Another Brother

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Another Brother

by AvocadoLove

Summary

It was a mission of revenge. There weren't supposed to be any survivors, but Chief Hakoda couldn't bring himself to kill the Fire Nation boy. Against his better judgment, he brought him home. A Zuko joins the Water Tribe story.
Never Gives Up

Chapter Notes

"You're going through a metamorphosis, my nephew. It will not be a pleasant experience, but when you come out of it, you will be the beautiful Prince you were always meant to be."

~ Iroh, The Earth King

Chief Hakoda hated the cleanup after any battle, even if it was one that ended in victory. He stood on the high prow of the newly captured Fire Nation ship, silent and watching his men work in twos and threes; stripping the ship for much needed supplies and throwing the bodies of their enemy overboard. Dark red pools of blood splattered the deck and drained under the metal rivets. Most of it, Hakoda noted with a grim satisfaction, the enemy's.

It hadn't been luck that had resulted in not a single mortality for his tribe, but careful strategy. The Fire Nation ship had been sighted mid-morning and they had stalked it silently. They struck at night, with the moon high in the sky blinking her baleful light on the fighting — the screaming.

The enemy ship had only three benders among her ranks, and without the energy of their elemental Sun Spirit they had been at a near disadvantage.

And now they were dead, and Chief Hakoda had a Fire Nation ship at his command.

A stiff breeze whipped his brown hair, and the newly rising sun cast long shadows across his face making the normal handsome man look haggard; old before his time.

As soon as his men were done scavenging, they would blast a hole in the bottom of this unnatural abomination. Hakoda trusted his own ships which were secured with natural wood, resin, and tar. This metal blasphemy deserved to be at the bottom of the ocean.

In water this deep, the Fire Nation would never be able to salvage it. It wouldn't be a great loss, but it would be a loss, and any wound to those evil murdering savages was a boon to him and his men's hearts.

This mission was one of revenge.

It had been three months since the surprise attack on the Southern Water Tribe. It had happened while most of the men were out on their annual seal-hunt. The losses… were staggering. Many had lost their entire families. While his own two young children were safe, Hakoda had lost his wife, Kya… and a part of his heart had died along with her.
"Hakoda!"

Hearing his name, the young Chief turned and saw Yuruck waving at him from portside. "There's something here you need to see!"

Raising his hand to signal that he had heard, Hakoda took the stairs to the lower deck two at a time. A group of men were gathered around what almost looked like an emergency metal raft. It had been strapped to the side of the ship, and its dust coverlet had been tugged half off by the search party. Whatever drew his warriors interest had been underneath.

Hakoda's second in command, Bato, turned at his arrival. "Tatum found him while searching out for supplies." Then he moved aside, and quite suddenly Hakoda found himself looking at a boy.

There was no doubt that the child was Fire Nation, what with his raven black hair and pale skin. He lay curled up, asleep with his knees tucked to his chest, completely unaware of the group gathered around him — and the reason for that was quite clear. Dark stains of blood, black with age spilled down the front of his robe like a young child who had tipped water on himself. It looked like someone had slashed his neck, from ear to collar. There was more. The visible upper left corner of his face surrounding the eye and left corner of his face was black, blistered and burned. Both wounds seemed infected, and Hakoda could smell the stink of rot from several feet away.

"What kind of monsters…” Yuruck whispered, but couldn't finish.

Bato touched Hakoda's shoulder. "I know you said that there were to be no survivors." It was a simple statement, and for a moment Hakoda didn't know what his first mate was alluding to until he noticed that the boy's chest was rising and falling in small, shallow movements. Despite the grievous wounds, he was alive.

All the men were looking to him now, and Hakoda felt the weight of responsibility on his shoulders. Bato was right. There were to be no Fire Nation survivors. The invading Fire soldiers had specifically targeted children on their last raid. Bato's two daughters were part of the casualties — murdered as they slept in their beds.

This was war.

Hakoda knew could not ask any of his men to do this. This would be his burden and his alone. With a nod, he reached to his long knife on his hip, unsheathing it. "Go," he said, simply.

The warriors didn't argue. None wanted to witness this. Hakoda shut his eyes, and waited until their footsteps faded away. Then, gripping his knife in a sweaty hand, he brought it to bear. The boy was clearly fevered with his wounds — this would probably be an act of mercy. The kindest thing would make it quick as possible so that he never woke up.

But as he turned the child over to get a clear, precise target at the neck, he caught a glimpse of the other side of his face; whole, unblemished, and young… younger than he thought. Why, the child had to be about the same age as his own Sokka…

He hesitated.

An image of his firstborn flashed in his mind. Sokka's laughing face, his sly intelligence, so sharp for a nine-year-old. He was a brave boy. He had begged to go along with them, to help take revenge for his mother's death. Both Sokka and his younger sister, Katara, expected Hakoda and his men to fight for their mother and the others…. How could he go back to them, and look them in the eyes, and tell them that the face of one of the enemy had been a child?
Hakoda's hand dropped. He had lost his nerve.

His men wouldn't like this, but he was the Chief, and besides… it was a great possibility the child would be dead before morning.

Carefully, wrapping the boy in the raft coverlet, he hefted him in his arms. The smell from the rotten wounds was nauseating.

The Fire Nation boy slept on, oblivious.

Later that evening, Hakoda chose to take dinner alone in his private cabin rather than fest victory with his men. He wanted to be with his own thoughts and plan what to do next.

Counting this last victory, he and his men had taken out four Fire Nation battleships. There were dozens more out there, sailing what should have been Southern Water Tribe waters. His warriors were willing to challenge them all, but reports from below deck had their supplies running low. Even with salvaging there were things that just couldn't be replaced. His men were getting fatigued, and soon it would be time to return home.

Hakoda's wishes for privacy were, of course, ignored by his second in command. Bato burst in the cabin without preamble, stinking of bad Fire Nation wine. Hakoda glanced up from his navigation maps and gestured for him to shut the door. Bato was the only one who could get away with interrupting him like this, but he didn't want the other men to see it.

"Healer Kuthruk's finally finished on the boy," said Bato in his normally direct way, as he came around to the other side of the desk. "He'll have to use most of our bandaging and probably all of our rosethorn packing to stay the infection. He says, though, that he might survive, but he'll probably lose that eye."

Hakoda grunted acknowledgement and went back to his maps. He knew Bato almost better than he knew himself. The man had another point to make, and Hakoda would be quiet and let him make it. He wasn't in the mood for games.

Sure enough, after a brief pause, Bato spoke again. "The men are relived we don't have a child's blood on our hands, but what if he survives, Hakoda? You know what he will become. No one will tolerate a Fire Nation man—"

Hakoda cut him off with a wave of his hand. "I doubt that boy is even eleven years old. He's hardly a man."

"He will be, someday. What do you plan to do? Take him ice-dodging when he's older?"

The chief looked up and saw the steel passion in his friend's blue eyes. "If he survives," he replied. "The boy will be taken on our next voyage and dropped off at the nearest Earth Kingdom port. Some of the Southern Islands are still neutral in the war." He had no intention of letting the seed of an enemy take root in his tribe.
Bato nodded, satisfied, and finally bent his attention on the navigational map. "Back home, then?"

Hakoda marked his stylus against the paper, drawing out their route. "Not right away. I want to patrol the local area for at least a week before we pull into port. No use going back only to be attacked again… I want our waters clear. If all goes well," he made another small notation and then leaned back, overlooking his work with satisfaction, "we should be seeing our shores within the month."

"I'll pass the word along?"

It was more a question than anything else and Hakoda nodded, rolling up the map and passing it along to his first mate. "If you please, and tell me about any changes with the boy."

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**OoOoOoOoO**

Zuko awoke to a world of pain. The left side of his face seared in agony, much worse than the needlesharp pain in his neck and on his chest. He tried to groan, feeling the world tilt and spin around him. He reached up automatically to his face only to have his fingers snatched in a much stronger hand. "No," said a voice. "Don't touch. Drink this, boy. It'll rehydrate you."

Something warm was pressed against his lips; the lip of a bowl. Salty broth splashed in his mouth, and he sipped eagerly for his hunger and thirst was almost worse than the pain. Later on, he would realize that the broth had some kind of medicine in it. The pain receded, and within a few moments he was asleep again.

Thus passed his first few days onboard the Water Tribe ship. He would wake up — sometimes by the executing pain of a bandage being changed on his face, sometimes by simple hunger. He would be told not to touch anything, and either broth or soothing tea would be forced on him.

On the forth day, Zuko opened his unbandaged eye, and got a fuzzy impression of wooden walls, a thick animal fur and a tanned, deeply lined face above him.

Then there was nothing.

On the sixth day his fever broke and Zuko awoke for the first time from what was more or less a natural sleep. For once there was no firm voice directing him to drink, and his hand went up to his face to encounter a soft bandage, like a patch, over the left side of his face.

What happened? Where was he?

The room he was in was small and dark except for a single oil lamp lit in the corner. His bed was nothing more than a simple pallet lined with what had to be some kind of animal fur. Zuko stared dumbly at it, tracing his fingers along the soft edge of the blanket. It felt foreign to him.

The door opened, and he startled, pulling himself up to his elbows. If he was surprised, the figure in the doorway was as well. The man paused for a long, long moment before walking in, tray in hand. "Well, I see that you're up… good. That's a good sign," he said, his voice carefully measured.

The man set the tray by his bed, and his face fell into the light. Despite himself, Zuko took in a quick breath of surprise. He was unlike any man he'd seen before; darker with a rounded, flat nose and
brown hair and... very, very cold blue eyes.

"How are you feeling?" the man asked.

Zuko opened his mouth to reply, but a sharp pain in his throat ended his word before it even began. He couldn't even hiss an answer. Instinctively, he reached up to grip at the sudden source of pain, but his hand was slapped away.

"No, don't touch!" Reaching over, the man brought the oil lamp closer and peered at Zuko's neck, grunting with what he saw. "Must have cut the vocal cords. Not that I'm surprised. You're a very lucky little boy. Whoever did that did that to you missed the big vein there by a hair."

Zuko didn't answer. He couldn't.

The man continued as if he had, "But I don't suppose you're feeling very lucky. I dare say that you won't lose the eye after all, but there will be a scar." He paused, snorting, "Oh yes, there will be a scar. The neck may heal, with time. Until then, you will use this." He reached under Zuko's pallet and came back up with a piece of parchment and some soft coal-chalk. "Write your name. Now that I'm fairly sure you'll live, I don't want to be calling you 'boy' anymore."

Swallowing painfully, Zuko did what he was told. He wanted to ask so much: Where was he? How did he get here? Did someone attack him? But his fingers trembled with the small effort of writing his own characters. When he pushed the parchment back the healer didn't look pleased.

"Zuko. Great Spirits." The healer rolled his eyes up to the ceiling. "Now that's a Fire Nation name if I ever heard one. Let's hope that the Chief graces you with a new name; a proper Water Tribe name. Now," and he pushed the tablet back, "tell me what you were doing on that ship. Were you a stowaway?"

Zuko stared at him for a moment, and then at the tablet. What was this man talking about? And what had happened? He couldn't remember... he had been...there had been fire... and pain... he was screaming something... and there was nothing.

Looking back on his own memories felt like a raw-burned wound. He didn't want to remember. It hurt too much.

Shaking his head, he shoved the tablet back.

For a moment he thought that the healer was going to demand he write again, but with a shrug he simply packed the tablet under the bed and brought the tray forward instead. "Well, I'm sure you'll tell your story when it's time. For now, let's see if you can keep down solids. You do remember how to eat?" His voice was kinder than it had been, and when he lifted the top off the tray a rush of delicious scents made Zuko instantly forget how upset he was. He nodded enthusiastically.

__________________________________________

OoOoOoOoO

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The next morning, he awoke to a soft shaking on his shoulders. Kuthruk, the healer from yesterday stood above him. "Wake up. The Chief wants to see you. Sit, and don't touch your eyepatch."
Blinking, feeling muzzy from a combination of painkillers and fever weakness, Zuko did what he was told. Trying to move about was difficult with his neck and face all tied in white. Kuthruk had to help him change into a simple blue tunic and pants. The clothes were obviously made for a man, and he had to cinch up a leather belt nearly twice around his torso to keep everything together.

Then, with a steady hand on Zuko's shoulder, Kuthruk guided him up to the main cabin. They had to pass for a few moments between two doorways on the outside, and Zuko caught a rush of salt-scented air and endless blue ocean before he was ushered in again.

The Chief's cabin was many times larger than his own, and it wasn't only the Chief, but a whole group of tanned, brown haired men there to greet him. Their conversation stopped the moment the door opened, and immediately, Zuko felt himself the center of attention from at least ten pairs of eyes.

Most boys would shrink back, and indeed years down the road Zuko would examine this memory and wonder at the fact that he didn't, and what it meant for him. But as it was, he was used to attention, and found it almost ordinary to be stared at.

The Chief himself sat in the middle. He was younger than most of the tribesmen, but he had an immediate way about him that commanded respect. Like the rest of the men, his eyes were blue. Like looking into a deep volcanic lake where the waters extended down, down, down...

Kuthruk pushed him forward, and Zuko knew what to do without being told. He got down on his knees, hands and forehead touching the floor in the way any Fire Nation child would greet a high leader.

A buzz of murmurings broke out among the group, and a couple laughed out loud. For his part, the Chief merely cleared his throat into a fist and touched Zuko's shoulder, bringing him back up into kneeling position.

"We'll have none of that here. You're on a Water Tribe ship." The Chief said, in a way that would probably make a lot of sense to an adult, but made none to Zuko. He looked back over his shoulder in confusion, seeking Kuthruk's guidance, but the healer's face was a blank mask. He was no help.

The Chief spoke again, drawing back Zuko's attention. His voice was neither kind or unkind, but direct and to the point. "Healer Kuthruk tells me that you can't speak, so I would like you to nod and shake your head when I ask you a question. Can you do that?"

Zuko nodded his head. He did this carefully, to avoid pulling the stitches across his neck.

"Good. As I said before, you are on a Water Tribe ship, my ship. While you are aboard it, you are under my command. Do you understand?"

Zuko nodded.

Chief Hakoda seemed to hesitate as if weighing his next words. "Right now there are no other children here, so you will be treated like a man. You will be given chores, like the other men, although I'll make sure that these don't interfere with your recovery." He gave a nod of respect towards Kuthruk. "You will be expected to do these without complaint."

Although Hakoda hadn't asked him a question, Zuko felt he should nod again. It seemed to be the right thing to do. For the first time, the Chief graced him with a small smile. "I have a son around your age. You may meet him. How old are you?"

Zuko started to raise his hands, and then hesitated, confused. For a long moment he stared at his
fingers, his uncovered golden eye darting back and forth. He knew how to count. He was sure of it, yet… he didn't know his own age. He couldn't recall having a birthday, although he knew what one was. Finally, he looked up at the Chief and shook his head.

"No?" Hakoda repeated. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "You don't want to tell me, or are you not sure? No, you can't answer that. Well, then." One hand came up, tapping thoughtfully at his chin. "Do you know if your father was on a Fire Nation ship?"

Zuko shook his head. He didn't know.

"He could be a bastard," muttered one man, from the back. "Doesn't know who his father is."

"That's enough from you, Tatum," snapped another man, to Chief Hakoda's right.

Hakoda ignored the sniping and gestured towards one of his men. Immediately, a map was rolled out in front of Zuko. "Do you know what this is?"

Zuko looked and recognized the Fire Nation archipelago. It was more or less a detailed map of all the major islands. He glanced up to the Chief with a vaguely amused expression before nodding. Of course he knew what this was.

The Chief named some islands, and Zuko put a finger to them, pointing them out accurately. Hakoda asked him to point to the major cities, and then almost as if it were a test, the minor villages.

Then Chief Hakoda asked where Zuko lived, and for the first time the boy's mind stuttered to a halt. He took a long moment to study the map, and found that he didn't know.

Zuko looked up, and shook his head.

Hakoda asked if he had ever seen any ships in the ports, and how many there were and what kind were they? To this, Zuko also had to shake his head. He couldn't remember that either.

Finally, they asked him to write down his family name and the name of his parents. That, he couldn't do. After a long moment of staring at the parchment, he shook his head and pushed it back.

Healer Kuthruk spoke up. "He may be just frightened, Hakoda. He is just a boy, and considering his injuries…"

But Zuko was looking at him, shaking his head. He wasn't shy. He just didn't know. They kept questioning him about it, expecting him to be frightened or upset, but it was hard to be scared when he didn't even remember the people he was supposed to miss.

Hakoda still tapped at his chin thoughtfully. "If you remember any of these things, Zuko, I want you to find Kuthruk and have him let me know."

Zuko nodded.

"Excellent. You're dismissed."

At once the Healer put a hand on his shoulder and steered him to the door. Zuko left, feeling weak, but thinking already about how hungry he was getting again. It didn't occur to him that he would continue to be the subject of the men's discussion for the rest of the night.
The next day Zuko was put under the care of Nunka, who, at twenty, was the youngest warrior on the ship.

"Have you ever knotted netting before?" the young warrior asked, as he retrieved Zuko from his room the next day. At Zuko's headshake, he said, "There's nothing to it, really. It's just tedious. Normally, the women do it, but since it's just us we have to make do."

Nunka may not have liked the work, but after he sat down on the deck, Zuko saw how quick and accurate his tanned fingers were with the net-rope. It seemed to be only a few flicks of his hands, and he had a string of knots completed which was the beginning of a tightly woven net.

"See?" said Nunka, holding up his work and grinning when Zuko's eyes widened. "Nothing to it."

Zuko opened his mouth, about to request for Nunka to do it again, but slower this time; his throat burned with pain. He couldn't even hiss.

Nunka did end up showing him again, and again. He would show Zuko as many times as he needed, but demanded near perfection in return. He would unstring twenty minutes worth of Zuko's work for a minor error. The third time this happened, Zuko made the mistake of glaring at the warrior and trying to snatch his rope back before it was undone. He received a sharp cuff on the back of his head for his insolence. After that, Zuko still seethed when he was made to redo the work, but he seethed discretely.

Finally, around midday Nunka seemed satisfied with his knots and allowed Zuko to have a snack of seal jerky and dried snow plums. Zuko's fingers, unused to working with rope, were starting to blister. So after the meal, Nunka led him down to the gallery and put him in charge of the cook, Ekchua, who had the biggest nose Zuko had ever seen.

Preparing food, Zuko quickly found, was much better than net-knotting. He didn't get to be outside, but he did get to sneak bits of what was being prepared, when Ekchua wasn't looking.

The next few days passed much the same with meeting the men and learning new things from each one of them… and eventually those days rolled into weeks. Slowly, as he grew stronger, Zuko was introduced to more and more of the ship's chores. The men weren't kind, but they weren't cruel. As long as Zuko did what he was told, and didn't put up a fuss, they were satisfied.

Occasionally, someone would ask him a question about the Fire Nation, and as long as they worded it in an indirect way, he found he could answer it with a nod or a shake of his head. The moment it became personal, he couldn't. One day Nunka mentioned that Fire Nation food was spicy. To this, Zuko nodded. It was spicy… but also full of flavor and delicious. But when Nunka asked what his favorite food was, Zuko could only shrug. He didn't remember having any particular dish… so how would he know?

One day, Ekchua (who was a quiet sort of person, so he and Zuko got along very well) asked if he missed his family. Zuko shook his head. He didn't miss his family. He didn't know his family.

As the days wore on, and the ship sailed further and further south, the air became cooler and cooler. Zuko got the surprise of his life one morning when he slipped and fell on a patch of frost that had collected in a shadowy corner of the ship.
Frost, he found, was something he felt sure he had no experience with at all prior to waking up on the Water Tribe ship. He liked the way he could trace patterns in the patches using his warm finger, and watch the white ice melt away to water. By mid-day, all the frost on the ship had melted away completely. It came back the next day, and the day after that… until it was cold enough so that the frost didn’t disappear at all.

Zuko would get to know ice very well. Indeed, in the next few years he wouldn’t pass one day of his life without it. But he wasn’t to know that yet, and having lived near the equator all of his life, he now saw it as a novelty.

There was one more important lesson that Zuko learned while on the ship: Fear of the Fire Nation. He knew that he was different from the Water Tribe men, of course, even without their constant comments. His skin was pale, his eyes gold to their blue. He wore his dark hair up in a high fashioned phoenix tail at the top of his head — he didn’t know why. He just knew he had always done this, and it was right. So he fixed it as such, every day. The Water Tribe men had the top layer of their brown hair pulled and tied at the back of their head’s, with the rest of it flowing to their shoulder’s.

But some of the men had burn-scars; on their arms, or on their legs. Sometimes when the wine would be passed around, Zuko would watch them compare their scars and tell outlandish stories on how they got them fighting Fire Nation soldiers.

But none of them could beat Zuko’s scars.

Healer Kuthruk finally stopped bandaging his eye on the third week and allowed Zuko to look in a small polished piece of metal at his own reflection.

I look mean, was the first thought that came to his mind. One quarter of the left side of his face was an angry red, extending raggedly past his hairline to his temple. The skin around his left eye was a darker shade; the eye itself puckered into a permanent glare. Zuko could see well enough, though.

The other side of his face was whole, and this was the side Zuko preferred to focus on. His neck was healing better, and the scar there would be more of a puffy line… maybe it would even fade in time. It was nothing compared to his face.

Zuko touched his scar around his eye, felt the tough flesh there, and put down the mirror. He didn't pick it back up for a week.

While all this related to the Fire Nation in a more or less direct way, and although he knew that he was Fire Nation, he didn't give where he came from much thought.

At least, until they attacked.

OoOoOoOoO

Zuko woke up one night to the clammer of alarm bells being rung topside. He had seen the great bells before; one positioned on every side of the ship, but had never heard them until now. He lay still under the thick blankets, unsure of what he should do. The warriors all slept in separate bunks in
another room. His own room, a hastily cleaned out storage space, was given to him because he was the only boy and also because he was Fire Nation. He had no one to look to for direction.

Footsteps thundered from the hallway beside him, and a shout went up, "WE'RE BEING BOARDED!"

Instantly, like a thick cloud bursting all of its rain at once, a roar went up from the Water Tribe warriors. And an answering one sounded from somewhere topside.

Zuko threw back his blankets shot to his feet. He had no real idea what he would do when he got out there, but it didn't matter because the door didn't budge; not even when he threw his entire weight against it. Someone had thrown the bolt against the other side. Perhaps they did it every night, and he'd never noticed before, but now it kept him in and away from the battle.

Zuko shoved his shoulder into the door again and again, and beat his fists against it. His mouth opened in silent shouts. Outside he could hear screaming, the swell of fighting men… everyone he knew was out there fighting. Everyone but him.

Suddenly, it was as if the world itself exploded. He was thrown backward against his bed in a rain of wooden splinters and flame. Zuko coughed, blinked, and then looked up into a nightmare.

To the boy's eyes, the man standing in his doorway seemed to be about ten feet tall. He was dressed in red plated armor, colored like dried blood. His face was covered in a white skull-like mask with only his light amber eyes glinting out.

The man stared down at him. This boy with the strange coloring, but who also wore the colors of the Water Tribe. With a snap of his wrist, the man lit his hand in a sheath of yellow flame and stepped forward, ready to snuff out the enemy's child.

Zuko stared at him with wide eyes, pressed against the fall wall, shaking his head silently. Mute as he was, he couldn't scream for help.

The Fire Nation soldier took another step towards him, and then faltered. His eyes, locked against Zuko's suddenly grew wide… and then blank. He fell forward onto his knees, and then crumpled down to the floor; the handle of a long bladed knife sticking from his back.

Behind him, stood Chief Hakoda.

"Are you alright?" Hakoda stepped forward, grabbing Zuko's wrist and hauling him up to his feet. Seeing his grateful nod, he reached to his belt and unstrapped something from the worn leather. Zuko found a slanted piece of metal shoved in his hand. "Here, take this boomerang. Use the sharp point to defend yourself if you have too. We're going to the top. Stay by me."

Then he was off and running, and Zuko didn't even have time to gape at the dead Fire Nation before he had to turn and follow.

The deck was pure chaos; fighting men, bodies lying in horrible awkward positions, and explosions of flame flying everywhere.

One solider stepped in front of Hakoda and Zuko, a jet of fire blossoming from his fist. The Chief was more than equal to it. He moved faster than Zuko had ever seen, and with a smooth movement had gotten beside the man and knocked his knees out from under him. The man gasped, and with another shove Hakoda had toppled him off the deck and into the cold, black night sea.

The soldier's final gout of flame had not dissipated into nothing. It caught the wooden railing on fire.
Zuko grabbed for a bucket of water — left over from when he and some of the other men had washed the deck earlier in the day — and doused the flame.

But there were more. Small fires left from Fire Nation benders caught the wooden ship like kindling. The warriors were too busy fighting to take notice; indeed Hakoda was in hand to hand combat with another Fire Nation solider. Zuko knew keep in his bones that the fire must be contained. It was just as important as fighting. So, grabbing another bucket, he ran to the aft of the ship and put out another fire there.

The warriors of the Water Tribe were fighting for their very lives. They had been ambushed by surprise, and were greatly outnumbered, but they were up to the challenge, and they were slowly winning the battle.

Only a few took notice of the Fire Nation boy running back and forth, putting out their enemy's small fires. No one saw how, when Zuko ran out of water, he took off his shirt and beat the flames down with it — sometimes slapping the fire with the palm of his hand to make sure it didn't spread — and all without being burned.

Finally, with a long hooting call from the attacking Fire Nation ship, what was left of their soldiers turned and retreated.

Dawn broke with celebration and success. The warriors had driven the enemy back... but the cost had been painful. Nunka, the youngest warrior on the ship, had been stabbed through the heart by an enemy blade.

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Later in the day Hakoda sat in his cabin, battling back a ache that was threatening to split his head in two.

The food stores had been burned to a crisp, and the fresh water tainted. The Fire Nation's aim had been to stop this rouge ship from its mission of revenge, and in that it succeeded. They would have to turn immediately for home or risk starvation.

This wasn't how he intended to end their months long campaign. Not on a failure. It was looking, though, like he wouldn't have a choice.

A soft knock sounded at the door. Hakoda growled, "Come in!"

He expected Bato with some more bad news. What he got instead was Zuko.

The boy walked in carefully and placed one clasped fist into his cupped palm in a bow of respect — they had finally gotten him to stop bowing to the floor like a Fire Nation dog a couple weeks ago. The boy couldn't speak what he wanted of course. Instead he reached back behind him and pulled out a bladed boomerang from his belt, handing it to Hakoda.

Hakoda looked at the boy and his disfigured, but earnest face. "No, Zuko," he said, pushing the boomerang back. "A boy your age ought to have a weapon for himself. Keep it, it's yours."
A grin lit up the Zuko's face, taking the Chief by surprise. He was a quiet child, of course, being muted. But Hakoda also noticed that he kept to himself; never playing outlandish imaginary battle games, or running around the ship in a fit of childish energy. This was the first time he had seen him smile.

"We will be arriving back at our home village within the next two days," Hakoda continued. "My son, Sokka, is very good with the boomerang. If you ask him, he'll show you what he knows."

Actually, it was very likely that Zuko wouldn't have to ask at all. Sokka would be more than willing to show off to whomever was around — whether they cared to see or not. But Zuko was nodding enthusiastically, and Hakoda felt a hint of a smile cross his face.

He dismissed Zuko and watched the boy scamper off. It would be strange, he thought, strange to see a boy like him running and playing in the village. When Hakoda had decided to spare his life, he didn't truly think he would survive, much less begin to thrive.

When the men next went out to battle, they would have to drop the boy off at an Earth Kingdom port, of course. Zuko couldn't stay with them forever. But Hakoda didn't realize until just then that he wasn't looking forward to that day. Not at all.

With a sigh, the young Chief got to his feet and headed out his cabin. Now that he had promised the boy, he might as well make his orders to turn home known to his men.

OoOoOoOoO
Chapter Notes

Art by Lazy Artisan: http://lazyartisan.deviantart.com/art/Critical-Decision-Color-99836414
Remember this Zuko. No matter how things may seem to change, never forget who you are.

- Ursa, Zuko Alone

The next morning, the Water Tribe warriors held their funeral for Nunka.

Healer Kuthruk had spent the entire night swathing the body in blue bandaging; covering him over and over until he looked more like an outline of a man rather than the actual person Zuko had known. Then another blue tarp was placed over that, this one with the Southern Water Tribe insignia.

The services were held out on the deck. The air was crisp, clear, and almost achingly cold, and it was everything Zuko could do not to fidget in place and stamp his feet to keep his blood warm. As it was, Kuthruk had to quell him down with a couple of hard stares before he settled and resigned himself to just staying cold.

As Chief, Hakoda presided over the whole affair and spoke in deep, stirring tones about their fallen comrade. How even as a boy, Nunka had always been eager to become a warrior. How he'd insisted on taking his ice-dodging rites a year early. His acts of bravery: The time he had saved a drowning girl by jumping into a frozen lake after her. He'd nearly drowned himself, and then got pneumonia for his efforts. And how, last night, it had been he to ring the alarm bells. The Fire Nation soldiers had killed him for his effort, but in doing so, he had saved them all.

Some of the men were crying silently, fat tears running down their tanned faces and into their beards. Zuko sniffed, remembering how Nunka had taught him to knot nets. How was he ever able to look at another net without thinking of him?

When all was said, Hakoda nodded to two of the men on his right: Nunka's brother and brother-in-law, respectively. The Chief wished Nunka a safe passage into the Spirit World, and then they tipped Nunka's body over the railing. He was so well bound up that he slipped right under the waves without so much as a bubble.

Zuko cast a hesitant look over the railing, but the water was so dark and so blue that he couldn't see below the surface. It felt to him a strange way to bury a person. He himself would rather be burned to ashes. At least that way, he could stay warm forever, and his remains could be placed in the Halls of Ancestors.

If this was a strange thought to have, he didn't know it. And of course, he couldn't share it with anyone.

The food had been mostly charred, and the water tainted, but the Fire Nation soldiers hadn't broken into the casts of wine. These were brought up at Hakoda's order, and soon all of the men were drinking and trading more and more outrageous stories about Nunka. They were stories too impolite to mention at the man's funeral, but what were good fodder for erasing tears during the wake.

For his part, Zuko stayed just apart from it all. He didn't like the taste of wine, although he did sip it out of thirst. He spent his time at the railing, watching the water slip past the bow of the ship. Off in the distance, he could see what almost looked like small white rocks bobbing in time with the waves. These were the beginning of what would later become a field of never-ending icebergs.
Tomorrow, they would be at the pole.

As the wine flowed, the men's talk slowly went from Nunka to the Fire Nation in general. Even with his back turned, Zuko could feel the burn of eyes upon his narrow shoulders.

"Nunka was one of a kind. They just snuffed him out, like he was nothing."

"They're savages. Got no respect for the beautiful… or the pure."

"You know they did to the Hai Bei forest? They were in the middle of a drought and the Fire Nation burned it, and everyone in it, alive…"

"I say we turn around and go right for the capital city. Do them like they did those poor Air Nomads."

"An eye for an eye. That's how the Water Tribe does things."

At this point, Zuko had edged away, ducking out of sight.

It was a short walk to what was left of his room. The door was completely shattered and still lying in pieces, and the room now smelled like the slightly arid scent of burned wood and sour blood. Zuko wrinkled his nose against it, and quickly dug around, giving a silent sigh of relief when he saw that the small mirror he had been allotted was unbroken. It had been hidden under his futon mattress, because he didn't like to use it often, for obvious reasons.

Now he brought it up and made himself look at his own reflection — at the whole side of his face.

Yellow-gold eyes like the sun. Pale skin. A sharp nose, and black hair.

Last night, the Fire Nation soldier who attacked him had been scary — inhuman. He had reached out towards him, probably about to kill him for no other reason than just being there. And under all those layers of red metal and fire there was a person… a person who looked a lot like Zuko himself.

But they were cruel. He'd heard the men talk, not just tonight but on all the nights when there was too much wine to go around. The list of Fire Nation sins went on and on… they killed all the Air Nomads, they killed Nunka, and now Zuko's stomach growled from hunger because they had burned all the food.

*I'm not like them*, thought Zuko, and his reflection stared at him, set and determined. *I'm not evil like them.*

This wasn't an unusual thought for a child of his age to be having. Zuko still saw the world very much in terms of black and white; good and evil. What was unusual was the fact that always before, he had thought of the Fire Nation in ambiguous terms. He had heard of their horrible ways every day from the warriors, but had never personalized it. He never felt ashamed of being who he was… until now.

The sound of rough-voiced singing drifted down from the deck. Zuko gave a silent sigh, and tucked the mirror back into its hiding place. From the slightly off-key tones of their voices, the men were probably far into their wine by now. Normally, he counted on himself to be too small and out of the way to be much of a threat even when their ire at the Fire Nation peaked. No one had ever hit him, and the only times he'd been cuffed around the head or ears was when he was too slow to learn a task or when he got frustrated or tired and didn't want to do it.

But he knew with a solid certainty that going up on the deck when the men were drunk and grieving
would be a very bad idea.

He couldn't stay here. There was only one other place on the ship he knew he would be safe.

OoOoOoOoO

It was all Chief Hakoda could do to stagger himself back up to his cabin at the end of that long, long night. Tomorrow, he knew, he would be cursing himself for letting his warriors drink themselves stupid. The mist collectors wouldn't be able to provide nearly enough water to cure an aching head, and there had been no food to sop up any of the alcohol.

He also knew, though, that a man sometimes just needed to grieve. His men were warriors, not women, and sometimes a man just needed a drink to come to terms with what was tearing him up inside.

Hakoda was thinking these things, and mentally excusing his own behavior now to get ready for the ache tomorrow, when he nearly tripped over a small bundle lying in the middle of his cabin. The Chief made an ungraceful leap to the side, and then blinked and grabbed the nearby oil lamp to get a closer look.

The boy, Zuko, was curled up on the floor-mat, asleep.

Hakoda realized, to his shame, that he had not given the boy one thought all night long. He should have kept his eye on him — or ordered Bato to do it. The child was under his protection, but men were angry and hurt at the Fire Nation, and full of wine…

But Zuko had found the one place on the ship where he would be safe.

Smart kid.

Hakoda passed a hand over his face, feeling the bristle of a day's growth there. Spirits, he was tired. So, as quietly as a drunken man could, he walked over to his own cot and tugged off the top fur. This, he draped over the boy. Zuko stirred, but didn't wake up.

The young Chief paused only to tug off his own boots, and then lay down on his own cot; asleep instantly.

OoOoOoOoO

The next morning, Hakoda's orders were simple and direct: They would continue on their straight path down to the South Pole at top speed. The mist collectors had done their job, and they could ration some water, but the colder the air got, the dryer it became. Although the men set the lines out and trawled small nets behind the ship; fish were scarce in this part of the ocean.
The only extra parka in storage was about five times too big for Zuko's small frame. He felt bulky, and the cold wind got into the extra space between his skin and the blue jacket. Luckily, he was far too taken with the sights around him to care very much about being half frozen.

To Zuko's delight, the occasional peak of white in the waves soon became vast fields floating icebergs and ice-sheets. Their ship either broke through the ice if it was brittle and thin, or went around if it was too large. Some of the icebergs were larger than the ship itself, and Zuko watched them pass with wide eyes. They almost seemed close enough to touch, although when climbed the railing and leaned out to try, he was yelled at by Bato.

Thick snowflakes fell from the sky, either coming in freezing flurries or else ice shavings blown off the nearby giant icebergs. These were fun to catch on his tongue, even though they did little for his raw thirst.

Best of all were the animals that lived in this strange, icy world. Zuko saw things he'd never even imagined before; Turtle-seals, cat-penguins, and giant blue orca. At each one of these sightings he would run over to one of the men, tug on his sleeve, and point, demanding to be told what it was. Most of them indulged his request, and offered some additional information as well. Zuko soon found out which animals were worth eating.

Then, on the morning of the third day, they finally made land.

Zuko knew it was coming. The warriors didn't tell him directly, but he could see the anticipation on their faces, and the way their steps became lighter. Finally, someone called out that he had spotted the village and at once Zuko rushed to the port-railing to take a look. The men had talked of their South Pole home every day, and he his imaginative mind had come up with a sprawling ice-palace guarded by ferocious polar-dogs. A place that would be hard, but enduring.

What he saw instead was nothing more was a small camp-like village. Zuko could only count a little more than the top of dozen bumpy snow structures. They were all clustered together behind a simple wall of ice and snow.

"It's not much, is it?"

He glanced over in surprise to see Bato by his side. The warrior had joined him without his noticing, and had correctly read the disappointment in his eyes.

"A hundred years ago, before the war, we had a vast city to rival our brothers in the North." Bato's grip tightened on the railing, "Now, our waterbenders are gone. Our people are scattered around the continent. This is all that's left." He looked down, meeting Zuko's wide golden eyes, and gave a smile that was both wistful and sad. "Go pack your things. We'll be pulling in, soon."

With a nod, Zuko drew back from the railing. Suddenly, he found himself feeling unsure. As far as he was concerned, his entire life had been on this ship. Now he was facing something wholly different on land... he wasn't sure what to do. Would the rest of the Water Tribe hate him? How could they not? His people destroyed their city.

Zuko's unease only grew once the ship floated to a stop. People were pouring from the village — women clutching babies, young toddlers clutching their mother's shins, and old people walking with slow jerky steps. He could see no kids around his age, and certainly no one that looked like him.

The bottom hatch of the ship opened, and at once the men swarmed out, and with glad cries the two groups met with each other. There was hugging, kissing... excited exclamations. Zuko stood to the side of it all, clutching a small sack with his two or three possessions, drowning in a parka much too
large for him, feeling lost.

Suddenly, he heard his name being called. He looked over and saw Chief Hakoda wave him over. He was standing with two children — the only two children close to Zuko's age in the village — on either side of him. They looked like the picture of a perfect family, only instead of where a mother would be, an aged woman stood instead, just apart from the rest.

"Kids," said Hakoda, as Zuko walked up. "This is Zuko. We found him on a Fire Nation ship, and he's going to be staying in the village for a while."

The boy, just as tall as Zuko himself, with is father's deep blue eyes and his hair pulled back on top and shaved at the sides, stared at him. "What happened to your face?"

"Sokka!" admonished the old woman.

Zuko gave a half shrug, awkwardly reaching up to touch the tough skin on his left side, as if to brush it away. Of course, he never could.

Hakoda answered on behalf of him. "We're not sure, and he can't tell us. When we found him, his throat was cut, and he's now a mute." Then he addressed Zuko, "This is my son, Sokka, and this little lady is my daughter, Katara." At the mention of her name, Katara, who looked about a year younger than Sokka, ducked her head behind her father. She was frightened of the boy and all of his scars. "And this is Kana. She leads the women of our tribe."

The old woman pulled a tight, slightly skeletal smile across her features. Her eyes were watchful and suspicious behind their kindness. "You must be freezing in that coat. Come with me, child. We'll get you something that better fits you."

She shuffled back to the village, and Zuko followed her. He glanced over his shoulder once, at the Chief, and saw that he was on his knees and was addressing his children at their level. All three of them were smiling happy. A family reunited.

The next day broke late for the entire village. Zuko was the first one up, rising with the sun as was his habit. His stomach was still uncomfortably full — the entire Tribe had feasted last night at the return of their warriors, and Zuko had tried to catch up for two days of missed meals in one sitting.

He went outside, and walked a little ways away from the tents and igloos. The morning air was cold — colder than he was sure he'd ever felt before, and he shivered under his thick parka. His breath streamed out of him, visible long after it left his lungs. But the sun was rising, and although the light it cast was pale and watery over the snow, stepping into the light somehow made him feel better.

Yesterday he had been too hungry, and then after he'd eaten, too tired to really take a look around the place. He did so now. The ship had come in from the north, and out there was only rolling sea-ice. The east and west both extended far outward as jagged coast. There wasn't any beach — the ever present ice and snow just simply stopped and the water began. Finally, Zuko looked south and saw the outline of a vast mountain range. Morning clouds were rolling in between at least five different peaks, plunging down in a living stream to the valley where they dissipated before reaching the
coast. It was a beautiful land, and even though he had no memories from his life before, he knew it was unlike anything he had ever seen.

The sun was climbing higher now, and the snow reflected its brightness, making it almost painful to look too far out. He shielded his eyes, put his head down against the freezing morning breeze, and continued walking away from the main village; past the back opening where the ice walls left a ten foot gap on either side.

Once he judged himself far enough away, he folded his legs and sat down in the snow. The top layer was crunchy with ice, and Zuko started digging around, finding quickly that underneath was powdery and soft. He ate some to sooth his morning thirst, and started digging a hole in the deep snow. He had the idea yesterday to make a fort for himself; a place of his own.

Presently, his fingers became sore from cold, and he stopped and looked up just in time to see a long shadow behind him. Zuko would have yelped in surprise if he had the capability to do so. He spun about, but the low sun had thrown the shadow long, and it was not a giant Fire Nation soldier behind him, but the girl, Katara.

For her part, she was just as started, and fell backwards into the snow with a squeak of surprise.

For a moment the Fire Nation boy and the Water Tribe girl looked at each other, as if sizing the other up. She had the same coloring as all the others, but there was something about her that was… softer. Prettier. She also wore her long hair differently than anyone he'd ever seen before, with two beaded loops tucked behind each ear.

Then, Katara spoke. "Gran-Gran says that if you're digging around, you should have mittens." From her parka, she withdrew a set of three fingered seal-hide mittens and carefully handed them over, withdrawing her own hand the second Zuko made his grab, as if he'd burn her.

He hadn't noticed, but the rest of the Water Tribe were starting to rise for the day. Zuko could see vague shapes back at the village, working against the bright lit snow. He nodded, and pulled the mittens.

Katara too, looked back at the village and she hesitated as if she wanted to go back there, but something made her stay. Instead of going back, she inched closer.

"Do you miss your mom and dad?"

The question seemed to come out of nowhere. He had been asked it before by the men, but it had been worded differently and had been mostly without compassion. Unexpectedly, Zuko felt a lump grow in his throat — not for his parents, for in truth he didn't remember anything about them. It was just that he had come to see the warriors on the ship as sort of family. Yes, some were surly, but some were kinder and had taken time out of their own work to teach him. He had known that life. Literally, it was all he knew. Now, it felt like he was starting all over again on land with different people.

Last night, Kana had given him over to one of the other women, Auya, to house. Auya hadn't been happy about it; Zuko saw it in her eyes. She had set him up in their family tent, but had mostly ignored him cast suspicious glances at him all night long. She had also, he noticed, slept with a knife by her pillow. Plus she had a newborn baby that required her constant care. It had mewed all night long, and he hadn't gotten any sleep. At least on the ship, he had his own small room... well, at least until the Fire Nation soldier destroyed it.

So Zuko shook his head to her question, but wanted to elaborate. He drew out the characters in the
"I miss being on the ship."

"Oh." Katara ventured a look past him, and moved a bit closer. "Why are you digging a hole?"

He scowled. It wasn't a hole. It was a fort.

"That'll take forever if you do it that way." Katara's lips curved into a mischievous grin. Apparently forgetting her fear, she crawled over, sitting by Zuko at the edge of his creation. "Just do this." Then, raising both arms, she made a downward scooping motion.

The snow responded instantly, following her movements, a large portion dug itself out and piled neatly along the side.

Zuko's light gold eyes widened. Katara was a waterbender!

She giggled at his reaction, a light blush highlighting her dark cheeks. He gestured excitedly for her to do it again, and she did. Shortly, Zuko had a deep circular hole for his fort, a little deeper than an arm length.

He set about packing the excess snow into high ridges around the depression. In his mind's eye this would be the start of what would be towering walls which, in its grand design, would keep everyone he didn't like, out. Katara watched him for a few moments, and once she got the idea she started working on the opposite end. Maybe it was her affinity with water, but her walls ended up being twice as high as his and neatly packed. Zuko's looked more like rounded lumps.

"You know, your house is going to need furs in it or else it'll get really cold at night."

Again, Zuko scowled. Not a house. he wrote in the snow, A fort.

"Well it's gonna need furs." She paused, smoothing out the rough edge of her wall. The snow under her hand turned to liquid and then froze again into ice as hard as rock. "I'll get some from Gran Gran." It wasn't a question, and after a moment's consideration, Zuko shrugged. A proper fort, he knew, allowed no girls. But he was cold now even with the sun shining on his back… he didn't want to think about how bitter it would be at night.

Fine, he wrote, Just don't girl it up.

Katara grinned and promised that she wouldn't.

Later that week, Kana sought out the advice of Hakoda. The young Chief was overseeing the sharpening of the harpoons and long-reach spears. It was mid-fall, and the Blue Orca migration would be at its peak soon. He estimated that they would need to take two animals to last out the winter… the year before, they had needed three. The Fire Nation raid in the spring had killed many people.

Seeing the old woman approach, Hakoda signaled for Bato to step into his place and walked over to meet her. "Is something wrong?"
Kana smiled up at him and shook her head. "No, but I need to have a talk with you. Hakoda, walk with me."

As his mother and also as the eldest woman, Kana had a special place in their Tribe. She was looked too as the repository of all of their wisdom, and in certain things she could overrule even Hakoda. It was very rare when she exercised this, or indeed used her rank at all. So when she asked for him to stop what he was doing and talk to her, he was intrigued, and instantly did as she said.

They walked side by side along the ice-coast. For some minutes, Kana didn't speak. She seemed to be gathering her thoughts, and would only share them when she was ready. Finally she said: "I quizzed the children on geography today."

Hakoda nodded. Normally, Kana and a woman helper taught all of the children several times a week in between chores.

"How are Sokka and Katara doing?" he asked.

"Fine… fine. Sokka is doing exceptionally well. He's a bright boy, Hakoda. All grandmothers should be as blessed."

He sensed there was something else behind her words. "But?"

"But then I quizzed Zuko." Kana stopped in her tracks, tilting her head up towards her son in law. The pale sun cast shadow's upon every line on her face, making her look very grave. "The boy can't speak, poor thing, but he was able to write in the snow. Hakoda, he knew every providence in the Earth Kingdom, as well as the major cities. He writes very well, in both the standard and the classical forms. I haven't yet tested in him mathematics, but I don't have a doubt he'll do fine there as well."

Hakoda was silent. He had the feeling he knew where this was going, and while he didn't like it, he respected Kana enough to state her piece.

"If this is how they are educating the children of the Fire Nation, we may have a real problem on our hands."

"They teach their children these things because they expect them to help invade the Earth Kingdom when they get older."

Kana nodded at this, agreeing. "And there's more. Katara… she needs a Waterbending Master."

They had this conversation before, and he was well versed on the subject. "But you've said yourself the Masters of the North will only teach her healing, not bending."

"This is true, but I wasn't suggesting going to the North." she paused, "Are you certain, completely certain, that there is no one to teach Katara?"

Hakoda did not answer her for a long time. He turned to the west, and in the distance he could see a lazy trail of smoke that stamped out what remained of their village. A pinched, haunted look came over his handsome features, and he ducked his head. "It wasn't an accident how the Fire Nation found our village. They knew I was looking for a Waterbending master. They knew we still had hope." Of course, no one could ever be sure that this was the reason they were attacked, but Hakoda felt this deep in his bones. This was his one shame… a shame he vowed he would never tell his children. His throat thickened, his next words choked with unshed tears. "They took my wife, because of me."

"Hakoda—"
He waved off her words almost angrily, turning away. "Katara will have to teach herself."

Kana bowed her head, accepting her son's words for what they were: the decision of the Tribe's Leader. Hakoda couldn't afford to think like a father. His burden was to protect the entire tribe. "She has no choice."

Katara, Zuko found, was very bossy, and once she got something into her head she didn't let it go. But unlike her brother, she seemed to like being around him; insisting that he take most of his meals with her, and patiently explaining how to do some of the needed chores around the village.

They worked on the fort during their free time, with Katara using some of the few bending skills she knew to enlarge the hole and strengthen the walls with ice. To Zuko's chagrin, it became as much her fort his — although he absolutely drew the line at letting her keep her dolls inside.

Her brother, Sokka, was mostly an elusive figure. Zuko would often catch him glaring narrow-eyed at him during meals, and during Kana's lessons. His surly, unapproachable nature made Zuko assume at first that he was a grumpy loner; completely the opposite of his bright, kind sister. Only later would he realize that this was by far the exception to Sokka's moods, and not the rule.

Hakoda had said that Sokka would teach him how to use the boomerang, and Zuko was eager to learn. He tried approaching the other boy on several occasions, pointing first to his boomerang, and then to Sokka's, but Sokka would just scowl and then walk away.

One day, determined that that he would learn, Zuko decided to follow Sokka; haunt him until the other boy finally gave in and taught him.

He didn't expect for Sokka to be so quick on the uptake. As soon as he knew what was going on, and that Zuko wouldn't leave him alone, he went to the outer snow-drifts beyond the village. Although he couldn't bend his element, Sokka moved through the snowdrifts like they were nothing but a well-worn forest path. He was completely at ease out in the thick snow and sub-zero temperatures. Zuko bumbled along as best he could, trying to follow in his footsteps, but he sank to his hips with each step and soon Sokka was out of sight. When he could no longer feel his toes, Zuko had to admit defeat and return to the village or else risk getting lost and frozen.

Zuko had his own tricks up his sleeve. Although he didn't know it, he had dealt with a master manipulator all of his life. He didn't remember any of it, but some of the innate skills stayed with him. He knew Sokka was like the water, and it was his nature to find the path of least resistance and plan around things to come at them from another way. It was Zuko's nature to confront, strike first, and keep going until he won.

Unfortunately, he didn't expect the confrontation to happen when it did.

It was a day like any other. He and Katara were working on their fort. They were busy building up another wall outside the main perimeter. Zuko had written to her in snowy sentences how the great city of Ba Sing Se was surrounded by a double-set of walls. How they were so high that some birds couldn't fly to the top, and how they were so strong that they and they kept even the Fire Nation out.
She decided that this was a great idea, and they should copy it. He set about using a piece of rope anchored to the middle of the fort to trace out a rough circle all the way around. She was gathering snow into bunches using her limited bending to push the snow together and then piling it up by hand.

They looked up at the same time to see Sokka striding over.

"Are you finally done sulking?" Katara called, almost cheerfully continuing to pack snow.

Sokka came to a stop just a few feet from them, a dark look on his face "You shouldn't be playing with him so much." He said, addressing his sister, and ignoring Zuko completely as if he wasn't there.

"You can't tell me what to do." Brushing off her mittens onto her long parka, she stood up, hands on her hips. "You're not dad!"

"Katara," and the look Sokka shot Zuko could have burned him to ash. "He's Fire Nation!"

Something hot and angry settled in Zuko's heart, and he stood up, clenching his fists.

"He's not like them!" yelled Katara.

"How do you know?"

"I just…" she glanced over at Zuko in a particular friendly way, causing a warm blush to highlight the unscarred areas of his face and neck. "I just do."

"They killed mom!" yelled Sokka, his voice cracking, "and you're just playing with him like it's all okay! Well, it's not! It's not right!"

Zuko wanted with all of his heart to yell at this boy, to tell him exactly what he thought: The Fire Nation attacked him once, too, and he didn't want to be anything like them.

Of course, he couldn't, and this wasn't the time or place to be scrawling his thoughts out in the snow. Zuko turned to Katara, wondering what she'd day, and found that her eyes were wet with unshed tears.

Another flash of anger, and something snapped in Zuko. He did the next logical thing, at least, in his eyes. He stomped over and shoved Sokka, hard.

The other boy stepped back, and an ugly look crossed his features before he returned the shove with another one of his own.

Zuko grabbed Sokka's wrist, and swung at him with his other hand. It hit Sokka wide, just across the shoulder. Sokka roared like an enraged lion-dillo, and took him down in a tackle. Then they were on the ground; fighting, punching, kicking.

It was a mostly equal match, with both boys being about the same weight and build. Sokka clocked Zuko hard across his good eye, and Zuko aimed a kick that landed just to the right of the other boy's groin. Neither one could easily get the upper hand over the other; although they tried. They rolled over and over, swinging at each other when they had enough space.

Katara was screaming at both of them to stop. Stop right now! She kicked snow at the thrashing boys, and as her anger and panic grew the snow and ice around them responded in kind: rolling, bucking, and waving in time with her cries.
"Stop it! I'm... I'm telling Gran Gran!" Katara screamed.

The snow under Sokka and Zuko melted and then reformed again instantly as ice, locking their bodies firmly in place mid-combat, with only their heads free. Sokka, on top, and about to lay into Zuko again, yelped in surprise. "Cut it out, Katara!"

But his sister had already run off, crying, and completely unaware of what she had just done.

"Ugh!" groaned Sokka, dropping his head in exasperation, "She has officially gone from weird to freakish."

Zuko glared up at him, but he was frozen in place, and couldn't speak his thoughts anyway.

After a long moment, the Water Tribe boy gave a long sigh, and did his best to shift, trying to break free of the ice encasing. "See if you can move to the right and I'll move to the left. Maybe we can sort of twist out," he directed. "No, my right! Your left."

Both boys strained and the brittle ice finally gave way with a sharp crack. They fell to the side, and rolled, each not wanting to be in contact with the other anymore. They were hardly free, for ragged chunks of ice still encased their feet and stuck to the fur of their parkas. It took the boys a few minutes of pounding the ice on a nearby rock (and low whispered cursing, in Sokka's case) to get free.

About that time, Kana showed up.

The old woman had expected something like this to happen for the last few days. She knew her grandson well, and had seen the anger in his young face whenever Katara and the Fire Nation boy played together. He had been unusually withdrawn, and even though she was sure he was trying not to show it — he grieved for his lost mother terribly.

Now she came upon the sight of the two boys sitting together, not talking, but diligently ridding themselves of ice side-by-side. Sokka's bottom lip was split, and Zuko's unscarred eye was puffy and looking like it would blacken tonight.

They glanced up at her arrival, and she caught a flash of twin looks of guilt.

"Sokka, can you tell me why your sister ran into the tent crying? Have you two been fighting?" she asked, although it was more than obvious that they had.

"No Gran Gran. We were..." he looked around for inspiration, "we were playing hide 'n freeze." He held up his sleeve, to which a bit of frozen snow was attached.

Kana raised one disbelieving eyebrow. "Is this true, Zuko?"

The other boy's unscarred eye widened, and he glanced at her, and then for a long moment at Sokka, before he nodded his head vigorously.

For his part, Sokka seemed surprised, but then nodded himself. "See? Katara just got all excited. We were just playing, Gran Gran."

Kana pursed her lips. Both of them were lying, and badly. But Kana had been long in the world, and she had seen generations of boys grow up. The fact of it was that they sometimes needed to settle their differences physically in a fight. Seeing Sokka and Zuko together now, she was strongly reminded of another scene just like it some thirty years ago... young Hakoda and Bato hadn't gotten along either when they were young, if she remembered correctly. Only when they had gotten half
stuck in a frozen bog, and worked their way out of the mess together, had they become the best of friends. Perhaps the same would happen now. If she felt either Zuko or Sokka was needlessly picking on the other, things would be different. Hopefully, if she left them alone, they would work out what the needed to work out.

But there was no excuse for the lying. Sokka, at least, knew better.

"I see," she said at last, pinning them both down with a hard look. "Next time you decide to scare your sister in this way, you should remember what a frightened bender can do. For upsetting her, you two will not have dinner tonight."

Sokka gave a groan. "Gran—"

"No arguing, young man. You're still not too old for me to switch your bottom."

Her grandson's jaw closed with a snap, and his cheeks colored in embarrassment. Kana made sure to meet eyes with Zuko, silently letting him know that that threat went for him too, before turning around and shuffling back to the tent. Hopefully, Katara would have calmed down from her hysterics enough to be able to help with dinner.

Once Kana was safely out of sight, Sokka gingerly put a hand to his aching jaw. "You hit pretty good." He said, begrudgingly.

Zuko's own eye was hurting fiercely, and he knew that he was going to look ridiculous for the next few days with one eye blackened and the other one scarred in a permanent glare.

Perhaps it was the adrenalin from the fight, but for the first time he felt hot under his parka. With a tired nod, he laid flat on his back against the cold snow. He and Sokka had rolled around while fighting, and hand taken out a good portion of the outer wall of the fort. All of his day's work had been ruined.

"I can't believe that I don't get to eat tonight. I've never not eaten." Sokka cast a disparaging glare in Zuko's direction, and muttered under his breath. "Stupid Fire Nation."

Zuko sat up, and considered, just for a moment, punching Sokka again. But he believed Kana's threat, and he didn't want to be switched. He clenched his fists, instead, wanting to yell at the other boy. He couldn't. So he did the next best thing, and wrote angrily in the snow.

_I hate the Fire Nation._ He put particular emphasis on the word.

Sokka leaned over to read, and then cast him a dubious look. "No you don't. How can you hate what you are?"

_I don't remember being Fire Nation. I just remember waking up on the ship._

The other boy seemed to consider this for a moment before he nodded, wisely. "That's probably why you haven't tried to kill us, yet, because you don't remember being like them." Then he fixed him with a hard look. "Is that how you got that scar? Did they do that to you?"

_I don't know. Probably._

Sokka's mouth pressed into a thin, angry line before he winced again, touching his split lip. "They're monsters." He muttered, and Zuko got the feeling that he wasn't really talking to him. "They… they killed two of my cousins last spring… and my mom. It's what they do. They just hate and kill."
The only thing Zuko could do was nod, because it was true… because he had seen it for himself. The Fire Nation soldier on the ship had wanted to kill him for nothing more than existing. He was just a kid, and if Hakoda hadn't been there… he'd be dead.

The two boys were silent; alone in their own thoughts. Sokka's were sad, remembering a mother murdered by a nation he had sworn to hate. Zuko's were equally sad, in their own way, hating the way he looked, and wondering deep down inside if he was just as bad as the people who birthed him.

Finally the Water Tribe boy sighed, picking up some snow and tossing it uselessly in a random direction. "I'm already hungry." he announced.

A thought crossed Zuko's mind, and he grinned. Standing up, he tugged on Sokka's sleeve and gestured for him to follow. He had decided the other day to dig out little cubby-holes in the deep walls of the fort. He went in now, and found (to his disgust) that Katara had snuck in some of her dolls anyway. Shoving those away, and ignoring Sokka's snicker, he found a package wrapped in seaweed in the back of the deepest cubby: Seal Jerky.

Sokka's blue eyes widened, and for the first time a grin came over his face. "Maybe you aren't so bad after all." allowed Sokka, after taking a proffered piece.

The two boys sat and ate, and Zuko quickly found that the best way to earn Sokka's friendship was through his stomach.

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OoOoOoOoO
Art by: Quater Comet! http://quatercomet.deviantart.com/art/Another-Brother-AU-95941909
The next few weeks were some of the busiest Zuko had ever known. The short artic summer was passing, and soon winter would be upon them. It was becoming fall, and for the people of the Water Tribe it meant that every spare hour of daylight was needed to hunt and gather. Even the children's classroom time was put aside. Every hand was put to work, preparing against the months of total darkness to come.

The men went out on their annual whaling trip, leaving their women and the children to gather what they could. And gather, they did. Zuko received a crash course on how to paddle a simple canoe, and he and Sokka were often set out to the small inlet bay to haul up nets and nets of small silver fish, each as big as a finger. Artic kelp was also harvested, and this had to be rolled in fresh snow afterward to get rid of the salt.

All of it was then taken to the tribe's smokehouse to be cured and saved for later. The elderly, or those too infirm to move far, stoked the great fire and constantly added wet branches keep the smokehouse smoky.

One day, Zuko was pulled off his canoeing duty by Kana, and joined Sokka and Katara while they were sent out to pick the last of the season's berries. The tribe preferred to live on one of the permanent ice-shelves, as close to their watery element as possible, but a short hike to the south and the ice gave way to frozen land. Tangled brambles and dried-out weeds dotted the landscape, but if Zuko shielded his eyes from the sun and looked further on, he could see the outline of what was a great forest — the source of logs for all the great ships under Chief Hakoda's command.

He followed the siblings as they moved through the brambles at an easy pace, picking what he could, and being mindful of the sharp thorns that would sting at him even though tough seal-hide mittens.

Katara and Sokka were bickering back and forth. They often did this, and while it had worried him at first, Zuko had eventually realized that while Sokka and Katara sometimes became harsh with one another, neither one of them ever got hurt.

But when they were really going at it, they usually forgot their silent companion.

Sometimes Katara would turn and ask him a question (especially when she was trying to emphasize a point to Sokka), and Zuko would either nod yes or no or shrug… but he was never fully involved in their conversation. Both siblings were quick-witted, and their words were ever so much faster than what he could ever do by writing in the snow. So Zuko could never voice his true opinion. He could just watch their fight and feel like the outcast he was — separate from the tribe by his nation, his skin, and his disability.

"You have to wait until you're ten for a reason, Sokka," Katara was saying, with as much disdain in her voice as possible. "Blue Orca's can eat people. You don't want to get eaten, do you?"
Her brother shrugged and kicked at a mound of snow. He wasn't doing much berry-picking, because he was still too busy sulking over being left behind by the men while they went whaling. "I'd be fine. I'd be with dad."

"Stop being a baby. You'll just go next year, and dad promised he'd take you ice-fishing after they got back, remember?"

"Well they could have made an exception for me." Sokka grabbed half-heartedly at a sprig of berries and tossed them into his basket. "I did guard all of you while all the men were gone, didn't I?"

Katara simply rolled her eyes at that and glanced over to check his work. "'C'mon, Sokka! Me and Zuko already filled our baskets. Yours is only half full."

Naturally, Sokka did the exact opposite of what his little sister wanted, and put his basket down. "I don't even eat these things. Only women like berries. I eat meat, like a man."

Behind them, Zuko straitened sent a glare at the other boy. He had, at that very moment, been popping a handful of mealy berries in his mouth. But of course, his thoughts could never be expressed, and the two siblings were far too involved in their discussion to take notice.

"Fine," said Katara, "I guess me and Zuko will have to penguin-sled all by ourselves, then."

This earned her a quick look from both boys — derision from her brother, and confusion for Zuko's part, for he hadn't seen a penguin yet, much less thought about sledding on one.

"You didn't— we don't have time…" Sokka began, but was silenced immediately when Katara pulled out three small fish from one of her pockets.

Curious, Zuko put down his own basket and walked over. He plucked at Katara's fur-lined sleeve and pointed to the fish, asking for an explanation. Her eyes, though, were centered with her brother in a silent match of wills. Finally Sokka gave an indifferent shrug and once again picked up his basket. "I guess we could," he allowed, "since Zuko's probably never been. But I get to pick where we sled. You always pick the stupid runs."

"Okay," she chirped, returning the small fish to her pocket.

Zuko looked from one sibling to another, feeling a bite of impatience. But they returned back to their berry picking, neither apparently feeling the need to explain what penguin-sledding actually was. He gave a silent sigh and stomped back over to his own basket. He hated not being able to talk.

"We're almost there!" Sokka called. The fierce wind carried his words away in an instant, and if Zuko not been only a few feet behind, he might not have heard them at all. "Just keep going!"

Zuko reached up to readjust his hood — he had already lost feeling in his unburned ear from the cold, and tightened his grip on the penguin. The animal was at least warm, and lay passively in his arms, apparently content to be carried up to a crazy height and be ridden upon on the way down. Behind him, Katara clutched at her own penguin, a grim sort of look on her young face.

Sokka was actually having the worst of it. In his zeal, he had picked a penguin that was nearly the
size of himself, and was struggling to march it up the snowy hill.

Actually hill wasn't the right word for it. As they came to the top, a few other choice terms came to Zuko's mind; precipice, mountain, death-trap. It was a sharp descent that went further down than he could even see. The very snow seemed to glint with malice, as if daring them to try their hand.

"This is your idea of a sled-run?" Katara demanded, turning to her brother. The sharp winter wind whipped at her hair loopies, making them flop crazily about her face.

Sokka didn't dignify that with a response, and set his penguin down belly first. "This is the best sled-run ever. You're just being a scaredy cat-chicken," he said, but made no move to slide off the edge.

"Oh yeah, well why aren't you going down there, oh brave warrior?"

They started to bicker again, and Zuko thought he could just scream from frustration. He was wet and cold. The freezing wind made his eyes water, and as he glanced down he thought that it had to be less windy at the bottom, if not warmer.

And now both Katara and Sokka had their voices raised, snapping back and forth words that were whipped away in an instant by the freezing wind. Zuko couldn't take it anymore. He shoved between Katara and Sokka, cutting their argument off short. Then, copying Sokka's move, he laid his penguin down on its belly and climbed on.

"Zuko, what are you doing?" Katara began, but it was too late. He had already kicked off, and in a moment he was gone.

The two Water Tribe siblings looked at each other, and then with a mutual shrug, got on their penguins. After all, even Katara had to admit that there was a bit of pride at stake. Neither one of them was going to be shown up by the Fire Nation kid on their own turf. With one deep breath they too kicked off and headed down the steep mountain.

The first few seconds of Zuko's first penguin-sledding ride were some of the most terrifying in his life. He was no longer cold — he was too scared to be cold. He whipped down the mountain at speeds he'd only dreamt of — the few bushes and rocks that were tall enough to peek out of the deep snow flashed by at a blur, and all he could see ahead of him was snow and the steep angle of the steep mountain-side.

Then he realized that he was safe, for he wasn't alone. He was on top of a penguin. Its sleek feathers cut through the snow like the sharpest of knives, gliding effortlessly over and around all obstacles. It was an old bird, and this was not its first time being ridden. It swerved this way and that, keeping himself and the child safe.

And with the fear gone, pure exhilaration took its place. Zuko grinned against the stinging wind, and would have whooped for joy if he had the capability. He turned behind him and saw that Sokka and Katara were following some fifty-feet away. But he was the one cutting the trail, and they were so far behind they'd never catch up. He gripped the penguin's feathers, silently urging it faster.

But there was a shrill voice on the wind. Again Zuko glanced back and saw Sokka waving desperately at him, trying to get his attention. He was pointing ahead, and when Zuko looked his heart felt like it dropped down to his stomach.

Just down the mountain slope was a steep curve. The path to the right led to safety. Straight ahead and to the left looked to be a sheer drop off.

Oh no.
The penguin didn't seem to see what he saw, and Zuko tugged on its feathers and pounded on its right shoulder, trying to get the thing to turn. But the cliff was looming close now, and out of panic Zuko looked back one more time for help... As if in slow motion he saw Katara's lovely face, clearly saw her fear for him... and then she turned away as the penguin she was riding turned to safety. Zuko's plowed straight ahead and he faced forward again just time to see the bottom of the world drop out from under him.

He had sometimes wondered what it would feel like to actually fly like the airbenders of legend, and for a spare second it actually felt like he was. He penguin had been sliding so fast that the simply arced out, and out…

Then gravity kicked in and they were falling. Zuko's mouth opened in a silent scream. He flailed and kicked away from the penguin, somehow knowing that if they landed together the bird would be crushed under him. The drop seemed to last forever, although it only about twenty feet or so. Then he landed in the soft snow, and rolled over and over, throwing up a shower of brilliant white snow.

He ended up on his back, arms and legs out. At first he thought that surely he was dead, and he waited for darkness to hit him. It didn't, of course, and after a few seconds he blinked and shook his head. The impact had rattled every bone in his body, although nothing felt like it was hurting…

"Zuko!"

"Zuko!"

Katara and Sokka came skidding to a stop beside him, having taken the more roundabout, sane way down the mountain. They rushed over, and Katara helped him sit up.

Instantly, Zuko gagged. It felt like something had lodged itself deep in his throat, around his neck scar. Zuko gagged again and coughed hard once, twice, three times, turning on all fours. Helpfully, Sokka pounded on his back.

Whatever it was came loose. Zuko swallowed hard, tasting both metallic blood and sour pus. His throat burned from inside around the scar. But it was a strange, good kind of pain. Like the pain of removing a festering splinter. He spat on the snow, and it came out both red and green. "Ugh."

Then he stopped and looked up at his friends. His light gold eyes were wide in surprise.

"Did you just..." Katara began. She had backed away at first, thinking that Zuko was about to throw up, but instantly she was at his side again, helping him get to his feet.

Zuko tried again. "Yes—" his voice was distorted, and he coughed again sharply into his hand, and spat, clearing the last of the blockage out. This time when he spoke his voice was normal — or as normal as it was ever going to get. There would always be a certain scratchy quality to it, and a hint of a lisp. But he would never again be forced to sit silently on the side, accidentally ostracized by muteness. "I can talk!" then, proudly, he said it again, just because he could. "I can talk!"

Katara grinned and threw her arms around him in a quick hug. "How is that possible?"

"I... I'm not sure." It felt strange to voice his thoughts, and when Katara stepped back, he absently rubbed at his neck. "It felt like something in my throat got knocked out when I landed."

Sokka, meanwhile, was less concerned with the why or how, but rather the result. He was practically preening. "I told you that was the best sled-run ever. You're welcome, by the way." He stepped forward, throwing a friendly arm about Zuko's shoulders. "So... do you wanna go again? Maybe you'll knock some memories loose this time."
"Sokka!" Katara glared at her brother, hands on her hips. "He could have broken his neck!"

"He didn't, did he? It just fixed him," he shot back, and then turned to Zuko, addressing him like an equal for nearly the first time in their brief relationship. "What do you say? First one down the hill wins? And no shortcuts this time."

Zuko looked back at the tall cliff and gulped painfully. That was probably the most horrible short-cut he'd ever taken. But he knew Sokka well enough now to see that the other boy was sort of testing him. There was no way he was going to back down. Not now. "Sure," he said, to Katara's obvious disgust. But Zuko felt fine — more than fine, and when he spat again as an experiment it came out clear. He looked around for his make-shift sled and saw it standing some way off, half of its feathers ruffled up and sticking the wrong way. "I think I'll need a new penguin, though."

OoOoOoOoO

Zuko now had a voice in the world around him, but it didn't mean that anything had really changed. There were still chores to be done: Food had to be gathered for the upcoming winter, and vital skills needed to be learned. But with each passing day, Zuko set his mind to his tasks. He set himself to learn as much as he could about his new life here, because now that he could talk he hated asking for help — most of the time it was only given grudgingly by the adults. He didn't any natural skills for what they considered to be the basics, and sometimes when Zuko was feeling the most frustrated he cursed his old life — whatever it had been — and wondered if he had been good at anything back in the Fire Nation.

But he was determined to see out any task assigned. More importantly, he never gave up. And he learned… sometimes only through trial and error, but it was still learning. Each passing day was better than the last, and he knew that one day he would be just as good as all the others at fishing, and cutting line, and skinning, and all the rest.

He grew stronger too. The fever that had so racked his body on the ship had gone. Healer Kuthruk examined him, and his newly unblocked throat, and declared him as fit as any other youngster — aside from the scarring on his face and neck.

The men returned from their whaling rip soon after that, and it was a sweet moment for Zuko to clasp his hands and bow to Chief Hakoda, formally welcoming him back with a strong voice. The Chief's eyes widened, and he ruffled Zuko's hair and claimed that both he and Sokka had grown at least an inch since he saw them last, nearly three weeks ago.

The Chief and his brave men had brought back two whales for the tribe, and the next days were spent slicing thick slabs of meat off the bone, and storing it in the smokehouse and cold-caves for the winter. It was hard, messy work which Zuko would have despised if not for Sokka promising to show him how to make spears out of the remaining whale bone.

He, Zuko, and Katara sat around the fire in Hakoda's hut late one night, four days after the men had returned. The Chief was gone on some kind of meeting which adults found important, but the children found boring.

Zuko often spent much of his time there. Even if the large hut wasn't always warm in temperature, it was warm in spirit. A far cry from Auya's hut. Zuko only went there to sleep, and even then he was the first one up and out by morning.
While the boys worked at sharpening spear-points, Katara worked on her own project — a simple whalebone necklace. She had also gotten it into her head to quiz Zuko on his past life in the Fire Nation for the last hour and a half. She could, perhaps, jog his memory. It would have annoyed him, but she was his first friend he'd made here, and Zuko was nothing if not loyal.

"So, if the sun doesn't stay down all winter, is it always like summer?" Katara asked, blinking her brilliantly blue eyes against the firelight in confusion. Zuko had just told her that the Fire Nation was centered near the equator, so there wasn't any real distinction between the seasons. "How do you know what season it is, then?"

Zuko, who was sharpening his spear-point with a black rock and casually glancing to Sokka to see if he was doing it right, shrugged. "I don't know. The fire sages keep a calendar. Plus, there's always a three day festival during the summer solstice."

She pounced immediately on that, because it was rare when he'd offer something so detailed. "Okay! Think about that, then. Think really, really, really hard. Try to remember the last solstice."

With a sigh, he put down the sharpening rock and squeezed his eyes shut. It was no use. "It's not working."

"But you remember—"

"No, I don't," Zuko said. Katara had been at this for an hour and he was starting to get a headache. "Look, I know the Fire Nation has summer solstice festivals. I know that there's a lot of fire works at night and more fire flakes than you can eat, but I can't picture any of it. It's just… gone."

"Oh." Katara sat, deflated for all of ten seconds before brightening. "Well, you'll just have to think of something else then. There has to be some kind of memory left in there."

"You mean in the big empty space that's Zuko's head?" Sokka chimed in, helpfully.

Zuko shoved him for that, and then passed his spear point over for inspection. "How does this look?"

The other boy gave it the eye of a professional before handing it back. "It needs to be pointier."

They worked in silence for a few minutes, and Zuko was left alone with his thoughts. Where had all of his memories gone, anyway? Were they still there, inside of him? Would he ever get them back? Did he want to get them back?

And what kind of person was he… back then?

He had accidentally voiced this last part out loud, and Katara looked up at him with her compassionate blue eyes. Sokka, though, thought he had answer. "You know what I think?" he asked, and then continued when no one actually said anything, "I think the Fire Nation was going to do something really bad, like attack a whole bunch of helpless people in the Earth Kingdom or something. But Zuko found out, and because he's slightly less evil than the rest of them—"

"Hey!"

"—he tried to stop it. And he did, and for punishment they scarred him and then brainwashed him so you couldn't remember anything."

"That's stupid," Katara declared.

For his part, Zuko agreed, although he did sort of like the fact that he was the hero of the story.
"Fine, then how did I get on the Fire Nation ship? Healer Kuthruk told me they found me hiding in a life-raft."

Sokka seemed to think about this for a moment. Then he shrugged. "I don't know."

Zuko sighed and went back to sharpening his spear-point. Sokka's own had a curved edge, like a scythe, and he wanted to copy that.

There was the sound of crunching snow just outside the tent as two sets of feet walked by. This was nothing unusual, but the lowered voices that accompanied it, was. Instantly, it got the children's attention, and with a mutual glance they all slid over to the side of the tent, pressing their ears against the soft blue cloth. Katara stifled a giggle, and Sokka hushed her immediately.

From their position, they could clearly hear the hushed voices of the two speakers, Kana and Auya.

"—don't like it. Not one bit," Auya was saying, "The Tribe has brought him back up to health, and yet he's still here. He has his voice, now, doesn't he?"

They were talking about him. Zuko felt his stomach clench, and behind the children — unseen and unnoticed — the small cooking fire in the center pit of the tent grew brighter.

"Yes," Kana agreed, "he does. But surely, he's no trouble to you, Auya?"

"Trouble?" she let out a single bark of a laugh. "No, except for the fact I can't get any sleep at night. Who could, with Fire Nation blood that in the same tent as me — near my family and my child."

Behind the kids, the fire flared higher.

"He's just a boy. If Hakoda thought him any danger—"

"I know, Kana. Really, I do. But my point is this; the Tribe has done a good thing in bringing him in. It would be unfair to raise him as one of us. He lives with my family, and I know him best. Take him to... to Kyoshi Island. They're soft-hearted, and they'd never treat him wrong for being what he is."

"No..." Katara cried before Sokka slapped a hand over her mouth.

There was a distinct pause, and all the children held their breath, fearing they had been heard. But Kana had merely been considering Auya's request, and finally she said, "I will speak to Hakoda about this. He has told me that the people of Kyoshi value their female children over their boys, but you are right... they would take him in."

Auya replied with something else, but the two women were moving away from the tent now, and were quickly out of hearing range.

Sokka, Katara, and Zuko sat there for a moment unable to move for the lingering fear they'd get caught. Distantly, Zuko realized that Katara had clutched his hand and that Sokka's fingers were digging into his shoulder. He let out a long sigh — the still unnoticed bright fire went down to normal strength — and it almost seemed to release them.

"No, they can't do this!" Katara looked up to her big brother, fingers tightening around Zuko's hand. "Sokka, you gotta go and tell dad that Zuko should stay right here."

Zuko, too, was looking to Sokka. He didn't know why. Maybe it was because Katara trusted him to lead, and so he did as well. "Auya's lying, Sokka. She doesn't know me! She... she doesn't even talk to me!" He wanted to throw something in frustration. Only Katara's tight hold on his hand kept him
still. "I don't want to leave!"

Sokka looked at both of them for a moment, and then sighed, turning away to crawl back over and poke at the fire with a stick. For some reason, the flame had eaten though the logs he'd just put on. "Dad always said that Zuko would only be staying with us for awhile."

"But—" Katara started to protest, and was silenced by her brother's swift glare. He wasn't done yet.

"So I can't just go begging to keep him around, because his mind's already made up. He'll just have to see for himself that Zuko is better being Water Tribe then Fire Nation."

"How do I do that?" Zuko asked. He dropped Katara's hand, and paced about in agitation, feeling desperate. He didn't want to leave everyone he knew and be adopted into some Earth Kingdom family. He loved it here. He didn't even mind being cold — so much.

"I don't know," Sokka admitted, poking moodily into the fire. Then suddenly he straightened, smiling. "But I have an idea!" He stood up, "Dad's going to take me ice fishing tomorrow. He promised a few weeks ago, remember? Why don't you come along with us? I can lend you some fish or something when we catch them, and he'll see that you're such a great hunter that he's bound to let you stay."

"Do you really think it will work?"

"'Course. My plans always work. You can ask Katara."

Zuko turned to Katara. She bit her lower lip and nodded. "Yeah. Sometimes they do," she admitted. But her eyes were shining with hope.
This adorable fanart is by GreenAppleFreak
http://greenapplefreak.deviantart.com/art/Shameless-Bribery-130643818
"Remember your Breath of Fire! It could save your life out there!"

~ Iroh, The Siege of The North Part 1

"Zuko, come on!" called Sokka, early the next morning. Shoving the fur-flap door aside, the Water Tribe boy quickly ducked in. "Dad's got the sledge all packed and—" he paused as his eyes adjusted to the dimmer light, and he saw what was going on. "Katara, are you playing with his hair?"

"She is not playing with my hair." Zuko was sitting down, both arms and legs crossed, a scowl highlighting the scar on his left side. But Katara was knelt behind him, and there was no doubt about it, she was fixing his raven black hair.

Sokka started laughing, so overcome that he nearly doubled over.

Zuko growled and made to reach for him, but Katara had too good of a hold on his hair and jerked him back.

"Stop it!" she snapped, "I'm almost finished!"

Sokka, of course, couldn't help but twist the knife in further. With a final gasp and a wide grin he sat up. "I should have just had you join Gran-Gran instead of Dad and me… I never thought you'd look so pretty with all those ribbons in your hair."

"What?!" Zuko reached up, but his hand was slapped back by Katara.

"Don't! You'll ruin it."

"You promised that you wouldn't put in any ribbons!"

"I didn't." With a final tug — a little harder than was strictly necessary — Katara finished and grabbed a small mirror.

