending skills."

Zuko's slumping shoulder's suddenly became rigid and his hands crushed the cup, sending shards
everywhere, the tea having boiled away. Standing abruptly, the blanket falling off his shoulder and
billowing to the floor like a falling flag, the teenager caused every flame into the room to explode
as if oil had just been poured on each, the candles nearly melting down to the wicks.

"What!" cried the teenager, steam rising off his skin as hands became fists. "Uncle, I would gladly
go into solitude, but I will not become the Avatar! I will not dishonor my nation or my father any
further."

Iroh's disposition became that of stone.

"And have me bury you there instead? I will not watch you fall into madness because you refuse
your bending, Prince Zuko! You are the Avatar, you cannot deny that. I'm not saying what you
have to do with those abilities or how far you need go into your training," the old General rose to
his feet, deadpanning his point, "but you can't and will not deny what you are!"

Zuko's fingers twitched as he felt the old man's chi envelope the room, pressing down on him with
a blinding effect. The young prince nearly falling to his knees with the waves of power pressing
him to bend to the older bender's inner flame. Yet, just as quickly as the demand was placed over
the younger man’s own inner flame, it disappeared, a sigh escaping the Dragon of the West.
Slowly, a hand came forward and placed itself on his nephew's shoulder, gripping it as he
whispered, "Please, at least try."

Shrugging off the touch, he stated in a quiet, bitter tone. "I will go to the Earth Kingdom’s waters
with you, but I need to think on the rest."

With that said he exited the room, daring not look back as he entered the hall, his gut tightening to
the point he wanted to retch. The whispers weren't helping either. He didn't know why but for
some reason they didn't seem demanding like they usually did when he was alone. They seemed
sad and sorrowful as if they were looking back and seeing the expression on Uncle's face which he,
himself, dare not witness. Even a speck of sorrow on that seemingly kind face of Iroh's would
crack what little reserve he had left.

The walk to his room was disturbingly quiet. He couldn't even hear the sound of the ship's engine
puncture the hall as he made his way to his room. The door didn't even squeak as he opened it. Yet,
his feet seemed to lead him in a deafening fluidity as he removed the remnants of the foot soldier's
armor that hadn't been detached when his wounds had been treated. He placed them on his bed in the same folded manner in which he had received them, except for the obvious dings and holes.

And so he sat there, staring at the wall opposite of his bed as if the walls would suddenly start to write on themselves, revealing what he should do. Looking away from the wall, Zuko decided that maybe it was best if he just slept on it like Uncle had told him so many times before when his thoughts were too heavy to completely comprehend.

Nodding in acceptance, the teenager rose grabbing the uniform. He wasn't sure what to do with it, but he knew that he didn't want to look at it anymore. It was a sickening reminder of what he had just done, that skeletal face plate nearly choking him with its accusing gaze.

His eyes fell on his trunk. It contained his true uniform and he saw no reason why the two uniforms couldn't keep each other company for he doubted that either one would ever lay its weight on his shoulders again. Kneeling in front of the metal chest with its decorative Fire Nation emblem on it, he opened the lid. He stared at the contents for a moment, memorizing the collection of goods that resided in it such as his scrolls, small training weights, spare clothing, his royal armor and relics of his childhood. They were childish to keep but they offered him a small comfort: such as the golden embroidered toy dragon his cousin, Lu Ten, had given him when he was very young; a top knot holder his mother had given him that was detailed with tiny red gems near the lip; the scorched remains of an Earth Kingdom doll Azula had given him that he sometimes wondered why he kept; a very old fire-bending scroll he had gotten from his grandfather when his bending first revealed itself; and the Earth General dagger from Uncle.

The dagger seemed to blink at him in the dull light.

With a small twitch of his hand, he laid the uniform next to his other and reached for the dagger. He remembered when he had first held this. Lu Ten was still alive, mom was still there, Azula wasn't completely vile and he still had his honor. He wanted his honor back so badly.

…

The watchman, who stood on the ice wall that guarded the Northern Water Tribe's city, was bored. Really, he thought that his position was rather expendable and slightly superfluous. Night hunting was something that was not done except for in the winter season when there was no sun to be named, and it wasn't as if the Fire Nation was going to try and attack them.

Well, at least not usually. The Fire Nation didn't physically bother them though the fear was always there: except for yesterday. The city was physically shaken when two fishing ships returned charred, its inhabitants still smoking. There were no fatal wounds but there were more than a few burn wounds. There had been a fire-bender that had detonated (for lack of a better word to describe throwing a huge fire-wall towards all four winds) and everyone that wasn't Fire Nation was thrown off the ship by the kata move. Luckily, no one got hypothermia due to some quick water bending.

There had been a stiffness in the village ever since though, warriors even going so far as to be prepped and ready for war that night, but nothing came all night nor the next day. They had even scoured the waters the next day for both the ship… and the missing water-bender.

Apparently, a young water-bender called Shui had grabbed onto the side of the hull of the steamer, yelling down to his Master, Jayendra, that he'd find the ship's base and then return.

He had not returned and the worry could be seen even on Chief Arnook's face when he had been informed of the loss of the bender. The young man had probably been captured and was either on his way to a dry prison cell or dead. Death happened to soldiers, even young ones, yet it hurt to
know that his body wouldn't be properly treated and prepped to be offered to the after world by the way of the sea. He had probably been burned to a crisp and left to be eaten by polar-bears on a glacier somewhere.

The guard sighed and looked up at the moon. La and Tui, he hoped the boy's soul did not linger and that the spirit world would be kind to him.

Looking out onto the water, he hoped to chase away such thoughts. Regretfully, his worries of the spirit world just doubled as he caught sight of a ghostly figure walking over the waters. Well, skipping over the waters.

The watchmen swallowed, wondering if he should call one of the other water-benders up to his post to confirm what he was seeing. He really didn't have time to think it over though before the thing was crawling the ice wall like some spectral spider-wolf. He had to swallow as the thing suddenly leapt over the ice ledge, falling into a crouch on the walkway.

The guardsman pulled out his weapon, the blade reflecting the moon light, his whisper dry as he spoke because he knew who the spirit belonged to, "Shui, please do not enact revenge on the village for your death. Please go to the spirit world in peace."

The figure's dark, almost haunted eyes blinked and then he took in a shallow breath, "W-what?"

The guard nearly laughed in relief. It wasn't an angry spirit. No, it was just a half-dead with exhaustion boy. He sheathed the weapon and rushed forward, placing a hand on the young bender's back to slowly eased him against the walled-railing. He could see the sweat on the bender's face. Too much heat was not a good thing in the poles.

"Did you run here, you little fool," growled the older guard as he looked the other over. "You could have killed yourself. What could be so important that you risk death? The Fire Nation ship was in retreat."

The younger warrior nodded, still taking in shallow exhausted breathes. Then, finally getting enough air in to breath, he croaked, "I-I had to. Time is short. The ship! They have the F-fire Nation Avatar on it."

Well, thought the night guard as he signaled one of the other sentries, at least he knew tonight wouldn't be boring.

Chapter End Notes

Ugh, it took me three tries to get that conversation with Iroh typed to my liking, and don't think for a minute that this is going to be a Zuko cries every chapter kind of thing. I think of his character as one that is full of pride and crying to him feels like committing a heinous sin. Most of all, he does not cry in front of others. So him crying to Uncle is a big revelation in Zuko and Iroh's relationship. And, wooh, two cliff hangers in one chapter; I think that's a first for me. You can thank Fourfourfourfour for one of them. :3

Furthermore, next update is on Monday.

(Revisions March 2015)
Zuko slowly picked up the blade, looking at the green embroidered handle. It was an exquisite piece yet not simply decorative. He knew the blade was sharp. He recalled playing with it after having received it, cutting the palm of his hand open. He decided that day that daggers weren’t his inclination and maybe he just needed a bigger blade. It was ironic how he had enacted that very thought into his training after he had been banished, wanting to learn more than fire-bending.

He needed to be prepared be it a dragon or an air-bender or whatever it was that was that was the cost of getting his honor restored.

Not that those things were important anymore. There was no way he would ever be able to reclaim his honor in those ways. There was another way, a fallowed practice by his people. A final way to reclaim respect if there was nothing left to maintain.

One could claim honor in death.

Zuko could claim honor in death.

Eye lids becoming weighted, he opened the sheath. The blade was clean, a metal perfection, the ultimate breed of earth. He dared not look at the words he knew were engraved on the blade for he could show no regret or fear in this action. Uncle would be disheartened but the old General was better off. He could return home unscathed and certainly not a traitor, because if anyone ever found out that Iroh had taken the Avatar’s side -despite the Avatar being of blood- Uncle would still be branded a heretic. He couldn’t do that to Iroh, and he wouldn’t shame his father any further either. If he could not live a life of honor, he’d die one with honor.

Decision final, he slowly took off his shirt and removed every thread or clothing except for his pants. He then lit a few candles in almost a practiced manner, setting them before him like an altar to the small blade. He didn’t bother with a note. There was no point. The men and Uncle would know his reasons for doing this and they would give him an honorable burial, a funeral pyre, his ashes returned home. His father and sister would be informed that his death had been one full of exaltation and then his remains would join his ancestors.

He could accept this life of wandering. A life as the Avatar he could not, especially since he had heard that powerful benders lived long lives.

Picking up the small dagger in two hands, Zuko slowly revealed the blade to the dim room, his eyes reflecting in the metal’s pristine surface. He took a breath, preparing himself for the pain that would follow, hoping that he wouldn’t botch this up like he did everything else. Given his luck, he’d probably ineffectively stabbed himself in the gut and die a slow painful death over a day or mores time, Uncle sitting like a broken man at his bed side. He could not take that. His mark had to be true and his grip had to be sturdy.

The blade didn’t even get to touch his belly though when his head suddenly felt like it imploded, a thousand voices raining down on him in fear, worry, sorrow, rage, contempt, and disappointment. Zuko could only drop the knife and curl up on the floor, throwing his hands over his ears as the voices slammed into his consciousness with their complaints.
“Don’t you dare you little water-snake!” rang out one whisper above the others, full of rage and familiarity.

“There’s no reason to be scared young fire-bender. Change is something everyone fears but this is not the way to deal with it,” said an airy voice.

“Calm down, child. There is no need for such drama,” stated one almost sarcastically.

“Ha! Fire-benders say they can take the heat, but a little responsibility lands in their laps and they get cold feet!” snarked a younger, chiding voice.

“Please be calm, young Avatar. There is no need to be rash. Be flexible like the water, adapt, move around the mountain and prosper,” stated a warm, feminine voice, so comforting Zuko swore he felt a hand run down his back.

There were dozens maybe even hundreds of others, each offering their opinion on the matter. One even jibed him for being a big baby about the whole thing, so inadequate were his skills he couldn’t even off himself. Zuko would have taken the time to be infuriated, but a dozen other suggestions and comments made themselves known in a head splitting manner. He couldn’t take the strain of it all though, he felt himself slipping like his soul was crawling out of his body, white mist everywhere, his breath becoming cold. He fought it as much as he could until a calm voice, an Ember Island accent, quipped at him.

“Prince Zuko, what were you trying to do? There is no honor in denying the world its savior. The world needs balance. It needs a fully realized Avatar. It needs you,” said the voice, the white becoming more evident like there was a white mist actually crawling over the room, a red figure slowly revealing itself as he stepped out of the growing mist.

Moaning into the flooring once he realized what was happening, Zuko tried to growl, “Go away.”

There was a long silence and then a throaty chuckle, “Stubborn. I would expect that from an earth-bender more than a fire-bender.”

The initial fear of the situation was starting to become irritation and rage. Zuko couldn’t help but hissed, “Leave! I don’t want to hear anything you have to say!”

The entity just persisted, graying hair in a top knot exhumed from the mist as the image presented itself, “Come now, Prince Zuko. It’s your responsibility to bring peace to the world. It’s in your blood.”

“Stop!” screamed the now enraged teenager, his head starting to feel light and his limbs feeling heavy, the cold devouring him and his thoughts as he laid curled up on the floor, his eyes straining to look at the figure.

His guest frowned at this and he took a step forward, his features becoming more refined, “Zuko… please. I am the last Fire Nation Avatar, Avatar Roku, and we need to speak. We will speak…”
had seen the effects only once:

There had been a small Earth Kingdom village, Ytomo, that had been taken about twenty years earlier by the Fire Nation Navy, but the Earth Kingdom had managed to reclaim the port city a few months later. Of course, the battle continued for the city over the years and once again the harbor and its trading waters were draped in red about two decades later, reclaiming the powerful trading port. As usual, as many Earth Kingdom citizens that could abandoned the city despite the Fire Nation soldiers’ hardest efforts to keep them working and performing their duties.

Jiao Long was one of those miscreants who tried to leave, dragging his neighbors and aged grandmother and grandfather with him. It was rumored that his mother had left him to die the day he was born because he was a bastard son, his mother refusing to acknowledge even doing the deed that made the child. The woman’s father and mother, feeling a bite of dishonor, had no sons so they rescued the child demanding their daughter raise the boy.

She ran away with a merchant, leaving her son with only a name, Jiao Long. The name meaning he looked like a dragon. Unfortunately, no one else quiet understood the true purpose of her giving her boy that name nor the warning behind said name until the night he tried to escape. The Fire Nation troops, irritated by the constant desertion of citizens, attacked. Jiao Long, perhaps on instinct, did the only thing he could do when the fire ball drew to near. He canceled out the attack with one of his own.

The guards were stunned into inaction, his grandparents were flabbergasted, the neighbors were shocked, and Jiao Long was horrified. That terror was doubled when the guards, finding their senses, forgot the others and tackled him, his family and friends leaving him behind as he cried out for them not to abandon him. But they still did, a sickened look on his grandparents’ faces for they now knew why their daughter had left her baby to die.

Now, like some whispered happened to interracial children, the Fire Nation did not kill the young man. Despite the fact that many of the red nation’s soldiers’ cared little for the people of the ‘lesser’ nations, they were glad for the new blood for it revealed an accomplishment in this war’s progression: the world was slowly becoming one nation, the Fire Nation. True, half-bloods would never make General, but it was good to have another bender.

Except, Jiao Long refused to call up his fire again. He refused to bend.

His Masters couldn’t convince him, couldn’t trick him, and his teachers couldn’t even threaten him. Not even warnings of a slow, agonizing death could deter him from his inaction. Slowly, Jiao Long’s limbs grew weak, his frame thinned, and his skin became gaunt as his body’s balance was consumed by his inner flame. The madness was the worst though when it finally set in months later. He clawed at himself, spoke to shadows, laughed at the wind and finally chewed his own tongue out. He successfully bled to death though the healers were sure that wasn’t the madman’s intention.

Inner balance was needed for the health of the mind and body, especially for benders. The inner energy was dangerous especially, compared to their ancestors, now that bending became ingrained into the genes as well as the spirit. Even the slightest refinement of one’s bending skills could press away the inner energy from losing control. Zuko did not have the small reserve of energy that most benders did. He had a thousand lifetimes worth which was why the Avatar could control all four elements. He needed to control all four elements.

Iroh would not watch Zuko claw at himself, speak to the walls, forget his values and then himself. He would not bury a second son! Zuko was meant to be the one burying him when that time came. He knew that it was best to just give Zuko space and time to think, but he was worried. No one, not
even the crew, had seen the boy come out of his room.

He had not done something foolish, had he?

No. Zuko would not be so rash in his actions. He took everything in stead. To well sometimes considering what had happened to him in his short life. Most would have been broken, falling into death or madness’s grasp. He trusted Zuko despite the teenager’s lack of foresight.

Slowly, Iroh drew his knuckles away. He’d leave the boy be for a little while longer. He was confident the teenager would relent to his plans. Zuko just needed time. Turning, his russet robes ruffling, the General was about to head to the deck and find some comfort in the sea’s song or in the crew, but a small sound made him halt. It was like a whisper.

Many whispers.

Feelings of deviance crawling under his skin, the old General slowly leaned on the hatch door, worried that Zuko might have gone mad behind his back… or he had snuck a pretty girl on board. He doubted the later, but an old man could hope.

Leaning against the door completely, his nose scrunched up, he listened intently. That was not a girl’s voice, but Zuko was neither talking to himself. There was something in there though. A something he had not felt in many years and he couldn’t place it. It seeped into his bones and settled into his lungs as he had inhaled the frigid air that seemed to be bleeding off the metal door now that he was so close. He pulled away from the door when he saw his breath escape him, a melting mist. He stared at the door for a moment, realization hitting him.

The spirit world! He hadn’t had any direct contact with it since… Lu Ten.

A wave of fear overcame the old man, his hands fleeing in the direction of the door’s latch. His hands grasped tightly despite the numbing cold, his mind racing despite the stony expression he wore. He knew that the Avatar could connect with the spirit world: after some practice. Zuko barely found out he was truly the Avatar a few hours ago. How could he connect with that part of himself so easily? The answer was he could not.

Unless the Prince had done something outrageously stupid…

Opening the door, the General had to pull in a breath, nearly choking. For a moment, he stood there, mist floating on the air especially by his feet as the chilly below-zero atmosphere in the room escaped into the warmer hall. Then, as if the room itself had taken a breath, the white mist collected into the back of the room slammed outward as if escaping the room and its confinement, Iroh’s robes shifting slightly with the current as he raised a hand to protect his eyes from the harsh breeze.

Yet, before he could even dwell on it, the mist was gone before he could even struggle for another breath, a collection of small ice shard covering his eye lashes and skin. Iroh quickly blinked away the ice, feeling the droplets stream down the inclines of his aged face until they were turned into stream by his inner heat. He blinked again though, because he had to be sure he didn’t have water in his eye. For there, on the floor, laid Zuko balled into a circle, hands over his ears. If it wasn’t for the mist of a warm breath escaping the downed royalty, the aging man might have thought his nephew dead.

Rushing forward on his stubby legs, Uncle quickly kneeled down and pulled the young fire-bender into his embrace. He looked over the young man for physical wounds, noting how he was barely clothed and how his skin was covered in small flakes of frost. If he didn’t know any better he’d
have looked around the room for an offending water-bender, but he knew that there wasn’t one. This was the spirit world’s action, especially with what he had seen in the mist before it had rushed by him.

A being in red.

A breath of fire escaping him, he picked up the half frozen teenager, cradling him, pressing his inner heat outward to help warm the boy. Then, once Zuko’s skin noticeably started to turn damp from the melting of the frost, he turned his attention to every candle wick in the room. Every candle ignite lighting the room with extended flames, the old Master not even moving a finger to make the fires breathe life.

Finally assured that Zuko was no longer freezing—though he doubted that was the spirit world’s intent—he pulled the teenager away from his chest. He frowned as his golden eyes roamed over the teenager again. He shook the young man slightly, expecting to hear a groan or at least see those golden eyes snap open. Nothing. No, Zuko was out. Not that he was surprised. Iroh, after he had traveled to the spirit world, had been exhausted, but why would Zuko have been in contact by the spirits at all? His skills were too raw and his mentality was to unsettled to be of any use to them.

So, why would they act?

Dwelling on that, the older man shifted, draping an arm under the teenager’s arm pit and lifting him, Zuko’s head sagging to the side as the General boosted him onto his nearby bed. It was then, as he placed the teenager under his thankfully unfrozen sheets, that he took a step back, his foot landing on something with a heavy click. He frowned, covering his shivering nephew up to his chin before bothering to move his foot to see what he had stepped on. Moving his foot, a chill that hadn’t even set into the old man’s bones when he first opened the door, set in his gut.

Slowly, almost fearfully, he bent down and picked up the blade, casting a look on the now shivering prince. Despite his usual control, the old man couldn’t help but tighten his grip the knife with such a shivering intensity that droplets of his own blood traveled down the edge of the showing blade before falling to the floor with a soft plop, blood mixing with water from the melting frost.

Zuko felt hot. It was the sticky kind of heat and not the pleasant dry warmth he enjoyed like the beat of the sun on his skin. Ugh, he hated it when they traveled through warm, sticky waters… wait, no. That wasn’t right. He remembered being cold. It had been cold. So cold as if there was frost setting on his skin. Wait… the cold had been real. He remembered the cold, the frigid breath-stealing cold. He was going to freeze to death!

Taking in a panicked breath, Zuko opened his, expecting to see a red figure towering over him and freezing mist all about him, but as he lay there, he realized just how hot the room was. Sweat was pouring down his back. He also realized, staring at the ceiling, that no one was standing over him. He swallowed dryly, noting almost immediately that his nose and throat felt dry, and that he needed to use the facilities badly. Groaning, he reached a hand up to his face, rubbing his eyes. Said eyes were dry as well, painfully so. He needed to wash his face also. At least that would make him feel better. He could rehydrate his eyes after finishing his morning rituals. If it was morning at all? But why was it so Agni-forsakenly hot in here to begin with? When had he even gone to bed?

Groaning once more just to feel his vocal cords stretch, Zuko lifted his legs, throwing his sheet to the side, his bare feet hitting the warm metal below. He glared at the floor for a moment. The room could be hot but the floor… it never got this hot unless someone purposely bothered to do so.
Frowning, Zuko lifted his eyes, his inner questions all answering themselves. There, about a yard’s length from his bed side sat his uncle, two candles at his side and a tea pot to his left. He merely sat there, not acknowledging the teenager’s return from the dream world as he took a sip of his leaf juice.

Letting the odd silence drag out, Zuko, still bewildered and half awake asked, “Uncle… why is the room so hot?”

“It is unwise to enrage the spirit world, nephew,” said Iroh, disregarding the question and not looking up from his tea as Zuko blinked sleep ridden eyes at him.

“What? Uncle… what are you even doing in my room? Drinking tea?” added Zuko, his mind still foggy. He knew something had happened, but what? He had entered his room to reflect and then...

The teenager’s eyes widened and his gaze danced to the chest where he had received his epiphany. His hand instinctively traveled to his gut, feeling for gauze or a bleeding goring wound. Not a trace of red. Then, looking at his unblemished chest for a moment, Zuko turned to gaze at his uncle. The man was just radiating heat, angry heat, and there, keeping his teapot company, was the small Earth Kingdom blade placed on a red cloth as if to be merely decorative to accompany the tea set.

Zuko knew better. It was a declaration. It was a testament of knowledge.

Not knowing what else to say, he whispered, “I’m sorry, Uncle… I just… you would be better off without me.”

The silence held and then a pair of angry, wrinkle-wore eyes glared at him, Iroh’s voice dripping in dominance, “Zuko do you think you honestly know better than I about what I need? A bird does not tell a fish how to swim.”

The prince went stiff, resentment and shame mixing in his stomach like a sickening brew. He licked his lips, feeling how dry they truly were, and then he whispered, “I didn’t say that, Uncle. I just thought that…”

“That’s exactly it!” finally raising his voice and expressing his indignation. “You never think ahead Zuko! Not only would you have disgraced your oath to me, you would have also enraged the spirit world. Who knows what they would have done finding out the newest Avatar had killed himself! The Ocean Spirit or any other being that respects the balance of the Avatar would have not blamed you, but the people on the ship! They might have killed us all in spite.”

Going taut, Zuko looked at his Uncle in disbelief, whispering, “T-they wouldn’t do that.”

“And how would you know?” added the older man, his voice becoming dangerously low.

Zuko swallowed, looking away. He did know and he would rather not think about it. He didn’t want to think about him; he didn’t want to think about Avatar Roku and what the past Avatar had said. It had been frightening to have a spirit kneel down and sit before him in his slowly freezing room, whispering to him. Roku hadn’t said a lot. He had even told Zuko that there was a large possibility that the prince would pass out, his chi too weak to hold a connection to the spirit world… especially an untrained Avatar. The spirit had smiled softly, saying he understood the young Prince’s want to reclaim his honor, but that it would also lead to more heart ache than good.

His Uncle and crew would suffer for his decision, the very water becoming enraged as well as many of the other elements. Roku didn’t establish further who or what he meant by elements, but then Zuko had finally interrupted, yelling at his past self for threatening them. Roku had shaken his head at that, eyes becoming somber as he whispered that it wasn’t him or the other Avatars that
would do such a thing. In fact, he was here to make sure such consequences didn’t occur. He had come with a warning… the world could not take another unsuccessful Avatar. The balance was breaking down and life needed balance. Without it the two worlds would fall into each other slowly, but surely and humans couldn’t not withstand the spirits forever.

Therefore, Zuko would not be allowed death so easily. The world couldn’t wait for another Avatar.

Zuko tried to retort, tried to press off the spirit’s demand, but Roku would not be detoured.

The spirit continued, his tone soft, “I know you are afraid, young Avatar. We all were once, but the demands of the world come before our own. Your decisions will be hard, explicitly so, but do not worry. We will send you a guide to help you on your way. Also,” added the spirit as he ran a hand slowly over Zuko forehead, hand cupping the scarred side of his face as the boy’s sight started to fade, “listen to your uncle. He is a wise man.”

All had gone dark after that like single pebble falling into an abyss, but he knew that the crew would be safe… as long as he bided by the spirit’s warning: he would not be allowed death so easily.

The teenager looked away from his uncle, ashamed that he had given into the other Avatar’s demand so easily, but he couldn’t risk Uncle.

Swallowing, he whispered, “Avatar Roku said he came to make sure that didn’t happen.”

Iroh sat up straight, the flames from the nearby candles flaring.

“Roku? The last Fire Nation Avatar? He came to speak with you?” said the old man as he gained a suspicious tone. “What did he say? It is wise to always listen to spirits, but you should always make your own decisions with care nonetheless.”

Zuko swallowed. Roku hadn’t said much and he was rather vague with most of his warnings, but one thing was for sure: he would not tell Uncle about the warning on the General’s part. Still not looking at the tea-lover, he whispered in slight embitterment, “He said I could not die without consequences and that they couldn’t wait for another Avatar… They also said that I should listen to my uncle. He is a wise man.”

The General actually had to draw back at that, shocked that an Avatar had actually commended his character despite how many wrongs he had performed in his life. Iroh, nonetheless, smiled sadly, knowing what the words also meant. He would not be burying his nephew in Earth Kingdom soil, but neither was Zuko allowed a choice. Slowly rising to his feet, the old bender groaned at his stiff joints. Then, locking eyes with his student, Iroh told Zuko to open his palm.

And Zuko did so.

Without even a moment’s worth of hesitation, he placed the dagger in the teenager’s hand, the words ‘never give up without a fight’ glaring in the lamp light. Zuko could only look up at his empathetic uncle.

Iroh merely patted him on the shoulder, stating, “Then we should be glad for the warning, my nephew. Now, why don’t you get dressed? We have much to discuss. We need to decide what island would be best for your training… and where we can find some air-bending scrolls. I’ve heard of an ancient library and some pirates. I might even have one in my quarters.”

Zuko merely nodded as he put the knife next to his side suddenly feeling not only demeaned, but also like a disciplined child, the very spirits scolding him.
Iroh could only frown, seeing the teenager’s inner struggles as he added, “I know it seems they left
you with little choice, Zuko, but from my point of view … they gave you many decisions. I’ll
speak with you a little later, nephew.”

His hand rested on the teenager’s shoulder a moment longer and then he was gone, leaving the boy
to his thoughts and nightmares.

Left alone and not knowing what else to do, the prince growled in his throat and got to his feet,
anger bubbling in his veins. He’d listen to Roku’s warning, but it didn’t mean he’d be giving into
them. He was no one’s pawn.

Stomping down the hall, the teenager pushed past one of the crewman, successfully stealing the
ship’s facilities before the crew member, Keiji, could even enter.

The shipman could only glare at the now closed hatch, grumbling to himself as he headed for the
deck deciding that it would be best to try and go over the side than burst his bladder as he waiting
for the equivalent of a mood induced, menstruating girl to finish. Not that he blamed the teenager
for this mood swing… he had just gotten some awfully, terrible news.

He’d miss training with the young firecracker.

…

Zuko slid on his metal boots, his only real piece of armor at the moment, his warm robes would be
the only thing clinging to him as he conversed with uncle. The man was probably over-heating his
room now so armor would probably cook him. Though part of him had contemplated putting on his
royal armor just to draw out his time before he went to speak to his uncle. But no, that was childish.
He would face this… if only to keep Uncle safe.

He refused to betray the Fire Nation though. Nothing would make him betray his people. He was
not like Roku no matter what the last Fire Nation Avatar said. The other could not conceive how
important honor was to a prince. Roku had also never lost his. He had never been lacking.

Pushing away thoughts that would only lead to dark places, Zuko placed his foot down making a
click echo over the room. He stood there, staring at the blade that was laid on his bed, now in its
sheath. Slowly, ignoring the whisper in the back of his mind, he picked it up and placed it in his
boot leg like he had seen Mia do with one of her many daggers. It would serve as a reminder… a
reminder of what he would do to keep what little honor he had left.

Shoes clicking in a small puddle that had yet to dry on his chamber’s floor, Zuko headed forward
out into the hall, a frown etched on his features. He trusted Uncle yet a small part of him was
apprehensive of what the old man had to say. Hands becoming fists, he wondered if he should just
scorn the man’s plans to train him despite Roku’s request. Smoke dripping from the creases
between his clenched fingers, Zuko suddenly stormed forward, his mind made up. Before he could
even get to Iroh’s door, the squeal of metal echoed down the halls like a moan, the ship suddenly
slamming to the side as if a huge wave had just hit against the starboard side of the ship.

Zuko, now clutching to the wall with an anxious look on his face, stood there a moment, waiting
for it to happen again as was common when they entered rough waters. Instead, the bow suddenly
slammed upward in a nearly thirty degree angle as if the steamer had just hit land, the metal squeal
of the ship’s hull drowning out the Prince’s surprised cry as he was thrown backwards and down
the hall, sliding roughly into a hatched door.

Rubbing the back of his head, the teenager was about to curse at the headsman’s terrible steering
when he suddenly heard shouts about the groaning of the ship’s hull, the ship still stuck at an angle. Eye’s going wide, he watched as a few of the crewmen stumbled down the hall, trying to gain balance at the strange angle.

Forgetting the sting in the back of his head, Zuko felt his heart skip a beat. Something was wrong. Had they hit something?

Were they sinking?

Finding his voice, he quickly yelled down the hall, “What’s going on. Did something happen to the ship?”

A pike-man, left eye heavily bandaged, slid to a halt as he struggled to pull on a shoulder guard, his balance nearly toppling as he yelled, “No, Prince Zuko. We are under attack! It’s the water-benders!”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this didn’t show up Monday. I had to type a new beginning for this and I also wanted to enjoy my Memorial Day weekend so… I figured you guys all had better things to do than read Fanfiction this weekend. XD But, think of it this way… you got a longer chapter. Now, in regards to a repeated question -from the last chapter- about Zuko mastering the elements in order: Fire, Wind, Water, and Earth. Trust me this has not escaped my attention but the answer to this question will not reveal itself until later. Furthermore, I just love the idea of induced madness from refusing one’s bending abilities. I got this idea from another Avatar fanfic I was working on called Hot Blood that I haven’t put out yet. It’s supposed to be just like Jiao Long’s tale but with one or our favorite characters, Jet, but I digress… I want to finish this one first. Next chapter should be done this Monday, given that it doesn’t need a new beginning. If not, it will still show up sometime next week like this one. A chapter a week until I run out of pre-typed chapters.
(Revisions March 2015)
Running, believe it or not, is difficult to do when the plane you are standing on is at a nearly thirty degree incline. Zuko didn’t even have to be on deck to know what was causing it either… the water-benders had marooned the ship’s belly in a glacier.

Cursing himself for being so engrossed with his own troubles that he had ignored the ship’s needs, Zuko stumbled to his room. He didn’t have time to put on his royal armor since it required assistance so he slammed open his chest seizing the extra set of footman armor.

He wasn’t going to waste the time putting on every piece but he also knew, after the ice daggers incident about three days ago, that he’d be killed if he went out there without protection. Grabbing mostly the chest armor, some metal wrists bands, and the masked helm, the prince staggered out of his room, dressing as he tried to run down the hall. He had just managed to slide on his helm when he threw open the hatch that led to the deck.

He had to actually stall, eyes going wide behind his mask, at the chaos. There had to at least be twenty to thirty Water Tribesmen on the steamer’s deck.

Trying to take it all in, Zuko nearly jumped out of his skin when a hand grabbed him by his wrist and pulled him back into the dark hall of the ship. Thinking the touch was malignant, Zuko was going to strike out when a huge ice wave suddenly slammed past where he had just been standing.

“Do not freeze up in battle, nephew. It is usually the last mistake you are allowed to make.”

Zuko went stiff before nodding, knowing it was his uncle that had rescued him. Pulling himself up straight, he stated, “Thank you, Uncle.”

“If only you’d listen so well when I’m tutoring you through your kata,” Iroh added with a dry chuckle before his face morphed into a sudden serious expression. “I was sure we hadn’t killed any of the water tribesmen, but it seems we might have. So, for the honor of his family and soul, their tribe is obligated to find the one who helped that poor soul to the after world when they cannot find the body. Many believe a soul will haunt the one that killed them and only part this world when the other is dead. A most unfortunate belief for us.”

The prince swallowed, realizing what had been said under those words. He had never killed anyone before even if it had been unknowingly. Just because the tribesmen were people of the water did not mean the water wouldn’t kill them if they fell in, just as fire would still burn you despite being a fire-bender. Zuko frowned at the later part, his rough skin pulling at the contorts of his face.

Finding his voice and keeping it as emotionless as possible, the teenager asked, “By why Uncle? There have been many battles between our two nations. Why would that attack be any different?”

A breath of smoke rolled off the older man’s lips as he thrust out his palm suddenly, knocking back a non-bending water tribesman that was about to slam a bone club into the back of one of his soldier’s heads. The fire-bender turned just in time to stare in a slightly flabbergasted manner at the dropped bone club. He then gave a slight thankful nod to the General before he threw a few fireballs in the other direction, joining up with a pike man so he had someone to watch his back.

“Because we attacked seemingly without purpose or resignation. Now, it is best we do not doddle,
nephew. We should assist our crew,” said the older bender with soft passiveness, not pushing the truth to the surface.

Zuko nodded, his lip twitching at the unspoken truth: he had done this to his crew.

Moving forward, he could only hope that his crew wasn’t the one to pay for his denial, but he’d ask for forgiveness later. Right now he had to fight for what was his. The two men, moving forward to assist their fellow countrymen, didn’t even notice the water-bender sneak behind them and into the depths of the ship.

The water bender with beads and ribbon in his hair, referred to as Ribbons by the prince though his name was assuredly Nguyen and not something as degrading as Ribbons, merely gave a quick glare at the two princely backs before heading inward, the shadows of the inner hull devouring him. There was no way that that his target was the medium height bender with the old man though his stature did look to be that of a prepubescent teenager. The fire-demons wouldn’t keep the Avatar in plain sight, would they? No, the lower decks seemed the optimal place, and once they saved the bridge to the spirit world, the Avatar, they’d sink this bloody ship.

…

Nguyen slid to a stop a few minutes later, his beaded hair waving forward from the loss of momentum on the metal flooring. His eyes glaring at the darkness, easily seeing everything in the shadows due to his night perception. It was good to be a water-bender some days, but it didn’t seem to be helping him now. He had been wandering from room to room like a blind water-snake looking for the lost Avatar. Luckily, the fire-benders all seemed to be on deck due to the fight, but he still hadn’t found the Avatar: the boy with a scar on his face. At least that was what Shui had said before the healers demanded he needed rest.

A young boy, almost a man, with a pony tail and a huge burn scar down the right side of his face. Fire Nation monsters. They already burned him it seemed, trying to mark the martyr with their hate.

Looking down the two halls, the blue-clad bender started heading down the direction where the sleeping quarters seemed to be located. He didn’t even get five yards down the echoing halls when he heard the squeak of the door hatch being open, thrusting forward harshly so that it slammed against the wall, a small amount of red light pouring into the hall like pooling blood.

Nguyen immediately gathered a guarded pose, his eyes shifting in a nervous manner. Nothing came out though. It was as if a spirit had freed the door, daring him to come closer and take a peek. The bender did no such thing, because more often than not, spirits would try to hurt you… especially since the war started. There was a hundred years of unsettled, murdered souls and unbalanced, elemental spirits roaming about. True, there had been a Wind, Water and Earth Avatar since the last Fire Nation Avatar, but they were all untrained. None of them except for the Earth Avatar really knew their place in the world and had lost their lives quickly.

The newest Avatar would not befall that fate. He would be trained and healed of whatever taint the Fire Nation had tried to instill on his young soul. In fact, maybe the door was a sign from thankful spirits.

Taking a weary step forward, Nguyen nearly cringed as his seal-skinned boot echoed down the enclosure. He might have even cursed himself if a shadow hadn’t fallen onto the floor from the doorway, heavy metallic footsteps heading forward. Slowly, pale fingers gripped the edge of the doorway and then a grey head made itself known along with two pairs of red, metal boots.
Lieutenant Jee stood up tall, head titled slightly as he glared at the being in the shadows. He couldn’t see who it was, but it wasn’t one of his men. The clothing, for one, wasn’t flaring in the light as Fire Nation armor was supposed to. Glaring, blood dripping down the side of his head – an injured procured during the crash - , he growled, “What do you want, water savage.”

Not missing a beat, Nguyen whispered in a husky grunt, hands moving in a water kata, “Tell me where you are keeping the Avatar.”

Jee’s eyes widened for a moment before he grabbed the hatch doorway to use as a shield, the attack hitting the heavy metal with a resounding clang. Though a little dizzy from the bump on his head, Jee wasted no time as he jumped out throwing a fire fist at the other warrior, threatening, “You will not be taking him! We don’t abandon our own.”

And he wasn’t about to leave Zuko to these water savages. The teenager would have made a good ruler – after he had discovered how he had acquired his scar - and he deserved that respect though the rest of the world would never give him it.

Zuko gave a grunt as he struck out with a kick, landing the attack into the chest of a non-bender which sent him into the rails. The young warrior latched onto the railing to keep standing as he growled, surprisingly calling out to his attacker, “You kick like a girl!”

Tenli, a Fire Nation spearman, actually stalled and stared stupidly at the water tribesman that had yelled at his prince until he was wacked in the back of the head by an ice whip, sending his helmet to the ground. The older, magnificently mustached man growled, letting the prince deal with his own – no matter how prepubescently stupid- problems. Iroh, who was only a few feet away, merely chuckled at the childish action so Tenli, despite himself, could only smile as well. If they got out of this alive, he’d miss that crazy, old man.

“I do not kick like a girl!” cried Zuko, his fists going to his side as he looked the young non-bending warrior up and down. He seemed no older than him, “At least I can aim! You have the aim of blind cat-panda!”

“What!” cracked the young water tribesman’s voice. “I am not a cat-panda! And at least I’m not short! Why do you think I can’t hit you!”

Zuko balked, “What?! Don’t blame your terrible aim on my height! I’m perfect for my age!”

Juku was about to retort, ready to continue this childish game on the lines of how the fire-bender was also the perfect height for a girl, but he stopped, Zuko’s words hitting home. In truth, Juku was almost the same height as the Fire Nation soldier before him except for being marginally taller. He was only eighteen. The Avatar was supposed to be a boy going into manhood; probably near his sixteenth birthday. Juku went tight in the shoulders.

No, the Avatar wouldn’t be on the battlefield, would he? Then again, Shui hadn’t said the boy had been in chains when he saw him practicing a water kata. Maybe those fire-breathers were trying to turn the Avatar evil! Not over Juku’s dead body.

Pulling out his boomerang, Juku became taunted, trying to keep the nervousness out of his voice as a plan developed in the back of his head, “Well, let’s see who can’t aim, Mr. Mic-Shorty!”

And then he threw his boomerang hoping that it would hit the offending soldier’s helmet so Juku would know for sure. He honestly didn’t know if he wanted to be right or wrong though.
Zuko dodged the incoming projectile with minimal ease and the prince could only look at the other young man with a questioning raise of his brow. Was he serious? He threw the equivalent of a metal toy at his head and expected him not to dodge it. He even got a forewarning. Really, could that even be considered an attack? Yes, it looked sharp but a spear offered greater attack thrust and an arrow at least allow better aim. So what was-

Wooosh-woosh-whooo-thunk!

The prince, not expecting the item to come back, suddenly cried out as something hit him the back of the helm. The hit was strong enough he actually felt his teeth rattle as he was thrown to the deck with a huff. For a moment all he could do was lay there and simmer as his helmet rolled around him in a mocking manner, dented. There was defiantly going to be a bump from that hit. And the idiot was going to pay!

Roaring and doing a summersault hand stand, Zuko was back to his feet, fists smoking, and his face molded into an expression of rage.

The water warrior automatically stopped smirking, his expression becoming one of slight horror and… was that pity?

Whining in his throat, the water idiot took a few rushed steps backwards, stumbling into the backs of two other water-benders, both of which were about to yell at the tottering fool for ruining their joined attack. Juku merely huffed and pointed though. Bother benders stalled as soon as they saw Zuko, their stances falling, the pike man they had been fighting forgotten as they both frowned at each other.

“Do you think it’s him,” whispered Juku.

“Probably, no one has found anything in the innards of the ship. Hurry. Go to Master Jayendra and Master Pakku. Tell him you found the boy and he doesn’t seem to want to come voluntarily with us if the flames from his fists are any indication. We’ll try to start separating him from the others,” whispered the older bender to the slightly panicked looking young man. Not that Nynto blamed him. Juku had just been fighting the young Avatar after all. What if he had mortally wounded the unknowing savior? At least they thought this boy was the Avatar, but it wasn’t like anyone else had found anyone younger. Unless these Fire-bastards had killed the Avatar last night, but the scar was far too much of a coincidence to just be pressed away.

“Now!”

The warrior turned messenger didn’t doddle, the other bender with Nynto helping the young man on his way when he gave him the equivalent of ice-skates, smirking when the non-bender yipped from the sudden increase in speed.

“Hey!” choked Zuko, a blush creeping to his cheeks as his challenger skated away. “Where do you think you’re going?”

About to run after the other younger warrior and beat him down with at least a witty comeback, Zuko was suddenly blocked off by the two water-benders the young warrior had hit into. Growling, he stated simply, “Fine. Stand in my way will you. I will defeat him later!”

And with that proclamation laid down, Zuko struck out only to be slammed a few feet back by a moving ice wave under his feet, nearly losing his balance as he was pushed away from his brothers’ –and uncle- in arms. Not giving the attack any mind, the prince was unknowingly being separated from the rest of his pack like some common prey.
“Master Jayendra, Master Pakku,” cried the young idiot, Juku, a few moments later as he slid to an uneven halt in front of the two men with something on his feet that could only be called ice-skates, his balance completely deplorable. “We found him. He’s fighting Nynto and his son. The Avatar doesn’t seem to realize we are here to help him though. What should we do?”

Jayendra nodded, growling in a rough voice as he looked the direction Juku had come from, “They probably have corrupted his mind or tortured him into believing he needs to protect the Fire Nation. No matter, we didn’t expect it to be easy, now did we Master Pakku. How about you shepherd off the young Avatar from the group so he can be liberated from these Fire Nation dolts and I do the fun part … Sink the ship. We do not need word getting back about the real Avatar has been found, now do we?”

Pakku merely raised a brow at his smirking partner before shaking his aging head, remaining behind as Juku skated off gracelessly, his arms laced behind his back and his voice strained despite his collected stance. “That doesn’t make sense, Jayendra. The Avatar should be a captive or at least dead. Not fighting for the enemy. I don’t think they’d risk trying to train him.”

The other Master scoffed, spreading his legs wide as he readied himself for the coming kata, “I wouldn’t worry with specifics, Pakku. Just be glad that your newest student is still alive. We can find out the details later… or are you just angry that this is going to be harder than you originally anticipated. I could always take the Avatar off your hands as a student if you don’t want him.”

The slightly older bender glanced at the scarred man and his lopsided grin. Jayendra always had too much wit to him.

Barely smiling, Pakku quickly recalled the small competitions the two of them seemed to form from time to time and whispered before he jumped forward, “I bet I can rescue my student before the ship even starts to capsize. The winner gets the Avatar.”

Jayendra merely chuckled darkly as ice started to form at his feet, the substance suddenly lurching forward and over the sides, “I’ll take that bet.”

On the other side of the deck Zuko slid on the ice that was slowly covering the ship’s deck. He couldn’t help but swallow, apprehensive, as a truth hit him as he ducked another attack from the small group of water benders that had cornered him. That was the least of his problems though. If they didn’t start melting this ice, the ship was going to capsize because it was too top heavy. Growling as he thought of the safety of his uncle and the crew, the prince rushed forward melting the ice wherever his feet landed, building up momentum. Without even a second thought he jumped into the air, landed on the ship’s raining, using it like some kind of skate-park rail, ice falling in his feet’s wake. The small group of water-benders that had beencornering him cursed as they took chase, Zuko sliding almost all the way to the opposite side of the ship, jumping last minute as he threw a fire attack at the guilty water-bender who was icing the ship. Said water-bender had no choice but to stop in his pursuit to capsize the ship in order to defend himself, the scarred bender glaring at Zuko as the teenager landed.

Zuko frowned at the man, wondering if he should strike before the other would.

Jayendra merely smiled back at the stoic prince, stating, “Too late, boy.”

The ship, as if at requested, snapped from its perch on the iceberg and started to lean to the starboard side. Knowing better, but unable to stop himself, Zuko turned from the scarred bender and looked up. Huge icicles the sizes of trees were reaching down from the tower at an
unnervingly rapid rate. The ship was going to capsize because of the weight, and the water was freezing. Not all of his crew men were fire-benders that could use their inner flame to survive in freezing waters. And even if the fire-benders did survive the initial impact into the water, there was no sanctuary, no land. There was no place to go. His crew was going to die -Uncle could die-because of him.

The realization hitting with critical cruelty, something answered back like an echoed in the back of his head along with the sound of bending metal. *The whispers were back again.*

Desperate, he found himself listening to the voices just for a moment in the back of his mind. He wasn’t sure why he did it or how he did it, but it happened nonetheless.

There was just this warm surge of power from seemingly nowhere, radiating out from his torso and into each limb. A white flood quickly washed over him and he could only surrender to it, closing his eyes as if it were a breeze falling onto him washing away all colors. He let out a breath and stared at what surrounded him: a white-forever covered in nothing but mist and clouds. He could vaguely feel his limbs moving, hearing cries of panic and surprise along with the fall of water.

He was moving, fighting, yet even with his eyes closed, a world came into view. The white and its whispers grew into a soft static, one voice starting to rise above the others along with shapes from the fog, trees still like lifeless limbs in winter. The prince could merely blink once, his body there in this foggy and snowy plain, yet he knew his eyes were closed, his lids heavy as if they were weighed down by wet snow. Nonetheless, he tried to open his eyes and chase away the fake winter his mind had buried him in with all its dead branches. He had to get back to the crew and Uncle. He was supposed to be fighting, making sure the ship didn't capsize, making sure they didn't fall in and drown.

But, he had to stop *this* first … and so the energy suddenly fell from his limbs like a tree shedding its leaf, his eyes unable to look away from this fake world even though he was slowly being pulled back. For there, in the mist and dead branches, now stood a figure out on the ice. At first he thought it was Roku again, but no. This figure was in white -a white dress- the moon seemingly to rise behind her as she spoke. It was a *warning*. Yet, as hard as he tried to remain wherever this limbo was, this plane of the spirit world, his ears were filling with static, her voice lost.

He knew this was something important, that he should be trying to hold on, but the mortal realm was grabbing him, pulling him out of this dream world.

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Iroh stood there, water dripping down his form and over the railings as every inch of ice melted away and greeted the sea, taking a few water tribesmen with it. His old eyes were wide as he watched Zuko’s form go still, the rapid movement of the boy’s arms stalling as the Avatar’s body pulled itself into a tall, straight stance showing superiority, those white eyes turning to look at the old General.

Standing up straight, Iroh knew that Zuko wasn’t looking at him; the *past* Avatar’s were looking at him. Part of him wanted to relent and give way to that empty gaze, but he knew their gazed was not meant to be viewed in that manner. They were looking to him for support. They were looking for him to be Zuko’s consul, to keep him strong when he felt like giving way. He didn’t know why they even bothered asking though. He had always been the boy’s spiritual aid, pointing him in the right direction and hoping Zuko would make the right decisions in the end.

Slowly inclining his head, Iroh made a silent promise to the Avatar. He didn’t promise it would be easy, but he would try. Not for the Avatar, but for Zuko.
The white eyed, Avatar-state Zuko pressed his palm and fist together and gave a slight bow, thanking the old General, and then, just like that, the light was gone. The reaction was instantaneous on the prince’s part, his legs seeming to give out on him as he fell to all fours, water splashing all over him and soaking his clothes. Not that the boy probably cared. He was too busy panting and shivering, a moment from retching all over the deck. Besides, he had bigger worries than getting wet. Like the fact that everyone had seen that he was… the Avatar.

Zuko swallowed, the urge to gag keeping his Adams apple bobbing as he struggle with himself. Why had he given in to those whispers? Why hadn’t he tried to be successful with his own abilities and not the Avatar’s? Was he that helpless? He was answered quickly, despite the squealing that owned his inner ear, in the form of shouts and the sound of rushing fire. He looked up with a heavy head, seeing the crew trying to get though a barrier of lingering water-benders. Wait … water-benders?

Zuko’s exhausted eyes tried to widen as he realized that the water benders were now all around him, pushing away his uncle and crew.

Everyone had seen that he was the Avatar… even the water-benders.

Panic set in and he struggled to get to his feet. He was growing weaker, his vision was getting blurry. That had really taken a lot out of him, but just as he started to stand, he saw a rush of blue. His eyes were only allowed to go wide as his breath was pulled in as a wheeze, the teenager being struck in the gut, right above his stomach, cutting off his chi. The scarred bender that had hit him merely gave him a small smile as the prince stumbled backward and unknowingly into a set of arms.

Pakku caught his reluctant student with ease, glaring at the other Master as the boy’s eyes rolled into the back of his head.

“Was that really necessary? I don’t need damaged goods,” growled the older man towards Jayendra.

Jayendra merely shrugged before stating, “He’ll live… you’re just mad that I won our bet.”

Pakku scoffed.

“You were supposed to capsize the ship, not catch the child,” growled Pakku as he titled the Avatar’s head back, looking over him. That scar was even nastier than Shui explained, but looking at the Fire Nation Avatar’s unmarred part of the face, he seemed to be the right age. Giving the teenager one last taxed look, he hefted the teenager into the arms of a much bulkier student of his and barked at the other Master, “Guard our backs as we get the Avatar to safety. Sink the ship.”

Jayendra merely grinned, his scar tissue pulling at the expression as he cracked his neck and stated, “Will do. I have a bone to pick with this ship’s old Fire Master.”

Pakku, turning his head, merely stared at the enraged, old man that seemed to be bombarding their line to get to the Avatar. There was something about the man, but he didn’t want to stay and elaborate. He’d dwell later. Jayendra could handle the enraged Master anyway, especially with that slightly arrogant air all about him. That man had slipped out of too many near death experiences to just die. He was a great Master and probably deserving of his slight narcissistic ways from time to time, but right now was not the time for his gloating.

“Just sink the ship, Jayendra. We have to be able to train the Avatar in safety here. I will not allow him to be sent to the walls of Ba Sing Se. We lost the last Avatar there. We cannot afford to lose
Jayendra merely nodded, swishing his wrists so that the removal of the Avatar would not be noticed by the teenager’s countrymen, mist floating up from the sea. The old fire-bender with golden necking immediately roared, smoke coming from his mouth as anger filled his eyes. The Master fire-bender wasted no time in challenging the water Master with a fire ball of his own, never noticing that below in the mist a small handful of water-benders were retreating, an unconscious bundle of red in their company.

Chief Arnook turned from his small council, his eyes becoming a harsh glare as Pakku started walking in his direction. He had just returned from his assignment, his cloths charred and seemingly still smoking in some areas. The water-benders that followed after seemed equally crispy, one or two of them appeared to be missing some hair now to.

The Chief’s frown deepened at that, part of him eyeing each man as they entered the ice-chamber. Where were the rest of the men? Where was the Avatar? The young man Shui had seen when clinging to the Fire Nation’s naval ship? His people had ignored the Fire Nation for decades. Had they given up that false peace for naught? Had he lost so many men in one battle for nothing?

Yet, just as heartache started to form, a word echoed over the room that made him turn his gaze towards the end of the small band. Towards the rear he noticed the towering figure of Takahiro, one of Pakku’s students, who was suddenly all but mauled by the young healer, Xue, as she jogged up to him.

“Monsters,” whispered her feminine voice, the word echoing over the expanse of the main chamber. For a moment Arnook thought she was referring into Takahiro’s rather sooty disposition, but then he saw a red clothed arm drip over the folds of Takahiro’s parka, Xue apparently touching who he could only guess was the new Avatar. He let out a soft sigh of relief. For a moment he merely watched the spectacle of the healer leading the burdened warrior to a mat where a few injured men had taken up residence. In doing so Arnook couldn’t help but notice the expression that hauled itself onto Takahiro’s heavy facial features. The expression seemed to be an interbreed of mild worry and something else. He knew that look.

Was that pity? What had happened to the Avatar?

Before he could truly focus on what the healer was saying or doing Pakku suddenly knelt down on the furs before him, a rather vexed look in his icy eyes. The smell of coal and fire just seeped off of him in a gagging concoction. The leader resisted the urge to itch his noise as he inclined his head slightly towards the Master water-bender as a sign of respect.

“For a moment I was afraid you didn’t retrieve the boy. Is the Avatar alright? And where are the rest of the men and Master Jayendra?” asked the chief as he tried to pay attention to the healer and the Avatar out of the corner of his eye.

Pakku, trying to dust off some soot from his clothes, continued to frown, “Jayendra was trying to sink the ship when I left, but there seemed to be a powerful fire-bending Master onboard so he needed more time. The mean little seal-rat will be fine. He just took a chi-block to the stomach and is no doubt exhausted from the battle he put up against us.”

Arnook gained a disturbed expression, looking in the direction of the new Avatar who was currently having his armor removed as the healers looked for wounds. He couldn’t make out one feature of fire-bender except for some russet garments and metal shoes. He wanted to get up and
see how badly the boy had been injured due to his rebut towards nearly two dozen fully trained water tribesmen, but the healers didn’t seem panicked so the boy was probably going to live. Turning his gaze to the obliviously infuriated Master, he asked calmly, “Are you sure Master Jayendra can handle it on his own, especially with a Fire Master there as well.”

Paku shook his head, looking years older than he had this morning. He had gotten a glance at the supposed fire-bending Master and at first he hadn’t recognized him, but on the ship ride back his blood had ran cold. It hadn’t seemed important at the time, but he had seen the flash of gold and the boy’s battle made a lot more sense now. Giving his leader a hard look, Pakku grumbled, “I don’t know. If the Avatar had come willingly I might have stayed, but I don’t know if I would have been much help against the Dragon of the West either.”

Arnook’s shoulder’s stiffened. It was true that he had tried to remain out of the rest of the world’s politics, but things that had to do with the Avatar always leaked through into the city like water under thawing ice. The Dragon of the West was indirectly responsible for the last Avatar’s death. He might not have made the finishing blow, but the fire-bending Master had torn down that walls long enough that the still training Avatar not ready for a full fledged attack by a barraged of trained fire-benders.

“Are you sure? What was he doing here?” asked the chief, his muscles tightening in his jaw line.

Paku gave him a tired, exhausted nod, “Yes, it’s been a while since any of us have seen a fire-bender, but they never change their royal bands, gold they are, usually a decorative item for the hair as well. He seems the right age for the Fire Lord’s older brother as well. I am not mistaken.”

“And why was he here? Scouting ahead? If so, why was the boy allowed to live? The Fire Lord proclaimed him a threat to their nation,” Arnook stated, a feeling of uncertainty starting to rise though he kept an emotionless disposition. He had been hoping to train the child here away from the world’s eye before sending him to the Earth Kingdom, but if the Dragon of the West was here it seemed he’d have to move the deliverer before they could even start with his training. Luckily, he hadn’t informed Master Yugato yet incase they’d have to remove the Avatar promptly.

“I don’t know. Perhaps he was training the boy. The little seal-rat was sure mean enough,” added the Master, giving a faint frown. “I haven’t seen many fire-benders since my youth, but the boy was rather good. A little sloppy and he had some difficulties keeping his breathing calm like the older fire-benders, but at least we won’t have to worry about training him fire-bending.”

Looking back in the direction of the Avatar, he noticed that Takahiro was still over the youth. Was the Avatar too polluted by Fire Nation propaganda to be of use? To even be trained? Should they have killed him instead of capturing him? Who would commit the sin if the Avatar had to be executed?

Paku, reading his leader’s expression, stated in a hopeful tone, “He’s still young. Not yet a man. It may take a few months of persistence, but I’m sure he will give in and accept that he is the Avatar; a being of balance.”

The chieftain watched the corner of the room, nodding slowly before stating, “And how do you think you will accomplish that?”

The Master gave a small, mischievous smile, “Kindness shall be his teacher after much exhaustion. You would be surprised how deep small acts of kindness can be readily accepted by a child like that.”

Arnook frowned at this, inquiring, “What do you mean by: a child like that?”
Pakku, this time, gazed in the direction of the Avatar, a glimpse of empathy in his eyes. “An elk-wolf that was attacked by his own pack may seek out solitude to lick his wounds, and if there is even the slightest glimpse that another pack will accept him readily, he will wearily seek out comfort from them and eventually join.”

“Yes, I know. Why is that relevant to the boy?”

Pakku, slowly placing a hand up on his face as if to replicate the scar, stated, “His scars are much deeper than we thought.”

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Agni. The whispers were loud this time. It sounded like there were dozens of them all in a large echoing room. He didn’t recall going to his quarters for some rest, but he felt exhausted. There had been a fight. Wait, no, fights with the Northern Water Tribe. No wonder he hurt everywhere. Probably got his butt handed to him during that last battle, and probably in an embarrassing display as well so that he had to be taken back to his room cradled in his Uncle’s arms like a child.

Great. Not only would he soon be wearing green, but before that he’d be called ‘little Zuzu’ by the crew until he got to the Earth Kingdom. He doubted any of them would say such a suicidal thing to his face, but he just knew the walls would echo it around for him nonetheless. Not to mention that Uncle would probably make him drink enough tea for the next few days that he would physically bloat from water retention. Even better. He wished he could just roll over and die. Not that the spirits would let him. So, if being the Avatar and a complete disgrace in his father’s eyes wasn’t bad enough, he was also a failure as the Avatar: something that required no training until after you got screwed over with the title! Agni, he couldn’t even hold his own against a few water-barbarians.

Not that anyone but the crew and Uncle would know that. Seclusion would soon be his life style, and it promised to be a silent one. Well, partially secluded, given that Uncle would probably try and find Zuko a nice Earth Kingdom girl. Not that Zuko cared. Uncle did that at every port city they stopped at. So, at least, he had the old, crazy man as company.

In fact … he could take anything, as long as he had Uncle. Uncle wanted him. He had said so.

The boy swallowed loudly at the thought, emotions suddenly bubbling to the surface like water about to overflow in a boiling pot, and then the closer whispers suddenly went silent.

It was in that instant, in that lack of whispered voices, that Zuko knew something was wrong. The air was so chilly instead of hot and the usual smell of burning coal was not there. This was not his bed, and he didn’t feel the waves crashing against the hull. All was still like solid earth … and he was surrounded. Had the past Avatar’s returned to try and freeze some sense into him like last time?

He sure hoped not. He didn’t need the men thinking he was wetting his bed with all the wet sheets he’d already had from the spirit’s last visit. Swallowing again, he decided that he would face Avatar Roku this time, even if it left him half dead and sleeping for three days. He would not be a pawn. He would not be the disgrace to his country.

Opening his eyes, his vision blurry, he was about to open his mouth and speak when he noticed… he was surround by blue. Wait, where was Roku?

“Oh no!” came a moving blur. “Grab my healing teacher, Chiyo. She can put him into a healing sleep. We can’t have the Avatar waking up here!”
Zuko blinked once. Wait, what? Avatar? No one in the crew blatantly called him the Avatar. It was Zuko, Prince, or at least Prince Zuko. Why would any of his men call him that when they knew he did not hold the title in any esteem? The teenager’s eyes widened in both realization and insight as a dark skinned man came into focus, his frown evident. Swallowing, his vision captured also the image of two women. They were all water tribe if the blue clothing and blue eyes were any indication.

He had lost his battle on the ship, hadn’t he? He wasn’t in his room. This wasn’t his ship. He wasn’t surrounded by the calm normalcy of his crew or Uncle and his teas. He was surrounded by the enemy.

Heart suddenly kicking into a panicked pump, Zuko tried to sit up only to have that large water tribesman grab him by the shoulders and push him down into the ice flooring, telling him to be still. Breath coming as a wheezing panic, Zuko merely grabbed at the man’s wrists, not knowing what else to do as bodies and raised voices moved around him, another form suddenly coming into his vision telling him to not move as his legs were restrained.

He would not be still!

Giving a throaty yell, he kicked the man in the jaw as he jarred a leg loose, throwing his capturer back with a faint cry. He then focused heat into his hands and watched with slight satisfaction as the large form let go of his shoulders with a gasping howl, grabbing at his charred wrists. The prince didn’t waste the opportunity as he stumbled to his feet, slamming into a nearby ice wall as a way to protect his back as he took in his surroundings, only to quickly regret it.

He was in a large ice chamber of some kind with about thirty water tribesmen in it. All of which he had gained the attention of. Swallowing, Zuko took in a chilled breath and did the only thing he could think of. He jumped over the healers and started to run for it. Chief Arnook merely watched the teenager leap out a nearby ice-window, screaming the whole way down. True, it wasn’t a deadly fall but still… he had never seen a Fire Nation soldier run.

Blinking, the man quickly rose to his feet, pointing at the uninjured warriors, “Hurry, catch him, but do not harm him. He is the Avatar after all.”

About ten men obeyed, Pakku still seated as his eyebrow twitched, “That little water snake is going to be trouble. Well, I suppose I shall follow, but I’m not too worried… it’s not like he can run across the ocean.”

Chief Arnook could merely watch with a confounded expression as Pakku calmly walked down the ice steps and in the direction the warriors had ran.

Gasping breaths escaped Zuko as he ran forward, dodging through the ice city now that he was out of the palace’s shadow. Part of him felt sick with himself. That greatly outnumbered, would it be considered cowardly to run away? Not that the answer mattered, but either way the question was biting at Zuko’s pride for he certainly felt cowardly. He was hiding in the shadows, jumping over small water-trenches, leaping over old people, and using small boats as stepping stones in order to get over the main waterways. Though, he had to admit, it was better to stay alive than end up dead. He hadn’t gotten much of a head start, but he knew that the shock alone of a fire-bender running away would probably give him a minute or two.

A sting of shame rose in his chest anyway.
No! He would not be ashamed of wanting to live. Uncle told him, not two nights ago, that there was no shame in surviving, death meant there would never be a way to regain ones honor. True, Zuko didn’t have much honor left: his nation, crown, and father were all ashamed of him! He would honor Uncle, and he would honor himself with the fact that he never gave up! He would never give up, especially not to some water savages!

Besides, Roku’s warning ran to deep for him to just relent.

Growling in determination, Zuko slid around a corner not even bothering to slow down, his metal boots sliding on the ice. He was getting use to sliding into walls with all the walkways being ice, but this was one of those moments when he really wished he had slowed down… his whole form suddenly forgetting land and falling into one of the water ways that lined the city’s streets.

It burned when he hit the water. He never knew that water could actually burned as he became completely submerged, but every single nerve went ablaze, screaming at him. He was so shocked by the gripping cold that he actually opened his mouth, pulling in a breath of water. The teenager realized his mistake immediately and found himself kicking for the surface, suddenly glad he had been stripped of most of his armor.

With a gasping, choking breath, he broke to the surface, his hands grasping for anything. Luckily, it seemed the spirits were keeping their promise to him, and he grabbed a hold of something, a set of screams echoing in his ringing ears. Panting there, it only took him a second to realize that it was one of the many small boats that traveled the waterways. Not wanting to lose his floating savior, Zuko threw his elbows over the sides as he coughed his lungs up, water splashing all over the boat’s interior. Not that Zuko cared. He just remained there hanging for a moment, gasping, trying to call on his inner flame to try and heat himself. He paid no mind to the two ship goers despite their obvious eyeing of his red uniform.

The young woman was the first to make a noise, gasping in fright as she tried to scoot away from the red clad boy that was trying to drag her ship into the cannel. Zuko, knowing that if she screamed he was in deep water –well, deeper water- put up one of his hands and found his voice squeaking as he almost begged between gasping breaths, “Please don’t scream! I’m not going to hurt you! I just want to get out of here alive!”

The teenage girl, with her long draping white hair, caught herself by placing a single hand over his mouth in almost an elegant manner, staring at the boy and that desperate look in his eyes. Before she could reply though, there were a collection of voices and shouts. Zuko, giving the girl one more pleading look, reluctantly dropped back down into the water, ignoring the numbness of his legs as he hid his head with the help of ship’s bulk.

The boat driver could only stare with surprised eyes before turning his attention to the coming warriors.

The footsteps stopped suddenly and for a moment the prince tightened, thinking he had been found out.

“Princess Yue,” cried a voice. “Are you alright? Did you see the Fire Nation boy run by? We must find him!”

Zuko pulled in a staggering gasp, a beseeching look on his face as he looked up at the two inhabitants, his fingers nearly slipping and sending him completely back into the frigid waters. The girl gave no recognition of his plight at all, not even looking to the side as his head went under slightly. Instead, turning her gaze completely to the men, she stated almost kindly, “Yes, I did see him…”
The prince shivered, ready to dive in the waters and make a swim for it thought he knew he’d probably get hypothermia if he stayed in the water much longer. For some reason he was having trouble calling forth his chi. It seemed that punch to the stomach had done something more than knock him out.

“And he ran that way, just around the corner,” she said, pointing her finger in the opposite direction.

There were a collection of thanks and even one inquiry if she could get back to the ice palace fine. She merely said yes and soon there was no one left, the only sound Zuko’s struggled breathing and the water lapping against the small boat. Then, almost as if her calm character had melted, a worried look covered her soft features and she looked at the boat-man, stating in a fretful tone, “Yukio, just don’t stand there. He’ll freeze if we don’t get him out of the water.”

The man nearly fell into the placid liquid himself as he took a step back, his eyes going wide as he objected, “But, Princess! He’s Fire Nation! He can’t be trusted. Just the other day some fishermen were…”

“I trust him enough not to let him die here,” she interrupted, not knowing where the words had come from, but there was just an allure about the boy, something that deserved respect and kindness. It was as if something inside her had glowed, something she only felt when looking at the moon. Not wasting any more time, she slowly leaned over, wrapping a gloved hand around the shivering teenager’s wrist. Yukio, throwing around a paranoid gaze, slowly leaned over and did the same, knowing all too well that Yue wouldn’t be able to get the armored teenager in by herself.

With a groan, Zuko tried to help pull himself in, but in the end completely relied on the tribesman to pull him to safety, allowing himself to fall like a dead fish to the bottom of the boat.

Not even bothering to thank the two, the prince suddenly pulled into a ball as he shivered, barely noting the two pairs of curious eyes now leaning over him as he tried to blow smoke. He had been in too long, hadn’t he? Zuko closed his eyes feeling fear hit him.

“Uncle, I’m sorry,” he whispered, his mind started to fog. It seemed that his caretaker would have to be burying another son… not that he thought the savages would give the old man his body.

Yukio, though not a warrior at heart, knew that the young man wouldn’t be here, in these ice walls, alive, if there wasn’t a good reason. He stared at the shivering youth trying not to feel angry that the princess who was now kneeling on the floor of the small ship, whispering for the young man to not fall asleep. She was kind, too kind sometimes. Sighing, he relented to the question he knew was coming when a gloved hand suddenly lashed up and grabbed a hold of his jacket.

“Please, Yukio, do something. I do not wish to watch him die,” Yue whispered, her eyes threatening to fill with tears. She had never watched anyone die before despite the harshness of her land.

Sighing again, the princess’s row-man suddenly took up a water bending stance, the ship lurching forward with a quick quake.

“What are you doing, Yukio? The palace is in that direction. We can’t let him die. It would be wrong,” she stated dejectedly when she noticed where they were heading, her gaze falling to the shivering teenager.

Yukio merely grunted, not use to moving the small ship this fast, “He’s dead either way if we don’t, princess. I’ll try to get him to the healers as quickly as possible, but I can’t promise he won’t
Yue merely gained a pained look before running her hand over the boy’s cooling skin as a struggled breath came out. The ocean gives and takes life, she knew that. That was how things had always been, but for some reason she felt that this was one life the ocean should not take. At least not today…

Chapter End Notes

Is it me or do the chapters seeming to be getting longer? Ugh, I added around four thousand words to this one in two days time. Either way, I took the time to add a cute little scene of Zuko/Yue because people were requesting it and because I thought it would be rather funny, so … cue embarrassing blushing moments for the next three to four chapters. Other than that, it technically is still Monday. :p

Next chapter should be up on Monday, but it needs a lot of work so it may show up around mid-week.

(Revisions March 2015)
Pakku’s seal boots padded down the ice stairs at a leisurely pace, his hands folded behind his back. A frown was firmly planted on his lips and he found himself lost to his thoughts, trapped in his own mind like fish beneath capped over ice. Those fish were just swimming around rushing to keep from being eaten, to live and exist, yet on the surface none of this could be seen or debated. Pakku was like the element he was endowed with. He was frozen yet fluid, but mostly always still and stern, tepid when he had to be but mostly frozen on the surface.

The Avatar had fought at first when they hadn’t known he was the Avatar, yet after he had been revealed to be the savior he had run. He had run away. That was upsetting, almost as troubling as the fact that the Dragon of the West was near their shores. He had seen the look in the Avatar’s eyes after he had come down from what he could only deduce as the Avatar state. It was full of regret and disgust.

Did the boy regret being the Avatar?

Frowning at the revelation, Pakku continued forward looking at the icy ground only to stall in his steps, his shadow killing the glitter of the snow before him. He heard it then, the rapid slashing of waves. He had been ready to cross an ice bridge into the city when a ship all but flew under him, throwing up waves. Barely able to turn his head in time, he watched the water bender pushed his small craft through the water, just a flash of red.

His frown increased as he watched the bender head up a waterway towards the ice palace. Something was most certainly wrong. He didn't know much about the boatman despite seeing him around the ice palace occasionally, but he did know that the bender was not so spirited in his rowing even though he was the princess’s row man.

Turning in the direction of the moving ship, his leisurely pace was now a sturdy jog. Something was amiss. The princess didn’t seem distressed from this distance, but the driver seemed far too nervous. Yes, there was something not quite right here, and he was going to go poke at it.

Slowing his pace now that he could see the inhabitants better, he put on a slight smile. He thought he saw a flash of red when the ship flew underneath him.

Smirking to himself, glad for his leisurely pace, he found himself standing near the edge of the waterway, staring down at the russet dressed youth whose head was in princess Yue’s lap. The girl, just noticing his intense gaze at Zuko, laid her two arms over the boy’s neck and head as if to protect him.

“Master Pakku! Please, do not harm him. I know he is Fire Nation, but he asked for my assistance and as a princess of the people I must do my best to uphold such a request. I will not turn my eyes from such a request when it comes from one currently so helpless,” said the young woman, her voice calm and clear but her eyes almost glaring. It was something he had never seen in the princess’s eyes. He did not deal with her much, being that he had no purpose in doing such. The determination in those eyes and the clear placid nature of her tone reminded Pakku of her father though. She was her father’s daughter, a leader of the people.

No wonder the spirits had spared her. She protected her people and coincidentally the Avatar as
well. Far too much of a coincidence it seemed, but who was he to judge the actions of the spirits? Shaking off the thought, he turned his attention to the shivering teenager, stating simply, “Do not worry, princess. I wouldn’t dream of harming the Avatar. It seems he does a fine job of doing that himself.”

…

A touch of heated air woke him as if stocking his inner flame. It was warm, but not so much so that it burned. It was like the kiss of the sun through the leaves of a tree, coming and going with the touch of the wind. If he bid off the wakeful world just enough he could imagine himself sitting under a tree in the royal gardens, his head on his mother’s lap as she whisper sweet nothings to her only son. Meanwhile, in the background, Azula’s friends made ‘eww’ noises as she tried to feed them amphibians she found in the mud, their feet slapping as they ran around in the nearby pool. He could almost smell his mother as well as the smell of the water nearby… almost.

He missed his mother. He even missed his sister’s evil little smirks before she’d pull a prank on him.

Slowly, he opened his eyes, knowing that there was no point in dreaming for such things. He blinked once, feeling the warm air drift up to his face, the shivering of his muscles and the rapid beating of his heart now realized. Luckily, there was a fire nearby; he could feel it trying to breath with him. He didn’t will it though. The rapid beating of his heart was too concerning as if he had been training all day, his breath rushed and thin. He frowned, wondering why his body was acting in such a way, and then it occurred to him. He had nearly drowned.

He took in a pained and purposely deep breath as his hands became a fist on what surly had to be fur. He had nearly drowned. He had been in the water and then…

Why was he not dead?

Sitting up quickly, he raised his arms ready to attack as his body tried to remain sitting though just barely remained upright.

Fortunately, there was no one in the room. Zuko’s shoulder’s relaxed slightly at the revelation, and he swallowed, feeling his throat sting. With a noting eye, he quickly started to look around. It was best to know ones’ surroundings so one could use the environment to their defense or offence. He seemed to be in a small, rounded ice-chamber with a fire pit in the middle of the room which was surrounded by earth and rock. For a moment, Zuko wanted to be perplexed by how the room wasn’t melting but the howl of a breeze caught his attention. There was hole in the ceiling.

His eyes widened. There was no denying that he was the Northern Water Tribe’s captive, but they wouldn’t be stupid enough that they wouldn’t only leave him alone but also leave an escape route, would they? Turning a worried eye to what he could only presume was the door, covered in a heavy white fur, Zuko rose to his feet nearly falling to his knees as not only the cold hit him but weakness. He growled in the back of his throat as he looked down at his bare chest.

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Those water savages had not only attacked his ship and captured him, but they also stripped him of his red clothing. The cold biting at him, the prince stopped looking at his nearly naked form and grabbed for the furs that had been wrapped around him as he slept on a pile of furs. Shifting and pulling the fur close to his neck, he moved forward on his knees, looking upward. It really couldn’t be this easy to escape, would it? It looked high but…

“I wouldn’t bother, if I were you,” came a voice that made the teenager stall in his plans, making the youth jump to his rigid legs in a kata stance, his blanket nearly falling into the nearby fire.
Fur lifting in the doorway, Pakku eyed the awakened teenager, giving him a defiant stare before turning around and whispering to the door’s unseen guards. He then allowed the fur to drop before he stepped in, stating in a drawn voice, “You are not only mean like a water-snake, but you are slippery like one to.”

Zuko kept up his guard, ignoring the sting of the cold air in his lungs. Baring his teeth, the fire-bender growled, “You will release me or suffer the consequences!”

Pakku raised a brow in question, smiling before grumbling, “Please boy, you are not going anywhere. Now sit down and cover yourself up before you get a cold.”

Standing defiantly, the prince did no such thing. Instead, he snorted out some flames, changing his stance slightly so he would be closer to the fire, his own inner flame weak. His eyes narrowed, challenging the older bender.

Pakku merely sighed, shaking his head slightly, “Fine, then I will make you sit.”

Not ready for the quick fluid like motion, one that he recognized, his leg was suddenly grabbed from under him by an ice whip, and he fell to the rug with a huff. Air stolen from his lungs, Zuko’s inner flame wavered as he struggled to take in a deep breath, coughing as the cold hit his throat.

“Now remain down, boy, or I’ll give you chilblains. Chief Arnook is coming to speak to you and you will speak with him. Depending on how you act you may or may not be allowed to survive. So, watch your tongue,” grumbled Pakku as he took a step back and peeked out of the fur door. He then turned to look at the teenager that was openly glaring at him, half naked on the floor as he tried to get up.

Snorting in disgust, Pakku leaned down to grab him by the armpits and place him back on the furs. Zuko pulled his arm away rather violently though, growling, “Don’t call me boy and I can walk.”

With heavy breathing, Zuko returned to the furs. Pulling the fur blanket back over his shoulders the prince tried not to twitch as the old water-bender sat down not far from his side. He wanted to lash out, burn off that smug expression that was just wishing to rise to the old bender’s face. He would not though. Despite the almost cocky visage of the old man, Zuko knew the water-bender’s words were truthful.

His life depended on his actions. Zuko knew he was on thin ice and being so weak (he was fairly sure his shaking limbs, shortness of breath, fluttering heart, and bluish tint were all symptoms of moderate hypothermia). He was in no condition to rebut or even fight his capturers. Regardless, he would die if he went back outside, especially without his cloths.

Shivering a little at the thought, he was suddenly glad he had not worn his traditional gold-marked armor that meant he was royalty. If he had worn that… he would now be a resident of the spirit world. Swallowing, he stated, “Where are my clothes?”

Pakku, who had been eyeing the boy silently from the corner of the room, answered simply, “They were wet. They were removed.”

Zuko glared at the man, asking softly, “When will I be getting them back?”

Pakku, whose head had been turned towards the door a moment ago, raised a brow as if the question had been ridiculous. Zuko’s constant cold glare told him he demanded an answer as if the cloths were sacred. Pakku’s lips became thin in contempt. Then, opening his mouth he was about speak but stalled when the fur was thrust upward, two warrior-class men entering as well as a
middle aged man who Pakku immediately inclined his head to.

It had to be the chieftain. He was not a bulky figure or even seemed to be very threatening. There was an air about him though. It was the same feeling he got when he was young and had watched a man walk down the darkened street in his home land, the lanterns lighting merely because he walked by them even though he made not a single move to will the flame to life. Zuko’s shivering muscles tightened, his teeth becoming braced.

The man put on a soft, almost doleful smile regardless of Zuko’s stern appearance. He then turned to an unknown figure outside the room and took a bowl from a pair of gnarled hands outside. He thanked the figure before entered the room completely once more, giving another, forlorn smile to Zuko before sitting down on the furs before the teenager, towering over him slightly.

For some reason Zuko suddenly felt ten again, sitting in his grandfather’s presence. He resisted the urge to look away. He had to look the man in his icy blue eyes.

Arnook gladly met Zuko’s gaze.

So this was the boy, the fire-bender who was almost in the grips of becoming a young adult, which was meant to save the world. This boy had defiant eyes and that scar. It seemed the Avatar represented the world so appropriately it almost pained him. The Fire Nation’s actions had scarred the world, even the spirit world was showing its pain on the face of this boy it seemed.

He could tell the Fire Nation Avatar did not wish to speak to him, but he had to try. Arnook hoped that the young man was not too corrupt, because, depending on how violent or accepting the fire-bender was, it would decide if he would survive this night. He did not want to destroy the bridge to the spirit world, but he would if he had to.

Offering a warmer smile, he lifted the steaming bowl towards the teenager in his first test of the young man’s aggression, stating, “It is not wise to jump into the waterways. Here, this will chase the chill from your bones.”

Zuko eyed the bowl for a moment. He didn’t want to take it. He didn’t want to even dream of getting near the water leader, but he felt like his inner flame was being smothered and any heat, even a bowl of some unknown blend, might keep it stoked. Slowly, he reached forward with shaking hands and took it, his pride snapping at him. Pulling away from the rough touch of the man’s skin when their fingers briefly touched, Zuko brought the mixture up to his lips and nearly choked on it during the first sip, the brown liquid dribbling down his chin.

“Yes, it’s never pleasant, but it warms you internally, keeping hypothermia and dehydration at bay. It’s made of fire root that can grow even in ice, seal fat, and red-whale…”

“Blood,” whispered Zuko, noting the metallic flavor. Part of him wanted to lean forward and release his newest stomach contents all over the fur-covered floor. He did no such thing though. It was an old trick that Fire Nation soldier’s used from time to time: drinking of red whale blood. Zuko had always thought it was disgusting, glad he had an inner flame to keep him warm. Now part of him was wishing he had tasted it sooner so at least he wouldn’t had seemed an imbecile in front of the enemy.

“Yes, blood,” stated the middle aged man with a worried look, frowning for a moment as he eyed the young man and how he held the bowl a few inches from his face but refused to bring it to his lips again. “You should drink the rest.”

Zuko watched the brown mixture of questionable root and flesh, before stating, “Why am I still
Chief Arnook, leaning back, frowned and stated, “Master Pakku was able to get most of the water off of you and to the healers,” the prince continued to watch his soup, “but that’s not what you meant, is it?”

Pulling the furs closer to his mostly naked body, he stated in a dry voice trying to ignore what the man before him was about to state, “It’s cold in here. Can you stoke the fire more?”

Paku frowned at the young man’s obvious evasion tactic, but held his tongue when the chieftain gave him a warning look. He groaned slowly as he stood, old joints complaining slightly as he rose and threw a piece of wood into the fire that was centered in the middle of the room. He thought the room too hot already, but stone and bone had been added to the walls mere hours ago just for the Avatar’s unique nature, so the walls could take the heat. He hoped it wouldn’t be this hot in here all the time. Wood was not a overly-common item in the pole, obliviously, but it was gathered a few times a year from a nearby Island tundra where the fire root grew plentifully as well. Part of him was surprised the teenager hadn’t spit it out… it was not something easily swallowed.

Watching the flame grow, part of the prince momentarily wondered if he could control the blaze as a distraction and try to escape again, but he knew better. Weakness was a new flavor for him to swallow. Besides, such an action was unwise. It seemed the young guard near the fabric covered door had the same thoughts as Zuko, his grip on the weapon near his leg becoming tight. Noting that as the only warning he was going to get, Zuko looked away from the fire and, pushing down his gag reflex, took another sip of the concoction.

The leader, at least Zuko had to presume he was given how the old bender had acted towards him, spoke again, his words careful, “I am Chief Arnook of the Northern Water Tribe. What is your name, young Avatar?”

His fingers tightened on the bowl and he swallowed, whispering, “I am not the Avatar. You are mistaken.”

The few figures that occupied the room, frowned, shifting slightly in a nervousness at the grinding of the young man’s voice. Arnook remained stoic in reaction and expression though, his voice level, “I was told about what happened on the ship. You are the Avatar. If you were not, you probably would not be here or alive. Now tell me young Avatar, what is your name?”

Zuko’s lip twitched, his fingers becoming tightened on the bowl. He wanted to spat his full title and throw the concoction in the other’s face. He would not though. He needed to survive if only for Uncle and his crew. He closed his eyes, willing away the anguish that stung at his heart. Was Uncle even alive, was the crew?

“First tell me what happened to the ship I was on?” he stated, trying to keep his voice even. He couldn’t call it his ship or they’d be suspicious. They’d kill him without a second thought if they found out he was a Fire Nation prince. He needed to swallow the honor of his title…

It seemed he was running out of honor.

Arnook frowned, looking at Pakku. The boy had been out for nearly a day after the water channel stunt, the battle long since over. He frowned at the thought, recalling the smoky Jayendra as he stomped past a laughing Pakku and into his chambers to give a full report of what had happened.

Raising a brow, he couldn’t help but notice the boy’s nervousness. He smiled at the realization, making a statement, “The crew is important to you. Your uncle was on the ship, wasn’t he?”
Before the banished prince could stop himself, he rose to his feet, bowl falling to the floor and spilling the contents nearly over Arnook’s shoes. His voice was deep and full of venom despite his shivering limbs, “What have you done to my uncle?! If you have hurt him, I’ll…”

Arnook allowed the teenager to yell, the words lost to him as he paid more attention to the teenager’s actions more than his words. His fists were shivering with rage. The Avatar was angry. He was enraged, but he was not striking out. He was scared, weary even, keeping himself in check not for himself but for someone else. He was not entirely selfish or dishonorable like most Fire Nation citizens their water tribe had encountered. He was thinking of another over himself, his uncle. That was admirable. The water tribes always held family in high regards.

Though, now looking at the boy’s now steaming fists, he was certainly an angry young man. Or, more accurately if the scar was any indication, the Avatar was probably more broken that angry. He was not stained by the Fire Nation propaganda completely, just broken by it. Luckily, with his show of restraint, it seemed that someone had influenced his young mind correctly in one form or another.

The teenager had finally stopped ranting. The fire was now blazing without the help of added fuel or wood as he glared at the chief. Arnook finally stopped eyeing his form and looked him in the eye, stating that he was now listening.

“Answer me?!” Zuko yelled, caring little that Pakku and the other water tribesmen were now on their feet, expecting a battle.

Arnook strangely smiled as if he was about to scold a child, “It is good to see some Fire Nation children are taught to have emotions, to love and respect family,” Zuko seemed confused, his anger dropping slightly with the height of the fire in the pit. “They got away, young Avatar. It seems that your fellow crew members are far more slippery than we expected.”

Zuko, feeling the after effects of his panicked fit, dropped back down into his furs looking stunned before whispering, “They are okay?”

“Maybe some frost bite,” he stated in almost a joke. “But… I can’t promise that they will stay safe.”

The relaxed disposition melted immediately, Zuko sensing the threat and snapping, “What?”

Arnook continued calmly, “They are on our water’s boarders. As long as you cooperate, no harm will come to them if they remain benign. I promise with my honor as the Northern Water Tribe Chief. Now, what is your name, young Avatar?”

The chieftain watched a horrified expression threaten to cover the boy’s face, even a flash of rage, but the Avatar slowly looked away, his fists shaking on his knees. The warning had been a low tactic, he knew that, but the boy would see it their way. He needed to be the bridge, he needed to return balance. He needed to be the Avatar.

Almost whispering, the boy stated, “You can call me Lee.”

Giving a nod, Arnook stated sadly, “I’m sorry to seem cruel, Avatar Lee, but you needed to learn so you can not only protect your uncle and fellow crew members, but the world. I know your nation taught you that the Avatar was a malignant threat to your Nation’s common wealth, but that is a lie. The Avatar has and always will be a form of hope. We will help you see that.” The Avatar would not look him in the eye, so Arnook stalled his speech and stated simply, “I will send more medicine for you. Omu and Tienmo will be here all night. If you need anything, please ask them. You are
our guest and we want your stay to be as comfortable as possible.”

Rising, Arnook gave a slight bow to the Avatar, wishing him a good night as he and Pakku left. Zuko merely glowered at the man, nostrils flaring before he turned to glare at his babysitters. The non-bender merely frowned, sliding back against one of the walls before he pulled out a small whale bone and started to sharpen it, probably for a knife. The other bender was a few years older than Zuko but close in age. He merely smiled and waved, stating in almost a happy voice as he settled down for a long night in another collection of furs, “So… you’re the Fire Nation Avatar. Hmmm, so tell me. Are Fire Nation girls hot?”

Zuko merely groaned, throwing himself into his furs as he tried to ignore the annoying water-bender’s voice. This was a form of torture, wasn’t it?

He had to find a way out of here and back to his ship.

…

“So, he got the water-snake to calm down when he mentioned his uncle. How did he even know the boy had an uncle on the ship? Though it would give an explanation as to why he wasn’t dead before we got there,” stated Jayendra as he walked down an ice hall in the palace, frowning.

“He talked in his delusional haze last night when the healer was perched over him, and don’t change the subject. You weren’t able to sink the ship,” stated Pakku as he walked down the hall beside the other man, a slight grin forming firmly on his usual resigned face.

Jayendra continued onward, picking at a burned spot on his parka he had yet to change, “So which one do you think was his uncle? We knocked off as many helmets as possible. Yes, most were middle aged men, but not very many that seemed any angrier than any of the rest of the crew when we took the boy.”

“Didn’t Nguyen say he met one mean rattlesnake down in the bowels of the ship?” added Pakku, trying not to grin at his competitor’s obvious distraction.

“Yes,” stated the other Master. “The fire-bender was apparently graying, so he was old enough, seemed of high standing, and he admitted an attachment to the Avatar. It might have been him.” Then, stalling for a moment, he added, “Or maybe it is the Dragon of the West.”

Pakku turned a surprised head to look at the other Master. Then, staring at each other for a moment as if contemplating those words, they both started to laugh walking down the halls in near hysteria only to be stared at by students and warriors alike. Pakku knew it was because the two of them were known for being ruthless fighters and benders, but even Masters at time laugh, correct? That was probably the only reason he hadn’t tried to kill Jayendra after all these years. The man irritated him to death but could also make him laugh.

“You still lost the bet,” added Pakku with a wicked grin, a rare humor now in his blood. “So the winner gets the Avatar and the loser…”

“I did not lose! I caught the water-snake. You should have stayed and sank the ship since I fulfilled your part of the bet,” argued the younger bender as the two of them turned the corner, heading through a doorway that led to a well lit room of ice windows. The smell of dried sea weed and other grains hit them immediately, the grains having been gathered during the short tundra summers or through trade with the pirates or the rare Earth Kingdom ship that bothered coming into the territory.
Walking past a few beasts of burden, the two came to a halt in front of a collection of white, poofy birds with long, pointed ears and bushy tales. The creatures, which all seemed to be asleep a moment ago, suddenly lifted their heads from underneath their wings and hooted. Each man put out an arm towards the nearest fox-owl, the birds jumping to their present handlers. Jayendra cooed back to his and scratched behind its long pointed ear, the creature yipping as it leaned into the itch. Pakku did no such petting. He wasn’t a big fan of animals of any inclination.

“Quit spoiling that thing and start thinking of what you are going to write our Earth Kingdom ally. Tell him to at least…”

“Wait, what? Stop right there Pakku. I am not writing those eccentric earth-benders. They’ll send some insane, military-craze, barefoot madman up here to bug us to train faster or try to take the Avatar to Ba Sing Se. You write them. Or better yet, neither of us writes them until the Avatar is about thirty, and they can’t kill him off,” stated Jayendra, his humor slowly dripping away like a melting icicle. Their connections with the Earth Kingdom were not unstable like a pebbled road up a mountain. They were rocky at best. The earth-benders were a stubborn people and did not know how to bend and flow like water did. One had to have a heavy hand and resonating voice it seemed to get anywhere with those people.

Then again, those stubborn ways were what had kept the Fire Nation at bay this long.

“You lost the bet. So you have to write the domineering earth-benders and deal with all that tragedy,” mocked Pakku as he headed for a corner to sit in and write a note to Master Yugato, leaving the other Master there to simmer. Oh yes, he knew he had not heard the last of this argument and that he’d probably pay in blood for making Jayendra write the eccentric earth-benders, but when writing an air-bender one had to have a type of finesse about them which Jayendra generally lacked. Air-benders were flighty like scared, little, snow birds after all.

Chapter End Notes

I’m so glad I designed Jayendra’s character. I know everyone thinks of Pakku as a stoic, even cold except for his fondness for Katara’s grandmother. I doubt he spent the last fifty or so years only dwelling on the fact that he was rejected. True, he is still bitter, but I’m sure he moved on in other aspects of his life: friends, students, and hobbies. Jayendra reveals one of these aspects though it borderlines between friend and enemy it seems. Now, I know half of you were wondering why I’m not talking about the last sentence of the chapter, but what fun would that be?

Next update should be on Monday.

(Revisions March 2015)
Old Air

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was as if the air had been stolen from the room, leaking away from the man that stood in the middle of the ice chamber and the truth he held in his hands. Slowly, he took in a deep breath, his blue parka billowing upward as if a phantom wind had rushed into the room to take up inhabitance in his lungs. They had been waiting for what felt like forever, pretending to be something they were not. The ground -ice, technically- was not their motherland, yet here they were drabbed in blue and surrounded in an enclosure of ice walls. He and his people had to make this sacrifice though. They had to abandon their yellow colors and towering mountain homes, because he needed them.

The Avatar would have to learn air-bending.

Master Yugato closed his eyes, pulling down the blue water-tribe hood, revealing his cerulean arrow tattoo, the sign of an air-bending Master. He opened his eyes and read the message again as if to make sure the world hadn’t been playing a game with his fragile aspirations. No, it was still written there in bold, almost contemptuous strokes:

“We have found the Fire Nation Avatar. Get your airy butt up here, before we start training him before you,” said the man out loud to himself, shaking his head. “And here I thought water was supposed to be flexible or at least elegant with their words. It seems this Master Pakku is more like a hail storm then a stream.”

He took another breath, feeling the air rush in through the labyrinths of the hidden ice-temple which served as a home for the remaining air-nomads. A portion of his mind worried for the last decade how they were going to keep Avatar Qiang’s death a secret. The poor man had been discovered when he was nearly thirty-two, having started a barn on fire when he had been trying to earth-bend. He had almost been killed for being a fire-bender. The only thing that had saved him were the local Dai Li.

Yugato sighed. He did not care for those shadow dwellers, but they had been incredibly useful in searching for the Avatars without the toys from the Avatar’s past lives. In fact, he had heard a rumor that some Dai Li were even considering the role of double-agent by joining the Fire Nation so they could have inside access to the island nation’s shores. Thus, secretly, they could look for the Fire Nation Avatar. It seemed that there would be no need for that treachery now, and he was fine with that. That plan would not have set well with him. In fact, looking for the Fire Nation Avatar for this past decade had tested his spiritual vows to the point he wondered if he should even call himself a monk anymore.

He had done things that offered no redemption or at least it had felt like that. But now he had a chance to help set the world straight, to create new winds and smooth over the burnt remains the war had created. He just had to get to the Northern Water Tribe first.

Placing the scroll up one of his sleeves, he started towards the western structure of the habitat where the sky-bison were housed. The creatures’ thick fur had kept the cold at bay, but the beasts still did not reproduce well in this climate. Their numbers were thin. The wiry grasses they were able to collect from the short tundra summers did not appease their appetites and none of them cared for sea weed though they all ate it. It broke his heart to watch them longingly look towards the sky, harsh blizzards keeping them grounded for long periods of time.
Yet, before he could even take a step out of the central chamber, a small form slid in front of him making his parka billow. The middle-aged nomad resisted the urge to sigh or pinch his nose bridge. Usually, his patience was that of saint, but when it came to the Aang—a name the elders had been weary to give the boy given the name’s taboo—he found himself at a loss. Taking in a calming breath he gave a soft smile to the boy that was grinning up at him with a staff in hand and his short body covered in the traditional colors of yellow and orange though he should have been wearing blue.

“Morning Aang. I see that you have decided to wear our ceremonial colors though I have requested you wear the garb of the Southern Water Tribe people,” he stated, recalling their neighbors which was a small minuscule village about fifty miles away. The villagers scarcely bothered them and none but the elders seemed to know that they were air-benders, which was fine with him. It did shame him slightly that he lied to the occasional visitor, though they were rare and few ever since the village’s men had gone off to war.

Aang rubbed the back of his head, smiling nervously before he bowed, “Sorry, Master Yugato. These colors just feel right, and I don’t care much for fur. It makes my skin itch, and I feel kind of sick when wearing it. Fur being alive once and all.”

The older air-bender nodded his head, use to the boy’s confessions of feeling that things were supposed to be different. Sometimes a part of him wondered if Aang was actually the reincarnated spirit of the short lived Avatar Aang, recalling even the minutest things of their people such as clothing. Part of him wanted to wash away such a thought from his own mind. Avatars’ souls were not meant to return to the Earth in that manner. They were meant to support the newest reincarnation from the spirit world. Yet… Aang sometimes did things. He had mentioned names of people that had died a hundred years ago, and he had even named his air-bison Appa, which had been the same name of Avatar Aang’s spirit animal. The other monks had been so unnerved that that day that they had tested the boy for the Avatar’s abilities, thinking that the Fire Nation Avatar must have passed away unknowingly.

Aang did not surpass in the spiritual testing. It had been a dejected yet relieving day. Yugato was upset that they had not found the Avatar, yet he was calmed by the fact that this optimistic child would not be burdened by the role of Avatar, especially during a time of war. Aang, spiritual and kind as he was, would probably not be able to do the things necessary of the Avatar.

Shaking his head slightly, the man placed a hand on Aang’s head, stating in a tired voice, “The same here, Aang. I do not feel comfortable wearing these furs, but neither do I want to risk the sanctity of this ice temple by revealing I am an air-bender. Be patient. All things have ends, even wars.”

The boy frowned, nodding with a sober expression.

Then, thinking the conversation was over and wanting to talk to a few of the elders before he left, Yugato turned to leave… only to be grabbed by the back of his blue coat. He looked down, thinking Aang needed some more closure, but, instead, the young boy was grinning up at him. It always amazed him how cheery the boy was despite almost every Master - that had survived the purges - being extraordinarily sober in the temple. One had to wonder where he got all of the spunk from.

“So, can I come? Can we going penguin sledding or ice surfing or iceberg hopping?” stated the boy in an elated tone as if he hadn’t just been scolded.

The older monk took on a pained expression, asking, “How did you know I was leaving, Aang? I haven’t even packed yet.”
Shrugging his shoulders slightly, the boy stated, “I just knew.”

Sometimes, on days like this, the older monk wished that the spirit world was just a little more blatantly forward. He knew Aang had some kind of destiny -his insight was proof enough to verify that theory- but what the young boy was meant to do for the world was something that Yugato had contemplated and probably would contemplate for years to come.

But not today. He needed to get to the location of the current Avatar. Something was wrong with the whole situation. It would have been one thing for the Earth Kingdom to find the child in one of the Fire Nation colonies, but the Northern Water Tribe? Why would there be any fire-benders in that location? It just didn’t sit right. He could feel it on the wind.

“I see, but the answer is no. I have important work to do. I cannot be stalled in these duties. Do you understand?” he stated simply.

Aang frowned, his lips moving for a moment as if he wanted to say something, but he remained silent letting the elder man walk away without a word. Yet, as soon as Master Yugato turned the corner, the young child’s lips drew themselves into a smile and he was running towards his quarters. He didn’t know why, but he had a feeling he needed to be on this trip. There was something he needed to do.

…

“No,” growled Zuko as he eyed the old man and the thing he was holding up, his scarred eye becoming a slit.

Pakku raised a brow, lowering the parka, and giving the teenager a questioning look. Offering a bored expression a second later, he stated in almost a mocking manner, “So… Fire Nation teenagers don’t eat and neither do they wear clothing?”

Zuko, who had been sleeping for the last week in his fur nest -refusing to eat more than broth- glared at the older man that seemed to darken his prison every day with his irritating presence. He knew he should be eating and that he should take the parka, but the food was unrecognizable, having the texture and flavor of liver while the parka was in water tribe colors. He’d rather become a resident of the spirit world than place that color on his flesh. He could swallow his pride to wear brown –maybe some green-, but blue was his opposite element and he had never really worn it. That was not going to happen.

True, he wanted to escape this week so the parka would certainly assist in that venture, but first he had to exterminate that smug look off of the old man’s face. Snapping his fingers, the parka suddenly burst into flames. The scarred bender behind this Pakku fellow –Zuko only remember his name because it reminded him of the word parka and he envisioned both would burn equally nicely- laughed heartily as Pakku dropped the now flaming clothing article to the floor without even twitching or taking his eyes off of the fire-bender.

Watching the teenager with a stony gaze, Jayendra still chuckling in the background, Pakku stated, “Well, since you apparently don’t care for warmth, I don’t think you’ll need the fire either.”

Barely acknowledging the look of horror on the boy’s face, Pakku flicked his wrists and the icy floor was suddenly water which leapt forward and devoured the fire with a hiss, draping the room in shadows, except for the small amount of light that escaped the far too high hole above. Pakku grinned in the dimness of the room, giving the two day guards a slightly apologetic nod before he turned to leave. The two water tribesmen merely looked at each other in the darkness, shrugging, before continuing their meaningless routines like small water tricks or blade sharpening. Unlike the
fire-bender, their eyes were use to the dark and they could easily see in it. They doubted the young bender could though with how twitchy he quickly became with every sound the two guards made.

Glaring at the backs of the two benders as they exited in the darkness, Zuko deflated slightly, looking to where the fire had been as he tried not to twitch due to the sound of blade sharpening and occasional water bending. The fire had been the only familiar thing in this world. Everything was taken away from him to remind him of himself and who he was. He didn’t have his armor. He hadn’t seen the sun in days. He didn’t even have the smell of charcoal or tea to comfort him. The only thing that seemed to remind him of who he was … was that fire. And it was dead.

Zuko slowly lay down in his furs… feeling a little emptier. He now worried that if he stayed in here much longer that he would start to fade like a deprived flame. Would his memories, his fears, his morals and his very being becoming nothing but remnants of ash, the Avatar taking over completely if he didn’t get out of this icy enclosure?

Despite himself, a small whimper escaped his throat as the thought continued. Would he soon be forgetting himself in this ice castle… including his mother, his country, and his Uncle? Where was his Uncle? Was he even real? Was this even real? Perhaps he had died when he received his scar all those years ago, and this was some kind of punishment for dishonoring his family.

He had to get out of here… even if he had to play obedient Avatar for a little bit. He had to at least see the sun.

…

Miles away, unknown to the teenager, sat a man in a room that was lit by a green fire, flickering in the background like a sick thing. Zuko had never met this man or heard of him for that matter, but this figure was a man of power.

This man was the voice that whispered in the broken king’s ear and some days he was even the Earth Kingdom King in all but form. In the past he would have relished the taste of such power, glad that he had such command, but everything changed when the last Avatar died: Avatar Qiang.

It had nearly devastated the delicate balance of his city’s traditions: the city of Ba Sing Se, and Long Feng would not let that happen again.

Long Feng frowned at the thought of the Avatar, slowly reaching forward to scratch behind the ear of a snowbird-fox on his desk. The creature purred and leaned into the touch. Part of him resisted the urge to crack the creature’s neck when a wave of irritation hit him. Now, this wasn’t the bird’s fault. It was just an inconvenience that the bird brought such badly timed information, though he was glad for the forewarning.

He did not need an Avatar, especially a Fire Nation Avatar, messing with his plans for this city and its order. Qiang nearly brought this city to the ground. If it wasn’t for his young m…

No, he did not need to think of that, especially not today. There was no telling what a wild card like a new Avatar could cause… Unless, he wasn’t so wild? Long Feng stopped tapping his nails on his desk and smiled slightly. Yes, a tame Avatar, and he knew just the man for the job as well.

Slowly rereading the parchment and its message of finding the Fire Nation Avatar, Long Feng slowly placed the letter up his sleeve and headed for the door. He had much to do today. The king was going through one of his phases and needed to be placed into a placid state of mind so the day promised to be busy. For one, he would need to rule the country as usual due to the king’s condition. It was ironic really. He had wanted the county and he had gotten it. He just had to
babysit a broken king in exchange. Some days seemed far too taxing with the price though, but even spirits and there meddling could not do anything to strive off a good tonic.

Stepping out of the room, he placed his hands behind his back and started walking. He needed to deal with the Avatar problem first though, and he had the perfect Dai Li agent in mind.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry, a short chapter because my little sister decided she needed to hog my computer all week and then destroy the power cord, but it is a fun chapter nonetheless. We got some Aang and some Long Feng in there. I long Feng actually. He wasn’t the type of villain that wanted world power or anything of the breed. He just wanted the city in the order tradition proclaimed… until Azula came along. I still doubt a girl would have outsmart a grown man who has been manipulating people his whole life, but you know … Anyway, I had issues and had to re-upload this chapter so sorry for the double message.
(Revisions March 2015)
Icy Ledges

Chapter Notes

The Image is by by Greenapplefreak: Crouching Dragon, Hidden Prince

See the end of the chapter for more notes
It was kind of stupid now that he thought about it. Yes, ledges that were yards and yards from the ground and only a few inches in width were not meant for walking on, especially when said ledge was made of ice. They tended to get slippery… especially for someone that naturally pushes heat off their body like a small sun.

Zuko glared at the ground –ice to be specific- with a type of contempt. True, he knew that his current situation was ill-conceived, but how could he plan ahead? All he saw was his prison of furs and ice. He hadn’t seen the halls, the neighboring rooms, or even a window to get an idea of the outline of the structure he was in. So the farthest he got in a plan was to knock out the guards silently during the night, and then he would stick to the shadows until he got to the docks. He could commandeer a boat – with a sail he noted- from there and hopefully find Uncle. Though he would settle for just plain, old land at first. He could always set up a camp and send his caretaker a messenger hawk.

Yes, it was a weak plan, pathetically so, but he had to try something. He found himself actually looking forward to Pakku’s visits, because anything was better than the echoing silence of his two guardsmen, even though the old water-bender was insufferable and needed a few burn wounds. Zuko had never realized how much he relied on Iroh’s company and voice until now. Uncle was his conscious it seemed. He was a enrooted part of the young man’s mental health with his constant meanderings be it in training, collective knowledge, how to live a good life, or things as simple as trying to force tea down his throat.

Zuko closed his eyes for a minute, trying to gather his inner strength.

He needed to do this, now. It had only been about two weeks and he was already forgetting things. What did the cook’s broths taste like instead of the strange mix that the water-benders offered him? What did the metal feel like under his shoes unlike the constant cold of ice? What did the silk uniforms he once wore feel like compared to the parka he had reluctantly accepted? Was there ever
really the smell of teas, burning charcoal and metal? What was the smell of his pillows? How bright was the red of his nation’s flags? What color of gold were Uncle’s eyes? What was his smell? Was it more like meditation candles or tea?

The teenager slowly opened his eyes as a thought struck him. *Was this what it was like to have someone die?* He recalled feeling this sorrow when his mother abandoned him, but he had been kept so busy with training and his sister’s sudden aggression that he hadn’t had time to think on his mother. He hadn’t had time to notice that her smell had faded from his sheet as she would always sit on them at night. The only place where her smell remained was in her closet where young Zuko would sneak and press his nose into her dresses to collect her scent. That is, until her dresses were removed.

He still didn’t know where they had been stored in the endless nooks and catacombs of the palace.

He could not do that here though. Even if Uncle had died, on the ship, he could have made one of Iroh’s favorite teas to call up the memory of him. Not here. Everything of his old life seemed stripped of him. He couldn’t even have his old clothes back and he doubted he’d ever see his dagger again.

Shaking his head, Zuko knew this was not the time to be dwelling on losses. He’d be losing a lot more than trinkets if he didn’t pull this escape off. For one, he’d probably lose his warm room… being that his weapon of choice had been firewood. He didn’t kill either of the guards, but he was sure both would have a headache in the morning. Having a log thrown at your head had to be dreadfully unpleasant.

Taking in a breath, Zuko started to send heat into his feet and hands. He wasn’t going to make it to the other side of the ledge. He was going down one way or another so he was going to choose the one that had the higher probability of *not dying*. He wasn’t the world’s greatest climber, but even he knew falling from this height would be the death of him. He’d just make deep footholds in the ice as a way down. He probably would get to the bottom without much hindrance.

Taking in a calming breath he did a half jump off the ledge, feet slamming into the ice and instantaneously sending up a fog as he melted foot holes for his feet. Starting the long track down, Zuko made sure to breathe as he sent heat into his shoes. He only hoped he didn’t burn the soles out of these boots because, during one of his many failed escape attempts, he found out a disturbing truth about water tribesmen:

*For such bulky clothing, the tribesmen were rather fast runners. Luckily, that same clothing was rather flammable.*

Zuko usually was not the type of person to take pleasure in others’ suffering, it reminded him far too much of his sister, but he couldn’t help but smirk at the thought of watching his babysitters dance. It wasn’t that he was harmed by the guardsmen, but he was usually watched by a few irritating young men that had almost drove him insane during their dragging visits. There were these two in particular: Omu and Juku. Dumb and dumber, a matching pair of incompetence. Both easily ignited his temper and sometimes he found his temper flaring in childish yelling matches that were usually followed by brutal sparing episodes which ended with Zuko covered in ice one way or another.

He was getting sick of frost bite and those two’s cocky smiles after he was detained. Juku was the most childish, but Omu was far more irritating with his womanizing rants and bumptious smile. If he didn’t get out of here soon, Zuko was going to kill one of them.

Grumbling an insult under his breath, the prince’s pace grew faster as he moved. He didn’t feel
comfortable wandering around in the dark, not because his eyes weren’t as adapt to the dark as the water-benders, but because they had more power than him when the moon revealed her pale skin. He was weak without the sun.

His hands gripped with almost a frightened vengeance to his hand holds as he continued downward, a flicker of fear being drowned by determination. He was nearly halfway down when something warm suddenly dripped onto his face. Zuko nearly started, hands and feet threatening to slip from the sudden invasion of brief warmth in this usually cold land. Reasserting his grip, Zuko slowly reached up a hand to see what had dripped on him.

He pulled his fingers away seeing… red? Why red? Nearly black-red. Wait a moment …Was this blood?

The prince suddenly looked up, and his own blood nearly ran cold as if he had seen a spirit. There, at the top of the ledge, was a black dot, or a head to be more exact, staring down at him. He didn’t even have to think twice about whose head that was. It was the very head of the guard he had hit earlier with the block of wood, head wound still oozing. The fire-bender swallowed. Why hadn’t it been the tribesman and not the bender that had arisen?

The universe was mocking him. As if being the Avatar wasn’t joke enough.

Taking in a breath to gather his inner fire, Zuko watched as the bender suddenly hopped over the ledge and started sliding down the ice wall like some kind of gravity-defying ninja, a water whip forming behind him before he brought it forward with a grunt, like a snake lashing out.

Zuko only had one thought as he watched the whip grow closer. He wondered if he was still too high up to jump. Probably, but he was known for his bad choices more than his good ones.

Lieutenant Jee stood in the doorway which led to the deck. He had come up there to see the blackened sky and an old man. Iroh lately was neither a General in this air nor the apparently dangerous Dragon of the West. He was a man with deep and silent thoughts. It was as if someone had stolen the oxygen from the room when you were around him. A breed of guilt and a seed of sorrow like that of a dying man followed him. Nonetheless, Iroh still stood tall and still against the wind, his robes rising and falling with the breeze. The old man seemed more of the earth than of the flame, still in all of his emotions as he faced the moon.

It didn’t take a healer to diagnose what was wrong. Iroh had not smiled, not laughed since Zuko had been captured. The old man was lost within himself and no one had the courage to address the issue, far too full of dishonor from losing the young prince. It had been nearly two weeks since Zuko had been captured and all they did was sit and wait. Not a single rescue attempt had been made nor a call for help.

The crew didn’t know what to think and neither did the lieutenant. Should he be angry or empathetic? Was the Dragon of the West mourning or was he just as cold as his brother, making sure the weight that had carried him down these past few years was indeed gone. Maybe Iroh simply didn’t want the responsibility of being the Avatar’s confidant. Those questions and more were probably why Lieutenant Jee found his metal boots suddenly stalling a few feet behind the almost god-like figure, his arms folding behind his back.

There was a silence, a stillness. Jee did not want to disturb it or bring forth any forbidding tidings. He knew they needed answers though. At first he didn’t know what to say, a partial moon low in the horizon as the sun threatened to rise in a few hours. So he said what he wanted, despite
whatever the General’s true intentions were.

“We will find him.”

Iroh was silent so Jee, feeling apprehensive, took a few steps forward until he was leaning against the ship’s thick railing. Deciding to drop his professional air, he released a long sigh which turned into a cold mist, a cloud clinging to the air before it became nothing.

His tone was almost bitter, never daring to look into those gold orbs, “What are you waiting for Prince Iroh? We should be looking for Zuko. In fact, why did we even come here?”

Iroh sighed, giving the lotus tile one last mournful look before placing it up his sleeve and turning toward his underling, stature offering no hateful intent towards the insult. The elder’s words were crisp though as he spoke, the wind whistling between the two of them like a Styx river, “Prince Zuko needed closure for his newfound abilities…,” Iroh then turned his head toward the ocean, eyes settling in the direction Zuko was most likely located in, his tone soft and almost sad, “and a flame needs air in order to grow and prosper. I can only hope that Zuko has found air instead of only water.”

Jee squinted in the direction the older fire-bender was staring, the wind stinging his eyes. Then, as if there was a sign in the horizon translating the puzzling explanation, the lieutenant had to slowly shake his bandaged head, words filled with disbelief, “No… you can’t mean, but I thought…”

Not knowing what else to do, the lieutenant could only close his eyes as if pained, stating, “I always thought Prince Zuko’s search was fruitless, that he’d never find anything but bones.”

Shaking his head, his blood starting to warm in something akin to rage, Jee could not believe it.

Iroh merely continued, “The air has a way of getting through the smallest of cracks, falling under ice and between stones. Fire may devour air, but it can never steal it all without smothering itself.” Then, giving a mournful chuckle, Iroh smiled acting almost like his normal self as he added, “Besides, they were called the Air Nomads for a reason. The wind never stays only in one spot so you can never catch it all.”

Not sure when he had dug his nails into his palms, he released his fists and stared at his current commander with an expression of disbelief, asking, “But what if there are no Air Nomads in the North Pole? We can’t just leave him there. Even if he does need to learn air-bending.”

Iroh smiled grimly, gripped the lotus tile under his sleeves while praying he was right, “After all this time on the same ship with the young prince, you truly never realized just how relentless he can be, did you?”

Jee could only scowl. He knew far too well how willful the young fire-bender could be. Nothing, short of death, could stop him from regaining his honor. So if he truly wanted out of those ice walls. He was going to do that, one way or another.

…

That morning Arnook sat at the head table, talking softly to his wife as thin sun beams fell into the large room, the floor glinting like white gold. Such sunny days were rare. In fact, it was a lovely sunrise and one wouldn’t think that a single person persistently glaring at you would ruin it in an icy expanse like the North Pole.

Well, you would be wrong.
Giving up on his warm meal, Arnook put down his bone utensil and turned his head to stare at Pakku who looked like he had just sucked on a lemon. Giving a wan smile, the chieftain asked almost kindly, “Good morning, Master Pakku. You seem troubled this morning.”

Pakku’s frown increased, all humor gone, “Troubled? I spent all last night chasing that boy down. He actually managed to get a hold of a boat with sails this time despite being half crippled from jumping off a cliff!”

A small choking sound escaped the chieftain, though Pakku could tell that it was merely the other man trying not to laugh.

“That’s a nasty cough you have there,” stated Pakku dryly. “But I’m serious, Arnook. The Avatar is becoming more daring and increasingly agitated. He actually attacked his two night guardsmen last night. They both had to spend the night in the healers’ rooms after we caught him. Avatar Lee also seemed more spirited about using his fire-bending last night. I don’t think he’s anywhere agitated enough to go into the Avatar state, but his energy needs to be channeled more effectively before he actually manages to escape.”