With a good deal of trepidation, Zuko looked. Katara had kept her word. She had pulled his hair from its high phoenix tail on the top of his head further back so it was more in line with the warrior's wolf tail that the Water Tribe men sported. She kept a piece in front out of the band, and had strung two deep blue beads of the Water Tribe colors. He had the scar on one side of his face, and the beads of the Water Tribe on the other. It was strangely appropriate.

"Hmm… he does look less Fire Nationy." Sokka said, in approval. Then he reached down, hauling Zuko up to his feet. "Dad's waiting. It's time to go."

Katara, too, leapt up to her feet. "I wanna go!" She had never before expressed the slightest interest
in coming along on an ice-fishing trip. In fact, she still didn't really want to come along, but she was young and she hated to be left behind while the boys had all the fun.

"Sorry Katara." With his hand still firmly around Zuko's arm, Sokka started to drag him out. "This is a trip for men only. No girls allowed."

She pouted, and Zuko turned, hesitating, not wanting to be as dismissive as her brother. But Sokka was tugging hard on his arm, and he had to go.

"Sorry Katara," he echoed, before he was pulled outside.

It was still very early. The sun had just risen over the far eastern horizon, and the air was thick with fog and pale wintry shadows. Off in the distance, Zuko could hear the high whine of polar-dogs, and the scrape of nails against ice.

Sokka pulled him in that direction, and in a few moments they could see Hakoda, a solid figure in the elusive frozen fog. He was bending over and running lines of hemp rope from the polar-dog's harnesses to the main sledge. His team of five polar-dogs yelped and whined in excitement, leaping back and forth against the ropes, but the sledge's brakes were down and the craft held steady.

Sensing the boys approach, Hakoda straightened and turned. Zuko saw him give a pause over his new appearance, and he caught a small nod and a gleam of approval in his blue eyes.

"We're nearly ready to go, boys. Sokka, show Zuko how to get in the sledge. You'll be in front, and he'll be to the back."

"Okay Dad!" And abruptly Sokka jerked Zuko to the side.

The sledge itself was a longly shaped contraption balanced on two rails that stuck out several feet in the front and the back. The driver either ran along between the rails, or else rested by standing on them while the polar-dogs pulled. The basket itself was neatly packed with fishing poles and blankets to the sides, and covering furs in the middle. At Sokka's direction, Zuko sat himself down with his back braced against rear of the sledge.

Sokka's eyes were bright with excitement, and his easy confidence with the rigging quelled Zuko's small nervousness. After all, he doubted the Fire Nation had anything like polar-dog sledges. He had no experience at this whatsoever.

A moment later, Hakoda was at the driver's position in the back, and with a shift of weight to break the ice around the rails he yelled out, "HAW!"

As one, the five polar-dogs lurched against their bindings. The sledge creaked and jolted forward. Then they were off and gliding over the snow.

Zuko let out a breathless laugh, surprised at power of the dogs — of the speed. Hakoda seemed to be running flat out, gripping the main sledge and pushing it along just as the dogs were pulling.

"You have to lean into the turns!" Sokka yelled from just in front.

"What?"

But a moment later, after another sharp call from Hakoda, the dogs shifted direction like a well-timed flight of birds. Sokka's back was pressed against Zuko's front, and he felt the Water Tribe boy lean to the right in time with the animals. Zuko copied it, even though he felt as if he was going to spill out of the basket at any second. Of course, he didn't, and a moment later the sledge had straightened and
they were once again flying across the snowy tundra.

It was by no means a smooth journey — or even a peaceful one. The dogs yelped loudly, and often. The snowpack was bumpy and uneven. Zuko knew that his rear would be sore by the end of the day.

He didn't care.

They traveled ceaselessly, tirelessly, over the frozen landscape. After a few minutes, Zuko settled back, content to watch the landscape zip by faster than he could ever run.

Plus, he was tired — he had spent much of last night wide awake and thinking about what Auya had said about him. Now he was away from the village, and with each passing moment, further away from her. He trusted Sokka, and he trusted in Katara's hope. Maybe by the time they got back home Sokka would have somehow convinced Hakoda to let him stay?

By mid-day the snowy land flattened out to a glossy sort of smoothness. Hakoda called out that they were crossing a large frozen lake, and to keep their eyes peeled for any rotten ice.

Zuko didn't know what made ice rotten. He peered about anxiously anyway, but saw nothing but blank, white snow.

The lake might have been frozen, but it seemed to stretch on and on until the sledge was in the middle and Zuko couldn't see anything on any direction but white flatness. The view might have gotten dull. But Hakoda had his own way of keeping the boys minds sharp and entertained.

"Look there, but not too closely!" Hakoda braced himself against the two back rails, resting for a moment, and raised one mittened hand out to the west. Zuko followed it, and saw what looked to be a small wisp of fog two ship lengths away, barely visible against the bright snow and pure blue sky.

Sokka saw it too, and craned his neck around, looking to his father. "What is it?"

"It's a wraith." Hakoda's face was grim. "They're angry spirits, killed in battle. If you're alone and you see one out in the wilderness you look away. They are vengeful things, and change shape to trick and lead men to their early deaths."

Zuko's eyes widened and he looked out again with a wary eye at the wisp of fog — was it his imagination, or was it getting closer? He shivered and pulled the edge of his hood down so that he could barely see it out of the corner of his good eye.

He felt Sokka scoff, but Zuko could feel how tense he was. Hakoda didn't allow them to linger at the spot, and with another quick command to the dogs, he mushed them forward. Soon the wraith was a distant speck along the horizon.

They finally slowed to a stop on the frozen lake's far bank. Once there had been a hardy polar forest there, but now only dead, charred trees littered the edge of the bank. Most had fallen into decay along the ground, but a couple had bits of life still in them and withered green shoots reached up to the sky.

"When I was a boy, this used to be a vast arctic forest. It burned down a good ten years ago," said Hakoda, as the boys looked on in wonder. Left unsaid, and immediately clear to all three of them, was exactly the reason for the forest's disappearance: The Fire Nation. "But," continued Hakoda, in a decidedly more upbeat tone. "It still makes for a great fishing spot. Start unloading the gear, boys. We will camp here."
"This is ice-fishing? It's boring."

"Be quiet. You'll scare away the fish."

"Scare away what fish? It's been an hour—"

"Shhh! I think I see something! No… wait… wait, that's just a twig."

Zuko groaned in frustration. He didn't care what Sokka said. Sitting around a hole in the ice with just a little line, bait, and a hook was cold and boring. He also felt a certain kind of desperation the longer they went without a bite. How was he to convince Hakoda to let him stay with the Water Tribe if he couldn't even catch a measly fish?

He glanced over and saw the Chief setting up the camp and feeding pieces of frozen fish to the polar-dogs back on the bank. The fact that he had been allowed to come at all had to be a good sign, right?

Zuko was determined to stay. But how?

A flash of something white drew Zuko's attention. Putting a hand up to shield his eyes against the still bright sun, he looked out across the frozen lake. A small cloud of white was rising from the ice only fifty feet away, more solid than a vapor, but it wasn't an animal… if he squinted his eyes it looked a lot like the wraith he had seen earlier.

"Sokka!"

"Shhh!"

Zuko grabbed his arm and pointed. "Look! Do you think it's…" he didn't want to finish, for fear of seeming stupid in Sokka's eyes.

But the other boy was following his thoughts, and skeptical that he was, he shook his head. "No. Dad was just making that stuff up. Wraith's aren't really real."

"Yeah… I guess."

Despite their words, neither boy moved a muscle. They stared out with wide eyes as the drift of white in the air became larger and larger. Then, almost as Sokka was about to turn around and call for his father, they saw a pair of long white ears pop out from the base of the thing, almost as if growing from the ice.

Immediately, Sokka relaxed. "It's just a stupid squirrel-rabbit digging around and throwing up snow." Then he brightened and stood up, reaching beside him for the sharp ivory knife Hakoda used to cut the fishing-hole. "Let's kill it and eat it!"
"But…" Zuko glanced at their fishing pole and at the unmoving line. "What about the fish?"

"Who cares about the fish? They're boring. Let's get some real meat. Look, do you want my dad to see you as a great hunter or not?"

That was all it took. With a nod, Zuko followed Sokka's example; he sunk down and moved quickly forward, stalking their prey.

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OoOoOoOoO

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From the shore, Hakoda noticed the movement of the boys from the corner of his eye. He paused his work, and stood up, watching them with a slight smile across his tanned features. It wasn't a good habit to abandon one's fishing post, but he couldn't help noticing the way his son and the Fire Nation boy moved — hunting whatever they were after as a team, pausing, ducking before darting forward.

Well, perhaps if they were successful, he would teach the new hunters how to gut and cook their kill tonight.

If he knew exactly what Sokka and Zuko were hunting, he would not have been amused at all. He would have been alarmed, and rightfully so. What Hakoda didn't know was that a group of pesky squirrel-rabbits had moved in and recently dug a warren of tunnels through the ice to escape the ashy, corrosive soil of their burned out forest home. Those tunnels weakened the ice.

Hakoda continued watching the boys, feeling a mix of fatherly pride for his son and mingled amusement for the antics of the young. Whatever they were hunting had to be small, because he couldn't see it from his distance. He could see how they seriously they were taking the hunt, and how Sokka silently directed Zuko with small hand gestures. Suddenly Zuko paused in his step and stood up to his full height. The Chief's eyebrows knit; what was the kid doing?

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OoOoOoOoO

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Far out, across the ice, Zuko stood up and looked around in confusion. There seemed to be dozens and dozens of circular burrows in the ice. At first, he had passed them off as some sort of shadows because they blended in so well with the environment — at least, until he had nearly stepped in one. Now the more he looked the more he saw, and the uneasier he became. "What are these holes doing
"What holes?" Sokka's focus was only for the juicy little meat creature just up ahead. The wind was with him, and he didn't want the Fire Nation kid to mess anything up. He took another cautious step — and then stumbled when his foot sunk down. "Hey! What's this stupid hole doing here?" He tried to tug his foot up, but it was stuck.

"I don't know." Zuko walked over and bent to give Sokka a hand, gripping his ankle and pulling upward. It didn't work, and he tugged again; harder. The sudden jarring along with their combined weight on the thin ice caused an unexpected effect:

CRACK.

The sound was so loud it echoed far and out repeated over and over again across the frozen lake. And it had come from under them.

Sokka and Zuko looked at their feet, at the pitted, slightly mushy ice, then at each other; twin looks of horror on their faces.

"Oh no." And that was all Sokka had time to say.

Another horrible crack and Zuko and Sokka fell down, down, down into the freezing cold water.

It felt as if a thousand knives were stabbing into him at once. Zuko opened his mouth to scream, and the water rushed in. His legs spasmed, kicked. His head broke the surface and he was able to take one cold, sharp breath that hurt more than anything else before he went down again — weighted by boots and a heavy, waterlogged parka.

The knives cut in deeper. He wanted to breathe in, but couldn't. His hand reached upward, grasping onto a razor sharp piece of ice to the side of the hole. He hauled himself up — heedless that it was cutting his hand and was able to gasp for air. "HELP!" he yelled to no one — everyone. "HELP!"

"Hold on!" He could see Hakoda, still far out in the distance, throw a length of rope around his middle and attach the other end to the sledge. The ice had cracked far out in all directions — he could only inch forward, testing one foot at a time to see if it would hold his weight, or else fall into the water himself.

Sokka, crawled up beside Zuko, his hands scrabbling against the ice to find purchase. But the ice was brittle and broke away as soon as he put is weight to it. Zuko reached for him, but Sokka slipped and fell under again. Zuko's own arms were losing strength, and he tried to hold onto the edge, but he was so cold already he could no longer feel his own fingers. As if in slow motion, he felt himself sliding down, sinking slowly under the water…

He could see the surface just above, and reached towards it, his hand silhouetted against the bright pale sun…

FLASH

And suddenly he was waking up in his bed. He blinked in confusion and sat up, turning towards the front of his bedroom.
A girl stood there, outlined by the bright crescent light behind the door. She about Katara's age and height, and was dressed in fine red robes. Her raven black hair was done up into an elegant knot, her skin a beautiful shade of porcelain — her smile was nothing short of malicious, her amber eyes narrowed, glinting almost evilly.

What did she want now?

She opened her mouth and spoke... something. Zuko couldn't hear the words, although he knew somehow he had understood her in the past. Whatever she was saying... It was horrible.

Zuko shook his head, feeling a mix of white hot anger and genuine fear. He controlled himself by a force of will, gripping the edge of the blanket, and yelled back at her.

The girl just grinned, and she nearly skipped over to his bedside in her excitement — talking, laughing, mocking... torturous words that made him shake his head again and grip his blanket so hard he thought he was going to set it ablaze.

No... She was lying...

FLASH

A strong hand wrapped around his wrist, and Zuko felt himself being lifted up, up and out. With one massive heave, Hakoda pulled him to safety and hauled him, coughing and gagging, out on the ice.

Then the Chief turned away and went back to the break in the ice. He inched out, flat on his stomach, reaching out and yelling at his son to come closer. Sokka was still in the water.

Zuko wanted to go help, but his very mind felt frozen. His lungs felt withered in his chest. Each breath was short and painful. He was shivering so hard it was almost like a seizure. Inside, nerves were firing randomly, desperately trying to keep him moving. Keep him warm.

He was cold... colder than he had ever been in his life. So cold he almost felt hot. But even that sensation was fading, and it was harder to harder to breathe. Black dots hovered at the very edge of his vision.

Something — he would never quite be sure what — made him pause his gasping for only a moment. He gave a controlled breath out; deep down and out again.

Steam billowed from his nose and mouth. A flick of heat lit from within. It was enough to make Zuko breathe like that again; deep down nearly from his belly. In through his nose and out his mouth. With each deep breath, the warmth grew outward. Finally, on his third exhalation, a small tongue of flame flicked out from between his teeth.

Zuko felt a wave of glorious heat rush through his body, unfreezing his blood.

He was trembling still, but it was the trembles of adrenaline and not cold. He blinked melting water from his eyes and sat up in time to see Hakoda haul Sokka out from the water.

The Chief paused, momentarily surprised to see Zuko aware and alert. Something flickered across his face — something more than relief. But Zuko was in not in the right mind to be perceptive. He could only stare at Sokka. The other boy's lips were blue from cold, his normally healthily tanned skin a pallid grey. And each breath he took sounded ragged, painful.
"Get up," Hakoda rasped, either to Zuko or Sokka, it didn't matter. Still on his stomach, he slid himself and Sokka across the thinner ice to where it was more a deep-set white — thicker. Staggering to stand, he set his own son on his feet. "You must keep moving."

Zuko was still cold, and he was soaked from head to foot, but now faint wisps of steam were coming off his shoulders. He stood to Chief Hakoda's command, shivering, but alert. Sokka was far worse off. "How can I help?"

The Chief stared at him as if he was an aberration, but Sokka was leaning listlessly in his arms, so gray he looked like a corpse. Every second counted, and this wasn't the time or the place to ask. "Go into my pack. We need to start a fire and get Sokka in blankets. He needs to keep moving, and he needs to get warm." Suddenly Sokka pitched forward, retching, and Hakoda tenderly held his shoulders, steadying him. "There now, son… Let it out…"

Zuko didn't give him a second look. He tore off to the sledge, pushing away eagerly sniffing polar-dogs, and ripped off a mitten to dive his hand in the pack and search around. Either he was too panicked to look properly, or the spark-rocks were in a different pack. Either way, he couldn't find them.

Hakoda was nearly at the bank and was removing Sokka's wet, frozen clothing. Zuko turned back and dumped out the contents of the pack, scattering kindling and wrapped fishing hooks in the snow. The spark-rocks weren't there. He could have cried out from frustration. Sokka was going to die because he couldn't start a fire.

… Or could he?

The memory rose again, along with a hot flash of bile. He had been so angry at the girl that he had to control himself from starting the blanket on fire…

Zuko didn't think about what it meant. He couldn't think or else he would have scared himself out of doing it. He'd seen firebending before, from the soldiers on the Fire Nation ship. And nearly breathed fire back then, didn't he? Abandoning the pack, he ran over to Hakoda, ignoring the man's sharp questions.

There was a downed log not too far off, and he grabbed rough stump of a limb in his cold fingers, pulling it over. Hakoda was barking something at him — demanding to know what he was doing, and where were the spark-rocks and kindling? Zuko ignored him. He took a sharp breath through his mouth, letting it out through his nose, closed his eyes, and punched as hard as he could.

His knuckles bit sharply against the wood, and something — some part of him seemed to rush out from between his knuckles. Instantly, the log was ablaze.

Hakoda jerked back in shock, his free hand moving to his belt knife. But the slowly dying son in his arms was the clear priority, and with a single nod, he directed Zuko to come help him with Sokka's clothing. They removed the sodden furs, and switched them with Hakoda's own parka.

Then, shoving, gripping, pleading, threatening, they made Sokka walk around and around the fire. Keeping his blood moving. Keeping him warm.

Sokka moved like a sleep-walker; in and out of consciousness. A couple of times, Hakoda had to slap his face to keep him awake. Zuko saw the twin flashes of pain on both father and son's face — how it killed Hakoda to do that. But Sokka had to keep moving.

It worked; fire was warm and slowly the color returned back to his lips, even if his face remained an
unhealthy shade of gray.

"Dad..." Sokka whispered, eyes still closed, listing against his father. "I'm tired..."

"I know, son." Hakoda put his hand to Sokka's cheek, testing its warmth. Finally satisfied he gave another nod. "I think you'll be okay now. You've earned yourself a rest." Carefully, he sat down and Sokka leaned against him, out in a moment. Then, for the first time in an hour Hakoda looked up from his son and at the Fire Nation boy across the fire.

Zuko gulped audibly, feeling pierced by those blue eyes. He sat down, across from them, drawing his legs up to his chest. "I... I didn't know..." he muttered miserably, looking away.

He hadn't allowed himself to think about it until now. He was a firebender. Like the Fire Nation men on the ship. Hakoda would surely think that Zuko would be like them... Evil like them...

"I just started breathing, and it made me warm, and I thought... I thought 'Well if I can do that then I should be able to light a log on fire.'" Zuko was rambling now, trying to explain himself; but after all he had only gotten his voice back a few weeks ago, and he wasn't very practiced yet. And he was scared, so scared that deep down inside he was just as evil as the rest of the firebenders. "And... and I saw something when I was under the water. I don't know who she was, but she lying. I knew that she was lying— and I'm not like them! I'm not! I was angry at her, but I didn't do anything—"

"Zuko."

Hakoda's deep voice cut into his nearly hysterical rambling with the force of a slap. Zuko looked up at him, his light gold eyes wide. "I want you to stop, and take a deep breath. We will address this," his eyes flicked to the fire, "later. Right now... Right now..." he trailed off, losing his own words, and Zuko realized at that moment that the Chief was nearly as shaken as he was. But for different reasons. He had almost just lost his son.

"Sokka... He's going to be okay, right?" he asked, his voice small.

"I don't know." Again Hakoda was looking at him, and when he spoke next it wasn't as a Water Tribe Chief to a nearly hysterical, afraid boy. It was something kinder than that, almost in the way he would talk to Sokka on the few occasions he would become upset and irrational. "We need to get him back to the healer. I'm going to pack up the sledge, and we will ride back as fast as we can. Zuko... How ever you made yourself warm — can you do that for him? Can you keep Sokka warm on the way back, too?"

"I... I think so." Meeting Hakoda's blue eyes, Zuko felt his resolve strengthen. "Yes."

They bundled up Sokka as best they could, wrapping him in all the furs and blankets they had. Zuko had a brief worry for Hakoda, as he had given up his own parka to replace Sokka's. Now he was visibly shivering in his blue tunic, and the journey back would surely be cold with the sun going down — but the Chief was a strong man. Probably the strongest man Zuko had ever known, and he knew that if anyone could get them back safe it would be him.

Zuko sat in back of the other boy, wrapping his arms around him to make sure he didn't slip off the sledge. It was hard — Sokka was easily his weight, and had fallen back into a sickly sleep. He was in danger of flopping back and when the dogs ran over bumpy snow. But Zuko gripped him as best he could, and concentrated on breathing in and out — warming himself, and warming Sokka through his own heightened body-heat.
That was the hardest work of all. Zuko felt like something was being pulled from deep down inside of him, and eventually he became so hot that beads of sweat collected on his forehead — just to freeze again by the cold night wind. He wasn't doing this for himself, though, and no matter how uncomfortably warm he became and how tired he got — he kept going.

It took them half a day to ride out to the fishing spot, but Hakoda drove his dogs so mercilessly that it only took half that time to get back. In many ways, luck with them. The night was cloudless, and frozen enough so that the rails of the sledge had no problems. And the moon was full, almost as if she were looking out for Sokka's wellbeing herself.

"It's okay, Zuko. You can let go of him now."

Zuko became aware of the world again and realized that the sledge had stopped, and indeed Hakoda and Healer Kuthruk were standing over him, trying to pry him away from the sick boy. He had been so focused on keeping Sokka warm — so intent on his breathing, that he hadn't even noticed.

With a nod, he let go and crawled out the sledge, falling heavily to his knees when his legs refused to support him. A hand hooked under his arm and helped him to his feet: Hakoda. "I want you to get yourself back to Auya's tent. Don't leave there until I come and get you. Do you understand?" At Zuko's second tired nod, Hakoda favored him with a tight smile. "You did good today."

That buoyed him. He wanted to ask again if Sokka was going to be all right, but Hakoda had turned and was helping healer Kuthruk. It was all Zuko could do to stumble to Auya's tent, fall into his pallet on the far side of it, and pull the sleeping bag over his head.

OoOoOoOoO

The night was late, but sleep was the furthest thing from Hakoda's mind. He sat, a solemn figure in the shadows of Kuthruk's tent as the healer tended to his son; checking his fingers and toes for signs of frostbite, running a beaded amulet over his chest to realign his chi, and lighting spicy incense to encourage good blood flow.

Someone must have alerted Kana, for she appeared a few minutes after the sledge had arrived, pressing a mug of some kind of hot sweet drink in Hakoda's hands. She sat by him, her lined face pulled down in worry; a silent watcher; knowing that her son would tell her the circumstances behind the accident later. Right now, Kuthruk needed all of his attention on her grandson.

After rewrapping Sokka's hands in bandaging — he had scraped them up badly clinging for life on the ice — Kuthruk turned to Hakoda and Kana.

"No signs of frostbite or chilblains. Just simple exhaustion. Aside from those cuts on his hands. I wouldn't have guessed he'd fallen in for as long as you said he did. He must have real fire in his veins to survive that."

The healer had meant it as a light joke. He did not expect Hakoda's frown to deepen. "No," he said,
after a moment, and anyone could tell that his mind was other places.

"He'll wake up soon, and he should be allowed to eat as much as he wants," Kuthruk continued, after an uncomfortable pause. Then he smiled reaching down to fondly tweak the sleeping boy's foot. "He should like that. A couple of days of bed rest, and he'll be as good as new."

Finally, Hakoda seemed to relax. "That's good news. Thank you, Kuthruk."

Kana spoke softly. "Something is on your mind, Hakoda. I can tell."

The Chief sat silent for a moment, and then nodded. "You're right." He drew his hand down his face, feeling the weight of responsibility over his people, and as a father. "Zuko is a firebender."

The Healer was in the middle of putting away jars of salve, but at this he paused. "I see," he said, carefully and returned from his shelves to sit next to his Chief. "Tell me everything."

"I won't go into the entire story, because this will have to be told before the tribe, but he lit a fire for Sokka out of a half-frozen log. He kept him warm on the way back."

"He probably saved him from pneumonia, then." Kuthruk sighed and glanced back towards Sokka. "The tribe will not like this. Bad enough that the boy is Fire Nation, but a firebender?"

Hakoda nodded and said nothing.
Hakoda sat traditional style in the Tribe's great roundhouse — the largest structure in the village. As per the name, the structure was circular in shape, both as a nod to the Spirit of the Moon and to best fit as many people in as small of space as possible. A blazing fire had been lit up in the center of the room, and the air was pleasantly warm and smoky. Soon, he knew, it would be almost uncomfortably hot both with the warmth of the Tribe’s adults packed in, and their angry words.

"I know, maybe you could find a nice Earth Kingdom family to adopt you."

- Azula, Zuko Alone
Bato took his place to Hakoda's right and sat whittling some kind of a figurine out of wood. Hakoda could sense his curiosity, but even his second in command and best friend would learn what happened with the rest of the tribe. He could read Bato like he could read himself, and he planned on using him as a gage to reflect the mood of his people.

Hakoda closed his eyes, collecting his thoughts — waiting. He heard murmured greetings as people slowly trickled in. Adult voices — for none of the children except for the smallest babies were allowed to attend. Someone grabbed up an aged seal-skin drum and began to pound out a low, welcoming thrum. As if that were a signal, the rest of the stragglers came in and took their seats.

Hastily called gatherings like this were rare. The tribe trusted Hakoda and his council of elders to make most of the major decisions in regards to when and where the next hunt would be, for marriage blessings, and war. But Hakoda was not a fool. This was a special situation; a decision that required the combined will of the tribe.

Finally, there was a small, almost imperceptible shift in the air. Even with his eyes shut, Hakoda knew that everyone had gathered and was waiting. He took a final deep breath to steady himself, and opened his eyes.

Instantly, a hush fell over the crowd.

"My brothers and sisters," he said, and his strong baritone voice carried easily to every ear. "I come to you today with a story to tell, and at the end we will decide as a people what to do about it. I ask only that you allow me to state my words first, and ask questions after."

He looked around, meeting blue gazes one by one — People, faces he had known all his life. They trusted him as their leader, just as they trusted his father before him to do the same. He hoped that it would be enough.

"I am sitting in front of you today as your Chief, but also as the father of Sokka. He is alive today because of the actions of Healer Kuthruk, and to the Fire Nation boy, Zuko."

So he began to tell his story, starting from the very beginning when Sokka first approached him asking if Zuko could come along on their ice-fishing trip.

Hakoda knew himself to be a great speaker. He knew how to stir a man's heart with stories, and how to frighten children into behaving during long winter months. Just as he had seen Sokka's own innate talent for creative planning, he had the ability to show the truth in his words, and make someone feel what he was speaking.

So when he told his people how one moment he was feeding the polar-dogs and watching the boys run off to hunt, and the next they had both fallen through the ice, some of the women gasped and Hakoda knew he had drawn them into his story.

"Most of you are aware," Hakoda said, pausing at that moment to sweep his gaze around the room, "of the choice I faced at that moment."

Some of the men looked away, not meeting his eyes. It was a cruel fact of Antarctic life that if two people were hypothermic and there was only one parka to go around — a brutal decision would have to be made. Hakoda was the only adult, the only one to build a fire and keep a boy moving around it.

It was every man's worst nightmare: Which to lend his jacket, and which to leave to death by exposure?
And they all knew, without saying, that this horrible thing had been on Hakoda's mind while he fished the boys free from the water — and of course Sokka had won.

Hakoda paused, letting that sink in, and he nodded his head once. "So you can imagine my shock when, after I pulled both boys out, Zuko got to his feet. Naturally, he was very cold, but lucid. And he was in a panic. When I told him to go make a fire to help warm up Sokka — he bent one instead."

A single gasp went up from around the villagers, along with an angry buzz. Hakoda held up his hand for silence. It took a few moments before he got it.

"Yes," he drawled in such a dry fashion that he got a few chuckles. "Needless to say, when Sokka was as warm as I could get him, and I recovered my wits, I interrogated the child. He did not know until then what he was capable of — I saw the truth myself in his eyes."

Despite Hakoda's warning to let him speak, Bato turned to him. "But Sokka… he will be fine?" The worry in his face and eyes were clear. Bato loved Sokka as if he was his own, just as Hakoda had loved Bato's two daughters, and had grieved as much as any father when they were killed in last spring's Fire Nation raid.

Hakoda nodded, allowing a small smile to cross his face. "Yes. Zuko used his bending to keep Sokka warm on the journey back. Healer Kuthruk believes it is because of that and how promptly he was put by a fire after leaving the water, that he will make a full recovery." Now he raised his chin, his authoritative voice echoing down from one end of the meeting room to the other. "Sokka will grow up stronger and wiser because of this. He will survive to lead the new generation in large part due to actions of a young firebender. Now we must decide, as a people, what to do."

There was a moment of silence, and then several people spoke up at once — some angry, some confused.

*It begins*, Hakoda thought. Hopefully, he had stated Zuko's case well enough.

Tatum was the first to stand. He was a burley lug of a man with thick eyebrows. He was also one of the tribe's most seasoned warriors. Hakoda acknowledged him with a nod, letting him speak freely.

"Brothers, and sisters; the choice is clear. While I am grateful to hear the Fire Nation boy helped saved young Sokka, it was merely a debt repaid. Chief Hakoda was the one to originally spare Zuko. He now owes this tribe nothing, and we require nothing of him." There were several nods from around, and cheered by this, Tatum continued, "The boy must go to the Earth Kingdom. I've heard talk from Auya about sending him to Kyoshi Island. Let's send him there."

Bato stood up, bristling, and barely waited for Hakoda's nod to rebuke. "It would be hard to get anyone to accept a Fire Nation boy on their doorstep, but a firebender? No. They would put him down like a polar-dog."

"But he cannot go back to the Fire Nation," Tatum replied. "I will not stand by while another firebender is added to their ranks."

Now there were more nods, and a woman, her face half hidden in the shadows called out. "Look what those Fire Nation savages already done to the boy! I can't hardly look at his face without thinking about it. He was abused over there. We can't send him back!"

Hakoda's plan was to be silent and have his people talk this out, for he had faith that they were good and that they would come to the right decision in the end. But at this, he had to speak; not as Sokka's father this time, but as Chief. "Even if I thought that it would be best for the boy to go back to his
own people — and I don't — I could never risk a ship full of my men in enemy waters just to drop off a child."

"He can't stay here!" another woman shot back, and Hakoda recognized the voice of Auya. Instantly, he was dismayed. He had counted on the woman to be on Zuko's side, since she was the one charged with housing him.

People started shouting, voicing their own opinions and Hakoda had to hold up his hand for silence.

Bato indicated that he wanted to speak again.

"I've watched the boy, and talked with him a few times. He follows the men around like a puppy, and imitates us. I have no doubt in my mind that he would wish to be Water Tribe, if he was given a chance."

"It just wouldn't be natural for the boy," said Auya, standing. "His best chance is to go to the Earth Kingdom. Perhaps he could hide his abilities—"

Healer Kuthruk spoke up, cutting off her words. "As far as I've been told, bending is something from the spirit, and not a physical power. Zuko could no more hide what he is than he can hide his eye color."

Ekchua, the man who had served as cook on the ship, grunted from the back. "He might be useful to us as a warrior when he grows up — fight fire with fire, eh?"

There was more murmuring to this, and Hakoda was glad that it was in approval rather than of anger. He saw his chance, and took it. "Bato, would you want to be responsible for the boy, then? He is young, yet. He could be molded into our ways."

Bato stared at him for a moment, and then a flash of grief passed over his face, and Hakoda knew the answer before he spoke it. "No. I can't… Hakoda, it's too soon since my daughters…" He broke off, looking away and Hakoda placed a hand on his shoulder. His friend didn't need to say any more.

There was a shuffling movement, and Kana stepped into the flickering firelight. Hakoda gestured for her to speak, intensely curious.

"Many of you know that I spent my childhood in our sister tribe up North," Kana said, and although her voice was soft, the quiet reverence of the tribe allowed her words to carry to every ear. Even Hakoda leaned forward, for he had only heard her talk of North a handful of times in his life. "When I was young, there was a Fire Nation raid on our city. Many men were killed on both sides, but we held them off, and at the end three prisoners were brought up to the Chief; a Fire Navy Captain and two of his Lieutenants — all firebenders. They were kept alive, and placed in the cells. It was thought we could use them for prisoner exchange since the Fire Nation had captured some of our waterbenders."

She paused then, hands folded within her fur-lined robes, head bowed. Hakoda wondered what was flashing behind her eyes — and what horrors she had witnessed as a girl. Was this the reason why she came down South? "I was friends at the time with a celebrated healer, Yagoda," Kana continued. "She was charged with keeping the men fed and healthy. We were of the same age, and as she was afraid of them, I would often accompany her." She paused, deep in thought. "They were… cruel men with tempers fit to burn… Looking back now, I don't see our Zuko in any of these men." A couple smiles went around, mostly from the women, but now Kana's deeply lined face was blank. She was not in the roundhouse… her mind was back in another time. "They abused us with insults at every chance, because we were young and because they could. But they were healthy, and strong…"
then the winter came." Again she paused. "Our Northern sister tribe live at a higher latitude, so they
suffer four months of darkness to our three. As soon as the days of darkness started, the Captain and
his two Lieutenants lost their firebending ability. Then, slowly, they became weaker. Yagoda did
everything that she could for them... She was so very kind in the face of their contempt. But they
wilted like flowers without the sun, and by the second month they were dead."

She finished speaking, and a certain stillness entered the room, as if all the air had gone out of it.

Hakoda felt his stomach clench. Kana's words had the weight of truth behind them. Automatically,
he looked across the room to Kuthruk. "Have you heard sort of thing before?"

"I know that extreme cold can reduce the capabilities of firebenders," Kuthruk said, after a moment.
"We've used it to our advantage before, if my memory serves. But it seems more likely that the men
Kana remembers caught some disease which they had no resistance against."

Kana shook her head slowly, regretfully. "Yagoda was certain. She said there was no physical
reason for it. It was almost as if the Spirits themselves had stepped in and seeped their life away."

All was silent for another moment as everyone digested this news. The tribe had been on the edge of
decision, but now Hakoda could feel the moment slip away. The final door had closed, leaving Zuko
with no options at all.

Again, Tatum stood to speak. "So the boy cannot go to the Earth Kingdoms, and we will not send
him back to the Fire Nation. Who's left? The Air Nomads? Well, it's a hundred years too late for
that."

His words seemed almost unnecessarily cruel in the face of what they had just heard, and there was
an awkward silence afterwards. Some people shifted.

Auya spoke again. "It isn't fair, but it is his people who are to blame for this. Not us."

Hakoda let out a long breath. He was impatient to speak, although he had promised himself that he
wouldn't. The Tribe may see him as too close to this, because of Sokka. Zuko needed an unbiased
champion.

Bato cast him a long look out of the corner of his eye, and then stood. They had been friends since
they were around Sokka's age, and the other man could read him like a book. Predictably, when he
spoke it was almost exactly what Hakoda himself would have said.

"So it comes to this, brothers and sisters: The boy will die. Either at the hand of his own people, or
by an angry Earth Kingdom mob, or by some sort of spiritual defect. He will die. So, the question is;
which would be the least cruel? Kana," and he turned, bowing his head respectfully at the woman
who had always been like a mother to him. "Do you think that those Fire Nation men suffered?"

Kana closed her eyes. "Some," she said, after a moment, "but not physically. It was their pride in
becoming weak that hurt them the most."

Bato nodded. "As I'm sure it would hurt any warrior."

"I'm still not convinced that their death wasn't caused by some sort of disease, or a strange suicide
pact," added Kuthruk, from his seat.

Tatum stood with a sneer. "Perhaps then we should consult the Spirits, and let them decide if we
cannot make up our minds about it."
His words were clearly meant as sarcasm, but a ripple of agreement went through the tribe.

"Perhaps we should," Bato agreed. "This winter could be... a sort of a test." He stroked his chin and turned to Hakoda. "And if he dies... Would it not be more humane to be surrounded by those who have cared for him?"

Hakoda privately thought that it was more than just a little harsh to test the boy with his very life. Something inside of him recoiled at thinking of Zuko wasting away from lack of sun. But he was also a realist, and nothing said in this gathering wasn't true. The Earth Kingdom had suffered through a hundred years of firebender attacks, and they would not grant Zuko an easy death. The evidence of what the Fire Nation was capable of was already seared across the boy’s face.

And there was always the chance that Kana was wrong.

"Then if the Spirits grant him the strength to survive the darkness of winter, he will be Water Tribe," he said, and his voice carried with it the weight of an order. He looked around and saw acceptance on the faces of his people — and felt a flash of pride. They had all lost so much to the Fire Nation, yet they were willing to accept one of their children as one of their own.

There was still one matter to clear up, though.

"Auya," Hakoda commanded, and the woman stood again. "No one will think worse of you for your words, so please answer truthfully; these might be Zuko's last days. Do you think you could care for him as if he were your son?"

The woman had started to shake her head almost as soon the last word had left her mouth. "No, Hakoda," she said, looking down at the ground. "I know he's just a child... but every time I look at him I can only think of my sister, Ahnah, and how the Fire Nation..." She closed her lips over her next words and shook her head again, taking her seat.

Ekchua, the cook stood up. "It's gotta be you, Chief." He grunted. "You have the only other bender in your family, and I've seen how he respects you." A round of pleased mutters followed his words.

Hakoda was taken aback. He hadn't expected this. In actuality, he had thought that Zuko would go to Auya... but that was now out of the question.

If Zuko was going to be Water Tribe, he would need someone strong to lead him. He was young enough to mold to their ways, but he would still need kind direction. Hakoda wondered briefly if his beloved Kya was watching this from the Spirit World, and laughing. She always told him that destiny had a twisting path all its own. Now in one turbulent year he had lost a wife, and gained another son.

Hakoda bowed his head in acceptance.
Zuko slept in usually late the next morning, well past the rising sun. When he awoke, Auya's tent was empty; she and her baby had gone to their daily chores without bothering to wake him first, although she had set aside some bread, a little seal-goat cheese, and a small flask of water for his breakfast.

Mindful of Hakoda's orders last night, Zuko ate in the tent and then only went as far out to peek out the fur-flap entrance.

Auya's tent was set near the border of the village, and through the morning fog he could see vague adult shapes converging on the Tribe's roundhouse. Zuko heard the low deep boom of a drum from that direction. Soon all the adults had gone inside. Usually meetings were held at night, after dinner. He had never seen one held in the morning like this, and it made his insides twist with worry.

How he wished he was able to just find the stupid spark-rocks instead of having to set that log on fire! But then Hakoda might not have ordered him to keep Sokka warm like he did, and Zuko may not have thought of it himself…

… He hoped Sokka was okay.

An hour's time found Zuko sitting just outside the tent, scraping snow into small sloppy piles for lack of anything else to do. The meeting was still going on, and although he could occasionally hear raised voices he couldn't quite catch the words. He dared not sneak closer, either. This was as far as he thought he could go, while still obeying Hakoda's command to stay in the tent.

Zuko heard a crunch of footfalls against icy snow and looked up to see Katara standing about ten feet away from him. One look at her face, and he knew that she knew. She was back to being afraid of him, and now maybe she had a good reason. Only this time Zuko had his voice, and although he didn't realize it, the few months of friendship and relative kindness from the tribe had done much for his confidence.

"Quit staring at me like that," he ordered. "I'm not going to burn you."

"How come you never told me?"

Of all the questions he thought she would ask, that wasn't one of them. He looked away from her, and moodily added a handful of snow to the top of his pile. "I didn't know… I just remembered."

He glanced up, wondering if she would believe him, or accuse him of lying. Her hands were on her hips, much like he had seen Kana do when she was feeling stern.

"You remembered?" she repeated. Maybe it was his imagination, but he thought he saw her face soften, just a little. "You mean, you got your memory back?"

"No, just one thing." He flashed to that red bedroom and that horrible girl, and he shivered. "I don't want to talk about it. How's Sokka?"

"He's sleeping. He's the one who told me what happened, after he stuffed his face full of food." Katara rolled her eyes, and dropped her hands from her hips. Then she hesitated, just for a moment longer, before stomping over and deliberately sitting down next to him. "I'm not afraid of you."

"Good." This was said harshly, to cover up the wave of pure golden relief that washed through him. He didn't look at her, not directly. It was easier to pretend to be mad at Katara… just in case she was still secretly mad at him. Like a preemptive strike.

"In fact," Katara continued, wholly oblivious to Zuko's plan. After all, she had one of her own.
"Now that you're a bender, you can teach me."

Zuko shook his head and grabbed yet another handful of snow, adding it to his growing pile. "Don't be stupid." The look she gave him then was so full of contempt that he again flashed to the girl in his memory. Quickly, he added, "Okay, look... Even if I ever got all my memories back; fire and water are opposites anyway. There's no point."

"But there's no one else in the whole South Pole to teach me!"

"Katara—"

But she was more determined than he. After all, she had been waiting her whole life to see someone bend, and she wasn't going to let a little thing like opposite elements stop her. "C'mon, I'll show you." She tugged him, still protesting, back in Auya's tent.

It was warmer inside, but the wash bucket in the corner still had a film of ice across the top. This, Katara broke and dipped her hand in, lifting some in her hand. The water held still for her, a near perfect globe in the cup of her palm. "Here, can you do this?"

"What? With water?"

"No." She gestured impatiently to the low coals smoldering in the tent's small fire-pit.

He did a double-take, and then shook his head, actually scooting himself away from the fire-pit. "Are you crazy?! I can't do that!"

"Yes you can." She held out the water-globe to him almost as an example. "It's your element. It will do what you tell it to do."

He looked from her hand to the softly glowing coals and back again. She was staring at him, with her hand still held out, such a plaintive look on her face that it almost hurt to have to say no.

"What if I become evil?" he said, and it came out as a whisper, because he didn't really want to say it, and he didn't want anyone else to accidentally hear his fears. "What if I... I become as bad as all of the rest of the Fire Nation, and I just want to burn everything down?"

Katara's face fell, and she got that sad, pained look on her face she always got when she was thinking about her mother. Then she shook her head. "You won't." Her free mitted hand reached out for his, curling about his fingers in a reassuring squeeze. "I know you, Zuko. You're not like the evil firebenders. You've been with us for too long, and you saved Sokka's life."

"But... what if—"

"You don't know how it is, 'cause you just learned that you could, but it hurts not bend. It's like... not being able to see color. So, you can teach me what you know, and I can teach you what you know... and... and we'll learn together. And if you slip and start burning people and stuff... well, I'll be there to put it out." The water rippled in her hand, as if emphasizing her words. "That's what water does."

Zuko would have never, ever done it if he didn't see some sort of point in her words. He had to admit, though, that he did. He felt a sort of longing to try and bend again. All morning he had been avoiding looking at the fire-pit, because he felt that in a small way the heat drew him in. Now that he dared to look he saw that the embers were glowing a sort of sickly orange, and it disturbed him in a vague sort of way. Like coming across an animal which was slowly dying from lack of air. He felt sympathy for the dying fire.
Finally, he nodded and carefully crawled forward, to kneel in front of the coals. There was every real chance he could get badly burned. "I can't just stick my hand in there," he said, feeling the weight of her gaze on him. Katara was beside him, water still in hand, watching his every move very closely. "Give me a minute."

He closed his eyes, knowing somehow instinctively that he had to be calmer than he was right now. He could feel the heat of the close burning coals tighten his skin, and it was almost a welcoming sensation, but he ignored it. Instead, he focused on breathing; in and out. In and out. Katara was right there with her water in case things got bad… She was right there…

"Zuko…"

His light gold eyes snapped open to Katara's alarmed hiss. The coals were brighter now, and Zuko got the impression that they were breathing with him. He raised his hand, hesitated one more moment, and then shoved it in. It was hot, but he was quick enough so that it didn't burn, and when he snapped his arm back he had a little dancing flame in the cup of his hand. "Wow!"

"See!" Katara made a move as if to hug him, but at the last moment remembered he was holding fire, and just settled for grinning. She had been waiting her whole life — all eight years of it — to talk about bending with another person, and it didn't matter at all if that person bent fire. "Do you feel a sort of… a pulling feeling with your fire?"

He frowned, and he looked at the fire in his hand thoughtfully. "No. It's more like… It's…" He trailed off.

"What?" she pressed.

"It feels like a little heartbeat. It's almost alive."

Now it was Katara's turn to frown and look to her own element. She had never felt that way about water. It moved in ebbs and flows. Fire, she thought, must be very different. Carefully, she tugged the mitten over her free hand with her teeth and reached out, holding her hand over Zuko's flame as close as she could without getting burned. She could feel it flickering in tiny waves, something almost the same as her own water… but very different at the same time.

Zuko did the same, covering his free hand over her globe of water.

"I think I feel what you're talking about," Katara said.

"I think… maybe I do, too."

The fur-lined tent flap opened, startling Zuko and Katara out of the reverie.

Zuko snatched his hand back from the globe of water and closed his fist; guiltily snuffing out the small flame. It was too late. Sokka had seen everything.

"What are you doing out of bed?" Katara's concern was only for her big brother, and she leapt up, pulling him inside. He was wearing his thickest parka and blue leggings, but there was still a sickly sort of grey color about his skin. Katara sat him down by the coals, and deftly grabbed one of Auya's best furs, throwing it about his shoulders. "Healer Kuthruk said you were to stay inside our tent."

"I'd rather die of pneumonia than boredom," snapped Sokka, although his blue gaze never left Zuko's face. "What were you two doing?"

"Bending." Katara's tone was nothing short of glib as she tucked the edges of the furs about Sokka's
body. She was always happiest when bossing someone around, or trying to mother them.

Sokka's face darkened, and Zuko looked away guiltily. He knew what had happened to Sokka and Katara's mother, and if Katara was going to pretend it didn't matter, it was only because she was so excited to have another bender around. Sokka was a different story.

Sure enough, when Sokka spoke his voice was full of venom. "I can't believe you two are just sitting around, wasting time like this," he said, then pointed outside. "Dad's in the roundhouse, telling the tribe now what you are, Zuko. I heard him and Kuthruk talking about it when they thought I was asleep. They're probably going to send you away, and you two are just sitting around playing with your magic?"

Katara gasped and murmured "No…" but Zuko knew that Sokka was telling the truth. Zuko wasn't going to say he was sorry, because he wasn't, really, but he felt a flash of shame flush his unscarred cheek.

No one said anything more for a few pained moments. Finally Sokka let out a long breath and scratched the back of his neck. "And… I guess you saved my life back there. So thanks." This was said very quickly, followed by a hastily held out hand. Zuko gripped his arm, Water Tribe style, and noticed that Sokka still felt cold to the touch, but he dared not warm him or increase the flame on the nearby coals.

"But…" Katara's eyes darted from one boy to another. "Who will teach me about bending if they send him away?"

"Is that all you care about?" Zuko demanded, turning to her.

"I don't!" she snapped, although her gaze darted guilty to the side. "But I just thought… You have a plan, don't you, Sokka?" Katara turned to her brother, hopeful.

The Water Tribe boy seemed to sink down in the folds of the thick blankets. Zuko had never seen him look so tired. It must have taken almost all his effort to just walk over to the tent.

"No," Sokka admitted, with a swipe of his hand across his nose. He looked like he was getting the sniffles. "I just wanted to say goodbye before they send Zuko back to the Fire Nation and turn him against us."

Zuko's mouth felt dry. "I wouldn't ever—"

"You won't have a choice. They took away your memories once, right?"

Sokka had a point, and Zuko felt a sense of horror rise up with himself. It was too easy to imagine himself in those blood-red uniforms, bearing down on the South Pole in one of those iron-ships… "No. I'll— I'll fight them. I'll run away," he said, clenching his fists. "And I'll join the Earth Kingdom and…" He thought again of that golden-eyed girl in his memories. He closed his eyes. "It was horrible over there. I remembered something when I was in the water. I'm never going back."

"Of course it's horrible over there," Sokka said, pragmatically. "Why do you think the Fire Nation is trying to conquer everyone else?"

But Katara had once again gripped Zuko's hand into her own. "What did you remember?"

"It doesn't matter."

"I still want to know. Please?"
Zuko opened his eyes and saw that her face was sincere. Even Sokka seemed mildly interested, although he looked like he was pretending not to be. So, he started speaking, telling them of his fragmented memory. The large bedroom, and of the girl with her hateful words which he could not understand today, but which had filled him with such terror before.

Sokka stopped him at points, and asked him to elaborate on certain details. Zuko did as he was told, and to his surprise with a little prompting he remembered things that he had half-forgotten before. There had been a dagger laying on his bed stand, the hilt inlaid with some sort of pearl design. The rich russet hangings around his bed were ornamented with the Fire Nation insignia. Although try as he might, he couldn't figure out one word that the girl had been saying.

Finally, there was nothing more to tell. Zuko felt strained and worn, having to remember the unpleasant memory all over again, although he felt anxious what Sokka thought of it. The other boy was thoughtful in ways that he knew he could never be.

But Sokka was also tired, and he sat huddled in his blankets, cold and miserable. "I don't know," he said, at last. "It's weird to think of a bedroom that large. Maybe your dad was a Chief of his village, although… If he was he would have been looking for you, wouldn't he?" Sokka sighed, his head bobbing in exhaustion.

Katara shot Zuko a meaningful look, and then went over to her brother. "I'll take you back to our tent. Auya will yell at us if she catches you sleeping in here. Come on."

She and Zuko hauled him to his feet, although Zuko could only help him to the door of the tent, remembering that he had been told to stay inside.

"I'll be back," Katara promised, meeting his eyes again.

Then the two siblings were gone, and Zuko was stuck alone in the tent with nothing but a cold fire and an unpleasant memory to keep him company. He stuck his head out of the tent, and reluctantly looked to the roundhouse.

What was taking the adults so long?

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The meeting adjourned soon after. Once the decision was made, the tribe as a whole was eager catch up with the day's chores, and hunting and gathering. A whole morning had been wasted, and winter's darkness would be upon them soon enough.

Only Hakoda stayed back, and with a nod to Bato to let him know he would be joining him later, he headed back to the main village to check on Sokka. This morning, Kuthruk had judged his health to be good enough to be moved back from the healer's tent to his own. It was a short walk, but Hakoda's mind was heavy with decision, and he ended up taking the long way —around the perimeter of the village.
He pushed back the fur-flap door and found Sokka curled up asleep under a thick pile of blankets, Katara by his side.

His daughter looked up. "Dad… you told everyone that Zuko had to stay, right?" she whispered. "He saved Sokka's life. You can't send him away."

Hakoda favored her with a small smile, but didn't answer her directly. "Go on outside and play, Katara. I need to speak with your brother."

She hesitated, nearly wiggling with curiosity, but she had been raised to mind her elders at all times and with a sullen nod, took herself outside.

Sokka seemed to be asleep, but he woke easily enough when Hakoda came to sit down beside him. He had eaten heartedly several hours before, much like Kuthruk had said, and had seemed to be in his usual high spirits this morning. Now he seemed to be tired again, but his eyes were clear and he watched his father with an intelligent gaze. Clearly, he was expecting bad news.

Hakoda picked his words very carefully. The boy had just lost his mother to a firebender attack this spring, after all. The best way would be to talk to Sokka in a clear, concise way. "Everyone thought that Zuko showed himself honorably in saving your life. He will stay with the tribe, and since our family has the only other bender, he will stay with me as my son."

Sokka jerked back in surprise, and then grinned. "Really?!"

"Yes, although I know it won't be easy. We've been a small family now for some time and it may take patience and understanding to make sure everyone finds their place."

"I think it’s right," Sokka said, after a long moment. Some of the jubilation and relief was fading, and now Sokka was thinking again. "But… I still get to be the elder brother, right Dad? I mean—" He set himself up more fully in the bed, trying to make his point, "—Zuko doesn't know anything. Like how to look for rock fish, or what season is best to hunt seal, and he still can never hit anything with a boomerang. I do, and I could teach him."

His son would make a great and wise Chief one day. Hakoda smiled and clapped his hand on Sokka's shoulder. He too, had thought of this, among many other things on his long walk. It was impossible to say how old Zuko was, exactly. The years just before adolescence sometimes made age an ambiguous thing. But where being the older brother was mostly a source of pride for Sokka, Hakoda’s plans were further reaching. In the coming years, it would mean who had the greater decision on who Katara would be betrothed too, and who would lead the tribe.

"Yes, Sokka. You will be the eldest. That's why I came to you with this, first. You must help guide your brother to our ways. He's made a good start, but as you said there's much more to learn." He paused then, meeting his son's gaze, and judging him to be old and mature enough to know the rest. "You must also help him be strong. Your Gran-Gran is wise and knows many things, and she has said firebenders need the sun to live."

Sokka's blue eyes widened, and Hakoda could almost see his quick mind make the connections. "But, there's gonna be no sun at all in the winter, and that's not too far away!"

"Exactly my point. The elders have decided it will be a test for him. If he lives then the Spirits mean him to be with us. So, it's going to be our job to make sure he's as strong as he can be."

"Oh." Sokka was quiet for a long, long moment. Then, "Do you think he'll die, Dad? Is that why you sent Katara out?"
Hakoda hesitated at this, but in truth Sokka was now eldest of two siblings, and he had to know the entire truth. "The Tribe did not come to this decision lightly. We think he has a better chance with us than anywhere else. The world won't be kind to a young firebender."

The boy sighed and shifted around, plucking a tuft of hair out of the fur blanket. "No, I guess not. They would all think Zuko was just like the rest of them. Not that I mind… it would be kind of neat to have a little brother, even if he is another bender." He looked up. "How are we going to tell him about the winter?"

And now they had come to the question that had been plaguing Hakoda the most during his walk. "No," he said, at length. "I don't think he should be told… not yet." Sokka opened his mouth, but Hakoda continued. "There's nothing we can do to change when the sun will or will not shine, and having Zuko worry about it won't help him at all. Sometimes, Sokka, people are stronger when they don't know that they need to be."

Sokka didn't agree fully with him. Hakoda could see it in his eyes. But he nodded all the same, accepting his father's wisdom for what it was.

Hakoda rose. "I will make sure Kuthruk stops by to check on you soon. Is there anything you need? Are you warm enough?"

"I am sort of hungry," Sokka admitted, ruefully. "Do we have anymore seal jerky?"

Later that afternoon, Hakoda visited Zuko in Auya's tent. He could see the boy brace himself for the worst, but there was no whining. The Fire Nation were a savage people, but they bred their boys and men to be tough… Hakoda would give them that. Looking down at Zuko, he couldn't tell that the boy had nearly drowned the day before. It seemed impossible that he could be so susceptible to a lack of sunlight.

"Zuko," Hakoda said, matter of factly. This was a matter of fact situation. How he wished that Kya were still here…. This needed a woman's touch. He probably should have brought Kana along, but it was too late now. "It's been decided that you are to stay with the tribe as one of my sons. Go on and pack your things. You'll be moving into my family's tent."

The boy seemed not to understand for a moment. He just looked up at him with large, light golden eyes. "You… you mean I'm not going to be banished?"

"Banished…? Hakoda knelt down so that he was eye-level with the child. "No, Zuko. I think you will make a fine Water Tribe warrior one day. Would you like to stay with Sokka, Katara, and I, as a family?"

"More than anything!"
"Good boy. I'll help you pack your things."

He didn't have much, and shortly thereafter Hakoda led him to the tent. Katara squealed upon seeing the boy — Hakoda assumed that Sokka had just told her the news — and he watched in amusement as she threw her arms around Zuko, embarrassing the boy horribly.

Kana set to work pressing Katara, Zuko and Sokka into cutting up sea-prunes for the night's soup. Soon the air in their small dwelling was filled with the smells of cooking, and children's high-pitched talking and laughter.

Hakoda sat by the fire, watching the scene, and allowed himself a smile. This tent had been empty, and too quiet since Kya had died. Now, for the first time, it seemed full of life again.

Outside, the short Antarctic day was ending — the long night was beginning.

Notes: Zuko has a family now! :)

Okay, so while I was writing this (and boredly looking up random Wiki articles at work.) I came across polar night. In season 1 it was supposed to be winter, but Sokka made a reference to 'Midnight Sun Madness', and when I rewatched the episode I realized that the sun never set. It might be winter for the northern hemisphere, but in the southern I guess they were in summer. Since they were having Midnight sun, I would assume that polar night would also occur. And because the Water Tribe apparently live at the South Pole I would assume at least some of this would be astronomical polar night — where no trace of light is at the horizon during any point in the day. (Again, all of this researched at work. I am the worst employee ever.)

Now, we know that firebenders lose their ability during eclipses and gain more of it with a comet. Waterbenders also lost their ability when the Moon Spirit was killed. I also think that the earthbenders in the out-to-sea jail were stricken with more than normal despair when they were separated from their element. If I really stretch, it's almost like the earthbenders only got some of their hope back once they were presented back with their element. Katara's inspirational speeches didn't help. The coal did. Of course, they did had metal — which none of them realized is possible to bend. So they didn't fade away completely.

Anyway those are my thoughts, and why I turned the plot in the direction that I did. Whee!

Thanks for reading! Your thoughts are appreciated!
The Dark Winter

Chapter Summary

This art was drawn by the lovely and talented GreenAppleFreak!
http://greenapplefreak.deviantart.com/art/In-the-Winter-Solstice-167794932

About the Art:
"Before Zuko arrived to their family, Hakoda used to joke and drink with his friends all night during the winter solstice. But now, as strange as it may seem, he finds himself more relaxed watching his new son sleep. Even Katara and Kana prefer to spend the night beside Zuko than in the Main House, and Hakoda practically has to shove Sokka out of the tent to convince him to go to the feast for a little while.

So there, while practically everyone is cheering and feasting, Hakoda’s family prefers to pass the time around each other. It makes for a nice image, what with all your family around. ^^;

I know it’s winter, but inside that tent the fire goes nonstop, and Kana and Katara are used to cold temperatures, so of course they are using summer clothes inside; Hakoda has just arrived after some ‘chief duty’ and is in the process of removing his parka (and probably placing it over Zuko, who despite being almost drowned by furs still looks like he’s cold."
With each day, the sun sunk down lower and lower below the horizon. At first, Zuko hardly noticed. He had a vague idea — he wasn’t sure where, but it was probably from his past life in the Fire Nation — that the days would become shorter, and then longer again after the Winter Solstice. Certainty no one told him any differently — even the seasoned warriors could hardly conceive of a
winter with sun. And no one wanted to broach the subject with him. That was Hakoda's duty.

So, when Zuko realized that the sun's light had diminished to only a few hours a day with winter hardly upon them, he asked Bato who hesitated, and then told him matter of factly that in the southern pole, the winter darkness lasted three months.

Zuko blinked in surprise, and then shrugged. It was just another new thing to learn.

The last few hours of light were spent in preparation. Banks of tall clouds and thunderheads raised high in the sky from the north, and it seemed with every passing day the storms got closer, and darker. The Water Tribe tents were made of sturdy fabric secured with tough rope, but even they would not be able to stand up to winter storms. Blocks of snow were cut, shaped, and stacked around the outer walls, curving in so that they formed a strong enough dome that could hold the weight of a man. The children were charged with packing bits of snow into the cracks formed between the blocks. They had to make it as insulated as possible to keep the chill air out.

Zuko got the idea of melting the snow into the really deep cracks to get it to fit. After all, it was only a little bit of bending — no fire was involved; he just had to place his hand over the spot and give it a small sort of a nudge. Katara caught onto what he was doing with a startling swiftness, and enthusiastically took up the idea — dragging Sokka along when the older boy started scoffing at their magic. Soon a system evolved where Sokka would gather the piles of loose snow, and identify the major cracks in the ice. Zuko would melt the snow in, and Katara would apply her own talent to reform the water inside to secure ice.

By the second day, Zuko and Katara had become so practiced at this that they didn't need to lay their hands over the snow they were manipulating. A small wave would do it, and the process happened so quickly that sometimes Zuko felt almost as if he were bending water, and not just the heat around it. He thought about asking Katara if she felt the same thing, but could never find the right words to express himself.

The days became shorter still, and it was without any apprehension on Zuko's part when the sun became a sliver of brilliance along the east horizon, and then nothing but a glow.

To the people of the Water Tribe, the first week of darkness was a celebration. Everyone piled into the great roundhouse and shared stories, and sang, and danced, and feasted around a great blazing fire. Sokka challenged Zuko to an eat-off of seal jerky— which Sokka then won quite handily.

The elder men of the village took turns telling stories and fables of their forefathers, using their hands to cast shadow puppets against one wall of the lodge. This, Zuko felt, was best done by Hakoda, who specialized stories so frightening and real that they would sometimes keep him and Katara awake and shivering at night.

His favorite story was one that everyone swore was true, because it was about Hakoda's grandfather. It went like this:

Back in those days, the land was wilder and the tribe was plagued in the summer by a giant elephant-wasp; a beast so large and so fierce that it dragged children away when they wandered too far from their homes.

Other kinds of people would have run away in fear, or fought among themselves, or been too afraid and stubborn to go out. But the people of the Southern Water Tribe instead came together in friendship and cooperation. They pooled their resources and fashioned a long string out of all their net-rope. The men waited for days around a trap of cut tiger-seal meat, but by this time the elephant-
wasp had only a taste for human-flesh.

After declaring that he was not afraid, the Chief’s eldest son tied the string around his waist and put himself out as bait. Three long days passed, and the giant elephant-wasp swooped down and carried him away. But the trick had paid off, and the tribe was able to follow the long string to the wasp’s nest. There, they joined in battle and their waterbenders drowned the monster. The Chief’s son was a hero, and the Water Tribe would never again be plagued by elephant-wasps, because the beasts would never forget the Southern Water Tribe, and how they were strong because they fought as one people and stuck things out together until the end.

So, the first week of darkness passed very pleasantly for Zuko. All the hard work he and the rest of the tribe put into hunting and gathering for days on end in the fall had paid off. The tribe would have enough to eat and drink for the winter. While the fierce winter wind howled and tore at their dwellings, they were so warmly packed with snow and skins that Zuko felt secure, and safe. Boredom was the only real problem.

And if sometimes Zuko caught some of the tribesmen giving him sidelong, pitying glances, he ignored them. They were probably just thinking of his scars.

OoOoOoO

One day — or night — there was a usual lull in the terrible winter storms. The sky was dark, but very clear and the half-moon shined down on the new fallen snow making it glitter like a thousand encrusted diamonds. Peeking his head out the tent, Sokka saw this and immediately challenged Zuko and Katara to a game of hide an’ freeze.

The children spent next few hours dashing around within the strict perimeter of the village, and shrieking when one or the other was caught.

It was one of those strange times of day when the sun should have been up, but wasn't. It lurked just below the horizon, casting a sort of dark twilight over the whole village. This, Zuko soon discovered, made for a ton of excellent hiding places. He got the idea to creep into one of the long shadows thrown off by someone’s tent and sink down into the snow, practically unseen. It worked nearly every time.

In this round, Katara was It, and he could hear her from far off away, counting to one hundred.

Zuko grinned to himself, and after checking to make sure he wasn't in view of Sokka (because he would steal his trick if he could), he walked over and laid out flat along the edge of a long shadow. Katara would have to look really hard to find him here.
His parka was thick, and lined with wolf-wolverine fur, but after a few minutes he felt the chill of snow against his belly. Katara had stopped counting, so he couldn't risk changing his position or using the fire breathing (which he liked to call his breath of fire, because it sounded mysterious) to warm up. So instead Zuko carefully shifted back and forth, creating a rut in the snow. It was strange, but sometimes the snow could provide a little insulation that way.

He had chosen very well for his hiding spot, but it was boring to wait, and he only getting colder by the minute. He sighed silently, thinking that next time he would stay near the roundhouse where it was warmer. He looked out from his half-sunken hole, and tried to count how many stars were dusted around the moon. There were many, and he kept losing his place. Before Zuko realized it, he had drifted off to sleep.

"Got you!"

Something shook his shoulder hard, pulling him out of a heavy doze. He groaned, and tried to get up, but his limbs felt stiff. He could hardly move.

"Get up!" Katara commanded. "I know you're there, Zuko!" She pulled on his parka, rolling him over so that he lay on his back. He could see her standing over him, grinning. "I already caught Sokka — he was cheating. He thought I wouldn't ever look in the boy's outhouse. So he's It … Zuko, c'mon. Get up!"

"I'm cold…" he groaned. He felt strangely lethargic, and numb.

Katara gave him a long look and then grabbed his arm, sitting him up.

He cupped his hands to his mouth, blowing into the mittens to get them warm the usual way — and then resorting to his breath of fire when that didn't work. He was able to blow steam; just enough to unfreeze his blood. The tongue of flame never came, though, and when he stood up he felt dizzy.

"What's wrong?" Katara asked.

"I don't know… I don't feel right."

Just then, Sokka came racing around the corner, counting as he went along. He had heard his siblings voices, and had been too excited to wait properly. "Ninety-nine! One-hundred! I found you!" He slapped Zuko's shoulder, "And you're It!" Then he seemed to realize that neither one of them were paying attention. "What's going on?"

"Zuko doesn't feel good. I told you that stupid jerky-eating contest was a bad idea."

If Zuko was feeling better, he wouldn't have missed the way Sokka's eyes widened ever so slightly before he gazed out to the dark horizon. "You can walk it off. I'll tell you what; I'll call this a redo," he said, generously, "and I'll go count again and you two can hide properly this time."

It sounded like a good idea, but Zuko only took four or five paces before a rolling shiver went down his spine, leaving him strangely breathless. "I don't feel much like playing anymore," he said, miserably wrapping his arms around himself. He just felt cold.

Again, there was an awkward pause from Sokka. "Maybe you should go lay down."

"Yeah… maybe." He shook his head, distracted, but took Sokka's advice and went back to the family tent, and crawled back into his sleeping bag. He was asleep almost as soon as his head hit his pillow.
By morning, his firebending had completely left him.

OoOoOoO

Zuko didn't know what was going on, and of course there was no one to ask. But as the days wore on, his energy dwindled. It didn't matter how much he slept — and suddenly he was sleeping a lot — past even Sokka who could nearly out-sleep anyone.

Katara had to shake his shoulder hard to get him to wake up in the mornings for breakfast.

He seemed to be colder than everyone else, too. He was freezing no matter how many furs Gran-Gran made him wear, and at the gatherings at the roundhouse he'd often sit to the side and watch the dancing and singing with half hooded eyes — too exhausted and worn to join in for more than a few minutes at a time.

One morning, he awoke to the familiar sensation of someone shaking his shoulder. He expected Katara's high, slightly nagging voice telling him that he had missed breakfast again. Instead he got the soft authoritative command of Hakoda.

"Wake up, Zuko."

He struggled to sit up, and it was like pulling himself out of thick mud. His scarred left eye was stuck shut with sleep-gunk, and he rubbed at it absently with the back of his hand. For a moment, he worried that he was in trouble — Hakoda's face was full of concern as he handed him a parka to pull over his blue tunic.

"As soon as you're ready, we're going to visit Healer Kuthruk."

"He'll tell me why I'm tired all the time?" Zuko asked, around a jaw-cracking yawn.

Hakoda hesitated, and then nodded once.

Not only was it dark outside, but the wind was blowing so fiercely that Zuko would have pitched over quite a few times if not for Hakoda's steady hand on his shoulder. As it was, he found himself exhausted, and gratefully lay down on a bed pallet when Kuthruk went to examine him.

The healer's tent was warm — warmer than even Hakoda's, and filled with spicy herbs that mingled together in a pleasant sort of way. Zuko found himself drifting off to sleep again, even before he knew it.

Hakoda watched the healer work silently for a few minutes — pinching the sleeping boy's skin, listening to his heartbeat and breathing, and running a few sprigs of incense over him and watching the smoke intently to see which direction it blew.
Finally, Kuthruk turned to him and his blue eyes looked very tired.

"He's healthy, physically. I suspect something is happening with his chi, which is nearly impossible to test for without a waterbending healer." Kuthruk must have seen the look on his Chief's face, because he added, "Chief, you knew this could happen."

Hakoda rewarded him with a sharp look. "What do you suggest we do?"

He let out a long sigh, pulling at his short beard in thought. "Have him eat more vegetables. Plants get energy from the sun, and maybe that could help him get whatever he needs. Also, keep him away from anyone who's coughing. The last thing he needs is to catch something he can't fight off. Aside from that..." Kuthruk sighed again, and for the first time a flash of regret crossed his face. "He needs to know what he's facing. I know you've kept it from him, to spare him. But that's not an option anymore."

The Chief nodded, and went over to wake Zuko again. It took a few minutes to get him to sit up. Sometimes, Hakoda swore he could almost see the life leaking out of the boy.

"I didn't know I was asleep," Zuko muttered, rubbing again at his left eye, as if it was bothering him. "Did you find out what was wrong?"

Again, Hakoda hesitated. This was hard, he realized, harder than he thought it would be. Yet the child deserved the full truth. "Yes," he said, "we've suspected it for some time. You're a firebender, and you need the sun. Without it, you're getting weaker."

"Oh," he replied, without any interest, still rubbing at his eye. "I guess that's why the Fire Nation's at the equator then. Plenty of sun there..." He trailed off, his hand dropping away. "Wait, what do you mean you've suspected? You knew, and you didn't tell me? I haven't been able to firebend for weeks, and you didn't tell me?!"

This was the most alive Hakoda had seen him for some time, and he was almost glad for it — despite the insolence. "It was my decision." He put both his hands on Zuko's thin shoulders, only to have his touch shrugged away.

"You should have told me! I'm not a baby!"

"Zuko, you need to calm yourself." Hakoda did not mean for so much disapproval to enter his voice, and he did feel a pang of guilt when the boy shrank back. "I did it because I didn't want to worry you. We didn't know for certain that this would happen," he said, and then added, "I know you're a young man. I'll try not to forget that, next time."

This seemed to mollify the boy slightly, although his pale cheek was still flushed with anger. He looked away, for a long moment, and Hakoda braced himself for the question he knew was coming: Was he going to die?

And at that moment, the Chief felt like the worst kind of coward, because he would have given nearly anything to not have to tell the truth.

When Zuko spoke, though, his voice was small, and the question wholly surprised him. "So are you going to have to send me away?" Before Hakoda could answer, Zuko continued, "I don't want to go back. I don't care if the Fire Nation gets sun all the time — I don't ever want to go back there ever again."

"No, you will not be sent back." He made sure to meet the boy's eyes as he answered, and was surprised at the naked relief that was there. Bato had been correct at the tribal meeting; Zuko wanted
to be Water Tribe more than anything. And Hakoda wondered, briefly, what kind of fierce loyalty existed in Fire Nation blood, and if they were all so determined once they had made their mind. "But that means you have to be strong. We still have a month and a half of darkness ahead."

Kuthruk coughed from his corner where he had been watching the exchange, silently. "Actually, the winter solstice is only three weeks away. It stands to reason if this is somehow connected to the sun, he may get better after that time."

"Why?" Zuko asked, turning to him.

The healer held up his hand, clenched in a fist. "Right now our part of the world is tilting from the sun," he said, pointing to the heel of his palm. "After the solstice, it will begin to turn back." And his wrist flexed, moving his fist to the other direction.

"So… only three more weeks?" Zuko repeated, and he drew himself up, glancing from the healer to his adoptive father. "That's easy. I can do it."

"Good boy." Hakoda smiled and ruffled his hair, and got a tentative grin in return.

He almost believed him.

During the next night's gathering, Hakoda saw Zuko playing with his two other children. They had found the wolfskin warrior helmets and he and Sokka were busy chasing Katara around the fire and spooking some of the toddlers. And if Zuko was slower in step than Sokka, Hakoda chose not to notice. He was satisfied that the boy was putting more effort into things, and turned back to his conversation with Bato.

Later on, he would find Zuko curled up asleep in a corner, helmet still on his head. He was in such a listless daze that Hakoda had to carry him back to their tent.

OoOoOoO

"Sokka," Katara whispered, nearly two weeks later. "Is Zuko gonna die?"

Sokka quickly shushed her, and sent a guilty look towards the boy he thought more and more as his younger brother. He was sleeping by the fire, his face pale and drawn. Nowadays, he wouldn't wake up hardly at all, except when forced by Gran-Gran to sit up and drink some broth.

Kuthruk had been called again, and both Katara and Sokka had seen the way the grizzled healer examined him, shook his head, and pulled Hakoda to the side to have a meaningful conversation outside the door.

"He's just not feeling good, because the Fire Nation worship’s the sun instead of the moon like normal people," Sokka said, wisely. "He'll be better, after the solstice. Dad said." Actually, Hakoda's
talk with his eldest son had been a much grimmer tone than that, but Sokka instinctually wanted to
shield Katara from what he could. He hated to see her cry.

Katara looked down. She had one of her favorite dolls in her lap, and she was alternately hugging it
and smoothing out the thick threads in its hair. "I don't think he's going to make it to the solstice," she
whispered, softly.

"Of course he is. Zuko's just not going to give up."

His little sister was looking to him now, and Sokka forced a smile on his face, even though he felt
like he was suffocating inside. He couldn't show any of that, though. He was always telling Zuko to
be strong, but Dad expected Sokka to be stronger. And if that meant not showing how worried he
was, and covering it up as best he could with humor… he could do that.

For the first time in his young life, but certainly not for the last time, Sokka decided that he didn't
want to understand any of his crazy bending stuff. He preferred to live in the world of the logical and
the sane, thank you very much. He lived in a world where people didn't just… fade away because of
the sun. It didn't make any sense. None of this stupid magic stuff made any sense.

The door's fur flap was pushed aside, and his father walked back into the tent. Kuthruk was gone,
but Bato and Gran-Gran had taken his place.

Hakoda's eyes met his across the tent, and Sokka's felt his stomach drop. Whatever had been said
outside hadn't been good news at all. Sokka would have cursed, if Gran-Gran wasn't so close to
hear.

"C'mon, Katara. It's too hot in here." Which was the truth. They had the fire going as hot as possible
in the tent, trying to keep Zuko warm. Not that it was doing any good. "Let's get to the roundhouse."

Katara wasn't fooled, not for one moment. She bit her lip and looked from Sokka and back to the
sleeping Zuko.

But Sokka curled his hand about hers, and tugged her to the door. The adults were off to the side,
and he didn't want Katara to hear anything that would upset her. His little sister still hesitated, and
Sokka blew out an annoyed breath. "Look," he said, and his voice was slightly sharper than he
intended, "Zuko didn't come all this way, get dropped on his head while penguin sledding, and
nearly drown, just to die now. C'mon."

This seemed to convince her more than anything else, and with a final long look back over her
shoulder she joined her brother.

OoOoOoO
Hakoda waited for Sokka to drag Katara out of the tent, before he turned and sat by the sick child again. Zuko was curled almost dangerously close to the fire, as if straining to get close to it. His eyes flicked back and forth under closed lids; he was dreaming, and Hakoda hoped for his sake that it was a good dream.

Kuthruk's final prognosis a few minutes ago outside had been a death sentence. "I think he will pass in his sleep in the next few days." He had said, "The best thing to do is to keep him comfortable… He won't feel a thing, Hakoda." The healer then put a hand to his shoulder in a gesture of sympathy, before taking up his things and trudging away. There was nothing more he could do.

Kana took her place on the other side of the boy. "It was very much like this, before." She didn't have to say when. They both knew she was speaking of the firebenders in the North.

There was a soft clink of a bottle while Bato fished around the tent for the rough-grain alcohol, hidden away for special — or horrible, occasions.

It had been a long time since Kana had tried to mother him. When he had taken his father's place as Chief, she had drawn back, which was only right. Hakoda wondered briefly how terrible his face must have looked, if she felt the need to reassure him now.

There was a murmur of success somewhere from Bato's direction, and a few moments later a mug of mulled rum was pressed into Hakoda's hands. It was a rough kind of alcohol, but if anyone needed it right now, it was him.

"Seeing a child die isn't easy for anyone," said Bato softly, sitting down to join them in their vigil. "But we knew going in this would be the kindest end he could have. Drink up, Chief."

Hakoda did what he was told, wincing against the harsh burn. Bato took his own drink, although Kana did not partake. There was a grim sort of silence between the three adults, punctuated only by the soft gasps of the slowly dying boy beside them.

"It's not fair to Katara and Sokka. They grew… attached." Hakoda murmured, at last, looking into his mug.

Bato sighed. "I think it's you who's grown attached." It had been much like what Kana had said — all the life out of him had just wilted away without the sun. And no, it wasn't fair. Zuko might be Fire Nation, but he turned out to be a good kid. "But since when has life ever been fair for us Water Folk?" he asked, speaking his thoughts out loud.

The boy shifted beside them, eyes darting at a frantic pace under his lids, and his hand curled into a fist. "Father..." he whispered, and Hakoda visibly gave a start. Zuko winced in his sleep and murmured pained, low. "I'm sorry."

Something felt like it snapped in Hakoda's chest, and he had to close his eyes against the pain. "You have nothing to be sorry for," he said, when he was able to speak. Reaching down, he rested his hand against the Zuko's forehead, finding it cold and dry. "You are very brave."

The boy let out a long breath, and his movements stilled as he fell back into a more natural sleep.

The adults grew respectfully silent again, but Zuko had been oblivious to their words before, and they knew logically he had been only dreaming.

"I didn't think it would be this hard." Bato's words seemed to surprise even him, and he gave a sort of a shrug, drinking deeply of his rum as if he just wanted to forget what he said. He had lost more to the Fire Nation than nearly everyone else in the tribe. He shouldn't be mourning like this.
But something in his words seemed to jerk a reaction out of Hakoda. He took a final swig of the rum and then set it down, wiping his mouth on the edge of a sleeve. "This test has gone too far. I'm taking him out. If I can get north, the sun will be shining. It may not be too late..." He stood up, but Bato had as well, and was blocking his path before he could make a step to go outside.

"You can't do this, Hakoda," Bato said lowly, urgently. "I know this hurts... Everyone knew this would hurt. And that's why the tribe wanted you to do it, in the end. You can't go back on your own orders, now!"

"He's dying! You can't expect me just to stand to the side and watch..." he trailed off and let out a low, breathless laugh, "and watch one of my own son's die."

He tried to shove past Bato, but the alcohol had hit his empty stomach hard, and his friend easily shoved him back and down again into.

"Sit down and listen to me!" Bato snarled, "What if you do this thing, and he survives? What then? You would have gone back on your own word, and your honor with the Tribe will be gone. Oh yes, that'll be good for Sokka and Katara. And what of Zuko? He won't be accepted and we will be back exactly where we were before — either sending him to the Earth Kingdom to be torn apart by an angry mob, or burned alive at the Fire Nation." He met Hakoda's eyes, glare for glare. The absurdity of what they were arguing about flashed across Bato's face, and he grinned, tempering his own words. "And the Tribe will have to name me Chief, and then you'll have to listen to me no matter what."

Hakoda snorted and looked away, although his temper had gone to a simmer. Some of what Bato had said penetrated his mind. "Until that happens, I am Chief," he said, after a long moment, and stood up. Bato could see the determination in his eyes. He fully meant to go through with this crazy task.

"Hakoda, if this is the will of the Spirits, you have to let it be," murmured Kana, softly.

The Chief paused at the fur doorflap, and then shook his head, pushing it aside and walking out.

It would take him a few hours to get the canoe packed and ready. In that time, almost as if the Spirits themselves were listening to Kana's words, a fierce storm blew in on the village.

The people of the Water Tribe were more than up to the challenge, and strung long lengths of rope from one tent to another so no one would get lost in the near whiteout blizzard. No one could even go outside without being blown over.

And, standing at the doorway with a length of fabric across his face to protect his skin from the scouring wind, Hakoda had to admit defeat. He couldn't bring Zuko out in this.

The child would die.

OoOoOoO
"Zuko, get up." Katara shook his shoulder steadily, noticing how cold he was, even though he slept right by the fire. She was nearly sweating under her clothes. She glanced around, checking to make sure the rest of her family were still sleeping. Dad and Gran-Gran didn't want her bugging Zuko, and Sokka would only scoff and laugh at her idea. She bent down, hissing in his unburned ear. "C'mon, Zuko. Get up. I want to show you something." She shook him again. "It's important."

His breathing was so shallow it was hardly there at all. Finally, he rolled his head to the side and opened his eyes. They were so dull it was like looking at a field of dried yellowed weeds, parched and dead. "What?" he rasped.

"Look." She held out her hand, a ball of cooling water cupped within.

He stared at it, dumbly. "That's… great, Katara." He closed his eyes. "Go away… I'm tired."

"No, you aren't looking." She shook his shoulder again until he opened his eyes. "I know you're not feeling good. I'd feel horrible if someone took away my bending, and it's the full moon and everything! I was thinking… you're doing this all wrong. Dad and Sokka keep telling you to be strong, but that's not it. You gotta be like the water, Zuko."

He didn't say anything, but she could tell she had his attention. At the very least, his eyes seemed to focus a little. Katara was encouraged. She went on, "Right now, you're like an ember that's going out, right? But water doesn't burn out. It freezes, or it steams, but it never goes away. It just changes."

"I don't…"

She sighed. Males could be so thick sometimes. "A Fire Nation boy would die 'cause there's no sun, but you're not Fire Nation anymore. Everyone says that you're Water Tribe now."

She held out the glob of water, and after a moment Zuko reached out towards it, covering his hand over it like they had done the first time they bended. Maybe it was Katara's imagination, but she swore that the water glowed a brilliant blue — just for a moment, between their fingers.

Zuko dropped his hand away, all the strength gone. "I'm Water Tribe," he mumbled, eyes sliding shut.

"And Water Tribe boys don't die 'cause of the sun. They just adapt." she told him. And the corner of Zuko's mouth twitched upward before he sank again into oblivion.

OoOoOoO

Zuko passed the day of Winter Solstice in what was more or less a coma. The bottom of the world
was tilted the furthest away from the sun as it was ever going to get, and there was hardly a scrap of life left in his body.

Kana, Kuthruk, and Hakoda took turns to keep him company, and when Katara and Sokka weren’t looking, pressing a hand to the scarred neck to see if there was still a pulse.

The next day, Zuko stirred and opened his eyes. Two days after that, he was able to sit up and told Kana that he was hungry.

Day by day, he grew stronger. Once he was sure he would live, Hakoda gave out a tacit reminder during the night's gathering that Zuko had indeed passed the Spiritual test, and that he was Water Tribe. No one dissented from this, because it was a tight knit community and even the most jaded adult had seen that the boy had suffered, and lived, where others of his kind had not. The general consensus was that it meant there was something good — something Water Tribe — inside of him. And slowly, he stopped being the Fire Nation child, and started being the second son of Hakoda — brother to Sokka and Katara.

One night, almost a month and a half after Zuko lay on his deathbed, Katara woke up to see her him slip out of the family tent. Curious, she pulled on her own parka and followed him. It was easy; a new layer of snow had fallen recently, and his footsteps were clearly visible even in the dark.

She found him just outside the village, facing east. Hearing her approach, he turned and spoke. "Do you feel it?"

"What? The wind?" She shivered and pulled her hood up.

"No." He pointed out to the east where a slight glow had been visible for days. "The sun."

She shook her head, and stood next to him, watching together as the glow slowly brightened more and more into a pearly luminescence. Zuko took deep breaths, in through his nose and exhaling out his mouth. On his forth breath, a slight sheen of yellow sun peeked just over the horizon.

Her brother visibly shivered, and then grinned, holding out his hand. A spark of flame lit, and even when the sun sank down again not fifteen minutes later, the flame both in his hand and deep within him continued bright and strong.

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OoOoOoO

Notes: Some parts were left vague on purpose, including the exact reasons why Zuko survived. More explanation will be given later in the series, but it has to do with his Spiritual state of mind. (And no, he did not gain his memories back, but a couple of them in particular are still floating around in his head, just out of reach)
Next: TIME SKIP! (Also, bending, southern lights, water fights, and a really eventful canoeing accident.)
A Sea Change

Chapter Summary

This fantastic art "Fishing--Sokka Style" provided by Golden Flute! (http://golden-flute.deviantart.com/art/ATLA-Fishing-Sokka-Style-113298031)

Notes: This is kind of a strange chapter. The first three quarters or so is comprised of loose drabbles. It's all in order as the kids grow older. Luckily, the last quarter of the fic is something… a little more cohesive which I hope you guys like. :D

OoOoOoO

“There is a storm coming. A big one.”

- Iroh, The Storm
Zuko gasped in a deep breath and then plunged overboard. The water closed in from every side, needling his skin with freezing cold. He ignored it, kicking his legs and reaching out to grasp an underwater rock.

He had calculated his position perfectly. In the cold, clear summer water everything had been visible from the surface. Now that he was under, features and objects were more or less a blur. He reached out, searching for a splash of red gripping an underwater rock, and once he found it, he stuck his pry under and heaved upward. The shell popped off with a soft *shawooping* sound. Grabbing it, feeling the burn of old air in his lungs, he kicked off the bottom and shot back up to the top.

His head broke the surface with a gasp, and he reached out, hauling himself back up to his canoe. He lay on his back for a few moments, letting the weak summer sun melt into his skin, and staring up into the impossibly blue sky. Then, with a wince (because the butt of his pry was digging into his skin) he sat up, and dug his hard-won prize out of the seal-skin sack.

It was a rust red, bumpy oblong. A shell with a crease down the middle that, when boiled, would open easily. Zuko tossed it in the bucket with a dozen others. They were Katara's favorite, both for their taste and the likelihood of finding pearls inside, and he was determined that she would have as much as she wanted on her upcoming birthday.

Just a few more, and he would be done.

Once again, Zuko went to the side of his canoe and peered down into the clear water, choosing his next target.

The people in the Water Tribe believed that the colorful southern lights in the night sky was a veiled curtain between their world and the world of the Spirits; that the great ancestors looked down upon them from the gap. And if you looked very hard – you could see the faces of the ones you lost gazing back down at you with love in their eyes.

Zuko knew for a fact that Sokka didn't believe any of it, because he had said so on a number of occasions. Sokka believed there had to be some other, some more rational explanation.

"I don't know what it is, but I'm sure someone will figure it out sometime. Maybe it has to do with the moon," he said wisely, one day while they were practicing hitting far off targets with their boomerangs.

Katara, on the other hand, did. More than once Zuko had seen her look up to the southern lights and
raise her hand, as if in greeting. He never asked who she saw in the sky — probably her mother.

As for himself, he at first looked towards the waving green and blue tinged veils with more than a little trepidation. Would he see his blood mother and father glaring down at him, evil, and snapping like the fire itself?

But he never did. Maybe, he thought, half-asleep one night with the southern lights crackling overhead. Maybe because he was Hakoda's son, his ancestors were now different, too. Maybe his Fire Nation ancestors couldn't see him from up high because he would just look like any other Water Tribe boy.

Comforted by this, he finally fell asleep.

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"What do you think?" asked Sokka, anxiously.

Zuko couldn't answer right away. He was too busy coughing, doubling over, pressing in on his stomach in order to force its contents to stay there and not come back up and embarrass him.

"Strong!" he gasped at last, pushing the stolen liquor bottle back into Sokka's hands. "Your turn."

"Hmm…" Sokka examined the label again, carefully wiping away some dust from the characters. With a shrug, he put the bottle to his lips and took a swig of his own — a smaller one than his hapless brother. He didn't cough nearly as much, although the strong spirit did burn all the way down. "I guess you just have to be a real man to enjoy it," he concluded at last.

This earned him a dirty look from Zuko's general direction. "I can't believe they like to drink this stuff," he grumbled, taking another swig.

"Think of it this way. We're getting our practice in so when they do let us drink in a few years, we won't embarrass ourselves." Sokka took his turn at the bottle. "I kinda like it."

"No you don't."

"Well, no. But now no one will know."

Presently, Zuko started to feel a little dizzy. He sat down in the cooling snow, and looked over the vista of their village. He and Sokka had chosen their little hiding spot well — they would be able to see anyone coming (especially a suspicious father) well before anyone could see them.

If being drunk made Zuko quiet and contemplative, it had the exact opposite effect on his elder brother. Sokka became even more animated and chatty, talking out loud to him well after Zuko had stopped bothering to answer.
Over all, it was a pleasant experience… even if they did end up stumbling, more or less, back to the tent. And somehow, Sokka had lost his best pair of mittens in the snow.

The next morning was an entirely different story.

Hakoda could hardly not notice the green, pained expression on his two son’s faces the next morning, or the way both of them winced whenever there was a loud noise. He didn't need to check the supply cave to know that one of the bottles of rum would be missing. Sokka and Zuko thought they were clever — and most of the time, they were — but neither one of them was the trouble maker Hakoda had been as a boy. He knew a hangover when he saw one.

It wasn't Hakoda's style to pull both boys aside and lecture them. No, he was more creative than that.

Instead, he put them on rowing duty for the day, which was hard, tough work. The sea was deliciously choppy, and he made sure to sit out of range when both boys inevitably lost their breakfasts over the side of the canoe. He didn't offer any sympathy, instead fixed them both with a glare that cut off any request to return to shore.

"If you two want the privileges of men, you've got to earn your work like men." And that was all he ever said about it.

OoOoOoO

"Zuko! Wake up!"

He struggled against the amber tinged terrors in his mind. It was like fighting against a black veil which only folded deeper with every movement.

He cried out, reaching for his attacker, and when his hands gasped against boney wrists — solid and real, he woke up to find himself face to face with Katara, hovering over him.

"It's okay," she whispered, meeting his wide, frightened gaze with an understanding sort of calm. "It was just a nightmare."

Zuko gulped in air like a dying fish. His heart felt like it was trying to beat its way out of his chest. But all was quiet in the tent; he could hear the crackle of the fire and the call of some kind of night bird. And Sokka's soft snores from his left assured him that his thrashing had mostly gone unnoticed. All of the children slept together, as was done in the Water Tribe.

He was still holding her wrists, and once he realized this he released them at once.

"Sorry," he muttered, laying back down, and trying to calm his hitched breathing.
Katara was quiet for a long time, and he thought that she had gone back to sleep until she spoke, "You were dreaming about the girl again, weren't you?"

Her whisper was so quiet, he could have pretended to ignore it. But there wasn't a point. She was right, anyway. "Yeah."

She didn't say anything more, and he rolled over, facing away from her. But every time he closed his eyes on that night he saw the girl's face; her evil amber eyes, and a laughing, taunting voice he couldn't understand.

OoOoOoO

And suddenly, Sokka realized that his younger brother had grown taller than him.

He didn't know when that had happened. One day they were playing around the fort, Sokka tackled Zuko and brought the pipsqueak down into the snow… and it seemed like the next day they were carrying firewood back to the camp and Sokka had to look up to meet Zuko's eyes.

It so wasn't fair, and when he made the mistake of complaining about it, he got to hear Katara and Zuko make short-jokes all day.

Sokka got his private revenge, a few days later. They were hunting with Bato and their father, tracking down a herd of moose-caribou. The boys, with their young eyes, were the first to spot a mess of antlers; just visible over the ridge.

"Over here!" Sokka yelled. There was no point in being quiet; the animals had backed themselves up against the sea. They had them trapped.

"What are we—" and in those three syllables, Zuko somehow managed to convey three entirely separate octaves. He stopped, gripping his own throat in shock.

Hakoda and Bato joined up with the boys just about the time Sokka had stopped laughing.

OoOoOoO

"They're coming back."
Katara’s voice was quiet, pensive. Zuko stared into the campfire, watching the orange glow for a long moment before he raised his head, following her glance.

He could them off in the distance; Dad had his arm thrown over Sokka’s shoulder, and by the slumped, dejected look in Sokka’s gait, Zuko knew without question that had been told he couldn't come to war.

He would never, ever tell Sokka (he hated to admit it even to himself), but at that moment Zuko felt relieved. He didn't want Sokka to go off to war, and leave him and Katara all alone with the women and kids. The Fire Nation was cruel and heartless, and if his brother was going to war, Zuko wanted to be along with him — so they could watch each other's backs like they had done all along.

As the pair drew closer, Katara and Zuko stood up to greet them. Zuko could see where Sokka's face-paint had been washed away by tears. He looked away, pretending not to see, and focused instead on his dad.

Hakoda’s face was grim —it seemed like he hadn't cracked a smile for weeks. Not since the plea come by messenger for aid. When he addressed his children, it was with a certain distance in his voice, as if he couldn't stand to be warm to them in this moment, or else he wouldn't be able to leave.

"The Earth Kingdom are our allies, and they have requested our help. The Fire Lord has stepped up his attacks recently; he's planning something, and the only hope now to stop him is to combine our forces."

"Dad…” Katara whispered, but didn't finish.

Turning, Hakoda addressed his sons. "Sokka, Zuko, you two will need to be the Tribe's warriors while we are gone. Kana will direct you, but as the men you will have your say in defense. Sokka, that will mean you especially, as eldest. Both of you, listen to your Gran-Gran, but also listen to your heart and your judgment."

Zuko swallowed hard past tears that threatened to come up and nodded, coming to stand by Sokka. "We will," they both murmured.

Hakoda nodded, swallowing as well. This was just hard, if not harder, for him. Then he turned to his daughter. "Katara—"

But he didn't get to finish, because she had flung her arms around his waist, sobbing. Then Sokka turned, and Zuko stepped forward and they all hugged him — as hard and as long as they could, because they all knew this might be for the last time.

Hakoda touched their heads, murmured words that were meant to comfort, but were meaningless. But the ships were ready, and eventually he had to draw back.

They all watched him go, and stood by the shore until the wooden ships with the blue sails were nothing but dark points on the horizon.

Later in life, Zuko would look back on that day and decide that was the one where he stopped feeling like a child. As they all turned and trudged back to the village — so empty and so dead without the men — he met eyes with Sokka and knew that there would be no more fooling around… no more games. Their father had left them with a task, and they were not going to fail.
Zuko's voice was first to break, but Sokka was the one who was the first to shave. He refused, at first, attempting to grow out the peach-fuzz on his upper lip into a proper mustache. But it was sparse at best, and when it became apparent that only one half would grow in properly, he had to admit defeat.

The sun had risen only a quarter high in the sky, shining its weak light upon the bright snowy landscape. Past the small huddle of dwellings and just up the coast there were a series of rocky-shale hills. It was the only place within walking distance from the village where the sun was able to truly bake in, helped by the rock underneath, and melt back the snow and ice during the warmer months. Yet the shale was loose, always crumbling down, and so grey and desolate that not even hardy artic brambles could take hold.

The only sign of life came from snow-melted water; streaming in rivets from higher peaks and valleys, and trickling down between the cracks and chipped stone before finally traveling out to the sea.

Two figures stood side-by-side in the middle of a small dip formed by two grey hills. At first look, it seemed as if the two were dancing — something ancient, yet strong and powerful and immeasurably graceful. The boy and girl swept their arms around in graceful loops, feet centered to the ground, and above them in the sky duel ribbons of water and fire flicked about to the left and to the right.

The two stopped, recalling their elements into globes in their hands before twisting them out again around their very bodies. Fire snapped and coiled about Zuko's frame like a beautiful and dangerous ribbon. Katara's water copied him almost exactly, but her stream was cool, thick and strong. Where his element looked like it was ready to snap out and enflame someone with a vengeance, hers was ready to defend, to cool and heal.

Occasionally, either Zuko or Katara would fall out of sync. After all, their elements were opposites, and Zuko had to make his movements quicker, more forceful. Katara, for her part needed to almost always be in motion; channeling the water, pushing and pulling it through the air.

She was the one keeping the pace; directing their shared set of katas that they had spent the last few years together carefully etching out of nothing more than vague ideas and determination.

"Okay, and now… out," she said, and both shifted into a low crouch; Katara flicking out her water into a sharp point of a spear as if to impale an enemy. Zuko's own fire lashed out as a lance. Both elements went to the length of their control — about thirty feet away or so, before the benders reeled them in.
"And defend." Katara commanded.

This time their movements were once again in unison. Both swept their arms inward and up, settling them like a shield in front of thief faces. Their elements leapt to their movements and a thick wall of ice and fire erupted before each of them. They let this hold for the count of three before dropping their stances.

It was the end. Twenty minutes work, and they had gone though all the katas that they had created. It was better than nothing, but learning new forms from zero reference and with no help was deeply frustrating… for both of them.

Katara sighed and let her water run from her fingers and back to the ground. Zuko sent his flames back to the camp-fire he had built to cook their lunch with. He preferred to always have a supply of fire with him when he practiced, like a waterbender, rather than generate it himself. That way he could match Katara's fluid movements with more ease.

"Real benders with masters practice from sun up to sun down," he grumbled, stretching down to touch his toes. He hadn't understood at the time, now years past, why Katara was so anxious to meet another bender. Now he knew. He could feel the bite of impatience each and every time their forms ended, along with something else, something sad. It was a craving that was not so different from hunger or thirst.

Katara walked to the campfire to check on their roasting lunch. The fish was still sizzling softly, propped up over the V of two sticks. It would still be a few minutes before they could eat.

She glanced up at his words and frowned. "Don't start talking like that," she commanded, pointing a twig at him. "I am a real bender, and you are too." Although, she did look a bit wistful at having nothing to do all day but practice. As it was, the rest of the tribe could only spare them for an hour a day at most… and they had to do it during lunch.

"It's just… There's more. There's so much more we could do, and I wish I could remember it!" He pressed the heel of his hand to his forehead, almost as if wishing he could press the knowledge out. Of course, nothing came. Nothing ever came.

Katara sent a sidelong glance to him over the campfire. "It's okay. We'll figure it out… somehow."

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OoOoOoO

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Zuko sighed, and cursed Katara one more time for falling so inconveniently sick with the flu. With her out, it had fallen to him to teach the little kids how to knot proper nets. He was no good at dealing with children, partially because he didn't remember being a small child, and partially because he was impatient.

"Tuktu, start that row again," he said, bending down, and with a swift tug unknotted the imperfect work. "You are going to have to rely on this net, so make it good and strong."
Tuktu's younger brother, Denahi held up his net, grinning a gap-toothed grin. "Zuko, how's this?"

He took the net into his hands. The knots were good enough, but, "You're weaving the net too tightly," he said, absently, handing it back and looking around to make sure the rest of the kids were still doing what they should be doing. "You're not fishing for an octopus."

"What's an octopus?"

Zuko glanced down at the boy in surprise. He had said that, hadn't he? "It's… just an old saying, I think. Never mind." He shook his head as if to clear it stood up. Where had that come from?

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"No, that can't be right." And with a quick swipe, Sokka grabbed the scroll out of Katara's hands, unrolled it, and turned it to the side, as if seeing it from a new angle would be better. A pause, and then. "There's no way this can be right."

Zuko came up from behind him, and his unburned eye widened as he, too, saw the grim figures. "That's all that's left?" He was always quicker to go from shock to anger, and he whirled around towards Gran-Gran. "But we've been gathering all season, and there are half as many people to feed. What happened?"

"Weevil-rats got into some of the fish-salt barrels last spring, remember?" Katara reminded him.

"Yes, but—"

Their Gran-Gran cut in, her stately voice rising above her grandchildren's initial shock. "The fact of it is that many of us elderly can't provide as well as we used too. These old hands just aren't very fast at picking and fishing, and with the men gone…" she gave a sigh, and gently tugged the scroll from Sokka's hands, rolling it up with a sort of finality.

"We'll take care of it, Gran-Gran." Sokka's eyes met with Zuko's, and they nodded at each other, set and determined. Dad had told them to protect the tribe, and they would. It was their job to be the men now, and to provide. "There's at least three weeks until it gets too dark to hunt," Sokka continued, "We can take the sledge and the dogs. If we bring home even a couple of Tiger-Seals…"

"We are all going to get sick on too much seal jerky," Katara groaned.

Sokka looked offended. "Sick of jerky? How can you get sick of jerky?"

"Not everyone can just live off meat alone, Sokka!" she snapped, then shook her head and pushed a piece of hair back to the nape of her neck. No one was going to say it, but she saw it on her brother's faces all the same: They wished that Dad was here. He would know what to do. How she wished…
But wishing wasn't going to do anything. He wasn't here. He had left them to fight war in a far
distant continent, and Katara felt a flare of irrational anger which she quickly shoved away. She
would deal with that, later.

"Alright," she said, "me and Gran-Gran will organize the women and the children while you two
hunt. We'll need greens: grasses, kelp, berries, and winterfruit." She cast around for a spare bit of
parchment to write on while she spoke, all the while ignoring the slight gagging sounds that Sokka
was making at the mention of plant-stuff.

"There have been shortages in the past," Gran-Gran said, "worse than this, and we have survived it.
We may have to ration ourselves, but we will survive."

"I never feel much like eating anyway, in the winter," Zuko muttered, quietly.

If this was his idea of a joke, Katara didn't appreciate it. She shot him a dark look. The first winter
had been by far the worst, with each following being a little easier for him to endure.

Zuko was still dead to the world around the solstice, and Katara had grown to hate that time of year;
seeing him comatose and curled around a fire he couldn't feel.

"Great!" Sokka, of course, had a whole different perspective on things. He threw his arm about
Zuko's shoulders, all good humor restored now that they had a plan. "I'll just have your ration, then."

Katara was appalled. "Sokka!"

Kana regarded her grandchildren, and her blue eyes sparkled with pride. This was the next
generation of leaders for her tribe, and they were young, far too young to have this burden. But they
were all shouldering it well.

OoOoOoO

The events leading up to the return of Sozin's comet would be something that historians would detail
and attempt to recount for generations to come. There were many dissenting opinions on the exact
date of Avatar Aang's return to the world, but the majority believed it to be the second day of the
eleventh month in the year of the monkey.

Even in high summer, the Antarctic land was frosted in white. The short summer with had no
purchase on the cool springs and autumn, and brutal winters. The areas of melt were few and far
between.

Out to sea, all was blue and calm with neither wind or fog to obscure the day. The air was so clean,
the sky and water such a deep blue that they were discernable from each other only from caps of
icebergs gently bobbing in the water. High overhead, four-winged pigeon-gulls called to each other
in high voices of complaint; wheeling, and diving. The only dab of color aside from white of ice and
deep navy of the water was a small smudge of brown; a single canoe, hugging along the jagged ice
coastline.

The three occupants, teenagers with only a year or so between them, were dressed in the traditional light blues and purples Southern Water Tribe. The two boys sitting in the front cut through the water with sure, even strokes with flat wooden paddles. The girl, younger than both of them, sat in the back with her hand steady on the rudder.

Finally, they came to a place where the water cut into the land, creating a small inlet bay. Paddles were put away. The boy at the front of the canoe, handsome and tanned with light blue eyes and hair shaved on both sides of his head with the top piece pulled back wolf-tail, leaned forward; spear in hand and eagerly gazing into the deep waters in search of a flicker of shadow.

The girl in back rolled her eyes at her brother's concentration, and when she gazed into the water it was to look at the brilliant reflection of the sky playing across the surface rather than to hunt. She was young, but already lovely with a soft face and her hair pulled back into a complicated braid with two hair loops dangling from each side.

The boy in the middle, taller than the other two, was distinguished by scars across his face and neck, gold eyes, and pale skin. He had shaggy raven black hair which today was let down — two blue beads weaved into a piece which sat next to the whole side of his face.

Something in the water caught the girl's attention. Her eyebrows knit and she shifted her weight, leaning forward to peer below the surface.

The movement rocked the canoe slightly, and the boy in front sat up to glare at his sister. "Hey, you're going to scare away all the fish!"

Katara's eyes widened focusing on a dart of a flounder-trout, lazing just below the surface. "Sokka, I think—"

"Shhh!" Sokka had gone back to his intense search. The point of his spear dipped below the surface, just for a moment. But the dark shape in the water was just a piece of kelp, and not a juicy, delicious fish. He made a face and used the butt of the spear to flip it aside before peering again. "It's not getting away from me this time."

Katara shot an exasperated glance at Sokka's back, and then to Zuko who just shrugged at her. He was busy lounging back, face tilted to the sun, the paddle resting casually across his lap. In contrast to the dark southern winters, he hardly got any sleep in the summer, and any moment of drowsiness was welcome.

"Here fishy, fishy..." Sokka whispered, in direct contrast to the order he had just given to stay quiet. The corner of his tongue poked out the corner of his mouth. "Come to Sokka..."

Katara narrowed her eyes and turned back to the water. The fish was still there, almost lazing gently just under the surface. If only she had a spear — her small net would never do, and both her brothers jealously guarded theirs. The fish seemed almost close enough to touch. In fact...

Tugging off her mitten with her teeth, Katara glanced one final time at the boys — neither were paying attention — before she reached out her hand, carefully moving it up and down in a slow wave.

The water rippled to her command and with an uplift of her hand a shaky globe of water sprung to the surface, the fish trapped neatly within. A grin crossed Katara's face; she had never even attempted anything like this before, and she got it on the first try! "Sokka, Zuko! Look!"
Zuko cracked open his unscarred eye, and had the decency to look mildly impressed. Sokka, meanwhile, had not turned around.

"Katara, I'm trying to fish, here!"

"But Sokka, look!" The globe of water floated upward to her command until it was hovering just over their heads. Katara grinned in triumph. "I caught one!"

Suddenly, a small stream of fire slipped through the air like a tiny orange spring, landing with a small hiss of steam right on the surface of the globe. It was a tiny impact, but enough to break Katara's concentration, and the globe disintegrated in mid-air. Zuko had timed it well: not only did Sokka get soaked, but the fish hit him on the back of the head on its way down.

"Hey!" Katara yelped.

Sokka sputtered, and his spear slipped from his grasp, falling into the water before bobbing up to the surface again just out of reach. He turned, his blue eyes snapping. "How come every time you two play with magic, I get soaked?"

"It made you look, didn't it?" Zuko drawled, not impressed by the dramatic way his elder brother wrung out the edge of his parka. He didn't get him that wet.

"Zuko, that was my fish!" snapped Katara, "And it's not magic, Sokka. It's—"

"Yeah, yeah. An ancient art unique to our culture." Sokka rolled his eyes before he snatched Zuko's long spear and bent over the side of the canoe again, using it as a hook to reel his own weapon back. "Tell you what. I'll match your magic waterbending to my skillful hunting, and we'll see which actually works."

"Well, I already would have one if Zuko didn't get jealous and ruin it! Ugh! You two are so—"

But Katara never got to tell them exactly what she thought. The canoe rocked again, and the three Water Tribe siblings looked up to see that they had drifted into a fast-draining current. It was taking them swiftly out to open water, and worse, right into the middle of a field of icebergs.

The boys grabbed their paddles, and dug in. It was no use trying to fight the current; it was too strong. Their only hope was to cut across, parallel to the shore. Unfortunately, that way was strewn with icebergs — deceptively tranquil on the surface, but massive below water with sides as sharp as razors.

From her seat on back, Katara gripped the rudder and barked out orders. "Left! Left! Sokka, your other left!"

But they were well within the icy grip of the current, and heading full speed between two icebergs, to a path too narrow for the canoe pass through. Zuko turned, barking out, "Katara, push them away!"

"I… I can't!"

"A little help over here, Zuko!" Sokka yelled.

It was too late. The nose of their boat hit just as the ice-bergs crashed together. The canoe tilted upward, pitching all three of them out, yelling in surprise and shock, onto the flat ice, before it fell back down into the water again, split into two, and promptly sank.
"Great… just great." Sokka sat up, rubbing his head, and glared at his brother. "You call that paddling?"

"Me? At least I was going in the right direction!"

Katara got painfully to her feet, dusted loose snow off her parka, and looked around. It wasn't good. They were stranded on a large iceberg, which floated on the edge of the current. Every second took them further and further away from land and out to the ice-fields. Behind her, the two brothers continued bickering.

"Well, lazy, if you put some effort into paddling—"

"Lazy?! I was paddling on the correct side—"

"If you weren't sitting back, letting me do all the work like you were some kind of… of king or something —"

"What?!"

Katara risked a glance over. Zuko was steaming — literally, and Sokka was using one of his arm wraps to tie both ends of his broken spear together, grumbling in a stage whisper. "Oh I know, you should have blasted the icebergs out of the way. But that would mean your firebending would be useful."

Zuko made a move towards Sokka, but not before Katara got between them first. "Do I have to separate you two?" she snapped, glaring at both of them. "If you haven't noticed, we're kind of in a situation here. Now is not the time for fighting."

"Maybe you should can just waterbend us back to land." Sokka's fingers danced in the air, sarcastically.

Behind her, Zuko snorted. "He's right, you know. You should have been able to move those icebergs."

And suddenly, Katara found herself pulled right along in with their argument. She rounded on Zuko, glaring up at him. "What about you? You could have blasted them apart."

"I was kind of busy trying to paddle us out!" he snapped.

Sokka held up a hand as if he were in class, cheerfully digging the knife deeper. "Not very well."

This was getting them nowhere. Katara stood back and made herself take a deep breath. The longer they argued, the further away from shore they were getting. "Sokka, please tell me you at least told Gran-Gran where we were heading…"

A look of dawning horror on his face was all the answer she needed. Zuko groaned and turned away in exasperation muttering. "Perfect, just perfect…"

"Well," Sokka rubbed the back of his neck, "when we don't make it back in a few hours, they're bound to come looking…"

"They won't even know where to start!" Zuko pointed to the shore, now a rapidly fading line on the horizon. "We can still see land. I say we just jump in and take our chances."

That was a very bad idea, and they all knew it. Even in the warmest time of the year, it was unsafe to
be in the water for more than a few minutes at a time. Zuko might be able to do it, but there would be no rescue if he couldn't bend himself back to warmth again. No one said anything, and Zuko turned, crossing his arms and looking sullenly out to sea.

Katara shook her head. "There has to be another way," she said, "We're going to get out of this, together."

"How?"

All three of them looked at one another, each seeing the same sort of grimness on each other's faces. This was bad. There was nothing to eat on an iceberg, nothing to drink... they'd be dead within a few days, or the iceberg would melt out from underneath them first and they would drown. Even Sokka was out of sarcasm.

Suddenly Sokka blinked, eyes lighting. "Wait!" he said, standing up to go to Zuko's side. He, too, gazed out to the vast field of icebergs. It was a desolate sight — too many tips of white to be able to count, and as soon as they were completely out of sight of land they could get easily turned around, and not be able to find their way back. But Sokka's quick mind was making different sort of connections all together, and he turned to the others, excited.

"We can still make it to shore! These icebergs are almost close enough to leap across. Katara, you can freeze a stepping stone to get from to one and another. Iceberg bridge!" he concluded, with a wide smile.

Zuko's unburned eye widened. He glanced out, perhaps finding the same path through the icebergs as Sokka. "Yeah... I think that'll work." He must have seen the doubt on Katara's face, because he added. "It will just be like one of your ice walls, but sideways."

But Katara wasn't so sure of herself. It was easy for Zuko to say that, but it was just theory and as they found out countless times in the past, ideas on bending didn't necessarily work on application.

She had to try.

Carefully, making sure she didn't slip, she scooted herself to the edge of the ice. The nearest iceberg was about six feet away — just too far away for a safe leap. She waved her arms in a loop, willing the water to freeze. It jumped at her command in a wave instead, splashing up and soaking her seal-hide boots.

She glanced backwards at her brothers, biting her lip. Ever helpful, Sokka gave her the thumbs up. Zuko stood by his side, just waiting for something to happen, radiating a calm confidence. He believed in her. They both did. Looking at them, Katara reminded herself that their very lives depended on her. She was the only one with the abilities to do this. Zuko — and most certainly Sokka — couldn't.

She faced the water again, breathing in from her nose and out her mouth like she had practiced a thousand times before. Then she pushed her hands out, fingers splayed, willing the water in front of her to freeze.

It did. Just for a moment, at least, before the current cracked through the thin ice. But it was a start, and with a determined glint in her eye, Katara got to her feet. It took only a couple of quick gestures to lock her boots in ice to make sure she didn't slip off the edge. Then, fully centered, she swung her arms around, ending once again in that push outward.

The water between the icebergs stilled, and then froze. This time it stayed frozen, as thick and secure
as the ice shelves on which they lived.

Sokka gave a whoop, and before Katara could stop him, he had scrambled down, across the short bridge and onto the next iceberg. "C'mon!" he called, "we're wasting all day sunlight, here!"

OoOoOoO

Katara became more adept at her freezing technique, creating safe bridges for them to cross on nearly every first try. They made good time, using the icebergs as giant stepping-stones to cross them out of the current and slowly, back towards land.

"There should be a peninsula around here," Sokka called eagerly. He was cutting the way, pointing out the direction on every path. "I think we only have a little way to go, and once we hit land we can just hike back home…"

But of course, it wasn't that easy. They were following more or less a path through the field of icebergs, cutting across the smaller ones out of the current and into calmer waters. Off in the distance, and steadily drawing nearer, a problem lay ahead.

It looked almost as if a mountain had sprung up out of the water. In a lifetime of living near and on sea ice, none of the Water Tribe siblings had ever seen anything so massive. It seemed to stretch from one horizon to another, and so high that they could tilt their necks up and up, and still the top couldn't be seen.

Such a thing was easy to plan around, and Sokka did his very best. Yet the iceberg was so big it almost seemed to draw everything around it in its path. No matter which direction that they went, the field of ice seemed to curve back around, leading them once more to the giant.

It was almost eerie, although none of them spoke about it.

Finally, they stood not a hundred yards away from the giant iceberg, unsure what to do next.

"I am not making a bridge there," Katara grumbled, crossing her arms.

Meanwhile, Zuko had tilted his head, as if looking at the thing from another angle. "No use going around it," he said, "I guess we're just going to have to go through it."

Sokka raised his eyebrow. "How do you want to do that?"

"See that dark spot?" Zuko pointed with one mitten to a long imperfection on the face of the crag, centered in the middle. "It looks like a big crack. I think if we target it, we could have a shot at splitting it into a few pieces, at least."

"Hmm… violent, but effective." Sokka stroked his chin, and then nodded in approval.

Katara grinned; the first smile she’d had in awhile. "I just think you're looking to blow something
up," she said, fondly reaching up to ruffle Zuko's dark hair.

He ducked away, scowling, but there wasn't any heat to it. He was used to her teasing, and when he straightened up again, his light gold eyes were bright. "Are you ready?"

She nodded, and they took a few steps back. Katara didn't want to say it out loud, because Sokka would have just made a comment, but it felt good to actually put one of their kata's to use. This had been one of the first moves she and Zuko had worked out — simple, but effective.

Katara bent some snow into a watery globe between her hands, and he conjured an identical ring of fire between his palms. Together they took a single step forward, miming an exaggerated underhanded toss.

Together, in a ribbon that twisted over and over, the two elements flew through the air and struck the targets, hitting perfectly in the middle of the deep imperfection.

There was a rush of steam and then a crack so loud that all three of them clapped their hands to their ears. For the space of two breaths, it seemed nothing had happened at all. Then, in slow motion, the entire face of the mammoth iceberg began to fall away. It started out small, like a tiny shift on an impossibly tall mountainside. Then it gained speed, crumbling away with rocks each as big as their family tent.

And the whole thing fell under with a grinding sound and a crash that would haunt Katara for weeks to come.

A huge wave rose in its wake, all froth and destruction. It rolled forward, and abruptly all three teens were confronted with exactly how short-sighted they had been, for they were directly in its path.

Katara held up her hands out of instinct, but it was like throwing a flat rock in the midst of a roiling ocean. There was no way she could shift that amount of water. She was just one girl — untrained and not even a real bender, no matter what had said before.

Looking up at that wave, which loomed high above — the tallest thing she thought she had ever seen, she doubted even the legendary Avatar could stop it.

Someone grabbed her, shoving her down. She had only a moment to gain an impression: Sokka landing beside her and Zuko on top of them both, thrusting fire-wreathed hands into the ice on either side of them to get a hold.

It would have been no use at all if the wave had crested over them. As it happened, it didn't. That destruction was waiting for the distant shore. Their iceberg rolled and pitched, nearly rising straight into the air, and if Zuko hadn't had such a good grip they would have all slid into the sea.

Then with a crash that rattled Katara's teeth in her skull, the iceberg righted itself and they were level again.

"Never mind," Sokka said, after they caught their breath checked to make sure they were all still alive. "I hate simple and violent. Next time, I don't care how long it takes; we go around."

Katara nodded in shaky agreement.

Zuko remained strangely silent. He sat up, staring at his own hands as if he didn't recognize them, and she immediately saw why: The tattered remains of his mittens clung black and charred to his wrists. His pale hands, though, were unblemished.
"Burned my mittens," he muttered, looking dazed.

Katara didn’t blame him. She had never seen him do any firebending move like that before. And it was obvious that he didn't know he could, either. He had just reacted out of instinct — and although he never spoke of it, she knew how deeply it disturbed him when new things cropped up like this. It reminded them all of his shadowed, former life. Zuko never fully trusted himself with his bending because of it — it was the reason he usually let her take the lead with their katas.

She reached out towards him, but Sokka was there, first. His brand of compassion was something totally different than hers.

"Hey," Sokka said, grabbing Zuko's shoulder to get his attention, "Fire hands, huh? Cool."

Katara wanted to roll her eyes, but Sokka's glib words had the desired effect, and Zuko seemed to mentally give himself a shake, coming back the present. "I wouldn't really say it was 'cool'…" he said, with the tiniest hint of a smirk.

"Yeah, but if I ever call you hot, I'll have to drown myself."

Zuko gave a low chuckle, and his brother slapped him on the back and helped him and Katara to their feet.

Together, they gazed out on the destruction that they had wrought. As far as Katara could tell, the massive mountain of the iceberg had split into four or five ragged chunks. They were still big and intimidating, but at least she could see over them.

Looking out to the water, her eyes caught something bright — something that almost looked like a reflection of the sun, but wasn't. Whatever it was, it was below the surface… and it was getting larger.

"Hey, what's that?" She pointed, and almost as soon as the words left her mouth, something exploded up from the ocean depths.

The three siblings winced away, but this time there was no giant wave. Just a shower of water as what looked like a whole new iceberg popped to the surface in front of them.

Only this iceberg was… glowing?

Katara squinted, stepping forward to get a better look. Then her mind caught up with what her eyes were trying to tell her, and she jerked back again in surprise.

No doubt about it — there was a form, a human shaped form sitting in the middle of that iceberg. Strange arrows curved from the figure's arms down to his joined fists, and up over his forehead.

As she watched, frozen in disbelief, the arrows and what looked to be the eyes, glowed.

Whoever was in there… was alive!

She didn't remember making the decision. She hardly even felt control over her body. She just reacted. Snatching Sokka's bone club from his holster, she raced over and with a deft movement, froze the water between her iceberg and the glowing one.

Katara heard Sokka and Zuko yelling at her to come back, but she was already racing across the short bridge. Whoever was in there couldn't wait for help!
She came right to the face of the ice and swung the bone club as hard as she could. It bounced off, small pieces of ice chipping away in every direction. Gritting her teeth, Katara swung again. Dimly, she heard her brothers skid to a stop behind her.

Someone, probably Zuko, made a grab for the club, but he missed and this time when her swing hit, it made an impact.

A jagged crack ran lengthwise up the encasing of ice, which she now realized was a globe. Then it split open, like a penguin egg, and a rush of warm air spilled out along with a jet of blue light so intense that she was momentarily blinded.

Sokka yanked her back, and the three siblings huddled together, protecting each other – each equally horrified as a figure, now a silhouette against the bright light, crawled out over the top and stood, looking down on them.

Then, just as suddenly, the light cut out. The figure wavered in his stance and then with a low groan, pitched forward. He slid down the slope, coming to a rest nearly at their feet.

"Is he… dead?" Zuko wondered aloud, prodding the figure with his toe.

Next time: Who is that mysterious boy in the iceberg?

(Ducks rotten fruit)
This chapter's gorgeous fanart drawn by Axentis! (Dayum, look at those luminous eyes!)
It took a few moments of furious blinking for Sokka to clear his light-dazzled eyes.

Slowly, the colorful dots in his vision faded away and the strange figure at his feet resolved itself.

It… was just a kid. He was eleven, maybe twelve, and shaved completely bald. The glowing arrows that had been so unearthly strange had now become light blue tattoos, each running down an arm and tipped at his forehead. He was dressed differently, too; strange, high pants and an overcoat of yellow and red.

Zuko prodded him again with the toe of his boot.

"Stop that!" Katara snapped and knelt down to lay her mitten across the strange boy's cheek. The boy stirred at her touch and blinked grey eyes up at her.

"Hey," she said, giving the kid a smile. Sokka nearly groaned aloud. He had seen that smile before; that time she adopted a seal-kitten, forgetting it would soon become too large to fit the tent. "Are you okay?"

The boy winced and blinked again. When he spoke, his voice was weak. "I need to ask you something."

Katara hesitated and bent her head to hear him. "What?"

Suddenly, the boy's grey eyes widened, and a mischievous smile crossed his face. "Do you want to go penguin sledding with me?"

"Uh." She was taken aback. "Sure…"

Sokka, at least, had recovered his wits and stepped forward. He retrieved his bone club and daringly prodded the boy with it. "Stand back, Katara. He could be dangerous."

But the boy just casually batted the club away, and too quickly for Sokka to react, leapt to his feet. "Where am I?" asked the boy, scratching the back of his head.
"South pole," Zuko answered. He had wisely kept his distance, and watched the scene with arms crossed over his chest, eyes narrowed. "How are you not frozen?"

"I dunno." The boy gave a shrug. "Huh. I didn't know I made it. I was just flying with Appa — Oh! Appa!" He turned, and with three graceful leaps, he somehow scaled the enclosure of ice and jumped back inside.

The three Water siblings turned, shrugged at each other, and followed.

Personally, Sokka didn't think that he could be surprised by anything else today. He had seen a giant mountain of ice split into pieces, Zuko doing some freaky fire thing with his hands, and now a crazy tattooed kid rise up from an iceberg. But when he scaled the ice globe, and looked inside… Yeah, the giant white and brown furry monster with six legs and beaver tail surprised him.

Zuko made a choked sort of sound, and Sokka looked over to see he had dropped his 'tough guy' pose, and was trying to pick his jaw off the floor. Come to think of it, so was Sokka.

"What… is that thing?" Zuko sputtered.

"Appa," the boy chirped, climbing around the thing's head to pull at his eyelids. "He's my flying bison. C'mon buddy, wake up."

Sokka had a pretty good view from where he stood, and he didn't see any wings on the thing. "Right," he said, jerking a thumb at Katara. "And this is Katara, my flying sister."

The giant animal stirred, shaking himself to the kid's obvious delight. Then, without warning it sneezed, and had Sokka not been standing over by Zuko, he might have been hit by a big load of green (and possibly contagious) snot. As it was, the glob smacked against the ice wall right behind him, and the two boys nearly tripped over one another in their scramble to get out of the way.

"These are my brothers," Katara said, stepping forward to tentatively reach out and lay a hand on the giant muzzle. "The sarcastic one is Sokka, and Mr. Grumpy over there is Zuko."

The kid beamed. "Oh, hi. I'm—" A strange look came over his face, and before Sokka could put his club out to defend himself, he sneezed.

But he didn't just sneeze. He flew at least twenty feet straight up in the air, as if — well, Sokka couldn't think of a proper analogy, but it was straight up IN THE AIR. Then he floated downward, overcoat billowing around him, as if it were nothing. "I'm Aang."

"You're an airbender," Katara breathed.

Personally, Sokka would have settled for 'freak', but airbender worked too.

"Yup!" Aang confirmed, with a smile.

"No… you can't be an airbender." Zuko stepped forward, holding out his hands as if pleading for sanity. Sokka knew the feeling. "I mean, no one has seen an airbender for a hundred years."

"What do you mean?" Aang asked.

But Sokka knew where his brother was going. He strode forward importantly, jabbing a finger into the kid's chest. "What he means, buster, is that clearly you're a spy." He could almost feel Katara's silent objection. Poor, naive Katara. He'd set her straight. "That bolt of light was probably a signal to the Fire Navy."
"Why would I want to signal the Fire Navy?" Aang asked. "I don't know anyone in the Fire Navy. Oh, hey," he turned to Zuko, "Do you know Kuzon?"

"Uh, no?" Zuko looked completely taken aback, which Sokka had to admit, was a difficult reaction to draw from his brother. And he'd tried.

"Sokka, look at his face," Katara said, "Is that the face of an evil Fire Nation spy?"

He had to admit the kid looked fairly innocent. And, if Sokka really thought about it, it was a little bit of a stretch to think that an airbender would be working for the Fire Nation. But still…

Sokka had enough.

"You know what? Giant light beams, flying bison, guys named Kuzon… airbenders. I think I've got midnight sun madness. I'm going home where things make sense," he declared, but he had no sooner turned around and looked out to the desolate sea that he remembered, oh whoops, they were all kinda, sorta, stranded.

"Yeah, you let us know how that goes," Zuko snorted, which earned him a glare from Sokka. After all, he was supposed to be on his side.

Of course, the weird flying kid had the answer. "Well, if you guys are stuck, Appa and I can give you a lift." Then he promptly floated to the top of the giant flying bison, extending a hand as if all were welcome.

Katara said, "We'd love a ride! Thanks!" and she climbed up before Sokka could grab her to shake some sense into her.

"Oh no, we are not getting on that fluffy snot monster." Sokka had only the faintest idea about how whiny and petulant he sounded at that point. But really, could anyone blame him? Was it too much to ask for this world to start making sense again?

Apparently it was, because Zuko gave a sort of a shrug and pulled himself on board, calling over his shoulder. "Better than freezing to death out on the ice."

"But… but he could eat us!"

All three were looking at him from the bison's back, and finally Sokka gave a defeated sigh, walking up to the beast. However, he refused to let go of his spear, and his sister and brother had to help pull him up.

Aang sat at the thing's head, gripping a pair of leather straps attached to the curved horns like reins. "Okay, first time flyers, hold on tight!" Then he flicked his hands. "Appa, yip-yip!"

The creature stirred, its muscles rolling under the thick pelt of fur. It slapped its wide beaver tail against the ice, and with a massive jerk and a rush of wind, it leapt out into the sky…

… only to fall down again with a sickening lurch and a splash that once again got Sokka all wet.

The fates hated him. They really did. For the second time today, he was forced to wring out the bottom of his parka.

"I knew he couldn't fly," he muttered.

Zuko grunted, arms folded. His attention was elsewhere, for Aang had turned back around and was
staring at their little sister with a dreamy expression on his face.

"Hey kid," Zuko snapped, "eyes in front."

Sokka had to admit, his little brother could really pull the intimidating firebender thing off sometimes. Aang gulped and quickly turned back around.

Slyly, on the down-low, Sokka and Zuko gave each other high-fives.

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Even though the sun had not fully set, it was well past what anyone could consider bedtime.

Katara and Sokka were dozing, curled up in the middle of the thick-padded bison-saddle. Zuko inched himself upright, bracing his back against the wooden wall, and watched the bison's slow swim with his arms still crossed over his chest. He had no chance of sleep at all; the sun still sat low in the sky and shone fully upon the scarred side of his face.

Katara stirred, turning her head, and caught his eye. "Still awake?"

"Can't sleep," he grunted, and then cast a dubious glance at the stranger sitting at the bison's head. The kid was sitting cross-legged, but leaning forward as if exhausted. Zuko wouldn't be surprised if he was. The fact that he was even alive had to be some kind of miracle.

His sister followed his gaze, and the look in her eyes was something he didn't want to see; soft, compassionate, and hopeful all at once. "He's an airbender," Katara breathed, as if releasing a long-awaited sigh.

"So he says."

"Do you think…" Katara paused, sitting up and biting her bottom lip. She glanced about for Sokka, but he was snoring peacefully, completely oblivious to their conversation. "Do you think Aang knows what happened to the Avatar?"

Something strange jerked in Zuko's chest, like a tug at his innards that sent a cold sort of shiver down his spine. He couldn't place the feeling, and in a moment, it was gone.

He shook his head, but only to clear his thoughts. It was best that Sokka was asleep, because he would have just jumped in proclaiming the Avatar as just a made up legend. Katara always believed the stories, and although Zuko could never quite pinpoint why, he did too. "I don't know," he said, at last. "I could ask him."

"Ask him nicely." Katara had no idea how much she sounded like Gran-Gran. But before Zuko could tell her, she reached out and gripped his hand. "He's an airbender," she repeated, eyes locked
with his, "Maybe he could teach us—"

"What? Airbending?"

"I don't know. Something. Anything."

He caught the hope in her voice, and another tingle went up and down his spine; one of excitement. He broke his gaze with Katara to look back at the kid, this time appraisingly. Air was probably different from Water and Fire all together, but he and Katara had learned from each other, right? It wasn't so far-fetched.

"Maybe," Zuko allowed, but couldn't hide the thread of excitement in his voice. He dropped her hand. "I'll ask about the Avatar, and you ask him to teach us after he rests. Get some sleep."

He would leave it up to Katara to convince the kid to teach them more bending. After all, she had worked her magic on him years ago, despite his fear and doubt.

Getting up, he carefully picked his way past the saddle, over the giant bison's back. It was an odd sensation; quite unlike padding across a fur-rug. The muscles under his feet bunched and unbunched as the animal swam, and a couple of times he had to kneel down and grip the fur to keep from losing his balance. There was a sharp dip between the body and the head.

After a hesitation, Zuko leapt over the short neck, catching one of the black tipped horns in his hand to steady himself.

Aang startled, jerking out of what must have been a light doze. At once, he relaxed and offered him a chipper grin. "Hey, Zuko," he said, as if he had known him all of his life. Then he scooted over and patted the space next to him, allowing the taller boy to take his seat.

Zuko had to admit, there was a strange sense of power from sitting on the bison's head. From this vantage point, it seemed as if an entire watery world was laid out before him; his to command. It was an interesting feeling, and not unwelcome.

But he pushed it away for the time being, and focused on the kid next to him. "Hey… Aang." He tried — and failed — to copy that same sort of familiarity in his voice. Quickly, he went on. "Look, I was sort of wondering… since you're an airbender, do you ever know what happened to the Avatar?"

"The Avatar?" Aang squeaked, raising his hand up to the back of his smooth head. "Uh… No, I didn't know him. I mean, I knew people that knew him, but… I didn't. Sorry."

"Oh." He really didn't expect the kid to know anything, but all the same he felt a pang of disappointment.

An awkward sort of silence stretched between the two. Aang, for some reason seemed twitchy, and Zuko was at a loss of what to say next. Sokka would know. He had a way with words that Zuko knew he could never have. So, out of slight desperation — and because the question had bugged him at the time — he asked, "So, who's Kuzon?"

Aang gave small chuckle at this. "Oh, he's one of my best friends. He's Fire Nation, too."

It felt as if Zuko had been simultaneously slapped and doused with a cold bucket of water. He straitened, narrow-eyed at the boy. "I'm not Fire Nation," he growled, and stood up. "Goodnight." With that, he jumped across the small gap between Appa's head and back to rejoin the others.
Behind him, Aang looked surprised. After a moment, he bent down, hand coming to rest by one of Appa's ears. "Was it something I said?"

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The 'flying' bison continued on his leisurely, yet steady swim, and by three in the morning they found shore. Everyone, sans Zuko, was sleeping. He quietly woke Katara and Sokka, and told them to get to their tent. After a moment of hesitation, he did the same for Aang; walking the extremely drowsy boy to one of the unused tents.

The airbender was so sleepy that Zuko doubted he barely understood what was going on, and when Zuko came back with some extra pelts for bedding, he found Aang curled up and asleep on the floor of the tent; perfectly comfortable without blankets.

No one in the camp was up, and the sun was still at the horizon, ever present during the summer months. It was just as nearly bright as full day, with only a pallid sort of grey to mark the time.

Zuko's body screamed for sleep, although he knew he could lay down for hours and not get any of it.

Returning to the home tent, he quietly poured himself some of the special tea that Gran-Gran made for him during the summer. It was the only way he could get more than an hour's worth of sleep during midnight-sun. He bent the liquid to warmth with a short breath, and wincing, downed the entire bitter cup.

Then he crawled in between the furs, ignoring Sokka's wide-mouthed snoring, and waited for it to kick in.

His dreams were troubled, full of dark mist and faceless beings who reached towards him with spindly fingers like claws. Screaming gibberish right in his face… Something about the Avatar…

Zuko awoke, a good seven hours later, alone in the tent, with the energy of the sun singing harshly in his veins.

Rubbing his eyes, he dressed quickly. He could hear all sorts of sounds just outside the fabric, but which were muffled and distorted beyond understanding. Dressing quickly, and shaking his head to rid himself of the last of his night-terrors, he pushed past the tent flap and walked out.

"Great!" Sokka was saying, sounding anything but happy. He stood facing Aang and Katara, outnumbered. "You're an airbender, Katara's a waterbender, and Zuko's a firebender, and together you can just waste time all day long!"

He was, then, completely surprised and gave a most undignified yelp when Zuko came up from behind and thumped him upside the head.
Unnoticing, Aang turned to Katara. "You're a waterbender!"

"Well," she bit her lip, suddenly shy in a way that Zuko had never seen from her before. "Sort of—"

"Yes, she is," Zuko snapped, cutting her off. "She's a good one." He didn't understand. She was the better bender out of both of them, the one who usually was able to pick up their ideas with ease… and wasn't she always saying how they were real benders, despite the lack of training?

But now Katara wouldn't quite look at him, and he didn't know why.

"And… you're a firebender?" Now Aang's grey eyes turned on him again.

Zuko met his gaze with a glower. "Yes, I am."

"Yeah, you can tell by his flame-boyant personality." Sokka was sure to stay just out of arm's reach.

Luckily, they were saved by Gran-Gran who had come up to see why the kids were gathered around, apparently not working. "All right, come on, enough playing. There are chores that need to be done around here."

OoOoOoO

Since Zuko and Sokka were the only men of the village, it fell to them to train up the new generation of warriors in their father's absence. This, Zuko had to admit, was Sokka's expertise. He liked to talk and make important speeches about being a warrior. And although he would never admit it, Zuko was sure it was his way of dealing with missing Dad. Where Zuko became introverted and moody, Sokka would puff himself up and overcompensate by treating toddlers like new recruits.

"One day, they won't be kids anymore," Sokka told him, some time ago when the training first started. "And I'll be leading them as Chief." He had paused, and added, "You can help, of course."

"…Thanks."

But Sokka was right, of course. They wouldn't be kids forever, and Zuko knew that war didn't stop for anyone. They all had to be ready for the day it would inevitably reach their shores.

He still felt a little groggy from the sleeping tea, so today he sat along the sidelines, watching Sokka parade in front of a group of six of the oldest boys (some, barely out of diapers), gesturing wildly with his boomerang and talking of wild fights and evil firebenders.

For his part, Zuko used his time to sharpen a large whale-tooth for what he hoped would be his new spear-point. He had lost his best one in that ridiculous canoe accident yesterday, and he didn't want to be without for very long. As he ran his sharpening stone again and again over the ivory, he listened with half an ear to his older brother.
"Now, men," Sokka said importantly. "Never show any fear when facing the Fire Nation. In the Water Tribe, we fight to the last man standing…” He went on, and Zuko found his mind wandering elsewhere.

The main village seemed quiet. At least, quieter than usual. It wasn't exactly a bustling hive of activity even on the best of days, after the men had gone to war. Zuko cast a glance around, did a swift headcount and came up short Katara and one tattooed airbender.

Auya was walking by, her arms laden with driftwood for the fire. He called out to her, "Hey, do you know where Katara and Aang went?"

The woman paused. She and Zuko had never learned to like each other after she more or less rejected him as a child, but the bonds between the people of the Water Tribe were not something taken in jest. They retained a more or less civil attitude; a cap of paper-thin ice overlaying a sea of intense dislike. "She and the boy went off towards the hills about an hour back," Auya said, curtly. "Said something about penguin sledding."

He nodded and sat down again to sharpen his spear, muttering under his breath, "Penguin sledding better not be a metaphor…"

"What's a metaphor?" Little Denahi asked, at his side.

Zuko groaned and flopped back in the cool snow.

After more lecturing from Sokka (and about three requested potty breaks from the boys — Zuko seriously considered limiting what they ate and drank for breakfast in the morning) the group was ready for an example of a good way to fight Fire Nation invaders.

Zuko stood up with a leisurely sort of air, aware that the children’s eyes were on him. He took his time, dusting off bits of snow from his parka and building up the suspense. Only when the boys started to fidget in anticipation did he twist around, reaching towards the flames of the nearest campfire. The fire jumped to his command. With his feet planted, he streamed the flames through the air, and then sent them, like a bright ribbon of fire, over to Sokka.

His brother was ready, and quickly stepped to the side as they had practiced, letting the flow of fire fly past him and land with a hiss in a nearby snow bank.

"There, you see that, warriors?" Sokka said, over the ohh's and aww's of the little boys. "Fire travels in more or less a straight line. Once it has left the control of the bender, you can avoid it. More importantly, while they are doing their weird little arm wavy thing—"
"It's called a kata," Zuko reminded him.

"...Whatever. While they're doing that, it's the perfect time to strike. My method? I prefer the boomerang." Sokka held up his own with just more than a little reverence.

But the boys weren't listening to Sokka any longer. Something else had caught their attention.

"Zuko, can you do that, next?" Tuktu asked, and pointed up to the sky.

At first Zuko thought it was the sun, but that was impossible because he could feel the actual sun shining brightly on his back. The bright orange glow against the blue sky had to be unnatural. All turned to watch it rise rapidly from the horizon; a trail of smoke in its wake.

All activity in the village paused as the phenomenon was sighted by more and more people. Then, just as the light reached its zenith, it exploded in a shower of loud and bright red fireworks.

"It's a flare." Sokka had come over to his side, and Zuko looked at him in surprise, seeing his brother's fists clenched. "That's coming from the direction of the old Fire Navy ship! Where are Katara and Aang?"

Zuko's stomach felt like it dropped out from his stomach. "Out. Auya said they went penguin sledding."

Although Sokka didn't know it, the dark look that crossed his features was so fierce that Zuko had to restrain himself from stepping back. He had seen Sokka angry, but always before there had been an undercurrent of goofiness that mellowed it out. Now, the humor was gone. "Aang’s trying to signal the Fire Navy with that flare! He's bringing them straight to us."

It wasn't often that Zuko found himself the voice of reason, but it was hard to reconcile in his head the overly-friendly kid with what he knew of the Fire Nation. "Hold on, Sokka, I don't think…"

But Sokka wasn't looking at him now. He was glaring out beyond the village. And following his gaze, Zuko felt a hot coal of anger settle within his heart.

Past the ice road and towards the abandoned Fire Navy ship came two figures set against the misty sunlight; Katara and Aang.

OoOoOoO

By the time the two had trudged up the icy path towards the village, they were greeted by the full village: a wall of disapproving glares and crossed arms. Even the little children, mostly oblivious to the political turmoil in a small village, hung back behind their parents, confused.

Sokka had been seething the entire time, and he was the first to break rank and step forward, pointing
angrily at Aang. "I knew it! You signaled the Fire Navy with that flare! You're trying to lead them straight to us, aren't you?"

"He didn't do anything," Katara shot back, wholly unrepentant. "It was an accident!"

Aang looked at them with wide eyes. "Yeah, we were just on the ship and there was a booby-trap and—"

But Sokka cut him off. "Oh, that's a likely story. Katara, get away from him!"

"And you," Zuko snarled, stepping forward toward Aang with anger in every line of his body. "What were you thinking?! You put us all in danger!"

Sokka was trying to lead Katara away, but at Zuko's words she shrugged off his touch and went over to stand between Aang and the angry firebender. "Zuko, you're making a mistake. Aang is not our enemy!"

Sokka joined up against Zuko's side, and the four teenagers squared off against each other.

"We're keeping our promise to Dad," Sokka snapped. "We're protecting you from threats like him."


Katara glared at him, and behind her the snow trembled ever so slightly. When she spoke, her voice was low, and dangerous. "I can't believe that you of all people would turn someone out, just because they're different. This tribe took you in."

Sokka stepped in front of Zuko, intending to forestall the impending fight. There was no point; Zuko was rooted to the ground in shock. He and his siblings had been in plenty of arguments before, and the words might have been harsh, but they were never meant to truly hurt…. Now he felt pierced right through the heart.

Gran-Gran, perhaps sensing the sudden impasse, stepped in. "Katara, you knew that going on that ship was forbidden. Your brothers are right. The airbender must leave."

"Then I'm banished, too!" With that, Katara swung around, gripped Aang by the shoulder and practically marched him away.

"Hey!" Sokka looked at Zuko, who only shrugged. Sokka ran a few steps after them. "Where do you think you're going?"

"To find a waterbender master!" Katara yelled over her shoulder. "Aang is taking me to the North Pole!"

"I am?" The airbender wondered. Then, "Great!"

"Fine!" Zuko snapped to Katara's retreating back. He was so angry and hurt that he felt he couldn't even breathe properly. Behind him at the campsite, every fire flared up in bright orange colors. He marched over, past Sokka who hurried to catch him, to Katara. "Go learn waterbending properly, if that's all you want! Never mind about your family, or your tribe. I guess we're not important enough for you anymore!"

Katara hesitated, and for the first time he saw indecision in her step. "That's not it, Zuko. This is important to me." She paused again, looking up at the broad back of the great bison. "You could come, too. I'm sure we could find a firebending master on the way."
He hated that part of himself that was tempted, if ever so slightly, by her offer. He wanted to yell at her. He wanted to hurt her just as much as she was hurting him. But it felt like the words, all of the anger and disappointment, had collected somewhere around his neck scar. He shook his head; a sharp, angry gesture, and turned away.

"Katara, I don't want to get between you and your family," Aang offered, tentatively.

"You're not," she lied.

Sokka moved forward, hands out, pleading. "You're really choosing him over us?"

She hesitated one last time before reaching out and gripping Sokka in a tight hug. "I'll be back. As soon as I've learned— I'll be back… I promise." Then before Sokka could say anything, she stepped away and went to her other brother.

But Zuko glowered at an invisible point in the snow, and refused to look at her. She held up her hand as if to touch him, but drew back at the last moment and reached up to Aang, who was sitting on Appa's head. In a moment she was up, and with a snap of the reins, the great beast turned and plodded slowly away.

Zuko turned only once to watch them leave. And back in the village, every campfire went dead.

OoOoOoO

"Hey," Sokka grabbed Zuko’s arm hard to get his attention. His blue eyes were bright with withheld emotion. "You know she's didn't mean any of that. She's just… angry. She'll be back, when she calms down."

They were walking back to the village. Everyone was still gathered, open curiosity and horror on their faces. Seeing all the woman looking to them for an explanation, Zuko took in a deep, shuddering breath and willed himself to feel the wisdom in Sokka words. He was probably right. Katara wouldn't get ten miles away before she got homesick and came back.

He nodded, once, and Sokka straightened himself up, almost unconsciously, before plastering an easy smile on his face for the sake of the rest of the village. "She'll be back," he said again, this time louder for everyone's benefit. "She's just seeing Aang off."

Zuko took his brother's cue and did the best to relax his shoulders and uncurl his fists. He couldn't manage a smile — not yet, but when the little kids swarmed around his legs, asking where Katara went, he was able to answer easily that she was just leading the airbender out past the boundaries. She'd be back… soon.

In the meantime, Sokka had other things to occupy the minds of his warriors in training. "All right
men!" he said, and at once all the little boys snapped to attention. "Ready our defenses! The Fire Nation could be on our shores any minute now. I want each and every one of you on the ice wall, looking for any sign of them!"

Denahi raised his hand, "But I gotta—"

"And no potty breaks!"

Zuko crossed his arms over his chest, smirking, as all the boys fell into action. "It's about time you thought of a good use for them," he said in a low aside.

Sokka preened. "Yup, and they'll be able to tell us as soon as Katara comes back. And if any of them start sleeping on watch, you can just scare them with a fire blast."

Gran-Gran listened to their conversation, her face lined with worry. "Sokka, you don't expect these children to actually fight if the Fire Nation do invade?"

He waved away her worry with an errant flip of his hand. "Nah, Gran-Gran. The chances of a Fire Navy ship actually being down close enough to see that flare are — well, they have to be really low. Like rock bottom, or next to none." He met Zuko's eyes. "We're going to be fine."

No sooner than he said that then a small, high shout pierced the wind. "Sokka! Zuko! I see them!"

"Katara?" Zuko called back in relief.

"No!" The boy pointed his mittened hand back towards the sea. "The Fire Nation!"

The brothers exchanged a glance that was equal parts shock and dawning horror. Without a word they turned, scrambling to the watch tower. They had built it last summer, over the remains of Zuko and Katara's old fort. It was the tallest structure in the village and apt to lean dangerously in one direction or another unless Katara fortified it regularly with new ice.

The steps were mushy with summer melt and a couple of times Zuko nearly slipped off, but within moments he and Sokka were at the top and looking out towards sea. The sun was setting — or at least as close to setting as it ever got, and they had to shield their eyes from the bright reflection of the water. But there, just beyond the far field of icebergs, was a grey metal point along the horizon.

"Maybe they won't spot the village," Zuko breathed. "They are pretty far out there."

But as the boys watched, the metal bow turned ever so slightly, becoming smaller as it lined up directly to their village. A lazy line of smoke drifted above it as the engines kicked into high gear. There was no doubt about it… the Fire Nation ship was headed to their shore.

Sokka cursed.

OoOoOoO
The giant bison plodded slowly onward though the dense snowdrifts. Every step of its six-legged foot broke through a thick casing of ice and permafrost as if it was eggshells. The path Appa left would have been pathetically easy to find, if not for the wide-beaver tail which dragged easily upon the ground, smoothing out the snow and leaving behind no trace at all.

Aang and Katara sat at Appa's head, not talking, letting the distance between themselves and the village increase in mutual, miserable silence.

Finally, they came to a low rise of a hill. And beyond that lay a landscape of snowy rock-columns. The winds were fierce in this part of the country, and it had stripped and scoured ancient strewn boulders into strange twisted objects which sat, glittering, under a layer of crystal ice and snow.

Feeling the bare wind on his face, Aang took in a deep breath and then tugged on the reins which had sat loosely in his hands. Appa groaned and then halted.

"This isn't right, Katara." Aang's young, high voice was gentle, but firm. "The monks who raised me used to say that to put the world in order, you have to put your family in order, and to do that you have to put your heart in order."

Katara had been crying, silently, and at her friend's words she raised a hand up to brush away an errant tear. "I know," she said at last, and together they sat in silence and watched the tendrils of fog being blown here and there through the ice columns. Finally, she continued. "All of my life, I've wanted to be a waterbender. When Zuko came, I thought we could learn together… and we did. But we don't know what we're doing half the time."

Aang looked thoughtful. "My best friend, Kuzon, was a firebender. Oh, he could do the craziest things with fire! One time we—" He broke off, perhaps realizing that this was not the time or the place for that particular story. "Anyway, I never thought about learning anything from him, because Fire and Air are different elements. I can't imagine how hard it would be to work Fire and Water, because they're opposites. You two must be really great benders to be able to do that."

"Really?" A slight smile tugged at her lips, and she was looking at him as if trying to judge whether he was just being nice. "You think so?"

"Yup!" And with a tug on Appa's reins, he directed the great bison around. "Maybe once everyone calms down, I can come back for a visit… I'd really like to see what you can do."

She looked down, shyly. "I'd like that."

He grinned, and within a few moments the bison had made his slow way around and they were plodding back towards the way they came. From this direction, they could see far up the coast, and out to the far flung ice-fields.

"So what will you do, next?" Katara wondered.

"I guess I'll visit the Southern Air Temple. Wow…." Aang blinked, and then grinned again as a particular thought struck him. "I haven't cleaned my room for over a hundred years. Not looking forward to that." He was going to add more, maybe tell her about the time he and Monk Gyatso played the best prank on some of the elders. Something, anything to get her to smile, because Aang really liked it when Katara smiled.

But then he caught a glint of silver out over the sea, just above the far horizon. He blinked again, and rubbed his eyes, but the dark smudge of silver was still out there when his vision cleared. "There's
something out there!" he exclaimed, and before Katara could react he dropped the reins and leapt high into the air to get a better look, letting a rush of wind float him back down again. There was no doubt about it; the ship was exactly like the one he and Katara had explored earlier.

She too, had seen the silver glint, and she stood up, her eyes wide. "It's heading towards the village!"

And there was no doubt in Aang's mind, about who the Fire Nation was coming for.

"This is all my fault…" He gripped his airstaff, but at that moment he knew he would never be able to fly high enough or fast enough. The dark, heavy burden of responsibility pulled him down like a ton of literal bricks.

To fly, one had to detach himself from the world — but how was he supposed to do that when it was his job to save the world?

"No…" Katara let out a low groan under her breath. The ship was advancing at a fast pace. Only a few moments ago it had just been a streak of silver. Now they could see its clear outline.

Then Aang had an idea. "Wait! Do you still have any fish left?"

She fished around in her pocket and brought out one single frozen minnow. Aang grinned in renewed delight. "A penguin would be able to get me there no problem! Stay with Appa." Before she could react he snatched the fish from her hands, and with one great bound he cleared the bison and landed some twenty feet away.

"Aang!" she yelped, "No! Wait!"

It was too late. Another three giant leaps and he was over the next rise of the hill.

Katara sat back down. But her shock lasted only for a moment, before indignation kicked in. No. No way was she going to just sit by and be safe while a Fire Nation ship steamed towards her village…

… Oh Spirits, her brothers… her stupid, lovable brothers would be the only thing to protect the village.

Taking the reins into her hands, she snapped them with all the authority she could muster. "C'mon, Appa. We need to hurry! Please!"

The bison let out a low groan, but picked up his shuffling pace.

OoOoOoO

Sokka and Zuko went through their battle preparations in near silence — trading parka's for thick close fitting wraps dyed in Water Tribe blue. A warrior's greatest weapon was his brave heart, but
actual weapons didn't hurt, either. Their boomerangs were holstered, and whale bone machetes were secured to their backs with a strap of leather. Finally, their ivory spears were checked for imperfection — Zuko missed his best spear, and promised himself that if they survived this he wouldn't be as foolish as to bring something like that fishing ever again.

Lastly came the war paint. Made of melted seal blubber mixed with finely ground coal and flour, it was applied thick and heavy to the face and neck. Zuko pulled his hair back into an unshaven wolf's tail, and when he took a glance at himself in a small looking glass, the face of a Water Tribe warrior scowled back at him. Behind the black and white paint, he saw himself for the first time without any scars — his left eye being more narrowed than his right the only indication.

"Ready?" Sokka asked.

Zuko put down the mirror and nodded. "Ready."

His brother reached forward and gripped his arm by the elbow, and Zuko did the same — one man to another. There weren't any words between them. There didn't need to be.

There was every chance one or both of them wouldn't make it back.

"Let's go knock some Fire Nation heads," Sokka said, and with those words they walked outside.

The village was in pandemonium — women scurrying back and forth, children crying, tent flaps being hastily closed up, polar-dogs howling from the scent of fear… and on the backdrop of it all, the Fire Navy ship drew steadily closer.

There was a gap in the parameter ice-wall, and between those two points Sokka and Zuko waited; ready to make their stand.

Thick black smoke seemed to pour from the steel column of the ship, as if it had caught the panic of the village and was hurrying for the kill. And now they could see small figures scurrying back and forth across the deck — there were so many, and only two warriors to fight them.

They expected the ship to stop on shore, and they would meet their enemy disembarking. It was quite the surprise when the ship did not even slow, but plowed headlong into the icy ridge that separated sea from land.

Zuko's heart leapt — just for a moment. But this was not a wooden Water Tribe ship. And with a crashing, squealing, and a grinding sound of metal plates against the tortured snapping of ice, the Fire Nation ship advanced.

Sokka and Zuko exchanged mutual looks of surprise, and although they backed a step or two in surprise, they held their ground.

The ship plowed towards them, banks of snow shoved forcefully to each side… and bit by bit it slowed as the weight of the snow collected against the metal hull.

The sheer weight of the ship warped the ice around it, and with a muffled sound of defeat, the unsteady watchtower fell inward on itself.

Sokka gave a low groan.

But it seemed like they were to be the next to be plowed over. It took every fiber of Zuko's resolve to hold steady. His panicked heart beat against his chest, and he tried to quell it down. He would not turn. He would not run.
Finally, finally the ship halted; a mere ten feet from where the boy warriors stood.

Zuko realized he was no longer scared — he was too angry to be scared. What right did these people have to come into his village, break down his brother's watchtower, and terrify all of the women and children? The fire inside bloomed up with savage force, and his fingers nearly smoked against the wooden shaft of the spear. He sent one more glance to Sokka and saw the steel resolve in his brother's eyes: Let them come. They were ready.

A hollow clang of a metal release was heard inside, and Zuko didn't know how he knew what would happen next, but he did.

He cried, "Watch out!" and pushed Sokka back. It was not a moment too soon, because the entire bowsprit of the ship fell forward, crashing down where they had stood, revealing a ramp — and the enemy.

The last time Zuko had set eyes on a Fire Nation man was when they had boarded Hakoda's ship; the night Nunka was killed. The six intervening years had dulled the memory, but now looking at the faceless white masks, the rust red armor, every detail of that night came back full force.

There were five soldiers, arranged in a flanking position — two in front and three in back. And in front of them, seeming oddly short and pot-bellied, was a grey-haired man wearing what Zuko recognized as a General's sash — order of the Dragon.

Sokka let out a warrior's yell and charged, aiming for the old fat one, marking him for their leader. The armored soldier to the right stepped forward, meeting Sokka's spear not with any weapon, but with his bare hands. He grabbed the spear, using Sokka's momentum against him, and broke it into two halves. Then he dealt Sokka a kick that sent him flying off the rampart, and back into the snow.

Zuko was right behind him, and seeing Sokka's mistake, stopped short and swiped instead at the soldier in front with the tip of his ivory point spear. The man let out a cruel chuckle, and moved faster than Zuko had ever expected. He stepped past Zuko's defense, and grabbed the spear from his hands, shoving him away. He fell backwards against the snow.

The two siblings had been dispatched in a matter of seconds, and with the threat gone the Fire Nation soldiers continued their path down to the village.

But then there was another roar from Sokka. He seemed to explode out of the snow, taking one of the men down in a tackle. It was ungraceful, sloppy, and Sokka was about half of the soldier's weight… but it did have the element of surprise.

One of the soldier's cursed and stepped forward to help his comrade, raw flame erupting from his fingers.

Zuko only had a second to react. He charged forward, sliding in between his brother and the Fire Nation soldier a moment before the fireball hit.

He held up his hands, and with one sweep of his arms, diverted the blast to the side so that it landed harmlessly with a hiss in the nearby snow.

A cry went up from one of the armored soldier's, "He's a firebender!"

Zuko got to his feet, centering himself in a graceful stance. Sokka had leapt up too, and threw his boomerang, aiming it once more for the leader in the middle who was watching the scene with perfect calm.
The General barely needed to move. One hand jabbed, as quick as a bolt of lightning, and the boomerang was engulfed in flames and fell scarcely before it had begun to fly.

The General punched out, and a lance of flame shot towards the brothers. Zuko took a deep breath, throwing up his arms to create a wall of fire that canceled it out before it could hit them. But he had never fought fire before, and he couldn't have counted on the sheer force of the impact. He was unburned, but blown backward, crashing into Sokka, and knocking them both once more into the snow.

He groaned, and rolled away only to feel the cold steal of a broadsword touching his neck — right where the scar was hidden under his black and white warrior's paint.

Another soldier held Sokka in much the same way, and both boys froze, helpless as the remaining Fire Nation men walked to the village.

Hearing the fighting, the women had come out from their huts. Some were clutching their children tightly. All of them were staring, wide-eyed at their invaders.

There was a beat of silence, and then the aged General spoke. His voice crackled, almost in the same way Zuko's crackled — and in some ways it was genial — but there was also hint of steel under it that brooked no rebuke. Under this man's calm manner was a seasoned warrior. He was dangerous.

"I am in search of the Avatar," the General said, folding his hands into the large sleeves of his russet robes. He paused for a moment, letting this sink in. "Perhaps, you have seen him?"

The women said nothing. They were terrified, perhaps stunned, by the duel realities of their most horrible nightmare crashing into their peaceful village, and the kindly looking old man in front of them.

"I see," said the General, when it became apparent that no one was going to talk. "I know that you are hiding him, and I do not wish for this to come to violence." He unfolded his arms, holding out the palm of his hand. A spark of fire lit within and despite the fact that they had seen Zuko do the same thing a hundred times before, the women drew back, fearful. The threat was very clear.

Suddenly, one of the soldier's gave a cry of surprise as a blur of something orange and yellow swept under his knees. He fell down, and none other than Aang slid before them, riding on top of a penguin. The children gave a cheer, and the little airbender gracefully leapt off the penguin before turning to face the General. "Looking for me?"

The old man's calm demeanor changed in an instant, looking shocked, before his lips pressed into a thin, grim line. "You are the airbender. You are the Avatar." It wasn't a question.

"Aang?" Zuko whispered.

"No way..." Sokka answered. The two shared another glance. This one of hope. Aang was the Avatar! Their village was saved.

... and where was Katara?

Aang held out his palms, maneuvering himself between the enemy firebender and the rest of the village people. But the aged man had simply tucked his arms in his robes again. "If you wish to save these people," he said, "you will come with me."

Aang hesitated, and cast a glance behind him to the terrified women and children. "Do you promise?"
The General nodded his head stiffly and then turned, his eyes flickering to Sokka and Zuko. "I will take the firebender, as well."

"NO!" Sokka made to get up, but was forced back again by the point of the soldier's blade.

Zuko lay stunned for a moment, but he saw the helpless women and children... he saw Gran-Gran's tear filled eyes, and he knew that Aang was making a sacrifice to save these people. If the kid could do it, he would as well.

He nodded, and the sword was drawn away from his neck. As rose to his feet, he had a sudden flash to one of Dad's old stories; the one about how the Chief's son put himself out as bait for the giant elephant-wasp in order to save the rest of the Tribe. Remembering this, Zuko stood to his full height, shoulder's back and proud.

"I'll go," he said and his voice was strong and clear. "I'm not afraid of you, old man."

"Show your Prince some respect, whelp!" One of the soldiers struck Zuko between the shoulders for his insolence, driving him down to his knees. His arms were pulled behind his back and bound. But he caught a flash of something — perhaps amusement in the General's eyes.

Aang's hands were also bound, and together the two of them were walked up the ramp and to the ship.

They turned, and Zuko took one last look at his home... the people who were his family... Sokka's snarl of helpless rage... before the ramp closed completely and he and Aang were plunged into darkness.

OoOoOoO

Sokka angrily rubbed some cool snow over his face, riding it of the last of the paint. The point of his boomerang stuck out of the snow nearby, blackened with soot but otherwise unharmed. He grabbed it, wiping it clean with fur-lined hem of his parka, and holstered it. Then he took a deep breath and turned to the ruins of his village.

We'll have to relocate, he thought dully. The Fire Navy ship had cut a huge swath between the ocean and the village, and it made all of the ice around it unstable. The women were apparently of the same thought, and he could see them milling back and forth, taking down tent poles and setting the children to task packing up supplies.

Zuko was gone. Taken.

Sokka's stomach twisted painfully from deep inside and he rubbed angrily at his eyes. He wasn't crying. Men didn't cry. He was just... frustrated, was all. And worried. After all, he knew his
brother's heart was in the right place, but if he'd just paused and thought things out for once instead of just putting himself up as a hostage…

… except that Sokka hadn't thought of a better idea at the time.

He cursed low under his breath and ignored that the back of his hand came down wet with angry tears. He wasn't going to stand there and wonder what he was going to tell Dad when he finally came home… no, he was going to do something about this. The safety of his little brother was his responsibility, just as the village was his responsibility.