Arnook suddenly became a little more serious, a hushed expression settling on his face. His expression was like the surface of still water, something unknown lurking below the surface. His eyes settled on Pakku and then as if reading all Pakku was and would ever be, he stated in an even tone, “You wish to train the Avatar before the air-benders? The Avatar will not be able to learn effectively. He does not yet understand the freedom of air so he will have no comprehension of the fluidity of water. He needs that knowledge. He will only harm himself or others if he trains out of the traditional order. A penguin cannot swim before all its feathers have grown in.”

Pakku didn’t flinch or even seem down trodden by the knowledge. Eyes becoming slits, he stated simply, “Then I’ll teach him to dodge. He can learn fluidity that way.”

Raising a brow as Pakku rose to leave, Chief Arnook said nothing. He merely looked at the ice floor, noting how the sun made the frozen water glimmer.

Chapter End Notes

Wooh, slight plot hole averted! It was brought to my attention that there was a plot hole in relation to Uncle having knowledge about water bending from the lighting technique; so I decided to fill that sucker in while adding some light to Uncle’s background as a military strategist as well as a little foreshadowing about the White Lotus Society. Also, before anyone starts to rant: no, I do not believe that every member knows each other, so he and Pakku have never met nor do they know every members real name. Furthermore, sorry about not updating for the last three weeks, but I had to go out of town for a temporary job and had little access to my computer and even less to the internet. Hope this chapter was a nice treat for all of you and I’ll see you next Monday.
(Revisions March 2015)
Zuko tried not to take a shaky breath or even twitch, but he was in a ridiculous amount of pain. Jumping the rest of the way down the ice-wall had not been one of his wisest moves. It was also not his most intellectual moment to deny the healer Pakku had brought in last night either. It wasn’t that he wasn’t injured –he was, but nothing life threatening- it was just that he did not like the feel of water wrapping around his ankle. It was wrong and revolting, water touching the lines of his chi. It threatened to drown his fire… and bring forth the water, water-bending.

He had felt it stir in his blood, his body dropping its usual warm setting. Even so, kicking the healer had not been his most noble moment and Pakku had made to remind him of that. After the middle age healer had huffed about evil fire-benders and left, the Master had stated simply that he needed to start learning his lessons the hard way: the first being what pain was. After making his cold declaration, Pakku -whom seemed more worn than usual- got up without another word leaving Zuko to suffer with his ill-decisions.

And so the prince had suffered the rest of the night with a partially healed ankle, sore rips, and a bruised shoulder from when he had slammed into the ice, rolling on it to ignore breaking his ankle from the landing. It had been a good move, but now it felt almost impossible to move his arm without feeling his entire spine was now in disarray. Maybe he had done more than bruised it.

Pushing off the thought, he sucked it up and ground his teeth as he took in a large breath, feeling an ache run down his entire body as if there was a bubble of air in his lung that would not dislodge. Yes, maybe it was best to desist in the escaping attempts for a few days.

Moaning as he tried to pull himself into a ball, Zuko agreed with his thoughts, “Maybe Uncle’s right about me needing to think ahead.”

…

A snowbird-fox cawed somewhere above in the sky, soaring away from the southern pole’s icy lands and towards the north, destination unknown to the two water tribe youths below its flight path. Katara stared upward at its cry for a brief moment while her brother, whom was on the other side of the small canoe, kept his eyes on the ocean’s waters with his spear held high. Looking back at her brother, the water-bender sighed and asked simply, “It’s been a while since we’ve seen Aa…”

“Shh, talky later. You’re scaring the fish,” stated the teenager as he peered over the edge of the boat.

Katara frowned at him, huffing as she turned her attention towards the water as well. This was their job now because there were no longer any men in the village to do things like fishing in the ice-floats. It was dangerous and most of the village was either mothers with young children, children too young to fish, or the elderly. So feeling obligated, especially since they were the chieftain’s children, Sokka and Katara found themselves doing the fishing more so than any of the other villagers. It had become a routine, really. Sokka considered himself a great fisher and hunter, so Katara got dragged along to make sure he didn’t get himself killed.

It was better than washing his socks, she supposed.
Focusing more intently on the water and trying to press off feelings of irritation, she noticed a fish in the waters below. It almost swam against the ship’s small hull in a mocking manner. There were no other water-benders in the South Pole besides her. So there was no one to appropriately teach her. She had to learn from trial and error.

Shrugging her shoulders and gaining a wry of a smile, she supposed today was as good as any to practice. Feeling the pull that always came when she called on her “water magic” as her brother so elegantly put it, she raised the fish out of the water in an orb of water.

An elated smile covered her face and she cried, “Sokka look!”

“Shh, Katara, you are going to scare it away,” complained the teenager as he rose his spear higher as he eyed his fish, paying no attention to his sister’s bending behind him. He was completely indisposed mentally at the moment as he purred, “Mmm, I can already smell it cooking.”

“But, Sokka,” she waved the water over her head. “I caught one!”

Yet, before either one could complete their current venture, there was a howl of wind and the next thing they both knew they heard a cry of ’wahoo’ from above. They had just enough time to look up, a blur jumping down from a neighboring ice-cliff. Both screamed. Katara lost her concentration causing her water orb to fall while Sokka threw his hands over his head, forgetting his current meaty victim. The ship nearly capsized as a weight slammed down onto it, wind nearly blowing the two of them out of the boat.

Neither one even had to open their eyes as they both replied simultaneously in slightly irritated tones, “Hi, Aang.”

The air-bender laughed - tints of yellow hanging out from beneath his blue tunic - as he sat down properly in the shifting boat as ripples ran away from the small vessel along with the fish. Looking from each of his close friends, the youth stated, “Hi, Katara. Hi, Sokka. What are you doing today?”

“Well, we were fishing,” grumbled Sokka as he turned to look properly at their companion.

“We’re? So you are done? Great! Well, then maybe you two would like…”

Katara put her hand up, looking around for a moment as if fire-benders were around the next glacier. Once she was satisfied, a worried expression covered her face, “Aang, did you use your air-bending to get down here?”

Aang gave her a strange look, before shrugging it off carelessly, chirping, “Of course, it would take all day to walk here and it would be impossible to…”

Interrupting him again, a slight rage glimmered in her eyes, “And what would have happened if one the elders saw or Yugato found out we knew about your bending? We’d never get to see you again.”

“Oh, what a shame would that be,” mumbled her brother as he grabbed a hold of an oar, knowing there’d be no more fishing with the walking hurricane in the boat. It was probably for the best though, the current was starting to pull them closer to the floating bodies of ice and there was a possibility they could all get crushed.

Not noting Sokka’s standard sarcastic jibe, the usually smiling face become downcast. It was true. Master Yugato had been deeply upset not to only find out that Aang had been sneaking off from his studies to play with the neighboring tribe children, but he had also risked revealing that he was an
air-bender. Doing so jeopardized not only their people but the water tribe as well. Aang knew this before hand, of course, so his visits were infrequent and rare: until he found out Katara was a water-bender.

She had no teacher, so he did the best to teacher her a few moves since water and air were both flowing elements. For some reason, it felt right like he should know water as well. True, his lessons were mostly useless, but it kept her practicing and it allowed him to be with her. He liked Katara. He really, really, liked Katara. He hadn’t really befriended her until about four years ago when he was old enough to sneak out, but he really adored her.

Now if only he could tell her.

Smiling at the thought that her attention was completely on him, he pushed away all worries and beamed, “Hey, guess what?”

“What?” said Katara, smiling sadly. She hated it when Aang ignored his problems, but Gran-Gran had stated in a story that air-benders were children of the wind for a reason. Nothing dragged it down. Air was weightless… most of the time. Nonetheless, she didn’t get to see the boy in the colder seasons due to the dangers of travel, even for air-benders, so it was nice to see their eccentric friend.

“Master Yugato is going to the North Pole and I’m going along,” burst out the youngest passenger, joy causing the air to ripple through all of their hair. He, of course, didn’t tell them that he hadn’t really been invited though.

Katara’s eyes widened instinctively, her own smile blooming like a water lily, “Really?! When? Why? Can I come?”

“Katara!” cried Sokka in disbelief. He knew his sister really wanted to learn water-magic, but to actually run away in some mad escapade? Dad had left them to take care of the village.

The girl suddenly looked a little ashamed, cheeks going red, “Uh, I mean, are you sure, Aang? Did he say so?”

Aang suddenly seemed a little sheepish, one hand going behind and rubbing his hood, revealing his arrow tattoo slightly. He shrugged his shoulders a little and softly admitted, “Well, no. He didn’t. It was just one of those feelings I get from time to time. I woke up this morning and just knew.”

The two water tribe children looked at each other. They both recalled Aang’s feeling. It was bizarre and almost on a spiritual level. Sometimes Aang just knew about things that were before his time. He knew of other nations and some of their beliefs, recalled historical figures that some of the village elders had never even heard of, and was strangely in tune with things to come. It was like someone or something was whispering in his ear, like words from the spirit world.

Though, one instance held high above the others.

One occurrence, about three years ago, Aang had what could only be called a vision. Not that that was the frightening part. It was his reaction afterwards. It started out with Aang sneaking into the village, looking for someone to play with. It didn’t take long to coax the other children into games and soon he was running around, laughing in the care-free manner that only Aang did. It was unnerving to see him fall into a dead stop. His smile melting as a terrified look covered his face, and then he suddenly screamed cupping his head. The sound reverberated over the entire village, stealing even the warmth from the fires with its echoing depth. Chief Haduko nearly tripped over Sokka in his rush to get out of the tent and see what was wrong, a bone club in hand. He had to
stall when he saw Aang curled up in the snow, hands over his face.

It took some prying and some fatherly intent, but the man managed to get Aang to sit up and look at him, one hand still over the child’s left eye as tears ran down his cheeks. The chieftain had merely thought that the boy had been poked in the eye so when he finally was able to pry the hand off of Aang’s face he had to pause, confused. He then asked what was the matter?

Aang could only state, blubbering and hiccupping, “He burned the older boy. He burned him despite how hard he begged.”

In the end, after questioning the child again and again about who this older boy was, Haduko had given up and took the weeping child home: even though it took about a day and a half to get there. It was always strange how their father never questions how Aang managed to always get to the village so easily.

Regardless, there were other things, words and actions, but that day still proved that there was something beyond normalcy about the boy with the arrow under his hair. The hair had long since been shaved off because Aang had said it was wrong, but the oddity that hung in the air about him was still there. It anything it was thicker, perhaps, like it was building up to something.

Sokka sighed, wagging his fingers as he stated, “Jeeze, Aang, aren’t you already weird enough? I mean you have freaky wind-magic, but feelings too? I thought…”

Before the younger boy could even deflate at Sokka’s words, Katara’s temper made itself known in glacier-shattering glory as she stood up in the boat, nearly yelling as the water rippled around the boat. “Don’t say that to him! He’s a wonderful air-bender, and we both know that his “freak” feelings have saved not only your life and mine, but dads as well when he warned him about that hunting trip.”

“What?! And how many times has he nearly gotten us killed on his crazy adventures? Remember the tiger-seals and the polar-moose? Yeah, nearly dying is what I call a good time!” yelled the brother as he rose to his feet as well, the boat starting to sway so that the air-bender could only clutch to the sides of the boat.

“Come on, guys, don’t fight,” whined the youngest passenger as he held on. “Please don’t fight. I-I’ll just go myself. I just wanted to say… bye. For some reason I have a feeling that I might not be coming back for a while.”

The two stopped immediately, Katara frowning before she gave a thoughtful look towards Aang. He could only return it. Part of him, upon meeting the girl, had fallen into those pools in her eyes. He had told her of the sky-bison and that he would one day take her to a water-bending Master. Unfortunately, the sky-bison and the air-benders whom shepherded them were supposed to be dead.

Not that he’d given up hope.

When Sokka was busy paddling back, the drama deflated, Aang shakily reached out a hand to try and grip Katara’s gloved hand, but she moved at the last moment to grab an oar to help her brother. Noticing Aang pull back his hand, she merely gave him a confused expression. Little did Aang know that as soon as he wandered off and Sokka slunk off to eat that Katara was going to keep his promise for him.
Pakku headed for the Avatar’s room, having just received his answer from Chief Arnook: he could teach the boy how to dodge. It was not the most basic or the most humane way to teach children how to water bend, but it was an affective lesson since sometimes bending made itself known during moments of stress and movement. Fending off two or more water-benders with nothing more than wit and fast toes was a perfect example of this movement. In fact, Pakku had grabbed two of his older students this morning, saying it was time to earn some extra credit. Now he found himself throwing a white fur door to the side as he stepped inside the Avatar’s confines, the two students at his flank.

Strangely, Avatar Lee was not sitting up, hell and spitfire ready. He was sleeping like a baby seal, tightly in a ball. Pakku’s bared teeth from his earlier rage slowly fell behind a growing frown, his brow rising. He gave the two guards in the room a look and they both shrugged, knowing the answer to the Master’s unasked question. Yes, it was strange that for once the fire-bender hadn’t risen with the sun, and no, they didn’t know why.

Trying not to become irritated by their uselessness, he walked forward and knelt down to properly examine the boy. Lee was indeed sleeping and not pretending. Warily reaching a hand forward for it was the first time he had actually touched the boy flesh to flesh, his bared teeth from his earlier rage slowly fell behind a growing frown, his brow rising. He gave the two guards in the room a look and they both shrugged, knowing the answer to the Master’s unasked question. Yes, it was strange that for once the fire-bender hadn’t risen with the sun, and no, they didn’t know why.

A smile crept on those wrinkled features at a sudden realization. The two guards were only allowed to share a wide-eyed expression before the next thing they knew a gasp was escaping the Avatar as the ice floor he was sleeping on suddenly turned into a pool below him, the young man sitting up and floundering in half soaked attire and bedding. Pakku couldn’t even blink before the young man was to his feet, dripping wet as he glared up at the slightly taller and older bender.

“What was that for?! Do you want to burn, old man,” growled Zuko, his irritable side crawling out full force as his hands became fists, smoke curling from his fists.

Pakku frowned, “It’s time someone taught you some manners, boy.”

Zuko wasn’t even allowed an outburst when he was suddenly all but hog wrestled by a pair of strong grips and suddenly dragged out of the room like a piece of meat. Pakku merely took a step to the side, a wicked smirk unmistakably devouring his features. Just hearing the Avatar make that squeak when he was dragged away filled him with a sense of gratification. He’d finally get to put that self-centered fire-bug in his place.

He was the Master and the Avatar was a student after all, his student.

With a grunt Zuko found himself released, causing him to fall to the icy ground. He immediately got up onto his knees, a growl in his throat that thankfully caused his two abductors to take an alarmed step backwards. He was in no mood for this today. Not only had he been dragged out of bed and was in pain, he was now wet and cold to boot. Though, as he stood up, fists throwing up steam as he glared at the two water-benders, all his hate suddenly dispersed away into the wind and he found his face turning, eyes blinking in disbelief.

He felt it on his skin. It was the sun and it was beating down on him.

A flame, which had felt like it had been dying for the past three weeks, suddenly flickered as it rekindled itself. He had needed to feel of the sun so badly. It was as if all the forlorn things that had happened to him in the past few weeks had suddenly faded away. He was warm and Agni was shining down on him.
Pakku stared at the back of the Avatar, having followed after his students a few yards after. It was a strange sight to behold. For one, he rarely got to see the back of the boy. Paranoid the boy was, he never turned his back to anyone if it could be helped.

Looking away from the dripping wet teenager -whom seemed to be staring at the sun to accomplish blindness-, Pakku focused his attention to his two students, asking, “How long has he been like that?”

The two students looked at each other, shrugged their shoulders and responding simply, “Since he came outside and saw the sun. It’s been a little creepy.”

The water Master continued to stand there, a faint breeze capturing the air and hauling thin clouds of loose snow over the ice. In fact, the air around the Avatar seemed to glisten, ice crystals hitting the light. It didn’t take a Master to know that the Avatar was conversing with his original base element, feeling it calm his soul. He had heard rumors that the most destructive thing to do to a fire bender was deny him the sun, and it seemed like there might be some truth to that rumor. It had only been a few weeks of being trapped in the palace and Lee was already acting like a sun-deprived plant, leaves reaching and growing in the direction of the sun. In fact, the Avatar had taken off his gloves, pale hands palm up as if to catch as much of the sunlight on his skin as possible.

The water-bender almost, almost, felt bad for what he was about to do. Then again, the boy had interrupted his sleeping patterns many a night, mocking the moon with his nightly races. When Pakku shifted his stance and threw a wave of water in the Avatar’s direction, he revealed a small hint of satisfaction as he hit the teenager on the left side of his body, sending the Avatar to his knees. A shocked look quickly covered Lee’s face and the glisten was now gone from his eyes.

Slowly. Lee turned his head, a frown forming as a familiar rage glimmered in his eyes.

It was the first time anyone had seen the teenager touch his scar, a thousand expressions gleaming in that face, but it so fast it seemed that he had made no expressions at all.

Rage still behind those eyes, Zuko slowly stood and turned towards the water Master, lip twitching as water dripped down his form once again. His tone seemed to melt ice, the peace he had acquired from meeting the sun after so long now gone as he spoke, “What was that for?!”

Pakku smiled again, stating, “To teach you a lesson. You will start learning water-bending today.”

A look of utmost horror seemed to fill the boy’s face, eyes going wide.

The Master continued in an unassailable tone despite the sudden tightened stance the Avatar took, “And since you do not fully comprehend the fluidity of water without wind to first show you, I will train you with the most basic step of water-bending that even a fire-bender should be able to comprehend: movement or simply how to dodge.”

Zuko stiffened, but said nothing, his glare unfailing.

“In this way you will also learn of the fluidity and the flexibility of your own body. Water is both of these things, and you are water, just as are all living things. Now move, boy!”

With immense satisfaction, Pakku shifted into a kata and struck out, his two students following suit. The courtyard of ice suddenly becoming a battlefield of sorts, collections of water and ice propelling at the moving target. Zuko, far to use to field training that required quick feet and a hot temper, fell into stance despite the pain in his ankle. He would not be this man’s student. If he
would be anyone’s, he would be Uncle’s. That didn’t mean he’d just stand and take the abuse. He was banished and the Avatar, but he was still a fighter. An old man and his two half-pint sidekicks would not stain what little honor he had left.

Jumping off of a melting part of the courtyard’s ground, the prince readied himself to counterattack and scorch off some parka’s as well as some flesh, but just as a flame shot forward in rather violent display, a column of ice suddenly rose out of the ground, Zuko’s flames hitting the ice and making his attack meaningless.

Despite himself, his rage flared

“Take this as another part of your lesson, Lee,” said Pakku in that same pompous tone as he walked through the steam and before the boy. “Most of the world is water. Water flows everywhere. It is beneath the ground, it is in the air. It gives life … and it can also take it away.”

Fury fueling his fire, Zuko struck out again and yet another column rose. This one was decorated with the mocking expression of a masked face with a tongue hanging out. One of the students suddenly laughing to Pakku’s left.

Pakku even allowed himself a smirk at Zuko’s expense as he added, “Be careful not to let it make a mockery of you, boy."

Making sure to melt the ice sculpture off the column, destroying the laughing expression, Zuko turned his attention towards the youth. He’d rather attack Pakku, but he’d much rather wipe that smug expression off the other teenager’s face. He didn’t get more than two steps though when he all but ran into another rising column, nearly falling to his buttocks in an embarrassing display.

Pakku again.

“Now, I will leave you to my students Oma and Rakku. I’ll be back when I feel the lesson is learned. I will not be surprised if you are here for the rest of the day, Lee,” stated Pakku simply before he turned, the two students sliding into place.

Pakku merely listened to the Avatar curse as he walked away, a frown forming as he drew farther from the battle. He barely had time to notice the flaw, but he had still seen it and it was troubling. So much so that he didn’t even take time to greet the other Master who slid across the training grounds, having been with his own students a few moments ago, leaving them to watch the Avatar’s dodging game.

“That was short? I thought you, personally, were going to beat him into the ice all day?” stated Jayendra as he gave up on his ice skating in order to take up a walking pace. “What? Too much for you to handle? I’ll take him if you don’t want him. Always wanted to train an almost god-like being, especially one that seems set on turning everyone he sees into toast.”

Shrugging off the need to play the other Master’s mind games, Pakku stopped in his trek to watch the Avatar carefully like an ice-hawk, trying to see which side the boy favored and how well he dodged each attack. The teenager seemed to be favoring his right, attacking the small hoard of cheering students watching on the sidelines until Omu got a hit in from the left.

Looking away and continuing on his former path, Pakku stated, “I have a … concern.”

“What? That he won’t learn? Too much fire in that boy? Does he needs to learn how to move hot air before he can heat water,” grinned the cocky Master. “He probably is a terrible tea maker anyway.”
Pakku kept a straight face despite the other’s quip, a bitterness climbing to the surface. “He’ll learn, but what worries me is that scar. I fear it did something more than ruin his good looks.”

Jayendra, catching on quickly, frowned as well. “That would be a problem, especially for an Avatar. Can the healers fix an injury that old?”

Watching Lee take a nasty swipe at one of the students - whom fell down only to recover with a quick spin – Pakku wanted to dissuade such worries. It was an impressive move, but not as impressive as the Avatar’s recovery. Maybe Lee wasn’t completely blind in that eye after all. Either way, he’d ask a healer about it.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry guys, I’ve been a bit exhausted. Work has been … troubling … so I took a break. Plus, I had to play Okami the whole way through. Love that game, should have played it sooner, too bad it took me about forty hours. Also, the scene with Aang is a bit choppy in the time sequence of things. I was meaning to write an Aang scene sooner but I couldn’t think of how to jump the gap from the last scene with him. Anyway, I hope I got Sokka’s and Katara's character's alright. Sokka’s still sarcastic and a meat lover while Katara tries to be understanding yet just a bit temperamental. (Revisions March 2015)
The temple was in a buzz. Old Masters were wandering about in yellow robes instead of blue and excitement and hope filled the halls overall. Air needs freedom or it becomes stagnant, and it was easy to say that that very thing had occurred, dulling the lighthearted antics of the people of the air. Some even wondered if they could be called air nomads anymore for they were no longer free to wander as nomads were supposed to. They were trapped here like air-bubbles under the ice. It would take a few years, there was no deny that, but the new Avatar offered them freedom.

Aang did not carry the same joyous poise the rest of the ice-temple did though.

He was dragging his feet down the halls, his blue attire half hanging on his form as he slowly pulled the parka off, the pieces cascading to the floor. No one, captured by their own coming bliss, noticed his down trodden features. He felt as if he had lost himself, lied to himself. He said that he would not be coming back for a while, but the truth was he didn’t know if he would be coming back at all. Whatever was calling him was going to keep him. He doubted he would come back in time to win her heart.

He most likely was going to lose Katara, but he had to fulfill this fate. At least he got to say goodbye.

Giving one more forlorn look around the ice temple, Aang headed back to his room. He had everything he needed packed which wasn’t much: some food, water, a few extra cloths, a bison whistle, and his glider. He just needed to grab those things. He didn’t even bother saying ‘hi’ to the few other kids zooming by on their air-balls. Aang merely walked passed each smiling face, keeping his breath shallow until he entered his room with a stiff ease, picking up his bag and staff.

There was no coming back. A part of him just knew.

A sad sigh escaped him and he gave his room a parting glance before he turned around towards the yellow-fabric door. He promised not to look back as he rushed outside… only to run into someone, stopping him in his retreat. A grunt escaping the air bender as his butt hit the ice floor below. Aang was quick to apologize, giving a false grin as he stated, “Sorry about that. I wasn’t watching where I was…”

“Where’s my sister, Aang?” demanded a familiar voice that seemed to creak with maturing age.

Aang knew who it was before he even looked up and met those stone-blue eyes that seemed to have stolen their very color from the sea. Said eyes were presently reflecting the rage of the ocean as well with all her storm-brought fury. Swallowing, his small Adams apple bobbing, the air bender floated to his feet and before Sokka could even cry ‘hey’ he was pushed into Aang’s room, the younger boy giving one paranoid look to the halls before he scampered back into the room as well, blocking the doorway as if to keep someone out more than in.

“What are you doing here? How did you even get here?” cried Aang as he broke out into a cold sweat. If he got into trouble right now he’d be punished with exercises, and he would never get to sneak into Appa’s saddle-bags and go with Master Yugato.

“I walked all the way here after I found out my sister was missing! She’s not going to the North
Aang, she’s staying right here with me until dad returns. Then he can decide where and if she learns water magic, not you,” stated the older boy, knowing that his father had been considering what to do about Katara’s abilities before he left. Sokka understood that his father wanted Katara to learn – it’s what their mother would have wanted - but they also had to look out for the best of the village.

A water-bender would bring raiders.

Katara likely was the one to have brought raiders last time, and their village had suffered for it. Their family in particular. Not that Sokka or anyone else would ever dream of blaming their mother’s death on the young bender. Water stuck together, flowed together, moved as one. It did not turn on its own especially not about something that would defile his mother’s loving sacrifice.

Aang, after his eyes stopped shifting like a scared little squirrel-mouse, turned to the elder brother and wilted slightly, biting his lip as he whispered, “And what if your dad doesn’t come back?”

The water tribesman’s mouth fell open slightly as if he had just been punch in the stomach. Aang was quick to catch on, stumbling to the other boy with quickened words, “Not that anything bad is going to happen to him. It’s just that … we don’t know when he’s coming back. He could take years.”

Sokka’s face reflected a slight distraught expression before he straightened up and stated, “He’s coming back soon, until then Katara is my responsibility because I am the oldest.” Pushing off the sorrow in his voice, Sokka quickly tried to take on a more demanding tone as he pointed a finger into the air-bender’s face, “Now tell me where she is.”

Waving his hands in a surrendering expression, Aang’s voice squeaked, “But I don’t know where she is, honest. I left you guys at the canoe, and I haven’t seen her since,” then, just as quickly, he started to beam, “Why, is she here?”

Sokka stared at the hopeful air-bender for a moment, his bottom lip puckered out as he dwelled on his thoughts before stating, “Don’t lie to me, air-boy!”

“What! I’m a monk. I’m not going to…”

“Don’t try to trick me with your filthy monk lies!” griped Sokka as he pointed defiantly at the monk before he poked him in the head a few times, Aang crying out and trying to push away the defying hand.

“Stop poking me and monks don’t lie,” whined Aang as he looked back at the fabric covered door, worry crawling down his frame. All this yelling was going to attract someone.

“Please, you’re spreading your monk lies right now. Now where is she? Is she under the bed,” demanded Sokka as he walked over to the simplistic bed that looked like a block of ice with a blanket draped over it, a small hole underneath probably for storage. The room wasn’t much so the extra room was probably appreciated. Sokka wasted no time getting to his knees and throwing up the sheet that hung over it. A gasped escaped him and Aang -thinking it was Katara- peaked over the elder boy’s shoulder hoping for it to be the girl. Instead, he merely got a confused look from Sokka as the boy pointed at the small black and white mass.

“Aang… why is there a penguin under your bed?”

Watching the penguin as it squeaked and started to waddle towards the door, the air bender shrugged his shoulders and stated, “I don’t know.”
The two watched the penguin for a moment more in a quiet curiosity until it slid under the fabric door. Then, looking back at the younger boy, Sokka grumbled, “Do you even know where my sister is?

Aang shook his head.

“Is she even here, in this ice … palace? I never knew you guy’s had an ice palace.”

Aang shrugged and then added in a modest voice, “It’s a temple actually… and you’re not supposed to be here. No one but the air nomads are supposed to know about this place. How did you get in any way past the front entrance, and what makes you so sure Katara’s here.”

Sokka stood up and pointed at himself with an arrogant grin, “Please, I’m the village’s greatest tracker. I merely tracked you and Katara’s footprints in the snow. It was easy to get here. Now let’s go find her.”

Aang merely gave him a weird look before giving a yip when the stronger male grabbed him by his thin wrist and started to drag him towards the exit. The younger boy started to stutter as he struggled, dragging his heals into the ground.

“Wait! Wait! You can’t just start to run through the temple. I’ll get into trouble! We’ll get into trouble,” stated Aang as he struggled against the other wondering if he should use his breath to throw them both against the wall. The question in his head was quickly answered when he watched a pale hand suddenly start to push away the fabric of his door to the side. Not knowing what else to do, he quickly made an air-ball and shoved it up the water tribesman’s shirt causing Sokka to screech and float up to the ceiling.

An older man with the beard peeked in with a confused expression on his face as he looked inside the room, his yellow robes shifting as he stalled, “Aang, is something the matter? I just heard a ruckus.”

Knowing that the ball wasn’t going to last long, especially if Sokka started struggling, Aang smiled guiltily and skipped forward, nudging the older man out of the room. He then smiled nonchalantly as he blocked his doorway, the fabric falling back down, “Master Mungi, what bring you to, uh, my room?”

The Master gave a tired smile and slowly pulled his hands out of his sleeves to point down the hall as a penguin waddled past a small gawking audience. Not knowing what else to do, the youth laughed in a guilty manner and rubbed the back of his head, “Well, it was… under my bed.”

The Master gained a confused expression though he quickly wore a fatigued smiled, his voice airy and tired like there was dust in his lungs, “Now Aang. I know you have a strange love of … riding … animals, but you do recall what Master Ingu said if we caught you bringing animals into the temple again?”

Aang’s mouth opened and then closed. He … was a dead man. Ingu said he would take Aang on for higher level lessons and spiritual enrichment so the boy wouldn’t have so much free time for bizarre hobbies. Aang didn’t want to start training to become a Master. He wasn’t even an adult yet like when most students started training to be Masters. Most adults stopped being fun. He couldn’t stop being fun, not yet. He had to make the boy with the scar on his face smile. At least once. He had had arcane dreams of the older boy nearly his entire life and they were always of pain or suffering. The older boy had never seemed happy. He’d never make the scarred boy laugh and grin if he was trapped here, training.
Choking on his tongue, Aang struggled to think of something to say, some distraction.

Luckily, or perhaps unluckily, another scream echoed down the hall – likely someone tripping on a penguin - just as a thud filled Aang’s room taking attention away from the current circumstances. Unfortunately, the thud was most likely Sokka falling to the floor … and everyone turned to look when a groan escaped Aang’s room. All and all, Sokka had had good float time, but it wasn’t long enough. Dodging in front of the fabric door as if taking a bullet as everyone turned to look, Aang put on his fictitious smile once more giving a dry laugh as he waved his hands, “Must have been something falling off the wall. I’ll go check that out.”

With that said Aang dived into the room, leaving the old bender standing there with a frown. Mungi had wanted to bring up spiritual communicating to the boy earlier due to the youth’s interesting abilities, but the situation hadn’t presented itself. Though, lately, Aang’s connection to the spirit world seemed strained for the child was more anxious than usual. His actions just now proved to the Master just how stressed the youth was. It worried him, because it likely meant something was stirring in the spirit world, and it probably had something to do with the Avatar’s discovery. There was time though. It wasn’t as if the child was going anywhere. Now, what was he going to do about that penguin? Perhaps after some tea with Master Ingu he’d deal with it. Ingu had wanted to take Aang under his wing for a while now, and it seemed that time was finally upon them if Aang’s spiritual abilities were starting to peak.

He hoped Aang handled the life well.

Meanwhile, inside the small room, a sigh escaped Aang as the old Master walked away towards the animal. Letting his peek-hole fall away in a swish of fabric, Aang turned towards Sokka who was now standing up and rubbing his butt as he mumbled to himself.

Turning towards the perpetrator of his suffering, Sokka gave a slight death glare and stated in a soft growl, “You didn’t have to air-magic me, Aang. Now help me find my sister, or I’ll step out there right now and reveal my bruised ass to everyone!”

Aang… could only sigh in defeat, grabbing his staff and bag. He would hopefully have time to help Sokka and ignore the Masters. He was so going to have that penguin incident come back and haunt him, even though he didn’t recall how it had even gotten there!

Ten minutes later and one badly disguised Sokka later the two of them were slowly making their way down the halls, dodging and diving in the shadows like two Dai Li impersonators. So far they had hit the bathing rooms, the kitchen, the holy-text library, the bathing rooms again, and were presently meandering about in the Masters’ private quarters.

“I’m telling you Katara would be near the bathing rooms. She likes water and things that go swish so it makes…”

Sokka didn’t even get to finish his train of thought when he was suddenly pulled into a corner, Aang slapping a hand over the other’s mouth. A fabric hanging door was slowly pulled open and in stepped Master Yugato along with two of the temple’s elders.

“Are you sure you are prepared for the trip? It will take a little over a month to get there if you don’t make too many unneeded stops and fly at night. Staying out of sight may hinder you slightly, but I believe you are completely capable of remaining unseen. It isn’t the first time you’ve wandered the outside world.”

A stiffness pulled at Yugato’s shoulders as he bowed his bald head.
The older master smiled sadly, “Enlightenment may not be in this lifetime for your, but you will be able to realize the fate of the Avatar. A will that reins over ours for it is the balance of the world.”

Yugato nodded, pulling a bag over his shoulder with the few goods he was taking from his quarters. “I know, and it’s a fate I accept. I will train the Avatar, and I will help return balance… and us to our homes in the sky.”

Slowly pulling his parka hood over his head to cover his tattoo, Yugato stated, “Is the bison ready for the journey as well?”

“Yes.”

Aang’s hand slowly slid away from Sokka’s mouth, not even minding the spit that was dripping down his hand. He wanted to look for Katara, he wanted to help Sokka, but he knew he had to go with Yugato. Every bone in his body was screaming at him, the wind was pushing at his back, and he had to get moving… Even if he had to lie to Sokka.

He felt a little sick due to the mere thought.

Turning to face the older boy, Aang tried not to bite his lip as he murmured, “I’m sure I know where she is.”

Not even given a choice, Sokka was then grabbed by the younger boy and all but dragged to the next area. Sokka did note that this time Aang paid little mind to the fact that people were in the halls. He even hopped over one or two people with nothing but an ‘excuse me’. One might have found it comical, even sad, that now there was no paranoid pussyfooting going on. And actually, they were receiving little attention. Apparently, Aang acting hyperactively-erratic was a norm here which Sokka figured was fine since it took only a few minutes to get to their new destination, and Sokka couldn’t help but gasp when they entered the bison chamber.

True, the room was immense and echoing like a great cave, holding secrets where the sun could not reach. Though Aang had a feeling that wasn’t what Sokka was impressed with when the older boy’s mouth started watering.

“Wow, look at the size of these bison. Think of all the meat!”

Aang nearly fell to the ground in shock and before he could stop himself he had ran in front of Sokka with his arms spread wide like some kind of spindly barrier, “What?! You can’t eat them! They are peaceful creatures. Rarer almost as dragons!”

Sokka already had his boomerang out, sighing as he dropped his battle pose.

“Oh come on. You got that excuse from my sister, didn’t you?” stated the water tribesman, his voice suddenly taking on a girly squeak as he fluttered his eyelashes. “Oh Sokka, you can’t kill that poor seal-otter they’re almost as rare as dragons. Oh brother, you can’t kill that polar-antelope they’re almost as rare as dragons. Not that mouse-bird, they’re almost…”

“I don’t sound like that!” suddenly echoed an enraged, feminine voice.

The two bickering boys suddenly stopped, Sokka’s lips still forming his next words though his tongue chose not to follow through, making a whistling noise before he was able to sputter, “Katara?!”

There was a long dragging nothingness, the only sound was of the bison breathing, until Sokka sighed, stating, “You are not leaving with Aang, Katara. Now come out.”
Another dragging silence carried on before a very defiant reply was heard, “No, I’m going to the Northern Water Tribe, and no one is going to stop me.”

“What?!” sputtered Sokka. “Come out right now. We promised to protect the village while dad and the other men were away. If we don’t come back the village will think we drowned and died… or worse, abandoned the tribe!”

There was a silence, dripping with her brother’s words. A truth. Her words were almost too soft to hear, “You made that promise Sokka, not me. You promised that to dad. I need to learn water-bending or I fear I may go mad. I need this. I’m old enough that you don’t need to babysit me anymore.”

Sokka looked stunned for a moment before his eyebrows creased and his voice shook with a type of rage, “Don’t you dare try to push me off so you can learn water-magic. It’s not babysitting. It’s an obligation to protect my little sister, and the only madness I see right now is your stupidity to go to a land you know nothing about!”

“I will learn, Sokka. I’m going,” demanded the girl, her voice causing Sokka’s head to turn towards her and the bison she was currently on. Katara tried to duck at the last moment, but she was sure that her eyes glinting at him from atop the beast and its fully packed saddle. Noticing that she had been detected, she silently cursed herself and ducked back down as if her hiding place hadn’t been compromised.

Sokka glared at the large beast and started walking up to it and its passenger; the bison by the name of Appa turned slightly at the enraged boy as the human all but yelled, “Get down right now!”

“I can’t! I need to learn, Sokka,” came a muffled reply from the bundle on the saddle.

“What,” squawked Sokka as he took a step back, his hands becoming fists. He was about to yell again when he suddenly heard voices echo down the hall. His eyes became slits. He knew that voice… it belonged to the man from the quarters, Yugato. He was getting ready to leave on his trip with his bison… the bison Katara was probably on. An anxiousness settled into his bones, because Sokka knew Yugato. The man would sometimes show up and carry Aang back home. He was kind like most air-bender’s, but he was not like other air-benders either. There was this ache in his eyes as if he had seen the shivering depths of the ocean and all the drowned souls below it. It secretly frightened him.

Shaking off the fear he had of the large animal, Sokka headed for its side, grasping the fur with his hands. Grunting, he started to pull himself up, but the bison suddenly shifted nearly making the boy fall off. A dry yelp escaped the teenager as he struggled to hold on. Yet, his worry of falling dripped away into nothingness when he noticed that the voices were closer… and that distraction was all it took for him to fall, the water tribe boy suddenly crying out as his head smacked against the ice flooring.

The drape over the bison’s goods was immediately thrown up as if a curtain was being thrust to the side, the next act of the play being revealed, a light raining down on the introducing character as if she or he was the only thing that existed in the world. And to Aang that was true. Katara always seemed to be on his center stage, pulling his thoughts away from all his oddities and nightmares of a lost boy with a scar around his eye.

Katara could only shift her head and give her audience a worried gaze before she slid down the bison’s side, her boots making a slapping noise as she hit the floor. Her steps were heedless of the ice as she leaned down to her brother’s side and his motionless form. She immediately lifted his
head into her lap to look for blood. Her worry were immediately replaced with a slightly relieved look as she whispered, “Thank the moon and ocean for his thick skull.”

Aang, not knowing what else to do, stood over the two as he chirped, “Is he okay? That thunk was pretty loud.”

Katara gave him an apologetic smile, patting her brother’s hair as she stated, “Yeah, just knocked himself out cold. Now help me get him up into the bison before your Master shows up.”

The girl had to stall though as Aang continued to gape at her as she struggled to lift her brother up by his arm pits, her brow rising as she asked, “Well, you coming or what? This is the bison they are taking to the North Pole and from what I overheard… nobody was invited.”

Aang blushed slightly as he pulled his bag gingerly over his shoulder.

“So do you want to stowaway with me or are you just going to stand there?” grinned Katara, her rare mischievous side showing as she tried to drag her drooling brother up the side of the bison.

Rubbing the back of his head, Aang grinned in embarrassment and looked at Sokka’s prone body. “What about Sokka though? He didn’t want us to go, and I doubt he wanted to come with us.”

Her wicked side peaked for a moment and she stated almost wickedly, “He said I was his responsibility. Plus, Yugato might notice something’s up if he finds my unconscious brother on the floor.”

Aang nodded almost energetically as he heard footsteps coming their way. He just hoped Sokka didn’t give them away. He talked in his sleep.

…

Iroh wasn’t sure how he had made his way here, this room in particular. He had been all but ignoring it, especially since a feeling of deep regret would rise in his chest from even staring at the door. Zuko’s door. Yet, today, he found himself wandering aimlessly like a man whose death sentence was set, and he had nothing left to do but roam around in his memories that had been.

The General quickly found himself merely sitting there at the foot of Zuko’s bed, one hand raised just inches above the sheets like he was reaching for something, something that wasn’t there.

His old heart was burdened today like his inner flame was now trying to burn off of heavy wood, struggling to keep burning. It had been over a month since Zuko was taken and they were growing low on supplies, but at least the men had shown where their loyalties truly laid. They cared more about the young prince than any of them cared to admit, and a mutiny would soon be upon them if something was not done to rescue the captured prince. And Iroh, when the time came because it would, was half tempted to join them.

He didn’t know how much longer he could wait for Zuko to find himself an air-bending Master, because Iroh knew that he could never teach the boy an art that was meant to be dead. He just had to watch the skies and soon he would see his nephew when it seemed the boy had learned air bending adequately enough to escape or secured a Master that would follow him in his journey.

… If the men didn’t react too soon.

Their patience wasn’t as waning, especially since they didn’t know what they were waiting for. But wait they had to. Iroh even had to. The Avatar had bowed to him, asked him in its silence to be a mediator to Zuko. There were no words needed for that request. And so, when entrusted with so
much responsibility, one must make hard choices: like making sure Zuko learned air-bending.

“Prince Iroh?”

Hearing his title, the old Master suddenly pulled his hand back toward himself, frowning as a young head popped itself into the room, wild hair sticking every which way. It was the ship’s youngest crew member, Shen. He was the youngest member on board, except Zuko. Iroh had actually requested such a fire-bender so Zuko would have someone equal in skill to practice with. Shen, it seemed, got more out of Zuko’s lessons than the young prince did, truthfully. Nonetheless, he was a good soldier and did his best to be kind to Zuko without making the prince feel as if he were being belittled. If Zuko had been born a soldier instead of a prince Iroh was sure the two of them would have been close friends. A prince with no honor seemed unable to have such things, or so Zuko led himself to believe.

Nodding, Iroh asked, “Come in, Shen. I do believe you have sought me out when alone because you have something you wish only me to hear?”

Before the older bender could even twitch, the younger man was across the room and on his knees bowing his brow all the way to the floor as he begged, “Please, brother of Fire Lord Ozai, forgive me for the treachery that I have been planning and will soon act on. I cannot stand idly by any longer and watch you and the crew fall into despair. I know it is wrong and even criminal for us to show the Avatar anything but abhorrence, but I cannot see Prince Zuko that way. He is, and forever will be, my prince and as a loyal Fire Nation soldier it is my duty to make sure he is safe. And he is not safe with those water-barbarians. So, for the past two weeks, I have been working on my own so that I may infiltrate the water tribesmen’s city, discover the prince’s whereabouts, and rescue him,” the young soldier then drew in a breath and then basically whispered, “… or at least make sure he has passed on from this world so we can move on with our own journeys.”

Iroh was still, his eyes squinting as if in thought or pained by the admission.

Shen took the other’s silence as a request to continue, “Please let it be known that none of the other crew members knew of my plan or contributed to it. They should not be punished or dishonored for the treachery I am about to commit towards the Fire Nation. Please promise me that they will not be blamed for my wrongs. I am sorry, Prince Iroh, but you must promise this to me before I go.”

Speechless was something Iroh rarely was. He was simply shocked. It seemed that his crew knew what he wanted more than he did. He wanted his nephew back, but he also wanted to fulfill his quest in acquiring guidance for the Avatar. Perhaps … he could have both. There were multitudes of water-benders in the world be they working at the docks of Ba Sing Se or in one of the Earth Kingdom’s great swamps. Air-benders were not so numerous, if at all, though he knew they couldn’t be an extinct breed. The rumors were far too numerous for the nomads to be truly gone. That was, after all, why he had allowed the water-tribe to have his honored nephew. But, the sad truth was, he knew that Zuko would have to remain there, in that place so far from his brethren, to learn air-bending.

It seemed that the crew and secretly he, himself, did not have that type of patience. Apparently, the prince’s impatience had rubbed off on them.

A sad smile slowly turned into something a little warmer, and he moved out a hand to grip the young soldier’s shoulder in a sign of support, “It is probably not best to ask forgiveness from me, Shen, for it seems I will be just as guilty. Now, let’s head to my room for some relaxing tea and to speak of your plans. I think that it is best if I contribute.”

The old man then rose, placing his hands behind his back. The shame he had felt when he had
originally set foot in the room was now burned away and replaced with a warm flame of hope. Soon this room would be occupied once again… and hopefully they would have a long term guest as well. Wind was a hard thing to capture, but not impossible.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the wait, my computer broke and I was without its love for nearly a month. Anyway, this chapter was supposed to be about Zuko and his medical nightmare but I lost most of that chapter to a computer error so I have to retype that for the next chapter.
(Revisions March 2015)
Unwanted Passengers

Yugato wasn't very good at it, but he thought the current situation called for such behavior along with an irritated tap from his foot just for good measure. He doubted that the glare was effective though with the way Aang seemed to be looking around their current terrain like an overactive weasel-bat instead of at him. The two water tribe children seemed even less effected: one still slightly dazed from being knocked out and the girl just seemed content with the dotting over her currently brain-dead brother.

"Children," growled their elder, pinching his nose bridge. "Explain to me again why you thought it was wise to not only come along with me on my mission but nearly get yourself killed when you scared me half to death while I was looking through the saddle bags? We were hundreds of feet in the air, above the clouds, if I had knocked one of you off who knows what would have happened."

Aang raised his hand halfway and stated in a confident tone, "I would have merely just used air bending to glide down."

"And what of Katara and Sokka!" added the man in an irritated tone, the wind rustling the dead leaves on the ground at his feet, the elder long since landed after the children nearly scared him to death. It was at times like this that Yugato realized just how much the world had touched him when he had been out looking for the Avatar as a much younger man… his patience was no longer that of a saint.

The youth jumped back with a 'ugh' noise while Katara winced… the water tribe boy merely drooled. Just how hard had the boy hit his head? Sighing and pinching his nose harder, Yugato waved his hand, stating, "Well, there's no use taking you back. We have been flying for nearly a day and I don't trust that Pakku fellow with the Av… with my assignment."

Yugato swallowed, glad the word Avatar hadn't escaped him. If they were captured or if he had decided to leave the children somewhere, it was best that they not know what was going on. Even the thick walls of the Northern Water Tribe wouldn't keep the Fire Nation Avatar safe if the Fire Nation found out about his existence.

Pushing such inner meditations aside, far to use to secrets and their hidden tidings, the Master huffed and caused the nearby trees that surrounded his emergency landing pad to shiver, pinecones dropping. A little calmer but still angry, he growled, "J-just go get some things to set up camp. It's nearly mid-day and the sky is clear. We will not be going anywhere for a while… though I should drag all of you back or at least discipline you with having to clean between Appa's toes."

The two mentally capable cringed, Sokka merely groaned and grabbed for his head, some sense seeming to slowly come back.

"Instead, for now, I want you to go and gather some wood for a fire and something to eat," he stated, almost giving a depressed sigh as he turned an eye towards Appa for a moment. The kids merely still stood there though, blinking in surprise as if asking… was that it? Nothing else? Not even a true punishment? Yugato, as if reading the two trouble makers' minds, pointed towards the surrounding woods as he hissed, "Now!"

Aang yipped and then stumbled towards the nearby shadows the trees were offering. Katara
swallowed, not liking the venom in the stoic character's voice and turned coat to run off, reaching for her brother's hands since he was still out of it. Yugato quickly grabbed the brain-dead boy first, placing a hand up in a stalling action, the girl sliding in the dirt from her sudden stopping.

"Let me look after your brother. He seems to have hit his head harder than you thought," he stated, responsibility overshadowing all his betrayed emotions. Troublesome kids, don't they know it's unwise to let someone sleep after hitting their head? Well, either way, the water tribesman was still alive so maybe he was just discombobulated but nonetheless, he was going to give the kid a good looking over.

"Sit, boy," whispered the elder, bald monk as he shooed the two others off with a stern glare.

Sokka merely grinned and suddenly threw himself forward in order to hug the man, "Okay dad but watch out … that flying mushroom doesn't look friendly."

Master Yugato gave a bored look in the direction the teenager pointed: Appa. Ugh, this wasn't good. Maybe there was brain damage… then again he might have always been a little weird. It was hard to tell with some water benders.

Aang, who was watching the elder air-bender start to try and pry the half-dazed Sokka off him, turned his eyes towards Katara and gave a nervous smirk, while puffing, "I was expecting worse."

Katara, hair loops falling into her eyes as they both started to jog away, gave him a worried look before stating, "I don't think he's through with us quite yet."

"So?" Yugato asked in such a smooth, thick voice, the children had to cringe as they ran back into camp; Aang's hands were full of wood and Katara carried what looked like a collection of root plants and a few fish on a string. He had to be surprised on her ingenuity on being able to fish so well without any real supplies… at least he hadn't seen her grab any that is. "Find everything?"

The two kids looked back at the man with his head shining in the sunlight and then their heavily piled hands. They both had agreed to bring enough to appease the Master yet he didn't seem to even note their hard work. They had to have been out there only twenty minutes and yet they came back with enough supplies to last at least two days. Though, both had to agree, that they were glad for the tundras near their homeland in order to know what to gather and they also had to agree… there was food everywhere. Finally, something besides sea prunes for a nice vegetable.

"I guess," finally stated Aang. Placing the wood down into a pile in what he guessed was the center of camp, three sleeping bags rolled out. It seemed there Master had decided to set up camp… though they were one sleeping bag short. Someone was going to have to curl up into Appa's fur tonight.

Katara placed her things down next, a few roots and nuts falling out of her coat which she had been using as a bag for food. She gave a nervous grin and placed four fish down next, presumably captured with her limited water bending skills because she did not have any hooks. Yugato couldn't help but notice she had already gutted them, so he said nothing when she started to set up the wood for a fire. Then, placing the fish on sticks, she grabbed some flint and started the fire. Yugato allowed the spark to become a flame before he started to speak.

"So," he stated causing the two youths to shiver as he finished wrapping Sokka's head with white gauze. "What exactly were you two hoping to accomplish by becoming stowaways? Really, I want to know what stupid idea you three had in your heads when you snuck into Appa's saddlebags?"
Shifting uncomfortably on the ground Aang, unable to take the piercing gaze of his elder suddenly exploded, his tongue moving so fast that Katara couldn't translated half the things he was saying as he spilled his guts.

"There was a dream and I knew you were leaving before anyone said so I figured it was a sign so I had to go and Katara wanted to learn water bending so bad that I had to invite her because you know what happens to benders that don't bend and I knew we were going to the North Pole so I asked her and then Sokka said no but she sneaked into the ice temple and onto Appa anyway and Sokka knocked himself out and you we coming so we all snuck out and now ... well, we're here," ended the boy as he took in a deep breath, ruffling everyone's cloths.

Yugato blinked, Katara blinked, and Sokka merely held his head as if his mind was spinning… which it probably was.

Yugato, personally, was upset. Aang should have told him or one of the Masters, any of the Masters, that he had had a vision or one of his feelings. The child had always been rather straight forward about his spiritual connection. Had he and the other Masters lost the youth's trust so that the boy no longer trusted them enough to share his troubles?

Katara, though unable to catch most of the garbled language, she caught one thing: you know what happens to benders that don't bend. What happens? She had never really been told anything… then again, there were no other benders around and no one ever seemed to deny her the right to bend… as long as no one was around.

Ignoring the worried look that had covered Katara's face, Yugato decided that there was no use sugar coating anything, "Aang... I'm disappointed in you for a number of reasons. I wish you would have told me of the feeling that was telling you to come." Mosty because it reveals your powers are related to the Avatar. "And for not concentrating on your studies as you have been instructed, because if you had you would know... that the Northern Water Tribe does not train female water benders."

Aang was to his feet before he could stop himself, howling, "B-but even girl benders have to learn!"

"And they do. Healing. That's all they are taught and that is all. It goes against their peoples' belief to teach women to fight," stated Yugato, not even giving Aang another glance as he turned his attention to the girl. She was still... the water before the dam breaks.

At a loss of what to do, Aang fell onto his behind. He couldn't look at the water bender, couldn't look up at her face with its round cheeks and deep eyes. He knew her eyes were just brimming with tears. He didn't have to look up to know that, her very hands were shaking on her lap like a leaf wishing to escape a tree limb to the wind. He had failed her. He had wanted her to learn bending and the Northern Water Tribe was supposed to offer that, a release for all her sorrows and tensions that were clutching to the outer layers of her beating heart.

Now there was nothing. He couldn't make her happy... would he ever be able to?

Yugato stopped Sokka from grabbing onto one of the fish and burning himself. He instead grabbed the end of the stick and used his air bending to cool the fish, slowly offering it to the boy. The boy was a little mentally challenged at the moment, but still liked his meat... just like his father.

Katara was the one who decided to break the silence, her voice threatening to break as she tried to speak, "T-then what am I going to do? I want to learn how to bend... like in Gran-Gran stories, not-not like some helpless midwife."
Yugato sat back, frowning. He couldn't take her back and he didn't believe in just abandoning her somewhere. There was one option though. He had heard a rumor about some water benders that weren't in either of the poles. Maybe he could do something, but first he had to ask someone who would know.

Offering a soft smile, he stated, "Don't give up hope yet my young bender. I know someone who may help us... on Kyoshi Island. Apparently, the island use to have a combination of both Water tribe and Earth Nation descendents."

The water bender immediately stalled the tears she was gathering and looked at him with those deep eyes.

"Wait," stated the elder bender as he noticed that two pairs of eyes were now on him, glimmering with hope. "Before you get your hopes up, I don't know if they have any water benders there at the moment, they send them away when their ability is identified, but I'm not sure where. We'll have to ask... if they'll tell us."

Aang was the first to get in his Master's face, the rare expression of rage in his face, "Why would they do that! What's wrong with being a bender!"

Yugato put up a hand, the light from the fire making his appearance seem angry though he was anything but, "Calm down, Aang. It is not uncommon to do such or even tell children to hide their abilities. Their village leader is just trying to keep the island neutral and ignored by the Fire Nation."

Frowning but certainly not enraged, the spiritual sensitive boy nodded and fell back on his bum in defeat, watching the fire dance.

"So," Katara was beaming with glee. "We are going to Kyoshi island and I'll get to learn water bending elsewhere!"

Smiling like a mad bobcat, Katara threw her arms around Aang's neck and cried in delight, "Isn't that wonderful, Aang!"

"Yeah, just wonderful," whispered Aang into her hair in a sober voice. She was supposed to explore the world with him and in that time he might have had the courage… might have had the will to say he really, really liked her.

Now he might never get the chance.

... Everyone had slept well despite the sun being overhead and hot compared to the weather all the members of the small fellowship were used to. Well, almost everyone. Aang had opted to sleep on Appa for the afternoon as they all got rested before setting out on their hijacked journey. He did not sleep though. He was upset and ashamed of himself in a number of ways. He was angry at his Master for making Katara go away. He had wanted her to be with him and now… now all he could do was think about how selfish he was for wanting to hold her back. She should get to learn water bending, that was her fate… and his was to meet the boy with the scar. And that was why, when everyone rose during the falling twilight that Aang still had not rested. He didn't want to dream of the boy with the scar and whatever it was that he was suppose to help him with.

He was angry at the boy with the scar because if it wasn't for him, Aang would have never wanted
to leave the South Pole and would have never planted the idea of Katara going the North Pole. They'd still be in there barren tundra, snowflakes tasting their faces. That wasn't the only reason he was angry at the nameless scarred boy either. One of the worst things had to be for making him different, for trapping him in some unwanted fate. Perhaps, he would not go to the boy… trick his Master into leaving him with Katara and Sokka until the elder was finished with his mission. Whatever that mission was…

And those were the types of thoughts that owned a usually optimistic boy's mind as they finished packing their goods and saddle back onto the bison, the huge beast soon leaping into the dark air like a feather to the wind.

The moon, with half her face hidden, fell into the background next to a field of dark blue clouds. Aang, who was leaning in the edge of the saddle, didn't seem to enjoy her gaze or her presence… he didn't really want anyone to notice him right now.

He barely even registered that Sokka had finally snapped out of whatever was wrong with him, a real meal and some sleep healed whatever was wrong with him. Figures that food would fix him. Unfortunately, he was now having a rather loud discussion with his sister and it wasn't of the pleasant type. Sokka felt as if his sister had degraded him as a warrior… kidnapping him and taking him away from his responsibilities.

Yugato had only interrupted long enough to assure the boy that he'd send a snow fox-bird to Sokka's villages so they'd know that the two siblings had neither abandoned their village nor died.

Didn't matter any in the end. Aang was still losing Katara… and Sokka as well. Air was rarely depressed, but when it was heavy… everyone could tell.

Yugato, who was sitting on Appa's head, sighed as he looked back over his shoulder. Shaking his head at the child's caprice mood, he turned slowly and asked, "Aang… come and sit up here with me."

Hearing his name, the child immediately perked up somewhat only to wilt as he caught the Master's gaze. Slowly, groaning about the inhumanity of it all, he got up and walked over towards the elder air bender, slumping next to him, with a pout.

Yugato offered a soft smile and stated, "Aang… about what you confessed yesterday. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't somewhat upset about the fact that you snuck onto Appa with two Water Tribe children as well. But what really bothers me is that you didn't tell me about the dream or one of the other Masters for that matter."

Aang twitched, looking away from his Master with a sigh of shame. He couldn't look up at the other, as he confessed, "I know Master Yugato. It's just that… I was worried that Master Ingu would finally make me start learning lessons in spiritual control and then I would be stuck becoming a Master at an early age and never… get to make the boy who has the scar on his face smile."

He couldn't help it, the elder looked utterly confused. What did learning spiritual control and enlightenment have to do with make people smile? Opening his mouth, he asked that, "Aang, I realize that you enjoy your games and such, but I hardly see what ignoring spiritual lessons have to do with sneaking on Appa."

Frown becoming a little angrier, frustration rising into the air, "I don't want to become boring like the other kids do when they become Masters! They stop laughing and playing with the penguins! They get all depressing and stop having fun." Admitted Aang exuberantly, only to soften his voice
and state, "If I'm no longer fun… how am I supposed to make the boy with the scar on his face smile? He's been so disheartened for so long… I don't know how he carries on like that. That's why I snuck onto Appa. I need to go to him. Help him."

Now that… was a confession. Thoughts racing, Yugato said the first thing that came to mind…

"So you're saying I'm unfun?" he asked, offering a soft grin. He had had a hard life since his journey around the world, but he still considered himself a monk and a good man; a good enough man still to relieve a child of some of his anxieties.

Aang sputtered, suddenly waving his arms in front of himself, "No, that's not what I meant. I mean, I thought… um."

Yugato offered him a larger smile, showing his canines before turning his gaze back to the night sky, talking in a warm tone, "It's okay, Aang. I know it wasn't meant to be an insult. But, I'm more worried about your reluctance in learning spiritual control and becoming a Master of it. It's something that you will have to do, Aang. A being with your abilities can not go to waste."

The boy seemed to wilt.

"But that does not mean you will not be you, Aang," quickly added the elder. "You may know more and be more mature due to lessons but only you decide if you shall continue to be fun or not."

A moment of silence hung in the air, but slowly a smile came to the boy's face as he asked, "So you've always been so uptight?"

His Master gave him almost a bored look before stating, "Yes, yes, I have."

It made him feel good to see the child then laugh, clutching his sides as his grin grew. No, Yugato had not always been so rigid. He had become that way over time. He was not the same person he had been. Aang would change as well, especially if he started giving the child spiritual lessons. The boy needed them, now. He would have to teach the Avatar so why not Aang at the same time? He had been wondering what to do with the strange air bender but it seemed he got his answer. The boy would be coming with him… but not the water tribe children. Aang had a journey and he needed to fulfill that...

The Master wished it was as simple as making a scarred boy smile, but nothing is ever that simple when it comes to the spirit world.

Looking away from the boy and the thoughts about his purpose in the world, Yugato squinted his eyes. Up in the distance there was the island of Kyoshi. He knew that Aang was attached to the girl and would probably want to drag this out, but they had to be quick about this… he was worried about the Avatar.

It would not fare well to have him trying to learn water bending before even comprehending the flexibility of air.

Looking back at the boy who had yet to notice the island in the distance, he focused in on the fact that there were circles under Aang’s eyes. He'd hate to be low about this, but if the boy was asleep this exchange would go smoothly. Placing a gentle hand onto the tired boy's head, he stated, "Child, lie down and get some rest, would you. Wish Sokka and Katara good night as well. Who knows what tomorrow may bring."

Giving his teacher a nod, the air bender headed back to the saddle and spoke with the two warring water children, making both of them smile before he fell into slumber, the wind playing with his
garments.

Yugato looked at the boy in the saddle one last time before covering him with a blanket. The bald child purred and smiled as he curled deeper into his own arms. The elder then turned his attention to the two Water Tribe children. Katara was frowning, her face flushed with rage and Sokka seemed slightly irritated as well, but he still held a very businesslike disposition.

"I still think it's wrong not to bring Aang with us! If we are going to the island we should have a proper goodbye!" hissed Katara as she puffed up, her hair loopies shaking as she threw a slight fit.

The elder bender merely placed a hand into the air, telling her to stall. The girl, though always spirited, went silent. The Master was still looking at the boy as if thinking; then rising to his feet with a rush of air he turned to the kids, grabbing a bag and flinging it over his shoulder. With the ease of a leaf floating to the earth, Yugato landed on the soil of Kyoshi Island, the dirt slight frozen. He turned to the girl, giving her a somewhat sad look.

Yugato knew, knew, that Aang had been having second thoughts about what to do last night when they started out again. They boy wanted to talk to this scarred boy… but he also wanted to stay with Katara and Sokka. The Master didn't know if it was because the child cherished them like half-siblings or because it had something to do with his spiritual connection. Maybe he was meant to meet these children again or maybe he had already instilled some purpose onto the two children that they had not yet realized. Either way, it was best to make this parting quick. Leave Aang to rest and he'd help the two children off. Yes, Aang would be mad, no doubt, for not being allowed a proper goodbye, but Yugato was the child's caretaker so he would decide what was best for him.

And right now, it was best to let water be as was its nature: flexible and flowing.

Putting on a soft smile, he stood between the two youngsters and placed a gentle hand on each of their shoulders. Both looked up at him with a mixture of hate, confusion, hurt and acceptance. He was their elder after all. Though he thought it important to remind them, "It may seem wrong now, Katara, but Aang has a fate to fulfill right now and so do you. Our vines may entangle another day but for now they must separate for our journeys are completely separate. Aang must follow his and you, Katara must learn water bending."

The girl started to tear up at this and Sokka merely became stoic at the other for making his sister cry.

"And Sokka, you are fated to protect your sister until you can return to your village. I doubt your father wouldn't mind you leaving the others in order to protect your sister," continued the man as he gave the two a gentle shove away from Appa. "Now let's be going and just be warned: they're girls."

Sokka's voice echoed, "What do you mean by "they're girls". Are we getting a greeting of some kind?"

Yugato couldn't keep the smile out of his voice, "Yeah, something like that."

Chapter End Notes
I was snowed in all weekend, five inches, so I wrote this up for you guys since I couldn't go into work.
He should really move…

Really, Zuko had been lying by the fire barely breathing. His pain was so apparent that the flames were actually following his breath: shallow and barely nonexistent. His two baby sitters just didn't get it. No matter how much wood or kindling they added to the fire, it never seemed to grow larger than a whisper, nearly extinguishing every time Zuko thought it too hard to breath.

Agni, everything hurt, even breathing. Maybe he should just give into Pakku, the daily beatings - correction, training- was not worth it. Due to having to run around and dodge, his ankle was not healing quickly and his shoulder ached even more from the rough landing from the ledge. Well, at least neither was broken, that fall from the ledge was brutal but at least he had been smart enough to collapse into a shoulder roll when he hit the ice with his feet.

Though, he was sure he had bruised ribs so that was a larger concern at the moment than a still swollen ankle. Every breath hurt! Pulling himself into a slightly tighter ball to try and press off the pain, he gained the attention of his two sitters.

"You cold, young Avatar?" asked the non-bender, Watto, as he stopped sharpening his blade, his breath coming out as a slight mist.

Nynto gave the other guard a look. That was a rather sympathetic tone. Not that the bender was surprised. Watto was a new father, and he would probably rather be home right now cooing over his cubby son than watching the Avatar, but Pakku had decided to offer some pity on the boy that he had been breaking for the past week by giving him some guards that wouldn't irritated the boy to death. Yes, breaking; it wasn't training. Pakku wasn't foolish enough to truly train the boy for it might offset an already unbalanced Avatar to skip over an element. So, the trainer was going to get some of that spit fire out of the boy… and it seemed Lee was at the breaking point. He had been beaten into the ground for nearly over a week from sun up until sun down since the last escape attempt.

Would the Avatar just give in or take no more and show the spirit he was finally?

"Probably, especially since the fire has refused to grow at all last night and adding more wood would be useless. The cold probably feels better anyway," added Nynto as he went back to his scroll, a rare treat that he was glad he had gotten from the pirates a few weeks back.

Watto gave the other guard a look before he got up and slowly threw some more wood on the fire. He did not immediately go back to his pile of furs though. He leaned down over the Avatar and touched the boy's shoulder. He expected his hand to be slapped away, but all he got was a twitch and soft moan as Zuko pulled back into himself. The new father shook his head, a sad frown forming on his face.

He was not cautious with touching the boy after that. He slowly forced Zuko onto his back which made the Avatar groan again and try to pull away momentarily with a hiss. Though, with continually prying fingers, Lee relented, offered an irritated growl.

"Oh, don't give me that attitude. All bark and no bite you are. Pride can only hold out for so long
until you get rib fractures," he stated soberly. Zuko only groaned, finally allowing the older man to place a roll of furs behind his head and unwrapped him from his furs. First thing he did was work off the boy's parka. It took a few hisses from the Avatar and a whistle from Nynto to understand why the fire was so low.

Watto shook his head as he looked at the bruises, stating, "Pakku sure gives good incentive to dodge, doesn't he?"

Zuko was too tired to glare so he just closed his eyes and struggled to breath as the other man's warm hands started pressing on his ribs checking to see if any were broken. He twitched, more from the touch than the pain that stabbed into his lungs making his breath seize.

The only person that really had touched Zuko since he left the Fire Nation was uncle and that was usually never skin on skin, and training just wasn't the same. Agni, he felt like crying, and he missed the tea drinker. The fire bender probably could weep if he wanted too and knock it up to being in pain. It was just becoming too much. He couldn't even think any more about getting away from this frozen underworld. It was like he was drowning, the not breathing part making it twice as difficult.

Or maybe he would start crying from pain… if the small unwanted whine escaping him was any indication. He wanted to get away, he did, but at this rate he'd die first.

Nynto winced at this, finally stalling in his reading. He sighed through his nose and rose to his feet, stating, "That's it. I'm getting Pakku."

Zuko wanted to sit up and protest wanted to spit and hiss, but just trying to move his abdomen made him wince. Yep, he was not moving.

Boots nearing the fur door, the water bender pushed it open and the next thing he knew he nearly fell backward when he noticed that Pakku was leaning against the opposite wall, waiting. The two men met gazes, and the guard frowned before offering a small bow.

"Master Pakku, just who I was looking for. Lee…"

"Does his temper seem any better today? He will not get a healer unless there is a compromise," stated the Master in a cold tone.

The guard frowned.

Pakku could be a cruel man sometimes, and it seemed to be all over that woman. Yes, the Master had tried many other women, but he could never finish the engagement necklace for any of them. A person could love many people, but there were different levels of love and sometimes once a person had had a certain kind of love, they look for that in everyone. The truth is, love is like snowflakes, not one is ever the same.

Feeling slightly daring, the guard's voice was almost harsh, "He is the Avatar. Water can be harsh at times as storms can rage on, but it is also the element of healing. It can be kind and soothing. You are not breaking him… you are torturing him. Fire needs to be calmed, not smothered."

The Master was silent for a moment as if thinking over what the other man had said, and then stated in a soft tone, "Go speak with the healer, Chiyo. Tell her that, hopefully, she will get to have a look at the Avatar today… maybe he'll finally allow a healer to touch him."

Nynto frowned, "Was this all over him kicking the other healer?"
"Partially, and for waking me up every other night, but mostly I needed to beat that Fire Nation propaganda out of him. It was far too thick," murmured the elder man before he rose up and headed for the room away from the slightly upset soldier, stalling for a moment. "I will try to be a little kinder, Nynto. We had the same water Master and for that I respect you and your advice."

Nynto, who was one of their Master's last students, closed his eyes and tried to compose himself. He trusted the elder man's words, but still … the child was already scarred. He needed a kind hand… unless that was Pakku's plan all along. Break the kid and once he starts obeying, shower him in praise. Kind of like brain washing if one thought about it. Pakku could have been a natural born earth bender with a skill like that, especially with how stubborn he could be.

Watto nearly balked seconds later when not his partner or even a healer kneeled next to him but instead Pakku. The Master frowned down at the bruises, the Avatar's eyes closed as he winced with each touch.

Pakku knew the teenager had trust issues so he was surprised the boy was even allowing his eyes to be close while under the touch of someone. The Master's frown increased and his voice was soft, "Anything broken?"

Zuko winced at the second voice's intrusion but made no moves, probably figuring it was his other guard.

"Not that I can tell. He just seems to be badly bruised though I am no healer. I now some basic first aid, but healing is a woman's art for a reason. They have the patience needed for it," added the warrior as he continued to eye Lee.

Raising a brow at the other, Pakku nodded but moved his hands in a circle nonetheless calling up an orb of water from the walls and floor around them. The melting water then became thin, little streams until a collection of little orbs formed around the bender's hands, threatening to become ice crystals. The reaction was instantaneous when the bender placed it on Zuko's abdomen. There was a blue glow, some of the bruises seeming to fade from the minor touch alone, but the real reason for the touch was to numb the boy's wounds because the Avatar wouldn't be sitting much longer.

Zuko was sitting up, scooting across the room in record timing, a wind seeming to be created by his very speed; though Pakku was sure the wind was more likely created as an unknown protective air-bending since it was a defensive art.

Pakku didn't even twitch at the boy's pained and slightly angry look as he pressed his back against the ice wall, hand wrapped around his lower abdomen. The Master sighed and stood up, walked over to the youth and looked down at him, offering a hand to help him up.

"Avatar Lee, I'm giving you a choice today. We can either learn some more dodging or you can go to the healers today and allow them to touch you," stated the Master, his voice gravelly but soft. Training, if it had revealed anything, was that stubbornness would only last through so many bruises and that there was defiantly something wrong with that eye.

Zuko, who had been ready to spring, loosened up with a confused look, his growing hair falling into his eyes. The Avatar shifted, uncertain, and then he added, "That's all?"

Pakku tried not to smile. He was afraid he had reached out to Lee too soon, but the timing seemed just right. Squatting down with his old joints, he met the teenager's gaze as he added, "For now. Today will be a slow day if you are compromising. You'll allow the healers to get a real look at you, maybe get some meditation in, and then have dinner with the Chieftain and his daughter. In exchange, if you behave, there will be rest for the next day or so. Is that agreed?"
Zuko didn't want to give up. He wanted to fight, wanted to hiss and bite like a caged dragon, but he was tired and weak. He didn't think he could take another one of Pakku's lessons. He had to survive. He knew that he already was failing in health because he was not use to the constant cold nor the lack of light. Zuko doubted that the old man would allow him to meditate with candles, but it didn't sound like a complete negative. Plus, dinner would probably just be like the ones he use to have when Grandpa was still alive, silent and awkward.

The healer was another matter. The fire-bender was not okay with that. It always felt like his fire bending was being drowned and that he'd be forced to become fluid like the element water, abandoning his past and fully claiming the fact that he was the Avatar. It was a fact that only the Avatar could bend water when he or she had been born from fire. A rejected part of him had acknowledged the fact that he was that Avatar, but it still felt surreal and that he wasn't actually here. Even the pain seemed false, but water… it penetrated his very soul, his inner flame.

Yet, the threat of Roku's words was far more concerning. His pride could suffer if it would spare his Uncle. So, despite himself, Zuko nodded. Yes, he would allow water near him. The Avatar could do that, though the bender still wanted to believe that that person wasn't him. It just felt wrong, a bad joke with no punch line, a universe with a sick sense of humor.

..."And then she said ice to meet you," laughed Juku as he slapped his fellow guard, Omu, on the shoulder. The two babysitters then laughed heartily together, Zuko doing his best not to cringe or start the two fools on fire. This was just cruel; his two most hated guards, and childish to boot, were his watchers for the day, proving one of Zuko's previous thoughts about the universe.

The universe didn't have a sick sense of humor, it had a bad one. This whole situation was like one of those idiots that thought all their jokes were funny when they really weren't.

Juku, the non-bending guard and around the age of seventeen-eighteen, turned his grin towards the Avatar, asking, "Wasn't that funny, Lee? Get it: ice? Funny, right?"

Omu curtly agreed, laughing in Zuko's ear; Zuko merely cringed. He should have picked option B and allow the crap to be beaten out of him. Anything was better than this. In fact, he was looking forward to the healing quarters because it at least got him away from these two idiots. He couldn't take much more of this. Thankfully, Zuko was right, not even a minute later, he found himself being half dragged into an ice hut, Pakku turning from the conversation he was having with an old woman.

"You got here in one piece," stated the old bender as he rose to his feet and took Zuko from his two leads.

Zuko jerked his arm away though, he wasn't helpless, and limped into the room by himself. He may be obeying for now, but he would get out of here. Uncle was waiting for him.

"What? Did you think we'd hurt the Avatar?" asked Omu, smirking.

"No, I was wondering if he'd kill the two of you," smirked Pakku, having picked these two boys as the Avatar's final test of surrender. If the two didn't come back maimed, it meant that Lee had yielded. Let the teaching begin. First lesson would have to wait though, but at least Lee would be in prime condition to capture the wind.

"Us, never. He loves us," stated Omu, Juku grinning as well as they exited.
"I'm sure he does," grunted Pakku as he directed Lee to sit down, wondering how he had ended up with those two fools to begin with.

The boy did as he was told, breath catching as he sat down. Pakku, making it a testing move, patted the Avatar's shoulder in a comforting manner knowing that he had to be calm like a spring's waters to keep the Avatar docile. Lee grumbled slightly, but did not press away, not even when Pakku started to help him take off his parka since the boy seemed to stiff to even move his arms. Lee didn't rebut much, except for a growl, having the older man slowly help undress him due to his injuries.

Then, one more figure entered.

A blush quickly entered the boy's face and he pushed away from Pakku's prying fingers which were taking off his white under-shirt. Zuko trained shirtless in front of the men on his ship all the time, but they were fellow soldiers.... Not girls. He'd never admit it to anyone, but for his age he was rather inexperienced. He was always so focused on obtaining his honor, be it by finding the rumored air-bender clan or slaying an extinct dragon, that he hadn't noticed just how hard Uncle had tried to get him some well needed experience. The unneeded stops at port, all this talk of pretty girls, and listening to the men's tales of how they met their wives, and far more intimate things were meant to offer that needed knowledge.

Now he felt like a fool. He couldn't even talk a girl, who wasn't a soldier, especially when she was looking at him bare chested.

Chiyo, the elder healer who had been talking to Pakku, laughed at the easily noticed embarrassment that came over the Avatar when her young student entered. Still chuckling, she signed for the younger healer to sit down next to her.

The girl was fully situated before the elder woman spoke, "My, my, Xue. It seems that the Avatar may have nerves of steel jumping off a ledge, but he can't even take a young pretty girl watching him undress."

Xue immediately went flush, and the two graying water-benders merely chuckled to themselves.

Zuko, in turn, only grew more flustered, anger rising. He was never laughed at. Not by Uncle or the crew, even when he failed his kata's again and again. He would not be a laughing stock! Rage overcoming his pain, the numbness already starting to wear off, Zuko rose to his feet, grabbed his parka from Pakku and storming out of the healer's room.

Omu and Juku both jumped to their feet at the Avatar's exit, Pakku rising to his feet in reaction and yelling, "Where are you going?"

Zuko stalled, knowing that storming away wouldn't work on these benders like it did Iroh. Swallowing some of his hate, he stated, "I need to go to the facilities."

And with that, the Avatar stomped off, leaving Pakku feeling confused as the Master signaled for at least one of the guards to follow the fuming Avatar. Omu was the one to volunteer though that did not make the Master feel any better. Maybe chuckling at Lee hadn't been the wisest idea. Now thinking about it, Pakku doubted the teenager had much luck with girls with a scar like that.

Though, since what was done was done, Pakku wasn't going to stop laughing. It seemed that there was now another way to integrate the Avatar into their culture: a pretty girl. Not that that was going to be his first objective, but it was best to allow the Avatar to socialize.
"You know... some people might actually want to use that."

"Shut up and leave me alone!"

Omu licked his teeth and leaned against the ice wall to the facilities that, in the North Pole, was at least more than a hole in the ground. He tapped his foot for a moment and then a wicked smile converged on his face. He remembered his first words to the Avatar, 'Are Fire Nation girls hot?' He had thought it was funny though slightly true. The truth was: Omu was a bit of a womanizer and a flirt. He had flirted with more than a number of girls be them twice his age and married or even a pirate. It was a bad habit, and he knew it was, but he wasn't married yet so he figured it was fair game.

Not that he ever wanted to be chained to one woman.

"Soooo you think Xue is cute, don't you?" stated Omu, evil mode coming into full swing.

Zuko threw open the flap, a blushing youthfulness to his form as he cried, "No!"

Omu played the exuberant cry no mind, using it a spring board to continue his torture, "Soooo … you don't like girls?"

"Of course I like girls!" yelled Zuko, taking a step forward, hands shaking though he didn't strike out and get into trouble; he had finally gotten a break.

Omu laughed at the Avatar's explosion, deciding to drag this out. He'd tried to get a rile out of Lee from time to time when he played guard duty, but usually one of the older guards would glare at him a few minutes in. After all, the fire inside the room would be blazing with Lee's contained fury, and Omu would have to stall in his prying to stop the room from melting. What? It was obvious that Lee didn't talk about his feelings and little was known about the Avatar's life. It wasn't that Pakku didn't try to pry from time to time; it was just that the boy was so vexed and vengeful that the only reaction Pakku would generally generate from the conversation were second degree burns or a bristling battle of words.

It was nice to know that Lee was human from time to time. It was such a human thing to be afraid of intimacy.

Feeling a slight kinship forming, he continued to pry, but decided to end this quickly with a bit of manipulation, "Sooo … you like Xue then?"

Lee's voice squeaked like a teenager and his eyes dodged side to side as he noticed passerby's watching, "No! It's just... it's just... I've been at sea a long time. I haven't been on many dates."

Omu's smile slowly disappeared. So, it was a lifestyle thing. Weird. Just how long had he been on that ship? Generally, boys weren't allowed to be sailors nor soldiers, and that certainly wasn't a family ship. Too many spears.

Coming into the Avatar's line of sight, his unscarred eye, Omu asked in all seriousness, "Just how long have you been at the ocean's pull? From the way it sounds, you were just a child?"

Lee turned his gaze away as if embarrassed, prompting the other to continue, suspicion rising as he asked, "Lee... why were you on that ship?"

Zuko raised his chin, proud, though the pain in his eyes was far too easily seen as he admitted, "To
regain my honor… my country's honor."

Honor, huh?

Shaking his head, Omu's statement was almost cold as he made a hand signal towards the healer's rooms, "But you are not just Fire Nation anymore, are you, Avatar? You are Water Tribe, Earth Kingdom and Air nomad as well. What do you need with Fire Nation honor?"

...

Zuko didn't recall how he had gotten back to the healers room or if he or someone else had undressed him all the way down to his skivvies. All he knew was that those words Omu had muttered hurt. It was as if all the punishments that Pakku put him through compared nothing to how the younger water bender had reached out and drowned his inner flame with words alone. If was as if Zuko was being buried in a casket of sand, an expressionless Lee staring down at him draped in Earth Kingdom tidings.

His mind might have even slowly watched as Zuko beat against the sands, his flame dying as he struggled for air. It was going to take a long time to suffocate, but his coffin was sealed and he was already thrown into the earth… Prince Zuko wouldn't even be allowed a pyre for his funeral.

"Boy, snap out of it!"

Zuko started, drawing back slightly when he realized that the old healer was kneeling in front of him, snapping her fingers. Part of him wanted to strike back at the old woman for invading his personal space like the proud fire bender he was, but he did not. Flames required air, and he felt he was running out of that, slowly. He sighed and dragged his hands into fists, stating in almost a whisper, "Sorry, I was in my thoughts."

The woman merely huffed and gently wrapped her wrinkled and callused fingers around one of his wrists, directing him to lie down. The boy did so without complaint, ignoring the looks that Pakku was throwing to a shrugging Omu. It was instantaneous, the cold feeling falling onto his crest like water from a night's rain falling into his grave. He couldn't help but tightened as the old woman started to run the blue orb of water over his flesh, his body pulling it in like a sponge.

She chided, glaring at Pakku for a moment, whispering something about being a mean old bird, before she told her student to assist. Zuko actually had to close his eyes as he watched the pretty girl lean down, her long hair that was unbound falling downward in a stream and threatening to touch him with feather touches. He knew that if wasn't in such a downtrodden mood, he might have actually been blushing and squirming. But… he didn't much support necrophilia.

He felt dead inside.

He was dead.

He wanted his uncle.

He wanted his honor.

Shivering at the thought of the old man being dead or something worse, he barely noted that the water had been pulled away and a pair of real hands fell onto his chest. He went stiff, wanting to sit up and rid himself of the touch, only to feel Pakku's gnarled hand reach upward and slam him down.
The old man quickly mumbled "Be still. They are checking your ribs for breaks or fractures."

Zuko grudgingly did as he was told, turning his head so he found himself staring at the wall behind Pakku. She was touching him, directed by the old teacher's fingers as they pushed on his ribs. He winced once or twice, feeling the old woman stall and then slowly press on that rib, asking if it was a sharp or dull pain. Zuko always answered quickly in a neutral tone, not looking at her and the girl whose hair was whizzing across his bare chest from time to time as she leaned over with her teacher's assistance.

He wished that he could be like any other teenager his age and if there was a pretty girl leaning over him, he'd feel aroused or at least be attracted to her. All he felt was ashamed. When he was younger, he had imagined that he would be like his father and uncle and find a beautiful Fire Nation girl, become betrothed, and have children. With the scar his thoughts of girls diminished, but burns were common in his land so he was sure once he reclaimed his honor, he was sure he would also find a good wife.

He'd be lucky if he would ever be able to step on the Fire Nation's rocky soil again for that matter find a good Fire Nation bride.

What does the Avatar need with love anyway? He is but a tool for the spirits. The part of him that was meant to have human wants was drowning in a grave of elements.

Zuko shivered a few minutes later as he sat there, cross legged, hands on his knees, his eyes closed; they had just finished up his back. The older, water healer chuckled as she looked at the bare-chested boy eyeing his muscled, youthful and pale body. With the fact added that he was now nearly bruise-less only made him look healthier as well as powerful. She smiled at her young assistant, noting how the other healer was trying to look anywhere but directly at the Avatar. She knew it wasn't because Xue had any want for the young hero; she had a betrothal necklace under that collar of hers. It was just, well, even she had to admit if it wasn't for the scar, the Avatar would be very handsome.

Speaking of which…

"Now that the easy work is done, it's probably time we take a look at that eye," her wrist whisking as some hot mixture of water and medicine dodged out of a nearby boiling pot. Zuko stiffened and looked at her, eyes wide… one of them at least.

Lee turned to his Master immediately and the old healer could just hear the betrayal in his voice, "This wasn't part of the agreement."

Pakkü ignored the look from the older healer and straightened up, offered the Avatar a somewhat stern look, "The agreement was that we go to the healers. I never stated that she would not be looking at your eye. Besides… you need it. You have trouble guarding on your left side and if your scrimmages over the training field have taught me anything: it is that if you are not completely blind in that eye, you are at least partially."

Zuko stiffened as if slapped. He wanted to reach a hand up and place it over his eye to hide it. He was not blind! True, that eye did have issues, but he was not blind. He could see!

… Shadows.

It was as good as being blind, wasn't it?

He felt his body wilt, his hands becoming fists as his head hanged, he hung his head in shame.
Uncle and the others had known and seemed to overlook it. They were always so straightforward; they never stuck from the left.

Zuko swallowed, glared at the Master and wanted to strike out it rage. He wanted to yell, scream and holler, but he knew otherwise. Roku had made his intentions known and if his pride had to drown for a few weeks, so be it. He'd escape this place with a healed body and maybe... a bit of his sight back.

Lip twitching, he looked at the healer and slowly turned to face her, whispering, "Will it hurt?"

The old woman actually laughed at him, despite the frown offered by Pakku and reached out and cupped the young man's chin, cackling, "Only if you move. Now squat down a little. I'm an old lady, I'm short."

She just continued to giggle, her smile seeming to wash away years of age, releasing some of the stress in the room. Zuko did as she asked.

Giggles subsiding, she added in a soft voice, "Now, close your eyes. I just want to see how bad the damage is, alright?"

Frowning, he closed his eyes, every muscle going stiff. He didn't want to give in, but he was the Avatar. If there was one thing he was certain about, they'd never kill him. At least not now, he was defeated. At least that was what they thought.

When the water touched his face though, he still felt like he had been shot with an arrow, and he would have lost all balance and fallen to the floor by the sudden intrusion of the water bender's energies in his body, but he felt a sturdy hand grab him.

The pain didn't stop though, and he found himself crying out for what felt like the first time and jerking away into his Master's chest. Why did it hurt? Why did it still burn? Agni! His flesh felt like it was burning off, again, and the only reason he wasn't clawing at his face was that Pakku was holding his wrists, angrily whispering to the healer.

It took about two minutes for the burning to subside, and by then Zuko was spiritually and physically spent. He didn't recall who helped him to his feet or who dressed him. All he heard when he left the small room, draped over his babysitters' shoulders, was the healer whispering to Pakku, "It's a spiritual wound... I don't know what I can do."

Chapter End Notes

I love the imagery of Zuko being buried and the thought that the Avatar is not allowed to love. So I already know what half of my reviews will be about. Anyway, next chapter we get to see may have some Roku in it. Yeah, angry old spirits!
"I c-can't believe that-that jerk! Ugh, he just left us. Left us!" all but yelled Katara as she threw her hands up into the air, jostling her hair loops and nearly throwing her side bag onto the road as she had her small fit.

Sokka nodded his head, looking forward and not really paying attention as he hiked his back pack up a little higher, the gravel of the dirt road grinding in the heel of his boots.

"How could he do that? I thought we were just going into town to talk to the village elder, but Yagoto just tells that village windbag to make sure we get a Water-bending Master and leaves us! We didn't even get to say goodbye to Aang!"

Sokka just nodded again, his eyes hypnotized by something in front of him. The sister went silence, and she followed his line of sight. Her temper increased tenfold when she realized what he had been paying attention to instead of her. She huffed and suddenly stepped in front of him, nearly making the elder boy run into the enraged water-bender.

"You're looking at that Kyoshi Warrior's behind, aren't you? You ... you ... you pig," she added, anger slowly dwindling at a realization. "She is really good with those fans of hers though. Makes your use with your boomerang seem armature."

She pretended not to notice the Kyoshi Warrior in front of them snicker at the comment and give Sokka a taunting grin before becoming stiff and professional once more. Suki was her name, right? Was she taking the whole trip with them?

Sokka, who had fallen hard for the girl that had successfully tried to beat the crap out of him minutes ago when he had insulted her warrior woman culture, took in an aghast breath, stating, "What? My skill with the boomerang is unrivaled. It always comes back!"

"Yeah, and how many times does it actually hit what you wanted it to though?" she mocked, a soft-sad smile encompassing her face; yet before her brother could try and rise to defend his honor, she continue in a cheerless tone. "But seriously... is this the right thing to do? We are just leaving Aang and we are going to go train with people we've never met. Is it right?"

Sokka was silent for a moment, the puppy look draining away into a calculating gaze.

"I don't know... but we can't step back now. It seems we've stirred something in the rest of the village, forced them to make a decision," stated the brother, his eyes turning to look at the small children ahead of them on the trail which were shuffling and cuddled with the older members from the village who were probably their parents.

He felt ashamed about what had transverse since their boots had stepped into the village, because watching children cry was never enjoyable. How could the Fire Nation do it every day? Truly, they were soulless beings.

Katara twitched at her brother's tone and slumped slightly as she looked ahead, her eyes trying to take in everything around her as she shifted her gaze from the mountains, the ocean, and the sky. She didn't want to look at the impending boat up a head at the trail's end. She tried even harder not to look at the little girl that was clinging to her mother's green robes, crocodile tears streaming...
down her face.

"Mommy, please don' make me go. I don' wanna leave," cried the young girl, pebbles shifting at her feet and trying to follow after.

A boy, probably a year or two younger than Katara, slowed to watch the girl cry. He then stopped completely and glared at Katara for a moment, allowing both Sokka and the sugar queen to see his spite before an older man chided him to come along.

Despite herself, she couldn't help but slide behind her bother, slightly enraged and embarrassed as she huffed, "What's his problem?"

Sokka, who had lost sight of the Kioski Warrior he had been watching, gave up and looked at his sister and then at the back of the head of the boy who had just been glaring. He shrugged his shoulders, noting that most of the adults with them looked like families to the children or the ship's crew. It was obvious that the adults were merely here to say goodbye to their children that were being sent away on the boat. None of the parents would be coming with them and that all the children in the group must have been some kind of bender.

To the children, being a bender was probably seemed like a punishment at this point.

"He's probably just mad at you," stated Sokka, scoffing at the angry youth ahead of them. He didn't seem bothered by the boy's death glare though.

"Why? I didn't do anything to him," said Katara, a little angry that someone was hostile at her for no good reason.

Sokka gave her the look before he shook his head and grumbled, "Well, not directly. It seemed the village elder had no plans of sending any of these kids to the mainland any time soon. All this was thrown together in a rush. The only reason they are sending the benders away now is because Yugota showed up and left us here. Well, mostly because he left you. The others can barely even twitch a stone or make a puddle waver. Katara... you are very good at bender, something the Fire Nation would notice."

Katara looked at her brother with an appalled expression. She didn't know if she should be insulted, upset, proud, or alarmed. Sokka had finally given her bending positive praise and didn't just call it water magic. Yet he had been extremely meat-headed as always and called this all her fault. It wasn't her fault that Yugato just left them here. She thought that they were going to go talk to the elder and see where the water-benders were. She wouldn't have minded going to the Northern Water Tribe for a little bit to learn healing as long as they went to real water-benders later.

But Yugato just abandoned them. He had talked to the elder alone for about an hour and came out and told them that the Kyoshi islanders knew where water-benders were and would take the two of them there. The Master had then stated he needed to go. He hadn't even allowed them to return and say goodbye to Aang, his feet so swift and the village elder so demanding to see Katara's current progress that neither sibling had time to think of a rebut as they watched Yugato leave. He had been almost cold when he had departed, telling them he'd send a message to their village for them to tell the them the siblings were alive and to wish them all luck.

Despite the unsettling circumstances, she would see the berate elder again if only to find Aang.

Shivering slightly at how cold the air suddenly felt, her soul dragging, she turned to Sokka and asked, "So... Is it worth it? Is it worth abandoning Aang just so I can learn real water-bending?"
Her brother didn't skip a beat as his expression became hard, "Of course it is. I have a feeling that we'll meet him again anyway. We couldn't get rid of the little air-moth if we wanted to."

"I hope so," Katara whispered as the traveling party all came to a stop, Sokka looking at all the families as the ship's crew walked passed everyone to ready the ship for the ocean's embrace: goods on some of their backs. The Wolf Warrior almost had to look away as all the mothers took this time to weep, kiss and offer departing vows of reunion as they pulled themselves from their babes.

Katara couldn't help but feel a sting of jealousy where Sokka only felt sorrow. She had no mother to weep goodbye to her, to promise reunion, and to whisper goodbye to. So instead she wrapped her lithe fingers around her brother's hand for a little comfort, ignoring the confused look he gave her. It had been a long time since she played the role of little sister, but he held her hand nonetheless with supple grace.

Within moment, they were pressing forward on their own, no adventurer or spirited spry like Aang to lead them. They had to take this journey alone… just the two of them.

Oyaji, the ship's captain, sighed, shaking his head and running a hand through his beard nervously watching siblings embrace and parents release their little treasures. It had been years since he had taken this trip, this voyage of tears, but it had to be done. There was a saying for this, actually: *fair well to the children blessed with far too much of the spirit's grace. May their lives be fulfilling and blessed, yet hard with flames always at their heels.*

Waving his hand, the captain signaled that it was time to go. It was best to get this trip over with.

"Are you sure about this?" asked Shen as he stood on the metal ship's deck surrounded by the crew who either looked petrified or half ready to laugh. And it was no doubt why, he was draped in water tribe apparel.

Finally, Keiji broke out into a hysterical fit and leaned against the helmsman who had a look of horror on his face.

Iroh, who looked torn in his emotions, coughed into his hand and stated with a false grin, "I think you look great… very convincing. Anyone would think you are natural born Water Tribesman."

Shen didn't look convinced. He was still wondering how he had been dooped into putting the blue furs on in the first place. Yeah, he was the nearest to the body structure needed to wear the cloths without having to hem in or out, but still. These cloths smelled. Ugh, did all water nation cloths smell like this? If so, they needed to rescue Zuko pronto.

Crinkling his nose and pushing down the fur hood, Shen grumbled his thoughts aloud, "Do all water tribe cloths smell like this? It smells like something crawled in this and died."

Jee and Iroh exchanged looks, each cringing and baring their teeth as if they were disgusted by a thought. It was the cook, Duck, who finally voiced what all the older members knew but were reluctant to state, "Well tha's because there was a dead man, or should I say dead woman, in it."

Keiji broke into full blown hysteria and slid to the floor laughing so hard he started crying. Shen looked horrified, be it because he was dressing in woman's clothing (though who couldn't really tell with all that fur) or that a dead body had been in it. One couldn't be sure just from looking.

Slowing turning his disgusted-horrified look from Keiji who was collapsed at his feet to Iroh and
then Jee whom both were trying to look slightly ashamed but not really, Shen asked, "Why did you put me in a dead woman's clothes!"

Jee and Iroh, both looking weathered from being out to sea so long without going into port (the all were), looked at each other and then Jee shrugged signing for Iroh to come and speak with him. Iroh frowned at the other man showing his obvious discontent but slowly turned to the youth to speak regardless.

"As you know a stream cannot flow smoothly if it is blocked by two many stones. Just as a plan cannot succeed if there are not steps taken to make sure nothing stalls its success," stated Iroh as he used the voice he generally delegated for Zuko during lessons.

Shen's expression hadn't changed though and Keiji, who had stopped his hysterical laughing so he could at least hear what Iroh was stating, started laughing hysterically once more. Shen took the time from his disgusted face to at least glare at the other, before showing he had not found Iroh's words terribly meaningful.

"I don't mean to be disrespectful Prince Iroh but… that doesn't answer my question," squeaked Shen as he started to peel the clothing off, caring little about the freezing temperature on the open deck. "Why am I wearing dead water-bender clothing?"

Jee shook his head, expecting more of the now-youngest crew member who was letting his youth show. The rest of the crew must have been spoiling him in Zuko's absence.

Straightening his shoulders, Jee decided to put this soldier in his place, voice stern, "Shen, stop being childish. You want your plan to work, don't you? Well, there aren't enough of us to storm the Northern Water Tribe so we need more covert tactics. We all agree with your plan to find Zuko, but we need to be careful. There is only one reason they would take Zuko alive is because they saw he was the Avatar."

The small group all shifted in a nervous flutter, like moth wings, but no one said anything at all. The word 'Avatar' had been something they all ignored, as if they were ignorant of the word's meaning and had not seen Zuko's eyes turn that ghostly blue when he bended the water off of the ship's deck. The place where the price had been standing during the event had almost become a taboo.

No one wished to stand near that side of the deck for too long.

Shaking his head, Jee stated, "It's something we may all like to deny but it's the truth. Zuko is the Avatar, and the Water Tribe wants the Avatar in order to have him rise up against the Fire Nation. They will be keeping tight grips on him if Zuko is being as stubborn as he usually is."

The rest of the crew looked torn trying to choose the proper emotions. Some were angry, some worried, and others ashamed. They were technically betraying their country, but what was the price of betraying crew and family?

Shen stopped pealing his clothing, sighing as he slowly pulled the parka back on, his expression defeated but willing as he stated in a rough voice, "Fine. Tell me what you need me to do… but please can't we wash this thing before I go?"

…

Staring out into the waters, feeling the push and pull of the waves against the wooden hull, Katara turned her attention to the older boy that had glared at her earlier. He was playing with rocks in his
hands. He had turned them all into orbs and was now circling the hard rocks around each other like the moon around the earth.

So, she asked, wondering if this earth-bender was going to be just as angry as he was earlier, "What's your name? Mine is Katara."

His green eyes just glared, cold and vengeful, his attention quickly falling back to his pebbles in hand when he noticed that Sokka was now staring from the opposite side of the deck, sharpening the tools of his trade.

Glaring back down at the deck, he spat, "Go away. I don't want anything to do with you, water-bender."

Frowning, but still determined, she squared her shoulders and sat down beside him regardless, asking, "It can't really be that terrible for everyone to be so … upset. Can it?"

He looked up to meet her gaze, his lips becoming a thin line before he stated, "They say our destination is haunted. That's why the older ones are upset, except me that is. And the young ones just miss their parents."

Katara's head jerk to the side, her blue eyes going wide before she frowned, stating, "So, it is like a spiritual place?"

He chuckled coolly and added, "Don't know, never been there, but I will tell you this… strange things happen in Foggy Swamp. Things even the bending Masters won't talk about or explain. So, don't wander off into the mist… you might see something you are not meant to like a face stealer or the dreaded…"

"Kyno," came a demanding voice, one of the older sea man (probably the first mate) frowning at the youth, stating, "Stop telling such tales, everyone can hear you, and there's no need to frighten her or the other children. The Foggy Swamp is shrouded in mystery because it helps keeps all the benders safe that way… there are no ghosts. The mist just plays tricks."

Katara shivered as first mate's eyes settled on her, "But I do agree with Kyno. It is best not to wander off."

Nodding her head and stumbling away from the two islanders, the water-bender quickly settled back down by her brother. Looking away from the angry youth, Katara settled her gaze on the twilight which setting over the water and dying the waters black. Despite herself, she felt a shiver of fear inside at the unknown, and she found herself cuddling closer to her brother, shocking him for the second time today with her sudden want for sibling intimacy.

Stalling in the sharpening of his boomerang, Sokka put down his tools and pulled her into a slight embrace like they use to as young children to strive off the cold under their shared furs. His brotherly need to protect quickly came forward and he asked, "What's wrong Katara?"

"Nothing… just a little spooked," she whispered.

He frowned, no liking that tone and so he continued, "Of what? I thought you were excited to learn bending, and I heard that the swamp was creepy but it's just a stupid old swamp. It's harmless. At least the people are supposed to be nice there, if a little eccentric."

She shook her head, watching as the Kyoshi Warriors lit a few lamps on deck, sending shadows over the glowing gloom, but it was just enough light to reveal the forms of the two siblings. It was enough to show that there were still light in their eyes, that they were more than just still statues on
Katara's lips barely made a sound as she whispered, "I have a feeling that there will be something haunting there, but if it's the forest or a person… I don't know yet."

Sokka merely frowned, placing his chin on top of his sister's as he continued to hug her. It was rare that he got to act the part of older brother with his sister being so self-reliant, but even as dense as he was he knew when it was best to keep quiet and just play his role because everyone, deep down, knows their roles… even if some will try at anything to deny it. Some roles and destinies cannot be changed.

Chapter End Notes

A very short chapter but we get to see some side characters, to get to see some sibling bonding which I think the series lacked at most points with Sokka being the comedic relief, and to quote unquote: get away from all the "Zuko Angst" though I so do love it. Mmmmm.
Chapter 15: The Moon and Meditation

Zuko sighed, looking down at his plate. The other day had been horrible. Not only had he been stripped and ridiculed, he now was all but being forced to assimilated since he had given an inch… now a mile was being forced down his throat. He was actually expected to eat with the chieftain and socialize with the barbarians during events such as morning breakfast. The teenager sighed and looked to his left, his Master would probably be glaring out of the corner of his eye until Zuko ate something since he had been bedridden for nearly two days. But, this morning, Pakku was paying more mind to the chieftain, whispering to him about the Avatar's condition before he raised his head and spoke directly to the youth he knew was staring at him.

"Please eat something, Avatar Lee. We will be meditating today, so nothing strenuous, but stop picking at your food."

Looking away, he picked at his food again. He was tired, not hungry. He still had a head ache from nearly two days ago. He had slept the whole day the first day and he was still tired.

Perhaps some medication would dull the pain, and though he hadn't wanted to admit it, part of him was curious as to how Water benders meditated. Fire benders usually used candles to reach out and listen to their own chi, mending with their natural element. In doing such, they would be calmed and purified by the flame's natural life. If not, the flame would flare and burn away more wax, shortening the natural flame's life.

Water had no life. It always seemed to be cold. Even the rain was cold.

Shivering at the thought, he sighed into his food and poked it with his utensil only to be poked by his babysitter. He turned his head to Omu hating the feel of the wolf-tail they had pulled his phoenix tail into so his slowly growing head of hair looked less scraggly. He had been very forward about his hate for it and that he wanted the traditional Fire Nation tail, but Pakku would have none of it. He apparently had to look respectable in front of the Chieftain and his family.

Eyes shifting from a quickly angering Omu, to the other side of the table, Zuko stared out of the corner of his eye. It hurt to see with that eye all morning, but at least he could see movement out of it. Pakku was still whispering to the head of the village, grumbling something about another Master and his slow pace.

The chieftain nodded and whispered something back, his head suddenly titling a little, beads jingling. Zuko looked down at his meal immediately, pretending he hadn't been listening in though the two were basically sitting next to him.

Pakku signed at the reaction, probably giving Lee a look before turning back to the chieftain and continuing, "I wouldn't worry about him spying, Arnook. That left eye can barely see."

Zuko tightened his grip on the spoon, the bone suddenly cracking and splintering everywhere as it gave into the heat of his palm, his glove catching on fire. The silence over the room was instantaneous, the princess who was next to Lee, just a little extra space than normal in between them, stalled to stare.
Her voice was surprisingly calm as she offered a small joke, "Avatar Lee, the best way to warm up the broth is from the bottom. Not through the spoon."

Zuko immediately blushed at this, shame running though his blood as he ducted his head from the pretty girl's stare. He had expected at least a glare or a grumble or some kind of punishing act for starting his glove on fire. Instead, the elders didn't even get a word in edgewise. The princess decided to keep the peace.

Placing what was left of the bone utensil on the table, Zuko felt something inside him calm and pull. It came from his Avatar's side, he had no doubt, but it wasn't angry or demanding. It felt like a memory, a recognition. He couldn't help but suddenly feel enlightened as if he was staring at the ocean though not forced to take part. He could just watch the push and pull of the waves on the bank. He had liked his life on the ocean at times, the slamming of the waves against the bulk of the ship.

He did not hate water; he just hated that he had to use it.

He also did not hate the princess, despite being a water tribesman.

"Sorry Princess Yue. I over calculated," he stated, feeling a blush as the realized everyone was looking at the two of them, the Princess coming to sit closer next to him with a new spoon.

"I'll say. Your mitten is on fire," she stated, looking a bit humored as she pointed to his on fire hand.

Zuko looked down and immediately patted it out, watching his mitten smoke. He surprisingly smiled, nervously. He didn't like how comfortable his spirit felt around her. It was as if he was meeting a very old friend, and he really was short on friends right now. In fact, he hadn't really had one in a long time. There were a few kids at the academy and Lu Ten always loved playing with him in an older sibling-like kind of way, and then there were the crew. True, before he found out he was the Avatar, he was proper to them as fellow soldiers should be, but he had been so driven in his quest that he never considered them as friends.

Now… well, they all felt like a kinship.

The crew had stuck by him when he needed it the most. At first they had all been distant when they first found out about his curse —though the details were debatable— but they never struck out. Some were softer with their words or a bit jumpy, but no one struck out. No one was angry at him. No one truly treated him badly.

They had tried to protect him.

A frown formed. He couldn't stop it, and he suddenly noticed that Yue was frowning at him. She had been speaking as well.

"W-what?" he murmured stupidly.

"I said… what's wrong? Is it the soup? You suddenly seemed distressed," she added, her warm smile suddenly seeming a little sad.

Feeling a bit weary, he added, "I-I wasn't sad."

Before he knew it, she had placed a gloved hand on top of his and added in a soft whisper so the two men —Pakku and Arnook— wouldn't over hear for now their conversation had stalled and the two men were both staring at the two youths. Yue's mother on the other hand was trying intensely
Zuko wanted to pull his hand away and allow his defensive rage rear its ugly head, but he did not. A part of his soul was still calm. He knew her, a part of him had never forgotten, but she was about his age. How could she be old enough that the older Avatars knew… wait… why was he questioning the spirit world? It never made sense.

Unable to hold his tongue, he stated, "I want to go home. I want my uncle."

The chief and the Master started whispering again, each watching out of the corner of their eye. They knew very little about Lee's past, if the daughter could drag it out of him, so be it, but they seemed far to busy to listen in themselves. Not that Zuko cared either way. He wasn't going to say much, if anymore, to the blue eyed girl.

Yue frowned and added, "You are very close with your uncle then? That's good. Family is important to the water tribe so I'm glad its important to you as well."

Zuko suddenly felt down to earth, grounded. It was so normal to talk about family. He didn't have to talk about bending, or fate, or anything so unpleasant. He decided he kind of liked the princess. N-not that way. It had just been a long time since he had met someone that reminded him of his mother.

"Yeah. He puts up with me, even when he shouldn't have to. He's far too good to me… In fact, it's not home I miss. Its him," stating those words, Zuko realized just how true they were, a pin prick or sorrow rising in his throat. He might have then struck out, angry for someone rising emotions in him that made him feel so feeble, but Yue was amazingly observant.

She placed a hand on top of his stating, "No need to become angry… you'll see him soon. I know it."

Zuko was about to snap back and state she knew nothing, but he found he wanted her words to be real, yet before he could even softly agree, he was grabbed by the scruff of his parka and lifted to his feet. Pakku was frowning at him like he had just committed some kind of atrocity, but before he could even think it over; the Water bender grabbed his soup and placed it in his hands. He then stated in a gruff tone, "Time to go, Lee. Take your soup with you and say goodbye to the princess. We have things to do."

He wasn't even given a moment to reply as the bender barked for him to follow. Zuko was confused, wondering about the sudden change in attitude until Omu whispered behind him, "I can't believed you touched the princess. She is of betrothal age you know. You don't want people getting the wrong idea."

He drank his soup as he walked, if only to keep his mouth from gapping open. A girl had touched his hand in a sensual, comforting manner… and he hadn't even noticed.

A few minutes later, thankfully in the opposite direction from the healing huts and the training grounds, Omu broke off and left Zuko alone with his Water Master. Generally, the Fire Nation prince inside him would have taken this as an ample opportunity to try and escape. He knew better though. He could see other Water Masters and students wandering down nearby alleys and icy paths, each turning an eye their way.

This was another test, wasn't it? And though Zuko had never been the best bending student,
especially when compared to his sister prodigy, he excelled in most of his other studies. He would not fail no matter how hot his feet became. The itch to run was so strong he nearly jolted into a run when they both stalled because he instinctively knew the older man would have trouble building up speed to catch him.

But Zuko instead pulled his hands into fists.

He had to wait for them to drop their guard.

This was for Uncle.

Trying to become a little looser, this wasn't dodging after all, he turned to see where Pakku had led them. It was a round wooden door. That was odd. Not that it was round or completely out of place in the ice but that it was a real door. Let's just state that furs were starting to become a norm in his mind and he feared he'd soon forget the clang of metal ones.

He gave Pakku a quizzical look and then stated, "What's that?"

Giving a smile that wasn't sarcastic or cold, he waved a hand at the door, "This is the most spiritual place in all the North Pole and this is where we will be meditating."

Zuko frowned. He was truthfully tired and spiritually drained. He had been for a few months now ever since he had bended air. He had tried to meditate after the incident, calm his chi, but it was impossible even on the trip up to the pole.

There had been the voices then, in the halls, on the deck, around every corner, and behind every hatch.

Those whispers were still adamant though rare. They mostly only made themselves known when he falling into rest or waking, that strange world between awake and asleep. Otherwise they were usually kept at bay by the mere presence of another being making noise, moving. It seemed that that was enough, but would the whispers be there when he tried to meditate?

Zuko shivered at the thought and quickly tried to banish his expression of worry before Pakku notice. He didn't want to be here. He didn't want to be the Avatar… he didn't want a lot of things. He hadn't wanted to be banished. He hadn't wanted his mother to leave. He had not wanted his sister to become cruel and unforgiving. He had not wanted to be scarred and nearly blinded.

Perhaps it was best just to meditate. He had far too many things on his mind. He could forget them all; calm his soul and chi. He needed to regain some inner balance.

Not even waiting for the older man to completely open the door for him, Zuko quickly enter the elaborate ice building. His breath was stolen from him when he entered. Not because it was unfathomably cold but because it was… warm. He almost melted right there feeling the heat in the air and the peace.

His muscles went limp. This was wonderful and the view wasn't too bad either.

"I see a part of you is already at harmony in this place," stated the elder bender with a slight chuckle as he stepped through the round door, closing it behind him. "Not that I am surprised."

Giving Pakku an estranged look, he asked, "What do you mean, and why is it so warm in here? I thought it would be… colder to meditate with water?"

"What? Would you rather sit under waterfall? Listening to moving water is just as effective."
Zuko frowned. He didn't like the idea of sitting under a freezing water fall to meditate -even though the water was warmer in here- which was a favorite of warm watered Water benders apparently. Not that Zuko knew there were any warm watered water-benders. So they settled for something far more calming. They would just sit by the pool in a classic mediation stance, with their hands placed on their knees and listen to the water running around them, the push and pull.

At first, the only thing on Zuko's mind was to concentrate on this like one did fire when meditating. Nothing was happening, of course, so he just tried to clear his mind, listen to the water. It was lapping gently around the small grassy island with the smell of greenery. It was wondrous. So much so he was sure that he might actually fall asleep mediating then get much mediating in.

Just as long as Pakku didn't notice. A sly grin threatened to spread on the teen's face but he managed to keep it at bay. Pakku said he would be meditating with him, but the old geezer might have his eyes open playing with that stupid tile that Zuko saw him rub between his thumbs from time to time. Iroh and he would have gotten along marvelously if they weren't natural born enemies.

This time a grin escaped him, his soul seeming a little less heavy.

Yes, those two would offer false smiles as they would try to crush each other in a game of Pia Sho, heat of battle in their eyes as they played a truthfully dull game. Generally, Zuko didn't care for the game, but that would be something to sit and watch.

Keeping that warm thought in mind, trying to press away any other worries, Zuko tried to enjoy this moment, this place. This island was safe, balanced and a part of him just knew that all was well here. A nap was more Uncle's thing than the prince's, but… he felt safe here.

His breaths started to become deep like that before one fell into a deep rest that came before sleep, Zuko knew he was going to be shaken awake, fall over or wake up in such a manner but he didn't care. It reminded him of when he was younger and was perched on his mother's bed, watching her brushing her hair. Then slowly she would turn, brush still in hand to chuckle at him as he started to fall asleep watching her, her warm voice stating…

"Zuko…"

The whisper slammed into his bones as if he had just been dipped in freezing water and his eyes burst open, and he found himself flaying out with a gasp. He was quickly to his feet, looking around in a fright. That had been an airy voice… not his mother. That was not his mother.

Pakku had been stirred from his personal meditation, slowly standing with his weathered bones and placing a hand outward towards Lee. The boy looked as if he had seen a spirit, the color gone from his skin and his eyes darting around. Had the boy nearly crossed over and become overwhelmed?

No, no. He wouldn't be this on edge. Was it a spirit?

Perhaps, this was the epicenter of all spiritual energy in the North Pole so it would make since. La and Tui were here though. No negative entities would dare enter.

Not knowing how else to get Lee to calm down or find out what had happened, he asked in a gruff tone, "Is something wrong? I thought we were supposed to be meditating."

Zuko flinched at his voice immediately, a slight tint of relief washing over him as he looked the other living being up and down. He had thought it was a whisper from one of the past Avatars, the beings about to force themselves onto him like in his ship's cabin, but there was nothing. No
freezing mist, no fog, no ice, and no Roku.

Maybe it had been his mom's voice, a memory, it had been so long. Had he forgot what she sounded like? A soft pang of grief ached inside him and he frowned, looked at his water Master and stated in a melancholy tone, "Nothing, just a memory."

Giving a frown, Pakku nodded but did not inquire. He merely waved a hand back to the grass and the two of them sat down again. Zuko flopped back down into the crisp grass, crossed his legs and releasing a deep breath. He dragged in another breath for good measure as if he were searching for a smell in the air. He merely smelled grass and set his soul up to be calmed.

This time he did not bother pretending. He was just going to go straight to sleep.

There was a suddenly pull, draino down his spine, the twisting downwards spiral that came with rest; he suddenly still felt like he was being buried, the oxygen rushing from his brain, but he had just lost consciousness. No more pain. Death would be quick and swift.

And there he dwelled, feeling still in his grave until he opened his eyes. He should not dwell on death. He would get back to uncle and…

And…

And where was he?

Zuko blinked, his breath wishing to steal itself away because he knew it was supposed to be cold here, there was snow everywhere yet he didn't feel the nip of chilled air in his lungs. He closed his eyes and looked around once more. Opening his eyes just revealed the same madness. It seemed that he was in a small wooden tub boat that was frozen in the never ending field of ice. He swallowed, his mind reeling, and he meekly peeked over the edge of the peasant, water craft. The ice was thick, that much was true, but he couldn't help but see huge shadows move under the ice as if there were giant kio fish down there or even elephant fish.

Sitting back down into the tub boat, Zuko contemplated if he should panic. He was even giving it great thought when he heard his name called in a way it never should have been:

"Avatar… Avatar Zuko."

His blood went cold and he found his head snapping in the direction of the west, where the moon seemed to be setting. He quickly got to his feet, anger flaring as he stated, "Who's there! How did you know my name! I command you to come out!"

There was a small chuckle; it echoed from behind him. Zuko turned, almost slipping on the small sheet of ice in the bottom of the boat, flame kata ready. He went stiff. Not because there was something horrible behind him, eyes staring forward in glee, but because he hadn't felt anything.

He hadn't been able to bend.

Looking down at his hands in a hurry and completely forgetting the disembodied giggle. He thrust his fingers apart as he tried to make a very easy palm torch.

Nothing.