He strode back towards the center of the village, hardly noticing how the little boys he had spent so much time training watched him with wide, blue eyes. To them, he was their warrior. The controlled anger in his step, the set and determined look on his face made them stop and stare in awe.

Sokka found Gran Gran just outside their tent, using a sharp knife to saw through some of the hemp ties that bound the cloth to the poles. "You're going after them?" She didn't need to look up as she asked this, because it hadn't been really a question at all. After all, it was the same thing that Hakoda would have done.

"I'm taking the canoe," Sokka confirmed. "Get everyone packed and moving as soon as possible. The Fire Nation will probably want revenge once I've freed Zuko and Aang and you can't be here."

Kana looked at him then, for the first time as a man. Normally Sokka would have preened, but at that moment his mind was elsewhere, planning. "We could set up the village again under Wolf's Head Peak. Katara knows that spot and when she comes back, she'll probably look there first."

Suddenly a low, deep sound, like a weary groan was heard, echoing off of the far snow banks and dips. Sokka turned and saw the silhouetted form of the giant bison lumbering over the rest of a nearby snowdrift. Katara sat on his head.

"Katara!" In a instant, Sokka was off and running. His sister slipped from the bison's head, and the two siblings embraced. In another community, in another culture, Katara would have been expected to apologize and explain her behavior. That wasn't how it worked in the Water Tribe. The fact that she had come back was all the apology that Sokka would ever need.

Katara pulled back after a moment, her eyes lingered on the ship-sized hole in the ice, the crushed icewall, the grim faces of the rest of the tribe…. and notably, the people who were missing from it. "What happened?"

"Aang told them that he was the Avatar and they took him and Zuko because he threw fire at them."

She sagged at his words, hands gripping at his elbows, looking for purchase. Sokka gripped her back, giving her a little shake to catch her attention. "It's okay. I'm going after them… I'm going to bring them back. You need to go with the women—"

"What?" She stared at him in shock. "No way, I'm coming with you!"

"No, it's too dangerous." In the corner of his eye, he caught Kana coming up to meet them. Sokka turned, almost whining, the kid that he was once more showing through. "Gran Gran, she has to stay here, right?"

But his grandmother was tugging something along behind her; a small sled packed with three sleeping bags, a sack full of food, and although the kids wouldn't know until sometime later, a small skin filled with the Tribe's meager supplies of coin. "Sokka, it is as much her destiny as it is yours to help the Avatar."
"But Aang's not the Avatar!" he looked from female to another, bleakly wondering why he was only ever the sane one in this family sometimes. "Do you think the real Avatar would allow himself to be captured? Why didn't he just blow them up with some awesome Avatar power?"

And just like that, it fit all into place for Katara. "Because he has to learn the elements before he could use them!" Her voice grew higher in her excitement, her eyes bright. "When we were exploring the ship, Aang and I talked and we figured out he must have been frozen for one-hundred years. That's the same time that the Avatar disappeared!"

"Look, I know you like him, but—"

"It has to be him, Sokka! Don't you remember Dad's stories? The Avatar has to master the elements according to the seasons… that's why he came down here. He needs to learn Water next!"

Kana nodded slowly. Her eyes were tired behind her mass of wrinkles; sad. "She's right, Sokka. And now, your destiny lies with him." She reached out, taking Sokka's hand and wrapping the hemp rope tied to the sled around it.

"Gran Gran…" But there was nothing more Sokka could say, and the old women moved to Katara.

"We were wrong to try to keep you here, my young waterbender. I'm so proud of you, and I know your mother would be as well." She hugged Katara, and then stepped back to address Sokka. "And Sokka, be sure to give Zuko my love… and be nice to your sister."

"Ugh, I — we just can't…he's not…" His protest was half-hearted at best, and with a shaky smile, Kana turned from her grandchildren and walked back down towards the village.

Katara turned, eyeing the small sled of supplies and then the canoe. There was no way they would be able to catch a battleship with that. So she turned, reaching a hand up to gently stroke Appa's velvety muzzle. "Aang is in trouble, Appa. We need to catch up to the ship. Do you think you could fly us there?"

The bison let out a low, mournful moan.

"I think that means, no," Sokka grumbled.

"I think it means yes." Katara reached over, snagging the rope from Sokka's hands and dragged the sled behind the beast to the wide beaver-tail. "Help me load him up."

Sokka grumbled, but did as he was told, and a few minutes later he was sitting sullenly back up in the saddle with Katara at the head. He had protested that he should be the one to drive the thing, but then Katara pointed out that he didn't believe Appa could fly anyway, so what was matter? She had a point.

"Up. Arise. Ascend," he commanded, rolling his eyes; ever the backseat driver.

Katara snapped the reins, but Appa didn't move a muscle. What was it that Aang had said...? Then she had it.

"Appa! Yip-yip!"

The beast gathered himself and with a sweep of his tail, launched into the air.
Zuko could see Aang sag slightly next to him, but the kid was putting on a brave face, so he said nothing. They were walked up a metal staircase to the main deck where they could breathe open air. Already, the ship was moving away and Zuko turned to see that his village had already become a vague outline against the horizon.

The General stood before them for a long moment, golden eyes flicking back and forth between the Avatar and the firebender in indecision. Then he nodded towards Zuko.

"Lieutenant Izhar, please secure the Avatar below deck." The old General said, "Lieutenant Ji, you will assist me in interrogation of the traitor."

Zuko snarled at the word, but was cuffed upside the head. And with a quick, "Yes, Prince Iroh," Lieutenant Ji pushed him towards a ramped staircase leading to what looked like the captain's cabin.

Zuko didn't struggle, although he wanted too, because he had promised away his freedom in exchange for his Tribe's safety, and he was a man of his word. He went proudly, with a sniff of disdain to the metal ramparts and fastenings as he passed. These Fire Nation people were so proud of their little machines, but he had seen the Water Tribe build better ships using just wood.

The interior was decorated in red hangings and plush overstuffed furniture. Both a tsungi horn and five-string liuqin sat leaned carefully against stands in the corner. Two separate fireplaces were stoked to full blast on each side of the room, making air feel uncomfortably warm and the skin on Zuko's face itch under his war-paint.

A tea set sat on a nearby low table, and General Iroh headed straight towards it. "Please, sit," he said, and Zuko was promptly pushed down into a kneeling position under the Lieutenant's hand. Iroh pretended not to notice and went about humming under his breath while he brewed. "Tea?" he asked, pouring himself a cup.

Zuko glowered and then looked away. He would have none of that Fire Nation swill.

The General took a sip, then inclined his head, walking over to the table and taking his own seat in a comfy over-stuffed chair. "What is your name?"

Zuko fixed his gaze on a far point in on the wall, focusing on a painting of what looked like a lotus flower, and said nothing.

"Very well, then. Where were the men of your village?" Iroh asked.

No answer.

The General sighed. "I can see that you are young, and confused. Please understand that no one will hurt you here, but I do need to know how a young firebender like yourself came to be living with the
Water Tribe.”

Zuko’s jaw tensed nearly imperceptibly, but he kept his silence.

"There have been raids on this spot in the past, sir," Lieutenant Ji said, tentatively. "One of the men could have gotten carried away, and this boy could have been the result."

The old man hummed for a moment. "Perhaps." He did not look happy with that theory, but he didn't offer up any other explanation. "Lieutenant, it is a shame to see a Fire Nation face obscured by paint."

"Yes sir." Taking the cue, Lieutenant Ji hauled Zuko up by his collar and shoved him outside to a small balcony. There was a water barrel set against the railing to collect the rain, and wash the dishes. Ji walked him forward and before Zuko could make a sound of protest, his head was dunked forcefully in it.

Zuko could hold his breath for a long time, having the practice during the summer when it was safe to swim, but Ji fisted his hair and brought him up only for a second before plunging his head under again and again. He was breathless and gasping by the time he was let up. Rivets of water ran down his face and neck, all black and white war-paint gone — his features and scars completely visible. With another shove, Ji brought him back inside.

"Much better now, sir."

"Excellent." Iroh was at his desk, peering at a map of what looked like the South Pole. He didn't glance up at their arrival, instead absently took another sip of his tea. "Now, what I would like to know is—" he looked at Zuko, and his words faltered. The teacup slipped from his fingers and fell, staining the map in soft brown liquid. "Zuko?!" And then, to Zuko's complete surprise and shock, the General stood up, reached across the desk, and pulled him into a tight hug.

"Wha— Get off me!" Somehow, Zuko was able to wrench himself away. He fell to the ground, and struggled away, falling back again when Iroh hurried around the oaken desk to haul him back up. "Don't touch me!"

For his part, Lieutenant Ji stood to the side, frozen, just as shocked as Iroh. "Zuko?" he repeated, looking to his General. "Surely not… that Zuko? Prince Zuko?"

"I do not know such a thing can be possible." Iroh stared at Zuko as if he was looking at an aberration, a ghost. "You are dead."

Dead? Prince… no… no… He shook his head vigorously, trying to scoot away. He came only to the far wall. "You're crazy. I don't know who you are."

"You have been presumed dead for over six years." Then Iroh's light amber eyes sharpened with such intensity that Zuko cringed back, despite himself. Iroh's voice went from kindly to fierce in the blink of an eye. "Who did this to you?" he demanded, striding forward and gesturing angrily to the scar around Zuko's left eye, then to his neck. "Did the Water Tribe abduct you?"

"N-no… I… They saved my life!"

"Prince—"

"STOP CALLING ME THAT!"

It was as if the words had made all the tension suddenly snap in the room, and replaced it with some
kind of unearthly silence. Iroh and Ji exchanged a look while Zuko finally struggled to his feet, bracing himself against the far wall. Zuko looked from one man to the other. "I am not a Prince, and I am not Fire Nation. My… my father's name is Hakoda and when he hears what's happened—"

Until this point he had kept his voice in a sort of steel calm, but now it broke and he swallowed convulsively. Dad was a world away and he needed him so much right now. "When— when he finds out you've attacked our village, he will come and kill you." Again he swallowed. His heart was hammering and his mouth was dry, "If I don't kill you, first."

The threat hung, empty in the air. "I remember you as a child," Iroh said after a long moment, returning to his desk to pick up the teacup. He regarded it for a moment, a finger tracing the round edge. "You used to play with my son, Lu Ten, around the turtle-duck pond in the palace gardens. You were a willful boy, just as you are a willful young man. I can see that."

His words should have struck a chord, but there was nothing in Zuko's memory. It was, as it had ever been, a blank. "I don't know who you are." It came out more as a plea than anything else.

"I am your uncle, Zuko."

Zuko stared at him, at the face which showed a strange mix of kindness and a calculating fierceness. His heart was thumping too wildly, his mind too scattered to tell if there was any resemblance at all between the two of them. He knew that he didn't recognize the face. This General might as well have been a perfect stranger. "I don't believe you," he said, although his thoughts were racing… six years… he said he'd been missing for over six years….

Now he saw clearly the flash of pain — however briefly — cross Iroh's face. "Lieutenant Ji," he said, turning to the other man. "Please alert the helmsman to reverse course."

"No!" Zuko started towards him, but he was no threat to them with his hands bound behind his back. "You promised you would leave them alone!"

"Someone has made you forget who you are, Zuko. I will have answers one way or another."

This was a nightmare. He could feel Iroh's amber gaze on him, watching his reaction closely. The Fire Nation General had all the leverage, and he had nothing. When Zuko spoke, his words felt like ash in his mouth. "Stop… Just — I'll tell you what you want. I'll tell you everything. Just don't hurt them. Please." He couldn't even look the General in the face, for he was nearly begging now. Begging to the man who represented the people he hated most

Perhaps it was Zuko's imagination, but he could almost hear the whistle of the wind, just outside the large porthole. When he looked up, he saw Iroh nod to Ji. Had they heard it too? The man bowed, one fist under his vertical palm, and walk out.

To his surprise and relief, the General turned his back to him and sat calmly again at the table, taking up a new cup of tea. Clearly, he was waiting.

"They… They found me on a ship. I was sick and hurt. They took me in and gave me a home.…"

He trailed off, looking miserably at the floor. There was nothing to the story, really. He wished he had Sokka's talent for embellishments to make it at least interesting.

Iroh stared at him calmly over his teacup. "Sit down, Prince Zuko." He indicated the table again, and this time Zuko sat. To his surprise, the General came up behind him and with a soft snick his bounds were cut. Zuko rubbed his chapped wrists, but didn't make a move to get up. Iroh hadn't said anything, but he could feel the man's presence like a power in itself in the room. If he made a move, he'd be down before he got to the door… and the Water Tribe was still in jeopardy.
And now the interrogation truly began.

"You were found on an Earth Kingdom ship?"

"Earth…? No." He shook his head. "Fire Nation."

Iroh's eyes widened in surprise and he was silent for a moment. Then, "What happened?"

The General didn't know? Zuko felt a flash of frustration, and he clenched his fists. "You tell me!" he snapped. Surely this old man was toying with him. "The first thing I remember is waking up on a Water Tribe ship." What happened to me?

He expected Iroh to snap back at him or to treat this as a lie. After all, even the Water Tribe men had been dubious at first about his lost memories. But the old man simply nodded once and continued sipping his tea as if they were having a casual conversation between old acquaintances rather than some strange prisoner interrogation.

Then Iroh asked him a question he did not expect.

"Who taught you to firebend?"

It took him by surprise. "No one," he blurted, "I taught myself."

"You firebend like a waterbender. Fire is not an element of defense, Prince Zuko. Treating as such weakens your power."

Zuko raised his chin. "I am Water Tribe."

Aside from their voices, it had been completely silent in the cabin, for the walls were thickly insulated and the quarters were located far above the noisy engine room. But now there was a sound — so faint that it almost wasn't there at all — the high whistle of the wind. Before either Zuko or Iroh had time to process the noise, a distinct thud sounded across the cabin door, as if something heavy had been thrown bodily across it.

Zuko tensed, waiting, hoping…

The whistle became an enraged bellow of air. The door slammed open, and Iroh stood up.

Zuko seized his chance and tipped the table between himself and the General, blocking the fireball aimed in Aang's direction. It only took a moment for Iroh to kick it out of his way. Aang — he had somehow not only gotten free, but had also recovered his airstaff — circled his arms, and a rush of air slammed the General and the table up against the far wall.

"Good timing." Zuko's grin was strained, but he clapped Aang on the shoulder. "Let's get out of here."

"Prince Zuko."

He didn't know why, but the General's voice made him pause at the door and look back. Iroh was slowly standing, collecting himself; and at that moment he seemed very old.

Aang tugged on his sleeve, his grey eyes wide. "Zuko, c'mon!"

Iroh did not attack again. Instead, he folded his hands within his robes. "I have been given a mission by the Fire Lord to capture the Avatar," he said, his voice grave. "If you do this, if you leave with this boy, you will be declared an enemy of the Fire Nation. The Fire Lord's wrath will be terrible,
and I will not be able to help you."

Zuko looked for a long, long moment upon the man, and even though he did not recognize the face from his past, he saw the truth of his words in his eyes.

Still, Zuko wasn't tempted and it wasn't hard to turn his back on him, murmur, "Let's go," and run with the Avatar down the long steel corridor…

…away from his past and to a different type of future all together.

OoOoOoO

Zuko had to fall flat backwards in order to avoid the bloom of fire aimed for him. He and Aang's escape had lasted long enough to get to open air on the wide deck. But by that time the alarm had been sounded and the anchor had been thrown to halt the ship.

Every available hand had come up top to stop the escapees.

Now the two boys were fighting for their lives against Imperial firebenders.

The flame curled overhead. Zuko rolled away, avoiding being scorched by inches. He scrambled to his feet, and he and an enemy firebender faced each other, circling. There was a cruel twist to the other man's lips. He held himself in a stiff stance, like the open jaws of a steel trap with Zuko in the middle.

"What's the matter, Water Tribe? Can't take the heat?"

Zuko's fists shook. He punched out: a quick jab of motion imitating what he had seen the soldiers do. But that was not how he bent flame. His own fire bloomed out weak, dissipating a mere foot away, and he heard the soldier's harsh cackle in his ears as he once again was forced to roll to the side to avoid getting burned.

And now he was backed up against the very edge of the deck. There weren't any bars or safety railings — just a sharp steel drop-off for dozens of feet to the cold churning sea.

The soldier pressed forward, backing the boy's heels to the edge. Zuko was scared, but his mind felt strangely clear. Fighting like them wasn't going to work. A firebender's strategy was to attack and keep on attacking — so Zuko forced himself to wait instead, hands held out with one palm up and one down.

When the burst of flame came, it was almost in slow motion to his senses. He reached out as if to grab, and with one smooth movement, twisted the fire into a wreath around him. Then, with a shove, he threw it back.
The Imperial firebender moved to block — a quick, almost angry motion — but it was nothing against the literal wave of fire. He was blown backward, saved from a burning by his thick layer of armor.

And two more firebenders rushed to take his place.

Meanwhile, Aang’s feet hardly seemed to touch the deck for a spare second as he leapt and flipped, dancing around the fire attacks and returning with forceful blasts of air. Three men in the water now clung to hastily thrown life-rings, having made the mistake of facing an airbender too close to the edge of the deck.

But Aang was sorely outnumbered, and a rash of red along his right arm told of one close encounter. Airbending Master or no, he was dueling at least ten firebenders.

From his spot on the balcony, Prince Iroh watched the melee. There was no need to involve himself; it was more than obvious the boys fight for freedom would be over shortly. This time Iroh intended to assign every able body, save the cook, to guard the child Avatar.

And as for his nephew…

Iroh’s eyes shifted over to the smaller, less spectacular battle. He watched the boy — and he looked so much like Lu Ten at that age — barely cut a swath between two jets of flame and divert them harmlessly to each side. When the fire had cleared, Zuko was unhurt, but even Iroh could see how he gasped in air with every breath. He had lost his breath control.

A bright flash of orange drew Iroh’s attention away. One of his soldiers had finally caught up to the Avatar's tricks, sending a blast right in his path. The boy yelped in surprise and dissipated the flame in a whirlwind — at the cost of his own altitude. He fell heavily to the deck and was instantly surrounded by a ring of firebenders, their fists cocked.

Zuko blocked another rolling ball of fire just in time by throwing up his arms and creating a defensive wall. He had maneuvered himself away from the edge of the deck, but had accidentally backed up against the plated wall of the engine room. A firebender or an earthbender could use close quarters to their advantage… a waterbender could not. He was as good as beaten.

Then, a noise like a low deep groan or a foghorn, echoed through the air. But that was impossible. Iroh’s ship was all alone out in the Southern Seas.

All activity paused — only one person on the ship knew the source of that noise.

Aang lifted his head from the deck, his grin wide enough to split his face in two. "Appa!"

A rush of white, and a creature every Fire Nation child was told had been extinct, landed on their deck. One slap of his wide beaver-like tail and half the firebenders surrounding Aang were blown away like a scattering of autumn leaves. Aang leapt up again and slammed his airstaff down, blowing away two more firebenders.

The soldiers fighting Zuko had stopped to gape at the creature, and he took his chance, lancing out what he intended to be a torrent of fire, and what ended up as a crackle of hot sparks — easily blocked by the closest man. The soldier retaliated with a swift fiery kick.

Zuko ducked and threw up his hands, instinctively trying to block, but there was no hope…

Then from nowhere, the Imperial firebender was bowled over by a large banked wave. The flames, now under no one's control, rolled harmlessly around Zuko and into nothingness.
A hand reached out and Zuko took it, smiling. "Nice waterbending."

"Thanks," Katara replied, grinning back.

Maybe more words would have passed between them; maybe an apology or perhaps nothing at all. But a moment later Zuko caught sight of a new danger: Prince Iroh had strode onto the deck, no longer content to watch from above.

A surge of fear gripped Zuko. He knew this man was too formidable to beat. It was time to leave.

"C'mon!" Grabbing Katara's wrist, he yanked her at full run for the safety of the bison. Aang was still dodging the remaining benders — he had not seen the danger yet. "Aang, we're leaving!" he called, glancing back towards the General — the man who had said he was his uncle.

And for the second time he caught, just for a moment, the indecision on Iroh's face as his amber gaze flicked over both Zuko and Aang. This time, he chose Aang.

The young airbender had only a moment to jump clear of the first set of fireballs, using his rotating airstaff to give him lift. But it was a slow escape.

"NO!" Zuko pivoted in his stance, reaching around to divert — but Iroh's blast of fire was too strong and it slipped past his reach — and at the same time Katara tried to summon an icewall between the flames and Aang… but it was too brittle to stop anything….

The Avatar turned his airstaff, cycling it desperately — he was blown right off the deck and into the cold sea.

Katara screamed, "NO! AANG! AANG!" and Zuko had to grab her by the waist to keep her from diving after him.

Sokka jumped down from the bison's head to help. "Katara! Stop! You can't—"

And in another instant, they were surrounded by the remaining firebenders.

With the threat of the airbender gone, the General turned to face the Water Tribe teens, hands once more tucked benignly within his robes. But before Iroh could speak, before any one of the siblings could truly begin to feel afraid, there was a rush of water, the sound of wind and… something not seen for over one-hundred years rose above the deck upon a cyclone of water.

It was Aang, but it was like no one had seen before. Like no one could even imagine.

His light blue tattoos glowed with an unearthly light. His eyes were gone, swallowed in white as if the peaceful little monk was only a shell containing the spirit within.

He was the Avatar.

The Avatar landed on the deck with enough force and power to shiver the metal plates. A couple of brave souls blasted fire balls, but the Avatar swept those away with a living tentacle of water. Air and Water worked together seamlessly, and with one outward push the walls of the cyclone shoved a wall of water, knocking the enemy off their own ship.

The Avatar stood on the deck, but with the Fire Nation soldiers gone, the white light flickered and died, leaving only Aang.

Katara rushed to his side, putting a helping hand under his arm as Aang wobbled in his stance.
"Aang… That was amazing!"

"Now that's what I call Avatar power!" Sokka crowed as he and Zuko rushed to join them.

The young monk looked up, confused and a little dazed. "What… What just happened?"

Zuko looked up, his gaze traveling past them all. Prince Iroh had wisely backed up to the stair rampart at the Avatar's return, wisely avoiding being washed overboard like the rest of his men.

"We need to leave," Zuko said.

The General made no move to stop them, but they all felt the weight of his gaze, and when Zuko looked back for the last time after scrambling aboard Appa, Iroh gave him a small, almost imperceptible nod.

Then Aang had called out, "Yip-yip" and the bison surged into the air. Within moments the ship was a small toy-sized thing drifting among the sea and ice.

OoOoOoO

It took two hours to fish the remaining crew from the icy sea. The Spirits had been kind in some ways — there hadn't been any deaths. Iroh was still kept busy, pressing cups of hot tea into cold hands and ordering bed-rest to his men both for chills and bruised egos.

Needless to say, music-night was canceled.

A sharp knock on the door would have caused Iroh to spill ink from his brush, if his hand wasn't naturally so steady. He wrote the last few characters — his signature — and rose from the desk to let it dry. "Come in."

He was unsurprised to see Lieutenant Ji stride in. Iroh let the man bow before addressing him. "The summons weren't urgent, Lieutenant. I was hoping you would get your rest."

"No one can sleep with the sun up like this. I'm fine, sir." Although his cheeks were still ruddy from his extended forced swim. "You have orders, my Prince?"

Iroh nodded and crossed the room to close the cabin door. He did not wish this conversation to be overheard. "This is not an order — it is a request, and one that is strictly off the record."

The Lieutenant's thick eyebrows shot right into his salt-and-pepper hair, but Iroh ignored the expression and went back to the desk to lift the scroll. The ink was good quality; it had dried quickly, and Iroh remained silent as he crumbled some wax and then melted it over the seam of the scroll, affixing it with the royal stamp.
"Do you have any children, Lieutenant Ji?"

"I have a daughter," he replied. "She's about seven years old, and she lives with my parents." There was a pause and when Iroh didn't offer any further explanation Ji hesitantly inquired, "Sir?"

The General sat down at the desk, motioning for Ji to take the other seat. His face was troubled, more troubled than Ji had ever seen him before. "I had first learned of my nephew's death scarcely after I had started to come to terms with the passing of my own son, Lu Ten," he said, after a long silence. "I had been on a quest… a spiritual quest, but against the advice of a friend I decided to return to the Fire Nation. I knew my family would need me. Two children lost in such a short amount of time… both to enemies of the Fire Nation. It nearly broke my family apart. And now, I find that one is still alive."

"Sir—" Ji hesitated, glancing at the steel cabin door which assured their privacy. He knew he could always be frank in Iroh's presence, but this would be coming very close to stepping over the line. "The boy is in league with an enemy nation… in league with the Avatar! You can't — he is a traitor, sir."

"You take a boy," Iroh said, his voice soft and full of memories of a young, happy, fiery child. A child who used to yell out 'Uncle!' and throw his arms about his legs when he came home from battles. "And you remove him from his family before his formative years. Then you tell him that everything he knows is evil and wrong, and punish him when he speaks of it." His hand went up, brushing under his own left eye for emphasis. "And you praise and accept him only him when he seeks out his new family. Zuko was only ten years old when he disappeared. I have seen full grown prisoners break under lesser circumstances."

The Lieutenant's jaw set, and he gave a stiff nod. "I didn't think of it in that light. Spirits above, they now have a Fire Nation royal about to come of age who is loyal to only the Water Tribes. It's… ingenious." He glanced out the port-hole, to the vista of sea and ice. "I didn't think the barbarians would have it in them."

"I do not believe that they do."

"Sir?"

The General raised his hand to stroke his beard, but whatever his thoughts were, he did not share them out loud. "My nephew mentioned a name… Hakoda? Have you heard of this man before?"

Ji cleared his throat. "Yes, sir. He is reported to be the leader of a fleet of Water Tribe ships which have caused minor problems for us on the eastern Earth Kingdom coast." Left unsaid was that had Iroh not been treating this hunt for the Avatar like a sort of early retirement-cruise, he would have kept up to date on Fire Nation communications.

Iroh's face darkened, but he was not bothered by the insinuation. He was thinking of Zuko's scars. "Whatever the bounty is on his head, I want it tripled." With that order, he pushed the sealed scroll across the desk. "This letter is for Princess Ursa's eyes only. It is very important… that Prince Ozai not see it."

"I understand, sir." Taking the scroll, Ji tucked it within one of the folds of his tunic. "But with all due respect, if he is traveling with the Avatar it will be just a matter of time before the truth is found out."

"I will hope by that time, it will not be an issue. The Fire Lord has commanded me to search for the Avatar, and I have found him. He is young, yes, but what we saw is just a taste of his full power. He
must be stopped." General Iroh paused, "But now I also have a second objective... I intend to bring Prince Zuko home."

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"We have to head North," Sokka announced, once the initial exhilaration of their escape had faded. "We'll lead the Fire Nation away from the village."

Zuko had spotted the packed supplies which had been tied securely to the saddle; he had guessed as much, but Sokka's words had with them the weight of finality. He realized for the first time that it would be long while before he saw home again. He turned, looking out behind them and silently watching the high peaks of white fade off into the distance — his mind buzzing with... everything.

Suddenly the mood, which had just moments before been jubilant, became melancholy and almost sad. Aang sat off to the side, knees tucked up to his chin and Katara scooted over to his side.

"Aang," she said, and the young airbender looked up. "Why didn't you tell us you were the Avatar?"

"Because I never wanted to be," came the soft, sad reply.

"What you did with the water... That was the most amazing thing I've ever seen." Katara beamed at him, and tentatively, Aang smiled back.

"Thanks, but I don't really know how I did it. I just... did it." Despite his modesty, Aang visibly perked up. He looked around happily, not seeming to notice how Zuko was trying to avoid catching his eye. He hoped that the kid would get the hint. Of course, he didn't. "So why did that General guy call you a prince?"

"What?" Katara snapped. Abruptly Zuko felt the weight of everyone's attention on himself.

He sighed and looked out to sea. "I don't know," he said, hedging. "That 'General guy' is Prince Iroh." A random fact came into his mind, as it had done when he had first thought about the solstice; a piece of Fire Nation information, completely without emotion or accompanying memory. "If that's true, he's the next in line to the throne, and he said... He said he's my uncle."

Katara gasped, her hand flying to her mouth, and Zuko crossed his arms, feeling defensive, and not quite knowing why.

It was Sokka who spoke next, though, in his typical, cynical way. "Well, do you believe him?"

"I don't know," Zuko said, again. He paused, considering. "He was trying to get information from me about the Tribe. He knew my name, though..." And he knew how long he had been missing, but he didn't want to add that.
"I could have said your name when we were fighting those soldiers." Sokka rubbed the back of his neck in thought. "I can't remember."

"Yeah." Zuko wanted desperately to believe him. It was possible Sokka called out his name. So many things had happened so fast. Prince Iroh could have taken that piece of information and run with it. "Maybe..."

If the boys were willing to delude themselves, Katara wasn't. She spoke, tentatively. "Do you remember anything about him?"

"No." On this, he was at least certain. It seemed like he would remember his own uncle, right? He could remember tons of useless stuff about the Fire Nation — all of the islands, all of the governors and the name of the major Generals, or at least the ones in favor of the Fire Lord...

… which happened to be the exact things a prince would be educated on.

A sick sensation bubbled within his gut, and he looked away again out to sea in case any of the others saw a flash of the fear and doubt on his face. He couldn't be a Fire Nation Prince. He... he just couldn't.

Sokka was the one who summed it up, like he was often able to do with stupid or amazing events, a half-smile on his handsome, tanned face. "So you're saying," he waited a beat, "that I'm sitting in a saddle with the Prince of the Fire Nation and the Avatar?"

Aang chuckled, weakly, but in good humor. Zuko just shot his brother a glare. "I'm not a Prince!"

"Oh, I'm sorry." Sokka touched his hand to his chest, as if in a bow. "Your highness."

"Shut up!" But now Sokka was bowing down so low, and with such comic reverence that Zuko couldn't help the bubble of laughter in his voice. He reached over, shoving the other boy hard. "Idiot..." It was said with fondness, and abruptly Sokka was upright again and grinning, giving a friendly shove back.

"You may be a Prince, you know, but you're still my little brother."

It was meant to be a mostly-manly hug that followed, but Zuko needed it more than he knew, and held on to Sokka. Then Katara followed and Zuko met her eyes for a moment and knew he wasn't upset at her for leaving the village. He could never stay angry at her for very long.

Poor Aang sat off to the side, smiling wistfully, but obviously the outsider. Katara, of course, could be counted on to say the exact right thing.

"Come over here, Aang. You're part of the family now, too."

Aang's grey eyes lit up and when he joined the group-hug, it felt right.

"So," said Sokka, after they separated, "We need to come up with a plan."

Katara looked thoughtful. "According to legend, the Avatar needs to learn the elements in order. You know Air, Aang. So next would be Water, Earth and then Fire." She ticked off the elements as she spoke.

"That's what the monks told me."

And now her smile was just a bit like Sokka's at his most devious. "Well, if we go to the North Pole
you can master waterbending."

"And, oh hey, so could you!" Zuko cut in with a roll of his eyes, not even bothering to pretend he didn't see her ulterior motive.

Aang, of course, didn't catch the sarcasm. "We can learn it together!"

She turned to her brothers, her smile now sweet. "And I'm sure there will be plenty of opportunities to see more firebending. And," she turned to Sokka, "you two will get to knock some Fire Nation heads on the way."

She had said the magic words. Zuko couldn't help but feel a bit wistful at the thought of learning more — he had barely held his own on the ship, and he certainly had no intention of letting his sister outstrip him in bending.

At his side, Sokka sighed almost dreamily. "I would like that. I would really like that."

"Then we're in this together," Katara said, with a bit of finality.

Aang turned and dug around in his small pack, coming out with a scroll. "All right, but before I learn waterbending, we have some serious business to attend to here." He pointed to a spot on the map. "Here, and here."

Sokka shifted around and came behind Aang, reading the map over his shoulder. "No way," he said, and his voice was full of the same sort of stubbornness Zuko had heard a hundred times before when he was trying to lead him and Katara on some crazy adventure. "They'll expect us to go to the Southern Air Temple first. It's too obvious. We can faint them out if we circle around here." He poked a finger to some of the pale-shaded islands.

As Aang and Sokka planned, Zuko found his mind wandering and turned to look out behind them. Off in the distance, a slight discoloration beyond the edge of the horizon, he could just make out a lazy draft of smoke. Iroh's ship was in full pursuit.

The Fire Nation would be after the Avatar… and even if the General wasn't telling the truth, Zuko knew that they would be after him as well, a rogue firebender.

Zuko’s light gold eyes narrowed. He and Sokka had failed in protecting their village, and he was determined that wouldn’t happen again. He would learn firebending as best he could. He would protect his family, and its newest member. He wasn't some haughty Prince. He had lived and thrived on the ice. He was Water Tribe.

All the Fire Nation had ever been to him were nightmares and scars.
Siege of Kyoshi Island

Chapter Summary

This chapter's picture "cuddling" was drawn by the talented GreenAppleFreak! (http://greenapplefreak.deviantart.com/art/Cuddling-144349304)
One other real quick note… I'm intentionally throwing as many wrenches in the plot as humanly possible so it doesn't end up being Season 1 with Zuko just there for extra comments, or something.

Also, YES I fucked up with the timeline of the war balloons. For some reason, when writing
this chapter, I thought they were already a part of the Fire Nation’s arsenal. So I'm totally handwaving that as a butterfly effect of Zuko's disappearance from the Fire Nation... uh, somehow.

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OoOoO

Your future is full of struggle and anguish, most of it self-inflicted.

- Aunt Wu to Sokka, The Fortuneteller

OoOoO

Sokka convinced Aang to set the bison for north. Best to make their path obvious to the pursuing Fire Nation ship and draw them as far away from the village as possible.

The further they flew — Appa's speed winding down from a desperate sprint to a more relaxed glide — the deeper the midnight-sun sank below the horizon. This made sense, when the kids paused to think about it. They were reaching the arctic circle and when they were no longer at the extreme edge of the world, the sun would rise and fall like it did in most other places, even in the middle of summer.

Iroh's ship was soon swallowed in the darkness behind them.

"Just… Just gonna take a nap." Zuko muttered, nodding as he spoke. No one was fooled. His chin dropped to his chest, and within a few minutes he was curled up and deeply asleep in the bison's saddle. After weeks of being exposed to the midnight sun, his body had crashed at the first sign of darkness.

Aang was flagging, too — both boys had an exhausting day, and he didn't put up too much of an objection when Sokka started wheeling to take over driver's duties on Appa's head. The young monk trudged back to the saddle and curled next to Zuko.

Katara sat, watching over them. The moon was only half-full, but so brilliant and the air so cold and crisp that she could see them both almost as if they were lit by a pale sun: Avatar and Prince.

The chill that went up her spine had nothing to do with the night air.

She flipped up the hood of her parka, sinking herself into the furs and pretending she were being snuggled by someone warm and secure: Maybe Dad… maybe Mom.

In some ways, it was easy to accept that Aang was the Avatar — he had appeared into their lives so dramatically — but even then it was hard to reconcile in her mind her cheerful friend with the powerful spirit that had swept all the firebenders off their own ship. Looking at him sleeping beside her brother, it was hard to believe that he could stop the war.
Katara shook her head and reached up to touch the blue stone of her necklace, as if in a talisman against those unworthy thoughts.

Stranger still was thinking of Zuko as a prince. Some years ago, Katara had stopped thinking of him as Fire Nation at all. He was her brother. Her strong willed, determined, passionate, bone-headed brother. He loved their father's stories as much as she did, both he and Sokka took their warrior duties too seriously, and he got stomach aches when he ate too many white snow-nuts. Thinking of him as royalty, the enemy's royalty, was absurd.

As she looked on, Aang shifted in his sleep and pressed his back up against Zuko's back, seeking out his body heat. The other boy didn't stir.

Katara's lip trembled, and then twitched upward into an almost maternal smile. Searching through their supplies, she unfolded one of the thick fur blankets and laid it over them.

Then she got up, walking across Appa's wide back to join Sokka at the driver's seat. She gave him a soft smile in greeting, which wasn't returned. He was busy staring out to sea, his back stiff and the leather reins tightly grasped in his mittens.

"Is everything okay?" she asked.

He sent her a sidelong look, and didn't answer her question directly. "We should find land soon. Get some rest."

"I'm fine, for now." She sat quiet for a moment, hands folded in her lap, expecting Sokka to speak again. If there was one thing that was constant about her eldest brother, it was that he hardly ever kept anything bottled inside. But the silence stretched on, and finally, shifting uncomfortably, she spoke. "Is this… about Zuko?"

That jerked him out of his melancholy silence. "Zuko? No… What?"

"You know, about him being a prince."

Sokka rolled his eyes, and at once he was the brother she knew again. All intelligence and biting sarcasm. "The only thing Zuko is prince of is annoying little brothers." He tugged on Appa's reins. Out in the distance, looking like a black smudge set against charcoal colored waters, sat a small strip of land. "That General guy was just trying to butter him up."

"But—"

"It's an interrogation technique, Katara. You're a girl," he added, flippantly. "I wouldn't expect you to understand."

"What does me being a girl have to do with anything?"

"Look, this isn't sewing and baking. It's strategy."

She considered, just for a moment, about bringing up a soaking wave of icy water and showing him exactly what this 'girl' was capable of. But before she could act on that impulse, he continued.

"Think about it, Katara. Zuko's been living with us for seven years—"

"Six years."

"Fine. And if someone that important—If a Prince of a whole nation went missing…. They just
wouldn't shrug and forget about it. Zuko is not a prince. You know that Dad's men might have—"
He stopped, cutting off his words with a click of his teeth, and he pulled again on Appa's reigns as if in distraction.

Normally, Katara would not have let that go. But now the bison was angling down, and she clutched almost fearfully at the steady black horn in front of her for balance. The strip of land was nothing more than a rocky rise somehow up-thrust in the middle of the southern sea. There was just enough room for Appa to land, although choppy sea waves beat on the island in all directions sending cold spray periodically over them all.

The bison didn't seem to mind — perhaps his fur was so thick that he didn't even feel it. With a shift of weight that made both Water Tribe siblings reach again for the steady horns, he hunkered himself down and let out a long, resting sigh.

"We'll be kind of doomed if this magical monster rolls over in his sleep," Sokka joked, standing up to reach towards the starlit sky in a long stretch. "I don't think he will, though, with Aang on his back."

They made their careful way up to the softly padded saddle. Katara pulled out another blanket to keep out the sea-spray and lay down next to Zuko, taking advantage of his unnaturally warm body heat. She expected Sokka to take his place — perhaps on the other side of Aang as added protection for the younger boy. But he kept himself apart on the other side of the saddle. She saw his outline, dark against the spray of glittering stars, watching over them with a troubled, guilty look on his face.

It occurred to her just as she was falling asleep that perhaps it wasn't Aang or Zuko who needed a helping hand; a supportive ear: It was Sokka.

OoOoO

In the South Pole, grass grew in more or less dry patches upon thinnest part of the permafrost, and then only during the summer months. During the first snowfalls, what little life was able to eek its way out of the snow was quickly covered and forgotten about.

It was nothing, nothing like this.

Seeing the bewildered expressions on his friend's faces, Aang angled Appa down for a landing right in the gently waving field of green.

"There's... just so much of it," Katara said in wonder. She was the one to jump down first, grinning widely when she felt how springy the grass was under her booted moccasins. Her sudden movement disrupted the native bugs, and a swarm of tiny gnats flew up to circle crazily at waist height. Off in the field they could hear more; chirping, chattering, droning insects. Far too many to count. So much more life in this field than an entire snow-plain back home.

Zuko was next. He stretched, giving a jaw-cracking yawn before he slid down the bison's side and
landed lightly on his feet. Gazing around this alien vista, Zuko knelt down, curling his fingers in the
green shoots and inhaled the strange yet somehow vaguely familiar scent of vegetation and sun-
baked earth.

Beside him, Sokka did the same and sneezed.

Aang leaned against his upright airstaff, a small smile on his face as he watched the siblings
cautiously explore. "You guys have never seen grass before?"

"We've never been outside the South Pole." Katara threw a glance at Zuko, who simply shrugged
back. He had been, but he didn't remember, so it didn't count. This was as new for him as it was for
Sokka and Katara.

"Oh wow, well this is nothing! Just wait until you see the Si Wong desert. And the Fire Nation has
rain forests so thick you can't even cut your way through. Oh! And the Hei Bai forest—"

"We're going to the North Pole." Sokka straightened up — he had been busy poking the tip of his
boomerang into a prairie-rabbit hole, but any tasty little creature was burrowed too far down to reach.
"Remember?"

"But there's no reason we can't have a little fun on the way." The airbender smiled. "You have to at
least ride the giant elephant koi."

"Aang, I know fun." Sokka stuck a thumb in his chest. "I am the Master of Fun, and riding a giant
fish does not sound like fun."

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OoOoO

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Hours later, Sokka repeated his complaint, this time while standing on the shores of a nearby bay
with his arms crossed tightly over his chest.

"Well," Zuko said, as he gathered some loose kindling into an organized pile and lit it with a quick
burst of heat. "It looks like he's having fun to me."

Far out across the sparkling blue bay, Aang was a doll-sized figure stripped down to his underpants
and grasping on tightly to the fin of an orange and white fish easily the size of Appa. The fish dove
and jumped through the water, looking pleased to have him as a passenger.

"Wow! Look at him go!" Katara had waded out to her knees in the bone-aching icy water and
watched Aang with shining eyes. She raised a hand to wave at him, and out in the bay, he waved
wildly back.

By the fire, Zuko made an exaggerated retching sound.

The elephant-koi took another wild leap, its body rising almost straight out of the water before
landing back with a crash and a spray of white. They could hear the boy's happy laughter and wild
whoops of joy echoing back to the shore.

Sokka crossed his arms even tighter. "Well, that's just… Clearly, the fish is doing all the work." But he looked more than a little wistful, like he was battling between staying in his grumpy mood as leader, or swimming out to take his turn on the giant fish.

Zuko stood, wiping his hands clean on the hem of his long blue tunic. He was considering the same thing as his brother, but his sharp eyes caught something dark and foreboding under the water. He squinted, raising his hand to shield his eyes. It couldn't be a deeper patch, because it was moving. A fin — dark and spiked, unlike the white and orange koi — sliced out of the water.

"AANG!" he yelled, "LOOK OUT!"

The fin turned and headed straight for the boy.

By now Katara and Sokka had also seen the danger and joined in the yelling. "AANG! GIANT FISH THING!" "COME BACK!" "BEHIND YOU!"

Aang waved back, pleased that his friends were so excited.

Sokka grabbed up his whale-bone machete and looked at his younger brother. "C'mon, we need to go after him."

But there was no need. Aang had finally turned his head and seen the dark snake-like shape heading towards him. He yelped and jumped clear of the fish, his legs pumping so fast and bending the air around him so that he actually ran over the surface of the water. The black fin was in hot pursuit, but it was no match for the airbending master. Aang didn't slow down, and ended up running headlong into Sokka and Zuko at the shore. All three boys crashed back against the rise of the bank in a tangle of limbs.

"Ugh," Aang groaned, clutching his head where he had bumped into Sokka's elbow. "What was that thing?"

"How should I know?" Zuko snapped. Aang's knee was digging painfully into his stomach, and he shoved the other boy off before getting to his feet.

The bay was tranquil again, and as deceptively calm as a smoothed over mirror. Even the elephant-koi had fled in the face of that… Whatever it was.

Aang scratched his head in wonder and went over to his pile of clothes, tugging the wide pants and orange over-shirt back over his head. "I don't think that was there one-hundred years ago."

Sokka took Katara's proffered hand, standing up and rubbing his back. "Wow, Aang, you're right, that was super-fun. Can we go now?"

No sooner had he said that then there was a sharp snapping of a twig in the nearby rocky forest. The kids turned, all suddenly reminded that they were not in the South Pole and in enemy territory. The Water Tribe siblings had hardly any experience with forests at all, and even the two boys shifted together nervously. Was that a shadow or a person behind the trunk of that tree?

Appa gave a low groan, mournful and yet somehow annoyed, and suddenly they were surrounded.

Zuko only had a second to react. He reached out to the campfire, trying to bring the flames to bear, but his arm was knocked away. He caught a flash of green — an impression of a white painted face, and then his knees were kicked out from under him, his face pushed in the dirt. A thin noose was
pulled over his wrists, tying them behind his back, and a blindfold slid over his eyes.

And beside him, he heard his brother groan, "Or we could stay awhile…"

Zuko found himself hauled back up to his feet. His captors were strangely silent, but he felt quick hands search over his pockets — removing his boomerang and bone-club. The thought of those same pawing hands, those same dirty fingers, searching over his sister in the same brisk and intimate fashion made his heart contract in rage.

"Katara?" he demanded, twisting his head right and left. It was no use; he couldn't see through the thick blindfold.

"Right here." Her voice came from his right; choked and scared.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes... They have me blindfolded."

"Me too."

"We're all blindfolded," Sokka muttered.

Then Aang's bright voice cut in. "Don't worry. I'm sure this is all just a big misunderstanding."

Someone shoved Zuko forward and he stumbled, unsure of his footing on the pebbly terrain. His captor had to hook an arm him under his elbow to keep him from falling flat on his face. Being hauled up again, Zuko caught a strange scent he didn't quite understand — orange blossoms and vanilla.

"Where are you taking us?!" Sokka demanded, from Zuko's left. He heard uneven footsteps as if his brother was struggling to find his footing as well. "If you lay one finger on any of them—" There was a deep thump and then Sokka's voice again; high and cracking, "Naaugh… Ow, OW!"

"No!" Zuko surged forward against his captor's grasp. "Don't hurt him!"

Something sharp was pressed against the back of his neck. It felt like pinpricks of fingernails. As if in a warning to silence himself. But that didn't make sense. What kind of warriors had long fingernails? Then he was shoved forward again.

He could only imagine that they were being led through the forest. The terrain underfoot soon went from rocky to soft with an odd crunching sound he assumed was dead, dried foliage. Aang had told them all only this morning how the trees in these area — so different from the sparse conifers back home — shed their thick, broad leaves every winter. That had to be what was crunching.

Zuko heard occasional stumbling, whispered curses from his siblings and even from Aang — what were Monkey-feathers, anyway? — But whoever had a hold on him kept a very strong grip. He only lost his footing once or twice.

Eventually, they came to a flat area he hoped was a road. He could smell the slight scent of roasting meat, and heard the general babble of people. That was good. If the blindfold were taken away and his hands freed, he might be able to draw from the fire. There had to be patches of snow around that Katara could use as a weapon.

With one final shove, Zuko was turned and pushed backward against something hard and rough. He shrugged his shoulders, but something — his guess would be another rope — was secured around
his middle, tying him against a thick pole. He assumed the others got the same treatment, because once the rope was tightened Sokka seemed to explode in ire. "Who are you?! Show yourselves, cowards!"

A man's voice broke in, deep and foreboding. "You four have some explaining to do."

Another voice spoke, but this one was a lot more feminine. "And if you don't answer all of our questions, we're throwing you back in the water with the Unagi."

Zuko grit his teeth, and tried to shrug from out of the bonds, but the ropes were tight. He could barely move. "We weren't doing anything wrong!"

The girl spoke. "This one," and Zuko felt something hard, like the butt of a weapon, poke into his chest. "looks he's been in some fights. I think he's a firebender."

"He's not," Sokka snapped, cutting off Zuko's angry retort. "You saw wrong."

Aang spoke up. "It's my fault. I'm the one who brought them here. If you should be angry at anyone, it's me. I didn't mean to trespass, though! Honest!"

That did the trick. Rough hands scrabbled at the back of Zuko's head. The blindfold was lifted, and he blinked for a few moments against the bright light before the scene resolved itself. To his side, Katara and the others were getting the same treatment. But what stood in front of him caught most of his attention. Zuko had been ready for anything — though he was fairly sure he hadn't been caught by Fire Nation soldiers, but instead of burly earthbenders he saw... girls?

"Wait," he said, twisting his head about to make sure the actual warriors weren't hiding somewhere in the back. "Where are the men who ambushed us?"

Suddenly one of the girls; painted like the rest but with a large golden tiara on her head stepped forward, all menace. She grabbed him by the collar with enough strength to lift him to his toes, and a green gloved fist shook in his face. "There were no men! We ambushed you. Now tell us who are you and what are you doing here?"

To his side, Sokka let out a bark of a laugh. "Wait a second. There's no way that you took us down."

The girl-warrior raked him over with narrowed, smoky-blue eyes. "We'll feed the loud one to the Unagi first," she said with a glare for Sokka, "the scarred one can go next."

"No!" Katara gasped, straining at her bonds. "Wait! Don't hurt them! My brothers are just idiots, sometimes."

Aang looked at the warriors with an earnest, innocent face. "I just wanted to ride the elephant koi. We didn't mean to cause any trouble miss... Uh, warrior, ma'am."

"How do we know you're not Fire Nation spies?" the old man demanded, while the warrior-girl continued glaring at the two brothers. "Kyoshi Island has stayed out of this war so far. We intend to keep it that way."

Something pinged deep in Zuko's mind. For a spare moment he thought it was another vague fact that had drifted its way up from the dark, shadowed recesses of his hidden memories. But no, this was a true memory, long ago when he first came into the tribe.

"Take him to Kyoshi Island. They're soft hearted, and they'd never treat him wrong for being what he is."
Right.

Looking around at these stern, painted faces and this strange vista filled with trees and rocks, Zuko repressed a shudder. For the thousandth time in his life, he cursed that fool Auya. These Kyoshi Islanders were threatening to kill them all just for trespassing. He couldn't imagine what they would have done to him as a child if they found out he was a firebender.

The name of the island had inspired a memory in Aang as well, but a wholly different one. "Oh," he said in a long, satisfied sigh. "This island is named for Kyoshi? Well, I know Kyoshi!"

There was a distinct, shocked silence. Then the old man laughed, laying his hands on his ample belly. "Avatar Kyoshi was born here four-hundred years ago. She has been dead for centuries."

"I know her because I'm the Avatar."

This earned him confused looks from everyone, including the three siblings. They could all see the statue of Avatar Kyoshi if they craned their heads up; a large strong-jawed woman in green and gold uniform. Aang was just a goofy kid, maybe a bit small for his age. His cheerful demeanor looked completely out of place, especially compared to the statue. It looked like Kyoshi had never smiled in her life.

Clearly, the old man was of the same mind. He had stopped laughing and now regarded them all with intense disapproval. "I've heard enough of this. Throw the imposter to the Unagi."

Instantly, the female warriors behind him snapped to attention. They advanced with what looked to be bladed fans in their hands.

"Aang," Katara said in a terse whisper, "Do some airbending!"

It seemed to be just what he was waiting for. With another, more secret smile, Aang took a deep breath and with a rush of wind he broke free of the bonds.

It was almost worth getting tied up to see the villagers — including all of the warriors save for the leader — shrink back with jaws dropped as the boy shot straight up in the air, flipped over the statue of their Avatar idol, and float easily back down.

The old man's mouth worked for a few seconds before he was able to speak. "It—it's true. You are the Avatar." Then he bowed, and every watching villager did the same.

Last was the leader of the warriors. She looked as if she was trying to swallow something very sour, and her suspicious eyes stayed on Sokka and Zuko for a long moment before she dropped her gaze and bowed.

OoOoO

Prince Iroh stood on the bow of his ship, hands clasped behind his back and observing the harbor.
with weary amber eyes. He heard the familiar tap, tap of boots upon the metal plating behind him. He did not have to turn around to know that Ji had come to his side.

"Commander Zhao has done well for himself," his Lieutenant murmured, echoing Iroh's own thoughts. The harbor was choked with warships, most of them making Iroh's own vessel seem undersized. The Prince preferred his ship — it was quick and nimble where the giants were plodding and slow. But he did not want to think about the well stocked kitchens, or the modern amenities of the newer models.

Iroh nodded and regarded Ji from the corner of his eye. "You have what you need for your journey, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir. And I've circulated your orders among the crew. No one is to go ashore in your absence." Except, of course, for Ji himself. This would be the point where he would separate from the crew and the prince he had served with for two years. It would be easy to blend in and lose himself in this busy Southern hub. If all went well, he would be back in Fire Nation territory within the month with the message to Princess Ursa in hand.

"Good," Iroh rumbled, "I will distract Commander Zhao and give you the time that you need."

"Thank you. It… has been a pleasure serving with you, sir."

Iroh turned and clasped a warm hand upon Ji's shoulder. His smile for his Lieutenant was genuine. "We will meet again, Ji. I am sure of it. Keep safe."

A half hour later, the ship had been tied to the dock, and Iroh was striding alone down the rampart. He was unsurprised to see a small welcoming party — his royal flag was recognizable. Commander Zhao himself stood at the head of it, and when Iroh's boots touched soil, the commander bowed low.

"It is an honor to receive the Prince of the Fire Nation." Zhao's voice was much as Iroh remembered it, smooth — too smooth. "What brings you to my harbor?"

"My ship needs to resupply, and I am here to requisition two of your war-balloons."

Zhao's face was too schooled to show any surprise, but Iroh thought he caught a hint of it anyway in his glittering eyes. "Of course, Prince Iroh. Would you care to join me for a drink?"

Iroh nodded, and the Commander turned smartly so that they walked side-by-side. "You have amassed quite the fleet, Commander," said Iroh with an eye for the row upon row of ships docked along the port.

"All of the navel forces are gearing up for the arrival of Sozin's Comet," Zhao replied. "Although I plan on cutting their teeth on some of the smaller islands off the Earth Kingdom. You've come at the right time, General. Another day would have seen us gone." He inclined his head politely. "How goes your search for the Avatar?"

Iroh smiled something benign, yet secret. "To be expected. I plan on using the balloons to visit the Southern Air Temple. No one has been there for a hundred years. There may still be a sign…"

This was a lie, of course. Iroh was counting on the young monk's return to the temple, and with him… his nephew. He only had to get there before the children arrived. His tiles were laid on the table, so to speak, and the trap was being set.

Commander Zhao led him to the main staging tent, and Iroh's nose was assaulted with overly fragrant packets of tea.
"Do you have any ginseng?" Iroh asked, hopefully. "It is my favorite."

The next morning, the kids woke to a polite knock on the door. Sokka was the one who answered it, his hair still down and rubbing sleep out of his eyes. He had to jump quickly out of the way as a gaggle of women, all carrying steaming platters of food walked in. A table was quickly set up, and soon it was covered with at least eighteen different types of food. The women scurried out as quickly as they came in, some winking and giggling at the child Avatar.

"Wow!" Aang exclaimed, sitting himself up at the head of the table and looking over it with wide grey eyes. "Dessert for breakfast!" He picked up a roll of sticky-sweet rice and popped it into his mouth. "You've got to try this one, Katara." He said thickly as he pointed excitedly to an orange-shaded roll.

Katara did, smiling at her friend's happiness as she took a bite. Then her expression changed to something strange — almost as if she was going to sneeze. She coughed and spat it back out into her napkin. "Hot!"

Zuko took one of the orange rolls for himself, and his remaining eyebrow raised at the spice when he bit into it. "Hey, that's not so bad." Then he promptly stuck another one onto his plate.

Katara, still fanning at her mouth, looked over and saw that someone had not joined the table. "C'mon, Sokka. The food is getting cold."

Her eldest brother sat slumped by the window, arms crossed moodily over his chest. "Not hungry."

All activity at the table stopped. Zuko and Katara exchanged a look of mutual shock. Even Aang seemed mildly surprised — he had heard Sokka complain bitterly over food many times in the last few days that he'd known him.

"Since when are you not hungry?" Zuko asked.

"Since he got his butt kicked yesterday by a bunch of girls," Katara replied, eager to dig one in after her little conversation with Sokka the other night.

Zuko and Aang laughed; it all seemed so stupid now that they were safe, and that Aang was being treated like a god by these people.

Sokka shot them all an icy glare, clearly not amused.

Aang grinned widely, and waved his hand, sending a couple of creamy pastries flying to the older boy. "Don't be angry, Sokka. Enjoy yourself. They're giving us the royal treatment!" Another puff of air and the light pastries fell onto a small plate right by Sokka's side.

The boy looked at it, and with a resigning sigh, took a bite. He chewed thoughtfully for a few moments, but then his face soured. With an angry shake of his head, he got up. The door slammed...
behind him.

Katara made a move to get up, but Zuko was first and placed a hand on her shoulder. "It's okay. I'll talk to him." He rose and followed Sokka out. He found him, a few moments later, sulking just outside the door.

"What's wrong with you?" Zuko demanded, once the door was safely shut behind.

Sokka shot him a scathing look. "Nothing. I'm fine."

"No you're not. You let those warrior girls get to you, didn't you?"

"No!" he said at once, although it was obvious that the answer was 'Yes.'

Zuko rolled his eyes and crossed his arms, leaning against the far wall, waiting. It didn't take long. Sokka was seething, gritting his teeth and claspng his hands into tight fists. As Katara had observed, it was hard for him to keep what was bothering him inside.

"It's just — I just… I couldn't stop those firebenders from getting to the village or taking you away, and I couldn't protect you or Katara yesterday."

"Oh." Zuko was silent for a beat, shifting his weight from one foot to another. He had thought Sokka was just dealing with a bruised ego. Now he wished that he had taken his sister along. She knew how to provide comfort. "Look," he began, hesitantly, "we were really outnumbered back at the village, and we were sort of taken by surprise here—"

"It doesn't matter." Sokka shook his head angrily, full of self recrimination. "It's my job to keep you two safe and I've failed. Twice."

Zuko couldn't help but feel a twinge of annoyance at that. After all, he could take care of himself. He didn't need his big brother to do it for him. But he bit back those words, instead saying, "Look Sokka, you're probably going to fail a lot—"

"Thanks, Zuko." Sokka's eyes were flinty, and before Zuko could finish, his brother shoulderered past him. "That really helps."

"Hey, I had a point to that!" But Zuko was calling to empty air. Sokka had turned the corner, and walked away.

OoOoO

After Sokka left, the mood in the guest suite became muted. Zuko ate quietly, ignoring Aang's longing looks out the window at the clear blue sky and Katara's annoyed little tuts over random female voices that kept filtering through the wooden walls.

Apparently news that the Avatar himself was staying in the village had drifted all over Kyoshi Island.
A gathering of what appeared to be mostly young females was forming in the square outside, and Aang periodically stuck his head outside to give them a wave. Finally, he announced that he was going to go exploring.

Zuko muttered his own excuse and left, feeling the weight of Katara's glare between his shoulders. He forced himself not to care. He didn't have to spend all day inside, sulking, just because Katara wanted to. He had his own plans.

He tried not to think about what General Iroh had told him when he was aboard the Fire Nation ship. It was nonsense. And even if it were true — which it wasn't, he quickly told himself — it wouldn't matter anyway because he was part of the Water Tribe. He didn't have any ties to the Fire Nation.

Still, feeling somewhat guilty for it, Zuko asked around, wondering if Kyoshi Island had a library or a hall of records. It was a long shot — why would anyone from the Earth Kingdom have records of the Royal Fire Nation family tree? But it at least kept him out of the way of the screaming masses of girls that seemed to follow Aang around.

He was eventually directed to an old hut set off to the side behind a row of overgrown bushes. He walked up the worn dirt path, noting how this hut — like so many others of this tiny village — looked to be in disrepair, and could stand to use a coat of paint.

The door was unlocked, but shrieked horribly on rusty hinges when he opened it. He walked in, curious, and then was immediately disappointed. Instead of scrolls or books there was a woman's dress and boots mounted on what could only be a shrine. It had the same functional utilitarian look as those warriors who had attacked them yesterday.

Something was painted on the far wall, and he bent close to look. It was a mural, but of what he couldn't quite tell. The only light came from outside through the half-open door, and it wasn't enough to distinguish details. He lit a kindle of flame in his palm, but the paint was so faded and dusty he could only make out the outlines of a peaceful scene; people working, building, children playing in the fields. Overlooking them all stood a tall dignified Kyoshi Warrior with a bladed fan resting near her thigh.

The door squealed open behind him, bringing with it a rush of fresh air, and the leader of the Kyoshi Warriors strode in, still decked out in her full regalia.

Zuko froze, fighting the impulse to close his hand over the flame. There wasn't any point. The girl — what had she called herself yesterday? Suki? — was staring at it. Then her jaw snapped shut, and she glared at him.

"I knew I saw you reach for that fire yesterday. What are you doing here? This is a sacred hut!"

"I didn't know that." He gestured around the dim room. "And there weren't any lights."

Suki reached over, grabbing at something half hidden in the shadows. A lamp. Roughly, she handed it over. He transferred the fire to the wick, and held it up. Now illuminated, the room looked even less spectacular than before. There was a weapon's display he had completely missed, but the bladed fans and elegant looking swords seemed aged and were in need of a good oiling.

"What are you doing here?" Suki demanded again, watching him sharp eyes that reminded him of a hunting kestrel-hawk.

Trying to find my supposed royal heritage. Wisely, Zuko did not voice that thought out loud and instead shrugged insolently. What would Sokka do? He would charm his way to her good side,
probably. Too bad Zuko didn't know how to be charming. "Uh, I like... history?" he offered.

Her painted eyes narrowed, but she stepped forward and gestured to the nearby display. "These were Avatar Kyoshi's personal weapons, and her uniform. She had the biggest feet of all the Avatars, you know."

Zuko made a sound in his throat he hoped sounded interested. He walked over to examine the mural again, and heard Suki follow.

"Your brother," and there was a slight uplift of her painted eyebrow at that word, as if she didn't believe their relation for a moment, "came to our dojo. He thought he would be able to show us girls a thing or two."

Zuko winced at the sharp tone in her voice. "And?"

"Let's just say we reminded him why we are called warriors." She stood in front of him now, and Zuko could almost feel the sense of danger radiating off of her. When she spoke next her voice was steely. "Us girls have kept this island free of Fire Nation rule in Avatar Kyoshi's name for a hundred years. So, let me make one thing very clear." She prodded a strong finger into Zuko's chest, "If you weren't with the Avatar, firebender, you would be lunch for the Unagi right now."

She was formidable, angry, and dangerously in his personal space. The wise thing would have been to step back, concede the point, or say nothing at all.

Zuko had never been that guy.

His good eye narrowed and he held his place, solidly unwilling to give an inch. In the back of his mind, he caught her scent — orange and vanilla, and it brought him back for a moment to that stumbling walk through the forest, and her tight, strong hold on him. "I have traveled and battled side-by-side with today's Avatar, and he trusts me. You're just honoring a ghost."

Suki grit her teeth, and for a moment he wondered if she was going to try to hit him. But she only said, "Tell your brother that he's welcome back for round two... if he's up to it."

Then, turning crisply on her heel, she strode out.

OoOoO

By the time lunch had rolled around, General Iroh was convinced that he had a thief among his crew.

The journey started well: The requisitioned war-balloons had made good time, and the wind had been with them. They traveled through the night, and arrived at the Southern Air Temple just as the first rays of sunshine had peeked over the frozen, snowcapped mountains.

The Temple was much as Iroh had expected it to be: cold, remote, and empty. As far as he knew, no one had set foot there for nearly a hundred years. His men whispered and clustered together,
nervously eyeing half rotted wooden railings and listening to the constant wind that whistled through empty stone corridors. Although none of them dared to speak of it in Iroh's presence — they did not want to be labeled cowards — they all feared that wind, and the ghosts of long dead airbenders that rode along with it.

Iroh did not blame them in the slightest.

It was hard — very hard — to not look into the empty rooms, the snow frosted corridors, the broken windows, and not think about how many people had died a century ago.

His tongue curled in his mouth, and it may have been his imagination but he thought he could still catch the scent of soot and ash. He could not help but think of it all as a sad waste. Surely his grandfather, Sozin, did not need to slaughter them all — as distasteful as it was, the children were all that needed to be killed. And then, only the children in a certain age. The babies and those above the age of twenty could have been spared. Wholesale slaughter was not the answer.

Iroh shook his head against those thoughts, and directed his men up to the main temple. This, he felt sure, the Avatar would be sure to visit. It seemed to be the Spiritual center of the temple.

That was before the stash of fruit was plundered, and his soldiers bright valuables went missing. Some of the men blamed the more light-fingered among them, and several scuffles broke out before Iroh ordered them back to work.

He had his own ideas what was going on, but couldn't confirm them until he caught the would-be thief red-handed.

Taking the last three sweet-peaches, the prince set himself up in a high room. From the balcony, he had the best view of the approaching vista. The weak sun was shining, soothing away aches and pains from a body now quite unaccustomed to hard labor. Iroh started to doze, awoken only by the soft sound of light feet upon the stone.

He cracked one eye, and smiled, seeing the identity of the thief. "Hello, little one," he said, softly, "You have caused much trouble for my crew today."

The white and brown creature with overly large ears sat up on his hind legs at the sound of Iroh's voice. Tilting his head, he crooned low in his throat, his large eyes focused on the closest of the three peaches.

Iroh held one out, and let the lemur approach. Its little hands were very much like a human's, and took the peach with delicate grace. It seemed content to eat by him, and when Iroh reached up to scratch behind one of the ears, it purred.

OoOoO

Supper time was a communal gathering on the Island of Kyoshi. Long tables were set out and the
villagers sat in groups, according to age and rank.

Aang, Katara and Zuko sat together, with every girl under the age of eighteen on the island jostling and giggling to get as close of a seat to the Avatar as possible. Aang took this in good humor and amused them with a small airbending trick which made a handful of berries fly around in crazy circles between his fingers.

Zuko glowered down at his plate, moody from his encounter with Suki. Katara wasn't much better. She sat at his side, silently disapproving of Aang's showboating. Zuko couldn't help but notice how, even though the table was almost groaning from the weight of so many girls crowding for a spot, there was an empty seat on the other side of himself. It seemed as desperate as the girls were to get close to Aang, none of them were willing to sit directly next to the disfigured kid.

Then, just as everyone had stopped chattering and was starting to tuck in, someone slid into the empty space beside Zuko. He caught a flash of a green uniform, and if anything Zuko's head dipped down lower. Great. Just what he needed. Another Kyoshi warrior.

"Hey Sokka," Aang chirped, "Nice dress."

Zuko glanced up, saw a familiar face now covered in a thick layer of lady's makeup, snorted into his cup of water, and promptly started to choke.

"Thank you, Aang," Sokka said, with as much dignity as he could muster while his little sister was overcome with a fit of giggles and his brother coughed and gasped for air.

"Sokka, w-why are you wearing a d-dress?" Katara could barely speak between her giggles. Oh, where was that portrait painter when she needed him?

Sokka drew himself up, affronted. "It's not a dress. It's a warrior's uniform. Suki and the other Kyoshi Warriors are teaching me how to fight in their style. See, look. The silk threads symbolizes brave blood, and the golden insignia represents the honor of a warrior's heart—"

"Yeah?" Zuko had finally gotten his breath back and reached out to poke playfully at Sokka. "What about the lipstick?"

But before his fingers could touch, Sokka whipped out a closed fan and knocked his hand away. Zuko yelped, more out of surprise than pain, because the movement had been quicker than he could react.

Sokka smirked. "The Kyoshi warrior's philosophy is turning defense into offense, and using the power of an opponent's strength against them."

"That's like waterbending!" Katara exclaimed, mildly impressed.

Sokka smiled, the first true smile he'd had since they left the South Pole. "Yup!"

Zuko shook out his stinging hand, but he couldn't help the small grudging admiration for Sokka's nerve. His family wasn't the only one who was staring at his get-up. Some of the girls had peeled their adoring eyes from Aang and were now watching Sokka — a boy in their warrior's makeup — with abject disapproval. Sokka didn't care. He bent to eat quickly, decked out in a dress and makeup, not bothered by their glares in the least. Unconsciously, it made Zuko sit up straighter in his own seat.

The other boy caught Zuko watching from the corner of his eye, and Sokka gave a ridiculous wink. "You know, I could put in a good word in with Suki. I'm sure she'd take on another pupil."
And Zuko considered it, really considered it… for the space of about five seconds. Finally, he shook his head. He was not going to wear a dress. Luckily, Katara stepped in and saved him from having to beg off with a bad excuse.

"No, we haven't practiced our bending in days," she said, and Zuko shot her a look of relief. She then turned to Aang. "You could show us what you know, and maybe we could all work on new techniques together."

"Oh… uh…" The young monk bit his lip, and sent a guilty look to the fluttering girls. "I sort of already promised I would go out with them."

"Aangy's taking us for a ride on his bison," one of the little girls announced with a glare for Katara, hands on her chubby hips.

Now it was Sokka's turn to snort into his drink. "Aangy?"

"You can come along, if you want," said Aang, completely earnest, and not noticing the way that Katara's eyes had narrowed.

"I think you're letting this Avatar stuff go to your head." Her low tone was something the two brothers had learned the hard way not to mess around with. Both Sokka and Zuko leaned back from the table, instinctively distancing themselves from any sources of liquid.

Aang hadn't learned that lesson yet, and narrowed his eyes back. "You know what I think? I think you're jealous."

"Jealous?! Of what?!"

"Jealous that we're having so much fun without you."

"That's ridiculous!"

"It is a little ridiculous, but I understand."

"If you want to go traipsing with these little girls instead of practicing, I get it… I'm glad!"

"I'm glad you're glad."

"Fine!"

"Fine!"

Both Sokka and Zuko's heads went back and forth, following the conversation like a bouncing ball. At Aang's final words, Katara stood up so fast that she knocked against the table and all of the food shivered and jumped. "If that's the way you feel… C'mon, Zuko." She reached down, grabbing her brother under his arm and hauling him to his feet. "We're going to have to practice alone."

She didn't wait for him to respond, and he nearly had to scramble after her to keep from being forcefully dragged away.

OoOoO
Suki already knew about Zuko's firebending ability, and they had both more or less announced that
Zuko was some type of bender in front of the little girls, but they still thought it prudent to keep their
practicing low key while they were at the island.

They cleared some space in the main common area of their suite. Katara found some clean water
from a nearby pitcher, and Zuko pulled his flames from the lit candles. They sat traditional style,
juggling their elements in easy, elegant circles above their heads. It was a deceptively hard process
— requiring both concentration and breath control…

… which explained why Katara was having such a hard time.

"Remember to breathe in from your mouth and out your nose," Zuko repeated for what had to be the
tenth time after her water accidentally collided with his fire in a hiss of steam.

Her face set in concentration and she pulled the water into a tight blue ring overhead. Almost
playfully, Zuko sent a zip of fire through the center. But she didn’t notice. Something tight and angry
crossed her face. "I bet Aang’s won’t even be careful with those girls. They could all fall out of the
saddle the way he flies Appa!" The wheel of water wavered and then fell completely apart,
showering them and extinguishing Zuko's fire.

"Ugh! Katara!"

"Sorry!" She stood up and waved her arms, summoning back the liquid and sending it to the pitcher.

Zuko growled and pulled his now messy hair back into a neater wolfs-tail before he did something
quite rare; lit his own flame for bending. "Who cares what he is doing?" he asked, lobbing an idle
ball of flame where it bounced against the far wall, leaving a scorch of soot before returning to his
hand. "He's the Avatar. He can take care of himself."

"He told me he was just a simple monk." Katara snapped, "But now he's just letting this all go to his
head!"

Zuko sighed and extinguished the flame. "Give the kid a break. His whole people were wiped out by
the Fire Nation. He's probably just acting out, or something."

But Katara wasn't listening. She was busy glowering out the window and Zuko distinctly heard her
growl out the word, "Aangy" before she got up and walked out.

The firebender sighed and wondered to himself when, exactly, he had become the sane sibling.
Katara slammed open the flimsy wooden door with enough force for it to crack against the far breakpoint and then snap back into place with an equally loud crash behind her. Later on, she would look back on the day and feel a little badly for the way she was acting, for dragging her brother away from a perfectly good meal only to cut practice short.

Now all she could see were those twittering girls with their stupid doe-eyed expressions, and poor Aang—who was only a kid, after all, and very naïve to the world—falling for their stupid charms.

_Aangy. UGH!_

She had meant what she said before. She was sure Aang wasn't being careful. The girls would laugh at his stupid jokes and he would bush from the point of his bald head to the soles of his feet, and he probably would urge Appa up too high or too fast…

The path from the village down to the bay sloped downward, and Katara found her pace picking up as she went. Her thoughts grew darker with each step, and soon she was jogging with her fists tight and angry against her thighs—and then running full pelt; knocking away winter-bare branches and jumping through patches of nettles. Somehow, someway she knew that her worries had come to life and her friend was going to get hurt…

And then she was at the rocky beach overlooking the cold, blue bay. Appa almost looked like a white cloud hovering in the sky. He was so far out across the water that he was the size of Katara's hand when she held it out from her.

Shielding her eyes from the brightly reflecting sun, Katara suddenly felt a little silly. They were far away, but she could see that Appa was traveling at what looked to be a sedate pace. She had been expecting crazy loopy-loops… but the bison could have been a plow-ostrichhorse for all he was hanging in the sky.

With a sigh, Katara dropped her hand and walked over to the nearest boulder. Brushing snow from the cap of the stone, she sat down. She would just stay here for a few minutes…

… a few minutes turned into an hour, and by then it was clear that Aang was going to continue flying Appa in sedate laps around the bay. Katara crossed her arms over her chest, feeling annoyed at herself, and at Aang for some reason — mostly because he hadn't acted out impulsively, and so now she felt like the unreasonable jerk.

Finally she got up, brushing out her dress to straighten it of wrinkles. She was getting stiff and sore sitting like that. Maybe she should go check up on Sokka. What kind of little sister was she if she missed out on the opportunity to make fun of him in a dress?

She had no sooner turned than a scream — so high and far away it could almost be mistaken for the wind — pierced the air. Whipping back, Katara saw something rising from the depths of the bay with a wedge shaped head and trailing whiskers. It was the Unagi.

"NO!" Katara cried, slapping her hands to her mouth in horror. But her shout was too little, too far to do any good. She had to watch, feeling helpless as the bison swerved to the right.

The Unagi missed his target, but its great head crashed along Appa's side. The bison's deep roar of pain and surprise could be heard across the water, and a tiny speck with waving arms and legs fell from his saddle to the water below.

Katara didn't think. Her body acted for her. She sloshed into the water, heedless of her heavy, fur-
lined dress, of the bone-aching cold, aware that she was out to shore and the poor girl who’d fallen was nearly in the middle of the bay. She would never reach in time.

_Are you a waterbender or not?_ snapped a voice in her head, sounding very much like Zuko.

Oh… Right.

She froze a thick block of ice in front of her, and, after hauling herself up, she centered her feet and repeated her ‘ice berg bridge move’ to create a frozen pathway about twenty feet out. "Hold on!" she yelled, dashing the length before pausing to lengthen the path. "Hold on! I'm coming!"

Meanwhile Aang had pulled Appa around, aiming a charge at the Unagi before sweeping away at the last second with a blast of air; keeping the sea-serpent's attention on himself instead of the little girl in the water.

One last shove, and Katara's ice pathway froze alongside the girl. She reached down, hauling the shaking, sobbing girl up onto solid ice. But the Unagi had not failed to notice what was going on nearly right beside it.

The Unagi and Katara locked eyes; blue against fishy green. It seemed for a long moment—although it was only a second or two. Then the creature's jaws parted, and it dove down…

… but not before Aang got there first.

A wall of white, and a hand grasped around Katara's own— she didn't know when she had even held it out. She was hauled up, and up, feeling as if her arm was going to be wrenched from its socket, and only had the presence of mind to grab onto the little girl by the collar, carrying her along with her. The wind itself seemed to pillow under her feet, and abruptly Katara and the little girl found themselves in Appa's saddle.

But the Unagi was still reaching for them. Appa turned to the side, and those rows and rows of razor sharp teeth missed him by bare inches. A blast of putrid fishy air swept over them all — the Unagi's breath.

Appa slapped his wide tail across the choppy water and they were flying up and up, out to safety.

"Aang!" Katara meant for her voice to be a rebuke, but it came out more like a breathless gasp. Almost a thank-you.

Abruptly, she found herself surrounded by all the little girls. Some were laughing out of pure relief, most were crying… but all apparently felt the need to be with a mother figure, and as eldest girl and hero of the moment, Katara fit the bill. She found herself crowded, and did her best to murmur comfort to them all, especially the fallen girl, Koko, who clung onto her with white-knuckled strength.

"Katara! That—that was amazing!" Aang hovered just off to the side, looking embarrassed and awed at the same time.

She felt a warm tingle go up her spine. Aang, an airbending master, the Avatar, was awed at _her_?

"You were so brave. I didn't know you could waterbend like that!"

She grinned. She couldn't help it. "Thanks, Aang. Don't tell my brothers, though." She could imagine their very bad reaction to her being in danger; it involved Aang strung up by Sokka's best rope, and Zuko coming at him with fire ready.
Perhaps Aang had the same thought, because he grinned sheepishly. "I'm not saying a word."

Appa groaned under them as if in agreement, and the young monk patted his head.

"Appa promises not to say anything, either." But then the bison groaned again, this time in a lower note and Aang looked to him in concern before glancing out to sea.

No less than four grey ships were silhouetted just over the horizon. Even from this distance, he could see the red and black flags. The Fire Nation.

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"Out skulking again?"

At the sound of that voice, Zuko decided he officially hated Kyoshi island. From its stupid sea monster, to its forests with not enough snow, to (and especially) its woman warriors. He hated this place, and once he and the others continued onto the North Pole he was never, ever coming back.

He didn't turn around to acknowledge the voice. That didn't deter Suki. She had a long stride, and it was easy to catch up and match pace alongside him.

They walked in silence for a few moments, around the winding path that took them through the outer perimeters of the village — where stone walled wells and ties for ostrich-horses rose from the ground.

Zuko glanced at her from the corner of his scarred eye to see her watching him. He sighed. "What do you want?"

She arched a finely painted brow. "Who says I wanted anything?"

"I'm just walking. You don't need to follow me."

"Who says I'm following you? Maybe I'm just walking this way, too."

"Yeah right." But short of tackling her, he wasn't sure how to ditch the Kyoshi Warrior. She could probably outrun anything he tried to pull, and by the set of her shoulders and the smug sort of air nearly leaking off of her, she knew it, too.

They walked in silence for a few minutes. They made an interesting set; scarred Water Tribe boy and painted warrior. Zuko couldn't help but notice how Suki kept looking at him, just slightly out of the corner of her eye. Each time he caught her at it, he bristled. Until finally: "What?!"

"Someone cut your throat, didn’t they?"

"W-what?" He repeated, and this time his voice broke. It wasn't what she said that had surprised him — he had just been expecting her to accuse him of trying to burn down the forest, or something. His
hand reached up to absently rub over the swollen pink line that extended from just under his jaw on his right side and across to the collar bone on his left. He hardly ever paid that scar much mind. When people stared at him, it was at his face, not his neck. "I mean, yeah… I guess." He rubbed at it absently and shrugged, turning away.

But she caught his wrist and before he could object she was stood close, examining it. She touched his jaw, turning his head to get a better look. "It looks deep. What happened?"

"What do you think?" he snapped, shrugging away. He didn't like the pity in her voice just as much as he didn't like the suspicion. "I don't see how it's any business of yours."

"I'm a warrior." She replied, hands on her hips, completely unrepentant. "I'm trained to fight and defend, and I was just… surprised, was all. Most would die from—from that."

"Well, I didn't." He wanted to walk away, but she would just follow him. He started to rub again at the scar, then realized what he was doing and forced his hand back down. "It messed up my voice. I couldn't talk for a few months afterwards." Until the first time he penguin sledged. He nearly grinned at the memory, and then caught himself, feeling her eyes still on him. "You should ask Sokka how I started speaking again. He can tell the story better than I can."

Suki rolled her eyes. "Oh, him." But before Zuko could bristle at her tone, she continued, "He's quite the charmer, you know. Or at least, he thinks he is. But he's learning quickly." She grinned wickedly. "And he looks pretty good in a dress."

Zuko groaned. "This had better not leave this island. I don't know how my family will live it down."

"So, is that why you're not training with us?"

He stared at her, struck dumb, and she casually walked forward, flicking out a fan as if it was a true lady's ordainment, and not a sharp weapon. "Sokka said he's trying to become a warrior. I can respect him for that. He's taking his training seriously, and trying to better himself. You, on the other hand, would rather have your pride, and spy around the village—"

"I told you I wasn't spying!"

"And sulk in the forest," Suki continued, archly.

"I'm not— I wasn't—" He was sputtering, frustrated, and clenching his fists so tight that wisps of smoke were curling from between his fingers. The second he realized it was happening, he relaxed his hands, but Suki's sharp eyes picked up on it anyway.

"Careful," she said. "I have been training all my life to fight against the likes of you. If you want to spar, then we'll do it in the dojo." A pause. "I want to show all my girls how to defeat a firebender."

He grit his teeth, growling out, "Fine. You're on." And it would only occur to him later that perhaps this was what Suki had been after all along, and that he was being baited — quite successfully.

But before Suki could reply, before she could set the terms, the peel of bells rang through the air, loud and piercing even though they were some way from the village.

Suki tensed and Zuko did, too, instinctively and looking around for a clue on what was going on.

"Those are the alarm bells. We're being invaded!" All humor was gone from her voice, and somehow — Zuko couldn't quite figure out how — she seemed to grow taller, then. A new air of authority. "Get back to the village and hide with the others. My women will take care of this." And
before he could reply, she had sprinted off.

A shadow passed overhead, and through the tops of the trees he saw the white mass of Appa’s belly. The decision was easy. If Suki thought he was going to hide from a battle, she was crazier than he thought she was.

"Aang!" he yelled, and ran to where the bison was landing; a clearing just outside the forest. "Wait up!"

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**OoOoO**

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Kyoshi Island was well known for its deep, wide harbor. It was part of the reason why the fishing industry was so valued here. In the off season, the harbor could provide for every ship and its protected bays could shield all against heavy winter storms.

Unfortunately, the bay which had provided for Kyoshi’s people even when they were connected to the mainland Earth Kingdom was also more than large enough to provide for the large Fire Navy imperial battle cruisers, commanded by Zhao.

The Fire Navy ships met no resistance when pulling into harbor. Almost simultaneously, the four bowsprits dipped, and a small platoon of men backed by a cavalry of Komodo Rhinos disembarked.

Commander Zhao led the way, clad for war and sitting atop his own Komodo Rhino.

His amber eyes narrowed as he took in the sharp, rocky beach; the winter-thin forest that wouldn't provide good cover for guerrilla resistance, and the wide path that led to the main town. It was quiet; he wouldn't be surprised if the locals were in hiding, or had fled outright. They would if they knew what was good for them.

"Set fire to the forest!" he ordered, indicating the platoon on the right. After all, the village didn’t need to be viable for it to be useful to the Fire Nation. They were just in need of the harbor.

A cruel smile curved at the Commander's lips. He gave the order to march forward.

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**OoOoO**
"Is it Prince Iroh again?" Katara rasped, peeking around the far corner of the general store. She, Aang and Zuko had stayed behind, wanting to fight. The children and young mothers who were not Kyoshi Warriors were herded into the far caves at the foot of the mountain. There would be enough supplies there for a week of siege.

Zuko braced himself against the edge of the building and glanced out, a quick furtive look. "No," he whispered, "Those ships are flying the flags of Sea Wolves. Iroh has the twin flame of the crown heir. Their troops are coming up the path. Get ready."

She nodded, flicking her hand to a nearby well. A small stream of water leapt to her command and streamed through the air, coiling around her wrist like an affectionate blue snake. Her brother nodded back and she heard the soft crackle of flame held in the palm of one hand.

There were so many Fire Nation soldiers. At least twice as many as this village had Kyoshi Warriors. She wasn't sure if she and Zuko could help too much — Oh, how she wished she could have learned something useful from Aang! — but they weren't going to hide. They were benders, no matter how poorly trained and self-taught. They had to help.

"Do you think Sokka's with the girls?" Zuko murmured.

The thought of her eldest brother fighting in women's makeup and a dress caused a slight smile, even as her stomach clenched in renewed worry. He had better take care of himself. If he got hurt or killed, she… she would never forgive him.

The Fire Nation soldiers advanced, and Katara felt herself trembling. Her and Zuko's plan was to wait for the Kyoshi Warrior's signal, and then strike from the side.

But before the soldiers entered the center of town — a threshold marked by the intimidating statue of Avatar Kyoshi glaring down at them from up top her high pole — there was the sound of whistling wind and a abruptly, a yellow and orange figure landed in front of the cavalry.

Katara gasped, looking reflexively behind her where, a moment ago, Aang had been waiting.

To her side, Zuko gave a low growl, "Idiot! What is he doing?!" and Katara had to put a hand on his shoulder to keep him from rushing after the younger boy.

"What's this?" The man astride the lead rhino. His face, unshielded by helmet, had confident, cruel features. He gave a loud laugh. "So this is what the people of Kyoshi have to defend them? A little boy?" He laughed again; a laugh that ended with a blast of fire aimed right at Aang's feet.

The young monk spun around, wielding his airstaff and knocked the blast harmlessly to the side. "No," he declared, and his young voice seemed to echo through the empty buildings and deserted streets. "I'm the Avatar."

It seemed to be just the signal that the Kyoshi Warriors were waiting for. At once three green-garbed warriors fell upon the mounted soldiers from their hiding places up top the roofs. Five more appeared from between buildings, wielding war fans to engage them directly.

The leader, for his part, gaped at Aang for the space of two seconds and then fired a larger bolt of fire at him.

Aang was far too quick, and before the flames had even left the commander's hands he had jumped up and away in a rush of air that knocked the commander right off his rhino.

Katara and Zuko entered the fray. Stepping forward in a synchronized movement, they shot out fire
and water in a long twisting ribbon, knocking two men off their mounts before the elements returned back to their hands.

"The rhinos!" Zuko yelled, seeing an opportunity. "Aim for the rhinos!"

Again, their elements shot out, water following the rapidly flowing fire. They struck their target, the nearest rhino's backside. The animal let out a roar of pain and surprise, lifting up on its high feet, and throwing its rider. It swung its head left and right, blindly, panicked, and charged forward to crash into two other rhinos, throwing them into a rage.

The lines of the Fire Nation soldiers broke, and what had been a organized invasion now seemed to have disintegrated into a common brawl. Firebenders were falling left and right to fan-wielding girls. Commander Zhao was barking out orders, trying to get a fix on the child Avatar. But just as Prince Iroh's men had discovered earlier, it was nearly impossible to hit the bounding, flipping, dodging boy. Aang retaliated in kind with powerful blasts of air that sent three men sprawling backwards.

In their excitement and anxiety to do some good, Zuko and Katara had stepped out from their hiding place from in back of the general store, and were sending their elements into the fray wherever they could. Zuko was still aiming his fire to terrify the rhinos, and Katara had gotten the idea to freeze water where the soldiers were standing, making them slip on patches of ice that were not there a second before.

The siblings didn't realize how exposed they were, and it was only by a stroke of luck that Zuko heard the quiet crunch of boots against stone above all the shouting and fire-blasting. He whipped around just in time to divert away a jet of fire aimed for himself and Katara. The jet arced over them both, crashing into the far wall of the building to their backs.

Katara retaliated with a wave of water that sprung up from the well, but the three firebenders were more than up for it, and two blasts later, the wave was dissipated in a rush of steam.

The three firebenders advanced. The boy and girl backed up nervously.

The lead firebender punched out, and Zuko took a deep breath, ready to call up a wall of flames to defend — but at the last moment something golden hit the firebender's wrist — a bladed fan — and knocked his arm away. A Kyoshi Warrior bounded into the fray, dealing a sharp upper cut to the firebender, which brought him down. The other two firebenders rushed towards the warrior, but she simply stepped aside and grabbed the backs of their necks, cracking their heads together.

Then, the warrior turned and she — no he — smiled.

"Sokka!" Katara cried, happily.

"You guys need to be more careful." Sokka grinned again, unabashedly proud of his own actions. Then he sobered. "The soldiers set fire to the forest." He pointed out towards the forest between them and the sea, where a wisp of smoke could be seen curling up towards the sky. "The warriors need a waterbender to help put it out."

Katara nodded. "On it!" And with one last grin for Sokka, she rushed through the thickened trees.

Sokka scooped up his fallen fans, and then nodded towards his younger brother. "Come on. Aang needs some backup."

"I can't believe," Zuko said with a barely concealed grin, as he followed Sokka, "that you are still fighting in that dress."
Sokka's hand waved in the air. "Oh, it's not so bad. It's actually kind of freeing—" he stopped with a yelp, jumping back as an errant fireblast landed at his feet.

"Sokka!" But some of the fighting had spilled over, and a charging rhino broke between the two brothers, a saddle half cut and leaning crazily from its side. Zuko ducked below another wave of fire, and when he glanced up again Sokka had somehow moved twenty feet away, and was helping some of the Kyoshi warriors corral and take down a knot of benders.

All around him, men were fighting with painted women. The arid smell of smoke and cries of warriors filled the air and hammered at his ears. He had often imagined battles, mostly after his dad went to war, but he never imagined it would be like this: Chaos. Fire and bladed fans flying in every direction, barked orders no one was hearing… Screams of the wounded…

Something caught Zuko's eye — smoke behind one of the main buildings. A sinking feeling that he couldn't quite identify formed in his stomach, and he ran, leaping over a downed and moaning Fire Nation soldier to round the far corner.

The brush grew thickly behind the buildings, in the space where the wood stopped and the forest began. Now that was all on fire, and backed up to it was the leader of the Kyoshi Warriors. She stood, fans outstretched, facing down two firebenders, one with a Commander's sash.

"Take her alive, if you can," the Commander was saying, "She's the leader. The other girls won't fight if—"

And that was as far as he got.

Zuko centered his stance and reached out, grabbing for the blaze behind Suki. With a loop of his arms he pulled the flames towards him, safely around the Warrior girl and threw them in an overarching wave at the firebenders. The men yelled out, surprised by the sneak attack, and dove to each side. It was just the diversion that Suki needed. Her fan went sailing, hitting one of the firebender's in his helmeted head, and knocking him to the ground.

The Commander was first to return to his feet. He gave a bellow of rage and swung around, blasting a jet of such force and heat that Zuko had barely enough time to dive behind a rocky fence. He covered his head as pieces of chipped and melted rock exploded all around him.

Suddenly, the onslaught stopped. Suki jumped between them. Her bladed fans shot out: snick, snick, snap! And Commander Zhao cried out again, this time in pain, holding a deeply cut arm which bloomed blood against his chest.

Suki turned and grabbed Zuko's arm, forcing him to flee with her; back behind the momentary safety of two sheds. "You need to go. I heard him talking before — he'll chase the Avatar. You have to leave, now!"

"No!" He shook his head, gripping her arm just as fiercely as she was grabbing him. "I want stay and fight."

Perhaps Suki saw some of the fire in his eyes. She paused and a soft sort of smile crossed her face. "I'm sorry," she said, "about before… I shouldn't have been suspicious of you because you're a firebender. You saved my life."

"And you saved mine," said Zuko, stubbornly. "We're even."

"It's not about being even! It's—" Then she hesitated once more, and Zuko was hardly prepared for it because at that moment it was the last thing on his mind… she leaned over and kissed him softly on
the cheek, and whispered, "Tell your brother I said thank you. Now get out of here."

He looked at her, completely dumbstruck, but with the beginnings of a smile on his face. "Yeah…"
Then, "Wait, what?"

But it was too late. With a low chuckle and a squeeze of his hand she was off again to rejoin her warriors.

He watched her go, touched his cheek, and visibly shook himself. Nothing had changed. The Kyoshi Warriors were still badly outnumbered, and worse, Zuko could see that the Fire Nation soldiers were starting to get over their initial shock and were regrouping. Suki was right. Leading them away would be the only hope to save the Island.

Zuko found himself grinning, although he didn't quite know why. He touched his cheek again; there was a slight smudge of paint.

OoOoO

Some minutes later, Appa lifted into the smoky sky. All of the kids were stained with soot and grim-faced; from the air, the destruction of Kyoshi Island was easy to see.

Katara and some of the Warriors had done their best, but a large part of the forest was still burning. Some of the buildings had been caught by the flames as well — even the statue of Kyoshi was afire.

"I should have been able to stop them." Aang slumped over the side of the saddle, downcast and exhausted.

Katara reached forward, laying a hand on his shoulder. "This isn't your fault, Aang. We're doing the right thing. The Fire Nation will follow us, and leave Kyoshi Island alone."

"Great. Then we'll have that Commander Muttonchops chasing us along with Old Prince Crazy." Sokka's words were muffled as he was trying to change out of the dress, and the thick neckpiece had gotten caught around his head. Katara rolled her eyes, and with a flick of her wrist, undid one of the ties so he didn't choke himself.

"The people of Kyoshi will rebuild," Zuko said, thinking of one warrior's strength in particular. Kyoshi Island didn't seem so bad, now... not really. "They're not going to let this get them down."

"But what if— I just wish…" The young monk trailed off with a sigh, and all was silent between them as they watched the island slowly grow smaller and smaller.

Sure enough, they could see the great ships pulling out of port. The Fire Nation was abandoning their siege. Maybe it wasn't worth it to fight these warriors with such little gain in resources — but more likely Commander Zhao just saw a tastier prize ahead.

Sokka had finally struggled back into his normal clothing, and was now rolling out a map, smoothing out the edges on the flattest part of the saddle. "Okay everyone, I figure it will take some time for those giant ships to get up to speed. We'll circle around here," he pointed to a small ring of islands, just tiny dots on the map, "to throw them off. Next stop: Aang's Air Temple."
Aang visibly brightened a little at this, and for the first time he tore his eyes away from the island. "You guys will love it. There's so many old caves, and there's an airball court…" He gave another long sigh, but this one had a note of happiness. "I can't wait to see how it's changed in the last hundred years."

Zuko winced while Katara and Sokka shot each other a quick look. No one said anything.

OoOoO

It was a bitterly cold day, and Prince Iroh was glad for the warm furry little body curled around his neck. He had expected the lemur to leave once it had fed, but it seemed to enjoy his company. Iroh found that he did as well; the creature had a very endearing way of cocking its head to the side every time he spoke, and chattering something back.

He decided to name it Momo; the old word for peach.

The lemur shifted on his shoulder and stood up, the tail curling possessively around his neck a moment before a knock was heard on the door. "Come in." Iroh commanded, soothing Momo's questioning chirp with a pat on the head.

Lieutenant Izhar walked in, giving a deep bow. "The second shift teams have checked in, sir. There's no sign of the Avatar."

"He will come, Lieutenant. Keep the men alert."

"Sir…" Lieutenant Ji would be bold enough to ask how Iroh could be so certain. But Izhar was newly promoted to his position, and unsure of where the lines lay. The Prince saw it in his face anyway, even if he decided not to answer in full. He just knew, like he had known where the weak-points in the outer wall of Ba Sing Se were. Some had called it a gift… he preferred to call it the wisdom borne of long experience. No spiritual foresight would show him the weak-points of an enemy's wall, and yet leave out the warning of his own beloved son's death.

"There are two temples for the males. This is the closer. The Avatar will be drawn to this place, his homeland. We only have to be patient."

"Y-yes, sir.,” Izhar stammered and hurriedly bowed again before backing through the door.

Iroh turned again towards the window, sipping a warm cup of tea. His eyes were to the horizon, waiting.

OoOoO
The Unforgiven

Art by Engelen
Zuko kept his eyes to the horizon. The sun was slowly rising in the east. He felt that even if he were blind, he would be able to feel the rise and set of the sun. But it was more than just seeing; it was in his bones. The air bison was asleep. The whole world felt like it was asleep under a thick coating of night-frost; even the birds were giving only sleepy twitters back and forth from the high trees. He sat with legs tucked under him on Appa's wide flank, watching the dark blue of night pale and melt away. It was cold — bitterly cold, but he had felt much sharper chill than this.

The sky grew brighter — lightening to grey and then slowly to glowing pink as the sun crested over the horizon and color was brought into the world.

"You always get up early, huh?"

Zuko looked to the side, startled to see that Aang had slipped by and sat next to him without his noticing. He gave a quick nod of greeting and then glanced down to his brother and sister — they were still curled up in the sleeping bags on the flat of Appa's tail, completely dead to the world.

The sky was brightening and now streaks of orange could be seen through the tall clouds — massive thunderheads that were roiling up as the earth was warmed by the sun. They were too far off to be a danger, and they were heading in the other direction anyway, but it made for a stunning view. Zuko wouldn't ever express it to anyone (except for maybe Katara… she'd understand) but it felt to him that the sun was the bringer of change. It seemed to him that everything stopped when the sun sank — his own spirit receded in the dark depths of cold winter.

His sister might argue that the moon and sea worked together to bring the ultimate balance, but he always preferred the sun.

"I can always feel the sunrise," Zuko said when the sun had become less of a sliver and more prominent on the horizon. "I usually wake to it unless I'm very tired."

Aang nodded. "My friend Kuzon was the same way. I guess it's a firebending thing, huh?"

"Maybe, but…" He shrugged. "I don't know any other firebenders. It's just how I am."

They fell into a companionable silence, content to sit and watch the sunrise and feel the rhythm of Appa's deep breathing under them. But now Zuko's thoughts were on what lay ahead. If Sokka was right (and Zuko trusted his map-reading skills even above his own) they would be hitting the Southern Air Temple today.

Yet Aang sat beside him, looking content to watch the sunrise just as if it was another day.

"Aang," he said after a moment, and then stopped as the young monk turned his eyes to him. Nervously, Zuko scratched the back of his neck, unsure how to voice his thoughts. "I don't know what we're going to find in your temple. Things have changed since you were frozen in the ice… It
might not be what you expect."

He blinked. "You're right, I don't know how things are changed... I bet they're really different now."
Maybe he caught the other boy's wince, because he added, "You don't know how it was. There were
hundreds of monks and bison in the temple, and a whole bunch more roaming and exploring. That's
why there's four temples — one for every direction of the wind. Just because no one has seen an
airbender doesn't mean they're not around." Now Aang was smiling. "Maybe people just didn't
know where to look."

Zuko wasn't reassured. He knew, knew that Aang was wrong. Just as he knew what was up and
what was down, he knew that all the Air Nomads were gone. Wiped out. The details, of course,
were lost to him in the same frustrating way as all of his Fire Nation based knowledge. So he
couldn't elaborate. He could only shake his head. "But the Fire Nation — they're bad. Just, really,
really evil." Zuko let out a long sigh and turned his face away from the east. It was too bright to look
comfortably at the sunrise now. "Just don't get your hopes up."

"I'm not." Aang's bright cheery voice spoke completely otherwise. "You'll love it there, Zuko. It's
one of the most beautiful places in the world, and this time of the year they always have circle
walking competitions." He jerked a thumb into his chest. "I'm one of the best."

"Is that... a dance?" he asked, getting a very strange mental image of a bunch of bald, robed monks
drunken dancing around the fire like the men and women in his tribe tended to do when there was
too much to drink. At least... before the men had gone to war.

"Noo, it's an airbending form." Aang scrambled to his feet, tugging the other boy's sleeve. "C'mon,
I'll show you."

Zuko glanced over; Sokka and Katara were still fast asleep. Katara was going to be so jealous if he
actually managed to learn something... but it would be nice to know a move before her. Just this
once. So he nodded, albeit a bit warily, and followed Aang down off the bison and down a little way
to a sandy sort of clearing where brush and weeds made a clear space lightly speckled with sand.

Aang put down a rock in the middle of it and, with Zuko watching curiously from the side, he
centered himself and started to move. At first Zuko thought that the strange duck-like steps was just
Aang goofing off or messing around. But the little monk walked around and around the rock, putting
each foot at a strange angle to one another, always keeping his palms centered inward. Occasionally
he'd twist and walk the other way, his tongue stuck out of the corner of his mouth in concentration.

But it was silly, and as far as Zuko could tell, there was no airbending involved.

"That's a stupid move," he huffed, stepping up to the younger boy. "Look, anyone could just come
up and—" He meant to give Aang a light shove, but somehow — he wasn't quite sure exactly —
Aang completed one of his little twisting steps, and got behind Zuko, a soft palm laid directly on his
spine.

"Wha-?" Zuko turned in surprise, intending to face him, but Aang stepped along with his
movements, keeping successfully behind him. He turned the other way, and Aang matched him step-
for-step.

"Hey, this isn't fair!" But Zuko was chuckling, turning in vain to try catch the other boy. It was no
use. Aang matched him easily for every move, and if Zuko couldn't face him he couldn't fight him.

And somehow it became a game between them — a game of firebender against airbender, in which
Zuko was loosing at every turn.
"The monks said that a fight avoided is a fight won," Aang said, still behind, laughter in his voice. "But this helps, too." Suddenly — and Zuko couldn't tell how, since the kid was behind him — Aang stepped forward, putting an ankle in front of Zuko's next step. Their legs fouled, and Zuko would have pitched forward onto his face if not for the steady hand gripping his elbow.

"Okay! Okay!" the older boy yelped, and Aang was able to circle-step in front of him, pushing him up to regain his balance.

Both boys were grinning, and Zuko was the first to look away, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly.

"So, ah, how do you do that again?"

OoOoOoO

"I am so hungry," Sokka moaned. He was stretched out dramatically along the bottom of the saddle, clutching a hand to his stomach. "Can't we just stop and eat?"

Zuko glanced down from the side of the saddle. They had been flying for hours and far, far below the ground was covered in a thick veil of mist. Sharp points of rock, looking like jagged teeth seemed to reach out of the fog. It didn't look like a safe place to land. "I think there's a couple of apples in my pack," he said, tossing his bundle over.

But Sokka only gave a sad shake of his head. "There was. I ate them yesterday."

"What do you mean? You've been eating my food?!"

His elder brother shrugged, completely unrepentant. "What can I say? Hunger is a driving force for me."

Zuko growled and snatched his pack back, pawing through it to come up empty. "You ate all of my blubbered seal-jerky, too?!"

"Ohh… that's what it was?" Aang gave a sheepish laugh from his seat up front on Appa's head, safely out of range from the incensed firebender. "I thought that was firewood."

"What?!"

Sokka was scowling, too. "Wait, you had blubbered seal jerky left, and never told me about it?"

"I was saving it!" Zuko snapped, tossing the pack back. If Sokka's reactions weren't so quick it would have hit him square in the face. "How could you think that was firewood, Aang?"

"Well it didn't look much like food…"

Katara chose that moment to step in, getting right between her squabbling brothers and the Avatar. "Guys, calm down. I know we're all a little hungry right now—"

"You don't have any extra food, do you?" Sokka looked hopefully to her pack. So far it had gone unsearched because there could have been any number of horrible… girly things in there. But desperate times called for desperate measures and he was reaching towards the pack before his sister slapped his hand away.

"No, I don't. I would have shared." This last part was directed squarely at Zuko who crossed his arms and scowled off to the side. Katara sighed, "Aang, maybe we could stop and forage for a bit?"
"No need. The temple has entire wild orchard groves along the hills. There should be plenty to eat." Aang snapped the reigns happily. "We're nearly there, guys! Appa, yip-yip!"

The Water Tribe siblings had already gotten a taste of Aang's dubious sense of time, but this time he was right. Not a half hour later they saw the first spiraling mountain peeking up from out of the clouds. Sokka sat up straighter in interest while Zuko forgot the fact that he was sulking, and crawled to the front of the saddle to get a better look. Katara joined his side, grinning.

The air itself seemed to change around them, becoming thicker and warmer somehow. The great bison had caught a natural thermal updraft and within moments they were shooting upward — hundreds of feet in the air, nearly scraping along the side of an impossibly high cliff while Aang laughed in delight and the siblings held on for dear life.

Then they were up and over the cliff, which was just one of a half dozen finger-like craigs set in the middle of the mountain range. Ahead, set in the middle like a centerpiece on a fancy table, sat the Southern Air Temple.

The tallest and highest mountain cliff had been carved away; ground down and then built back up again in the form of several tall blue and white twisting towers with cave complexes set in the middle. Trees sprouted crazily from the far sides, and as they drew closer they could see how the hill had been flattened into levels for farming and orchards.

Appa was flying them in from the direct west, and ahead was a long pathway starting from the base and winding crazily up and up like a loopy piece of string all the way to the upper-most tower.

It was silent. And cold. And still.

OoOoOoO

Appa landed on the base of the high temple. They crossed over a small arched bridge to the main temple with the siblings silent, heads twisting about in every direction to get a look at every sharp angle of the place. It was so much different than home, so different than Kyoshi Island.

If Aang was affected by the strange stillness of the land, or the somber mood of his companions, he didn't show it. He bounced in his steps, pointing out everything. "That's the circle-walking court, and the rock gardens! And there's where the bison sleep!" He gestured to some stable-shaped structures, the cracks now choked with old weeds and the flat areas covered in snow. "And… that's where we used to play airball." Wooden pegs had been driven into a field, but nothing had disturbed the snow. Maybe not for years. Aang dropped his hand and gave a sigh. His eyes were far away; distant in an old memory that wasn't old for him. "This whole place was just so full of life…"

Zuko exchanged a glance with Sokka, and the elder brother shrugged, stepping forward. "So Aang, how did you guys play this airball game?"

The young monk instantly brightened and turned, grinning over his shoulder.

His subsequent explanation made the earlier complicated circle-walking seem like a breeze. Sokka listened attentively, rubbing his chin and asking questions he probably thought sounded intelligent.

Zuko, though, felt his eyes glaze over and hung back to walk with a melancholy Katara.

"It's so… quiet here," she said, in a low undertone.

"It's dead." It was Zuko's nature to get to the point, and Katara slumped slightly at his words. But she couldn't deny it. She nodded and gave a long sigh. Then, suddenly, she froze in her step, and her
hand shot out to grasp Zuko's arm. "Did you see that?"

He followed her gaze, shielding his eyes against the intense glare of the sun-struck snow on the far hill. But he saw only one of the large towers, and a twisting empty path. "See what? What?"

"I thought I saw…" Her blue eyes narrowed, but whatever she had seen was gone. The grip on his arm relaxed. "I thought I saw something moving up there, but… it's gone now."

"Probably just melting snow falling off of trees." Zuko shook his head, and turned away. "There's nothing here, Katara. They wouldn't have left anything alive."

She caught on that immediately. "They?"

"The Fire Nation."

He tried to walk away, but her grip was there on his arm again, holding him in place. She was staring at him, something akin to hope in her bright eyes. "You mean, you're remembering something?"

"Oh yeah." He bit out the sarcastic words before he could temper himself. She was always on him about his memories, and his answer was always the same: No. "I remember playing on those stairs as a baby, and playing airball while my evil Fire Nation family killed Air Nomads for fun."

She gave him such a long, steady look that he eventually dropped his gaze, ashamed of his dark words. Finally, he added, "Look, something really bad happened here… I just feel sort of strange about it." He tried to laugh, although the thought that struck him wasn't all that funny. "My blood relatives could have helped kill Aang's friends. It's a little awkward."

"Hey." He looked down at her, his light gold eyes meeting her at her blue fierce, compassionate gaze. "Maybe they did, but that's not you. Your true relatives helped establish the Southern Water Tribes." She reached forward to push against his chest with her mitten, over his heart. "You belong to a long line of Chiefs; Brave, honorable men. Don't let yourself forget it."

Zuko let out a long breath he wasn't even aware he had been holding. He hadn't talked to his brother or sister about what Prince Iroh had said, aside from that first day. Hearing this now, he felt some weight come off his shoulders.

"Yeah," he said, finding it suddenly hard to speak. "I know."

Sokka had apparently grasped the finer basics of the game. He had shed his parka and was struggling to scramble up one of the wooden poles while Aang elegantly floated to the top of another, a light wooden ball in his hand.

With this distraction, Zuko smirked, remembering his earlier circle-walking lesson, and getting the distinct feeling that this was going to be over for his brother very quickly. Aang loved games, and he was good at them.

Zuko walked over to the side of the small field, wanting to get a better view and gestured for Katara to follow.

She did, but her right boot kicked against something partially hidden in the snow. She fell down, gasped, and crawled backwards from the object in surprise. "Zuko! Get over here!"

"Are you okay?" Then he saw it too; a rust red curved triangle sticking out of the ground. He paused for a long moment, looking at her, and then bent down to grab the thing and twist it up out of the snow.
There was a popping sound, and a Fire Nation helmet and white face-mask glared up at him in his hands. But that wasn't all... there was something behind that white face-mask... Something that rolled inside when he tilted it to get a better look. A skull.

"Gyeeh!" He dropped the thing at once, bending down to scoop clean snow over his gloves.

Katara only let herself stare at the head for a few moments before she gulped and turned. With a reverse scooping motion she brought a soft pile of snow from a nearby rise over the helmet, burying it again.

Neither wanted to think about what else lay under the snow. Suddenly the unremarkable bumps and valleys no one had noticed took on a darker meaning.

Katara looked green. "We... we can't let Aang see this."

"What do we do?"

"I—"

She was interrupted by a sickening thud from above and Sokka fell back into the snow. Aang's joyful laughter was heard over head, echoing off of the empty buildings and valleys. "Aang seven, Sokka zero!"

"Ugh." Sokka rolled over, rubbing his injured backside, moaning, "Making him feel better is putting me in a world of hurt..." Then he caught the looks on his sibling's faces and sobered immediately. "What? What's wrong?"

At that moment, a still giggling Aang floated down to retrieve the ball; it had landed dangerously close to the helmet. Katara rushed forward, putting herself between the monk and the ball, a false cheery smile on her face. "Aang, I really want to see rest of the temple. It... it looks so interesting! What's that over there?" She pointed to a square building, halfway up the hill.

"Uh, the restrooms?"

"Oh wow, that's great." Her hand slipped over his and she was leading him away, tossing a 'help me out here' glance over her shoulder.

Zuko nodded, bending to help pick Sokka back up to his feet.

"What's going on, Zuko?" demanded Sokka in a low hiss, catching his elbow.

He felt tired, suddenly. Katara was leading Aang away from this, but who knows what else would be found up at the top? They should probably leave. "Just watch your feet," he advised, steering his brother away from a suspicious bulge in the snow. "You might step on someone."

It was almost funny how quickly Sokka paled, how audibly he gulped. "You mean..."

Funny, until Zuko looked around and saw one misshapen mound after another covered in a cool blanket of snow. "Yes."

The other boy made a strange wheezing sound. "I'm suddenly not so hungry anymore," he said clutching his stomach, and now looking a bit green. "We should get out of here."

*They didn't even clean up their dead.* Zuko thought, feeling sick. The soldiers didn't get a proper funeral pyre... they just were left by their own commanders, sat out to rot.
Up ahead, Aang was chatting animatedly with Katara, going on about the advanced pipework (apparently fed by hot geothermal under the mountain) and was completely distracted.

Zuko nodded. "Yeah, as soon as he's seen what we need, we can make some excuse and get out of here."

"Firebenders were here… We should get out of here now before Aang —" Sokka gulped again, "I mean, we could accidentally run into a skeleton of someone he knows, or something."

"I know." Zuko paused, thinking back to this morning and the younger boy's cheerful denial. "But maybe he needs to see this, too. As long as Katara is with him, he'll be okay." If anyone could comfort, it was his sister.

Zuko's Gran Gran had stitched his parka that very spring, layering it with blue-dyed fabric and skin that was a Water Tribe woman's secret. It had kept him warm during the worst storms, in temperatures so low that the fog of breath froze on eyelashes, and no one could see more than a hand-span ahead.

But somehow the mournful, whistling wind of the temple cut right through his parka like a sharp knife. He shivered, resisting the urge to use his breath of fire out of respect for the dead monks.

"I don't like this place, Sokka." Zuko said, at last. "It's bad."

OoOoOoO

Zuko and Sokka half expected to see more horrors at the top of the temple, but either there hadn't been bloody fighting here or (more likely) the century's worth of storms and weather had cleaned the temple steps of anything left.

Aang was not completely oblivious to the darkened tone, and eventually grew quiet. Once or twice he stopped on a step, and took a long look out to the vista. His eyes were unfocused… he was remembering a different time, almost a different place.

"Monk Gyatso said there was someone I would meet when I was ready," said Aang at last, when Zuko and Sokka had caught up to them. "He said he would answer my questions about being the Avatar."

Katara bit her lip. "Aang, no one could have survived a hundred years—"

"I survived a hundred years." Those words would have been bitter, having come from anyone else. From Aang, it seemed more like an impish challenge. He even half-smiled. "So it is possible."

Sokka seemed to catch his mood, and he rubbed at his empty stomach, instantly forgetting how nauseous he had been half an hour ago. "And maybe whoever it is has a medley of delicious cured meats!"

They were following Aang, trusting him to lead the way, but suddenly stopped and turned, his grey eyes widening and a smile of delight stretching across his face. The others followed his gaze and saw what they could only guess was some kind of long eared white and brown rabbit-bat sitting on a nearby rock, grooming itself.

"LEMUR!" Aang shrieked.

Sokka, of course, saw things from a slightly different angle. "FOOD!"
And, clutching airstaff and boomerang respectively, the two boys leapt after the creature. The poor thing looked up, gave a shriek of terror and sprinted off with the boys in hot pursuit.

Katara and Zuko stayed behind, eyebrows arched in strangely identical expressions of annoyance.

"Sokka's kidding, right? I am not eating that," scoffed Katara as the two boys rounded the far corner.

Her brother shook his head. The creature — lemur, or whatever — looked too stringy to be any good. How hungry was Sokka, anyway? "Come on," he said with a long suffering sigh, and motioned for her to follow.

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Sokka's legs covered more ground with every stride, but Aang was more than up to winning this race. The air seemed to give way before him, and he soon rocketed past the other boy, giggling a little at Sokka's, "Hey, no fair!" of indignation.

Aang had lived at this temple for years, in between journeying with his guardian monk Gyatso, but things had changed and grown older — different in the century of disuse. There were vines where there shouldn't be vines. Some staircases had crumbled. There wasn't snow on the ground when he had left, either. It had been high summer.

So he didn't recognize the path that the lemur was taking. And by the time he realized where he was, and saw that the temple door had been cracked ajar — he had never seen it open before — the lemur was already scrambling inside, and Aang didn't hesitate to follow.

"Where did you go, little guy?" Aang asked, slowing down to a walk while his eyes fully adjusted to the dim light. The lemur was sitting on a strange statue… In fact, as Aang's eyes grew used to the dim darkness he realized that the whole room was filled with statues. The one directly in front of Aang was an aged man with a square jaw in Earth Kingdom clothing. Next to him was a woman from the Water Tribes, and—

Aang stepped forward in wonder, bedazzled with the sight. The were hundreds, maybe even a thousand or more statues, all set in a spiraling pattern going up and up… a never ending chain…

A shadow moved, unseen to the side, and something metallic swung down while the floor popped up. Instantly, before he could even begin to react, Aang was surrounded, entrapped on all four sides and vaulted upwards — suspended in a metal box.

"Hey!" he yelped, more in shock and surprise than genuine fear. He tried a basic airblast, but his wrists and elbows banged against the steel walls with a hollow clang. It was too small a space to airbend! "Hey!" he yelled again, jumping up to catch the metal bars so he could peek out a small vent-like window.

The box hung suspended from a chain at least twenty feet up, but he could clearly see the small knot of firebenders gathered below — The old General guy looked up at him with pleased expression on his face.

Then, Sokka blundered in through the open door. "Aang, did you find my dinner ye…" His intelligent eyes took in the entire scene, and before Prince Iroh could order them to attack, Sokka had his boomerang out and thrown. His aim was true, and it hit the metal chain holding Aang's steel prison up with a shower of sparks. But it was not enough to cut through with one hit.

Then Sokka was ducking away from a fire blast, bringing his bone machete out to strike—
And he was grabbed roughly by the arm. Prince Iroh spun him about, and Sokka crashed head first into the nearest statue of a firebending Avatar. Skull met stone with a resounding crack, and the boy sat down, hard.

Iroh moved forward, but Sokka held up one finger. "Wait…" His voice was thick, his eyes strangely unfocused. He reached for Iroh, missed by about a foot or so, and then collapsed into unconsciousness.

Iroh bent to take the boy's pulse. "Ready the second and third traps," he ordered, standing up again. "The other two are benders—"

They didn't have time to prepare. The final two children were at the door. Zuko gaped in the same way Sokka had done, but it was Katara who acted first. She raised her hands up and then pushed them down, and all of the ice that had collected in the cracks in the high ceiling, all of the water that had gathered and frozen in the shadows, fell to the ground in shards of icy rain. The soldiers ducked and scattered.

Zuko reached for his boomerang and it flew truly, striking the same imperfection that Sokka's had created, and severing the rest of the chain. Aang's box fell with a clatter, although the boy was still trapped inside.

It took about the space of two seconds for the men to realize that the icy shards weren't sharp enough to impale. One shot fire at the two before Iroh could call out a warning: He had seen his nephew do this trick before, and sure enough with a graceful sweep of his arms, Zuko was able to reroute the fire and twist it around as his own weapon.

The waterbender, too, had called up her own element from the fallen ice. Together, they stepped forward in the same gracefully bounding movement and a wave of fire and ice broke past Iroh's men and sent them scattering.

Lieutenant Izhar, newly promoted in Ji's absence, leapt forward kicking and punching quick fireblasts that were meant to overwhelm an opponent. A move that worked fairly well against waterbenders.

Zuko could think of nothing more than blocking with his own shield of flames, gasping with the effort. Katara stepped behind him and launched back with a blast of water that knocked the attacking firebender off his feet.

"We have to get to Aang and Sokka!" Katara yelped, but now nearly all of their enemies were firing with those quick blasts. They were too rapid for Zuko to react, and his shield of fire was failing… he was gasping for air, breath control gone, and the heat and smoke was becoming unbearable…

He shoved his hands out, instinctively pushing his shield outward, keeping the stinging flames away from his bare skin. It dissipated into nothing within seconds. Grabbing Katara, he spun her away out the cracked temple door — fire blasts missing them both by inches.

He fell to the side, unexpectedly winded, coughing. Firebenders were pouring out the door, and thinking quickly, Katara seized some snow from the temple steps and hurled it as ice against the door, locking the rest in.

But that was no solution — none at all, because Aang and Sokka were still inside and two firebenders and the aged prince had been able to follow them outside. Zuko staggered to his feet, trying to raise a firewall for defense… but Iroh was too quick, and his blast was aimed at Katara. She threw up spray of water which saved her from being burned, but she was blasted back… tumbling
over and over…

Towards the edge of the steep canyon wall… and off the edge…

All Zuko could see of his sister were two hands, fingers white, holding onto the temple edge.

"NO! KATARA!" Zuko ran, but had not gained more than two paces before he was tripped by a well timed blast from Iroh that sent him falling hard to the ground.

"Hold him!" At Iroh's sharp words the two men rushed forward, grabbing him. Zuko fought back, wildly, disjointedly, but they were trained soldiers and pushed him to the ground, holding his arms behind his back… and now Katara's hold had slipped to one hand and her wail of terror could be heard echoing up from the temple walls…

"KATARA! KATARA!" Zuko screamed her name over and over again, fighting, flailing against the firebenders like a mad thing. Not even trying to bend — he was too panicked to think clearly. The soldiers held on, nearly sitting on the screaming, writhing boy. He had somehow wrenched one hand free, and reached out to her… but she was too far… she was slipping…

Things seemed to happen in slow motion. He saw Iroh hurrying to the edge. Katara was just holding on by her finger tips, and he could hear her wails above even his own — it was all he could hear.

Iroh bent to help, but then her fingertips had disappeared, slipping away a hand's-breath from safety.

Everything seemed to stop. Zuko's heart contracted in his chest. He looked up; Iroh's shocked amber eyes met his own.

*I didn't mean for this to happen.*

*I will never forgive you.*

The looks passed silently between them, as quick as an eye blink. As clear as spoken words.

"No… no." Zuko was first to turn away, shaking his head — his entire body was shaking — denying, but there was nothing to deny. She was gone. "No…no, please…NO!" But saying it didn't make it not true. Katara was gone. Fallen. And Zuko screamed again, twisting against his captors... She was dead… his sister was dead…

"Get the restraints." Iroh's voice held barely over a rough whisper. He glanced again to the temple edge, and felt the guilt of the girl's death as almost a physical blow. There was nothing he could do… it was just another guilt to added over a lifetime of mistakes. The best he could do now was restrain the hysterical boy so he didn't hurt himself or others, maybe force a sleeping drought on him…

Yes, that would be… best. For the best.

And that was all Iroh had time to think before the temple-door exploded outwards.

OoOoOoO

Aang had never felt so helpless in his life.

He beat his fists against the box. The air inside swirled around in angry currents, but there was not enough space to do anything. Even as the Avatar, even as a twelve-year-old airbending master, he just wasn't powerful enough.

Katara and Zuko were out there, fighting. Sokka was hurt. He had to help them. The firebenders…
… Fire Nation. Here. In the temple. Somehow, here without a sky bison.

His beating firsts slowed as realization finally, finally struck him. "No…" But if they were here, now, they could have been here then, too. What if all his airbenders weren't just in hiding? What if they were all gone? Killed.

A hundred years… everyone took pride in their temple. They would have never allowed it to fall into such disrepair. Not even if there was one person left. They were all gone.

His friends… all of the monks… Gyatso…

"NO!" Aang cried again, sinking to his knees, folding his arms around himself as if to keep it all in. He couldn't. The grief was too much.

And his cry was joined by another, a heart-wrenching wail from outside. "KATARA! KATARA!"

Something was wrong outside. The firebenders had hurt Katara.

Aang felt despair and a kind of rage, a need for revenge he had never felt before. It engulfed him, swallowed him.

Something inside snapped. Aang was gone, and the Avatar Spirit took his place.

OoOoOoO

It was only Prince Iroh's reflexes — trained and honed over years of firebending — that saved himself, his men, and his nephew from being crushed by stone fragments. He whipped around, generating a concussion explosion that blasted the worst away, although they were all pelted by a hale of pebbles.

Through the cloud of dust which was all that was left of the temple, a pair of unworldly white eyes glared down at them all.

"Aang…" Zuko whispered, but there wasn't any need. It wasn't Aang. It was the Avatar.

The Avatar hovered above the ground, his hands in claws, hunched over, his face a mask of rage and pain. He didn't move, but the wind came anyway; rushing from the mountains, from the hills and valleys. A torrent, a gale of wind that whipped towards them all — shoving all the shocked firebenders back.

One of the men holding Zuko yelped in fear. "He's trying to blow us off the mountain!" His grip loosened, just enough for Zuko to roll around and shove him forcefully back. The wind around them all was only picking up speed, and to his horror he found himself sliding backwards.

"AANG! STOP!" Zuko reached out, catching a corner of stone, using the rough block to shield himself. The wind was tugging at him from every direction, trying to pull him away, and it was increasing.

Iroh yelled orders to his men — words that were ripped out of his mouth and carried away in the now screaming wind. Fireblasts, sent by the bravest of the bunch, were bent away from the slowly rising Avatar and sent back among scattered screams and yells.

Aang's face twisted into something ugly, and suddenly the ground erupted, tossing the firebenders back like ragdolls.
The wind roared around them, scoring skin like sandpaper. Shielding his eyes from the worst of it, Iroh called for retreat, and then, to Zuko's surprise — and disgust, Iroh looked towards him. "Zuko. Come with us!"

The stone under them shivered, buckling. They all felt it drop, sickeningly, a few feet. Zuko clutched his boulder — being younger and lighter than the other firebenders, and without the benefit of heavy armor, it was the only thing keeping him from being blown away.

The firebenders were retreating, but Iroh held back, looking to him with sadness in his amber eyes.

Zuko stared back with hate, an expression between a grimace and a snarl masking his face, highlighting his scars. "I would rather die." All he could see in his mind's eye was Katara's fingers slipping over the edge — Iroh moving too slowly to save her.

"Don't be foolish!" Iroh called.

And then came another sound; different from the wind — Lower.

Tail pumping, straining against the wind, and with a deep bellow, Appa soared above them, landing in the no-man's land between Aang and cliff's edge…

… Katara sat in the saddle.

The wind here was worse than anywhere else. She hunched against the front of the saddle, wind whipping out her hair, calling to the Avatar. "Aang! I know you're upset… and I know it's hard to lose the people you love, but this isn't the right way." The Avatar was watching her now, expressionless. "I know you're in a lot of pain. I went through the same thing when I lost my mother, but if you don't stop, you're going to hurt a lot of people. The airbenders are gone, but Sokka, Zuko and I… we're your family now."

The wind slackened slightly, and the Avatar slowly sank to the ground. Katara jumped off Appa and ran towards him, catching him in a tight hug the moment his feet touched the ground. The wind relaxed, the glowing tattoo's flickered, and then Aang was himself again, slumped down in near exhaustion.

Zuko whipped around, intent on fighting Iroh — but the Prince and his men were gone. Fled.

He shook his head, half in a daze and staggered over to Katara and Aang. "Katara, I… I… thought —"

She was still clutching Aang fiercely and looked up at his words, giving a quick shake of her head. The meaning was clear. Aang was fragile right now. Don't say it. Don't upset him.

Meanwhile, the young monk had turned into her embrace, shoulders shaking, hiccupping, "If the firebenders found this temple… It means they found the other ones, too…"

Zuko bit back the rest of his words, swallowing hard, and looked at the remains of the temple. It had exploded outward — chunks of rock and bits of statues were lying everywhere. There was no sign at all of Iroh or his men, and Sokka…

… Sokka!

His good eye widened and he dashed away, back through the crumbled remains of the door.

Those next few moments, looking for his brother in what remained of the temple were some of the
worst in his life. Boulders were scattered everywhere — some bigger than Zuko himself. The hundreds of statues within had all been knocked down or had simply shattered into lethal chunks under the force of the Avatar's rage. Only one was left; the newest of them all, depicting an aged and dignified firebender with a twin flame crown upon his head. It stood firm, shielding the unconscious Water Tribe boy lying crumpled at its base.

Zuko bent, checking Sokka's pulse and letting out a long breath when he felt it strong and steady under his fingers. He could have lost them both…

"C'mon Sokka, get up." He shook his brother's shoulder, and got no response. It wasn't a good idea to move the injured like this, but there wasn't much of a choice. He doubted that Iroh and his men had retreated for very long. So he threw the other boy's arm over his shoulder and hefted him up.

Katara gave a small cry when Zuko exited the temple, staggering under his brother's weight. Finally disengaging herself from Aang, she rushed over to help him. She had been crying — tears had made streaks in the dust on her cheeks, and up close Zuko realized that she was trembling… It had been a very close call — Appa had almost not caught her in time.

But she was strong — probably the strongest person he knew. She pushed her own terror away to help him with his burden. Together, they somehow maneuvered Sokka to the saddle. Aang jumped over to Appa's head, and they were up and safely into the sky.

Katara dug around in their packs and came back with bandaging and a strip of cloth. She bent some snow she'd picked up a few moments before and made a cold compress, laying it over to the egg-sized lump on Sokka's forehead. Zuko hovered nearby, shielding Sokka from the wind, feeling useless.

"I think he'll be fine," she said, at long last. "It's just a bump on the head."

"I'm going to kill him."

Katara looked up, shocked, and met Zuko's fierce gaze. He wasn't talking about Sokka, or Aang. He was thinking about the man who had called himself his uncle. "Don't, Zuko… Not right now. Sokka's going to be okay. And I'm… I'm fine, too."

He looked away. He hadn't missed the waiver in her voice. He wouldn't ever forget watching her slip off that cliff.

"Why didn't Aang take Iroh's men out?" he asked, finally, looking towards the bison's head where the young monk sat there, alone. "He could have. He had the power."

She shook her head. "It wasn't about that. He was hurting, and it activated his Avatar Spirit…He could have easily killed the firebenders. All the firebenders." And she looked at him. "But he didn't, because it wasn't about revenge. He was just in a lot of pain."

It was a low blow, and Zuko nearly called her out on it. But her point was made. He glowered, but said nothing.

Sokka was stirring into wakefulness now, wincing, and asking what was going on. Zuko reached over to touch his shoulder to let him know he was still here, but he ultimately got up, leaving the healing motherly-type stuff to Katara.

He felt like pacing, but on a flying bison there was nowhere to go. Somehow, he ended up at Appa's head, next to Aang. He intended to ask Aang the same question, why he didn't rid them all of an enemy when he had the chance? But one look on his friend's face wiped that idea away.
Aang was trying to smile — he really was. But the grief inside kept trying threatening to break free, and his eyes were watering very suspiciously.

"I guess… you were right. About the temple, I mean," Aang said, at last, with a slightly cracking voice.

Zuko's shoulders slumped, and he sat down, feeling exhausted all of a sudden. "I wish I wasn't." A pause. "Aang, I'm sorry, for what it's worth…"

Aang's hands were tight around the reigns, and he nodded. Zuko couldn't tell if he was listening or not. "I'm really the last airbender," he said, almost to himself. As if he still couldn't believe it.

"I don't know how, but we will set this right." He shook his head — a quick, almost angry gesture. "We'll get the Fire Nation back for what they've done to your people."

The younger boy blinked at Zuko's fierce words. Then he shook his head. "The monks used to tell me that holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone; you are the only one who gets burned."

"I can hold hot coals," Zuko reminded him.

"Still." And Aang snapped the reigns again, but now his face was more relaxed. Reminding the other boy of his people's teachings, had reminded himself as well. "They wouldn't want me to live in anger or hate… I'm the Avatar, and…and it's my job to stop the war. I just wish I knew how."

"We'll figure something out," he said, after a pause. The fire had that bloomed inside was dying a little as Aang seemed to cheer up. Katara's words came back to him, and he thought repeating them wouldn't be such a bad idea. "Me, and Katara and Sokka… we're going to be with you. You're family now."

"Thanks…" Now Aang was smiling for real, and Zuko clapped him on the shoulder.

Back in the saddle, Sokka was sitting up, clutching the cold compress to his head and looking disgruntled that he had missed the fighting. Then he started complaining, in a high, plaintive voice about how hungry he still was. Zuko smirked. It wasn't quite a smile, but it was a start.

OoOoOoO

"All the men are accounted for, sir," Lieutenant Izhar said, after his customary bow.

Prince Iroh nodded, but his attention was elsewhere. He was bent over a map, making notations, tracing the Avatar's path. North-northwest.

"Order the men to ready the balloons," he said, finally, straightening. "I wish to reach the ship and disembark by the end of the day."

"Yes sir." The Lieutenant bowed and left.

Iroh looked again to the map, and then out over the horizon. The Avatar's bison had long since gone. He had not been pleased, of course, to see them escape. At the same time, Iroh was an honest man and he could not deny that he felt a measure of relief that the Water Tribe girl was alive.

He flashed again to the hatred in his nephew's eyes.

A warm weight fell onto his shoulder, the slight grip of tiny hands on his arm. Iroh's lips twitched
upward in a smile and he rested one large hand on the lemur's head, feeling it arch under his touch like a feline.

"So, you have come out of hiding my little friend?" The poor animal had been startled by the Avatar's power — and rightly so. Iroh was glad to see Momo had come out unharmed.

He reached into his pack and brought out a small slice of candied plum which the lemur took up with a happy trill.

Iroh smiled. "Would you like to join me on my little quest? I cannot promise candied treats every day, but it is sure to be interesting. We could keep each other company."

He did not know if the lemur understood his speech — perhaps it just responded to warm the tone of his voice. In any case Momo gave a little chirp and circled himself on Iroh's shoulder, laying down and curling his tail possessively around his neck. It was all the answer the aged prince needed.

He bent again, rolling up the map. "If the Avatar continues on his path, he will be within reach of New Azulon. If he and Prince Zuko are captured…" He trailed off with a sigh, feeling a headache start in between his eyes. He was getting too old for this. "On the other hand, there are some warm springs near the Earth Kingdom coast. I often find that a good soak revitalizes the mind, and calms the body."

Momo did not answer. He had fallen asleep. Iroh gave him an absent pat before making his way down the long staircase.

OoOoOoO

Next up: With Sokka still injured and food scarce, what's a brother to do?
Field Trip

Adorable Fanart by Tophis1

About the art: They're out hunting for berries right now, which can only happen when it's warmer. That's my excuse for having no mittens. >.<
"What? Everyone else went on a life changing fieldtrip with Zuko. Now it's my turn."

- Toph, The Phoenix King

"I'm hungry," announced Sokka. He was sitting up against a mossy log, legs scrunched up in a blue sleeping bag instead of taking in heat by the half-cold fire. "And bored." This was directed at his little sister, who was busy stirring half cold embers with a stick.

Katara barely glanced up. "Look at your maps, then."

"I've been at the squiggly lines on this page for so long, I'm starting to see squiggles everywhere," he answered, and would have flopped back down if not for the fact that he was currently battling a
fierce headache and more than a little dizziness. Sokka settled for a dramatic sigh instead.

Katara sent him a quick glare, but her expression softened when she caught sight of his pale, sickly shade, the slight glaze of pain in his eyes. The swelling on Sokka's forehead had gone down, but it had left behind a combination of dark purple and yellow tinged bruises.

Lifting a water-skin, she walked over to sit by her eldest brother. "Sokka, it's only been a few days. You need to rest. We're not all going to fall apart because you're not running around playing leader."

"I'm not playing leader. I just happen to be the leader because I'm the oldest." A pause as he took the proffered water-skin and drank deeply, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. "And the smartest."

It was very tempting not to give into some of her lesser urges and rap him over the head with a stick. Maybe Gran Gran would have done it. But her brother's thick skull had already taken enough of a beating thanks to Prince Iroh.

So, instead of snapping at him, she forced herself to take a deep breath. "You overdid it, mister brave chief. So now you get to rest today…. Do you know how frightened I was when you fainted yesterday?"

"I did not faint!" Sokka's cracked in indignation. "I merely — I just felt a little dizzy. I'm fine."

"You have a concussion, and if you don't take it easy I swear I'll — I'm not going to lose you just because of your ego." He was staring at her as she spoke, a slight smile on his face as if he was already thinking of a joke or something to brush her away. Katara lifted her chin stubbornly, and met his eyes. "Do you know how lost we would be without you?" she asked. "Zuko needs someone to help him think things through. Aang looks up to you. I can see it. You're my big brother. I need you too."

A slight brush darkened Sokka's cheeks. He looked away from her, but some of the rebellion had gone from his expression. "Well… I guess having everyone else do all the work for once isn't the end of the world."

"Good." She smiled. "I knew you would see it my way."

"But I am hungry," Sokka said, again, after a few moments of silence.

"Zuko and Aang will be back soon," she soothed. "I'm sure they'll find something."

Sokka grumbled something low (and luckily for him) mostly unintelligible. He shifted around in his sleeping bag, drumming his fingers on the ground. And then, despite his resolve not too, pulled out the map and started to study it again.

Satisfied that she had made her point, Katara went back to tending the fire.

But Sokka was never one to keep silent for very long. "I don't get it."

"What?"

"We should be at Omashu by now."

She glanced over to see him following some of the lines on the map with a forefinger, his nose so close it was nearly brushing the parchment. Putting down the stick she walked over and knelt down beside him again. This was one of Aang's maps. Although it had been frozen for the last hundred years, it held up well and was still ledgable in most places.
It didn't look anything like any of the maps she or Sokka had grown up using. She could read a
nautical map. Gran Gran had drilled points of reference and contour lines in her head from early
childhood. But this was an Air Nomad's map, and she could only assume that the strange wavy lines
over land and the numerical notations were air currents instead of water currents.

Sokka lifted his head and rubbed at the bridge of his nose — a habit he unconsciously picked up
from Zuko. "Maybe the city doesn't even exist anymore."

"We could always ask for directions."

"Kataaaraaa." Sokka looked mortally offended. "We can't just ask for directions. We're not lost. I
just… don't know where we are?" he ended this on a hopeful note.

She huffed. "That sounds like we're lost to me."

"Men don't get lost." Now Sokka was sitting up again. He tugged the map away in irritation. "I'll
figure it out. I just—"

But he was cut off by a movement in the bushes on the far side of their campsite; the crack of a
broken twig.

Katara reacted quickly, summoning water from one of the water-skins into a glowing ball between
her fingers, but a moment later Aang's bald head broke through the leaves of a nearby bush, and she
relaxed.

Aang gave her a cheerful grin and then his head disappeared as he called back over his shoulder. "I
found them, Zuko!" Then he was pushing through the bushes again.

Katara raised an eyebrow. "Did you two get lost?" she asked, with a quirk of a smile towards Sokka.

"Only a little," Aang answered, completely unashamed. With another tug he was free of the twiggy
bush, and stumbled into the campsite. He was using the front of his shirt as a net, and it was heavily
weighed down by round brown nuts. Katara just hoped they were eatable.

Another crackling in the bushes and Zuko emerged. One look at her other brother's face, and Katara
knew that the foraging had not gone well. His remaining eyebrow was knit forward, highlighting his
scarred features, and it was with more of a growl than a greeting that he tossed his half empty bag
down at Katara's feet. "Nuts and roots," he said, in disgust. "I don't understand it. How can a forest
this big be so empty?"

Aang had dumped his shirt out near Zuko's pack — and there were even less of the brown nuts than
Katara had feared. "Well," he said, "it is winter."

"No it's not. It's summer." Sokka struggled to sit up in his sleeping bag, and then looked doubtful for
a moment, casting a glance at Katara as if remembering he had recently been hit on the head pretty
hard. "Right?"

Zuko answered for her. "Yeah, you're right. We were experiencing midnight sun back home. The
summer solstice shouldn't be too far off."

"Guys, there are patches of snow on the ground." Then Aang remembered exactly who he was
speaking too. "There's not going to be any snow on the ground in a few months. It will get a lot
warmer, you'll see. You might like it."

Katara glanced down at her own hands — bare because it was too hot to wear any mittens. "You
mean, even warmer than it is now?"

"Oh yeah," Aang said. "The Southern and Northern hemispheres are switched. We're coming up to
the winter solstice, not the summer solstice."

Aang didn't understand the surprised, even stricken look that came over the sibling's faces, or why
Katara took in a quick breath and glanced towards Zuko. But the scarred boy just shook his head,
murmuring, "I didn't know… I didn't feel anything."

"This place," Sokka concluded, sinking back down into his sleeping bag. "Is officially weird."

Aang showed Katara how to crack open the nuts and pry the soft flesh from the shells, and in the end
she decided that there might be enough along with Zuko's roots to make a stew. It was mixed
success. There just wasn't enough to go around; her stew was more water than actual food, but by
the time she was finished the sun was just sinking below the horizon and everyone was too hungry to
care.

Katara ladled out everyone's portions, but Zuko pushed his back with a quick shake of his head.
"Sokka needs this more than I do," he said in a quiet undertone.

"Zuko—"

But he shook his head again, pressing his lips into a thin stubborn line. She sighed and ladled half of
his out, and back into Sokka's bowl.

It was a morose little campfire that night. Sokka's tried to lighten up everyone's mood, but he wasn't
feeling well and his jokes were thin and strained. He ended up falling asleep early, tucked up against
Appa's warm flank. Aang excused himself from the campfire a little later and sat on a bolder with
legs crossed in a lotus position; meditating.

Zuko had drawn his legs up and was sitting by the fire, moodily staring at the ground deep in
thought. When he finally spoke, it took Katara by surprise.

"There's a town not too far from here. I saw it when I was climbing trees for those stupid nuts."

"What?" Katara was so surprised she lost control of the water she was bending to clean out the
bowls. It fell to the ground in a muddy mess, and she had to bend some more from a nearby stream.
"Why didn't you say anything? We could buy food, supplies—"

"We already bought food the other day, and now we're out, and half our money is gone." He dug the
point of his boomerang in the soft soil, as if stabbing something invisible. "We have weeks until we
get to the North Pole."

"So what do we do?"

"I… I don't know."

He was looking into the campfire now and resolutely not meeting her gaze. There weren't many
times when Katara couldn't read his mood — sometimes it felt she knew him better than anyone. But now, she couldn't. Zuko looked confused, and worried. But there was something else, something she couldn't put her finger on.

"We have to try," she said, "Maybe if we buy something I can spread out into a few meals, like rice…. That can't be expensive."

He nodded once, although she got the distinct feeling that he wasn't listening to her. Soon afterwards, he excused himself to sleep.

OoOoOoO

It was the same old nightmare. The same malicious smile, the same laughing amber eyes.

"Who are you?!" Zuko demanded, clutching the blanket in his dream so hard he thought it would surely burst into flames. "What do you want from me?!!"

The girl smiled at him; and her face smile so full of evil intent that Zuko felt himself recoil in horror. He backed away, but he was small and helpless and there was no where to run. No… no… she was lying… she was lying…

He jerked violently out of his doze, sitting up in his sleeping bag, gasping. Everything around him was quiet and dark and cool; a stark contrast to his dream filled with hues of red fabric and warm scented air.

Zuko passed a hand over his sweaty face, trying to get control over himself.

The moon overhead had only moved a finger-length in the sky. He had barely just lain down, yet everything in the camp was quiet. Katara was curled up nearby. Aang had laid himself on the other side of the campfire, forgoing blankets or mattress; he slept right on the ground.

Sokka was still curled up with Appa, using the flying bison as a giant furry pillow. His soft snores rolled over the entire campsite, so familiar to Zuko that he could hardly remember a night in his life without hearing them.

Yet there had been a time, hadn't there? A time he couldn't remember. When he was a different person with different feelings and different values… When he had been Fire Nation.

Not anymore, he thought fiercely, shoving back the nightmare. There were more immediate worries right now other than the type of person he had been when he was eight years old.

His stomach felt so empty it was starting to hurt. Zuko pressed his hand to it, trying to tell himself that he had eaten only a few hours ago, and that he and Katara would probably go to the market in the morning. He could make it until then.

But his metabolism burned brightly. Not only was he growing, he was a growing firebender, and his body needed more than a half cup's worth of watery-stew.

Zuko forced himself to lie back down, lacing his fingers behind his head. But growing worries
nagged at his mind, keeping him from sleep. Their Water Tribe money wasn't going as far as it should in the Earth Kingdom. It was almost as if the merchants saw the foreign coins and suddenly everything tripled in price. They could easily spend the last of their money tomorrow in an expensive marketplace for just a day or two's worth of food. And then what?

Zuko looked up to the sky, to the moon. He had been taught, like all Water Tribe children, that the moon often brought luck. Tonight, it was nearly full.

The idea struck him again, just as forcefully as the hunger pangs in his stomach. Earlier at the campfire, he had cast away the thought as foolishness. But it stuck with him, and still hungry with everyone else asleep, he thought of it again: He could go into the town by himself. It wouldn't hurt to look around…

Zuko shook his head, scowling at his own thoughts. He was going have to be honest with himself. He wasn't just planning on a midnight stroll through town. He was thinking about stealing. Like a thief. Like a shameless Fire Nation piece of scum—

No, came a sudden, very clear thought. Fire Nation men don't steal. They bully. They murder, and burn… but they don't steal. That would be something below their honor.

And strangely enough, that made him feel a little better about the whole thing.

He didn't ever remember making the conscious decision. He just acted. He rose quietly out of his sleeping bag, pulled on his boots, and with one last look at the campsite behind him, he slipped away.

Zuko's earlier expedition with Aang taught him how easy it was to get turned around in this thick forest of trees. Now it was dark, and a hazy night's mist was creeping through the gaps between the trunks and thickening in open patches. Some of his father's advice came back. What worked in the thin artic forests should be good enough here.

So with every count of a hundred paces he took out an old whale-tooth which had the point filed to the sharpness of a dagger, and scoured a line in a tree trunk. The new scar set in the bark glowed white under the moon, and he was sure he could use that trail to find his way back.

At every moment Zuko was alert for the noises of animals creeping through the trees — or of people. But the only sounds were the soft rush of wind through the branches of the trees, and the twitter of night-bugs. Once or twice he heard a slight crash, but it was always so far off in the distance and probably made by such little feet that he only paused for a moment before continuing on. Mostly it was quiet; almost oppressively so. As if the entire forest were holding its breath.

The edge of town wasn't far off, and soon he had crossed the threshold into the village and was walking past a row of neat-ordered houses with prim square yards. Even though the windows had their shutters pulled for the night, he felt strangely visible; a boy walking alone with a blue tunic that seemed to almost shine in the moonlight.

One of the house's occupants had left their laundry to hang overnight. Zuko looked down at his pale arms. He didn't need a mirror to know that his features were all too recognizable. They were on the run after all, and the less trail that Prince Iroh needed, the better…

He still felt horribly guilty for stealing the clothes, but the black hooded shirt and dark pants were much better at covering his pale skin. And after hiding his parka and recognizable Water Tribe clothing behind a secluded tree, he was able to blend into the darkness and move quickly forward; a furtive figure in the shadows.
Zuko didn't know what to expect of this town. He had only been in a couple of them so far, and that counted Kyoshi Island. Still, if the forest was almost unnaturally quiet so was this village. It was as if the entire population were asleep, or off somewhere else. All doors were closed, all the merchant stalls were shut up and locked up. Feeling a little desperate, he tried prying one open to see if there was anything stealable inside, but it was locked up too tightly.

Eventually, realizing that there was no one around to see him, he melted out of the shadows and just walked down the streets — his soft seal-skin boots echoed on empty flag-stone paths.

Sokka's earlier words came back to him full force, and he found himself agreeing: This place was weird. How could both the forest and the town be... empty?

He sighed, leaning against a building and crossing his arms over his chest, glancing up at the moon as if for guidance.

And there it was. He didn't know how he could have missed it before. It was an estate which was set up on the top of the slight rise of a hill, and glinted in grandeur in the milky light of the full moon. Zuko stepped forward to have a better look. The cobbled road he was following twisted upwards, past a double-set of arched gates and to what had to be tended gardens.

Everything else about this night had been a failure. He stood, hovering half-in and half-out of a moon shadow thrown by a building, unsure. He could go back. If he left now, no one would even know he was gone.

He hesitated, just for a moment longer, before stepping forward. There was every chance that the estate had gardens. Maybe a few fruit trees. It would be safer to pick from there than random bushes in the wild forest. A victimless crime... he liked those.

Zuko took the long way around, cutting through some empty back alleys and a couple of yards instead of using the wide path – if these people were as rich as they looked, they might have guards. He crept around, picking a low point on the stone wall, and scaling it as quick as a shadow; stone was so much easier to climb than a face of a slick glacier.

He landed in a crouch on top of a thick mat of tended grass. He took a quick look around, and cursed low under his breath. There weren't any fruit trees in sight. The estate grounds were well cared for, with drooping willows and a stream running under a small footbridge. A few large boulders were set here and there – most likely in the positions that would most bring the family luck and good fortunes.

Just as he was about to turn back, he caught the scent of something — something sweet and baked, hanging thick in the still night air. His stomach reacted, pinching inward so painfully empty that he curled forward, putting a hand to it.

Once the spasm had passed, he crept forward, feeling painfully exposed under the moonlight and out of the shadows. Zuko couldn't shake the feeling, somehow, he was being watched. But that was stupid... there was no one around. No guards. No animals... no movement in the bushes. He reached the building and there, on a low windowsill, were two berry pies set out to cool for the night.

He reached in his pocket and withdrew a sack, but those pies were going to be a mess by the time he made it back to the camp. The room beyond was dark, and he could just make out the outlines of low set tables. A kitchen? There could be something else, more food, further within. If he was careful, if he was quiet...

Emboldened by his new success, he shifted the pies to the side and put a foot in. The family hadn't even drawn down paper shades for the night — no doubt trying to encourage a night breeze. Within
a few moments, he was inside.

He had lived in Water Tribe tents, and no doubt he had been in a Fire Nation home, but none of this was familiar to him. He was in a kitchen of some sort, because of the neat stacks of plates and bowls. They had been ordered neatly to each side, sitting on what looked like marble countertops. Zuko ran his hand curiously over the stone, feeling how finely it had been polished.

_These people are very rich_, he thought as he reached up to peek inside a cabinet; more bright plates and glasses. _Surely they won't miss a bag of rice or two…_

Suddenly the ground itself seemed to shift under him. Zuko fell to the side, cracking his ribs painfully on the stone counter-top before hitting the ground. He was up in a flash, turning, running for the safety of the window. A slab of stone erupted out of nowhere, blocking his path. He skidded to a stop.

Before he could turn, before he could think about unholstering his boomerang and trying to defend himself, the slab broke in three neat pieces, and hurled in his direction as if by an invisible hand. They hit him hard, in fierce succession, knocking him back into the far wall, and instantly his arms were encased in stone.

He cursed, trying to wiggle free. With his arms encased and locked to the wall, he couldn't bring up any fire.

A laugh — small, as if coming from a child's throat — came from one side of the room. Zuko zeroed in on it, but there was no movement in the shadows.

"Well, well, look what I've caught. Not many burglars get past the guards out front. You must be really sneaky." A pause. "Or really thick-headed."

The kitchen was dark; his attacker hadn't brought up any lights. "Let me go!" Zuko snapped, to the darkened room. "I wasn't going to take anything!" Which was a lie, and a bad one. The mysterious earthbender must have known as well because the stone tightened painfully, making him gasp, "I…I was just looking around!"

The young voice — and how old was this kid anyway? — seemed to almost smirk in the dark. "Oh well if you were just looking around… I guess you can go." And instantly the rock crumbled way to sink back into the floor. Zuko stood, unsure for a moment, but not wanting to let this chance slip by. But he only got a few steps before he tripped on an unseen rock. He fell painfully, but forced himself to rise again. Another step and the ground seemed to sink in and he found himself up to his waist trapped in the floor.

"Just kidding." The voice sing-songed. "You know, I've always wanted my own pet. What do you think I should name you?"

Zuko's scrabbling fingers found a chunk of rock. He growled, hurling it in the direction of the voice. Bad idea. The rock came right back at him at twice the speed, hitting him painfully in the shoulder. He yelped, and the voice laughed.

"Good idea, blockhead. Throw _rocks_ at the earthbender. That will do you some good."

A dozen horrible scenario's flashed through Zuko's mind; Katara, waiting for him to show up again back at camp… Himself, locked in a jail-cell. Sokka, still injured and wincing in pain, having to come and plead for them to let him out. They would be so ashamed at him for stealing. For getting caught and delaying their trip to the North Pole. He was so stupid…
"Let me go!"

"No."

He snarled, scrabbling about, trying to grab something, anything to get him out of this hole. The earthbender laughed again, but then it cut off suddenly; sharply. There was a slight movement in the shadows as the young earthbender twisted around, and a muffled a low gasp. "She's coming!"

Abruptly the tight rock encasing his legs loosened and he popped out of the ground like a cork to land sharply on his hands and knees. There was a soft crumble of stone, as every marble tile and crack and fissure reordered itself.

"Hide!" the young voice whispered.

Zuko didn't need to be told twice. He got to his feet, aiming for the safety of the window. But his legs felt prickly and bloodless from being trapped so tightly in stone. He could only manage a rough limp, and now he could clearly hear footsteps coming from down the darkened hall. A woman's voice called out, "Toph?"

He wouldn't be able to make it in time. Thinking fast, he dove underneath one of the tables… … which happened to be the earthbender's chosen hiding place.

She was just a girl, he realized, with an unpleasant shock. Tiny. Maybe Aang's age, and dressed in a peasant's outfit of tan and green. She looked just as out of place in this fancy household as he did. What was more, she looked to be just as unhappy to share the hiding spot as he was to find her there.

Her nose wrinkled in the semi-darkness. "What are you doing?! Not here! Don't hide here—" But it was too late.

The footsteps stopped, and the woman called out again, uncertainly in the dark, "Toph, was that you, sweetie? Are you out of bed?"

The girl, Toph, held silent; tensed with both hands flat against the floor as if to get support, biting her lower lip. Zuko forced himself to take deep, even breaths, looking again towards the slight arc of light that meant the window, and freedom, and wondering if his legs were uncramped enough to make the sprint. It was risky. If this girl's mother was an earthbender too, there would be no hope at all once he was sighted.

Toph dug a sharp elbow into his ribs, hissing, "Quiet down! I can't hear a thing over your heartbeat!"

"…What?"

But the woman was moving away from their table and towards the back of the wide kitchen. She was half obscured by darkness, but he could see her opening up a cabinet as if searching for something. Then there was a sharp snap of two struck spark-rocks, and immediately the kitchen was illuminated by the soft light of a candle.

And suddenly their not-much-of-a-hiding-place wasn't one at all.

The woman was turning, candle in hand, and Zuko only had a second to act. He reached out, gesturing to the small flame. It flickered to strength — just for a moment — increasing in heat in a flash and melting the wax underneath. A few droplets fell down, stinging the woman's hand. She gave a surprised cry, and the candle slipped from her finger to land, once again darkened, on the floor.
A hand, tiny but with the strength of steel bands, enclosed around Zuko's elbow and he found himself being dragged from under the table. The window was the other direction, but so was the woman, and at that moment he didn't think he could shake the girl's grip anyway.

They sprinted down the hall; her bare feet and his seal-hide boots making almost no sound at all. Abruptly the girl stopped and pulled him to the side with enough force to almost yank his arm out of its socket. They ducked into a room and she repeated her order. "Hide!"

She jumped into what could only be a large bed, and threw the covers up to her chin. Zuko hesitated and sunk behind a large wooden chest, rubbing his legs to get feeling back into them and feeling tender bruises forming up and down his back, his torso... everywhere.

They waited for the space of ten long breaths. Then the door creaked open. The woman stuck her head in, candle again in hand. From Zuko's place he could see how the candle threw soft light on Toph's face. She had her eyes shut, her face relaxed in fake blissful slumber. He heard the woman give a soft sigh of relief, and then the door closed again.

It was silent in the room.

Zuko counted to thirty in his head and peeked over the chest, checking to make sure it was all clear. The girl had sat up, and thrown the covers back.

"How did you do that?" she demanded. "With the candle? What did you do to make her drop it?"

"I—" A strange feeling of shame he couldn't quite place rushed through his veins. He hesitated, shaking his head.

But the girl didn't seem to notice it, for whatever reason. She continued staring at him. "Well?"

"It doesn't matter. I need to get out of here." He looked around the room properly for the first time. It was strange... spare of most furniture, even though he had seen that Toph's family could afford it. There were rolled bamboo paintings on the walls, but they were stuck here and there at odd angles — some even facing the wrong direction. As if the person plastering them had no idea how they should look.

He rose to his feet, noticing how Toph was staring at him. Her eyes were just a touch too wide, and were an odd clouded shade. When he stepped to the side in careful experimentation, her head turned towards him, but not completely. She couldn't see him.

"You're... blind, aren't you?"

"So?" The response was immediate and forceful. Toph scrambled from the bed and faced him, as solid and unflinching as one of the boulders set in the outside gardens. "I can still whip your butt."

It hit him then; had been beaten by a blind twelve-year-old girl. Zuko's last bit of ego felt crushed into nothingness. He groaned, resisting the urge to pinch the aching spot between his eyes. "Just point me out of here. I'll promise I'll never come back." Which was the truth.

But Toph shook her head, and an evil little grin came up over her face. "Look, you might have just saved me from being caught by my mom, but you were still trying to rob my house." Her arms crossed over her chest. "Even if I didn't feel like crushing your bones to powder, all it would take is one scream." She held up a finger to emphasize the point. "And ten guards run in here, and you never get to see daylight again."

The girl didn't know how powerful those last few words were for him, or maybe she did because her
shark-like smile only increased when he shuddered.

Zuko clenched his fists. "I wasn't trying to steal anything valuable! I'm not a thief. I'm— my brother's hurt. There's nothing to eat in the forest, and I just thought — Look, you're rich and I'm sure you don't eat half of what you have. I wasn't going to steal anything really important. Just some food."

There was no reason for her to believe him. No reason at all, except for the fact he was telling the truth. He waited for several long agonizing moments; for her to scream, for her to encase him in stone and use him as her own personal punching bag.

But she blinked and cocked her head to the side. Then to his surprise she snapped her fingers — as if gesturing to an obedient dog-cat. "Follow me, Sparky."

"Sparky?" Zuko wondered, but did as he was told.

Toph stopped in front of a wall and with one quick, strong gesture, the stone slid up to reveal a door large enough for a twelve year old girl. Toph motioned for him to follow, and when Zuko did he found himself outside in the courtyard again.

It was hard not to be impressed. The little girl bended like it was nothing, like moving the earth around was part of an every day thing. Where he and Katara had to work painfully at each Kata, Toph simply worked her element like a seasoned card player at a table.

What was more, she seemed to know how he felt. Her hair dark hair covered her useless eyes, but her grin was white and wide in the darkness. "It's okay, you can say it. I'm the greatest earthbender in the world. You've seen nothing yet."

Zuko glanced down at her. He wasn't exactly willing to go that far. "Maybe you're good, but I've never seen an earthbender before."

"Where have you lived all your life? Under a rock?"

"The South Pole."

She turned to face him, her sightless eyes level at his chest. "Oh, you're Water Tribe. So that's why you're so wishy-washy." Then she punched him hard in the shoulder.

"Ow!" he yelped, "What was that for?"

"Hmm… Delicate, too." Toph started walking, obviously meaning for Zuko to follow. He did, grudgingly, rubbing his sore arm.

"I'm not wishy-washy," he muttered, rebelliously under his breath. How did this girl know where she was going? He kept expecting her to stumble or trip, but as he watched she expertly went around a large upraised rock, just as if she saw it.

"So what happened to your brother? You're kinda a long way from the South Pole." The question came from nowhere. Zuko hesitated, before settling on a vague version of the truth.

"He got hurt fighting firebenders. We're traveling up north."

"Just you and your brother?"

Zuko hesitated again, and then somehow stumbled over a little dip in the path that appeared right before his feet. He looked up, glaring at the back of Toph's head. He didn't like this line of
questioning, this interrogation. "And my sister and our friend."

Toph's next question surprised him. She turned, sightless eyes regarding him. "Alone? No parents around?"

He swallowed, thinking of his dad. "No."

"You're so lucky." This was said in a long sigh, and she turned back around again and continued on her path. "I'm not even supposed to go out into the gardens without an escort. My mom and dad think I'm this tiny, helpless little girl."

"They don't know you're—" A half dozen words ran through his mind: spoiled, brutish, violent… Zuko settled on one, "tough?"

She stopped, and he almost ran into her. "You think I'm tough?" she asked, "Really?"

"Well," he rotated his shoulder, feeling it pop painfully in a couple of places. "Yeah, I guess. You did just take me down pretty fast back there."

"It wasn't like it was hard."

Zuko grit his teeth, but forced himself not to say anything. But the girl seemed to be mollified. She started walking again, and now there was a definite spring to her step.

"I'm the reigning Earth Rumble Champion, you know."

"Earth Rumble?"

"I get to beat up on these tough muscled guys, and show them who's really boss. It's great. They call me the Blind Bandit, and I got this belt." Toph reached down, tracing her stubby fingers on a wide heavy belt he hadn't noticed before. And something in the way she said it, her graceless boasting, suddenly struck home again to Zuko how young this girl really was. And how… strangely lonely. Somehow, Zuko got the feeling that Toph hadn't told anyone about this before. Except to him… a near stranger.