"I-I have no bending," he whimpered before looking around the steadily increasing darkness of this plane, twilight hitting and the moon hanging above him now like some kind of nightlight. It might have been beautiful with the snow twinkling like crushed diamonds throughout the landscape, but
he was too busy freaking out to care; especially when he heard another giggle which sounded more like a trickster then one of a good natured fool.

"Calm yourself Avatar. No one can bend in the spirit realm," finally said the voice, this time sounding more like a young woman then a mischievous child.

Despite the nagging taste of recognition that came from the voice, Zuko turned ready to defend himself, ready to strike out. He immediately stalled and resisted the urge to tilt his head in question. She was lovely, there was no doubt about that, draped in fabric so white and blue it seemed to glow as if the fabric came from the moon itself. Sadly, she was far too far away to make out any true details such as a face.

A part of him did not want to attack her. A small smidge of his soul wanted to bow like one did to a Master, which didn't make since to the teen. This was a fine lady, not a trainer of bending. At least she didn't seem the part.

"Who are you? What do you want?" he demanded over the distance between them, watching her carefully as he tried to make out her face.

"Nothing more than to speak with you, Avatar. You are the bridge between the living and the spirit world after all," she said in a whispering voice, a familiar voice.

Zuko slowly dropped his fists and looked around once more, noting how eerie it was here. He was meditating but… how had. He wasn't in the spirit world, was he?

The spirit giggled like that of a young woman with a secret from her perch in the distance. She waved one of her hands for a moment, speaking softly, "First, I wish there was more time. You are not trained in any of the other elements but your birth one and your first interaction with the spirit world was unpleasant. I am sorry to have to press this onto you Avatar Zuko but… you must not remain here."

Zuko stuttered back.

Now that wasn't what he was expecting. He thought that the spirit world would embrace him or at least one of the Avatars would come and give him a good sturdy beating for what he had nearly done back in his chambers. They had seemed angry enough.

A shiver ran down his spine. Did it matter? Not really. He just wanted out of here.

"Fine! I didn't want this fate. Release me from this … realm?" stated the youth, all rage gone from his voice as he realized she was gone; just a swirl of snow where she had been standing.

There was then a soft voice suddenly behind him, sounding even more familiar as the figure spoke, "In a moment… but first I wish to assist you. There is something broken in you, Avatar. Something marred and damaged like a crack in the ice that makes the rest of the body weak. I wish I could keep you hidden at my peoples' shores and protect you. I cannot, for you have fate and even a guide to help you on your way."

Zuko went stiff, the voice like a whisper in his ear. He look wearily over his should and saw a fearful sight. The being from the distance was now directly behind him, back to his back. He turned around, a sight fear in his heart. When had she (for the figure was definably a female with that long waving-white hair and that elegant white dress) gotten behind him?

"W-what! When did you get behind me?"
She continued to talk though as if not noting that the boy was talking to her nor reaching for her to turn her around and look at her face.

"But first, since I cannot protect you, I wish to assist you on your journey," as soon as Zuko touched her, there was a spray of snow and Zuko had to close his eyes on instinct and as soon as he opened them again… the form and familiar voice were gone. He blinked in confusion, and then he heard a giggle behind him… he suddenly realized who's voice that was… and that familiar white hair.

"Yue?" he squeaked. "Is that you? What are you doing here?"

"I am not her and yet she is I. Now, please remain still," the estranged apparition replied, once again behind him and making his hair stand on end. And before he could even react and turn around, those white hands were loosely placed over his eyes, one hand petting the burnt eye for a moment before she firmly planted her hand on his face and then… he felt it…he had felt the same thing just days ago.

It was the same feeling as in the medical hut, but instead of the feel of a trickle of water, if felt like whirlpool was trying to pull at something beneath his flesh.

He immediately pulled away, slapping away the hand that had been, moments before flesh and bone, but was now water… splashing to the ground and leaving the limb amputated.

He was about to yell at Yue, or not Yue, for touch him while at the same time wondering why he hadn't thought it was strange she was in this frozen place to begin with.

His breath dragged in harshly, making a wheezing sound.

Instead of the pretty princess and her snow white hair, there stood a form that in all manners mocked her from the way she held her wrists, to the way her hair was done. The dress seemed to flow now though, a wind created by waves.

He stumbled back in collection of awe and horror as he noted the only real thing that set her apart from the real Yue was that the apparition had no face.

Fear suddenly flew over his entire form.

He knew the dangers of the spirit world. He had heard the tales of lovers pulled into mirrors and bodies stolen by evil spirits, whole islands devoured. And there was nothing worse than encountering a faceless spirit, because it usually meant they had no names and thus were looking for one to steal.

B-but why did she already have a stolen form then? Spirits that slowly devoured another's presence only took from one source… why would she want to harm him?

The spirit, that had been taking a set forward for every step Zoku took back, suddenly stalled, hands falling to her side as her words echoed in his head, "Do not fear me young prince, young Avatar. I will not harm you. I merely wish to destroy your scars before you… depart."

His eyes widened, thinking the worst and he took a defensive position thought he knew it will be useless. He had no bending in this realm.

The spirit seems saddened by the Avatar's hostility and slowly waves her hand, slowly pointing towards the terrain behind him. He didn't look at first, more weary of her.
She nodded her head at his decision and stated, "It seems our time is up… you will have to heal yourself, though I'm sure your guide will help you if you know it or not. Listen to him; he knows more than he appears to. Also listen to your Uncle, he is a good man."

Zuko took a step back, surprised at the mention of his uncle, yet before he could even ask what she meant he heard a roar and turned his head just slightly, only to have to turn around as a fearful look took over his face. There was a darkness rushing forward, and he found himself not wanting to be devoured by it with how it was slamming forward like a typhoon. He was scared, desperate. He didn't want to be pulled under by the dark waves for he was fire and to be consumed in such a way would destroy him.

The water was going to swallow him up.

He gave the spirit one more weary look but no longer cared about her. Instead he started to rush forward towards the tub boat. It seemed the ice floor was turning into those waves so it would be freed from the ice soon. The spirit did not stall him though, did not move as the waves grew larger and larger, the moon bearing down towards the earth.

Yet, even before the waves could even swallow her faceless form, Zuko heard her voice echo softly, "You must not remain in the Pole… it's still too soon for you to face him, and I don't wish to have the snow dyed black and red. Seek out your Masters and bide Roku's warning…"

The teenager gave the warning little mind though as he jumped into the tub boat, the waves hitting a moment more and throwing the little boat around like a petal in the wind… and there he remained, swaying back and forth in an endless pool of dark water.

The spirit did not return and the Moon went dark as if the spirit had left with it. Soon, darkness seemed to steal all of Zuko's sight, barely any stars in the sky. And before he knew it, time suddenly felt meaningless. There was just the tub and how it merely swayed back and forth.

Zuko suddenly wondering if it was a bad idea to get into the boat. There was no sunlight here and there was no sound beside the waves. It was a type of sensory desperation, the prince started to twitch as days seemed to pass in a blink of an eye. It wasn't even cold. He felt nothing. A part of him, after what felt like several more days without food or water, his body never crying out for either, Zuko considered jumping into the water and taking his chances.

Desperation was setting in. He even considered drowning just to get away from the nothingness… but then he heard a whisper in his ear.

"Lee… wake up."

He only had enough time to turn but not react, his limbs weak and heavy from the small trapped boat. His eyes went wide and his breath died in his throat as he watched a hand rise from the water, grab the edge of the boat and in slow motion, tipped the water craft… the black, flavorless water rushed around Zuko like a hungry, parasitic blanket.

He only had time to see that the white hand that had grabbed his boat was now what was pulling him under as well.

It was going to drown him.

It was going to destroy his inner flame.

Yet, just as the darkness became all consuming, there was light, a surface and Zuko felt himself not knowing if he had the strength to kick to the surface… thankfully, the same hand that had dragged
him under, now seemed to be pulling him up. Before he knew what he was doing, he grasped the hand and it pulled him up… up… and suddenly…

Zuko gasped, taking in air as if he had been under the water for a long time, lungs stinging and as if on instinct… as if afraid he would be dragged back under by the next wave, he reached upward and grabbed the first real tangible thing he could. It was person, he was sure of that much because they grabbed back, wrapping their arms around his back in an awkward kind of embrace.

He closed his eyes, imagining for a moment that it was his Uncle that had pulled him from the world beyond and had pulled him into an embrace, a loose hug. It was comforting, pulling away from the fear of that place and of his own lonely heart, yet… he knew far too well that Uncle never wore orange and smelled like tea and not the wind after a storm.

And Uncle would never call him…

"Avatar Lee… are you okay? One can get lost easily in the spirit world."

Chapter End Notes

I bet a lot of you already know who's shown up…. I don't feel entirely happy with the spirit world interaction but I think it got a lot of foreshadowing across so it should do. Regardless, hope you enjoyed the update. Little lazy on the proofreading but at least it's done.
Shock

After those words … he should have let go. It is not good to admit to hugging his capture, for that matter continued to do so. He just wanted to believe that it was Iroh he was hugging, embracing, holding onto so he would never be lost again, but those hands weren’t warm enough and there wasn’t enough pudge… this was not Prince Iroh.

In fact, it wasn’t until the stranger whispered that horrible title again did Zuko pull away from his delusion, “Avatar Lee? Are you alright?”

Drawing away in repulsion, Zuko did not want to be caught in the embrace of someone that sought for him to live only to fulfill his apparent purpose as a tool of the spirit world. Slowly, the prince growled, ready to demand someone call him by his birth given name and not that ridiculous Lee.

But… the shock that overcame Zuko was a bit much for anger because when he looked at the face of the being that had saved him from the spirit world, it had left him witless.

He never thought he’d ever see one in his lifetime, especially one that was kneeling before him with a kind hand on his shoulder, but that touch just confirmed he was not insane. There was an adult air-bender in front of him, the man’s bald head and blue tattoos were more than enough to prove Zuko inner proclamation. Not that the orange and yellow attire weren’t hindering that belief.

Noticing the Avatar’s wide eyed gaze, Yugato smiled softly and rose to his feet, bowing to the young Avatar, “Sorry, I forgot to introduce myself. My name his Master Yugato, and I am to be your air-bending Master. It is nice to meet you young Avatar.”

Zuko just continued to stare at him, eyes even wider. The monk frowned at this, kneeling down and stating kindly, “I’m sorry… you are still distressed from the spirit realm. You were trapped there for nearly five days so it is not entirely unsuspected. That is why it is best to be wary when entering the spirit realm when so … inexperienced.”

The prince nearly fell over, for the first time realizing his throat was dry and his stomach ached. In truth, such a period of time should have left him dead, but yeah… Avatar powers.

“Perhaps it’s best that we get you some nourishment, Lee. Being long periods of time in the spirit world generally won’t kill a being such as yourself but it’s exhausting for the body nonetheless,” continued the thin, tall man as he placed a hand under Zuko’s armpit and slowly raised the Avatar.
to his feet, the teenager stumbling before he grabbed onto the older man for support.

As if noticing his fault, the teenager immediately stood up straight and glared at the air-bender. Zuko wanted to say something, wanted to hiss at the older man, tell him the same thing he had told Pakku. Yet, just as his lips, dry and chapped, started to move with their proclamation, he bit his tongue. He had just gotten onto Pakku’s good side, so he was one more step closer to escaping. The more he was trusted, the more space he would be given and then… he’d be free.

Looking at Pakku, as if not acknowledging the middle-aged man that had saved him from his frozen hell, the Avatar bit out, “I’m going to my room to rest. Mediating with you was as harsh as learning to dodge.”

The water bender’s eyes got wide, and before Pakku could even refute the youth’s statement, the boy was stumbling towards the exit, a guard and healer rushing after the pathetic display. Now, the Master did expect at least an outburst from the boy. He’d be irate too after being stuck in that sitting position for a few days… the leg cramps would be horrid, but with the way the air-bender was looking at him, Pakku felt that Lee must have known that the Air Master would not take kindly to his student’s previous treatment.

Yugato, coming up to Pakku with a frown, asked, “A rather stoic youth, I doubt it’s just a stage. Is there something I need to know… about the scar and these previous lessons? Isn’t there, Master Pakku?”

The water-bender frowned. This was going to be a long conversation. Nodding to the other man, he decided it was probably best to do it over some blood wine. Though if the man drank, Pakku didn’t care, the wine would be for his heavy mind.

The Avatar had starting to grow on him and a small bloom of guilt was started to form in his chest.

…

Aang laughed as he ran around the icy court yard under his own judgment. He had been abandoned by his Master moments ago when a very worried water-bender stated that the monk had to help the Avatar before unpacking. Thus, the boy was alone. He had contemplated following the group of little girls that all seemed inbound to a collection of huts, probably for classes. He hadn’t followed them though, because he had no want to study today. True, it probably was water-bending so he wouldn’t technically have to worry, but the thought of just watching was somewhat boring as well.
He’d rather play in the snow.

After a snow man or two, not knowing what else to do, Aang pulled out his air staff and smiled. It was a rare treat to get to use this around anyone but the monks because of the danger, but with the welcome they had received, it seemed that air-benders were expected so who was he to disappoint them. He loved it when people would gape at his skills. The elder monks always stated he was very good, extremely for his age.

Smiling like a little nymph, the youth took a running start, his staff snapping open as a breeze drew the youth upward into the sky, orange wings classing with the endless blue and white around him. Aang knew that the orange color he was wearing and bearing was meant to display his air-bender pride… and also, when Yugato had changed into his own orange wardrobe, that it also meant that, “the Avatar would be fully trained.”

Aang had smiled at that, laughed, rambling that there was a trick he had been working on and couldn’t wait to teach it to the new Avatar.

Yugato had surprisingly smiled at Aang in a warm way, a happy way unlike the false expressions he forced to the surface so often.

A light of hope had been born into the Master’s heart and Aang was glad to see it.

He did a loop in the air just at the thought, laughing as the tribesmen all stalled in their duties and started to point at him. Today was going to be a good day… and it was going to be even better when he got to meet the Avatar.

He felt like he was about to see an old friend.

…

Shen smiled stupidly as another pair of Water Tribesmen smiled at him. He continued to grin back nervously wondering again if the water tribes were always this friendly to each other. Personally, it was creeping him out. Why were all the men smiling at him with that hungry look …

Shaking his head, the young man decided he couldn’t think of that. He was on a mission. He had to find Prince Zuko, access if he was still alive, and the environment that surrounded the prince so he
could go back to the crew and calculate a way to free the reluctant Avatar. Noting a slightly older man elbowing his son as they passed on one of the small boats in the water way, Shen offered back a small smile as the young tribesman nearly fell into the water trying to wave to him.

Yeah… something was up. He was sure of it and the further he got into the ice city, the more he suspected why. Iroh and Jee had admit that they had found the cloths on a woman that had been put out to sea, long dead, her body being given to her element as was customary of her people. Shen… was disturbed by the thought alone. Why would you want stray animals eating you or fish if you fell in? Cremation was the only right thing to do… though the Earth Kingdom’s burying techniques weren’t too terrible though the thought of being eaten by bugs in the dirt was just as bad as fish.

Regardless, the further he got into the city, the more he started to recognize why he was catching every young man’s eye. As fire-benders, he couldn’t tell the difference between men and women’s clothing styles in the pole, but now he started to notice that there were small details: an embroidered design, finely braided edges, furrier hoods, and head gear.

He knew it was strange that the crew demanded to do his hair as it was. It was … girly. A realization hit the young man at the truth of why all the young tribesmen were smiling at him. He was a paled skinned, lovely looking woman! The young fire-bender had to bite his lip to stop himself from throwing his mouth open and blowing flames in rage.

They would pay for this … oh, they would pay.

Soon, Shen’s once patience and almost paranoid pace suddenly became angry and huffy. He was going to find the prince as quickly as possible and get out of these cloths, but first he had to figure out where the prince would be kept.

Would it be a dark icy prison, the cold creeping into the young man’s heart until he fell down with a sickness? It was not a well-known fact, but fire-benders did not dwell well in the dark. They could not sustain themselves in long periods of darkness, their mind playing tricks on them as if their very flesh would creep off into the dark when they weren’t watching.

Shen’s skin crawled at the thought and he pulled his hood a little closer inward, shivering.

The prince was fine… Shen had to believe that. He needed that.
Picking another corner at random, hoping to find one with fewer young men down it so he wouldn’t be paused over, the fire-bender was almost disappointed when he crossed a group of young tribesmen that were standing on the bridge but not one of them turned their heads to look at him… they were staring at something else.

Shen stalled to stare and noticed nothing of interest in the waterway, nothing unusual, yet then he saw one of the boys point upward. Was there a storm on the way because …

Despite himself, Shen stepped forward and stared in awe as he watched a blur of orange do a loop in the sky. He leaned a little farther over the ledge and for a moment he was just going to stand there gaping when he finally realized… this was the sign he was looking for.

The Avatar had to learn air-bending and that was either Zuko expressing his first lessons or an air-bender that had come out of the world’s wood work to help the forlorn Avatar on his way.

Either way, it was his best lead, and Shen found himself turning his seal made boots, suddenly running. He no longer was paying mind to the young men or the smell that they could barely get out of his cloths or the fact that he was pretending to be a woman apparently…

That was an air-bender.

Shen soon found himself being led closer and closer towards the inner realms of the ice city by the air-bender. He could see the ice palace up in the distance and, without even a doubt in his mind; he knew that was where Zuko was being kept.

In a prison, no doubt… if it was gilded or dark, it didn’t seem to matter. He’d save the young prince. Zuko had suffered far too much in his short life.

Yet, just as he turned a corner, he realized his folly in running. There were too many water ways in this ice kingdom and he was about to fall into one of them. Though, it seemed fate liked him more than this parka’s previous owner, a sturdy hand suddenly stepping in front of the sliding soldier and stalling them both with a little water bending… ice suddenly guarding the front of his boots.

“Whoa there pretty lady,” stated an elder tribesman that had stalled him when Shen had nearly went over the edge. “Why you in such a hurry?”
Shen moved his mouth, trying to think of something to say, but the only thing he could do was offer a nervous laugh. He remembered this bender… the one with the scar. The water-jerk had nearly sunk the steamer.

Jayendra, said water-jerk, seemed to notice the young woman’s nervousness immediately and for a moment wondered if it was from his scar. It was not uncommon for a woman to become nervous, staring at his scar, but this young woman, a little older than sixteen (probably an illness had kept her from going out of the house and displaying herself sooner) had her neck revealed with nothing but a plain band around it, showing she was looking for a prospective husband. In his culture, a betrothed girl wore a medallion on her neck and an older woman generally wore clothing to keep her neck covered, but bearing oneself so openly meant she was looking for prospects…

She wasn’t a face he knew, but the water community had little huts scatter around the city where the tenants were more enclosed, so he wasn’t surprised and wasn’t disappointed by a new face.

Still smiling, Jayendra let go of one of her shoulders and turned in the direction the young, warm woman had been heading, noticing the young air-bender flying in the direction of a rather huffy moving figure in the distance, followed by a … guardsman.

Ah, the Avatar had come out of the state he had been in. It was almost funny to see Pakku running into the palace days ago, eyes wide, as he stated the Avatar was glowing and he could not wake the boy from his trance.

It was quickly discerned that Lee must be in the spirit world and it had been viewed as a positive thing… until the teenager wouldn’t come out of it.

Shortly after the monk arrive and told the worried Master and chieftain right off that the young man had most likely become lost in the spirit world and he’d help him back. The monk must have committed to his claim. Jayendra would know the Avatar’s angry gait anywhere.

Laughing in his throat, the Master stated, “Wanted to see the Avatar and air-benders I take it? The monks have only been here an hour or so and half of the tribe seems to know.”

Eye’s wide, Shen almost fell to his knees and praised the sun for his good fortune. They just as wells have given the Avatar to him.

Nodding his head vigorously, making sure to lower his voice so it would sound feminine, Shen
stated, “Yes, yes. I want to see the Avatar so much.”

Jayendra laughed throatily at the young woman’s forwardness and stated warmly, “Well, he’s not very social and he's not taking private audiences due to his … situation… but we are having the full moon celebration tonight and he’s sure to be there with his new Master. Perhaps … you would like to come with me tonight?”

Somehow Shen didn’t throw up in his throat at the prospect … like Iroh he recognized a bit of luck where it was. He’d get an actual opportunity to speak with Zuko or at least see if he was alright.

So, putting on his best smile, Shen stated, “It’d l-l-love to?”

Yet, in the back of his mind, the only thing Shen could think was he was so going to make Jee and Iroh pay.

…

Down the icy way from Shen’s location, moved a rather irate Zuko, not noticing that only a few yards away was a rescuer… no matter how informal said attire. All he cared about though was getting as far away from that air-bender as he could.

He had crossed over into the spirit realm and had been trapped, a spirit giving him a horrible warning. It had been haunting and it gave him just one more reason why he did not to want to be the Avatar.

Personally, it has shaken him so badly that Zuko knew that he would not be sleeping tonight.

Yet, the spirits were never subtle, as Uncle use to say, and right when he had started to convince himself once again that he could escape his fate in one way or the other, Zuko heard something to his left and jumped, far to use to dodging, not that his breath still wasn’t taken from him regardless as if he had been hit.

There was another one… the wind so strong as the small air-bender landed that it created a gust that threw back Zuko’s parka hood revealing the prince’s face. The shorter bender drabbed in orange and yellow with a winged staffed could merely stare at him with wide eyes, the snow settling all around him.
Zuko resisted the urge to lift up a hand and cover his charcoaled face from the boy’s gaze because that was certainly what the air-bender must have been looking at so intently. Zuko did not though… a familiar rage that the ice had been trying to cover suddenly bursting from below the thin frozen sheets like a beast that had been trapped down below.

He took a step forward, almost yelling, “What are you looking at!”

Aang, probably noting that he had been staring at Zuko’s face, looked away in shame knowing far too well how much it bother the older boy… yes, the boy from his dreams. The boy that got burned… It all made sense now. Aang knew there was a reason he had to go with Yugato instead of staying with Katara like he would have liked. This teenager … Aang didn’t even know his name yet the youth felt like he knew so many things about him.

It was almost funny. He knew someone he had never met … though it seemed that this inner knowing wasn’t shared by the boy from his memories.

The scarred boy wasn’t as happy to see Aang as Aang was to see him. It was like he was fulfilling a purpose.

Placing on a smile, knowing that the other boy had just misunderstood his expression for shock instead of well-meaning awe, Aang swung his staff so that its wings closed and held it vertically as he bowed slightly, stating, “My name is Aang. What is yours?”

Zuko frowned, the urge to say his full title always there but continuously bit back by the bleach of his false name that seemed to become more and more of his true identity than his princely self. Inclining his head just slightly, Zuko stated, “Lee, my name is Lee though some wish to call me Avatar Lee.”

Aang’s smile became one of glee. So he would be spending his afternoons teaching the burned boy, the Avatar, air-bending. It was a wonderful thought though the Avatar’s next words seemed almost the opposite.

“So… you are an air-bender, right? The pupil of the elder one who pulled me from the spirit realm?”

Aang nodded, adding happily, “I bend air and we have a flying bison, so I guess I am. The older
monk is Master Yugato. Yes, he is very wise about the spirit realm. One day… I will learn such things as well, I guess…”

Minding the frown that threatened to show itself in the young boy’s expression over his last words, Zuko asked almost bitterly, his own worries weighing far more on his mind more than what the younger boy’s worries were, stated, “Are you here to make me air-bend?”

For a moment the air-bender seemed insult, hurt, but then he put on a huge grin and in the warmest expression the boy stated, “Not really… I came here to make sure you smile.”

Zuko’s brows furrowed, confused, as he asked, “Why?”

Looking away from Zuko, as if lost for words, the youngster looked back up and bore into the prince, stealing his breath with his gaze alone as Aang stated, “Because I promised I would… a long time ago.”

Feeling something old, Avatar old, creep under his skin he stood there uncertain. In the end, a wave of dizziness and hunger caused him to move. Moving pass the air-bender, the only thing the prince knew for sure was that this boy with his grey eyes … was going to keep that promise as best as he could.

Because he fallowed Zuko all the way to his room, where he told the other to scram and closed the fur door.

Minutes later, Zuko hadn’t yet decided if that was a good or bad thing that the other boy had made that vow when he finished his soup and curled under his furs to sleep, barely noting the squeak for Pakku’s feet nor the accompanying airy sets. They spoke to him, he was sure… but their words were soft and lost like memories when was a young child and the words could not be quiet grasped.

Which was fine… the sound just brought a combination of dreams and memories forward of when he was a young child, uncle playing with him in the garden along with a bald headed little boy.
Zuko groaned something unintelligible and waved his arm from under his pile of furs, grumbling, "Uncle, go away. I don't want any tea."

A pale hand shook his shoulder again.

"I'm not hungry either," growled a Zuko’s voice from under the furs, the pile shifting slightly to the left away from the form that was prodding him.

"You are always telling me I'm training to hard, let me sleep," grumbled the boy, a little more awake, and rolled over, which caused a foot to pop out only long enough to twitch his toes and be pulled back under.

Aang frowned at this, standing up straight and looking at the two guards. Pakku and Yugato had come in to check on the Avatar, found him asleep, and abandoned Aang there. His Master gave him simple instructions to make sure that the Avatar was awake before the Moon Festival, but not to wake him until then. If he was bored he could go out on his glider again or play with the other children in the village. So, after bothering the guards, who said they were there for Lee's safety, he went outside. He met a few clumsy water bending pupils in the main courtyard, but for some reason his mind kept traveling back to the fire-bender.

… He seemed so angry and upset at the prospect of air-bending. Well, that wouldn't do. If you asked Aang, it was the best element. It was so free and blissful.

He'd change Lee's opinion. He planned on doing some air-bending tricks at the Moon Festival, but first he had to wake Lee up. Everyone was already heading to the main hall, if the laughter echoing down the halls was any indication.

The younger boy sighed and poked Lee once, grumbling, "Come on, wake up."
The two elder guards merely chuckled at the young boy's antics, and the tribesman who seemed to be carving something even chirped, "It's going to take more than that little air-bender. Lately, Pakku's had to wake up that lazy boy with a cold wave of water. Much to Lee's … distaste."

The two men both laughed at that and went back to their twiddling hobbies. Aang merely frowned at them. He didn't want to wait for Pakku. He wanted to befriend the Avatar and he couldn't do that with a stoic water-bender breathing down their backs.

Sighing as he looked up at the ventilation hole in the ceiling, Aang was struck with an epiphany. Waving his hands together, a trickster's smile on his face, Aang created an air-ball and then released it on the sleeping victim. The reaction was instantaneous: Lee hovered in the air for a moment as his furs all floated away to various parts of the room, leaving the elder boy looking confused and disheveled as his half-masted eyes looked around in confusion.

Then, as if being struck in the back of the head by a heavy palm to jump start his brain, he was reminded that he'd normally be angry about being woken up and got to his knees in a slightly defensive pose ready to strike, smoke suddenly starting to drip down his jaw like a slow liquid. Yet, his rage quickly turned to embarrassment as he took in the scene, his two guards laughing and pointing at a meekly smiling Aang.

The teenager immediately blushed. He had just been attacked by a stick boy? How could his guard become so lax in such a short amount of time?

Aang, not noticing Zuko's inner turmoil at the realization he was starting to trust his captors not to attack him in his sleep, merely waved his fingers stating, "Eh-he-he … good morning. I mean evening."

"Give me one could reason I shouldn't start your clothes on fire for waking me up," growled Zuko as he knelt there, hair up-turned and his furs floating down to the floor with heavy plomps. He couldn't recall ever wanting to sleep as badly as he did right now; his chi was so drained he was sure he wouldn't even be able to conjure a flame.

Aang put his hands behind his back, embarrassed about the air-bending trick. It was a wakeup call that the monks would sometimes do to the sleepy heads … and that Aang would sometimes do to the Masters. He'd generally have to run very fast afterwards, but it was worth it… the look on their faces was just so amusing. Lee's face though… was kind of scary. It was like he was trying to light Aang on fire with his gaze alone.

Smiling regardless, figuring that Zuko was just going to lie back down if he didn't do anything, Aang answered the teenager's question, "To help you get ready."

Before Zuko could even ask what for, Aang was soon laughing and running around the fire like a trickster. Soon, Zuko's strong stance, his root, was interrupted as he was nearly blown over, his
concentration lost. Zuko's eyes went wide in his moment in distraction before he suddenly went blind, a parka being thrown over his head and forced down his body. Aang did not stop with the wind charades until he stood before a smoking Zuko… smoking as in he was about to blow flames because he looked like a blue worm, his arms bound inside of his long parka.

Baring his teeth in a strained grin, Aang whispered, "Oops, here, let me. I was just helping you get … dressed."

Zuko, still half asleep, took a step back, yelling, "Don't! I'll … get … out… on …my own."

The two water tribesmen, who had been straightening their parkas from the wind, both started to chuckle, gaining a glare from the prince, but they were ignored as Aang came forward to try and help the other. Soon, Aang was trying to tug the parka down while Zuko barked that he could dress himself, and this stupidity continued until a very confused looking Yugato was standing in the doorway with Pakku standing halfway in the door, baffled.

Giving the other Master a look, Pakku decided he wanted no part of this madness, and stated to the other, "I'm sure you are more than capable of finding the main hall and dealing with … whatever this is."

Yugato shook his head and took his hands out of his sleeves, nodding to the other with a friendly smile as if nothing incredibly awkward wasn't happening just behind him, and stated in an airy voice like that of one of the elder monks, "Yes, your tour and our … conversation … was most informative. I will tell the children to hurry and we will be to the Moon Festival soon."

Pakku raised a brow at the other Master's comment, his mind a little on edge with how calmly Yugato had taken the information of about the scar, the forced capture, and the dodging lessons with far too much ease. His still expression still bothered Pakku; he was unable to tell if Yugato was angry or had accepted the situation. He'd dwell on that later though. Right now, he had to check on Jayendra's ridiculous claim that he had a date for the festival.

Who would be stupid enough to date that scarred idiot?

No one that knew him, that was for sure.

Shaking his head at the thought of the other water-bender, Pakku gave no more mind to the madness in the room behind him. Air-benders were always eccentric, wandering about with no true
family units. He really shouldn't be surprised. Not in the least.

Back in the room, Yugato's eyes turned back to the scene before him and he shook his head, forcing a soft smile. He was glad for Aang's friendly behavior because he was rather disappointed to hear of Pakku's idea of kindness to the boy. Apparently they had to beat the Fire Nation propaganda out of them.

Though, Pakku had eloquently put it as teaching him how to dodge.

Yes, the Avatar had calmed down, but there was still this gleam in the teenager's eye that worried Yugato. It made him worry that if someone wasn't watching the fire-bender at all moments, he would disappear into a puff of smoke. If the world wasn't in such a state of distress, he'd let the Avatar go. He would let the teenager run for a few years until the spirit world caught up to him, as it always seemed to those blessed in such ways, and thrust him forward into his fate in one form or another.

Though, given his forced containment, Pakku wasn't completely wrong in his judgment of keeping the boy here to train because Lee had barely been able to escape the spirit realm and could not call upon the Avatar State to escape. Was it the scar? Had it damaged his spirit in some way that the Avatar had to struggle through every phase instead of being naturally endowed with quick reflexes and concentration? The story of the healing room, though not told in depth, promised much struggle.

Or perhaps Lee's inability to escape had nothing to do with the scar. Maybe it was the other Avatars before him that would not allow such a misuse of power. Had the Avatar made his past selves angry somehow? Yugato had no idea what one had to do to make their past selves mad, but if Lee's temper was like the few fire-benders the Air Master had met … enough said on that.

Shaking the thought off, Yugato noted that Lee had struggled into his parka properly so he could keep Aang at arm's length as he asked the other youth why the Agni did he have to get dressed in the middle of the night?

Answering quickly, as he walked over to the two youths, the Air Master stated, "It is the Moon Festival. They happen every month during the full moon as a way to respect and celebrate the Moon and Ocean spirits. Because of your recent behavior, you have been allowed to come to this one. It is a treat, Pakku had stated, and so that you can be introduced to the rest of the tribe properly."

Lee's anger suddenly became an expression between horror and fear and his arm failed in keeping
Aang back, so that the youth fell against him with the older boy's pants in hand. Lee, standing there in nothing but his thankfully long parka and tribal undies, pushed the other boy away by his forehead, causing Aang to fall to the floor chin first, and finally showed his true colors to the Master.

"I will not!" barked Zuko, his fury suddenly showing as flames all but jumped from his mouth. "I will not be paraded around! I will not be stared down by a crowd of water … barbarians!"

Yugato stood still, as if surprised for a moment, before he replied calmly, as if he didn't hear the end of the sentence about barbarians, "I doubt this is really about the crowd, Lee. The manner in which you hold your shoulders alone shows you are used to higher society standards… like crowds."

Zuko went tight, barely even noting that Aang had stood up, pants still in hand.

The Master shook his head, coming forward and with surprising gentleness, for he knew it was what the Avatar truly needed, a kind hand; he reached forward as if to touch the scared side of Zuko's face… only to have the Avatar pull away. The arrogant look now gone… almost frightened.

That didn't detour Yugato, determined to form a spiritual bond of some type to help the Avatar along. But for comfort's sake, he pulled his hand back just slightly and added, "I know that Pakku's actions were slightly unjust to you, Lee, but do not judge all of the water tribesmen for his actions. This is a desperate world, desperate for someone to restore a balance. Your introduction is not meant to embarrass or harm you… it's meant to bring hope to the people, even if it is only a few water-bender barbarians and forgotten air-benders."

Zuko was still glaring, having just been woken from his dreams of Uncle and now being judged by a far too inquisitive air-bender. Feeling his lip twitch, he wondered for a moment if he could grab his pants fast enough to make a run for it. He just wanted to play along for Pakku until he could escape… that was not the case here. It seemed the whole village was overjoyed by his false compliance.

He felt like it was sullying his honor to falsify his intentions.

It made him feel sick.

Not knowing what else to say, he said in a grave whisper, "It would be a lie to stand before them
and say I am the Avatar."

Yugato, having taken the pants from Aang, gave Zuko a confused look before he added softly, "Could you elaborate what you mean by that, Lee?"

Stealing his pants from the other man, Zuko almost yelled, "I was never meant to be the Avatar! I do not what to be their hero! I want my honor! I want to be back on my ship! I want my Uncle and his stupid leaf juice! I don't care what you, or Pakku, that Yue spirit, or whatever Avatar Roku says! I don't want to be the Avatar!"

Noticing the teenager's distressed rage and inner turmoil finally brought forth for probably the first time since being saved from the spirit realm, Yugato remained silent as he watched a tear threaten to escape that unmarred golden eye. The air-bender knew what was coming.

Looking at the two guards, he quickly stated to them, "Please take Aang and … leave us for a moment."

The two water tribesmen looked at him before Yugato added almost harshly, "Now."

Aang was already heading to the door, knowing that tone, before the two men could get to their feet and leave reluctantly.

Zuko suddenly felt trapped, the air-bender suddenly seeming imposing for the first time with his suffocating gaze in the now too-silent room. The teen was almost tempted to press himself against the icy walls if it wasn't for the fact that Yugato was now in front of him, towering over him slightly, as he took ahold of his shoulder, stating, "We will speak of your worries of Roku and this … spirits later in your spiritual control lessons, and I understand being separated from your Uncle is distressing, but calm yourself. From what I understand … running away has solved nothing for you. Do not try to escape from something as simple as a party where you're the honored guest. There will be more worthy times to retreat, spare your chi the burden."

Having calmed a fair amount of students in his time, Yugato placed one of his long fingered hands behind the Avatar's neck and pulled him into a loose hug. The teen, though with his stiffness clearly unhappy, did not strike out, complying. Yugato wasn't fooled though. It was a false retreat. Lee was just allowing himself to be touched though still adamant in his opinions of hate. This was going to be a struggle, and not because Lee was most likely contemplating how best to start his newest Master on fire, but because, from the way Lee had held him after the spirit realm incident, Lee was very lost. Like a child.
Lee knew nothing about who he was supposed to be, who he was supposed to fight, and who was his comfort. Well, that was nothing that Aang's games couldn't distract from, nor some calming meditation couldn't at least dampen, but perhaps he could look into this mysterious… Uncle.

If one controlled that man… they controlled Lee, if the teen's desperation for the man was any indication.

Letting go of a stiff Lee, still surprised he hadn't been pushed away, the elder man pointed to the pants Lee was still holding possessively, adding, "Now, it's just a party, Avatar Lee. Please enjoy it, if only for the princess's sake. I hear she was excited that you were coming, but please… put on some pants.

A moment of blushing later and Lee grudgingly walked to the main chamber with Yugato, his two guards, and a chatty kid around him.

He still couldn't believe that the monk had pried under his skin so easily with a few calm words and a brief pat on the back. He should have been enraged at being touched alone. Then again, Iroh always did the same thing to him. This monk must have gotten notes from the tea drinker somehow.

"Here we are," stated his newest torturer, Yugato, smiling warmly at Zuko before they entered the echoing, loud, and well-lit main hall.

Yeah, he took notes.

…

If that creepy barbarian touched his shoulder one more time he promised he would rip off this parka and proclaim that he was a man and the pervert would taste a crispy death.

Shen did not though. He had even gone so far as to stuff his shirt so he’d have a bosom. Nothing over defined so Jayendra might be suspicious, but just enough to keep the man looking at his fake breasts instead of his golden eyes or pale skin.

Pressing off the thought of what he had used to get that bounce, Shen smiled vibrantly at Jayendra as they slowly walked into the huge main hall. If he wasn't surrounded by potential enemies, he
might have gaped in amazement. True, the water tribe would always be barbarians, but they were artisans. He could just see raised art everywhere in the walls, pigments mixed into the ice making it shimmer like the aurora lights that haunted the sky.

He turned his gaze back to his surroundings, ignoring the fact that Jayendra's hand had grazed his behind. Accidentally… maybe, but unlikely, but he had bigger things to worry about like looking for a fiery attitude and a scarred eye. It was strange that they would even allow Zuko to a party like this, but as he had thought earlier: Zuko could be caught in a gilded cage, and the younger's beliefs could become warped and pressed until he thought these kidnappers were his friends.

Over his dead body. Shen would never allow a Fire Nation prince, his prince, befall such a tragedy.

Zuko belonged with his Uncle. They were all each other had and family, like in all cultures except for probably the Air Nomads, was important.

Suddenly pulled from his thoughts by Jayendra's laughing, Shen nearly took a step back as a white haired water-bender gave him a scrutinizing gaze.

"Are you sure we aren't both mad and she isn't a spirit, because I refuse to believe that you found a date. Every woman in the city knows your reputation," grumbled Pakku as said water bender eyed Shen, part of him tempted to poke the supposed female to make sure she wasn't a figment.

His rival and companion shook his head and turned his attention to Shen, who at this time was known as Keemi to the water-bender after setting up this false date with the older man, stating, "Don't mind that rude old man, Keemi; he's just jealous that I got such a lovely young date."

Shen grinned nervously and stated in a soft voice, "Well … thank you. I think."

Jayendra chuckled at the confused statement and stated, "Well, we are going to be doing a water show, but I'll show you where to sit. But first… there he is."

Slowly, looking away from those blue eyes, Shen's breath was stolen away as two air-benders bowed, not only to someone who must have been a chieftain, but a rather sour looking prince as well. For a moment, the fire-bender was almost sure that wasn't the boy he had come to rescue. Zuko's hair was far too shaggy and pulled into a water-tribesman's hair due as it slowly grew out and blue hid his whole form.
The only reason he was sure that this was his prince at all was when the boy must have felt eyes on him and for a moment… they just stared at each other. Zuko's expression was as if he had just seen a ghost.

Chapter End Notes

I love the image of Zuko standing around without pants. Fan girl-ism, I know, but can you blame me. I’d love someone if they did fanart of that for me. :3
Chapter Notes

Thanks to BlueLucied for proofreading this chapter. :3

Also, the image was made by Bloodmoon14: Wanna Dance
Despite his inner want, Zuko didn’t rush forward and give his fellow fire-bender a very un-princely hug, crying to the other that he was glad. Glad that he hadn’t been going mad since a part of himself seemed to be forgetting the sound of Iroh’s voice or the image of his mother. It was as if the Fire Nation had been nothing more than a delusion. It was as if such thoughts and histories were just a last ditch attempt of a slowly flickering flame in a blizzard’s embrace which was trying not to go out as it held onto a mad boy’s thoughts.

But he was not insane. He was more than a candle. He was fire. The thought suddenly made him feel warm. Complete. It was as if he was finally being allowed to go home, his father forgiving him. He was … not alone. That belief alone made him want to weep like a small child, but he would never allow himself to be so weak.

Such thoughts did not stop the small sob that echoed in his throat at the sight of Shen and the two air-benders halted. Yugato, whose usual calm visage suddenly looked troubled and guilty, was about to speak but his airy voice was promptly interrupted by a rather attentive Aang.

“Something wrong? Are you nervous? Do you not know how to dance? You are supposed to have fun,” stated Aang as he ran up to Zuko, forcing a smiling though he felt something was wrong. A lot of things were wrong with Lee of course, but Aang promised himself that he would help fix
them all. “Or… do you not like parties?”

Yugato interrupted, not wanting to ruin Aang’s jovial (though it was always that way) state with the Avatar’s obvious answer and quickly pressed, “Aang, head to the sitting furs, let me speak with Lee.”

Aang reluctantly nodded and smiled as he ran a few yards forward and flopped next to a very pretty girl with long white hair, Princess Yue. The elder man’s voice was rather soft as he wearily placed a hand on Zuko’s shoulder, asking, “If you really can’t do this, we can try on a later date if this is far too pressing for you emotionally, Lee.”

The prince, feeling pride from his old lands and a blood line sting in the back of his throat, stood up straight and stated calmly, “No, just an old … ghost came to haunt me for a moment.”

Then, not waiting for his Master’s reply, stiffly walked across the hall ignoring the gawking masses that had not yet seen the Avatar. He was almost relieved when he finally took a seat at the head table, next to Aang, because now with some many prominent figures at the forefront he wouldn’t be able to quite tell if people were staring at him, the chieftain and his wife, Yugato, or the chatty little air-bender that was happily introducing himself to Yue and her father.

Unsurprisingly, Aang’s idea of an introduction to royalty was not a formal address but a marble trick, which by Yue’s giggling was hilarious. The student or the marble gag itself… Zuko could only guess.

Yugato stood back for a minute to observe his student in silent worry about the thought of what a stressed Avatar state could do, then slowly followed after. With a weightless ease, he took a seat next to the Avatar, ready to continue their earlier conversation in a low whisper only to notice that the boy suddenly went stiff, eyes wide. He followed the gaze and almost spurted the drink he had been given when he noticed what the boy was looking at a girl. A very pale girl, a mix breed probably, taking a seat at a table meant for water-bending Masters and their dates or spouses if he had to guess by the forms that were slowly taking up residence at said table.

He almost smiled to himself when he suddenly felt heat in the air, shifting the air currents around them.

Well, here he had thought this party was going to be painful, but here Lee was… just like any boy his age, looking at pretty girls.
And he had been worried.

Taking a sip of something that was like warm soup in a cup, the Master ignored the Avatar’s stiffness and poor display of disinterest towards the girl across the way and instead observed said girl over the lip of his cup. Said female had probably felt Lee’s gaze by now with the way she was trying to look in Lee’s direction while still pretending to pay attention to the scarred bender beside her. Yugato believed the man’s name was Jayendra. That man would have probably been a better teacher then Pakku, given that he looked to have a sense of humor, though Jayendra probably would have drowned said student if he had known the teenager was looking at his date in such a way.

The air-bender smiled into his cup and took in the scent of his drink. Smelled like there was meat in this, but unlike Aang he had learned some hard truths about the world and took another swig before he let his eyes travel to the other bender standing next to the table: Pakku.

Idiot, fool. He was more worthy of being an earth-bender with his rough love technique instead of using fluidity to manipulate the Avatar into staying like the chieftain had with his warning. Yugato did not approve of Pakku’s dodging lessons one bit. There shouldn’t have been any at all. He should have been allowed the boy’s ear first since his element was the next in the line, but at least the Avatar was still here. At least Lee was still far away from any fire-benders that might try to further pollute the bridge between the worlds. Lee was already stained. It could take years to spiritual cleanse the damage done.

Looking to the open floor and away from Pakku, the soft beat of drums had started meaning the party was about to begin.

With soft voice, though its authority seemed to echo off the icy walls, Chieftain Arnook rose to his feet and spread his hands out, his body language showing he was addressing all who witnessed him with his soft and almost tired face.

“My brothers, my sisters, my tribe and any witnessing ancestors, let this night of celebration be not only as a way to thank the Moon for her gifts, but to also to thank the Ocean for pulling the Avatar to us with it’s currents,” said the Chieftain, his hand directing slightly in the direction of Zuko. Said boy seemed to sink a little lower into his pile of furs, wishing he had a hood to throw over his head though decided to sit there, stoically staring at his food as if the Chief had not just addressed him.

Truthfully, Zuko knew he would be jovial if his own people were the ones staring up at him with such admiration, but this was the Water Tribe. A prince prided by another nation. He felt like a freak. A ghoul, a half dead thing, stuck between the worlds of the dead and the living. Cold water and hot flame. He swallowed and despite himself still held his chin high though his eyes could never rise from the table.
He may have been banished, may have been scarred, may be the bloody Avatar, but he was still a prince.

Chief Arnook nodded his head, beads in his hair clicking against each other as he nodded to the Avatar once more before continuing, “This is a great gift, a sign of hope that we surely needed. The world will be returned to balance. The currents of the water flow as they always have, but we still must be vigilant. The Avatar is young, untrained, but with each passing sway of the moon, we are given gifts to continue on our path. Such as Master Yugato... Avatar Lee’s first Master.”

Aang immediately waved his hand, grinning as he chirped to the crowd, “And his assistant!”

Despite himself, Arnook chuckled at the youth’s antics as well as the patrons and added, “Yes and his assistant, Aang.”

There was a murmur and some more laughter, the young air-bender having managed to kill the serious tone that had previously owned the air. Then, without further ado, the leader stated, “Let the celebration begin!”

Without even being requested, the water-bending Masters entered the middle of the floor around an ice fountain and immediately opened the ceiling to the large hall, moonlight falling in like a ghostly rain. The drums had picked up a louder tone, a few flutes entering the background as a musical heartbeat seeming to pep up the party. The water-benders then started to dance with their very element, carousels of movement and sly feet. It was a wonderful display, definitely practiced with passion and joy as a few benders broke off once in a while with a little singular flair, marking the celebration as more than a stiff tradition.

A few minutes later, a few amateur benders took the floor as the more experienced Masters sat down to enjoy the celebration and food, chatter and laughter echoing through the expanse of the large room like ghostly memories bleeding thorough.

Zuko, having finally noticed that Yugato was watching him out of the corner of his eye, decided that instead of watching his crewmate and throwing Shen’s cover, it was best to gather his strength. So, gladly he reached for a steaming dish in front of him that was quickly cooling. He blew on it, knowing Water Tribe food tasted better when warm.

Except for sea prunes.
Nastiest … things … ever…

At least this was good though, with the slippery feel of seaweed toward the bottom, but the mere thought that he didn’t mind the taste of this food kind of made him a little sick. He was getting used to this cold place. He had to get out of here and for the first time in days there wasn’t a doubt in his mind that he wouldn’t.

A few water dances later, the floor was sacrificed to the normal tribesmen for use and Aang decided it was an opportunity best not wasted.

For the last few minutes, he had been entertaining the Princess with stories of his culture and small air tricks. He liked her. She was nice and seemed to have this energy about her that reminded him of an old friend. The calm about her could have comforted anyone … anyone. Including a tortured soul.

Turning away from Yue, looking over at Lee… the air-bender’s high fell. Here he was, enjoying the celebration with a jubilation that made him want to join the display with some bending tricks of his own… only to be dragged down harshly by reality. Lee looked terrible. He was stiff and seemed utterly stressed if the vein in his forehead was any indication of his inner mentality.

That was unacceptable. Aang knew, knew, that he was supposed to fix something in Lee, like there was a broken link in a chain and he could not let it be until each and every link was fastened together in working order. He didn’t know exactly how to do it, but he knew the best place to start. He had to make Lee smile. And not just any smile! It had to be the kind of smile Yue had; warm and happy if maybe a little sad.

Lee should smile like that. Lee should …

Aang almost fell over and instantly grinned wickedly as he looked at the main floor, couples and grandparents with their grandchildren taking the floor as drums were beat at a steady tune and bone flutes took up a merry note. Laughter was ringing in the air, elation offered to the Moon.

Turning to Yue, who was watching the other dancers almost longingly, Aang smiled at her. “Yue … you like dancing, right? Cause you are a girl and most girls like that. Right? At least I think so. I’m not a girl, but I know girls, and you are a girl I’m rather sure that since you like watching
dancing that maybe…?”

The princess, who had been smiling brightly, turned those ocean blue eyes to the younger boy who was rambling now as a nervous sweat started to reveal itself on his brow. After a minute of forgetting to breath, Yue decided to stop the boy from his tirade and stated, “Are you asking me for a dance, Aang?”

He blushed for a moment, the thought not even occurring that he could take the floor with the lovely Yue until now.

Unable to look her in the eye, he stated in a bashful whisper, “Well, I kind of … am saving my first dance for someone special, but… Lee said he wanted to.”

The Princess raised her brow as if she didn’t believe him, her white hair glinting in the light as she leaned forward to look over Aang’s form and down the table at Lee, who was angrily stabbing something on his plate as if to check if it was dead enough or not before putting it in his mouth.

Blanching on his words, Aang was quick to lean forward and block her line of sight before adding with wildly waving hands, “B-but he’s kind of shy with girls and doesn’t know how to ask.”

Yue blinked, surprised. Lee had seemed kind enough when they had spoken at the table in the past but he hadn’t struck her as the shy type. Then again his gaze kept falling onto the attractive Water Tribe woman at the Water Masters’ table. Yue didn’t recognize her, but it was obvious Lee was trying to seem inconspicuous when throwing looks at her. He probably wanted to ask her … or any other girl for a dance.

*He might just be inexperienced about asking.*

She wouldn’t be surprised… with that scar. Lee probably had been shot down so many times because of that reddened flesh that he had given up. Well, Yue might have been a princess but she was also her people’s servant, with a deep and caring heart. She would never allow an ailing soul that deserved peace to continue to flail like a fish on a ship’s deck. He deserved a moment of delight and childhood bliss.

Smiling at her mother, Yue stated she was going to dance and stood up, placing her bare hands in her sleeves. She pecked Aang on the cheek quickly, thanking him for being so kind in telling her, and then headed forward, her shadow quickly falling over a distracted Lee.
So in tune with killing the dead thing on his plate and waiting for a signal from the only other fire- bender in the room, Zuko almost jumped out of his skin when he heard a soft, “Uh, hum.”

His eyes went wide, ashamed of himself for a moment that he was apparently so out of his skull that he hadn’t even noticed that Yue, a Princess and not even a warrior, had snuck up on him. She even had to make a noise for him to notice.

Blinking, as if uncertain how to react, Zuko murmured, “Uh, Princess Yue. I … didn’t see you.”

She giggled softly into her parka’s sleeve and spoke with a warm smile. “Yes, I can see that, but I don’t think Master Jayendra is willing to share his date.”

Zuko choked, his brain finally truly comprehending how Shen got into this party: feminine wiles. Ugh, the universe felt kind of wrong now. Ugh, now he imagined Shen trying to duel him in that dress. Uncle in a dress. Stop! His brain was taking him nowhere fast and it was a place that he would rather not go.

Look at Yue! Look at real girl! Zuko’s brain cried out as it tried to salvage a little bit of his sexuality.

Yue, noticing the horrified look on Lee’s face, added in a kind tone, “Don’t worry though. I was going to ask you, Lee. Would you like to dance with me? I’d love the company.”

Zuko’s face went flush, realizing for the first time that not only Yue but everyone else at the table was looking at him. Some people were smiling, other with worry and some with suspicious glints in their eyes. It was as if someone had stopped time to stare at the two of them. Well, Yue was cute and she was abnormally nice to him. Nicer than the average water savage at least.

Could she even be called a savage?

Could all the Water Tribe really be savages?

Pakku, definitely, but these people were all laughing and dancing and singing like citizens in his country were no longer allowed to. Did the tribe’s joy make them savages? Turning his gaze away from the floor, Zuko met those doe eyes.
It wasn’t his place to decide, came an old part of his soul. So he would hold his opinions. He was days, maybe a few hours, away from leaving and going back to his Uncle. He would dance with the blue-eyed girl and maybe he could get closer to Shen and speak with the disguised man.

Nodding, his voice almost cracking, the prince stated, “Yes. I-I would like to.”

Rising to his feet, he nervously looked at the bare hand that was outstretched toward him. Slowly, he reached out and let her grab onto his fingers as he long sleeve protected both their hands from the cold now. Then, feeling a little more confident, he smiled and led her out towards the middle of the hall. Still nervous, but far too used to dancing in public due to his mother’s love of dancing, Zuko’s feet started to recall a dance he had not practiced in quite a while. It was a movement not meant for battle or hate or pride, but existed only to make a beautiful girl smile, be it his mother or Yue.

Taking her hand in his completely, he was glad that at least this type of slow dance was culturally universal, probably because it was practiced at most noble weddings. With a confident grace meant for royals, the pair stepped out onto the floor. He knew that, even though they weren’t physically pressed together or anything like some of the more sensual dances he had seen in the Earth Kingdom, that they were too close. He wanted to take a step back and create a larger distance between the two of them, his hormones suddenly feeling awake for his age. Unfortunately, since they were dancing, she’d merely step with him.

After a few paces of Lee’s obvious awkwardness, a tingle running down his spine, Yue laughed softly and stated, “Calm yourself, Lee. It’s just a dance. Let’s just enjoy the music.”

Zuko, who had been minding his feet and sweaty hands the whole time, finally looked up and for a moment, his breath stolen. Yue seemed to be glowing and he was almost taken aback until he recognized that it was actually the moonlight falling down on her.

Beside himself, he found his lips falling into a warm smile, his expression softening as Yue smiled back. The tingle now was settling in his stomach and he found he didn’t mind looking at Yue and her plump lips or how her hips would bump into his hips from time to time innocently. The giggling echoing in his head didn’t even bother Zuko, the whispers from his past seemingly entertained by the sight of the newest reincarnation’s plans and plot shot down by the smile of a pretty girl and unrequited hormones.

Zuko just didn’t get it as he found himself drawing the girl a little closer, forehead drawing closer to hers as if bowing down, her eyes were hypnotizing. Just how this frigid place ever managed to grow such a wonderful and rare desert flower, Zuko would never know, but he was glad.
Yue was warm. Really warm. Perhaps this is what Uncle meant, when a girl looks you in the eye…

“You are a very good dancer, Lee,” said Yue suddenly, noticing how the Avatar after a few minutes had seemed to melt and flow on the dance floor with her, staring couples soon forgotten as Lee pulled her a little closer.

At first she thought of pulling away, but looking into those eyes, there was nothing predatory or hungry like most boys that pulled girls too close. He wasn’t trying to get a feel, he was just glad to have another soul so close and despite herself she didn’t want to break free either.

It was like meeting an old companion… an old lover that she had known for many years. Quickly pressing off the idea, part of her wondering if she would be glad or not if her father came up with the same deduction now that she was of age and accepting grooms, she thought it best to talk.

“How did you learn to dance? I thought you lived on a ship with your uncle?”

The placid look turned tired and a part of the girl thought for a moment he was going to pull away upset, but instead the Avatar just looked tired, whispering, “Before the ship… my mother, she loved dancing. My father didn’t care for it so she would make me dance with her,” he smiled and added, “even if she had to kneel forward since I was so short. I learned to be a good dancer from tripping on her dress robes.”

Yue giggled at the mental image in her head of a cute little Lee with a faceless woman with said boy grasping her long red dress to keep upright. It made her feel as if she knew Lee a little more now, part of her glad that the music had taken a slower tune, if only to appease the slow dancers. If she would have looked up, she may have noticed that a lot of people were watching the Avatar and her, the princess.

A powerful bender and a girl in need of a suitable groom, the moonlight seeming to reveal too much for wandering eyes or minds. Sometimes the spirits weren’t as subtle as one would like or at all and the past Avatar’s reincarnations are sometimes too bold. Not that the teens in the crossfire noticed.

The princess laughed, teeth all bared in a broad smile as she added, “Well, I’m sure all the other girls were just jealous that there was such a handsome man on the dance floor and none of them could cut in.”

Zuko smiled as well, purring. “She sure thought so. My mom, I mean. She said I was the most handsome…”
It finally occurred to him that the girl before him had just called him, the scarred-banished-unhonorable prince, handsome. A blush suddenly appeared on his face causing him to cough, “Y-you think I’m handsome?”

Yue, as if caught in a lie, stared in shock for a moment before her face gained a peaceful expression. Looking at him with her soft eyes, as she quickly added in a careful voice, “Of course you are, Lee. You are very handsome.”

Looking away from her, noting how her hands tightened as if to keep him from running away, Zuko could barely whisper, “But … the scar.”

Feeling the hand that had been on his shoulder lift, Zuko almost started as a pale hand came forward into his line of touch and then with a weary hand she touched the left side of his face. He might have been angry, might have been enraged if anyone else had touched him that way, but it didn’t hurt or burn or bleed. It was comforting and warm, daring. He didn’t even feel scared as her palm pressed over his eye blocking out the light for a moment.

As if calmed by her very touch, the moon whispering at his back, her voice rang in the back of his head as she whispered softly, “You are beautiful.”

Slowly, opening his eyes, not even noticing that the two of them had been given some space on the middle of the floor, his Masters and citizens staring, yet all he saw was Yue. It was then, looking at her, that he didn’t feel angry at the Moon Spirit for stealing Yue’s form and frightening him in such a way in the spirit realm. The Moon couldn’t have picked anyone as lovely to mimic.

*Kiss her, you little water snake!*

*Oh don’t rush him…*

With unpracticed daring he slowly learned downward, wishing to kiss the beautiful princess, a familiar comfort in the back of his mind that he had done this a thousand times before in some life and there was no need to be nervous. A boy, even an Avatar, should enjoy his first kiss. Not that Yue was pulling away, tilting her chin up slightly as she slowly closed her eyes.

Two old souls were about to be reintroduced.
“Are you going to kiss her?”

Zuko immediately opened his eyes and pulled away from the surprised looking princess, the spell of moonlight being broken as a pair of grey eyes looked upward at the two teenagers. Scrambling away, Zuko was the first to choke, his voice screeching in etches of puberty as he stated, “W-what! No … we were just dancing.”

“Why not?” asked Aang. “Isn’t she pretty enough?”

Choking this time, Zuko barked, “Of course she is, b-but I’m a gentleman. Never on a first date.”

“This was a first date?” asked Yue bemusedly, loving how the less experienced boy flushed even more, steam actually rolling off of him.

He swallowed then and, as if unable to think of anything else, “I need to go to the bathroom.”

He then stormed across the dance floor, older couples laughing softly as he passed. He dared not even look behind him where he knew undoubtedly Yue’s parents were probably laughing and he didn’t even want to know what Pakku or Yugato’s expressions were. He was going to stay in there the rest of the night.

… Which of course he didn’t, after a few minutes, he decided that it was rather cowardly to hide in a bathroom … again… and had made his way back to the party. There he leaned again the wall and brooded, noting with a faint blush that Yue was now dancing with Aang and throwing an occasional smile his way. It was just … unnerving. Here he was a prince and he couldn’t even kiss a princess without melting into an emotionally incapable pile of blushing goo.

Maybe uncle had been right. He had needed to talk to girls when they went into port.

Finally a shadow fell over him and he sighed, expecting it to be one of his babysitters who would undoubtedly start mocking him for such a horrific display for the next few days. Or years at the pace it was taking to get out of here.

“Should have kissed her, a pretty girl like that,” said a taller tribeswoman who held a fan over her
lower face, and for a moment Zuko was about to growl something unpleasant to the older female when the woman continued. “Your uncle would love this story so much more if it ended with a little smooching. Agni, I never knew you were so inexperienced when it came to girls.”

Oh, he knew that mocking tone. All the crew would use it whenever Uncle would bring up girls.

“Shen?”

The other fire-bender almost dropped his fan and seemed to panic for a moment as if his cover had been blown, only to quickly recover and then giggled aloud, “Oh Avatar, you are so coy! I’d love to dance with you!”

Then, not even waiting for the teenager’s response, grabbed the boy by the shoulder and slammed him into his fake breasts and growled in the blushing prince’s ear, “Shhhh, don’t blow my cover. I don’t want to end up caught… especially not as something so degrading.”

Nodding into the fake breasts his face was planted in, the teenager mumbled, “You are suffocating me.”

Letting up on the grip on the prince’s shoulder, his compatriot whispered, “Sorry, still a little twitchy. I still can’t believe I found you out in the open. I was sure you’d be shackled somewhere, but then again… you’re their hero. They don’t put their heroes in chains.”

“They just keep them locked up behind walls,” growled the prince in an agitated voice, noting that Yue had looked their direction and was laughing softly into her hand. Not that he blamed her. He probably looked ridiculous being led by a taller tribeswoman around the dance floor, his face almost flush against her breasts. Just what did Shen stuff in there to make them so … jiggly.

“You really should have kissed her.” said Shen again, “Because the crew all agreed before this whole Avatar mess, that the first Fire Nation port we came to, for your sixteenth birthday you were going to be taken to the Red Lamp District.”

“What!” he barked, only to be slammed down into Shen’s fake breasts again. Where the other man had gotten those fake squishy things or what he had made them out of… Zuko would rather not think too hard on it.
“Regardless,” added the soldier as he kept a paranoid eye around them, “I need some information from you if we are going to get out of here. Now, because I was stuck with Jayendra,” the man’s eye twitched, “I know that you have made multiple escape attempts. Tell me what is hindering you the most.”

“Water whips. They leave welts,” hissed Zuko, recalling their sting.

The older soldier glared at the teenager for a moment, “No… was it getting out of your cell, getting through town, remaining undetected?”

Angry sarcasm aside, the Prince whispered, “The largest problem has to be that even if I take out the guards someone always checks in every hour, so even with my stealth someone is going to find me gone.”

Zuko eyed Pakku for a moment who was watching him now that the dance was drawing to the end, his words truly angry for the first time in weeks, “Then there’s the wall … and the blistering cold ocean. If I get a boat, I can’t get past the wall, and if I get over the wall without a boat I’ll drown. Going off into the tundra isn’t an option either. If it’s one thing I’ve learned living here is how easy it is to nearly freeze to death.”

Nodding, the elder man added, “Alright, we’ll take care of that, but we don’t want to rush this. I have an idea where your room is located since it’s the gossip of the palace.”

Zuko gave the estranged drag queen a look but the other bender just shrugged and stated, “What? A dress gets you a lot of information around here and I made a mental map of the area.”

Still holding a horrified expression, Shen ignored the look and continued, “Soon, I’m going to head back to the ship. I’ll then return with an unnoticed invasion force…”

Zuko pictured Jee in a dress which made him shudder as the other bender continued, “Which will probably be within the next ten to twelve days, while the new moon has made the sky black and the benders are at their weakest. I’ll need you to do is be ready to go in minutes’ notice. We’ll probably be there for you in the hours before dusk, three or four in the morning. We will have a route and transportation set up. You just have to survive until then.”

Grunting in acknowledgement, Zuko had so many questions he wanted to ask such as if Uncle was okay or strangely if the old man was out of tea as well as how the crew was, but it was then that
Zuko noticed the slow music had stopped and giving a pained look, Shen pulled away and stated, “I will be back for you.”

Then in a high pitched voice as Jayendra started to walk over with a dirty grin, probably noting how the Avatar had technically been in his date’s breasts the whole time, Shen placed his fan over his face and giggled, “Oh Avatar, you are so handsey and you dance so well. You make a young woman blush.”

Zuko might have taken a moment to be horrified as the water-bender patted him on the shoulder. “Next time try her ass,” and then preceded to smoothly place a hand on Shen’s ass as the two walked away but Aang once again interrupted the embarrassing situation, grabbing the unresponsive teen by the arm and laughing, “Come on. The moon dance is about to start! Yugato says you’ve enough excitement for one night and after this it’s to bed with us. We have training tomorrow.”

Then, after half dragging him across the floor, the air-bender pressed Zuko’s spare hand into Yue’s bare hand, the bald kid asking, “What did Jayendra mean by handsey?”

Zuko was only allowed a horrified blush in Yue’s directions before there was a sudden jerk on his arm, finally noticing that everyone had interlocked hands so there were now circles of people around circles of people, waving their arms in waves as they walked counter-clockwise as a human chain.

Moon dance… it fit he supposed, but he was just glad that the night was almost over. He didn’t know how much more sexual tension he could take.

Though Yue had a nice smile. A really nice smile and despite himself he actually smiled softly back at her as the younger energetic fools all danced around each other in circles to represent the moon.

Not that the grin lasted long. The moment Aang saw his lips frown upward the child did something most odd. He jumped into the air, a yell of joy escaping him, which would have been fine and dandy with a bowl of candy … if his wind didn’t throw them all on the floor as he came back down.

The kid must have really liked dances because the rest of the night he seemed ecstatic.
Elsewhere, far from the party of air-benders and water-benders and two fire-benders was the final element: earth.

With slow, calculated steps, the figure walked, nothing but a single bag over his shoulder and a pouch that looked like it was heavy with gold at his waist, but not one of the sleazy or starving figures in the port town made a move as the figure walked to the docks. Those who knew his garb could not believe their eyes, thinking they had left that city and its horrors long behind, while others were merely spooked that this man never showed his face. The circular green hat he wore was tipped so perfectly that all you could see was the man’s mouth which was neutral of all emotions.

He also moved like a statue which had been given legs, solid, sturdy… and more than capable. The last group of men in his travels that had tried to steal his purse had learned all too quickly what he was.

Luckily for the stoic man, the night had settled over the little port town. One would have thought the town dead if there wasn’t the sound of rowdy bars in the far reaches and crickets hiding in the grasses. So, the only proof that this ghostly figure wasn’t a haunted spirit at all was the grinding of gravel against rock; his footsteps against the earth.

Oh, the dock barker, had been staring at a cricket just hopping by until the noise of said moving feet forced his head up. The high risk trader, as he liked to refer to himself (instead of pirate) had to blink at the figure that had appeared before him like an apparition out of thin air.

For a moment Oh considered pulling his butterfly sword out of its holder because he automatically felt something was wrong, but he pressed the feeling away. No, there was as reason the Captain placed him here, to bring in the customers. Unlike the rest of his shipmates, he knew how to put on a smile and a cool attitude and to save the violence for when it was really needed.

Pressing a jovial expression on his face, despite the strange ensemble the man had on (though it was exceptionally well done, meaning money), he walked up to him and winked, leaning his head slightly to try and see the face under that circular hat, “Hello there! It’s a little late for shopping but I’m guessing you are a man looking for the earlier-earlier shopper deals. Well, look no further. Our curios are fine and rare. Is there anything you are looking for in particular?”

The man, whose hands were behind his back and hidden by his sleeves, looked up at the boat, a frown forming on his face before he spoke. “I have no interest in curios.”
Oh frowned at this, though his smile hardly faltered as he continued. “We have fine linens. Not that yours aren’t wonderfully… green, but the Army might easily notice that you are a deserter.”

The man didn’t even flinch at the jibe, having heard it a few times on his travels, his voice even as he spoke again. “It is not military. It is a Dai Li uniform. Now, answer me carefully because this may decide if I will be throwing you into the nearest wall or not for disrespecting a loyal servant of the Earth King: is that ship yours?”

Oh, though ready to flee at a moment’s notice after the mention of the Dai Li, frowned as he added, “I’m part of her crew for … high risk traders.”

Suddenly, the bottom part of the face Oh could see showed its first hint of emotion. A smug little grin, before a purse was thrown to his feet and the man’s sickeningly calm voice purred. “Then take me to the North Pole. I have a mission to uphold. I have a student to evaluate.”
Jee finished stuffing his pipe, careful not to pack it too tight though he didn’t mind having to relight it a few times. His snapping thumbs then lit up the night for a moment, the man giving the pipe a few seconds to smolder. He silently looked around the empty deck to make sure none of the other men were up at this Agni-forsaken hour.

Closing his eyes, the firebender took in a small intake enjoying the rare treat of flavored smoke on his tongue. It wasn’t that smoking was banned or anything on the ship, it was just that Zuko thought it was a waste of money and smelled terrible. So, understandably, the men of the Wani thought it was worth its weight in gold.

As a consequence, lighting up your pipe meant you had to share if discovered. Duck, the resident cook, was a well-known moocher as well as Iroh. He loved the old prince like a removed cousin that just wouldn’t leave, but right now Jee needed to be alone. Especially with the stress that had settled into the ship’s bones, the very metal frame of the ship groaning like it was about to give.

It had been about five days since Shen had gone out in his Water Tribe dress, and for those five days, his skiff had yet to meet them at the rendezvous point. Jee knew infiltration was probably going to take a few days. So, to keep his mind steady, he reminded himself that the whole situation was just outrageous and if they all survived this, it would be something to laugh over.

Snapping his fingers again, a spark lighting up his face like a dying firecracker, Jee stared down and tried to see his reflection in the water below. He then turned his gaze to the surrounding glaciers to see if he could catch any movement in the moonlight ... he was not blind to the fact that there were Water Tribe scouts spying on them. Truthfully, he knew he shouldn't even be smoking. The crew had killed all exteriors lights the last few nights to try and lose their unwanted observers in the darkness of the ocean’s grasp.

At first, the crew didn't even know the Water Tribe was actively following them, but they then caught movement off one of the icebergs. A flash of blue and the glint of a sharpened weapon. The ship was being watched and yet oddly not attacked. The growing theory from the crew was that the water savages might be using the Wani's location and crew as a bartering tool against Prince Zuko.

Jee’s eye twitched at the thought alone.

Regardless of the disturbing theory, the still missing Shen and another scout sighting had put all of the men on edge. And though some of the seamen were still reluctant to assist the Avatar, they all agreed that the Water Tribe could not be allowed to keep a Fire Nation Prince. Banished or not ... Even though, with each passing day, the cold seemed to be creeping into all of their bones and nipping at their inner flames.

In fact, the other day, Keiji who was one of the resident firebenders, had nearly collapsed. True, some of the seamen had noticed the benders had been twitchy a few days beforehand, but they
thought they had more time. Then, suddenly, Keiji faltered in the middle of one of the halls, hugging himself as he full-body shivered. You could hear the terror in his voice, as he whispered, “Don’t let my inner flame go out… P-please. I c-can’t let it go out!”

It was decided that the cold was getting to him along with the paranoia that he might die and be buried at sea, his body taken by these cold waters. It was every firebender’s worst nightmare. Iroh, Ryto who was the crew’s field medic, and Jee agreed that bed rest and some of Iroh’s herbal teas were best for the troubled bender.

Thus, the man was nearly bedridden until they were in an environment with a little more sunlight to his mind and chi. The rest of the crew had even volunteered to take turns checking on Keiji to make sure the man’s room was always kept sweltering as an assurance to him that he would remain hot-blooded. As an extra precaution, everyone even went so far as to keep candles littered around Keiji’s barrack to comfort him and to allow him to meditate if needed. Not that he probably would… he was still in a state of panic.

In fact, a lot of the crew’s benders were starting to get that way. The fear of losing their inner flame to this freezing and partially lightless land suddenly seemed very real as the days started to shorten. The commanding officers didn’t know how long they could reassure everyone that no one’s inner flames were going to go out. Not here. Not now.

Shaking off the chilling thought, Jee tried to ignore his shaking hands. Regardless of multiple verbal reinforcements, Keiji’s plight had planted the seeds of doubt and worry into every bender’s heart on the ship.

To lose one's inner flame … madness surely would follow after be it two months or ten years later. The wait depended on the will of the bender and how much he or she had been reliant on their bending. Since all the men on the boat were soldiers as well as sparring partners to the hot-tempered prince, it was a frightening thought indeed.

Letting out a plume of smoke passed his chapped lips, Jee shook his head. He knew that if something didn’t happen soon, Iroh would have to make a choice. Zuko was the Avatar, his pervious lives knew the snow and the cold. He could handle being stuck in the North Pole. As for the Wani, hysteria filing down the ranks, the Dragon of the West may have to make a hard decision.

The choice was to either risk the crew or to leave Zuko behind.

Taking in a deep drag, the embers of the pipe lighting up his face, Jee held onto the taste for a moment and then exhaled out of his nose. Since most of the crew had been willing to wait for Zuko, willing to rescue the boy who’d been banished, but they were running out of time.

Jee closed his eyes tightly, another cloud of smoke escaping his nostrils as his spare hand gripped the railing of the ship. He had to resist the urge to pull his hand away in pain from the frigid metal. A normal person might lose some skin, but Jee was a firebender and refused to bow to the cold, steam now swirling around his hands as he heated his skin.

Sighing, the aging soldier thought of the non-benders now. That was another disquieting factor about this arctic hell. Most firebenders, though they feared for their inner flames, could take the cold for a few weeks but a nonbender had no inner flame to chase off the chill to protect their toes and fingers. Frostbite had become a real worry. Blackened fingers and toes were no big loss unless that toe happened to be the big toe for balance or the thumb. Especially the thumbs. How could an engineer use his tools or a pikeman wield his weapon without a thumb? Of course, extra lining was offered to the rest of the crew but if the benders were already distressed: what of the others? There
were more nonbenders on the ship then firebenders after all.

Biting down on his pipe, secretly Jee wondered if he should be glad to be rid of the Avatar, but admittedly such thoughts left a sour taste in his mouth that no pipe could dampen.

Taking another taste of the burning pipe, knowing that whatever the morning decided to bring them it was best to handle it with a well-rested mind, Jee decided to go to bed.

Yet, a turn of his metal heel, his red cloak catching the wind, Jee’s breath caught and his eyes widen when he saw something that made his inner flame shiver and shrink back. With a wet pulp, something fell over one of the deck sides and a part of Jee wanted to believe that it was just ice falling. He knew it wasn’t though when the white mass, encased in the shadows, started to pull itself to lazy feet. Then, slowly it turned its head in the Jee’s direction, black orbs blinking.

The captain knew what it was instinctively, feeling the pipe slip from his hand in horror. It had to be a Wallowing: a type of Funayūrei spirit. Usually, it was of a woman that had drowned at sea as she waited for her lover to return. Those spirits would grow more and more embittered under the waves until finally, they would build a body out of their skeleton and things found beneath the waters. Then, with their haunting forms, they would drag themselves onto ships looking for their lover. Everyman that wasn’t him was dragged beneath the sea as punishment.

The tales of empty ships afloat on the ocean were legendary, especially in arctic waters where it was rumored the ice witches would freeze their literally stolen hearts, never allowing the souls of her victims out of the ocean.

A few wet steps in his direction, seaweed falling to the deck, Jee finally gained his senses. Having never really faced a spirit, Jee’s stance was one meant for easy movement … or a quick escape. He knew that entire ships were found empty where a Wallowing would step, leaving nothing but her pearly tears behind. That was not happening to his crew.

And yet, as the thing drew closer, something seemed really off with the spirit and before Jee could even put a quizzical expression on his face, he watched as his pipe was picked up from where it had fallen. Then, the long black haired thing put it to its blue lips, taking in a long drag before letting it out with a cough.

The voice nearly knocked the ship’s captain over, “I knew you had a stash, Lieutenant Jee.”

Nearly collapsing against the metal railing in surprise, the clothing finally giving a hint, the man gasped, “Shen?”

Taking another puff, shaking slightly in his wet heavy dressings, the younger firebender nodded, “Who else? A sea witch? I knew I was supposed to wait at the rendezvous point, but why in the whole cursed pole were the lights all out, sir? I fell into the water trying to crawl up the side railing! My inner flames the only reason I’m not dead!”

Blinking, trying to regain some of his composure, the Lieutenant stated, “We’ve had Water Tribe scouts around. We were trying to lose them before meeting up with you.”

A hard shiver slamming against his body, Shen tried to stop his teeth from chattering as he asked, “Oh … that’s nice and all but… I’m freezing. Will you help me, please! Otherwise, I’ll be too dead to make a report.”

Finally noticing that the other man was almost too cold to move, Jee walked forward and quickly heated the air around the two of them in a burst of steam before rushing the man inside. It was easy
to say that no one was going to get any sleep tonight. They would be too busy preparing. They would not be leaving Zuko it seemed.

The Avatar's fate was yet to be decided.

Zuko rolled over again, sighing into his bedding. The nonbending guard looked up from his carving while the waterbender didn’t even raise his head, a ball of water between his hands like a floating orb. He was concentrating on it and refused to be distracted by the Avatar’s restlessness, unlike his counterpart.

Going back to his carving, the nonbender, Huroko, spoke softly, “You know, you have training with Master Yugato tomorrow. It is probably best to get some rest. You are his for the entire day and though I doubt his lessons will be as trying as Pakku’s, learning new katas is hard for a weary mind.”

“And what would you know of bending,” grumbled Zuko as a golden eye glared from under the furs suddenly.

“More than you think, considering our homes and most of the structures around us are made by benders,” he added. “You pick things up.”

Zuko rolled over again, the shaggy part of his head facing the two babysitters. Silence reigned over the room for a few more minutes before Zuko sighed and turned onto his stomach only to roll back onto his side.

The nonbender chuckled at the display of restlessness, murmuring as one of his multiple ponytails fell forward from his shoulder, “Sometimes the best thing for a heavy mind is to talk about it. Otherwise, it will haunt you until sunrise.”

“You sound like my uncle,” grumbled the prince, wincing under his sheets a moment later. Agni, why had he let such an intimate detail out around the barbarians? True, that was what was on his mind and keeping him partially restless: his uncle. He just couldn’t stop himself. Who wouldn’t be a little excited to know they had a release date?

Not that it was complete freedom, just physical. He was still trapped within the fate of the Avatar. At least the whispers of the previous Avatars, barely audible as they were, seemed to no longer bother him as much. The faint little echoes were just part of him now.

Agni ... Was he accepting his fate so easily already?

The graying tribesman hummed to himself, not even looking up at the teenager as he continued his previous mission to make a toy from his future niece or nephew. It was just a few more weeks of waiting now. Yet, feeling sly, the older warrior continued, “Well, I’m sure that he would agree with me when I say this … you should have kissed the girl. You might have been able to sleep right now if you had.”

Zuko sat up at the remark, throwing his furs off as he rose to his feet, steam rising off his form from under his parka as he barked, “I don’t need to explain my reasoning to you!”

Huroko threw his head back and laughed, “That you were too scared to make the first move? It needs no explanation, Avatar Lee, but take some advice from a happily married man: don't miss
your chance. Yue is now of marrying age and has had a few men already ask. I hear Hahn might get her hand. So, if you want a chance, you should go for it.”

A wheezing breath escaped the teenager and for a moment Huroko was sure the boy was going to melt a hole in the floor just to escape. When he didn't, the man smirked coyly and added, “If you are good, I will give you a piece of carving wood and a knife so that you can get started.”

Swallowing and willing away the blush on his cheeks, Zuko growled, “And what do I need carving wood and a knife for?”

Chuckling, as if Lee was asking a childish question, the nonbender hummed to himself before adding, “Well, as customary in the Water Tribes, in order to propose to a woman you must give her a gift. Generally, it is a hand-carved betrothal necklace made out of wood or ivory. If she accepts, she places it around her neck to show the rest of the tribe that she has found someone worthy of her love and affection.”

The Avatar’s eyes were so wide that his scarred one no longer looked squinted and the tribesman was sure he had just broken the boy. Well, that petrified look explained something at least. It seemed that the Avatar had little to no experience with romance or girls and was floundering spectacularly.

This was going to be hilarious.

“So, what do you think? Being the Avatar you might even have a chance with the Chief. I will even teach you the basics if you are good to that Master Yugato fellow. Wood carving is a practiced art after all,” the aged man continued, a smile from ear to ear as a curl of wood fell to the floor from his own project.

Suddenly looking like a scared little mouse-ferret instead of a mad moose-lion, the teenager’s voice cracked as he stated, “I-I’m tired. I need to rest.”

The firebender was then back under his furs, not even twitching. There was no doubt in the water tribesman’s mind that the teenager was still awake under those furs, but at least Lee had stopped rolling around like a nervous groom before his wedding night. Finally, silence fell over the room once more, the fire crackling peacefully in its firepit as it should this time of night.

The waterbender beside Huroko finally reacted to the scene, smirking at the older man’s side as he whispered, “You can truly be cruel sometimes Huroko. Picking on a bashful boy like that.”

The nonbender chuckled to himself and after a few minutes of silence, he asked, “What are you working on anyway, Ein? Generally, you’d throw a few good quips into such a conversation.”

Lowering his glowing orb just slightly, Ein murmured, “Just trying to turn this orb into a bomb of mass destruction.”

Knife slipping as his eyes went wide, a single droplet of blood running down to splatter on the ice, the warrior choked, “…Oh. Well, can you try doing that when I’m not around you? I want to see some of my grandbabies if you wouldn’t mind.”

The youth slowly pulled his hood off of his head, white hair going every which way as if it had never been brushed. He then shrugged his shoulders, “I guess…”
“Prince Zuko, look a tsungi horn,” said Iroh as they stopped at a booth in the bazaar. “Your last one mysteriously disappeared yet you were so good it. It was a sad day we had to start having Music Night without you.”

Eye twitching, his phoenix tail almost seeming to ruffle like an angry bird in the wind, Zuko barked, “I threw it in the ocean, Uncle! I did not lose it. I hate Music Night!”

The Dragon of the West continued onward as he bought the thing and then handed the newly acquired item to one of the masked soldiers that had been unlucky enough to draw the short straw. No one wanted shopping duty.

The prince groaned as his uncle walked onward, the old man stating, “Girls find music romantic, Nephew. Even your father knows how to play. The ladies in court were quite taken with him.”

“I doubt it was the tsungi horn,” grumbled the prince as he picked up a blue demon mask and glared at it for a moment, contemplating if maybe he should adorn his walls with a little more stuff. Plus, he had a notable face… it might be helpful to be able to hide it from time to time.

There was a giggle behind him, and for a moment, he wondered if one of his firebenders were hitting on a female saleswoman when he heard movement at his side.

" I don't know," suddenly said a voice he knew, even liked, as the familiar face of Yue suddenly leaned over from his left side, coming into sight.

“Y-Yue?” whispered the boy sheepishly when he looked into her eyes, a playful glint in her blue orbs. Not that that kept his attention for long as she stepped in front of him, no longer in the usual parka she generally adorned, but a rather scant white dress more suited for hot Earth Kingdom days.

Not that he minded, suddenly feeling a blush on his cheeks as she suddenly moved in close, her body nearly pressing against him. “I think you'd make beautiful music ... even more so if I was at your side.”

“I'll leave you two alone,” chuckled Iroh suddenly, seeming to disappear into nothing, the background no longer a bazaar but his bedroom from the Fire Nation. The moon seemed to be hanging over his very room, the lit candles in the background almost unneeded.

“Umm, what are you doing? Why are we here?!” he said, a small squeak escaping the teenager as the girl leaned the rest of the way in like she was going to kiss him, but instead, she tilted towards his ear.

Her warm breath washed over his face before she gave his ear a soft peck, whispering, “I'm going to help put you back together, Prince Zuko. Don't be scared.”

Eyes going wide in confusion, Zuko didn't even get to question her as she suddenly pushed him backward. He cried out her name and immediately fell into his own bed, the sheets suddenly starting to sink like quicksand, multitudes of hands forming in the sheets to pull him down faster. He was sure he screamed as those red depths pulled him under.

... 

“Lee? You awake?”

Zuko’s eye’s slammed open and he sat up in his furs, sweat pooling down his chest and as he gasped for breath, his eyes looking around as if he expected his red bedroom and Yue before him.
He was immediately greeted with the familiar sight of his cell in the ice palace. Just what had that been? And worse yet, as he immediately looked around to see if there was anyone around to notice his embarrassing predicament, he hadn't been thrashing in his sleep or speaking Yue's name. Had he?

His heart sank in horror and the prince nearly sank through the floor in horror as Aang sat there beside his furs, one finger out as if he was ready to poke the previously sleeping Avatar.

Now smiling, Aang rubbed the back of his head as if ashamed and murmured, “S-sorry for having to wake you so rudely, but it’s just really late and Master Yugato was sure you would have been up by now. I know you had trouble sleeping last night, or so said the guards…”

Zuko choked in his throat in shame, pulling the furs over his head. He just knew he called Yue's name out in his sleep ... and the night guards probably thought he was a pervert now. He just hoped and prayed that they didn't spread rumors about the embarrassing predicament because he did not need it getting back to Yue. If it did, he'd probably just learning waterbending so he could drown himself with it.

“… but it’s already passed noon, which is really late to start training. Not to rush you or anything but…”

“ Noon!” cried the prince in surprise. “That can’t be right. I haven’t slept in passed sunrise since I was a child. Firebenders rise with the sun.”

The airbender shrugged and walking over to a pile of things by his staff, opening a satchel he had brought with him, “It is unwise to interrupt an Avatar in the Dream Realm. It may have answers to what has or may be. At least that was what Yugato said after trying to wake you the second time. He laughed a lot the second time though too when you grumbled something. He said you might be having a good dream and it would be cruel to wake you.”

“I wonder if Princess Yue would agree?” mocked one of the guards softly, the two guards suddenly breaking into soft snickers which merely caused Zuko to choke on his own tongue as he sent a heated glare at them. Not that Aang noticed anything that had transpired as he turned around with a yellow and orange bundle in his arms, walking forward as he graciously presented them to the mortified teenager.

“Here. These should be around your size. They are surprisingly warm since we used to live on the mountain tops. You can wear your parka under it if you want in case you're still cold. Airbenders are taught at a young age how to bend the air around their body to keep out colder, heavier air,” added Aang with a grin, glad that Lee’s hands were slowly moving forward to take the bundle, though the blush on his face seemed out of place. “Regardless, Yugato says its customary to wear the Nation’s clothing when you are practicing its element.”

“I’d rather wear red,” groused the teenager as he tried to shake off the dream about Yue and the devouring sheets. His mind was just racing. In fact, he was so flustered that he decided to just take his frustrations out on the garments as he tossed them to the side.

“In fact, I refuse to wear these,” growled Zuko, wondering what the energetic child would do about the predicament.

The monk, taking a moment to frown at the discarded garment, merely shrugged his shoulders as he chirped, “Okay, let’s go.”

Zuko ... was almost disappointed.
After a few minutes, Zuko was still surprised that the bald kid had merely said ‘okay’. Now they were just walking through the palace halls, the prince vaguely listening to Aang prattle on. The walls echoed with the child’s voice until Zuko finally found himself asking, “Why weren’t you mad when I refused to wear the Air Nomad colors?”

Aang, who had stopped his chatter long enough to listen, shrugged his shoulders and said, “I wear parkas all the time. That doesn’t mean I stop being an Air Nomad, and just because you don’t wear all the elements colors doesn’t mean you stop being the Avatar. So, it really doesn't matter. It’s just a formality is what Yugato says.”

The feeling of a knife being figuratively pressed into his chest almost made Zuko fall to his knees. The tribe forcing him into the stupid yellow and orange get-up would have been less painful then what the boy had just said. It would have been kinder than reminding him of the truth.

*Avatar …*

Stalling, as if noticing something was wrong, the airbender asked, “Are you okay? You’re not upset about the clothing, are you? I don’t think Yugato will be mad. It is cold here. I would keep the parka on too if I couldn’t airbend warmer air around myself.”

Shaking his head, not wanting Aang or anyone to know how each reminder of his destined fate pained him, Zuko replied, “No, I just want to know where are we going? We’ve walked passed this frozen log art like three times and even the guards look bored. Can we just get to this leaf or paper or arm flapping lesson so I can get it over with? I would just like to go to my room…”

*Cell*, the prince thought bitterly as he continued with false words, “and sleep.”

*And wait for this to be over…*

*Yet you think about Yue...* his mind added almost immediately. Zuko could only swallow at that. What was wrong with him? A pretty girl calls him handsome and now he’s haunted by her in his dreams.

Zuko immediately shook off the disconcerting thought.

Aang merely nodded and cheeped, “Yeah, sorry. I just haven’t really gotten to talk to you alone and Yugato said that if I wanted to blab on like I usually do that it’s best to do it now before the lesson, because then I’ll have to be quiet. The lesson shouldn't be too stressful today, but Yugato might let you leave early if you are really tired.”

Closing his eyes, Zuko gritting his teeth as he tried to recall Shen’s promise. And would Aang ever stop talking? But the boy did bring to question what kind of training they were doing today.

“What do you mean there will be no talking during the lesson?” asked Zuko with a glint in his scarred eye, part of him already knowing the answer now that he thought about it.

“Well, because of the trouble you had with the Spirit World the other day, Master Yugato thought it imperative that we start there,” pouted Aang as if he was the one being punished, not even noticing that the blood seemed to drain from Zuko’s face when they suddenly drew closer to the round door which guarded the Spirit Oasis.

Despite himself, the prince froze, his lungs wheezing. He was not ready to go back in there. It wasn’t that he was scared. It was just that … Okay, faceless chicks are terrifying. He couldn’t deal
Aang, feeling the air being rapidly pulled into the Avatar’s chest, quickly grabbed ahold of Zuko’s hand and looked up at the other boy, “Don’t worry. I don’t like connecting with my spiritual abilities much either, but Master Yugato says that the spirits gave me the ability for a reason. It is better to be educated then unprepared.”

Not wanting to seem weak, Zuko pulled away from the youth's grip, not even noting what Aang meant by ‘my spiritual abilities’ as he pulled open the circular door and proudly proclaimed, “I’m not scared of the Spirit Realm.”

Blinking, as if surprised, Aang frowned and followed after. He never said Lee was scared.

A few minutes later, Zuko decided he officially hated this place despite its warmth, its greenery, and its calmness. He loathed this place.

Balling his hands into fists, he was vaguely aware that his tribesman guards had stalled at the door, more than willing to wait there until the lesson was over as they closed the entrance.

He hoped they got leg cramps from standing like frozen sentries there. Though, walking up to the Airbending Master, Zuko felt like he would rather stay with the waterbenders. Though their lessons were cruel and cold … they were familiar. He knew the kata for a water-whip and a high-wave with their fluid motions. He was actually sick with himself because he had unknowingly memorized some of Pakku’s moves, but having Yugato stall and stare at him with those grey eyes was just so unnerving.

Everything, everything, up until now could be lied about, a delusion, but the moment he purposefully used another element in hopes of mastering it … that would be a turning point and then he could never go back.

Zuko's adams-apple bobbed fiercely as the prince swallowed, feeling sickness settle in his gut even when Yugato offered a soft smile and small bow.

“Avatar Lee, I’m glad that you slept well. I hope they were dreams of enlightenment,” said the Master with almost a coquettish glint in his eye as he continued to stand on the other side of the pond which housed the two koi fish. Zuko didn’t know why, but a deep part of himself that still valued his country’s propaganda just yelled at him not to stare at the two fish in their endless cycle. It would not lead to good things.

The firebender just nodded shortly, his neck and muscles stiff.

What was to be expected of him? Did he even want to know?

Walking forward, his robes shifting with an unnatural wind, Yugato waved a hand as a sign for them to sit around the small pond. Without question, Aang did a jump into the air and used an air … ball?… to slowly drag his butt to the earth, the wind current sending Zuko’s hair rustling as the child sat down. Zuko looked back up at Yugato in silent defiance, but the Master just continued to stare, patient, as if peeling away at levels of the young firebender’s soul.

Finally, the silence almost becoming stagnant, Yugato stated kindly, “You don’t have to sit if you do not wish to, but it may be more comfortable. We will just be talking today. Perhaps even some mediation. A heavy mind does not have the concentration needed to reap many benefits.”

Slowly memorizing how the elder monk moved before sitting down and patiently waiting, Zuko sat as an airy voice in his head seemingly directed his limbs. Soon, the prince found himself
mimicking the curled limbs of Yugato and Aang. Surprised, Zuko was about to untangle his legs and take up a far more distinguished Fire Nation position when Yugato captured his attention.

“First, I thought it best for formal introductions. There probably hasn’t been much time for you to reflect on your position or to even grasp a few moments of peace, but the stormy skies have come and passed and today has clear skies for us. Now is a moment of tranquility and recalibration. Again, my name is Master Yugato. I am a descendant of the thought-extinct Air Nomads as well as the young man next to you, one of my other students, Aang. He is technically at a Master level having earned his tattoos, but he has much farther to go, especially on a spiritual level which is why I brought him with me.”

Aang snickered at that as if there was something missing from that proclamation, such as how he really hadn’t been exactly invited, making the elder man frown as his eyebrow twitched.

“Also, he is an incurable prankster. I feared to leave him alone or there may not be anything left to go home to,” added the Master, making Aang’s eyes go wide.

“What,” squeaked the bald boy, threatening to use a puppy dog pout. “I-I wouldn’t destroy the temple.”

“Not on purpose, but knowing you, you’d try starting another zoo in your room and that would not end well,” added Yugato in a sour tone.

The boy smiled nervously and rubbed a hand against the back of his head as the elder continued, “Regardless, I feel that Master Pakku has left a sour taste in your mouth, causing you to misinterpret what we are actually trying to do for you. Avatar Lee, we wish for you to learn all four elements safely away from any propaganda from the Fire Nation. I know Pakku thought that he had to beat your past out of—”

“I don’t need to be protected from my own country!” suddenly interpreted Zuko, sparks escaping his tightly balled fists. “And you cannot make me forgot my heritage. I will not betray the Fire Lord! No dodging lesson can tell me otherwise. I will protect my country!”

Aang seemed to sink away from Zuko and thought the prince felt a pang of regret, the younger boy having grown on him like an unwanted mushroom, Zuko refused to relinquish his glare at the Airbending Master. Yugato merely sat there, eyes half-masted before he stated, “So your country would protect you?”

The banished boy’s breath caught, his insides suddenly tight as his lips tried to make words. Sadly, all he could do was make a thin-lined frown as his Uncle’s and the previous Avatars’ words came to mind. He would not be allowed to die and going home would probably get him killed.

The Avatar closed his eyes as if ashamed, and Yugato smoothly answered, “If they did not outright kill you, they would break your limbs so they would heal crooked and cripple you. Then, they would lock you away, waiting for you to die alone in the dark.”

Tongue dry, Zuko whispered, “H-he would never.”

“Who wouldn’t allow it?” asked Yugato, his tone serious and rather cold compared to how inviting he had been moments ago.

Knowing that saying “his father” was inadvisable, the prince stated the first thing he could think of, “My uncle.”

Yugato, though he had not been happy to have the conversation with Pakku, was thankful to have
heard the partial backstory of Lee. Putting on a soft expression, the orange-clad man added, “The one from the warship that you were on?”

Taken from, thought Zuko bitterly before he stated, “Yes.”

Yugato nodded, “I see. I heard that the crew, even after you had revealed yourself to be the Avatar, fought desperately to retrieve you. Some thought they may have been trying to capture you for despicable reasons. So…”

“They would never! Uncle was even planning on taking me to the Earth Kingdom so I could … could…”

Still watching him with a still expression, Yugato added, “Learn the elements?”

“Just to keep my sanity! I will not turn against my country. I am not a traitor!” yelled Zuko, the air seeming to spark with his rage, Yugato still frozen in place while Aang had started to inch away.

Yugato sat patiently, still as a stone, watching the sparks in the air almost absentmindedly. He could put it all out. He could stop this rising fire … he just had to dismiss the air all around the Avatar, but he would not unless things started getting dangerous. For now though, he’d let the boy have his rage and sorrow. A man must learn to accept pain before he can release it from his mind and soul.

Suddenly, the teenager seemed spent, gasping as he glared at the older man. Knowing it was probably his turn to speak, the Master murmured, “Who said you were a traitor? Not I? How is being the Avatar truly a conscious choice? You had no-decision in your fate to be traitorous. A traitor is someone that makes a distinct decision. You cannot decide what you are. It is they that are the fools who make a natural cycle of the world traitorous.”

Then, his eyes half-masted, Yugato added, “Is that why you were too ashamed to wear the traditional Air Nomad garb?”

Lee, probably on instinct, automatically reached for his scar.

The Master then watched as the teenager automatically ripped his hand away from his scar as if he had been burned by it. He tried to understand what was unspoken. The scar's origins mattered.

Right after Yugato had saved Lee from the Spirit Realm, Chiyo had come to check on the nearly comatose boy. Pakku, thinking now would be an opportune moment with the Avatar passed out, had asked for her to check the scar. It was then that Yugato learned what that scar really meant and the damage it had caused. Like the world’s balance, the Avatar's balance was scarred. As if someone had ripped into the young boy’s chi and tried to slice pieces of his spirit away with their nails.

Chiyo could heal many things, but chi wounds were delicate. She considered using water from the sacred pond, but she doubted that the Avatar would allow her to try again so soon after the first time. It had been very painful for him. Due to his current state, it couldn’t be done at that moment anyway.

Yugato agreed. The Avatar would have to train spiritually as well as with his other elements before trying again. Lee had to get those chi knots out himself. He had to pick at those scars with his own will.

So it was true that the scar was holding the Avatar back, but it still didn't explain why the boy hadn't gone into the Avatar State during one of Pakku’s lessons. Then again … the Ocean and
Moon Spirits were here. Who knew how much sway they had given their essence of balance.

Did they have enough sway to calm the Avatar State? There is no doubt that the spirits were desperate for balance. What would they do to achieve it?

“How did you get the scar, Lee? Did your nation’s pride do that to you? The Dragon of the West perhaps?”

Lee all but exploded, rising to his feet as flames exploded from his fists, starting some of the grass on fire. In retort, Aang actually yipped and ran for cover behind his Master. Yugato, in turn, rose to his feet and blocked the sudden rush of heat and flames as Lee yelled, “HE WOULD NEVER HURT ME! Never!”

Then, after a few enraged breaths, the Avatar gained his senses, noticing how Yugato had taken a defensive pose. Plus, his two guards had entered the scene ready to par any attacks.

Dropping his shoulder’s in defeat, Lee’s voice was barely a whisper, “… He would never hurt me.”

Lee suddenly looked broken and tired, slowly kneeling back onto his knees, the flames dying around him before the waterbenders even flicked a wrist to put out the flames. After a few more moments of a nervous standoff, Lee staring at the charred grass, the boy continued, “He and the rest of the crew … they didn’t have to be kind to me. They didn’t have to care.”

Yugato slowly got out of his defensive stance, waving the two guards off as he placed his hands back into his sleeves. With light feet he calmly walked forward, sitting down next to Lee. Then, with a careful hand, he touched Lee’s rising shoulder as the teen took deep breaths to calm himself.

“I am glad that they were kind to you, Lee. It is good to have family, a blanket of comfort on these cold seas,” said Yugato wearily, wondering if it would be safe to pry anymore. “Would you mind telling me about them? You may tell me of the scar later, but today, tell me of them. Tell me of the things that brought you comfort on these open waters.”

Lee, suddenly looking a lot younger as his features softened, nodded, “My uncle has always been good to me. Even when he was away at war, he’d send back gifts. He once gave me an Earth General’s dagger and I had loved it. Still do. He got my sister a doll though… she hated it.”

Smiling forlornly, the Avatar continued his tale. Little did Yugato know that the tale was mostly true except for when he omitted the existence of his princely rights, who his real uncle was, and how he had gotten onto the ship. The word banishment was far too sour to whisper. He just stated that, once on the ship, he trained with his uncle and the crew to improve his skills until the day he could return to the Fire Nation.

Because, despite everything, a part of him always believed he would go home.

Yugato made no course to correct him because, one day, when this war ended, it would be true. Though, it would unlikely be the country the teenager seemed to recall so fondly.

Chapter End Notes
Funayūrei: "marine spirit" are spirits found in Japanese mythology. They are the ghosts of people who have died at sea. They approach people on boats and ask to borrow a Hishaku, a utensil for scooping up water. If they are given a ladle, they will pour seawater into the boat until it sinks.

January 2020 Revisions: Made the dream scene a little more teen-friendly and cleaned up some of the phrasings.
Things had gone well after he had gotten Lee to talk about his Uncle.

It was clear that he loved the man, and if Yugato wasn’t so certain that Lee’s Uncle would try to strike him down the moment they met for abducting his beloved nephew, he would love nothing more than to sit and get to know the man better, see if the fire-bender would be open to joining the Order. He sounded like a wise and honorable fellow, far more than a servant of the Fire Lord.

If the man wasn’t already on someone’s list for recruitment, or already a member. Really, the whole situation seemed a little too perfect, the Avatar just finding himself at the North Pole. He could have found a teacher elsewhere, somewhere more accessible. It was far easier to get to the Foggy Swamp then the North Pole, and water-bending scrolls were more common than one would think. You just had to know where to look or who to ask.

Someone on that ship had wanted Lee to find his way here, and unless they were involved with the Order of the White Lotus, Yugato had feeling that the only reason was because of that stupid, stupid rumor about air and cold and something about ‘air bubbles in ice’. He had no idea where the rumor had come from, and sometimes a part of him believed that it was the reason the Fire Nation had been so relentless when raiding the South Pole. Getting rid of the Southern Water Tribe’s benders was just a bonus.

The Southern Raider’s real purpose had been to look for air-benders. They had never found any, of course, the Arctic Temple was hidden well inland, far from the coast and the Fire Navy’s warships. Even the Order had trouble reaching the temple, and the supplies they sent had to go from ship to ship to bison, all done during the darkest hours of the night.

Chief Hakoda and the South Pole’s elders had known what their small temple really housed, and even though Yugato suspected they were bitter about the sword that hung over their homes and families, they bore it because they knew that without the air-benders, the Avatar cycle would break. Sozin and his descendants had been relentless and would slaughter every single nomad they could find, even the few that were non-benders.

Perhaps some bitter tribesman had started the rumor. Yugato doubted that, but regardless, if someone on the ship knew the rumor it would explain why they had come all the way to the North Pole. The Fire Nation knew, at least, there were no Air Masters at the South Pole.

There wasn’t much left in the South at all.

But the whole thing seemed far too insightful for a regular person. It felt planned, like a calculated move in a game of Pai Sho. It felt like what a White Lotus member would do, but there were few in the Order from the Fire Nation, so few in fact that most members were unsure if they had any connections left in the Fire Nation at all. If there were, then they would have found the Avatar
sooner and maybe even taken him straight to the Arctic Temple for his air-bending training.

Unless they hadn’t known. The White Lotus was secretive to a fault, even with each other.

Yugato shook his head, inwardly cursing the Order’s lack of connections in the Fire Nation and letting his thoughts return to the question of Lee’s uncle. He would make good on his promise. The White Lotus was always in need of more members.

There really weren’t enough fire-benders or Fire Nation citizens in the Order, since so many believed in the racial superiority that had been hammered in by the Fire Lord over the course of the war. Hopefully when Lee had been fully trained and the war ended, the Order of the White Lotus would be able to re-establish their connections in the Fire Nation.

Lee’s uncle was just the first step towards that goal.

Sadly, that would not happen for months, possibly even years. But Yugato knew the day he did finally meet the man, (the thought crossed his mind that he really had to ask Lee what his uncle’s name was) that he would tell the fire-bender how greatly he had influenced the Avatar and that without that influence, the world may never have had a chance at peace again. He would also tell the man that Lee’s struggle with his fire-bending was nothing that the boy could help, that it was all because of the scar.

But things were not that perfect. Lee’s progress would remain slow until they figured out a way to untangle the knots and tears beneath the scar that sucked at the boy’s chi like a greedy parasite.

Yugato opened his eyes slowly and turned his head to watch his students; Aang seemed perfectly content as he sat in meditation, eyes closed and fists pressed together. Lee, however, kept shifting as if someone was prodding him with a stick.

“You need to press away all thoughts and concentrate, Lee. Try to loosen up, as Aang mentioned earlier. I don’t even have to look to know that you haven’t cleared your mind,” his voice broke the silence and Aang’s concentration, the younger boy’s face grimacing as if he had just tasted something sour.

Zuko, who had taken up the same meditative position as the air-benders; fists pressed together and legs crossed, let his hands drop and jumped to his feet. It was his usual spit-fire response, ignited by his irritation and the fact that since the Air Master seemed to have no intention of teaching him hard lessons like Pakku and his dodging, that he could yell as much as he liked.

“I am trying! There’s nothing to concentrate on! I learned how to meditate with candles, and I don’t even want to meditate! I don’t-” his throat went tight, the next words past his lips barely a whisper, “want to go back there.”

Yugato rose to his feet, stepping closer to Lee to place a comforting hand on the teenager’s shoulder. “Gather your breath. Breathe in the new, release the old.”

He glared at the hand on his shoulder, hating how the familiar action reminded him of Uncle’s own calming tactics. But he followed the air-bender’s direction, taking in a breath and then releasing it.

“Good, now sit back down and tell me what has your mind at such ill-ease. I may not be the bridge to the Spirit World, but I have experience you do not. Sometimes we fear things because we do not understand them, like the dark water in a deep pool. You do not know what hides in the darkness, and even if the thing that slithers past your legs feels dangerous, it usually ends up being nothing
but a simple fish,” said Yugato as he watched as the boy’s eyes flick to the pond and the Koi fish, always circling one another, before the boy’s shoulders sank and he eased back down to the grassy ground.

He hadn’t meant to surrender so easy to Yugato’s words. But all Zuko could think was that it didn’t feel as if he was imprisoned, even with his promised escape. He didn’t know if was just the Master’s airy, almost comforting voice or how Yugato reminded him so much of his Uncle, or if it was just the knowledge that he would soon be gone... He just felt calm even if the oasis still unnerved him. The memory of the faceless spirit and its cryptic warning hung at the edges of his mind. Some Avatar he was turning out to be. Scared of spirits. The warning hadn’t even made any sense and it made his stomach churn whenever he tried to figure it out.

The air-bending Master seemed harmless, just like Uncle. It was just plain eerie how much he was like the old man and he also believed the half-lies about his life... He would believe his story about the Spirit World.

“Pakku decided that I had been good enough to do something other than dodging, so he brought me here to learn how to meditate like a water-bender. He thought it was a good idea, but I had trouble with it, and...” Zuko stalled, he hadn’t talked to anyone about his mother, not even Iroh. He certainly didn’t want to tell Yugato. Worse, he didn’t want to think that it had been his mother’s spirit he had heard, that she was dead. He took another breath and continued, “Something happened, and I was surrounded by ice, trapped in a pea-... In a boat. There was ice as far as I could see and huge dark things swimming beneath it.”

He swallowed at the next words, trying and failing to hide the distress in his eyes as he added, “And I couldn’t bend.”

Yugato offered a sympathetic nod, “Don’t let that trouble you. One cannot bend in the Spirit World. Stories from previous Avatars have told us that the power they wielded there came from their words, not their bending. You should seek their assistance in that regard.”

Zuko stiffened as he recalled the all the voices that had crowded his mind the night he had tried to end himself honorably, his lip twitching as he murmured, “I don’t know how much more assistance I can take from them.”

His response only earned him a strange look, but he didn’t give Yugato the chance to question him as he continued to tell the story of his nightmare with a controlled voice. “I got out to look around, and turned to look at the moon, and when I turned back around there was this girl. She was almost like Princess Yue... But she didn’t have a face.”

He couldn’t help but shiver at the memory. Even Aang, who had been steady in his own meditation (and trying to discreetly watch them with one eye), recoiled at the words. Yugato motioned for him to continue, even though concern was evident on his face. As he continued to tell the story there was a growing panic in the pit of his stomach, his skin prickling and his heart starting to pound in his chest. “I asked if she was Yue and she kept disappearing and reappearing behind me, or in my blind spot. She said something like ‘I am not her and yet I am’ and kept trying to touch my scar.”

Zuko’s fingers twitched instinctively and he placed his hand over his scar, holding it there, as if afraid that someone else would try to touch him. “She said she wanted to heal me, but I didn’t let her. I thought it would hurt like last time... Finally she told me that her time was up and the ice started to melt and I ran back to the boat because I thought I would drown. She said that I’d have to heal myself, something about a guide and to listen to Roku’s warning, that I mustn’t die, that I can’t stay in the North Pole. That it was too soon to face... him.”
As he tried to recall all that the spirit had told him, Zuko’s expression grew more confused and angry. This was the first time he had really stopped to think of his encounter in the spirit world, and the memory had set his heart beating in his ears and caused his words to become rushed and troubled. “I was trapped in that boat, in the dark.” He closed his eyes and swallowed hard, trying to press away the fear that eating away at his insides and causing him to shiver. “I don’t want to go back there. I can’t.”

Keeping a hand on the boy’s shoulder, Yugato was aware of how the situation was degrading quickly. He had to act to if he didn’t want the oasis ending up set on fire because of the Avatar having a breakdown of some sort, which by the way the boy was starting to hyperventilate, could easily happen. Carefully, since he didn’t like the prospect of having his hands burned or forcing the Avatar state, he knelt down next to Lee on his unscarred side, placing his free hand on the teenager’s forearm.

“Calm, Lee. Calm. You are not in the Spirit World. Deep, slow breaths.” He moved the hand on Lee’s shoulder to his back, rubbing a circle on the boy’s back, a trick that usually helped calm agitated students down. “There is no reason to panic. The next time will be easier, I promise.”

Embarrassment crawled up with his bubbling anger, and Zuko was fighting back the tears that were starting to well up in his good eye. He reacted the way he knew best, snapping at the air-bender that was kneeling next to him. “How would you know? I’m... I’m not cut out to be the Avatar! I don’t want to be the Avatar! I just want to go back to my ship and have Uncle tell me I’m breathing wrong and that I should drink more tea and join in music night! I don’t want to have people whispering in my head or have people keep trying to fix me! I just want my honor back!”

That did it. He was tearing up and a breath away from crying. Even if it was from the stress and fear of his encounter, part of him knew it was because he was a prisoner in this place. It was as if someone had been pulling at little strings in his head all morning, the ease he had felt after telling Yugato and Aang about his childhood overcome by the stress of recalling his trip to the Spirit Realm. It was too much.

He knew Shen would be back soon to rescue him, but what if they didn’t make it? What if they were caught and he was trapped here?

Yugato decided that enough was enough and pulled the Avatar into an awkward embrace, still rubbing calming circles on the boy’s back as he whispered to him. “Don’t dwell on such things, Lee. It will only unbalance you. Gather your breathe, deep and calm, as you did before.”

Wiping his eye, Zuko tried to keep at least some of his pride intact by not allowing the air-benders to see his tears. Yugato continued to rub his back, but almost started when Aang scooted up next to him and joined in the hug.

For some reason, the bald kid’s presence was comforting, almost like he was an old friend.

Zuko closed his eyes, allowing a few tears to flow freely down his unscarred cheek. He soaked in the comfort offered by the two monks as he breathed like Yugato had directed. After a few minutes passed, he finally felt like he could breathe without trouble, the robes that the airbenders wore fluttering with every calming breath he took.

He was certain that he was bending the air around them, but tried not to dwell on that fact too hard. His chest still ached from his heart beating so fast and all he wanted was silence. Of course, the quiet didn’t last as one of the Tribesman by the door whispered something to the other, probably something about seeing if they were okay.
Acting as if the question had been directly to him, Yugato swept up to his feet. His hand only left Zuko’s shoulder when he was sure the teenager wouldn’t fall over and walked with light steps to the pair of guards who worriedly greeted him before the three men conversed in hushed whispers.

Doing his best to ignore the Master and the quiet conversation that was obviously about him, Zuko looked over at Aang, who was still leaning against him. The other boy just smiled encouragingly but didn’t move, even when Zuko looked down at his shaking hands. All of his muscles felt taut and twitchy. He hadn’t felt like this, been this unstable...

A shaking hand slowly reached up and touched his scar.

Zuko hadn’t felt this way since he had woken in a strange bed, half blind, Iroh asleep at his bedside. There had been a rolled-up scroll in the old man’s hand, and he had taken it and read of his banishment. He had figured at that moment that it was how dying felt, the way his lungs had seemed to fail, the tight vice that had gripped his heart, and the way he had almost blacked out again as he struggled to remain sitting up.

It had been a hard day, though that day had revealed to him how much Uncle loved him. He had known Iroh treasured him as much as any man cared for a niece or nephew, but it hadn’t been the normal affection one gave out of obligation. It had been a deep, crushing emotion that had held him, had told him that he wasn’t dying, had kept him grounded even when Zuko was screaming himself hoarse.

Hand falling from his face, the prince rubbed his throat for a moment as he recalled how raw his throat had been and how he couldn’t speak right for a week.

Not that there was anything he wanted to say.

Hating the distant, pained look in Lee’s eyes, Aang managed to find his voice, tapping the other’s shoulder to get his attention. “She probably didn’t mean to scare you. The spirits are desperate, they want the world in balance again. And you’re probably just not as in tune with your spiritual side, like the last couple Avatars were.”

Moving his hand down from his throat, not even noticing that Yugato was walking back up behind him, the older teenager watched as Aang sat up on his own and pulled his knees up into his chest.

“What do you mean?” Zuko croaked, more then eager to distract himself from his own thoughts.

Aang glanced up, noted how Yugato was eyeing him, then turned to stare at the circling Koi fish. He hated that he had to introduce Lee to his creepy-know-things-I-shouldn’t-side so soon, but the words escaped him regardless, “The spirit you saw was the Moon Spirit. She was probably desperate, and even though you can get into the Spirit World, something is holding you back... Blocking you, blocking out her words. She pressed harder then she should have ‘cause she thought it was important you know.”

Even though Lee looked confused, Yugato understood in a moment. The faceless spirit had been the Moon spirit, and the thing blocking the way? The scar. It explained Lee’s vision almost perfectly. The Moon, the Ocean. The frozen landscape. But what was the Princess’s significance?

The air-bender sat back down, within arms-reach of the Avatar, but with a modicum of space between them, nodding towards Aang, but addressing Lee as he spoke. “It explains much, then. This Oasis is kept by the energies of the Moon and Ocean spirits. Why it was so hard on you.” Not that Pakku made it any easier. “These spirits are ancient. To encounter them as you did would have been overwhelming for one such as yourself; young and with no experience when it comes to the
spiritual realm."

That scar isn’t helping much either.

Zuko actually twitched at the ‘young’ comment but said nothing as Yugato continued, turning his head to look behind him when there was activity at the entrance to the Oasis. A woman, a healer he vaguely recalled seeing, stood waiting in the doorway, and the older air-bender was quick to rise and move to greet her.