"That's what I was doing tonight," Toph continued, heedless of Zuko's silence. Or maybe she just didn't care. "I was just coming home when you decided to show up. You're just lucky I'm tired from all my fighting." She laced her fingers together, cracking them all at once for emphasis.

Zuko winced.

They were still walking through the garden — it was so much larger than he ever suspected, and he wondered suddenly if Toph had any brothers and sisters. She didn't say anything more, and no more rocks jutted or unexpected dips cut though Zuko's path. Finally when they reached the other side of a low bridge, she held up her hand, signaling him to stop.

Again he got that feeling that she was looking at him, even though she clearly wasn't. "Stay here." And once again his boots and ankles were encased in stone.

"Hey!" he yelped, throwing out his arms, teetering in place.

She chuckled, and turned to leave. Zuko felt a bolt of panic. "No, wait… wait! Where are you going?"

"Shut it, Sparky. I'll be right back."
Toph either shared Aang's very bad sense of time, or the minutes crawled by slowly as Zuko waited there, alone in the middle of the estate's garden; completely visible under the bright moonlight. Finally, finally there was the sound of soft padded feet upon grass and Toph came back; something big and bulky slung over her shoulder.

"Here," she said, shoving the sack over. The contents clinked within.

He stared dumbly at it, not understanding. "What?"

"I guess your stupid sob-story worked. So take it." At once Zuko found his arms filled with a sack of goods, and his feet released from the stone.

"I—" he started, then paused to set down the sack. He bowed low with one fist encased in the other; Water Tribe style. "Thank you."

It was hard to tell in the night air, but he could almost swear the brutish girl blushed. "I guess you're right. We don't need all of it. Now get out of here, and if I ever see you around again..." She balled a tiny fist and shook it, and that was all the incentive that Zuko needed. With a hasty nod, he grabbed the sack and walked back towards the far garden wall.

If he turned around to look back, he would have seen something almost sad and wistful on Toph's face. He didn't, nor did he ever know that she watched him… as only a blind earthbender could, following his faint flashing vibrations until he was to the edge of town, and safe.

OoOoOoO

Zuko meant to get back to the camp well before anyone realized he had been missing, but neither time nor luck was on his side. Where the town had been empty, suddenly there were people walking the streets even at this late hour. It didn't take much to put two and two together and realize that most were probably at the Earth Rumble or whatever it was, before. He had to step quietly, and keep to the shadows to avoid being seen.

Everything hurt.

Being pelted by stone, encased in tight rock, falling a half dozen times… he felt every inch of his skin was tenderized. The cool early dawn made it worse; stiffening up abused muscles. He paused on the outskirts of town to change back into his normal clothing — the black outfit was too dirty by now to be returned. He figured he might as well keep it — and fish through the pack and eat a slice of soft bread to assuage his hunger. When he started walking again, he couldn't help the slight limp on his right side.

Dawn broke while he was still in the forest following his way back by his marks in the tree trunks. It was bright by the time he stepped into the camp.

"Where have you been?" Katara turned to face him, hands on her hips. Her ringing voice made the slight ache in his head grow and sharpen like a dagger.

"Out." He brushed past her, not really in the mood to explain himself. He swung pack around his shoulder and set it down. "There's food, and supplies."

"Food?" Sokka who was sitting by the fire perked up. His eyes were notably brighter than yesterday, and he scooted over, pawing through the bag over Katara's outraged protests.
"Zuko, you didn't... How can we afford... Did you steal this...?" She bent by the sack, her eyes wide as Sokka brought out loaves of bread, bags of rice, bushels of apples, packets of dehydrated broth, jars of sweet and spicy sauces, corn-potatoes, a smear of butter wrapped in wax paper, and one very smooshed pie.

Aang had a completely different outlook. "Wow, that's a good haul. Did you make a new friend or something?"

Zuko rubbed the bridge of his nose; feeling foolish and proud all at the same time. "No, it was given. Trust me." He held up his hand when Katara started to argue. "I've been out all night. I'm tired. I'm going to sleep. No disturbances."

With that, he limped over and pulled himself up into Appa's saddle, curling up on the shadiest side. He fell asleep, listening to his family; Sokka's exclamations of relief, Aang's cheerful laughter, and Katara's half annoyed murmurs.

And he dreamed of the tiny earthbending girl, alone in her giant house.

OoOoOoO

Don't worry. This isn't the last we'll hear of Toph. The GAang just has to get some stuff done first. :)
Sokka and the Spirit

Notes: This AU Season 1 isn't going to follow the normal pattern. I'm not going to rewrite every single show, simply because I don't have very good ideas for all of them. Some shows will be out of order, some won't be appearing and some things will be very new.

This is the longest chapter yet. Hope you all enjoy!

OoOoOoO

"I thought you had changed!"
"I have changed."

~ Katara and Zuko, The Crossroads of Destiny

OoOoOoO

"The Avatar's methods are… unusual."

That's an understatement, Katara thought, ducking as a piece of wood hit the roof overhead with a clatter.

It had been a normal day that turned into a strange night. They had been flying northwards, following the path that Sokka had plotted out, and had come to a burned out forest. Upon landing, they had been approached by an elderly man who had asked for the Avatar's help with an angry spirit that had been terrorizing his village.

Now she, Sokka, Zuko and some of the villagers were clustered around the window watching Aang trying to talk sense into a black and white monster twice the size of Appa — whose only concern seemed to be smashing all the remaining buildings down.

The head of the village, a man called Gon, spoke again. "Are you sure that boy knows what he's doing?"

Katara bristled at the perceived slight to her friend. But before she could reply Zuko had turned around and growled, "What do you think?"
…Which wasn't an answer at all, but Gon shrank away from his ferocity and kept his silence.

Sokka, however, wasn't afraid of his younger brother's anger. If anything, he was more agitated than Zuko and kept pacing back and forth, lips pressed in a thin line, unholstering and reholstering his boomerang. "This isn't right. We shouldn't just stay here and cower."

"Aang will know what to do, Sokka." Katara put as much sympathy in her voice as she could muster.

Now he was fully recovered from his bump on the head, Sokka had been itching to jump into action — maybe to prove himself to his family, maybe just to show himself he was good as new. Now he was gritting his teeth, watching the scene unfold with narrowed eyes. Zuko gave him a bump on the shoulder, which he ignored.

Meanwhile, Aang was doing everything he could to get the spirit monster's attention. He leapt to the top of a nearby building, calling out, "Excuse me, will you please turn around?" It would have almost been funny if the monster was not literally punching a rapidly crumbling building. Aang's face crinkled in frustration. "I command you to turn around!"

The spirit did, effortlessly swatting the little monk as if he were nothing but a buzzing horsefly. Aang fell bonelessly to the ground.

"That's it!" Sokka snarled. "He needs help!"

"No, wait!" But Zuko's cry fell on deaf ears. Sokka had already sprinted out the door. Zuko started after him, but was held back by Gon, the head of the village.

"You can't go out there. It's not safe!" Gon said.

"Let go of me!" Zuko yelled.

Katara heard the argument as if from very far away. She stood by the window watching Sokka run away from safety of the main hall and out to the open at Aang's side.

Time itself seemed to slow down, even though the horrible moment took less time than the blink of an eye. One second Sokka was helping Aang back up to his feet and speaking too quietly for her to hear, and the next the spirit monster had snatched her brother up.

"Sokka!" Katara wrenched away from the window, throwing off an old villager's hand who tried to hold her back, and ran for the door.

It took only a moment for her to get outside — the space of ten heartbeats, no more — but already the monster's black and white form was lost to the darkness, and Aang was flying after it in hot pursuit.

"Sokka!" Katara yelled again, slowing to a stop. Zuko was only one step behind her. His unscarred eye wide and round in shock while the other glared fixedly ahead.

Sokka was gone.
… and suddenly he was standing and surrounded on all sides by a great forest of bamboo.

Sokka took a startled step back, only for his shoulders to press into more bamboo. He cast a glance around, confused. The great shoots were so thickly grown he couldn't see more than a foot in either direction; up and up so high he could barely see the sky — a muted sort of washed out orange peaking through the thinner leaves up top.

"Uh… Hello?" he called out, uncertainly. His voice was muted, swallowed up in the great forest of green. "Um … spirit… monster thingy?"

There wasn't an answer.

Cautiously, he reached out and hooked the point of his boomerang to one of the bamboo shoots and pushed it aside. It bent to his will, the fibers giving a soft sort of crackle. That was good enough for him. Wiggling, cursing Sokka began to force his way inch-by-inch through the thick forest. He didn't know where he was, or how he got here. All he knew was he had to get back to the village, and make sure Aang and the others were okay.

Time seemed to have acquired a strange quality as he threaded his way through the bamboo. One moment he was pushing his way past a thick stalk, and the next he was past it and was picking up his boomerang which had somehow slipped free… then he was turning sideway to slip between two more shoots of bamboo… and he was past that clump and stepping over a stone…

It was as if time were pausing and slowing, skipping forward in random jumps as if he was leaping from rock to rock across a pond. He could have been traveling for minutes… It could have been days.

A shadow moved to his left. Sokka squinted, using his boomerang to part two shoots. "Hello?"

The form resolved itself; it was unlike the flickering play of shadows from the pale sun. It was real — at least as real as anything else he'd seen so far in this crazy forest. More importantly, it was human shaped.

"Hello?" Sokka called again, and again received no answer.

Then the shadow paused, turned, and Sokka was seized with an irrational fear and simultaneous hope that whatever it was, it would go away completely. He shoved through the stalks, splintering them out of his way, cursing as he fell. But the shadow stayed put and in another strange skipping, jumping timeframe Sokka had come right up to him: a man dressed in a shabby green tunic.

"Oh," said the man, with a benign smile on his face. "You've come to join us, too."

"Um, yeah. Sure." Sokka looked around, but they were alone in this close bamboo forest. "Where am I? How did I get here?"

The man smiled again even wider this time. His teeth had a gap where an eyetooth should be. "Why, you're dead of course."
There was a beat.

"No, I'm not." Sokka pressed a hand to his chest. He could feel his heart thump just as it had always done, even if it was a little fast. He could feel quite clearly the ridges of his boomerang under his grip, could smell the scent of thick vegetation around him. "Look, I was attacked by—"

"The Hei Bai Spirit. This is the afterlife, young man." The villager turned, green eyes examining the bamboo as though appraising an unusual piece of art. "We all find it strange at first, but you will get used to it soon. We all do." Then he turned away, hands clasped behind his back and admiring the view of endless green.

"I'm not dead." Sokka repeated, louder this time. But the man ignored him.

Finding no more help at all, Sokka grit his teeth and moved away. Within a few moments the figure had retreated into shapeless shadow and then was no longer visible in the darting, pale sunlight.

The man couldn't be right, could he? Sokka took a deep breath for experimentation and held it. Within a few moments his lungs burned for air, and he let it out in a grateful rush. There. That solved it. A dead person didn't need to breathe. Science.

Maybe he was asleep? Sokka pinched himself, and when nothing happened he did it again; harder this time until he yelped in pain. The noise was welcome because it meant he was alive and feeling, but it was swallowed instantly in the suffocating shoots of green.

"I didn't ask for this," he grumbled, shouldering through a thick patch of bamboo. The thin sharp leaves caught and tore at his hands, and he had to pull his sleeves up over his fingers to protect them. "I'm just a guy with a boomerang. I told Aang he would need backup against a giant spirit monster. But did anyone listen? Nooo…"

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Prince Iroh winced as he sank slowly in the hot springwater. Perhaps he had been over-zealous with his heating, but as the water finally came level to his neck, he tilted back his head and gave a long sigh. By Agni, father to them all… he needed this.

His little lemur companion chirped a question from the side of the rock tub and dipped a paw in. Momo drew it back immediately with a shriek of surprise for the warmth.

Before Iroh could comment, Momo had tipped himself in and started paddling about, sending small splashes up the side of the basin. The lemur could only handle a few moments of the heat, however, and soon crawled out to sit on the lip of the rock and groom himself.

Iroh could feel the warmth sinking into his skin, loosening tight and tense muscles. Agni was high in
the sky, and he turned his head to it, opening his senses and feeling the element warm in his spirit as well as in his body.

The aged firebender smiled and closed his eyes. It had been a long journey from the Southern Air Temple, and any leads on the Avatar's location were half-suspect at best; hints won through a combination of bribery and threats to the local population. Iroh disliked working that way. It went against the grain of his personality. Still, needs are a must.

Despite his resolve to relax and let the warmth revitalize his body and mind, he couldn't keep back the shadows of worry. His nephew… and the Avatar had somehow moved beyond his reach. Iroh was in real danger of having both of them slip through his fingers. Every moment, every day, he was aware of the fact that he had to stop the Avatar before he became too strong… and before Prince Zuko did something in his ignorance that would truly betray the nation of his birth.

Time was running out. And Iroh felt both old and alive at the same time. If the fates were different, he would be looking forward to seeing grandchildren, not traipsing through the Earth Kingdom in search of a legend and a lost nephew.

He was also an honest man. Maybe there was something to be said of Fire Lord Azulon's order to search out the Avatar.

"It will give you time to grieve, my son. Some time to find purpose in your life again."

Purpose. That was something Prince Iroh had not felt in some time.

Although his eyes were half-lidded in relaxation, a part of Iroh's mind was always alert, always aware of his surroundings. He had, after all, told his crew to take the rest of the day on leave. He didn't have any backup, any protection.

So when Momo tensed, his ears flicking upright, Iroh was alert at once.

"Hello?" he called, his voice roughened by the warm steam. He glanced left and right to the silent forest. "Who is there?"

His answer came as a low rumble in the earth. Iroh began to stand, but the stone tub around him cracked into pieces like a broken plate. The water hissed out, and Iroh slipped, falling back. Four spears of earth erupted from around him; the points aimed for his throat.

The bushes moved and several burly men in Earth Kingdom regiment uniforms walked out. Iroh regarded them silently.

"Well, well what do we have here? A Fire Nation soldier all by himself?" sneered one.

Another man had gone to Iroh's clothing where it was draped over the low branch of a tree. Seeing the insignia, he gasped and stepped back as if it would burn him. "This isn't any soldier. Those are royal markings! It's Prince Iroh! The Dragon of the West!"

Iroh narrowed his eyes, but said nothing.

Up in the trees, unseen by the earthbenders, Momo scolded them all soundly. But his little voice was lost to the leaves and the rest of the animal life in the forest.

When the earthbenders took his favorite person, Momo spread his webbed arms and followed.
Katara and Zuko waited at the forest's edge for a sign, any sign of Aang and Sokka. The forest beyond the town was deathly silent. They stood there for hours, peering out for any movement in shadows, a noise, a hope.

But there was nothing.

Katara dozed off sometime after midnight, legs tucked up and chin resting on her knees. Zuko sat beside her, intent on keeping his vigil for his brother and Aang. He ended up dozing off one or twice; startled awake by the sound of a snapping twig, or a half-formed dream of Sokka swaggering up the path with a wide grin on his face. "Oh please, like a stupid spirit-monster could keep me down!"

The new rising sun cast dawn shadows upon the ruined village. The rays of light lit Zuko's scarred face, and he jerked into consciousness, muzzily shaking his head. Katara was asleep next to him, shivering slightly in the damp grass. He took off his parka and draped over her shoulders.

Presently, they were joined by the old man who had first brought them to the village. Zuko was never good with names, and he was distracted and barely acknowledged him. But the old man didn't seem to expect a greeting. He stood by Zuko, watching with the boy as the sun rose and the night-crickets stilled their chirps.

"Don't worry," said the man, at length. "I have full faith that the Avatar will return soon. Your brother is in good hands."

Katara stirred at the sound of his voice and the old man bent to give her a sympathetic smile.

Zuko swallowed and looked again to the mouth of the forest, thinking again of Aang's optimism. His bouncy sort of strength.

A gentle breeze stirred the morning; a dried brown leaf fluttered across the ground, and he knew somehow that the old man was right. He had only known the kid for a few weeks, and he didn't know when, but somewhere along the way he had grown to trust him — he'd grown to think of him as a friend. Aside from maybe himself and his father, there was no one else he trusted more to look after Sokka.

"Yeah," he said, "I know."

"You two have been out all night. Maybe you should get some rest."

Katara had sat up, letting Zuko's parka fall from her shoulders. With a rueful grin at her own sleepiness, she shook her head, and handed it back. "No, I want to be here for when they get back."

Her eyes met her brother's and he gave a nod in agreement.
"Breakfast is served in the main hall." The old man stretched a crooked finger in the general direction. "We don't have much... but you're welcome to come eat when you're hungry." He rose, then, leaving them to their lonely vigil.

It was silent between the two for some time. Finally Katara said, "You know, Sokka's going to be so upset when he comes back. He didn't even really believe in spirits. And now—"

"He's been kidnapped by one," Zuko finished. His smile, though, was fleeting. "Do you think...?" he couldn't finish, but the question held still in the air, and he couldn't quite meet her eyes. He didn't doubt Aang as a person, but...

Katara's lips thinned. "Wherever he is, Sokka make that spirit wish it never touched him. Even if it's with his bad jokes. And Aang... Aang will come through."

Behind them, the village was waking. They could hear the faint babble of people, and someone had already set to work trying to nail shut one of the gaping holes in a rooftop. There probably wasn't any point. Unless Aang got back, and soon, the spirit monster would likely destroy what was left of the town that night.

Zuko took one long last look towards the trees. He could see no sign of Aang or Sokka down the forest path. With a sigh, he rose to his feet and extended his hand down to help Katara up. "I guess we'll just have to trust him," he said. "Let's see if we can't give these people a hand cleaning up."

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A sudden, warm weight fell on Sokka's right shoulder, like a friendly hand. He yelped and spun around, bringing his boomerang to bear. There was no one behind him, and he drew in a deep, shuddering breath, clutching the hilt of his boomerang like it was a shield.

But now, for the first time, he could see a slight gap in between the bamboo shoots.

He pushed through and found himself in the middle of a small clearing. The ground was covered in a carpet of mossy grass, and filtered sunlight streamed through.

And there, his hair done up in a neat top-knot affixed with a golden pin, was man dressed in Fire Nation armor.

"Who are you?" Sokka demanded, pointing with the sharp tip of his boomerang in what he hoped was a threatening manner. "Where am I?"

The Fire Nation man regarded him for a moment, hands clasped behind his back. He wore the full uniform regalia that Sokka had seen on others, but there was something polished about his appearance. Something vaguely familiar in the set of his light gold eyes, and the small play of a smile...
across his face.

"My name is Lu Ten," he said. "And you are in the Spirit World, Sokka."

"The Spirit—wait. Stop." He shook his boomerang at the him. "How do you know my name?"

If the man was threatened by Sokka’s random flailing, he didn’t show it. With his hands still clasped loosely behind his back, he walked around the startled boy. "I know many things about you: The time you stole a bottle of rum from the supply caves and used it to get drunk with your brother. Your journey with the Avatar." He paused, and the corner of his mouth turned up. "And how you worry yourself to sleep every night about trying to keep your family safe, and wondering if father would approve of you leaving the South Pole. He would, by the way. I'm sure he would be very proud."

Sokka stared, mouth open, almost speechless. "But h-how… You mean you've been using the Spirit World to spy on me! That is so—so very off limits!"

Lu Ten stopped and stood before him. An eyebrow quirked. "Even for your spirit guide?"

Now, if Sokka felt confused before, he was at least sure this man was lying now. "One: If you were my 'spirit guide' you would know I don't believe in spirit guides. Two: You're Fire Nation. My guide would clearly be a Water Tribe warrior. Three: No… just no." He would have added a fourth, a fifth, and maybe even a sixth reason, but he was counting his fingers out on the hand that held his boomerang, and he didn't want to put it down to continue, so he settled for just glaring.

"All excellent points," said Lu Ten, breezily. Despite the stuffy, crisp uniform he had a relaxed air about him. But behind the slouched posture there was something sharp and intelligent in his light amber eyes. "I had the feeling you wouldn't be very receptive to the idea. Most would welcome wisdom from their spirit guides."

Sokka bristled. "Unless your wisdom is telling me how to get out of this stupid forest, I don't want it hear it." He had enough of this. He had places to go, people to see… less crazy conversations to have. With another pointed glare for the Fire Nation man, he turned to the literal wall of bamboo. Somehow it seemed to have grown thicker in the last five minutes. Sokka stuck an arm in up to his shoulder, trying to wiggle through. "C’mon… stupid bamboo…"

Lu Ten gave a slow nod and sat down on a wide mossy bolder. "Your friend, the Avatar is working on that with his own spiritual guide. You'll go back, Sokka. What I'm more concerned with is what your choices will be once you leave this place."

Sokka's struggles slowed, and he very reluctantly turned back around. "What do you mean?"

"Where you lead, others will follow. The success or failure of your journey is as much on your shoulders, as the Avatar's."

"Why? What's going to happen?"

"Sit with me," said Lu Ten, indicating a soft mossy bolder. Sokka visibly hesitated, and Lu Ten offered an easy smile. "I told you that the Avatar is working on a solution. We have time in the Spirit World. Trust me on this."

"I never trust Fire Nation…" he grumbled, but sat anyway, boomerang still clutched in his hand. Just in case.

The spirit guide was silent for a moment. His eyes were far off and gazing at something that Sokka could not see. Something troubling in the far horizon of the future. "You will be faced with a
decision, if my guess is correct," he said, at last. "In one hand, you will have the guaranteed safety of your family." Lu Ten held out one cupped hand, regarding it with half lidded eyes. "And in the other you will have what is right."

Another person would have immediately questioned this. Sokka didn't. He pressed his lips together. His blue eyes narrowed has he sought to make the connections. "So you're saying… I'm going to have to do something that I don't want to do, but I'll have to do it anyway." When Lu Ten nodded, Sokka asked the next logical question. "Why?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you that."

"Okay, so when will it happen?"

"I can't tell you that, either."

Sokka slumped. "You have to be the worst Spirit Guide ever. How do I know this isn't some Fire Nation trick?" He ignored Lu Ten's deep chuckle. "Where were you when I got lost for two days when I was five? Or when I nearly drowned when I was nine? Or when I got my butt kicked by those girls AND Prince Iroh?"

"Ah," said Lu Ten. "But you learned from those experiences, correct? And as for Prince Iroh…"

For the first time, the spirit guide seemed to hesitate. He almost looked wistful. "There is something else you do need to know."

As he spoke the air shimmered, then grow indistinct. Sokka clutched at his boomerang again, but before he had time to really become frightened, the air changed in volume again, and features and objects popped back into being — only they were different.

Instead of a mossy clearing, he was now at the bank of a muddy little pond. Water reeds choked the edges, and some kind of flowering tree blossomed overhead. Lu Ten got to his feet. "C'mon," he said, with a wink. "I want to show you something. It may help answer some questions."

Wary, but curious, Sokka got up and followed his guide, twisting his head this way and that to take everything in. They walked on a small curving path that roughly followed the bank — it was a well manicured garden, Sokka realized. He could see the edges of the walls through thickly leaved vines.

The path opened and the bank sloped down to a grassy edge. A kid sat at the muddy bank with his back to them — he was young, maybe eight or nine — in Fire Nation clothing. He sat on the very edge, the tips of his shoes in the water, uncaring or unaware how the mud was dirtying his backside.

And he was throwing rough chunks of bread to several squawking turtleducks.

"What—" Sokka started to say, but the sound of crashing in the nearby foliage stopped him short. Two bushes parted, and Sokka recoiled in horror, nearly crashing back into his spirit guide.

It was Prince Iroh.

The man spotted the boy and pushed his ungainly way through, and Sokka wanted to cry out a warning… but his voice stuttered, halted. There was something different about the prince. His hair was darker, his beard streaked with grey. He was slimmer, too, for all that he was having difficulty dragging himself free of the brush.

At last, Iroh dusted himself free of clinging leaves. He didn't seem to notice Sokka and Lu Ten at all. "So this is the place you have chosen to sulk."
The boy at the shore refused to acknowledge him, and Prince Iroh — a younger version of Prince Iroh, Sokka realized — grinned. "Not that I don't blame you. It is lovely place."

"'S'not fair," the boy sniffed, back still turned away. His quick fingers ripped another chunk of bread from the loaf, and he angrily threw it into the water.

The benign smile slid off of Prince Iroh's face. "No," he allowed, "but I assure you the Capital zoo will be open for some time. You will still have your chance to visit it, my nephew."

The boy turned… and Sokka nearly got the shock of his life. He knew that face, although he had never seen it whole and unmarred. It had been so long since he had seen him do up his hair in that stupid Fire Nation style like that.

"Zuko…?" Sokka breathed.

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Katara set herself to work, and quickly became a hero among the women. The Hei Bai spirit had destroyed the piping to the water tower a week ago, but it was a simple matter for her to bend a stream of water from the well to some hastily scrabbled together troughs. The women were delighted, and set to work bringing out dirty laundry and praising her so thoroughly that she felt dizzy from blushing.

Zuko was lending a hand repairing the fence of one of the rabbit-chicken coops. One of the men was showing him how to properly mend the wire while the remaining village children scattered about, laughing and trying to recapture the scattered hens.

Despite everything — her worry for Sokka and Aang — it was a pleasant day. The steady sense of industry reminded Katara painfully of home. If she closed her eyes, she could imagine the bite of frosty air… could almost hear the sound of Sokka directing the toddlers, and the women chatting about the latest fish-catch.

"Could we bother you for some more water, dear?"

Katara opened her eyes and met the shy face of one of the village women. Lighter skinned. Green-eyed. So different from one of the women of her tribe, but also the same in many ways. Katara nodded and arched her arms, bringing in a fresh wave of clean water to replace the dirty.

As the two nearest women washed and scrubbed the clothing, they chatted among themselves. "Oh, I'd kill for a little cow-goat milk right now. Settles my stomach in the mornings, it does."

"I don't know how you can stand the stuff. It unsettles mine! But I suppose after the Avatar fixes this business with the spirit we can rebuild and restock."
Katara joined the two women, and at their encouraging smile picked up a tunic and began to scrub. "Did the spirit take your cow-goats?"

"No." The woman to her right gave a sigh. "Some of the men got the bright idea that the spirit was angry. They thought that maybe a sacrifice of some rabbit-chickens might appease its anger. When that didn't work, they slaughtered all the flamingo-goats." She paused. "These are bad times… bad times. I don't know how we're gonna last the winter even if this spirit doesn't destroy the village, and everyone we love."

"I'm… sorry," Katara murmured.

The woman laid a water-wrinkled hand on her knee. "Nothing to be sorry for, dear. It's our fault… we've brought this on ourselves, somehow, and no atonements or sacrifices of firebenders are gonna change that. I can only hope your friend the Avatar can fix things."

Katara nodded absently, but then stopped. "Wait. What did you say about firebenders?"

The woman hesitated, but her friend spoke up. "After Junji's little girl was taken, and putting the animals to slaughter didn't appease the spirit, we didn't know what else to do. Maybe the spirit was angry because something we did. Maybe we weren't doing enough. I dunno. No one does." She paused, laying the shirt she was scrubbing out to dry before selecting another from the pile and wetting it in water. Katara didn't speak up. She felt frozen, horrified, because she had the feeling she knew what was going to be said next. "They found a couple of them firebenders out doing whatever evil they were up too, and brought 'em back. Then—"

"Ekta," snapped the other woman. "That's enough of that business now." But she wasn't looking towards her friend. She was looking at Katara, at her wide blue eyes and suddenly grey-tinged skin. The woman nodded slowly, as if she saw the horror in her mind. "Don't worry yourself about it, dear. This is war, and the spirit wasn't appeased anyway. I don't think that the men will need to do any more of that nastiness now that your friend the Avatar is here to help."

"They… killed the firebenders?" Katara didn't need to see the slow nods of their heads to get her answer. It took every fiber of control that she had to not twist her head back and check on Zuko. She made herself count to thirty before carefully glancing back at her brother.

Zuko was still working mending the wire along the rabbit-chicken coop. He was talking to one of the men as they took turns holding and then securing the poles for the new fence. Katara was too far away to hear the conversation. As she watched one of the men clapped Zuko on the shoulder. Was that one of the men who had killed the firebenders? What would they do if the found out that Zuko…

She stood up, abruptly, and the water in the washing basin sloshed all around her. "I… I'm going to see what my brother's up too," she stammered, in the face of their confused expressions. With a jerky bow, she excused herself and half walked, half ran over to Zuko's side.

"We should check on Appa," she said, grabbing his arm, her fingernails digging into his flesh. He looked down at her, startled, and she begged him with her eyes not to ask. Not yet. "We left him alone all night, and… and he must miss Aang so much…"

Zuko stared at her like she had gone insane, but to his credit he didn't say anything. He straightened up and glanced toward the man in charge, but the villager only waved him away with a grin and a thanks. They were nearly finished anyway.
Appa did make for a sorry sight, standing alone at the edge of the village. The great giant bison made a show of snuffling over the two teens, as if to make sure that they were still there and that they weren't going to be abandoning him either. Katara patted his nose and dug around in one of Aang's packs until she came up with a stiff bison-brush to work some of the knots out of Appa's thick fur.

Zuko stood to the side, arms crossed, waiting for an explanation. But Katara glanced around before she spoke, making sure none of the villagers were near by to hear. "You didn't tell any of them you can bend fire, did you?"

"No. Why would I?"

Katara let out a breath she didn't realize she had been holding. "A couple of the women told me that the men killed a couple of firebenders the other day. They… they thought it would appease the angry spirit."

Zuko's good eye went wide and then narrow again. "What?" It came out as a low hiss and he swung his head around, looking back at the village; the people he just helped, and who had just fed himself and Katara a nice breakfast. His face was averted, but she could see him recoiling in horror, and at the same time… trying to push it away. They had been Fire Nation after all, and it was war.

"Zuko."

His head snapped back towards her, and for a moment she looked at his uneven face. She hardly noticed the scar anymore. But now he looked at her with two different eyes; one her brother, and the other narrowed and glinting.

Her hand clenched in Appa's thick fur, and the bison turned his head, his sweet alfalfa-scented breath washing over her. It brought her back to the present, and she realized he was waiting for her to speak. "I know what you're thinking, and I promise we'll do something about this, but not right now. I want you to be safe. As soon as Aang comes back—"

"No." His voice was quiet, nearly a whisper, and he looked down at the ground. "No, it's… okay."

"It's not okay! They can't go around killing people because they're afraid."

"They were Fire Nation, Katara."

His words hit her like a blow. She stood there, rooted to the ground in shock. But only for a moment, because she felt her ire rising. She had expected to be forcefully holding him back. Why didn't he get it? She opened her mouth to snap something, he but stepped forward, hands fisted to his thighs.

"They're just like… like Prince Iroh. He almost killed you, and he'd capture Aang in a heartbeat if he could. Don't feel any pity for them, Katara. They're monsters. All of them."

The last few words were nearly spat out, and his unburned cheek was flushed with emotion… and Katara didn't know whether she wanted to slap some sense into him, or hug him.

"Those villagers didn't kill the firebenders in battle," she said, "They murdered them."

"You saw what the Fire Nation did to the forest. If they somehow captured some firebenders nearby, they were probably about to do the same thing to rest of the land."

"You don't know that."

"Oh yeah? Maybe they were trying to reenact it like the battle of Han Tui." Impassioned in his
speech as he was, he hardly seemed to be understanding what he was saying. "Just wait until a drought comes along and burn it all to the ground!" Zuko slashed his hand for emphasis, a small wisp of smoke rising in the wake.

Katara stared at him. "The battle of… what?"

"What?" Her confusion gave him a pause. "I just—you never heard about that?"

"No." She stepped forward, tentative. "Zuko are you… remembering something?"

His light gold eyes flicked rapidly back and forth. After a long moment he shook his head. "It was one of the great battles of Fire Lord Sozin. He was advancing the army, but they were met by earthbenders dispatched from Ba Sing Se. They were outnumbered, driven into a forest. And then…” He closed his eyes. "The siege lasted a month, and there was a drought so Sozin… ordered a fire started in the thickest part of the forest. It grew into an inferno. Even most of the firebenders even couldn't escape, and all the earthbenders were doomed… Five thousand benders died. Sozin came back a hero." He gave a strange sort of shiver and turned away, pressing the sleeve of his tunic to his mouth. He looked like he was going to be ill.

Katara didn't know what to say, but when she reached out to touch his shoulder her hand wasn't shrugged off. "That's a horrible thing to remember," she said, pushing back her own sharp disappointment. Like all of Zuko's memories of the Fire Nation this was purely factual. Not even a memory at all, but a figment of history probably gleaned in a history lesson.

He swallowed and then gave a long sigh. She removed her hand. "Yeah, it is. But it gives me an idea." He straightened up and turned around. "I'm tired of waiting around. Let's take Appa out to the burned out part of the forest. Maybe we missed something."

The sun was rising, and filtering through the treetops in little dappled patches. Prince Iroh sat very still, focusing on his breathing — inward when they were walking through a shaft of sunlight, outward when they were again in shadow. He sipped the sunlight in like a man about to cross the desert and drinking as much as he could ahead of time to steady him.

He had remained silent in his captivity, and aside from a few thrown comments, his captors hadn't addressed him. They had given him little spare clothing, nothing more than a loincloth to cover his nudity.

_They mean to humiliate me, no doubt_, Iroh thought. _I'll be paraded through Earth Kingdom towns on his way to… wherever they were taking me. The defeated Fire Nation royal._

Iroh was not defeated. Not yet. He was patient.
And he had a lotus tile up his sleeve.

Not literally, of course. But the prince's amber eyes had caught what the Earth soldiers had missed — flashes of white and brown, high up in the treetops. Momo had followed them throughout the night. He was an intelligent creature. Perhaps he would know to help when the time was right.

Iroh broke his silence the first time in hours. "Where are you taking me?" he asked, pitching his voice to a quaver. Let them think him ashamed of his nudity. Let them think he was old and broken.

He was sat up against the back of a soldier, sharing a saddle pad, and he felt the man's back tense against his shoulder.

It was the sergeant up front who answered. "To face justice."

The ever-present fire within Iroh's flared, and he couldn't quite keep the snap out of his voice. "Yes," he said. "But where, specifically?"

Although he could only see the back of the sergeant's head, somehow he knew he was smirking. The man halted his ostrich-horse and whipped it around. Sure enough, one corner of his mouth was curved. "Take a guess. You laid siege on it for six-hundred days."

Something cold bit at Iroh's spirit, effectively quenching the fire. It was not hard to look down, to pretend to be ashamed. "The great city of Ba Sing Se."

"Apparently too great for you," the sergeant sneered. "You threw everything you could at it, and it did not fall."

Iroh closed his eyes. "Yes."

Satisfied that his prisoner was old, and quelled, the sergeant turned his ostrich-horse back. They continued the journey in silence.

Behind Iroh's eyes, memories were passing… of those he loved, and those he lost.

OoOoOoO

"Zuko! Down there! It's Aang!"

Zuko turned to his sister's shout and followed her gaze. There, along the edge of the forest was a circle of stones hidden in the ash. Everything was pallid and grey, which made Aang's orange and yellow clothing stick out all the easier.

He grinned and with a sharp, "Yip-yip," to Appa, tugged the reigns to the side and angled the bison in.
Appa landed as softly as a ten ton flying bison possibly could, stirring up a cloud of soft ash that drifted lazily into the sky, staining the air brownish grey. They were surrounded by a forest of blackened dead husks of trees, charred by a fire that had been no accident. The rocks Zuko had noted from above were covered in soot, burned remains of what used to be a great alter.

And in the middle of it sat a statue of a bear, and on its head, serenely meditating, was Aang.

Zuko felt a flare of anger. He jumped down off Appa's head, landing in the soft ash and strode up to the statue. "We've been worried sick about you, and you've been here meditating?! Where's Sokka?"

Katara had come up behind him, her neck craning up to look at her friend. Aang hadn't reacted at all. It was hard to tell from below, but she could see one of his hands… and the strange glow that came from his skin.

"His arrows," she hissed, catching her brother's arm.

Zuko had been gearing himself up to climb up there himself, but at her warning he stepped to the side and got a better angle. There was no doubt about it. Aang's arrows were glowing, just as he had seen them do when he was in the Avatar state.

"But there's nothing going on," Zuko blurted, looking around at the dead — yet windless landscape. "He's not even using his Avatar power."

An idea struck Katara and she gasped. "The Avatar is the bridge between the Spirit World! Maybe he's contacting the spirits!"

"He can do that?"

To this, Katara could only shrug. Both siblings looked up at their friend again, at a loss for what to do.

Finally, after a moment of scratching the back of his head in thought, Zuko came to a decision. "I'm getting him down from there."

"Zuko," she snapped. "We can't disturb him! What if he's doing something important?"

He ignored her and leapt, catching one of the bear's stone paws before hauling himself up. "The sun will be down in a couple of hours. I'm not leaving him here to be eaten by that spirit monster or to be picked up by a Fire Nation patrol."

Zuko was naturally agile, and quickly found hand and footholds in the curves of the statue. But nearly to the top, he realized he would have no way of getting Aang down without crashing them both to the ground and possibly breaking the little monk's neck. Aang had somehow perfectly balanced himself up at the top, and would have almost looked asleep if not for the distinctly glowing tattoos. Zuko sighed and jumped down again, landing in a crouch, and ignoring Katara's superior look.

"We will just have to guard his body," his sister said. "I'm sure whatever Aang is doing, it's important. We'll wait here and make sure he's safe until he comes back."

Zuko glanced up again, to Aang's serene blankness. The little monk's tattoos were glowing like a beacon in the dead, burned forest. Katara was right; it was like there was no life left in his body at all. He was just a shell, waiting patiently for the spark that was Aang to come back to his own body. He was helpless like this.
Zuko found himself nodding, agreeing. They would stay, and wait for him to come back.

A soft breeze tickled at his unburned cheek and he looked towards the remaining forest — a band of green off in the distance.

_Sokka, where are you?_

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_OoOoOoO_

Sokka felt like he was falling, although the world around him was quite solid, if not completely real. That was _Zuko_… Zuko before Sokka even knew him. He stepped back, shaking his head. But this— no, but that meant that Iroh… and so Zuko truly was…

"Prince Zuko," Lu Ten confirmed, a quiet voice of reason from behind him. It was as if he was reading Sokka's thoughts. In actuality, he probably was.

The younger version of his brother had turned back to the pond. "I'm older than she is!" Zuko snapped, wiping suspiciously watering eyes on the edge of his sleeve. "Father told me that if I get high enough marks, I could go… and I've been trying! I practiced so much, and she didn't at all…" he trailed off, angry, his bottom lip trembling. And it hit Sokka then like a slap in the face he Zuko wasn't talking about _his_ father, but obviously some other father… some Fire Nation father. "But of course _she_ gets everything perfect." At these last words Zuko ripped the remaining loaf in two, and tossed both pieces as far out as they could go. The turtleducks swarmed the blobs, quacking and squawking in greed while Zuko looked on, scowling.

Somehow his glare didn't look half as menacing without his scars.

"What happened to him?" asked Sokka, as Prince Iroh joined his nephew at the shore. "How did he get burned? Who tried to cut his throat?"

"I don't know."

Sokka turned, planning on calling Lu Ten out on a lie. He was a spirit guide, or whatever. How could he not know? But for the first time, there was a look of sadness on the firebender's face. Lu Ten shook his head. "I'm not his spirit guide, Sokka. I'm yours."

"There now…" And the younger version of Prince Iroh walked over, putting a hand on Zuko's shoulder. A lot in the same way that Sokka would, when Zuko would get in one of his moods. "So she will see the zoo before you, but what if by the time she came back you knew a firebending trick that she didn't?"

That got the boy's attention. He tore his gaze from the pond and looked up at his uncle, interested. "Like what?"
Prince Iroh grinned. "It's my specialty. The reason why I am called the Dragon of the West. I learned it so I won't freeze to death when we conquer the Water Tribes —"

Sokka made a noise of outrage in the back of his throat.

"— it's called the breath of fire."

Sokka had seen enough. He rounded on his spirit guide. "Look, this is a really cute family moment, but this was a long time ago. Okay, so… fine, Zuko was a prince or whatever. Fine. But he is part of our tribe now… He doesn't even like the Fire Nation!"

"Destiny is a funny thing, Sokka," said Lu Ten. "Yours, the Avatar's, Katara's, Zuko's, Iroh's… none of them are set in stone."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

Lu Ten did not design to answer, but the slight smile was back. He seemed to be amused by Sokka's reaction, as if pleased by watching someone struggle to find the truth when it was right there all along, right in front of his face.

Back on the shore, Iroh was still talking softly to Zuko, telling him how to steadily breathe deep from within his stomach. Both man and boy were completely oblivious to the harsh conversation not ten feet away.

It's like, Sokka thought, me and Lu Ten are ghosts. Or maybe Iroh and Zuko are the ghosts. Ghosts of the past.

As he watched, a small flame peeked out from between Zuko's teeth. The boy who would later on become Sokka's brother gasped and grinned. "I did it, Uncle!"

Sokka had seen him use that move a hundred times. It was the very move, apparently, that had saved Sokka's own life that time he almost drowned. The day that Zuko discovered he could firebend. Now, as he watched Iroh congratulate the boy and then slyly suggest they go back to the palace for tea and cookies, he felt a bit of sadness.

Zuko didn't remember this.

And Prince Iroh in this time he would never guess that he would eventually try hunt down the boy he was cheering up.

Sokka turned again to Lu Ten. He felt calmer now. His anger had been replaced by melancholy that tugged at his heart, and weighed him down. "He's not just some old man who likes spoiling his nephew." It felt weird to be saying that word in conjunction with Zuko and Iroh. It felt wrong. "What am I supposed to do? Invite Iroh in for tea and cookies? Katara can provide the water and he'll provide the fire?" He mimed a quick punch, like a fire blast, and winced. "Iroh's trying to capture Aang. And he'll probably kill us for getting in his way."

"Perhaps," said Lu Ten. Although he didn't seem to be concerned about the prospect.

"Zuko doesn't even remember him like this! He's—" Sokka bit off the last words angrily. He was going to say was Zuko better off. Better off? Scarred and not even remembering anything before he was nine? "His family sound like jerks, anyway." Except for Prince Iroh, this one time.

And suddenly, Sokka realized that he had been missing the point all along. He had been focusing on his brother — and why not? It was weird to see him so… Fire Nationy. But what if that wasn't what
Lu Ten meant to show him?

Sokka turned, looking at Lu Ten with one eyebrow cocked. "Why did you really show me this?"

"I have my reasons, and I think you know what they are… even if you don't want to acknowledge it just yet." His spirit guide grinned, and hesitated. His light amber eyes grew unfocused. "But now our time is drawing short. The Avatar has returned to the physical world, and its time you left as well. The exit is that way."

He gestured and Sokka turned to see the thick bamboo forest again, and a gap between the stalks where he had never noticed it before.

Suddenly Sokka was out of the lush Fire Nation garden completely and back, surrounded by a curtain of green.

Lu Ten was nowhere to be found.

Sokka hesitated. "What do you mean?" His voice muffled against the bamboo, and there wasn't an answer. Only oppressive silence.

Turning again, Sokka eyed gap between the stalks — only a shaft of white light could be seen. Steeling himself, he stepped forward.

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OoOoOoO

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The Earth Kingdom soldiers had led their mounts up a steep rocky pass. The sun was sinking down along the other side of the horizon, and Iroh was worried. He had spotted Momo out in the open several times — the lemur had no trees or shrubs to hide in. He was following at a distance, but if the soldiers saw… if they realized he was being followed…

Iroh intended to give it a few more hours. He was not being poorly treated, and there was every chance that his crew would find the trail and mount a rescue. He planned to break himself out by Agni's first light on the next dawn. But out ahead was more and more desolate wasteland. They were leaving the forest, and entering into a wide expanse of rocky shale; perfect for the earthbenders.

A flash of blue caught his eye — a voice on the wind. Iroh turned, but saw nothing… nothing until he glanced up. He didn't see more blue — he saw white instead.

From down on the ground, the bison could easily be mistaken for a cloud in the sky, but for the fact that Iroh had spent the last few weeks thinking of that shape. He gave an involuntary gasp. The Avatar!
Hearing him, the sergeant up front pulled his ostrich-horse short. "Is something wrong?"

"No!... No..." Iroh cleared his throat, as if amending a cough. Suddenly his limbs found new life in them, and he knew that if the Avatar and his nephew were close by, he could suffer this foolishness no longer. It was time to act. "Actually, there is something wrong. My restraints are too loose."

"Too loose?" the sergeant barked.

Iroh was more than a match for the man. He met his suspicious glare with a small, watery smile. "Yes, you see the chains are jangling and it bumps my wrists." He raised his voice slightly, a querulous old man.

The sergeant sighed and made a curt gesture to his second in command. "Corporal, tighten the prisoners restraints."

"Yes sir."

Iroh helpfully held out his hands. The corporal grabbed for his keys which were latched onto a ring, and held them up. A moment before they touched, Iroh breathed out.

It wasn't his breath of fire — his intention wasn't to melt the man's face off. He directed a superheated jet of steam to his own maniacals, and with one smooth movement, pinned the corporal's hand to the thick cuff. The man screamed and wrenched away.

Iroh jumped down, sending a blast of fire with his chained feet to the ostrich-horses. The creatures whinnied and reared back.

Iroh hit the ground with a grunt. Maybe if he thought help was coming — maybe if he was just trying to buy himself some time, he would have attempted to roll to safety down the hill, and escape later into the trees. The grim reality was that Iroh was all alone. He rolled back up to his feet, standing his ground.

The ostrich-horses were whinnying in terror, but the captain kneed his beast brutally forward, heedless how the fire singed its feathers. Iroh stood his ground, waiting carefully for the right moment —

And when it came it was not at all what he suspected.

Out of the air was another flash of white. The captain screamed — more out of surprise than actual pain. Momo had knocked his wide brimmed helmet away, and was on top of his head, pulling at his hair and screeching wildly.

Iroh darted forward. The still hot metal shackles didn't burn him, and gave way to some plasticity. He snatched the key ring from the man's belt and shoved it in the lock. One twist later and his hands were free. He knocked the shrieking captain aside and took his place on the ostrich-horse — sitting awkwardly on the side because his feet were still chained.

"Ha!" He slapped the beast's rump with one hot hand and then were off, and running to safety. Iroh had his feet unchained in a few moments, and he ducked low on the saddle. The captain, he hoped, was the sort of man to reserve the best fit beast for his own personal transport. He had a good chance of escape.

A familiar warm weight settled on his shoulder, and Iroh reached up to scratch Momo's ears. The lemur purred.
Only later, once he was sure of his escape, would he glance up to the sky and take a good heading of the sky bison's path… where it was going, and where it came from.

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**OoOoOoO**

Zuko was not patient. He could not sit still. He paced back and forth in front of the statue of the bear; acorns and cold remains of charcoal snapped underfoot, his seal-hide boots were soon coated with a fine layer of ash.

Katara watched his seething with compassionate eyes, but said nothing. She knew how he hated to wait, and now the sun was sinking to the horizon. It would be dusk soon.

The Spirit would be coming.

A chill wind passed over the wasteland, although the boy and girl did not feel it. A voice was on the breeze, although it was silent to their ears; a scream of terror. "Slow down! We're gonna crash!"

And then Aang's arrows faded of light, and he woke up.

Katara was on her feet in an instant, coming over and throwing her arms around him the moment his feet touched the ashy ground. "Aang! You're back!"

"Where's Sokka?" Zuko came to his other side, his voice insistent. "Is he all right?"

Aang's narrow shoulders slumped. "I don't know." And Zuko would have snapped at him, but for the dejected look that came over his face. He reigned his anger in, barely, and glanced over to the western mountains. The village.

"We'll find him." His voice was a low growl.

Aang too, looked to the west. His storm grey eyes widened. "The Spirit! It's going to attack the village again. I have to stop it! C'mon!" He leapt to Appa's head. Katara and Zuko were right behind him.

Pressed on by Aang's urgency, the bison flew low and swift, cutting right over the trees. But they were not alone. Katara saw it first, and her gasp of surprise alerted the two boys. Even in winter, the crowns of the pines were thick, and they could only see flashes of the ground below; and a black and white body. Racing, just as they were racing to the village.

Aang snapped the reigns, but Appa could go no faster and bison and Spirit came to their destination at the same moment; when the last of the sunlight had drained over the mountains.

The black and white spirit gave a roar — high and wild — something not belonging to this world. It raised a fist, bringing it down on the first building that it saw as Appa came about, landing in front of
the village hall.

"Get inside!" Aang ordered, gripping his airstaff. "I've got to find out a way to stop him."

"No!" Zuko's eyes glinted with an inner fire. He turned, not caring if the villagers saw him, and pulled from candles lit from within the great hall. Within a few moments, he held a bright stream of fire in between his hands like a short chain. "We're taking this thing down together."

"I don't want anyone else to get hurt!" Aang turned to Katara, hoping she would provide some tempering influence on the firebender, but her normally soft face was set in a hard look of determination and her own water was fist between her hands.

He should have known. They were going to get their brother back, no matter what.

"We're not leaving you." Katara said. "We're not going to let you fight this thing alone!"

"But I don't want to fight him!" His protests fell on deaf ears, and it was too late anyway because the angry spirit had grown bored of pounding on the roof of the house. It turned without turning; one moment facing east and the other moment moving straight forward.

Seeing the three children, it charged, roaring so loud that the fluid in Aang's ears shook. Katara and Zuko were behind them, elements crackling. He didn't want them there… he couldn't stand to see them taken, but Aang felt their strength, and it steadied his own.

For one moment — a split second between thought and action — he wondered if this was part of what it was like to be in the Water Tribe. To never stand alone, and defend always as a group.

The spirit was rushing toward them, and Aang leapt. He meant to flip himself over the Spirit, turn and distract it from the others so they could encircle — his hand reached down to touch the wedge-shaped forehead, just for a moment so he could get leverage to flip.

But in that moment he saw something underneath. Something bear-shaped. Something kind.

The Spirit stopped. So did Aang. He floated back down to the ground; no longer afraid, but looking at the spirit in wonder.

"You're the Hei Bai Spirit," he said, in wonder. "You're the Spirit of the forest, aren't you?"

The creature didn't speak. It didn't attack, either. Behind Aang, Zuko and Katara exchanged a quick look, but didn't lower their elements.

Aang, though, was smiling. "You're upset and angry because your home was burned down… I know, because I felt the same way. Then I found this." He dug around in his pocket and brought out a fat acorn, the same one Katara had handed him a few days before. It had germinated in the warm safety of his pocket, the top split and a poke of green was erupting from the top; the start of a new shoot, of a new tree. Aang held it out for the spirit to see.

"It's going to grow back, Hei Bai. The villagers here love the forest. It's their home, too. It will take time, but it's all going to come back."

The Spirit reached out with fingers each as long as the monk's torso. It plucked the acorn with surprising delicacy out of his hands, and studied it for a moment. Then, wordlessly, it turned, shrinking down to size. A bear once more — a panda. It plodded off back past the ruins and houses.

As it sank into the forest, shoots of bamboo sprung up behind it. A forest as thick as the trees.
It was silent for a moment, but then the bamboo shivered — there were shadowed shapes moving forward and abruptly people were stumbling out, looking around in wonder.

Sokka was with them.

Katara gave a glad cry and rushed forward, capturing her startled brother in a hug. Sokka rocked back for a moment, looking wholly dazed, and asked, "What happened?"

"Aang gave an acorn to the monster." Zuko grinned and punched Sokka on the shoulder in manly greeting. "Welcome back."

"You were in the spirit world for over twenty-four hours!" his sister exclaimed, finally stepping back and giving him some room to breathe. "How do you feel?"

Sokka hesitated. He didn't look worse for wear, although Sokka's blue, slightly unfocused, eyes lingered on Zuko for just a moment or two. "I feel like I have to use the bathroom. Really bad." And before either sibling could comment, he staggered off with a pained expression on his face.

Zuko turned, watching his retreat, and snorted. "At least he's back."

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Sokka did have to use the facilities, even if it wasn't quite as bad as he made it out to be. He just needed a moment to think, to breathe. He stayed in the outhouse for a bit, swallowing down bile, staring at one of the cracks in the rough wooden door.

He felt a strange mix of sickness, guilt and rebellion churning his gut.

"In one hand you will have the guaranteed safety of your family," Lu Ten had said, and the words echoed around and around in his head like a bad song. "And in the other, you will have what is right."

And when he saw Zuko, once again scarred, ignorant of everything… Prince Zuko…

Sokka took in a deep breath, and then let it out very slowly. This kind of stuff wasn't for him. He didn't believe in most of the mystical, and he outright resented being told that someday he would be forced to make a decision between his family and doing the right thing.

He was Sokka, son of Chief Hakoda of the Southern Water Tribes. He made his own fate.

He opened the door, forcing his walk from a stilted, tense gait to something almost a swagger. He had just escaped the Spirit World, right? He put a cocky, half-smile on his face and by the time he reached his siblings and Aang, he could almost believe that everything was all right.
Katara was still fawning over Aang as Sokka strode up. "I'm so proud of you, Aang." Her eyes were sparkling blue, gazing down at the little monk in a mixture of awe and almost motherly pride.

From behind her, Zuko caught Sokka's gaze and rolled his eyes.

It was a small thing, but the familiar gesture made Sokka's heart lighten a little, and when he grinned back it was real.

Aang grinned, his cheeks alight with a blush even in the rapidly fading light. "Actually, I did have a little help. I need to speak to Roku."

"Roku?" Zuko asked. "Wasn't he the Avatar before you?" At Aang's nod he said, "But… he's dead, right?"

"Yeah, and I think I found a way to contact his spirit."

Katara grinned. "That's great!"

"Creepy, but great," Sokka drawled, but it was only to hide his own confusion. After all, he had spoken to Lu Ten pretty easily, and all he had to do was get scooped up by an angry forest spirit. Aang was the Avatar, and probably more adept at those… sort of things. "So are you going to call the forest spirit back or something?"

Aang shook his head and bit his lip. "No, I have to go to a temple on a crescent shaped island on the solstice."

All the Water Tribe siblings shared a look. Katara was the one who spoke. "Aang, the solstice is tomorrow."

"Yeah, and there's one more problem." Aang paused and took a breath. "The island is in the Fire Nation."

Katara, Zuko and Sokka drew back, identical looks of shock and horror on their faces.

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Gon, the head man of the village, fell asleep with a smile of satisfaction on his face. He had not been willing to admit to himself until now how close to despair he truly had been. After his wife, Yan Me was taken by the Hei Bai spirit, he had lost all hope… but now, truly, they had been blessed by the Avatar. Now they could rebuild.

A sharp knock on his door woke him out of the most restful sleep he had in over a month. Rubbing
his eyes, yawning widely, he staggered to the entrance. There was a sound — almost like a high pitched scream outside, but it barely registered. It was the middle of the night. Why would someone —

And he opened up the door, and stared into a nightmare.

An older man stood there dressed in Fire Nation armor. Gon threw his hands over his face, instinctively to shield himself, but the aged General simply smiled. "I understand the Avatar was here. Where is he?" The voice was mild, but underneath it was pure steel.

Gon shook his head, but not out of denial… out of fear. "I… I— He's gone. You're too late!"

"Sir!"

Both the General and Gon turned to see a red-armored officer come up. Something was folded neatly under the crook of his arm, and Gon felt a new wash of terror. He recognized those clothes, and that empty helmet. His greatest shame.

"We found this in one of the houses," said the firebender. "The tags say they belong to two infantrymen, Zang Li and Huzun."

Prince Iroh turned to Gon, his amber eyes glinting.

OoOoOoO

Next up: Field trip to the Crescent Island.
Crescent Island Revelations

Art by the fab GreenAppleFreak
"Until then, enjoy these gifts. For Zuko, a pearl dagger from the general who surrendered when we broke through the outer wall. Note the inscription and the superior craftsmanship."

~ Ursa, Zuko Alone

They flew through the night, using one of Aang's old star-maps for a directional guide. Crescent Island was half a world away and they only had a day to get there.

Zuko woke up at the first light of dawn as was his habit. He struggled from sleep, his limbs were stiff with cold and his face raw from windburn — a consequence of a night spent in the air. Pulling his shaggy hair out of his face and tying it back in a wolfstail, he walked over Appa's wide white and brown back to join Aang, who was dozing on the bison's head.

They must have crossed the last of the Earth Kingdom sometime during the night. Below them, in every visible direction was ocean — flat and blue with little peaked caps of cresting waves. It went on and on... it would be hours before they saw land again.

So far to go, and maybe not enough time to get there.

Aang was curled over on himself, napping on the top of Appa's head, and Zuko carefully unwound the reigns from his limp fingers.

"You should go back and get some rest," he said, when Aang stirred. "I can take over for awhile."

The young monk shook his heavy head, yawning widely and struggled to sit up. "No... I'll be fine." He glanced back towards Appa's saddle, to Sokka and Katara who were visible as blue lumps still in their sleeping bags. "You guys shouldn't have come."

"What are you talking about?" Zuko favored him with a glare. "Of course we should."
"But if any of you get hurt I'd never be able to forgive myself." Aang looked down, twisting his fingers in Appa's thick fur, biting his lower lip.

Zuko sighed. "Let us worry about that, okay? You're our friend. We aren't just going to let you take off to the Fire Nation alone. Besides," he added, after a moment, "it's good luck to take a firebender to the Fire Nation… I think."

Aang blinked, before he realized that this was Zuko's brand of humor. He didn't often joke. It made Aang smile anyway. "Right," he chirped, digging a playful elbow into the older boy's ribs.

But despite his bravado, Aang was tired. After awhile, he lay down again, stretching out on his stomach and looking at the vast endless sea below them. There seemed to be more questions crowding his mind than waves below. How far did they have to go? What did the other Avatar have to say that was so important? Would he be angry for Aang being frozen and gone for a hundred years? Would he be able to teach him how to be the Avatar, as Monk Gyatso had said? Aang leaned down to stroke the spot between Appa's eyes, lost in thought.

Appa gave a soft groan.

"Do you think he'll make it?" Zuko asked.

"Appa? Sure he will. He's strong, aren't you boy?"

Appa groaned again.

Aang lay there on his belly for some time, thinking of the crazy dragon ride that had brought him to Roku's Temple in the first place, and worrying.

He might have fallen asleep, because the next thing he knew, Zuko was speaking in a low murmured undertone, "Feels weird to be awake during the solstice."

"Why?" Aang turned his head, and the other boy looked at him a bit startled. Apparently he had just been talking to himself.

"Nothing." And Zuko pointedly glanced away. But when Aang remained silent and just watched him expectantly, he finally gave in with a sigh. "Firebenders rise with the sun, right? Well, in the South Pole it gets dark during the winter months… it's hard." Something in the way he said this made it seem a lot like an understatement. Still, Aang didn't interrupt and Zuko continued after his pause. "But here it is the Winter Solstice in the Northern Hemisphere, which is the worst day at home, because the sun is tilted so far away, and now I just feel… fine. I wouldn't even known it was the solstice at all unless all this craziness hadn't happened."

Aang sat up next to him, crossing his legs and looking thoughtful. "I never heard of a bender needing their element like that before, but I grew up in an Air Temple. You can't get away from air. It would be strange to be a firebender, Aang thought, but luckily did not say it out loud.

Zuko snorted. "It's how I know I'm Water Tribe. Other firebenders might die without the sun for months. I didn't." Then, it was almost as if he had been reading Aang's mind because he then asked, "Roku was born a firebender, wasn't he?"

Aang nodded. "Yeah, so maybe he will know what to do about the Fire Nation… and about this war. I don't."

The admission took Zuko by surprise, although he was careful not to react. If Aang had been having doubts about being the Avatar before, he had only shared them with Katara and not either one of the
boys. Frankly, now that it was out, Zuko didn't know what to say other than, "We'll get you there in time."

"I hope."

"We will," he said in a self-assured sort of way that brooked no argument.

"I don't think that Roku is going to be happy with me for being gone for so long."

"Probably."

Aang frowned at this, but then Zuko spoke again.

"But you are the Avatar now, and you're doing the best you can. You got Sokka back from the Spirit World, and you saved that whole village from Hei Bai." Zuko favored him with a smile. "You have the stuff, Aang. Roku will see that."

Aang nodded again, drawing his knees up to his chest. He felt a little better. Maybe.

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Prince Iroh's joints ached, and he was reminded once again that he was getting too old for this. Too old for capture by Earth Kingdom soldiers, and subsequent escape. Too old for cleaning up messes left over in unfriendly, paranoid towns. He should be sleeping, resting his aching bones.

But while he was old, he also loved Pai Sho.

Ensign Lin was no prodigy, but after six months aboard, Iroh could safely say that the boy was coming along in the game. He had picked up the basics quickly - the rules were simple. But Lin was impatient, and seemed capable of only thinking one or two moves ahead.

The young ensign moved his jasmine tile forward, giving a nervous glance to gauge Iroh's reaction. Perhaps he feared retribution if he ever managed to out-move the Fire Nation royal.

That didn't concern Iroh… as long as Lin continued to play as he did, the young ensign would never have to fear the taste of victory.

The ensign’s whole strategy was typical. Lin's pieces chased Iroh's across the board, hoping shift the weight of balance to his favor. Meanwhile, it was a simple matter for Iroh to set a trap.

Iroh moved his favored piece – the lotus tile – and snatched one of Lin's air tiles.

"Didn't see that coming, sir," the ensign said with determined cheerfulness. "I guess I was looking at the other side of the board." And he moved his jasmine tile again, tantalizingly close to one of Iroh’s
water tiles; another two moves and he would have it.

Iroh nodded, and moved another piece, and took one of Lin's.

The ensign whistled between his teeth. "Excuse me for askin', sir, but I was just about to move that piece you just took. How'd you—"

It was difficult for Iroh not to smile. "Pai Sho is more than just about capturing tiles. This is a game of strategy. The more aggressively you attack, Ensign Lin, the easier it is for me to turn and strike back—"

He stopped.

A thought, perhaps something that had been nagging at the back of his mind for some time, finally came to the forefront. He bent over, a hand stroking his beard, studying the tiles and the arrangement of the board: The Air tiles in pinwheel formation – the Avatar. The Lotus Tile — his Nephew, and flanking to the right and the left as two water tiles — the two Water Tribe Children.

Iroh sat back, stunned. "I have been a great fool."

"Sir?" Ensign Lin asked.

But the Prince did not answer him. He got up, and with a quick bow, forfeited the game. Then, before the startled ensign could react, he swept off to his room. There was something he needed – another tile to be added to the board.

OoOoOoO

Midday found Sokka sitting towards the back of Appa's saddle, staring out to sea with unfocused eyes. His thoughts weren't focused on the present mad dash against all reason to the Fire Nation. Instead his mind was turned to a scene so long ago —although thanks to freaky spirit world magic — relived in startling detail.

Zuko and Prince Iroh had been close. Prince Zuko… A Fire Nation version of his own brother. And Lu Ten's cryptic warnings about choosing between what was right and his family…. What did it all mean?

Normally Sokka would just be wondering if it would be worth it to bug Katara into fixing something to eat. Now his thoughts cast out wide, troubled. Should he sit his younger brother down and tell him everything that he had seen?

Sokka tried planning exactly how he would do it (because he was always a big fan of plans), but each version was a little more crazy than the last. "Hey Zuko," he imagined himself saying, ever so casually. "So you know how I was kidnapped by Hei Bai yesterday? Well I met my Spirit Guide in
the bamboo spirit forest, and I wanted to let you know that your old Fire Nation family was a bunch of jerks that made you cry as a kid, except for Iroh who liked to feed you tea and cookies…"

Sokka didn't believe in fate, but it was a large coincidence that, while shaking his head and coming out of his own thoughts, he focused again out to sea and saw a glint of silver along the horizon.

"Fire Nation!"

His shout had every head turned towards him. Katara put down her sewing, and Zuko climbed over Appa's bulk and joined Sokka's side, leaving Aang to keep steering at his head.

"Where?"

Sokka wordlessly pointed the direction, shielding his eyes from the glare of the sun reflecting on the water. Already the ship was more than a glint, and had started to take shape. They must have been spotted already from the deck; the ship was gaining. Quickly.

Zuko scowled at the shape. "Can you tell who it is?"

Sokka's eyes were better at long distances. He had only seen this ship once before, but it had invaded his village — he would never forget its sleek lines. His stomach plummeted. "It looks like Prince Iroh's."

"How did he find us?" Katara asked.

The look on Zuko's face was terrible. He shook his head and called back to Aang. "Can we go any faster?"

"Appa's been flying all night!"

"Aang, the Fire Nation isn't exactly going to give him a rest!" Sokka snapped, but most of his sarcasm was lost as Katara cried.

"LOOK OUT!"

Iroh's ship was still far back, but something fast and round was launching upward from it — a boulder dipped in sticky tar and set alight. It arced through the air, aimed straight for Appa.

The bison groaned and all of the kids felt a sickening drop right in the middle of their stomachs as he stalled in mid-air. The fiery mess missed them by mere feet, a stinky trail of smoke making them all clutch their noses.

"Aang!" Katara called. "We need to get up higher before Iroh throws another hot sticker at us!"

But Aang was hunched forward in determination. He had spotted something. "We have bigger problems than that," he said, pointing ahead.

Something else was on the edge of the opposite horizon; new glints of metal like an ugly string of pearls on the water's surface.

Appa was speeding towards it, and those glints rapidly took shape: at least twenty battle ships stood between them and Fire Nation waters.

"A blockade," Zuko murmured, into the stunned silence.
Iroh stood on the bow of the ship, the stiff wind blowing out all the wrinkles of his uniform. He had set the engines to full all through the night. Now the efforts were paying off; the Avatar's bison was within sight.

"Load the catapults," he called. His eyes squinted upwards where the bison's darker belly could just be seen against the blue sky and puffy clouds. Iroh waited patiently, his arms clasped loosely behind his back as the catapult was loaded and its payload lit. "Aim low. I wish to disable the beast, only."

Sensing the excitement, Momo flitted around the ship, perching on railings and chirping questions at Iroh's men. They were too well trained to take any notice of him.

"Fire," said Iroh.

All necks on the deck craned, watching, and for a moment it seemed the payload would hit… but the beast maneuvered back, and the boulder flew past its nose.

"Reload," said Iroh, calmly. In truth he had not expected the first shot to hit.

This was a firebender's greatest advantage, attacking a fleeing opponent. Metal couldn't fatigue. This ship did not need to rest. Normally it would be a matter of hunting down the quarry until it was exhausted, and coming in for the final attack from there.

But Iroh had studied the maps. He knew it would not be this simple.

"Sir!" Ensign Lin was at the telescope. "There are ships ahead – dozens of 'em! Fire Nation. Sir, they're running the flags of the western blockade!"

Quick as a snapping mongoose-dragon, Iroh turned to his Lieutenant who had been standing quietly by. "Who is commanding the blockade?"

"Last reports indicate Commander Zhao, sir."

Iroh's amber eyes narrowed and he turned again to the sea, just as their catapult launched another load up towards the Avatar. He did not need to follow it to see that it would be a miss. And they would not have many more chances before they were within range of being hit by friendly fire.

The Avatar flew straightly forward, towards the blockade. A hundred men – more — under Zhao's command would see him and the bison. After today this would be no longer just Iroh's quest.

Stupid, stupid boy…

"Sir?" his Lieutenant asked, and paused, hesitant.

Iroh felt like turning, felt like snapping at the soft officer. He missed Lieutenant Ji; that man had fire
in him, and never held back what he thought.

Under his wide sleeves, Iroh's fingers worried the White Lotus tile, turning it over again and again. The prince closed his eyes, letting his breath out in a low, even rush. When he opened them, his face was once again of calm determination. He knew what he had to do. "Lieutenant Izhar, cut the engines to half-full."

"Aye sir." He turned to yell to the aft, "Engines! Half-full!"

"Load the catapult," Iroh ordered. "But do not fire unless the Avatar turns his course."

There was silence from the deck around him, and although Iroh had not turned he could well imagine the looks his officers were exchanging behind his back. It should have been his Lieutenant who spoke next, but as Iroh had already known, the man was gutless.

Instead the cheerful and high voice of Ensign Lin was heard. "Sir… we aren't going to just let them take our quarry?"

Again, Iroh's fingers traced over the slight ridges and rises of the white lotus tile. "No Ensign," he said, at last. "I intend to do no such thing."

OoOoOoO

The tiny image of the air bison glinted in the glass of another telescope several miles away. The hands holding the scope tightened — just for a fraction of a moment, but when it was lowered, Commander Zhao was smiling.

"This must be my lucky day," he purred. The scope went up again, and a quick glance across to the line of horizon brought another surprise.

Of course.

He had his suspicions. Every officer knew of Prince Iroh's current mission, but no one seriously expected him to succeed. Then again, no one seriously thought the Avatar was more than just a bygone legend, either.

Zhao lowered the scope again and turned to his waiting men. "Ready the catapults!"

"But sir… there's a ship out there. One of our own! If we fire, we risk striking them."

The Commander didn't spare a glance back. "Then they will just have to stay out of our way. The Avatar will not cross over Fire Nation borders on my watch."

Zhao was in the command of over two dozen Fire Nation battle cruisers, and his men had quickly learned to follow his orders. Shouts went up from around him, and the signal officers flashed his orders to the others ships by flag. They were ready well before the bison flew into range.
"LAUNCH!" Zhao roared.

OoOoOoO

There was nothing they could do. Turning north to avoid the blockade would take time — time they didn't have. Turning back would mean facing Prince Iroh's ship full on. Plowing ahead, running the blockade was the only option left.

Aang glanced back to his friends, and one by one the Water Tribe siblings nodded: Anxious, determined, calculating… they were in mutual agreement. They had come too far to back down now. It was Fire Nation or bust.

Aang turned back, taking the reigns into his hands, hunching his shoulders, a glint of steel determination in his grey eyes. "Appa! Yip-yip!"

The air bison let out a groaning roar and swung his wide tail down. The whistling air around them whipped into a scream, and the vast line of ships far below grew rapidly larger.

There was a movement below, a glint of metal movement between the water and the air — no one was looking back, now. They had not noticed that Prince Iroh's ship had fallen behind. It wouldn't have changed things in the slightest if they had.

Suddenly something bloomed from the ships ahead—dozens of tar-coated flaming boulders—launched through the air. All directly aimed for Appa's soft underbelly.

"Aang!" Katara cried. "Look out!"

But Aang was yanking Appa's reigns, and the beast was in agreement with him. They shifted, speeding skywards, although the flaming boulders were much faster. Children and boulders all reached the high cloudbank at the same, sending the white clouds into a roiling confusion of flying rocks and orange fire. Appa roared again, and Aang let him have his head, trusting the bison's instincts. He twisted, nearly sideways to avoid a close hit—the boulder so near that they all felt the heat from the flame. Then with a sickening dive, another twist, another near miss, it seemed they would make it out alive after all—

Sokka lost his grip.

Later on he would tell a chiding Katara that he was reaching for something important that was about to slide off. The truth was his hands were slick with sweat, and on the sharpest of Appa's twists where he was nearly upside-down, he simply lost his hold.

"SOKKA!" Katara screamed, as her brother slipped over the edge.

"NO!" Zuko reached for him, missed, and watched him disappear under the clouds.
Aang grabbed the reigns back, tugging them down. Appa had already turned, but when they broke through the bottom of the clouds Sokka was a flailing doll-sized figure down, down below.

It was a race to the water's surface, and as Sokka's form grew larger so did the ocean — until blue filled their vision, and it seemed that they would all reach the waves at the same time. Then Zuko reached out, snagged Sokka's wrist in both hands and yanked him back into the wide saddle just as Aang pulled savagely up on the reigns, trying to level them out.

Appa's feet skipped the choppy waves — and then it would have been over for sure — but he regained his balance, and with another strike of his tail they were speeding along the very surface of the water, level with the ships.

The Fire Navy launched again, and only Appa's instincts and timing kept them from getting hit at close range. The boulders sent up magnificent plumes of water into the air — high enough to overtake them all. But Katara rose to her knees, throwing out her hands in a pushing gesture that turned the waves back.

There was a boulder that somehow seemed bigger than all the rest of them combined. Fired from the flag-ship, it was aimed right at Appa's head.

Aang leapt out, airstaff in hand. His form was perfect as he kicked out, one leg straight out ahead of him. A blast of air blew out and hit the boulder dead center. It exploded, the lethal chunks whipped away in an instant to form a donut shaped clearing just large enough for the bison to rocket through.

Now they were sailing past the ships themselves. The soldiers on deck set out blasts of fire, perhaps as a last resort. Most were too far away to do any damage, but Zuko stood up and copied his sister's movements, pushing back what he could in a returning wave of fire and heat. He wasn't strong enough to stop it all, but Appa only got singed a little on one side.

And then they were through.

"We did it!" Aang crowed, pumping a fist into the air. Then he stopped.

Sokka spoke for them all. "We made it to the Fire Nation," he said, a sick expression on his face. "Great…?"

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OoOoOoO

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Prince Iroh had long ago taken control of the long-seeing spyglass. Usually, it wasn't his style. He much preferred to stand back and let others report to him, but for this… He refused to rely on a second-hand witness to tell him that his nephew, and the Avatar, had made it safely.

He was unaware of the cold burning wind, his white knuckled hands, or the warm weight of the
lemur on his shoulder. His entire world seemed to shrink down to that little view through the spyglass.

When the blue-garbed boy fell from the bison's saddle—Iroh couldn't breathe.

A quick twist of the spyglass and a refocusing of the lens showed it was the Water Tribe boy, not his nephew.

The Avatar caught him anyway.

"Lieutenant Izhar," Iroh said, without taking the scope from his eye. "Increase the engines to full, and run up the royal flag." He paused, peering again, decisions weighing heavily on his mind. "My belongings are packed in my cabin. Please have someone bring them up for me."

"Right away sir."

He sensed, more than saw his Lieutenant bow. But Iroh was not paying him any mind, every atom of his attention was once again focused on the narrow view through the spyglass.

And he only took the next full, proper breath once the Avatar's air bison crossed the last ship of the blockade.

With the engines steaming once again to full power, there was very little delay in reaching the flagship. Zhao's battle cruiser was perhaps a little newer, although not larger, than the ship Iroh had chosen when he set out on his quest nearly three years ago.

A ramp was lain between the two ships, and Iroh casually strolled across to Zhao's deck, Momo still on his shoulder. No less than three ensigns staggered behind him, sweating, with their arms full of his packed belongings.

Commander Zhao ran a tight ship — the deck was clean of debris and sticky tar despite of the fact the crew had been in heated catapult launchings less than twenty minutes ago. The less than modest crew arranged themselves in two neat lines with Zhao in front. They bowed low as Iroh boarded.

Zhao was first to rise to stand at easy attention. "Prince Iroh," he said, and his eyes flicked to the lemur just for the barest of moments before returning back. "It would appear that you were not chasing a legend after all." Yet there was no surprise, no concern at all in his tone. Iroh filed that away for later.

"It is always satisfying to see one's theories pan out," Iroh agreed, mildly. "I have been pursuing the Avatar since the Earth Kingdom border."

"Then you know where he is headed?"

Iroh rewarded the Commander with a sage look. He had not forgotten for one moment what an ambitious man Zhao was. "My crew is tired," he said, at last. "They have served be very well, but now I will require fresh men and ships with more engine power." He looked about the deck in satisfaction, pretending not to notice the way Zhao's twitched with controlled anger. Iroh did not wait for the Commander's reply before he issued his first order. After all, he outranked the other man not only in birth.

"Set a course for the Crescent Island, Commander Zhao, and send orders for three ships to flank. The rest will stay behind."

He would not have Zhao's ambition tip the balance over what was already a situation that required…
delicate handling.

"Yes… my prince." Zhao bowed again, stiffly.

Iroh smiled and reached up to scratch Momo's head. "I will be in the cabin. Please come and join me for a cup of jasmine tea before the Avatar is sighted. I have brought some of my finest blends."

And with that, Iroh signaled for the baggage-carrying ensigns to follow him. Momo gave a twitter on his shoulder, perhaps sensing his inner satisfaction.

OoOoOoO

The bison flew on.

The great blockade was only a halfway point — miles and miles of endless blue still lay ahead of them. Appa's strength faltered, although as the day wore on and the sun slowly crossed over the horizon he kept slowing, having to be reminded by gentle "Yip-yip's" from Aang to hurry, that time was not on their side.

They were racing against the setting sun, trying to reach the Crescent Island before it set completely. Now the sun burned low in the sky, and the literal eighteen hours of flying had put everyone in a stupor.

"There it is!" Aang's sudden cry roused the Water Tribe siblings.

Zuko blinked, sat up, and crawled to Katara's side to look over the edge of the saddle and his first view of the Fire Nation.

The moment seemed very much like it had been when he first set eyes on the tiny South Pole village as a child from the deck of Hakoda's ship; it was nothing as he had imagined.

The island stood out blackly in contrast to the surrounding deep blue sea. A volcano on the southern tip leaked glittering red magma which ran a short length into the water, throwing up plumes of hot steam. The land was bare of vegetation. It was stark and ugly.

As Aang directed Appa in for a landing, Zuko caught a faint scent of sulfur in the air. The bison touched ground with a groan of relief, and the kids only had a few moments to scramble down before he rolled over on his side, exhausted.

Katara and Aang set to him immediately, stroking his muzzle and crooning praises to the beast, telling him how wonderful he was; how strong and how brave.

Sokka stretched, and his back popped at least five times. "Nice place," he commented, looking around at the barren landscape of black rock and foaming water.
Zuko snorted. "Yeah, no kidding." His sealhide boots crunched the volcanic stone like glass, and when he bent to pick some of it up, it was unpleasantly sharp to the touch.

This wasn't a place to live.

 Unexpectedly, he thought of home; the cold air and frozen landscape. It was winter solstice here, so it would be the summer solstice in the south… and even if he didn't get enough sleep in the summer under the full glare of the midnight sun, there would be celebrating, and the little kids would get summer-day presents. The adults would mark the day to start planning and hunting during the short fall to harvest for the early winter…

Zuko's throat felt tight and he quickly looked away from his siblings and Aang, coughing politely into his fist— as if that were the problem.

"That's the temple Roku's dragon took me to," Aang said, helpfully pointing to the only real feature on the island; a tall tower carved of red stone with wicked points on each side. He had told everyone of the whole story of his crazy Spirit World adventure during their long flight. Katara and Zuko had listened with rapt attention — Sokka, strangely silent and withdrawn. No doubt, Zuko thought, because he didn't believe in Spirit World stuff.

In fact, his older brother had his arms crossed over his chest and was shifting from foot-to-foot as if he was bothered by the warm soil. "So, what? Do we just knock on the door?"


As it turned out, they didn't need to knock. The oversized thick stone doors had been propped open; no doubt to encourage evening sea breezes. They walked in slowly. Both Water Tribe boys flanked Aang and Katara cautiously with their whale bone machete's out and ready.

"Hello?" Aang called, and his voice echoed off of dark marble floors. Torches were lit on either side, and the walls glinted with thinly veined gold. "Anyone home?" After a moment of silence, Aang turned to the others with a shrug. "I guess not."

He had no sooner spoke than shadows fell across the room. The kids whipped around, and there in the doorway as if appearing out of thin air, were five men; robed in red, gaunt and wrinkled.

"We are the Fire Sages that guard this temple," one of the men, the oldest, croaked.

Aang stepped forward, a wide smile on his face and spread his hands in a gesture of peace. "Great! I'm the Avatar."
"We know." With that, the old man struck, aiming a fireblast at the young monk.

Katara cried out, but Aang cycled his air staff, dissipating the fire before it hit. "Run!" he yelled. "I'll hold them off!" And with another blast of air, he swept the sages off their feet.