Yugoda, the head Healer, had come directly for the Avatar’s care as Chiyo was occupied elsewhere in the city and couldn’t come herself. One of the guards had run all the way to the healing huts at Master Yugato’s insistence to fetch her; explaining the events that he had witnessed and that the air-bender had requested her help for the distraught teenager.

She and Yugato exchanged pleasantries until they were sure Lee’s attention had been turned elsewhere. “I heard you needed a little something to calm frayed nerves, hmm?” She pulled a small vial from her sleeve and smiled at the taller man, pressing it carefully into his hand and thinking to herself for a moment that if she was younger woman, she wouldn’t mind chasing such a handsome bender.

The air-bender nodded, unaware the woman’s smile was slightly lecherous in nature as he said, “Yes, and thank you for coming so quickly. I fear I pressed a little too hard, and Lee had a sort of panic attack. I was unaware he was so... fragile.”

Clucking her tongue in disapproval, Yugoda shook her head and put her hands in the sleeves of her parka. “He was taken from his family and all he knew, told he has to save the world, and had to deal with that old goat Pakku on top of it all. I’m surprised he didn’t break like this sooner. Maybe the knowledge is finally starting to sink in, but don’t worry. I know my herbs,” she chuckled as she inclined her head towards the bottle she had just handed to the air-bender. “Just a drop or two should be fine for what you asked. Three drops have a numbing effect. Four will make him much more susceptible to sleep. Works best with tea.”

“Tea?” Yugato asked as he slipped the vial into the folds of his robe.

“Yes, tea. Hides the taste well. Now, I think our young Avatar should take some Passion Flower tea before he goes to bed, it will help him sleep. But since I want you to give him some of that Kava-Kava now, I asked that a pot of Jasmine be brought here for you to use.” She laughed softly, speaking with a smile and a motherly tone, but personally was enjoying the chance to admire the air-bending master’s broad, yellow robed shoulders. “That guard you sent was complaining that you’d turned him into an errand boy, ordering him to the kitchens. Make sure Lee eats, poor boy is much too skinny.”

“Of course, I thank you once again for your help,” said Yugato as he bowed slightly before turning his attention to the Oasis’ entrance. He took a step past the healer towards the door, but was stopped by a roving hand pinching his rear. The air-bender shot up with a yip at the touch, both hands moving to cover his backside.

There was a laugh as Yugoda walked by, still smiling even as he shot her a horrified glance, her hands slipping back into her sleeves. She passed through the door just as the other guard entered, arms loaded down with a large basket full of clanking dishes, a steaming teapot awkwardly hanging by its handle from his fingers. He was mindful enough to turn as the healer walked by, keeping his own backside safe from sly fingers.

As soon as the woman was out of earshot, the guard who had stayed behind let out a laugh; grinned
at the still-blushing Master and chuckled, “She seems like a kind old woman, until you turn around.”

The other tribesman shook his head and sighed, shifting the burden in his arms as he added, “La and Tui, all the healers end up being perverts. Anyways, I’ve got the tea that Healer Yugoda asked for, and what you asked for from the cooks.”

Yugato nodded, the blushing monk trying to keep his dignified manner by pretending he hadn’t just been pinched by a lecherous old woman, waving for the guard to follow him. He’d dwell on that later.

Watching the commotion by the door had been emotionally trying for Zuko. Seeing the healer goose Master Yugato had been humorous, but he was more bothered by the fact that everyone in the Palace would be treating him like glass over one little episode. Well, it hadn’t been that little. Maybe he was more stressed then he realized, nearly breaking down like that, but now that didn’t matter much. Shen had promised to return with the crew to rescue him.

So, for now, he’d drink and, Agni, did he smell food? He was actually looking forwards to the tea, but smelling whatever the guard was carrying had made him notice how hungry he was. He hadn’t eaten anything since being woken up. Zuko looked down at his hands, still shaking, and the eagerness for a meal was overtaken by anger, causing him to bite down on the inside of his cheek.

*What was wrong with him? Why was he falling apart so easily? First he couldn’t manage to escape on his own, and then he couldn’t dodge. He couldn’t look at a pretty girl without getting hot under the collar. Now he was having crying fits over stupid spirits!*  
*When would this nightmare be over?*

His thoughts were interrupted by Yugato speaking to him, holding out a covered bowl, “Since you did not agree to the robes, I thought that you might be more open to experiencing a different aspect of the Air Nomad life.”

Zuko took the bowl without comment, not looking up to meet the master’s gaze as the Master continued speaking, “We are vegetarians, though some of us do enjoy things like eggs or milk, since the animal that produces it remains unharmed. Some are stricter, however, and will refuse to eat such things.”

Watching those pale Fire Nation hands pull the bowl towards the inner body, Yugato did not add how hard that choice had made things for some of the monks in the Southern Temple. One could not be too picky when it came to living in the poles.

Yugato sat after handing Aang a bowl of his own, the guard placing the basket and teapot on the grass nearby as the Master continued, “Part of learning how to bend is to embrace the lifestyle and the culture that it has fosters. Our own culture may be crippled...” He immediately thought of his travels and how he had forsaken his usual lifestyle in order to survive, “But it is not dead.”

The guard, who had been setting up a warming stand for the tea, seemed a little put off by the macabre statement, but placed the teapot on the small stone stand filled with glowing coals before bowing to Yugato again, murmuring, “I’ll take that all back to the kitchens when you’re done, Master Yugato.”

Nodding in response, the older monk turned to eye his pupils, noting that Aang had already started eating with gusto, clearly enjoying the more familiar fare. Yugato had told Chief Arnook of their strict vegetarian diet, though he hadn’t necessarily thought of the Avatar when he had spoken of it.
Lee had uncovered his dish and had started eating, though he did so with a more reserved pace, interrupted between bites as Aang pointed out the different ingredients to the other boy.

“These seaweed noodles are great, aren’t they? And those bits are tofu, I think they fry them or something. The dumplings have all kinds of great stuff in them, but you have to watch out for the ones with the seaweed paste, they taste funny. The celery-carrot ones are usually the best. Those chunks are taro-tato root, and those bits are pickled radishes though sometimes certain vegetables are hard to get or have to be preserved,” chirped the younger bender, his enthusiasm very clear, but Lee’s expression remained dour as he handled his chopsticks.

“I miss Fire Nation food. Especially some of the... uh,” Zuko wanted to say meats, but stalled as he looked at his present company. “The spices. Our dishes have a lot of spices and are really hot.”

Aang smiled wider, “Oh! I hope I get to try some one day! I want to travel like Master Yugato did, but he won’t tell me about all of his adventures.”

The older air-bender frowned, knowing he had omitted certain tales for good reasons, the Master adding in a sober tone, “I’m sure one day you will have the chance to have your own adventures and travel the world like a proper Air Nomad.”

He glanced at Lee as he spoke.

Zuko shrunk back at the look, hating the additional expectation that had just been placed on his shoulders. He turned to Aang and put on a false grin as he continued working on his meal, adding after a bite, “It’s definitely better than stewed sea prunes.”

The following ‘Ewww!’ he received in response from the younger bender was enough to stop that train of conversation.

While the two boys were discussing their mutual dislike of the Water Tribe dish, Yugato busied himself with the tea, using his flowing orange sleeves to hide the cups as he placed a few drops of the medicine that Yugoda had given him into one of them. He then carefully poured the tea, placing one of the bulky cups in front of Lee. There was a moment of panic as Aang reached for it instead, but with a fluid grace he slapped the boy’s hand away and said softly, “Manners, Aang.” The young air-bender frowned and grumbled something, but quickly cheered back up when Yugato handed him his own drink.

The Master sipped his own tea as he continued to watch the pair in front of him. Aang quickly drained his own cup, but Lee had paused and was looking strangely at the mug in his hand.

“I like this smell,” the Avatar spoke quietly when he noticed that both air-benders had stopped to look at him. “My... My uncle. Jasmine is his favorite. He loves it so much, he even smells like it. All the time.”

Zuko’s eyes became downcast as he murmured softly, “I miss him.”

“I’m sure you’ll be back with your Uncle in no time, Lee.” Yugato nodded, taking another appreciative sip of his tea.

Zuko closed his eyes and breathed, taking in the aroma drifting up knowing that that sort of comment was ambiguous at best, “And how long will that be?”

The air-bender paused for a moment, knowing that any answer he gave would be little more than a lie. He tried to at least look sorrowful as he spoke. “Soon, hopefully.” Yugato watched as Lee nodded and dropped back into silence, finishing his meal. Aang had already finished and was
looking ready to fall over, and he couldn’t help but chuckle at the groggy display.

“Perhaps you two could use a short rest. Aang, Lee?” He smiled calmly as he spoke, watching Lee finish the last of his tea.

Zuko looked up from his empty cup, shaken out of his own thoughts, “What?”

“You both had quite a night last night. Perhaps a short nap is in order?” Yugato eyed the Avatar carefully over the rim of his cup.

While Aang looked more than ready to go with his teacher’s suggestion, Zuko just shook his head, even though he did feel kind of funny, his voice harsh as he stated, “No. I’m not tired.”

“I see. Well, then, since we have finished our meal, I wish to ask one last question about your journey to the Spirit Realm,” said the old monk continued to look at him carefully, like he was expecting something to happen.

Shaking off a feeling of suspicion, the Prince returned the careful glance as he asked, “What exactly?”

Yugato’s voice seemed strained as he spoke, “The Moon. I have a feeling she was trying to tell you about something important. Did she tell you who ‘he’ was?”

The Master could only frown as Lee shook his head in response, but was encouraged as the boy fought back a yawn, the air-bender replying, “The spirits are never very forthcoming... Are you sure you’re not tired, Lee?”

“I know I am,” Aang said as he let out a yawn and flopped back, stretching out on the soft grass. “I think a nap sounds like a great plan.”

Laughing softly at his student’s display, Yugato turned to Lee and smiled, “I don’t mind if you wish to rest as well, Lee. It’s been a long day.”

Even though he felt calm and relaxed, and the thought of a short nap actually sounded rather nice, Zuko shook his head, even as he struggled to stay upright, “No, m’alright.”

The Master quirked an eyebrow, trying not to look too amused at the boy’s insistence.

“Are you sure?” asked Yugato as he watched as Lee opened his mouth, likely to protest once more, but instead could only chuckle as the boy keeled over onto his back. He almost exactly mirrored Aang as he lost his balance and lay sprawled out on the grass. “I think a nap sounds like a great plan.”

Silently thanking Yugoda’s clever thinking (and trying not to think about her too-clever hands), he put his cup down and rose carefully in order to tell them of what he had learned. He had been planning on doing that as soon as the lesson was finished, but had not wanted to leave Lee alone when he had started panicking.

Aang falling asleep had just been a bonus. Lee would be able to rest better without the younger boy up and about and trying to pester him. Moving over to the small, sleeping form, Yugato picked up the young air-bender and placed him closer to the older boy. The Oasis was warmer than most of the palace, but not by much, and fire-benders always radiated a little heat, even when asleep. The younger boy shifted as he was moved, yawning again and resting his bald on Lee’s stomach. To Yugato’s relief, the Avatar didn’t so much as twitch at the touch.
Nodding to himself and gently re-arranging limbs so neither of the sleeping youths would get kinks, Yugato had to pause and smile. The pair looked at peace, like a couple of sleeping owl-kits.

Then, feeling emboldened, he reached down, brushing some of Lee’s hair aside to get a better look at his scar. It was an ugly thing and he stared for a moment before brushing his fingers over the ragged skin. Lee did react to that, frowning and twisting his neck away from the foreign touch.

Yugato pulled his hand away, fingers curling into a fist.

How he hated the Fire Nation! He knew that he should not judge, that was not how he was taught, how he taught the children at the temple, but they had done this. They had razed the temples and had tried to trick and capture the few air-benders that had escaped the massacres. The Nomads had just barely survived; a few Masters that had been traveling between the temples and children that had been hidden during the attacks, protected by the sacrifices of their elders.

It was the Fire Nation that had forced his people into hiding in the frozen corners of the world. They had tried to break the Avatar cycle by completely wiping them out!

Not even the Fire Nation Avatar had escaped the Fire Nation’s wrath, if the scarred boy in front of him was any proof.

Taking a deep breath as he turned and strode towards the circular door, he tried to push the hate from his heart. It wasn’t right to hate, to be so angry. He had to keep his heart in order, so that he could help keep the world in order. Yugato always tried to be more enlightened, though he sometimes doubted he would ever manage it. Still, he had to try.

Ignoring the guards’ curious glances as he approached, Yugato muttered, “I have to go find Master Pakku and the Chief. If the boys wake up before I return, tell Aang to instruct the Avatar on some breathing exercises, he’ll know what I mean.”

The guards nodded quietly, one of them moving to open the door for the Master. They looked between each other after the other man had left, then to the sleeping boys.

“Hope that kid stays asleep. It’s easier to deal with him when he’s not trying to run off or set us on fire,” whispered one of them, before the two guards laughed quietly between themselves as they wondered what exactly Yugoda had given the air-bender to use. It sure made their lives easier.

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Meanwhile, far away from the North Pole, was another boy, but one that didn’t worry about spirits or bending or crazy magic.

Sokka really didn’t care too much about spirits or the Spirit World. He was a realist and if there was something that he couldn’t understand or couldn’t be rationally explained, it would be put in the Magic section of his brain and left there. He was always more focused on the important things in life, like physical strength, where he could get meat for his next meal, and if the pretty Kyoshi Warrior would talk to him again.

He smiled to himself as he watched Suki help one of the younger children get something to eat. She was passing out star-eel soup which might have been more enticing if the stupid things hadn’t made their way onto the ship just to attack him. At least that’s how it had seemed. It had taken Katara hours to get all the prickles out of his hands. Sokka was more than ready for this sea adventure to be over.

At least there was a good view. A really good view.
“Really?”

The sound of his sister’s voice immediately broke him out of his reverie, and Sokka turned to find Katara eyeing him with disbelief.

“What?” he tried his best to sound innocent, even if Katara had caught him ogling Suki again.

“She’s going to notice if you keep staring like that, and then you’ll end up tossed off the boat and you’ll have to swim the rest of the way!” said Katara, her words were sharp as she continued to work, mending a rip in a small shirt.

Sokka could only snort in reply as he sat down next to her, pulling out a whetstone to sharpen his club and murmuring to himself, “Well, she’s a real woman. And real women take stuff like that as a compliment.”

“Like how she took the ‘women aren’t supposed to fight’ compliment?” Katara replied with a bored-looking glance that slowly turned to a snide grin. “She seemed to be able to fight without a problem, especially how she showed you who was boss. In a dress.”

“It wasn’t a fair fight! They ganged up on me!”

Katara continued to smile to herself as she watched her brother whine, but then shook her head, “If you’re bored enough to sit around and watch the girls, you can do something useful. The kids seemed to enjoy the star-eels, I bet they’d love some fresh fish too.”

The reality of where they were sunk in on the older boy, and he suddenly felt tired, face set in a frown. It was one of the things he hated about the strange ship. It was big enough to make good speed to the mainland, but the sleeping quarters were cramped and wasn’t uncommon to overhear some of the children cry themselves to sleep. The men that crewed the ship didn’t have to the time to comfort them, so it was left to the teenagers; the two Water-Tribe siblings and the five Kyoshi Warriors.

It was hard for Sokka to handle the emotional young benders. True, there were only fourteen of the kids, but emotions were for girls, so Katara and Suki and the rest of the Kyoshi Warriors dealt with the children while Sokka helped around the ship with grunt work and trivial tasks.

...Like fishing.

He stuck his club back on his belt and stood, about to ask where the fishing poles were when one of the children, a little girl named Yuet, came up to him with one of the ship’s poles in hand and offered it to him. Sokka took the pole with a smile, watching as the girl stuck her sleeve back in her mouth and sat back down at Katara’s feet.

The teenager held onto the pole and smiled at the scene. Yuet was a water-bender, a rarity on Kyoshi Island, and the girl had stuck close to Katara since finding out she was a bender as well. She watched with rapt attention as Katara worked on mending the shirt in her hands, eyes following the motion of every stitch. Besides fixing clothes, Katara had been making cloth dolls for some of the smaller girls, to try and cheer them up.

With all of the sad children, it felt they were on some sort of orphan ship.

Well, if the Katara could something for the girls, then he could do something for the boys. Maybe carve toy animals for the younger ones...

Sokka nodded to himself with a grin at the thought before going to find some bait. With a bucket in
one hand and the pole in the other, he found a good spot at the edge of the deck to sit down, legs kicked out over the side. He was preparing a hook when one of the boys, a little guy named Toh Je sat down next to him, another fishing pole in hand. The boy was about ten, and though most of the other children ignored him for some unknown reason, he always had a cheerful smile on his face, even if one of his front teeth was missing.

But despite his cheerful face, Sokka could see the sadness in his dark eyes.

The little boy waved a slice of moon peach that he had set on the hook at the older teen, smiling wide, “I’m gonna catch the Unagi!”

He sounded rather sure of himself, and Sokka had to duck when the little boy cast the hook out into the water, letting out a rather unmanly squawk as he did. It was a defensive reaction, really. The last time Toh Je had sat down to fish with him had ended up being rather painful.

Only once the younger boy had finished casting and Sokka was sure that the hook was safely in the water did he cast out his own line, adding, “Please. Sea Monsters do not eat moon peaches. They eat meat.”

Turning to glance back to where Suki had started leading her warriors in their morning exercise, he grinned. “And they like pretty maidens. That’s why they always need to be saved!”

Toh Je frowned and squinted his eyes at the older boy. “Nuh-uh!”

“Yeah-huh!” Sokka’s reply was playful as the two of them bickered.

The little boy pouted and waved the pole in his hands, “Nuh-uh! Just watch, I’ll catch a sea monster!”

Across the deck, Suki stalled in her kata, folding her fans and resting her hands on her hips. The girls behind her did the same as they all turned to watch the two fisherman loudly start to squabble about sea monsters. She could only frown at them for a moment before having to bring up one of her fans to hide the smile slowly forming on her lips.

The Water Tribesman was strange, but he had an odd charm. Even though he was acting rather childish, he was also sitting with a little boy he had only known for a short time, treating him like a little brother, or like how a father would treat a son.

He’d probably be terribly awkward with children of his own. Given his luck, he’d probably have nothing but daughters.

The thought made her giggle softly, making the other warriors look at her oddly. It wasn’t terribly feminine, but was something they didn’t hear from Suki often. Coming up closer behind her, one of the girls murmured, “He’s kind of cute, but maybe you could like someone a little less...”

“Dim-witted?”

“Idiotic?”

“Sexist?”

Suki had to fight back the smile that was on her lips, giving the rest of the girls a stern look, preparing to defend the boy. After all, they really didn’t know him that well. She knew enough from their awkward knocked-into-each-other-because-the-ship-was-rocking conversations that he could actually be charming, but before she could open her mouth to say so there was a sharp yelp
from said boy’s direction.

The noise was sudden enough that she had dropped into a defensive position and whipped open her second fan, but the scene in front of her made her drop her guard and laugh. Sokka was rubbing at a red mark on his face and glaring at the smaller boy, who was apologizing profusely for smacking him with the pole.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry! I thought I’d need more force to reel in the sea monster!” the boy cried as he looked guiltily up at the pole, then to the snapped line fluttering in the breeze before laying it off to the side.

Sokka groaned behind his hand before he started on another tirade about as to why monsters couldn’t be lured with fruit when a commotion started on the other side of the ship. The Warriors that had been giggling or snorting at the pair of them had dropped into silence, while there were yells of alarm from the crew. Katara had only looked up when she had been sprayed with seawater, and had grabbed Yuet’s tiny hand and hauled the girl to the other end of the deck, where Sokka and Toh Je were oblivious to the world around them as the older boy continued his speech about proper fishing.

Swallowing hard, Katara turned to look at her brother, seeing that he was still rambling on the merits of the proper bait, “Uh, Sokka?”

Her voice made him pause mid-speech to look at his sister, the water tribesman barking, “Whaaaaaat!? Can’t you see us men are having a serious discussion here?”

Suki spoke up next, pointing her fan off somewhere towards the other end of the ship as he turned to look at the Warrior, “S-s-s-sea-sea-”.

“Seaweed? Yech, no! I’ve told you! I eat meat, woman! We’ve had this discussion before!” Sokka frowned, vaguely noting the look of fear on Suki’s face.

Katara was far too used to her brother’s antics to let that sort of talk bother her and barked out at him, “Sokka! That’s not what she’s trying to say! She’s trying to say-”.

“Sea Monster!” Toh Je managed to squeak out, having had more sense to turn and face what everyone on deck was staring at, his amber eyes wide and his face going pale.

Sokka rolled his eyes and went to turn back to look at the younger boy, growling, “Not this again! Didn’t I tell you that Moon peaches... can’t... catch...” The words died on his lips, and he could only sink back as he finally laid his eyes on the giant creature that had risen up out of the sea and was looming over the ship, spraying everyone with cold seawater. Four sets of eyes roved over the figures on deck before coming to rest on none other then Sokka. Silently, the boy was glad that he had been drenched with water because he was pretty sure he had just wet his pants.

He swallowed hard as he met the monster’s gaze, “Oh.. come on.”

Chapter End Notes

A nice long chapter… it was longer, but after some technical difficulties, a few
thousand words transplanted elsewhere, beating it into submission, a short break … we finally got it done. Enjoy.
Between Realms

Chapter Notes

Say thanks to BlueLucied for helping me out with this chapter. The sucker was a long one.

Also, image is by Bloodmoon14: Reluctant Hero Chillin

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
“Move! Move! Move!” Suki barked as her fans slammed open, water welling up and slamming against the hull of the ship from the sea monster’s limbs. The children on deck all screamed in reaction as they fell to the soaked deck as the warriors all took up a battle position. The Kyoski warrior continued, “Sokka! Get away from that thing!”

Swallowing, eyes wide, Sokka gave a frightened grin as he slowly turned to look at the green clad warrior, choking under his breath, “Sure … just as soon as I run!”

The Water Tribesman found himself stumbling to his feet and away from his fishing position. Toh Je was luckily already in front of him so the elder warrior didn’t have to worry about him. Unfortunately for Sokka, he slipped on the ocean-drenched deck and fell with a sickening thud as soon as he got to his feet. Not that the pending bruises slowed him down, especially when the creature turned its black gaze on him. The teenager gave a nervous laugh under the sea monster’s gaze before he reacted and crawled backwards like a crab in his hurry to get away uneaten. It wasn’t until the back of his head brushed against some green skirts did he stop his crab crawling.

The girls, Sokka noted as he looked upward, didn’t have an ounce of alarm or panic on their face like he recently had. They were proud and tall like soldiers though they were only teenagers. It seemed that that was a theme Sokka shared with the warrior women. He was only a teenager and he was expected to protect the entire village.

Because the adult warriors were probably all dead.

No, no! Sokka mentally chided himself. He knew he must not think like that. Dad wasn’t dead. He couldn’t be. Dad was just fine and as brilliant as ever, and one day they would meet again and their village and family would be fine. He was fine. His broken family was fine. He just had another obstacle to overcome before that day came. The day he showed his father what a warrior and man he had become.

It was just a giant squid after all.

Just a giant … or maybe it was an octopus?
Eh … they cooked the same but all those eyes were kind of creeping him out.

Picking up his club, trying to concentrate on his father’s lessons which seemed so long ago now, the teenager swallowed his panic and stood up. He quickly took up a battle position. He would be a proud Water Tribesman and would prove his worth and strength today. He would not be afraid … even though he was having difficulty pushing away the butterflies in his stomach. Even more so when his mind calculated the odds that the ship might capsize due to the creature’s thrashing limbs. It could drown everyone in the ship.

Taking a deep breath, he vaguely noticed the children were being herded underneath the deck like so many scared, little fish.

This was not the time to be afraid of drowning. The waters were warmer here than in the South Pole so just falling in wouldn’t kill you.

Regardless, thought the male as his guts gave a hungry growl and his mind gained some confidence, if we survived this there will be good eating tonight. Mmmm, squid legs.

Positioning his feet as if ready to strike, the teenager forgot all fear and hope and raised his club into the air as he gave a mighty roar, “Meat! Today you die.”

Everyone could hear Katara -who had been readying for battle as well- slap herself in the forehead as her brother ran towards the beast.

Said beast had started to drape itself over the ship deck even more at this point, it’s many squid-octopus limbs looking like meaty tree limbs that needed to be cut. Katara didn’t know if she was going to die by giant-squid-octopus today or if she was going to die from embarrassment.

In the end, as she gathered water around her as best as she could, she decided it didn’t matter because she was still going to drown Sokka later. If she had to do it from the spirit world, so be it.

…

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN I CAN’T LEAVE! I’VE BEEN STUCK THREE HOURS WITH … THAT!” yelled Zuko as he waved heatedly at a self-entertained Aang behind him. Said air-bender was stirring up a cloud of dust with how fast his air-scooter was going around and around the enclosure. At this very moment, the poor prince was now wondering if Master Yugato was worse than Pakku or not. Pakku rarely left him alone even when he wanted to be, Yugato seemed patient. Contrariwise, the man had just up and abandoned him the moment he passed out.

He still didn’t know how Aang had ended up drooling on him.

The one tribesman that was guarding the door and currently under the scrutiny of Zuko’s voice frowned deeply. He stood his ground though in front of the circular door for the spiritual garden, as still and as confident as a million year old ice berg. Regardless of his tolerant disposition though, the Avatar still stood there fuming as if he expected some kind of reply. If only to keep the sanctuary from starting on fire, the water-bender decided to speak, “I’m sorry Avatar Lee. Air Master Yugato stated we were to watch you until he returned. He was sure he would be back before you stirred, but since he has not returned I would recommend breathing exercises with Aang or … to try meditating if you felt up to it. Yugato would have supported that and he’d be here in a moment’s notice if anything happened.”

With perfect timing -if only to interrupt the heaviness in the air between the tribesman and Zuko- Aang whipped by on his air-scooter behind the prince with an exuberant “weeee” as he made
another lap around the sanctuary. It was an interruption Zuko was secretly glad for because he hadn’t even had time to shudder at the meditating option as he turned towards the hyperactive air-bender. The two water tribesmen merely watched as Zuko’s eye twitched. And for a moment, after all this time, the two men wondered if the young air-bender’s antics were finally going to be enough to throw the Avatar into the Avatar State from pure irritation alone.

Yet, just when it seemed that that throbbing vein was about to burst in the fire-bender’s forehead, there was a nearby breeze behind them. Aang had stalled in his practice of vexation in order to place himself down on light feet beside the fire-bender. The air-bender merely smiled up at the others as he glowed, “Come on, Lee. See, after you learn how to balance yourself, air-scooters are easy. Are you sure you don’t want to try? Unless you want to try the leaf exercise like most new air-benders do?”

Turning away from the guards completely, his mind and form still numb from his unusual nap, Zuko found himself at the end of patients and couldn’t stop himself from barking at Aang, “NO! I’m sure I don’t want to! Like I have told you twenty times already!”

Aang could only blink in reaction to the hostility. He wasn’t put-off by Lee’s ferocity at all and quickly followed behind the hot-tempered Avatar as they made their way back towards the pond. Watching the other carefully, like an observant little brother, Aang couldn’t help but notice how the fire-bender jerked his head when he saw his own reflection in the pond. Fingers twitching, a heavy-depressed feeling that Aang had no liking for pressed against his heart strings.

Lee really didn’t like seeing his scar in a reflection, did he?

Frowning for a moment, remembering how he himself had been curled up in the snow about three years ago having felt just a shadow of his own face being burned off, Aang flopped down next to the sitting Avatar. Trying to lighten the mood, the young bender leaned back down at his elbows and asked in a light hearted manner, “Well, we can just sit here and be bored. Really, really, bored.”

There was about a minute of silence, the elder boy wondering if he would actually get to dwell on his unusual rest and the aftertaste in his mouth when Aang continued, “Or… we can try mind talking.”

Despite himself, despite how stupid he knew it was to ask, it came out of Zuko’s mouth regardless, “Mind talking? Do I want to know?”

Aang’s smile brightened a little bit and he stared down at the water with its two koi fishes. He felt like he had seen them many times before. It was the same old feeling he had when he had held Yue’s hand during the dance. But … those feelings were miniscule compare to the spiritual feeling he got when around Lee. It was a heavy demand, a promise, a destination and a direction. And right now it demanded that the Avatar meditate.

Yet, despite how much he disliked the spiritual pull at his soul and how it was an oddity towards his usual happy-go-lucky mindset, Aang knew he was supposed to listen to it. The youth frowned for a moment at the thought, his eyebrows creasing in confusion. He kind of hated the kind feelings though and their infrequent interrupts, but he liked Lee. And the spiritual pull, it cared for Lee. Of that much Aang was sure. So, he would not dismiss it entirely.

But he wasn’t going to actively listen either … mind talking was close enough.

Pressing down the feeling, noting that Lee was looking worriedly at his sudden silence, the air-bender continued, “Well, I thought it up when the monks took us into the tundra this summer and I
saw my first tree. It wasn’t as large as some depictions I’ve seen in scrolls, but one of the monks said it had an aura to it. Like the Great Tree from the Foggy Swamp. He said he was but a small child when he hid there and a swamp bender told him a tale.”

Zuko raised a brow and might have said ‘no’ but Aang was too quick, “Well, the tale mentioned a lot about swamp magic and spiritual connections and screaming birds, I think. But, mostly, the story was about how all things are connected. Like all the elements, all creatures… and every soul.”

The prince blinked at that, almost surprised. It sounded like something Uncle would whisper about though it always sounded traitorous in nature when the elderly man spoke kindly of the other elements. Aang made it sound like a game which made Zuko question his origins for the briefest moments … The Fire Nation was superior, right?

Aang’s bubbly voice didn’t give him time to question that thought though when the younger boy chirped, “So, in essence, we should be able to communicate with our souls. Normal people would have a harder time doing this though since they aren’t as spiritually adapted as you or I. Our minds graze the plane between the spirit realm and the living. It’s where spirits that can’t move on dwell and is also where the Avatar can momentarily inhabit before he moves on into the Spirit Realm. So, knowing that, what we need to do is concentrate on that plane and send out our thoughts into that realm, like a note in your head, and address it to the recipient. The recipient has to be meditating or sleeping to receive it though…like with hauntings.”

Zuko looked at Aang in disbelief, his mouth already shaping to say ‘no and that that was the stupidest thing he had ever heard’, but then he stalled. He really didn’t want to meditate nowadays for obvious reasons, especially right now with his mind still fuzzy, but if there was even just a chance to speak to Uncle… he would take it. Iroh meditated regularly and he seemed to know things … in a spiritual sense.

He could contact Uncle.

Well, if it was real. Looking at Aang now, Zuko had to conclude that it probably was not a real study. But by Agni was there anything else to do in this sun-forsaken place? No, not really.

Sitting up, tired, he glared at the air-bender and grumbled, “Fine.”

Aang nodded and then took his meditating pose, closing his eyes as he immediately set to work thinking as hard as he could. Zuko, deciding that Uncle was going to make him meditate once he got home anyway, decided he just as well get over the whole Moon thing. Not that he was scared or anything. Weary perhaps.

Yes, he was weary.

Closing his eyes, he took the same pose as Aang and took in a breath, his eyes rolling behind his eye lids. He didn’t think of clearing his mind or his inner chi, he concentrated on things that made him happy. He just thought of his mother and his Uncle and the days when his family used to enjoy the beach on Ember Island. Most of those things were lost to him now, but they still brought him warmth. Warmth much like his new family, the waves slamming against the hull of a mighty ship and badly sang ballads echoing in his head.

Uncle…Uncle… I’m here.

I’m here. Please… when are you coming? I need your help. I need to plan this accurately.
“Help… help with what?”

Zuko twitched, wishing desperately that it was his Uncle but the voice was far too squeaky, too familiar.

*Aang.*

Ugh.

Opening his eyes, his expression caught somewhere between being angry and exhausted, he turned his eyes towards Aang and was about to ask him, ‘*Aren’t we supposed to be meditating*’ when he noticed that Aang’s eyes were closed and that the boy was still as stone. He also noticed that he was standing over Aang and was currently looking down at the monk. When had he risen to his feet?

“What do you need help with?” came Aang’s voice again though the youth’s mouth didn’t move. A muscle didn’t even twitch on the young monk and it was easy to say that Zuko’s mind quickly filled itself with unease.

Taking in a quick breath, telling himself to remain calm despite the cold chill that was now running down the prince’s spine, Zuko decided to turn towards the origin of the voice. For a moment, he could not decide if this was better than a faceless Yue or not. There stood Aang, his body a soft blue hue like a ghost. A haunting specter even to the most hardened soldiers.

Instinctively, Zuko took a step back in a mixture of surprise and defense.

Aang, not liking Lee’s blatant stare or defensive poise, looked over his shoulder. When he didn’t notice anything considered an oddity, he did a three-sixty turn. Unfortunately, the younger boy must have been completely blind and didn’t seem to notice his own appearance as he inquired with a worried expression, “What? Did one of those healing girls pin something to my back again?”

Resisting the urge to slap himself in the forehead, Zuko shook his head and blurted out, “No! Are you blind! You are see-through! Does that not strike you as odd?”

Blinking, Aang slowly looked down at his sleeves and then jumped back with a gasp.

“I’m translucent-ie! Oooh.”

This time, Zuko did slap himself in the forehead. He was bound and determined that there was nothing in Aang’s head. Nothing. Just air. Aang literally was living up to the title airhead. Zuko then slapped his head again just on principle for allowing his head to make such a bad joke. Agni, he was around that water-idiot far too often, Juku or whatever his name was.

“Hey, you’re lucent-ie as well,” interrupted Aang, horror crawling in his throat as he looked around in a rising panic.

Zuko, dread forming in his stomach, slowly looked down at his translucent feet allowing his gaze to travel upward until he was looking at his hands. Swallowing hard, Zuko took a deep breath and then, already knowing the answer, he swung around in a fire-bender kata.

Predictably, nothing happened.

He knew nothing would happen, but Yugato had promised. Promised him that nothing would go wrong and he had believed the senile fool. Where was this *Master* now, huh?
Hands turning into fists, the teenager wondered for a moment if he should use some of the more colorful words that he had picked up at various ports. Aang’s voice interrupted that mental triad though when the monk asked, “Is this what the Spirit Realm is supposed to look like? I don’t really remember my time own times there. I thought it was supposed to be icy and creepy.”

Zuko frowned, lip twitching when he suddenly barked, “I wasn’t scared of that place!”

Putting his hands up defensively, Aang quickly stated, “I didn’t say you were!”

Though Zuko continued as if Aang didn’t say anything, “I’ve been under stress! Alright! Besides … it wasn’t so normal. The world wasn’t like ours and I wasn’t blue. I’m starting to hate this color. Really hate this color. Green is sounding better every day.”

Standing there, glaring at his hands as if he’d rather chop them off then have them be blue, Zuko couldn’t help but realize something. Yugato had kept half of his promise, he wasn’t alone. Aang was with him, as helpless as that was though. It was still comforting in a strange way.

“Why are you here? I thought only the Avatar can fully inhabit this between plane unless you are dead,” Zuko murmured.

Aang, who had been trying a bending kata as well, stalled and gave him a quizzical look. “Well, sometimes people with slightly spiritual connections can trespass into the spirit realm or the plane before it, but only for short amounts of time with the between realm unlike the Avatar. But I think I got here because we were trying to mind talk and you are the Avatar so… you dragged us both in.”

Zuko remained silent, face hard set. It was difficult at the best of times to be serious around Aang, especially when he talked like that. But, Zuko knew he shouldn’t be surprised at the weak almost distracting answer. It seemed that Aang was made to be a walking distraction. Even when awake, it was even harder to think about honor or the Fire Nation or that this was a prison around the bubbly boy. But the truth still was that the North Pole was a prison and that he was once again stuck in the Spirit Realm …

Regardless of all the adversity though, if Iroh could see him it would all be worth it. Not only would it calm the ache in his chest and ignite his inner flame, it could be quite tactical. If the crew knew where he exactly was when they came or his memorized roster of his guards, they would be gone before sunrise and the water-benders would be none the wiser. Not that they could keep up with his ship, even if it was thirty years old.

Shaking off the walking disaster that was Aang, Zuko decided not to waste his time with theories as he murmured, “I need to find Uncle.”

Feet spry, Zuko started walking though a part of him was a little weary. Would he even be able to find his ship and even if he could walk over the water, what were the chances that Aang’s idiocy was true? What would talking to Uncle do anyway but comfort him? Tactically, he’d still have to wait for the new moon.

Regardless of all that though, there was the worry that Uncle and the others wouldn’t be able to help him escape. Or what if the old man had already left because of the cold or need for supplies and missed Shen? What if Shen’s disguise had been uncovered and the spy was dead? Truthfully, it was a thought which was almost too much to bear.

He would escape here. He had to. One way or the other.

Despite himself, the prince knew that tactical information wasn’t the real reason he needed to
contact his uncle though. Maybe he needed a reminder for his sanity. Maybe he just needed to see the walls of his moving home. Maybe he needed to smell jasmine tea. All he knew was that going to see Iroh would be enough to get him through the next few days.

Especially since he was slowly forgetting his title of prince and that he was getting used to being called Lee.

In fact, one night he had dreamed he had forgot his name. He forgot his name was Zuko. And that was why he needed to see a flash of red, to hear Uncle chide him about breathing, and have someone to repeat his name to him out loud to prove his past was real and that…

“My name is Zuko.”

“What did you say,” murmured Aang, enjoying the experience of wandering around like a ghost, wondering if he would be able to play a prank on someone with ghost powers as he had mentally labeled it.

“Aren’t you supposed to be looking for someone to haunt?” Zuko grumbled in irritation as he looked around. He had only been to the Spirit Oasis twice but he was sure that he had memorized the damnable way out. So, with his shoulder’s square, he headed out of the icy keep, Aang following after his heels while making ghost noises as they moved past the two guards.

Zuko didn’t stick around to see if either guard reacted.

A few halls later, Zuko still had to tell his mind that it wasn’t wrong that guards weren’t stalling him in the halls. He knew he had to keep a clear head right now even though Aang was making ghost noises not far behind him like a distracted bird. The prince was sure he had memorized a successful layout of the palace and the surrounding area during his escape attempts, but he had yet to find the correct exit. Frowning harder, part of him glad Aang had seemed to detour into the kitchens, Zuko questioned his adroitness. Perhaps his directional skills were not as up to par as he thought. In truth, in his escape attempts, he had always tried to get outside as soon as possible to dodge the night guard and his personal guards who generally always took the same routes. He really didn’t know this part of the ice castle.

Perhaps he was in the wrong wing and the wings just had similar layouts.

And that he was currently lost.

Perhaps he could walk through walls … then again, what if he stepped out of a wall three stories up? The prince cringed at the thought and even more so when he asked himself: could he get hurt in the plane in between? Growling in the back of his throat, he stomped forward cursing himself. Had he really been in the North Pole for such and elongated period of time that it had thrown off his sense of direction? He was a master of a ship after all, direction was supposed to be one of his crafts!

Cursing his foul luck and the water barbarians, Zuko chose a hall at random. He was just going to crawl out a window… at least that way he could see the bottom though he would rather just blow a hole in the wall at this point. His temper was just starting to flair to the point of exploding. He didn’t even care that now he was in a part of the ice palace he was sure he had never been to with its well-furnished halls.

Well, it was well furnished for Water Tribe standards.

He might have walked right through the decorated area, in fact, if he hadn’t passed a room at the
exact right moment. Someone had whispered his name … Well, his false name. Lee.

“Well that explains part of Avatar Lee’s experience in the Spirit Realm. Yue, to be blessed in such a way… it must make a father very proud.”

“Yes, I am very proud of her, but the warning is troublesome. I wish Lee had been able to grasp more information from her. Our walls have always been impenetrable so how could there be a threat? I would rather he remain here but a message from the Moon Spirit herself … “

“Chief, perhaps we are looking at his the wrong way. What if it’s a warning of a spy and that Lee may be soon to being discovered,” came another voice down the hall. “That would be devastating and worth warning because we must protect him until he is ready. We can’t have the Fire Nation knowing of him until he’s learned all the elements. We can’t have him fail like the rest.”

“And even if we were infiltrated? Where will we take him then? Our sister tribe? Ha. That’s a joke,” came a cranky, aging voice Zuko loathed all too well.

Ugh, Pakku.

A sigh came from the authoritarian voice, “Master Pakku, they were once a great tribe like ours and should serve as a reminder as to why we should take this warning seriously. As much as it pains me … We must send the Avatar away. Somewhere a little more secure. I cannot dismiss a warning for the Moon Spirit herself.”

Zuko nearly choked, tip toeing past the door guard to hear better.

“Who says he didn’t lie about talking to her? What if it’s a ploy of his so he can try to run away?” came Pakku’s voice. “The water snake is slippery. He will be gone in a day. If you must go through with this ridiculous lie, we should at least shackle him.”

“We cannot keep shackles on him!” barked an angry voice that seemed to notice it’s error a moment later and speak with a calm almost pleading tone. “It will hinder his training and, given his nature, will only make him more volatile. He needs a calm hand that will open his mind to the idea that he is meant to balance the elements. He must accept that he is the bridge between the realm of the living and dead. It is a waste to pick fruit before it is done, Master Pakku … It is best to water the orchard and wait instead of picking blossoms before they can even become fruit.”

“Pretty speech,” growled a listener, “but it doesn’t change the fact that he has been corrupted by Fire Nation propaganda. Kind words and assurances about the spirit world will not make him disregard his past. In fact, he might actually start to believe that the other elements are weak.”

“Well, we just can’t make him forget his past. We can only enlighten him with multiple views,” stated the airy voice calmly, Zuko figuring that was Yugato as he found himself slowly tilting his head to see who was speaking about him.

There was a moment of silence and though a part of his mind knew they couldn’t see him, Zuko was cautious. He quickly leaned his back against the outer wall and turned his head so he could carefully peek into the room to see who was trying to govern his fate. At first glance, it seemed to be everyone that currently had power over him at the moment: Chief Arnook, Master Pakku, a Master he believed was called Jayendra, and Master Yugato.

His lip twitched in disgusted. He knew he should just leave. He shouldn’t worry about the madness of these men, but his mind reminded him the importance of covert information … and so he remained like a blue spirit hiding in the shadows.
“That’s … not entirely true,” stated Jayendra all of a sudden, everyone including Zuko turning their heads to look at him as if he had suddenly grown two heads.

The scarred bender licked his front incisor at all the attention, keeping cool as usual as he continued, “Well, thanks to Pakku I got stuck with the eccentric earth-benders when sending out for Avatar Lee’s various Masters. Air Master Yugato came first, of course, because he was the first element we needed. The earth-benders replied promptly as well though. Long Feng to be exact.”

Pakku moaned and placed a hand over his eyes, whispering, “Why did it have to be the aberrant earth-bender not to mention power crazed one? Can’t we just skip over that element? Earth-benders are almost as bad as fire-benders sometimes.”

No one amused Pakku’s complaint though as the other Water Master continued.

“Yes, that Long Feng, and he came up with a proposal. If I dare call it that … So, to make a long story short, in his letters Long Feng originally thought of having the Earth King assign a retired General. But, when he heard of Lee’s escape attempts, he decided a fire-bender could not be trusted. It was then that he decided he would send one of his best Dai Li agents,” Jayendra’s voice became taunt. “Long Feng wrote that one of his agents would teach Avatar Lee earth-bending and would make Lee forget any and all Fire Nation propaganda he’d ever known if he needed to.”

Every mouth seemed to go silent in the room, be it from disbelief or engrossment.

“What?” whispered the aging voice of Arnook. “I don’t understand.”

Giving a sigh, the scarred bender continued, “Well, I had to read the note several times before it sank in, Long Feng wasn’t very forward, but … then an eerie thought struck me.”

“You can think on you own? I am surprised, Jayendra,” mocked Pakku.

“Drown in a lake, Pakku,” said Jayendra, no even skipping a beat as he continued his theory. “Has anyone ever thought how odd it was that Ba Sing Se managed to keep Avatar Qiang’s death a secret as if the walls had never went down? There had to have been a lot of witnesses of his charred form given how large the city is or at least suspected he died even if he became a crippled shut in. It’s just like … people didn’t want to remember.”

There was a moment of stillness, all the men in the room leaning in as if this was an urban legend that was finally going to reveal its end. Unfortunately, Jayendra remained silent after that. And only after Arnook noticed that no one wanted to intervene with the silence did the chieftain inquire, “And how do you think they managed that, Master Jayendra?”

Jayendra shook his head, stating truthfully, “I don’t know. That’s one of Ba Sing Se’s many secrets. I don’t know if its torture or drugs or mind games or some kind of spiritual skill… but I do believe Long Feng’s letters. He can make Lee forget.”

There was a moment of silence again. As if they were all children before a campfire, a nightmarish tale having finally reached its end which left more questions than answers.

This time it was a slightly angry air-bender that disturbed the silence, a wind dragging over the room as the Master growled, “No. No! This mind alteration thing sounds like a terrible idea! The past lives would be furious. The first time the Avatar State happens, do you think it’s going to attack the Fire Nation or us? What if he can’t even activate the Avatar State because of tampering? The Avatar’s mind is just as important as his spirit! And what of the scar and its disability? The memories behind the scar are already causing difficulties for him. If he forgets, he may never
release those chi bindings and learning all the elements will be difficult not to mention timely for him!”

“And what if it solves all the problems! What if he becomes a quick and powerful study, the past spirits would thank us,” interrupted Pakku angrily.

The air stirred everyone’s cloths for a moment and Yugato all but barked, “Forgetting his past won’t fix the damage the scar has done to his chi. You all most trust me on this! He has to do that through meditation and accepting himself and his past grievances. Forgetting them does not undo the scars.”

Arnook, quite sure this was going to break out into a battle royale if he didn’t do something, brought forth his authoritarian voice and all but yelled, “Quiet!”

The wind that was all but billowing around the room suddenly drew down and the ice floor, which had started shivering, calmed itself as well. The two Master’s glared at each other silently brooding as the Chieftain sighed, taking a breath as he murmured, “I can see both the positive and negative outcomes to this … memory tampering proposal, but the earth-bender isn’t even here and we don’t even know if it is real. But, given Lee’s difficulty, it shouldn’t be ignored as a possibility.”

Yugato started speaking again, flabbergast, but Zuko couldn’t listen anymore. His spirit was sinking and his stomach was suddenly churning. Even his lungs were suddenly wishing to grasp panicked breaths though he knew he really wasn’t breathing right now. At least not in this form, but back where his real body was… Well, he’d probably be having himself another panic attack because they couldn’t do that to him. His life was shitty and perhaps the first days after he had been banished he may have greeted the idea of forgetting with ecstasy, but this was his life. He still had good things to remember, warm things.

The Ember Island Summers.

The turtle-duck pond and sitting next to his mother.

The rush of bending his first time.

The smell of his mother and the way her long gowns hung on her wrists and the way her lips always had a ghost-smile.

The scent of tea in Iroh’s cloths.

Music night and how the songs floated down into his room, haunting his dreams with warmer thoughts.

The way his dao swords sung as he pulled off a perfect kata with them.

Shaking his head as he took guarded steps backwards, Zuko decided he would not be accepting such a fate like forgetting. They were not taking his mother or Iroh or the crew. He was getting out of here before they stole his soul, his name, and the last shredded remains of his honor. Finally, setting a hard glare in determination, Zuko found himself running.

Only to nearly slam into a rushing water-bender!

Falling backward because he wasn’t ready to test of the theory that he could walk through people, Zuko watched the water-bender run over to the small group of men, panting.

“Master Yugato!” the bender cried as he caught his breath. “You have to come back to the Spirit
Oasis. Something’s wrong with Lee and Aang. We thought they were just meditating until we saw the glow under the Avatar’s eye lids and then his breathing became sharp and panicked. We decided we couldn’t wait.”

Yugato, whose voice was losing its patience, stalled in his verbal fight with Pakku as his eyes becoming slits. The Air Master’s gaze immediately turned to the hall and he stared for a moment expecting a frightened Avatar spirit to be staring at them. Luckily, there didn’t seem to be glowing being because he was sure he felt them being watched earlier and such talk of mind manipulation - even if it was false- would frighten anyone … And it wasn’t the first time Aang had crossed into the plane in between.

Allowing a soft sigh of exhaustion to escape him, Yugato rose with a gush of wind and then with light feet he hastily moved forward toward the Spirit Oasis. He didn’t even bother with goodbyes, anger bubbling under his skin. After all, he had promised to keep Lee safe and he would.

Plus, walking out on the others was slightly satisfying … no matter how un-monkly such a though was.

Unfortunately, the air-bender’s angry march didn’t even get started when a scream suddenly echoed down the hall he had stepped into, nearly causing Yugato to trip on his own robes. Gaining his balance quickly, Yugato took a defensive position as the wind billowed around his robes from his sudden stop. Then, rushing forward with air-bending speeds, he nearly tripped on his robes again. It only took one glance into the nearby kitchens to see where the scream had originated before Yugato huffed in irritation.

It figured. Aang had done it again! How he had even done it the first time was beyond all the elders. True, it wasn’t impossible for a person to get into the Spirit Realm, but they had to be spiritual beings and it generally only happened after a Spirit Guide gave that person a fate. Aang … this was his third time even though Yugato and the elders had said it was dangerous and that he should not be trying to play in the Spirit Realm or the places in between.

Luckily it seemed Aang was only playing in the realm between. It seemed that he hadn’t attracted any horrors to bring back from the Spirit Realm. Unlike the Avatar, there were no past lives to greet the troubling making air-bender. There was no one to protect Aang or directed him. He could easily get lost or be captured by a spirit, his body left as a dried out husk.

Anger still there from his fight with Pakku, the monk yelled, “Aang! Back to your body! Did I not tell you how dangerous leaving your body was once before?”

The two cooks, who were currently having their cooking utensils juggled by an invisible Aang, stared in surprised as the tools were dropped. Yugato merely sighed again as a blue boy put his hands behind his back and smiled nervously before disappearing through a wall.

Yugato just shook his head, not even hearing the one cook whisper to the other as they huddled in the corner together, “Who was he talking to?”

Picking up his pace again, Yugato refused to be interrupted again, though his feet did threaten to stall at least twice as he recalled Aang’s ability to touch something in his astral form. It was uncanny. How Aang even managed to juggle anything was astronomical considering that most people had to be dead first and also had to be decades old before they could even move anything. And if Yugato wasn’t currently worried about Lee, he’d take a moment to be bothered by that information and what it meant.

Meanwhile, halfway across the frozen city, was another blue spirit that was keeping up a rushed
pace that failed to match the elder air-benders’. Zuko hadn’t waited to stick around after the water-bender had reported to Yugato that he was in the Spirit Realm. He had run off knowing only one thing: he needed to get to his Uncle and tell him of the Earth Kingdom’s nefarious plans. And he needed to get there before Yugato got the Spirit Oasis and pulled him from this realm, this place in between.

With desperation, the prince wished that he could move faster or had a steed or … he’d even accept air-bending speed right now. Regardless, he somehow got up to the frozen wall that guarded the ice city from the sea. For a moment, breathless, he stood there. Sorrow was encasing his heart. Part of his mind had almost believed that his ship would be out there in the water, smoke billing from the stack, but as he took slow and tired steps toward the edge of the wall, his hope was continually disproven. The ship wasn’t there. There was just the gleaming ocean, blue and deep with the sunlight shimmering off the still snow and ice that reached on forever forward.

Realistically, a part of him knew it wouldn’t be there. Uncle nor the crew were clueless imbeciles and would pick a tactical location to throw anchor. Unfortunately… that also left Zuko in the dark. Where would he even begin? How far could he even travel from his body?

Not that the hardships of his heart could answer when suddenly there was someone taller beside him. The other appeared suddenly in existence, almost with a pop noise. And, with a skip of his heart, Zuko almost thought it was Avatar Roku for a moment only to look up and meet the gaze of his Air Master, Yugato. Comprehension slamming into the back of his mind, Zuko wondered if he could outrun the other in the between-realm when Yugato put out a hand and touched the youth’s shoulder.

His ears buzzed as he was if being pulled through a hurricane and the next thing he knew … He was laying the grass, breathing hard. At least he was sure it was grass with the way it was rubbing against the back of his head.

Ugh, he hated the feel of hair. He just wanted to shave it! Was that so much to ask?

“Lee… are you alright? I came as quickly as I could,” said the Master, frowning as he leaned over the Avatar.

The rush of finally being back in his body caused Zuko to be silent for a moment, especially now more than ever because he knew that this bender had real power over him now. If Yugato did not defend his memories … he was as good as gone if the Earth Master arrived before his rescue team. Swallowing the need to lash out, recalling that he might have been a prince but he was also a soldier, Zuko nodded slowly trying to act normally though now there was a real fear buried under his ribcage. It was like a small super nova was slowly building under his flesh. It was disturbing. Zuko was no accustom to fear.

Agni, every day the thought of moving to the Earth Kingdom and wearing green the rest of his unfortunate life seemed better and better as the hours passed. He missed Uncle.

Swallowing, not knowing what else to say or risk panicking and lashing out, he whispered, “I could be better. I don’t feel well. In fact, I need to … rest.”

Zuko then slowly sat up, refusing to look at the Master and the man’s worried stare. In truth, he had no plans of resting. He only needed to think of a way out of this. He needed to get out of here as soon as possible because he might not be able to wait for Uncle or the others. The earth-bender could be here tomorrow for all he knew.

But how was he going to get out of here without assistance? It was obvious he couldn’t get out
alone!

... Sokka screamed as he was thrown backwards with his war club again, two crewmen with pikes and axes behind him. They both cringed at the crunch noise as the water tribesman was thrown back into some barrels, wood splintering everywhere.

"See, I told you that it was only taking the girls. It's a damsel eating monster," said one of the crewmen, both wincing as they watched Sokka limp out of the pile.

"But it hasn't eaten one of them, even with the girl's cutting its squidy arms," said the other seaman, blood dripping down his forehead as he stood up from his earlier backlash, wincing as he watched a squid arm fall to the deck. "So … should we bother attacking? We might just end up in the water again and you know I'm a terrible swimmer."

The other two sea-hand looked at their crew member with sarcastic expressions, both secretly thinking about how they were just going to throw Que in the water next time they were at port and force him to learn how to swim properly. But, just then, a rather angry and splinter covered teenager stumbled over to their small group, gasping like a fish out of water.

"Why are you three just standing here!" yelled Sokka, the epic sea battle seeming a little less epic with half of the male crew either pulling themselves out of the water or knocked out or … just watching. Yeah, it was probably nice that the beast hadn't broken the ship in half yet with one of its heavy limbs but these three were just useless.

Looking at the teenager and then back at the giant shelled squid-octopus, the three sea men stated in unison, "Tactical reasoning."

Sokka's jaw hung for a moment, his wolf's tail half fallen out and hanging against his sweaty and salt water covered brow. "What? H-how is that fighting a giant squid!"

"It might be an octopus," said the lanky Que as he cringed as he watched the battle, Suki finding herself upside down and trying to hold her skirt up while the sucker-cover limbed shook her as if trying to get spare change. All it got out of her was a scroll and what looked like a one of Sokka's beaded hair ties.

The teenager stared at it for a moment, the decorative piece covered in slime on the deck, squinting, "She stole my hair tie! Why would she do that?"

One of the older member's shrugged his shoulders, "Well, it was rumored that was how Avatar Kyoshi picked her suitors. Most men were terrified of her because of her strength and stature but the one that came back for his item would be given a chance to get it back… for a kiss that would make her smile."

The teenager blinked, not even noticing that Katara, who had been one of the first victims of a squid arm, threw a frozen splash at the beast's eyes only to get shook around like a wet dog. Sokka, a true teenage boy through and through instead inquired further about Suki’s theft, "So all they had to do was kiss her. That doesn't sound so hard."

The two men were silent before stating, "She was a very stoic woman… kind of like a Dai Li if you've ever met one."

"Who? … Who are they?"
"Sokka!" screamed Katara as she struggled to make an attack, a squid arm flinging her about. "Don't just stand there! HELP US!"

The teenager shook his head, forgetting the hair band as he noticed his sister's anger, "U-ugh yeah! Where was I... oh yeah, tactical! What tactic! You are just standing there!"

Frowning, one bushy crewman stated, "Well, how does one kill a large squid? We've tried pointy objects and sticks which as of late," a different crewman was suddenly thrown overboard with a squeal of horror, his sword imbedding itself into the wood at Sokka's feet, "which has been unsuccessful. So, noting that our brawn has had negative effect at the squid-beast..."

"Octopus."

"We have to decide how to go forward when attacking it," finished the crewman, stroking his beard.

Sokka, thinking that having a beard to stroke sounded like a good goal for the future, added, "So, pointy objects and running forward screaming with a boomerang in hand are considered ineffective methods?"

"Yes... and fans as well if we take the girls' attack tactics into account," said the crewman, the three men suddenly standing there pondering as they rubbed their beards in thought... or in Sokka's case, a nonexistent beard.

"Soooo... any ideas?"

"Fire..." suddenly said a voice at their feet, all four males looking down to see a mini male, Toh Je, at their feet. "Cook 'im!"

The four older non-benders stared for a moment before looking at Sokka. Sokka, shrugging his shoulders, murmured, "It sounds tasty but a little too fire-bendery. Any other ideas?"

The young bender, that was supposed to be under the deck, took a moment to look insult before he got a gleam in his eyes and ran off. The tacticians did not seem to note the youth's behavior as they continued to stand around in a circle as the monster roared, sending one of the Kyoshi Warriors flying into the nearby sea. A moment later, said Kyoshi warrior popped up from the ocean water, frowning as her makeup dripped down her face.

Wiping the makeup from her face, the freed Kyoshi warrior swam back into the fray, noting the tacticians and their nonexistent action. "If you want anything done, you have to do it yourself."

"We could try scaring it away," said Sokka all of a sudden, barely even noting that the Kyoshi warrior as she crawled up on deck.

The other two men nodded their heads, the kid pulling his shirt over his head and walking forward slowly as if he was a headless spirit, probably planning on making some ghost noises. Sokka got no farther than a few feet before his sister yelled down at him, "What are you doing, Sokka! Do you want to die!"

Said idiot was then promptly hit by a stray squid arm and thrown back across the deck by the angry tentacle. All the older males stepped out of the way just in time to miss the ghost-impersonator, the three men wincing because they had heard the smacking sound as Sokka came to a halt on the deck.

Coming to a sliding half behind the parted tactile group, a sucker shape on the side of his neck, the
teenager sat up and grumbled, "Bad plan. Next."

A next plan wasn’t even offered by the misfit sea monster tactical team when suddenly a little blur ran past them with a war cry, tongue hanging out of his mouth. Toh Je was running forward like a wild boy, a bottle of liqueur from the looks of it raised above his head with a flaming cloth tucked in the end. A Molotov cocktail it was and the child had his sights aimed at the ocean beast’s face. Giving a war cry, the young bender yelled, "Let you be fried!"

The tactical crewmen didn't see it that way though, all four crying, "Not the sake!"

The young bender did not hear them though, his thoughts on the flammable weapon as he took aim and let it fly. The Kyoshi Warriors were all paying attention though, rising fans up to guard their eyes, the bottle in slow motion and it soared. The sound of glass shattering was miniscule compared to the sound the shelled giant-octopus-squid made though.

The squeal that escaped the sea beast seemed to mark an end to the battle for the creature was now a-flame, waving its arms as it started to drop the damsels onto the deck and overboard into the water. Sokka, only standing still long enough to make sure the beast hadn’t left merely to lick its burn wounds, tripped forward over to a rather slime covered part of the deck. There, where the warriors that had been dropped, were now struggling to stand, fans being shaken to get rid of slime.

Coming up to Suki first, Sokka’s mind still on the stolen hair band, tried to help her to her feet.

"A-are you okay," said the wet teenager as he helped the warrior woman to her feet, his eyes trying not to look at her ripped skirt though his dreams for the next few nights certainly were not going to allow him to forget.

Gasping for breath after all the squeezing, her white makeup somewhat smeared from the water, the girl gripped his arm for a moment before she barked, "What do you think? Ever been partially molested by a giant squid? I have marks all over my legs and places I didn't even know I had."

Looking backward, Sokka suddenly rubbed his butt and winced, "I kind of understand. Thing has a dirty mind for being in water all the time. I'm going to have sucker shaped welt on my bum for the next two weeks. But … it’s not all bad, I did find my hair tie."

Suki, suddenly looking red, stumbled for words before she freed herself from the boy, “Uh, yes … hair ties. M-must have thought it was one of mine. N-now excuse me, I have to help the rest of my warriors out of the water.”

Sokka, even as his sister came up and slapped him in the back of the head for not helping her to her feet, merely smiled like a love sick teenager. *She liked him. She really, really, liked him.*

…

After Lee had stopped shaking and gained his breath, Yugato decided it was time to go. It was with little effort that he helped the boy to his feet. Lee wasn’t even against being assisted to his room with how distant his mind seemed to be. It was an oddity for the Avatar that unsettled Yugato more then he would like to admit. Even more so when he finally noticed how Lee kept twitched away from his touch as he led him back to his room.

Only once some medical tea had been sent for and the Avatar was under his fur bed, did the Air Master leave the fire-bender’s side. Lee would rest, yet there was this air about the Avatar that disturbed him. Lee had kept rubbing his wrists and had been as silent as possible, which was an oddity for the generally quick-to-temper Avatar. Did Lee feel betrayed? He had kept his promise to
the Avatar, hadn’t he? He had gotten there as soon as something went wrong, or was he not fast enough?

Had another Spirit asked something of the Avatar?

Was it the Moon Spirit again?

A frown pulling at his features, Yugato turned his attentions to his second problem when he stepped out of Lee’s room, Aang. The youth had fared far better from the journey then Lee it seemed. After pulling Zuko from the Spirit Realm, Aang was already to his feet and looking guilty, apologizing over and over again as the small group had walked the Avatar to his room.

Not that he would blame Aang for Lee’s crossing over.

The again, Aang was definitely spiritual endowed so it might now have helped the Avatar’s case which was still something he couldn’t wrap his mind around. The child just could leave his body behind far too easily. Most could only pull from their body once or twice and live before darker Spirits would try to take advantage if that person. Yet, Aang not only managed it without any consequences, he seemed to have piggy-backed with the Avatar and touched the living realm. Even the living Avatar couldn’t do that! True, the rule of most spirits was that they had to be a few decades old or incredibly enraged to be able to touch anything in the living realm.

But Aang had, juggling kitchen utensils no less.

It was a troubling circumstance. Last time Aang had crossed over it had caused an uproar amongst the air-bending elders and the second time Aang had even been carted to Master Mungi for immediate apprenticeship in the spiritual studies if only for his own safety. Unsurprisingly, Aang had been dubbed to young at the time, but there was no doubt in Yugato’s mind that perhaps the Masters should have made an exception. Yes, Aang would have had to spend most of his life studying the Spirit Realm and the power of the soul and mind more so than bending, but it would be a well-meaning life … and a quiet one as well. It might have been hard for an active and adventurous soul like Aang at first to be chained to a temple most of his life instead of travel like most nomads, but a spiritual student traveled with their soul after all. He would adapt and such a life would also rule out possession.

Yugato shivered at the thought, knowing tales of how spirits would sometimes get into the womb and eat the soul of the child in order to take its place. Monstrous things, changelings of a sort. And for a time, some of the Air Masters suspected such a thing. But Aang … Aang wasn’t cold or cruel or hungry. So Aang being a changeling had been ruled out long ago, but it still left many questions about the fate of Aang.

What was he meant to do?

“Master? Are you mad? I know I said I wouldn’t do it again … but, but I wanted to show Avatar Lee that the Spirit Realms wasn’t always bad.”

Perking up, realizing that Aang had been waiting out in the hall for his Master to chide him, Yugato frowned down at the younger monk. He wanted to be angry, he really did, especially now that it seemed Aang had been the instigator of this evening’s nightmare. But when the youngster bowed his head in shame, his form seeming small and pathetic, the elder couldn’t force himself to be mad.

Pulling forward a calm mind, telling himself that he had raised his voice far too many times today, Yugato put on a soft expression.
“I am more upset than angry. I understand that you wanted to comfort Lee and reassure him about his ability, but the prank in the kitchen was defiantly unbecoming. And it certainly was not humorous for the cooks. They were confused and probably frightened, Aang. A monk does not practice such cruelties, which is why you will go clean up your mess in the kitchen tonight and apologize to those cooks. And though I don’t support lying, it may be best to say it was a bad air-bending joke so you do not frighten them further.”

Nodding his head, Aang pouted, “Yes, Master.”

Smiling softly as Aang rose his head, he touched the top of youth’s head and started walking to the kitchen with his little trouble maker, asking, “So did anything abnormally strange happen in the realm between? With you or Lee?”

Beside himself, not understanding that the elder bender was leaning towards information on how he touched the living realm, Aang smiled weakly before he murmured, “Well… Lee did say something strange. Something about … Zuko.”

Chapter End Notes

Happy Thanksgiving. Despite that, since I can’t decide myself, there is a pole on my profile asking if you guys want this store to be broken into three books for easier navigating like the tv series or should I just make this a mega-story that combines all three chapters? Go vote! … Ugh, now I reminded myself of the presidential elections. XD
A big thank you to BlueLucied for helping me out with this chapter. I know she’s busy, so I’m thankful for whenever she is able to assist with a chapter. :)

Zuko sighed into his sheets, finding he loved the smell. It was the smell of steam, fire and a slight twinge of sweat with the salty aftertaste that came with living on the sea. Generally, he didn't indulge in oversleeping but for some reason he felt so well rested. He felt like he hadn't even dreamed and that … that was always a good thing. He forgot his life in those dead nights. He forgot the reason for his banishment, his heartache, his struggling pride and his honor.

There was only rest.

And that strange aftertaste.

Ugh, Uncle made him drink tea before bed again, hadn’t he?

But Uncle isn't here …

Zuko's eyes snapped open and the world came rushing back: the Northern Water Tribe, Pakku, the air-benders and yesterday. He had been planning to try another escape attempt last night, his mind in a panic, but instead Yugato had coerced him to drink some tea and to crawl into his fur bed.

And … he must have fallen asleep.

How had he managed that?! He had been twitching, mentally distraught and there had been this pressing in the back of his mind from the old part of his soul. And he had been tipping and tipping and the … blackness. How had he fallen asleep when he had been so anxious? He had trained himself to welcome the night and to blend into its nothingness. He wasn't an old man that needed his rest!

Then again … it had been a harrowing experience yesterday. Maybe the between realm had taken a lot more out of him then he had thought.

Deciding that perhaps it was best he hadn’t planned an escape when panicked, he slowly sat up and eyed the room. His heart was hammering, knowing that if he saw just a glint of green he would go off. Instead, he watched as one of his water-bending guards yawned and stared at the fire in the center of the room.

The guard looked so bored that he seemed ready to fall asleep sitting there. He didn't even perk up when Zuko sat up a little straighter. Only when Zuko reached for his folded parka –how had he slept through someone taking his parka off he did not know- and slid it on did the guard turn to look at him.

Uh, it was Juku.

"Oh, you’re alive. You slept like an iceberg. Me and Watto were wondering if we should start
looking for a pulse," said Juku lazily before he raised to his feet, the other man giving Zuko a sympathetic smile. "Well, it's best to get up and get ready then, lady-killer."

Zuko glared at the nickname but didn’t rise up to the bait. He was used to the idiot’s babble.

“Yugato,” continued Juku, “asked that you be brought to the training grounds near the healing huts so you can get some sun light and so you can start practicing air-bending."

The prince twitched at that and he might have struck out, his nerves wearing thin, when suddenly there was a breeze blasting across the room, nearly blowing the fire out. Zuko held his breath as he watched the fire flicker and almost die, a sick feeling rising in his gut when he realized where the wind had come from … him. He had been angry, that much was true, but he would have rather had fire react to his growing temper but instead the wind had called itself into existence and to his defense.

And he was once again reminded he was the Avatar.

Heart constricting, a part of him feeling the same way he had the first day he had air-bended, he pushed back a sob.

Right now … he had to keep it together. He had to be strong like his blood line was expected to be. In truth, a part of him knew that if he took advantage of his Avatar powers or if he would allow the past lives to press into the back of his mind, he would probably already be out of this frozen wasteland. But he just … couldn’t. He felt that if he allowed the Avatar to have control, Lee would start to become truer than Zuko … but then again, there might not be a Zuko very soon.

Swallowing at the thought, the prince told himself to keep calm and act placid until he found a fool proof way of getting out of here, unless Uncle got here first that is. So … he had to breathe. He had to pretend to at least be interested in his Masters. He had to play the role of Avatar if he wanted out of here intact.

And as he stood, not offering a word of complaint, Zuko was sure that in a way the Earth Master had already accomplished his dastardly deed. He was already forgetting what it meant to be a fire-bender.

He was forgetting what it meant to be a prince.

... 

Despite his internal promise to play ‘good student’ Zuko could not even pretend to show any interest in breakfast. After picking at his morning meal as if it were still alive, the prince had allowed Watto and Juku to lead him to the new training ground without a word. The whole time he felt a tickling in the back of his throat though. A tickle that threatened to become a sob and then a wail and then a full break down followed by a fiery fit.

And … if he had any idea of what his past lives would do if he allowed them in, he might have allowed that after the fit.

But pride was a stubborn creature. It did not wane for anything; it had to die a little piece at a time before it would fall and crumble.

"Lee!" chirped Aang as he stalled in whatever kata he had been doing with the Air Master. The youth then laughed light-heartedly and ran up to the prince, sliding to a halt in front of the fire-bender with a gust of wind. "Are you ready to learn some air-bending! Well, not any fun air-bending today, but you will get to learn the basics. It’s kind of like dancing!"
Zuko stalled in his brooding and looked up at the older air-bender as the monk came over to them, hands folded inside his robes. The Master gave a slight bow to his student, adding, "Well, it's not exactly dancing but it might be easier to think of air-bending that way for a beginner."

Lip twitching, Zuko wanted to strike out and deny the foreign culture but he knew he had to keep his temper about him with so much on the line. Instead, he growled, "As long as there is no more meditating."

Giving a soft nod, the older bender waved behind him at an odd contraption that was highly out of place in the wintered area. "No, not today. I think it would do your mind and body well to get a little exercise today. I fear your easy access to the spirit realm may be slightly stressed related or perhaps it is your past lives doing. Either way, a good cup of tea before bed and some physical exertion should help calm your nerves."

Fury bleeding into sarcasm, Zuko growled, "I wouldn't be that way if I was still with my crew."

Frowning, Yugato replied, "And I am sorry about that, but the world needs the Avatar. I know the circumstances are not what you would like, Avatar Lee, but please at least try to see it from our point of view. In fact, if you think you would rather try and meditate in order to contact one of your past lives, I'm sure they would …"

"Air-bending exercises it is then," said Zuko, not even liking the idea of being yelled at again by all his past lives or running into the moon spirit.

Trying to not look disappointed that he was interrupted, the elder monk gave a soft smile and stated, "Wonderful, though I think as an Avatar, your future abilities will be supported by your spiritual connection more so than your physical ones. Now, where to begin? Yes, as with all new air-benders, before trying to perform their first kata … there is the leaf exercise. The leaf exercise-"

"What!"

Yugato stalled as the Avatar interrupt him, "The leaf exercise. It's mostly for practicing flow and grace before-"

"No! Are you saying my bending in inept! I am well trained and powerful!" barked Zuko, shame pressing into his chest as he recalled the praise his sister received and how he could barely even receive a congratulations from his old Fire Masters. It had always been about her! Everything! She was born lucky. He was lucky to have been born.

Yugato, bring his hands into his sleeves, frowned and straitened his pose, "I did not say you were inept, Lee. You are a skilled fire-bender from what I am told from your scrimmages with the tribe. Are you the most powerful fire-bender in the world, no, but not all Avatars were noted for their physical prowess in bending. Some were noted for their intelligence or grace or spiritual adaptability."

Zuko's lips became thin as he frowned. So, not only was he the Avatar, he apparently was a weak one? What, because his powers didn't develop before he was sixteen? Because he had only called on his Avatar abilities once when he saved his ship and not since then?!

Hands becoming fists, pride so sore that he wanted to start something orange on fire, Zuko was about to demand a duel with the air-bender to prove his bending prowess when there was an interruption.

"Well, let's see if he can show us otherwise," chirped in the usual annoyance.
Zuko merely sighed as Aang hopped up to him, the air-bender’s usual chipper smile ingrained on his face. The whole display ruined any thoughts of vengeance that Zuko dared hold for the Master.

"I mean, I'm sure you are a great air-bender. You could probably even air-bend today if you wanted to," added Aang as he grabbed Zuko by his parka and tugged him towards the strange wooden doors. At least it looked like wooden doors at least, maybe they were bamboo and was that rice paper or leather? Zuko might have even taken time to press off the lesson with some inane questions about the materials used to build the contraption but suddenly found Yugato by their side.

"Aang, I do think it was a wonderful idea that you stowed away on the bison," whispered Yugato to his student as stepped up next to Zuko, asking, "What do you say, Avatar Lee? Do you wish to disprove me?"

Honor tugging it two different directions, the prince frowned. He knew the air-bender was trying to manipulating him and trying to trick him into bending but at the same time … he couldn't see himself having a fit in front of Aang. Especially with the younger boy beaming up at him.

He had never been admired in that way. He had never been gazed up at in wonderment. His sister would have rather died than look up at him in that way.

It was nice …

Shoulder's slumping, figuring he couldn't plan an escape right now anyway, he nodded and whispered, "Of course I will. So what is this thing and what is it supposed to teach me?"

"Some call it simply 'the gates' and it will help you learn the fundamentals of air-bending," said Yugato as he motioned towards the contraption that so resembled the ones that had long been burned up in the nomads air-temples though this one was obviously recently made, imbedded in the training ground. "Aang, would you like to demonstrate?"

Smiling broadly, the youth created an air-scooter and rode his way over to the gates, causing a breeze to ruffle Zuko's and Yugato's clothes.

Landing on a light foot while the other one was used to help him balance, Aang made quite a presentation of himself as he chirped, "Using this time honored tool, Lee, I will show you the first steps to air-bending and then we can make air-scooters."

Aang, not even noting that Zuko rolled his eyes about the stupid air-scooter thing again, turned to face the wooden doors. Aang then address the Avatar in a far more serious tone, "The goal is to weave your way through the gates and make it to the other side without touching them … or being thrown to the ground and sliding ten feet on your face."

"I doubt I would slide ten feet, Aang," grumbled Zuko, finding himself drawn to the lesson even though every fiber of his ancestry was telling him not to listen. "It seems easy enough to accomplish."

Yugato stroked his small mustache and chuckled slightly as he stepped forward as if to stare at the doors. "Aang forgot to mention that you had to get through the doors without touching them … while the gates are rapidly moving."

Then, twisting in such a fluid motion he almost looked like a blur, Yugato thrust his hands forward and released a powerful burst of air. The gates immediately burst to life, spinning rapidly like blunt death traps. Yugato, standing up strait, then reached deeply into his robe as if he was looking for
something. Smiling that sad smile of his, he then pulled out a small wooden box. Staring at the intricate air-bending carvings only for a moment, Yugato opened the lid.

Zuko was surprised when he didn’t see the elder bender pull out some type of treasure or relic. Instead, something far simpler was pulled from the small box. It was a leaf. A simple thing really but certainly out of place in this cold wasteland. It was a wonder how they had even managed to keep it somewhat green as it didn't look like it had been collected recently, small golden designs painted lightly onto its surface.

Was it from the ancient temples that their people once did grace?

His heart skipped a beat, it almost ached for a moment to think of hundreds of air-benders being burned. And though his blood line told him to feel no shame, Zuko found himself placing a hand over his chest as if his heart ached.

'Do not be sad, young one. The mountains are not important, just the people that escaped them,' whispered the voice of a past life as it pressed against the back of his mind.

Zuko's eye twitched in reaction to the soft voice, the teenager cursing himself for how easily his past lives seemed to be pressing into his thoughts lately. Pulling his hand from his chest, the teenager tried to ignore the sorrowful part of his soul as he tried to listen to Yugato's drivel.

Meanwhile, Yugato had placed the small box back into his robes and shifted slightly like he was going into a stance. The movement was small and barely notable, like what a fire-bender would do to light a single candle, but as the air-bender released the leaf to the winds it was pushed towards the gates. The leaf seemed to give no resistance as it drifted through the air, picking up speed as it drew nearer to the gates.

Watching the leaf twist towards the spinning doors like a green and golden little dancer, Zuko listened to the Master speak in that airy voice of his. "The key to air-bending is to be like the leaf. Watch how it passes through the gates … it will not touch one of them. This movement is known as flow. The leaf flows with the movement of the gates, not against them."

Frowning harder, Zuko watched as the leaf spiraled and twirled and threatened to hit into one of the twisting gates as it was pulled into the moving maze and yet it soon emerged on the other side as if the twisting gates were nothing. Zuko couldn’t help but grimace. How was he supposed to do that?

"Aang, will you fetch the leaf for me and finish the demonstration for Lee?" asked the Master as he folded his hands behind his back, trying not to notice Lee’s growing frown.

Grin as wide as ever, Zuko watched with wide eyes as Aang rushed toward the spinning doors. And for a moment he worried the air-head was going to be hit. Instead, with a grace he didn't expect from the little trickster, Aang started weaving through the air-bending tool like a tree-fox. The youth rapidly changed direction with each oncoming door as if it was nothing, spinning with any panel that came near him.

Yugato merely continued as Aang finished his demonstration without so much as a bruise. "Besides flow, air-bending is also about spiral movements which is called spin. When you meet resistance, do not falter. Instead, you must be able to switch direction at a moment's notice and thus continue flow."

Aang, finally coming to the end, decided to splurge in his display and ended it with a huge dramatic spin the air. It resembled a small hurricane as his air-bending carried him up, up, and up...
until his fingers finally grabbed onto the leaf. Then, with a slow wide twirl he came back down to earth with a small bow.

Coming up from his bow, Aang was smiling as usual before he jogged back over to his Master and offered him the leaf with a gentle hand. Yugato bowed slightly and pulled the greenery into his sleeve before he turned his attention back to the Avatar.

"Now Lee … do you wish to try?"

Pride tugging itself in many directions, tactically, Zuko thought it best to at least try. At least that way it would seem that he was playing the part of good Avatar. At least that way if the Earth Master appeared, he would be able to protect his mind for a little longer.

‘A mind is a terrible thing to waste, young Avatar. Air-bending isn’t that bad. It isn’t as good as earth-bending, but there is no shame in it,’ came another voice as Zuko felt panic flicker in the back of his throat, sickness threatening to swell up inside his gut.

Resisting the urge to growl at the past voice, wondering if other Avatars had it this bad, Zuko decided to try the spinning gates if only to distract his mind.

Taking in a deep breath, the prince walked forward and stepped in front of the two air-benders. He ignored Aang’s hoot of good luck as he stared at the spinning doors with a dissecting gaze. They were spinning quite fast but he was sure that with his stealth skills he would be able to shift through the spinning maze …

… Probably.

‘Oh … this is going to be quite a show! Someone get snacks, I can’t wait to watch him bounce,’ came a senile sounding past life.

Grumbling, deciding he was sick of the spiritual side of this curse, Zuko decided he didn’t care if it hurt. If bending would silence the voices, he would accept playing the air-bender’s version of dodge.

Taking in a breath, Zuko suddenly rushed forward and slid into the contraption. He tried to be light on his feet. He tried to recall the stealth he trained for while trapped on his ship. He tried to recall how he taught himself to jump rooftops whenever they would visit a seaside village. And, at first, he dodged the first gate as a breeze pressed at his hood and he even managed to get past the second spinning gate yet he only had time to blink when the next gate slid into his way and right into his chest.

After that it was a painful rush before the prince found himself being bounced from door to door until there was a rather rough landing onto the ice … his form sliding to a slow halt. For a moment he laid there on his back staring up at the endless blue sky. It hadn’t hurt as much as he thought it would, the bouncing, but he was a little breathless.

And mad.

‘Ha ha, did you see that, he bounced!’ came the senile voice again.

Now… he was really mad. How could a mere child do this with such minimal ease and here he was, almost of marriageable age, being thrown to the ground like he was inept.

He was not a failure!
Getting up quickly, the prince walked back to the spinning gates, trying to ignore Aang’s call of ‘are you okay’ and Yugato’s ‘not everyone is successful their first day, there is no shame in it’. He would be strong.

He was strong and vibrant and by Agni he wasn’t going to lose to a door!

Digging his seal boots into the ice he then thrust himself forward, running at the gates … only to smack right into the first one. Then, not even given a moment to twitch, Zuko was gobbled up by the spinning maze, thrown around like a rag doll for a few moments and then finally tossed out the opposite side. For a minute, the prince gasped, cold ice pressed against his cheek. And for a minute more he just laid there breathless and huffing until Aang’s shoes came into his field of vision.

The air-bender got down on his hands and knees and placed his own face down onto the ice so he could meet Zuko’s gaze, warmly chirping, “At least you made it to the other side.”

Growling, Zuko was too his feet in a second despite his shaky legs. Then, trying to gather some breath, he stalked back … too fast and though his speed was admirable, the prince knew he was going to be hit but he would not give in easily!

Irritated, deciding to do as he was asked in his own manner, the Prince suddenly grabbed onto one of the doors and spun around like a lemur on a branch. Then, using the momentum, he threw himself in the air and with fast footed grace he hopped the remainder of the moving maze on top of the spinning doors.

Landing on the other side, Zuko could hear Yugato sigh and Aang laugh himself silly. Then, turning towards the air-bender, he waited for an outburst or something. Instead, Yugato’s shoulders shagged and he stared for a moment as if flabbergasted. Then, as if gathering his thoughts, the Master smiled weakly and yelled across the ice arena, “That was very … impressive, Lee. Your speed is admirable and you did get to the other side … but you still have to perform the exercise like Aang did.”

Zuko, a little put out, huffed smoke out of his nose, baring his teeth in irritation.

Offering a sad smile this time, Yugato called out across the training grounds again, “We can take a break if you like, Lee. How about a nice cup of tea-“

“I don’t need tea!” yelled Zuko back as he headed back to the front of the spinning gates.

He’d show them … but at least the jumping exercise offered him a little bit of an achievement.

And so, the wicked cycle continued, the Avatar gaining an upper hand just by running and dodging through the shifting maze though he never quite made it through. After the tenth time of ending up on his back, Yugato had tried to convince the Avatar into taking a break again. But Lee … was stubborn. It was a promising attribute for earth-bending but for not for air-bending.

In fact, the horror show slowly gained an audience beside the two air-benders and the Avatar’s guards. It had been almost an hour and half of this painful display until Pakku finally showed up, his eyebrows held in a quizzical manner. He watched Aang cheer on the older boy, only for the Avatar to run right into one of the spinning gates, bounce around and end up on his face.

Pakku almost laughed, but refused himself the pleasure when he turned to the older air-bender. Yugato had a hand over his eyes as if the display was too painful to watch.

Struggling to keep his smile at bay, loving that the air-bender was being tortured in his own way, Pakku cleared his throat. “How goes the … ah … training?”
Yugato, lifting his hand from his eyes, gave Pakku a dry look before he sighed and pulled his hands behind his back so he would look a little more presentable.

“Good morning, Master Pakku. How was your morning?” said Yugato, trying to be cordial.

A smile suddenly bleeding onto his face, Pakku watched Zuko slide against the ice. “Better than yours in seems.”

Watching Zuko get up, his form becoming stern, the air-bender murmured, “I worry the words that were meant to entice action have turned into a session of masochism. I believe that this will only end in blood … well, more blood.”

“Stubborn as a seal-shark. Just won’t give up, that one,” said Pakku. “But … I doubt he will be here much longer.”

Yugato, ignoring that Zuko had just taken a nasty hit, gave the other Master a quizzical look. “And what do you mean by that?”

“Because he is about to blow. I’ve seen that expression before,” said Pakku as he waited for a fiery display to replace the wooden gates.

Turning, the Air Master watched as electricity seemed to jump over the Avatar’s body as Lee got to his feet. His form was so hot, boiling in fact, that fog seemed to be rushing into the training circle as hot air met cold air. And just when he was about to call out to Lee and tell him to breath, the youth seemed to explode. He slid into a kata, a scream of rage filling the training grounds, and just as his hands slid forward in a slicing motion … a fiery blast escaped him. Thus, a hard burst of angry energy slammed into the wooded creation in an outburst that most fire-benders would envy … and most air-benders would fear.

There was barely time to react, barely time to blink as the blast spread over the arena, wooden doors being ripped to pieces and flying towards the watching crowd. Yugato, despite a wooden door sailing his way, found he could not move. Found he could not look away from the red hot fury that was the Avatar.

A fire-bender.

He promised he would not be weak. He promised that he would leave his past behind and accept and train the Avatar. And yet … and yet … Lee was a fire-bender. Just like all the others.

“Fire-benders are attacking! Get the women and children out of here!”

Smoke was drifting under the door; there were cries and yells from the people outside. Yugato found himself sitting up with a gasp of air, his hair falling into his eyes. He quickly put a hand over his mouth as he accidently took in a mouthful of smoke. He quickly found himself filtering the air in the room as he stumbled toward the exit, trying to keep it clean as possible so he wouldn’t pass out from smoke inhalation. He had a duty to uphold.

Slamming out onto the second story deck, the air-bender disguised as a scruffy traveler, stared in horror at what was before him. The village was under attack, fire-benders with their skull masks were wandering through the streets setting fire to homes and anyone that didn’t get out of the way fast enough. It was revolting, it was disgusting … he-he had to get out of here.

True, he knew how to use a staff very well for defense, all air-benders naturally did given the use of their gliders, but this was a small army and if he dared use his bending … they would never stop hunting him. Swallowing, hating himself for it felt like cowardice, he quickly ran back into the
room and whipped away the smoke so he could grab his things. Throwing on his sandals and his side-bag, he grabbed his wrapped staff last and headed for the deck.

Relying entirely on his acrobatics, the air-bender swung himself up onto the roof of the building. It was early morning so there still wasn’t much light out so he doubted he would be seen jumping roof to roof. And so, feet so spry that he seemed more like a spirit then a man, the air-bender turned his eyes away from the wreckage below, the cries of the suffering following close behind.

Even as his soul ached, telling him to defend the poor souls, he knew he could not especially when he had troubles of his own … A fire-bender had noticed his retreat and had sent a fire ball right for him.

Yugato manager to slide to a halt at the last second, his scarf getting singed, but the loss of momentum revealed how weak the roof was at this point … the whole roof seeming to cave in beneath him. The fall was not forever … Instead, it was blazing and painful as he quickly fell through the second story floor as swiftly as the roof and then all the way down onto the first floor’s dirt floor, the second story’s wood falling around him. There, on the first floor, the air-bender gasped as ash and smoke and fire surround him, wood pressing on his back. It was hard to breath. The wind was knocked out of him and smoke was closing in on his scratched and bruised form. The darkness was threatening to take him with the smoke … and then a pair of metal boots stalled before him.

“Well, well. What do we have here? A little roof rat.”

Yugato …

“Yugato! You miserable air-bender, are you alright? Did you hit your head?”

“M-master … are you okay? Master?”

That was Aang’s voice. W-where was he?

Yugato blinked a few times, his vision coming back to him. Aang was knelt down next to him and Pakku kept slapping Aang’s hands away as he check Yugato for injuries. He was on the ground. Yes, Lee had lost his temper and the resulting explosion had thrown him backwards … and he had had another flash back. He could still feel the rest of the memory fading back to the deep clutches of his mind where it belonged, mostly forgotten. That memory was the beginning of a nightmare for him and a very hard time in his life. It was certainly not something he needed to remember right now. He knew that Lee was not the fire-bender from the memory so he did not know what triggered it. Perhaps it was merely the slight of seeing those gates explode, the smoke and ash and rubble flying at him. The memory had just refused to remain silent.

Swallowing as he raised a hand up to his head, Yugato tried to press the memory down. He could not remember that. He could not remember that or the hate might boil forth again and he couldn’t do that to Aang. He was so pure souled and Lee … it wouldn’t be fair to judge him based on what that man had done.

Sighing, sitting up with a grunt, Yugato touched the back of his head … pulling his hand to see red dripping between his fingers. Well, it seemed he hadn’t been stabbed by any debris but he had taken a nasty hit to the head. Then, looking around, he quickly noted that Aang looked upset and Lee, who was standing nearby at a slight distance with a water-bender clutching at one of his arms, looked horrified. The tempered teen had an expression as if he had just signed his own death warrant.
Frowning slightly at the Avatar, Yugato was about to get to his feet and re-assure the fire-bender that he was not angry, and yet as he got to his feet the world started titling and he found a pair of hands reaching out to steady him.

“Whoa there Master Yugato,” said Jayendra as he steadied the bleeding bender. “You left a dent in the ice with your noggin. Take it slow.”

Yugato, looking up at the scarred bender, had to wonder how long he had been out for Jayendra to show up … and how long he was going to be in the medical tents. But he still had to calm this situation, Pakku had his eyes on Lee and it did not look like a kind gaze.

Nodding to his support, Yugato reached up and touched his head again, mumbling, “Yes, I see that Master Jayendra. I was just worried about my students. Aang, Lee? Are you both alright?”

Aang, who looked near tears at this point, nodded and Lee nodded as well as he looked away, unable to make eye contact.

“Good. Well, it seems air lessons are done for the day. Aang … why don’t you take Lee to meet Appa and tell Lee a little about our culture while I … gather myself.”

Pakku opened his mouth, something angry about to escape him no doubt, but Yugato interrupted the older bender. “Lee’s guards may assist Aang, Pakku … I may need some assistance getting to the medical huts if you don’t mind.”

“What … he just attacked you,” growled the old water-bender as he eyed the Avatar. “Besides, Jayendra can take you.”

Yugato, waving off the older bender’s argument, persisted. “But I would … feel better if a Master such as yourself was there.”

Jayendra merely laughed at the Air Master’s behavior, chuckling, “You won’t deny your vanity, will you Master Pakku?”

Meanwhile, the Masters heading towards the healing huts left two confused guards and Yugato’s two students behind, the still smoke gates behind them as the singed audience left the show. Aang merely wiped away the tears that were threatening to escape his eyes and skipped over to the perpetrator of the whole issue. Lee looked troubled and nervous as if he expected something terrible to happen even though Yugato had basically expressed he was not angry.

Grabbing Zuko’s sleeve to get his attention, Aang beamed up at him to raise the teenager’s spirits. “You don’t have to look so upset, Lee. I’m sure Yugato knows it was an accident. All benders have accidents … or outbursts in your case. He wasn’t mad. He even let you go see Appa.”

Zuko, whose heart was panicking in his chest, the promise of losing his mind even realer than it was yesterday given that he had injured one of his Masters, choked, “Appa … what’s an Appa?”

Not the least put off by the teenager’s odd behavior now that he knew his Master was okay, Aang said softly, “He’s a flying bison. He always makes Yugato feel less stressed. Maybe he will do the same for you … and then maybe Master Yugato will even let us go for a ride when he’s feeling better. It’s been a long day after all.”

Lip twitching, Zuko was going to proclaim that he would never ride a flying bison. It was unnatural for a fire-bender to do so and yet … an idea was born, creeping and working its way into his mind like a blood-worm that had gotten under his skin. And it might have seemed a little manipulative, a little dark, but sometimes it wasn’t bad to use the tools set before you especially when a green
robed freak was coming to take your mind. A mind he would surely get at this point. And, despite his honor’s refusal to listen to the worm, it was hard not to notice how much Aang wanted to please him.

Aang would be a means to an ends to this charade … one way or the other.

‘Perhaps you are your father’s son,’ whispered what could have only been Roku.

Chapter End Notes

I hope everyone had a Merry Christmas and/or Happy Holidays. Here’s everybody’s late present. Enjoy … and sorry that Zuko took a slightly dark turn here. >.> Also, sorry about the wait. I’ve been unemployed for a while so I have put a lot of energy in my new job. I like my job though … and it gave me time to almost finish the next chapter. It just needs to be proofread and picked at by me and my beta. Later.
“LAND! Oh sweet merciful dirt!” cried Sokka as he threw himself onto the shore after the ship finished crippling into port. Then, spitting up sand, the warrior sat there for a moment, grumbling, “Wait … I’ve never really been around dirt. I prefer ice actually.”

Katara, who was helping all the children put on their packs before they walked onto the docks, stalled and stared for a moment. It was a small dock, in truth, not worth the Fire Nation’s attention, but it was new and large and interesting to her. She had only known ice and winter. So she was understandably excited because, for the first time since she had been abandoned by Master Yugato, she felt right … She felt good.

She was going to learn water-bending and she was half-way there. Sure they had to overcome a Giant Shelled-Octopus which had littered the deck in decapitated tentacles, but they had survived...
the boat trip. Now, just a nice boring week or two’s walk and she would be water-bending!

“Is this meat? Yes? Good. I’ll take it!” cried Sokka as he spoke with a nearby vendor.

Well, she had felt good … until she saw what her brother was doing.

“What are you eating?” she found herself asking as she stepped off of the boat.

Sokka had happened upon a vendor of questionable meats and had an indistinguishable creature hanging over his open mouth. Stalling, he kept the meat hanging there and waiting as he turned towards his sister. “Meat. Man’s meat.”

“Man’s meat, huh? Do you even know what animal that came from?” said Katara as she pointed at the dripping piece of … something. Ugh, it was making her wheezy just looking at it. Was that puss or fat it was dripping? Wait … she didn’t want to know.

“What animal did it come from? Come on woman, does it matter? Meat is meat and every animal equals meat,” said her brother as he turned his attention back to the dripping piece of questionable food, the teenager practically swallowing the hunk of flesh whole.

Katara cringed as her brother made some horrible slurping noises.

“That doesn’t even make … Ugh, I can’t believe you ate that. W-whatever, just don’t bawl to me when you get sick,” groused the water-bender as she turned her attention away from the annoying sibling and to the collection of people near the ship. Suki and the rest of her warriors seemed to be herding the kids into smaller groups next to one of the warriors.

Why were they breaking the kids into groups?

Stalling as Suki pointed one of the smaller girls towards another group of children, Katara waited patiently before asking, “What are you doing? Are we deciding sleeping arrangements for the tents?”

Turning to the water-bender, her expression stoic, the warrior murmured sadly, “Just breaking up the group. We had a disconcerting report from some of the locals.”

Katara frowned, asking, “What do you mean by disconcerting?”

Matching Katara’s frown, Suki’s leader persona pulled itself to the surface as she stepped out of the younger benders’ hearing range. “Fire Nation squads are about and … there are even rumors that people have been disappearing. We don’t know if the two are connected, but then again the Fire Nation soldiers might be about trying to find the cause of the disappearances. Apparently, the colonies in the area have lost people as well. Either way, a large group will attract the Fire Nation and the young benders … when they get scared they can’t always control their bending.”

“What!” squawked Katara, pulling back only to stall and ask, “Do we really have to separate? Why can’t we just fight off the squads?”

Suki shook her head, taking off her head gear as she did so. “Trust me. Even if we did win against one of the squads, another one would be sent after us. And if we warriors just had to worry about ourselves that would not be an issue, but the children … they cannot run and hide and fight like we can. It is best to ignore attention.”

Frowning as Suki and the other warriors started to remove their traditional garb, probably to blend in with the rest of the travelers, Katara stated, “But … What if the Fire Nation isn’t the one making
people disappear?"

Suki, pulling out some brown garb that had been purchased earlier, looked Katara in the eye, her tone cold, “What could be worse than the Fire Nation?”

Katara honestly couldn’t think of one thing worse. Not one thing.

“…It’s staring at me …”

Aang laughed at the slightly petrified Avatar as he ran forward, hovered in the air for a moment before he came down onto the soft fluffy head that was Appa’s. The youth smiled and rubbed his face into the beast’s fur, murmuring, “Yeah, he does that. It means he wants to get to know you … or he’s hungry.”

Zuko, who had put a hand outward towards Appa’s nose so the great beast could smell him, pulled his hand away as if the large animal was about to bite it off. The prince quickly asked, “What does he eat?!”

Having rubbed his face against the creature’s fur long enough, the kid raised his head and laughed, “Not people … at least I have never heard of a bison eating someone. They sure are big enough though, aren’t they?”

Taking another step away from the large sky bison, Zuko grumbled, “You are not reassuring me, Aang.”

Appa, apparently bored with just staring at the new visitor, decided to introduce himself. The large creature suddenly moved his head forward, tongue whipping out as he slobbered all over the prince, drool coating itself down the firebender’s parka and face. Zuko could do nothing but stand there with a horrified expression on as Appa gave a satisfied grunt and collapsed back onto the floor, the laughter of two guards echoing with Aang’s which only furthered the blush on Zuko’s face.

“See, he likes you!”

Fingers twitching, daring not to open his eyes or risk getting slobber in them, Zuko reached up a hand and slowly started to wipe away the drool from his face, flicking his wrists to get some of the extra slobber off. Then, sending a glare at Aang, drool dripping down the side of his face, the prince grumbled, “Yeah … I’m sure he does. Why else would he slobber all over me!”

Aang laughed again as Zuko tried to use his hand as a towel to wipe some more of the drool off. “Come on! Come pet him. He’s super fluffy!”

Looking at the cooling drool on his hand, Zuko gave Aang an irritated glare.

“No.”

“But Appa wants to love you,” said Aang, giggling like a small child that had just been given his favorite toy back.

The whole situation was somewhat silly and yet at the same time Zuko felt it pushing away some of his worries. Worries like Yugato allowing the Earth Master to have his mind. It had been an accident after all. Well … starting those mocking gates on fire, that hadn’t been an accident. What had been an accident had been putting so much force behind it so that it exploded everywhere. He
had never performed a kata that uncontrolled. He might have been pleasantly surprised with his strength if he wasn’t currently surrounded by waterbenders.

“Well, I don’t like fuzz. I don’t even like my own fuzz on the top of my head,” grumbled Zuko, angsting about his growing hair again.

Aang laughed and rolled over a few times on his version of a giant fuzz-bed, “Yeah, my hair grew out once and I didn’t much care for it either … but you can either stay down there and get licked or you can come up here and scratched Appa’s back.”

Zuko frowned up at the boy on Appa’s head and then look at the slobbering beast’s tongue. He sighed in defeat and decided fur was better than slobber any day.

Giving Appa’s head a wide berth, the prince got to the bison’s side and grabbed a handful of fur, pulling himself upward. He then awkwardly knelt on the creature’s back. Aang, who had taken to scratching the creature’s head, turned his grin at Zuko before stating, “This is how you scratch. We can brush him later and clean between his toes too!”

“Oh … joy.”

About two hours later, Zuko found he didn’t mind the fuzzy beast. Yes, he was covered in loose fur but he also now had a loose-fur bed to sit on as he leaned against Appa’s side. The creature’s body heat made him feel like he was going to sweat as he listened to the large bison breathe. He had never really noticed how cold he was until he was really warm. He still didn’t know why the cold hadn’t crawled into his bones and made him ill though. Iroh had told him about the illness his first year out to sea and why it was imperative to dress warmly even if he had his inner fire. A single fire could not beat back the cold forever.

He worried about his crew.

Had anyone gotten ill from the cold yet?

“What’s wrong?” asked Aang as he stopped raking the fur off of Appa’s rump.

Zuko turned to look at the youth, part of him thinking how ridiculous it was to have to use a rake to brush the huge beast before he murmured, “I don’t want to be here.”

Aang suddenly looked hurt, asking, “You don’t like Appa?”

Shaking his head, already knowing he couldn’t handle a melancholy Aang, the prince replied, “No, the fuzz monster is fine. I just don’t like it here. I don’t like this frozen place. I want to go home.”

Placing his rake down, Aang flopped down onto Appa’s back, white fur floating into the air. “You want to go home … Do you mean the Fire Nation or the ship they say you were on?”

Taken aback, Zuko had to look upwards in surprise uncertain of what to say and yet all he could think about was his crew and Uncle. His answer was simple. “My ship, I suppose. I’m not really allowed to go home anymore, to the Fire Nation.”

Zuko nearly slapped himself after those words escaped him. Why had he told Aang that?! If the right person put two and two together they would realize that he had meant banishment!

Aang didn’t seem to realize Zuko’s error though as the youth pulled his knees up to his chin, frowning. “Yeah … I can’t go home either. The nomad temples, I mean. I’m told about them all the time from stories and in books, but I feel that I’m missing something. And I think it’s that place
sometimes.”

Suddenly feeling like a complete scumbag, Zuko diverted eye contact. “Yeah, that has to be tough.”

Aang merely nodded. Not realizing how awkward the conversation had started to become for Zuko. “Yeah … I really want to go, you know. At least once.”

Then, as if suddenly getting an idea, Aang got on his belly and leaned outward so he was in Zuko’s field of vision. “You’ll take me, won’t you? Once your learn air, water, and all that … right?”

Feeling even more awkward and like a liar, for he had no plans on staying in this frozen wasteland that long, the prince murmured, “Ugh … sure. If we can.”

Pulling himself back onto Appa, Aang laughed and rolled around for a moment before he spoke to the ceiling. “That would be fun. We could try air-ball. I hear there’s a lot of falling involved for non air-benders but I’m sure with all the bending skills you’ll have it will be easy for you.”

Zuko, pulling into himself and feeling more and more horrible for lying to Aang, murmured, “Yeah … air-ball. Sounds like fun.”

And then, silence reigned over the room again except for the snoring sound from Appa. Zuko, feeling like the scum of the earth, had dropped his head into his knees praying that he could just escape before making any more false promises to Aang.

Aang, who he thought had fallen asleep, suddenly asked in a soft voice, “Lee … why exactly don’t you want to be here? I mean, I would like to go home as well to the things I’m familiar with, but it’s nice here as well. I mean Yue is really nice and a lot of the water benders and the healers …”

“Well, maybe not Paku,” said Aang on second thought.

Zuko -so high strung- actually laughed, chuckling softly as he agreed, “Yeah, I’m pretty sure he would rather drown me then deal with me.”

Aang’s eyes went big, “He wouldn’t do that, would he? … Perhaps, you should have Master Jayendra teach you. He seems nice even though I don’t think the seal-shark that gave him that scar was the size of a whale.”

Hand unknowingly petting the fur beside him, the prince turned to look upward at the little airbender. “You asked him where he got his scar and he didn’t kill you?”

Aang smiled and rolled over onto his back so that he was now lying in an awkward position. “Yeah, I knew he wouldn’t be mad.”

Zuko smiled softly, feeling that he liked Aang a little bit more after every instance they were together. Yes, Aang was irritating, but in a little brother way. Like family.

The firebender slowly stop smiling though as Aang rolled around in the fur above him, the words in his throat before he even realized they were being said, “And why haven’t you ask me how I got my scar?”

The smile that was on the airbender’s face threatened to bleed away into nothingness as he stopped rolling around in Appa’s fur. Then, leaning forward, he allowed himself to roll off the bison entirely until he was next to Lee in the fur pile.
Sitting up with a grunt, the youth gave the Avatar a sad smile as he added softly, “Because I knew it bothered you and … because I already knew … how you got it.”

Eye’s filling with worry, a horrific idea that his Masters apparently already knew he was Prince Zuko and were just playing with him, the firebender almost grabbed Aang and shook him by his shoulders. But, he had to keep his cool. Aang was odd. Perhaps it had something to do with mind speaking or …

Or maybe your past lives told him.

Stalling at the strange thought, Zuko asked in a dry, choking voice, “And how do you know that … I’ve never told anyone.”

Aang, titling his head back because Zuko was pretty much glaring at hole through his soul, sighed and whispered, “It’s a … spiritual thing. I don’t want to talk about it.”

Rage dripping to the surface like magma from below the earth, Zuko was about to bite out that he deserved to know, it was his scar after all. Instead, another voice softly inquired what Zuko was thinking.

“Yes, but I would like to hear about it as well. This scar.”

Head snapping hard to the left, Zuko wondered if one of his guards had listened in on their entire conversation. Instead, as the speaker’s form was introduced to him, Zuko’s breath was stolen.

The spirits were laughing at him.

Aang, not even noticing Zuko’s silent panic, pulled himself out of his ball to see who had spoken. Popping a head over Appa’s tail so he could see what Lee was looking at, the airbender stared at the visitor in a thoughtful manner.

In the middle of the room, as if he had always been there, stood a man. A very silent man apparently since he was able to sneak up on the two of them. At least Aang thought it was a man. The clothes were odd to him, especially for this area and very formal.

Not knowing what else to do, Aang murmured, “Uh, hi.”

“Ah, a young airbender. It seems I was directed to the right location, “ said the man draped entirely in green, his arms behind his back with a soft false-smile plastered on his face. Slowly, his gaze turned to the stock-still Lee. “So, I must only presume that you are the Avatar.”

Aang, a part of him feeling he just knew that green uniform the longer he stared at it, nodded so that the man knew he was correct before he introduced himself. “I’m Aang and this is Avatar Lee. Can I wear your hat?”

The Earth Kingdom man kept his same passive smile. “No, but I would like to speak with Avatar Lee if you don’t mind.”

Zuko could only swallow as the green robed man turned his attention completely onto the prince, his breath stalling as his heart skipped a beat. There was a glint of green. Please, please don’t be the Earthbender!

And, like his worst nightmare being given voice and movement, the man bowed slightly which caused his braid to fall to the side. The man’s voice was so sickly sweet that it made Zuko physically shiver as if he was freezing. “It is an honor to meet you, my student. You may call me
Master Kun Tien and I am to be your Earth Master. The pleasure is all mine.”

Iroh, meanwhile, smiled as he looked at the small company of men before him. It had been a blessing, it really had, that they had run across those high risk traders. It was still odd that they were this far up North, but upon inquiry all the pirates’ barker, Oh, had to say was that they had some cargo to drop off.

“Irritating and strangely creepy cargo” apparently.

Regardless, the pirates had goods to purchase and trade for, apparently too heavy to look for a battle when goods could be traded for coin.

Iroh had accepted their prices quaintly though he almost wept at his good fortune. True, in the end the crew had agreed that they had to restock and that the sick had to be tended to. They could not survive until the New Moon, but now he could renounce part of that decision. They were only two for three days from the Northern Tribe. A smaller vessel could sneak into the territory and rescue his nephew, fresh stocks and material available for the men that had volunteered.

Giving Jee a curt nod, he smiled to the small four man rescue team before him. “Please be careful and please bring Zuko back safe. I wish I could go myself but I’m an old man … I fear my stealth skills are not as well off as all of you.”

Jee merely saluted his aging prince. “Of course, we understand. We will bring your nephew back safe, Prince Iroh.”

Then, without any further demand, Jee and his small party of men dressed in black and faded red headed down into the lower tiers towards the ship’s small water engine. Jee and the others were determined to make sure that old man had no further worries about his nephew’s safety. After all, once they rescued Zuko, the Avatar, Iroh would have enough worries of his own.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah … what a great chapter ending! We finally get to know Kun and it seems his introduction hasn’t been taken well with Zuko. And as for Katara’s section, I totally wanted to make a Slenderman joke but somehow I refrained. XD
Chapter Notes

Thank you BlueLucied for the advice on this chapter.

Image is Avatar State by Taku: Avatar State. I lost the original link somewhere on Tumblr, so its on Deviant Art for now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
The world had crashed down, a thousand tints of painted glass falling down from the sky and raining around him. Time had stilled, his heart was kept in a metal box unable to beat as it struggled and struggled and … he was getting light headed. He couldn't breathe or think and his heart was still.

The spirit world was also pulling at him … until a small voice pushed into the back of his mind, a hand touching his forearm.

"Lee … you okay?"

His heart regained its rhythm, breath was once again his, and the world wasn't being drowned out by the imaginary sound of falling glass. He turned to look at the worried airbender and then turned his gaze upward back to the Earth Master. Said earthbender had lost his grin and was merely staring in a placid manner as if waiting for Zuko to address him.
Swallowing, Zuko moved his lips, telling himself to play the part, to act like he was one of the Ember Island Players … to play the part of good little Avatar. But his lips could barely move and all he kept doing was swallowing like the words were trapped in the back of his throat. And it took him a moment to finally realize something, the reason for his panic. He was scared. He was truly terrified, and it felt as if this man was more like Death then a mere earthbender.

Gaining his soft false-smile once again, as if noting the Avatar's nervous twitch, Kun murmured, "I see that the young Avatar is shy. Unfortunate for a leader, but intriguing. Regardless, Avatar Lee, would you mind coming with me for a moment? I'd like to speak with you alone."

Zuko suddenly felt gut wrenchingly sick. He felt like the world was caving in and pressing down on him with its full weight. He was in the casket again. It was filling up with dirt again. He was suffocating. His flame was going out. He needed to get away. He needed to get out of here.

He needed to run.

No, he needed to fight. This man … this man was threatening his very existence. His mind.

And he was sick of running.

He was a prince!

He was also a firebender.

And then his pride reared its ugly head, disguised so quaintly as honor. Then fight, it whispered, the voice in his head sounding so much like his father's.

Not even giving it a second thought. Not even a plan at hand, an animalistic instinct almost the only thing driving him forward, Zuko did the only thing he could think of: attack. He was away from the bison in the blink of an eye and though he certainly would be punished for attacking one of his Masters, it was decided. If he could injure or cripple this Kun character long enough for Iroh and the others to rescue him, then he might be able to spare his mind, his thoughts, his most guarded dreams.

Sliding into a kata, the young firebender wanted to handicap the earthbender as quickly as possible. And the best way to do that was to take out an earthbender's feet. An earthbender needed a strong stance to be able to bend. At least that was what he had been taught.

Fire bursting from his feet, dancing over the ice in a horrific blaze of red and steam, the earthbender at least took the time to look surprised under that ridiculous hat of his before he jumped backwards, his shoes sliding on the ice. Zuko, not willing to give the man any leeway just because he wasn't used to walking on ice, took the earth-bender's slippery stance as an opportunity to try and strike fast again.

The earth-bender, trying to regain his balance, watched in horror as Zuko entered another kata, fire flying from his fist. The usual earth no longer below his feet, the Master almost seemed done for, especially when the water-bending guard cried out in the background for Lee to stop. Yet, as if realizing something, the Master gained a stony expression and pulled off his hat, quickly using it as a make-shift shield as the fire hit.

Sliding back even farther in the icy terrain from the impact, an explosive sound echoing and scaring all the animals there, the smoke cleared to reveal that the earth-bender was still in one piece. In fact, the Earth Master was surprisingly smiling behind the blockade of his hat which was now aflame. Then, rising up from the half knelt position he had taken while sliding backwards, the
Dai Lee agent gave his usual false-smile towards the flabbergast Zuko, murmuring, "I take it that was supposed to hurt me? It did not look like a mere demonstration."

Glaring, the motion making his face seem harsh and deeply scarred, Zuko started for the earth-bender with the plan of knocking the other down and setting him aflame.

Still using his hat like a shield, the earth-bender allowed the fire-bender to run up and slam an angry fist into the hat, flames bursting from either side as the attack met stone.

His fist aching slightly from the impact, Zuko noted dully that the hat's interior was actually made of a thick and heavy mineral which was withstanding the barrage of flame with ease. Zuko at least took a moment to appreciate the disguised defense. Who knew a mere hat could be functional in battle? And yet, he was surprised once again when the hat proved its offensive capabilities, slamming into his chest like a boulder and knocking the wind out of him.

Grabbing at his chest, praying that a rib was not broken for even his teeth shook from the impact, Zuko glared at the Dai Lee agent for a moment as he realized his mistake in attacking so thoughtlessly. He needed to save this rash action somehow before the water-benders got in the mix because quick and easy certainly hadn't worked.

The agent, as cool and emotionless as ever, slowly stood up straight, acting as if the prince hadn't just tried to barbecue him. Then, as if trying to regain his usual professional standards, Kun reached down and dusted off his uniform, straightening up his form before he replied, "Please don't do that again, Avatar Lee. I have no intention of harming you, but this barbaric behavior is not assisting either of us. So please desist."

"Desist! Desist! Don't play dumb," barked Zuko, his eyes shifting as he watched his two water guards come to the edge of his current battlefield, waiting to see if the fire-bender was done with his fit or in need of some restraint.

Zuko's mind struggled to calculate two other benders into his panicked battle plans as blood beat against his inner ear drums, making the world seemed to twitch with each beat of his heart.

And yet, despite his tactical mind, it was rash action that won the battle in his mind. "I know what you were sent here for. You want to take everything from me!"

Seemingly dusting off his hat, or at least seeing how charred it was, Kun stalled and looked up at the prince, giving the same soft false-smile as he murmured, "Avatar Lee, I think you are confused. I don't want to take anything from you. There must have been a misunderstanding somewhere. I want nothing more than to make sure that you fulfill your duties as Avatar and learn earthbending. Please … you look disoriented. Perhaps you should sit down."

Zuko's lip twitched, a part of him wanting to attack again, though the logical part of him mind was reminding him that he could not take on the two water-benders as well as the earth-bender. He should have finished the dark stranger off as quickly as possible! Now his ribs hurt and the earth-bender was trying to manipulate him. He was not a toy to be tossed about!

Shaking his head, hating the looks the water-benders were giving him as if he was a mad dog or a sick pup, Zuko bit back, "Stop it! You will not manipulate me!"

The earth-bender was prepared this time, suddenly shifting to the left and out of range as Zuko threw a flaming punch. The water-benders were ready this time as well though, the two of them breaking into the battle as one threw a cold wave over the teenager, making him lose focus and footing as the water-bender barked, "You will cool down Lee! Don't make us restrain you."
Not really ready for the blast of cold water, Zuko merely choked on the water that had went up his nose, the cold biting at his skin and bones in a painful way he could not name. Generally, the water-benders didn't try to soak his cloths, but it seemed Nguyen was a master of his own skill … using the cold against Zuko far more easily then the prince would like to admit. And yet, stance shivering, he kept his feet, water splashing all around him and freezing almost immediately in the harsh cold of the arctic.

Instead, he used the biting cold as a reason to become that much angrier, his eyes becoming slits as he glared defiantly at the waterbender.

Nguyen kept his bending stance regardless of the soul burrowing glare, murmuring, "You heard me, Lee. Calm down. I'm not going to play games with you like Pakku does. If you don't calm down now, you might freeze with all that water in your clothing. So sit down and let me remove the water from your clothing and then we will discuss the issue. There is no need for violence, especially since you've been so good lately."

"Please listen to the waterbender," immediately agreed the Dai Lee agent as he came to stand behind the two waterbender's next to an apprehensive looking Aang who had entered the scene. "I have no intention of hurting you … It is best if you sit down and listen to us."

Zuko twitched at the green-clad man's words. What he was saying was probably very rational to an average viewer but there was something behind words. Some deep impregnable meaning that a person just didn't understand until they were too far corrupted by that false smile and that cool voice.

He hated that voice, he decided, though a deep part of him wanted to sit and listen. To obey like he had been doing ever since he had been captured, his mind slowly getting used the water tribe and their demands. And yet something still wanted to fight. It was like the earthbender was already stealing his ability to make his own decisions. He would not be a puppet! He would not be a puppet to his past lives, the water tribe, or this mind bender!

He would not become complacent again!

Any gathered logic gone, his mind seeming to forget that Aang was among the group, Zuko growled out a deep black cloud of smoke. Then, jumping into the air, he brought down a wave of hot flames that would boil most men alive. The two waterbenders barely had time to try and pull off katas while the earthbender merely stood there, fearless. And before there was the smell of burning flesh and fabric and hair, the flames were suddenly being suffocated by a breath of the wind, Zuko's attack suddenly lifeless except for the smoke that remained.

There, smoke rising around him along with steam, stood Aang with his staff, his clothes billowing. He had parted the flames, his young form suddenly looking far older than he really was … He even felt like one of the voices in the back of the prince's mind.

His tone was one Zuko would never expect from the carefree child though.

"What are you doing?! You could have hit us. What is wrong with you?!” demanded Aang, his expression and tone serious, almost cold. "I thought you seemed nice and that maybe firebenders weren't as terrifying as all the stories said they were, but … look what you did! You could have hurt someone."

Zuko, for his part, felt like he had hit Iroh. It was a feeling that crawled up into his throat and settled there in a half-suffocating manner. And for a moment, Zuko felt like what little honor he had left was ashamed, angry at him for forgetting the air-bender was there, for striking so
thoughtlessly at Aang. And another part of him, the part that recalled the young prince that had once sat next to his mother with a kind heart and soft smile, wanted to apologize and admit that he was just scared and frightened and he just wanted to go home. Yet, as the smoke parted, he realized something that made his soul sink into the pit of his stomach.

The earth-bender was no longer there!

Turning his head, trying not to be too obvious that he was depending on his good eye, he barely had time to gasp as something slammed him against the icy ground, hands grabbing at his wrists. The teenager groaned, feeling what had to be cool stone locking onto one of his wrists like a vise. He quickly growled in reaction and jerked at his second arm which was slowly being twisted. Unfortunately, the earth-bender had a stone grip and he couldn't pull free. And he dared not pull harder because he didn't need a dislocating shoulder in the mix.

Cursing, hating the man's silence for it was entirely unnerving, Zuko noted that the man must not have been very experienced with fire-benders because he forgot about Zuko's feet.

Forgetting Aang, the anger returned and the prince slammed back his head in a rouse which was supposed to look like a head butt. Zuko was quite satisfied when the Master reeled back to protect his face. Taking advantage of the lost weight on his back, Zuko slid out of the other's immediate grip only to note that the stone gloves were binding his wrists together. Great. Shaking off any worry of a handicap, he stumbled to his knees only to throw out a nasty wave of fire from his right foot as the three men headed his way in order to pin him down again.

The water-benders both yipped and jumped out of the way while Aang cried, 'Please stop' in the background. The earth-bender, not as spry on the ice, only managed to hop back and ignore the majority of the flames. So Kun fortunately ignored having his face fried off but his green robes were not so lucky.

Grunting in surprise, the earth-bender was trying to pat out a fire on his sleeve as one of the water-benders came over to assist him. Zuko, meanwhile, accepted that this situation was not going as planned and turned his attention to the nearest wall to him. Tripping back to his feet, hopping towards the wall, the prince used his feet once again to blow down the wall, melting ice and also causing ice chunks to explode outward in a hotheaded display. Barely even waiting for all the ice-chunks to stop falling, the prince slid into the revealed courtyard. It wasn't much of a battle ground, being small, but there was a large fountain he could take cover behind while he took off these cuffs! He had to get out of here, even if he had to hide in the wastelands for his crew's rescue.

Ignoring the cries of his water-bending guards, he barely had time to duck behind the fountain when a clump of earth went blasting past him; the earth-bender's patience was apparently extinguished after Zuko tried to melt off the agent's face.

Panting behind his cover, Zuko sullenly considered that the earth-bender in fact had brought more dirty with him then his gloves and shoes … but his real problem was going to be the water-benders. He had to move now or they would merely bog him down. In hind sight, they were probably more of a problem then one earth-bender … if you left out the mind stealing factoid.

Tugging at the earthy restraints, Zuko strained his ears to hear his opponent … or should he say opponents. He barely heard the click of ice-cleats before he rolled away from his cover. Deciding that the restraints must have been some type of heavy earth such as crystal, he gave up on wiggling out of them and quickly jumped, praying he wouldn't land on his face. And a moment later, he had managed to jump over his arms, thus bringing the earth-cuffs to the front of his form. It still wasn't the ideal circumstances, but at least he had his stance back.
And the earth-bender would not be the victor of this game. Though with two angry water guards looking at him as well … he didn’t know if he would be the victor either.

...

Elsewhere, halfway across the ice city, Yugato nearly ran out of the healing huts, a smirking Pakku and Jayendra not far behind him. The air-bender wasn't in a hurry because he had heard of the feud occurring between the Avatar and his newest Master. He was in a hurry because of the crazy old healer he had gotten stuck with. It originally was a middle aged woman that had spoken to him kindly and then she entered, Yugoda.

Pakku had burst out laughing immediately even after the old woman threw him a glare.

He should have known from Pakku's reaction alone that it was going to be a daunting experience. And it certainly was. Those old hands were fast.

Resisting the urge to rub his behind, if only to save face in front of the two older and grinning Water Masters, Yugato pulled his hands into his sleeves and stood up straight, trying to look presentable despite the growing blush on his cheeks.

"Well … at least that's over," said Yugato, trying not to sound bitter even though it came out that way.

"A shame," smiled Jayendra. "We were betting how many grabs she was going to get in. She likes young men."

Yugato, unable to stall his temper, flushed red and the wind rattled around the Masters. "You brought me to that hut knowing what she was going to do! I-I was injured and disoriented! How dare you!"

The slight show of anger did not detour the two water-benders in the least. Instead, the two shared a look and started laughing again, the air-bender blushing even harder.

The air-bender, feeling ruffled and irritated like a bird that had been poked at too many times, pushed down the rumples in his orange robes and decided it was best to leave instead of lashing out. He was not a free roaming drifter like he had played while he was in the Earth Kingdom. He had rules to abide by as an Air Master. And patience was one of them …

He needed to breathe … and free himself from the troubles of the world. He needed to concentrate on enlightenment and spiritual purity. In with the good, out with the bad. There, he already felt better. He just had to keep a cool head about him a little while longer and …

"Master Yugato! Master Pakku!"

The air-bender released the breath he had been holding, not the least bit calmer. Trying to keep a placid face, he turned toward the figure that was running to him. It was sympathetic Watto, a good man, and he looked a little singed.

Sliding to a halt in front of the group of Masters, the two water-benders quickly lost their sardonic expressions. The young tribesman took a few moments to gather his breath, having run the whole way. Taking in a few choking gasps, the tribesmen pointed weakly behind him as he struggled to capture enough air to speak again.

Pakku's nose crinkled in distaste as he immediately presumed the worst.
"Is it Lee? Is he trying to run again? I thought he gave up on that. He knows that even if he gets through the city, there is nowhere to go outside of the walls," growled the water-bender, turning his sights in the direction the tribesman was pointing in.

Shaking his head, still panting, Watto pointed harder towards the direction he ran from.

Pakku, growing even more intolerant of the man's struggle for breath, was about to bark some rather distasteful things when suddenly there was a roar from the direction that the man had come from. A huge explosion shook the ice city and, in the distance, flames and smoke gave a hint of what as occurring. The three Master's gave each other a disquieting glace before they all silently agree what the issue was.

Jayendra and Pakku were already running towards the chaos while Yugato remained behind, touching the warrior's shoulder as he asked calmly, "Are you alright? Are you fine on your own?"

Finally getting his breath, the man nodded and stood up straight, vexingly admitting, "I don't know … what … happened. Lee's … Earth Master … tried to speak … to him … and Lee exploded."

"Earth Master," countered Yugato, slightly perplexed. "I didn't know he had arrived."

His breathing gathered, Watto wiped his mouth and nodded, "Neither did I … but … he's here."

"Thank you for the warning," was all Yugato had to say before he was suddenly rushing in the direction of the anarchy, his speed propelling him to the battle long before the Water Masters could even step a foot into the courtyard.

Hopping up an ice building as if it was nothing but a calm walk, the Air Master slid to a halt as he covered his face from the sudden gust of smoke in his direction. Squinting, hearing what was obviously some type of a battle, it took a moment for the wind to blow the smoke about before he could see what was happening. The small courtyard was completely devastated, furs and anything that could catch flame was on fire, chunks of what was probably a statue or fountain strewn across the small courtyard, melted ice pooling to and fro … and a teenager trying to seemingly kill a greened robed figure as some water-benders tried to play interference in the middle of all of it.

Lee seemed dead set on broiling the earth-bender, rage saturating the air.

Yugato frowned. Lee had been so well behaved as of late. What could have triggered this?

Turning his head behind him, seeing Pakku and Jayendra now sledding (for really there was no better word for the way they were sliding on the ice with such a rapid pace) he decided to end this before Pakku got his claws into the boy. The man was a true authoritarian. Break his rules, you paid for it.

Gliding down from the building, telling himself that he needed to carry his staff with him more often (the practice having worn out of their culture for obvious reasons) he suddenly found himself a few feet behind Zuko. Calling his winds forward, the man thrusting his hands to the side, a strong breeze suddenly drowning any fires and pressed away any smoke.

Zuko, his wits still about him despite the growing rage and whispers pressing into the back of his mind, turned his head to acknowledge his Master. Rage contorting his features, he seemed like all the other fire-benders that Yugato had the misfortune of meeting when abroad, but this was also the Avatar.

Keeping a calm air about him, Yugato spoke, "Lee … calm yourself. Please, before someone gets hurt."
Zuko was still puffing, his lungs struggling to stoke his inner fire. The prince didn't seem interested in the Air Master though, his attention turning back to the earth-bender. Yugato saw the action before it could occur though and quickly slid in front of the earth-bender, his wind knocking Zuko's flames to the side and smothering them.

Eye's becoming squinted and glaring, Zuko merely growled in his throat, smoke dripping from his fists. "You will get out of my way, monk! This is between me and him. I will not be anyone's victim."

Trying to regulate the situation, Yugato ignored the tiny voice in his head that was telling him to just move out of the way. It wasn't that he couldn't defend against a fire-bender. It was just that he did not want to gain the strife of the Avatar.

"Please," begged Yugato, dully noting that the Earth Master behind him had not yet shown one ounce of worry about the situation, his hands pulled behind his back and his chard hat titled. "There is no need for this, and what do you mean by victim? I have just met this man but it is you that seems far more dangerous than him right now, Avatar Lee."

Zuko, despite himself, was taken back at the air-bender's words. He … was more dangerous than that thing behind Yugato?! That-that mind stealer?

Then it snapped, rage and desperation setting in. He quickly forgot Shen and the Fire Nation and everything. He was cracking like an eggshell put under pressure before it finally collapsed inward. He actually laughed, madness in his voice as he pointed at the earth-bender behind the Air Master.

"Me… Me… I'm more dangerous than him? I am more of a monster then him?" said Zuko, his mind tripping into the abyss, his past lives seeming to reach up from under the ice and pull him under, light slowly disappearing from his sight the deeper they dragged him under.

Yugato shook his head, ignoring the fact that Pakku and Jayendra had finally got there, a small troop of tribesmen on the sidelines as well. It seemed they were here for backup, but Yugato prayed he could rope the situation in before it escalated to the point of no return.

Taking a step forward, his expression remorseful, Yugato spoke softly, "That is not what I said. You are not a monster, Lee. You are just frustrated and distressed. Please, let us get some tea and speak calmly about this."

Tears threatening to fall down his face, the tension pressing him deeper and deeper into his mind as he looked for some kind of comfort, anything, the smallest thing, until he finally laughed again, "Don't lie to me! I know the look you are giving me. You think I'm a monster … You apparently think so little of me that you would rather have him steal my mind then deal with the nasty firebender!"

Yugato looked taken back at Zuko's revelation and even Pakku had enough discretion to at least look a bit ashamed. So … Lee had heard them.

Swallowing any alarm that dared to rise to the surface, Yugato stood firm. It seemed that he had to be the one to smooth over the situation.

Trying to choose his words carefully, the Air Master almost pleaded, "You heard that? … Of course you heard that. But Lee … Please just listen before you drag this out any further. It, what you overheard, it was the discussion of desperate men. There were no plans to take any type of action that would harm you. We would never purposely harm the Avatar."
The world was falling away and for the first time Zuko felt hopeless and defeated and alone, Yugato obviously was trying to trick him. Kind Yugato. He knew Shen said they were coming to his rescue but perhaps it was a ruse. Perhaps it was a lie. Perhaps his mind had been so desperate for another fire-bender to tell him he was safe that he imagined the incident with Shen. It certainly would have explained the dress. But it mattered not, he hated being the Avatar! He just wanted things to be as they were before that dreadful day on his ship's deck. He just wanted his honor. That was all he wanted!

He hated being the Avatar.

He hated the Avatar!

"Don't call me that! I hate this place! I hate being the Avatar!"

And he left himself fall completely, falling into the whispers that resided in the back if his head, forever battling with him since the incident with the dagger. He let them have him, let them soothe him and promise to protect him with their old knowledge and knowing and power.

So much power … like when his ship was sinking.

Zuko's eyes then snapped open after his rage-felt admittance, glowing white and gapping. But it was anything but Zuko staring back at Yugato. It was the Avatar state and it would not listen to Yugato's pleas.

And then the Avatar struck out.

…

Shen's teeth chattered as they drifted by another ice-berg. The little steamer was freezing compared to the sub-zero battle cruiser they had come from, and personally he was chiding himself for being one of the fire-benders that had volunteered to liberate the prince from his captivity.

So, despite almost drowning and freezing to death and being utterly embarrassed about being dressed as a woman, Shen could not find it in his heart to remain with the ship as it headed inward into warmer waters.

He wasn't sick like the others … yet.

He just knew it was a matter of time though. He could feel it, deep in his bones, his inner flame was starting to waver. He hadn't told Ryto, the ship's medic, because Jee was already having trouble putting a team together to free Zuko due to the number of weakened or ailing members on the battle cruiser. It was just a few more days. They wouldn't make it for a new moon but as long as it wasn't a full moon, they would be all right.

Placing a hand over his mouth, Shen resisted the urge to sneeze, his shoulder's shaking. Agni … Maybe he wouldn't be able to last a few more days.

"Soldier … What do you see?"

Shen nearly jumped out of his skin as he turned his head to see Jee standing behind him, having stepped out of the housed interior of their small vessel. Originally, the small steamer didn't have a back wall, but it had been added in order to keep the team warm during their cold trip, and since most of them were fire-benders (excluding one hardy pike-man) they kept each other warm.

Struggling not to chatter his teeth, though failing miserably, Shen murmured, "N-nothing sir. N
ships, no water-benders. Seeing the main vessel leave must have lessened their guard. I haven't spotted anything put penguins."

"Good," murmured the superior officer, his aged face dragging down into a frown as smoke escaped his nostrils, his inner fire probably warming him. "Are you alright? You seem cold. Why aren't you using your inner fire out here?"

Blanket strewn over his shoulders, his teeth chattering, the man tried to come up with some excuse. He did not want to be the reason Lieutenant Jee would head back to the main ship. And he knew Jee would. Shen's safety outweighed Zuko's discomfort. Despite being a captive, it was obvious that Zuko was being treated as well as a prisoner could be treated.

Yet, for the death of him, he couldn't think of anything to say as Jee's frown grew deeper and deeper.

"Umm," said Shen, cursing his lack of astuteness as he struggled to come up with something to say.

"Shen," whispered Jee in a stern tone. "Has the chill set in?"

"No, no, no. I'm fine, j-just hungry," murmured Shen, too cold to even think of anything cleverer to say.

Frown increasing, his features wearing down with apprehension, Jee asked straightforwardly. "Is your inner flame going out? I need to know, now, before it gets worse."

Refusing to see the Dragon of the West's frown, refusing to let down a prince that had been so happy to see him (even in a dress), Shen wanted to shake his head in complete denial, but he also knew from experience that it was useless to lie to Jee. The man just knew things.

And yet, as fate would have it, even as the larger and older man took a step forward to completely intimidate the younger fire-bender with waves of heat pouring off Jee almost as a challenge, something interfered just when Shen was about to admit his ailment. A sudden ray of light lit up the sky, thrusting heavenward and parting the clouds. It was barely three seconds later that a rattling sound echoed over the expanse and a sudden breeze slammed into the two fire-benders. It was not strong enough to knock either one over, but it threw Shen's blanket to the wind and stole the breath from both of the men.

It was there, the two of them watching that unnatural white light fade, that a sullenness settled over the both of them. Neither knew exactly what the light meant, but both of them worried that it had to do with the Avatar. Jee at least had the breath to whisper their suspicions, "Agni, please don't let that be Zuko."

Chapter End Notes

Wee! We get to see glow powers but at a price! Will Jee and Shen make it in time? Will Shen be okay! Oh the humanity. The suspense. The heart break! Its killing me … Oh well, maybe the next chapter. And sorry about the long wait, I've been a little drug out lately.

(Revisions September 2013)
Yugato, for his part, could not look away from those endless white orbs … the gaze of the Avatar state nearly knocking him down. He had heard legends about it and its power, but in the scrolls it was always said: it was something you had to see to truly understand the horror of it. After all, you were looking into the soul of the Earth. That was the truest definition of the Avatar State. It was primal and catastrophic so you had to pray that it wasn't looking at you, because it was assured: you would meet its fury.

It was then that Yugato was sure he was going to die, and the Avatar did not dissuade such thoughts when it finally spoke, its voice echoing Lee's feeling, "I will not be chained."

Yugato, legs giving out on him, stumbled back into a solid structure. He turned his head enough to see it was the Earth Master and sagged against the other when he realized he wasn't dead yet.

Then, only his fingers twitching, the Avatar started its display of power, the teenager throwing his head back as flames erupted from his open mouth like a great belching dragon. The wind quickly joined the Avatar's rage, erupting like a tornado around the fire-bender, flames given life in the cyclone's exterior. Soon, there were waves of hot air bleeding into the cold arctic afternoon, melting homes and the very icy ground upon which the Avatar had stood, the cyclone getting larger and larger as it slowly started to claim the palace grounds.

Yugato, frozen by the display of power, barely even felt someone snag his arm until he was being basically dragged. He titled his head, eyeing the Earth Bender that was pulling him away from the growing cyclone.

"We have to stop him," said the air-bender, horror in his voice.

"Obviously," agreed Pakku as he slid over to the Air Master, helping Yugato's weak legs; the monk had been so sure he was going to die when the Avatar tilted his gaze in his direction, his legs were still trying to catch up. "He's going to melt the city."

"No," said Yugato. "I don't know how he didn't activate it the first time, but this time … the Fire Sages will know that the Avatar has returned."

Pakku's face actually seemed to pale at the news as he looked at his reluctant student, his voice hoarse, "Should we try to stop him? I can get the water-benders to-"

Placing a hand up, having regained the strength in his legs, Yugato shook his head, "If there is one thing I know about the Avatar State, it is best not to antagonize it. We need to calm him down and pray we get him out of it before he activates the temples around the world. It is a wonder that he hasn't already."

"One problem there," said Jayendra as he gathered with the group of Masters, the scarred bender trying to shield his eyes with his hands as the wind billowed at his clothing. "No one can get close enough to even calm him down and that wind … it's getting faster. I think we have to worry about evacuating people first. We need to get them out of the way."

"Agreed," said Pakku as he watched the winds start to become misty and almost cloud-like, "But is there nothing we can do to calm him down?"
"Are you a loved one?" said Yugato more to make a point then to actually expect an answer.

"Well maybe if loved one translates into: I'd love to strangle you. Yeah, Pakku would fit that description. Most of the Water Tribe actually," said Jayendra in an irritated tone, Pakku throwing him a nasty glare.

"Then I doubt there is much we can do … the Fire Nation will know about the Avatar," whispered Yugato, his tone pained.

And there, the winds roaring around them and growing louder and louder, was a moment of silence amongst the Masters. It was as if they had already failed.

…

Aang had seen the whole display from the rush of battle followed by the Avatar state itself. It had unnerved a part of him and yet he couldn't find it in himself to be truly afraid. It was just part of him. He loved adventure and folly and running down the side of a mountain with an avalanche following after you. He loved a little bit of chaos because chaos in itself was a type of freedom. It had no rules or regulation or responsibilities … it just was. And yet, this chaos before him did not instill that same feeling of freedom. It surprisingly made him sad to see Lee this way and he wanted to reach out to his new friend and tell him to calm down and that everything would be okay, he would lead the way.

What that exactly meant, he wasn't sure, but he was sure that this was not supposed to be happening. He was supposed to do something about it … especially when it started to get out of hand.

It was a cyclone at this point, a tornado almost of flame and fire and wind. The heat was almost unbearable because Aang had personally never really known true heat. He was raised in the cold. He knew the cold almost as well as a water tribesman did, and this heat was wrong. This blaze of power was heating the air. Structures were starting to melt and the cyclone was only getting larger and larger as the wind grew fierce.

People were screaming and running and tripping … and then the cyclone grabbed a hold of the first house, melting it and destroying it as if it was nothing but a child's wooden blocks. And it was then, as Aang watch a piece of rubble fly out of the cyclone and slam into the back of an aging man, that he realized how serious the situation really was.

The Avatar was mad. He was angry … and this growing cyclone would devour the whole city in a matter of minutes.

Aang, who had been ordered to retreat shortly after the fire-balls started to destroy the courtyard, pulled his staff close and swallowed feeling a pit of guilt settle in his stomach. He should have tried harder to calm Zuko before the situation had escalated, but he was just a youth who had been raised in a temple most of his life. What could he do? He was just some air-bending kid.

You can do more than you know.

Aang's grip tightened even more on his staff, his oddity rising to the occasion as it whispered to him again.

You must speak with him.

Aang wanted to shake his head, hating his spiritual connection because this was not the time to act weird or freak out. There were hoards of people filing out of their houses, grabbing their children
and running because their city was going to be destroyed. He should be helping people escape. He shouldn't be trying to figure out the fastest way to get tenderized and then fried lightly like a piece of pork. And yet the voice in his head, the voice that sounded oddly like his own voice, added:

*People are going to die … speak to him.*

The air-bender groaned at the intrusion in his head and dragged up a palm to press against his eye socket. His head was starting to hurt. Squinting his eyes as hard as he could, he pressed away the vision he knew was coming. They always came. Things that had been, places that were, places he knew and yet could not have known.

He did not have time for this and yet it came, a memory, a thought, a vision … whatever it wanted to be called.

A man wearing full Air Master garb stood before him in what looked like a temple: an air temple but it was in perfect condition, air-benders in orange and yellow laughing and playing in the background. And yet the Master looked unhappy, disappointed even and for some reason that deeply bothered Aang even though a part of him had no idea why this figure's sorrow would bother him so.

"Master Gyatso, please, don't ground me. I need my glider. I can't be stuck on the ground all week. It wasn't like I got hurt," whined a young voice that reminded him deeply of his own, so much so it unnerved him slightly.

The Master sighed and looked down at the glider in his hand, an ancient design that didn't need to be disguised as a walking stick or umbrella like their modern gliders usually were. He pulled it close and gave whomever he was talking to a sad smile.

"I am sorry my student but you jumped into a *cyclone* … You could have been hurt and all the Masters agree: we can't allow that," said Gyatso carefully, his words carrying something unspoken behind it.

The youthful voice sighed, almost whimpering as he murmured, "I understand Master … I just wanted to see the eye though. I heard the best place to view a storm was in the middle."

The old man laughed slightly as he signaled for the young bender to follow him, "I wouldn't always trust what the older students tell you. They are just upset with your aptitude for bending and want to see you fail. You must'n be angry with them though ... I will talk with them later."

The young voice was silent for a moment, and then sorrowfully replied, "Yes Master."

Gyatso offered a true smile this time and laughed, "Don't let it bother you. Come, tell me how you did get in the eye while we find some fruit pies … not that we plan on eating them."

The young voice laughed, warmly adding, "Well, it's not like I broke through the winds, I just went around. I allowed the exterior currents to carry me up to the top of the storm and then I went down through the center of the storm. It was a blast."

The memory faded with Gyatso's laugh.

Aang, when he opened his eyes, found tears streaming down his face. He didn't know why but the thought of this Gyatso person brought him much happiness and sorrow. Using his sleeves to wipe his nose, the youth promised he'd find out why this man was important to a part of his soul as he looked back on the scene before him. The cyclone was almost twice as large now … and this time it was not as intimidating. He knew how to get to Lee.
Throwing open his glider, a look of determination on his face, Aang was suddenly running forward and taking to the air. Even though he knew he should be dwelling on his surroundings and powerful wind and the flying debris, all he could think of was Gyatso and his sad smile … Why was he truly so sad?

Eyes squinting as he drew higher and higher into the sky, the cold air hitting him as he suddenly burst above the cloud cover, the air thin. He could barely believe how quickly he had risen and yet, telling his lungs not to panic from the lack of breath, Aang located the very center of the storm and glancing at it, thinking it was indeed a great view, he dove down grabbing onto Gyatso's true smile for strength.

He knew if he found out whom this Gyatso was he might know something more about himself and his abilities. Maybe he was Gyatso … finally reborn. A life to live again and yet that didn't feel quite right.

Finally taking in a breath, the air warm again, Aang merely allowed himself to fall. Using gravity to descend, the air-bender quickly found the ground coming his way. Opening his glider, the bender slowed his descent and hovered for a moment before his feet splashed into the water below, the water surprisingly warm and halfway up his ankles.

Lee was melting the city's very foundation it seemed. This was worse than a few buildings.

Swallowing, the preteen slowly raised his head and readied himself to meet the Avatar's gaze. He was ready to beg Lee to stop. He was ready to tell the Avatar he was supposed to help people. His stomach sinking because he did not want to think of what would happen if the Avatar wished to attack him, Aang pointed a defiant gaze in the Avatar's direction. What he saw though, the wind still fluttering around them even though he was technically in the eye of the storm, made Aang almost want to sink backwards into the whirlwind behind him if only to escape the strange figure.

It was the Avatar … and yet it was not his Avatar. The figure before him was not Lee, or at least didn't look like Lee. The man in the middle of the storm was a tall figure, draped in red with his hair pulled back in classic Fire Nation fashion. He had this regal look all about him even with those haunting white orbs with their directionless gaze.

His next words almost made the air-bender flinch in his own skin, "Aang, where have you been?"

The kid looked behind him to make sure there wasn't another Aang in the vortex because there was no way this stately character knew his name. Why would he? He was just some air-bender kid with spiritual powers. And yet, as he turned around, it was obvious that no one else was in the vortex. Not, knowing what else to do, Aang slowly pointed at himself. The regal fire-bender merely nodded his head, his voice deep and strangely familiar, like a stone dropped beneath the water. You know that you dropped it down there, but the color of the stone was slowly forgotten and was just recalled as a murky black color like the water it rested in.

"Yes, Aang. I'm speaking to you. There is no one else here, is there?"

Aang looked behind himself once more at the swirling grey vortex before he gulped and choked, "No … but how did you know my name? And who are you?"

The figure gave Aang a sad smile and spoke kindly, "Let's just say … we've met before. But don't dwell on that now. You can merely call me Avatar Roku. I have come because I needed to speak to
you since it seems that Zuko has lost his way, and it is your job to help lead him where he needs to be and to help him when he falters."

Roku's eyes took on a cheerless look, "His scars run deep."

Aang stood there a moment, confused. Who was Zuko?

"As you have noticed, Avatar Zuko cannot stay here anymore. I understand the Water Tribe's desperation and some of the past lives ... agree... that perhaps a clean slate may be best, but Zuko must be given a chance to be the Avatar before such a course is allowed," continued Roku, his glowing form hypnotizing the air-bender.

"Okay," said Aang as he bit his lip, feeling like this was way too much responsibility for him, like his actions would decide if Lee or Zuko or whatever his name was would forget himself. "But ... what do I do? I'm just some airbending kid. I just wanted to stop this and make sure no one else got hurt! I just want Lee ... to smile."

"And you will, Aang, but right now you must listen carefully, my time grows short," said Roku with the same sad smile that whispered some unknown truth and pity. "Even in the Avatar State, Zuko will not make it to the main lands. He would become exhausted before then, untrained as he is. So I must set the burden on your shoulders, my young friend."

Aang swallowed but merely nodded his head though he was no fan of the lack of answers he was getting.

"In the ocean comes a group of firebenders that wish to take the Avatar away from this place," said Roku, titling his head in the direction the firebenders were undoubtedly coming from.

"Fire-firebenders! Like burn-your-house-down firebenders? Why would I want Lee, umm ... Zuko... I mean the Avatar... with them?!" gasped Aang, feeling like the cyclone was closing in on him.

"Because his uncle sent them. He is a wise man," added Roku with a sad smile, his voice softer. "Do not fear them Aang. They merely wish to help one of their own so I want you to help Zuko get to them. Help Zuko get out of this city."

Aang held a flabbergasted expression and seemed ready to reluctantly agree but then Roku said something most unexpected.

"And I want you to go with them, keep Zuko on track," said Roku, the wind suddenly wavering. "But, my time is almost done. You must hurry Aang. Zuko will not be able to hold these winds much longer and once he is out ... he will surely collapse. If he is to escape, you must do something now. And Aang..."

The airbender reared back slightly, shaking his head. A daring escape? Could he do that? Well, it did kind of sound like fun, but what of his Master? Not that the youth got to complain or retort when suddenly Roku bowed his head and murmured, "Thank you for your sacrifice."

Aang then started to feel a pull, like he was going to be thrown out of the vortex. Fearing the weight of those words and their hidden meaning, Aang reached out a hand and cried, "No, wait! I have questions for you! Do you know someone named Gyatso! And what sacrifice! Wait."

But, instead of a reply, the wind was suddenly all around him, the cyclone throwing him out into
Aang screamed at the powerful rush, thinking himself dead because he surely couldn't steady himself before he hit the ground. And yet, a second later he found his butt making impact with something soft and slightly pointy. The youth yelled out in surprise and struggled against it only to stall a moment later when he sneezed, realizing what he had fallen in.

"Hay?" murmured the youth as he opened his eyes and looked at the pile of soft stuff he had landed in. He then looked upward, the ceiling ripped out by Lee's powers most likely and revealing the sky. Said sky was quickly replaced by a fuzzy head though, Appa's head. Said beast wasted no time placing his head into the hay pile, licking Aang which causing the youth to laugh and giggle as he kicked out and begged, "No Appa, stop, stop. I need to help Lee. I need a daring escape plan or something. Stop, you're tickling me."

And yet as soon as he had said those lines, Appa drawing away, the youth sat up on his elbows and smiled at the large beast, an idea already in motion, "You know what Appa, you just gave me an idea. Tell me: are you any good with daring escape plans?"

Appa merely opened his jaw and yawned.

"I'll take that as a yes," said the air-bender with a grin as he jumped to his feet, smiling to himself. "Glad I kept a hold of my staff though because I can't go on a trip without it. Now where's your saddle."

…

Meanwhile, far from the air-bender and the dead's request stood a figure in red, his face alight in a blue unworldly glow. His head was tilted back, his eyes wide, his heart pounding so hard in his chest he barely even noticed that his fellow sages had wandered up behind him. He just couldn't believe it. It was a dark day, a dark day indeed, because it meant … they would have to kill one of their own, a child or babe most likely.

"The Avatar … has awoken," whispered a voice behind Shyu, causing the Fire Sage to slowly turn around.

His expression was not hopeful as he eyed the aging fire-bender: the Great Sage, Jurro. Jurro's family had long since lost its meaning and was no longer connected to the Avatar and the Fire Sages' original beliefs. As far as Shyu was aware, few of the sages were. Maybe there were a few that wandered the colonies banishing wayward spirits and contributing to formal ceremonies, because apparently some of them had actually conversed with air-benders on a spiritual level. Not that Shyu shared that rumor with anyone here. Most of the Fire Sages of Crescent Island had long since gone bad. True, he knew that the High Sage did not condone nor support either opinion, but officially he was supposed to detest that blue light: the sign of the Avatar.

"Someone send a message to the Fire Lord. The Avatar has returned for his new cycle … most likely as one of our own," said Jurro, his face alight in a blue light as the previous lives' statues glowed.

"This is indeed a dark day," murmured Shyu to the aging sage, trying his best to not sound bitter.

The Great Sage turned to him, a quip of a smirk slowly pulling at his sagging skin. "Oh, I wouldn't say that. If he or she was raised a true Fire Nation citizen they will chose our side and soon the world will know all our glory … if he or she can overcome their previous lives, that is."

Face cast in shadows as he turned his back completely to the gazing sages, Shyu nodded, "Yes … our Fire Lord's glory."
And with that, Shyu, grandson of Kaja, walked away, his mind swimming in a thick panic. Perhaps he would see if that rumor was true. Perhaps, there were air-benders still in the world. Maybe there were still a few that hid from genocide and they could take in the Avatar. Maybe his contacts in the Fire Nation would help find the child before the Fire Lord did? Maybe the child was lucky enough not to be born in the Fire Nation? And yet, among all the questions, one thing was certain: the Avatar was no longer safe.

Chapter End Notes

Not much to say. It's a short chapter probably because this story has been frustrating me something awful so I figured a short chapter was the way to go. Baby steps as they say. Also, I will be going back and revising chapters slowly as well for grammar or plot inconsistencies so updates are going to be slow as I do this.
Aang held on tight to Appa’s reins, the saddle firmly in place. His butt was slightly raised in the air and his tongue was held decisively between his teeth like he was ready to take off at any moment. He was just waiting, eyes squinted and all set for a race … though if someone would pass they would think he looked utterly ridiculous since Appa looked half asleep and was barely on his feet. Not that anyone, even the cute bender girls Aang liked to do air-tricks for, would have noticed him. There was fear in almost everyone in the city, seal hide boots racing away from the hot cyclone. Not that Aang blamed them. The cyclone seemed set on slowly eating away at the city, yet an air-
bender would have known better. There was a wane in the wind’s powers and soon Roku’s
distraction would end.

Yes, this was Roku’s control. Aang had at first been worried that Zuko would destroy the city, but
now he knew better. If the Avatar state wanted to destroy the city, it could have done it already no
matter how untrained. Truthfully, Aang liked to believe that Roku had the reins, but Lee was too
kind to want to truly hurt anybody. True, Lee was moody and a hot head and had no love for games
it seemed, but Aang liked to believe the best in everybody.

And so he waited, Roku’s words bounding around in his head like a flying beetle stuck indoors.
He had to help Lee escape this place … or Zuko. Hmmm, he really needed to find out what that
was about. Was Zuko a nickname or his real name or was it his second name?

Hmm … maybe he should just place the two names together. Perhaps that would clear that up.

Zuee?

Aang snorted to himself and immediately shook his head.

Luko?

He giggled at the thought, thinking he had just made a great game to play as he waited for the
cyclone to fade: name smashing. Though Yugato would probably grumble and say it was
disrespectful name murdering … only to grin a moment later and call Aang something ridiculous
like Aagato.

Grinning cheekily at the thought, Aang dwelled on some great new names. What would his new
name be? He didn’t have a second name so he’d borrow one. How about Zuko’s sour old Master:
Pakku?

Paang? Aakku?

Aang snorted at the stupidity of it.

No, no. He’d borrow Lee’s fake name, Zaang! Yeah, it sounded really flaming. He liked it. Maybe
he could change his name since he would be on the run as well. He always wanted to know what it
was like to be on the run, never settling down anywhere, the road open for exploration. Perhaps
even Lee-Zuko would like to change his name as well. In fact, this rescue could be fun, sneaking
away from their Masters.

Hmm, Zaang was his already so Zuko-Lee couldn’t take his new name so how about mix it with
someone else’s name. Not Pakku, Lee-Zuko would never consent to that. So how about … Yue. Her name was pretty.

Zue?

Hmmm. No. It sounded kind of girly. Hmm, maybe he should borrow a name from someone Zuko-Lee hadn’t met. That way his new name would be far more mysterious.

Zukka?

No … Sokka would say it wasn’t manly enough.

Zutara?

Nah, it sounded like a board game or something.

Smiling all of a sudden, laughing so hard that he reeled back, feet in the air for a moment, Aang decided he had the perfect name for Zuko-Lee, “Zappa! That’s a great name for Lee-Zuko, don’t you think Appa?”

Appa merely bellowed in reply, pulling on the reins and head shaking nearly sending Aang off his perch.

Only giving a surprised sound, Aang merely gave into the momentum and floated to the ground laughing before he threw his arms around Appa’s neck as well as he could before hugged the great flying beast, rubbing his face into Appa’s fur. His inquiry was muffled as he chirped, “Come on, don’t you want to share your name? I’m sure Lee will like it.”

Appa merely bellowed again, taking a few steps forward.

Aang, not knowing what else to do, held onto the ruffles of fur and poked his head out, eyes wide as Appa started forward towards the cyclone … or the fading one that is.

“Woah! It seems Roku is done. Glad you were paying attention buddy. Now let’s rescue Zappa! This is going to be so much fun!” cried Aang with a wicked grin, the boy throwing himself up onto his perch with a quick breeze. “This is going to be so amazing! Come on boy, yip-yip.”

Kun Tien stood patiently at a distance, the hot wind ruffling his robes as he witnessed the power of the Avatar. It was amazing that the Avatar had the power to make a flaming cyclone which made the sky look like it was on fire in one of the coldest places in the world. He might have gaped (if he wasn’t generally barren of such emotions) in wonderment unlike all the worried water tribesmen.
and women that were rushing past him. They were all heading to the wall in case there was a need to evacuate the city entirely and yet the shaken Yugato and royal family members seemed to be ushered farther into the city … to something called the Spirit Oasis. Who knew what kind of spirits protected that place because the Masters actually believed the Avatar would not ravage it.

“I fear he is going to melt the city entirely and drown its people. I have had many dreams … you would think this would have been one of them,” came a voice, along with the squeal of seal hide boots.

Making sure not to jump in surprise, Kun Tien turned his head and gave his surprise company a glance. The interloper was a thin water tribesman that carried a gaunt almost sad face. At a glance, there didn’t seem to be anything important about him. He looked like any other water tribesman in all honestly. He didn’t move like a water-bender though, but for some reason the Earth Master could not ignore the fact that this man was still while there was so much movement around them. It was as if he was worried more about this city of ice and snow than his own life. Why? Kun did not know. Even he knew when to retreat … though he always loved an interesting mind.

“Dreams…,” said Kun quizzically. “Dreams are but secrets of the mind, back doors to memories and hidden thoughts. They cannot tell you the future and they certainly will not save this city.”

The gaunt and yet strangely regal figure turned his head slowly, his words sad, “No, they cannot save my city.”

“And yet you are not afraid?” said Kun softly.

“No,” said the man slowly, his words almost haunting as the wind ruffled his hair and coat, “Because I had a different dream; a dream about the Avatar that had nothing to do with my city.”

Making sure his lip did not twitch and that his face was kept as void as possible of emotion, Kun Tien nodded his hat slightly, curious, “If I may inquire, then what was the dream about?”

“I know the Masters respect me, but most of them would give this dream little weight. It is quite cryptic,” said the man in a solemn tone, his gaze set firmly on the cyclone. “In my dream he was circled by three dragons. One was red, the other blue and the last one was green. Lee sat upon a throne of some kind confused and frustrated by the dragons’ council as they encircled him, be it good or bad. You see he had these items before him: a jar of swampy water, a stone cup with smoldering embers, a crown made of stone and bottle full of fluttering air toys. The dragons were all whispering different things to him. One wanted him to keep only the flames and to throw away the others. Another wanted him to throw away the embers and obey the stone crown, and the last one merely wanted him to make the right decision though it would not tell him what that was. Meanwhile, the Avatar was just trying to place the pieces together, like the items belonged together all along.”
Kun instinctively stiffened, noting that a cold chill seemed to be creeping back into the air. It was not a well noted skill in the Earth Kingdom, but sometimes there were people that just knew things. People that had touched the Spirit Realm and had come back … different.

The Earth Master was about to inquire what the man thought such a vague dream could mean, be it unity or failure because such a dream sounded more like destruction than good news, but suddenly the man titled his head and sighed deeply in relief.

“It seems there was a reason I did not see my city’s end… It appears that the Avatar is done,” said the regal figure.

The Dai Li Agent was about to inquire what he meant by that when suddenly he heard the familiar sound of seal boots running and sliding in their direction, an aged water-bender and what appeared to be his students coming to a halt next to the almost omniscient figure.

“Chief Arnook, what are you doing out here? Princess Yue was worried. She said that you left without even an explanation,” said Pakku, his hair a frazzled mess, his features seeming strained. “Please return to the Spirit Oasis. We cannot challenge the Avatar while he is in the Avatar state.”

Arnook, tilting his head to the respectable Master, nodded slightly before asking simply, “Challenge him, Master Pakku? Whatever for? It seems to me that Lee has finally come out to face the world … and all the decisions he has made.”

Pakku was about to disagree with the royal, Arnook obviously in one of his phases (some say he had gained visions from touching the pond in of the Spirit Oasis when he went to pull his daughter out of the water), but found his words cut short when one of his students started tugging on his sleeve, everyone looking towards the Avatar. The cyclone’s wind was suddenly slowly and losing its flaming exterior. It was easy to see the glowing figure slowly float for a moment more with the fading winds and then suddenly plummet with a splash into the pool of water below him.

“Bloody water snake. Tienmo, stay with the chief and … mind the earth-bender,” growled Pakku as he shared a quick glare with Kun. “Omu, the rest of you, with me.”

The four warriors all agreed quickly, sliding and running in the direction of the Avatar, leaving Arnook with the earth-bender once more. Kun Tien, knowing better then to waste a moment, titled his head to the seemly spiritually connected Chief and asked, “It’s a pleasure, Chief Arnook. Please do not mind the interruption. Tell me … did you have any other visions of the Avatar?”

Staring at the distance for a moment, noting with a raised brow that a fly bison had entered the mist given off by the heated water, Arnook murmured, “There was another one. I do not think it is relevant. It was more a dream of what could have been if the last Air Avatar decided to wake a hundred years almost too late.”
Kun titled his head in inquiry, “Please tell me more, Chief Arnook.”

Arnook, his gaze turning away from the scene before him, frowned at the earth-bender, his own words an inquiry. “Perhaps, but first Earth Master, why don’t you tell me what Long Feng really wants with the Avatar? I know it is not to end the war. He has his walls, he doesn’t need peace.”

Frowning, despite telling his face to remain neutral, Kun slowly gained his unexpressive smile, murmuring slightly, “Chief Arnook, of course you are not accusing Long Feng, Grand Secretariat of The Impenetrable City, of any misconduct, are you? He merely wants spiritual peace … like everyone else in the royal court.”

Despite wanting to dig further, Arnook merely nodded, feeling that the Earth Master’s words were loaded with a much deeper truth then they seemed.

…

Zuko wasn’t sure when the whispers stalled, when the warm comfort was pulled away. It just felt like he was falling, like the feeling one has when they are sliding off their bed right before they hit the floor. He hated that feeling, not only because his once peaceful dream suddenly became a free fall dream off a cliff, but because he knew he was about to hit the floor. And yet he could not bring himself to care, not even with the roaring in his ears that felt so real or with the sudden chill that was eating at the heat that had entombed him (he must have kicked off his sheets). He just wanted the vague, warm dream to continue.

And yet he knew it could not.

_Splash!_

Zuko’s eyes snapped open suddenly as he was submerged underneath the water, air bubbles floating all around him. For a moment, he thought this was still part of the dream. The water warm was comforting and yet the second he opened his mouth and lost a mouthful of air the sooner he realized this was not a dream. He was underwater and his lungs were already starting to sting.

Panic rising to the surface, Zuko looked around in a flurry. He had no idea which way was up or where he was or what he had been doing moments before, but he did not want to drown. It was one of the most un-honorable ways to die as a fire-bender especially if your body was never found.

He did not want to die this way!
Flailing around in the water for a moment, Zuko tried to figure out which way was up. And yet the water was so dark he had no idea which way was up. Lungs stinging as he twisted his head around, the teenager couldn’t help but slam a hand over his mouth as he struggled to keep his mouth closed, to keep alive a moment more to continue his desperate search. And yet the bubbles bled past his fingers and floated away, taking his life with it. Cursing himself, a mouthful of water being pulled into his lungs as he struggled to keep his mouth closed, a deep part of the depressed teenager couldn’t help but close his eyes as he struggled not to panic.

This was how he was going to die, wasn’t it?

And yet a dark part of himself could only wonder if it was for the best, to die? He wouldn’t have to be the Avatar anymore. He wouldn’t have to worry about struggling and struggling and bending to the wills of others. In death, perhaps he wouldn’t be… lonely anymore. He could be free.

Hands loosen their grip, he vaguely wondered if he should just take another breath of water and be done with it… yet, there was this voice that spoke when he was about to give into the stinging of his lungs. It was so warm and so ancient that he felt it rattle his bones, but unlike all the other voices that seemed to press their way into the back of his mind, this one needed no force. It was as if it had and would always be a part of him.

‘Don’t worry. I promised we would be together all of our lives… especially when you needed me the most. Now, open your eyes. Don’t let the darkness win against the light. It only takes one warm thought to keep going.’

One warm memory? Though Zuko as he struggled to obey. I didn’t have one! Thoughts of his mother only brought sorrow and his father only brought shame! He had not a single, warm memory. And yet the voice seemed to chuckle at him for forgetting. How could he forget the most precious things to him… and it wasn’t his honor.

Zuko’s eyes snapped open, a cool thought pressing into the back of his mind, the most guarded and humbliest of places: Uncle. How could he forget? He had made a promise to his uncle and his crew. He would not die. Uncle needed him. Uncle had said he needed him… Uncle had called him son.

Struggling to focusing, he tried to calm himself and think. Yes, he did not know which was up. Flames smothered in water so he could not rely on his fire-bending, but air… it was flexible; it was free. It would not be hindered by the substance surrounding him. It would merely float to the surface, because air could not be caged.
Swallowing, his pride fighting with his need to survive, Zuko made a decision.

He had to try.

Slowly releasing what little air was still in his lungs, Zuko concentrated his will on the feeling he had had the first time he had accidently air-bended, training with his fellow fire-benders. He had been happy during training. He had been sweating and jumping about and had forgot all his responsibilities and hardships. There was just the moment and then he had smiled … and it had happened.

Zuko knew he had very little to be happy about. His life had been hard and sorrowful. He was lucky to have been born. He had very little joy or freedom to grasp onto … and yet, there was his crew and his ship. He had always thought it a prison, but now that he had actually been in a real prison, he now understood just how much freedom and happiness he had.

Suddenly, grasping onto that glint of freedom, the air from his lungs became a bubble nestled calmly in his hands like an orb of life.

For a moment, he couldn’t believe he had bended another element so willing and yet he felt no shame.

Slowly parting his hands, the bubble remained still before it slowly started to float downwards.

No, no wait. He was the one upside down!

Now knowing which way was up, Zuko found his lungs reminding him to kick and punch and claw to the surface. It felt like an eternity, even though it had probably been only a few seconds, before his head suddenly burst above the water. His lungs pulling in as much air as they could until his form was boggled down into the hot water again. Wading, coughing up water, the fur weighing him down terribly, Zuko tried to gasp for a few more moments as he tried to look about. What had happened? He had been with Aang and then … he was here? In this warm water, the mist so dense he couldn’t even tell where he was.

Was he still even in the North Pole? Or had he died … and was trapped in the Spirit Realm?

“Lee! Lee! You okay?” came a cry through the mist, a young voice … a kind voice. If not entirely
infuriating at times.

“A-ang?” coughed Zuko, wading in the direction the voice had come from. “W-where are we?”

Coming to what looked like the edge of the warm water basin, Zuko nearly jumped out of his skin when he heard the shifting of footsteps in water, a hand offered to him through the mist as a young face smiled down at him.

“Well … it used to be the courtyard until you melted it,” said Aang nervously as he rubbed the back of head, not the least bit put off that Zuko ignored his offered hand as the teenager pulled himself up onto the ice shelf, sitting in the shallow water as he continued to cough. “You kind of went into the Avatar State and got all glowy and then fire-cyclone-of-doomy and … it wasn’t pretty. I don’t think anyone was seriously hurt though.”

Zuko, still a little breathless and a bit overcome by the fact that air-bending had been so effortless when he gave up and allowed it to happen, couldn’t stop looking at his hands before he slowly looked up and acknowledged Aang. Confused by the youth’s ramble, all Zuko could say was, “Oh … a fire-cyclone. Why would I-”

And then the memories all came back with a cry of his title over the mist, “Avatar Lee! Lee! Where are you?”

Glowering, Zuko glared in the direction the voice had come from. He’d know that voice anywhere. It was Pakku and it brought a smoldering reminder. Now he recalled. He remembered the Earth Master and the battle in the courtyard … and that he allowed the voices of his past lives to have control. Swallowing, realizing of how much trouble he was in when the Master’s got a hold of him, Zuko almost groaned as a sick feeling formed in his gut. He was too weak to run, his limbs felt so heavy and his head so light, how was he going to get out of this?

Slowly, titling his head, glad the heat coming off the cooling water was hiding him from his Master, Zuko looked to the only person he felt he could trust: the monk.

“Aang … I have to get out of here. Please,” Zuko swallowed, his pride almost choking him as he said the most painful words he could, “Help me.”

Looking surprised and then a bit ashamed for a moment, Aang slowly offered a hand up to the other, his eyes almost alight as he admitted, “Why else would I be here?”
Zuko, surprised that he was given assistance without question or suspicion, took the boy’s hand, voiceless.

“Now let’s get out of here … I got some great plans for us. Isn’t that right Appa?” said Aang as he looked behind himself. The great beast merely bellowed back as its head popped out of the misty cover.

Zuko, struggling to get to his feet and to not pass out, couldn’t help but place a hand on his stomach; he had a sinking feeling about this. There was going to be flying involved, wasn’t there?

…

Yugato’s hands shook badly as he accepted a cup of tea from a worried looking Jayendra, the water-bender having led the Air Master to the Spirit Oasis. He still couldn’t believe that he was alive. The stories he had heard of the Avatar’s fury were legendary. There were few that survived its glance and yet: he was alive.

Taking in a deep breath, the Master told himself to calm down. He hated it when he got this way, so petrified he could barely function. It wasn’t that he was a coward or anything of the sort. It was just that after he was captured by the Fire Nation and … and … he-he didn’t want to think about that. It troubled his dreams enough. He didn’t need those memories haunting him right now.

He didn’t care if he looked like a pathetic mess to the other Master right now. There was a reason he had gone back to the ice temple in the South Pole and no longer wandered the Earth Kingdom. That Fire Nation had stolen a part of his grace.

He had accepted the assignment with Lee because he wanted to face that fear in some way, to stop running. He knew teaching a Fire Nation Avatar was not going to be easy but there were so many troubling circumstances added to the mix: the temper, the teenager angst, the powerful spiritual connection, the reluctant bending and the scar.

His grip tightened on his bone-cup as he struggled with the idea that they had failed. Why had the spirits made the Avatar human to begin with? Why did the Avatar have to live life over and over again with all its failings instead of being an all-powerful spirit? This war could have never been!

Taking in a deep breath, Yugato allowed his frustrations to float away with a breath. He opened his eyes and stared at the swirling mix in his cup and its twirling levels of brown.

No, that was a foolish thought. True, no one but the past lives recalled the Avatar’s beginning, but anyone with knowledge of the spirits could understand why the spirit was born again and again. A great god on a mountain top would not be able to relate or even care of the worries of man. The Avatar had to be human to save humanity. He had to feel joy and hate and sorrow.
Unfortunately, Lee seemed to have felt a lot of sorrow in his short life, but that just brought to
question: why weren't the pervious Avatars helping the boy? He knew they couldn't make choices
for him, but they always tried to steer the current reincarnation in the right direction.

Yugato released a breath suddenly, a realization hitting him.

Perhaps the past lives were trying to steer him in the right direction. Perhaps that was why Lee was
in the North Pole to begin with. After all, he wasn't completely blind in the left eye. He also had
remained hidden for so long and the Fire Nation ship he was with apparently was independent. It
had remained in the cold for the boy and had never called for backup. The water-tribe had just been
waiting for a message hawk to leave the ship … it never did. In fact, it didn’t seem interested in
anything more than stealing water-bending katas. Apparently, the boy’s uncle was on the ship
which was probably why the Avatar had remained safe so far from the Fire Lord.

He would love to meet that man, Lee’s Uncle. The water tribesmen that had been on the battle
cruiser said there were some awful mean and protective fire-benders there; the uncle likely one of
them.

Taking a sip of the tea, feeling calmer already, Yugato considered that maybe there was a lot of
fate involved in the situation and he just wasn't seeing it, which reminded him… what did Aang
have to do with the Avatar's fate? It just felt like too many coincidences, especially since Aang said
he knew he had to sneak along. Perhaps it had to do with the youth’s strange spiritual connection.
In fact, if Aang would have shown just an ounce of dual bending he would have been proclaimed
the Avatar in a heartbeat.

And yet, when the elder’s had asked the five-year-old Aang if he recalled anything from a previous
life as the Avatar, the young boy had frowned and asked, "But … wha’ of the wreal Avatar?"

Yugato smiled slightly at the thought. Aang was always a breath of fresh air. Perhaps Aang was
just another sign from the Spirit Realm, a tool, but what kind of tool was he? It was obvious he had
been given his spiritual endowment for some purpose but what could it be for?

Frowning at his tea, Yugato wished that the Avatar State would have spoken instead of lashed out.
Perhaps it would have revealed something to this spiritual mystery.

And yet, just as Yugato was going to give up on the mysteries of the spirits … it seemed like the
spirits had decided he had waited long enough for answers because suddenly a rather frazzled
Pakku ran into the sanctuary, stumbling. For a moment all Yugato could do was stare in horror
before Pakku got into the air-bender's face as he growled, "Your student and bison just helped the
Avatar escape! Do something. You are the only one that can fly."

Beside himself, part of himself still unable to comprehend why Aang was stealing the bison to
begin with, Yugato continued to stand there until the other man grabbed his shoulders and shook him slightly, nearly spilling his tea, "Now!"

Frowning, looking up slowly as if to gather himself where Pakku was flustered, Yugato murmured, “Well, I would … if my glider hadn't been in the saddle. I had been planning on taking Lee flying if he behaved. But … I don’t understand why Aang would …”

A horrified expression overcame Yugato’s face and he wanted to slap himself. Aang was a tool meant to steer the Avatar, wasn’t he? How could he be so blind?

Groaning at his lack of insight, the man decided to keep that to himself as he grumbled something completely unrelated if only to protect his student, “Uhhh! My Pia Sho set was in the saddle.”

Pakku, letting go of the other, looked completely flabbergast as he bit out, “Who cares about your Pia Sho set! We lost the Avatar. What are we going to do?”

Jayendra, looking Pakku and Yugato over as he entered the scene (having heard the whole thing across the Oasis), put a hand on Pakku’s shoulder to calm him, his words almost a demand, “We will think of something Pakku. At least he’s out of the Avatar state. After all, how hard can it be to track down two teenagers and a flying bison?”

“Harder than you think,” ground out Yugato as he recalled all the times he and the other Masters at the temple had to search for a missing Aang. “Aang is well rounded in escape attempts and getting into trouble.”

Pakku, a man of few emotions besides sullenness, looked absolutely pained at the prospect of searching for two teenagers as he growled, “I’m too old this.”

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I totally made fun of pairings in this chapter. It is not a hint for the future chapters. It is just a little joke I thought all fanfiction readers would enjoy. Also, if anyone was wondering why Arnook had some creepy seer-like dreams it’s because I really think he had the ability. Remember in the series when Arnook talked about the spirits giving him a vision of Yue turning into the moon? I do … And it gave me a reason to stuff in a whole bunch of foreshadowing. Have fun figuring that out.

Anyway, the next chapter should be the last one for Book 1 and then I will be starting on the next story arc. The only question now is if you guys want the Books to be separated into different stories on the website or if you want a mega story. I put up a poll for you guys to decide on my profile fanfiction profile:
Also, I finally started watching Korra’s new season and I’m so happy with it unlike the first season. For one, we got some world traveling in and the spirit world is actually important in this season! The story of the first Avatar was wonderful and I would be lying if I said it didn’t influence a small scene in this chapter.

Lastly, have a Happy Halloween everyone. Consider this chapter a treat.
The sun rose on a new day, the sunlight glimmering off the ice and snow, promising better days with its warmth … even if the landscape could be considered anything but welcoming with its below freezing temperatures. Regardless of the sun’s promises, the Northern Water Tribe was currently in a sullen mood as it took care of those without a home or shelter as well as the injured. It was shows of kindness and thoughtfulness like that which would make anyone think, even a fire-bender, that the water tribes were just like everyone else. They could be kind, they could be cruel, but they always took care of their own.

Jee, wondering why people were being shifted to other homes to begin with, might have taken time to admire the kindness of the barbarian people, but he had bigger worries. Even pushing the little steamer at full speed, they could not get to the frozen city before sun rise, and they had to waste another hour having Shen look for clothes so the rest of the small team could infiltrate the city as nothing more than hapless water tribesman. Jee still couldn’t believe how well Shen pulled off those water tribe clothes … especially since they had been meant for a woman.

“Agni, does he have to flaunt it? It’s … disturbing,” whispered one aged and scraggly crewman that had come along with the small rescue team; the soldier now was adorn in a fur of blue fabric, scratching at it with every amount of energy he had.

“Perhaps if you stopped scratching yourself so avidly,” growled the lieutenant as he glared back at his subordinate, Yong. “Shen has to keep wandering gazes off of us after all.”

Yong, scratching at his parka, stalled and gave his superior a sour look as he grumbled, “Well, I’m not use to this fur. I work with metal and engines and blazing hot pipe-work … not scratchy fur.”

Jee frowned at his engine-man’s words. Right now he didn’t need a scene. Instead, they needed to find out what happened to the young prince, not if Yong and the others were enjoying their time as water-barbarians. And yet, just when he was going to hiss some words of discipline, Shen signaled for them to follow.

Lieutenant Jee figured Yong’s bad attitude could wait … even though he completely agreed that it was highly disturbing how well Shen flaunted it. Right now he merely wanted all of his men out of this barren wasteland as quickly as possible. He was not ignorant to Shen’s shivering nor the pikeman’s (Yibito) slightly blue lips. None of them were built for drawn out exposure to the cold … especially if the chill was setting in. True, another fire-bender could warm one of the crewmen until they gone back to the ship, but this was not the time or place to be a fire-bender.

Finally, after giggling (giggling!) with a group of young women that seemed to be carrying fish home for afternoon lunch, Shen lost his fake smile and slowly stalked over to the icy alleyway Jee and the others were currently trying to look inconspicuous in.

“You all look entirely out of place,” grumbled Shen as he stepped into the alley, glancing at his
fellow countryman, “Especially you, Yong, stop scratching yourself all over. You look like a hog-monkey trying to pick bugs off its back.”

Yong stopped scratching and looked ready to defend his honor when Jee step forward and asked in a serious, whispered tone, “And what of Zuko? Have you heard anything?”

Frowning, looking over his shoulder as if he thought someone was watching them, or perhaps to build suspense since the young fire-bender was known for his melodrama, Shen frowned long and hard at the others as if he was about to admit the worse, but suddenly he grinned and blurted out, “He escaped! He got away on his own.”

“Really? When? How?” seemed to chime all of the men in the passageway.

Shen’s smile, fading into a cringe, shrugged slightly, “Well, sometime yesterday afternoon … after he melted part of the city with a horrific fire-cyclone. Apparently, he activated the Avatar State.”

“He what!” cried Jee, his eyes horrified. He actually pulled his hood down and placed a hand over his mouth, his world crumbling down.

If Zuko fully activated the Avatar State then … the Fire Sages must have noticed.

Agni, they knew.

They knew!

“They know,” he whispered.

“Who knows what?” came a deep voice, seal fur boots coming to a halt behind Shen. Everyone in the alley, horrified by the prospect of the Fire Nation actively knowing about the new Avatar, got even more bad news as a scarred water tribesman stalled behind Shen, a half a dozen blue-clad warriors (probably students) behind him.

Shen, eyes going wide, quickly turned around, his breath being pulled in with surprise. He wasn’t surprised because the alley had over half a dozen water tribesmen a few feet from skittish battle ready fire-benders, but because his date had somehow found him. Oh joy. He hadn’t even been in the city a few hours and the deranged Water Master had already found him! Well, he supposed it wasn’t that big of a city, nothing compared to the Fire Nation’s capital, but he still had trouble keeping the dread out of his voice.

“Oh Jayendra! I-it’s you. I-I haven’t seen you since the Moon Festival,” choked Shen as he tried to raise his voice an octave or two, praying that the men behind him would catch the hint and try to not be too suspicious. “I-it was a wonderful night. You were such pleasant company and … a great dancer?”

Jayendra, admiring Shen for he was unaware of the nefarious nature the cross dresser really was up to, chuckled, “Well, for being such a good dancer, you sure disappeared quickly afterwards. At first I thought you were hiding from me, because as much as I asked around and looked for you, I could not find a fair-skinned woman named Keemi.”

Jee actually choked at this and Yong had to smother a laugh.

Shen, trying to resist the urge to turn around and glare at his countrymen, coughed into his hand and murmured, “Well, you know. I go by lots and lots of nicknames and … ,” rubbing his arm as he tried to think of excuses to throw the other off his trail, “I’ve been so busy doing … women things that I don’t get out and about much. You know,” thinking fast as he noticed the suspicious
glances that were aimed behind him at his fellow crewmen Shen added, “taking care of my father and brothers … and my estranged uncle.”

Yong, who was behind Jee, shared a look with the pikeman and leaned over and whispered, “Who do you think the estranged uncle is?”

Yibito, the pikeman, merely gave Yong a look and coughed, “I think you already know.”

Jee, ready to stomp on Yong’s toes, went still when he noticed that the gaze of every water-bender there was on them. Instead, he offered a strained smile and nodded his head slightly in a greeting.

“My father and brothers?” said Jayendra in surprise, no longer eyeing the strangers suspiciously behind the woman. Then, not even waiting for Keemi to introduce anyone, the Water Master stepped forward and offered a hand to Jee.

Jee, standing there a moment dumbstruck, finally comprehended that the other wanted to introduce himself and clasped wrists with the water-bender.

Jayendra, taking Jee’s reluctance and then willingness to shake as a chance, smiled broadly and murmured to the grey haired fire-bender, “So I have finally met the man himself: the father of the lovely Keemi. You raised her well if I may so myself.”

Yong, at this point, couldn’t hold it in any longer and fell over as he cackled madly, Yibito glaring down at him.

Jee, as he watch all his men look away from him in order to resist the urge to break down into fits of laughter, frowned and tightened his grip on the water-bender’s arm. He couldn’t help but ask, partially offended that he apparently looked that old (but at least he wasn’t the estranged uncle) why he had to be the father.

“And what made you guess I was her father? We haven’t been previously introduced.”

Jayendra tightened his grip as well as the shake continued into an awkward length of time. He knew this game. He knew it all too well. The father was testing him, seeing if he was worth his little girl. The Master knew he would have to prove himself and he knew exactly what to say to win the fair female’s father over. Introductions first though. Scaly seals, Keemi sure had a lot of brothers. No wonder she was so busy and obviously the youngest!

“I could tell by your protective glare. Only a proud, defensive father would have that kind of glare. She also has your eyes,” added Jayendra, noting that they were an odd brown-yellow color. Keemi and family obviously had some Fire Nation in their past with those eyes. Not that he would bring it up in respectable company. Most women hadn’t chosen that coupling voluntarily if they were a true water tribe woman. Keemi was a fine water tribe woman though. A real partier and yet seemingly shy at the same time. Personally, he cared very little where the genes came from though the originator was obviously three or four generations back. As long as there was no fire-bending in the blood, he would not judge.

“Ah, I see,” said Jee, wondering when the water whips were going to come out. Yes, his eyes were not golden but they certainly did reveal his heritage as a fire-bender.

“Regardless, she is a fine young lady … and I couldn’t help but notice that her neck is revealed and lacking anything,” said Jayendra.

Generally, he wouldn’t be so hasty about such a thing having just met Keemi, but she, unlike most of the women in the city, had put up with him for a whole night! Yes, he was on his best behavior.
(okay, marginally acceptable behavior), but he knew a catch when he saw one. Their difference in
an age and his scar didn’t seem to bother her either given she went out with him to begin with for
the Moon Festival. This girl was nothing but a catch in his book.

Jee looked at the man oddly, his eye brow raising. What in Agni did that mean? Who cared if
Shen’s neck was revealed (minus a thin band that hid his Adam’s apple). It mattered very little to
him. For the sun’s sake, the man was already wearing a dress and giggling like a woman. If he
wanted to reveal his neck, Jee figured the fire-bender was already playing the part, why not go full
out with a neck band.

“So, what of it?” asked Jee, wondering if they had insulted one of water barbarians’ customs as he
continued to shake the other one’s wrist.

Jayendra, feeling the others grip tighten, merely nodded and found it best to confess his interest.

“Well … your daughter is lovely and since she does not have a betrothal necklace, I was wondering
if I could start courting her to see if we are compatible?” said Jayendra as he threw a warm smile at
the surprised Keemi. Poor thing was so red in the face she looked like she was going to die from
the surprise of it all.

Shen was anything but surprised. He had only gasped because horror was crawling up the back of
his throat along with the thought of: *this isn’t happening; I will never hear the end of it!* Jee,
meanwhile, seemed torn between his emotions and merely looked constipated. Shen’s old brothers
merely stood there is gaping surprise. Yong, having finally rose to his feet from his previous
laughing fit, promptly fell over as he started laughing in near hysteria.

Yobito, in the meantime time, noted the troubled look that was spreading on the water-bender’s
face the longer Yong laughed. Grabbing Yong as if he was trying to raise the other to his feet,
Yobito promptly waved the others off as he murmured, “Please don’t mind my estranged uncle …
he-he’s just crazy. I wish you luck with my sister?”

Jee, finally regaining his wits, pulled his hand from the other as he grumbled, “No, I will not allow
it. You … are not honorable enough for her.”

Shen, who had been holding his breath, silently sighed in relief.

“Oh, I understand,” said Jayendra, his smile returning. “You have heard of my reputation. Well, I
wish to settle down so do not judge me on that alone, but if you do not think we worthy … what
would you say if I proved myself. In fact, I will be leaving the North Pole in day’s time to help
reclaim the Avatar.”

Yong’s laughing died almost immediately in his throat and everyone that had been struggling not
to laugh suddenly seeming serious. Just want they needed, this nightmare of water-jerks following
them around.

Jayendra, the unfortunate fool, took their serious gazes as ones of interest and continued, “You
heard me. The Northern Water Tribe will no longer stand idly by. Chief Arnook has allowed a
small party of us to go and look for the Avatar. The Avatar’s Water, Earth and Air Masters will be
with us and we will secure him and start training him. We will save the world from the Fire
Nation.”

The Water Master, noting the father’s wide eyes, could only guess that the other was stunned.
Then, nodding to Keemi who seemed to be blushing in surprise (actually it was horror), he slowing
started walking away, giving Jee a stern look as he murmured, “I will prove myself honorable and
until then…” He grabbed Shen’s hand before the other could even protest and offered a small peck on the glove, “I will be dreaming of you and our possible future life together.”

Letting go of the cross dresser’s hand, he then walked away in grandiose style, not noticing that Shen was frantically rubbing his hand against his parka or that Yong had continued laughing. In fact, once all the water tribesmen were out of ear shot, all the crewmen started laughing, except for Jee. He, glaring at Jayendra’s retreating form, could only sigh upset that his men had missed the most important thing about the interaction. Yes, Shen would never live this incident down, but it was far more concerning for the Zuko’s future.

“They will never stop hunting him, will they?” said the soldier bitterly to himself.

Meanwhile, Zuko, if he could see his hands, was sure his knuckles were white. At this point he couldn’t even feel his hands because his grasp was so tight. Flying bison … were absolutely terrifying! He had almost died once when they were ascending and his hand had slipped off the saddle, only to grasp wildly at fur until he found purchase on the belt. He had also almost flown off again when a wild burst of freezing air had hit them. He finally had almost died again when Aang decided to show him a trick. He had not found the trick very amusing. The boy was to always keep his hands on the reins from now on, always.

Sighing, despite the almost falling to his death part (even though Aang assured him that he would catch him), Zuko had to admit that he was feeling somewhat safe now, especially since his mind kept reliving that enlightened moment … when he had air-bended. It was a warm feeling. Not like fire-bending deep in one’s gut, but it was a feeling that settled in his lungs, around his heart, light and fluffy. It was nice and Zuko was sure … it was a feeling of freedom.

Too bad he was also freezing and couldn’t properly enjoy the feeling though. His inner flame was struggling to just keep him warm and to steam-dry his fur clothing. Agni, he hoped he didn’t get sick … or develop the chill. True, he hadn’t developed it yet while he was at the North Pole but the water tribe did do a great job keeping him warm despite soaking him in water whenever he tried to escape.

Zuko’s teeth chattered at the thought.

Ugh, he really didn’t need to get sick right now. He hadn’t survived that horrible place with his values at least partially intact to end up dying on the back of a bison in the middle of nowhere.

“Hey Lee?” suddenly interrupted a voice during his brooding. Zuko’s eyes automatically went wide as he looked up, thinking the youth had left the steering to the beast, but Aang was just looking back at him with a slightly bemused expression.

“You okay? You aren’t going to be sick, are you? Because you look kind of sick. Like puke all over Appa’s fur and have it smell nasty until we can give Appa a proper bath kind of sick,” continued Aang.

Shaking his head mostly in confusion than in reassurance, Zuko swallowed hard unable to give a proper excuse … Though part of him knew he refused to open his mouth because he did not want to eject his stomach contents all over Appa’s fur and have it smell nasty until they could give Appa a proper bath. Besides, he had bigger worries than losing his lunch … like hypothermia. This wind was freezing.

Calling on his inner fire, Zuko pushed the warm feeling in his lungs away, the feeling of freedom
diminishing slightly as he tried to stoke his inner flame.

“Great!” said Aang, chirpy once more. “Because if you were sick we would have to make you some nasty soup and then you’d be all grumpy because you didn’t like the taste and then we couldn’t go penguin sledding or go see the mammoth Kio fish that I …”

“Wait,” interrupted the prince because it was going to end up as one of those conversations if he didn’t stop this now. “What about my Uncle? We do not have time of penguins. I need to see my Uncle. I have to make sure … nothing bad happens to him.”

Frowning, tilting a little more to his side so that he wasn’t talking just over his shoulder, Aang nodded, “Sure, those were just going to be pit stops, but should Appa fly faster? Is there something wrong with your uncle?”

Except the warning the spirits left, thought Zuko bitterly before he shook his head and added, “No, he’s just … he worries about me. I don’t want him to worry.”

Smile returning, Aang nodded, “I understand. So do you have any idea where they are at? We’ve just been kind of flying south, aimlessly.”

The prince shook his head in a forlorn manner. He knew he could send up a fireball flare, but what if the Water Tribe witnessed it first or a Fire Nation ship that wasn’t his? So, instead … they were left to fly around, the prince uncertain where his ship and those on it where. For now, all they could do was head to warmer waters.

Regardless, his tone tired, he admitted to the young driver, “I know, but we have to keep moving. It might take a little while … but I’m just ready to go home.”

Aang, tilting his head like he was a quizzical bird, looked confused for a moment before he asked, “Home? But it’s a boat. How can it be your home?”

Breathing hot air into his hands, Zuko’s teeth chattering before he softly smiled, a real almost sad kind of smile, “Because … it’s important to me. It’s safe. It’s … just a place where everyone I care for is. It’s just home and I’m ready to go back to it.”

Frowning, Aang realized he wanted to ask of Lee’s father and mother or if he had any siblings. How could a ship full of soldiers be a home? But it then occurred to the little air-bender that he really didn’t know Lee very well, he didn’t even know if Zuko was a last name, but smiling to himself Aang promised he would learn more about his friend.

Nodding at the thought, Aang merely chuckled in agreement, “Then we are going home! The only question is … which way is home? Ummm … Appa says this way!”

Zuko, trying to ignore the fact that a giant bison had just chosen their intended direction, dared to look over at the great expanse. Yes, he was again reminded how high they were up, but at least they were heading in another direction than that horrible ice city. The North Pole had been a daunting experience, but as much as it pained him to admit it … he just couldn’t pretend that he wasn’t the Avatar anymore. He was the Avatar. He was the bridge to the Spirit World. And the only question now was … what was he supposed to do about it?

Closing his eyes, the expanse of the ocean fading behind black eye lids, he exhaled and slowly opened his eyes. Time would tell he supposed. Time would tell.

…
Elsewhere, far from brooding Avatars and irritating little air-benders and fire-benders dressed as water tribesmen and women, sat a dark princess in a dark chair in a darkened room having dark thoughts. She was not the type of princess one would naturally think of when they would think of the world’s princesses. Most would think of something on the lines of Yue: kind, good natured, and a beacon for the people.

This princess was not anything like the northern ice princess. In fact, if Yue had an opposite in almost every way, it would be this girl, this girl dressed in red with a deep inner madness always rumbling and tumbling right below the surface. And this princess, anything but friendly company, was named Azula and she was in the process of her most cherished daily ritual. Her hair was being slowly combed back with a gold comb, every strand in its place and everything in order. Everything was as she wanted it to be. Not a single thing was out of place!

Closing her eyes, she called on her inner fire to chase off the chill that was settling in her bones. She decided she would enjoy this even if the servant’s hand was shaking. It was one of her few pleasures. She loved her hair to be silky and soft and perfect … just like her mother’s.

Eyes snapping open in surprise, Azula frowned at the thought and immediately crushed it. She was not a weak woman like her mother. She was strong. She would be more than that frail, ember-dyed female. She would be more than a mere wife.

Out of the corner of her eye, she watched a servant come toward her, head down with a scroll in hand. Slowly, she opened it, and raised a brow as a cruel smile played at her lips, "Zuzu still hasn't come for his yearly allowance and dearest Uncle hasn't taken anything from his royal accounts either. Oh, most troubling."

She faked a frown for a moment if only to seem troubled, smiling once more as she dwelt on the idea, "Oh, poor Zuzu, did you meet your end in the grimy deep? It's been so long since anyone has seen you or your ship."

Rolling the scroll back up, she looked at the messenger and stated in a sultry tone, "Send out a message. See if anyone has seen that ship of his. If my brother is dead … I want a properly funeral. I might even pretend to cry."

Then, in a mocking tone that spoke volumes of what she really wanted, the female purred, “And then I can officially claim my right as crown heir.”

Chapter End Notes

Someone said they were a shameless Shen/Jayendra fan now so I decided to continue the joke for them. Aang was just being adorable as usually (I really need a plushy of him). As for the last scene … well, she had to show up some time.

Also, Book 1: Air is now complete!! Yay me! Now it’s time for Book 2: Water. Since the poll is now complete, it seems we shall be having a mega story though I will label the next chapter as Book 2 so people know that I’m technically starting the next book. Also, review. I technically finished a book. I want some love especially from you creepers that watch the story (mainly FF.net) but have never reviewed once. I see that watch number up there, it doesn't match the review number at all. I would then put an emo-glare here but I’m too inept to know what one looks like. Later.
Summary: Zuko didn’t want this fate, hadn’t wanted the surprise of bending air, but he can’t just lie down and die… the past Avatar’s have expectation, Iroh has hopes, and his father has an army. Perhaps it would be easier to just drown in a swamp then bother with water-bending. Air-bending is bad enough when his only source of information in an eleven-year-old. AU. Book 2.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

BOOK TWO

…

A monster, a beast, a father the least,

Had a son put on fate’s short leash.

Though souls do linger and reach with long nails,

Praying for a hero to rise with the gales,

A young man is reminded his life not his own

And princely regrets pull him down with the undertow.

…”I am free.”

Aang turned his head back towards Lee who had just spoken. The older teenager had finally loosened his death grip on Appa’s saddle and was now just sitting there, his eyes closed as if he was just feeling the setting sun on his skin. The look on the other’s face … there was a calmness, an enlightenment that Aang almost envied. It was as if a great weight had been lifted from Lee’s shoulders and the teenager’s next words almost made Aang’s stomach churn in envy, because even though he was an air-bender and was free by definition … there was a heaviness in the bottom of his soul, as if he had a great burden to bare.

“Are you sure? Freedom is just a definition of mind. So if you feel free, then you are free, but you could still be stuck in the North Pole and be free if you wished to think that way. Yet you can still be imprisoned while you are a wanderer … or something like that,” repeated Aang as he recalled one of his lessons, burying his inner worries as soon as they rose. It was not something he liked to dwell on. Freedom really was a definition of mind and he liked to think of himself as free and happy. Though sometimes he thought he was lying to himself, like he had forgotten a heavy promise he had made. He just wanted to be happy and to make others happy as well, was that so much to ask?

Lee merely glared for a moment at the other, like the thought of ever going back to the North Pole was as appealing as having his right leg cut off. Then, pressing back the want to be irritated at his
rescuer, Zuko grumbled, “Perhaps it could have been that way for you … but my freedom is on my ship with my uncle and crew.”

Zuko, for his part, was a little surprised with how openly he had admitted that. Wasn’t the Fire Nation Palace the freedom and home he wanted? Not some rusting metal ship with bad music tastes. Truthfully, now that he had time to dwell on it, a part of him was starting to wonder how much value he really had in his homeland since it had banished him so easily. And yet, a deep part of him quickly dismissed the idea, telling him how un-honorable such a thought had been.

Aang, his smile dying slightly at Lee’s comment, mentally noted that Lee had called it his crew and ship, but decided to not give it much mind. It was just a pronoun after all. And the ship did sound interesting to the young monk who always loved a little adventure, especially Lee’s tea-crazed uncle. Aang knew that they were going to get along splendidly… if the fire-bending crew didn’t outright kill him.

Okay, okay, he would admit it. He was gripping the reins so tight he couldn’t feel his fingers. He was terrified! A deep older part of himself told him that he could be friends with any fire-bender he wanted, just look at Lee, but the newer part of his soul that had been raised to hide in the icecaps was absolutely petrified. He was going to a ship full of fire-benders! Yes, the very same type fire-benders that burned his people’s traditional homes in the mountains and pressed them into hiding and near extinction. The very same type of people that slaughter his kind a hundred years ago and made the world believe that there were no more air-benders. The very same type of fire-benders that killed Katara’s mother.

And so, despite himself, despite how much he was trying to believe that everything was going to be fine and that he was as free as he liked to imagine, the words still escaped him nonetheless, “They won’t hurt me, will they Lee?”

Zuko immediately looked angry at the comment and Aang quickly found himself blundering for the right words so he wouldn’t lose his new friend, “Not that I think that all fire-benders are bad or anything. It’s just that … the air-masters in the temple and … the elders in the nearby village and Sozin’s Comet and … Katara’s mom …”

Even though a deep part of himself was telling him to be offended that the young air-bender would even question his honor or the control he had over his crew (though he honestly kind of questioned that himself after he had that first air-bending incident), he found he understood the other’s fear. After all, despite how much he didn’t want to dwell on it, it had to be done for the greater good of the Fire Nation; the air-benders had to be destroyed… And that thought hurt. It really did. It hurt more than he would like to admit, because Yugato and Aang just tried so hard to be kind and considerate in their own ways despite their limitations … It just made him wonder why anyone would want to hurt an air-bender or why anyone thought they were a threat to begin with.

Thinking his words over carefully, his honor demanding it, Zuko straightened his spine and spoke as if there was no chance of anything else ever occurring, “No one will hurt you from my ship. I will personally make sure of it. On my honor Aang, I will make sure of it.”

Turning his head, he saw Zuko was now sitting on his knees, chin proud and lifted like it was more a declaration than some kind of promise.

Feeling the rough fabric of Appa’s reins in his hand, Aang gave a sad smile and nodded as he accepted the other boy’s claim though there was still a flicker of apprehension in his chest. What kind of authority did Lee actually have to make a crew of fire-benders do as he asked?

“If you say so Lee, I will believe you,” said Aang, readily accepting the other’s claim despite the
weakness of his voice. “Now, to bigger issues, it’s getting dark and both I and Appa are getting tired. Where are we going to hunker down for the night?”

Zuko, raising an eyebrow, having not dared look over the side in hours, merely murmured, “Anywhere we can get out of the wind, of course. I might even be about to build us a fire … we’ll have to be in a slightly hidden area for that though.”

Aang slowly gained a sheepish look and could only murmur, “Uh, about that. There is nothing … but ocean. I haven’t even seen an iceberg. Plus, I have no idea if we are even going in the right direction … you kind of said you just wanted to go home and then acted like you were going to puke on Appa. You never corrected my … direction.”

Zuko, dread filling his stomach, inched forward so he could look out at the moonlit horizon. Nothing but dark waters. Great, they were lost, at night, in the middle of the ocean. Could it get any worse?

“Also, I think we dropped the food satchel during our escape. I just glanced back and noticed it was gone, so I don’t think we have anything to eat.”

And he had to ask. Wonderful. He might have escaped but now they were either going to fall to their deaths, drown or starve. Fantastic. Could anything else go wrong?

“Also,” said Aang, looking pained. “I have to pee.”

Zuko, despite himself, slapped himself in the forehead.

…

Elsewhere from anything seemingly important to do with the Avatar, was a girl. At first glance there was outwardly nothing special about her. Her hair was up and her small, young, and almost frail looking form was adorned in a pale green dress of fine fabric. Currently, she was seated at the table, her food untouched and her expression seemingly neutral.

And yet there was an obvious heaviness in the room, especially when the girl said, “No, I will not go.”

“Dear,” said the girl’s mother, Poppy, “Don’t be unreasonable. You have no … opportunities … here, but in the city you might-”

“No. I like it here. I just found my place in this town,” she barked, the calm in her voice slowly dying, her hands becoming fists below the table.

“Your place in this town?” asked the girl’s father, Lao, his back straight and his shoulders ridged. “Whatever do you mean by that? You never leave this house or the garden. I can’t even recall the last time you went into town … given your condition.”

Biting her tongue, knowing she had said too much already, the young girl tried to cover her tracks by taking on the tone of a submissive yet helpless daughter, “What I mean, father, is that … I like my gardens and I just started lessons with Master Yu. Please, I wish to learn more.”

“Learn more, you say?” said Lao, an obvious bitterness in his voice, his tea cup placed loudly on the table so his daughter could sense his distaste before he even spoke. “Why? Have you not learned enough behind me and your mother’s back? After all, you seem to be doing well at that underground earth-bending rink you’ve been going to for the last few nights.”
The young girl threw her head up and with wide milky eyes stared in the direction of her father. Despite herself, despite her fiery undercoat, she had no words. She could only swallow.

“Did you honestly think that I wouldn’t notice that my blind daughter had gone missing? The guards and I were up all night looking for you and when we found you … Well, Master Yu’s services are no longer required though your lessons as a lady are in need of severe grooming.”

“Y-you know about that? But … h-how long?”

“Long enough,” said Lao, his disappointment evident in his very voice, “that I believe your education as a Lady has been faulty and that we have not been conditioning you well enough to become a good wife. You being blind has already been a challenge, but given this behavior I feel we have no choice. We are sending you to stay with your grandmother and aunt in Ba Sing Se. They know some excellent teachers such as the renowned Madame Macmu-Ling.”

The blind girl reeled back into her chair, the world crashing down around her as her secrets were revealed and her greatest horror was presented on her lap.

“Grandma Beifong and Aunt Lami in Ba Sing Se? But father, they’ll bind my feet or something worse! Please, please don’t send me there!” suddenly cried the girl, her resolve crumbling as she struggled with the want to obey her father as she had always pretended to do and yet fight like the Blind Bandit she had dubbed herself to be months ago.

“You should have thought of that, Toph, before you betrayed my trust,” said Lao, his next words driving deep into the girl’s heart before she could even think of a retort or an escape plan, “I’m so disappointed in you.”

Chapter End Notes

Dear creepers held up in your basements, coffee shops and dark corners in the campus library that the janitors don’t even know about (stop looking at the stain on the carpet … you don’t want to know what it is). I thank you. I thank you for coming out of your reclusive state and braving the dangers of the review button. But, alas, you did it. Congratulate yourself. Step out into the sun (you might have to wear shades so you don’t blind others with your epic reviewing self) and tell the world that you reviewed and you feel damn good about it.

Anyway, that was just reply to my reviewers from the last chapter. On another note, to kick off the second book I thought I would give everyone an idea of what was going on with Toph. Yeah, I have no plans of retelling the series with them discovering her as they did before. She is the last element after all. She gets her own flare. And please don’t whine about her being so submissive. I always saw Toph as submissive only to her parents … which is why she ran away in my mind. Anyway, later.
“See! We made it! No starving to death … *though I was kind of thirsty there for a while …* or drowning … *well, we almost drown that one time when Appa fell asleep …* and we were only attacked once! Yes … it was a *horrible, fire breathing dragon from the spirit world,* but when doesn’t that happen?” said Aang in a chipper voice as he hopped and floated through the forest, collecting sticks though Zuko had specifically asked for fire wood. Not tiny little pieces of wood that would barely serve for starting a fire with.

Zuko, unfortunately, had been stuck babysitting the young air-bender after one too many *animals-attacking-you-because-Aang-tries-to-ride it* incidents. He, of course, was actually gathering the fire wood.

“And then there was that horrible piranha-bear that stole and ate your pants and you had to go pant-less for a day until we could buy you some more pants,” drabbled on Aang.

Zuko, at this point, was about to blow. He did not want recall the last few horribly-epic days they had had since escaping the North Pole. He just wanted a day of not-crazy Avatar weirdness. And, just when he was about to have himself a nice old-fashion Zuko fit of yelling to the sky, Aang’s voice broke through the angst, “Oooh, look. It’s a circus tent. I mean, I’ve lived my whole life in the South Pole, but I totally still know what one looks like.”

Zuko, ripped from his epic moment of angst, rushed pass the young air-bender and stared at the makeshift building in the clearing, his mind made up as nothing but good memories of the circus and circus bears (yes, just bear, not a platypus-bear or anything) clouded any voice of reason.

“Welp, that settles that. I’m joining the circus,” said Zuko as he started to walk forward, not a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

Aang, for his part, was a bit taken back as he stood there a moment, quickly following after the older boy, “What? You are kidding, right? I didn’t think you had a sense of humor.”

“I don’t. I’m joining the circus. I’m sick of this Avatar curse,” said Zuko as he stomped toward into the clearing towards what looked like the ringleader as the tent was having its finishing touches put up.

“But what about being the you know what … saving you know place?” whispered Aang as they drew closer to other people, no one even giving Aang’s yellow and orange apparel a second glance.

“Nope. Joining the circus,” said Zuko as he started pealing parts of his parka off so he would look less water-tribe.

Aang, wandering at his side, looking completely flabbergast, choked, “B-but what about me?”

Zuko, stalling in front of the ringmaster, ignored Aang and stated very boldly, “I hate my life. I am
running away from it. You may call me Pedro and I will be joining the circus.”

The ringmaster looked them both up and down, frowned for a moment before he clapped his hands together and smiled, “I do need fresh meat; you’ll do well, but what of this one?”

They both looked at Aang who was crouched over and looking completely helpless like everyone in the world had gone mad but him.

“This is my pet monkey. He talks,” said Zuko in the calmest, most serious voice he could.

The ringleader frowned and ran his fingers through his mustache, eyeing Aang with a curious glance, not the least bit bothered by the arrow on Aang’s head or his attire.

“Are you sure he’s a talking monkey? He hasn’t spoken yet.”

Aang, eyebrow raised, stumbled, “B-but I’m not a monkey.”

The ringmaster, now smiling again, laughed to himself, “Ah, wonderful. I know just what to do with him. I will be right back with a unicycle.”

Giving the ringmaster an are-you-serious glace, he looked up at Zuko and deadpanned, “You have to be kidding.”

“Nope, Uncle loves circuses. I’m sure after a few years we will run into him. I am sick of adventures as the Avatar. All it leads to is multiple near-death experiences and probably love interests that won’t go anywhere and I’m tired of it. If I have to learn to juggle … SO. BE. IT.”

Aang, wondering if the other had finally snapped, took a step away and rubbed the back of his neck nervously as he murmured, “B-but … what? I don’t … Umm … So this isn’t the end?”

Zuko, smiling for once in his life, proclaimed, “Pffff. Of course it’s the end. I’m sick of this Avatar crap. As far as I’m concerned, I can now pass wind epically, make a slushy all my own and build an epic sandcastle. Why would I do anything else like have dangerous adventures. I’d rather join the circus. So I did.”

Aang could only go, “Oh … okay … I guess it’s –”

THE END.

Chapter End Notes

Paw07: Yeah …. For those of you who are gullible, shame on me for knowing you hadn’t checked your calendar to see what today was. For those of you who checked the date and still fell for it, shame on you … Also, shame on all of you that haven’t read my profile and would know I only update on the weekends. Pff, who updates on Tuesdays? Plus, Zuko doesn’t smile. Regardless, April Fools! It is a wonderful day for trickery and tomfoolery, when people who think they are witty try to prank others (no one ever said I was terribly witty). So soldiers, I have a job for you, go out into that big bright world (yes, this includes you creepers who shun the light; just bring an umbrella which won’t make you look suspicious at all) and honor the holiday with a little
trickery. Feel free to tell me of your prank. If I get enough April Fools replies, I will give out a gift one-shot to whomever I and my beta-reader find to be the victor. And don’t lie or steal someone else’s prank because there is no real victory in cheating. Plus, Loki will find you.
A Thing in the Dark

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Kira Kyuu for proofreading.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Oh … okay … I guess it’s – THE END.”

“AHHHHH! I don’t want to be a monkey!” came a sudden scream as Aang jolted awake, his face covered in sweat.

For a moment, the youth just sat there panting, a horrified expression on his face as he collected his surroundings. No, unicycle. Check. Lee wasn’t juggling. Check. The bearded lady didn’t want to make him her smoogly-poo. Double check.

Sighing, looking back to see that Lee was still curled up in the back of the saddle deeply asleep, the air-bender rubbed his raccoon eyes. They had to have been flying for a day now and the sun was setting, orange blossoming on the setting horizon.

The dream about the circus must have been caused from exhaustion. True, Lee had offered to try and fly Appa and to keep the great exhausted beast awake, but Aang refused. Appa was his responsibility and if Appa wasn’t allowed to sleep, neither would Aang. They had stalled once, in the water to rest (and pee), but floating still required energy and so it had been a short break. Personally, Aang didn’t know how much longer they could go on like this. Yes, at least the air was now a little warmer and no longer so fridge as it was in the deep North Pole, but he was certain they were going in the wrong direction. There was nothing out here and the icebergs that were about couldn’t even keep him or Lee afloat.

Sighing, wishing that they had picked a different random direction, Aang tightened his grip on the reins and scolded himself. Here he said that he would remain awake, for Appa, and instead he fell asleep sitting up. Staring at the reins in his hands for a moment, a part of Aang started to wonder: what if they didn’t get out of this? Had Lee learned enough water-bending to make ice and perhaps make them an iceboat if worse came to worse? What if Appa fell? What if …

A sudden grunt came from Appa, Aang jerking the reins when he thought the beast was going to fall asleep in mid-air. Instead, the sky-bison had changed direction and was heading… heading… to a dot on the horizon.

Squinting, his heart hammering in his chest, Aang jumped to his feet and ran across Appa’s back, nearly jumping on the sleeping Avatar as he started shaking him awake, “Lee! Lee! We see a ship! There’s a ship!”

Lee, jolting, not use to being touched, gathered his surroundings in a panicked hurry. Only after he had noticed it was Aang and that there was nothing to be on guard about did the teenager groggily ask, “What? What’s wrong? Is it my ship? Is it the Northern Water Tribe?”

Shaking his head, Aang practically bounced, “It’s a ship! It’s a ship! I don’t know if it’s your ship, but it’s a ship.”
Frowning, groggily pulling himself to his knees despite being exhausted, Zuko forced himself to bury his fear of getting out of the saddle and falling horribly to his death. Instead, he slowly perched himself on top of Appa’s head, his eyes going wide when he saw that there was indeed a ship in the distance.

For a moment he thought he might smile, that he might get to see his Uncle again and that everything, somehow, would be so much better with that ageing figure by his side. And yet, as quickly as it formed, his smile was dead. It was as if it had never been, it was gone so quickly.

Instead, a frown of worry formed on the teenager’s face as he tried to squint and get a better look at what type of ship it was. From this distance, it didn’t look big enough to be a steamer or a war ship, but it was too big to be something like a simple fishing ship, which was too bad because a fishing ship would at least mean land was near. It obviously was not a fishing ship though …

“Perhaps a cargo ship?” said Zuko out loud, the teenager nearly jumping out of his skin when suddenly Appa let out a bellow and started to dive.

“Spirits above,” cried out Zuko, latching onto the nearest thing he could so he wouldn’t fall off … which so happened to be a thin air-bender who had long since reclaimed the reins.

Aang, in turn, choked as the older boy latched onto him, nearly falling off himself as he giggled, “Hey, careful. I’m ticklish there.”

Zuko, half temped to let go of the now squirming boy, could only bark, “Then stop making him dive! We should get a good look at the ship before we go down there!”

“Umm,” said Aang as he tugged on the reins a little. “I don’t think Appa’s listening to me anymore.”

“W-what!” cried Zuko as he let go of the other, grabbing into the reins and tugging them himself. All he got was an angry roar as Appa made his way faster towards the ship. “W-what if that was a Fire Nation ship!”

“But it isn’t, right?” said Aang, now clinging to Zuko since the older boy now had the reins.

“Well, it doesn’t look like a one, doesn’t mean it couldn’t be!” yelled Zuko as he glared at the other.

“Oh … so this could be bad to just land on some random party’s ship,” said Aang as if it just had occurred to him.

Zuko, a blood vessel about to pop in his forehead, barked, “Yes!”

“Oh … Ahhhhhh!

And so, the whole way down, Appa’s mind set, the two benders clung to the great beast’s fur, screaming as if death was now upon them. And yet, just as quickly as the descent had become, it ended with a mighty jolt, the sound of wood creaking under heavy paws and water splashing against a sturdy hull. Zuko, perhaps gripping too tight, found himself flying forward due to the impact, his body making a heavy clunk as he went rolling into a wooden deck. Aang, at this time used his bending last minute to stop himself from doing the same thing, air billowing all around him as he gently floated his feet down to the wood deck.

Stalling only long enough to give the now sleeping bison a worried look, Aang found himself hopping over to Zuko who was now lying on his back, struggling to pull the air back into him.
“Lee!” cried Aang as he knelt down against the other. “Are you okay?

Wheezing, struggling to intake a breath, Zuko was finally about to cough, “No … I am never …. getting …. on that bison … again.”

Aang, his worried look about to be washed away like dirt from a spring rain, stalled when a shadow suddenly fell over him, a voice gurgling, “Well, well, what do we have here? I’ve had stowaways before … but never ones so far out to sea.”

Looking up, the two teenagers stared at the strange man with an iguana-parrot on his shoulder. The growing, greedy grin on his face revealing his intentions before either youth could plead their case, “But that’s not a bad thing. I’ve turned in a bounty for many a earth and water benders in the past, but an air-bender bounty and a flying bison: now what a pretty copper he will make … get them boys.”

…

“Ugh, I hate these things. They are always making me trip. How do you even walk in them,” whined Sokka as he tugged at his … skirt.

Suki, who had agreed to take the water tribesman on as a student if and only if he wore the traditional garb for a Kyoshi Warrior makeup and all, tried not to chuckle at the other. Sokka, after seeing how well her and her girl took out some bandits during their slow trek to the swamp, had found that girls could kick butt and perhaps it wouldn’t hurt to have some extra skills. She, just glad to get some practice in during their long trek to the Foggy Swamp, had not dissuaded him. Plus, she would get to be around Sokka more after all.

Not-not that she liked him … he was just funny, and she didn’t get many laughs in now days.

“I think that will be enough tonight,” said Suki with a smile as she offered the blushing teenager a hand up, not that she blamed him, half the camp had watched him get thrown across their make-shift arena after all. It had been placed so closed intentionally in order to keep an eye on the camp. It also allowed the benders to have a little area to make a mess if they felt so inclined to.

Sokka, secretly glad to just have a reason to touch the other as well, took the offered hand as Suki helped him stand. Her tug was a little too strong though and the teenager boy found himself bumping into her and nearly causing her to fall over as he came to his feet. Sokka, in turn, was quick to wrap a hand around her lower back in order to keep her standing.

There was an awkward moment of their faces being really close, until, like always, Suki drew away with a small cough. She was likely blushing as much as Sokka was, but give all the makeup she had on, he couldn’t really tell.

“Well, that was quite a workout,” said the Kyoshi Warrior as she pretended to dust off her skirt, murmuring, “Now I’m all hot and flustered.”

“Y-yeah, me too,” said Sokka as he rubbed the back of his head in embarrassment. It was always like this, there was never enough privacy to actually act on any of their feelings. There were just too many small faces around and a nosy sister to even ask her … if she liked him.

“Regardless,” said the Warrior as she gathered herself, cool and composed as usual. “We should decide who is going to stand guard tonight. For some reason I feel that we should have two on guard at a time instead of just one like usual. There’s just something about this forest. It makes my blood feel chilled. I … just don’t like it. Would you mind volunteering, Sokka?”
Sokka, shaking his head as he tried to get that love-sick expression off his face, found himself quickly agreeing, “Oh yeah, sure. No problem. I love standing guard … in the dark.”

“Oh, wonderful. I … ugh … better be going to bed then. It’s getting late and I might have to take a night watch… g-goodnight Sokka,” she murmured, suddenly acting a lot more shy and meek then she had moments ago when she had been handing him his own butt.

“Y-yeah, good night,” called the tribesman after the female warrior, a part of him finally noticing that yes, indeed, it had started to get dark.

And yet, strangely, he had yet to hear one owl or see one lightning bug. There was just this stillness around. And now that she said that aloud, he found he had to agree. Since they had entered the forest, a week ago though they had been traveling about three weeks now, he couldn’t help but notice that villages with actual people in them had become scarcer and scarcer the closer they got the mountains. And there was this deep chill in the air. It almost reminded Sokka of type of lands he had grown up in: few people and a deep set coldness.

The abandoned villages they kept happening across though that was a new breed of unease he wasn’t accustom to, especially since there were no signs of fire-benders having driven the villagers off, which brought to question: what exactly had driven the villagers off?

Rubbing his hands together, trying to tell himself he did not feel like he was being watched, Sokka found he could not look away from one in particular cold dark place in the forest all night. Because, even though he knew it was paranoid and stupid, he felt that if he looked away, for even a moment, something would creep into their camp from the darkness. Something he could not fight, something that all children were afraid of, but never knew the name to.

…

“Sokka … you look terrible. Did you even sleep last night? Did you volunteer to be a night guard again?” said Katara as she gave her brother a piece of fruit for breakfast, cringing away because she was sure meat-head would whine about something not being slaughtered to ingest. Instead, he merely took the piece of dried fruit and kind of gummed it, his eyes glassed over as he continued to walk with the group.

“I’ll take that as a: yes, Katara, I didn’t sleep again last night,” said Katara slightly sarcastically as she tried to impersonate Sokka’s squeaky voice, arms crossing over her waist as she glaring at her brother, wondering how he was even walking a straight line right now.

When he didn’t even react, she sighed, murmuring, “Okay, I’ll go fishing with you tonight if you are that meat deprived … just stop being angry at me. I know you are still upset with me and Aang for accidently kidnapping you and stuffing you into Appa’s saddlebags, but please stop ignoring me. You’ve been that way for days now.”

When nothing but silence and a gnawing sound greeted her query, her tone became worried as she reached out and touched her sibling softly on the shoulder, stalling there march, “Sokka? Are you alright?”

Blinking, as if suddenly coming around at his sister’s tone, Sokka finally gathered himself and watched for a moment as the children kept walking without the two tribesmen. He even sagged slightly as he rubbed his hand over his face, “What … yah. I’m fine.”

Frowning, wanting to be angry at her sibling for so blatantly lying to her, she shook her head as her hair loops twisted madly, “No, no you are not. Something’s been wrong with you for the past few
days. Tell me what it is.”

Sighing, scratching the back of his head as he watched the last of the children walk past them, the contemplated what was bothering him. There were a lot of things, like his feet and his stomach and Suki’s reluctance to notice him the way he wanted to be noticed, but as for the thing that was really bothering him … It perhaps would be best to just say nothing at all. Not that he thought he could get away with that. Katara now had that expression their mom used to have whenever she was mad at their father. He had thought it was funny as a child to watch the chieftain cringe away due to a mere glare from his mother, but as he grew older the more he understood a woman’s spite. And thought he did not really think of Katara as a woman yet, he knew it was sometimes best to just give her what she wanted.

He was also, honestly, just too tired to fight with her.

“You’ll think I’m going crazy,” Sokka murmured as his shoulder’s fell forward.

“You don’t think I already thought of you as a crazy?” joked Katara for a moment, a soft chuckle escaping her before she frowned and looked behind them down the darkening path, her hands coming up and rubbing her shoulders as if she was hugging herself.

Sokka, despite his tired eyes, followed her gaze and he too felt the need to chase off a chill that had just caused him to have goose bumps. Frowning, he stared at the path the group had just come from, noting how a place that had just been filled with light and insects and singing birds was now still. It was as if a shadow had set over that part of the forest. In fact, it even seemed darker, foreboding … like the thing he watched out in the night, but now it seemed to be following them. It was like a thing that would rush up behind you and only fall back when you turned your head just right, but when he turned your head completely to see what it was … it was always gone.

“Do you feel it too, Katara?” whispered Sokka, afraid to raise his voice too loud, incase the children overheard them and it frightened them … or incase it might over hear him. “It’s like those stories gran-gran would tell … about things that were always just behind you in the blinding snow. How it … would follow you and get you turned around and around until you were lost. And then, one at a time, each man half frozen, it would pick off the weakest, drag them away into the cold and –”

“Enough Sokka,” bit in Katara’s tone, the teenager turning his red eyes to his sister’s angry and slightly afraid gaze. “Those things don’t live in forests. Windagos are just stories the adults made up to make sure we didn’t wander outside during a blizzard as children. And, even if they are real … they couldn’t live here. It’s too warm.”

Frowning, wanting to tell his sister that he wasn’t saying it was a windago in particular, Sokka found he couldn’t get a word in edgewise as his younger sister wrapped her arm around his and started to lead him forward with a sturdy march.

“That’s it. Tonight, I’m putting you to bed early with the rest of the young children. No night watch for you, mister.”

“But I’m a grown man!” tried to defend Sokka as he was dragged along, his sister refusing to allow him to look behind them at the darkening path despite it being nearly midday.

“Nope, I will hear none of that. You are going to bed with the children,” said Katara, mother-mode activated. She refused to listen to his nonsense … even though, for the briefest of moments she saw something moving out of her peripheral vision. She refused to give into the paranoia her brother had fell victim to though.
There was nothing there.

And yet, if she would have turned her head, given her brother’s seemingly paranoid nature a second thought, she would have seen a gnarled graying hand place itself upon a darkened trunk, yellow nails digging deep into the bark.

Chapter End Notes

Paw07: Yes, it’s a short chapter, but at least it’s an update, no? Also, thank you, for all you good sports for April 1st. I respect a good sense of humor. Also, some of my readers really liked the chapter so I decided to incorporate it into the tale. Aang was the only sane one in the dream, so I made it his dream. Regardless, it’s been a long time, but we finally got back to Sokka and Katara! And yes, my horror fan-girlling in creeping to the surface as usual and something unpleasant is after our favorite siblings.
How had it come to this?

Zuko dodged a well-aimed throwing knife, a dull thud echoing in his ears as the thing missed him by mere inches, embedding itself into the wooden deck.

No, really? How had it come to this? He honestly had no idea. Last he knew they were sleep-deprived and flying around aimlessly with little to no hope of finding any land before their flying bison gave out and everyone drowned. His mind was still stuck in an ‘I hate flying mode’, but somehow he was now fighting pirates while Aang hopped around the ship’s sails, dodging pirates on swinging ropes. It was really a bit surreal actually. Huh, maybe he was dehydrated and this was all a horrible, torturous image before he died.

“How still, you squirmy little seagull-rat!” cried one of the pirates as he tried to shimmy up the mast, Aang whapping down any pirate that tried to crawl up with a mighty gust of wind from his glider. And yet, they seemed to be gaining, three or four grown men shimmying up the mast to get the air-bender.

Aang, cringing at the one pirate that had a sword in his mouth, called out, “Uh, Lee … I’m pretty sure I don’t like pirates. In fact, I think I might need an adult.”

Zuko, kicking out at a pirate’s weak stance while grabbing his sword simultaneously in order to start a quick sparring match of metal on metal, did not dignify the young air-bender’s comment with a reply. Instead, he grunted when suddenly a boot kicked him in his midsection, causing Zuko to nearly lose the grip to his stolen weapon. Grabbing at his side and diving into a quick roll through pirate legs, Zuko barely lifted his borrowed sword up in time to block a heavy blow aimed at his throat, the Captain seemingly trying to crush his back into the wood deck.

Gritting his teeth, feeling his grip faltering due to all the weight being pressed down onto him, he kicked out in a fiery explosion, the pirate captain jumping back along with two of his goons at the sudden act of fire bending.

For a moment, the entire ship was still, even the guy that Aang was poking in the head with his staff, the Captain’s shock suddenly turning into a bellowing laugh as he looked Zuko up and down, “Now look what we have here! I thought we had a little air-bender and a lost water tribesman, but it looks like nothing more than a half-breed.”

Beside himself, Zuko actually stiffened, insulted to his very being.

“… You’re not the price of an air-bender, but you still would fetch a nice price. Half-breeds can fetch a fair price to the right Fire Master. They always need fresh soldiers at the front lines. Hopefully you aren’t too old, though. They might have to beat the water tribesman out of you,” mocked the pirate captain as he eyed Zuko with a sardonic grin. “Too bad about the scar though.”

Zuko, outraged, feeling like the pirate had just called all Fire Nation soldier’s something akin to rapists, roared and struck out with a flaming fist that spread outward like dragon's breath. The captain’s eyes went wide and the bird on his shoulder squawked in surprise. The large man barely had enough time to thrust his winter cloak up to protect him from the flames … though the center
mast was not so lucky, flames quickly crawling upwards towards the red sails. The pirates crawling up said center mast to get Aang screamed and jumped down before they were barbequed alive, Aang himself cringing as the flames quickly started upwards towards him.

Not knowing what else to do, not wanting to be a bald and crispy air-bender, Aang decided that a boat on fire was bad … especially with them on it. Rising his staff, he took in a deep breath and struck a mighty breeze downward. Instead of snuffing said flames out though, the fire seemed to be thrown to the deck. The already groaning pirates from the fall hastily screamed and rolled out of the way a wave of fire fell towards them. Most got out of the way except one that was thrashing about madly because his sleeve was on fire only to promptly fall overboard with a splash.

Aang cringed at the splash, part of him leaning over to cry down, “Sorry about that!”

Peri, a pirate in brown and black with a slip of cloth over the bottom part of her face, stood there for a moment watching the chaos. They were all a bunch of idiots, they really were. Shifting into a bender’s pose, the pirate soon called upon her inner energies and before anyone could do anything but stare at the large hovering wave now at the side of the ship, a cold freezing wave fell over the entire deck and the men on it. There was a hissing noise along with a large collection of surprised screams and soon the entire deck was covered in fish, seaweed, squid and men gasping on the deck as if they were waterless fish.

For a moment everyone laid or knelt where they were, panting for breath be it because they had got a mouth full of water or because the water was bloody freezing. The captain, standing up on wide and sturdy legs, shook the water off of his cloak, frowning for a moment as he watched his heavy brown garment smoke. He had been on fire and now he was soaking wet. He really hated benders sometimes.

“Was that really necessary?” growled the captain, his iguana-bird coughing as it tried to ruffle its wet feather.

“Would you have rather I let the ship burn?” said the now obviously female pirate as she placed a hand on her hip. “I don’t know about you, but I don’t feel like swimming to shore.”

Giving a disgruntle look to the female pirate, a femme that took nothing from no one which was why she had joined him a few years back, abandoning the Northern Water Tribe and their restraints on female water-benders. He respected her for it and it had made her mean, in a silent and stewing way, like a storm that had come out of nowhere. She got the job done though so he couldn’t complain.

It didn’t make her any less irritating, though.

“I understand your point, darlin’,” said the captain, using the nickname he knew she hated. “So deal with the boy. I do not wish to burn my favorite cloak … nor my ship.”

Zuko, now standing up himself as well, grabbed at two different types of sword that had been nearly washed away and off the deck. One was a heavy broad-like sword and a single dao sword though both were quickly treated like dao in his hands. He couldn’t help but growl, “I am sick of getting wet. I am sick of water-benders. I’m sick of people trying to confine me … I will not be caged again.”

The teenager gave a war cry and, the weaponless pirates diving out of the way, Zuko struck out towards the female pirate. The woman smoothly jumped and dived to the side, landing on one knee as she brought up the equivalent of an ice shield to protect her from the fire-bender’s next vicious swipe, his blade slamming into the ice shield nearly severing it in two.
Though her mouth could not been seen, it was unmistakable that Peri smiled, a warrior’s vigor flickering in her pale eyes like the moon reflecting off deep pools.

She would defeat this boy.

Aang, meanwhile, had made his way across the deck, most of the pirates having been distracted by the thought of being flambéed. Thus, he was left to the snoring oaf that was Appa. The great beast hadn’t even stirred when the wave had fallen over him, a few sea creatures clinging to his fur coat. A few days without sleep and constant work could do that, Aang supposed. He wouldn’t want to get up either. Regardless, he was now upon his fluffy steed, pulling at the creature’s snoring face as he tried to cohort the other, “Appa. Appa, come on, buddy. I mean I love pirate stories as much as the next, but I really don’t want to be part of the pirate story. Appa. Appa!”

“What? Don’t like pirate stories … they were always my favorite,” came a reply from behind him.

Slowly, **ever so slowly**, Aang turned his head, a nervous grin slowly growing on his features as he took in the full bulk of the season buccaneer and the two men smirking behind him.

“N-No. I love them. Never boring,” said Aang as his eyes fell to small dagger the pirate captain was pretending to use to clean under his finger nails, an obvious threat and yet not too overt. “Can’t we all just be friends?”

Raising a brow, a smirk slowly forming on his face, the captain turned his head slightly long enough to watch Peri dodge a fire ball and then turned back to give Aang a skeptical look.

Dropping Appa’s upper lip, which he had been holding up this whole time in an awkward pose, the air-bender chuckled slightly and made a dive for his staff. The captain, as if guessing Aang’s next move, shrugged his iguana-bird off of his shoulder, the feathered beast squawking as he dived for Aang.

The bald kid yelped diving to the side as a nasty pair of talon tried to grasp him. He was then hopping around as he tried to protect his head with his yellow garments, his shirt partially pulled over his head as he cried, “Nice iguana-bird, *nice iguana-bird!* Stop pecking at my head! Not the shirt! *Aahh*, that tickles, no. *Ow*, stop tickle-biting!”

Zuko, who was panting at this point as he tried to keep two sword wielding pirates, a bulky pirate with a hammer, and a water-bender at bay, barely managed to hop out of the way in time as a flailing Aang tripped into the scene, crying nice-birdy as he fell into the water-bender. Aang, batting at his shirt, watched in horror as the bird made a very nice chest-burster scene with his shirt before it was squawking and attacking the next nearest living thing: Peri the female pirate.

As if in a blind fury, the bird was upon the female pirate, the woman screeching as it managed to get entangled in her hair. Waving her hands erratically to try and get the troublesome thing out, she accidently water-bended instead, causing random ice to form on the deck. Any pirate in the area was soon floundering to keep their footing as well as Zuko whom was once again missing his metal boots. His seal-skin boots could not take the large amounts of heat that he needed to melt the ice beneath his feet. So, when Aang tried to hop away, he ended up sliding with a yell, slamming right into Zuko. Zuko, having become a lot more practiced when it came to walking on ice but still no master, still ended up slipping across the deck, his swords flailing as he tried to use them to steady himself and fight random pirates that were slipping past him.

Awkwardly knocking one of the pirates to the side, using the decorative pommel of his dao sword to hit the pirate in the back so he could take grab another dao sword, Zuko felt his balance return somewhat with *two* familiar weights in his hands. He quickly looked for Aang and spotted the air-
bender which had taken to jumping from pirate to pirate as a type of hopscotch. He was heading back for Appa, probably trying to wake the great beast again.

Nodding his head, deciding not to draw attention to the air-bender or his actions, Zuko instead looked around to see if there was anyone still on their feet that wasn't flailing helplessly. Across the deck, Zuko and the captain crossed gazes, both glaring and unperturbed by the flailing bodied between the two of them.

Not wasting a moment more, Zuko twirled his borrowed dao over his head in what had to be more for display than anything, and just when he was about to take a lesson from Aang and jump from pirate’s to pirate’s back, he heard a jingle behind him. He turned his head just in time to see what looked like a … metal spoon? … come down towards his head. There was a dull ting as the object made contact and a thud as a teenage body met the deck.

The captain, at first surprised, was quickly bellowing a laugh. He wasted no time walking rather unsteadily to the scene before him, his resident cook holding nothing but a large metal ladle as a weapon, though there were a large collection of knives on his belt: cooking knives mind you, but knives nonetheless. Said chef nodded his head to his captain as the other stalled before him.

“Ah, Cooky. I know I can always count on you,” said the pirate captain in a humorous tone as he walked over to a knocked out Zuko, shoes inches from the slightly drooling teenager, a lump forming on his forehead. Sighing, deciding it was best not to scar his merchandise any further, he leaned over and patted a flame out of Zuko's collar. It seemed he had had one more fire-trick up his sleeve before he was knocked out.

He then turned and looked at his cook, dumbfound for a moment before he burst out another loud galloping laugh when he noticed the live thing squirming on the cook’s back. It was hearty and full and the man actually shed a tear. Somehow, somehow, not only had Cooky knocked out the half-breed, but he had managed to catch the air-bender in a net like the boy was common fowl. The air-bender actually frowned and sheepishly waved at the captain.