The siblings ran, ducking into the nearest corridor which led to a long tunnel-like hallway. That hallway led into another one, and then a sharp set of stairs leading up and down.

"Zuko, where do we go?" Katara asked.

"How am I supposed to know?!"

Sokka spotted a likely door and tried the handle. It was unlocked. "In here! Aang, c'mon!" Aang was rounding the nearest corner, using airbending to increase his speed and catch up. At Sokka's call, he slowed and ducted into the room with them.

Zuko shut the door and they listened with baited breath. Footsteps soon echoed down the hallway outside.

"We cannot let the Avatar contact Roku," one said, his voice muffled through the walls. "Who knows how powerful the boy will become?"

"We must split up. Search every hall and corridor."

Then the footsteps faded away.

The kids relaxed, breathing normally for the first time in minutes.

"This isn't right," Aang said, wiping his brow and leaning against a gilded wall. "Sages are supposed to help the Avatar, not hurt me."

Sokka shrugged. "They're Fire Nation. What do you expect?"

"Sokka!" Katara chided, although Zuko gave a nod in his defense. It was foolish to trust Fire Nation.

Aang turned the handle and opened the door just the slightest crack — the well oiled hinges gave no squeak or sound to betray them. They waited several tense moments, listening to the emptiness of the hallway; the sages were searching elsewhere in the temple.

"The sun's setting soon," said Zuko, and no one questioned how he knew. "We have about twenty minutes."

Aang nodded and opened the door the rest of the way. "I think we have to go up this way. Roku's room should be at the top of the temple."

Just ahead of them was a narrow staircase. Sokka gave a shrug and took the lead, machete out and ready. They skittered up the staircase and down another set of red halls. Some led to outside windows, and some to inner doorways. There didn't seem to be another way up.

Then they heard footsteps down the hall.

"Run!" Sokka hissed.

They did, tearing down the corridor and around a sharp bend. Behind them they heard a man's voice call out, "Stop! Wait! I'm not here to harm you!" None of them believed it for a moment.
The corridor turned again, ending dead against a glass-pained window which overlooked the boiling land and churning sea.

Aang yelped, "Not this way!"

They turned around to pick another direction, but the path was blocked. A Fire Sage stood in the corridor, hands held out and panting with exertion. "Wait!" he cried again, and the children tensed, but the man dropped to his knees, his forehead nearly scraping the floor. "I know why you're here. I serve you, Avatar."

Aang had been in a spry airbending stance, but at this he drooped almost comically. "You do? But —"

More voices echoed down the hall—the other Fire Sages, calling out to one another and asking if they had seen anything.

The sage in front of him raised his head and got painfully to his feet. "Time is running out. I know you wish to speak to Avatar Roku. I can take you to him."

Aang looked around: at the dead-end hallway, at his friend's quizzical but wary faces. He turned back to the sage. "How?"

In reply the Fire Sage reached over to a lantern and twisted it to the side revealing a small hole in the wall. Taking a deep breath, the sage placed his palm over it and exhaled sharply. A line of fire erupted from his palm and raced around the edges, revealing a door which slid aside.

"This way," the sage said.

Zuko looked at the doorway and then at the other firebender. "How do we know this isn't a trap?"

"We don't trust Fire Nation," Sokka added stepping forward, shoulder to shoulder with his brother.

Another voice echoed down the hall—the other Fire Sages were getting closer. The man gestured again to the door. "Please, I wish to help you, but I am only one. If the other sages discover us I cannot possibly defend you all."

The young Avatar bit his lower lip, hesitating. Katara stepped forward and put a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Aang, what do you think?"

His grey eyes darted back and forth between the sage and the plated window. Out on the horizon, the bottom of the sun was nearly touching the water. "We have to trust him."

"Quickly, then!" The sage gestured for them to duck inside. They did — Sokka and Zuko with suspiciously narrowed eyes.

Once they had passed the sage stepped inside and with another quick blast against the lever, shut the door. It was dark but only for a moment; he lit a kindle of flame in his palm and gestured to the children.

"My name is Shyu," he said. "Please, follow me."
The path behind the paneled wall was flat and even, but each footprint left a mark in the thick layer of dust along the floor. No one had been down there for years. Decades maybe.

Shyu led the way; the flame no longer kindled in his palm. Every two dozen steps or so he shot a small controlled flame from his fingers to a torch up ahead, lighting the way. Zuko watched him with a hesitant fascination; he doubted he had enough control to shoot that small and accurate of a flame. It had never occurred to him to try.

There was more; he had never been around another firebender. The exception being his brief unwelcome moments in Prince Iroh's cabin. A hundred questions flitted around in his head, a lifetime of wonderings. Why did he wake up every morning to the rising sun? If he could control fire, how could it be that his face had been burned? Was it true what Iroh had said? Did he treat fire as an element of defense, and was he weak because of it?

The old sage was chatting softly with Aang up front, and Zuko watched him curiously… almost hungrily. But he held himself back. He wasn't shy. Shyu was Fire Nation, for all that he was helping them now. Zuko's lifetime of questions warred with his lifetime of knowledge that Fire Nation was evil and to be feared…

Katara walked by his side, and he caught her glancing at him once or twice. The expression on her face was unreadable, although the way that her shoulder casually brushed against his every time Shyu directed another small flame at a torch told him that she at least understood a little what was going on in his head.

And it was hot in the hidden corridors. The very walls around them seemed to radiate warmth. Soon, the children all had a fine sheen of sweat on their brows.

The Fire Sage's voice drifted back, helped by the cavernous walls. "I never wanted to serve the Fire Lord. We should serve Agni and the balance." He shook his head as thousand regrets flashed across his face. "When the statue of Roku's eyes began to glow and we knew you had returned to the world, I knew I would have to betray the other sages. It should be our duty to assist the Avatar. It gives me great honor to do so again."

Aang bowed low. "Thank you for helping us."

Shyu smiled, though it disappeared off of the man's face the moment they reached the top of a long winding series of steps. He gasped, "No!" and ran past wide stone columns to a large set of double doors. "The sanctuary doors! They're closed!"

Aang was first to his side. He reached out, touching the double doors and peering at the strange twisting lock. "These look like the air-locks in my Temple. Can't you just open it with firebending?"

"No. Not with myself alone."

There was a stilted pause where Katara dug a sharp elbow in Zuko's side. He glanced at her and with
a resigned sigh, stepped forward into the flickering torchlight. "I'm a firebender. I can help."

"You?" The Fire Sage whipped around to stare at what he thought was a Water Tribe boy. He blinked, as if seeing Zuko for the first time — and perhaps he had. All of his attention so far had been focused on the Avatar. "No," he said, after a long moment and gestured again to the door. "Two will not be enough. It takes five firebenders or one fully realized Avatar to open these doors."

"So what do we do?" Aang asked.

Shyu looked at the kids, and then slumped. "The sun is nearly set. I'm… sorry."

"Wait!" Sokka had come to the door too, and was examining the lock, rubbing his chin in thought. "We don't need the door to open. Maybe we just need it to look like it has."

"What are you talking about?" Katara asked, speaking for them all.

Sokka turned to the Fire Sage. "The Sages don't know how powerful Aang really is. Can you throw some fire at the door? The soot will make it look like it's been opened."

"I don't know, Sokka," Aang said, his voice veiled in doubt. "They do know I haven't mastered all the elements yet."

He waved that away with a flippant hand. "Doesn't matter. They'll have to go in to check to see if you're inside. Then," Sokka punched one fist into another and grinned, "Surprise attack from behind!"

There was a moment where Shyu considered it, then glanced at Zuko as if assessing his inner capabilities. But as to what he saw, he didn't say. "That… just might work," he murmured.

Aang, Sokka and Katara hurried out of the way as the two firebenders took their stances. Shyu took a deep breath and punched out, blasting a thick jet of fire into the nearest lock. Zuko took the other side, summoning a flame from the nearest torch before stepping forward with a pushing motion; his flame was thinner, cooler, and left behind more soot.

Shyu raised an eyebrow at the unusual technique, but respect for the Avatar's companion kept him from criticizing it. He only said, "Exhale on your strike. The power from firebending comes from the breath, and you are not breathing nearly enough."

Shyu took another deep breath, raising his hands to his chest for emphasis. Then he let it out in a quick noisy rush as he punched, striking and darkening another hole in the lock.

Zuko nodded once and took a breath — he perhaps overfilled his lungs, but when he let it out and threw his kindled flame at the lock, the flame at least looked stronger.

The Fire Sage nodded and stepped back, indicating the last mawed hole. This time Zuko's flame hit it dead center, his most forceful blast yet.

Sokka walked over to examine the door, wiping a careful finger along the soot. He nodded his approval. "It looks blasted enough. Time to spring our trap."
"In here! Quickly!" Shyu's voice echoed throughout the cavernous sanctuary, and the kids sunk behind the great pillars. "The Avatar is inside!"

"Impossible! The boy is just an airbender! How—" The man's voice broke off with a gasp. He was looking at the evidence of the sooty doorway.

"I don't know." Shyu sounded credibly frustrated. "Perhaps someone has been able to teach him. The sun is only moments away from setting."

"He cannot be allowed to contact Roku!" another agreed. "We must open the door!"

The five sages arranged themselves before the doorway. One deep combined deep breath, and five powerful jets of fire hit the lock. With a low groan of metal upon metal and a great settling of decades worth of dust, the door slowly slid aside.

From their hiding place it was impossible for any of the gang to see what was going on, but an angry yell went up from one of the sages told them all they needed to know. "The room is empty! We have been tricked! Shut the door!"

"NOW!" Sokka yelled.

Shyu turned, sweeping a leg under a man to his left and sending him crashing to the floor. Sokka, Katara and Zuko rushed in to help. It was luck, or shock, that allowed them to get to the firebenders, grabbing their arms behind their backs or just pushing them down.

Katara didn't have a firm hold, and her sage was younger and wiler than most. He managed to twist from her grasp and reach for a latch half hidden in a corner.

With an agonized rumble, the door began to slide shut.

"Aang!" Katara cried, "Go! Hurry!"

The young monk needed no more incentive. He shot from his hiding place behind a pillar, and with a blast of air, leapt over the struggling sages. The door was nearly shut, but he was slender and dove right in, landing lightly on his feet. Then he turned and grinned back at his friends. He made it!

Katara was still struggling, holding onto one arm of her sage while the man tried to push her off. Suddenly something white — a flying lemur — dove from above, landing on her head and making her shriek in surprise.

And there, standing behind them all at the mouth of the stairway and flanked by a dozen soldiers was Prince Iroh and Commander Zhao.

Aang's heart contracted within his chest. The doors were closing. He reached out to help, even as the literal platoon of soldiers stepped forward towards his friends.

He only saw the scene for a spare moment. Then it was gone. The massive doors were shut, sealing
"NO!" He swung around in a semi-circle, throwing a powerful gust of air at the sealed crack between the two doors. It rolled away harmlessly. "No! I don't want to be in here! Let me out!" Roku didn't matter now, his vision didn't matter. His friends were in trouble! "Let me out!"

Aang didn't notice at first the rolling steam along the floor, collecting as thick as his knees. He was panicking, throwing gust after gust at the door, terrified that his friends were going to be hurt…

A slight cough interrupted his tirade.

Aang turned, grey eyes wide. It was as if he was looking at his own reflection – only not. The aged man was tall, with no similar features, but there was something Aang recognized of himself in his bemused expression.

"Welcome Aang," Avatar Roku said. "What took you so long?"

Aang swallowed hard, and then put his hands together in a low bow.

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It wasn't much of a fight at all – the children were overpowered, and at Iroh's command, lashed against one of the great dragon-stone pillars in thick, heavy chains. Zuko twisted, a low fierce growl coming from somewhere deep inside his throat. "It's too late, Iroh! Aang is inside and the sun is setting."

But Iroh had turned away, ignoring him, his real attention back to the sanctuary doors. He made a curt gesture towards the sages, and at Zhao's command they fired a combined blast at the fire locks. The heat was incredible, tightening the skin and making those not gifted with the element of fire look away.

This time, the door remained unmovend.

"It may be that Avatar Roku doesn't want us inside," mused a sage.

Commander Zhao didn't seem concerned. His smile was nothing short of oily. "No matter. Sooner or later, he has to come out."

Katara gave a low moan of fear for her friend; stifling it as soon as she could.

It was too late. The Commander heard, and turned, assessing his prisoners for the first time. His gaze passed over Katara and Sokka without much interest, locking onto Zuko and his grin only got wider.

"Well, well. If it isn't the rouge firebender. I remember you from Kyoshi Island."
Zuko grit his teeth, although he didn't shrink back. He leaned forward tightly against the chains instead; some hidden instinct inside not wanting to let this other firebender know he was afraid. "I remember your men getting driven back by a bunch of girls."

The commander stepped forward, and with a snap of his wrist his right hand lit into flame.

"No!" But Katara could do nothing more than lurch against the chain. If looks could kill, though, Zhao would have been a smoking heap on the floor. "Leave him alone!"

"We do not have time for this, Commander." Iroh's had slipped close by. And, even though Zhao and Zuko were too busy with locked glares to really pay attention, Sokka noticed how the aged prince deftly inserted himself just to the side, ready to strike—and defend.

Finally Zhao broke his gaze with the teen, glancing over, and ground out, "The law is very clear on the penalty for treason, my Prince."

"His fate is for the Fire Lord to decide." When Zhao didn't move, Iroh's voice became sharper. "Resume your place and wait for the Avatar."

Finally, finally, Zhao stood down. The flame dissipated from his hand and he turned around, snapping to his next Lieutenant to get into formation. "As soon as that door opens, direct all of your firepower to the door!"

Sokka watched his brother glare, narrow eyed, at the Commander, and then at the man who was his uncle, even though Iroh had once again turned away. Zuko didn't say anything more — his jaw was clenched tightly, but Sokka could feel angry heat coming off him in waves.

Katara twitched fretfully at his other side. Her brother was out of danger, but her friend wasn't. "How is Aang going to make it out of this?"

"How are we going to get out of this?" Sokka shot back, wriggling against his chains. It was no good. They were too tight.

Meanwhile, Zuko's light gold eyes were still locked on Zhao's back. "I'll fight them," Zuko snarled. His unburned eye glittered savagely. He seemed almost possessed by the desire to pay back the Commander's insult… he seemed to have forgotten Iroh completely. "I'll fight them all."

Sokka opened his mouth to say something — preferably pithy — but Katara got there first.

"Zuko, concentrate!" she snapped, and her brother visibly blinked, as if coming back to himself. He shook his head and took a deep breath, and looked towards his sister.

Katara was smaller than the two boys — the chains weren't as tight for her as they were for either of them. "You two lean forward. I might be able to get my arm free…" She shrugged her shoulder upward, moving her right arm inch by inch. The chains were tight and were leaving dark bruises against her tanned skin, but she grit her teeth and worked through it. If she could get one arm free… it would be a start. Maybe there was some water around she could use from a vase or a pitcher or something. Maybe…

It was all cut short a moment later — a flash of bright light illuminated all the cracks in between and around the doorways. A rush of steam billowed out, and the door opened. The light increased — like looking into the white hot core of the sun itself. Katara, Zuko and Sokka winced away, turning their heads from it.

When the light had faded to something less than an eye-searing level and they could look again, the
room beyond was dark, save for two glowing eyes.

"NO!" Katara screamed, abandoning her careful escape. There was no time… "Aang! Look out!"

"FIRE!" Zhao's order roared around the room, and at least a dozen soldiers punched forward, releasing their fire at once. Katara wanted to shut her eyes from it, but part of her couldn't believe… it couldn't end like this. It couldn't end like this!

It didn't. The fire didn't hit Aang. It whipped around him again and again in a bright glowing ball — burning away the rest of the steam and revealing —

It wasn't Aang at all.

Everyone in the room had the same moment of dumbstruck horror. The Sages were the first to react, dropping to their knees murmuring, "Avatar Roku..."

The man was tall, noble, and with his head peaked with a twin flame crown. His eyes glowed as Aang's did when he was in the Avatar state, but his skin was a molted grey — they were looking at the very vision of the dead Avatar himself. Yet here he was, as powerful as he had been in life, and very, very angry.

The Avatar swept his hands around in two elegant movements, condensing the fire into a bright ball in between his hands. Then he let it out and the fire swept forward again, knocking the platoon of firebender's back and racing towards the kids. Again, Sokka, Katara and Zuko winced away, but the fire hit only their chains; dissipating them in a moment of intense heat that somehow didn't burn.

"HAH!" Roku took a powerful step forward, chopping his hand down. A great fissure erupted in the floor, and with an uplift of his hand literal magma began to spew out, rolling to each side.

The firebenders were running — Zhao along with them. They were quite willing to blast fire at a half-grown airbending monk, but they had no chance at all against the might of a fully realized Avatar.

Shyu hovered in between escaping and staying with the children. "Avatar Roku is going to destroy this temple! Run!"

"Not without Aang!" Katara yelled.

Zuko stood behind them, and was about to add his own comment when a strong pair of arms grabbed him from behind. Before he could yell out, "Sokka! Help!" a hand slapped against his mouth and he was pulled behind the pillar.

Zuko struck out wildly, turning and catching his attacker across the shoulder. The man — Prince Iroh — grunted with the impact, but took it in favor of shoving him hard against the pillar. Zuko's head snapped; he was dazed, stunned for a precious few moments.

Iroh's face was grim, and it had nothing to do with the Fire Temple literally falling to pieces around him. "You have no need to set yourself against Zhao. He is an officer, but you are a Prince. You could command him at any time."

Zuko grimaced. "What are you going to do, Iroh?" His vision swam in and out of focus - for a moment it seemed there were three aged Prince's above him, instead of one. "Execute the traitor?"

"You are not a traitor, nephew. You are a victim."
Zuko was no one's victim. Nor was he this man's nephew. But before he could say it, Iroh had knelt and pushed something into his palm, curling his fingers around it. Something bound in leather.

Amber eyes caught his own. "This was yours, once. It's time that you had it again."

The very floor beneath them lurched violently to the side. Iroh fell back, and Zuko rolled away. Ignoring the sudden vertigo, the surge of nausea, he stood up to face the other firebender once and for all… but Iroh was already to the main door, sprinting away with his men in full retreat.

Zuko didn't have time to wonder about the thing Iroh had gifted him. Suddenly the outpouring smoke which had been rushing by in a knee high thick mist, literally stalled. Then it reversed course, rushing back to the aged apparition of an Avatar. Roku seemed to collect it back to himself with a grim face. Taking a standing position, he squared his shoulders, pushing the breath back down… and out.

And suddenly Aang was standing there, leaning dangerously to one side.

Sokka and Katara cried out; they were closer and they rushed to catch him before he fell.

"Where's Shyu?" Aang asked, weakly.

Katara shook her head. "I don't know, but we need to get out of here."

"Stairway's blocked!" Zuko could see the mass of destruction just through the thick smoke. It had collapsed right after Iroh had fled.

"Great!" Sokka snapped. "Anyone else have any good ideas on how to get out?"

As if on cue, a great chunk of floor caved in towards the middle, panels falling into a sudden chasm. The kids backed up nervously, exchanging frightened glances. Suddenly Katara gasped and pointed to the window.

Appa was speeding toward them – heedless of the gouts of lava or falling, erupted rocks. He pulled up neatly to one side of the window, braying out as if telling them to hurry.

They did.

Their feet had hardly touched the saddle before Aang called, "Yip-Yip!" Appa slammed his tail downward and with a rush of wind they took off and made for the safety of the sky.

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OoOoOoO

Zhao's hands curled inward upon the iron railings. "We have nothing—nothing at all to show for this," he snarled, looking up into the wide empty sky, dark now that the sun had long set in a final
blaze of orange glory. He swung around. "Would you care to tell me why you showed leniency to a firebending traitor who is in league with the Avatar?"

His tone was nothing short of insolent, but Prince Iroh paid him no mind. He was busy feeding tidbits to the little lemur. Only when Momo snatched up the last morsel and had curled up again, contented on his favorite place on Iroh's shoulder did the Prince respond. "I assure you, the Fire Lord will be very interested in the boy."

"If we took the chance to eliminate the Water Tribe barbarians—"

Something sharp twisted Iroh's face. He stood up, making the lemur squawk in alarm and despite himself, Zhao stepped back. "The Fire Lord will want the boy alive, Commander Zhao." But then, just as swiftly as the anger had come, it passed again. Iroh folded his hands into his robes and looked out to sea. "You will accompany my ship back to Earth Kingdom waters. Please scribe this order to Admiral Zee; going forward, your ships and infantrymen are being placed under my command."

"B-but, Prince Iroh—"

Iroh's voice rose, overriding his shocked protest. "You will be my first Captain, and will join my hunt for the Avatar. All sightings are to be reported to me, and it is my standing order that the Avatar and the firebender are to be captured alive."

It was both a promotion and a demotion all in the same single stroke. No longer would Zhao be the commanding the power of over two dozen ships… and it was only a lifetime of engrained habit that unclenched Zhao's jaw and reminded him to bow, deeply. "Yes, Prince Iroh."

The aged Prince signaled him to go with an easy wave of his hand. When Zhao turned away to dictate his orders, his eyes were flashing in rage.

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The sun had long set and the moon was more than newly risen by the time their excited jitters had calmed down, and the adrenaline exhilaration had faded. It happened very suddenly: Aang looked out across the moonlit ocean, and his face, which had been cheery and laughing, fell.

"Aang?" Katara touched his shoulder. "What's wrong?"

"What did Roku say?" Sokka asked, when Aang didn't answer right away.

It looked as if for a moment Aang wouldn't tell them; maybe he would try to keep his pain inward where it couldn't trouble his friends. But Katara was looking at him in her particularly soft way, and try as he might he couldn't avoid her compassionate gaze. "He said there's a comet coming." His voice was hushed, betraying the dread that had somehow settled around his heart. "At the end of
Zuko glanced to dusting of stars above, as if expecting to see something now. "So?"

Aang bit his lip, wincing at something inside. When he spoke, it all came out in a rush. "Roku said that I have to learn all the elements before the comet comes, because once it does it's going to give the firebenders more power than we can even imagine. And… and I haven't even started waterbending yet, and we're still weeks away from the North Pole. But if I don't stop the Fire Lord before the comet comes, the whole world will be thrown out of balance forever, and—"

"Wait. Stop." Katara commanded. She knelt, a hand to each side of Aang's narrow shoulders. "Look at me. Breathe, Aang."

Sokka and Zuko were just as shaken, and Sokka swung towards his younger brother. "What is he talking about? What comet?"

"How am I supposed to know?"

"Don't you have, you know, some kind of mythical connection to that kind of stuff? This thing gives firebenders more power."

Zuko scowled. "Oh yeah, you're right. Why didn't I just remember that?"

"Guys!" Katara snapped, "Cut it out!... He's really hurt."

The two boys broke off to look back at Aang. He had sunk down to his knees, Katara's arms wrapped around him in a hug, his head bowed. "What am I going to do?" Aang asked, and his voice sounded broken. "It took me twelve years to master airbending."

"Technically… one hundred and twelve," said Sokka, and immediately yelped as Zuko's elbow dug into his rib.

Aang sighed, slumping down even further.

"You're not going to have to do this alone." Katara said, with another squeeze to his shoulders. "And, maybe we don't have to wait until we get to the North Pole. I know a little waterbending. Maybe… I could show you?"

"Really?" Aang looked up at her, a glimmer of hope in his eyes.

Zuko took his cue from his sister and came to Aang's other side, kneeling down so he was eye level with his friend. "And I could teach you what I know about firebending. It's not much, but…"

Sokka cut him off. "Still, three out of four elements isn't bad," he added, with a hand up to his chin in thought. "And who cares about Earth? That sounds like a stupid element, anyway." He ignored Zuko's scowl, thinking it was for something else… after all, Sokka had never seen an earthbender at work, while Zuko had. Painfully.

But the comforting words helped. Surrounded by his friends, knowing that he wasn't alone, the weight on Aang's shoulders suddenly didn't feel so heavy. "Thanks guys," he whispered.

It was only later, after the requisite group hug and when Aang was cracking a smile again, that Sokka pointed to Zuko. "Hey, what's that on your belt?"

His hand immediately flew down to his belt, where, in the mad dash for safety he had unthinkingly
shoved Iroh's gift. He took it out now, feeling the weight of the other's eyes upon him. "I don't know," he said, honestly. "Prince Iroh gave it to me… he said it was mine, once." He gave an awkward shrug and sat down to examine it.

No one spoke, although Sokka and Katara exchanged glances.

The moon was full, and the sky was cloudless, but it was still hard for Zuko (who's eyes were, of course, adapted to see flame) to make out all the fine details. It was a leather holster for what looked to be a belt knife, rather plain, and not something he would immediately associate with a 'Prince'. He gripped the handle and drew out the blade.

Recognition hit him like a bolt of lightening down his spine. He gasped, jerking back, nearly dropping the knife – only keeping his hold in shock. "This… this is mine."

"Yeah," said Sokka. "You said that."

"No." And his eyes rose to meet Katara's. "This… I remember this knife. It was on my nightstand, the night the little girl came in. It was right there."

Sokka and Aang just looked confused, but of course Katara remembered. Zuko didn't often speak of his one remaining memory before he joined the Water Tribe. She knelt by him, gently prizing the knife from his slack fingers, examining it herself. She read the inscriptions carefully, "Never give up without a fight," and she glanced up to him again. "You said Iroh had this? What does it mean?"

"I don't know." He stared at the knife in her hands, his mind reeling. "How could Iroh have known that I…" he trailed off, running a shaky hand through his hair. Zuko felt completely undone.

Sokka knelt as well, and if Zuko and Katara's eyes weren't on the knife, they would have seen a strange sort of inner conflict pass over his face. He, of course, knew the truth. But sitting there with them, with his younger brother nearly trembling in shock, and with everything they had just learned about the comet… it wasn't the right time.

"Give it to me," Sokka said, and once he had it he turned it over, examined the other side with expert precision.

"Made in Earth Kingdom." Katara helpfully read, craning her neck to look at the blade in the moonlight. "Well, what does that mean?"

There was only one thing he could say. "Hmm… Maybe it means Zuko was made in the Earth Kingdom." Sokka's eyebrows went up, suggestively.

It took to the count of three for that little nugget of information to register.

Zuko recoiled. "Ugh!"

"Sokka!" Katara chided.

Aang blinked. "What do you mean?"

But the thick tension had been broken. Zuko took his knife back and slid it back into its sheath. For a moment, it looked as though he was going to fling it off the bison's saddle. But then he sighed and affixed it to his belt once more, glaring around afterwards as if daring someone to say something.

No one did.
Sokka smirked, and clapped him on the shoulder. But when he looked away, out towards the sea and back towards the Fire Nation, his expression was serious and closed.

He felt like a coward.
Interlude: Zuko's Tombstone

**OoOoOoO**

*The Winter Solstice*

**OoOoOoO**

The winter plums were flowering. From her reclined position, Princess Azula watched the light breeze flutter the delicate white flowers, sprinkling the petals down past her open window and to the pathway. Azula had never been outside the hot, tropical zone of the equator. She would have never thought to compare the small drifts of flowers to a frosty dusting of snow.

As it was, she only considered the way the soft white petals would soon brown and wilt on her pristine pathway, and she made a mental note to herself to order her servants to be extra vigilant in their sweeping.

Over the soft babble of water and whispered comments of her servants, she heard footsteps coming from down the hall—marble floors were very good at conducting noise.

She cursed to herself and shut her eyes. Perhaps if she pretended to have dozed off…

The footsteps stopped just to her right side, and the girl could feel the weight of a stare upon her brow. She didn't acknowledge it, instinctively seeking to win this small battle of wills. Predictably, she was not the one who broke first.

"Azula, you know what day it is."

"I'm just getting my hair combed, mother." And her feet scrubbed, but she knew better than to add that.

"Your hair is beautiful as it is. Meet me at the east gate." With that firm order, Ursa walked away.

Azula waited until her mother's footsteps had dimmed down the hall. Once she could no longer hear them, therefore pretending she wasn't going to follow her request at all, the princess sighed and sat up, snapping her fingers. Instantly the servants fell in line, tucking a soft cloth about her neck so that her wet hair didn't dribble on her robe, patting her hair dry and then arranging it up with the royal pin affixed firmly in place.

She deliberately took her time choosing suitable attire — sending back the servants three times before settling on her favorite red and black outfit with light-duty armor. It was comfortable, yet functional. After this nonsense was over with, she would be heading to the courtyard for some firebending practice before dinner. Yes, that would be pleasant.

The national holiday meant that the palace was unusually empty, devoid of the usual courtiers and noblemen crowding the halls and looking to seek royal favor. No doubt they were resting at their own villas, or perhaps the less restrained would be celebrating with the common folk in the streets. The Winter Solstice was the Day of the Dead in the Fire Nation, where the Spirit World and the Physical World were most closely aligned. It was a day of remembrance of those departed.

At one time, Azula remembered enjoying this day—watching with wide young eyes the ruckus
fireworks set in all the streets to chase away evil spirits, the delicate floating lotus candles set alight in the fountains, the spice cakes.

Pointless.

Her mother was waiting at the eastern gate. Her hair was in its usual elegant half knot, but up close Azula could see a few strands out of place, just here and there. Probably from the palanquin ride. Azula had applied to Father for permission years ago not to be part of the annual dawn precession through the capital streets. Her mother always kept to the tradition, taking it upon herself to be the lone royal representative.

It was a shame Azula could not forgo this tedious ritual as well.

Ursa didn't speak as she and her daughter made their stately way past the eastern gardens, around the Hall of Ancestors—a large outside pavilion with a golden placard and a sprinkling of ashes for every royal.

Their destination wasn't too far off now. It was a quiet, gated garden—a place where the cherry trees dipped low, heavy with early blossoms and where sweet ivy clung on the wrought iron gates.

The children's cemetery.

Several aged tombstones poked out of the ground, some so old that the rain and wind of the preceding centuries had reduced them down to shapeless nubs. The most recent with the stone face still bright and new, was lit by an ever lasting oil-fed flame along the top. It was this one by which Ursa knelt. And, after a small roll over her eyes, Azula did as well.

The two didn't speak for a long time. Tears, small and silent, dripped down Ursa's cheeks while Azula looked away. She had always hated seeing her mother's weakness.

The Day of the Dead was a time for prayers and reflection. Azula didn't bother. Growing quickly bored with the silence, her gaze swept from the tombstone to a clump of ivy just to the right. The intervening years had hidden all of the evidence, but Azula knew the spirit-board and lumps of candles were probably still there where she had hidden them, three years ago. In a fit of whimsy brought on by a discovery of the practice in the Dragon Library Catacombs, Azula had dragged her two childhood friends Mai and Ty Lee down to the cemetery to practice a séance and raise the spirit of her dead brother.

Nothing happened, of course. She hadn't expected it to. Her real goal at the time had been to scare Ty Lee, and it worked. The other girl reportedly hadn't been able to sleep alone without one of her many sisters in the same room for weeks afterwards.

The séance had another unexpected result: To this day it was the only time Azula had ever seen Mai cry.

Azula's right foot was falling asleep, and she shifted ever so slightly to relieve it. She resisted the urge to let out a long sigh. How long must she stay like this?

Perhaps Ursa sensed her frustration. She opened her eyes and when she spoke it was with a false brightness—as if her son could actually hear her. "Sixteen years old, Zuko. Nearly a man." Ursa tried to smile, but her bottom lip trembled. "You would have grown so handsome, I could imagine… it would be driving me mad keeping the girls away."

"Mother," Azula said, hardly able to stand it. "He was hopeless around girls."
Again, Ursa tried a shaky smile. "Just a phase, I think." From her long robes, she pulled out a few trinkets, placing them by the base of the tomb, and brushing away a few dead leaves. They were toys: a small komodo-rhino, a puzzle box and a small flute. Toys that ten-year-old Zuko would have liked, but which would have been inappropriate for a teenager.

Azula didn't bother to point this out. Ursa would probably be returning to this spot every year for the next forty years and still bring the same type of toys—offerings for a lost son who would be forever ten-years-old in her heart.

Her mother brought out two joss sticks, and with two pinches of her fingers, lit them. The incense drifted up in lazy loops and spirals, tickling Azula's nose. It was by only the finest breath control that she resisted sneezing.

"I miss you every day." Ursa whispered, bowing her head once more.

And Azula resigned herself to a long, tedious afternoon.

OoOoO

By the time the joss sticks burned low, and Azula had given up on disguising her bored sighs (Mai had been a most excellent teacher in the art of silent contempt) Ursa had allowed her to leave. Her mother would take a small, private dinner in her rooms – still grieving throughout the day.

Azula had no patience for that sort of thing: her legs had most definitely fallen asleep, and she walked slowly out of the gardens at last, feeling the setting sun on her cheeks and wondering which of her three firebending masters to summon first. She would not have an entire afternoon wasted.

As she got closer to the palace, the gardens turned slowly from wildflowers and unordered chaos to the more manicured paths and valleys. She passed a large weeping willow tree; as a child she had played under its wide boughs, a rare source of cooling shade in the Fire Nation heat.

Perhaps it was the hours of reflection in the graveyard, but for a moment Azula could have sworn that she caught a flash of red between the branches; a long forgotten memory of herself and her brother chasing each other under the dabbled shade. For a second–a barest half breath of time—she heard his high happy laughter.

_I tried to warn you, Zuzu. You were a fool not to listen, and I have no patience for fools._

It was with these thoughts that she made her way through past the gardens and to the outer, airy corridors.

Perhaps some wouldn't have noticed the man at all—servants and soldiers with pressing messages came and went on a regular basis, and a new face was hardly noteworthy. But Azula's keen amber eyes picked up the slight hesitation in the soldier's step, his official armor, and the way he glanced about like a man who was lost, but definitely didn't want to look like it.
"Who are you?" Azula snapped, with all of the importance of someone used to asking questions and getting them answered without hesitation. "What is your business here?"

The soldier made a fatal mistake. He paused, eyes shifting to the right and then to the left in a quick panicked flick. "I—"

He got no further than that.

Azula stepped forward as quick as a ferret-snake, shoving the man back against the wall. The outcome of a match-up between a fourteen-year-old girl and a fully grown man, only a few years past his prime, should have been easy for anyone to guess. But this was no normal fourteen-year-old girl, and the man's eyes widened as her hand drew back, creating blue sparks.

"You aren't supposed to be here." It wasn't a question.

The man's jaw worked silently several times. "I—I was sent by Prince Iroh with a message. I have a message for Princess Ursa."

"Prince Iroh is my esteemed uncle, and Ursa is my mother. I will pass it along for you."

"B—but he said it was for her eyes only."

Azula smiled, and before he could react her free hand searched through his jerkin, coming out with the message scroll affixed with the royal seal. Then she stepped back, breaking the seal and unrolling it in one precise gesture.

Lieutenant Ji could only stand and watch helplessly.

He saw the Princess's eyes widen, the way her sharp pointed nails dug into the paper as her breath caught. Finally, she looked up and Ji was certain at that moment he was staring death itself in the face.

OoOoO


Azula slowed her pace to match with her father's. Prince Ozai walked straight and tall, head forward, shoulders back; tall and proud. The picture of health, of balance and the fitness of firebending control. Azula knew better. She was walking at half speed to keep from out-stepping him. Ozai never mis-stepped, never winced, but she could see how hard his right hand clutched the top of his cane, and she knew how stiffly the leg swung under his rich robes.

So, by one slow, carefully measured step and a tap of a cane after another, they made their way through the inner corridors and out to the gardens. They paused overlooking the turtle-duck pond.

"Azula," Ozai said at last, "you wished to have a word in private. Well we are here, and now I am waiting."
Stung by the rebuke, Azula remembered her place and knelt down before her father. Her hand drew out the scroll where it had been tucked, hidden from her mother's view under her robes. "I have intercepted this message from Uncle Iroh's first Lieutenant. He was trying to deliver it to mother in secret."

Wordlessly, he took the scroll. With her head bent down, she could not see his reaction save for his hand which curled over the cane. His fingers were white.

"I see." And that was all he said, for a very long time.

After some minutes, Azula dared to look up. Ozai had turned away from her, overlooking the pond. He was paying her no attention which was unusual enough. She stood.

"Father, that—the night Zuko disappeared—"

His head snapped back to her, as if realizing that she was still there. That unnerved Azula. For as long as she could remember she had always been the center of his world.

"Understand this, Azula." he said. "There has not been a female Fire Lord in all of our Nation's history when there has been the slightest chance of a male heir. It was you who the Spirits gifted with talent, intelligence, and cunning. The second born, disqualified only by chance of birth."

He was not just talking about her… he was speaking also of himself. But these were things she knew —had known for quite some time. It hadn't mattered, not for years, but now…

"What are your orders, father?"

Ozai pressed his lips into a very thin line, and the scroll burst into flame between his fingers. All evidence destroyed in an instant. "It will be best not to trouble your mother with this. She has been… delicate since the loss of her son. She does not need to know about this… imposter."

The last word, and its many meanings, seemed to linger in the courtyard. And later on, Azula would only remember it as a cloud passing across the sun, but the sky over the palace garden seemed to darken.

"Yes, father."

"It is the Day of the Dead, is it not? Well then, how appropriate." Ozai smiled as if in good humor, but there was nothing happy in his gaze. He turned again, facing the pond with his hands clasped loosely behind his back. "I will have a task for you, Azula. It is about time you went out to see the world, and it is your duty alone to make sure your throne is secure. You will need to clear all obstacles from your path. Learn what you can from your masters and prepare yourself. You will be called upon, shortly."

It was a clear dismissal. Azula knelt again and left, her face composed in a mask of determination.

And when she passed the willow tree again, and heard the echo of the boy's laughter, she firmly ignored it.
The Storm Builds

This amazing art is by Flurrin.

Based on the lines (a few chapters back): Katara glared at him, and behind her the snow trembled ever so slightly. When she spoke, her voice was low, and dangerous. "I can't believe that you of all people would turn someone out, just because they're different. This tribe took you in."

OoOoO

"Your friend is the Avatar?"
"Sure is, and I'll bet he'll fetch a lot more on the black market then that fancy scroll."

~ Sokka and the Pirate Captain, The Waterbending Scroll

OoOoO
The air was soft and warm and the color of fluffy orange sugar-candy, just how Monk Gyatso used to make it.

Aang stretched his arms, fingers flexing against the grips on each side of his airglider. He grinned into the wind. To his senses, the air currents wrapped around him, playful and friendly – urging him up and higher. But he was happy just floating above the surface of the ocean – the water was the purest shade of blue, so bright to look at that it should have hurt his eyes. It didn't. Not now.

He dipped the airglider down, playfully skipping just over the waves. Katara's shimmering laughter echoed back at him from the right, and he turned to see her skimming along side him, sweeping her arms in elegant arcs and riding along the ice pathways she was creating.

Two shadows passed from above – Sokka to his left, doing a lazy loop-de-loop with his own airglider, and Zuko on Aang's right, riding on Appa's head and waving to him.

Although Katara was some feet away, her voice sounded close as if she were whispering in his ear. "We need you Aang."

"I know," Aang grinned, feeling affectionate towards his friends. They had risked everything to go to the Fire Nation with him. "I need you guys too."

"Don't leave this time, okay?" Zuko's voice, too, was closer than it should have been. "Don't let us down."

The sky seemed to darken, and Aang turned to look at him, saying, "No, I won't. I won't ever again —" But then Zuko was right next to him, standing there. His scars were gone, his face softened to became cubby and younger— no, it wasn't Zuko at all.

"Kuzon?" he gasped.

"You never even said goodbye," Kuzon said, looking down.

Aang's heart clenched. He stood up. He was no longer flying – how could he ever detach himself from his worries and be free again, knowing what he did? "I know… I didn't mean for it to happen."

"Monk Gyatso came by, looking for you. I thought you died."

"Kuzon, I'm so, so sorry. I —" Aang's words stuck in his throat. He reached out to touch his friend, but his fingers passed through Kuzon's shoulder. He wasn't real. He was long gone. A ghost.

Lightening split the air, shattering the daylight like a fractured mirror. Suddenly it had fallen dark around him, and Aang was alone sitting on Appa's head, ducking against cold drops of water which were pelting down like small hammer blows. The air was thick with grey clouds, the puffy outlines shaped like meditating monks. He could hear their whispers, their condemnations even above the shrieking wind.

"We needed you, Aang. "

"You left us."

"You left us…"

"No!" Aang cried, although his voice felt weak. He was so small in the face of the surf, the wind, his
own guilt. "It wasn't supposed to—I just needed to get away! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

A great wall of water rose up, spurned on by the lashing wind. Appa bellowed in fear and tried to turn away, but the wave crashed down upon them both, driving them mercilessly down… down… the water crushing all life from his body. Aang couldn't breathe, and the reins were slipping from his fingers…

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OoOoO

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Aang woke up gasping for air.

It was still dark. He and his friends had made it back to the Earth Kingdom from the Crescent Island around dusk that night, and had fallen asleep all pretty much where they had collapsed, snug up against Appa's broad side. Not a hint of light lit the east horizon – even Zuko was still fast asleep.

Aang put a hand to his head, breathing deeply. It was only a dream. But he didn't lay back down. He could never hope to fall back asleep, even if his heart wasn't still thudding with the nightmare's after effects of adrenaline and guilt.

Besides, Sokka's wide-mouthed snoring was loud enough to practically wake the dead.

Katara murmured something in her sleep and cracked open a blue eye. "Aang?" she asked, seeing his outline in the dim light. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just had a bad dream. You can go back to sleep."

But she had already turned over away from Sokka's snores and rolled to face Zuko's warm back, asleep again before he had even finished her sentence.

Looking at her, Aang couldn't help a wistful smile. She said she would teach him what she knew about waterbending… and he bet that she would be just as pretty and graceful teaching as she had been in his dream.

He got up, shuffling around their hastily cobbled together campsite in a sleepy haze, and he passed the hours sitting at Appa's head, chin on his knees, thinking about the autumn wind-tournaments at the Southern Air Temple.

The sun lit the sky into false grey of dawn only an hour later. Predictably, the moment the first rays of the newly risen sun peeked over the far mountains, Zuko stirred and sat up.

If he was surprised to see Aang already awake, he didn't mention it. He said nothing at all; casually crawling out from his sleeping bag, rolling it, and setting about lighting a small campfire.

Aang caught the other boy glancing at him a few times, a frown on his face, but he didn't ask why he was up and Aang didn't particularly want to talk about his dreams.

But with the lightening of the sky came the lightening of Aang's own mood. He jumped to his feet with a rush of cool air and hunted around the campsite until he found a roundish stone. He then
returned to the other boy and held it out with a lopsided smile on his face. "How about some circle-walking?"

They hadn't practiced the airbender form since the day of their disastrous visit to the Southern Air Temple. Seeing the rock now and Aang's hopeful expression, Zuko nodded once and straightened, stretching.

There was a grassy clearing not far from the camp. Aang placed the rock in the middle, and began to move around it; keeping his hands centered inward, his feet placed always at an angle to one another. Zuko watched quietly from the side for the first few revolutions, arms crossed over his chest.

Aang was performing the simplest of the steps, and as he stepped and pivoted, his mind drifted back again to his old life at the temple. He could almost imagine hearing his friends nearly practicing around their own stones, the monk's calling out gentle instructions. And when Zuko moved to stepped in opposite of Aang; all intense confidence with hardly any of the right moves, Aang could almost imagine him as another airbender.

Almost, except for the blue clothing and beads in his hair which declared him Water Tribe, and the yellow eyes and pale skin which spoke of the Fire Nation.

Aang tried to imagine his friend, just for a moment, with a shaved head and airmaster tattoos. He giggled, and Zuko glanced up at him, speaking for the first time all morning. "What?"

He checked his laughter, settling for a wide grin. "You need to turn your feet in, like this." Aang stopped and stood, knees bent inwards with both feet out in strange angles.

Zuko's good eye narrowed. "I'll fall over."

"No you won't, and it will make you quick and nimble." Aang struck out, withholding a blast of air and turned quickly, pretending to dodge and invisible opponent. Zuko watched him intensely, and copied the maneuver, sloppily. At Aang's correction, he did it again and finished it with a quick turn.

"Good!" Aang chirped, and started walking the circle; slower this time so Zuko could see where he put each foot. "Count to eight," he suggested, and started again. "One…two…three…" He stepped as he went. "Four…five…See? Each step has purpose."

Zuko stood back again, watching the process. "I thought I was the one supposed to be teaching you." But his grumbles were mostly good-natured, and his steps were becoming more sure and accurate with each round. Soon, Aang thought, they could practice some of the other, more advanced S-type moves.

Their practice was finally broken up by a delicious, mouthwatering smell drifting from the camp; Katara had started cooking breakfast, and Aang's stomach pinched in painfully. There hadn't been much time for anything aside from a hurried snack on their way to the Fire Nation, and nothing on the way back. Zuko straightened up and put a hand to his own stomach, and Aang suddenly remembered how much Kuzon used to eat – Monk Gyatso would always joke his stomach was a deep pit with fire at the bottom.

And that thought brought back the dream again.

"Hey," Zuko was looking at him in a sidelong fashion. "You okay?"

*You never even said goodbye...*

"Aang?" Zuko asked again.
"Yeah." Aang blinked, shook his head to clear his thoughts, and then playfully smacked the other boy's shoulder. "Race ya!" And he set off back towards the camp before Zuko could protest.

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A few hours later they were once again in the air, putting some distance inland between themselves and the Western Earth Kingdom coast. Katara was shifting through her bag, rearranging her clothing and looking for something suitable to wear for waterbending practice. She hadn't forgotten her promise to Aang, and was clearly looking forward to the exercise.

"We'll start you out on the basics, first," she said with a glance to Aang. "I can show you what I've worked out in water, and by the time we reach the North Pole and find a waterbending master… well, we should both have a good head start."

"But what about a firebending master?" Aang asked.

Zuko shrugged. He was sitting on the other side of the saddle, leaning back with his head tilted to the sun. "Maybe we can raid a Fire Nation colony, and watch what they do when they firebend at us." It was hard to tell if he was joking or not. Judging by the scowl on Katara's face, Aang guessed he probably wasn't.

"Yeah…" Aang scratched the back of his neck. "Let's save that one for later."

Sokka had once again taken the driver's spot on Appa's head. He always seemed happiest when leading the way, and he snapped the reins importantly. "Well if you guys are going to waterbend, we're going to have to find some water."

"You think?" Katara shot back, archly.

"Go back out west. The coast is nearby." Zuko suggested.

"Nope." And Sokka snapped the reins again. "We need to head inland away from the Fire Nation, and I know just the place."

"No you don't."

"Trust me," said Sokka. "I got a good feeling."

So later on, when Sokka angled in Appa for a landing at the a wide misty end of a river; a place where no less than three waterfalls, all crashing down into deep blue lagoon, with three sides choked off from any outsiders by sharp cliffs and the forth being a wide sandy beach, everyone's jaw's dropped.

Once Appa landed, Sokka jumped down and his chest puffed out in pride. "Am I good or am I good?"

"He's never going to let us forget about this," Katara told Aang in an aside, as they worked the wide buckles to relieve Appa of his saddle. "From now on every time he does something stupid he'll just
turn to us and say, 'Yeah, but remember that time I found the waterfalls?'".

Aang smothered a giggle.

Zuko's unofficial assigned job was to start and maintain the campfire. While Katara and Aang worked with Appa, he hunted around for firewood. Finding nothing except for dried water-reeds and bits of moss, he settled for dragging a half sodden log up onto the beach. Then he knelt by it, placing one hand on each side and breathed in and out deeply, his eyes half closed, focusing on channeling the heat. Within a few moments the wood began to steam and dry.

Aang stopped what he was doing to watch, his grey eyes wide. "Whoa… will I be able to do that?"

"Big deal," Sokka said. His chest was still puffed and he was twirling his boomerang in what he clearly thought was a manly sort of way. "He's just speeding up the sun's work —" A splash of water hit him square in the face, and he sputtered indignantly. "Hey!"

Katara grinned. "That will be your first waterbending lesson, Aang," she said. "Splashing is all in the wrist."

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Katara had decided that she would have the first chance at teaching Aang bending, and by now all three boys knew better than to argue with her. She took Aang by his bony wrist, pulling him to a shallow pool and stopping only to hand Sokka a pokey stick and tell him that Appa's feet needed cleaning, and to make sure to get the mud and bugs between his toes.

Zuko had the bad grace to laugh at his brother's misfortune, and was promptly handed a stiff bison brush by Aang.

So, grumbling, the two boys stripped down to their underpants and waded, hissing with cold, into the clear blue water. Appa waded right after them, his bulk displacing a huge amount of water and sending little rippled waves back to the shore. The winter chill didn't bother the bison; he gave a low groan of pleasure, sinking himself down until he blew bubbles out his nose.

"Ah, gross!" Sokka pulled the stick out from between two of Appa's toes, and made a face at the brownish green glob stuck at the end of it. "Appa, what have you been stepping in?"

It was hard to say how much Appa heard and understood him, but he made a huffing sound very much like deep laughter and lulled over onto his side, unceremoniously dumping Zuko, who had been untangling mats of hair, back into the water. He broke the surface of the water a moment later, sputtering and glaring at his brother. "What'd you do that for?"

"Oh right, the magical furry ten-ton monster rolls over and it's my fault?"

Appa took exception to this and blew a snort of water in his direction. Sokka just rolled his eyes and
waved the putrid stick at him. "Don't you start, either."

Zuko clambered back up the bison's side, settling back down where he had been working some of the thickest mats with the stiff bristled brush – just at the point where the saddle usually sat. "At least he only has six feet," he complained, picking free a knot of fur that was as big as his fist. "I should cut this out and let him grow it again."

"No way. That's cheating." Sokka flicked the stick, sending the brown glob safely away down river.

As the boys worked, Katara set to instructing Aang in the ankle-deep water by the river. Her voice bounced over the water to them in occasional snatches of conversation. "Now, this is something I find really useful… I call it streaming the water…"

Zuko hazarded a glance back to the shore and watched for a moment or two as Katara fell into her graceful pose he knew so well. Aang was watching her as well, although Zuko's sharp eyes noted that he wasn't looking as much about how she moved, but, well, her.

He scowled, shook his head, and returned to pulling mats out of the bison's hair.

By the time the worst of the knots were worked out and Appa's hair was, not silky but passable, Zuko's back felt stretched and sore from bending over so long. He straightened and stretched, tilting his head to the sky; though the air was heavy with mist, a light grey sheet of clouds had rolled in (probably for the best) even under the cloudy sky he felt hot and sweaty. The Earth Kingdom's version of winter was a joke.

Sokka was sitting safely out of the water on Appa's flank, working diligently on the bison's last foot. Seeing that, Zuko got a devious idea. His older brother was too puffed up with himself today; someone ought to take him down a few pegs.

Taking careful aim, he dove from Appa's back. Underwater, Sokka's dangling leg looked like a tanned splotch up against Appa's white fur. Zuko surfaced for a second, grabbed hold of Sokka's ankle and yanked, hard.

Sokka tipped into the cold water with a loud squawk of surprise. His head broke the surface a moment later and the battle was on.

Soon the water was thick with shouts and choked laughter as the two boys tested their strength against one another, each trying to get the upper hand and dunking one another under. It was a fairly even match: Zuko was taller, but years of sunless winters made it hard to gain any real bulk to his frame.

Sokka also had taken the momentary advantage - a hand gripped under Zuko's knee, and was just about to haul him up over his shoulder and dunk him – but he was first to sense the oncoming danger, catching the ominous shadow just on the edge of his vision.

The two boys stopped scrabbling and fell still, looking up. A swell of water, twice as high as Appa, had appeared impossibly in the middle of the lagoon. It towered above them, spare second from folding down right on top of them.

"AAANNG…" Sokka called, his voice thick and heavy from dread. There was no question on who made the wave; that was Avatar-sized bending.

And when it crashed down upon the two boys, sweeping them up and tumbling them over and over until they came to a stop, coughing and sputtering back on the shore, they both raised their heads and glared at the little monk.
"Oh! Ha-ha... sorry about that guys." Aang gave another nervous laugh and a wave as if to say 'my bad'. "It kinda got away from me there."

Zuko spat a mouthful of river water and staggered to his feet – half his side was covered in a fine crusting of sand. "I get his arms," he snarled, bending down to give Sokka a hand up.

"I got his feet." Sokka answered.

Aang’s eyes widened almost comically as the two boys advanced. He turned, instinctively seeking sanctuary in the form of Katara. But she just stood to the side, arms crossed, trying and failing to hide a grin. Clearly, Aang was going to pay the price for out-doing her in waterbending practice.

Aang probably could have knocked the two away with an air blast if he really wanted too. As it was, he only was able to duck away twice before Zuko caught his arm. Sokka caught hold of the younger boy's ankles and together they unceremoniously swung him into the water.

"Water Tribe one, Avatar zero," Sokka said proudly.

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It was only a short time later when the boys had dressed again and Aang blown his own clothing dry with a stiff wind that Katara looked in their sack of supplies and announced that they were running low. The food Zuko had managed to gain from his trip in the village was either eaten at this point, or spoiled from age.

"We flew over a forest not too far from here," Sokka said. "Should be plenty of tasty meat creatures there... and maybe some nuts and roots or whatever, too," he added, seeing Aang's expression.

"Great!" Aang chirped, and would have rushed off to take the drivers seat at Appa's head before Sokka got there, except Zuko was quicker.

"Hold it!" he snagged the young monk by the back of the collar, stopping him mid-stride. "You're not going anywhere. You still have a firebending lesson today."

"Really?" Aang turned and grinned upward at him, his expression so bright that it made Zuko smirk back and completely ruin the image he was trying to craft of himself being a tough, wise sifu. "I can learn firebending and help with the food later, right guys? Katara?" He looked to the other two, almost pleading.

"Of course you can," Katara said, smiling fondly at him. Sokka simply shrugged and made for Appa.

Before she turned to join him, Katara's brilliant blue eyes met Zuko's and there was something else, some other hidden amusement in her expression. "Good luck."

The misty lagoon and its waterfalls were great for waterbending, but it was too damp for working
with fire. Zuko led Aang a little ways up the beach where the air was dryer. Then, collecting some spare wood into a neat pile, he lit it.

"Sit down," he said, and followed his own example, putting himself close to the fire. He had time to think on how he wanted to start Aang's firebending while de-matting Appa. Katara would have already had him starting basic moves she worked out, but he would have to start smaller. Water didn't burn or rage out of control.

For a moment, Zuko wondered how other firebenders started... how had he been taught as a small child? But of course, the memories weren't there. The best way, he concluded, was how he had started learning – so long ago in Auya's cold tent.

Aang looked at the flame with wide eyes. "Am I going to learn to throw fire?"

Zuko hesitated. "We'll see how you progress."

"Oh! What about flaming pinwheels? I saw Kuzon do those one time and—“ His mouth snapped shut, perhaps noticing the other boy's severe look.

"Right now I want you to just handle fire without getting burned."

This was probably not the wisest thing to say. He didn't miss the quick dart of Aang's eyes to him again, or rather, the left side of his face.

Zuko shouldn't have been surprised. It wasn't like he looked at himself a lot; real mirrors were expensive and even then he didn't like reminders not only of the disfiguring scars, but how different he looked from everyone he loved. Sometimes he wondered what he would have looked like without the burn and the slash across his neck. Plainer, probably. In those rare moments of reflection he thought that maybe it was better this way—never knowing a time when he must have looked normal. Everyone he grew up with in his tribe had gotten used to his features years ago, anyway. They looked at him squarely— not at his left side in horror or his right in pity. They just looked at him; just as Aang had always looked at him... until now.

There was little point in hiding the fact that his biggest scar was a burn.

Zuko's hand drifted up to touch the tough flesh on his cheek almost without realizing it, and saw Aang wince, knowing he had been caught staring.

"What happened?" Aang asked, his voice small. "Did—did that happen when you were firebending?"

"No," he said, then paused, considering. "Well, I don't know. Maybe. I don't exactly remember it. I might not even known I was a firebender at the time. Who knows?" He gave an awkward, one shouldered shrug. "I can tell you that since I learned to firebend I've never burned myself or anyone else on accident, and the first thing I want to teach you is how to do that same." He passed his hand effortlessly through the flames, scooping up a palmful which he held up to Aang in demonstration. "Katara told you about water always pushing and pulling?"

"Well, fire feels more like a heartbeat. It sort of..." He lidded his good eye half shut in thought, trying to put into words what he felt instinctively down to his very bones. "It's not a friend, exactly. You can't turn your back on it, but if you respect it, it will keep you warm when you're cold, and help defend you against your enemies. So I guess it's more like, a partnership?" He shook his head and shrugged awkwardly again, not waiting for Aang's answer. "The bender needs fire to live, just
as the fire needs the bender."

"So you're saying it's alive?" Aang cast a dubious glance at the small campfire as if waiting for it to sprout a face.

Zuko smirked. "It needs air just like we do, and fuel to eat. But you tell me. Eventually, I want you to grab some fire."

Aang blanched. "Just reach in? But I'm not a firebender yet!"

"If you want to be a firebender, you have to work with fire."

"But…" Aang reached out, as if to test the waters, and visibly hesitating as he felt the heat of the flames prick his open palm. "What if I get burned?"

"Once you have control of the fire you won't be. We're going to work on that, first."

Aang nodded again, his grey eyes focused on the kindle of fire in Zuko's palm. "So once I do that you'll show me how to fireblast?" he mimed a quick, hard punch; probably the way he had seen the Fire Sages do it.

Zuko smiled grimly and closed his hand, snuffing out the flame – much to Aang's disappointment. "I'll show you that once you get your own fire." He straightened up, following Aang's example and crossing his legs in a lotus position. Normally when he tried this, he just sat normally, but he found that sitting straighter meant he could breathe deeper. "I want you to take in a breath of air. In through your nose and exhale out your mouth…"

By the time Sokka and Katara arrived back with Appa, both Zuko and Aang were ready for a break. Aang was complaining that his stomach muscles hurt from breathing so deep, and he felt a little light headed. Zuko was tired of telling the young monk not to fidget and stop crinkling his face every time he exhaled. Aang hadn't actually caught hold of the flames yet, and Zuko was not about to actually let him dive his hand in the fire until he was completely sure he had it under control.

So when Aang jumped up in relief, completely abandoning the firebending lesson, Zuko didn't snap at him. He wanted to do the same thing.

"How'd it go?" Sokka asked.

Zuko caught Katara's eye, and she gave him a smile; she understood, and that gave him the grace to answer, "He's getting there."

Finally, Aang remembered his manners and bowed low to both siblings. "Thank you for the lesson, Sifu Katara." Another bow. "Sifu Zuko." Then he stood up, grinning and ignoring the blushes from the other two. "What's to eat?"

Sokka held up a rough piece of twine in answer. Tied to the end was what looked almost like a rat-beaver—dead and grinning and probably the least appetizing thing any of them had ever seen, even to the ones who did eat meat. "I guess we're going to have to go to the market for supplies… although this rat might be good with some spices." He put a finger to his chin in thought.

Katara made a face and pushed past her eldest brother, heading towards Appa's pack. "I'll get the money."
Despite Sokka's reluctance to backtrack, the only village to be found was back toward the coast. The shoreline swept back into a shallow inlet bay; this being low tide all the fishermen's wives and children were sloshing about in the ankle-deep surf, digging in the sticky mud for clams and unlucky fish trapped in the tide pools.

The village itself was a cluster of six dozen or so clustered houses with most of the main activity centered along the edges of the piers. Long tables were set out in front of each moored ship with colorful barkers at each end, trying to draw attention to their wares.

With Appa safely hidden in the nearby forest, Aang, Katara, Zuko and Sokka walked along piers, glancing every once in awhile at wooden tables filled with strangely shaped fish and baskets of harvested fruit. Sokka had a bag slung over his shoulder, and already it was half-full with a few purchases. Their empty bellies had loosened Katara's tight hold on the money, they already spent two out of their six remaining coins.

And one of them hadn't even been on food.

Aang was hardly noticing the tables, too intent on examining his shiny new bison-whistle. To the Water Tribe siblings' complete disgust, it blew nothing but silent air and Aang had been promptly forbidden from ever handling the money ever again.

"Hey, you kids!"

They turned to see a swarthy barker with a lime green bandanna and a golden hoped hearing the size of a fist bare down on them. He was grinning. "From the looks of your clothes, I can see you are world-travelers." His eyes seemed to linger on the catch of Sokka's tunic, the gap of fabric that showed skin, for just a hair's breath too long before he smiled again. "Could I interest you in some of our exotic curios?"

"Sure!" said Aang, before anyone could decline. Then, "What are curios?"

This seemed to give the barker a pause. "I don't know," he admitted. "But I'm sure we got 'em!"

"What, this stuff?" Zuko pointed to a table, smaller than the rest and littered with crusty-looking statues and bits of stained glass. "No thanks."

"Oh that? No, that is only for the public view. The real stuff is in there." The barker gestured to the wide-mouthed ship behind him. He grinned again, more of a leer this time as he stepped closer to the two brothers. "Water Tribe, right? Can't let the pier foreman see the... more interesting things we carry. We've got spear's a plenty and the Captain himself has a collection of boomerangs."

Sokka looked vaguely interested. "Well..."

"Well nothing," Katara snapped. "We're here to buy food, not boomerangs. Anyway, you two could
make new ones yourselves."

"It might be worth a look." Zuko said, and held up a hand at his sister's venomous glare. "Just for a minute, and if there's nothing good we can leave."

"C'mon, Katara." Aang grinned up at her. "I want to see the curios."

Katara looked from one male to another, and realized that she was outnumbered. "Fine," she said, with a huff, crossing her arms. Then, with the barker cheerfully leading the way, she muttered under her breath. "Boys…"

But her bad mood lasted until she stepped past the threshold of the main cabin. Every inch seemed packed with all sizes and shapes of objects, from lady’s dresses to a cabinet of scrolls off in the corner. Zuko bent to examine a grinning monkey statue with ruby eyes while Sokka went to the back to search for weapons.

There was something that seemed to draw Katara to the cabinet. Thanks to GranGran's lessons, she was literate, but she couldn't make out all the inscriptions on every end. They were too formal.

She didn't need any words for the thickest scroll; the one with the painted Water Tribe blue end-stop with engraved wave patterns. Carefully, not realizing she was holding her breath at all, she reached out and withdrew the scroll. She unrolled it, and her gasp could be heard around the small cabin. "This… This is a waterbending scroll!"

She barely heard the other's response, or noticed Zuko walk over to look over her shoulder until he spoke. "Wow, look at those moves."

There were perhaps only four actual waterbending forms, but each was carefully drawn out with a figure demonstrating every graceful step. For two benders who had spent all of their lives slowly eking out kata's with nothing more than half-formed ideas and determination, this was a goldmine.

Their eyes met, and the same thought flashed between them.

Katara turned towards a man who was lounging behind a counter with an impressive looking captain's hat and some kind of lizard-parrot on his shoulder. "How much for this waterbending scroll?"

Her voice was too high, a touch too excited, and the captain seemed to pick up on it at once. "Already got a buyer. Some Earth Kingdom noble is willing to pay a lot of money for that piece of paper you have there."

"What would an Earth Kingdom noble want with a waterbending scroll?" Zuko pointed out. "Sell it to us instead. We—she would actually be able to use it."

The captain seemed less than concerned by his plea. When he spoke again, there was a gap where his eyetooth should have been. "Don't care who uses it, boy. The deal's already been made… Unless you got two hundred coins on you right now."

"Two hundred…?" Katara trailed off, and looked down again at the precious scroll. It was quite literally worth its weight in gold. With a gulp, she carefully re-rolled it.

Zuko scowled. "That's piracy."

"Aye. Perhaps." The captain shrugged one shoulder – the one his lizard-parrot was not perched on – and leaned across the counter, his eyes glittering in amusement. "But it's business, too."
Aang and Sokka had come over, attracted by the conversation and the sick, saddened look that was coming over Katara's face. "Don't worry, Katara." Aang said. "Merchants love to haggle. I'll get that scroll for you." Katara doubtfully handed over their coins and Aang grinned, sauntering up to the counter. "Excuse me, good sir. How about… two copper pieces for that scroll? No? How about three?"

Zuko shook his head and something sharp caught his eye – a row of gleaming swords arranged along a nearby wall. He turned fully to look, now hardly registering Aang's horrible haggling skills, or how Katara accidentally bumped into Sokka when he too, came over.

"Doesn't look like the leather on these have been oiled in, about, forever." Sokka said, joining his brother to admire the weapons. He set down his pack and tentatively lifted one of the swords from a wall-hook. His fingers left bright spots upon the dusty handle. "I wonder how much they'll want for this?"

"Probably two hundred gold pieces." Zuko grumbled, only a little bitterly.

There was a small collection of boomerangs off to the side. He bent to examine them. But while the shapes were similar, the surfaces were painted in dark color blues, the handle grips wider than he had ever seen. "Hey Sokka, do you think these could be from the Northern Water Tribe?"

"Maybe." Sokka returned the dusty sword to its hook, but now he was frowning, looking around the place with narrowed blue eyes. "Wait a minute, there's stuff from all over the place: Water Tribe, Earth Kingdom, and I'm sure the tacky red stuff is from the Fire Nation. Where do you think these guys got all of it?"

"I don't know. Trading? Why?"

"With a war going on?" Sokka asked, and didn't wait for Zuko's response before turning away, muttering to himself. "A collection of 'interesting curios', a lizard-parrot— Hey… These guys are pirates!"

For being so smart, Sokka could be really stupid at times. His loud announcement seemed to cut through the air, interrupting Aang's failing negotiations. Everyone turned to stare at him, and then the captain behind the counter grinned again and reached up to tip his wide hat, as if in greeting. "We prefer to call ourselves high-risk traders."

"Wow!" Aang beamed up at him. "I've always wanted to meet a pirate!"

But this only seemed to alarm Katara. She backed up a step, jumping when her hip crashed into what looked like a table of delicate wooden figures, knocking two of them over with loud clatters. Within a few moments she scooped up Sokka's half forgotten bag and shoved it back in his arms. "Guys… I'm not really comfortable with this. I think we should leave."

Aang turned towards her. "Aw, but Katara—"

"I feel like I'm getting weird looks. I want to go," she insisted, and it was at least partially true… the barker had edged himself forward and stood again near Sokka.

Aang pouted for a moment longer, but they could all see her unease. In fact, Katara was first out the door, and didn't even demand Aang hand her the coins safely back in her possession. She led them on a swift pace back across the docks, with the boys giving each other covert glances; silent questions about what this sudden change in mood was all about. But they had no sooner stepped to the edge of the docks when there was a shout behind them.
"Hey, you kids!"

It had come from the pirate ship.

Zuko glanced over his shoulder, and gave a detersive snort at the number of men running onto the top-deck, trying to wave them down. "What do they want now?"

"Looks like they came to their senses," was Aang’s cheerful answer. He turned around and gave the pirates a little wave.

But that only seemed to spur the pirates on, and now they were practically pilling topside from the cabin.

No one noticed Katara edge away nervously, or the expression of alarm and guilt that crossed her face. "You guys… I don't think they want to talk…"

Completely forgoing the normal route, the pirates simply leapt over the edge of the railing, landing heavily on the docks and withdrawing their swords.

"Stop right there!" A pirate yelled. From his scabbard, he pulled out a long twisted knife with bits of rust on the edges. His meaning was very clear.

Sokka cursed – and for once Katara didn't correct him. "They know Aang’s the Avatar! Run!"

Aang acted first, twisting around with aircrash in hand and aiming a rush of wind to the middle of the approaching pirates – all greasy grins and twirling blades - sweeping the closest man off his feet and crashing him into the rest of the pack.

The kids fled, running away from the docks and to the marketplace. But the village was small, just a shabby collection of weather-worn buildings, and under the overcast sky not many merchants were out to provide them cover.

Aang did what he could. Using directed airblasts, he knocked apple stalls over, rolling the fruit under the feet of some unsuspecting pirates and tripping them. Katara spied a barrel of rainwater and with an arch of her arms, pulled the liquid out and froze it when it splashed to the ground, creating treacherous black-ice for their pursuers.

But for every pirate who fell, another seemed to be right behind him. And they knew these alleyways well.

One man who had to be at least seven feet tall with too many piercings through every part of his face to count, came roaring out from between two houses, sword flashing. The blade missed Zuko a mere inch. The boy reeled back, throwing up a shower of sparks – more out of surprise than anything else, there weren't any live fires around to pull from. But the man fell back in alarm and in that hesitation, Aang stepped forward to knock him away with another airblast.

"I'm calling Appa!" Aang dug out the bison whistle, but was stopped when Sokka pointed ahead, making an inarticulate sound of distress in the back of his throat.

Half a dozen pirates suddenly stood before them, cutting off the already pinched alleyway. The kids skidded to a stop, and turned, but the way back had even more pirates blocking their path. There were similar alleyways to the right and to the left, but they had no way to know which one led to safety… and which to even more danger.

The pirates moved forward, closing in.
"Wait!" Aang tapped the butt of his airstaff on the ground, snapping it open into an elegant glider. "Climb on, and hold on tight—" he ordered, but stopped, and his friends could see his indecision clearly. Aang was a twelve-year-old airbending master, and the Avatar at that – but he was also light as a feather. The Water Tribe teens were not.

"Go." Zuko reached forward, pushing Katara forward, nearly into Aang. "I'll be fine."

"We'll be fine." Sokka corrected backing from Aang and standing with his brother. "Splitting up is our best shot."

"What?!" The look on Katara's face was terrible; a mix of dawning horror and guilt. "No, you can't—" But Sokka was already turning away, making a rude gesture to the pirates to catch their attention, and she only locked eyes with Zuko – one last agonized look, before he turned with Sokka and fled down the nearest alleyway, trying to draw the pirates off.

And Aang was yelling at her to hold on, and she had no choice but to wrap her arms around his neck, close her eyes, and feel the world slip away under feet. Aang actually stepped on the heads of one or two pirates to get a lift-off.

… It hurt when she tumbled down, only a few spare moments later, crashing against the ground with Aang pinned on top of her, bound and tangled in the weight of a throwing net.

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Neither boy had any illusions of what they were doing – drawing off as many pirates as they could on foot in order to give Aang and Katara the best chance they could in the air was risky at best, a suicide mission at worst. There needed to be no words between them because they had come to the same conclusion: Aang was the most important member of the group, and neither one of them was going to let the pirates have their little sister.

It was pure luck that the alleyway they ran down turned into a helpful little side-street behind some businesses, chocked full of crates and boxes. A group of snarling pirates were hot on their heels. Sokka drew out his bone machete, hooking the end to a stack of crates as they ran past and tipping them over.

Zuko was a half-step ahead, and darted quickly to the left, down yet another alley with a blind curve. Suddenly it opened into a wide square courtyard, ringed by a neighborhood of small dumpy fish-houses with pointed rooftops.

"We need… a place… to hide." Sokka panted, bending over to rest his hands on his knees and catch his breath. The crates had slowed the pirates for a moment, although he could hear the clatter of footsteps echoing narrow stone walls, and getting closer.

Zuko looked around, frowning to himself, and then glanced upwards. His quick gold eyes caught a deep shadow and he pointed to a sheltered place right where the roofs of two close houses had
joined, creating a small shadowed area. "There!"

That looked fine to Sokka. "Can't head straight for it. Gotta circle around and lose them."

"Okay, how?"

"Watch and learn." Sokka straightened again and they took off running, halfway across the courtyard before they were spotted. Another angry shout went up, but it only served to add another burst of panicked-driven speed to their step. These new back alleys were short, curved every few feet, and patterned like a maze between houses. They jumped between small fenced yards, cut across cobbled roads, and back behind more houses. Twice more they heard approaching footsteps, and once a shout, but they were always able to turn in the other direction.

A movement exploded out at them from a shadowed path two the right; a pair of burly pirates, one swinging what looked to be a mace attached to a light chain. Zuko didn't remember actually taking the pearl dagger from his belt. It was just there in his right hand as he stepped forward, using his left to knock the chain, causing it to wrap tightly around his wrist. The dagger flashed and the pirate bellowed in surprise – a sizeable slash now gaping his bicep. The pirate dropped the chained mace, clutching his arm instead, and Zuko turned in time to see Sokka knock his own pirate over the head with his whalebone machete.

"C'mon!" Zuko yelled, and they were running again, leaving behind the stunned and cut men.

But now Sokka was leading the way. Zuko was already lost, and his brother had an uncanny sense of direction. His mind whirled with all the twists and turns; the only thing he could do was to trust that Sokka at least knew where they were going. And before he knew how they got there, they were facing the house with the steepled shadowed rooftop.

Zuko's burning legs gained new strength – he sprinted the last few steps, passing Sokka and then leapt as high as he could. The very tips of his fingers caught the rough wood, and gritting his teeth, he forced himself to hang on, to dig his boots in and haul himself inch by painful inch up to the roof shingles. Once at the top, he hooked his ankle under the crook of the eave and bent back, extending a hand to a mostly bemused Sokka.

They hadn't seen a pirate for the last part of their flight, but for a few seconds, scrabbling along the roof they were visible to anyone who cared to look. Then they were safe, ducking into the small triangle of shadow cast by the overhang of two overlapping roofs.

The space was just big enough for both of them, and both boys squatted there, getting their breath back. From their elevated position they could see over the roofs of at least five buildings; the pirates seemed to have split up in their search, and they could see the now small figures still dashing back and forth, still roaming the streets.

"I've decided," said Sokka, after a few long minutes, "I hate pirates. Sure, they're pretty cool looking with their tattoos and their lizard-parrots, but when you get down to it… they're just a bunch of jerks."

"Yeah, no kidding." Zuko's eyes were to the sky. There was only slate clouds above, not a speck of orange or the bulk of a sky bison to be seen. "I hope Aang and Katara are okay."

"They are." Sokka grinned as a particular thought struck him. "Now that I'm pretty sure we're going to live, we have guilt on our side. I'm going to make them both do all my chores for a week. And Aang's going to have to let me fly Appa." He even rubbed his hands together in anticipation.
They could still see the pirates milling around down below – something had attracted a knot of them, but they were so far off in the distance neither Sokka or Zuko could tell what was going on. The brothers hunkered down, intending to wait them out.

A stiff breeze kicked up, bringing with it a miserable sort of drizzle that, of course, blew in sideways and had them both shivering. There was a shuttered window behind them, perhaps leading to a sort of an attic, although when Sokka tried it was locked shut. Zuko couldn't light a fire, both for fear of lighting up their dark hide-away and for the fact they were both surrounded by wooden shingles.

There was nothing to do but wait.

But the rain was just as cold for the pirates, and eventually the frequency of the patrols along the alleyways reduced until there was long stretches of minutes were they weren't seen at all.

The rain slackened and a thick roll of fog came in from the sea, darkening the landscape well before evening. The boy's climb down from the roof was a lot less graceful and more uncoordinated than going up owing to stiff joints and cold muscles.

They took the return walk slowly to stop and listen carefully along each new stretch of cobbled road for telltale signs or sounds of movement. It felt like playing hide and seek in a way, only with buildings instead of snow-drifts and nasty armed pirates instead of a sibling.

The last rays of the day's sun would have been shining down by the time they finally exited from the village and staggered back up the long track up a steep slope, and back into the forest – except the thick cloud cover darkened everything, making the trees seem like giant shadows and the ground muffled their footsteps. They were cold, wet, and exhausted.

But that was okay. They had gotten away unscathed, outsmarting swarthy pirates, no less. They would come sauntering into camp like the brave warriors they were. Katara would probably have something hot to eat, and Aang would be laughing and buzzing around on his air scooter…

Appa gave a lowing sort of a groan, having scented the boys before they came into view. The beast rushed over as only a ten-ton bison could, smashing saplings and unfortunate bushes underfoot with such noise that it would have raised alarms of anyone within a half mile – if anyone else was out that cold evening. Appa stopped short of running them over, snuffling and moaning again and again. His hair had rematted, now soaked from the rain.

"Whoa, easy there big guy." Sokka pushed the giant head away, redirecting Appa's tongue to Zuko, much to his disgust.

"Ugh! Appa, no! Bad bison!" Appa had gotten Zuko square in the face and he sputtered, wiping away palmfuls of slobber. "Hasn't Aang played with you today?"

"I don't think he has." Sokka was looking back to the clearing. It was silent, shrouded in a vague drift of mist. No smell of a campfire or cooking, no high-pitched happy laughter.

Appa moaned again, and this time it was low and plaintive – almost a cry.
Katara hit the ground hard and Aang landed on top of her, one pointy elbow digging into her back. He was rolling away in a moment, trying to gain traction for a blast of air, but the pirates were there too, and the thick webbing only tightened. Coils of rope were thrown back and forth, and in a moment Katara and Aang were so tightly bound that neither could move; they could hardly breathe.

A dirty, unshaven pirate face leaned down into Katara's vision, filling it up. "Gotcha, girlie." And his breathe washed over her, so foul that she could almost taste it.

"What about them boys?" another pirate asked.

"Off runnin'. We'll catch up to 'em. They've where else to go."

"Aye."

The thought of her brothers being run down, hunted like artic moose made a little sob of fear rise from Katara's throat. All captured… all her fault. And when the pirates found her brothers… when they checked in Sokka's pack…

Her involuntary sound caused Aang to thrash against the bindings. They were so tight his movements came out as only a wiggle. "Let her go!" he yelled. "I'm the one you want!"

"Aang!" she gasped. "Shush up!" The last thing they needed was for the pirates to figure out who exactly they had just caught. Sokka had been wrong. She knew they weren't after the Avatar at all—at least, not right now.

But the pirates laughed and made rude remarks about Aang's heroic words. They worked quickly, removing the netting, but keeping the children bound hand and foot. Then they were picked up—some of the pirates hands lingered where none ought to be, making Katara grit her teeth and wish her own hands were free, just for moment. She would find some water somewhere…

The large four-mast ship rose into view. They were carried, trussed up like chickens back into the cabin filled with curios and one very smug looking captain.

The pirate who caught them, the one with at least a half dozen hoops in his nose, stepped forward. "'Caught two of them, but the other two brats run off."

The captain nodded. "And the scroll?"

"Not here. Must be with the boys."

"Scroll? What scroll?" Aang made another wiggle, and the captain motioned for him and Katara to be put down. The young monk looked back and forth. "We don't have any scroll…" he trailed off, and then turned to his companion when they were on their feet again. She looked away, and his eyes went wide. "Katara?"

"I'm sorry, Aang," she whispered. "I didn't think—"

She was looking at her friend and wasn't watching when the captain stepped forward. The harsh crack of hand against cheek was heard around the room. Katara cried out, hunching down.

The captain's voice was steely. "So you thought you could steal from us, wench? You best pray to
whatever spirit guards yer people that scroll is undamaged, or I'll take every gold piece out on yer hide."

He raised his hand again and out of her corner of her eye Katara saw Aang take a deep breath, likely to blow the captain back against his own deck. She shook her head once, trying to stop him. They couldn't find out he was the Avatar—

And in that moment, before either the pirate captain or Aang could make their next move, a voice called down from topside. "Hey, Captin'!" It was the barker who had first lured them in.

The man swung around. "What?!!"

"There's a customer up here wanting ta know if we got any extra Pai Sho tile pieces."

Before the captain could respond, another voice broke in. This one aged, and genial. "I am looking specifically for the lotus tile. Without it, I have an incomplete set."

There was the slight creak of wood, and a man stepped into the cabin, a grayed man in full Fire Nation armor, hands tucked into his wide sleeves. Seeing the children, he froze mid-stride.

Prince Iroh, Katara and Aang stared at each other for a full three shocked seconds. The lemur on his shoulder, chirped.