“Aahh, Cooky, don’t give me that look. I know you want the great beast, but I think he would line our pockets better than our gullets.”

Cooky glared, his eyebrow twitching, the Captain sighing, “I will dwell on it … but it really is too much for all of us to eat. Now, let’s get these little barge rat-birds into cells before they wake up.”

Aang, cringing as Cooky walked past the large man, could only give a nervous grin. Oh boy, out of the kettle and into the fire as the saying went.
Too bad for them that they didn’t know Aang was a temple renounced escape artist and he smoothly and reached for the captain’s keys.

…

His head ached but for some reason Zuko felt he should not be surprised by that. For some reason it had become a depressingly reoccurring norm in his life.

Eyes opening slowly, the world stinging and biting at him like so many insects, Zuko moaned as something poked him again. Grumbling, he tried to swat it away, only to feel some heavy weight tug at his arms. His eyes snapped open in a second, the teenager certain he was going to wake in an ice-encased room with a small fire in the middle, two guards watching his back and a pair of heavy … cuffs … on his wrists.

And yet, yellow eyes shifting in a panic in the dark, he did not see the glint of ice or the blaze of a fire pit or blue-dressed man watching him … instead there was a man in a hat, a bird on his shoulder. He automatically jerked at his restraints a gnarled sound of rage in his throat as he tried to jerk forward.

Not this again! *Not this again!*

Is this what his life had been reduced to? One type of imprisonment or another?! He had been imprisoned in so many cages in life he had not asked for. Now he was to be bartered off as mere cannon fodder? He would kill this pirate!

Zuko felt the sting of the voices in the back of his mind, part of him wanting to rip them forward and take advantage of them, but instead he collapsed against the wooden wall to which he had been shackled and denied them access. He was in chains. He would sink to the bottom of the ocean … Plus, what if he hurt Aang.

For some reason, he couldn’t even bear the thought of that.

So he refrained, held back his rage and merely tightened his hands into fists, like a captured soldier readying himself to be tortured.

The pirate merely chuckled, his form shifting in the dark. Why he hadn’t brought a candle, Zuko could only guess that this wasn’t the first time nor would it be the last that the crew had caught themselves a fire-bender to be traded off like livestock. He grit his teeth in rage just at the thought. Then again, he understood it all too well. The Fire Lord did not tolerate traitors or deserters so things like enslaved fire-benders were not as frowned upon as one might think … because sometimes it saved the military the job of hunting down a deserter.

“So tell me,” said the captain as he pulled a small barrel forward sitting upon it like an old mountain settling as he peered at the teenager through the bars that separated them, as if the cuffs were enough. “Where did you find yourself an air-bender? I mean, I know the rumors that there are some still hiding about the world, pretending to be what they are not … but this one looks like an air-bender and acts like an air-bender. He even has himself a fine flyin’ bison. For some reason, I feel he doesn’t know that he isn’t supposed to be acting like an air-bender, especially with those tattoos there.”

Zuko titled his head somewhat and looked at the air-bender that was located in the cell right next to his. The boy was sprawled out on his back, drooling like he didn’t have a care in the world. Not that he should have expected less of the quirky pre-teen. He hadn’t slept in a few days.
“So tell me,” said the pirate as he leaned forward, a leer on his lips. “We have but one bird … where is the next?”

Bristling slightly at the question, Zuko’s lips became a thin line as he recalled Aang and Master Yugato. He did not want to do air-bending, but the two air-benders had been flexible and dare he say kind to him. He couldn’t even imagine the rest of the nomads being any different. Perhaps an odd people, but never cruel, a people that deserved kindness because that was all they had given to him. The thought of the air temples, especially after meeting Aang and Yugato, now brought a new heaviness to Zuko.

Even though he had an idea of where Aang came from, he would never tell.

Apparently his glare spoke all he needed to say, the captain’s smile disappearing as he sat back with a sigh, shaking his head slightly.

Rubbing his knee for a moment, as if trying to rub away the ache to an old wound, the captain murmured, “You shouldn’t make the path harder for you than it needs to be. The life a half breed, especially one with bending, can be hard. I could make it … at least beneficial. I’m always looking for a good bender to add to my ranks. And though you’re young and sheltered in this artic backwater place … you have skill. If I didn’t know any better, I would have said you were raised by fire-benders, but if that were true you wouldn’t be out here alone. You’d already be a soldier and you’d probably already be dead. Half-breeds, though welcome in the ranks, generally end up on the front lines. Short, quick, and brief … Is that what you want for your life?”

Despite himself, despite his want to strike out and burn away the other’s acidic words, he remained still. He needed a plan. He needed a plan! Uncle always said he was rash. Rash is what got him caught again and again in the North Pole.

Sitting there a moment more, as if waiting for his prisoner to speak or bite out in rage, he actually raised an eyebrow when Zuko almost whispered, “I will not tarnish my honor any more than I already have. You will get nothing from me, pirate. I am not afraid of you.”

Sighing, standing up as he dusted his pants off, he cracked his neck and looked at Aang for a moment, “I don’t really like to make children cry, but it seems tomorrow I will have to ask him where his people had been held up … or I’m going to let Cooky start cutting off some legs. I doubt the bison needs all of them.”

Golden eyes widening, surprise and horror at the thought of him telling Aang that, Zuko growled and felt the cuffs on his wrist sting as they got hot as a thin stream of smoke was huffed out of his nose, the teenager jumping up and tugged on his restraints as he growled, “I will burn this ship to the ground.”

The captain merely smiled, chirping to a figure in the doorway, the cook, “Did you hear that Cooky? He thinks he won’t burn with the rest of us? You are not a dragon, boy, but let me know if you change your mind about not dying on the front lines.”

And with that, the captain disappeared into the lighted hall, the cook standing there in a shadows like a haggard bird of some kind that had had all its feather’s plucked, though the yellow flicker in his eyes was undeniable at this point and Zuko couldn’t help but reel back slight under its striking gaze. It wasn’t until the cook silently shut that door behind him that Zuko couldn’t help but wonder if he wasn’t the first one the captain had made that offer to.

Collapsing sideways into the pile of hay and the raggy blanket that had at least been left, Zuko glared at the darkness for a moment as he wondered if it was wise to remain on guard all night. He
would get out ... maybe ... possibly. Agni, what was he going to do with Aang? At least in the North Pole it was just him. What was he going to do with a second body weighing him down? Yes, he had technically had command over his ship, but his crew could take care of themselves for the most part and Uncle was always there as well as Jee. He had never personally been weighted with the responsibility of another being and his sister certainly did not count.

Sighing, closing his eyes, hating the spirits for choosing him to be the Avatar, Zuko begrudgingly thought to himself: he could barely save himself and now he didn’t even think he could get Aang out of this and yet they expected him to save the world?

He cursed the logic of spirits and before he knew it, sleep was upon him as if night was a literal blanket and had soothed him to sleep like a fitful child. It had been a long few days of near restlessness and at least they weren’t flying. He was used to the lull of waves, the crashing of a cold current against an unyielding hull. It reminded him of home.

How he missed Uncle.

... "Lee ... psst, Lee? Are you awake?" asked Aang, earlier morning upon them, the preteen now looking fully rested.

A scruffy brown blanket merely shift in the other cell, a growling noise. Zuko had woken with the sun and yet with only darkness to great him, he found himself curled back under the blanket just listening to the shifting of the hull as his groggy mind tried to calculate a clean a swift escape plan. At the rate he had to think himself out of situations he was sure he would be a better tactician than a warrior.


Zuko sighed under his raggy sheet. Maybe he should just leave the air-bender.

Now he felt bad.

Groggily sit up, his glare haft mast as he looked at the far too chirper air-bender given the circumstances, he grumbled, "Yes, Aang?"

“Oh, good you are awake. I was worried that they, uh ... hit you too hard. That spoon seemed to have packed a wallop,” murmured Aang as he rubbed the back of his head while giving a nervous grin, the chains jingling on his thin wrists.

Closing his eyes, signing, Zuko grumbled, “Yes, a spoon took me out ... Now, be quiet. I need to think.”

Watching Zuko pull his legs to himself, the older boy looking more and more miserable as time passed, Aang rubbed the back of his head again, frowning as he added, “Well, look at the bright side. We've gotten a night of sleep, they left us food and water for breakfast and ... it's warm. You did seem kind of cold up there on Appa.”

“Yeah,” growled Zuko, baring his teeth for a moment as smoke bloomed from between his fists. “Lucky that we have been captured again and chained to be sold off to the highest bidders. I couldn’t have imagined a better landing.”

Wincing at the other bender's bitter sarcasm, Aang sighed and shrugged his shoulder as he felt in his pocket for the key he had hi-jacked, before a smirk entered his face, the youth joking, “Hey,
"wanna see a trick?"

Zuko, tilting his head, ready to throw a glare at the young air-bender, nearly choked on his own tongue when the nomad turned around, made a few jingly noises and then turned around, dropping his cuffs to the floor.

"Ta-da!" said Aang in a jubilant tone. He actually chuckled at the surprise on the other boy's face as he floated to his feet, his ankle manacle long since gone, his wind ruffling the stale air in the hold.

Aang showed off his wrists, smiling, "See, metal-bending! Plus, the monks always said I was getting in and out of places I wasn't supposed to be, and that trouble followed me wherever I went. But now that Appa’s rested and we are rested and fed … it’s time for escape. Now just let me call on my metal-bending and I’ll get you out as well. Just give me your hands and I’ll metal bend you right out!"

Standing before the bars, smiling, small hands outstretched as if greeting Zuko, Aang asked, “Well, what are you waiting for? Give me your hands.”

Head falling back, sighing out of nose, Zuko found he couldn’t stop himself. He couldn’t stop the bubbling laugh that was slowly crawling up his throat. Before he knew it, he was laughing so hard he was almost crying. There was no way; there was no way that somehow this was working for Aang. Things never went this smooth for him. He had been a prison for a few months, but Aang managed to escape one restful night later?

It took all that was in him not to sob as he chuckled. How did Aang have so much luck … when he seemed to have none at all?

“You … okay? It’s just that you are laughing and smiling and … kind of acting crazy,” asked Aang as he wiggled his fingers at the other.

Zuko, coughing as his laughter died, he just shook his head, murmuring, “You just … you just reminded me of my sister. She has all the luck in the world and I … I was…”

Stalling, looking at the metal on his wrists, noting how his parka was the only thing saving him from raw wrists, Zuko frowned. This was not the time to snap. He had made a promise to himself. He would find Uncle. He had to. Rising to his feet for moment, trying to access the situation he offered his wrists to Aang, ready to see the other’s trick as he grumbled, “Sorry, Aang, I just was … I needed a good laugh. Now, give me the keys. You should have told me last night … that would have saved me a few hours of thinking.”

Aang’s impish smile died on his lips, the younger boy floundering slightly, “But, I … I wanted to make it look like a trick.”

“We have no time for tricks,” grumbled Zuko as he took the keys from the now frowning again, the shackles falling to the floor a moment later as Zuko rubbed his wrists. “Now, all of my plans have been changed. I need to think of a new one.”

Aang, an impish grin slowly pulling at his face again, chirped, “Oh, I already have a plan.”

“Really?”

Aang shrugged and gave the other a thumbs up.
“No, the water-savages clothes were bad enough. I am not wearing that.”

Aang merely looked over his shoulder, turning his attention back to the teenager as he nervously added, “Well, I think you look good in blue, but pirate? Who doesn’t want to look like a pirate?”

Zuko gave him a dead pan look as he kicked off the last shackle. How Aang had managed to not only to sneak a pair of keys and a map apparently off of the captain, he also knew there some clothes were as well. Zuko really was starting to wonder if Aang had some kind of supernatural ability to skirt around trouble and yet sickeningly succeed. It really wasn’t cosmosically fair. He wouldn’t look a gift ostrich-horse in the mouth though and decided to take it as it came. That was all you could do when it came to Aang apparently. But really, why pirate clothes?

Looking at the other, a part of him thinking that that oversized hat really did look ridiculous on Aang and where had he even gotten an eye-patch large enough to cover most of his scar, Zuko couldn’t help but deadpan, “Aang … why exactly do we have to dress up as pirates?”

Aang was silent for a moment, his eyes unable to look at the other before he whispered, “Because I don’t want them to eat Appa.”

Standing there, dumbfounded for a moment, the meaning of the words hit Zuko like a ton of bricks. The captain hadn't been down to bother Aang yet … which meant that Aang heard their conversation last night. Sighing through his nose, part of him understanding that Aang basically was saying that they had to do this now before the captain came down and offered Aang his ultimatum. They could not wait until night to sneak out … though a deeper part of Zuko did want to call the captain's bluff. He would not damage such a rare specimen.

Aang was not used to bargaining though and calling bluffs. Zuko would admit he wasn't very good at it, especially when it came to betting, but sometimes you just had to play your move and hope for the best. And it seemed he would have to be doing that now … with the help of an eye patch.

Zuko, picking up the pirate outfit, frowning at it as he gave a sniff, grumbled, “There better not have been a dead pirate in this. Come on … let’s go save Appa. And don’t you dare hug me.”

One awkward dodging contest through the ship later, an elaborate lie about being a very short set of pirates to a frowning Oh whom seemed far too intoxicated for this early in the morning. It was a lie that should not have worked but Aang had the universe apparently tilted in their favor. Then, one short jog later to dodge a set of footsteps heading their way, they ended up in the same room as Appa. Then, not even three seconds later, said fuzz-beast was woken by a rather exuberant crying of relief by Aang before he pounced on him.

“A-are you sure? Are all his legs there? We should count them again,” said Aang as he worriedly dotted over the now yawning beast. “Oh, hey, what's in that cage over there?”

Zuko was merely too busy to pay Aang much mind though, being in what was technically the cargo hold of the ship. He was trying to re-stuff the saddle bags that the pirates had apparently rummaged through. He cringed slightly at the air-bending scrolls and other things he happened across. Part of him wanted to leave them here, but he still remember … how weightless he had felt when he had air-bended. That soft voice in his head, so old and knowing, and a warmth that whispered happiness and freedom.

Despite himself, he let out a slow breath, trying to remember that warm happy feeling, like so many freed birds that could go wherever they please. He actually felt his hair rustle as well as the baggy
black and brown shirt that covered his water-tribe clothes. And he held it for a moment, that warmth. He only noticed that Aang had gone silent when the younger boy spoke.

“I heard the rustling of wind over loose snow the first time I air-bended. They say it’s different for everyone. What do you hear?”

Opening his eyes, thinking of home again, he mumbled, “Freedom. That is what I hear. Now, let’s get Appa’s saddle on and get out of here—”

There was suddenly a crash, a door being kicked open, the dust settling to the side to reveal a long ladle spoon and a cleaver sword. Said spoon was quickly pointed at Appa, a chopping motion made. Aang, his pirate hat almost falling off, cried, “He's come for Appa!”

Sighing, watching Aang scream for about thirty seconds before he decided he wouldn't be done in by a chef again, stood up and grumbled, “I will deal with the … spoon guy … you get that saddle on … somehow—”

“Already on it,” said Aang, already tightening the straps on Appa. Zuko might have taken the time to ask just how he had gotten that done already, but he barely had time to dodge a spoon.

Dogging said spoon with an awkward squat, Zuko found himself screaming out a supplies list for Aang to pack into the saddle bags as he tried to kick and punch his way out of this. He would have used fire-bending but they needed to get above deck before he tried to burn the ship down again.

Plus, looking into those eerie yellow eyes, he wondered if it would even work. There was just something off about the cook.

Dodging a cleaver that seemed to have been pulled out of nowhere, yipping as four other kitchen knives of varying sizes were thrown in his direction while making a dull thunk in the wooden wall behind him, Zuko was about to yell it was time to go when the deck suddenly opened up, warm sun rays falling down on him like a fresh breeze. He took that as a sign and finally lashed out with a wave of fire, the cook's eyes widening as he jumped behind a nearby water barrel. Zuko, part of him regretting not finishing a fight because he doubted that that was the last he would see of the mute, he race across the floor just as the infamous yip-yip filled the room. Grappling for white hair, he dashed up the side of the saddle as a now rested Appa took off with a bellow.

Zuko, gripping the saddle for dear life, almost couldn't believe their luck when they actually took to the sky without anything happening. They actually had supplies and a map and a well-rested Appa. He actually smirked slightly as he glanced back down at a rage filled crew. He wanted to go 'ha' but felt he need not disappoint his honor any further. Instead, he turned to Aang and offered a soft happy smile. Not had he freed him once, he freed him twice … and he looked ridiculous in that hat. It was drooping with feathers and … was that a tail and … ears?

Wait a minute.

“Wow, they looked mad,” joked Aang as he grinned that impish smile of his. “Must have really wanted lemur stew.”

Zuko was about to ask what he meant by that when suddenly a head with a large pair of ears popped out of Aang’s hat, and then before Zuko could even reel back in surprise, the small creature had launched itself from under Aang's hat, up his shoulder and on top of his head where it curled up as if getting ready to sleep.

Aang merely giggled as he grabbed onto his pirate hat to keep it from fly off, the pirate ship falling
behind them along with the fear of re-imprisonment. Smiling, Aang chirped, “I call him Momo and he's a flying lemur. I think he'll be great company.”

Zuko could only sigh, his shoulder’s drooping. And here he had thought he was getting out of this scott-free. It seemed he now had something else to babysit … or was it one more thing babysitting him?

Momo gave the frowning fire-bender no answer and merely yawned on top of his head, quite comfortable in his new position.

Chapter End Notes

I love my mental image of Cooky. Yes, I liked the pirates and sorry if it seemed a little rushed, but I wanted to make it like an 'episode' thing. Also, you can all thank Bloodmoon14 for the bribe-I mean gift art. Hope you all liked the chapter. I hope to have another one out for Halloween as well.
“But I don’t wanna,” whined Sokka as his sister helped tug him into the tent, practically dragging him to bed like a toddler.

“What? Are you four?” she grumbled, all but pushing her half-dressed sibling into his sleeping roll as she closed the tents flaps, hunkering down for the night. She had made a promise that he was going to get some sleep tonight and, as his overbearing sister, she was going to keep her promises.

Sokka, pulling off his seal skin boots lazily, frowned at his sister as she took one more nervous glance at the tent’s flaps.

“You’ve seen it too, haven’t you? In the darkness?” he said, his tone very serious despite how obviously exhausted he was. Just how many days had he gone without sleep? He was starting to look like a raccoon-dog.

“What? No, no. Don’t be ridiculous,” said Katara as she used a joking tone even though she was slowly becoming petrified that her brother was right, especially with all the children’s nightmares as of late. They had to get out of this forested mountain pass and somewhere safe. There was just something here. “You are just being paranoid. The lack of sleep has gotten to your fat head.”

Sokka frowned, as much as a person with his shirt half off could, and threw his shirt at her before he crawled into his sleeping roll, grumbling, “My head isn’t fat and don’t use that tone. I’m older than you.”

“What tone?” said Katara as she took off her boots as well, stripping as she got ready for bed.

“The ‘you’re crazy and full of lies’ tone,” said Sokka in a fake impersonation of his sister, placing his fingers next to his ears in a fake impersonation of hair loopies.

She glared at him for a moment, her eyes becoming slits as she looked at him with a critical gaze. “Did you just make fun of my hair?”

Knowing that tenor, Sokka immediately tried to deny it, “N-no, stop changing the subject. This isn’t about your hair. What’s with girls always talking about their hair? It’s about … whatever’s out there. The short ones-”

“You mean the children?” said Katara as she crossed her arms over her chest.

Waving his hand, obviously half-asleep, Sokka nodded and grumbled, “Yeah, them. They keep saying they are seeing things as well. Like shadows outside the tent, things breathing outside, and footsteps. They aren’t just having nightmares. I know something is out there. A hunter just knows.”
Katara gave her brother the look at the word hunter.

Shaking her head, her brother collapsing on top of his bed roll, she spared one quick look at the tents entrance before crawling into her bed roll, grumbling, “Just go to bed, Sokka. We have a hard day tomorrow.”

Sokka, a snoring black lump in the dark tent, could offer no refute.

Curling into her own bedroll, looking back to her brother and his ever present snoring, she smiled sadly. At least she had gotten him to bed. Now she just had fall asleep herself. Surprisingly, her eyes closed quickly, slumber overcoming her like a soft calming wave. She barely noted the shifting shadows outside the tent as she murmured to herself, “… There’s no such thing as monsters.”

Sokka, rolling over in his own roll, could only mumble-half-drool in his sleep, “Of course there aren’t, Suki … how about … how about you come over here and give me a kiss.”

He then chuckled and made a kissy noise in his sleep.

Katara rolled her eyes, but still dragged a secret smile to her lips because of her brother’s increasingly obvious love-sick antics. Her mind was somewhat calmed by the presence of something normal and ever-present as goofy Sokka. Everything was going to fine. Everything was going to be just fine.

Night had fully settled over the camp and a lone fire-cricket sang its lonely song. All was quiet, all was quiet, and yet the warmth of the camp’s single campfire did not calm the two sentries in their traditional green garb. Suki had decided to follow Sokka’s lead and rest this night leaving Temkin and Miki to watch over the traveling group. Miki was struggling to read a scroll with the weak firelight and Temkin was busy sharpening her blades. Neither had spoken since the faint moonlight had been cast aside by the heavy branches above them. It was a still darkness with only spots of soft moonlight raining down. Both acted as if it were any other night, but there was this crawling feeling under each of the warrior women’s skin. It was a twitching feeling like something was about to happen.

Both girls nearly jumped out of their skin when an abnormally loud snap echoed over the camp. The two girls were quickly to their feet with their fans drawn, both looking into the darkness. For a moment, there was no sound but the two girls’ breathing and the snap of the fire. Even the insects had died away into nothing. It was as if the entire world had died in a heartbeat, except for the two warriors.

And yet, nothing occurred. Nothing charged out of the woods hissing and snapping at the two trained warriors. There was only silence and the crackle of a slowly dying fire.

Gradually, Miki lowered her weapons and looked at the other girl with a shrug. Her words meek as she tried to sound as normal as possible, “A bit jumpy tonight, are we not?”

Temkin lowered her own fans, but kept them open and ready, her stern expression looking about the camp once more. It was still just the five tents circling the fire, nothing new, nothing different. Though, the insects were still strangely absent. There weren’t even any mosquito-gnats.

Miki swallowed, a cold chill now in the air and running down her back. Though, she considered herself a fine warrior in practice, she knew she was not as brave or strong as some of the other
members, such as Temkin. If anything, she would call herself more of a strategist.

Despite herself and her want to be as near the fire as possible, as if the warm flames were keeping something at bay, Miki added, “Perhaps to clear our minds of worry … we should make a quick round of the nearby area around the camp. Not too far, but just enough.”

Temkin, as stern as stone, slowly nodded her head, her fans clicking as they came to full attention. Then, with silent feet, the two girls separated to check the perimeter. There was the gentle sound of crushed leaves, grass and just the faintest sway of their battle skirts as they both listened intently for another snap in the forest. At first, all seemed well, that the world was as it should be despite the surprising lack of life.

And then there was the faintest thump.

Miki nearly dropped her fans in her haste to turn around and see where the thump had come from. She squinted her eyes, breathing through her nose deeply to calm the beating of her heart. It had to be an animal of some kind. Fire-benders were far more straight-forward. They did not have the best eye-sight in the dark either. They were creatures of the sun after all, but earth-benders were another story.

Walking a few more yards from the camp, titling her head to and fro as she observed the dim surroundings. Finally, she concluded that nothing was there and turned around. She quickly started heading back to the distant flicker of the camp fire. Was it her or had its flame gotten lower?

She immediately frowned, wondering if they had grabbed some green wood when there was another thump. It was closer this time followed about two more thumps.

She whirled around in a flurry of fan blades and skirts, her battle face on. She surveyed her surroundings with quick eyes … and again, there was nothing. She stood there a good minute or two as if daring whatever creature or beast that was in the darkness to come forward and show itself. Yet there was nothing, not even the crunchy of leaves, grass, or branches.

Swallowing, wishing away the cold feeling settling in her gut, she decided that it was best to go back to camp and regroup. She slowly turned, her grip so tight on her fans that her fingers were turning white. Yet, she barely got two steps towards the camp, towards the light, when there was another thump. It was so much louder and so much closer.

Exhaling, telling herself to just ignore it and head to camp, there was suddenly another thumping noise along with the slight ruffle of the wind. It was like something had just landed behind her. She even felt a prickle up her spine as if something had just breathed down the back of her neck, her hair moving ever so slightly.

Dragging in a choking breath, her joints feeling locked and tight as if fear was turning her joints to stone, she slowly tilted her head backwards. Her eyes widened and her pupils dilated at the towering figure behind her, still and unmoving.

It almost looked human, for the briefest of moments, and perhaps it once had been. But that graying flesh, that old outfit and those dried pulled back lips revealing black, rotten teeth told a much different tale.

Only having time to blink once, she felt her mouth open. Miki felt her lips part and her lungs press the air out of them to form a scream, a wail, a cry that would wake every being in the vicinity.

And yet, no sound escaped her. It was a soundless exhale of air. It was not a failure on her part. It
was as if the very oxygen had been stolen from her the moment she exhaled. She couldn’t even pull in another breath to try again, because the very atmosphere seemed to sting around this thing, especially when the beast dug its long dried-out looking fingers into her shoulder and forced her to face it.

Struggling, fear forcing her heart to patter like a dying little wet thing, she opened her mouth wider to try and pull in air again only to have a choking wet noise escape her.

The beast, this thing, almost seemed to smile at her struggle. Its free hand came forward and wrapped itself around her neck as if to hold her still while it tilted her chin up. Miki’s small hands quickly came up in rebut, grasping the offended gnarled limb as she tried to tug it off, but she was growing light headed. The creature, in turn, merely seemed to grin at her struggle, all its teeth bared. It then started to tilt its head downward as if to kiss her, its green hat threatening to fall off of its head. It parted its blackened teeth only the slightest and then, near her face, sucked in a rattling breath.

Miki squirmed at the dry sound, coughing and gasping like a drowning rat-mole. She even tried hitting it with her fans again, but it was like hitting wood.

The dead thing merely inhaled again, this time taking even the air she was choking on and leaving the girl gasping like a water-less fish. Soon, she couldn't fight anymore, her vision filling with spots as her body started to falter. The dead thing merely took another rattling breath, though, stealing the last of her air from her lungs.

Miki finally dropped her fans, a dead hand placing itself around the curve of her back as her legs gave out. The rattling noise continued until something that wasn't air was pulled from the suffocating girl’s mouth. A flicker of blue, of life and energy, the girls lips turning cerulean with the small lights loss.

Her mind going fuzzy, Miki swore she felt her soul tugging at her flesh, as if the creature was stealing her very essence. And yet strangely, the Kyoshi Warrior’s last thoughts were not if she was going to die, because she was sure that was her fate. Her last thoughts were of the children she had been requested to guard and of an Avatar in the Spirit World that she had been imaged after. A simple question hung in her mind above all others: had she lived honorably?

The next noise that anyone would have heard was Temkin crying out as she knelt before her fellow Kyoshi warrior, not a monster in sight.

…

It was warm, just the slightest taste of arctic chill outside, and she was here. Her back was to Katara, her hair sweeping down her spine like an elegant stream. Katara wanted the woman to turn around, to look at her, to glance in her direction with a smile that made the very snow twinkle. She wanted that woman to forgive her for bringing the wolf-badgers to their door, for bringing sorrow to her family and tribe.

Katara knew she had brought the fire-benders, the raiders, to the village because of her revealed abilities.

And yet, as far as Katara reached and as much as she cried out for the woman, she would not turn around to look at her. The elegant figure just drew farther and farther away, disappearing into the mist like a glacier floating out to sea. It was like the woman was going to melt away and be forgotten. It was as if she had never been.
Unfortunately, her mother wasn’t a glacier that had sat there for millions of years in defiance of the sun. She was already rotten and gone, bones on the bottom of the ocean. It was as if her mother was shunning her for bringing the fire-benders to their door, for doing this to her. For charring her beautiful hair and soft skin. For turning the snow red.

Katara opened her mouth … and screamed. She was so sorry. It really should have been her. It should have been her that died that day.

Jolting awake, part of her knowing that that was not her scream, Katara sat up, her heart in a panic. Her brother, having just sat up as well, hair every which way, asked, “What was that?”

Katara, sitting there for a moment more, wondering if she had actually cried out in her sleep, nearly balked when another distant cry rang into the tent's fabric walls.

“How, someone. Help me!”

Stumbling to kick off her sleeping bag while Sokka all but hopped out of the tent with his sleep bag still wrung around him like a worm, they both got out of the tent's flap in time to witness Temkin dragging a limp form in camp. Suki was already out of her tent at this time, dressed in her night wear with her fans raised. She looked around as if expecting flames to suddenly start their tents ablaze or for a man in red to come down upon the encampment like a red vengeful demon.

There was nothing, though, just Temkin’s almost sobbing as she dragged Miki’s form to the fire. She was trying to get the other girl as close to the fire as possible. Her words were hurried, “Please, help me. She’s so cold and … and I can’t tell if she is breathing. I think she collapsed. I don’t see any wounds.”

Suki, a grim expression forming on her face, swallowed loudly and snapped her head up as a small body peeked outside of a tent flap. The children were waking. She frowned harder and quickly spoke, “Everyone, go back to sleep. Everything’s fine. Miki’s … Miki’s just not feeling well. Back to bed with all of you.”

The eldest children knew better, of course, but obeyed. The rest of the Kyoshi warriors and the water siblings gathering around the fallen girl, though. Katara wasted no time in assisting Temkin. She personally knew the impact the cold can have on a body. It was not an uncommon death to say the least. To say that Miki already looked the part of a corpse was an understatement.

Miki was freezing, more like ice than the dead. She didn’t have a touch of warmth to her. Her lips were cerulean and her eyes were distant, almost misty. If it wasn’t for the small pitter-patter of a pulse under her skin and the almost death-rattle that seemed to escape her lungs from time to time, Miki would be considered dead.

And so they waited for two days for the warrior-girl to die or improve. She did not change, though. Nor did not get worse. Her rattling breath was a grim reminder to everyone, especially in the dead of night. Some of the children could barely sleep. The strange thing was that the children claimed it wasn’t her breathing that had woke them, but something else. Something rotten that would cast a shadow on the tents at night.

And so the paranoia grew. It was like a heavy thing that settled in ones lungs like it had crawled inside everyone’s mouths in the night and was trying to suffocate them.

Now Sokka wasn’t the only one not sleeping.

On the third day, when the fire no longer seemed warm no matter how many logs were thrown into
the flames, it was decided that they should leave. Though, they were all young Kyoshi Warriors and the mainlands were not well known to most of them, they all knew of a place: the ruins of Taku. It was an Earth Kingdom city destroyed early on in the war. Its crumbling walls would offer a brief respite from the shadows, the cold, and the fear that was drowning them.

It also had the Herbalist Institute.

Though, Miki was not dead, all the girls felt that if something was not done soon, her flesh would grow even colder until she was, finally, completely still. True, they were all warriors, but no one in the camp had ever been so personable with death. Not one of them was quite ready to become personally acquainted either. Making makeshift shovels and using them seemed like too much of a spiritual burden to bear.

And so, moving along now as if something was chasing them, the group of children and borderline adults made their way to a forgotten city in a largely forgotten place … for there was most assuredly something chasing them. Also, perhaps, nowadays, there was something worse than fire-benders.

... Sensu exhaled softly and released the arrow, a dull *thunk* barely heard from the far off target. Perfect, as was expected of any YuYan archer. Pulling his string back once again, ready to split the first arrow into something akin to splinters, the marksman stalled when he noticed that Colonel Shinu was storming across the training field of Pohuai Stronghold. His Second in Command was not far behind him. It would seem that the missing company had finally made itself known. They were due days ago to circulate some of the older soldiers out and allow them to head home. There were also some promising archers that were being considered for the YuYan ranks.

Curiosity engulfing him, Sensu tilted his head to one of his bow-brothers, Gijen. The taller man merely stood still as if he did not recognize the other archer’s silent request, his bow string drawn back in absolute stillness. His fingers dared not even shake. He could probably pose like that for hours which, even to a Yuyan, was a considerable feat. Then, with a cool exhale, he released.

Sensu was not surprised when the arrow went through the target, imbedding itself in the wall behind it. Colonel Shinu would probably give them all a berating again about missing and hitting the wall, though, all of them knew they rarely missed.

No need for an exchange of words, the larger man with his impassive features followed Sensu silently to the inner gates that guarded the compound. The uproar and whispers from the pikemen’s walkway was stirring up everyone’s curiosity even more. What could be so interesting about a small company? Were there Earth Kingdom soldiers on their tail? Unlikely. Since the long ago loss of the port city of Taku, the area had all but been the Fire Nations lands. Yes, there were still small parties that liked to stir up trouble and even scrimmages from time to time, but this empty side of the Earth Kingdom was all but the Fire Lord’s.

Regardless, an alarm would have been sounded if there were enemy soldiers at their gate.

Then, just when Sensu was eying the compound’s walls ready to scale it to calm his silent curiosity, the larger inner door finally opened. Dust from the dirt road scattered for a moment as if to obscure the scene. When the dust finally settled, not a company of thirty men entered but only the shadow of one man. No … two men.

One survivor was obviously a simple pikeman, his pike barely held in hand as he stumbled forward. His other arm was around a compatriot’s waist, half dragging the other man.
Wasting no time, the colonel’s Second in Command called for a healer while two fire-bender’s came forward to take the barely conscious man from the shaken and pale pikeman. He looked ghostly white, his lips light blue and his eyes were so wide he seemed afraid to blink. The pikeman looked like a spooked animal.

The Colonel, ignoring the rush of a healer to the soldier that had been laid right there in the dirt, turned his attention to the shaken soldier. Colonel Shinu’s words were brisk, “Report. Where are the rest of your men? Was there an ambush?”

The pikeman just stood there a moment, his teeth chattering as if he was deathly cold even though it was the middle of the day. Then, voice horse and broken, he choked, “T-they’re gone. It took their breath … it took their breath.”

Raising a brow, the colonel asked in a confused tone, “Stole their breath? What are you talking about? Talk some sense. Gather yourself! You are a soldier of the Fire Nation.”

The pikeman, now grasping his pike’s staff like it was the only thing keeping him standing, tried to gulp in some air before he barely whispered, “T-they picked us o-one at a time … T-they had to be dead, corpses from the grave … They had to be a hundred years old with the clothes they were wearing. They were the dead.”

The man then fell to his knees, nearly hysterical. The healer had both men spirited away before the colonel could properly digest what the pikeman had said. Slowly, he looked out at the surrounding forest, the old trees still and silent. He quickly signaled for the gates to close, to separate his men from the wildness of this place.

Colonel Shinu, walking away, whispered almost too softly to hear, “The spirits must be angry.”

The two archers heard his words nonetheless.

Looking at each other, Sensu frowned and, as always, Gijen was impassive about it. Well, someone was going to be sent on a scouting mission to see if a Fire Sage would be needed to ward off any unhappy spirits. It was one thing to have a man wander off and follow a spirits song into an old battle torn area. It was another thing to lose an entire company.

Sensu tried not to cringe as the Colonel made eye contact with him, eyes blazing with determination as his superior commanded, “Sensu, Gijen! Collect a small party of YuYan archers. I want you to go out and see what this madness is about.”

Gijen merely nodded and Sensu tried not to grimace. Ugh, spirits, angry ones from the sound of it. It was not something to be trifled with. Some people believed spirits were powerless since they had fallen out of favor. Sensu knew better though. Spirits never faded away or fell out of favor with the world. They were here before man, and they were very, very patient.

Meanwhile, far from creatures that crept and crawled stealing the living’s breath, there sat a teenager with a flying lemur on his head. In all truth, Zuko had tried batting the creature off more than once yet, somehow, the little thing seemed rather attached to his head. Aang’s personal theory on the matter was that Zuko’s head was warmer than his … and that there wasn’t a hat to compete with.

Sighing as a tail swung back and forth into his line of sight, Zuko grappled with the little beast and wrestled it off his head … only to have it latch back on in a new position. There then was the
crunch of something being devoured on top of his head, making the teenager’s eye twitch.

He couldn’t take much more of this madness. He was going stir-crazy.

Ignoring his living hat for a moment, Zuko glared at Aang as he stuffed a map back under his shirt. It had been snagged like so many other supplies during the pirate incident. Truthfully, even though the thought of those heavy restraints on his wrists had nearly brought forth a full-fledged panic attack at the time, Zuko bitterly acknowledging that the stop on the pirate's ship had been beneficial. The pilfered supplies would hold them over and Appa had gotten some rest. Aang had even jokingly referred to the incident as the *Pirates’ Inn*. Come for the food and a place to rest, leave with an adventure.

Zuko had not found the anecdote amusing to say the least, but currently they had bigger issues. For one, Aang was not showing him the map he apparently nicked. They had been heading in the same direction for nearly half a day and had yet to even see a bird, a sure sign of land. Zuko didn't want to risk falling off the bison merely to wrestle it from Aang, but he was starting to consider it.

Sighing, frustration getting the better of him, he angrily flopped back into the saddle bags and tried to sulk in a way that Aang wouldn’t notice. He was the eldest after all and, though, his sister never looked up at him, he’d at least try and sulk in a dignified manner.

Aang, who had been riding on Appa's head, must have noticed and laughed at his small fit. He turned slightly and smiled cheekily as his pirate hat jerked to the side. Somehow, it was still on his head, though, Zuko had no idea how. The prince was personally convinced that Aang had tied it to his head. It probably had something to do with Zuko threatening to burn it in the night the first chance he got.

Trying to keep the mood light, Aang asked kindly, “How about you take a small nap? We'll find land sooner or later. The map's right.”

Zuko, sighing, resisted the urge to snap at the far too optimistic bender. “Well, maybe you should just let me see the map and then I will decide if I should worry or not.”

Aang merely patted his shirt, as if mocking the older boy, and that was it. Zuko’s strained patience could take no more and the fire-bender jumped forward grabbing Aang’s shirt. He then dragged the air-bender into the saddle with him while wrestling for the map. Appa, at this time, had his reins yanked and roared as he nosedived below the clouds.

It only took about ten seconds of flailing on Aang’s part before the larger boy was all but sitting on him, threatening to fry his feathered hat. Zuko’s smug grin quickly disappeared when he saw a huge X on the middle of the map, though. This was obviously a pirate’s treasure map.

“Yes! You stole a pirate’s treasure map?!” roared Zuko, his enraged expression turning to confusion when he noticed that Aang had somehow gotten away from him and was now half hanging off the saddles, pointing downward.

“Hey, hey, it’s land! Land! See, the map was right! See, an island,” exclaimed Aang, nearly bursting with excitement the closer they got to the forested island.

Zuko, cautiously looking over the edge, immediately frowned and sighed. He wondered if it was too late to throw himself off into the waters below. “And it’s shaped like a skull Aang. A *skull*.”

Looking back down at the nearing land mass, tongue bit between his teeth as if concentrating, the air-bender merely replied, “Really, I think it looks more like a pineapple.”
Staring at the younger bender for a moment, Zuko relented to the lunacy of the situation. Did it really matter if it looked like a skull? No, it was land. That was all that mattered … and yet part of him was telling himself that he would regret thinking that way. Zuko, for the most part, hacked it up to paranoia and decided he would deal with whatever the island threw their way later.

“Hey, since we are here, we should follow that X on the map.”

Zuko couldn't face palm hard enough.

Chapter End Notes

I just love writing creepy-freaky scenes. I almost made this a Sender Man kind of monster, but decided to stick with something a little more traditional.

As for my absences, it’s mostly because of negative reviews about personal preferences (more than constructive criticism). It has been beating down on my self-esteem when it comes to this story. I really do love this story, but lately I cannot even bring myself to read the reviews. So I’m sorry if you left a beautiful review and I never commented back. I still adore this story and will do my best to pick up my old schedule again.

Also, I want to thank Bloodmoon14 for the inspiration to update. She really warmed me up to an update with some nice fanart for the fic. Thank you for the beautiful piece Bloodmoon!

(Revisions December 2016)
“See, it’s a pineapple shaped island,” said Aang as they peered down at the island below them. Zuko had insisted that they do a quick once over to make sure it wasn’t inhabited by cannibals, undead skeleton-pirate-ghosts or something equally ridiculous and yet completely plausible in Zuko’s current reality.

“No, it is a skull,” grumbled Zuko, more than ready to sleep on something that wasn’t ice or fur. Sand had never looked so good.

“No, it’s a pineapple. See, look at all the happy trees and dolphin-rays and … giant … saber-tooth … sharks,” said Aang as they flew over the island, doing a quick sweep of the place.

Zuko, braving to look over the edge of the saddle, glared at the air-bender when he saw that there was something more than dolphin-rays in the crystal clear waters. It was a beautiful island, even if it was nowhere near as warm as the islands Zuko grew up on, but it wasn’t covered in ice or snow and for that he was thankful. It seemed they were heading into a warmer climate. Though, honestly, he would have preferred to see something more of the gray coloration with the wonderful scent of burning coal in the air. He feared that he was already forgetting what his room looked like or Iroh’s favorite tea.

Zuko sighed at the thought and gripped the saddle tightly as they started to descend toward a little cove. Zuko could not get off the saddle fast enough when they hit solid ground, the sand shifting below his feet in a glorious manner. If he had less pride, Zuko might have fallen to his knees and ran his hands through the sand, thankful for its sturdy and grounded existence. He might grow a little more used to the open sky overtime, but he still preferred the solid earth under his feet.

“Wow, look at this place,” said Aang as he floated down, not phased in the least by Appa’s dramatic flop to his side even though it shook the earth. The beast was asleep before Aang even touched the ground. “It looks completely deserted. So why do you think the pirates marked this place? Do you think it’s their summer home?”

Zuko gave the perky air-bender a flat look. He could see where this was leading, especially since the air-bender seemed skittish, excitable and oh-so-ready for an adventure.

“Aang … there is no summer home and, before you ask again, no, we are not looking for the 'X' on the map. As far as you are concerned, there is no 'X' on the map and there was never an 'X' on the map. In fact, there was never a map,” the exiled prince ground out.

“But you just took the map from me-”

“Aang-”

“And you are currently stuffing it into your boot-”
“Aang-”

“And it’s probably going to smell like feet-”

“Aang! Yes, there really is a map, but it is no longer is your concern,” snapped Zuko, before he quickly felt guilty as if he had just kicked a puppy-armadillo. “… Let’s just see if you can find that pond we saw overhead and get us some fresh water while I set up camp. Could you do that?”

Looking over his shoulder at the forest, then back at Zuko, and then at the forest, Aang’s excitement was almost sweating out of his skin. Said air-bender already had his glider in hand and was yelling back quickly, “Okay-bye-see-you-later-I’ll-be-back-soon!”

Zuko, who had the water skins in hand and an unamused frown on his face, watched as the air-bender flew off. He grumbled out, “But … the water skins?”

Sighing, the prince watched the air-bender flew in the direction that was most certainly not the fresh water pond. Zuko flopped down into the sand, sat there a moment and then collapsed on his back. He was glad for the quiet and the warmth of the sand which was seeping into his very bones. Never would he take the heat of the sun for granted again after spending a few hellish weeks in the North Pole. He could just suck up the rays forever … too bad he had to be the adult in this situation.

Not that he minded Aang. He was so much better than Azula. She would have already resorted to cannibalism.

Amused, the teenager smiled to himself at the ridiculous thought, glad for the feel of a faint wind ruffling his straggly hair.

…

He tried to breathe deeply, tried to pull in a calm collection of air and feel it stoke his inner fire. He tried to feel it warm his insides and bring him a flicker of warmth, but all he felt was a chill to his bones that could not be chased away. Even the heat of the steam room nor the slowly warming waters could chase away the cold. Nothing could chase away the guilt nor the aching loneliness that rested in Iroh's heart.

In the quiet of his room, from the men and the eyes of those who might see fault in his actions, alone lotus tile lay before him. He wanted to hate it. He wanted to curse it for forcing him to make the decisions he did, but it wasn’t like he was the Grand Lotus. He didn’t have all the tiles in this game.

Truthfully, they didn't have to head to the North Pole. They really hadn't. He knew there were water-benders scattered around the world. He had even created a technique or two from watching water-benders. Though, lightning would never be water.

He could not say the same for air-benders, though. He had known of the manhunts. He had even been aware of the traps that had been set up years ago to end the lives of any stragglers, but he had never seen one himself. Apparently, even though the nomads were a nomadic people and wandered where they pleased, the time of Sozen's comet had been during a month of importance to the Air Nomads. Almost all of them had returned home in order to honor their traditions.

It had been an effective slaughter largely because the nomads were not a violent people. Most had never known murder, even in self-defense.

There was a rumor, though. A rumor that had always piqued Iroh's interest, but even with his lotus
tile he could not reveal if it was true or not. After all, not all lotus flowers are seen upon a pond's surface. Some hide just out of sight, right beneath others.

He knew it was because of his bloodline, the reason he could not fully grasp the entire truth of the White Lotus. He partially accepted this for not even he was completely free of from being tortured for information. After all, a good General knows when to know something and when not to …

It still hurt, though. Heading to the North Pole and treating Zuko like bait in order to scare up some air-benders. Not that he would every utter such a coarse thing. He had merely hoped to gain the attention of a passing breeze, a form in yellow, an air-bender to train Zuko.

Instead, Zuko was taken from him.

He had been so angry that night he could have boiled the oceans and cared little if the Moon and Ocean Spirits were boiled with it. And yet he had refrained, because he also knew that where he failed to know if the rumors were true if Air Nomads still existed or not, the Northern Water Tribe would know.

And they had.

Breathing in deeply, trying to soothe his aching heart, Iroh opened his eyes just before there was a knock on the door. It was a familiar flicker. An inner flame he was both glad and troubled to feel … for it came alone.

All of the candles wavered in the room for a moment as he thought of Jee's lack of success, but at least he came back alive. Turning to gaze at the candles around him and how low their flames were, he tried to perk them up as he inhaled a deep breath. He then answered calmly, “Come in.”

He was greeted by the door swinging open, Jee stepping into the room. He was still in his water tribesman garb. It seemed that he hadn’t even wasted the time in changing. Iroh was glad to see that the crew had returned safe, but the empty void behind the lieutenant spoke volumes. He knew that they had not brought back his nephew, but it still was going to hurt to hear.

Iroh tried to keep the lump in his throat from choking him. It was the ball of despair that was seemingly crawling up from his heart as if seeking to suffocate the life out of him. He kept his features cool and collected, though. He had not lived as long as he had by being rash. He would let the other man speak before he gave into sorrow.

“Ah, Lieutenant Jee, you are back. Tell me, what news do you bring of my nephew?”

Jee bowed slightly and knelt before the prince on his knees. He looked at the floor for a moment as if in thought before he met the older man’s gaze. His words were clipped and professional as usual, though, something seemed to linger there. Just below the surface.

“I’m sorry to interrupt your meditation, Prince Iroh, but I felt you would like to be informed as soon as we boarded about the situation,” said Jee, his features betraying nothing of what was discovered.

Iroh nodded slightly, asking, “Yes, you are correct … and I fear since my nephew isn’t here, that something unforeseen has occurred.”

“Yes, I’m sorry. We were unable to rescue Prince Zuko,” Jee admitted, steadily ignoring the pained expression on the older man’s face as he continued, “Because he already escaped, apparently on the back of a flying bison, from what we understand. Not much else is known. There appears to have been a lot of chaos during his escape.”
Iroh chuckled softly, relief easing the lump in his throat and the ache in his heart. “I wouldn’t expect anything else from him. You know he has never been reserved for his actions.”

Trying to keep his eye from twitching, Jee blatantly agreed, “He sure isn’t. Unfortunately, I fear he departed with a bit too much flair from the Northern Water Tribe. You see, that night, we saw a light, a ray that went straight up into the sky. When we finally got behind the wall, we discovered that Zuko had used ... the Avatar State to escape.”

Iroh sat back, the lump in his throat returning, but for entirely different reasons. It took him a moment to swallow it down before he dared speak, “That certainly doesn’t bode well, does it, Lieutenant Jee?”

Nodding slightly, Jee agreed as his brow wrinkled. They might have a freed prince to find, but he doubted that they would be the only ones looking for him. They could only hope that the Fire Lord was too busy searching amongst the infants of their land to think that the Avatar was near adulthood and already learning his trade. Because he knew, as everyone on their ship knew, that no amount of royal blood would save Zuko from his father.

After all, it hadn’t spared him three years ago.

“So,” Jee hesitantly started, “Where do you think the young prince went?”

Gaining a flabbergasted expression, Iroh admitted in a bewildered tone, “How would I know? That boy has always had a terrible sense of direction. Knowing him, he's probably heading to the Fire Nation.”

Jee honestly couldn't disagree with that.

…

After enjoying the sun for a few minutes, Zuko had set camp up including a small fire pit. He had even tried fishing ... and failed marvelously at it. Luckily, he was saved by his living hat: Momo. The little creature obviously had not always been in a cage. It found fruited trees with little ease as well as nuts on the ground. Zuko just had to follow after until they had ended up at a fresh water source. Unlike his wayward partner, he remembered the water-skins.

Boots sinking into the beach’s sand an hour or two later, a small sack burden with nuts and berries that were Momo-approved, Zuko was surprised to see that Aang was already back at camp. The young boy was seated upon a large rock near Appa, staring out at the water as it crashed upon the shore, singing its endless song as tiny shells were pulled back into the sea.

“You forgot the water skins,” grumbled Zuko as he knelt before the fire pit he had dug earlier. He didn't know much about surviving in the wild, but that was one thing he did know how to do. A quick palm of flames engulfed the dry driftwood a moment later as he continued to grumble in his usual sullen tone. “I gathered some nuts and berries. Momo was eating them so they shouldn’t be poisonous.”

Aang, turning his head slightly, his usual cheerful visage gone, merely nodded, “Yeah, sorry about that. I was excited to be somewhere that wasn’t ice-covered. I just wanted to see if things were like in my dreams if things were as vibrant and exciting away from home as I remember it. It’s not as exciting as the stories the older benders tell at the temple. It’s just so ... quiet.”

The air-bender was silent for a moment, silence clinging to the moment like barnacles upon the rocks, until the boy continued, “There was always humming in the temple, the squeal of boots on
Zuko, sitting on his knees, was suddenly struck by the younger boy’s forlorn attitude. Was Aang … homesick? He hadn’t seen an ounce of that when he was in the North Pole, but then again, his Master was with him the whole time. If there was anything he had learned while away from Iroh, home was defined by who was there and not where you were.

The older boy cringed away slightly at the younger boy’s expression of open sorrow. The prince still wasn’t one for showing emotions. He was a royal and, even at a young age, one knew what they were supposed to show to the populace and what not to. One just didn’t cry as the royal family. If anything, you were cold. Unfortunately, if you acted that way too long enough, it became what you were.

Azula was always much better at hiding her emotions than he was. He still didn’t know if that was a good or bad thing because he wasn't sure she had emotions at all anymore.

He remembered when she used to cry, laugh and giggle. The leap from that mischievous yet not-completely-homicidal girl to the thing she was now was something he did not like to dwell on. It was like some dark thing had crept into her room one night, crawled down her throat and slowly scooped her heart out, one emotion at a time.

She was now a cold thing, a spirit with some unknown vendetta roiling around in her gut.

But this wasn’t Azula, and this wasn’t the royal court. This was just Aang … a homesick little boy that had somehow wormed his way into Zuko’s good graces.

Sighing, feeling the map crinkle and crunch in his boot, Zuko relented, feeling like an older brother that just had to give in. He knew he was going to regret this. He just knew this was going to backfire and blow up in his face like everything always did, but he would be lying if he didn’t admit that the remnants of the little boy he used to be wasn’t at least bit curious. It was a pirates’ map, after all.

“It can be that way sometimes when you are away from home. Trust me, I know that feeling better than anyone. But,” pulling the pirate’s map out of his boot, Zuko conceded, “I’m sure this map can provide at least a distraction.”

Aang nearly fell off the rock in his hurry to get down, his smile once again returned.

“Really?! Oh, this is going to be the best –”

“Only for an hour or two, before the sun goes down, and then it’s back to camp. We probably won’t even find anything. Pirates always bury their treasures.”

Grumbling to himself, glaring at the map with such venom one was sure that it would soon burst into flames and be little more than ash. Zuko finally allowed his temper to triumph and folded the pirate map almost calmly before throwing it on the ground and stomping on it. He knew that he should have been minding his temper like Uncle was always telling him, and he kind of did … he could have started it on fire.

After all, they had been walking in circles for nearly two hours! Whoever had written this map was either a complete imbecile or a mad genius. Both would char just as nicely either way, as far as Zuko was concerned.
Aang, meanwhile, was up in a tree, looking about with a curious eye. Though, it was true that he did a quick fly over on his own, he hardly could see through the entire canopy. It seemed like only a day ago they could see their breath and still sight an occasion glacier, and now they were in a temperate yet fair biome, life bountiful trees spiraling about in thick masses. It reminded Aang slightly of the tundra in spring, when everything rushed to live and die in a few short months, the sunlight ever present. A part of him might have been overcome by the lush vibrancy of an island covered in plants when he had only ever know white glimmering snow, but he remembers beautiful places, far greener and far more vibrant.

At least he thought they were his memories … Or perhaps they were just dreams.

Or maybe someone else's dreams.

Stalling on a branch, feeling a slight breeze ruffle his yellow clothing, Aang's crouch became a stand as he spotted something glimmer in the trees. Something was out there.

“Hey, I think I see something!” Aang called, looking down just in time to see Momo squeal and fly by the air-bender, nearly knocking him off of his perch. He had a map in his paws. Lee, hot head still blazing, was running after the poor lemur, growling, “Give me back that map! It’s not food!”

Aang, clutching the tree trunk at this point, blinked a few times, trying to gather himself from a near fall. Then, noticing that Lee's blue parka was quickly blending into the wild flora, Aang called out, “Hey, wait for me!”

The air-bender then gathered his balance and hopped to the next tree-top using the wind to press him forward through the branches, loose leaves trailing after like lost little orphans. At the speed he was going, he almost missed it as he flew past Zuko, Momo in one hand and the map in another. The teenager was standing at the entrance of a clearing.

Thinking fast, Aang placed his feet in front of himself and ran up a tree trunk before doing a quick summersault. In a hop and a skip, he glided down to the soft earth at Lee’s side. A loud, “Woah,” escaped him.

“How did we even miss that?” said Lee as he let Momo go, tucking the map into his parka before the little sneak could grab at it again and nibble even more on it. Momo merely screeched in distaste before he flew off into the clearing, looking for something less papery to probably eat.

Aang, amazement keeping him silent for a moment, finally grinned sheepishly and chirped, “Well, at least those squiggles on the map make a lot more sense, right?”

Zuko stared at the ruins, his good eye wide in amazement. True, it was falling apart, large stones scattered and scarred as if a typhoon had claimed it once and taken half of the stonework with it, but the design was unmistakable. Even with the overgrowth of trees, moss and ferns springing up and growing between stones, he knew what this was. He recognized the architecture. It was something he had been taught about in his historical studies, something he barely remembered. It was a glimmer of long lost ancestors.

These ruins shadowed the designs of the deserted city of the Sun Warriors.

It was a single temple. It probably was one of the many small branches that had split off of the great Sun Warriors and been forgotten. These ruins were the only sign that those ancient people had been here at all. It was something he knew Uncle would have fawned over and would have observed with an intrigued eye. He, on the other hand, felt his blood go cold.
This relic of the Sun Warriors probably didn’t mean they were anywhere near the Fire Nation …
but it did mean they were heading in the wrong direction. Instead of heading toward the main
content, the Earth Kingdom, they had headed west, which explained why they had been over the
ocean for so many days and the sudden change in temperature. They were probably nowhere near
the Northern Air Temple. They were probably closer to the Western Air Temple! They had to be
on an island between those temples and the Northern Water Tribe!

Agni! Why had he let Aang navigate?

Because he was slightly petrified of Appa, offered his inner voice.

Not that he would ever admit that.

To anyone.

Ever.

Plus, the island was the only land on the map. So they really had no choice in the matter.

Yes, the situation was just wonderful.

Unable to stop himself, Zuko plopped down right there in the overgrowth, disbelief forming on his
face as he mumbled to no one in particular, “We went in the wrong direction.”

“What?” came an echoed response, a sooty air-bender popping out of a stone dragon’s mouth that
he had been exploring. Momo popped out of his shirt a second later coughing up a puff of soot.
They hadn’t even noticed the teenager’s angst-moment. There was exploring to be done, after all.

Glaring, every princely part of him wanting to have a fit, Zuko relented. He blamed the spirits for
all of this. Throwing his hands up, stomping ahead, Zuko yelled to the sky, “Nothing! The spirits
just hate me! Let’s go explore the stupid ruins and look for some probably haunted pirate treasure!
That sounds just about right!”

To say Aang was ecstatic, even if it turned out to be cursed pirate treasure, would have been an
understatement.

…

“I’ll slit their bellies! I’ll crush their skulls. I’ll leave them on a barren island with nothing but the
skin on their backs! I’ll feed them to that bloody bear in the hold! I’ll-“

“Wait … bear? You mean platypus-bear, right?” said Oh as he stopped picking at the dirt under his
fingernails, looking up at his captain who was busy tromping around his cabin.

To say that the captain was enraged when he discovered his two captives, four if you counted the
flying bison and the lemur, were gone was an understatement. He wasn’t happy about losing the
map, either. It had been found in a chest full of old documents that washed onto shore. True, they
had discovered a water-bending scroll in said chest and had finally found a buyer, but the map
hadn’t revealed much. The local fisherman in port said it was home of a spirit that betrayed the
dragons of the island. Said spirit was cursed to wander the world forever until the dragons returned
to the island. Laughable, yes, but no one wanted to test it. That is, until now.

“No, bear!”

“You mean a walrus-bear?” said Oh further, his gaze falling away from the haunted word
bouncing around in his head.

“No, the BEAR,” growled the captain.

“You mean the –“

“No, just bear!” barked the Captain as he glared for a moment, just daring Oh to ask again. “You really don’t go down in the cargo hold very often, do you?”

Oh merely shrugged, grinning in a lazy manner.

“Regardless,” grumbled the captain as he folded his fingers together and stared at nothing, “How much longer until we get to the island?”

Oh, staring at the ceiling as he popped out his bottom lip in thought, shrugged, “Sometime tomorrow evening, I’d wager. We’ll probably miss them … unless, you know, the curse is true and they are already dead.”

The captain raised a brow, thinking back to those angry golden eyes of the young fire-bender, “Oh, I doubt it. I think there is too much pride in that one just to lie down and die without a fight.”

Oh merely grinned wickedly, shrugging, “I don’t suppose you’d like to make a wager on that, would you?”

The captain frowned, his words dry, “And I suppose half of the crew already has made this wager already, haven’t they?”

Laughing, the thinner pirate leaned forward and put up four fingers. “The current betting pool is: they’re dead; they’re not there; we are all going to be cursed, so what does it matter; and the ever popular: the half-breed has killed the air-bender. Dare to place a wager, my dear captain?”

Raising a brow, the captain dwelt on the last option. It sounded as good as any. After all, there had to be a way to pass the time as the ship rushed to that small island’s shores. The water-tribe half-breed was a nice catch, but a supposedly dead race, the air-bender, now that was something else entirely.

He had never been one for curses, anyway.

Smiling, he slammed down a gold coin on his desk, a greasy grin gripping his lips, “I’ll take that wager.”

Chapter End Notes

Not much going on with this chapter. I’m trying to rush this island/pirate arch along, but I feel if I rush it too much I won’t do it justice. Don’t worry there’s actually plot afoot there, but quite honestly, we need some Aang antics or it wouldn’t be AtLA. As for Uncle, it’s been forever since we had an Uncle scene. Sorry about that, there really isn’t much going on with him except for guilt. Poor Iroh.

He needs a hug. Next chapter is going back to the water siblings. Later loves!

(Revisions December 2016)
“It barely looks seaworthy,” said Yugato to himself as he looked at the wooden ship with a critical gaze.

He really wasn't much of a boat fan. He preferred flying bison though they were currently one short now. Not that anyone else minded. Pakku and Jayendra were already jumping onto the wooden ship, the bow ebbing back and forth as the last of the supplies were loaded. It had been four days since the Avatar had escaped and the other Masters were rearing to go (except, maybe, Kun Tien; a forever silently and brooding mystery). The Chief had requested patience, though. Scouts had to be sent out first to at least get an idea of what direction the Avatar had headed in. It would be fool hearted to set out without a direction.

Luckily, they had found a passing merchant's ship and had received word of not a bison, but a single older-modeled Fire Nation ship headed towards the mainland. It was the boy's ship, the one that had his uncle on it … and the Fire Nation Prince, Iroh. They must have waited almost this whole time to reclaim the boy and finally their supplies ran out.

And though the scouts could not exactly tell where the Avatar had gone, all the Masters knew that Avatar Lee was heading in the direction his uncle. If not currently, it would be sooner or later. The boy truly cared deeply for his uncle.

Yugato, personally, didn't even know if they should be following Lee or not. After the fire cyclone, Lee was now an unknown. In all honesty, Lee had always been an unknown. At least that was how Yugato felt. They knew very little about Avatar Lee. Just that he was on a ship with his uncle and apparently Prince Iroh. The strange thing was … the Fire Nation never came to knock down their gates after they had captured Lee.

The Fire Nation was silent.

Truthfully, Prince Iroh had been dormant since the death of his son and heir, Lu Ten, but how could he be so latent? His ship had been attacked after all and something was stolen from him. Yes, the eldest prince was nearly a forgotten relic, a memory of greatness that had almost claimed the city of Ba Sing Se, but why would he do nothing?

Prince Iroh was now as much of a wild card in this as Lee it seemed.

Two peas in a pod really.

“You seem deep in thought Master Yugato,” suddenly interrupted Pakku, the man standing with his usual pose on the boat, his arms folded behind his back. He didn’t even seem affected by the to and fro swaying of the boat. Not that Yugato was surprised. Pakku was of the water people after all.
Nodding, folding his hands into his long yellow sleeves, Yugato admitted, “I dwell on if this is wise … to follow the boy I mean. He doesn’t want our knowledge. I fear we were too … hasty … with our actions towards him, and now there is only resentment there. Chasing him will only cause him to begrudge us further. I still feel it is not wise to follow him.”

Pakku frowned and simply asked, “Would you rather we do nothing? Should we let the Fire Nation claim the world, claim the Avatar? Kill the Avatar? If they didn’t know of his existence then, they will know it now given his last stunt.”

Neither of them dared look in the direction where the city was little more than rubble.

“And what of your other wayward student, Aang? I know that you trust Lee with him, but what of Lee’s uncle or Prince Iroh?”

Yugato sighed, feeling tired and defeated, his world too heavy. Pakku was corrected. He trusted Lee not to hurt Aang, for he knew Aang and the Avatar were connected, but he could not speak of the company Lee kept.

He decided to speak his worries aloud, because, even though they were of differing mindsets when it came to the Avatar, they both wished for the same conclusion.

“Yes, I worry about Prince Iroh. He could have called an army down on our heads. Instead, he waited. I do not know what he wants and that is the most disturbing part. He is an unknown,” said Yugato, his frown deepening.

Pakku nodded, a cold breeze running over his form and ruffling the fur on his parka, “Yes, I have been dwelling on that as well. We have not confirmed if it was Prince Iroh, but given that gold-accented armor, I do not know who else it could be. Though, it makes me wonder … If he is the prince, what does he want with the Avatar?”

The two men stood there a moment, dwelling on it when the answer hit the both of them like a stone. In fact, the answer came with a green-clad Master, Kun Tien, as he headed towards the soon to be departing boat.

Kun Tien’s words were softly spoken, almost in a hypnotic manner, as he walked up to the other Masters, “Not to interrupt the conversion, but I couldn’t help but overhear. From what I have learned, in court, a man of power only keeps secrets from his betters for one reason: he wants more power. From what I know, after his son was lost, Prince Iroh lost his claim to the throne. So it stands to question, for a man that has almost everything he could want: what is the one thing he cannot have?”

Yugo's hands dropped to his side at the realization and Pakku's stern posture became even more guarded. Pakku couldn't help but speak what everyone was thinking, “So you think he wants his throne back. You think he wants to overthrow his brother with the Avatar as his pawn.”

The earth-bender merely inclined his head towards the other two benders as if acknowledging the Master’s words. He then stepped down into the boat, heading towards the small inner quarters without another word. He truly was a man of few words and thus left the two Masters with new and troubling thoughts.

Pakku quickly regained his previous posture, though, his gaze cold as he turned to Yugato, his words clipped, “Perhaps Master Kun Tien has answered our questions for us, Master Yugato. It’s no longer a question of should we follow the Avatar and your student, but what will happen if we do not?”
Yugato shuddered at the thought. He did not know if that was a good thing or not that Iroh wanted to overthrow his brother, or if they were completely wrong in such idle thoughts, but he was certain of one thing: a good man cannot stand and do nothing.

And with that thought, Yugato stepped onto the boat.

“… this looks welcoming. The destroyed buildings and charred remains really compliment the local flora real well. I’m just so excited to be here!” sarcastically yelled Sokka as he resisted the urge to throw down his pack and stomp on it irrationally.

But he resisted.

Barely.

This was not the time or place. He was the only man in the group after all, even if Suki may or may not have kicked his butt multiple times. He had to look strong.

Suki, one of the smaller girls in her arms, placed the small child down and gave Sokka a tired but humored smile. The little girl, Yuet, merely sat down right there in the dirt, curling her feet under her dress because her feet were cold. She had lost her shoes in the rush to get to these ruins, to a healer, and away from whatever was following them. If they had been successful in their long jogged trek, Suki couldn’t say. She still couldn't honestly say if something was after them or not. Though Miki’s mysterious ailment seemed to be more than just that, but there was no proof. She honestly would just feel better being out of the open.

“So,” said Katara as she knelt down next to Yuet and offered her the fabric doll she had made a few weeks ago on the ship. The young water-bender had dropped it a while ago, but even Katara was too tired from the long march to rush ahead and offer it to her. In fact, everyone was tired, exhausted, and the thought of taking another step just seemed cruel. Katara had to ask nonetheless, “Where is this herbalist institute that you were talking about anyway? Given the look of the place … I’m surprised anything’s still standing.”

Then, if on cue, a forlorn building in front of them took this very opportunity moment to collapse, the young adults cringing as a wave of dust hit them all. If that was a bad omen, it was even worse when Suki, looking more than a little guilty, slowly pointed at the stairs next to the small group. The long, long, long stairs all the way to the top of a mountain.

“It’s up there. Unfortunately.”

Sokka, his eye now twitching, was unable to contain himself. He messily wrestled his carrying pack off, cookware banging about, before throwing it to the ground, his boomerang coming off at just the right moment to smack him in the face.

Katara, despite herself, laughed. The sound seeming to echo in this dead place, uplift it even. True, there were a lot of unknowns about right now from the thing following them, Miki’s still form, the danger of Fire Nation soldiers around every corner, but at least some things never changed.

Sokka really did bring it on himself.

A small giggle fit later along with a welt on Sokka's forehead, they started up the stairs like a grim army: too tired to march and yet too disadvantaged to remain still. They had to march and march they did up the chipped, cracked and still-charred steps. The end never seeming to come and yet almost over. It was an estranged freedom. It was like they were almost at their destination and yet
would never get there in time. After so long of there being nothing but trees and ruins, they would finally have a roof over their head and a friendly face.

At least Sokka hoped it would be a friendly face. Preferably a pretty one as well, but given his luck … they were far more likely to run into a hoard of fire-benders.

Meanwhile, not very far from the grumbles of many children hiking up seemingly endless stairs, a small collection of YuYan archers made their own investigation of troubling events. Namely, where the rest of the small company of Fire Nation soldiers had gone. Thirty were meant to arrive at Pohaui Stronghold, but they only received two. One stuttering in madness and the other unconscious. Sensu had been unable to disappear before he had been volunteered for the small expedition into the wilds around the mountain to see where the supplies and men had gone.

At least he hadn’t been the only one. In fact, there were five other unfortunate souls that were to accompany him.

Not that Gijen, his bow brother, cared. He was rather stoic about all things he encountered. Sensu was sure, that if a spirit of death stood before him, Gijen wouldn’t even flinch. The other man always had his back so he could not ask for more.

Well, maybe he could have asked for better company.

Bhao could be just such a whiner.

“I still can’t believe we got this crap job,” grumbled Bhao as he hopped to the next tree, the rest of the YuYan hopping nearby. They were keeping to the trees to ignore any ambushes. Not that any of them thought they were actually dealing with men. “And how did I get suckered into this? Sensu, you could have asked someone else to join you. You just wanted to steal my nap time from me, didn’t you?”

Sensu merely stalled long enough on the same branch to give Bhao a small smirk before he fired off a shot at a nearby tree, a rope attached to the arrow. He didn’t even miss a beat as he swung across the small clearing underneath.

In truth, Bhao wasn’t his first choice. He just happened to trip on the other archer. Literally. Bhao was notorious for napping in hazardous locations. In spite, he had recruited the whiny man. So Bhao’s punishment was entirely self-inflicted as far as Sensu was concerned.

“Hey, don’t you swing away from me. I can do that trick as –ummmp!”

The youngest YuYan’s whining was silence by Wenzhou’s large hand as he slapped it over the younger archer’s mouth. In truth, Wenzhou was the only one that could silence the whiner in non-combative situations. It was probably because he had large hands or that he was just plain intimidating to look at with those scars on his face.

One did not mess with Wenzhou lightly … well, except Bhao. No one knew how he wasn’t dead yet.

Either way, the professional composure the YuYans were generally known for was instantly collected, all of the YuYans suddenly gathering in a tall sturdy tree as Wenzhou silently pointed to the west. There … a thin line of smoke reached for the sky, fading into nothingness as it drew higher and higher. The six men looked at each other and nodded in understanding. They then changed direction. The smoke was like a beacon.
Jumping through the trees, it was immediately noted that a stillness had seemed to settle over the forest. It even grasped the singing of the birds. In fact, there were no sounds except for the wind and the creaking of a lone wagon wheel as it turned around and around, the wooden transport tilted on its side.

From the trees the YuYans were now situated in, they looked down at the clearing with solemn expressions.

The first thing they noticed was that there was rice all about. It was scattered on the ground like so many little pebbles. One might have thought it snowed with how it covered the encampment … if it wasn't for the scorch marks all around the area along with a field of arrows and broken spears sticking up from the ground. It looked like a battle had occurred in the dead of night, tents half ripped down and charred.

It was far too still.

Only after making a quick survey of the area, did the first YuYan dare to touch the ground.

Ye Lui, a superior tracker, moved as if his feet had barely touched the ground. He seemed to walk on the balls of his feet, shifting around every embedded arrow and abandoned helmet on seemingly weightless feet. He even appeared to miss every grain of rice as he glided over the encampment, looking at tracks and for survivors. If he had ever been endowed with a bending ability, everyone would have assumed it would be air.

A few minutes later he made his way back to the small group of YuYan that had stood and waited silently for his analysis.

His words were softly spoken, barely a whisper in case anyone was around to overhear.

“Looking at the tracks. It is obvious that they were attacked in the night. Most stumbled out of their tents after a struggled was put up in the west quadrant of the camp. Someone probably screamed. The rest of the company put up a fight. They obviously saw their attacker, unlike the night guards. It seems the non-benders were trying to stay near the fires while the fire-benders went on the offensive, but then they were just gone. Most were seemingly plucked from their positions. They were not dragged away. And then the rice … it looks like the last ones were fighting with the rice bags … or throwing the rice about. Why I can't really imagine. Perhaps the whole attack was over the supplies and they wanted to make a point of destroying it. Though, burning would be much more effective if you ask me,” said Ye Lui critically, though one could see just the slightest hints of worry on his features.

Ye Lui, always a professional, even if he was being mauled by a platypus-bear.

Too bad no one believed his theory when Bhao couldn’t help but make a very valid point, “Well, I would accept that as a possible theory if there were any bodies … or for that matter blood.”

An abnormal chill filled the air following those words as if a miasma was slowly crawling away from the scene before the six men. It was hard to tell when things were supernatural in nature, given that spirits left very little proof, but sometimes there was just this feeling in your gut, like a slight tugging at one's soul.

Right now Sensu felt like something was trying to drag his soul up his throat. He actually was starting to feel physically ill standing near the clearing. He knew that his mother had been particularly sensitive when it came to spirits. His father had taken her to a Fire Sage twice to have a wayward spirit removed from her. Sensu, personally, hadn’t had many true interactions with spirits
and because if his mother's cursed abilities … he prayed he wasn’t so unlucky.

Clearing his throat, trying to dislodge the nausea that was crawling up his trachea, the appointed leader of the group spoke, “I doubt we will find any more answers in this clearing. We should break up into groups of two and fan out. We will return here when the sun hits its highest point.”

The group all nodded in understanding and once again took to the trees. The only proof they were there at all were a few loose leaves falling to the ground.

…

Sokka was crawling. He was crawling desperately up the steps to the herbal institute.

He was almost to the top.

He was almost there.

He had to beat them.

He wouldn’t let them win.

Never give in! Never surrender!

What would his father think of him if he stopped here? If he failed here at this pinnacle moment of manliness?

Sweet glaciers! He could hear their footsteps right on the stone behind him.

They were catching up to him. He had to crawl faster! Faster! No, no, no! He could hear them hopping steps right behind him. He could see their shadows creeping up the steps.

Drawing ever closer.

They were almost on top of him now.

He had to -

“NOOOOOooo! Manliness!” cried Sokka, probably ten steps from the top as two little girls in blue puffed and scrambled passed him to get to the final and last step. Sokka supposed that’s what he got for encouraging the children to race him up the steps, to prove their manliness.

Of course, the winners would be two little girls.

“We are manliest men!” giggled the two sisters, Min and Lin, as they grunted and tried to flex their little girl arms at the top, the two of them panting and laughing for the first time in days. Not that Sokka blamed them. It was as if, as they climbed the mountain, that the shadow that had been chasing them had found something else to cling to.

“Well, I am third manliest!” cried Toh Je as he raced passed a panting Kyno, flexing his arms along with the two sisters.

Three more children ran past along with a frowning Kyno. Then, to add injury to injury, Katara purposefully pushed Sokka back down as she ran up the last few steps, crying, “And I am the eighth manliest!”

“Hey, you pushed me!” whined the elder sibling as he frowned at his sister’s mischievous grin. He
had thought the whole trip up the steps was going to be a daunting climb for the children, yet everyone seemed to be in a fine mood. Maybe there wasn't anything following them. Maybe, it was all in their heads. Maybe, it was just the forest closing in on them. It just seemed wrong that there was so much greenery in one spot.

“And if you don't hurry up, you'll be lucky to be the tenth manliest,” mocked Katara with a playful grin as Suki walked past Sokka with Yuet on her shoulders, the warrior woman giggling slightly at Sokka's flabbergast expression.

“Well … I was carrying the most in my pack,” quickly defended the water tribesman as he rose to his feet, his heavy pack rattling with loose cookware. He then glanced behind himself at the rear guard and Miki's bearers. He eyed the four female warriors and quickly decided that he didn't want to be beaten by a comatose girl.

Cookware jiggling, he quickly made it to the top step, puffing out his chest as Suki looked up at him.

Suki merely sighed but looked no less humored by his antics as she put the child down. She didn't know why but Sokka's playfulness was cute. In fact … he was really cute.

Katara merely rolled her eyes at her brother's behavior and Suki's slight blush. She, instead, turned her gaze to the building before her. Just like the rest of the dilapidated city, it was beaten by the weather and time. It obviously was still cared for though given that the roof wasn't caving in. All the vines crawling about made one question its stability, though.

Temkin reluctantly left Miki's side to take the front guard with Suki, the two girls taunt as they headed to the decorative door. It was a heavy thing likely made of stone, yet it was carved with a lovely elder tree, roots spinning all about like strands of hair. Giving each other a look, Suki reluctantly knocked first. The sound was entirely too loud and haunting in this abandoned city, some of the younger kids even jumped, and yet the echo rang off into nothing.

The door remained stubbornly closed.

After a few minutes of awkwardly standing there, it became obvious that no one was coming.

The two female warriors looked back at the rest of the ground and their expectant expressions. Suki finally shrugged, “Maybe no one’s home. She could be gathering herbs.”

No one believed that, of course. Everyone was asking the same thing: had the thing in the forest already done away with the herbalists that lived deep in the mountains?

And yet, just when the youngest was about to start sniffling at the hopelessness of the situation and the thought of walking back down all those stairs, Sokka stepped forward. The pots on his pack jingling and completely destroying his manly pose as he stated, “Here, let a man do it.”

Despite herself, always glad for Sokka's perfectly timed interruptions, Suki chuckled as she watched a ladle swing back and forth on Sokka's pack. She couldn't help but wave a hand at Min and Lin as she cheekily added, “So you think Min and Lin, the manliest of the group, can get the door open then?”

Sokka floundered, his voice cracking, “B-but they are little girls. I told you my pack was too heavy, and Katara pushed me -”

“Hey!” Katara defended.
“-I had a handicap. Plus, they cheated.”

Min and Lin could not deny that last part as they both blushed and glanced guiltily at each other. Truthfully, they both had hanged on to one of Sokka's legs for a period of time, weighing him down. So they hadn't exactly run up the whole thing.

Suki, meanwhile, could barely contain a grin as she waved her hand at the heavy stone door, murmuring, “Handicap, you say? Well then, show us your manliness. How about you open the door.”

Jutting his chin out, chest puffed out slightly, Sokka swaggered over to the door. He then looked at the door with a critical gaze as if analyzing the best course of action. Then, to everyone but Katara's surprise, Sokka merely grabbed the knocker, leaned back at a hundred and twenty-degree angle and grunted as his heels dug grooves into the earth.

And so this continued for about three minutes, and yet, the very moment Sokka seemed ready to give in, ready to claim it was an impossible task and that they would have to find another way in, the door finally swung inward … a seemingly half dead thing before them.

Of course, it was a push door.

Also, everyone screamed.

...Ye Liu and Zhaoqi both slid down the loose shale, the shifting stones tumbling down the slope with the two YuYan archers. Zhaoqi had no idea where they were heading, having rapidly changed direction, but he rarely questioned Ye Liu. Ye Liu always saw something in the field, and it generally led him where he needed to be. So Zhaoqi stopped questioning his bow brother long ago.

In fact, it wasn’t long before they happened upon what looked like an old trading route to Taku. It wasn’t the main trading route because Pohuai Stronghold and its men now owned the road. This one was older. Probably rarely used even before the fall of Taku, but apparently not forgotten. Even he could easily identify the new footprints in the earth and sand.

It looked like a small group had happened by. They were in a hurry from the look of it … like something was chasing them.

Zhaoqi frowned and squatted before the tracks, looking at them critically as Ye Liu headed forward to scope out the path. He was a tracker like all YuYan though not as well versed as Ye Liu. There appeared to be a small group, probably six or seven. Maybe a few more. It was hard to tell with the rushed and incomplete footsteps. In fact, these footsteps were small. Almost as if this was a group of –

“It is a group of children,” finally interrupted Ye Liu softly as he stood before Zhaoqi once again, a small blue shoe in hand. “They are likely escaping from the recently taken town of Wihan. Should we go after them or continue looking?”

Zhaoqi, the older of the two, stood and looked down the path, watching as it curved and was devoured by the encroaching forest. He tilted his head in thought. Wihan was a farming community in a neighboring valley which was recently taken over for its resources. And, as all Earth Kingdom villages, it put up a fight.

They really were a proud and stubborn people.
Predictably, a fair amount of the population was either killed, imprisoned or managed to smuggle themselves into the wilds. He personally now wondered how many victims the forest had claimed if something was truly about.

Regardless, the village needed bodies to tend to the fields. He could tell that most of them were children, but there was at least one young male in the group that was old enough to work the fields. If the boots were any indication. There were at least four or five older girls as well. Working age. The other children were small, yes, but could probably do minor farm labor if they came from Wihan. As a farmer once told him, once you help till up that earth, it's always in your blood. Even a child of a farmer was more capable on a farm than a full-grown soldier.

Taking the blue shoe from Ye Lui, his mind decided, Zhaogi nodded, “Wihan needs more able bodies. We just can’t let the conquered go where they may, especially not children in this … wild place.”

Both of them knew he wasn’t talking about the animals.

“Plus, given their hurried pace and how close they were to the ambushed camp, they might have an idea of what takes new recruits but not the rice that they carry,” said Zhaogi as he turned his gaze upward. It was almost mid-day. He doubted any of the other YuYan had any more luck than they did. They would likely follow the escaped children. Though why the children were heading in the direction of the abandoned city of Taku was beyond him.

There was nothing but silence there.

…

“Ahhhhhhhh!”

The old woman stood there a moment, watching as the group of children screamed in her general direction. What was wrong with kids these days? Yes, she hadn’t brushed her hair today and still had her mud mask on, but youthfulness had to be strived for. They were all acting like they had never seen a beautiful mountain hermit before.

Shaking her head, Miyuki rubbing against her legs as she went outside to her afternoon bird hunt, the herbalist cackling slightly to herself, “I knew I was still youthful for my age, but never have I seen so many open-mouthed expressions over it.”

She couldn’t help but grin to herself at how quickly that shut them up.

…

“So … she’s been this way ever since,” finished Suki a few minutes later after the screaming incident. Currently, she was standing next to her friend Miki, who had been laid on a stone slab in what looked like a room overgrown with flora. She might have found it to be a lovely room, even interesting as plants she had never seen before bloomed all around her, but her friend's state wouldn't allow her mind to wander in such a way.

Katara, meanwhile, was placing a warm towel on Miki’s head to try and warm her up. It was strange that the old woman hadn't even told them to grab a blanket for the fallen female warrior. Then again, the old herbalists might just be crazy. She certainly seemed it.

“Can you do anything for her? Her breathing just keeps getting slower and slower, and … I swear I don't even feel a pulse anymore,” Suki continued as she tried to keep the tremble out of her voice. “And with the … dangers … in the forest … We just can’t drag her along anymore.”
Not that she had any proof that there was anything at all in the forest. The children were just scared.

Rummaging about a set of drawers that were half grown into by some type of blooming fern, the herbalist’s legs finally stopped waving in the air. She finally found it. She quickly came up for air covered in dust and cobwebs. The women eyed the girl on the table and the three teenagers in the room, the rest of the children setting up for supper and a place to sleep for the night.

The short lady then hummed to herself and tapped her chin as she murmured, “You're scared of the dangers in the forest you say.”

Before Suki could even awkwardly dismiss the worries Sokka had confined to her about, the old woman was making her way noisily across the room, dragging a stool up to the slab Miki was on. She then did a curious thing. She placed not medicine on the table, but a little mirror before Miki’s blue-tinged lips and waited until the unconscious girl sucked in and released a rattling breath.

The healer frowned, pulled the small mirror away, rubbed it on her dress as if to clean it and tried again. A humming noise soon filled the room as if she old woman was stumped. She then opened Miki’s mouth and gazed into it for a few moments before she hummed again. The healer then jumped off of her stool and trotted away from the small group. In the hall, the old woman went towards a walk-in cupboard full of dry goods. There was suddenly a thump, the three teens all jumping from the noise. Then, a grunting echoed in from the hallway, followed by what sounded like a dragging noise. This continued on for about a minute or two until Sokka stood up from his seating in the corner of the room and went out to help the old woman.

It sounded like she was dragging rocks out there.

He was surprised when she all but threw a bag of rice at him when he offered to help her.

The old woman merely cackled as Sokka all but fell on the floor under the bags sudden weight, “Use your upper arm strength … not that it looks like you have any.”

Sokka, now laying on his back with a thirty-pound bag on his chest, glared as the old woman walked around him and back into the room. Really, she was like a hundred and twenty years old. How did she even managed to throw that?

Grunting as he sat up, rubbing his chest as he grumbled to himself and rose to his feet, Sokka threw the bag over his shoulder and sauntered back into the room. How did he always manage to be everyone's punching bag? Maybe it was karma and in his last life, he was a fire-bender. He honestly was starting to wonder.

“What exactly am I supposed to do with this? Katara is the cook. Not me,” said the teenager when he got into the room. He decidedly ignored the pointed glare of his sibling.

“Oh, just put it around the body,” said the old woman.

Sokka nearly blanched and dropped the bag, Suki threw her hands over his mouth, and Katara dropped the warm towel she had been about to dab Miki’s forehead with.

The old woman just continued to mix whatever concoction she had as if she did not realize the youths' horror.

Sokka, unsurprisingly, was the first to reclaim his wit, “What you talking about old woman?! She’s still breathing. You haven’t even tried to do anything for her.”
Frowning, her humming stalling, the herbalist sighed and motioned towards Miki. “What is there to do? She is caught in a moment of death, boy. Her breath comes out cold. There is no warmth to her. Her heart is now still. Whatever she is … it is likely no longer alive. Whatever she is, it is now a supernatural thing. A dead thing. I am sorry children. I am but a herbalist, not a spiritualist. Now, cover her in rice. It should keep her from rising.”

Nearly dropping the bag of rice again when Katara bumped into him in her hurry to get away from the still girl, Sokka choked, “Rising? Supernatural?! B-but she is breathing!”

Shaking her head, taking two copper coins from a bag she had and placing them on Miki’s eyelids, the old woman turned to the horrified little group, “No, that is just her body trying to call back its chi. When it grows restless enough it will rise and take someone else’s instead. It may take her a few days, it may take her a hundred years. But it will never be enough. So is the nature of Jiangshi.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry, Katara and Sokka’s arch is going to drag a bit, but I am bound and determined that if I’m going to put spooky stuff in a fic I am going to do it right! Regardless, the way I see it, there was never enough spirits in the first series. As for Jiangshi, or hopping vampires, Wikipedia can help you there though I will be taking some creative license. As for the Masters, a reviewer was wondering what was happening with them so I threw them in. I need to do a Toph scene here soon as well. Not much else going on except for I need a new beta reader. As some of you may have noticed, this was not beta-read. I swear I go through beta readers every year. Most just stop reading fanfiction or lose interest in the genre. Anyway, are there any of my seasoned readers, people that have been on the site for a few years, that could take the time to beta read or just skim over chapters before I put them out? Just a grammatical read over would be nice. Just send me a note or leave a review if you are interested. Thanks.

(Revisions November 2016)
Under the Island Part 1

Chapter Notes

Thanks to the new betas: CACrest and Grey Noise!

I also wanted to thank everyone else that made an offer: Dearest Destiny, Googum, JinyiWei, Lettervreter, Miriti1, Next Stop Willoughby, NotWellKnown, Puck_Rock, RentFan27, theb3arjew, and TheMightyErrg.

Image by me: Chapter 35

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Of course, they were at the ruins for more than two hours.

Zuko honestly didn’t know why he had thought that this would be a quick trip around the island. Despite being quick-footed, Aang dragged his feet incredibly well when he was interested in something. Not that Zuko disagreed. These ruins … They were beautiful, haunting and entrapping all at the same time. There were stories carved in these walls of dragons, Sun Warriors, and spirits abound.

If he had been a different person in a different time, he could have spent days here lost in these stories trying to comprehend things long forgotten.

It was then, standing before a huge still-intact mural of two dragons dancing about each other that...
Zuko suddenly noticed that he was just as bad as Aang … And that Aang was now missing. Apparently, he had been standing there so long, staring at the two magnificently carved dragons that Aang had disappeared. Twilight had also started to descent on the island. Torch bugs and luna moths were actually starting to come out.

Zuko blinked, surprised.

When was the last time he had stood somewhere long enough just enjoying the tranquility of a place?

He frowned … and thought of his mother.

He immediately turned his thoughts elsewhere.

Now, where to start looking for Aang? With Zuko’s luck, he’d probably found ghost pirates or -

“Hey, Lee? You done? Wanna catch torch bugs?” suddenly came a voice from above the mural, nearly making Zuko jump into a bending kata on reaction alone.

Quickly looking up, golden eyes wide and searching, Zuko immediately calmed when he caught sight of a slim form. It was just Aang lying in the moss on the top of the stone mural, his thin fingers waving about while lazily trying to touch a luna moth fluttering above his head. Momo was little more than a living pillow at this time as well.

“Aang,” grumbled Zuko in slight irritation. “How long have you been up there?”

Shrugging, the boy sat up and dangled his feet over the mural as he admitted, “A while. Like when the sun started setting, but you seemed to be enjoying yourself so I decided to wait. It’s nice here. The air is warm, but it still has this crisp nip to it. I wouldn’t mind sleeping right here honestly.”

Shoulders sagging, Zuko was unable to be angry at Aang. It was technically his fault they weren’t going to get back to the camp before nightfall. “Well, we better get back before it gets too dark.”

Whirling his right hand slightly, a flame was suddenly born in the prince’s palm. It lit up the area like a little beacon, illuminating the mural before him and the surrounding area. Zuko was almost surprised when there was a sudden glistening from the wall, a thousand little red diamonds reflecting the flickering light all about. He squinted, intrigued.

There wasn’t actual treasure still here, was there?

Aang, noting how the area was now reflecting little red diamonds everywhere, jumped down weightlessly with Momo now on his shoulder. The lemur screeched at the red reflections and immediately jumped down, trying to catch one of the moving red lights as he scampered through the surrounding flora.

Only watching Momo for a moment in amusement, Aang looked up at the mural along with a curious Zuko. Perhaps they would actually find some treasure on this little escapade, or at least something shiny. Either way, it seemed Momo approved. Whatever it was, it was under the moss at the very top of the dancing dragon mural.

“Wow, pretty. What is it?” said Aang as he waved his hand about, watching little reflections of red light dance over his skin. It was something they would have never noticed in the daylight given all the tree cover above them.

Zuko, taller than Aang, reached up and tugged at the hanging moss. The squishy vegetation came
down after a few tugs revealed more of the mural. A red gem the size of a chicken-pig egg was embedded above and between the two dragons as if they were both protecting it. At first glance, it would seem the gem represented the sun, but it didn’t have rays falling from it like all the other sun murals. It seemed delicate for lack of a better word. There was also this flaming circle carved about it like the gem was on fire.

Squinting, trying to get a better look in the gloom, Zuko brought his flaming hand upward and to the gem.

Was that supposed to be flames? Why was the gem on fire? What did it represent? Wait … Was there something behind the gem? Was that a small mirror? Well, that would explain its reflective properties, but what purpose could a -

Click!

Realization hit Zuko just as he felt the ground beneath his feet shift and open like a gaping maw. He had heard of such devices that reacted to light, such as the summer or winter solstice temples. He supposed it made sense how that beautiful, red gem was still there. It was booby-trapped and anyone that revealed it to the light had fallen like they were falling now.

…

She knew her dress was getting filthy. She knew she was getting dirt all over the dress her mother had newly tailored, but she had to say goodbye. She had to say goodbye to one of the few beings she had dared to call a friend, even Master. He had never judged or expected anything of her. He did not care that she had milky eyes or that she was the daughter of a powerful family.

He cared not for such things.

He only cared for the steady grip of the earth below him and the quiet solitude it would offer when he would dig a pit so deep and dark that the world forgot he was there. She wished she could do the same.

She wished she could run away and survive in the wilds like she had tried to do when she was six. She would love it. She would love to throw her shoes off and forget things like ladies’ etiquette and manners. Why did a blind girl need to know how to properly bow her head when meeting a noble in order to not make improper eye contact? She couldn’t even see?! No one wanted her. She was apparently defective, broken, fragile and something to be hidden away. Why did she have to worry about the proper amount of wrist to show when pouring tea?

These were unimportant things! Why couldn’t her parents understand that?

She wanted to fight, shift the earth, and feel its power and strength rumble below her. She wanted to feel powerful and in control. Everything she wasn’t in that home.

She was strong here. She was equal!

Finally, after waiting what felt like hours, she felt the earth rumble slightly below her. She knew she could look for him, but it was best to wait. He had taught her patience and stillness, to wait for the right moment.

Even after all these years … she knew where the cave was where they first met. It was the one she had ran away to when she was five. She had been crying, and he had come. Unbidden and sturdy as stone.
She felt the earth tremble and shift, the smell of wet earth suddenly everywhere along with hot breath.

He had come.

She smiled grimly to herself.

Despite herself, despite always being so strong and unyielding, the Blind Bandit as she dubbed herself, suddenly felt five again. She felt lost and over-encumbered with the weight of her name. Tears were something only for sissy-babies and were something the Blind Bandit would never sink to. But right now she wasn’t just the Blind Bandit. She was Toph Beifong. A girl that no one knew about whom wasn’t trusted with her own existence.

Either way, her Master did not judge. He would not care if she laughed, screamed or sobbed.

He would not care if she got his fur wet.

Toph felt a tightness in her throat, a hiccup threatening to exist as she reached out and felt forward for his nose and hairy head, for the sturdiness of her Master and longtime friend: the badger-mole.

He did not have a name. He didn’t need one. She could tell it was him by the way he moved and shifted the earth.

Burying her head into his fur, she hiccupped, her words choked, “How could he say that to me?! My own father! How could he say that?! I don’t want to go to that city. I don’t want to be trapped behind those walls… I don’t want to be caged. I want to fight.”

She hiccupped again, the next words burning her throat, “But he said I had to be a lady, and if I wouldn’t go to Ba Sing Se they were going to start binding my feet! He wanted to make sure to keep me home and make sure I was presentable like I’m of no use until I’m married!”

At that a sob finally escaped her, the young girl burying herself into the badger-mole’s fur. She wanted to detest her father. She wanted to hate him! She wanted to hate the man that raised her and treasured her, yet trapped her away on the property’s grounds like a fragile little doll.

Why couldn’t he be more like a badger-mole?

Why couldn’t he just accept her as she was?

She could be more than a bride.

Deciding that this would be the last time someone made her cry, Toph did that very thing. She wept for her hate, sorrow, and misguided love … and the thought of living in a city surrounded by walls.

Holding onto her Master’s fur like it was the last time, Toph told herself she would survive for she was of the earth and the earth endures.

Ba Sing Se wouldn’t break her.

If anything, she would break them.

“Not good! Not good! Not good!” yelled Aang next to him as they started to fall, Zuko’s flame going out in surprise … but not before he saw the spikes at the bottom of the opening pit. Apparently, Aang had seen them as well for he cried, “We need to air-bend!”
Bend! B-ah … What did Yugato say again?!

‘Spin and flow. Come now. It’s just like dancing,’ offered a soft whisper in the back of his mind.

For the first time ever, Zuko was thankful that the connection with his past lives was so prominent. Pulling in a deep breath of air, he released it along with everything that seemed to weigh him down. Twirling and twisting to the ground unknown, Zuko allowed this moment of freedom and weightlessness without shame. He didn’t want to admit it, but he liked air-bending. There was so much freedom there. So much so a part of him wanted to run away with it and forget his name was Zuko. He would rather be Lee.

Just Lee.

There were a million Lees.

There was now a flow of wind all around him as he slowed his descent, the air billowing his clothes and grasping at his hair. Before Zuko could truly grasp the sound of freedom though and the strange peace it offered, he met the ground with a grunt. He was half surprised with how quickly the ground came. He had slowed down enough to avoid breaking his legs and a pit full of spikes, but it was still a hard landing. He honestly didn’t know if he would ever be as graceful as Aang. Then again … this was the first time he had really tried.

Standing there a moment on shaky legs, his heart racing from the fall, Zuko patted himself down for puncture holes just to make sure. He was rarely that lucky. He then remembered one small detail, “Aang! Are you alright?”

From across the dark room, there was a sneeze and then a, “Yeah, but it’s kind of dusty and dark down here.”

Zuko agreed. There was barely any light pouring in from the high square hole above them. He couldn’t help but state the obvious, “Yeah, I can’t see anything either. Be careful when you move. You don’t know where the spikes are. I don’t even know how I missed them.”

Aang was about to agree when a thought hit him, “Yeah … Uh, Lee? Aren’t you a fire-bender?”

Zuko could have slapped himself.

Immediately bringing a flame to life in his hand, blush on his cheeks, Zuko bit out, “I know that! How could I forget? I-eggh!”

The Avatar’s flame nearly went out when the cavern lit up and he saw Aang, the spike pit and the huge collection of skulls behind said air-bender.

Coughing in his free hand, feeling like he had to protect the younger bender from the sight of dozens of skulls grinning grimly at Aang’s back, Zuko murmured, “Umm, uh. Yeah. How about you come over here and … notlookbehindyourself.”

Aang, still dusting off his clothes, gave the old boy a look, “Uh, what was that? Did you say something was on my back?”


Aang stood completely still, horror pulling at his features as he whimpered, “There’s something on my back … isn’t there? Is it a spider-bat? A giant spider-bat? I’ve never seen one or anything, but
I’ve read about them and seen drawings in scrolls. They say that they bite really hard and that they aren’t very friendly. You still shouldn’t squish them though because they are important to the environment, but I really don’t want one on me!”

Zuko was kind of dumbfounded by the ramble and shook his head, “Um … no, it’s not a spider-bat.”

Aang immediately lost the wide-eyed and petrified expression on his face. He even sighed and ruffled the air around them with a small calming breeze.

“Oh, that’s a relief,” said Aang as he placed a hand on his chest. “Sokka once told me this story about giant spider-bats and how they ate this guy’s face and laid eggs in his belly. I had nightmares for weeks. I couldn’t get a wink of sleep until the other Masters assured me there weren’t any spider-bats at the poles. But it was that time of year when the sun was out most of the day so then I couldn’t sleep if I wanted to, and it was just a really, really terrible year and – Hey, where’s my staff?”

Zuko choked as Aang picked his staff up … a few skulls being jarred loose from their pile and rolling before the air-bender’s feet like so many horrible marbles.

Aang immediately stopped smiling as one hit his foot. He even blinked as if surprised there was a human skull at his feet, staring up at him with its black eye sockets. Slowly, Zuko placed his hand over his eyes, because he couldn’t watch this meltdown.

The air-bender, unsurprisingly, turned around immediately, a dry croak escaping him, “Oh.”

There was an awkward moment of silence, something dripping in the background, as Aang choked, “There are skulls down here. Lots and lots of skulls.”

Zuko dared moved his hand. Well, that could have been worse. He expected screaming, wailing or something. Aang might have been happy-go-lucky, but that didn’t mean he handled death well.

“Yes, there are a lot of them,” said Zuko awkwardly. “Let's just find a way out of here.”

“Yeah sure,” said Aang as he shuffled away from the skulls, still unable to look away from the bone pile. “It is a pirate island after all. Of course, there had to be skulls. It could be sooo much wor-”

Shuu-Clunk!

“-se,” finished Aang as he cringed and dared to look up. The trap door had just slid shut and encased them in complete darkness, except for the flickering light of Zuko’s flame. Well, at least that explained how the trap was still active even after all these years. It reset itself.

Aang laughed guiltily, knowing he shouldn’t have said that. He’d heard enough pirate stories or just stories, in general, to know it was taboo. Even in the shifting darkness, Aang could see the murderous glare on Lee's face.

“Well, someone moved the skulls from the pit into this horrible … bone pile. Maybe there’s another way in,” said Aang as he looked around their current enclosure. It really looked like they were in an old well. The sides were built up with slippery stone, damp and even dribbling here and there. It seemed the spike pit in the middle also doubled as a drain of sorts. It would be impossible to have climbed out if you weren’t an air-bender, not that Aang would have left Zuko alone down here anyway.
He really had to start teaching Zuko some basic katas. He got the spin thing right tonight, but what if he hadn’t?

Aang swallowed at the thought of Zuko being injured or dead and immediately shook his head to rid himself of the horror. Suddenly, skulls weren't that scary … unless he just saw one twitch!

“IT moved,” whispered Aang as he pulled his staff close and took a step back towards Zuko.

Zuko, who was now looking for another light activated stone, titled his head and asked, “What, Aang? Did you find something?”

Aang was about to push it off as paranoia due to these shifting shadows, only to watch the skull actually shiver back and forth slightly … and then one of the skeletal hands twitched next to it. Zuko, who had been examining a particularly shiny stone, was nearly knocked into the wall when there was suddenly an air-bender all over him, literally crawling over him like a monkey-boar trying to ignore the ground. Only once Aang was all but hanging off Zuko, Zuko standing there like a begrudged momma monkey-boar did the prince growl, “Aang … Get off me!”

“B-but the skulls … moooved.”

Zuko gave a sideways glance at the air-bender that was half perched on his shoulder, unimpressed. Teeth bared in irritation, Zuko brightened his flame and drew it closer to the pile of bones.

Nothing moved.

Sighing, Zuko murmured, “Aang … there's nothing there.”

Aang poked up his head a bit, frowning, “I was sure it moved.”

“They’re just skulls, Aang. Look closely,” said Zuko as he brought the flame to the bleached bones, the eye holes shifting in the darkness … until suddenly, a pair of eyes appeared in a skull.

Aang screamed.

Zuko screamed.

And surprisingly, the skull screeched as well.

Then, suddenly, said skull was bounding away with four fuzzy feet and a puffy little tail, screeching loudly. Zuko was doing all he could do to dance around the thing while Aang held onto his side like a limpet, screaming something about vengeful spirits of the island. He almost fell into the spike pit during the whole game of don't-let-it-touch-you as Aang hugged onto Zuko's neck, nearly strangling him. This whole scene might have lasted forever, or until Zuko fell into the pit, when the moving skull finally veered a bit too much to the left and smacked right into the wall. There was a cracking noise like the bone had snapped, and just when Zuko was contemplating going on the offensive, said moving skull started to fall to the ground and into a pile of bone shards. It left a very confused lemur in its stead.

Momo chittered there for a moment, fur standing on end, only to screech again as the stone he had just hit pushed inward, a stone door suddenly opening before the fuzzy creature. Momo wasted no time screeching at the two boys and disappearing down the dark tunnel, leaving a slightly petrified Zuko and Aang standing there. Zuko holding Aang like a big scared possum-dog.

Only once Zuko had noticed how ridiculous he looked holding Aang in his arms did he suddenly
drop the other boy.

Aang, good-natured as usual, popped up immediately like he hadn’t just been dropped, chirping, “Oh, it was just Momo, and look, he found a secret entrance. Good job, Momo!”

The air-bender was then to his feet, waving for Zuko to follow him into the lightless tunnel that could lead anywhere, “Hey, come on. Let’s see where it goes.”

Despite himself, despite knowing that this was probably going to end horribly, Zuko belligerently stomped after the air-bender, growling under his breath. What else could go wrong tonight?

Chapter End Notes

So sorry if this update seems short. In truth, it just kept getting longer and longer so I finally just cut in half. Personally, I blame Aang and his shenanigans. Anyway, the next chapter will be part two and is basically done at this point. It just needs some fine tuning. As for the Toph angst ... Yeah, it’s hard to do. I want to make her strong and unyielding as she is in the series, but I always felt there was this part of her we never got to see. This girl who had to run away in the dead of night and make a new persona to be strong. I feel it was the Blind Bandit that went with the Gaang and spoke out against her father, but what happened to the sheltered little girl who knew nothing but the backyard and the expectations of her father? Well, don’t worry. I won’t try to overdo the Toph angst. :3

(Revisions November 2016)
“Oooh, look at that. And that. Hey, have we seen that rock before? Echo-echo-echoooo,” said Aang, all too excited to be in a creepy, dripping cave system. Zuko meanwhile was right behind the other, stomping down the path, the equivalent of a grouchy torch.

“How can you be excited about this?” grumbled Zuko, almost pouting at this point. “We’ve been down here all night! We might never find our way out! We might starve, Aang.”

“Pfff,” said Aang as he floated over to a stalagmite that seemed to have some type of semi-luminescent slime on it. “We can eat cave slime. Completely organic. See.”

Zuko could barely open his mouth to argue before Aang was licking the slimy rock. The air-bender promptly started coughing only to choke it down and state, “Mmm, satisfying.”

Giving the other a look that screamed I-don’t-believe-you, Zuko huffed, “I am not eating cave slime, Aang.”
Frowning at this, resisting the urge to lick his sleeve in order to get rid of the slime’s aftertaste, Aang glanced around for another solution. He quickly noticed some glowing mushrooms nearby. He walked over and plucked a few while stating, “Or we can have mushrooms. They are vegetarian-friendly.”

Zuko’s eyes got wide as he put a hand out, “No, Aang. Wait-”

*Squish.*

The prince tried not to cringe as he watched the air-bender scarf down one or two of the glowing fungi. He didn’t know much about mushrooms, but it was glowing so that couldn’t be good.

“Hey, these aren’t half bad,” said the air-bender as he chewed, stuffing another into his mouth. “You want one?”

Waving his hands in front of himself as he took a step back, Zuko said, “No, I’m good. I am so good right now. Not hungry at all. Really, I’m not.”

Though good was definitely not what Zuko was a few minutes later. He was anything but good. He was three seconds for stone-melting rage. He didn’t know if it was the slime or the mushroom, but Aang was bouncing off the walls … literally. He was riding his air-scooter around and around and around Zuko. Talking about tasting the color purple, friendly mushrooms, how Momo’s tail was actually a mustache disguise, and how much he was glad they were on an adventure. Oh, and did you see that water drip? Did you? Did you? Did you? No. No, he didn’t. It was a cave. The walls were dripping everywhere!

Then the singing started.

Oh, what an Agni forsaken song it was.

“Badgermole, badgermole, badgermole. Mushroom, mushroom, mushroom,” sang Aang as he went around and around the other like a mosquitofly that needed to be smacked.

Zuko, one eye twitching, knew infuriated madness would soon be upon him if he didn’t do something. He all but growled at the other, “Aang, please stop. Now.”

Aang just went into another chorus, adding to the confined madness.

“Badgermole, badgermole, badgermole. Mushroom, mushroom, mushroom … SNAKE!” suddenly cried Aang as he stopped, air-scooter disappearing while Zuko nearly smacked into the youth’s back.

“W-what, kind of snake?” asked Zuko, ready to step in front of the other boy and deal with any menaces. He was so hungry at this point that he’d definitely eat some charred water-snake. Okay, honestly, it didn’t even matter what kind of snake. He would eat it. Sometimes supplies were low on the steamer, but he could never recall going so long without a regular meal. Surviving on the run and in the wilderness so far wasn’t panning out well for him. Snake sounded almost perfect right now.

“Oh, wait, it’s just Momo’s tail,” said Aang as he seemed to jitter on the spot.

Zuko could have almost cried. Stomach growling angrily up at him, the prince sighed. In a begrudged manner he walked forward, the flame in hand flickering sickly. Not only was he going to die in the dark and underground. He was going to die hungry.
Zuko’s stomach loudly agreed.

Aang, who had seemed to calm down just a little bit, plucked another glowing mushroom as they walked by, pushing it toward’ s Zuko’ s face, “Hungry?”

Tilting his head up and away from the offending fungus, Zuko growled, “No, I’m fine.”

His stomach loudly admitted otherwise. It was a ghastly noise, gastral even.

Jumping slightly in surprise, Aang quickly stopped the fire-bender by wrapping his arms around the taller boy’s waist, placing his ear against Zuko’s gut.

The prince sighed, stalling for a full three seconds before he growled, “Aang get off before I push you off.”

Tilting his big gray eyes up at the other, pupils so large they were almost creepy in the darkness, Aang pouted, “But it’s trying to tell us something. Shhhh.”

Frowning down at the air-bender, Zuko resisted the urge to smack his forehead at the stupidity of the situation. He also briefly wondered if it would be easier to just stand there and wait it out or to just start the air-bender on fire. After his stomach started whining though and Aang started talking back to it, Zuko had had enough. He roughly pushed the younger boy off before stomping away.

The longer they dilly-dallied, the hungrier they were going to get. What he wouldn’t give for some questionable nuts or some shifty supplies they stole from pirates.

Aang, sitting up as if nothing had happened, was quickly back on his feet.

“Here,” said Aang as he zoomed in front of the other a few moments later, arms full of blue and other questionable mushrooms. “The beast in your belly wanted these. And cabbage. It really wanted cabbage. It even demanded you marry the daughter of a cabbage merchant. I don’t know where we are going to find a cabbage merchant and his daughter, but these might appease the thing in your belly for now.”

Zuko, caught between brooding and too-tired-to-care, tried to reason with the air-bender, “Aang, I am not going to eat-mmmffm!”

The fire-bender immediately reeled back as Aang stuffed something in his mouth. He was then spitting it out a second later as he started licking his sleeve. Oh, it was soo … so ugh, he almost puked thinking of the texture alone. How mushrooms somehow conspired to be both mushy and clammy, like a dead man’s skin left too long in the sun, he would never know. And the flavor … the best description would be: purple.

Licking his sleeve shamelessly as he tried to get rid of the taste, Zuko turned to the younger bender, the flame in his hand flaring for a moment as he barked, “What was that?!”

Not even a bit put out by the obvious danger, Aang merely popped another one in the other boy’s open mouth as he was talking.

Zuko nearly choked as he swallowed it.

Luckily, it wasn’t a blue one.

Unluckily, Aang might have poisoned him.

He spent the next ten minutes trying to throw up, Aang awkwardly patting the older boy’s back
while telling him the belly beast was extremely displeased with him and that he should start looking for a bride soon.

Zuko made it a point to burn every mushroom he saw after that point before Aang could even dare pick another.

The peace did not last though for then there was the question. Oh, that horrible spirit-forbidden phrase. At first, it was just once. Just one time. Harmless on its own, but then it was two times, then four, and now it was every five minutes like clockwork…

“So … are we there yet?”

Zuko wiped his mouth, hating the taste of bile. He burned another mushroom he saw in spite before he growled, “How would I know? We’re lost, remember?”

Aang, sticking Momo in his shirt while using his tail as a mustache, merely shrugged his shoulders, “I don’t know? Avatar powers.”

The prince’s eye twitched, the flame in his hand crackling for a moment as he tried to smother some of his rage. He managed to contain himself though and thus merely growled like a platypus-bear. “That’s not even funny, Aang.”

Smiling stupidly, Aang hopped after the other, still mentally detached. “Oooh, don’t be such a pouty face. It could be worse.”

Stalling, shoulders taut, Zuko turned around and all but barked at the shorter boy, smoke curling out of the top of his twitching lip, “I don’t have a pouty face! And how can it be worse? We are trapped in a cave system with seemingly no way out! Even if we do get out, it still puts us days behind Uncle. And did you forget the pirates? Because I sure didn’t. They probably know we took the map as well.”

Aang, only catching about half of that rant, merely shrugged as Momo’s ears popped out of his shirt, “Well, there could always be more booby traps?”

Eye still twitching, Zuko decided the air-head was no use to him in his mushroom and slime-induced haze and was about to stomp ahead, but stalled. That part of the floor seemed almost too smooth, suspiciously so. Yes, the whole place was a maze of ancient stonework intermeshed with natural caves, but this one stone looked particularly out of place. It was even slightly raised up.

Deciding to ignore the entire thing altogether, Zuko took a step to the left. There, one possible trap ignored. Now, probably dozens more to go.

Yet, before he could even take a step forward, he heard a familiar click.

“E-eahhhhhhh!”

And down he went.

Aang, slightly behind the older bender, watched as Zuko fell through what looked like trapped floor-slide. He stood there for a moment in nearly complete darkness (except for the glowing slime and mushrooms) as if completely stumped as to where the older bender had gone. Then, as if thinking it was some kind of game, Aang cried out, “Hey, wait for me! That looks fun! Weeee!”

The air-bender then jumped in just before the trapped floor snapped shut, Momo still in his shirt.
Aang squealed the whole way down, the dirt slide shifting and tilting to and fro. It was dark, cramped, and far too steep, one never knowing which way they were going to suddenly turn. Finally, after about two loop-de-loops, the slide finally opened, revealing a vast cavern with waterfalls all around it. Aang, even in his mushroom-induced haze, had to gape. The cavern was huge. They had to be under the small mountain on the island or even the ocean itself. It was breathtaking. Water was pooling into a large lake below like a never filling spring, the water itself seemingly glowing a soft blue from the crystals bellow the water and at the water’s edge. Even in his slowly clearing mind, Aang could make out the beautiful dragon sculptures all over the cavern walls. It was as if a mass of dragons had come here and settled amongst the walls in matching sets, turning to stone to remain in those poses forever.

It was then, their slide twirling down the central column so they could see the entire cave from a 360 degrees, that Aang noted the most fantastic thing about the cave. There, in the middle of this glowing expanse, was a small circular island. It seemed to have been built there, an altar covered in intricate carvings and red gems. It glittered like a beacon to treasure hunters, especially the centerpiece which was a golden orb.

Aang almost fell on his face when he finally got to the end of the slide, unable to look away from the island and all the majesty that surrounded it. Momo, who was not happy with the rough landing, screeched at the air-bender and hopped away, going off to probably explore the cavern. Zuko, standing closer to the water’s edge, couldn't look away either. His eyes were wide and his mouth hung slightly open. He never expected anything like this to be here. So untouched. Well, the mural sure made a lot more sense now. It was about this golden orb.

It had to be the size of Zuko's head, if not a little larger. He didn't want to even imagine how heavy it was if it was completely made out of gold.

“Wow,” said Aang, smiling like a fool. “Want to go touch it?”

Zuko blanched, wondering if the other boy was crazy. They just fell through a trapped door. Of course, that thing was trapped! They would be better off not touching it at all or even looking at it too much … though at least they were no longer wandering through endless passageways. All this water hopefully meant there had to be a way out.

“It’s obviously trapped,” grumbled Zuko as he started to look around at the rest of the large cavern. “Will you fly up there and see where the water is coming in. I will swim to the bottom of the lake and see if there is a way out there.”

Zuko, not waiting a moment more, started to strip his parka. The color didn't bother him as much as it once did. Honestly, for now, he knew there were worse things to be dressed as. Such as pirates. His upper lip twitched at just the thought. They had called him a half-breed. It had hurt more than he would ever admit because it felt true. His mother had abandoned him and his father sent him away in shame.

But at least one person in this whole world wanted him.

At least one person.

Smiling sadly at the thought of his uncle, Zuko was about to pull off his boots and dive into the water, when a voice echoed over his thoughts and the roar of moving water in the background.
“Lee, I at least have to touch it. Sooo … *beat you to the golden egg!*” laughed Aang as he pointed to the golden sphere on the island, smiling like an idiot as he hopped onto the first stepping stone across the lake.

Zuko nearly fell into the water in surprise. Hadn't the air-head just heard what he said?

“Aang! Don’t. You. Dare!” finally managed to bark the stupefied Avatar.

Aang had already hopped onto the second stone sticking out of the water and leading to the little island. Almost drunkenly he balancing on one foot as he grinned at the fire-bender. Then, as if daring Zuko, he hopped onto the next stone, grinning like a madman. Zuko was to his feet in an instant, a glare in his eyes as he stood there ready to tackle Aang into the water if the younger bender even dared to take another step. The stepping stones could be trapped for all he knew.

“Aang, come back *NOW,*” commanded Zuko as he pointed down at the platform he was on. “Don't make me come and get you.”

The air-bender laughed and then he started skipping down the stepping stone path. Zuko growled and took after the air-bender, jumping as if to tackle the mushroom-eater. Aang just bound out of the way like a red-elk, laughing and hopping about like a fool. Zuko merely lunged again, but Aang merely did a backward flip and landed two stepping stones forward, the wind ruffling both of their clothes.

Aang then balanced there on one foot, smiling almost mockingly.

Zuko stood still as well, glaring. If it was anyone else, he would have thrown a fireball by now.

Gritting his teeth, Zuko decided to try something different since lunging nor fire-bending were going to work here. It was just once and no one but a half-drugged Aang was around anyway. Quickly trying to mimic one of the katas he had seen Aang and Yugato do while trying to collect that free feeling, Zuko lashed out with an air-bending kata.

It was messy, sloppy, and didn’t hold an ounce of grace. Zuko almost fell into the water from the backflow alone, but Aang was hit by the rough breeze regardless; a squeal escaping the air-bender as he started to fall, waving his arms madly.

Deciding not to waste an opportunity, Zuko rushed the flailing bender, ready to tackle the younger bender into the water only to have Aang yelp in surprise and twist up into the air at the last minute.

Zuko himself actually slipped, his feet falling into the water as his upper half clung to the stone column desperately trying not to fall any farther into the water.

Aang merely twirled with his air-bending, one foot gracefully placing him down onto the decorative island before the altar and its gold sphere. Turning away from the enraged fire-bender, Aang stared at what was before him. The altar had obviously been meant to house several golden orbs upon its copper and stone form and given that they were all empty except for the top tier, the gold orb was that much more inviting. It was as if it was forbidden to touch it, raised upward from people’s hands.

As a monk, Aang wasn’t a very greedy person. Curiosity, though … it would always be his downfall. This orb honestly didn’t look like it was mere metal. He was sure it was something more. And so, with a confident hand, Aang stepped upward on the bottom tiers and reached forward to touch it … only to stop when he heard a dripping noise behind him.

“It’s just a little touch,” whined Aang, already knowing Lee was right behind him.
“No. No one will be touching it,” grumbled Zuko, even more irritated than earlier because he was half wet.

“Just a small feel,” said Aang, wanting to at least have a respectable ending to his personal pirate tale.

“No, you won't,” barked Zuko as he lunged forward to pull Aang off the tiers.

Aang, not ready to be yanked off the tiers, overcompensated and flailed a hand outward smacking it right into the golden egg.

Zuko, Aang now in a headlock, watched with a terrified expression as the orb titled back and forth, seemingly lighter than it originally appeared. Not wanting it to break, he quickly reached out a spare hand and barely caught the round object before it could hit the floor. Only once he was sure it wasn’t going to fall out of his hand, did the prince turn to glare at the air-bender in his grasp.

“Why'd you touch it?” said Aang from his headlock before Zuko could even chide the other. “I thought you said it was booby-trapped and that no one should touch it.”

Blush forming on his cheeks, embarrassment crawling up every nerve, Zuko choked, “You knocked it off. Of course, I had to touch it.”

Aang, trying to squirm free, merely repeated himself, “But you still touched it.”

“You almost broke it! Of course, I had to touch it,” Zuko all but growled, wanting to take said egg and beat the other with it.

“Why would I break it?” added Aang, squirming even more.

“Because you ate that mushroom!” barked Zuko, a vein starting to throb in his forehead.

“What does breaking golden eggs have to do with mushrooms? Were you going to make an omelet?” said Aang, squirming even more and nearly succeeding.

Zuko nearly groaned. When was the mushroom going to wear off? Normal Aang was trying enough, but this?

Opening his mouth, caring little if the answer sounded logical or not, Zuko’s words were cut off by a sudden gong-like noise. It echoed over the entire cavern, like a metallic cry of rage. The banished prince’s hopes quickly sank.

Of course, the egg was trapped. Why wouldn’t it be? What now? Was the cavern going to fill with water, sand, manta-sharks? All three?

Instead, the whole place started to shake. Zuko had to let go of Aang to just hold onto the golden egg. It was then that the prince noticed that the golden egg was seemingly more than a decorative egg. It was actually warm and wasn’t heavy like metal at all. It was dense in a different way … like there was a wet mixture inside it.

It wasn’t a real egg, was it?

Not that the Avatar got to dwell on it, the shaking increasing. Finally, when Zuko was sure they were going to have to start dodging stalactites from the top of the cavern, something suddenly rose up from the waters before the small island. It rose and rose until it towered over the two benders, a standing stream of moving water. It was only then that Zuko noticed that a skull was at the very top
of the water tower, grinning threateningly down at the two of them.

*Great.* This was spirit business. Just want they needed.

Then, before Zuko could even gather himself, other bones started to rise up from the water. The bones were obviously too big to be that of humans. In fact, they seemed to be building around said skull like a grizzly jigsaw. Looking at the quickly growing bone pile and the carvings all around, Zuko had to look down again at the *egg* in his hands. He knew what these large bones belonged to: dragons.

The glistening at the bottom of the lake wasn’t caused by crystals at all, was it? It was light reflecting off of dragon scales, wasn’t it?

This place … this place was a graveyard and they had disturbed it.

Swallowing, knowing already what had to be done, Zuko straightened his back and faced the forming titan before him. He carefully handed the egg off to Aang as he did so. It seemed like he had run across something only an Avatar could fix … yet, he had no idea where to begin or even if he wanted to.

The prince decided to rely on a lesson he had learned from his mother: it is best to be polite when you are the one at fault.

Bowing his head when the last of the bones were set into place, a collection of bone and dribbling water before him like a great dragon, Zuko called out, his throat so dry he was almost afraid to speak, “Please forgive us great dragon spirit. We did not mean to disturb you. We were lost and merely happened upon this place. We did not wish to disturb anything here. Please, we will leave everything as it was, just direct us on a way out.”

Standing there, head still bowed, Zuko almost thought he was going to have to repeat himself when finally a great growl filled the cavern.

Looking up at the bone titan, Zuko was about to bow his head again and repeat his apology. He didn’t even get to open his mouth again when a voice echoed over the expanse. It wasn’t what Zuko expected and that scared him more than anything. It was the kind of voice that belong to a dying man. Each word wet and gasping.

“I … can … never … leave … and … neither … will … you.”

Before Zuko could even blink, the bone dragon was suddenly rushing forward, jaw gaping and open. Zuko dodged out of the way with a sweeping roll, falling partially into the water given how small the island was. The young man grunted as he gripped the side of the stone island, trying not to fall in and pull himself up as quickly as possible. Yet, he need not have worried, because, as the dragon flew around ready to make another sweep, it flew right over him and towards its second target: Aang.

“Yee-ah!” cried Aang as he pulled the golden egg close. “Why's it after me?!”

Aang then bound back to the original platform, skipping stones as he awkwardly held the egg over his head while trying to look behind himself. He immediately regretted it as he watched a maw full of far-too-many-teeth drawing ever closer to him. He barely had time to jump a few extra feet up into the air before the dragon lunged for him, the air-bender watching bone-scales fly by right below him. He then cringed as he came down running on the dragon’s back. Said dragon did not find that amusing and made a roundabout, trying to snap the offending air-bender off of its back.
Aang barely had enough time to scream and jumped far enough to the left to avoid getting swallowed.

Zuko, meanwhile, was hopping across the rock path, trying to hurry while not slipping in. He finally stalled when he had sure footing, soggy boots feeling heavy and precarious as he did a fire bending kata … just as it lunged for Aang. The flaming ball flew with deadly accuracy, slamming into the side of the bone beast’s side. The beast shook and rattled as if it would fall apart in one hit, the corpse rearing its great bonehead back with a haunting squeal.

“Put down the egg, Aang! It’s probably after the egg!” cried Zuko as he nearly fell off a wet stepping stone as he tried to hurry to the original landing. It seemed the bloody dragon had gotten all the stepping stones wet on its last fly over and his boots weren’t helping. He didn’t have time to fall in. Aang needed help!

“What did you say?!” yelled Aang as he jumped to a nearby cave wall, sliding down the side only to run across the water a moment later, throwing up waves and making a wide arc.

Jumping to the next stone, Zuko nearly slipped again. He needed to get to the main landing. He needed some steady ground to attack and aim.

Stalling, cupping his mouth to make himself louder, Zuko yelled again, “Aang, put down the egg! It obviously wants the egg!”

Unfortunately, Aang did not hear him. The air-bender was currently on the other side of the cavern at this time, running across the water like fowl trying to take flight. He was making his way back through with grim determination and quickly zoomed past Zuko a second later, nearly knocking the fire-bender into the water with his after breeze alone.

The air-bender at least had the decency to yell an apology as he went past. “Sorry! I have an idea just a minute!”

Zuko waved his arms slightly as the other bender passed, trying to keep his balance. Yet, after regaining his balance, a rattling noise reminded the prince what was right behind Aang. Zuko barely had enough time to look to his side and see an opening jaw coming his way. He sighed … and promptly jumped in the water. The dragon flew overhead without a second glance at the rippling water, jaw still open for an orange and yellow snack.

The first thing Zuko noted as he went under was that the water was deep, much deeper than it looked from above. Opening his eyes as air bubbles raced away from him, Zuko couldn’t help but note the stepping stones now looked more like stepping pillars underwater. Some had obviously been trapped once upon a time, but had long since been rusted by time and salt water or now laid at the bottom of the deep pool like fallen logs.

It was also there, at the bottom of the pool, that Zuko truly saw the dragon bones. He could even see more gold and silvery colors at the bottom. They were likely cracked eggs like the one Aang was carrying. Well, that explained why the pedestal looked like it had been made to hold at least a dozen of those things. It had. And now there was only one.

And with that thought, the banished prince started to kick to the surface. He needed to get that egg back to the pedestal. Hopefully, that would calm this spirit.

_Hopefully._

Breaking to the surface, Zuko nearly went back under in surprise as he caught sight of what Aang
had been doing the few seconds he was underwater.

The air-bender was currently running up the center support beam of the cavern. He was running circles upward, and the bone dragon was following after. Then, finally at the very top of the column, the little fool went *yeeha* and jumped towards the ceiling of the cavern. He hit the stone ceiling feet first, propelling himself downward and between one of the loose coils of the dragon’s body. The bone beast gladly followed, slithering between itself. It was willing to do anything to capture the egg and its egg thief.

Even tie itself in knots.

Zuko could only watch with wide eyes as Aang ran down to the original dock, almost posing there with the egg as the beast opened its jaw behind him as if to swallow the boy whole … only *yanked* a few yards from Aang’s form. It seemed the boy’s plan was successful, but he at least at the decency to cringe away from the snapping jaws of impending death as he all but crawled to Zuko.

“Tied himself in knots, didn’t he?” Joked the air-bender as he offered a hand up to the other boy. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” grumbled Zuko as he swam to the landing Aang was on, entirely sick of stepping stones and this island in general. “Let’s just put the egg back and get out of this place before it gets loose.”

Yet, just as Zuko swam up to the rising, head bobbing, a horrific sight greeted him. The dragon’s bones were shifting through each other, silently undoing any knot that may have been. It was now behind Aang, dwarfing him like a water-snake to a cricket-mouse.

“Aang! Look out!” cried Zuko as he splashed and tried to point out the thing behind the air-bender, but, as Aang started to turn around to see the gaping jaws that were greeting him, they snapped shut. There was then a sickening silence as Zuko watch the dragon tilt its head and swallow Aang whole.

“Aaanngg!” cried the banished prince, his heart skipping a beat.

No. No. No! Not Aang! He was a good kid. He was nice and there was this feeling of familiarity all around him that Zuko rarely felt in anyone. Only Uncle … and his mother … Lu Ten.

“Why aren’t you helping me?” whispered Zuko to that part of himself, his head bobbing in the water. The prince didn’t even get to feel the whispers rise and greet him in reply, because now the large skull was peering down over the landing at him, ready to do away with the other intruder.

Not knowing what else to do, rage starting to overcome his shock, Zuko gathered his breath and awkwardly tried to do a kata while in the water. It was a messy fireball, but it was big and full of his growing wrath. The dragon didn’t even get to rear back its head in surprise as the fireball slammed into the right side of its face. The explosion thrust the great dragon back while knocking loose the lower jaw bone. Zuko, right below the thing, quickly realized his error as the large chunk of bone came straight for him. He tried to dive under and out swim the falling jaw, but it merely slammed into his back, suddenly propelling him deeper into the water with its weight.

Panicked air bubbles escaping him, Zuko tried to turn around and push away from the jaw that was forcing him downwards into the deep waters. He almost succeeded, but the ground came too quickly, and Zuko found himself trapped on the bottom of the lake bed surround in bones and scales and the most perfect white sand.
More air bubbles escaping him, Zuko tried to shimmy loose. He had to get out. And why? Why was it always water? How many times did he nearly have to drown?!

Finally, when Zuko was actually starting to panic, there came the ringing of a bell from the back if his mind instead of a voice. It immediately felt old and for some reason, sad, like this past life’s name had been long forgotten. Regardless, he understood her unspoken words well enough.

Now, breathe.

The next thing Zuko knew he was rising out of the water, gasping for air, reaching out for the first thing he could grab. His hand hit something hard and he latched onto it, pulling himself up and out of the water. Gasping, Zuko quickly realized he was on the decorative island … and that his hands were blue.

His eyes went wide, he quickly turned around ready to rush back to his body. He was going to drown down there! Why had they thrown him into the between realm right now?! Yet, as he turned around, the cavern revealed what was dwelling just out of sight in the half-realm, what lingered between the living and the spirit realm. The cavern now full of whispering, smoking dragons that flew around and around the underground cavern belching ghostly black smoke. He could barely see half of the stepping stones the miasma was so thick.

Taking a breath, he decided to trust the past life that had decided to help him. He didn’t know how to enter his body again regardless. Yugato hadn’t had time to teach him.

Swallowing, hands becoming fists as rage and fear fought within him, Zuko took another breath and turned around. Part of him just knew what to do, the soft ringing of a bell in his ear.

Meanwhile, in the human realm, another bender was equally distressed though his lines of thought were more ‘oh spirits, I’m alive, I’m alive’ and ‘oh this is sooo gross.’ It also supported his vegetarian lifestyle. One didn’t quite look at meat the same when they were swallowed whole.

Aang grunted in the small enclosure, feeling his body slide down the bone trachea a little farther. He was doing his best to use his legs to keep him still in the bone dragon’s throat and to keep his air bubble twirling around and around. This creature was half made of water after all and the moment he let his air bubble drop he was sure he would either be swallowed or drown. He really didn’t want to risk going any deeper into the beast either, because a part of him knew that he would be taken, body and all, to the spirit realm. He didn’t know how he knew that, but he trusted his gut.

Grunting as he tried to keep from being crushed, Aang pushed the egg against his chest. Part of him wanted to drop it, to let it be, but a different part of him knew that if he dropped it, he was going to be crushed instead of drowned.

“Come on, Lee,” whined the air-bender to himself as something akin to drool dripped down on his shoulders, his mind almost completely clear from his mushroom haze after burning so much energy. “Please, please help me! I promise I won’t eat anymore glowing mushrooms.”

Yet, just when he started losing his air-bubble, water slowly dripping all around him, there was suddenly a jarring. It was like the whole dragon had been smacked to the side. Aang, in surprise, lost the last of his air-bubble, water filling in all around him. Aang quickly threw a hand over his mouth, trying to keep what air he had left. In doing this he lost his grip though and started to slide downward. In surprise, he opened his mouth, losing his last breath of air and nearly the egg as well.
Aang, true fear settling in his bones, found himself repeating a mantra over and over again in his head: I will not drown again. I will not drown again. I will not drown again!

He didn’t know why those words were in his head. Part of him didn’t care. He just wanted out. He knew he had a fate. He had a purpose!

Just then all the cracking and the shaking finally seemed to stall, an icy chill suddenly coming from the water around him. Before Aang could even shutter from the cold, though there was a splitting noise, like old wood being snapped. And finally, there was light. The water around the air-bender quickly cascaded out of a widening hole, Aang finding himself falling with it.

Holding the egg close, closing his eyes for the impacted into likely water, Aang fell out of the bone dragon, snapped bones tugging at his loose clothing as he fell. The air-bender couldn’t help but shout slightly as he slammed into something hard like stone, the air so very cold around his soaking wet form.

Aang immediately sat up, egg in his lap as he grabbed his arms, rubbing them to try and warm himself. He quickly looked up to see where the dragon was, only to cringe away. The bone dragon was right above him, bottom jaw missing and frozen solid. He quickly looked around to see where he was and how he had gotten out.

He almost didn’t recognize the cavern.

It was covered in ice. It had obviously been a battleground. Jagged sheets of ice everywhere in the now frozen lake, pointed up in the air like spiky towers. He would have gaped at that alone, but what really caught his attention was the person before him. The person that had saved him.

It was a past life of Lee from the look of her and her blue glow.

And she was beautiful.

She was merely standing there at the forefront of the altar island, looking up at the dragon she had just done battle with. A warm dress hugged her form, the whole thing trailing all the way to the floor like flowing water. Her hair was long as well, falling down the entirety of her back and held together with large bone beads. A fur cape also covered her shoulders flowing all around her, easily marking her as one of the Avatar’s past Water Tribe incarnations.

Aang, curiosity getting the better of him, picked the egg up and stood, looking her and her ghostly form over. He immediately felt safe around her like he had spoken to her before. It was almost as if they had been friends in a previous life.

“Hi, I’m Aang. What’s your name?”

The young woman looked down from the frozen dragon and at Aang, smiling sadly. She bowed her waist slightly as if in greeting, the small bells hanging from her ears ringing as if in answer. It was as if she was so old that she no longer had a voice and the bell was the only way she could answer.

Aang was not perturbed though. He merely smiled as if she had spoken, adding, “Wow, Lee has some really pretty past lives.”

At this, the past life raised up her draping long fur-lined sleeve and covered her smile, the bells ringing on her ears as if she was laughing at his comment.

Smiling at her humor, Aang asked, “Should we run or something? Or is Lee stuck in the spirit
realm again?"

The past life pulled down her sleeve and gave a knowing smile, the woman tilting her partially painted face up to the dragon, the action saying everything that needed to be said.

“He’s speaking with the dragon you say?"

The woman’s bell merely rang once and for a time Aang stood there in complete silence, waiting.

Zuko stood on the altar island before the bone dragon. It was as horrible in the half-realm as in the living realm, but something was different and odd about the bone dragon. It was covered in chains. Every bone seemed to have a spectral chain clamped to it as if the bone beast was merely a puppet, a toy to be played with. Zuko, realizing this, tilted his head up and over to the dragon, looking for the puppeteer.

And there he found it.

It was the spirit of a man. A simple human soul latched onto this world.

Well, he supposed, that explained why the first thing to rise from the water was a human skull. It seemed that they weren’t dealing with a dragon at all.

Looking this soul up and down, he watched as the chains loosened and tightened all over the man’s form. At first glance, he seemed to be Fire Nation, but his face was painted, feathers hanging from his hair. In fact, he looked like he belonged to these ruins. A Sun Warrior perhaps, like from the oldest Fire Temple scriptures. If so, he was likely an old soul left to rot.

Zuko, anger bubbling in his stomach, wanted to bark out demands. He wanted to start this spirit on fire and watch it wither in this other realm, but he already knew from experience that he had no such abilities in the spirit realm. He had no fire here. All he had were his words.

Swallowing, Zuko ground out, “Who are you? Human souls are not meant to linger in this plane.”

There was a moment of silence. It seemed to drag on forever. Zuko wanted to bark out his question again, impatience reigning over him, but the spirit finally replied in a choking voice, water spewing from its mouth after every word, “I … can … never … leave.”

The voice echoed in an inhuman way and something akin to the word demon bounced around in Zuko’s head before he asked, “What do you mean you can never leave?”

“I … was …. a … traitor. I … am … the … cursed.”

Looking at the man more carefully, he did finally note that there was a red glow on the bands that kept his many chains in place. The characters were old, ancient, yet a whisper in the back of his mind clearly defined it. Traitor was carved into the bands.

Knowing that the only way out of this place, back to his body and saving Aang was to solve this conundrum, Zuko asked, “It says, traitor. Explain.”

“I … was …. a … traitor. I … am … the … cursed.”

The thick metal band around the spirit’s neck rattled as he turned his head, the sound of cracking bones filling the expanse. It was as if it hadn’t moved its neck in eons. Its arm was no better as the spirit struggled to raise it, the bone dragon’s head trying to move where he pointed. He pointed along the radius of the cavern, seemingly at all the dragon shadows.
Zuko swallowed, understanding dawning on him. “You were the one to kill the dragons and break the eggs? Weren't you?”

The spirit nodded, a rattling breath escaping it as it seemingly coughed up water from nowhere. This fire-bender had obviously been drowned and never properly put to rest. Zuko wouldn’t have been surprised if the man had been caught after his betrayal, chained and weight down, and then thrown into this very lake.

It would explain why his bones were here.

“What do you mean by cursed?” said Zuko, feeling almost a sense of pity for the departed soul. “Is that why you attacked us?”

The spirit choked a bit more. Its chains shuttering slightly as he tried to point to the whispering dragons around them again, “They … have … cursed … me … for … my … betrayal... I … can … never … leave … until … the … dragons … return … to … the … island.”

Zuko eyed one of the misty, smoke dragons as it flew behind the incarcerated spirit, black and white scales shimmering for a moment before it crashed into the mist of another dragon and disappeared. He doubted he could take on a normal dragon for that matter a dozen or more of them. How this man had killed all of them, Zuko didn’t want to know. It was obviously done without a trace of honor.

There was no honor for egg-smashers.

Looking back at the spirit, wanting to leave it there to suffer, a soft warmth in the back of his mind whispered it wasn’t his place to judge, only to release the dead. Their judgment came in the spirit realm when it came time to be reborn. If they got to be reborn at all.

Looking at the pedestal where the egg had once been, a thought occurred to him. Quickly, Zuko asked, “Have you killed the air-bender? Has he destroyed the egg?”

The spirit gasped for a moment as if it was exceptionally hard to capture a breath, though they both knew a spirit had no need for breathing. Then it answered simply, “Not … yet … I … cannot… He … has … the … egg. I … cannot … crush … the … last … one. The … last … dragon.”

Swallowing, hating to make a promise to save a dragon when killing one was far more likely to offer him any honor, Zuko bowed his head slightly and made a vow, “I, the Avatar, will set you free earthly spirit. I will take the egg and I will get it to hatch. I will then return with the dragon to this place to break your curse. On my honor, I swear this.”

Not that Zuko felt he had much honor these days.

“Now, please release us.”

The trapped spirit was still for a moment until it slowly nodded its head, its voice softer and seemingly tired now, “Take … the … egg … and … hatch … it... I … hold … you … by … your … honor, Avatar.”

And with that, Zuko felt like he was falling backward. Back into his body and finally to the floor.

There was a thud, the prince immediately groaning as he reached up and cupped the back of his head. He wasn't even given a moment to moan about the forming lump on his head when Aang was suddenly standing over him, big gray eyes filling with questions that Zuko knew were going to give him a headache.
Well, a larger headache.

At least he hadn't nearly passed out this time.

“Are you alright, Lee?” finally asked Aang as he put the egg down a little ways away from Zuko's head. Despite himself, Zuko found himself looking at it … and then the frozen bone dragon above them. It still had its half jaw open as if ready to bite down. Not that Zuko was afraid of it anymore. It just felt burdensome now. How was he supposed to be a prince, the Avatar and hatch out a dragon? Oh, and survive Aang. That was a big one recently.

He sighed, plopping down completely. He had no will to move or anything really.

“Aang ...” said Zuko, closing his eyes.

“Yeah?” said Aang, still standing above him.

“Remind me never to follow a pirate map ever again.”

Aang laughed and swayed on the balls of his feet, chirping all too truthfully, “Sure thing … but I can't make any promises.”

Despite himself, Zuko grinned slightly at that, adding, “And Aang.”

“Yeah.”

“I'm going to sleep right here for the night,” added the prince, not even caring that it was cold. “I'm not going to move an inch. This entire thing was exhausting.”

Aang merely chuckled, unable to disagree though there was a waver in his voice, “But … could you start a fire at least. It's kind of cold now, and I don't think we’re supposed to get this egg cold.”

At that, Zuko actually laughed, the sound echoing over the cavern's expanse. He had just realized something. How did one hatch a dragon egg anyway?

“Oh, and Lee?” said Aang, grinning mischievously.

“What Aang?” said Zuko, contemplating how much energy it would take to sit up.

“I just thought you would like to know … You have some very pretty past lives.”

Zuko groaned and covered his face. Would this horrible trip ever end?

Chapter End Notes

I really love this chapter. It has a Goonies/Treasure Island feel to it. It also makes a slight homage to Sokka and his cactus scene. Also, anyone gets the badger song internet joke? And the Skyrim ingredients? I have no shame for abusing those. As for the past life, her doodles on the top. Yes, I know its horrible. >.>

(Revisions November 2016)
Chapter Summary

Sorry guys! I just noticed I mixed up chapter 37 and 38 here on A03. So the chapter 'A New Name' comes before 'A Tale of Sacrifice.'

Chapter Notes

Also, thanks to CACrest and GreyNoise for proofreading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“I … hate … this … place,” came a growl, Zuko looking up at the top of a cavern, frowning at the light shining down. The opening was barely out of reach … by about 5 yards. How was he supposed to get up there with a dragon egg? He supposed he should count himself lucky they found an exit at all. Thankfully, his time in the Avatar state (or Miss Bell as Aang called the past life even with a threat to limb and body), had knocked some cave walls in during the battle revealing an extra passageway.

Aang, stalling next to him, looked up and smiled slightly at the light above their heads. “See, a little positivity will take you anywhere. Even an exit.”

Sighing, shifting the egg awkwardly to his hip, Zuko grumbled, “And how am I supposed to get up there Aang?”

Zuko immediately regretted his words.

“Air-bend, of course. I’ll go up first with the egg so we don’t smash it, and then I’ll come back down and teach you a kata. Your form might have been sloppy when you tried to knock me in the lake, but it was a valiant first try,” said Aang as he reached out to take the egg from Zuko.

Zuko was too flabbergasted to stop the young bender or even disagree as the air-bender took the egg. How had Aang even remembered that? He was hoping that in his mushroom induced haze the air-bender would have forgotten, but luck was never on Zuko’s side.

Before the banished prince could even open his mouth and disagree, though, Aang had already given his staff to the fire-bender and was in a kata pose. It was a bit awkward given the egg, but Zuko watched as the air-bender merely spun all the way up to the mouth of the cavern. Aang made it look easy even with the egg’s awkward mass. It also didn’t look so far up now. If there had been a wall to scale, he might have been able to run up on his own.

Deflating when the air-bender poked his head over the cavern’s edge, he already could tell that Aang was ecstatic at the prospect of an air-bending lesson. A part of Zuko knew he had to start sooner or later, that he couldn’t reject a part of his soul forever, but a part of him still couldn’t accept it. It was a hard truth to swallow even with the spirits, dragon eggs, and flying bison in his daily life.
It was like his life belonged to someone else. Perhaps, he should just keep the name, Lee. It almost seemed fitting.

Floating down like a leaf in autumn, Aang chirped, “Ready? I’m sure you remember the basics with Yugato. So, do you want to try the kata I just did or merely a wind lift with the staff? It’s technically not big enough for someone of your height and weight, but we’ll never know until you try.”

Zuko eyed the staff in his hand. Was it childish of him to actually want to try using it? Appa was terrifying, there was no doubt, but just seeing how light and free Aang was when he soared around with the thing, Zuko couldn’t help but be a little envious. If he was still a child, he would have demanded to try it long ago.

Swallowing his pride, something that was painfully becoming far too easy for him, Zuko murmured, “How do you open the staff?”

Aang was overjoyed to show him, the tool clicking open in Zuko’s hands with a little guidance from the younger boy. Aang was actually floating with excitement at this point. He even pointed out all the main parts of the staff. He also told Zuko how the staffs were handcrafted by the monks.

It was a delicate instrument, light, and seemingly hollow at some points.

Zuko would be the first to admit he wasn’t as good as his sister when it came to his studies, but he was entranced with the device, especially when Aang added, “Master Yugato probably would have made you your first one. I think he even brought material for it. We’ll have to check. In fact, most Masters make their student’s first staffs and then when you became a Master or more proficient, you would make your own. Mind you, most are little kids when they get their first staff and are not very good with pointy things so Yugato probably would have asked you to help make your first one.”

Feeling the smooth wood under his thumb, Zuko couldn’t help but ask, “So, was this a gift or did you make it?”

Aang gave the staff a thoughtful look and stated, “I made it. Most of the Masters were surprised when I made this one without assistance. The first one was eaten by a seal-shark so I made this one before anyone could get mad. Honestly, it was almost easy. It was like I had made one before.”

There was a moment of silence as if Aang was thinking about something, and then he seemed to come out of it, bouncing on his heels.

“So this one is easy. First, watch me do this kata. It’s a simple one where you gather your breath and concentrate on your legs, then you release. It’s just a simple extension to a jump where the wind catches under the glider’s wings and carries you up farther,” said Aang.

The boy then gathered a breath, bent his knees slightly, and releasing his breath at the same time while springing forward. Even without the glider Aang almost made it to the mouth of the cavern. The youth then glided down simply as if it was the easiest thing in the world.

Zuko frowned. He was sure he was going to mess it up. He was probably going to smack right into the cave wall or something equally irritating, but the sooner he did this, the sooner he could leave.

Sighing, he nodded and practiced the kata a few times in action alone. He then gathered his breath, feeling a nervous excitement that wasn’t driven by anger or battle like his fire-bending was. He gathered his chi and, listening to the whisper in his mind that was practically telling him to fly and
never come down, Zuko sprung forward releasing his breath … and a very loud fart.

Aang, who at first looked dumbfounded, was on the ground a moment later, laughing so hard he was almost crying. Zuko, who had been propelled slightly by the flatulence, nearly tripped and fell on his face. He had had to wave the staff around like an idiot just to keep his footing. Only once he was sure he had reclaimed his balance did Zuko turn his ire on the hysterical air-bender.

“You knew that was going to happen, didn’t you?! I’m tired, dirty, hungry and sick of caves! I’m not in the mood for fake kata pranks,” barked Zuko, the fire-bender struggling not to start the staff in his hands on fire.

Aang, still laughing so hard he could barely breathe, tried to gather himself while Zuko simmered. When the air-bender finally pulled himself together to at least breathe, though his struggle not to laugh was still notable, he added, “Y-you concentrated all your chi into your butt, didn’t you? Instead of your knees?”

The air-bender then fell over again, laughing some more.

It took about five minutes for Aang to calm down enough to be able to stand and at least direct his increasingly agitated student. Though the young bender’s giggling every few minutes only served to enrage Zuko further, it also filled the Avatar with determination. At this point, he was bound and determined to learn this kata if only to get out of this hole and away from Aang.

“Okay,” said Aang as he choked down another chuckle. “You ready? Getting frustrated won’t help. Remember, air is movement. So, if you want, I can create an air-ball to help lift you up after this time if you don’t get it. Just because you’re the Avatar, doesn’t mean you get everything the first time.”

Zuko glared. He rarely got anything the first time. He had to work twice as hard as most people. He was determined at this point, though, especially since he had almost succeeded twice already. The third time was a charm … though Azula would have already gotten this and probably conquered the world. Really, what was with him? He was the Avatar. He had learned this all before apparently, yet here he was floundering over a simple kata. Most wouldn’t even consider him very good at fire-bending. Yet, he could just look at something funny, and he would fall into the spirit realm. Was that normal? Were some Avatars better with conversing with spirits than bending? He was almost disappointed he didn’t have someone like Yugato or maybe Pakku to ask.

Pushing his thoughts back, telling himself this wasn’t the time, Zuko tried to concentrate on the feeling of freedom, movement, and the crisp taste of a breeze over the ocean. Then, he breathed in deeply, grasping that cool collected feeling in his throat and lungs before releasing.

He was suddenly floating upwards, a breeze gathering under the glider’s little, orange wings and taking him, up, up, up.

It felt so wonderful to be free, to glide like this … and then he was promptly reminded that his name was Zuko, a banished prince. His feet promptly hit the ground, and he couldn’t help but frown at the stone below his feet. He wanted to hate the ground for existing at that moment, for not allowing him to fall forever. Yet, a quick breeze behind him reminded Zuko that he had better things to do than mope about the fate life had dealt him.

It looked like they were now on the other side of the island, if the rocky cliff-face they were near and the ocean's roar were any indication.

“Wow,” said Aang as he floated up next to Zuko. “That was great. I thought you would have
Zuko, who quickly following the airbender's gaze, nearly dropped the staff in his hand as he turned his head, cursing the damaged sight in his left eye once again. He hadn’t even seen them there. They were not much more than shadows and light in that eye. But there they were, two pirates, just standing there upon the stones like mocking statues, the golden egg between them.

It was the cook and the pirate wench. She had a wicked smile on her face … Zuko’s stomach couldn’t help but plummet. She didn’t suspect that he was the Avatar, did she? Just how much had they seen?

“Well, well, what do we have here?” the water-bending pirate, Peri, sang. “Two little birdies lost from the nest. Oh me, oh my. Cooky, what soup would they make best?”

Cooky, who had bent over to pick up the golden egg, was now running his fingers curiously over the surface. He merely shrugged his shoulder at her quip and waved his fingers in a way that must have meant something to the female pirate. She merely continued to smile, nodding as she sang once more, “Yes, yes. I agree. We must boil off the feathers before we cook the meat!”

The woman’s playful grin became something akin to sinister. There was now a thirst for battle in her eyes as she started to gather water around her form. Zuko, admittedly, found the expression somewhat unsettling to see on a waterbender’s face, especially a female one. The only female water-benders he had ever interacted with were healers. Most were well-meaning, their smiles soft and kind even when he was difficult. This woman … it felt like she had something to prove, a rage to quell in her heart.

And it seemed like Aang and he was going to have to deal with the blunt of it.

Still praying that the woman had thought it was Aang’s air-bending and not his, Zuko handed the staff to his current teacher. He then fell into a fire-bending kata, immediately whispering, “Get the egg, Aang. I’ll deal with her.”

The waterbender, eight watery arms now gathered around her like a squid-octopus, merely grinned at the firebender’s challenge. She then struck out, a water whip snapping in Zuko’s direction. Not willing to dodge, he met her water attack with a flaming fist, hot steam sizzling into the air. Not waiting for the female to strike again, Zuko was rising into another kata. He quickly jumped into the air, throwing a fireball from his foot. He landed on his left foot and gracefully spun around, using the momentum to throw a curving arc of fire in her direction. The woman lifted her arms up into her chest just in time to take the attack, the eight arms suddenly curling up around her like a night bloom closing for the day.

Steam exploded everywhere, causing a mist to cover the battlefield.

Aang, meanwhile, was making his way behind the cook, the steam now serving as a type of cover for him. He wasn’t much of a sneaker, but he really didn’t want to get caught in a net again. So sneaking it was! He always wanted to pretend to be a ninja. Luckily, it seemed the scruffy cook was content merely standing there with the egg at his side as he watched what he could of the battle before him. Aang had no idea why the man put down the egg to begin with, but he wasn’t going to question his good luck. So, tongue sticking out of the side of his mouth as he crouched behind the pirate, Aang ever-so-painfully-slowly reached for the egg. He hoped to get a good grip and then make a run for it. Yet, the moment his fingers were about to touch the golden surface, a ladle was slapping against his fingers.

“Youch!” cried the air-bender as he whirled back waving his hand, a red welt already appearing
where the cook had struck him. “That hurt. Did you have to hit me so hard?”

The cook, raising a brow at the young air-bender, seemed to say, ‘Yes, I had to.’ Then, not even waiting a moment more for the air-bender to gather himself, the cook had pulled out a matching, long-stemmed ladle. He was now handling the two ladles more like matching blades instead of spoons. Aang barely had time to yip in surprise and bound into the air over the man’s head before two heavy spoons swung where the air-bender had just been kneeling. The cook, eyes going wide, looked up just in time to have Aang step on his face instead of the top of his head as he landed. Something even cracked underneath the air-bender’s heel.

“Sorry!” cried Aang as he bound off the older man’s face, the pirate nearly falling over from the sudden impact to his face.

Landing a short distance away, closer to the egg, Aang cringed as he watched the man cover his face with one hand, blood now dripping between his fingers. The older man immediately glared at Aang in an accusing manner.

Aang, pulling his staff close to his chest and reeling back as if he had just been shouted at, choked, “It was an accident. I barely jumped off the ground in time to avoid you! And you … you hit my hand. See, it’s going to bruise.”

The cook gave the air-bender a dead-panned look as if stating a broken nose didn’t compare to a mere bruise. Then, a small cracking noise filling the area as he reset his nose. Cooky then stood up straight, blood pooling down onto his shirt. His glare said he was not impressed. Aang, offering a guilty smile, merely backed up until he was right next to the egg.

“Well, it looks like you have that to take care of. Can’t have your shirt staining. So I will just be taking this-”

The air-bender barely moved to the left fast enough to ignore a butcher knife being thrown at him, the blade embedding itself into the ground.

Taking a moment to watch the butcher-knife jiggle from where it was embedded, Aang turned to the pirate and choked, “You-you tried to stab me?!”

Cooky shrugged, basically saying, ‘Yeah, what of it? I am a pirate.’

The man didn’t waste another moment before he was running back towards the young bender. This time Aang put on a face of determination and snapped open his glider. He then swung forward sending a powerful gust of wind and dust at the charging cook. The man barely had time to bring up his two arms to protect his already abused face. The gust hit him so hard though that he actually slid a few feet back, even more dust thrown up into the air with his unyielding stance. Yet, just as Aang was reaching for the egg again, another knife was thrown.

Aang, screaming in surprise, quickly dived out of the way with a collection of rustling robes. He escaped to be stabbed another day, but the fighting duo behind him was not so lucky.

A scream echoed over the expanse. Both Aang and Cooky stalled long enough to cringe, hoping it wasn’t their battle partner.

“Eagh! Bloody afterlife! You stabbed me!” finally came a barking yell as the female pirate's water whip collapsed around her, the woman fell onto one knee as she grasped at her other leg's thigh. She was wincing and swearing as she eyed the knife protruding out of her higher calf. Zuko, a few feet from her, actually blushed as she continued to curse in a way that would make even Jee blush.
He had never heard a woman speak like that.

… Unless they were Azula. Zuko was sure Azula could curse like that. He sometimes wondered if she was really a girl and not something akin to half saber-toothed-shark, half platypus-bear or something.

“La and Tui! Cooky! Watch where you are aiming! How am I supposed to fight with a bloody knife in me!” barked the woman, only to suddenly realize her error as she turned her gaze to a slightly battered looking fire-bender. A blush of embarrassment crossed her face. She had basically just told him that she couldn't defend herself, hadn’t she?

Zuko knew that even if they defeated these two, they had an entire crew of pirates that could still overwhelm them. He couldn’t wait for the water-bender to recover. So he ran forward, barely dodging under a loose water whip the woman threw at him at the last second. Yet, just as he got near her for a quick close range attack, the woman ripped the knife out of her leg and slashed it at him.

Ignoring the attack by his barely existing facial hair, Zuko fell to the ground, rolling at the last moment to ignore another downward stab.

Quickly falling into a crouch, Zuko glared at the bullheaded female. She didn’t fight with honor, trying to stab him like that. She was a pirate, he supposed, but either way, he didn’t have time for this. They needed to get off this island.

Deciding a little brute force was in order, Zuko suddenly found himself on his feet and throwing flames repeatedly at his crippled opponent. They both knew she wasn’t going to last much longer under the barrage, but she was of a stubborn sort. Or perhaps smart … just because Zuko was planning on sparing her, didn’t mean any other fire-bender would.

He swallowed the bitter pill for what it was, his throat clenching. He really didn't have time to deal with this, especially with Aang screaming over there like a little girl. He didn't care if Aang was apparently a Master air-bender, he was also a pacifist. And honestly, he didn’t like the looks of that Cooky fellow. Mind you, he was a pirate, but there was this item know as a brush at the very least. At least the water-bender seemed to brush her hair.

Plus ... Aang was still this sheltered, awkward kid and Zuko kind of felt responsible for him.

Dragging in a breath of air, feeling the heat of fire mix with the freedom of the wind in his gut, Zuko struck out. He kicked a fireball so large and hot that for a moment it almost looked blue. Peri barely had time to pull ice around her form when suddenly she knocked back into the forest in an explosion of fire and ice. A dry scream echoed over the expanse.

Coming out of his kick, watching the ground smoke only for a moment as he waited to see if she was getting up from the underbrush, Zuko turned his attention to Aang.

The young monk, surprisingly, was doing really well. He was air-bending in a battle though it seemed more a defensive art.

Aang, dodging another knife being thrown at him, barely brought his staff up in time to have two metal ladles slam against the hand crafted tool. Aang, much smaller than his opponent, nearly collapsed under the sudden strength of the pirate. He could even hear his staff cracking. The air-bender cringed at the thought. Was this pirate intentionally trying to break his staff? He kept getting in close and smacking it with his metal ladles. It was just then that a terrible thought occurred to the young bender: Yes, he was purposely trying to break his staff. After all, it was a
Aang, unable to float away in time, readied his staff for another impacted. Yet, this time, when the spoons hit wood, they were accompanied by fire.

The cook was a fire-bender.

“Ghhaa!!” cried Aang as the flames licked the flesh on his hands. Needing to get away, he quickly used the tail of his staff to blow his opponent away again. Hopping away a second later, Aang took a quick moment to look at his hands and staff.

The staff had taken most of the attack and was now smoking, but he still got burned. The palms of his hands had been open in order to brace his staff and to protect his fingers during the attack. Small red welts were already starting to form. Aang cringed and grasped his staff awkwardly, wincing at the action. He then sprung into the air, ready to bat the cook away with hurricane force … only to meet a fireball midair. Eyes going wide, instincts battling his in-progress kata, Aang decided to swing with the fireball. The tail of his staff opened and seemingly scooped up the midair fire attack. Then with a spin a disk thrower would be proud of, he came back around and batted the fireball back at its owner.

Cooky didn’t even have time to dodge, the fireball slamming into him … and pushing him right off a nearby cliff face.

Immediately landing, the air-bender stood there a moment, going ashen. He immediately looked over to Zuko for answers as the older boy jogged over to him. He then glanced at his slightly charred staff, then at his red hands again, and finally back at the cliff. He repeated this action twice before he gulped and asked the banished prince, “Y-you don’t think I killed him, do you?”

Zuko, frowning, found he couldn’t lie to the younger boy, “… Probably.”

“Probably?!” squawked Aang, his voice breaking. “B-but I’m a monk. I’m not supposed to kill anyone. Could he … not be dead?”

Staring at the cliff’s edge, Zuko tried to find the best way to tell the young boy that it was okay. The cook had probably been a nameless half-breed or a traitor anyway, but at least he now fully understood the pirate captain's words from the other night: *I’m always looking for a good bender to add to my ranks.* They already had a fire-bender on board from the look of it. Whoever Cooky had been, Zuko didn't really care, because there was only one thing they both needed to know right now. “Aang … He was a pirate.”

Going even paler, Aang rushed to the edge of the cliff, his mind overcome with guilt. He quickly poked his head over the edge of the cliff, the boy calling down, “Hey … are you dead? Sorry about knocking you off a cliff! … Um, hello?”

Zuko, now next to the panicking air-bender, peeked over the edge. Pebbles were falling over the cliff face from his movement alone. It wasn’t safe over here, especially with that far fall right into the ocean’s spray, pointy rocks included. There was nobody … at least not yet. Things like that had
a habit of washing up on shore.

“What do you mean? *Are you dead?* If he's dead, he won’t be able to answer Aang. We should grab the egg and go,” grumbled Zuko, his pity limited for a blood-thirsty pirate.

“Besides,” Zuko added, remembering the scar on the man’s neck. “I'm pretty sure he was mute.”

Aang, looking even more ashen, poked his head further over the cliff, calling out, “Sorry … again! I forgot you couldn't talk! Just wave your arms or something instead.”

Zuko covered his eyes, unable to witness the absurdity. Sighing, feeling ten years older than he was, Zuko was about to sternly tell Aang that no one could survive a fall like that and that they should just leave, but then Aang perked up.

“Oh, hey. He’s alive!” The boy then cupped his mouth and called down again as the half-drowned pirate pulled himself up onto a large rock. “Hey, Mr. Pirate! You don't have to say anything, just wave your hands!”

The pirate did something else entirely.

Aang sat back on his knees and immediately frowned, “Well, that wasn’t a very nice hand gesture.”

Zuko, peeking down, immediately went red in the face, his princely arrogance simmering to the surface. The cook sure knew his rude hand gestures. And how dare he insult a Fire Nation prince!

Leaning over the edge, smoke flowing from his spare fist, Zuko yelled, “Did you just insult my bloodline and my bending?! How dare you! I am a *prin-* I mean, a better fire-bender than you! You should show some respect! We might have even thrown a rope down or something, but now you can crawl up on your own!”

The next thing Aang knew, Zuko was pulling the air-bender away from the edge just as a fireball was thrown up at them, the heat ruffling their clothes as it went by.

Standing there a moment, *rage* now bubbling in his stomach, Zuko tried to control his temper as he murmured, “Come on, let’s go get the egg and then look at your hands. We also really need to get back to the beach and away from … whatever this is.” *Stupidity* was probably the right word for it.

Nodding, Aang cradled his hands as he walked to the egg. Zuko, hanging back, took a moment to look down the cliff again. He took a second to glare at the other fire-bender before he promptly threw a fireball of his own down. He tried not to smirk too much as he walked away. He hoped the jerk fell back into the ocean.

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something. My uncle, after I got this burn wound, would change the bandages for me ... especially in the beginning.”

Zuko swallowed at the thought and tried to ignore the obvious staring on Aang's part. “The pain was ... terrible, but he would pull the heat out of the wound. It made it bearable.”

Frowning, Aang nodded, stating, “Do you know how?”

Shrugging, the older boy murmured softly, “I had it done so many times ... I could never forget. Now, hold your hands out. It might even reduce swelling.”

Cringing slightly, Aang put his hands out as he tried to speak in a chipper tone, “Well, at least one good thing came out of this. You can now learn how to fly Appa.”

Almost dropping the monk's hand, halfway done with the first palm, Zuko almost whined, “W-what?! B-but I can't fly.”

Laughing, loving the look of dread on the Avatar's face, the air-bender smiled broadly, “Well, it’s not going to be me now, is it?”

Sighing, nodding and hating himself for it, Zuko growled, “Well, don't blame me if we both die.”

Aang could only laugh, smiling softly. For a moment, they both just sat in silence, the small brook babbling at them. Then, staring at the older boy in a curious manner, Aang asked a question that had been on his mind from time to time, “Lee ... who is Zuko?”

Almost dropping the young bender's hands, Zuko's eyes went wide. He hadn't said too much earlier, had he? Had Aang caught on, knowing he wanted to say: prince? Was that enough of a clue for him to figure out he was that Prince Zuko?

Swallowing, his words strained, Zuko slowly asked, “Where did you hear that name?”

Shrugging, Aang admitted, “When we were in the between realm, you said your name was Zuko. It was like you were reminding yourself. I was meaning to ask earlier, but things haven't exactly been lax. I kept forgetting.”

Looking away, resisting the urge to bite his lower lip like he used to as a child, Zuko took a deep breath. Aang was his friend, right? He probably wouldn't even care if he was a prince. A banished prince.

Zuko closed his eyes at the thought. No, he didn't want to admit that. He didn't want to admit he was a banished prince and that he was a disgrace. Well, the least he could do for the boy that was starting to grow on him like a little brother was to tell him a partial truth. At least a small part of it. Right?

Looking at the small hand now cupped in his as he pulled the heat from the red wound, Zuko dwelt on his next words carefully. Should he say something? Everything? Nothing at all?

Finally deciding, he admitted, “My name ... is Zuko. I lied to the waterbenders. I was afraid of what would happen if I told the truth.”

Aang, sitting there, didn't even twitch. Not even when Momo went screeching past their heads, trying to catch a bug. Zuko almost sighed in relief. Aang must not know of Prince Zuko. Then again, the name Zuko did become slightly popular after his birth. Many families probably borrowed the name hoping it would bring their son's honor. He doubted anyone would ever want to
use his name again though once they found out he was the Avatar. He *even* defiled the name of his grandfather. Part of him didn't even want his own name anymore. It seemed so heavy with too many burdens. Being a banished and disgraced prince was bad enough, but to be the Avatar as well?

Glancing at the streaming water before them, Zuko couldn't help but admit, “But I wish my name was Lee. It would be nice to be someone else. I could escape the burdens of that name and the dishonor it carries. I could be no one. In fact, with a name like Lee, I could be anyone. I could be someone new.”

Perhaps then he could be free like so many birds.

The next words choked him, but he said it aloud nonetheless, “Perhaps as Lee, I wouldn't mind being the Avatar as much.”

Zuko, now done with his confession, dropped his hands into his lap, staring at the callouses that had formed from his practice with the dao swords. He knew it was cowardly to want to run away, but he felt that was all he could do nowadays. All he could do was run from his fate, his name, the memories of his mother and his lack of skills. He knew he could never escape any of them, not really, but at least he could get away from his name. It wasn't like he would ever be able to rule anyway. Honestly, he wasn't sure when it had happened, but he had started to hate his name.

Aang, looking at his own hands, nodded and rolled his digits towards himself. He accepted this. “Well, I like Zuko, but Lee's fine with me as well. If that's who you want to be, I am happy to meet him. He seems like a great guy so far, but I hope one day I get to meet Zuko as well.”

Zuko was actually stunned into silence at Aang's words. He didn't know why, but those words felt like one of the kindest things anyone had ever said to him. Perhaps that was something a real friend would say. A friend would forgive his lies and accept him for whatever he wanted to be. And, as sad as it was to admit, Aang was one of the first real friends he had had in a long time. His fate was a heavy one, but at least he now felt someone would help him carry the weight of the title *Avatar* and never judge him for any of his mistakes along the way.

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The rest of the trip through the woods was uneventful, yet Zuko's mind was clouded with so many thoughts. What would Uncle think of him for wanting to be Lee? Would he be angry? Would he be sad? Would he accept it with just a nod and give himself some kind of ludicrous name like Mushi?

He didn't know why, but those thoughts really didn't bother him too much. For, like Aang, he was sure Iroh would accept it with nothing but a sad smile. That was how Iroh was. He wanted Zuko to grow, to be something more.

Unlike his father, Iroh wanted him to be kind.

Zuko swallowed the thought of his father and shrugged it aside. They were almost there. He didn't have time for such recollections. He had to be prepared to fight if someone had gotten to their camp before them. Luckily, it seemed that no one was there.

Signaling for Aang and the egg to come out, the air-bender floated out of the trees and down to the camp, the egg on his back like a backpack. Zuko had tied his blue parka into knots and it had turned out quite successful. It really was a great idea … even if Aang did look a bit ridiculous. Either way, Zuko was free of the weight if a fight occurred.
Standing on the beach, listening to the wave’s crash against the sand, Zuko almost couldn’t believe there were pirates here. It was quiet and as peaceful as when they first came to the island. Usually, his luck was so rotten his ride would have been on fire by now and there would have been a small army to greet him. It seemed that luck was on his side or, more likely, it was probably Aang’s luck.

Pointing to Appa, glad the great beast had fallen asleep with his saddle on, Zuko barked, “Hurry up and wake up Appa. I’ll hurry and get us packed. I don’t want to tempt fate.”

Aang merely nodded and hopped over to the bison, the air-bender snuggling under a large furry chin as he laughed, “Up and at ’em big buddy! Lee says we are tempting fate!”

Appa answered with a great yawn, drool dribbling all the way down onto Aang’s head as he lazily stood. Zuko’s eye twitched at the sight alone as he nearly dropped the bag of fruit he was tying shut. He hadn’t found a whole bunch of food the other day, but he was sure it was enough to get to the mainland now that he had an idea of where they were.

Securing the bag of food and water skins in the saddle bag, the small group was quickly on their way … except Aang stalled him before he could sit in the saddle. The young air-bender kindly reminded him, “Come, get on Appa’s head. I’ll tell you how to fly.”

Oh yeah. He had forgotten.

Ugh.

He should have thrown another fireball down at that sleazy pirate. Just in spite. Being in the saddle was concerning enough for the fire-bender, but now he had to steer to his own death? Wonderful.

Yet, despite his reservations, Zuko stiffly crept up from the saddle and to a spot on Appa’s head. Appa merely yawned at his new driver's weight, Zuko freezing like a stone because he thought the great beast was going to shake him off. Only after a minute of complete stillness and Aang looking at him funny did the Avatar pick up the reins.

“Oh, Appa's super easy to deal with. He goes with the flow. Don't you boy?” said Aang as he patted the fluffy white fur.

Appa merely yawned again.

“Alright,” continued Aang as he tried not to wince because of his hands. He seemed to keep forgetting they were injured even with them wrapped. “It's pretty simple. He reacts to the movement of the reins. If you pull back, it means up and to let the reins go slack, means to go down. That way of you drop the reins, he'll automatically land. As for directions, pull on the rein you want him to turn his head in and he will fly in that direction.”

Zuko nodded, finding the instructions to be oddly reminiscent to a rhino’s training or an ostrich-horse. Nodding, he admitted, “Seems easy enough.”

“Great! Now let me tell you how to do a loopy-loop!” Aang then went into a quick rant of pulling the two reins simultaneously and tugging and pulling in opposite directions. In the end, Zuko just had to sigh and grumble they didn't have time for this nonsense and to just get on with it.

Aang wasn't put out. Instead, he smiled and gave a thumbs-up as he sat back down in the saddle, leaving Zuko feeling exposed. His next words meant there was no going back, “Alright, time to go up. All you need to say is … yip, yip.”

Appa immediately answered with a bellow, the large beast surging forward on his many legs.
Zuko, in reaction, pulled the reins back causing Appa to roar again and run even faster in order to get into the air as quickly as possible. Zuko, a half scream on his lips, almost closed his eyes … until he saw something with sails come into the beach, floating from its cover behind the cliffs that surround their small bay.

It was the pirate ship and even he could see the net-catapults from here. They had been waiting for them, all this time. There wasn’t even enough distance now to turn around, and he didn’t understand the commands well enough to tell Appa to dodge. He could practically see the smirk on the captain’s face, especially when the captain yelled, “Fire!”

Zuko could hear the swishing of knives all the way across the small bay as ropes were cut, a huge net being released like a swinging vortex. Everything seemed to move in slow motion after that, Zuko’s mind slamming into tactics and maneuvers worthy of his education as a prince. Too bad he didn’t know if he would be able to pull them off. Appa was a new breed of steed. If he messed this up at minimal Appa might slam into the neighboring rock face and they would escape the net. He didn’t know what kind of impacts the large beast could take, though. Could Appa take a beating like a rhino could? He would presume so, but sky-bison were also a creature of the sky. Where their bones delicate? It was better than not dodging, right? Or should he stay the course and take the nets full force. Would he be quick enough to cut the ropes off before Appa was pulled down by the attached anchors? Then again, if he cut them, what if the net kept dragging Appa down? Would they fall into the ocean? What if Appa were to drown? They would be trapped on the island with the pirates if they didn’t drown as well.

Yet, just when Zuko made up his mind to take on the cliff side, something exploded from the water below. It was like a geyser, water splashing all over the surprised teenager causing him to jerk on the reins again. Appa suddenly steered right instead of left and into the direction of the net. There was no impact, though, no reminder of gravity and its weight.

Instead, there was a jarring noise, like rope hitting bamboo.

Quickly wiping the water out of his eyes, Zuko didn’t know if he should be thankful or horrified … for the bone-dragon had returned. Little ice crystals were falling off its body and into the warm ocean water as it took over the scene. Somehow, in the light, it seemed even more horrifying as it loomed over the small bay. Yet, it wasn’t looking at Zuko with its dead glare. Its sights were on the pirate ship that had just hit it with a net.

There was a moment of silence, water dripping off the creature of bone like a waterfall. For a moment, it seemed a sentry awoken, trying to decide its next course of action. Then, his bottom jaw now reattached, the bone dragon snapped open its maw and released a roar. It was an airy noise, like a broken flute, but still terrifying as it seemed to vibrate Zuko’s very bones with its pitch. It then struck out at the pirate’s ship in a collection of splintered wood and great teeth, cries and screams coming from the crew on deck.

Zuko, unknowingly, was still flying upward, watching in horrified fascination. He only snapped out of it when Aang yelled down a thank you to the bone dragon. It seemed the spirit was making sure they weren’t going to be followed and that Zuko could uphold his promise to hatch the egg. And he would … if he had any idea how to hatch a dragon egg.

“Hey, Lee,” said Aang, voicing Zuko’s own thoughts. “Just how are we supposed to hatch this thing anyway?”

Sighing, trying to not look down and imagine plummeting to his death, Zuko admitted, “I have no
Hey loves. The pirate arc is over … well mostly. We may see them again, but for the most part, it's over. There should be a doodle up of Cooky and Peri later. As for the battle-themed chapter, I blame DBZ for that. Got caught up in a few fanfics from over there and it's still latched onto my brain slightly. Next chapter will probably be Katara and Sokka. I kind of stalled mid arc for that one. Also, Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays to everyone in case I don't get another chapter out before then.

(Revisions December 2016): Grammarly really wanted me to change all benders to blenders. I laughed so hard.
When Sokka had been growing up, there had been an old man in the village who never stopped staring out at the snow. Not particularly strange, given most of the year there was nothing but snow.

This man was looking for something, though, his aging eyes always shifting to and fro … especially in the dead of winter. It was unnerving, the haunted look in those old eyes. Katara was probably too young to remember, but Sokka recalled him. He recalled how the man would always have a fire nearby. He kept it hot, even when it was not cold.

Sokka had always kept his distance from this old man for he felt there was something otherworldly about him. It was like the old man could see between realms and that he was waiting for something. One day, Sokka had decided to approach the old man, cold and wet from playing in the snow. The man had a fire after all and anyone in the village was welcome to share its heat.

The old man hadn't even looked away from the horizon when Sokka had sat before his fire, dusk starting to fall over the glittering expanse.

There was only silence, except for the howl of the wind and the crackling of the fire. Then the old man spoke, his words haunting, “Boy. Why you still outside? You shouldn’t be outside tonight. Not tonight.”

Young Sokka, frowning and misinterpreting the warning, thought it was a challenge. “I'm not scared of the dark.”

The old man released a grating laugh and smiled almost bitterly at Sokka's chubby look of defiance. The old man’s next words carried little humor, though. “You should be. Spirits have an easier time crossing in the dark and forgotten places, especially tonight. Remember, this world was theirs before it was ours and without the Avatar … there is no way to truly escape their vengeance. And spirits, they are patient. They don’t mind waiting, even a lifetime.”

Sokka stared, eyes big as dread started to crawl into his young heart.

The old man merely continued, the scar near his mouth seeming taunt and tight as he rubbed a hand over his lower jaw. “Just like I know that he will be coming for me. I escaped all those years ago, a
lifetime ago, but he still got my entire family. Did you know there used to be two villages on either side of this cold cape, child? Like two brothers on the ice? I was the only one that got out alive. He, it, came to punish us. That spirit crawled up from a dark place in the snow. He came to take.”

Sokka, at this time, had been near tears, his young mind swimming with monsters. The old man stalled and merely smiled before he patted the young boy with a gnarled hand. His next words were warm despite their weight, “Don’t worry, little wolf. Just keep the fire burning hot tonight and it won’t bother you. This is something I have been waiting for … for many years. It best have an old man’s blood than a young pup’s. Now, you head in tonight and don’t come outside no matter what. And don’t look back. Old I may be, but a fight I will still put up.”

Sokka had all but ran to the hut, his young mind now noticing that everyone else was already in their own huts and that an unnatural darkness had seemed to settle over the world. He had dared to glance back though as the fur over the door settled closed. He had dared to glance back … and never would he forget. The man's eyes had been looking at Sokka, piercing into his very soul as if saying, ‘Look at me … and not the shadow behind me.’ Sokka had tried not to see the dark figure slowly rising up over the old man, or its mangled unworldly too-many limbs or its grinning jaw. But he had glanced. Just a moment … before the fur over the hut's entrance fell shut.

There were no screams like he expected to hear. There were no sounds of carnage, nor cries of vigor from a hard fought battle. It was silent.

It was like listening to a fire slowly go out.

It was a whimper.

The next day the village was the same as it always was. No signs of spirits … nor the old man. He was just gone as if he had been dragged away by shadows. There wasn’t even a drop of blood in the snow to be found nor any signs of a struggle. It could have been a dream. Then again, it could have been the type of spirit that only existed once you acknowledged its existence. In asking even about the old man Sokka felt he would admit that the thing he had seen in the dark was real, and then it would come and snatch his village up as well.

So Sokka swallowed his questions like a heavy stone to forever be carried in his stomach. In this way he unknowingly gathering hate and fear for the spirit world, wondering if someday the shadowed being would come and claim him as well.

Staring at Miki’s cold form, Sokka silently wondered if that spirit had finally caught up with him in some way. He wondered if this was somehow his fault for looking back all those years ago.

Taking a breath, Sokka decided it didn’t matter if that was the reason. There was no point in regretting it now.

Instead, like the old man, part of him accepted it. He accepted that Miki was all but dead and that spirits were spirits. They were here before us, be they born from rivers, forest, rocks or even the forgotten dead. And now there was no Avatar to cool their ire or calm their hearts. All you could do was fight … even if it was with a bag of rice.

And so Sokka started to pour the rice around Miki’s form, his expression somber as Katara and Suki continued to hang onto their denial.

Katara, finally unable to take the sound of rice slowly rolling to the floor like so many loose thoughts, finally ran over and grabbed her brother's hand, stalling his work. Her words were choked and probably spoken more on Suki's defense than her own. “What are you doing? She's not dead!”
Staring at his sister, frowning deeply like his father always did, Sokka pried his hand away. “Katara … even if she isn't dead, she isn't completely alive either. I honestly don't know how rice is going to stop a spirit, but dad put me in charge of you so I will do what I have to.”

Katara took a step back as if offended. She then gave Miki's still, cold form one more glance before she stomped over and grabbed Suki's hand, murmuring, “Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

The herbalist, giving the boy a half-crazed look, finally waved her hand as if to continue. Her tone was scratchy but at least it was befitting for the atmosphere, “Finish putting the rice on her, boy. And then I will tell you a tale of these surrounding valleys and why these things came to be. Mind you, they have always been here, but the Fire Nation rarely recognizes the beliefs of others and why they have them.”

“Of course, it's the Fire Nations fault,” grumbled Sokka as he delicately poured the rice around her like an outline. Part of him made sure to keep rice off of her delicate face, though. She had been pretty.

Waving a gnarled hand, the old woman continued, “Well, time for granny to tell a tale, eh? I suppose the best place to start would have to be the beginning. Mind you there are varying versions, but this is the one I was told when I was young during the Rice Festival.”

“Long ago, when this mountain was young, there wasn't a valley at all. It was one large mountain, but people came here regardless. The mountain spirit saw their troubles in living up so high and said he would suck in his gut and go hungry so that there would be land for them to grow their crops. He only asked that they give part of their crop to fill his empty belly once a year. The villagers agreed and for a time, things were good.”

“Much time passed and a young tax collector came to collect taxes for the current king. He was aghast that the villagers were not paying taxes on the rice they were throwing away to caves, nooks and little rock temples throughout the surrounding mountains that the large mountain had become. He demanded that all the extra rice be given to the current king to make up for all the rice they wasted previous years. The villagers begged and pleaded, saying there wouldn't be enough to give the spirit and feed their families. The tax collector would hear nothing of it and took the rice, forcing the villagers to feed their families over appeasing the spirit. And it continued that way for a while, the mountain slowly growing hungrier and hungrier as the years passed.”

“Soon, travelers started to go missing, and then people that had strayed too far into the woods. It didn't take long for the villagers to grow so wary that they didn’t even want to mind the crops. It was in this disarray that the tax collector came back to find that the rice had not been harvested yet. He threatened to take all the rice this year.”

“The villagers, deciding that something had to be offered to the mountain god, decided to trick the tax collector and lured him up to one of the largest caves in the mountain. The Gaping Maw it was called. They then threw him in, crying out to the mountain god that this was the man that had been starving him the last few years and perhaps the fat on his belly would suffice for this year.”

“In the dark, the man floundered about, trying to crawl back up. The mountain god merely watched him before coming forward. In the moonlight, the mountain spirit apparently looked like a gaunt and half-starved tiger-elk with far too many horns. The great spirit stared at the man with hunger and disgust. He did not require flesh of the mortal world, but he was starving… so he took the sacrifice that had been offered, for, like the rice, it was given freely.”

“He ate the man's essence, his chi, and for a time was full.”
“A human body cannot remain alive and chi-less though. So the jiangshi was born. It is easy to say that the first few years were hard for the people in the mountains with the jiangshi always hungry, wanting to replace its lost chi.”

“The mountain spirit saw this and mourned for what it had created, but neither could it destroy its creation. It is said the villagers asked the Avatar what they should do. The Avatar, after communicating with the spirit and the villagers, created the Rice Festival. Temples were quickly built by all the prominent caves serving as both a place for offerings and a place of rest for the jiangshi. Villagers only had to offer some rice at these shrines to feed the mountain … and to keep the jiangshi asleep in their beds of rice.”

“As you probably can already tell, there is no one left or allowed to offer rice to the mountain nor its dark children,” finished the old woman, the old tale hanging in the air.

Sokka, now done with his somber chore, was now frowning. He swallowed shallowly as he asked, “And you want us to do what? Take rice to all the shrines? I don't know if you have noticed lady, but we are sneaking the back way around the mountain to ignore fire-benders. We don't want to get closer to the villages that were conquered just to throw rice down some hole.”

The old woman cackled, shaking her head, “As if there are any shrines left. The fire-benders destroyed most of them because they were created by an Avatar. They detest any artifacts of the Avatar. They never once took a moment to think why the Avatar might have made them.”

Taking only a moment to be shocked, Sokka barked, “What do you want me to do about it then?”

Shrugging, the old woman admitted, “Nothing. Such is the nature of neutral chi. The Fire Nation will either see the error in their ways … or the mountain will slowly reclaim itself.”

Frowning, anger bubbling to the surface, Sokka barked, “And what are we supposed to do then? Wait for the fire-benders to do something good? Ha. We need to get off this mountain and away from those things. How about you tell us how to do that?”

“Very quickly, I would imagine,” chuckled the old woman. “Jiangshi have trouble crossing large amounts of moving water, such as a river, for the river spirit feels it is a corpse for them to claim. Or so they say. If you can get over the Yellow Pearl River before they catch you, then you should be free from their reach.”

Sokka, dwelling on the maps that the group had been going by, suddenly started, “Yellow Pearl River, that's at least a two days walk. A normal walk … without children! We would never make it before nightfall.”

Giving the boy a mad look, the old woman cackled again in what seemed to be a bout of madness as she added, “Well, the Rice Festival is a Festival of sacrifice. In the past, the spirits have been known to take other things. Tell me, boy, what are you willing to give up to protect the ones around you?”

Sokka was too stunned to say anything. Her words hitting too close to home. Because, for a moment, Sokka could only think of his mother.

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“It is unlikely that they saw anything because I doubt that a thirty man unit wouldn’t have seen them. Then again, we have no other leads, do we?”

The rest of the YuYan archers in his team nodded in agreement. The only thing anyone had really found was the severe lack of well … anything. There were seemingly no animals about. Not even the song of swamp frogs could be heard. Given the farms they had taken, there really hadn’t been much need for hunting, but now it was horrifically obvious how long something had been wrong. Just how long did it take every animal in the mountains to disappear? It also brought into question the lack of resistance fighters. Even though the city of Taku was long ago destroyed, there were still groups willing to fight for its ruins and strategic location. Everyone had merely thought that they had been quiet these last few months … the truth was probably something else had gotten to them first.

Putting the little shoe in a side bag, Sensu nodded at the others. “Well, it is better to go back with some captives than nothing at all. We should fetch them. Perhaps the locals might be able to enlighten us with what is going on here. Local lore can carry more weight than we know, especially if it has something to do with local spirits. It is best we find out as soon as possible.”

The others nodded in agreement again. Then, without another word, they dashed forward like fast moving red-elks towards the ruins of the city. Ye Lui would stall from time to time to look at the children’s footprints along the path to see where the small group was headed. It wasn't long before they were dragged into the ruins of Taku and towards the upper north side of the decimated city where a set of seemingly endless steps led upward.

Looking up, twilight starting to fall upon the ruins of the city like a final goodbye, the men watched as one building gained a few twinkling lights. It was lamplight. There had been a rumor of an old, hermit woman that still lived in the city. She, apparently, healed any wayward Earth Kingdom soldier that still knew she was there.

Well, it seemed they had finally found her. It was no wonder … no one wanted to run up that many stairs.

Bhao, looking at all the steps he would have to run up given it was the easiest way up the mountain, grumbled, “So, do we run up all the steps now or when it’s dark so we can trip easier?”

“An ambush is much easier in the dark,” answered Sensu simply, before he added, “Plus, it wouldn’t do for one of them to see us running up the steps now, would it? It is best to wait until nightfall.”

Frowning, looking behind himself bitterly at the unnatural silence that seemed to have gathered for the coming evening, the youngest member couldn't help but ask, “And what of the thing or things in the forest?”

Wenzhou, always one to silence any type of whining, quickly asked, “What? Do you think your footsteps too loud? Or do you think your brothers in battle were not swift and silent enough coming up the mountain? Do you think a beast or spirit has already found us? We are no mere pikemen nor clumsy fully-armored fire-benders. We are YuYan. Hunters of the sun.”

Cringing inward slightly while pressing a little closer to the tree trunk he was situated near, Bhao pouted and looked back up at the mountain before he mumbled, “I didn't say that.”

Nodding, always knowing exactly what to say or do to silence the youngster, Wenzhou smiled.

Shortly after, the six men hunkered down for their wait in the tree's branches. None of them were
the wiser that something was watching not only them but the mountain before them. For it was not their stealth that had given them away. No, their footsteps were indeed light and nearly soundless. It, in fact, was their very breath.

A breath of chi and life can attract many an unwanted thing.

After all, it was the first night of the Rice Festival.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry, a short update. Well, it’s better than no update I suppose. Personally, I blame work … and maybe Elder Scrolls Online… I regret nothing.

(Revisions December 2016)
Thank you to CACrest for proofreading!

Sorry for the repost.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Katara could barely stand it. It was like fingernails were clawing down her back. It was like something was always breathing right into her ear. She was also finding loose grains of rice everywhere. They stalked her like unwanted memories. She couldn’t take it. She could accept that they had dragged a near-corpse all this way. No, they had dragged a friend all this way. Her tribe would do the same for anyone’s body. You had to set them on the ice after all or to the water. You had to say farewell.

This was different, though. It felt like she had failed not only Miki’s body, but the remnants of her soul. It didn’t feel like the pain of losing her mother, she hadn’t known Miki that well, but it still pressed at her … especially when Sokka stopped referring to Miki as a person.

She was just a thing now.

It was like she had never been a girl to Sokka. It was like she hadn’t blushed at his back from time to time, forming a crush. She was just a half-dead thing now, waiting to devour them all.

Helping lay some sleeping blankets on the floor along with a musty futon they had found, Katara tried to understand. Yes, Miki had been. She had been a good soul, but they were still here. They still needed to live.

Patting one little girl on the head, Katara helped her snuggle down before she turned her attention to the door behind her. Two of the Kyoshi warriors were waiting for her to finish putting the last of the kids to sleep. The rest of them, the closest things to adults in this little ragtag group, had to discuss the survival of the children. No one was going to come save them. Perhaps if there was still an active Avatar there would be someone to save them. The Avatar existed to save people from spirits like this, but where was he now? Katara had always been told he was the hope of the future.

Katara gripped her parka tightly. She was slowly losing faith in the bridge between worlds. The
Avatar, obviously, wasn’t going to come and help them. He was in Ba Sing Se, hidden by its walls. He didn’t care about the world anymore. They had to save themselves.

The water-bender stood up straight, a grim look of determination in her eyes. She was going to help save them all. Now was not the time to mourn. There would be time for that later, but first … where was her brother?

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The mountain had been silent as they made their way upward. The only sound that dare exist was the echo of their arrows being released. It was abnormal and concerning. It did not stall the YuYan in their mission, though. They would collect the children … and maybe find out where the rest of their men had gone.

Up the mountain quicker than most would deem possible, the YuYan all settled quickly on the roof of the old herbal institute and near the windows. They passed each window until there was a voice. A young man’s voice, squeaky and edging on manhood.

It seemed they had found their quarry.

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The four Kyoshi Warriors and the two water tribesman stood around a small table, a map before them. Their voices echoed through the cracks in the walls. Suddenly, a bump on the ceiling caused all of them to start. Two of the Kyoshi warriors even dragged out their fans.

“What was that?” said Sokka as he stared up at the ceiling, eyes widening as the ceiling shook slightly as if in answer. He expected to hear heavy breathing or some other spirit-worthy sound follow after. Instead, there was just the sound of the wind blowing against the badly sealed window. It was likely the culprit.

“I still can’t believe that Miki is …” said Lalli, one of the Kyoshi warriors, her hand covering her mouth. “We were … carrying a …”

Sokka looked away from the ceiling, meeting the warrior’s gaze. They stared at each other knowingly, the words hanging in the air in the small room of preadults.

“Yeah … and we are still here. Stuck here. Trapped on this mountain by these jiangshi. We need to get off of this mountain,” said Sokka, turning his attention back to the map, his mind picking apart plan after plan he had before they could fully form.

“We do but like you said earlier, it’s a normal two-day trip to the nearest river. We wouldn’t make it with all the children,” said Suki, her brow creasing. “Can’t we just wait to leave until after the Rice Festival? It’s what stirred them up, right? Or maybe we can take rice with us? We can leave it behind us so they can collect it, eat it, count it, or sleep in it. Whatever it is that they do with it.”

Sokka rubbed his chin as if considering it, but then he shook his head. “No. We have to offer it. It’s supposed to be a sacrifice or gift. So, I doubt that would work. And even if it did, can we carry that much rice? And where are we going to get it? From the old woman? The pantry doesn’t have that much rice.”

The other girls sighed and Suki frowned. Sokka was continually irritating, but he was also right. There was too much at stake just to guess. They had eight children, not counting themselves, that needed to get to the Foggy Swamp safely. She just wasn’t going to place their safety on a maybe.
Looking to the other girls, Suki asked, “Anyone else have any ideas?”

Meanwhile, above the small collection of teenagers, a group of YuYan shared a look. Their mouths all held a grim line as they listened to the bad news. It was spirits. Wonderful. This was most unfortunate but not unexpected. At least now they knew what happened to the small company that was coming to the stronghold. Now, the only thing left to do was collect the children, especially the teenagers. They obviously knew the local lore and a Fire Sage was bound to ask for a native that personally knew the tale. Too bad, even as teenagers, most of them looked like warriors. Not that any of the YuYan doubted their personal skills. It was just likely that the teenagers would scatter, and the spirits in the mountains would find themselves a feast.

Unfortunate, but unavoidable.

Sensu stared at the boy from the shadows. The blue-dressed teenager knew the most. He was a thinker. A planner and, obviously, knew more than the girls.

“We need the boy. Even if all the others get away,” said Sensu to the other archers.

“Agreed,” answered Ye Liu, though, he was looking anywhere but at their current leader. Instead, he was grabbing his bow and pulling back the string with calculated ease. His next words caused everyone’s heads to snap forward and back to the window. “But, first, we should get rid of that. If we can.”

There, behind the six teenagers, stood a shadow in the doorway. Looming and silent. It was more a shadow than a thing of substance. Its only movement was the slow twitching of its fingers. Not that Ye Liu really cared. His arrow would either kill it or not. You never knew with spirits. Some were more corporeal or powerful than others.

Lip twitching, eyes squinting slightly, Ye Liu released his arrow. The sound of cracking glass went nearly unnoticed, leaving only a minor hole in the glass. The thunk of an arrow embedding itself into bone and forcing a body to the floor was what made all the teenagers jump and observe their surroundings. Not that the teenagers really got to react to the body of a gray corpse on the floor nor the arrow embedded in its forehead. Suddenly, there was the sound of crashing glass … a body jumping through the nearby window.

A form in red rolled into the room, war paint and bow included as glass sprayed everywhere. Said archer was quickly following by three other figures, each sweeping into the room like birds of prey. For a moment, all the teenagers could do was stand and stare. It was like their minds couldn’t comprehend what was worse: the corpse that had been standing in the dark room over, having entered without any of their notice, or the four Fire Nation soldiers.

Suki, luckily, finally snapped out of it as one of the archers shook the glass shards off of his shoulders, the debris falling to the floor with little ringing tones. Said chiming was answered in turn by a rattling breath behind them all, the girl’s attention pulled just as quickly from the archers back to the hall. Suki prayed it wasn’t Miki in the hall … She didn’t know if she had the strength in her to hit the undead girl.

Thankfully, it was not her, but something much, much older. A lady’s servant if the clothes were any indication.

Quickly making a decision, the warrior girl cried out, “Girls! Spread out! Katara, check on the children, take Temko with you. Lalli, get some rice on that thing before it gets back up! The rest of us will fight.”
Katara wanted to disagree, to say she would stay and fight, but her hands became fists instead as she stiffly turned toward the room the children had bedded down in for that night. She could fight later. She could fight when her bending was a blade and a shield and not a sloppy mess. Then, no one would be able to hurt her or the ones she loved.

Meanwhile, Suki sprang forward in a collection of fan blades and skirts. Though, they were all archers and far better skilled for distance attacks, none of the YuYan feared close quarters combat. Each had short swords or throwing weapons. Some still clung to their bow, twisting and turning out of the way like wayward shadows.

And so, the female warriors and Sokka met the archers head on.

The herbalist, at this time, was speaking to her cat in a few rooms over, wandering to and fro like a madwoman on a mission. She did not seem to note the cries of battle or the grunts of bodies being slammed into her home’s walls. She was too busy talking to her cat. “No, no. We are going on a long trip. We don’t need the pear blossom, but we need the black plum. And these herbs as well. We cannot leave without these.”

The white cat merely meowed in turn, licking around the strange little saddle bag she had been situated with.

The old woman, in turn, seemed to be packing a heavy traveler’s bag with herbs and other oddities. There was also a bedroll tied to the back along with some sparse cookware. She was going places. She had even changed into what looked like traveling clothes.

“Now, where is that Air Nomad pedant? We need to keep evil spirits away,” said the herbalist, coming over with a wooden box. A second later Miyuki screeched as she was buried in a pile of pendants, necklaces and other stringed things which were tangled in a knotted mess. “Help me find it, will you?”

Yet, before the cat could even start the struggle from her necklace prison, there was a rain of wood and stone as a boy dressed in blue was kicked through a thin wall. A second later an archer was jumping through said hole in the wall after him, scattering dust everywhere. The archer then preceded to shoot a netted arrow at the boy. Sokka, in turn, took a moment to scream before he rolled out of the way and clumsily onto his stomach.

The herbalist seemed far less shocked than her cat at seeing a battle taking place in her home. She didn’t even blink an eye as Sokka got to his feet, released a war cry, and tried to hit the trained soldier with his bone club. The teenager was merely dodged and then kicked back through the wall he came through, the battle once again in the room over. If it could be called a single room … there were quite a few walls missing now. Not surprising, given half the walls were made of rice paper.

Stalling, the old woman blinked as if finally comprehending the situation. She then merely chuckled before leaning over and picking up an Air Nomad pendant that had been knocked loose from the pile. She hung it around her neck and smiled sadly down at it before she looked back up at the YuYan archers in her halls. “Look at that Miyuki. So many visitors today, and they seem quite handsome at that. It’s a good thing I put my face mask on today. And you thought I should skip it.”

Miyuki gave the old woman a deadpan stare as if asking, ‘You know they’re Fire Nation, right?’

Nodding as if the cat had spoken, the old woman lifted the angry feline out of the pile of trinkets. “No time to stare, dearie. Unfortunately, so many guests will attract more guests… and not the
handsome kind.”

The woman then took in a breath and held it as she stared out a nearby window … two shadowy figures just standing outside, still like rotting tree trunks. She stared at the still beings, not even breathing until the two suddenly sprang away, likely hopping onto the roof. It was as if they had lost sight of her.

She released her breath and chuckled in a mad way as she pulled her pack on. “Yes, certainly the unpleasant sort of company. Well, time for the mail chutes, eh, Miyuki?”

And so, the old woman walked through the war zone that had become her home. Teenagers and archers were being kicked through walls while arrows flew every which way. She didn’t even have to dodge. She just seemed to walk through the chaos as if she knew it would never touch her. Miyuki, on the other hand, looked petrified as she ran after her owner, tripping a wayward YuYan archer in a way that only a house cat could. Said archer merely grunted and then rolled into his fall as fan blades quickly followed after him.

Katara, staring at the chaos, had a group of children now behind her. Some of the young benders were still haphazardly trying to get dressed while others had their packs on upside down. The water-bender knew she should run, keep the younger ones away from the filthy Fire Nation, and yet, could she leave her brother? The Kyoshi Warriors?

“Will you move, dearie? Some people have escapes to make?” came an old humored voice, interrupting the young adult’s thoughts.

Katara, daring to look away from the chaos as one of the Kyoshi warriors was reduced to hand to hand combat because her fans had been shot away, stared at the old herbalist. She just realized that she didn’t even know the old woman’s name. Had the herbalist even said it? Some people said names were power and you should be careful who you give them to, for spirits liked to eat such things. Did the old woman think a bunch of kids would steal her name?

Pushing the thought way, marking it as unimportant at such a time, Katara choked, “Escape? Where?! Those things are outside!”

“Yes, yes, they are, but we are taking the mail chutes. Nearly forgot they were there. They will take us all the way down the mountain. It should shave off at least a day in our run to the river,” said the herbalist as she stepped forward, squeezing passed Katara like a stubborn old cat. “Or the chutes might kill us. Who knows if all the chutes’ tracks are still completely intact.”

Katara and Kemko, the Kyoshi Warrior next to her, took a moment to share a horrified look. Then again, what other choice did they have?

Turning to the kids, Katara made a choice, sending a private prayer to La and Tui for good luck. “We’ll have to chance it. Come on, let’s follow the herbalist.”

“What of the others?” asked Kemko as she gripped her bladed fans tightly, listening to the fight with a wanton heart. “Is there no way we can draw them away from the battle to retreat?”

“You can wait for the other guests,” said the herbalist, stuffing what looked like a framed water color painting into her shirt as she walked down the hall, taking small trinkets as she went. “Fire needs to breathe. Earth and water don’t. Those elements can hide the breath of their chi at least for a time. Fire Nation cannot. Just hold your breath and maybe the undead won’t see you.”

“What?” said Katara nearly tripping after the old woman. She wanted more of an explanation, but
there wasn’t time. A scream, a true scream even as muffled as it was, sounded. It caused all the YuYan and Kyoshi Warriors to look up and stall. There was a scuffle on the roof, grunts and heavy hops. There was then a *twak*, an arrow shooting right through the ceiling a second later as if it had been knocked away. It was followed by two or three other arrows, each embedding itself into the floor below as it left holes in the ceiling above. It was as if someone was purposely shooting downward and through the failing roof, but why would they do that?

A second later, everyone received an answer as two bodies fell through the weakened roof, rolling as they hit the flooring below. It was Yu Liu, and he was half carrying his bow brother, Zhaoqi. The older man seemed to be struggling just for breath as he held his throat, his lips the lightest of blues. He was struggling just to keep his own feet, and it was obvious that Yu Liu was the only reason he was still standing for that matter alive.

Sensu, frowning, didn’t have time to pull Yu Liu and Zhaoqi out of the room that became a battlefield when suddenly something heavy and stiff jumped down into the room with all of them. It threw dust everywhere as it landed, like an earth-bender making a flashy entrance. Yet, when the dust settled, it obviously wasn’t an earth-bender. At least, not anymore. It clearly had been one of the militia that plagued Pohuai Stronghold … ten years ago. That type of armor had long since been retired. The rasping death rattle, white open eyes, and dry pulled back black lips were the other signs that this thing was most assuredly not alive anymore.

Well, it seemed they got to see what had been happening to all the Earth Kingdom militia in the area for the past ten years, and it wasn’t exactly anything pleasant. Sensu, the YuYan’s mission leader, didn’t even get to question the creature further when Zhaoqi made a choked noise, dragging in a terrified yet raspy breath. It gained the thing’s attention and suddenly it *hopped* across the room. It was then slamming Yu Liu into a wall before he could even react and was then upon the already injured archer. The undead seemed to breathe in, to close to a sputtering Zhaoqi’s face. It appeared to be trying to suck something in. It was like it was trying to steal the archer’s very breath and likely … his chi.

Sensu didn’t even have to bark any orders. It was an unspoken command to protect their own. Let the children go. They could catch them again, and so they released a rain of arrows.

Suki and Lalli, back to back, watched in horrified fascination as all the Fire Nation archers seemed to forget them. The men were all turning their attention to the bigger threat in the room. It was slightly insulting, and yet, Suki was not the type of look a gift ostrich-horse in the mouth. This was their chance to get away.

Waving her fans, getting all the girls’ (and Sokka’s) attention as the archers aimed for the undead, the Kyoshi Warriors all headed to a hall Temko was waving them towards. Sokka was only allowed a questioning look when he noticed that all the children were trying to hold their breath from time to time, when suddenly a giant bag of rice was thrown at him, again. What was with people and throwing food at him? Mind you, he generally wouldn’t mind, but he wasn’t going to get to eat it so it was doubly cruel to him.

“Put some rice in the doorway. It will slow down the jiangshi. Any gift given must always be observed and counted,” said the old woman as she stuffed something else into her pack, “But you better pour more than one line. The jiangshi are fast counters, and you breathe too heavily boy. Hold your breath once in a while and they might stop seeing us enough to get away.”

Sokka, done with his first line of rice, looked at the old woman in disbelief. He didn’t even have time to argue about men needing more air than women when there was a thud right next to him, a form suddenly before him. The teenager immediately screamed, nearly falling backward as what
must have once been a farm girl stood before the line. Her milky eyes first looked at Sokka and then at the rice line. She was obviously one of the undead given the worn look over her clothes and the drawn look of her features. She might have even been pretty before she died.

Nonetheless, the undead farm girl released a rattling breath as if sighing and then looked down. She stared for a moment as if irritated by a chore, and then her head started swinging back and forth with sickening cracking noises and unnatural speed. She was obviously counting the rice from sight alone … each and every grain.

Sokka could only stand there, rice slowly pooling on the floor, unable to look away. Kyno, the oldest child in the group and the one forced to bring up the rear with Sokka, stalled next to the water tribesman. He gaped as well. It wasn’t until the undead farm girl looked back at the both of them with milky eyes that they both realized their folly. She had finished counting and they had yet to put down another line. They could have sworn the undead girl smiled as she hopping over the rice line.

Both boys screamed for a moment like fools before they slapped hands over each other’s mouths to cover their breath. The youngest boy at least was smart enough to grab a hand full of rice and throw it at the jiangshi in order to stall her. Then, both holding their breath as their cheeks turned red, they both proceeded to put down line after line of rice for their escape route.

The jiangshi at least took the time to look irritated before she started counting.

A few seconds later, both boys raced outside towards what looked like a stone track. They were both gasping like fools as the Kyoshi Warriors loaded the last of the children into stone looking carts. The old healer was in the front telling them all to get a move on it.

Sokka, all but diving into the last cart, signaled for Kyno to jump into the fourth stone cart with him. It looked like he was volunteering to take up the rear. Not surprising given he had the rice, but the young earth-bender couldn’t help but see a problem with this entire situation.

“Uh … how are we going to get the carts moving?”

The obvious answer was earth-bending, but Sokka didn’t even get to try and push the cart when a YuYan slammed through the back door after them. It seemed they were done with the undead inside.

“Earth-bend! Earth-bend!” cried Sokka as he grabbed the oldest youth with them, dragging him into the cart.

“I’m bending! I’m bending!” screamed the youth as he started stomping his legs. The cart, of course, didn’t go anywhere at first until an arrow flew over their heads. There were now two YuYan by the door, eyeing the youths as if deciding how to capture them all at once.

“They’re multiplying!” cried Sokka as he ducked down into the stone cart. “Do some earth magic!”

“I’m trying!” cried the boy, now slapping a bare foot against the inside of the cart. It wasn’t until one of the YuYan peered into the stone cart that Kyno was shocked enough to push the back cart and in turn all the carts in front of them, down the railing like a runaway rail cart.

The YuYan, now all bursting through the back door (Wenzhou carrying Zhaoqi like a sack of potatoes over one of his shoulders), all stood there a moment glowering as all the carts slid towards the first steep decline. All the children, jerking with the awkward movements of the young earth-
benders in each cart, took a moment to glare, laugh, point, wave or stick their tongues out. They were getting away!

Looking at each other silently, the YuYan almost chuckled as two of them shot arrows forward, ropes attached to each. Said arrows embedded themselves easily into the children’s carts. Three of the archers then jumped into the last cart, two of them (and a potato sack) staying back to act like runners as they pushed the cart forward. All the kids, seeing this, screamed as the fifth stone cart started after them, gravity now taking hold and thrusting them down a steep slope like a roller coaster. The rapid speed ripped the roped arrows from the first carts, but the damage was done … the YuYan were giving chase.

Luckily, most of the stone track seemed to be intact, all the kids crying out as a steep descent took place. Unfortunately, the YuYan were also gathering speed. Sokka, watching with a critical gaze, swallowed and looked forward and then back. They had to get rid of the YuYan now while they had speeds advantage. Unused tracks were flying by which meant there had to be change stations to get onto them. Earth-benders probably had stood at these change stations and directed the stone carts to the correct parts of the city. Sokka was going to do the same.

“Alright Kyno, see those switching stations,” said Sokka, getting lower into the cart while he pointed towards the upcoming switch-station. “When we go passed that next change station, I need you to use your earth voodoo and switch it over. We can lose our stalkers if they get directed to a different route. Then we can get off of this terrible mountain.”

Kyno swallowed. He was barely trained in his bending, but he could do this. At first, he had hated the two water tribe siblings, but a part of him … really wanted to learn. He wanted to learn his element so badly that his teeth hurt and his bones ached. He hadn’t realized he had the need until they stepped foot onto the mainland. Just how long had he been in pain, held back from his bending? He just wished … he didn’t have to leave his home to do it.

Nodding, the preteen barely got to stand up when an arrow whizzed overhead, embedding itself into a change station. It was obviously a warning. It seemed that Sokka’s vague pointing had tipped the archers off to his plan. They really did have sharp eyes.

Sokka growled and gritted his teeth. They needed to get away from the archers now while they still had enough track to get a head start. It was obvious that the soldiers wanted them alive, but the benders in their small group … Sokka knew the rumors. They would be sent away, never to be seen again. His sister, his little sister, would be dried out and the earth-benders would be starved of their element. Worst case for him, he would get a work detail or maybe be forced onto a farm to produce for the Fire Nation. There were a lot of empty villages on the way here, and the Fire Nation probably wanted them filled again. Non-benders were a resource if they didn’t fight too hard.

Swallowing the bitter truth of the situation, Sokka made a choice as he watched his sister try and throw an ice ball at the archers behind him. He, of course, got wet as the water missed, but his sister’s struggle to fight just encouraged his mindset further. He could afford to be caught. He could be a distraction. Katara could not be caught. After all, Sokka had promised his dad to protect his little sister. He had also made the same promise to Kya, his mother, years before. He had promised her that he would watch his sister as his mother stepped out into the blinding sunlight to meet the raiders. He would not break his last promise to her.

Swallowing, standing up, he barely had time to take his boomerang and deflect an arrow. Then, never knowing if he would get another chance, he met Suki’s eyes. She was in the cart in front of them. She was opening her mouth to tell him to get down, but he was already leaning forward. It
was awkward and not at all graceful, but he kissed the girl.

He kissed the girl.

Pulling away a second later, Suki looking shocked, he was about to turn around when Suki caught him by the collar and in turn pulled him in for a real kiss. She, unlike him, had gotten practice somewhere along the way. It felt like a real kiss … as well as a goodbye. It was like she already knew what he was thinking. Her words stern, “You better come back to us, Sokka.”

Nodding, he returned back to his stone cart, his words simple to Kyno, “You know what to do … and be nice to my sister.”

Kyno didn’t even know what to say when Sokka was giving a warrior’s cry and jumping the short distance into the YuYan’s cart with his bone club drawn. The grown men, surprised, went down in a huff to the cart’s floor as Sokka landed on the crowded men. Kyno, no longer being aimed at, stood and stomped his foot, the vibration heading through the earth and to the stone switch station. With a grinding jerk, the YuYan’s cart turned down a separate direction.

Sokka, flailing his arms as he tried to battle in close and awkward quarters with three trained soldiers, barely got one more glance out of the top of the cart. His sister was crying out to him, her hair-loopies whipping in the wind. He was immediately sorry. He forgot to say goodbye to her, and then one of the YuYan got the upper hand slamming his head into the side of the stone cart. The world went dark before Sokka could even feel any real regret.

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“That brat. He broke my bow when he landed on us,” came a growling voice.

Another male voice huffed, “Your broken bow is the least of our problems. Take Zhaoqi’s for now. He is in no condition to fight. He barely can stand.”

“But what about the bender kids and the old healer?”

“The kids?” came a younger voice, a twak sound echoing in the background. “What about these things? They aren’t staying down, and I’m running out of arrows.”

“Hey,” said a voice close to Sokka, “Is the water-jerk waking up?”

“Someone, quick, check his bindings. We didn’t see him water-bend, but it’s better to be safe than sorry. Most of the other children looked like benders.”

Sokka wasn’t even allowed to shake off his disorientation when he was slammed onto his stomach, a knee placed on his back. His arms were then roughly jerked, the harsh rope he hadn’t noticed digging into his skin.

The teenager grunted, taking in the scene. He was surround by YuYan in a small clearing. They all seemed troubled by something, skittish even, and then Sokka noticed the heavy breathing. His head snapped to the side, his mouth shutting automatically as he caught sight of a girl a few yards away. An undead girl. She was lying upon the ground, clawing at the earth as she turned her milky eyes in his direction. Her black teeth gnashed like a hungry thing, a hoard of arrows in her back like a pincushion. And yet, despite the grievous damage to her form, she made a crawling motion towards him. She didn’t even get an inch farther, though, when there was another twak … an arrow entrenching itself right into her skull.

The undead girl was still … for only a moment, a rattling breath escaping her.
“See. It won’t stay dead,” said Bhao, turning to their unit leader.

Sokka, watching another arrow sink into the undead girl’s heart, suddenly found that he was unable to control his breathing. He couldn’t hold his breath for the life of him. Instead, his breathing was coming faster and faster. He couldn’t calm down and tears were threatening to gather in his eyes. There was a mantra playing in his head: he was captured, bound and trapped on the mountain; he’d soon be one of those things. Maybe his sacrifice was for nothing? Maybe Katara was already dead? Father had asked for him to take care of her. He was supposed to be a man. He was supposed to be strong, but he was just a teenager. He wasn’t even officially a man by his village’s standards. And the village. He had abandoned the village. Did gran-gran and the others have enough food? He hadn’t even wanted to be here. He had to be strong. He had to be a man, but he wasn’t a man. He ... he was scared. He didn’t want to die here.

He didn’t want to be an undead boy.

“Hey, hey,” finally came a deep voice through the din of Sokka’s slowly escalating panic, Sensu suddenly patting the teenager’s head. “Come on, breathe, kid. We won’t let her have you. We don’t need more of those things. Now, just take breaths in through the nose. Nice and easy, count your breaths.”

Sokka hated the fire-jerks, but he didn’t know what else to do. So, he counted each breath, telling himself that he was going to get out of this. He was the meat and sarcasm guy. He was going to be fine. Just fine. He could do this … he had already accepted this fate when he had jumped across the carts. He was a nobody. It was better for him to be captured instead of his sister.

“There we go. Now, kid. Do you know what these things are?” said Sensu as he pointed to the undead girl.

Seeing no point in lying, part of him knowing that the only way he was going to get off of this mountain was with the help of the fire-jerks, Sokka replied shakily, “It’s a jiangshi.”

“Okay, got it,” said the archer, another twak filling the air as one of the archers pinned the undead girl to the ground with an arrow to the leg. “Do you know how to kill it?”

“It’s neither dead nor living. It cannot live nor can it die,” said Sokka as he looked away from the undead girl. He was getting sick just from looking at her. She was filled with so many arrows.

“Should we bind it then?” asked Bhao as he started pulling arrows out of the dead thing’s back. They obviously weren’t hindering it. He just as well reuse them.

“And then?” said Sensu as he forced the teenager to sit up. “Binding isn’t going to hold forever. No, we need something more permanent. We are going to deal with this curse here and now if we can. We might even save the new recruits from the company if any are still alive.”

Turning his gaze back to Sokka, part of him hating and yet accepting that they all may be drawn into the spirit world, Sensu asked, “Now kid, what are these things and how can we get rid of them? I need to know the legend behind them … and don’t think about lying to me. The girl in blue was your sister, right? Well, there is no way she is getting off this mountain with those things around. If you want her to at least have a chance you will tell me what you know.”

Sokka, swallowing, hated the man for knowing his weaknesses so easily. And so, for Katara and the other bender kids, Sokka told them what he could of a hungry forest spirit and the Rice Festival.
A few minutes later, the YuYan were back in the trees.

“Really? Some rice would have solved all of this? Why didn’t the locals say anything about spirit payments? I thought the Rice Festival was just a festival. Ugh, we are going to die,” said Bhao as he hopped to a new tree, a bag of rice tied to his back. They had detoured to the captured encampment, grabbing what rice they could.

Sensu glanced back from their rush across the mountain to the closest cavern they knew of to offer the rice too. It was a pit. A deep dark hole that the locals feared. The temple that had been before it had been simple and seemingly rushed, but it had been made to last. It had not come down easily.

Some years ago, it had been pushed into the pit itself for it was nothing but heavy boulders. Personally, Sensu didn’t know why they had destroyed all the small temples throughout the mountains. It seemed an insult to the ancient earth, but the last colonel before Colonel Shinu had been a mean-spirited man. He wanted to hurt the native people merely for the sake of hurting them. Apparently, he had wanted to strip their culture from their bones.

They said that colonel had gone missing in the mountains months later and to this day no one had found him. Not even his bones. Sensu now suspected what happened to that mean-spirited man, and it had not been a pleasant end.

Jumping from tree to tree, jiangshi growing more and more numerous, Sensu was sure that any moment now he would see a flash of red on one of the undead.

Landing on the ground, rolling into the fall, he wasn’t surprised at all when the teenager on Gejin’s back shouted out in surprise. Gejin had likely rolled with him. In fact, all the YuYan were now on the ground, running. They could hear the undead not far behind. You could even hear their hopping, their rattling breaths between the trees. None of the YuYan knew how many were behind them, no one wanted to look, but the undead were obviously waiting near the entrance of the pit. The deepest darkest hole at the base of the mountain.

Coming to the edge, Gejin all but threw the water tribe boy off of his back and near the rim of the cavern. A second later, Sensu threw a bag rice at him. “Say what needs to be said and throw the rice in. Pray it works or we are all dead.”

Taking up the rice bag, looking back at the YuYan who were now all pointing their bows at the gathering forms in the surrounding trees, Sokka swallowed. Well, he was probably going to die anyway. Why not wing it?

“Oh, great … spirit … in the hole,” one of the YuYan turned to give Sokka a side glance. Sokka merely smiled nervously and coughed. “We bring you this sacrifice of … rice. Tasty, tasty, rice. Mmmm.”

Now half of the YuYan were giving Sokka a look of skepticism. He just ignored it, though, and started to pour bag after bag of rice into the dark gaping hole. Looking over his shoulder, he couldn’t help but note there were more jiangshi, some hopping out of the trees. Some stood tall, some hunched over. Either way, they were all wheezing, breathing in deeply with their dried lips. It was as if they could taste the livings’ breath all the way across the small clearing.

“That’s it? Why are they still coming?” growled Bhao, looking back at the teenager.

There were more and more of the undead now. They were not going to be able to run away and
even if they did, Sokka knew he would be dead weight. He was going to get left behind, and there was still the matter of Katara and the bender kids. There was no way they had gotten off the mountain yet, even with the mail chutes.

“The Rice Festival is a festival of sacrifice. The farmers would sacrifice part of their hard work and food from their families. Their blood and sweat. It should work,” said Sokka softly.

Then the rest of the old herbalist’s words then hit him: in the past, the spirits have been known to take other things. Tell me, boy, what are you willing to give up to protect the ones around you?

The next thought blindsided Sokka and again he thought of his mother. She gave herself for Katara’s sake. Should he … do the same? Should he throw himself into the pit? It called for a sacrifice. The undead were going to get them anyway at this rate, especially him. At least he might be able to protect Katara this way.

Swallowing again, his heart rate suddenly escalating, Sokka shakily rose to his legs and looked down into the darkness. His next question was if it would hurt? Would it hurt to fall into the darkness? Would it hurt to be ripped into by the spirit of the mountain? Would it hurt … to become one of those things?

Suddenly, as if coming forward due to his thoughts alone, a glow appeared in the pit. Sokka blinked. He might have been terrified if he hadn’t noticed it was just dragonfly-moths. Lots and lots of them. In fact, more and more kept rising out of the pit like little stars, seeming to light up the dark pit. Then, before the water tribesman could even blink, the little lights combined as if they had always been one, a figure forming over the mouth of the cave. It was bright and blinding causing everyone to look away and grunt at its suddenness. The jiangshi, though, they stalled and then fell back into the tree line.

They knew better than to interfere.

Already knowing what was before him, what was standing midair above the mouth of the cave, Sokka immediately didn’t want to look. He knew that light, even as it died down, was no longer just firefly-moths. It was like with the old man in the village all over again, and the black spirit he dared not give a name.

A spirit was before him. He didn’t want to look. It might take him. It might take them all. He didn’t want to look. He just wanted to close his eyes tight and wake in their father’s hut.

His breaths were now coming in almost panicked little gasps. He was scared. He was really scared, but that was okay. It was okay to be scared. Mom had probably been scared before she died, before her sacrifice.

Sokka swallowed stiffly, he gathered his courage and the pride of his tribe and forced himself to raise his head. He would face this.

The spirit was not a drifting shadow before him. It was light. It was also in the shape of a giant tiger-elk, horns large and sweeping like a tree with far too many branches. There were even bells and charms upon its sweeping magnificent antlers, jingling with a soft song in the wind. It was a sight to behold, a hunting trophy if it was alive, and yet Sokka could see its ribs as if the great beast was starving.

Swallowing, Sokka found that his tongue was heavy, and yet, he dared speak as he got down onto his knees and bowed before what was obviously a great Mountain Spirit. “I-I have come to offer a sacrifice … myself if I must.”
The YuYan, who were still eyeing the undead in the tree line, turned in surprise.

There was a silence, just a slight rattling on the wind, and then surprisingly, a voice greeted him. “It has been a long time since one has offered themselves to me.”

Sokka swallowed, noting how the voice was heavy like rushing water in a brook. Katara probably would have loved the sound of it. Personally, it terrified him. Was this going to be the last thing he ever heard? Nonetheless, he kept his courage. “I am a water tribesman. A warrior of my tribe. I will do what I must … even jump into the pit.”

The great spirit flicked his ears as if in thought and then it shook its head, turning its gaze to its creations: the jiangshi. The tiger-elk stared for a minute before he spoke again. “No. The mere will to do so feeds me, little warrior-sacrifice, but you must offer up an item to take with me. A symbol of your will.”

Sokka blinked, the words taking a moment to hit him. He didn’t need to sacrifice himself? He didn’t have to die today? The teenager almost laughed, but then stilled. If not his life, what was good enough for a spirit?

The teenager almost jumped out of his skin when a sandal landed next to him. Sensu standing over him. The man held a deeply disturbed expression as he stared at the spirit and then looked down at blue-clad local. He could hear a rushing noise from the great spirit, like moving water, but … was the teenager actually hearing words? Sensu’s throat seemed dry as he spoke, “Is it saying something?”

The teenager turned and looked at the archer. Was he deaf? Nonetheless, Sokka answered, “He said I don’t have to sacrifice myself, but I must sacrifice an item showing my will to do so.”

The man stared at him for a moment, brows drawing downward. Sensu frowned heavily before he motioned for his bow brother. “The boy’s bag, Gejin. He must offer up something to the spirit.”

Gejin frowned as well but threw the bag to his fellow archer regardless.

Giving Sokka a look that basically said, ‘Don’t try anything,’ Sensu offered the bag to Sokka.

Taking the bag, Sokka resisted the urge to hug it close. He might never see this again. This deep blue bag, stitched by Gran-Gran. Nonetheless, he opened it and stared inside. What would represent the sacrifice of his body and his soul? Eyeing the sparse items, for this trip hadn’t exactly been planned, the boy immediately knew what represented his body. Some seal jerky. It came from the South Pole, just like him. His soul was harder. What could represent a soul? What could one exchange for that? Sokka closed his eyes … and then felt around in the bag. A soul. What made his soul?

Slowly, the teenager fingered the bag’s items, a sadness filling his eyes. He immediately picked out his bone club. Bato and his dad had helped him make it. Mom had been sitting in the hut with Katara messily helping her with sea prunes at the time. They had been watching. The bone had been from one of the first kills Sokka had helped his dad and Bato gut and skin. It was one of his most cherished memories. It was a perfect day with the ones he loved.

If a memory could be an item, that perfect day, it would be this bone club. This weapon represented a part of his soul, especially because it hurt. The thought of leaving it behind ached. It stung with a hollowness to think of leaving it, yet he pulled it out, careless of the YuYan that were watching him. Carefully, he placed it on the ground next to the wrapped meat, swallowing the sorrow in his throat. He allowed his fingers to linger on the weapon a moment more before he
whispered, “I offer these things as a part of my soul … and body. I’ll miss you meat, bone club.”

A YuYan behind him blanched, “You are giving a Mountain Spirit meat? That won’t appease it!”

Yet, before Sokka could even argue, the spirit chuckled and said simply, “I am appeased, Sokka the warrior-sacrifice. I accept your offering.”

Sokka, releasing a breath he hadn’t even noticed he had been holding, bowed and stated simply, “Thank you great Mountain Spirit.”

Then, to the horror of both the YuYan archers and Sokka, there was a skittering noise down in the hole. Deep, deep down. It slowly grew louder and louder. It was quickly joined with a rasping noise and a clawing noise. Then suddenly a form was crawling out of the pit.

It was a jiangshi.

Sokka yelped and fell back against the archer’s legs, his mind grappling for answers. Maybe, it did want him after all? Yet, before Sokka could even hold his breath or Sensu could pull back an arrow, the undead thing knelt to retrieve Sokka’s offerings. Being this close, Sokka couldn’t help but note how different this jiangshi was from the others. First off, it was old, very old. It looked like it was from an era when warlords still ruled the lands that became the Earth Kingdom, when the world was still wild. In fact, the jiangshi looked like a warlord. Perhaps, this was the tax collector from the story and he had actually collected his own taxes.

Nonetheless, unlike the other undead, this one didn’t seem so worn. In fact, if it wasn’t for the paper charm plastered to its forehead (probably from a past Avatar) and the outdated fur-lined armor, Sokka may have mistaken him for being alive … or a spirit. Luckily, the jiangshi didn’t even look at him as it merely wheezed and leaned down, picking up Sokka’s offering. A sacrifice of body and spirit. Sokka would miss both, but mostly the club. After all, his father could be …

Sokka buried that thought and refused to dwell on it. He should just be glad that he was probably going to live. His willingness to throw himself into the pit alone had appeased the spirit. The club was just a memento.

Knelt there, finally daring to breathe, Sokka watched as the tiger-elk came forward and nudged the old warlord towards the pit. It was playful and kind like a tiger-elk with one of her cubs. The spirit even whispered, “To bed with you, all of you.”

It was then like a flood. All the undead that had been following them, all the ones still in the trees that had been watching them with their milky white eyes, they all rushed forward. The YuYan, terrified, tried to get out of the way as the not-dead rushed forward. Yet, they were not grabbed nor were they tugged into the hole in the earth. The jiangshi merely rushed past them, into the pit and down its walls like spider-ants.

It was terrifying, and yet, Sokka couldn’t help but wonder, in their piles of treasure and beds of rice, did the jiangshi dream? Were they put to bed like small children by the mountain god himself? Did they still have souls attached to them or were they empty husks? In the end, as the great tiger-elk turned to leave, the charms jiggling on his great antlers, Sokka found his voice.

It was a question, a terror that he had bottled down so deep he dared not give it a name, but when else could he ask? Who else could he ask? He doubted he would meet another great spirit … at least not a benevolent one. He honestly didn’t want anything to do with spirits, but he feared it was too late because he had looked backward all those years ago. He had glanced into the shadows, and they had looked back.
“S-spirit. Great Mountain Spirit, thingy. Please wait. I … I have something to ask?” dared Sokka, his voice squeaking awkwardly.

The great spirit stalled, ears falling back against its head. It was listening, though, Sokka could tell it wished to return to its creations.

“I-I looked back. I looked back when I was told not to, and I saw it … in the dark. It took him, the old man, and no one mentioned it afterward. He said it took his village. It came to take. Will it come for me as well?” questioned Sokka, trying to ignore the looks he was now getting from the YuYan. They were acting like he was talking to himself. What was so weird about talking to a giant glowing tiger-elk?

Okay, it was weird, but he had to know. He felt like it was eating him slowly from the inside.

The tiger-elk finally turned around and seemed to really look at Sokka. It was as if it was examining him, looking for some kind of blemish or smear on his soul. Sokka tried to not squirm. He had been willing to throw himself to his death a few minutes ago, he could take a little staring.

Giant white eyes blinking, the tiger-elk titled its head, stating simply, “But it already has you for you fear it.”

Sokka’s spine went stiff. It … it already had him? What did that mean? Ugh, he hated spirits for this reason! Could he even return back to the village knowing that thing was after him? Would it take his village as well?

“The question of importance, little sacrifice, is not if it will take your home, but if it will take you. It cannot take form without you. So, the real question is if you are willing to fight it? For, even the smallest creature in my mountains has the right to live if they fight for it. Including you,” said the spirit as it drew closer and closer.

Sokka wanted to back away, especially when the spirit’s face got near his own, large horns seeming to encircle him. He knew he could probably roll backward and run for it, but he held his ground, gulping loudly. What was it with spirits being completely terrifying even when they weren’t trying to kill you? Why couldn’t they be small or tasty looking? Was that a horrible thing to ask for?

The spirit chuckled as if hearing the water tribesman’s thoughts. “Well?”

“I want to fight,” finally answered Sokka, his tongue feeling dry. “I’m a warrior after all.”

The spirit chortled again as if speaking to a child. “Well then, little warrior-sacrifice, I will give you a chance to fight what’s inside you. It is the seed of a wendigo, but it is so ravenous. It so hungers for blood, meat and bone. I don’t know if you will win.”

Sokka, skin going pale, wondering what the great spirit meant by inside him, cringed downward as the Mountain Spirit started shaking its head. For a moment, he thought those great antlers were going to gouge him. They did not. Instead, what looked like blue glowing snow seemed to fall from the spirit’s antlers, falling onto Sokka’s skin and clothing… only to be absorbed a moment later. Sokka, at first, was dumbfounded. He really wanted to ask how spirit dandruff and the sound of bells was going to help him, but somehow, he kept his mouth shut. Not that that stopped the spirit from chuckling at him again and stepping away.

The spirit eyed the teenager once more before nodding its great head as if satisfied, the metal charms ringing as it added, “Be warned little warrior-sacrifice … should you win, it leaves a space
for something else to try and crawl in.”

Then, before Sokka could question what the spirit meant, it nodded once more and then suddenly burst into a cloud of dragonfly-moths which swooped down into the cavern below.

Nose crunching up, his mind now sickeningly reminded he still needed to escape the Fire Nation, Sokka was about to start forming an escape plan. He didn’t get very far, though, when a stab of pain raised upward from his stomach and up his throat. He nearly doubled over, hands wrapping around his torso. He quickly ground his teeth and dragged in a raspy breath as he prayed for the stabbing pain to subside.

It did not. If anything, the pain got worse, tears threatening to fall from his eyes as the agony spread throughout his guts. What had the spirit done to him?

Sokka, now all but choking as he struggled to breathe, was distantly aware that one of the YuYan archers was saying something to him when suddenly he threw his hands over his mouth. He had no control over it at all. He couldn’t even try to swallow as something seemed to … crawl up his throat. Before he knew it, he was emptying his stomach contents. Something was very, very wrong. This wasn’t post-battle nerves. It was coming up black, sliding between his fingers like black tar. It was black like shadows. Black like shadows he dared not give a name, and it felt like something was crawling up his throat. It was a hunger. A want for his meat to be slightly raw. For blood and gore and limbs galore. It was there. How long had this hunger been there, inside him?

It was ravenous.

The next thing Sokka knew he was leaning over the pit, mouth wide open as he started to cough up more and more black ooze. His body was rebelling, shaking. His veins felt like they were on fire … and some dark thing seemed to squirm inside him. It felt like that night when he looked back. Something had crawled in, and now he was struggling to get it out.

He’d either win … or it would tonight.

Eyes rolling into the back of his head, unable to breathe this whole time, Sokka was only vaguely aware that one of the YuYan reached out just in time to grab him before he could fall into the pit.

Chapter End Notes

Hello loves. I wanted to give you all something for the holidays, but it took a while to proofread. Oh well. Anyway, I hadn’t planned on Sokka interacting so much with spirits or being infected, but I have been proofreading the older chapters and I latched onto Sokka’s backstory in Chapter 38. I kind of decided to force Sokka to interact with two of the things he hates most: spirit things and Fire Nation. Yep. I also wanted to play with the concept of how the Fire Nation deals with integrating the captured population and how they deal with spirits. So Sokka’s going to get his own underplot for a while. Katara and the kids really aren’t going to have anything interesting happening to them for a while anyway so it should be fine.

Also, sorry for the long wait. I lost my job. It’s been very hard on me. I lost a lot of my spare time for things like writing when I finally got a new job. Nonetheless, I hope you all enjoyed the chapter.
The wind seemed to rip through his russet robes. The cold bit at him and held on. It was like a hungry thing snapping at any exposed skin, trying desperately to draw blood. The cold even tried to bite at what was beneath his robes. It wanted to devour every part of him, and yet Iroh didn’t leave the deck of the ship. He stood there still and watching as *The Wani*, his nephew’s ship, neared a Fire Nation port.

Iroh had never hated the cold, he had accepted it for what it was. The opposite of heat. It offered balance to the world, hot and cold mixing, bouncing against each other and yet feeding one other and the world. But right now, he found himself hating it as it nipped at his cheeks and snapped at his aging hands. The cold was trying to steal something from him: the very heat from his body. Hadn’t it taken enough from him recently?

The Dragon of the West closed his eyes and released a breath, mist rising into the air like smoke.

Finally, the town of Leng Gangkou had come into view. In truth, they could have stopped sooner, at a town that claimed to be neutral if only to keep alive in these troubled times, but the reality of the situation was that Iroh had plans.

First and foremost, he had to see to the needs of the crew and ship. It needed repairs after the water tribesmen’s attack. The crew was lucky that the hull hadn’t been breached when they had been beached on the iceberg. The crew had made the repairs they could, but some were far more substantial … especially if he had to go chasing down Zuko and wherever he had ended up. He prayed to the spirits that his nephew was looked after and kept a low profile.

Closing his eyes, Iroh sighed, a hand becoming a fist around the lotus tile he held. This would have never happened if he had more trust amongst the White Lotus, but … since the last Water Tribe Avatar, Avatar Avaka, there was very little trust given to the Fire Nation members in the society. He was only invited given he was too powerful to be ignored. Young Avatar Avaka hadn’t had a chance after being brayed by a Fire Nation Lotus member. The traitor had given the Avatar’s location away like a spare thought to the wind. It was a wonder the entire organization hadn’t been revealed that day by the traitor, a man long dead. To this day, no one knew his reasoning.

But those were the mysteries of the past and Iroh had done what he had to. Air-bender’s were flighty things, like small sure-winged birds. They had to be lured in with seeds and scraps of bread. From the sounds of it, Zuko had been presented an Air Master during his stay in the ice city.

Iroh tried not to grind his teeth. That hadn’t been planned, Zuko’s stay in the Northern Tribe, but his nephew was free now. It was just a matter of time until they were reunited … even if it took Iroh’s last breath.

The sound of heavy footsteps pulled the aging prince from his thoughts, a flicker of warmth behind him.
“Lieutenant Jee … you seem to be in higher spirits. I trust you are feeling better in these warmer waters?” said the shorter fire bender as he turned to greet his loyal Lieutenant.

The man looked pale, having started to fall ill from the Chill and lack of sunlight. He honestly should have been in bed or in the steam room instead of outside in the cold, but Jee was too proud to be doted on by the ship’s healer and Third Officer, Ryto. Well, perhaps dotted wasn’t the right word for Ryto. The man was a like a tiger-mink. He just lurked in the shadows, quiet and still as he eyed his prey. Then, when your guard was down, he pounced on your back digging in his teeth.

Well, maybe Iroh was exaggerating a bit … Ryto never bit anyone, but the rest of that was pretty accurate.

Once, Iroh had caught the flu and had been all but grounded to his chambers as the Third in Command had the entire ship scoured for the disease. Zuko had never looked so traumatized, all the fire-benders forced to boil the water for every surface. The ship had seemed almost new after that.

Iroh forced a smile at the thought of the young prince, bandages on his face, as he whined to Uncle about how un-princely it was to clean sludge off the floors. Then again, if Iroh had had Dragon Fever and not just a flu… it might have killed someone Zuko’s age. Iroh had had it before, during one of his sieges, and he would have survived unscathed. Zuko had still been recovering from his burn. The young prince might have … he might have …

Prince Iroh banished the thought, turning his full attention to Lieutenant Jee.

“I will be better soon,” said Jee as he dragged out his pipe, filling it. “I had to get away. The steam room smells like feet.”

Iroh chuckled.

“How long until we are to port?” said the lieutenant as he created a spark on his fingertips, smoke curling around his face from his pipe. The man longingly looked up at the port that was sparkling in the distance. Early morning was daring to peak and yet unwilling to rise, a distance glow promising that the sun would soon be here.

“We should arrive shortly after sunrise.” said Iroh, a smile still pulling at his face, a little humor raising his spirits.

Smoke rolled out of Jee’s nostrils as he stared at the port town. The destination promised many reliefs … as well as many failures. They had not recovered the young prince. At least, it was obviously a Fire Nation colony. He could even see the huge steamers from here, clinging to the port like elbow leeches that would soon be falling off.

“That’s what I am worried about,” said Jee. “What if someone inquiries about Zuko’s whereabouts? It has been a while since anyone has seen us.”

The next thought hit Jee like a wave pulling him under the waters. He almost sputtered. Instead, he exhaled, smoke lingering around the man for a moment before the wind stole it away. “Then again, this might be an opportunity. We could … claim he caught Dragon Fever. I doubt he encountered it while in the palace. No one would think twice if we claimed a fever took him. You could go into mourning and then he could, both of you could, start anew.”

Standing up a little straighter, Iroh ponder is silence. Jee’s words had cut him like a knife. He did not trust his own tongue. When he was finally able to speak, his words were almost captured by the
wind. A whisper. He knew it was a stale thought he couldn’t let go of, but so was the nature of hope. It did not let go easily. “How can a dead prince claim a throne, Lieutenant Jee?”

Tasting the smoke on his tongue before it rushed out his nose, Jee leaned on the railings of the ship. He stared out at the ocean for a moment before he carefully answered, “You and I both know, the moment he used air, Zuko would never be able to claim that throne. It is lost to him.”

“Then who will claim it? His sister? Azula? Azula’s betrothed?” said Iroh, trying to keep the disgust from his voice. “Something is very wrong with her. My brother ruined her somehow. She will never be the princess her mother was.”

Jee snorted, “No offense my Prince, but betrothal? As if anyone would want to marry her. I hear everyone has politely declined whenever our dear Fire Lord has inquired about a marriage proposal … Well, unless that rumor about that upstate Zhao is true.”

Both men shuddered. Ugh, would their babies have sideburns as well?

“Then who?” said Iroh, anger starting to form in his belly.

Looking at his Prince, Jee chose his words carefully. He knew his thoughts would dig in deep, but they needed to be said. If Prince Iroh had an heir … he could make a legitimate claim for the thrown. He was the first born. It was his right!

“There are others that could make a claim. Anyone with a drop of royal blood in them can rule. But, if you do settle down in the Earth Kingdom with your nephew, perhaps you can find another wife. You could produce another heir. You still have time for it. It would give you claim to the throne again and, with that power, you could even protect Prince Zuko, the Avatar.”

Iroh closed his eyes, the memory of his late wife ripping into his heart, yet the truth to Jee’s words dug far deeper.

“You know what I say is true, my Prince. Look how long your father reigned. You are a strong bender. You will live a long life. There is still time,” said Jee, voicing what probably half of the Fire Nation population thought. Prince Iroh was much beloved, still was. If he had a son, an heir, a want to claim the throne as well as the Avatar in his pocket … perhaps there would be a chance.

Iroh’s silence spoke volumes, though.

“Prince Iroh?” said Iroh quickly, standing up straight. Had he overstepped his bounds? Should he bow and beg for forgiveness?

Yet, before Jee could even incline his head, Iroh put out a hand, stalling the other man. “There is no need for that lieutenant. It … is indeed something to dwell on, but first we must get to port and then find Prince Zuko. I must find him first before I dwell on other options.”

Jee still bowed, feeling the Prince’s misery. He did not regret his words, though, for he felt he had never been so truthful before. There was still time.

…

Sokka … heard wheezing, a wet sound. Miki had sounded the same way before they abandoned her and left her to the mountain. All the half dead sounded that way. Was … he dead? Everything was so black and cold yet surprisingly hot at times.

Was he one of them? The jiangshi? Was he barely aware of himself? For all time was he bound to
He almost sobbed.

No, no. The Mountain Spirit wouldn’t do that. Yes, he recalled the giant tiger-elk. He also recalled the darkness … inside him. Was it still inside him?! Was it still there in his gut waiting to devour his village?! Get it out!

Before Sokka could truly comprehend anything, he was leaning over his bedside and throwing up. Surprisingly, there was something in his stomach and it was white. Maybe soup or rice gruel, but it wasn’t black. Thank the moon, it wasn’t black! He couldn’t help but stare at the floor for a moment, his mind fuzzy and exhausted yet strangely relieved. He was only vaguely aware that someone had come up to him, grumbling as they started pushing him back into bed. A healer maybe?

“Was it black?” came another voice, outside of Sokka’s range of sight as he was pushed back into the cot, the maybe-healer covering him up. The healer was a graying man with a slightly heavy face which was adorned with a thin mustache and beard. Where was Grangran or Katara? Whenever he was sick, it was always one or the other that knelt at his bedside. But … he wasn’t in the South Pole anymore, was he?

Where was he?

“No, it was not,” said healer as he checked Sokka’s eyes and wiped off his face with a damp cloth.

“Are his eyes still black? The sage’s asked for a hawk if there were any changes in the spirit touched boy,” came the voice again as another figure came up to Sokka’s bedside. He was a regal looking man with his hair up in a stern topknot. He seemed to carry this air of authority on his broad shoulders. He was also dressed in red. In fact, both men were in red.

Where? What … What was going on? Why was he surrounded by Fire Nation?! Better question: why wasn’t he being barbecued?

“No, they went back to their original color yesterday. Well, I presume his eyes were originally blue. He isn’t a water bender, is he? I should sedate him now if he is. I don’t need frostbite,” said the mustached man.

“The YuYan do not believe so. During the incident, the boy did not strike out with any water, only weapons. He had terrible aim, apparently,” said the regal looking man, his lips frowning in thought. “Are you sure the spirit didn’t win and this isn’t a possessed corpse like those hopping spirits? I don’t want him near any more of my men if there is a risk of him turning. We barely recovered a fraction of the new unit for the stronghold, and I cannot afford to lose any more soldiers to spirits.”

Sokka, even slightly disoriented, was insulted about the aim comment, but he couldn’t even voice his opinion. His throat was raw and the healer was all but forcing a spoon of some foul-tasting concoction down his throat. He then was forced to swallow some water a moment later, nearly choking at its spiciness. Who knew water could be spicy. Ugh. He felt like he was going to throw up again. Thankful, the graying healer was now allowing him to lay down completely, a wet towel placed on his forehead.

Moon and Ocean, that was cool. Ugh, why had he been pushed back under these blankets? He was
so hot. Did he have a fever?

“I am not a fire sage, Colonel. I am a healer, but he’s not throwing up or choking on that black tar anymore. He also now has a fever instead of being freezing cold. I think whatever the Mountain Spirit instigated, has passed,” said the healer. “If he survives the night, you probably can send another hawk to the sages then, Colonel Shinu. Anything before would be impromptu.”

The Colonel tightened in the shoulders before nodding, folding his arms behind his back. “Very well, I’ll allow him to stay in your care, healer Rhije. We have more than enough bodies to keep the funeral pyres burning for days without the boy added to its cleansing fire. Plus, it will not do us any harm to be in the good graces of the Fire Sages. It’s not often that we can offer them a recruit from the conquered colonies, especially one that can apparently commune with spirits.”

The healer nodded, “Yes, the archers said he was speaking with the Mountain Spirit. They didn’t hear a thing. Apparently, it’s not a common gift I take it?”

Colonel Shinu shook his head, frowning again as he looked down at the delirious boy. He seemed to be water tribe, though the YuYan were sure he came from one of the surrounding villages. Not entirely uncommon to have mixed blood like that. These cold shores were close enough to the southern waters for there to be some mixed breeding with the Southern Water Tribesmen. The boy was a little old for integration, but Shinu was sure the Fire Sages would accept the challenge given the boy’s apparent gifts. For Agni’s sake, he spoke with a great spirit. An uncommon gift.

“It is a rare ability, from what I understand, which is why we are going through the effort to keep him alive and in the stronghold. I would have sent him to the farms for the villagers to deal with otherwise,” said the Colonel, still frowning as he watched the boy’s eyes flicker shut. Colonel Shinu didn’t care for spirits, but he was educated enough to realize the importance of keeping the peace as well as one could.

The spirits were old and did not like to be stepped on. He was going to have the villagers rebuild the Mountain Spirits shrines as soon as most of the crops were collected. He knew better than to tempt fate.

Rhije nodded, turning over the wet towel. “I will do my best with his fever then. The boy should live.”

Nodding, the Colonel gruffly replied, “Good to hear. I hope to see the boy up by the time the Sage’s appear. I want him out of my hair. I do not care for spirits.”

Little did the Colonel know, that neither did Sokka care for spirits either, but it seemed choices were being made for him that he would have little control over. Nonetheless, he was alive and if he was alive … he could deal with anything. At least that was always what he told himself.

…

Iroh’s words held true as The Wani made port shortly after sunrise. The ship seemed tiny and minuscule compared to the larger Fire Nation warships that swayed in port around it, but that never bothered Iroh. He knew in some battles, it paid to be small and quick … especially if you were catching octopus-eels as the saying went.

The first order of business was getting the ship resupplied and repaired. He planned to leave with Zuko once he found his nephew, but knowing that boy it would take three months to find him and he would also be imprisoned by Earth Kingdom generals.
Nonetheless, he planned to get some funds from their yearly accounts so the two of them would have something to live off of while Zuko was training. He also wanted to get some news about refugee locations. The best way to become invisible was to fall in with the rest of the crowd. He was also thinking of settling in a small mountain village if he could, but that offered its own concerns. Yes, a deserted area would offer plenty of space for Zuko to practice, but then there was the problem of finding him elemental masters. He would have to see if Zuko was taught anything in air-bending during his visit with the Northern Tribe, but as for earth and water, Iroh was now reluctant to just ask anyone to teach his nephew … even the White Lotus.

Perhaps in time …

Currently, Iroh was wondering if he could falsify Zuko being a mix-blood that had discovered himself to be a water or earth-bender. He would play the concerned uncle that spirited his nephew away from the Fire Nation colonies. Zuko would just have to keep his other elements to himself during training. He knew that would be hard on the younger bender, but now was a time to swallow his pride … for Zuko had promised him and the spirits that he would live.

And life was messy sometimes.

Then there was the query of what Lieutenant Jee had said earlier that day. During Zuko’s training … should he try to find a new wife and produce an heir? He knew he had aged a bit since Lu Ten had passed, his hair completely graying from grief, but the lieutenant’s words were true. It was unlikely Zuko would be allowed to rule as the Avatar if this war ever ended. Plus, an heir would give Iroh the chance to take back the throne from his brother.

Prince Iroh honestly held little interest in being the Fire Lord, but if it brought protection to Zuko … should he seek out that heavy crown?

Stepping onto the dock, his arms folded behind his back, the aging Prince was ashamed to say he had not been minding his surroundings. On the battlefield, such a thing would get you killed. Mind you, he wasn’t on a campaign, but enemies come in all forms.

“If it isn’t the Dragon of the West,” came a familiar voice from in front of the dwelling fire-bender, Iroh’s head snapping up. “There was worry that you and the banished Prince had been lost to the sea … It is good to see that such a thing has not occurred.”

Back straightening, Iroh met the gaze of none other than Captain Zhao. The man had barely been able to keep the smirk out of his tone though a smile did tug at this lips. The captain, at least, managed to show some respect, bowing slightly when he met Iroh’s gaze. Though Prince Zuko had been banished, Iroh had not. Many merely thought he was still in mourning, having lost his son and his crown, and thus traveled the world.

Even with the slight show of respect, Iroh had to school his features and act like a tired old man. He did not trust Zhao, especially when he had seen the man’s smile during Zuko’s famed Agni Kai. A man that smiled at acts of cruelty was a man to be wary of.

“Good morning to you, Captain Zhao. It is indeed good to see a familiar face after such a long journey,” said Iroh in a warm voice, a soft smile settling upon his features. “It is nice to know that during my absence; this old retired General was thought of.”

Zhao’s smug face slowly dripped away, the man standing up straight out of his bow, towering over the retired General. “Actually, it’s Commander now.”

“Ah,” said Iroh, noting how the ex-Captain puffed up at the proclamation. “Congratulations on the
promotion. I take it you are settling into the position well?"

“Yes, I have been,” said Zhao, already bored with the pleasantries as he turned and eyed Iroh’s ship for a moment, a frown pulling at his jawline as he stared at the scars in the ship’s metal. “It looks like you have been in a skirmish. I’m surprised that old tub held together. Tell me, was it in these waters? We have heard rumors that the Northern Water Tribe has been more active lately.”

Iroh struggled not to frown, instead chuckling, a calculated lie flowing off his tongue like water. “Yes, she held together. And you are correct, the water tribe seems increasingly agitated. We ran into a small party that managed to thrust our ship into an ice flow. The damage was significant enough to the propellers that we were stuck out there in the ice for weeks.”

Zhao, still looking at the obvious ice damage to the ship, slowly nodded, “Again, it is good to hear that you and the crew returned mostly unscathed, but I can’t help but inquire, what of our banished prince? Princess Azula has sent out letters of inquiry. She has been most concerned about the health of her brother.”

“I’m sure she is...” said Iroh, his voice becoming chilled. Azula? Concerned? Unlikely. That girl was probably just wondering if it was time to celebrate being the only heir or not. Why hadn’t she been sweet, like Princess Ursa?

Instead, she took after her father with his disease: his hate.

“Yes, yes. She was growing quite concerned,” said Zhao, showing false worry if only to keep one step away from fully insulting the eldest Prince. “In fact, I would be glad to invite the two of you to my ship for tea so I could tell the princess just how well you both are. Perhaps the young prince can tell me of his travels … to regain his honor, I mean.”

Ah, there it was. He was probably going to poke at Zuko’s banishment with every word that spewed from his mouth. The man was indeed an antagonist. He was always looking to start a fight. Then again, Zhao might just be snooping. Finding the next Avatar would regain Zuko’s honor after all … if he, himself, wasn’t the Avatar. Lieutenant Jee and the others from the rescue team had mentioned that Zuko had gone into the Avatar state to escape the Northern Water Tribe’s city. Were the Fire Sage’s now aware that a new Avatar was amongst them? Was Zhao looking for boys Zuko’s age or did they think the Avatar was just a baby, Avatar Quiang having finally passed? He hoped it was the latter or better yet, not at all. Zhao was the last thing Zuko needed on his trail.

He hated to do this, but again Jee’s words echoed in his head like an insect bumping around in his skull.

Slowly, Iroh put on a deep frown, part of him noticing that the first of The Wani’s crew were departing the ship behind him. “Ah yes, as much as it pains me to turn down tea, I fear Prince Zuko is not well enough to leave his quarters.”

He just couldn’t say he was dead. Not yet … what fools hope he carried around!

“That’s unfortunate … it is nothing serious, I hope,” said Commander Zhao with a gleam in his eye, once again putting on the act of false sympathy if only to keep in Iroh’s good graces. “I could have one of my medical officers take a look if you like. It would be no trouble, my prince.”

A strained smile pulling at his lips, Iroh continued with this little game. “What a kind offer, Commander, but I fear it is Dragon Fever. The crew has been suffering for weeks and I would not want to expose anyone unnecessarily to it.”
Zhao nearly tripped into his two guards with how quickly he reeled away from Iroh. He even pulled out a small piece of cloth to cover the lower part of his face. Not that Iroh blamed him. Dragon Fever could be very deadly and was very contagious, even for fire benders. Anyone who had had it usually developed an immunity, but those who had never had it, were best to be weary.

“I-is your ship in proper quarantine?” said Zhao, trying not to squeak though he failed miserably. Again, Iroh didn’t blame him for being alarmed. It didn’t happen often, but sometimes if a bender caught Dragon Fever, it would burn up their chi networks, crippling their bending. It was a fear for all fire benders.

“Yes, yes. Most of the ship is under quarantine. Isn’t that correct, Medical Officer Ryto?” said Iroh, turning to their ship’s Third in Command and Medic as he walked by with a list of supplies he was planning on ordering in the port town.

Stalling, having been completely absorbed in his list of healing supplies, the usually quiet yet serious man stood up straight. “Prince Iroh. Sorry, sir. What were you saying?”

Giving the man a serious look, hoping he would catch on quickly and act accordingly, Iroh continued, “That you, as the ship’s Medical Officer, are keeping most of the crew under quarantine due to the outbreak of Dragon Fever on the ship?”

Eye’s going wide, ready to deny it, he quickly sputtered as he caught Iroh’s deadly glare. “Ah, y-yes. That’s right. Just terrible. Most of the bending crew was affected. I, having had it before, was going into town to order supplies right now. Yes, right now. Quarantine, like the Prince said.”

Zhao’s sharp gaze turned towards another crew member of The Wani as he all but tripped off of the ship and onto the docks. Chim was still fighting off the Chill and was looking two shades from death because of it, but nothing, even nearly having his inner flame gutter out, was going to stop him from going to the nearest Inn for a good hard drink.

“Then what about him?” growled Zhao, his voice muffled by the rag over his mouth, one hand pointing accusingly at a possible cotangent.

Chim, half hunched over, sneezed and wiped his nose on his sleeve. Then, looking up, he noticed that everyone on the dock was staring at him like his hair was on fire. “What? Is there snot in my beard again?”

Ryto and Iroh exchanged a panicked look quickly before Ryto launched himself into action. “Private Chim! What do you think you are doing on the dock?! You are under quarantine like the rest of the ship. Dragon Fever is no joke.”

Chim, having had Dragon Fever as a child many years ago, blinked in confusion. “What are you talk-youch! Don’t tug on the beard! Not the beard!”

The healer, having grabbed Chim’s beard if only to shut him up before he blew Iroh’s cover, all but dragged the other man back up the ramp to the ship. “Back to your quarters now! In fact, I should remind the entire ship that only those I designate can leave this ship.”

Iroh and Zhao both watched as the medic herded a few other men back into the ship, his demands sending them all running like scared squirrel-mice. Ryto could be terrifying when he wanted to be. Personally, part of Iroh was glad for the quick excuse. Yes, he didn’t want to deny the crew their shore time, but at the same time, he didn’t need Zhao interrogating his men. Most of them seemed to be on his side, but one slip of the tongue … and Zuko would be as good as imprisoned for the rest of his life. If not dead. Then again, how this lie was running, he might just have to claim that
Prince Zuko died of Dragon Fever when out to sea. He hadn’t even said the words aloud and already his tongue tasted bitter, his inner fire flickering in disgusted. Such a lie would have to be a last resort.

“Well, it looks like you have this under control, Prince Iroh. I will leave you to it,” said Zhao, eyeing Iroh like he was contagious as well.

Smiling, part of him deeply satisfied with the terror he was putting into the Commander’s heart, Iroh added, “Certainly, certainly. When it is a better time we must have tea.”

“Yeah … tea,” grumbled Zhao as he all but turned tail and ran away, two armored guards stumbling after him.

Watching the display, Iroh chuckled. Who knew that someone like Zhao would make his day?

Chapter End Notes

Hello loves, just a quick update to show I am alive. I looked and looked to see if Zuko’s ship had a name, but I couldn’t find one so I dubbed it: Kensaku, which I believe translates into searching. And I’ve been promising it forever, but we finally got some Iroh time! Yeah! Plus, Zuko’s adorable crew. I honestly want to sit down and name every single one. Alas, it is not really necessary … at the moment! :P

We also got to see Zhao. Mmmm, hot man with mutton chops. A great weakness of mine.

Edit: A few reviewers were sure Zuko’s ship was called The Wani, which apparently means crocodile. Sounds good to me.
"See … you landed Appa just fine," said Aang as he pulled himself out of a bush, a squirrel-frog jumping off of his head and away.

“We nearly died … as usual,” growled Zuko, branches in his hair and clothes as he laid a few feet away from the crash site, looking grumpier than usual as the dust settled from his less than graceful landing. Appa, in reply, merely grunted and waved his legs in the air as he continued to lay on his back. It really had been a bumpy landing.

Aang, in turn, merely floated out of the bushes, smiling as he added with a chirp, “Like the Masters always say. Any landing that you can walk away from is a good landing. Plus, we found land.”

“Yeah, land,” groused Zuko as he continued to lay there, wincing as he pulled a branch from under his back, “It’s probably haunted and infested with spirits. Or both. Or better yet, it has spirit pirates. With our luck, that’s probably exactly what this forest is full of.”

Appa grunted as if agreeing with Zuko. The great bison then pulled himself out the trees that the fire-bender had crashed them into, hitting the ground with a great thud. Zuko actually bounced from the impact of the multi-ton bison. Aang merely laughed at the display, floating to Appa’s side to start taking the saddle off.

“Great landing, boy,” said Aang to their great stead before he turned back to Zuko. “And I doubt they would put a port town so close to a spirit-pirate infested forest. It just seems silly bringing the boats to them.”

Sitting up straight, the banished prince couldn’t help but squawk, “A port?! Where?”

Air-bending the saddle off of Appa so the sky bison could roll onto his back, the air-bender pointed his bandaged hand, “That way, surrounded by those cliffs. I saw it when you were flying here. Didn’t you see it? I thought that was why we picked this as a spot to land. So we could go into the village but we’re still far enough away in case the villagers aren’t friendly. Plus, it looked pretty big so maybe we can ask about your uncle.”

Zuko tried not to wince as he jerked his head in the direction Aang was pointing. He could now vaguely smell smoke in the air. He almost cursed himself for being so blind. Then again, that was the direction his weak eye had been facing and it had been rather foggy. Plus, he had been trying not to kill all of them while flying a giant sky bison.

Sighing in irritation, Zuko sat up in contemplation. Perhaps the pirate incident wasn’t completely horrible. After getting some directions it didn’t take long to make their way back towards the Northern part of the Earth Kingdom. He knew that if Iroh left him in that frozen wasteland, it was for supplies. Then again, it wasn’t like they could just walk into town and ask if Prince Iroh had made port. Any Fire Nation loyalist worth their salt knew better than to say something so traitorous about the royal family. He also couldn’t just walk up and say he was the Prince. No one would believe that a raggy teenager dressed as a water tribesman was the banished Prince Zuko. Plus, he didn’t need that kind of attention. He didn’t need powerful eyes turning in Iroh’s or his direction when he had become so … stained.
Regardless, he had told Aang he wanted to be called Lee. So how would Lee find the information he needed? Aang giggled in the background. Well, for one, he probably shouldn’t allow Aang into town with him. He stuck out like a sore thumb and, as much as it pained Zuko to admit it, he stuck out as well. His scar. His blemish. His dishonor. It was something everyone stared at, judged, and gapped at. He had to be discreet about this.

Luckily, the darkness had always been his friend.

Setting up camp, Zuko decided to wait for sun down. He didn’t know what it was about his stealth training, this dark figure in his mind that refused to use his bending, but he always felt it was something he got from his mother. It, like his mother, would disappear off into the night … leaving chaos and confusion in its wake.

In fact, sometimes in the back of his mind, Zuko secretly wondered if his mother had been some kind of spirit, shedding her flesh to keep him safe as she returned to the spirit world. Did that make him a skin changer as well or just spiritual? Is that why the Avatar title had latched onto him? Is that why the past Avatars had such a sway in his mind? Was … he faulty? Had his mother always planned on leaving him?

‘You know that isn’t true,’ whispered a past life, their tone motherly and warm. ‘Your mother loved you … spirit or not.’

Not wanting a debate to start in his head, Zuko squeezed his eyes and drowned out his thoughts with menial tasks around their forming camp. He only dared stop when he was sure his past lives were silent, his golden eyes turning to the sky just in time to watch the sun being swallowed by the horizon.

Soon, he would set out.

All he had to do was get Aang to fall asleep, which was no easy feat. Convincing the younger boy was fruitless, tiring him out only led to bending practice, and apparently stuffing him under Appa’s tail and yelling at him to go to sleep was ineffective as well. He had to pull some of Uncle’s old tales out of the back of his mind to even get a sleepy yawn out of the air-bender. In the end, Aang had loved hearing about the Fire Nation of forgotten yesteryears, and that was probably going to bite him in the butt later, but it did its job all the same.

Then, the fire fading into embers as he departed, Zuko wandered away from a sleeping Aang like a loose shadow set out to frolic in the night.

…

Zuko left most of his parka behind despite being able to see his breath. He could use his inner fire to keep warm as he wandered towards town. Plus, if he was seen, he didn’t want to be easily identified as a water tribesman. He wanted to be as featureless as possible like a faceless spirit cursed to wander the midnight gloom … or at least until he found something more fitting to wear. Something like that.

There, clinging to the town’s edge and barely draped in the flickering light, was a wagon. It was weighed down with festival costumes and masks, seemingly ready to burst open with color and cheer. It was an actors’ trope. In fact, it seemed that the entire town was preparing for some kind of festival if the noise was anything to go by. And there, hanging on the corner of the wagon, was the mask of the Blue Spirit.

A sense of sadness crept into him for a moment as he recalled his mother’s attachment to said
Waiting for a small party of rowdy soldiers on shore leave to pass, he wandered into the light and stared at the grinning blue masking. He was no spirit, but sometimes he felt as lost as one. So, he picked up the mask, testing its weight in his hands. It would do … as well as these black garments.

Wishing he had had some money to leave as a token, the banished prince quickly scaled a nearby wall, the grinning blue mask now hiding his face and staring down at the town below. He spotted the port where a number of large Fire Nation ships lulled menacingly. The port’s logs might have something about Uncle or the ships themselves.

Eying a nearby roof, readying himself to make a leap, Zuko nearly slipped off the roof he was currently on when a voice sounded behind him.

“Nice mask, Lee. Is it for the festival that’s supposed to be starting tonight? Should I get a mask? I saw some at a vendor I walked by. I could go back.”

Clinging to the roof he had nearly slid off of, Zuko eyed the ground below him and his now dangling legs. Minor air-bending had probably been the only thing to keep him from falling completely and that … was quite a fall. About two stories. He hoped no one felt the breeze below.

“Ooh, nice form considering you just learn-”

Swinging his legs back onto the roof, Zuko was slapping a hand over Aang’s mouth before he could speak his name again. Zuko even went so far as to drag them both away from the edge of the roof before hissing, “What are you doing here? How did you know it was me … wait, who’s watching the egg?”

Far in the forest, Appa watched the dragon egg roll off his tail from where Aang had originally placed it. The boy had asked them to watch it while he was gone. Momo, in turn, placed it back on the bison’s tail and, for the fifth time that night, the two fliers watched the egg roll back down for Momo to collect once more.

Meanwhile, back on the roof, Aang stared at Zuko for a moment before mumbling something. Zuko was about to tell him to speak more clearly when he noticed that he still had a hand over the air-bender’s mouth. Sighing, he removed his hand and waited for an answer, “I’m here because you are here. I followed you shortly after you left. We are a team or the Gaang. Get it. It’s like gang but with an extra g-”

“Don’t ever say that again,” snarled Zuko as he turned his attention back to the streets below. Okay, he could deal with this. Aang might be loud but he was also squirmy. Maybe he could be a distraction or a lookout? No, he should send him back. Then again, knowing Aang, he’d probably attract the entire army somehow.

For about three seconds Aang was quiet before agreeing, “Yeah, you are right. It takes more than two people to be a gang. I’d say we’d need at least two or three more people to be the Gaang.”

Raising his brow, already having trouble thinking how Uncle was going to interact with Aang for that matter another two or three people, he vowed to kill that nickname before it caught on.

Tilting his head towards the port, deciding it was better for Aang to help here where he could come to the rescue, the young man stated, “Do you see the large ship, the one running extra flags? It or one of the buildings nearby likely has a log that might have some information about my uncle’s ship. Port logs and ship logs are usually well documented and are kept under some kind of character.
security but, if there is a festival tonight, security might be lax. Since you are here, you just as well help me. It's best that we do this tonight while everyone is distracted. You look for the main building to the port and I … will check the ship.”

Nodding in acceptance, Aang added, “Sounds like a plan and afterward we can go to the festival, right?”

If he wasn’t wearing a mask, Aang might have seen Zuko roll his eyes.

…

Zuko crept across the rooftops, practically soundless. The pirate’s dao swords he had obtained were snuggly attached to his back like a pair of old friends. He felt like everything would have gone off without a hitch if it wasn’t for one thing … a tag along.

A second later there was a soft thud of landing feet behind him as well as the shifting sound of clay karwara. Zuko didn’t even have time to cringe as he listened to the thunk of the roofing giving out and promptly smashing into the ground below. Zuko immediately turned and glared at Aang. Said boy merely grinned awkwardly and made an attempt to hide his staff behind his back.

“Sorry. This roof tiling is kind of loose,” said Aang instinctively.

Zuko nearly sighed, but instead went still when he heard someone below state, “What was that?”

Aang’s eyes went wide in horror. Zuko, in turn, grabbed the younger bender by his shirt before he could react and tugged him low to the rooftop, blending both of them into the shadows. Aang was a great bender, but stealth obviously wasn’t his strong suit.

There was a choir of heavy footsteps, likely soldiers, below. Their metal boots stalled at the base of the storage building they were hiding on, their voices echoing up into the shadows.

“Tiling. That’s odd,” said one voice.

“Is it really? The only thing they ever update around this nowhere place is the higher officers’ quarters,” grumbled back a younger voice.

“Keep your mouth shut,” growled the second soldier. “Talk like that is why you got both of us stuck at the docks tonight, I’d like to remind you. I, unlike you, wanted to spend my shore leave at the festival tonight. Not at the docks.”

There was more grumbling and then the footstep trotted off. Only after a moment of silence did Zuko release the breath he had been holding. He doubted that his glare could be seen with the mask on, but he glared nonetheless.

“You must be silent, Aang,” finally whispered Zuko. “Now, I will be heading to the ship. I want you to head to that building over there and look for the dock’s log book. Do not be seen. Hang on the ceilings if you must. If the soldier’s see you air-bend or your tattoos, they will never stop hunting you. You must not be seen. Do you understand?”

Frowning, Aang slowly nodded.

And with that, they parted ways, Zuko hopping away into the darkness like the Spirit he was dressed as. Aang, meanwhile, took his staff in hand and took to the sky, the sounds of the festival starting in the background.
Zuko, having put on the mask, had decided to not use any of his bending. A non-bender would not have any direct affiliation and that was exactly what he wanted. Spirits rarely chose sides after all.

Hopping off of the roof that he had been hiding upon, Zuko hid in the shadows of the building for a total of three seconds while he waited for a small fireteam of four to pass by. Then, as silent as a ghost, he fell into step behind them, his footstep muted by the noise of their metal boots. He remained behind them, hidden in their shadows, until they were halfway up the ramp to the large Fire Nation vessel. Then, hearing one soldier call out from the ship, he slid over the side of the ramp, his fingers barely hanging onto the metal edge as he started shimming up the ramp from underneath.

From underneath, he basically followed the small team all the way to the deck and once they stepped foot onto the ship, he swung upward landing silently in a crouch behind them. After that, he ran to the shadow cast by the tall tower on the ship, sliding against the wall to try and blend into the darkness. He watched a set of pikemen make rounds on the stern before tilting his head upwards. There officers’ cabins were probably located in the quarterdeck as was the norm for high standing officers and guests.

Making his way to a nearby door to get inside, Zuko had just started reaching for the heavy latch when he heard the telltale sound of heavy footsteps. He barely fell behind the door in time for the heavy hatch to swing open and allow two officers to step outside. They were flanked by four fully armored fire-benders and looked quite vexed.

“I can’t believe he wanted to call all the men back from their shore leave just because there was a rumor about Dragon Fever. The Fleet Captain can be so paranoid,” groused one of the men as he dusted off his uniform slightly.

The other high officer frowned, his greying hair almost luminescent in the moonlight. “Watch your tongue. You are young and have never been around Dragon Fever. All benders are wise to fear it. Can you imagine the rest of your life with crippled bending or complete lack of it? Most cannot live without their gifts. There is nothing wrong with a little caution.”

The younger officer flinched but continued walking, not even noticing the blue masked individual that was barely hiding behind the opened hatch. “Yes, but barely anyone even got off that apparently infected ship. I mean, a healer should have been sent –“

Zuko paid little mind to the rest of the conversation as he slid into the slowly closing door, the heavy hatch slamming shut almost ominously behind him. For a moment, Zuko remained completely still, listening to the hum of the ship and its powerful steam engine. He inhaled for a moment like a traveler returned home. He knew it wasn’t his ship, but it smelled like it: of iron and rust and the sea.

He remained crouched for only one more deep inhale before he rushed forward like a weasel-mink, his movements fast and nearly silent. He always slowed every time he heard an echoing step or neared an intersection or open door, but as he suspected the ship was mostly empty. It probably had to do with the festival. Even from the bay, the celebrations seemed to echo into the ship putting Zuko on edge. It was almost a blessing when he drew near what had to be the Fleet Commander’s quarters if the markings on the door were anything to go by.

“A commander of the fleet, huh? Well, that explained why there were so many ships in the bay. It also looked like someone was showing off. It must be a new position.
Slinking in, the door surprisingly unlocked, Zuko beelined to the grandiose desk in the room. He shifted through the piles of scrolls, not even knowing where to start. He immediately happened upon a document with a royal seal. He stalled for a moment, part of him terrified it was about him and that somehow his father had found out he was the Avatar … and yet he yearned to read it. He wanted even the smallest of connections with his father, even if it was merely to memorize the stern brushstrokes of his calligraphy.

He unrolled the scroll, his eyes darting back and forth like hungry owl-foxes … He nearly dropped the scroll and gagged. The only thing that kept him poised was the mask upon his face and the need to remain quiet. It was a marriage proposal for a betrothal between Fleet Commander Zhao and his sister, Princess Azula.

Eww … their babies would have sideburns.

He shook his head. He didn’t even want to know who recommended that pairing to begin with or how terrifying Azula had to be with normal boys that his father had starting to look at war-hardened soldiers for a good match.

Reading over the scroll once more to see if there was any mention of himself, Zuko twitched at the thought of the probable babies again. Ugh … sideburns. They’d probably be mean as wolverine-bears as well.

Rolling the scroll up and placing it back where it came from, he glanced around the room in mild curiosity. Huh, there were fewer burn marks on the walls then he would have wagered for Zhao’s quarters. He was sorely tempted to sabotage something in the room just for petty vengeance. That man always made his life a living hell whenever he and his crew ran into the older fire-bender. It was like he didn’t want Zuko to regain his honor … Well, that made sense now. Zhao had his sights on the palace.

Shaking off his disgust, Zuko started digging through the desk with less restraint now that he knew who was commanding the fleet. Finally, he found something that looked like Zhao’s log. He was about to reach for it when he felt something tug at his soul, a past life whispering for him to wait. The scroll. What scroll?

He turned his attention to a wooden decorative box on the desk. It seemed out of place.

Curiosity getting the better of him, Zuko opened it. Huh, some gold. That was useful. You wouldn’t know it from looking at him, but Aang ate a lot. So, not even a little guilty, he took the gold. There was also this old … scroll?

Reaching for it, he felt a tug at his chi like when he tried to water-bend. Carefully, he picked it up. It was old. So old in fact that he could barely read it as he unrolled the ancient document. From what he could tell, it was speaking about the moon and the ocean spirits.

Zhao … could not have this.

Feeling strangely protective of Princess Yue for some reason, he immediately rolled up the document and stuffed it in his shirt.

The tug on his spirit now gone, Zuko once again reached for Zhao’s log. He read through the entries, noting scrimmages and pages upon pages of narcissism until he finally found a recent log. It mentioned that the Wani had been in this very port not even two days ago. The crew had not been allowed off the ship because of … Dragon Fever. Prince Iroh had even confirmed Prince Zuko’s illness. A hawk was even being sent to the palace to inform his father of his illness.
Zuko slowly lowered the log, his lungs feeling tight and constricted. Was his crew really sick? Yet, even if they were, why would Iroh claim he was ill? Iroh had said he wasn’t ashamed of Zuko being the Avatar … but what if he really was? What if he was planning on reporting Zuko as dead so he could go back home, leaving Zuko to those water savages? He said Zuko was like a son to him, but what if he had lied?

What … if he was alone? Abandoned all over again? What if no one wanted him?

A choking feeling caught in Zuko’s throat. He was so close to getting back to the ship, to the closest thing he had had as a home these past few years, but what if he wasn’t wanted back?

Suddenly there was an explosion outside which lit up the interior of the room. Zuko jumped in reaction and pulled his dao blades out, his feet sliding into a powerful stance … yet there was no attack or burst of fire in his direction. In fact, the cabin had been lit up via the one window in the room. It wasn’t fire-bending at all. Outside, fireworks were now blooming to life in the night sky.

Zuko, lowering his blades slightly, almost laughed at his paranoia as he turned towards the window, the colorful array and its light reflecting off his form. He watched for a moment, once again yearning for his childhood home. He missed the capital’s firework display. Nowhere could compare … not ever again.

“Well, well, well. What do we have here? An uninvited guest,” sounded a voice from behind, causing Zuko to step away from the window and its display so that he was facing a dark figure in the doorway.

Said intruder slammed the heavy metal door open the rest of the way, a fireball blooming to life in his palm to reveal none other than Zhao himself.

“Who are you?” said Zhao, his voice like a soft growl. “An assassin? A spy? Who sent you?”

Zuko locked his jaw to keep from making a noise. He didn’t want to risk the older fire-bender recognizing his voice. Instead, he ran the tips of his dao swords across the metallic floor so that the blades sang and then he took a new stance in challenge. He had nothing to say.

Zhao’s lip twitched before he took up his own kata. “You want it burned out of you? Very well.”

The fire blast that followed was like a tide of fire, Zhao never one for restraint. The whole room was covered in flames it seemed and the only thing that saved the Blue Spirit was a quick dodge-roll behind the Fleet Commander’s desk. The desk was nearly toppled over from the force of the blast, papers were suddenly incinerated, banners on the walls were set a flame, and the very room’s air seemed to simmer as the wave of flames hit the wall and crawled all the way up to the ceiling.

Zuko bore the heat in silence, his teeth gritted behind his mask as the air became almost intolerable to breathe. He did not react though. He merely stuffed the log in his black shirt and waited for the wave of fire to end. A few seconds later the blast of fire was dying and Zuko immediately reacted before Zhao could perform another kata. The teenager slammed his feet against the wall and pushed back against the desk, sending it sliding across the room as a flaming piece of wood.

Zhao didn’t even have time to react as the desk crashed into him throwing him back into the hall. Zuko, in turn, was to his feet and to the now-blackened window. He only stalled long enough to stare at Zhao as the man cradled his likely bruised chest, his blue mask glinting in the firelight of the charred room. Then, before Zhao could gather himself, the Blue Spirit brought one of his weapons up and slammed the pommel into the blackened glass. Already weakened from the flames, it shattered. Zuko barely had time to hear Zhao roar before he was jumping out of the
window … and right into a small troop of fire-benders and pikemen.

Several men went down in a huff as Zuko landed on top of them, shouts of surprise echoing over the deck of the ship. The banished prince didn’t even have time to untangle himself from the pile of groaning soldiers he had landed on when Zhao was leaning out the window and shouting, “Capture the intruder!”

Shaking off his fall, the Blue Spirit rolled between one or two soldier’s legs and then rose to his feet by tugging down another man down. He then starting jumping over the remaining men, rolling and dodging through limbs as most of them were too surprised or in too close of quarters to react. It was complete chaos, but Zuko also knew the second he was out of the troop’s collection of bodies it would be easier for the fire-benders to start throwing attacks at him and then he would really have to move.

Elbowing one soldier in the gut while using the other’s back as a launchpad, the Blue Spirit hit the deck running. He could already hear the alarm being raised, soldiers being ripped from their beds or patrol routes. He had to get to the ramp and off the ship, now.

His feet were pounding as he told himself to run faster. Zuko could already hear the hum of metal boots coming his way before he even got to the ramp off of the ship. He kept running though and was almost glad when a pikeman got in his way. He sidestepped the taller man and slammed the pommel of his sword into the soldier’s side, causing him to yip and drop his pike.

Zuko didn’t even miss a beat, grabbing the pike like it was a pole he used his momentum to vault over the soldiers currently running up the ramp. The small group of men all shouted as the Blue Spirit soared over them like a large cat, the soldiers tripping over themselves to get back down the ramp. Some of them were even knocked into the bay with wet splashes.

The banished prince landed with a shoulder roll, sliding to his feet. He barely had time to bring his dao swords up to block a slice at his head. He exchanged blows with the half-dressed and obviously grumpy soldier before kicking him in the knee and rolling over his falling form so that he could meet another blade.

Unfortunately, since every soldier he ran into seemed to slow him down, Zuko wasn’t even halfway across the docks when he was surrounded by pikemen and swordsmen alike. Already his blades seemed to be singing endlessly as they slammed repeatedly into metal and wood weapons alike. He was tiring quickly and there were just too many bodies. He … had been backed into a corner.

“Don’t maim him too seriously. I still need him to talk,” finally came the voice of Zhao, the men parting the circle they had formed around the blue-masked intruder. “I want him interrogated to see who sent him … unless you would like to save us all some time and tell me now. It’ll save you a lot of unneeded agonies.”

Zuko, breathing as carefully as he could to keep from gasping, didn’t even twitch as the pikes pointed his way pushed in closer. He kept his mask facing Zhao, if only to show his defiance.

Smiling wickedly at the unspoken challenge, Zhao waved at his men in as he added, “Take him.”

Zuko was immediately sieged upon, the non-benders left to handle him in close combat. Maybe if he could get to one of the buildings nearby and make a run for it on top of the roofs, he could get away. He just needed to find an opening in this circle –

“Gah!” a dry cry finally escaped the banished prince as someone managed to snag his leg with a
hooked weapon, making him fall to one knee for a moment. He tried to roll through the legs surrounding him. He even managed to knock two or three soldiers over to get to the edge of the encirclement, but just when he was about to rise to his feet and rush to the nearest building a heavy weight slammed onto his back. He went down with a grunt as one, then two, and then a third body pinned him to the ground. One soldier had even managed to bend his arm behind his back and now they were currently trying to pry his weapon from his fingers.

“Take his weapons and then take off that mask,” barked Zhao in the background. “I want to see who had the gall to break into my cabin.”

Zuko bucked and wiggled but every time he thought he was going to get free or managed to slice his sword, another body seemed to be added to his back. He could barely breathe at this point, his face being pushed into the wooden dock. He didn’t even have enough breath to fire-bend right now even if he wanted to, but he couldn’t be caught. Not now … not when he was so close to finding Uncle.

He had promised he would live.

Suddenly, there was a warmth in the back of his mind, voices from the past rising up. He even felt the energy pool in his gut. Apparently, he wasn’t the only one that refused to be caught.

No. No! NO! He was going to be forced into the Avatar State if this kept up and there was no promise his past lives valued his identity as much as he did. The mask would probably blow off in the ensuing maelstrom. He needed to get up before one of his past lives completely pulled him under!

‘I’m going to deal with this,’ said a stern voice, the water already rippling beneath him under the dock.

“Hey, get off him!” came a cry from above, a burst of air suddenly slamming all of the soldier’s off of Zuko’s back as none other than Aang landed in the circle. The younger boy was already twirling his glider around, the top fan snapping open as he did simple gust katas, throwing all the soldiers back and away with shouts of surprise.

Zhao watched in both amazement and growing vexation. Those yellow clothes, the arrow tattoos, the staff, and the air-bending were a sure sign of an air-bender. And not just a strangler or half-breed that had survived the last hundred years by luck alone with barely tatters of a culture upon their back. This child was obviously fully trained which meant that there may be some truth about the Air Nomad culture still being alive and in hiding … It also meant that the Avatar could have an air-bending teacher.

“Capture the air-bender!” barked Zhao as he fell into a kata with two other benders at his side, a blast of fire sent Aang and the Blue Spirit’s way. Aang, knowing Zuko was still getting to his feet, stepped in front of him and spun his staff around in a blur, creating an air-vortex around the two of them. Even with the wind roaring in his ears, Zuko could feel the heat just outside as the flames hit the air-vortex around them, their vision a blur of red.

A second later the flames ended and Zhao was already at the forefront, a fiery fist slamming into the middle of Aang’s spinning staff. His hand’s still healing, the young air-bender yipped in pain and surprise, his staff slipping from his hands and soaring across the port. It probably smacked someone straight in the head if the cry of pain that followed was any indication.

Zuko, now to his feet, quickly stepped in front of Aang, his two blades singing as he swiped at the older man before he could attack again. Zhao slid back a few feet and took a defensive stance.
Zuko then jerked his head slightly in the direction Aang’s staff had soared as if telling the air-bender to get it and let’s get out of here.

Aang nodded and was suddenly dodging and weaving between soldiers, seemingly untouchable. Seeing the younger boy dance around bodies and weapons suddenly made the leaf exercise make so much more sense. Zuko almost regretted blowing the stupid thing to bits. Almost.

Swiping at Zhao with a twist of his body, the Blue Spirit pushed the powerful bender back. He would have loved to put that hothead in his place, but the Blue Spirit wasn’t Zhao’s rival. Zuko was. The Blue Spirit was supposed to disappear when he got what he wanted.

His blades flashing whenever a firework exploded above them, Zuko kept driving Zhao back and seemingly separating himself from the air-bender that was dodging and dancing through the growing crowd of Fire Nation soldier’s in the port. Yet, when Zhao was finally able to gather his footing, the man nearly stepped off the dock.

Zhao only had enough time to give a surprised look to the Blue Spirit before Zuko brought up a foot and kicked him right off the dock and into the bay’s cold water. Then, right when Zhao resurfaced, the Blue Spirit jumped down, stepping right on top of the fire-bender’s head and sending him back under the waves. He then started hopping on floating buoys in the bay, barely hopping fast enough to keep above the water before he got to the next dock and started running towards Aang. The air-bender was becoming surrounded.

Rushing through the crowd like Aang had done, though nowhere near as gracefully as he splintered staffs and stances as he went, Zuko slid to Aang’s back to help guard it.

Aang, his staff back in his hands, tilted his head slightly to see the Blue Spirit at his back. “We’re surrounded. What are we going to do? We can’t just push our way through this crowd and I can’t really take off. There are just too many.”

The Blue Spirit tilted his head back at Aang, looking at the boy’s staff before he motioned upwards with a spinning motion.

Face scrunching up in confusion, Aang asked, “What does that mean? Can’t you at least say something?”

Zuko swiped a bender’s feet from under him before he could gather a stance while Aang blew away another two men that had stepped too close. The dark clad boy then slashed a pikeman’s weapon away so that it helicoptered into the air for a moment. Zuko pointedly jabbed a sword up at the soaring staff to emphasize what he wanted. And Aang, blinking in surprise, stared at his bandaged hands for a moment before he nodded. Despite his hands and the lack of a runway, he could lift them both up … probably.

Aang decided for one big push before they made their getaway. He snapped open the top of his staff and swung outward with a big swipe, knocking the forefront men back into the rest of the crowd. He then stepped around Zuko and did the same to the other side.

“Hang on!” cried Aang as he jumped into the air and started to spin the staff so they could take off, the young boy wrapping his legs around the Blue Spirit’s waist as they ascended. Zuko quickly knocked any thrown projectiles away with his swords as they got higher and higher. It seemed they were going to get away until suddenly a bark of pain escaped Aang and they dropped a few feet.

The Blue Spirit snapped his gaze up as if asking the air-bender what was wrong. Aang, his face pinched in pain, remarked, “Sorry, my hands are still healing … I can’t keep this up. I’m going to
see if we can glide to the nearest building and then we are going to have to run for it.”

Zuko merely nodded.

Immediately, the staff snapped open and they were gliding to the nearest roof. It became quickly apparent that they were going to be a bit short. And Aang, his hands just struggling to keep their grip on the staff, couldn’t free one hand for a boost. So, hoping that everyone would presume the extra lift came from Aang, Zuko breathed in deep and felt a brief stirring of freedom. He waved his swords, smacking a spear away. He also used the movement to stir the breeze, giving the glider a little boost.

A few seconds later, the two boys were crashing onto the clay roofing. Zuko rolled to his feet while Aang knelt there, his hands near his chest.

“Sorry, my hands are just too raw still. I just … can’t fly any further while carrying someone,” confessed Aang.

Leaning in, Zuko pulled Aang to his feet, nodding in acceptance. And then both boys were off, hopping across the rooftops. Aang flung Zuko over the largest of gaps before it could embed itself in Aang’s back, he slid to a stop on one of the roofs. Aang, already having jumped to the next roof, yipped and hopped away from a soldier that had just slammed a bamboo ladder onto the house to get up there. He quickly sliced the air downward, throwing the climbing soldiers back into the street below.

“Why did you stop?! We have to keep moving. There are just too many of them! And the way they are throwing fireballs, the whole town is going to be on fire!” cried Aang, moving to knock another ladder down.

Zuko, looking away from his newest destination, jabbed a sword towards the trees as if telling him to leave.

Aang immediately slammed his staff down in defiance. “No, I am not leaving you.”

The Blue Spirit took a step forward and jabbed his sword again in the direction of the trees. This obviously was not up for negotiation.

Standing there a moment more, Aang was finally forced to move when a fire-bender got on top of the roof. He swiped the man off and then opened his glider. He could only carry his own weight right now and they both knew it. It only made sense to separate here.

Zuko, making sure Aang departed, turned towards the celebrations in town. He could see it from here … the distraction he needed. Now he just needed a fire-bender. Well, one beside himself that is.

Coming to a stop a few blocks from the celebration, he acted like he was cornered. He even looked behind himself at the large leap to the next roof. Immediately, there were bamboo ladders slung against the building, a small collection of soldiers stepping onto the roof with weapons drawn.

Without a second thought, the Blue Spirit flung the three non-benders off the roof, the men all moaning as they hit the ground below with a thud. It wasn’t a far fall so he refused to feel bad
about attacking his countrymen. Then, before Zuko could even take a calming breath, a fire-bender was on the roof and after him. Bursts of flames exploded from the fire-bender’s fist and, like his namesake, Zuko acted like a spirit, untouchable, dancing around each attack. He wanted to draw the fire-bender in closer. Closer … closer.

Then, finally, the soldier willing to fight in close combat, Zuko grabbed the soldier’s arm right when he was about to release a blast … aiming it right into the huge fireworks bin below. Even with a mask on, Zuko knew the fire-bender had a horrified expression about what he had just done.

Kicking the fire-bender off the roof, Zuko ran to the next building and jumped just as the huge pile of fireworks started to go off, the explosion actually propelling him forward. He didn’t waste a moment after that disappearing in the chaos, soldiers ducking in the streets as fireworks zipped and zoomed everywhere, snaking their way through the streets like angry little dragons. It wasn’t long before Zuko was completely out of the town, the Blue Spirit disappearing into the night.

…

Zuko was barely two steps into the camp when Aang jumped off of Appa’s back, the monk’s temper surprisingly showing, “How could you make me leave you! I’m supposed to be your Air Master, aren’t I?”

The banished prince ripped his mask off, his temper flaring slightly as he ground out, “I told you to remain out of sight, Aang! And I specifically told you not to show your tattoos or air-bend if you were seen. And what did you do? You flung half of the fleet’s footmen into the bay. You could have died.”

Aang, his face pinched in anger, slammed his staff on the ground as his voice rose as well. Poor Appa and Momo were left to watch from the sidelines, Appa’s tail encircling the golden egg protectively.

“So could have you, Lee! We are friends! I did what a good friend is supposed to. I helped you and watched your back,” said Aang, the air current starting to swirl around him … only to suddenly fade as the young bender added, “And besides … if one of us had to die tonight … it would have been me.”

Zuko stalled, shocked for a moment that Aang, still a kid as far as he was concerned, had uttered such a thing. He shook his head and sliced his hand down in a cutting motion. “No, I made the choice to go in there. I wanted to find my uncle. I can’t have you getting hurt over –“

“You have to promise me, Lee, that you will try to live,” interrupted Aang, the boy’s tone stern and undeniable, slicing straight through Zuko’s anger like a knife.

Reeling back as if physically struck, Zuko blinked as his promise to Uncle and his past lives rang in his head. Suddenly, he felt tired and achy from the fight in the bay. He could feel the bruises forming under his dark clothes and the sting of his exerted muscles.

Deflating, somehow unable to fight with Aang, he nodded once. “I … will Aang. I will honor that promise. Now, let’s get out of here before they track us to our camp. We have a ship to find and undoubtedly a warm cup of tea waiting for us. Zhao had a note about the ship Uncle was on. We missed it by two days. Aang … I finally am going home.”

Aang, his frown being replaced with a warm smile, nodded slightly as he agreed, “Tea sounds good. Now, let’s hurry and get the saddle back on. Master Yugato would be furious with me if he found out I lost it to a bunch of fire-benders.”
A few minutes later after hastily packing, they were to the sky, Appa roaring as they took off. Both boys winced as a stray fire-ball whizzed past Appa’s head, a dozen fire-benders suddenly flooding into the clearing they had just evacuated. Even as they ascended far out of reach, Aang could see the hungry and determined look in side-burn guy’s eyes. Yeah, that guy totally had anger issues and they would probably meet again.

Sighing as he tightened his grip on the reins regardless of his aching hands, Aang glanced back at Lee. Said Avatar was low in the saddle, keeping his head down so that his face couldn’t be seen. Aang trusted Lee, but he also knew how important a fully trained Avatar was to the world right now … especially now that the Fire Nation knew the Avatar had been reincarnated.

Pulling out a scroll he had found in the building, Aang frowned as he reread it again. It was a notice that was apparently going to all Fire Nation higher-ups. They believed that the Avatar had finally been reborn into the Fire Nation. It either was a newborn or an individual that had just learned bending. All Fire Nation children with bending capabilities were to be checked, for the honor of the Fire Nation. To not report a child who could be the Avatar … was treason.

Aang swallowed, stuffing the scroll back into his shirt. Lee didn’t need anything else upsetting him right now. If anything, it was best that they were looking for children and not a teenager on the cusp of manhood. It would keep Lee safe a little while longer. Though, Aang did admit, he pitied the children of the Fire Nation and anyone sent to seek them out.

Chapter End Notes

Hello loves … I’m sure like everyone else that still reads AtLA fanfiction, you all know that Netflix is picking the series back up to try its hand at a live-action remake. Since apparently the original makers are involved, hopefully, they won’t fuck it up. So, I’m super excited about that.

As for the chapter, I hope it was action-packed enough for the reveal of the Blue Spirit. I had a hell of a time even starting. I just didn’t know how to lead up an homage to one of the best episodes in the series. At least I love the Blue Spirit episode and I’m pretty sure it’s my favorite episode as well.
The Fire Sages

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“We found the spirit-touched boy trying to escape again, sir. He hadn’t gotten very far,” said one of the fire-benders, his voice slightly muffled by his mask. Sokka, currently, was carried in between the two soldiers like a limp noodle.

Kicking his feet slightly, since he was basically hanging there, Sokka barked, “Stop calling me that! It sounds so wrong. Plus, I have nothing to do with spirits. I don’t believe in spirit magic. Also, I wasn’t escaping. I was just looking for the bathroom.”

Healer Rhije sighed as the boy was brought before him. This was the third time that the spirit-touched boy, Sokka was his name, had tried to sneak out of the healing ward. He obviously didn’t want to be in the fort to begin with and was even less enthused when Rhije had told him he was going to be conscripted into the service of the Fire Sages.

Sighing as he stepped away from one of his other patients, Rhije shook his head at the boy. “Sokka, Sokka. Not only are you lying, but you also went out in the cold again. What did I tell you about going out in the cold … and escaping for that matter?”

The healer signaled for the two soldiers to drop Sokka on his cot and they did so before stepping back and waiting for further orders. The aging healer immediately grabbed the over shirt that was hanging near Sokka’s cot, draping it over the teenager’s shivering shoulders.

Sokka hated that stupid over-shirt. It was bright red. In fact, when he had finally broken his fever, he found all of his water tribesmen articles missing. He had been completely changed into Fire Nation attire. He hated these new clothes, but he had been so cold after waking up. Even in the South Pole he couldn’t remember always being this cold. It was as if he was … empty. Despite not wanting to show any weakness, Sokka shivered and pulled the stupid red over-shirt closer.

Shaking his head at Sokka’s silence, the healer finally relented, “Get the manacles.”

Sitting up straight, Sokka tried to argue, “I wasn’t escaping! Really!” He totally was. “I just really needed to pee.”

“And every cot has a chamber pot for that very reason,” added Rhije calmly, stepping away so that the soldiers could take over.

“B-but … I can’t let ash-makers watch me pee!” tried to defend Sokka as he squirmed away from the fire-bender that was grabbing at him. The soldier in the cot next to Sokka glared at the boy for the ash-maker comment. He smiled weakly at the man before he was jerked back by one of the armored fire-benders, the manacle snapping shut and seeming to burn his skin with its cold metal.

The healer shook his head once more and wandered away to deal with an actual patient that needed his time. The two armored soldiers also walked away calmly as if Sokka was merely a nuisance instead of a threat.

Staring at his chained wrist, Sokka wondered if he could pick it when the muscly soldier in the cot next to him spoke, the man’s cold gaze sinking under the teenager’s skin. “I’d get used to us ash-makers, kid. If the Fire Sages want you, it’s going to be a lifetime gig.”
Glaring at the injured soldier next to him, Sokka flopped into his cot and turned his back to the man. He told himself he would find a way out of this. He was the meat and sarcasm guy. He’d be fine. And yet, despite himself, he found himself feeling the manacle upon his wrist, the weight of it far too real for him.

…

Sokka hated many things about the Fire Nation, but he would be hard-pressed to insult their love of meat. He didn’t care for how everything seemed to be spicy, but given he was actually being given full meals, he wasn’t complaining … and yet that bothered him. He was being fed pretty well, clothed, and honestly, for being a captive he was treated fairly decently despite the manacles. It kind of disturbed him. It was like they were trying to absorb him. No, assimilated. Yeah, yeah, that was the word.

Stalling halfway through his meal, Sokka found that his appetite was gone.

He didn’t understand it. He was sure it had something to do with these Fire Sages everyone kept mentioning, but what exactly did that mean for him?

Putting his bowl on the little stand next to his cot unfinished, Sokka turned to look at the muscley guy next to him. His name was Goob or something. He, like most of the other soldiers currently in the medical ward, had been a victim of the Jiangshi. He had nearly been drained of all of his chi but had had enough left in him that he was able to recover. It was left unsaid, but Sokka’s interference was probably why a lot of them were not part of the half-dead now. It was probably why Goob and the others tolerated him at all.

“Hey, Goob,” said Sokka, looking at the older man.

Closing his eyes as if collecting his patience, the soldier turned to Sokka and ground out, “It’s Qui. Not Goob. And … why are you not finishing your food? You always finish your food. If you are going to puke, don’t do it on my side.”

“Don’t do it on my side either,” protested the eye-patch guy in the cot at his other side. “All you did was puke that first day. The mop bucket couldn’t keep up. It was disgusting.”

Sokka wiped his hand down his face and barked, “I’m not puking on anything, okay! I just had a question.”

For a moment the two soldiers exchanged a look, before Eye-patch looked at Muscely, “Don’t answer him. He’s just trying to interrogate you.”

“What? No! I just have a question,” tried to defend the water tribesman. “I just want to know who these Fire Guru-Sages guys are?”

Qui raised a brow, putting down the scroll he was reading as he stated, “They are the spiritual advisors of the Royal Family and servants to the spiritual needs of the people. They are the followers of Agni. The bringers of light that will cleanse the world of all spiritual impurities.”

Sokka sat there confused for a moment before he waved his hand, “And, forgive me for my confusion, but why do they want me?! I’m just some water tribe kid. I can’t even fire-bend.”

Frowning, Qui merely replied, “You spoke with the Great Spirit of the Mountain, didn’t you? You convinced it to call back its half-dead and release the mountains of its curse, didn’t you?”

Sitting back, still uncomfortable about the whole incident, Sokka objected, “I merely made a
sacrifice to the spirit. Why’s that such a big deal? Anyone could have done it.”

“But you asked it what it wanted, didn’t you?” further prodded muscly-guy. “And it answered you and you understood, right? At least that’s what all the archers are saying. Correct me if I’m wrong?”

Sokka was silent for a moment before he murmured, “T-that was a fluke. A onetime thing. I don’t deal with any of the spirit magic stuff. I’m just … Sokka.”

“Well, just Sokka,” said Qui, his tone allowing little for argument. “Since the war, there are a lot of upset spirits that cannot pass on or are causing a ruckus. Fire Sages and their acolytes deal with those things to keep the Fire Nation strong and the land conquered fertile. You, having a spiritual connection, have likely been volunteered to be a Fire Sage’s acolyte. Serve the Fire Lord well and you will live an honorable life.”

Sokka wanted to argue. He didn’t care about the Fire Nation’s glory or their Fire Lord, but somehow, he resisted. No one wanted to set him on fire yet and he was okay with that.

Turning his back to muscly guy, Sokka tried to finish his meal. He was going to whittle the utensil into something he could use to pick the lock with as soon as he was done. Problem was, every time he tried to swallow, he felt like choking. Not because he didn’t like the food, it had meat in it, but because he was terrified.

He wanted to tell himself that he wasn’t scared of anything, not even the fire-benders all around him, but the thought of spirits … it left him shaking. He didn’t want to admit it, but he was scared. People that messed with spirits ended up dead or missing. This world was their land before humans and the spirits liked to remind mortals of their place.

…

Sokka had his head under the blanket. His wrist was currently close to his face as he tried picking the lock with a spoon he had mangled. Okay, he was doing this. He was getting out of here. Just a little bit more and –

Floooop! The blanket was suddenly ripped off of his head and Sokka was left sitting there looking up at Healer Rhije, Colonel Smooshy-Face, an armored fire-bender, and Robe-Guy. Hmm, Robe-Guy was new.

“Really, that’s the fifth spoon this week,” grumbled Rhije, before the mangled tool was grabbed from Sokka’s hands.

“Hey, I was using that,” whined Sokka, forcing himself to sit up and rub his manacled wrist. It was official, the Fire Nation was trying to bore him to death and if Robe-Guy wasn’t eyeing him so oddly, he would have welcomed the distraction.

“So, this is the spirit touched boy,” said the guy in the red robe and funny hat. “And you are sure he isn’t a water-bender?”

“Yes,” said Colonel Shinu, his arms folded behind his back. “He used weapons while my archers were out in the field and his escape attempts haven’t contained any bending. Not that it would have helped. No one escapes Pohuai Stronghold. You should know that he is a strong-willed boy from what I understand and a bit dense. So I hope he will do for your cause.”

“Hey,” defended Sokka. “I’m not dense. Gran-gran said a thick head will keep my brain safe.”
The older men all shared a look before the Fire Sage added, “I see what you mean. Now, I haven’t been blessed with the ability to see auras, but my new acolyte, Hu-Woo, does. Don’t you?”

A teenager, barely older than Sokka and in that awkward lanky stage of his life, stepped forward. He obviously wasn’t Fire Nation and it was even more noticeable because he kept rubbing his wrists and looking at all the fire-benders nervously. He … was what Sokka was going to become if he didn’t get out of here. Well, minus the awkward phase. Sokka was sure that wasn’t going to befall him. He was going to be a manly man when he got his final growth spurts.

“O-of course, Fire Sage Jenki,” said Hu-Woo clumsily as he stepped forward. He then stared at Sokka in a way that made him very uncomfortable. He almost felt like covering up, it was that piercing.

“I … see a touch of blue. He likely has water-benders in his line, but he is not a water-bender. His aura doesn’t carry that gift. His chi lines are wide open though, like … something was holding them open and feeding off of his spiritual energies until recently. Its … left him with a lot of reserves and an … empty space,” said the boy, drawing in nearer as if to see better.

Sokka, having enough, tore his blanket away from the fire-bender to hide his body from the other boy. “Hey, stop looking at my chi-lines or whatever! It's creepy.”

“Empty space,” whispered the Fire Sage before humming to himself. “Well, that might be troublesome in the future, but we are going to need all the acolytes we can get with spiritual abilities. So, I will take the boy as he is and burn away what is unneeded as with all colony acolytes. After all, with the rebirth of the Avatar into the Fire Nation, we are going to need all the spiritually sensitive people we can find in order to discover the child.”

His chains being removed from the wall and handed to the Sage, Sokka swallowed thickly at the news. The Avatar had been reborn in the Fire Nation, huh? Yeah, that wasn't good.

Elsewhere, growing farther and farther from her brother, Katara stalled while rummaging through their packs. It was Sokka’s wet-stone. He had fought a penguin for it after dad had left. He came home with a scratched-up face and more than a little proud of himself. The thought of his cheeky smile … made her eyes moisten. She had promised not to cry in front of the children. She had promised herself to keep strong and to keep heading to their destination, the Foggy Swamp. Sokka knew where they were heading and when he escaped, they would meet again.

But, in the back of her mind, she worried that they would not meet again … at least not in this world.

“There is no dishonor in crying,” suddenly said Suki, her armored body hiding Katara from the rest of the camp and their newest visitors; a group of kids introducing themselves as the Freedom Fighters. “I will shield you from all peering eyes if that’s what you need. Even the greatest and thickest of trees was weak when it was but a seed.”

And with that, Suki embraced the water-bender she was quickly coming to know as a fellow female warrior, a sister. And there they remained for a moment, two souls comforting each other as the clouds floated overhead.
A quick update for a short chapter. As you can tell, Sokka’s plot is intertwining more with the main plot and will be answering some of those big questions people have been asking. Sorry for sad-Katara, but I can’t imagine her being anything but depressed if she lost her bother.
Iroh sat in his quarters, the whine of the hull the only sound in the room. There were a collection of candles that flickered all around him, the flames shifting as if there was a breeze in the room. There wasn’t. It was just Iroh trying to meditate, to breathe. He had never had meditation issues in the past, but his soul felt burdened, heavy and … he just couldn’t catch his breath.

Sighing, opening his eyes, he sat there staring at the flickering flames around him before he exhaled, extinguishing every flame in the room and casting himself into darkness. The firstborn sat there a moment more, calling up memories of his failures. He knew he shouldn’t. Such thoughts were keeping his soul bound to his body. He knew that it was unwise to give in to sorrow. Zuko had escaped the Northern Water Tribe and that was all the hope he needed, but he still wanted to cross over and beg the spirits for his nephew’s location.

The world was large. He might not find Zuko for years or ever.

‘Do not lose hope, Iroh. Sometimes you merely … have to look up,’ suddenly said a voice, the tone humor-filled and playful.

Iroh jerked to the left at the sound, immediately seeing something in the dark. There was a figure, a
body, a dark outline that did not belong. And yet, it was a familiar figure of regal proportions. He had seen the outline before in Zuko’s room many weeks ago. The figure was little more than a flicker of blue eyes, a spirit barely fading into this realm, and yet he knew exactly who he was.

“Avatar Roku?” whispered Iroh, wondering if he had actually crossed over.

The spirit’s eyes seemed to glimmer a haunting blue before he nodded, his voice echoing, ‘Iroh, be the Avatar’s guide. Help him find himself, even the pieces he doesn’t want to claim.’

And then the past life was gone in a blink of an eye, the outline dispersing like dust to the air. Iroh merely sat there breathless.

Closing his eyes, lighting one of the candles in front of himself, Iroh looked around the room once more before wiping a hand down his face. He suddenly felt very old and maybe a little irritated. “Why must spirits always be so cryptic?”

There was suddenly a pounding on his door, making the aging man jump. A second later, Lieutenant Jee was opening the metallic door, his expression pinched as he spoke, “Prince Iroh, you are needed on deck. There I something coming from the sky. It’s been growing steadily closer and the ship is obviously its destination.”

His eyes gaining a steely look, Iroh was to his feet and following the other fire-bender, their footsteps echoing down the metal halls. The aging prince tried not to squint as he stepped out into the sunlight. He hadn’t come out to greet the morning sun in days. Crossing realms required large amounts of time and concentration. It took a dedicated soul and once you came back, you were never quite the same. It was like you always had a foot in that other realm.

Eyes adjusting quickly to their element, Iroh looked up towards the sun where Jee was pointing. At first, it just seemed to be a shadow on the sun, a growing dot. It became larger and larger revealing a set of horns and a large … tail? A bellow could then be heard in the distance.

“What is it?” questioned Iroh, the prince now wondering if the past life’s warning had been literal. How very cordial of him.

“I can’t tell, but I’m not taking any chances,” growled Jee before turning to the soldiers that were gathering on deck. “Men, into position. I can’t tell what that is, but I want us ready.”

Iroh stood there like a stout tree, unyielding as he waited. His eyes only widened when he could see that it was a white creature… No, it couldn’t be? No one had officially seen one in decades.

“Is that a sky bison?”

True, some individuals believed that the bison still lived wild in the highest mountain tops, but a sky bison shouldn’t be out here in the middle of the ocean … obviously flying towards the ship.

“Should we attack?” asked one of the fire-benders, his voice seeming weary behind his helmet.

Iroh lifted a hand, gaining the attention of all the benders and pikemen that were gathering on the deck. “We will wait. Pikemen to the rear, benders to the forefront. Take a defensive kata stance. Patience reveals all things.”

They didn’t have to wait for very long, a sky bison drawing closer and closer to the ship. None of the soldiers moved. None of them even twitched as all twenty men on deck stood there like clay statues, awaiting the word of their remaining prince. Some finally started shifting uncomfortably as the sky beast drew closer until it was right above the deck … the whole ship rocked as the multi-
ton beast landed on the deck, more than one soldier stumbling from the impact. Still, Iroh didn't call on an attack.

"See ... I landed just fine, even with my burned hands," said a young voice, a small child on top of the beast's head. Immediately, his garb and the tattoo on his head revealed what he was. All the soldiers on deck quickly regained their footing, pointing their fists in the small form's direction. The air-bender gained a weary look in his eyes, but no one gave him much mind as a water tribesman jumped off the bison’s saddle. Honestly, no one recognized him at first glance in that parka and wolf’s tail haircut. It was his voice that stirred the hearts of the men on that ship.

“...Uncle.”

It was just a simple word, an utterance that the windy sea had almost stolen as it blew across the deck, but Iroh knew that voice. He knew it like a parent knows the voice of their child when they are scared and call out in the night.

“... Zuko,” replied Iroh, his tone desperate and almost afraid that he was imaging the whole thing, “Prince Zuko … is that you?”

Walking forward like he didn’t even see the other men on the deck, Zuko’s voice almost trembled, “Yes, Uncle. I came … I came home.”

The aged prince didn’t even hesitate after that. He rushed forward, his speed surprising for what most considered an old man. He was then embracing his nephew, wrapping his arms around the lanky teenager like he was afraid Zuko would cease to be if he didn’t hold onto him. Zuko only withheld for a second before he immediately reciprocated the embrace, burying his shaggy head down into his uncle’s shoulder and trying his best to not sob in relief like a child that had been lost in the woods.

“I thought I would never see you again,” finally choked Zuko into the aging man’s shoulder, his breathing shaky as tears buried themselves in Iroh’s shoulder, the boy trying to ignore the shame of crying in public. “I tried to escape again and again, but I couldn’t get back to the ship ... I’m sorry I got captured, Uncle. I’m sorry that I made us go to the North Pole. I’m sorry … I made you worry.”

Rubbing his nephew’s back, a hand cupping the back of Zuko’s shaggy head as his own eyes wettened, Iroh whispered, “It’s okay, Prince Zuko. We are fine now. You are safe.”

Iroh continued to whisper into his nephew’s shoulder, feeling the shake of the boy’s form against his own and the heat of his skin. He paid attention to every minute thing that supported Iroh’s reality of the situation, that he wasn’t imagining his nephew coming home. Truthfully, the aging prince had started to fall into depression, his heart aching like when he had lost Lu Ten, but this time the rift in his heart could heal. He got this one back … He got this son back and nothing in this world or the next would take him again.

Neither of the Fire Nation Princes was sure how long they stood there, but slowly Iroh was the first to let go if only to look the sprouting teenager over.

Looking the scruffy fire-bender up and down from his shaggy head to his water tribe parka, Iroh carefully cupped the boy’s face in his hands as if looking for even the smallest of errors. He was surprised that the usually reserved teenager didn’t pull away from the touch on his scar nor shy away as the elder prince wiped away the last of his tears with his thumb.

“You have gotten taller … though I don’t know if blue is your color, nephew,” chuckled Iroh after a moment of observation, a sad smile on his face. Zuko, in turn, smiled bitterly before gathering his
composure and standing up straight.

“I’d have to whole heartily agree, Uncle. It is a color I would like to shed as soon as possible,” said the banished prince, wanting nothing more than to take a warm bath and greet his bedchambers.

“Oh, of course, my nephew, of course,” said Iroh as he tilted his gaze slightly over his nephew’s shoulder, his eyes meeting the young monk’s before Aang smiled weakly and gave a small wave, “But first, would you like to introduce your allies?”

Blinking in surprise, as if he had completely forgotten about the shorter monk, Zuko turned on his heel and stared for a second. He knew the men of the ship were watching, waiting to see what he would say about the ten-ton beast and the obvious air-bender on the deck of the ship. The old Zuko, the one before that fateful day on this very deck, would have been repulsed at the idea of introducing Aang to Uncle and the crew, but he wasn’t quite that same boy anymore.

Waving for the slightlyterrified air-bender to come closer to the armor-clad Fire Nation soldiers, he waited for Aang to get off Appa’s head.

Gathering his courage, Aang swallowed and then landed with a soft thud on the metal deck. He gave a nervous glance around, like a bird trying to decide if he should take flight or not. In the end, Aang decided to trust Lee and pulled his staff close, walking forward to meet the Avatar’s beloved uncle.

Trying to act like his normal friendly self, even though he was surrounded by Fire Nation soldiers, Aang smiled and bowed respectfully to Iroh. Zuko took this time to introduce him, “Uncle Iroh, this Aang, my current Air Master. He helped me escape the North Pole and … he is my friend.”

Part of Iroh was almost shocked to hear that not only had Zuko accepted an Air Master but also earned a friend.

The aging prince, in turn, bowed his head in a show of gratitude to the young monk. “I am happy you brought my nephew back to me, Aang. You are welcome on this ship as a guest. I would like to speak with you more, but first I’d like to speak with my nephew alone. Lieutenant Jee will see to you and your sky bison’s needs until we can speak properly.”

Eyes going wide as he watched Iroh turn away with Lee, part of Aang’s mind screamed at him to not to be left alone with unknown Fire Nation soldiers. The air-bender even put out a hand as if to grab the edge of Zuko’s departing parka, only to have a heavy callused hand put on his shoulder instead.

Meeping, the preteen, turned his head to see a very unhappy looking grey-haired man staring down at him.

Scowling must be a fire-bender thing was the first though Aang had about the man.

“The princes need a moment, young monk. You can come with me until they call for you. It’s warmer inside,” said Jee, eyes observing every detail to the young air-bender like he was a bird of prey.

Despite himself, stories of bloodthirsty Fire Nation soldier’s echoing in his head, Aang tried to keep his feet on the ground. He wanted to follow after Lee, ask what this ‘princes’ thing was about, but Uncle Iroh obviously wanted to catch up. Plus, Aang generally loved meeting new people! Not all Fire Nation soldiers were bad … right?

Standing there, the stories of the elders echoing in his head about the dangers of the Fire Nation,
Aang nearly jumped a foot in the air when Jee stated again, “Are you going to continue to stand there? We should go inside.”

Licking his lips anxiously, Aang tried to smile as he waved at Appa, suddenly deciding he didn’t want to be trapped below deck like a bird-lizard in a box, “… It’s not that cold. Plus, I … I can’t leave Appa up here alone. He’s very shy. I’ll stay up here for now.”

Jee looked at the bison. It was sniffing three of the crewmen that were daring enough to get close (though all three of them jumped back as the great beast yawned at them). Calling out the men, the Lieutenant barked, “You three, open the bow of the ship and put the bison with the komodo-rhinos. See that it is fed and watered.”

The three men looked aghast and slightly terrified … until Appa promptly sneezed on all three of them. Now, they just looked disgusted and slightly gooey.

Aang opened his mouth, ready to volunteer to help, but Jee already had a hand on the boy’s back, pushing the air-bender forward towards the dark stairs going down into the ship’s bowels. Jee was kind of intimidating. He had the same angry stoicism that Lee had had when Aang had first met the other boy. Maybe it was just a fire-bender thing. It was only the second fire-bender Aang had ever met.

Sliding under the man’s hand, running back to Appa and pulling a bundle out of the saddle, Aang cried out, “Oh, I almost forgot the egg. Can you carry this? My hands are full.”

Jee … immediately ran a hand down his face, sighing.

…

Leading the slim boy into the dim halls, any flames they walked by leaping high, Jee felt like a bag-boy as he carried a shoulder bag and something round wrapped in a parka. An egg apparently. Did bison lay eggs? Oh, and apparently, he was now a glorified babysitter. It took all that was in him not to twitch every time the youthful bender opened his mouth and jabbered on about something else inane. “… And then we were captured by pirates.”

Jee tried not to start the lemur on fire as the irritating little pest jumped from the child’s head and then promptly onto his shoulders, picking his greying hair for lice or something.

Wondering if the boy would notice some singed hair on his pet, Jee shooed the animal off his shoulder.

“Animals should be in the cargo hold,” he groused, part of him already getting the sinking feeling that Aang was going to end up his responsibility during this whole horrible trip.

“The cargo bay … like where Appa’s at? Oh, can I ride one of the komodo rhinos?!?” asked Aang, nearly bumping into Jee’s back as the man stalled. He looked down at Aang, raising a brow as if that was the stupidest question in the world. Not that it mattered. Finally, they had arrived at the guest quarters. Honestly, Jee didn’t think the room had ever been used. Iroh just kind of used it for his spare junk and that extra Pai Sho set.

Opening the door, stepping into the room far enough to light a fire so that it was warm in the room and not quite so gloomy, Jee put the round bundle on the bed and stood before the fire. He looked down at the boy, trying not to sneer at the smiling child, “This is where you will be staying. I’ll be leaving now. I’ll send the healer to look at your hands in a bit.”

Looking around the room, cringing as the terrifying masks hanging on the wall seemed to stare
back at him, Aang immediately swallowed. Despite all the reassurances the young bender was trying to convince himself of, his face fell. Carefully, he asked, “…You’re not going to lock me in now? Are you?”

Raising a brow, Jee folded his arms behind his back. Part of him wanted to say: yes, he never had the patience to deal with children. Instead, he decided to take the high road and asked, “Is there a reason I should?”

Squeezing his staff closer, the lemur making itself into a living hat on the boy’s head, Aang shifted awkwardly and looked down at the floor. For the first time that day, the small bender was soft-spoken and painfully-obviously a child, “No … it’s just that … I’m an Air Nomad and you’re … Fire Nation.”

Feeling blindsided by the boy’s sudden change in demure, the destruction of the Air Nomads raced across the back of the aging man’s mind like a jagged scar. Jee twitched … and then the fire in the room died down into a gasping little flame.

Jee slowly exhaled. He knew that they taught children about the Air Army … And he had never believed it, especially after visiting the Air Temple ruins that first time. He remembered all the small skeletons with their hang jaws and accusing empty eye sockets. He recalled how all those little figures were still interwoven after nearly a century in soot-covered corners.

None of those bones looked like soldiers. Just students and their teachers.

Coming forward, his hand stalling right above the boy’s shoulder as if uncertain, Jee carefully placed a warm hand on the boy. He tried to keep the irritation out of his voice, his tone trying to be warm instead of authoritarian and brutal, “No. Of course not. You are safe on the ship as the princes’ guest. As such, I won’t let anyone harm you. Now, make yourself at home. Someone will be by with some water and food.”

Sagging, as if relieved that all Fire Nation soldiers weren’t automatically evil, Aang nodded, a pair of lemur ears popping out of his shirt. “Okay, but before you go, you wouldn’t happen to know how to hatch a dragon egg, would you?”

Jee left the room a few minutes later, apparently with homework. Now he understood how the boy had befriended Zuko, that child was tenaciously friendly and leech-like. It was probably going to be contagious on the ship … Iroh was going to love it.

Turning to walk down the hall and order some lower crewmembers to feed and listen to the air-child prattle on, Jee didn’t even get a few meters away from the guest door when one of the men was running over to him.

“Sir, we received a hawk … It has the royal seal on it,” said one of the pikemen, handing the scroll to the Lieutenant. “I would have taken it straight to Prince Iroh, but I doubted he would appreciate being disturbed with Prince Zuko finally back.”

“I doubt so as well,” said Jee automatically, waving the man off. He then stared at the seal, a frown forming. Carefully, he looked back at the guest door, his mind ticking away.

Deciding to deal with this while the princes caught up, the lieutenant broke the seal, his eyes widening as he read the elegant script. The Fire Lord was offering Prince Zuko a way home … if he found and captured the new Avatar.
Well … there you go. He finally got home. Proofread is lazy because I'm tired. Night guys.

(Revisions November 2019)
Iroh could feel the heat pour off his nephew as they walked through the halls of the Wani. He usually allowed Zuko to have more space. After all, it was always best to give a young flame room to breathe or else you risked suffocating it. But, part of him was still terrified that the young prince would blink out of existence like a star that the heavens had cast down. He tried not to be terribly apparent, but he couldn’t stop staring at the boy.

Zuko had grown. He was taller and had filled out some more. And though blue would never be his color, at least the Water Tribe had been feeding him. His hair had even started to grow out. So, despite being a little shaggy, he looked handsome and regal with the way he held himself. Like Lu Ten at that age. But, most importantly, Iroh could see no immediate injuries.

But not all injuries are physical.

The old dragon wanted to ask how Zuko had been treated. He wanted to ask if he had learned any waterbending and what Masters had decided to take him on. He just wanted to fill in the gaps so that his heart may be filled. A wound had started to form there and it needed something of substance to continue healing. He needed to know that his nephew had been treated well while they were separated.

Directing the boy to his personal quarters, even though he saw the wanting glance Zuko threw further down the hall and towards his own room, Iroh asked, “Nephew, would you like some tea? I would like to hear what has happened in our time apart.”

Meeting Iroh’s gaze, a small ghost of a smile tugging at his lips as if in nostalgia, Zuko nodded, “Of course, Uncle. Hot tea leaf juice would be fine.”

The aging prince felt his heart melt again because, for a second, with that small little smile, Zuko really did look like Lu Ten. Sweet Lu Ten who had learned to love tea for him. He hoped Zuko would learn to love tea one day as well.

They had just sat down and Iroh had barely started to boil the water when his heart could take no more. The Fire Master pulled his nephew into a hug, burying the boy’s head under his chin while simultaneously suffocating the teenager in his robes. He would usually never be so forward with such shows of affection, it was dangerous to show such connections in court, but they weren’t in the palace or anywhere near the Dragon Throne. There was no one here to hurt them.

One of his boys had come home.

Iroh, unable to hold back, then started to sob. Nothing loud or messy like children are prone to. No, it was more reserved than that. His sobs were soft like little hiccups, but even Zuko could probably feel how his chest heaved while he struggled not to cry harder. His breathing was a complete mess now, the fires flickering oddly in the room.

Hungry for familiar contact, Zuko allowed himself to be smothered as he buried his head deeper into his uncle’s robes, intaking a deep breath. He could smell the slight ting of tea leaves that always clung to Iroh along with the incenses that were used for meditation. Then there was that warm-air almost burnt scent that clung to all firebenders like an ozone. Zuko wished he could say
that it reminded him of hugging his father … but he never got hugs from his real father. Just Iroh, Lu Ten, and then there was this one foggy memory that he sometimes thought was just a dream, when Azulon had hugged him.

Zuko didn’t remember why Azulon was upset, but he was sure it had something to do with his aunt’s death. It was the first and only time he had been alone with his grandfather … and it was the only time he had ever seen any emotion on that stern face.

Are Fire Lord’s even allowed to cry?

Also, had grandfather really threatened to kill him? Then again, Azula always *lies*.

Pushing all thoughts of the palace away before he got caught in a regret-filled loop, Zuko took a few more breaths and returned the hug, clinging to those rich robes like a piglet-monkey. He couldn’t help but feel tears start to gather as well, his throat struggling to choke down a sob. He was safe now. He wasn’t a guest of the Northern Water Tribe anymore and there was no point in sobbing.

And yet he did.

A fine picture the two of them probably made, sobbing like fools.

Iroh even managed to burn the boiling water. Not that Zuko was broken up about that, but once they collected themselves, Iroh dutifully started another pot.

“I missed you, nephew. I didn’t know if they were treating you well. An old man worries,” Iroh finally said, his hair worse for wear and his eyes red.

Zuko was sure he looked worse, his hair probably everywhere after a crying fit like that, his eyes red and squinty.

“I was a prisoner, Uncle. How do you think my stay was?” Zuko said bitterly, his grudge against Pakku still fresh in his mind, but the moment he saw Iroh start to frown he quickly added, “But, it could have been worse. They called me a guest. I was kept in a guarded room in the Chieftain’s palace, but they fed me and clothed me. My Water Master taught me how to dodge though and left me wanting to burn his eyebrows off if not his whole face; I later tried to kill my Earth Master … he saved me from the spirit realm and was apparently going to teach me how to make my first airstaff. He was thoughtful.”

Iroh’s frown hadn’t disappeared so Zuko quickly added, “B-but, I met a cute-I mean nice girl, Uncle. I … she … we talked some and d-danced.”

The Dragon of the West’s worried brow turned into a growing grin and Zuko quickly regretted his words, especially when the aging Fire Prince leaned in and stroked his beard, “A pretty girl you say? Tell me more nephew.”

Zuko sputtered, immediately blushing, “I, um, her name was Yue. P-princess Yue. She was the chieftain’s daughter. It was nothing. She was just very kind to me and I liked talking to her.”

The glint was hard to miss in Iroh’s eye as the man moved to pour them more tea. “A caring woman is never nothing, nephew. Such a girl is the kind of woman you ask to bare your children.”

The teenager immediately spatred his hot leaf juice all over his uncle, snapping at him that this was not the time to talk about pretty girls. Somehow, Uncle chuckled through the entire thing.
The teasing didn’t last forever though. Uncle started to pry in order to get an idea of how bad or good Zuko’s treatment was. And, after making his Uncle cry minutes before, Zuko honestly couldn’t reveal everything. The thought of worrying the aging man wore down on Zuko like a boulder hanging over his head, just waiting to crush him. He didn’t know if he would ever tell Iroh everything.

So, instead, he told his uncle about some of his less suicidal escape attempts, the food, his fake name, and the healers. He spoke of Pakku and the chieftain, breezing over some of the more forceful lessons the Water Master had tried to instill on him. He spoke of how he had tried to meditate and fell into the Spirit Realm. He mentioned the visage of Princess Yue that wasn’t actually Yue, and how it had said something was broken in him. He spoke of the Air Master Yugato and how he had been sympathetic. He mentioned that Aang had come along with the Air Master and then proceeded to be a friendly little elbow-leech. He even spoke a bit about the festival and his dance with the princess. He ignored the blush on his cheeks and the way Iroh grinned at him. He then mentioned how the Earth Master had made him snap, forcing him into the Avatar State so that he could finally escape with Aang's help.

He ghosted over how terrified he had been of Master Kun Tein.

How can someone steal your memories?

Iroh was frowning by the end of it, running his hand through his beard as he hummed to himself. Zuko couldn’t help but look at him with almost pleading eyes as if asking him if he had fought hard enough or if … maybe he should have stayed? A part of him believed that Iroh was better off without him. That the aging Dragon was safer and far less of a traitor without him around but instead Iroh stated, “You did well nephew.”

That had not been what Zuko was expecting.

“I know that being caught by the Northern Water Tribe was … far from ideal, but you handled it as peaceably as can be expected. I know that the other Nations are desperate for a fully realized Avatar, but to go so far as to take you memories? Did the Earth Master mention how it was done?” asked Iroh, a sharpness in his eyes.

Zuko shook his head. “I probably could have found out Uncle, if I hadn’t overreacted, but the thought of losing even a little of myself. I just snapped and there was so much power. And the Avatar State … is overwhelming. There were so many voices and they were all pulling at me and yet were me. I never want to do that again.”

Sighing, looking older all of a sudden like he was coming to some hard decisions, Iroh added, “There is no dishonor in keeping yourself intact, nephew. A koi does not merely throw itself onto the shore because the wolf-bats are hungry.”

Zuko raised a brow.

“How can someone steal your memories?”

“Now, I was hoping to wait until you were settled in before we had this conversation, but from what you tell me, your Masters were desperate. They will surely come searching for you. And, as they say, a water lily should not settle roots where there is no water,” said Iroh seriously. “We cannot remain on the Wani much longer. Your previous Masters know it and will follow it, and even if they cannot take you again … it may attract unwanted attention.”

The banished prince did not like the sound of that. “What do you mean Uncle?”

“Commander Zhao tried to board the ship the other day. He seemed unusually suspicious, and the
only thing that kept him away was a ruse about Dragon Fever. We must find a place in the Earth
Kingdom sooner rather than later where you can train. And, while we travel, perhaps we can find a
trustworthy Water Master and Earth Master as well,” continued Iroh, his gaze still hard and
calculating.

The anger inside the young prince wanted to fight, wanted to claw at its enclosing destiny with all
its might, but another part of him, the side he had named Lee, knew Uncle was right. Avatar Lee
knew it was the best for him, Uncle, and the crew if he kept moving. They had to go.

Home was wherever Uncle was anyway.

So, even though his throat felt like it was closing up, that the world was pressing down onto him to
heavily, Lee nodded and simply stated, “Perhaps you are right, Uncle. When … when should we
leave?”

Smiling sadly, Iroh placed a hand on his shoulder and squeezed, “Not tonight, nephew. First, I
want you to finish your tea, bathe, change and rest. A man needs rest. Then we can discuss where
we are going and when we should leave.”

Not knowing what else to say, his throat feeling even too tight to drink tea, Zuko nodded, “Of
course, Uncle.”

…

Aang stood there staring at all the masks on the wall, his head feeling fuzzy like it tended to do
from time to time when he was trying to remember something … that he shouldn’t?

One of the masks on the wall, in particular, made his stomach drop. It was a simple white mask
with huge blue circles around the eyes and these blood-red lips. The smile was knowing, sinister
even, and though the face wasn’t quite right, words echoed in the young airbender’s head: Shall I
take your face as well?

Frowning, wondering what that could possibly mean, Aang literally jumped a few feet into the air
when suddenly there was a knock on the door. The metal door slid open a moment later revealing
two men. One man was carrying a small table with a bowl and tea-set on it, while the other man
had a bag slung over his shoulder.

For a second, the two Fire Nation men stood there stiffly, blinking up at the airbending child that
had just plastered himself in the upper corner of the ceiling, panting as if they had just terrified
him. Lieutenant Jee had told them the air-child was a bit skittish and wary of Fire Nation soldiers,
but this was a bit ridiculous.

Regardless, the two men looked at each other with matching frowns because neither one of them
planned on hurting a child that also happened to be a guest on the ship. The man carrying the bag
stepped forward first, his face serious and his tone allowing little for discussion, “Air Master Aang,
I am Ryto, the ship’s healer, and this Tenli. I have been asked to attend to you. So, please come
down. Such a position cannot be good for your healing hands.”

Aang, as if remembered his burned hands, suddenly winced and dropped to the floor, filling the
room with airbending as he made a smooth landing. Both men stood there in awe at the act of
airbending, their hair now ruined and the soup almost spilled.

Ryto was the first to recover as if seeing an ancient lost art like airbending was nothing, the man
strolling into the room. Tenli followed dutifully, setting the little table down in the middle of the
Not knowing what else to do, Aang swallowed nervously and padded over to the table. He looked the two men over, both dressed in red but lacking any armor, their eyes following his every move. He wanted to believe what Jee had said to him earlier, that he was a guest and that no one on the ship would harm him … but the warnings that had been ground into him as a child were hard to dismiss.

Finally realizing that the two men were staring at him because he was probably being rude, Aang put his hands together and bowed slightly as he remembered his manners, “Hi, I’m Aang. An airbender. Uh … thanks for attending to me?”

The two men continued to stare before Tenli patted the floor next to him, “Come on, sit down. We aren’t getting any younger and your food’s getting cold. Plus, Ryto has people to nag.”

The healer threw a glare at the pikeman that promised vengeance, but the makeshift assistant merely shrugged. Aang, in turn, tried to plaster a smile on his face before sitting down with the two crewmen. The preteen sat there awkwardly for a moment before the Ryto cleared his throat and offered out his hand. “Here. Let me see your hands.”

“Oh, right, I forgot. I mean. I didn’t forget. It still hurts pretty bad, and there’s no way I could forget because I can’t do normal things like fly Appa or glide. Do you know how hard it is to use a glider when you can’t grip it properly? And don’t even get me started on brushing Appa –”

The two men were now staring at him with raised brows.

“Oh, sorry. My hands. Right,” said Aang trying not to twitch as he offered his hands to the healer before him, his mouth still moving because he didn’t know what else to do. “So, your name is Ryto? Do people always ask you for directions because you always know the Ryto-way to go?”

Aang tried to smile with his pun, Tenli looked somewhat constipated like he thought about laughing, but Ryto just gave him a look before he started to unwrap the wounded hands. Aang winced as those long-fingered hands went to work but he didn’t pull away.

Soon enough the ship’s healer was eyeing the angry-red and slightly-oozy burn wounds with a critical eye. He even hummed to himself before he stated, “It could be worse. They are both healing nicely and obviously have been properly cared for. I’m surprised you knew how to treat these wounds.”

Hissing as the man started to clean the red flesh, Aang admitted, “Well, Lee mostly did it, actually. He said he had experience with … burns.”

Tenli raised a brow and so did Ryto before Aang realized his mistake. That was right. He almost forgot that Zuko was Lee’s real name. “I mean Zuko. Zuko treated them.”

Now both the crewmen were looking away, their faces either pinched or carefully neutral. The healer at least had the nerve to murmur, “Yes, Prince Zuko does know how to treat burn wounds. He … has much experience.”

A cooling salve quickly was added to Aang’s skin but that didn’t shock him as much as, “Prince? What do you mean by Prince?”

Pouring what definitely smelled like medical tea, it was Tenli’s turn to speak, “You didn’t know? Zuko is a prince to the Fire Nation.”
“Banished Prince,” corrected Ryto as he finished wrapping one hand. “Not that that title matters anymore. He can never go home. After all, an Avatar cannot be a prince, especially not a banished one.”

Aang could only look at the two men in horror before taking the first offered cup and downing it in a harsh gulp. He immediately regretted it, of course. For one, it was medical tea and tasted horrible, and secondly, it burned all the way down.

At least Tenli got a snort out of it. Ryto, in turn, shook his head before asking, “You really didn’t know, did you?”

Aang didn’t say anything at first because he was too busy airing his tongue. Zuko’s second name made a whole lot more sense now, but that just brought forth a thousand other questions. Like how does a Prince get banished and why can’t he ever go home?

…

Jee’s boots echoed as he made his way down the corridor to speak with the head animal handler. He was waiting for it. This was the calm before the storm, before the ship suddenly exploded into a riot or mutiny or a giant fireball or something. The sun was starting to sink into the sea though, threatening to turn the sky a rainbow of colors, and yet nothing had happened with the return of Zuko and his Air Master.

Except for … the lollygaggers.

That was an oddity. Most of the crew had routes or tasks that they were supposed to complete, yet he kept finding crew members where they essentially didn’t belong. At first, it had unsettled him, like there was some kind of organization to the placement, but he saw no reason for the two engineers to be peeking around a doorway into the cargo bay and animal hold.

He stalled there and stared at the backs of their shirts, both of the crewmen seemingly oblivious to his loud footsteps as they whispered to each other.

“Do you think they’ll let us have a turn?”

“Xun is a selfish jerk. He’ll never share. He’ll just pull rank or something to get rid of us.”

“Yeah, he’s such a jerkbender.”

“A jerkhoarder is more like it.”

Suddenly getting tired of this mutinous idiocy, Jee leaned forward and growled between their two heads, “Is that any way to speak about your Chief Officer?”

Both of the engineers jumped away, sliding around with a sir and an awkward bow of respect. They both looked guilty and more than a little ashamed. Neither would meet his gaze.

“Well, out with it. The first of you to admit to mutinous plans against the princes may escape corporal punishment,” barked Jee, waiting for one of the men to break.

Instead of looking terrified or enraged, Chow and Chin, the only two brothers on the ship, gave each other an awkward glance. For a moment there seemed to be an eyeball battle between the two of them like they were debating about who should say what.

Jee only put up with this for about half a minute before he turned to Chin. The man’s eyes widened
as he was put on the spot and suddenly be blurted out, “It’s not mutinous if it’s true, sir. Xun never-“

“Chief Officer Xun,” corrected Jee.

“Chief Officer Xun never shares,” finished Chow for his brother. “He’s not the only one that wants a warm nap on the fluff monster.”

A warm nap? Fluff monster? What?

Deciding an explanation would take too long, Jee stepped between the two brothers and looked around the corner and down into the hold … only to immediately regretted it. What was he seeing? What was this madness?! Someone had taken the saddle off of the flying bison at some point and now there was a line of the men taking naps in the fuzzy creature’s fur. Most of the men were curled up on the flying bison’s side, burrowed into its fur like little lamb-larks. They probably were enjoying the heat its great fuzzy body was putting off if their satisfied grins were anything to go off of, but Chief Officer Xun alone was curled up on the creature’s back like a greedy cat-owl. He, apparently, was not sharing his space.

And that wasn’t the worst of it.

Someone had also raided the giant saddle, finding what looked like large oil-paper umbrellas. An airbending tool of some sort likely. And now some of the crew were currently taking turns leaping off the railing that overlooked the hold. They’d then float down like dandelion seeds before being sent spinning whenever the bison snored. The bison was apparently very popular and didn’t seem to mind one bit that it was now the crews’ personal heater.

Jee turned to look at the two technicians, confusion written all over his face. He could only ask one thing, “Why?”

The two brothers shrugged, one admitting unapologetically, “It’s fuzzy and warm, sir. All the men have been cold for weeks.”

Running a hand down his face, wondering if airbenders just dragged madness wherever they may, he grumbled, “And where is Doi the animal handler? Why isn’t he down here dealing with this debacle?”

“He’s helping the cook,” said Chow simply.

Jee raised a brow, already feeling a migraine of epic proportions coming on, “And why does Duck need Doi’s help? I told them they weren’t allowed to gamble on the fates of the komodo rhinos riders anymore. It instills distrust in the ranks. No one wants the amount of times they’re bucked off counted. We’re navy men, not the army.”

The two men snorted like it was a great joke but stalled when Jee glared at them. Yeah, that was a migraine. He could feel it claw at the back of his eyes, but before he could even storm down into the hold and demand that everyone leave the sky bison alone, a screech started to echo down the adjoining hall.

Jee and the two engine technicians stalled, their heads all turning towards the noise in the darkness. At first, it was an odd sound, screeching almost like metal dragging on metal but lower-pitched.

“What now?” growled Jee, stepping in front of the two non-benders and taking a defensive kata,
his eyes squinting as he tried to see whatever was in the gloom. He barely got to see the reflective eyes in the darkness before suddenly the lemur was flying down the hall, nearly banking into the three men.

All three of the men barked in surprise and plastered themselves against the walls to ignore the screeching little creature. They didn’t even get to question what the little screechy beast (Jee believed it was called Momo) was flying away from when suddenly the cook came dashing out of the darkness.

“Come back here, you little food thief. I’m cooking your ears!” barked Duck as he raced after the lemur.

Jee wasn’t even allowed to acknowledge that lazy, old Duck knew how to run when suddenly Doi slid down the hall, crying out, “You said we weren’t going to eat it!”

“It don’t need ears!” yelled back the cook as he tripped around a corner, nearly biffing it as he skidded on some fallen nuts the lemur had probably stolen and dropped.

If Doi was going to reply, he didn’t get a chance as Jee reached out and yanked the man back by the collar of his shirt. The mustached man immediately ended up on his back and looking up at his commander.

“Sir, the lemur,” defended Doi as he sat up and waved his hand pleadingly down the hall.

“It will be fine. Airbenders and their animal compatriots are apparently good at hiding,” groused Jee as he stood up straight, folding his hands behind his back. He was the perfect example of a superior officer deserving of respect. Not that he got nearly enough with this ragtag crew.

Doi just pouted up at him like a particularly doe-eyed man-child.

Ugh, this day would never end.

“I would ask why you weren’t at your station, but I don’t want to look down into the hold again unless I want to risk madness,” continued Jee in a dry tone, Doi giving him a muddled look, “Instead, I’m going to inquire about dragon eggs. If, perchance, Prince Zuko and the airbending boy found one and brought it onto the ship, how would you go about hatching it?”

The look of excitement that slowly filled the animal handler’s face was startling. Doi had never seemed so happy. Jee personally found the expression disturbing.

“Please don’t joke about such things, sir! I’ve always wanted to see a dragon! It’s a life dream, besides riding one that is!” gushed Doi, his eyes wide and excited as he got to his feet.

Jee decided he didn’t like that hopeful glint his underling’s eyes either. Then again, it might just be because the crewman was crowding his personal space. When was the last time Doi brushed his hair?

“I do not joke. It is currently in the airbender’s quarters. The child asked how to hatch it,” said Jee bitterly. How had he ended up babysitting again?

“Really?! Is his quarters this way? Also, he got quarters? I’m surprised since he’s an airbender, but he’s also Prince Zuko’s Air Master, right? Oh, but back to the dragon egg,” prattled Doi, acting like a child at a festival. He even started to walk down a random hall.

“To the left,” corrected Jee, wondering why he was essentially following behind his subordinate
instead of leading the way.

“What color is the shell? Oh, don’t tell me. I can’t wait to see if for myself,” continued Doi as he was essentially tugged down the correct corridors. “I hope it’s gold. Dragon’s with golden shells are lucky.”

…

“How does a Prince get banished and why can’t he ever go home?”

Apparently Aang had asked that out loud because the two men were now frowning deeply. Tenli suddenly wouldn’t even meet his gaze and Ryto looked torn like it wasn’t his tale to tell. Instead, Ryto slowly refilled Aang’s teacup and whispered, “Please have another cup, Air Master Aang. It is a sensitive subject. In fact, most of the crew didn’t really know why Prince Zuko was banished or where he got his scar for that matter … until recently. It was one of the reasons the ship didn’t mutiny when we found out he was the Avatar.”

Aang felt his stomach sink, a pain that wasn’t his own echoing in his head. He even reached up a hand and touched his face as if to feel a scar that was not there.

Tenli still wouldn’t look at him and Ryto stared at him as if trying to decide what to say. Finally, the healer sighed and shook his head, “It would feel wrong telling you something so deeply personal for Prince Zuko. You should ask him or his esteemed uncle why he was banished, not us. It is not our place.”

Sitting there, wondering how he was going to bridge that conversation, Aang decided to leave it for later and instead asked, “Okay. So, Zuko is a prince then?”

The two men nodded warily like they didn’t want to be the cause of Aang suddenly fleeing or something.

“So,” continued Aang, “That means he is related to the Fire Lord, right? Is he his nephew?”

Ryko looked like he swallowed an egg, his frown growing.

“But he keeps talking about his uncle, Uncle Iroh,” continued Aang as he tapped his chin, one hand still unwrapped. “And the elders said there were only two sons of Fire Lord Azulon, which means that Zuko is … oh.”

Aang suddenly felt breathless. Lee, or Zuko, was the son of the Fire Lord. The banished son of the Fire Lord. No wonder he had lied about his true name to the Water Tribe. Honestly, knowing this, part of Aang wanted to flee. He wanted to take Appa and find Master Yugato because this was way over his head. He didn’t know how to deal with this.

Should he be mad? Angry?

Then again, Lee had admitted that his name was Zuko, and that he had been afraid to tell people his real name. Aang couldn’t even imagine what some of the Masters would have done if they had known Zuko’s true bloodlines.

Besides, Zuko had said he wouldn’t mind being Lee. So, did that mean he didn’t want to be a prince anymore? Was that why he was banished?

Aang didn’t know. There were too many questions, too many things unanswered, but he did know that he didn’t want to push Lee away. Lee needed to learn airbending. Plus, Aang had promised
himself that he would make Lee smile more. Running away wouldn’t help anyone.

He’d just have to ask Lee about being the Fire Lord's son as well he supposed.

Forcing a smile on his face, Aang stated, “That’s going to be an awkward conversation.”

The two Fire Nation men gave each other anxious looks like they didn’t understand why Aang hadn’t gotten up already and started to run away. They knew how to chase, but this awkward small talk with a nomad that their ancestors had massacred was killing them. They never even got to voice their concerns though when suddenly the door slammed open, a wild-eyed crewman stepping into the room. Aang might have ended back up on the ceiling if Ryto wasn’t still wrapping his other hand.

“I have come for the egg,” said Doi as he stepped into the room, hands opened expectantly towards Aang.

Aang just looked confused and slightly terrified of this random crewman, Tenli looked like he was torn between concern and hilarity, and Ryto looked simply irritated. The healer pinched his nose bridge and exhaled deeply before he groused, “Doi … did one of the komodo rhinos kick you in the head again?”

The man, mustached lip dragging into a frown, folded his arms over his chest, “I got kicked once, Ryto. Once. And you won’t let me live it down.”

“It was more than once, Doi. I just think you’ve landed on your head so many times that you’ve forgotten them all. Honestly, I think you’ve lost the concept of knocking,” continued the healer, sarcasm lacing his words. “In fact, after I’m done taking care of the prince’s guest, I’d love to reintroduce you to the notion of manners … and hair brushing apparently.”

“Who spit in your breakfast rice, Ryto?” grumbled Doi with his hands still crossed over his chest, only to suddenly turn bubbly again as he looked at Aang, “So, Lieutenant Jee said you have a dragon egg! Is it true?! Where did you find it? Can I touch it? Smell it?! Memorize its texture?”

Jee took this opportune moment to finally catch up with his subordinate, hearing just the tail end of the questionnaire. He gave the animal handler a tired glance and was about to say something (likely apologize to everyone in the room), when Aang floated to his feet, just as excited.

“We got it from a bone dragon that was haunting this island which was also infested with pirates and tasty mushrooms! It smells like egg and charcoal but feels like a whole bunch of thick seashells fused together. Do you want to touch it?” chirped Aang, seeming to float back towards the cot where the egg was still wrapped in a parka.

Ryto made a displeased noise as his patient basically escaped across the room and Jee ran his hand down his face again. Great. The little airbender was already infecting the crew with his weird bubbliness. Doi was always kind of eccentric mind you, but Jee feared that this was going to become a trend if the cargo hold was an indication of the coming days.

“It’s gold-colored,” gushed Doi as Aang presented the egg to the excited man, allowing him to pick it up. “And it’s warm. Plus, the shell does kind of reminded me of overlapping seashells.”

Then, to the surprise of no one really, Doi brought the dragon egg up to his nose and inhaled deeply like he was smelling flowers. He made a thoughtful humming noise and then, despite Ryto’s knowing glare, he licked it. Everyone present cringed and Jee even covered his eyes, embarrassed by his crew.
“Hmm, smells and tastes like wet bear dog,” said Doi thoughtfully.

Aang rubbed the back of his head as if embarrassed, “Uh, yeah. That’s probably our fault. We kept it wrapped in parkas this whole time and those likely haven’t been washed since … summer.”

Tenli actually made a gagging noise and quickly covered his mouth.

Shrugging like he didn’t mind, the lanky animal caretaker walked over to the fireplace in the room with a skip in his step, “No worries. Call in flavoring. Now, let’s cook this egg.”

Aang immediately blanched, sliding in front of the fireplace while he waved his hands about, “What? No! We promised the spirit that we’d hatch it! Not eat it.”

Doi rolled his eyes, “Do I look like a cook to you. That’s Duck’s job.”

The airbender merely stood there, continuing to look confused.

The animal handler sighed, “Dragon eggs require hot temperatures to hatch, usually volcanoes. So, to hatch it, we basically have to cook it. So, into the fire with it.”

Understanding overcame Aang’s eyes and he was hopping around once more, “What, really? That’s so cool. How long will it take to hatch? Today? Tomorrow? How big are baby dragons? Can I ride one?”

Just as excited as the child, Doi replied, “I have no idea … on any of those things. Let’s throw it in.”

Jee covered his eyes with his hand again like he couldn’t watch this mockery a moment more and exhaled deeply, smoke rolling out of his nostrils. He stood there wondering if he’d have to put out the flames when those two inevitably managed to start their eyebrows on fire. He had better uses for his time after all … like deciding what he was going to do with the proclamation from the Fire Lord Rytō, looking up from his position at the small table, waved Jee over, “Please sit, sir. Would you like some calming medical tea? It’s for pain and swelling though it might help with that growing migraine.”

Rubbing his neck, Jee looked at the two excitable idiots once more before he sat down. He grunted and accepted a spare glass.

Pitying his commanding officer, Ryto said simply, “It could have been worse, sir. Price Zuko could have brought three elemental Masters with him after all.”

…

Elsewhere, on a Northern Water Tribe ship, Master Pakku sneezed into his tea. Simultaneously, Master Kun Tein somehow held in his own sneeze while Master Yugato was completely caught off guard. He sneezed all over the small tea table on the deck, sending said table and everyone’s teacups flying. Conveniently, he also added some air to the sails.

“I suppose the time for tea is over. I didn’t really like that blend anyway,” grumbled Pakku as he used his waterbending to clean himself off. He left the rest of the mess to the clumsy deck hand though, the poor kid immediately tripping over the abandoned teapot.
Chapter End Notes

Hello everyone. I decided this would be a fluff chapter of sorts, especially since Appa got involved and now it's literally a fluff chapter. And then I was like, ‘Hmm, who handles the animals usually on the ship?’ because of the komodo rhinos. Then Doi showed up and now Aang has an adult that's just as bubbly as him.

Anyway, if you finally got a reply to your review months later, sorry about that. Usually, I’m rather prompt, so I decided to just reply with this update.

Furthermore, should I get a Tumblr? I feel I’m too much of a recluse and the format just doesn’t make sense to me. >.>

Works inspired by this: The World Needs a Hero and It's Gonna Be You! by LittleMrsAdams

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!