"Well," said the prince, with a nod of respect to the captain. "It appears your barker was telling the truth. You do have quite interesting curios."
This adorable Art is by ScuttlebuttInk

(The two boys drinking stolen alcohol from a previous chapter.)

OoOoO

Please Prince Zuko, if the Fire Nation captures you, there is nothing I can do. Do not follow the Avatar.
Prince Iroh's amber eyes took in the situation in a glance; the tied and bound Avatar and the Water Tribe girl, the unhappy captain. And the finer details: the red, swelling mark on the girl's face, how the Avatar stood with perfect balance which left him ready to strike a blow, despite his bindings.

Iroh almost smiled. This unfortunate pirate captain did not know what he was dealing with, or else he would have the children restrained in more than simple hemp rope.

The captain, too, was making his own deductions, identifying Iroh's sash of rank for what it was. He grinned, something that was more strained and uneasy rather than pleasant. "'Scuse us, good sir. I was just dealing with a couple 'o thieves. What can I do for you?"

"I was looking for a tile to complete my Pai Sho set," Iroh repeated, tucking his hands in the wide sleeves of his robes. "But this interests me more. Tell me, Captain, have you managed to capture the two boys as well?"

The pirate captain's eyes narrowed, although his grin became wider. "So these be professional troublemakers, eh? No, these brats took something from me. A waterbending scroll worth at least three hundred coins—"

"Hey, you said it was two-hundred before!" the young Avatar yelled, and was promptly grabbed by the pirate by one ear which was then given a savage twist. "Ow, ow, ow!"

"Stop it!" the girl shrieked. She lunged forward, but was easily held back by two other pirates. She turned to the captain, pleading. "I'm the one who stole your scroll, and... and I'm sorry! I can get it back. I—"

"I have a different proposition." Iroh's calm tone cut through the air like a knife, silencing the still struggling Avatar and the laughing pirates. "These children are wanted fugitives of the Fire Nation. I will pay you the two-hundred pieces for your missing scroll, and another hundred for these two."

The captain seemed to consider it for a moment. "Aye, that is a generous offer. Very generous indeed." But he turned his back on the prince, sliding behind the children. His hand rested loosely on the girl's shoulder, and she went very still. "But I believe a pretty thing like this will make on more on the market. My price is three-hundred for the boy and the scroll both. If you want this girl to be warming yer bed, you best be willing to pay a higher price."

Iroh didn't move. His expression didn't change, but Momo was able to sense his mood. The little lemur sat up straighter, wrapping his tail securely around his neck and let out a throaty little trill. Something about the sudden coldness in those amber eyes made the captain back slightly, although his hand stayed on the girl. He hastily continued, "'Course, you can throw in that fine beastie on your shoulder there, and we can call it a deal."

Iroh raised his hand, touching light fingers to Momo's back. "My little companion is not for sale." He paused, letting the tension of the haggle build. "I will pay no more than three-fifty for both children...and the collection of those deliciously scented tea-packets I smell."
Again, the captain paused. Then his hand slipped from Katara's shoulder (to her shuddering relief) and he gave another, businesslike grin. "You be driving a hard bargain. I accept, but you bringing the payment in coins. Gold coins."

"I would expect nothing less." Iroh did not extend a hand to finalize the deal, and the captain did not offer one in turn. Instead, Iroh turned to the nearest man, a beefy looking pirate with several golden hoops in his ears. "My Commander will be awaiting outside. Please, retrieve him for me and tell him to bring along the strong restraints."

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"Where are they?" Zuko asked, and then, because there was no answer either Sokka or Appa could give, he repeated it again; louder, and turning around as if expecting Katara and Aang to come bursting out of the brush at any moment. "Where are they?"

"I thought—I mean, we outran so many of the pirates…” Sokka had an unfocused look on his face. He was thinking back, trying to retrace every step of their mad escape. "But maybe they weren't trying hard to catch us because…” He trailed off and groaned, scrubbing at his face with a hand. “Katara and Aang have to have been caught."

"Then we'll just have to go back." Zuko was striding towards Appa even before he finished speaking.

The other teen nodded and followed him, absently picking up his shoulder-bag by one strap. Something fell out a gap in the stitching and hit the forest floor with a thump. He bent to retrieve it, and froze. "Oh no."

Zuko stopped, turned, a question on his tongue. Then he saw what Sokka held. "What— wait, you stole the waterbending scroll?!"

"Why would I want a waterbending scroll?!" Sokka's indignant voice broke in no less than three places.

The two boys looked at each other with mirrored expressions, and each saw the other make the same connections.

Sokka exploded. "That's it! She may be a girl, but she's cut off from ever shopping again. Ever!"

Zuko took a step back. He seemed to be in a daze, for once the calm one in the face of Sokka who was still ranting. "That's why Katara was acting so weird. She must have put it in your bag when we were looking at the weapons."

"Great!" Sokka snapped, flailing both his arms and the scroll. "You can just tell her how clever and sneaky she was when we return this and pirates are finished trying to hack us to pieces!"

Zuko scowled. "We can't give back that scroll. Those pirates probably stole it from the Water Tribe. It's not theirs to keep." He saw the look of doubt on Sokka's face and pressed on. "This scroll is for
waterbending. It's important to Katara and to Aang."

"Well, too bad. They'll just have to wait until we get north to learn."

"We can't just—" Zuko ran an agitated hand through his hair, trying to put into words what he felt deep in his soul. The feeling, the need to bend. Katara would have understood. He knew she felt it just as strongly. But Sokka… "Look, you just don't get it, okay? You don't understand how it is to want to bend, but don’t know how."

Sokka flinched, as if he had been struck, and at once his ridiculous flailing stopped. His blue eyes hardened, and he walked up until he was toe-to-toe with his younger brother. "Oh I don't understand?"

"That's not what I meant!"

"No, go on, tell me Mr. Bender. Tell me why learning a few fancy moves is more important than making sure your sister and your friend are safe. Do you think the pirates are just going to ask nicely to get it back? Or is it something else I'm not getting, because I can't bend?"

Zuko narrowed his good eye. "That's not what I meant," he repeated again, through grit teeth.

"Yeah, well I think it was."

Both boys glared at each other, and Zuko was first to break, crossing his arms and glaring off to the side with a sour look on his face.

Appa groaned, lowly. It broke the tension in the same way that Katara always stopped their bickering before it could escalate too far. Only she wasn't here, and although neither boy would admit it out-loud, they both felt her absence. Badly.

Finally Sokka gave a loud sigh and reached up to rub the back of his neck. The anger had drained away, leaving only awkwardness. "Yeah… well, whatever."

Zuko just shrugged as if answering an unasked question. "You're right. About the scroll," he added, quickly, with a swift sideways glance at his brother. "We'll take it back to the pirates."

Sokka nodded in reply and turned to the giant bison. Appa dipped his great head, allowing him to climb on and take the reins, with an anxious snort as if admonishing them for taking so long about it.

Zuko silently jumped to the basket-saddle, and they were off.

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The night was full upon them now, moonless and dark due to the thick cloud-cover above. The only thing visible ahead were the lanterns of the fish-houses, and a flashing lighthouse further out.

Sokka angled Appa in low, close above the surface of the silent bay. Neither wanted a repeat of the hide and seek against the pirates through the village, doubly as hard now with a ten-ton bison. So
they flew in from the sea, eyes straining to pick out the shapes of ships along the long, dark pier – and one in particular with a deep hull and a four mast sail.

Sokka always suspected that he had the better night-sight out of the two of them, and certainly he was the one to pick up the danger first.

The near total darkness made it hard to tell one thing from another at a distance, and they had both mistaken the lit running lanterns along the ship's prow as something else – a building perhaps, or part of the pier. But Sokka was first to recognize the shape, and when he did he jerked Appa’s reins up sharply in surprise, causing the bison to stagger in midair before regaining his balance.

"What's wrong?" Zuko hissed, but Sokka was already pointing ahead.

"That's a Fire Navy ship!"

But it was no ordinary Fire Navy ship, and Zuko's expression darkened to anger. He swore words they had only heard Bato use, and even then only when the warrior thought no one had been listening.

Sokka tugged on the reins – gentler this time – and directed Appa to float closer, right along side the massive hull of the ship. He was fairly certain that this was a blind spot from the cabin above. And if Appa made a large splash when he finally sunk into the water to swim up to the pier, it was at least dimmed by the sound of crashing waves back on shore.

The boys dismounted, climbing quickly from Appa's wide back onto the wooden planks. Sokka turned, putting his fingers up to his lips, and hoping the bison would understand.

For his part, the beast simply rumbled and sank further into the water until only the tips of his upright horns could be seen from the level of the pier.

Zuko kept sending glares at the Fire Navy ship as if trying to burn a hull through the metal with his scowl. "How does Iroh keep turning up like this?"

"I don't know." Sokka's mind was already several steps ahead, analyzing the situation without prompting, as if from muscle memory. "This is bad. Really bad. But maybe Prince Iroh doesn't know we were here yet… I mean, how often does the Fire Nation deal with pirates?"

Zuko scowled again, but said nothing. Apparently his on-again-off-again knowledge of the Fire Nation wasn't turning anything useful that night. Sokka sighed and sank down, gesturing for Zuko to follow and keeping to the shadows. It wasn't hard – lantern oil was expensive, and there was only one every fifty feet or so, enough to lead a drunken man from the village and to the ship, but not good for anything else.

Sokka noticed how the lanterns would dim suspiciously upon approach, but didn't say anything to his firebending brother.

The pirate ship was moored just where they remembered it, to Sokka's intense relief. It also seemed to be the life of the party with men staggering this way and that, on deck and just along the piers, flagons of amber liquid clutched in their hands. They were obviously celebrating, and Sokka just hoped it wasn't at the fact that they caught the Avatar.

Suddenly Zuko's hand seized upon his wrist and Sokka found himself being dragged behind a large wooden pillar. Zuko had seen something he hadn’t – a bit of movement from the rampart of the ship. Both boys pressed their backs to the shadowed side of the pillar, and within a few moments they heard and felt the shiver of a well-ordered march of two dozen feet.
Only when they had mostly passed did Sokka peek out, and his breath froze in his throat.

A small platoon of Fire Nation soldiers were stepping solidly in two ordered lines. Prince Iroh and that one angry looking Commander-guy with the bad muttonchops was at its head. In the middle, easily visible even in the dim light among the rust reds and spiky armor of the Fire Nation, were Aang and Katara; bound head to foot in chains, shuffling along with two sharp points of broadswords at their backs to ensure their cooperation.

He felt Zuko shift at his side, and Sokka grabbed his forearm hard. He met his gold eyes and shook his head once. There had to be twenty Fire Nation soldiers out there.

It was hard to remain still and quiet, safe in the shadows. The two brothers followed along the best they could, darting from behind wooden column to wooden column, keeping out of sight and waiting for a chance, a distraction, to go in.

Aang stumbled once– he was weighed down with at least twice the chains that had been thrown around Katara – but the nearest soldier roughly hauled him back up to his feet by his collar and they continued on without another misstep.

Then they were to the Fire Nation ship, and being pushed up the ramp.

"Sokka…" Zuko growled.

The silent question seemed to almost hang in the air. Sokka closed his eyes, not able to watch his sister and his friend step disappear into the ship. "We can't just rush in there. We'll just get captured, too. We're Katara and Aang's only hope right now, and we have to do this right… We have to have a plan."

A light breeze stirred, bringing with it the sound of voices. Two figures had hung back while the prisoners were led in and were speaking quietly to one another, and if the two boys strained, they could just pick out the words.

"My helmsman report a storm blowing in from the west, Prince Iroh." And Sokka recognized the voice as Commander Zhao. "If we raise anchor immediately we can be back within home waters by the end of the week."

"No, Commander," Prince Iroh answered. An oddly shaped lump flickered over his shoulders – that damned lemur which was always with him. "I would like two contingents of men sent out in the morning. I wish to retrieve the two Water Tribe boys as well."

"But with the Avatar as your prisoner—!" Zhao's voice choked off mid-sentence, as if silenced by a glare or some other reminder the other two boys could not see. When he spoke again, it was with deference. "My Prince, you must reconsider. You can return with the boy, now, as a legend. Any delay now—"

"I am charging you with making sure the boy does not escape." Iroh replied. His voice was cold. "Those are my orders, Commander."

"Interesting, Sokka thought, So these Fire Nation jerks aren't all united. And he could also guess, very easily, why Prince Iroh didn't want to leave yet. He turned to his brother, nodding once, but was very careful not to look him in the eye. For whatever reason, having the Avatar wasn't good enough. Iroh wanted his nephew as well.

Zuko took a very long moment before pulling away. Together, they headed back to Appa to regroup, and to plan.
The place they chose was a high, lonely flat-topped hill which overlooked a sharp drop-off and the bay beyond. It was nearly perfect; the high spot guaranteed that it would be hard anyone to sneak up on them, and from there they could watch the running lights of the ships, make sure that the Iroh’s ship wouldn't disembark in the middle of the night.

The brothers set up camp in silence – Zuko brooding, and apt to snarl when the tent he was trying to set up kept getting snagged on twigs and low tree branches.

"I hate this!" Zuko snapped. He stood up and gave the tent peg a swift kick, sending the thing flying into the bushes.

Sokka ignored his tantrum. He was squatting down, arranging three or four sticks in a particular order, using them to mark the position of the Fire Nation ship, the plank and the pirate's ship. But he was tired and kept blinking rapidly, passing a hand over his face. "We should take turns staying up," he said, at last. It was the first thing he said since they arrived. "Just in case Iroh changes his mind and the ship takes off with the new tide."

Zuko shot him a sour look. "What if it does? Who's going to be able to stop a ship? Appa? It's dark. There's no moon, no light. We could sneak down there right now."

"No," Sokka shook his head and stood. "Look, I know it's hard but we're just going to have to lay low right now. The only thing we have is surprise. We're going to get just one shot at this, Zuko. You can't just rush in. It won't work."

His brother shook his head, his lips pressed together in an thin, angry line. Abruptly, Sokka was reminded of their earlier argument. But, after a silent minute Zuko gave clipped nod of agreement.

"Okay." Zuko's voice was strained, although Sokka didn't know if it was due to worry for Katara and Aang, or some holdover from their argument before, or if it was nothing at all and he was too tired and frazzled to read the other boy correctly.

Sokka thought, briefly, about offering to stay up first. He had to work on a solution, a plan, a way to get Aang and Katara out of there. What would his dad do in this situation? Probably hold a war council. But he was tired. And it was hard to think when he was sore, and hungry. So he said, "Wake me up around midnight. Okay?" He didn't wait for Zuko's answer, figuring the other boy was probably in too bad of a mood to acknowledge him anyway. So Sokka crawled into his sleeping bag, feeling the bottom folds of the fur and cloth around his toes like ice. It would warm up in a few minutes, though. And he was already drifting off. "G'night..." he muttered, and then a particular sleepy phrase came to him, making him grin to himself and add, "Jerkbender."

Through half-lidded eyes, he saw Zuko glance at him sharply and then a corner of his mouth ticked up in a grudging smile.

That wouldn't have happened if he was feeling angry about earlier. The argument had truly passed, and Sokka rolled over, asleep within moments.

OoOoO
Zuko looked out over the cliff’s edge, watching the slowly bobbing row of lights that lit the Fire Nation ship until his eyes crossed and his head bobbed, once, twice… until he jerked up suddenly awake again to find that the crescent moon had moved three finger length’s across the sky. The Fire Nation ship was still there.

He still had a few hours left on his watch. Zuko stabbed the ground with the sharp point of a twig, digging a little hole in the dirt. He wanted to be down there, now, fighting to free Katara and Aang, set fire to things— maybe confront Iroh once and for all.

But he saw Sokka's wisdom in waiting – saw it, and didn't like it, not one bit. If either Aang or Katara were hurt because they had waited… if something were to happen…

He stood up abruptly, his skin itching and crawling. He had to do something. He couldn't just sit around and be useless. Maybe he could take Appa back down and do some reconnaissance. Sokka slept like the dead, anyway. He would never know…

Zuko was drifting over to the bison, trying to figure out the best, quietest way of waking him up, when he caught sight of Sokka's travel-bag. He froze, mid-step, and crossed his arms, glaring at the bag as if it held the solution to his problems.

Maybe it did.

Prince Iroh had told him, on that first terrible meeting, that he firebent like a waterbender. That it made him weak. Zuko had never consciously made the decision to firebend the way he did. He didn't know what he was doing when he was a child, or how to properly begin. Neither did Katara. They just wanted to bend, and had spent countless hours practicing and making forms up as they went along. It was hard work, full of give and take with many more failures than successes.

He wasn't a waterbender.

But he also didn't think firebending the way he did made him weak.

Zuko took another step closer to the bag, away from Appa and away from his rash decision to go out spying. He glanced furtively over his shoulder to make sure Sokka was still asleep, while pulling out the scroll.

There was a hollow not very far away – a dip in the short sparse grass where he could easily keep an eye on the gently bobbing Fire Nation ship, and be out of view, as long as he kept his fire below shoulder-height. He unrolled the scroll, propping it open between two stones, and frowned, studying it. There were perhaps four actual forms, but the one depicted first looked the most promising; Water Whip.

"Okay," he murmured, and his voice echoed hollowly in the dark air around him. "Fire lash? Looks easy enough."

He lit a small fire out of hot brand he had taken from the camp, and stood back, widening his stance and checking over his shoulder again to the scroll, and readjusting his footing an inch to the right. Then he took a deep breath and summoned the flicking flame into a loose ball of fire between his hands.

Carefully, and after another look at the scroll to check what to do, he widened his hands, stretching the flame into a stream and sent it out. He had been aiming for a nearby stump, but the fire lasted only just past his reach before dissipating into air with a puff of smoke.
Maybe it needed to be hotter, then.

He summoned more flame, and stepped forward again, trying to make his movements graceful and fluid. The way he had seen Katara do a hundred times before…

Katara, who was probably tied up and scared out of her mind, alone on a Fire Nation ship—

The flame crackled and died between his fingers before he even sent it out.

"Oh come on! What was that?" Zuko snapped, although he wasn't sure if he was yelling at the flames, or at himself.

He didn't have time for this. He closed his eyes, trying to imagine how Katara would approach how to bend, while trying not to think of Katara herself. She was the better bender out of the two of them, the most creative, the most patient. She usually understood what had to be done first, and how to do it. (*If they hurt her, if they did anything to her, he would burn their ship to cinders, hunt every last one of them down—*)

"ARGH!" The fire snapped out, angry, vengeful in a wobbling ungraceful arc, like a crashing wave. It fell onto the stump and immediately the wood was caught afame. Zuko stood there and watched it burn, the light playing over his scars, for a few long moments before he raised his hands and pushed the fire back down, snuffing it out.

It took a few minutes to steady his breathing, and for his chest not to feel so tight, like there were bands around him holding in white hot flame. He stared into his small campfire and told himself that he and Sokka were *going* to get them out. Katara was strong. Aang was—well, not wise, but Zuko trusted him to keep his sister safe.

He raised his hands, bringing up another length of fire and stepped into the movements. Then he did it again when the flame failed before it could even whip out. And again. And again.

Hours later, the tips of his fingers stained with soot and dull exhaustion was creeping into every sinew of his body. The flame under his command shot out in a bright ribbon. He bent his arms to the side, thinking briefly of the thick bull-kelp that lived under the sea back home, and how it would bend under the even the biggest of waves, but would not crack. The ribbon twisted to his command in mid-air, the tip flicking out on itself and striking the charred log with an audible crack.

Zuko stood, shocked, the flame running away from his fingers and dissipating into nothingness. A half-sort of smile crawled up one side of his face. He had done it. A real bending form; not something made up. Real.

Katara should have been here, with him.

The smile faded, and suddenly Zuko was keenly aware of the dark night – the silence and emptiness around him. Even Sokka's snoring couldn't be heard from his practice area. And if Zuko cared to wake him up, he would be annoyed, not congratulatory. Bending was not something he could share with his brother, and the only person who could - the two who *really* deserved to be practicing these moves were locked up, imprisoned.

*Tomorrow,* he thought, unaware of the fierce, determined set in his jaw as he bent down, extinguished his training-fire, and carefully rolled the scroll back up. He glanced again towards the far-off ship. Dawn was still half the night away. It was time to put the scroll back and wake Sokka for the next watch.

But tomorrow, he swore, he would get his sister and Aang out of there.
"I'm so sorry, Aang." Katara said, for perhaps the twentieth time since being thrown in the ship's holding cell. But as many times as she said it, and as many times as he had replied that it was okay, and that they were going to get out of there... it hadn't helped any of her guilt.

"It's okay, Katara," said Aang, predictably. He lay slumped in the holding cell across from her, weighted down by the heavy chains affixed to each limb. His wrists were narrow, but the shackles were still tight and he had just spent the better part of an hour squirming, tugging, and blowing useless blasts of air at his bindings with no effect whatsoever. "What's done is done."

She looked away from him, biting her lip and bringing her knees up to her chest. She had left her coat back with Appa before they had left to go shopping, and it was cold and damp in the cell. Not damp enough for water – at least not enough she could bend, but just enough to make her miserable.

How long would it take to get to the Fire Nation, she wondered. And what would happen to Aang once they got there? Would she ever get to see her brothers again? Would her dad ever know what happened to her?

Images of them all swam up in her head, almost vividly real in the closed darkness of her cell. Dad would be so sad and worried... Sokka would be angry at her, she was sure. Angry for putting them all in danger, but he would be worried, too, and cover it up with bad jokes. And Zuko... he would be so disappointed. For stealing, for putting everyone in the danger she had, but mostly for sitting in the cell and feeling sorry for herself, for giving up.

*What do I do?* she thought, *Aang needs me, but I don't know how to get out of here.*

If she half squinted her eyes she could imagine her brother standing there, arms crossed and his good eye narrowed. His voice would have been just a little harsh: *It didn't matter what she did. As long as she did something. As long as she didn't give up.*

"Easy for you to say," Katara grumbled.

Her voice had been louder than she meant, and Aang raised his eyes to look at her. "Huh?"

"Nothing." Katara shook her head, banishing the apparition from her mind. Then she got up and walked to the set of bars separating her cell from Aang's. She meant only to check up on him, and maybe to try to apologize – just one more time – for letting him down. Her fingers curled around the bars, and she realized they were vaguely wet.

Curiously, she ran two fingers down the length of the steel from as high as she could reach down to the floor. She came away with a drop of water – just one – clinging to the tip of her finger.

She gasped, curling her fingers around it, and clutching the droplet against her breast like a talisman. "Aang! Can you scoot over here? I have an idea."
The young monk was exhausted, but at Katara's pleading, he shifted, dragging chains and heavy weights until he sat as near to the dividing bars as his tether allowed. His hands could only reach up to his waist and he had to nearly bend double to rub his eyes. "Wha's'it?" he asked, thickly.

She held of her palm, and the now frozen drop of water glittered like a diamond in the low light. "See if you can bend this into one of the locks in your chains. If we freeze more of it inside the lock might break. You bend it inside the lock, and I'll see if I can get more I—"

But she got no further than that.

There hadn't been any warning. The thick steel inner walls of these Fire Nation ships didn't allow for the sounds of footsteps to come through from the corridor beyond. Katara didn't even hear the cell door being unlatched. Suddenly, the door was thrown open and a large figure of a man stood in the doorway, the light from the torches outside outlining him in a menacing halo.

Katara snatched her hand back, but the man didn't seem to notice. He strode confidently in, and as soon as he moved from the bright light she recognized him at last: Zhao, the commander who had attacked Kyoshi Island and who had tied herself and her brothers up in the Fire Temple.

Aang tried to stand – at least, his heavy chains rattled as he shifted around. They were too heavy. The Commander didn't see him to have eye for him anyway. He strode right up to Katara's cell and leered in at her.

"I thought you should know Prince Iroh has put quite the bounty on your little companions heads. By morning every man, woman and child who can hold a spear from the village will be after them." He paused then, holding her gaze while her heart felt plunged in ice-water. "Dead, or alive."

She stared at him, her chest and throat too constricted to speak. *All her fault... It was all her fault...*

It was Aang who spoke. "What do you want?"

"It's really very simple. Even you should be able to understand." Zhao looked to the side, glancing at the bound Avatar with mild curiosity and then pretending to be absorbed with picking off an invisible piece of off his immaculate sash of rank. "It's in my best interest, and that of your two friends, if I find them first. You have my word that a hair won't be singed off their scruffy little heads. Tell me where they are and they stay alive. Or let the greedy villagers find them... and bring them in however they want."

"No." The word came strong from her lips, with unexpected force. She took a step to the bars, and although the commander didn't flinch back, she felt his attention slide back to her.

"Don't be foolish, girl. This may be their only chance." A deliberate pause. "Don't tell me you would rather have their blood on your hands?"

Katara flinched as if she had been struck again, and she saw his satisfied smile as the words hit their mark. But she didn't step back. She lifted one hand, touching the blue pendant on her mother's necklace. It gave her strength and hope. "No," she repeated. "And you can search all you want, but Sokka and Zuko will never let you find them. Not until they want to be found."

"No." The word came strong from her lips, with unexpected force. She took a step to the bars, and although the commander didn't flinch back, she felt his attention slide back to her.

"Don't be foolish, girl. This may be their only chance." A deliberate pause. "Don't tell me you would rather have their blood on your hands?"

His lip curled. "You've had your chance, little girl—" Then he stopped, literally mid-sentence. His amber eyes flicked back and forth, and Katara watched him warily, one hand still to her necklace, the other clutching the frozen droplet of water. But the commander only smiled – an oily smile that didn't fail to send another shiver up her spine. "Yes... yes, of course. How interesting." His eyes refocused back on her and he gave a nod. "You have helped me, after all, water peasant." Then, before she
"What was that about?" Katara asked, but only got a shrug from Aang.

Her cheeks were wet. Zhao's offer had upset her more than she wanted to admit, and she angrily tried to wipe the lingering tears away, only to think better of it. A moment later two more drops of water had joined her collection.

She squared her shoulders, forcing her fear turn into determination. Yes, this was her fault, and she was going to do everything in her power to fix it. She'd work on Aang's chains all night, the whole journey to the Fire Nation without sleeping, if she had to.

"Aang, sit up," she said, when the young monk put his head down for a moment to rest. "We've got work to do."

Commander Zhao's booted steps echoed sharply in the halls and corridors. He was grinning to himself, probably drawing the curious gazes of the lesser ranked officers, but at that moment he didn't care.

Protocol and common sense demanded that the ship depart immediately to the Fire Nation once the Avatar had been locked safely in chains. Yet they had stayed with Prince Iroh insisting that that the search for the two Water Tribe boys continue. Zhao himself had been stopped from executing the firebending abomination on their last encounter at the Fire Temple. Why?

And now, it all made sense.

Zhao did not have to ask the girl which of the two boys had been named Zuko. He had thought the annoying Water Tribe firebender had been an abomination of some sort, perhaps borne out of a hybrid coupling. But Zuko? The famous, deceased **Prince Zuko**? The boy was around the same age… It would explain the bending talent, Iroh's strange reluctance to leave without him. It more than fit.

How the boy had come to the Water Tribe, Commander Zhao could not imagine. He cared even less. Prince Iroh was obviously attempting to avert a major scandal – a member of the royal family turned traitor. Such a shame.

Such an opportunity.

The boy's worth would only be second to the capture of the Avatar in the Fire Lord's eyes. He who brought him in would gain the honor. A stroke of luck had granted Iroh the Avatar, but if Zhao were the one to bring in the disgraced prince…

Zhao's grin became wider and he laughed aloud again, letting it echo in the halls around him.
Zuko woke to a hand on his shoulder. He sat up, blinking, rubbing at his bad eye which felt dry and was making half of his world look fuzzy and indistinct. It was early – earlier than he was used to for the sun hadn't even started to rise yet. But he recognized Sokka's shape in the shadows, and after a few moments he saw that his brother was wet, soaked to the bone and shivering in the cold pre-morning air.

Only then did Zuko register the hard patter of rain along the tent walls. Another storm must have blown in while Sokka was taking his watch.

"Take my parka," Zuko said. "I'll be fine for a bit without it."

Sokka shook his head. He was grinning in between chattering teeth. This kind of damp cold was nothing to him, he who had known harsher conditions from the first day of his life. "I got it all figured out. We're going to be able to get into the Fire Nation ship completely undetected, right under Prince Iroh's nose."

"What?" Zuko paused, mid-yawn. "How?"

Sokka gestured excitedly for Zuko to get up. He did, still rubbing his eye, and followed him outside. Some of the coals from the fire hadn't been drowned by the rain yet, and they threw flickering shadows on the ground. It had been obvious Sokka had been spending his entire watch working on his plan, because the now soggy ground all around the tent was covered in little diagrams, arrows, and pictures all scratched out with the sharp point of a stick. Half of them, it seemed, had been scratched out again, and although Zuko turned his head this way and that, he couldn't make heads or beaver-moose tail's out of any of it.

He left it up to his brother to explain.

"My instinct tell me that Prince Iroh is still hanging around for something – probably us or else he'd be off to the Fire Nation with Aang in tow." Sokka said. "All we have to do is get a hold of some Fire Nation uniforms, sneak on the ship, find Katara and Aang, free them, and then escape back to shore with one of their own lifeboats."

Zuko stared at him for a moment. He wasn't quite sure if it was because he was still waking up, or because Sokka's plan was really that bad. "How exactly," he asked picking one aspect, "are we supposed to get Fire Nation uniforms?"

Sokka grinned and the light of the fire caught the blue in his eyes, making them glint like the sharp edge of a knife. "That will be the easy part."
By the time the first sliver of sunlight had crested over the east horizon, Sokka and Zuko were back among the buildings and alleyways of the little fishing village.

The residents themselves were beginning to stir – good fishing waited for no man – and soon even the rain-soaked air was thick with the scents of woodsmoke and cooking. It was a painful, gut-cramping reminder to the two boys that they hadn't eaten since yesterday afternoon.

But there was nothing to be done about it. The rain was really falling now, pouring down in thick drops and making them wish that they hadn't left their oil-skinned parkas back with Appa. But heavy jackets wouldn't fit under uniforms. They ducked in the alleyway nearest to the piers where they could have the best view of the Fire Nation ship, avoiding sheets of runoff from the nearby rooftops.

They didn't have to wait for long. In the grey air they could soon see figures in red armor strolling along the top-deck, checking the mooring and doing basic chores. A few minutes later, the rampart lowered and five or six other figures streamed out in full Fire Nation armor.

The men were carrying something – scrolls, orders to be sent out, perhaps. It didn't matter. Zuko felt Sokka's tension as the soldiers peeled off in different directions, one heading right past their hiding place. The two boys crouched low, Sokka's hand on his whale-bone machete, Zuko barehanded. They would have to be quick, and above all, silent. If the soldier alerted the others…. If he was able to summon help…

The tension in their frames tightened as the man drew nearer, until he was three steps away from their sheltered hiding place – and none the wiser.

Zuko leapt, his legs contracting as if they were tight springs finally set loose. He grabbed the man from behind, hand clasped tightly over his mouth to keep him from shouting. And with a wrench of strength borne by adrenaline, pulled him back into the alleyway.

But this man was a soldier. He let go of the scrolls, setting them loose and rolling along the wet cobblestone ground, grabbed Zuko's arm, and doubled forward. He flipped the hapless boy over his back into a pile of empty wooden fish-crates.

Sokka was there in an instant, swinging the base of his club at the man's head to knock him down. He hit his shoulder instead. The man snarled, and if he were a firebender Sokka would have been done, but they had luck on their side. Sokka was grabbed and kneed painfully in the stomach with enough force to leave him wheezing.

Zuko looked up to see the soldier reaching behind himself, his quick fingers unbuckling the sheath to reveal a wicked looking dagger. Zuko leapt up, half-fighting his way out of the crates, and tackled soldier just as he the dagger came free from his belt. It was sloppy, uncoordinated – panicked. But it drove the man away from his brother. Together, both soldier and boy fell to the ground, and the dagger came away from his grip and clattered into a grimy corner.

Zuko had taken the worst of the fall – the man was over him, the weight of his armor pinning him down. Zuko shoved his legs up, trying to get room between them to firebend. His palms sparked, but
no flame caught because hard fingers were now gripped to his throat, fingers pressing in on his windpipe.

Zuko choked, trying to twist away, turning enough to clock the man right in the jaw. But the soldier was intent – his hard amber eyes met Zuko's, his jaw flaked with spittle – or maybe that was Zuko's too… he couldn't tell because the edges of the world were growing dark. He clawed at man's hands, his lungs spasming.

The sound of running feet, and an impact as if very far away— Sokka did something – Zuko couldn't quite tell, but suddenly the weight and pressure was gone.

He rolled away, coughing, his arms and legs tingling like they had been cut off from blood.

When he could sit up, he saw that Sokka and the soldier were on their feet, crouched and circling each other like wild beasts. Somehow, the soldier had gotten back his dagger, and Sokka his whale-bone machete. Sokka had a wicked slice along his forearm which was weeping blood. He seemed not to notice, but the Fire Nation soldier was grinning in triumph, twirling his bloodied dagger in his hand in silent mocking.

Zuko didn't think about what he had to do next. He was still gasping, still lightheaded from lack of oxygen, but he took an deep breath – more of a gasp - forcing the air through his bruised windpipe. When he exhaled, it was fire. He crouched low, and with one sideways sweep of his arms, sent the lash of flame out. The tip curled around the man's wrist, making him jump back, dropping his weapon.

Sokka was ready; he stepped forward with a sharp kick, catching the soldier right in his kneecap.

The man cried out – the most sound any of them had made so far - and fell to his knees. Sokka hit him right on the top of his head with the butt of his whale-bone machete.

With a final groan, the man sunk to his knees and fell over, unconscious.

At first the boys could do nothing more than lean over and pant, trying to get their wind back and steady shaky legs. That was harder than they could have ever expected. It had nearly taken everything out of them. When Sokka spoke, he was echoing both of their thoughts.

"I don't think I can do that again."

"Yeah, no kidding," Zuko husked. He leaned against the far wall, massaging his neck. A ring of vivid red and purple finger-sized marks were already standing out against his pale skin. At that moment he looked more bruise and scar than skin.

Sokka was gingerly unwrapping his arm guard, trying not to wince. Zuko came over to examine the wound: The white fabric had prevented the dagger from slicing to the bone, but the cut was long and was bleeding freely. It needed stitches, but that would have to wait. The only thing Zuko could do for the moment was wrap it as tight as he could.

Through the gap in the alleyway he could clearly see the outline of both the Fire Nation and pirate ship’s. "There has to be a different way to get in there."

But Sokka wasn't listening. He had bent over and scooped up one of the scrolls the soldier had dropped, giving a choked yelp when his own likeness stared back at him. "I don't have an earring! Since when do I have an earring?"

Zuko snatched the scroll out of his brother's hands to look at it himself: It was a wanted poster, and
sure enough, the picture vaguely looked like Sokka… if Sokka were twenty-years-old and had somehow become a pirate. Zuko's own picture wasn't much better. "Who drew this? My scars are on the wrong side, and..." he trailed off, finally reading instead of gaping. "They're offering five-hundred royal backed gold pieces for us. Alive."

His brother rubbed his chin, and when he grinned it was distinctly wolfish. "Hmm... That's a lot of money. I wonder how much they'd pay for just one of us?"

Zuko glared at him.

"No, I'm serious," Sokka nudged the still unconscious soldier with the tip of his seal-hide boot. "That's a lot of good money. No wonder this guy didn't yell out for help. He thought he could take us both and then collect the reward himself."

"He nearly did."

"Yeah, so let's finish what he started."

Zuko started to nod, agreeing, and then stopped. He looked down at the crumpled guard, at the rust-red uniform, at the faceplate. His lips thinned and when he spoke his voice was flat. "I guess it'll have to be me then?"

"What?"

"You know, in the armor with the helmet." But it was the piece over his face that he mimed when he spoke. It was clear what exactly he was referring to even if Sokka could ignore the suddenly too stiff way he stood, the way his Adams apple bobbed continuously as he swallowed. He had known what the plan was, but now that it was happening he found he wasn't comfortable with the idea. Not of himself being in that uniform.

Sokka stared at him for the count of three. Then he snorted. "Playing dress-up doesn't make it the real deal, you know." A pause. "Besides, you're going to be the prisoner."

"What?" Zuko looked back and forth between the crumpled guard and his brother, torn between relief and alarm. "Sokka, I'm six inches taller than you. No one is going to believe—"

"Two inches! And Gran-Gran said I was due for another growth spurt anytime now!" Sokka snapped. "Anyway, Prince Iroh isn't even going to notice me. It's you he wants."

The impact of that statement at first flew right over Zuko's head. He was still concerned with the plan. But then, when Sokka didn't say anything more, and bent to start to work the heavy armor off the Fire Nation officer, he frowned. "What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing." Sokka muttered. "Help me with the catches here."

Zuko knelt down, but it was to only get eye-level with his brother. "What did you mean, Sokka?"

Sokka glanced up at him, and there was something in his deep blue eyes... some hesitation that Zuko didn't like at all. Maybe if it were Katara—he could always read her emotions like a book, and she the same way with him. Sokka was good at keeping his brilliant, and occasionally eccentric musings to himself. "Iroh really is—" he started, and then again came that strange hesitation, as if he were biting back words. Sokka glanced away, avoiding his gaze. "They won't care much about me, except for maybe slave labor in a mine or something, and I don't want to have to spell it out to you, but you're a firebender. It's not enough that Iroh gets the Avatar, or else he would have halfway back to
OoOoO

They ended up hog-tying the still unconscious soldier and leaving him in a mostly dry area of the alleyway, snug between two fish crates. It took still a few minutes to figure out how exactly the complicated Fire Nation uniform was supposed to fit over Sokka's skinny frame. The soldier was taller and meatier, and while the armor plates didn't exactly match-up, they figured it would be okay unless someone looked too close.

Finally, with Zuko's hands secured behind his back with rope tied in an easy Water Tribe knot set to give with one sharp tug, Sokka lead him out.

"Don't walk like that. You're too proud," Sokka hissed. He was struggling to see out of the narrow bone-white face plate and over Zuko's head to look where he was going. "I just beat you up, remember?"

His younger brother growled something under his breath, but he did hunch over, eyes trained on the ground.

If this were real, he thought, there would be no way he would be going this quietly.

"You! Stop right there!"

Both brothers froze right in their steps and turned. A Fire Nation soldier wearing a rank-pin of a lieutenant was behind them. It was he who had spoken, and his golden-brown eyes swept from Zuko to the uniformed Sokka and back again. His upper lip curled. "So you managed to catch one of the kids, did you? What about the other one?"

"Oh him?" Sokka's voice came out an octave above even his natural range, and he paused, coughing dramatically into his hand. When he spoke again, his voice was low, gruff, and to Zuko's ears, very fake. "I was out putting up posters, and saw them. They tried to run, but this one here was slow." He slapped Zuko's shoulder, causing the other boy to shoot him a dirty look.

"I see." The lieutenant's eyes narrowed, but it wasn't in suspicion. It was greed. "Well even if we don't find the other, that's still half the reward."

"Uh, yeah," agreed Sokka, bobbing his head. "So... I'm going to just put him with the other prisoners and, uh, go collect my money—"

"Oh, no need for that." And now the lieutenant was smiling. "You haven't heard? Commander Zhao wants to interrogate the captives the moment they're brought in. He'll want to see this one, first. I'll accompany you."
Zuko's spine straightened the moment the Commander's name was uttered. "What?!" he barked, without thinking, breaking his persona as the beaten down Water Tribe boy. "No, I'm not going there. Where's my sister?"

The lieutenant's grin darkened into something sinister, and he took a threatening step towards the boy. But Sokka got there first.

Thinking fast, Sokka slapped Zuko hard upside the head – a ringing clout that was meant to stun more than hurt. "Silence, prisoner!" he snapped, and his other hand tightened on Zuko's wrist.

The unspoken message was clear: *Shut up, Zuko. Let me do the talking!*

The lieutenant huffed out a chuckle. "Water Tribe. Bunch of savages don't know when keep quiet. Maybe the Commander will spare us the trouble and just burn out his tongue."

"Yeah, you said it!" Sokka's laugh of agreement was high pitched, and painfully forced. But when the lieutenant turned to lead the way towards the docked ship, he pushed Zuko forward, making him follow. "Just play along," Sokka whispered, while the man was a few steps ahead. "He's just in it for the reward. Don't make him suspect anything."

Zuko nodded once, but his shoulders were tight even as he slumped back down into his downtrodden hunch.

The lieutenant led the way confidently up the rampart, and through a maze of metal hallways, stopping at one unremarkable door. He knocked twice.

"Enter!" called a muffled voice, from inside.

One firm push from the lieutenant and the door swung open to reveal an unexpectedly wide storage room; rows and rows of spears and blades hung from the walls, their killing edges polished to a gleam. And in the middle of it, overseeing an inspection, was Commander Zhao flanked by no less than five men.

The Commander turned. "This had better be —" He stopped, his eyes falling on Zuko. "Well, well, well. What do we have here?"

Taking the cue, Sokka pushed Zuko forward a step or two, one hand still clasped firmly about his brother's wrist in a silent plea to behave.

The lieutenant leading them threw a crisp salute, which Sokka echoed, albeit a little sloppily. He took in a breath to speak, but again, the lieutenant cut him off. "I brought in the Water Tribe boys, sir. Just as ordered."

Typical Fire Nation to be taking all the credit where none was due. Sokka opened his mouth to object – his mouth had always been a step ahead of his brain.

He caught the plural, *Water Tribe boys*, a second too late.

Sokka stepped back. The lieutenant was quicker. He turned, and with one easy movement, hooked a finger under Sokka's too large helmet and wrenched it off – exposing the other Water Tribe boy underneath.

Zuko's hands came free from the deliberately loose rope, already sparking with intent, but there was little he could do. He and Sokka were already surrounded by Zhao's men, faced by the pointy end of several spears.
The lieutenant tossed the helmet it away with a sneer. "You can't really have expected me to fall for that, savage? That's the oldest trick in the scrolls."

"Oh, I don't know," said Sokka, with forced casualness. "You Fire Nation guys are pretty stupid."

A couple of faceless soldiers growled at this, but Commander Zhao only smiled. "Excellent work, Lieutenant Izhar. You will be commended in my report."

"Thank you, sir," said the lieutenant with a pleased bow.

Zhao turned his attention once more to the boys. "Impersonating a Fire Nation officer – that's like dressing up a hog-monkey and expecting it to dance." But his eyes were trained not to Sokka now, but to Zuko.

Zuko clenched his fists. He locked gazes with Zhao, stepping forward stiffly, almost against his own will, bringing his chest up to the sharp spear points. "Release us at once, Zhao!" It was nothing short of an order, somehow powerful, but equally ridiculous coming from the Water Tribe teen.

"Or what, exactly?" Zhao's voice was low, almost cloying.

Sokka stepped up, coming shoulder to shoulder his with his brother. "You think you're pretty tough with all these guys around!" but his words fell oddly flat. There was a sort of pressure in the air, a pressure that he was only starting to become aware of. Zuko and Zhao were glaring at one another, ignoring Sokka as if he hadn't spoken. Maybe they hadn't heard him at all.

Around them, high up on the walls, the torches were flickering. It was impossible to say who was doing it, or maybe both were for the flames were jerking, flicking back and forth as if caught in the middle of a gale. But the air was still. Still and thick with tension.

Zuko's lips had peeled back in a silent snarl. "I fought you at Kyoshi Island. I'll do it again."

"Is that a challenge?"

"Yes!" Zuko leaned forward, nearly vibrating, passionate for the fight. "If I win, you let us go free. Me, the Avatar, my sister and my brother."

"What is going on here?" The question, no less of an order than Zuko's had been, cut through the room with the sharpness of a knife. Instantly, the almost palatable, intangible tension was gone. The torches stopped their wild dancing. Every head turned.

Prince Iroh stood in the opened doorway.

"I think you heard it for yourself, General," said Zhao. He seemed very pleased with himself, like a man who had outwitted a wily opponent. "The boy has challenged me to an Agni Kai, and I was about to accept."

"Agni Kai?" Sokka hadn't heard the word before, although it did sound… Fire Nationy. He glanced at Zuko and saw that his good eye had widened.

"What?" And for a moment – just a brief moment in time – Sokka saw the same exact expression of dawning horror on Iroh's face. He and Zuko did look a lot alike, give or take fifty years and fifty pounds.

Zhao's smile was oily. "Don't think you can stop this, Iroh. Barbarian as he is, he is also a firebender. It is his right." He turned, nearly grandstanding for his small audience, and gave a mocking bow.
which set Sokka's teeth on edge. "And I accept your challenge, Prince Zuko."

The words and the name swept over the watching soldiers – including the ones who had crowded in after Iroh to see what all the yelling had been about. The sudden surge of shocked murmurs from so many throats all at once filled the room, overpowering Zuko's loud, indignant, "I am not a prince!"

Zhao was still smiling around, and with a final smirk he brushed past the two Water Tribe boys, shouldering Zuko in his wake. "Outside, on the foredeck. I'm going to enjoy watching you burn, boy."

Iroh's expression was thunderous. "Leave us." His order, while not loud, made every watching man scurry to the exit.

The door shut behind them, leaving only the aged prince and the two teens.

And even though there was only one of him, and two of them, and he stood below Sokka's height with his hands clasped within the thick folds of his robes, they didn't move, didn't reach for any of the weapons lining the walls.

The torchlights were flickering, flaring up in bright yellows and reds. There was no doubt that it was Iroh's power this time. When he spoke, however, his voice was steely, yet calm.

"You cannot hope to win against Zhao. He is considered a master among his peers."

"I don't need your advice!" Zuko snapped.

"Wait." Sokka held up a hand before Iroh could reply, turning to his brother. If someone had to inject a little bit of sanity in this situation, it might as well be him. "What exactly is this Agni Kai thing? What do you have to do?"

"I think it's like…" Zuko's gaze turned inward, as if he were grappling with the half-formed notion himself and trying to put it into terms both he and Sokka would understand. "Like an honor duel." Which was done by two warriors out on the ice, and usually stopped at first blood.

Iroh's expression was pinched. "It is a fire duel, nephew. And you have challenged a master."

Sokka stared his brother. "What, are you crazy?"

"I have to do this, Sokka. If I win he's agreed to let Aang and Katara go." But his face had gone even paler than usual, nearly white about his lips. He looked scared. He looked angry.

"And what if you lose? No, wait." Sokka turned to Iroh, and in his mind's eye he saw the scene his spirit guide, Lu Ten, had showed him which had happened so long ago; Iroh comforting an upset Zuko, and patiently teaching him a firebending trick to cheer him up. Iroh had cared for him, once.

"You say you're his uncle, right?" he asked, and ignored Zuko's sputtered outrage. "Then get him out of this."

"I don't need his help!" Zuko snapped, but Sokka wasn't listening. He was looking at Iroh, holding onto the image of the boy and his uncle. He was family, and that had to mean something… even to the Fire Nation.

"Just let us go. You can say we took you by surprise, or something. No one has to know." Sokka swallowed, feeling sick at his next word. "Please."

Iroh bowed his head. He looked old, then. Older than Sokka had thought. After a long, long moment
he spoke. "Zuko, if you retract this foolish challenge, I will release this boy here." He looked at Sokka. "And his sister."

Sokka waited a beat, but that was the extent of Iroh's offer. *Fire Nation*, he thought savagely, and he knew he had been an idiot to even hope. They were cruel monsters, and this one was no different. "What?! What about Aang?" His voice went up and down an octave in mingled disbelief and anger. "What about Zuko?"

"It is my duty to bring the Avatar back to the Fire Nation. Zuko must return to his family."

"You—"

"No," Zuko said, before Sokka could really tell the old Prince what was on his mind. "No deal."

Then he turned to his brother, gripping his arm above the elbow, facing him not man to man, not even brother to brother, but warrior to chief. "Listen, I know I can do this. I don't know how or why, but I'm not crazy. I know I can defeat him, Sokka."

Sokka stared at him for a long, long moment. There was nothing weak in Zuko's gaze. Finally, he felt himself nodding, giving permission he wasn't aware until that moment he had to give. He trusted him; trusted in his judgment.

"Fine," he said, and Zuko's grip tightened in gratitude.

"Prince Zuko." Iroh's voice was grave. "Whether you wish to admit it or not, the Fire Nation is your true home. I have done what I could to keep your identity a secret—Perhaps I hoped you would come to your senses. Zhao will work tirelessly to make sure you are seen as a traitor to your people. You must remember this; you are of royal blood. No matter what the outcome of this duel, I will make sure you can return in honor."

Zuko lifted his chin. "I don't remember the Fire Nation," he said. "And I don't remember you. The Water Tribe took me in and raised me. Sokka's father adopted me into his family, despite what I am. *They* are my people. You're just wasting your breath."

A brassy gong rung out from somewhere up above, almost as if to punctuate his words. Iroh closed his eyes, but he did not move. "It's time. I will lead the way. My only advice to you is this; Zhao is overconfident in his abilities. If you focus on your basics and take him by surprise, you may live past today, Nephew." The last word seemed to be almost said out of spite, as if Zuko's speech had not mattered in the least.

Then, before either could respond Iroh turned, opening the door once again. As soon as he was out, his pet flying lemur settled on his shoulder, as if the creature had been waiting outside for his return.

If it was on the boy's mind to make a run for freedom (Sokka, at least, considered it) the idea was quashed by the sight of Fire Nation guards posted every ten feet or so along the corridor. Plus Prince Iroh himself.

Sokka sighed and very quietly whispered, "Are you sure about this?"

Zuko visibly swallowed, but his back was straight – if not for the tightness in his jaw, he would have looked completely cool and certain. "I refuse to let him win."

Sokka nodded, although he wasn't sure if Zuko meant Zhao… or Iroh.
Agni Kai

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

This cute art is by Chomocho!
"Prince Zuko, have you forgotten what happened last time you dueled a master?"
"I will never forget."

Iroh and Zuko – The Southern Air Temple

In the end, it was impossible to break Aang's restraints through freezing and accelerated rust. The locks were too well made, the metal too refined. It was only by accident—an annoyed flick of her fingers an hour or two into trying to break the lock, that Katara got the idea of using her carefully gathered droplets of water as a cutting tool.

It was hard work, and she didn't dare try the technique too close to Aang's bare skin. The half ounce or so of water she had managed to collect from condensation worked like a small knife or a file. It was slow; every cut at first was shallow, a bare scratch across hardened metal. She also had trouble hitting the same place twice.

Hours of trying to airbend the heavy chains off and dragging them around the cell had left Aang exhausted. He couldn't keep his eyes open, no matter how many times Katara snapped at him to stay still. Eventually, she let him sleep… he needed it, and as the dull night wore on she was having trouble keeping her own head from bobbing. Once or twice she jerked back into alertness with her bending water puddled by her knee.

But as she practiced, she grew better. The shallow scores in the metal grew deeper and deeper. Finally, with a sharp snap and a clink of metal, the first of Aang's heavy chains was severed in two.

Katara's gasp of delight woke Aang. He blinked sleepily and rubbed at his head. Then he realized he could move that arm more freely. "Katara?" he asked, then caught sight of the broken chain. "Oh wow, you did it!"

"Shh! Not so loud!" She threw a cautious look at the door, but they'd had no more visitors since Commander Zhao. "Here, toss me the length of your other chain and I'll start working on that."

"Why? Just cut the shackles off my wrist. It'll be quicker." He held out his wrists, and the thinner chain linking them, expectantly, but she drew back, biting her lip.

"I could cut you like that." She couldn't take it if anyone else got hurt over her foolishness. "I'll just cut the big ones off. The main links are far enough away from your skin."

He just smiled. "You won't hurt me, Katara. You're—"

"I said no, Aang." She fixed him with a hard glare until he looked away and sighed.

"Well, I can't exactly do a lot of airbending like this. Maybe the guards will have keys to unlock the chain in the middle."

It took her another half hour to cut the rest of the main chains.

He stood, wobbling for a moment as he adjusted again to the weight of his own body. He waved off Katara's concern, and after a few moments and a couple of deep breaths, said, "You have got to
"show me that trick later." And he smiled.

"I just made it up tonight..." Although she blushed at his praise.

After that, it was little effort to cut through the bars of their holding cell. Katara cut and Aang rushed in, quick as thought even restricted by the weight of the shackles, to catch the bars before they could hit the ground and cause a clatter. Then they squeezed through the gap.

They paused before opening the door, catching each other's eyes. Aang twisted his hands rapidly, the chain on his wrist taunt. The air pressure seemed to change in the room, pressing against their eardrums, and a spherical ball of swirling blue wind coalesced in his hand. He looked up from it, and with an answering nod, she took the handle.

Two guards were standing there to either side chatting amiably. Katara saw for one frozen moment their shock and surprise before Aang released his hold on the bended ball of energy, unleashing gale-force blast of air. The two men hit the far wall and slumped down like limp rag-dolls. Unconscious.

Katara and Aang leapt out into the hallway, elements ready to face... nothing.

The corridor was empty.

They looked at each other, shrugged. Without a word, they started down the metal hallway.

They didn't know where they were going—it wasn't like there weren't any helpful signs on the ship's bulkheads or the doors—but by the third empty hallway, Katara's head was ringing with the strangeness of their escape. Where were all the guards? She took the corridor to the right, and Aang fell into step behind her, awkward and short-stepped because of his remaining restraints.

"Katara!" he gasped, "Wait!"

She did, paused to let him catch up, she peaked around a corner. The corridor beyond was deserted. "What's wrong?"

Aang drew in beside her, holding the short length of chain that stretched between his wrists so it wouldn't jangle. "We can't leave yet. I still have to get my glider." He looked up at her, his grey eyes large and pleading. "It's the only thing I have left from the monks, and I don't want to lose that too."

Katara sighed, but she knew how important the glider was to him. Unconsciously, her hand stilled over the blue stone of her necklace. "Okay," she said. "They have to have some sort of supply room or something..."

They set out again, jogging down one stark, empty corridor after another. Steel riveted doors stood out on either side of the halls, and most of them were unlocked. But those only led into further corridors, short sets of stairs up or down to the next level, or utility closets. One door opened to reveal a grey bay stuffed with a series of pipes, some dripping water. Katara pulled the liquid to her with a smooth reeling motion of her hands and collected it into a globe the size of her head.

Even chained, Aang he was quick on his feet in a sprint and could open and look into three rooms for every one of hers. He stood in front of a large, likely door now. "I've got a good feeling about this one," he said, pushing it open with a flourish.

Someone had set up a flimsily card table directly inside, and four beefy Fire Nation soldiers sat around it. The biggest one had already leapt from his seat, throwing down his cards and declaring, "Ha! Full dragon clutch beats two pair!" Then he paused, turning to stare at the open door.
"Heh." Aang gave a shy wiggle of his fingers. "Wrong door."

He slammed it shut as the soldiers scrambled to their feet.

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The storm had been gathering strength through the day. Now the bruise-colored clouds had finally broken wide open and the two Water Tribe boys and Prince Iroh stepped into driving rain. The wind was howling like a thing alive, driving the rain sideways one second and straight the next – pelting down with such force that the droplets felt as if they were being bended from above.

Both boys paused at the threshold under the eves to stare outside. Through the gray, soaked air they could see two orderly lines of red uniformed soldiers standing the parameter of the deck, leaving the middle wide and open like an arena. It seemed the entire compliment of the ship had braved the storm to witness the Agni Kai.

Sokka shot his brother a look, both eyebrows raised in silent question. Are you sure about this?

Zuko’s jaw tightened. He nodded, resolute before he stepped forward out into the rain.

A shift in the wind seemed to clear the rainy air for a moment, almost as if a curtain was opening.

Standing not thirty feet away, with a calculated smile on his face, was Commander Zhao. He was unexpectedly shirtless, save for a loose wrap around his shoulder the color of dried blood. He looked predatory; eager in his stance with arms and shoulders thick with ropy muscle.

Zuko’s step faltered, and someone put a bracing hand to his shoulder. Prince Iroh. Zuko recoiled from the touch, but the message behind it was clear. He straightened his shoulders and stepped forward—stiff and awkward and trying to look like he knew what he was doing.

Zhao yelled something from his side of the arena – Zuko could not hear the words over the rain and the wind, but guessed it was some sort of insult.

A man stationed off to the side struck a mallet-shaped beater to a gong once again. The crash of trembled the pooled water on the deck. It seemed to be a signal, and with a final smirk Commander Zhao turned his back on the boy and knelt down, one fist flat against the steel deck.

Zuko just stood, his own fists half-raised, already soaked through with wet hair dripping in his eyes, and unsure what to do next. He heard a jeer from the right coming from the watching soldier… although half-blinded by the rain he couldn’t tell exactly from where. All the amber-eyed, pale soldiers tended to look the same to him anyway. He could not even identify Sokka, who was still dressed like one of them.

And still Zhao knelt. What was he waiting for? Was it a trick? Some kind of ruse? Zuko took a half step forward. Now, in the stillness before the duel, with the knowledge of what he must do, he was
suddenly aware of the way his own muscles were burning from exhaustion; the combination of staying up the night perfecting his fire-whip and the grueling fight with the Fire Nation soldier earlier this morning. He was aware, too, of the sound of his own ragged breath in his ears and the searing reminder down his wind-pipe of being half choked earlier.

For the first time, Zuko felt doubt swell into his mind, quenching the fires of anger which had sustained him this far. He and Katara had practiced for years, but only had come up with a few moves. Would it be enough?

It was pouring now. A coat of standing water layered the deck; much more was coming down than could be diverted away, and the air was thick with fog and moist. How anyone was supposed to bend fire in conditions like this?

He could turn now. He knew Iroh would be waiting safely to the side, probably under some shelter. Zuko knew he could still accept his offer and Sokka and Katara would be safe. Maybe he could find a way to free Aang on his own – No, no… Iroh would take him back to the Fire Nation. He would never go back.

He would die first.

The gong struck again – a third, final time, and Commander Zhao rose, the coverlet wrapping his shoulders fluttering away impressively in the wind. Zuko swallowed hard, but held steady. Across the deck, gold eyes met amber.

Commander Zhao was first to strike.

He stepped forward, unleashing a jet of fire which was like an explosion on its own. Zuko was right; the rain did help diminish the flame, but there was plenty of it to spare. Massive, hot, and strangely wild at the edges, it seemed to fill the entire area between them. Zuko couldn't have avoided it if he wanted to.

So he stood his ground, instead.

Taking a deep steady breath, he swung his arms out to the side to divert Zhao's fire. He then twisted his hands, forcing the flames around, behind and forward again – now his own – and back towards Zhao in a high, crashing wave that hissed and steamed in the rain-soaked air.

The Commander backed a step in surprise, but his own defending move was something Zuko had never seen before; strong and blocky with fists extended from his middle. The fire rolled off and around Zhao's shoulders into nothingness.

Then Zhao was on the offensive again, this time kicking and punching in bright flashes, sending thin powerful bolts like arrows which Zuko could only knock away with bursts of his own flame.

There was a lull as Zhao regathered his strength, and Zuko took it, running forward to meet the man head on. His own flames collapsed into a thin stream which he sent out, snapping, a deadly last of fire.

But the rain was pouring down, and the water pierced through the ribbon, and it was little effort for Zhao to knock it away.

One spin and a powerful kick and Zhao shot out a sharp blade of fire, aimed right for Zuko's chest.

Zuko sucked in a deep breath and brought his hands up, bringing with it a wall of flames, like a shield of ice Katara used. The thick firewall saved his life, but the amount of fire seemed to reach in
and pull all the breath from his lungs.

The force from Zhao's next blast knocked Zuko flat back onto the wet deck.

Zhao closed the distance at a quick sprint. He was grinning, his eyes alight with the anticipation of the kill.

Zuko rolled onto his feet, only quick reflexes allowing him to duck under a flaming fist. He saw an opening and took it; an awkward duck-footed step as he had slipped behind Zhao, palm directly on the center of his spine. He was still winded from his last effort, gasping for air – all breath control gone – but Aang's gentle instructions from their morning practice sessions floated back into his mind. When the Commander roared in surprise and twisted to shoot a killing blast to the right, Zuko stepped with him, keeping himself safely behind.

"Coward!" Zhao cried, now turning to the left, shooting another blast which hit nothing. "Face your death like a man!"

Zuko shifted again, putting an ankle in front of Zhao's next step. Their legs fouled, and the Commander lost his balance. He pin-wheeled his arms in an effort to stay upright, but it was no use. He fell to the deck with a heavy thud.

At that moment, Zuko should have struck. The commander was down. Zuko raced forward, pulling back his arm. Then their eyes met, and Zuko saw the naked fear in them.

He hesitated.

Zhao whipped his legs up, scissoring them in a blast of fire that was hot enough to evaporate all the rain within three feet to a rush of steam. Zuko ducked ungracefully away, and the commander leapt up to his feet.

He struck out at Zuko with unfancy palm strikes – simple, direct and powerful blasts which pounded at the boy and his thin fire-wall, driving him back step-by-step.

Zuko sucked in a breath and tried to blow it out again as flame. It wasn't enough. It was all he could do to keep a shield of flame up to take the strikes, keep the heat away enough to avoid being burned. It was thin in too many places. Zhao's flame licked eagerly at his outstretched hands—

With a yell, the Commander stepped forward with both fists outstretched in a forceful blast. Zuko tried to reach out to divert it, but his breath control was gone, his balance shaky. He managed to turn the fire, but the concussion hit him like a battering ram. He was knocked right onto his back, fallen for the final time.

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Aang staggered and would have tripped over his own ankle-chain had Katara not pulled him back up
by an elbow. Behind them, the card playing soldiers were in hot pursuit – although they had learned to keep a safe distance, wary of more thrown barbs of ice from Katara.

But now she was reduced to only a palmful of water, and they were racing for their lives.

They hit a staircase and ran up - Aang clumsily bending a blast of air behind them to lighten their feet. The next level was more nicely furnished than anything they had seen before, with red rugs and cheery looking torches burning upon the walls. The kids didn't pause to look, just blew past, cutting right and then left – only to stop short.

"Dead end!" Katara yelled. She skidded to a halt, but Aang didn't see her in time, crashing into her and knocking them both down. They got up in a moment, but the soldiers had rounded the last bend.

They were trapped.

The soldier in the front grinned under his sweaty beard. "There ain't no where else to go, kids. Give it up and maybe we'll put you back in your cells all nice-like."

Katara stepped forward, instinctively putting herself between her restrained friend and the firebenders. The water in her hand flowed to her fingers and crystallized into ice, but it was little and pathetic and they all knew it. "You'll have to get through me first."

"Aw, don't be like that little girl," another soldier leered, "What you gonna do? Splash us?"

All four of the men chuckled. The one in the front had a wide grin on his face. He pulled back his hand as if to strike, flames already licking at his knuckles. "Have it your way. I'm going to enjoy this, water bitch."

At that same moment, Aang touched Katara's arm. His eyes were half lidded, as if he were concentrating very hard on something inward. "Katara," he whispered, "get ready to run."

OoOoO

"Fire feels more like a heartbeat. It's not a friend. You can't turn your back on it, but if you respect it, it will keep you warm when you're cold, and help defend you against your enemies. The bender needs fire to live, just as the fire needs the bender."

Zuko's words flashed through Aang's mind, quick as thought. Peering past Katara, he ignored the taunting soldiers and focused instead on the flickering torches on either side of the hallway. And when he took a deep breath – in through his nose and exhaling out his mouth – the torches seemed to brighten and Aang felt a glimmer of something hot inside of him.

"Katara, get ready to run."

The soldier in front of them had already pulled his fist for a quick, deadly strike, but Aang was faster. He swept his arms out as if casting an invisible line. The nearest torch over the soldier's heads flared,
exploding outward into the corridor with a flash. It was all brightness and little heat, but the
distraction was enough. The men jumped back, and the firebender's own blast went wide as the
others fell into him.

Aang pushed Katara forward and they slipped past the jumped men. They sprinted down the
corridor, turning the corner just in time to avoid blasts of fire aimed at their backs.

Turning right led to another dead end, but there was a door off to the side – decorated in threaded
gold, and set slightly open. They rushed in, slamming the door behind them and throwing the lock.
With a press of her hands, Katara used the last of her water to freeze the seam of the door, just in
case.

The soldiers were on it immediately. She could hear them banging and cursing for her to let them in,
although Katara's unnaturally strong ice was holding for now. She resisted the urge to stick her
tongue at the door.

The room they found themselves in was... strange. Not at all what Katara expected to find in a Fire
Nation ship. A double set of fireplaces crackled merrily from each side. The walls were decorated
with richly colored hangings, a scattering of stringed instruments, and what looked to be a picture of
a lotus flower. The room smelled of old spices, faintly familiar, although she couldn't place it.

Aang let out a gasp beside her. "My air glider!" It lay propped against one wall and Aang stumbled
over to it, hugging it against his chest. Then he pulled back, looking ruefully at his wrists. "I can't fly
with these," he said, clinking the manacles ruefully.

"Well, there has to be a key around here somewhere." She went to a nearby desk and pulled at a one
of the drawers, but it was locked. "What is this place?"

"It's Iroh's room."

Katara looked up sharply at Aang, and he sort of gave a shrug before turning to a set of double doors
on the other side of the room. "Well, he was in here last time I was on the ship."

A chill went up Katara's spine. She glanced again to the door. The soldiers had stopped pounding
upon it, but there was an ominous red glow around the handle and she could see rivets of water
melting down the door. Her ice wasn't going to last for long. "Aang, we need to get out of here."
Abandoning the desk, she looked around for something – anything to help. A vase of flowers with
water in it. Anything.

"Katara, come look!"

Aang's panicked voice came from beyond the double doors. It led to a high balcony of some sort and
at first she couldn't see what was going on. She hadn't even known it was storming outside the ship,
but the rain was coming down in sheets so thick she could hardly tell what he was pointing at. Prince
Iroh's room and the balcony stood high over the foredeck of the ship, and she caught at first two neat
rows of armed men; nearly a ship's compliment worth. So that's where they had gone! So why—

A double flare of fire caught her attention. Two figures – firebenders – were fighting on the deck.
Both were dark haired, but the thinner of the two was dressed in familiar Water Tribe blue.

No...

"ZUKO!" she yelled, but the wind carried away her voice.

Aang gripped her arm to get her attention.
"We have to get down there. You have to cut these." He held up his chained wrists.

Katara shook her head, backing a step. "No. I can't. I—"

She was interrupted by loud explosion from back inside the room. The metal door lay half open, red with heat and smoking against the carpet. The explosion hadn't cleared the way for the soldiers completely, but it would only take one more.

Out on the deck, the figure of Zuko fell.

Aang's grey eyes caught hers. "You can do this, Katara. You're a great waterbender, and I trust you." She could only see calm certainty in his gaze. He had faith in her.

"O-okay," she said. Her voice just shook a little. "Hold out your arms. I'm going to try to make this fast."

Water droplets rose from the soaked deck, gathering under her fingertips. She brought it down in a slicing motion harder than she had before. It hit just where she had aimed it, right at the joint connecting the two pieces between his wrists. And with another snap the chains broke apart, falling into two pieces. She had sliced it in just one hit.

Aang rubbed at his freed wrists and grinned. "I bet they don't teach that sort of move in the waterbending scroll."

Katara grinned and another strike of the water and the chain linking Aang's feet were freed as well.

There was a final explosion from inside the room – so loud it rattled Katara's teeth. Aang snapped the airglider open, she gripped him around the waist and the wild-storm winds took them up into the air.

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Zhao advanced slowly, like a predator. A short length of chain lay on the deck by his feet, forgotten by those rushing to clear the deck for the Agni Kai. He picked it up, swinging it menacingly, striking the deck with sparks, and smirking when Zuko tried to scuttle away. Around him, the watching Fire Nation soldiers jeered.

Smirking, Zhao brought the line of chain wrapped in fire down.

Zuko rolled to the right, feeling searing heat and a hiss of water and steam pass him, right where his head had been a second before. He tried to get up, but Zhao had done playing with his food. Dropping the chain, he rushed in fast for the kill.

For a second, all Zuko could see was the man's leering face, the bright flash of his teeth and eager fire in his hands.

Panic seized him. His legs jerked as if on their own accord, he scuttled backwards, nearly crab-walking to avoid another strike.
He bumped into something hard – a bucket left from washing the deck, half filled with rainwater.

And Zhao was running at him, fist sheathed in fire. Zuko didn't think. His hands, holding the metal bucket now, flashed into heat and he threw the boiled water right at Zhao's naked chest.

The commander reeled back with a yell of equal parts surprise and pain, his flame doused. Zuko kicked him in the thigh hard enough to bring him down.

Zhao fell, screaming.

Zuko struggled to his feet, dazed, lightheaded from lack of oxygen, unsure if it was over. But Zhao was half-curled and writhing in agony upon the wet deck, paying him no attention. He would not be getting back up.

It was over. Zuko had won.

And Zuko looked out across the foredeck, noting the spectators again for the first time in what seemed to be hours. The rushing wind brought their whispers.

"Never seen moves like that…"

"They say he's the lost Prince Zuko..."

"Did he just bend that water?"

"Not possible…"

For a moment, just a brief moment in time, Zuko stood straight and tall with adrenaline singing in his veins, the victor of an Agni Kai, and he knew that he had won the soldiers respect. He could have asked for them to bow to him, and they would have done it.

It was a heady, dangerous thought. But even as he pushed it away in the next moment, some of the giddiness remained.

The gong struck again, signaling the end of the Agni Kai.

Zuko caught a glimpse of movement from the corner of his good eye. He half turned, but he was too slow.

Commander Zhao was already up, hunched from his injury, his face in a snarl with hot fire erupting from between his knuckles.

In the next instant, the standing water under Zhao's feet pooled and solidified into ice. The Commander's right foot slipped, the shot went wide, and he was down again.

Zuko stepped forward, one fist cocked back, but before he could make the final, killing blow he felt a hand close over his shoulder.

A high voice said, "No! Zuko don't! He's not worth it."

"Katara?" He spun around. She was there, right there – she had been the one, of course, to freeze the water. "How?" he asked, but the answer didn't come because she was pulling him into a tight hug.

Distantly, he noticed the red uniformed soldiers rushing forward to subdue the still half-wild, struggling commander, but that didn't matter. Katara was there, and he needed her to calm his hotblooded anger more than he liked to admit.
Finally, Zuko pulled back, still gripping her shoulders tightly. He must have been more light-headed, more exhausted than he thought because he could only ask, "You're here? You're okay?"

"I'm okay," she replied, and he read the truth of it in her eyes. "Aang and I broke out. What's going on? Why were you fighting, and—" She turned out of his grip, looking back to Sokka who was calling their names and running up to meet them. "Sokka, why are you dressed in Fire Nation clothing? What's happened?"

Sokka managed to skid to a stop, a wide grin on his face. "All part of my brilliant plan for rescue. It even almost worked." He punched Zuko playfully on the shoulder in congratulations… perhaps a touch too hard, because he had seen how close of a duel it had been.

"Prince Zuko."

Iroh stood before them. He spared a glance for Katara and Aang, and the lemur in his arms let out sound that was half curious chirp, half a pleased purr. Its white and brown fur stuck out at odd angles as if Iroh had been not watching the way he had pet it during the duel. Around them, the men noticed the change in mood and had come to attention, drawing their weapons.

Seeing this, Zuko stepped forward, but Sokka and Katara were there first, blocking him from the aged Prince. Katara in particular had a savage look on her normally lovely face, and the drops of rain splattering around them trembled ominously

"We had a deal," Sokka said, lowly. "He wins and you let us go."

"The Avatar and this young lady were purchased from the pirates by myself, not Commander Zhao," said Iroh. But he paused, tilting his head to the driving rain, before he met Zuko's gaze. "You fought furiously and won with honor, Nephew. There is no higher compliment for a firebender."

Zuko growled, "I did it to save Aang and Katara." He then added, almost sullenly, "And I'm not your nephew."

Iroh didn't seem concerned by this. He raised a hand, and the surrounding soldiers backed away. "My ship cannot leave dock until the storm has passed. You will have that much of a head start."

A low groan sounded in the air, and the Fire Nation soldiers scattered as Appa landed with a rush of wet-fur scented wind. Aang tucked his bison-whistle back in his shirt with a look of satisfaction. "Hey buddy!" he called. One leap later, he was on top of Appa's head, scratching at his ears.

Zuko watched Iroh suspiciously through narrowed eyes, but the Prince didn't make a move to call back his order.

Nodding once, Zuko turned and walked to Appa without a parting word. Sokka sent a lingering glare at Iroh, and then followed.

Only Katara hung back. She remembered how Iroh had haggled the pirate captain for her, when he could have just as easily left just with Aang. There had been so much to think about afterwards – so much doubt and worry and work trying to get out of that cell – but for the first time she realized she could have been in real trouble if he left her there, with those men.

"You really are Zuko's uncle, aren't you?" she asked him.

He nodded. "I am."

She bit her lip. There were so many things she wanted to ask, but this wasn't the time, wasn't the
place. But maybe, she thought, maybe if he is Zuko's uncle there is good in him, too. She only said, "Thank you… you know, for saving me from the pirates." And after a jerky half-embarrassed bow she turned and ran for Appa, catching Sokka's outstretched hand and swinging aboard.

Then they were off.

OoOoO

It took some time for everyone to catch up with one another. The rain had finally starting to slacken and the sky darkening into evening by the time Katara and Aang had finished telling of their escape, and Zuko and Sokka of their abortive rescue.

"And it was all because I wanted that stupid waterbending scroll." Katara slumped in her corner of Appa's saddle, looking miserable "The worst part of it is, I didn't even get it."

"The worst part?!" Sokka squawked, but Zuko cut him off.

"What's wrong with you? You can't just go around stealing things. Do you know how worried we were?"

"Yeah," Sokka added. "And I had to fight a guy like this big to even get that stupid uniform." He raised his hand way above his head, indicating a monster of a man roughly ten feet tall. "And he had a knife!" Which she already knew because she had been the one to stitch up the slash in his arm, but he felt it needed repeating again.

Katara still winced and looked down. "I know, I know. I'm sorry, you guys. Stealing is bad, and I'll never do it again."

"You'd better not." Zuko growled.

"What about our chores?" Sokka added, ever hopeful. "With my bad arm and Zuko so tired from Agni Kai-ing, I don't think we can do everything all by ourselves…"

She started to huff, but she caught the mischievous glint in her brother's eyes. Then Sokka turned to rummage through his pack. He brought out the waterbending scroll, and her eyes widened to an almost comical size. For a second it looked as if Sokka was going to torture her by withholding for just a moment longer, maybe make her say they were the best brothers ever, or make her promise cook his favorite meal.

But a strange look came over his face. He hunched over with a sharp, racking cough, and in a second Katara snatch the scroll from his hands and cuddled it to her chest. "Oh! You got it! You got it! Thank you! Are—are you okay?"

"Me? Never better," Sokka said, wiping his runny nose on his sleeve.
From the perspective of an outsider, Prince Iroh was the very picture of patience. He sat on a low bench outside the officer's quarters; calm of breath, fingers casually flipping a lotus tile over and over in the palm of his hand. The white and brown lemur, however, was able to sense his friend's true mood, and reflected it. Momo was jumpy and anxious. His large ears twitched and swiveled at every noise.

After a long length of time there was a sound from the other side of the bulkhead. A latch was jerked back, the door opened and a gruff man in a red smock and a physician's insignia stepped out.

Iroh stood up, but it was the physician who gave a deep bow.

"Commander Zhao is in pain and there will be some scarring, but his firebending will not be hindered."

Some scarring. The lines on Iroh's face deepened as he thought of other scars. Commander Zhao should consider himself lucky he would be able to cover his scars with a shirt.

"Thank you," Iroh said. "May I speak with him?" It was not a request.

The doctor nodded and stepped aside, allowing the prince to pass. Iroh did, but not before pausing to reach inside his tunic to withdraw a single sealed scroll. "If you would be so kind, please arrange a message-hawk for delivery. These orders must reach Colonel Shinu without haste."

"Yes, sir." With another bow and one last glance back over his shoulder at his patient, the man walked away, leaving Iroh to shut the door behind him.

Zhao lay on his back upon the single cot. Iroh stepped to the side of it, staring down at him and waiting for the man's half-drugged, amber gaze to focus on his face.

"Commander Zhao," Iroh's voice had a touch of formality he had not used with the doctor. "You have lost your Agni Kai, and your own terms have forced me to release the prisoners. You have disgraced yourself and your rank."

The man was clearly under some sort of sedation, his face slack yet strangely wild at the same time. He gave a weak half-snarl. "What will you do now, Iroh?… The men know… The dead prince travels with the Avatar… You can't possibly avoid the scandal."

"Perhaps," Iroh allowed. "But I was not the one who lost to a half-trained boy today. The capture of the Avatar and Prince Zuko are no longer your concern. You and your men will be assigned other, less strenuous missions while you recover." He paused, perhaps savoring the moment. "It may give you a chance to reflect on your true loyalties… and to work on your firebending basics."

With that, Iroh turned and strode out of the room. The door shut on Commander Zhao's scream of rage.
**Next up:** With Sokka and Katara fallen ill, what are Aang and Zuko to do?

Chapter End Notes

It's the busy season for my work, so I may not be able to post another chapter until after Christmas. It'll be a looooolong one, though! :)

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OoOoO
It started with a cough.

No one thought a thing about it. They flew away from Prince Iroh's ship through the hard driving rain, jubilant at their escape and too relieved to pay attention to a little sore throat and cough. The cut on Sokka's arm was stitched, but sore, and he didn't bother to complain later that night when his cough turned from dry and annoying to deep and racking.

When Katara suggested that he take it easy, he waved her away. "It's been raining. I just caught a cold," he said, and went back to sharpening his boomerang.

The next morning Sokka woke much later than usual – past when Aang and Zuko were back from their circle-walking practice – coughing almost constantly, nose dripping, and eyes dull. He tried to shrug off Katara again when she asked how he was feeling, but couldn't quite duck fast enough when she put a hand to his forehead.

"Sokka, you're burning up!"

Sokka opened his mouth to protest, but was instead doubled over instead by a series of sharp, wet coughs.

When he finally caught his breath, Katara was pushing him back towards the pile of sleeping bags. Well, he was feeling pretty lousy, and he supposed it wasn't the worst thing in the world to have Aang and Zuko do his chores...

By the next morning his fever had spiked high. He lay in his sleeping bag with all the extra furs and blankets bundled on and around him, tossing his head fitfully and talking to people who weren't there.

Then Katara started to cough.
"I'm fine," she said. "I just caught a cold."

"That's what Sokka said yesterday!" Zuko snapped. "Now look at him!"

They turned their heads. A sheen of sweat bloomed out across Sokka's tanned forehead, glinting in the firelight.

"Water," he gasped, eyes half closed. Their nearby argument had woken him from his doze.

Katara shot a quick narrow-eyed glare at Zuko for being so loud before turning to bend some water from the nearby stream into a bowl. Walking over, she knelt down and put the bowl to Sokka's lips.

Zuko followed closely at her heels. "He needs a healer. You do, too, if you're catching it."

"What Sokka needs is rest and willow-bark tea to bring the favor down, and I already told you, I'm fine!"

Sokka seemed to catch a little of the conversation. He grinned up at them through heat-chapped lips. "Maybe we could travel underground, like the earthbenders. It's warm and comfy down there…"

"That's nice, Sokka." Katara patted his arm in a comforting sort of way and refilled the bowl with a flick of her wrist.

Aang, meanwhile, had alighted to Appa's saddle and was busily digging through Sokka's pack. Once he found what he was looking for he floated down between Katara and Zuko, unrolling a ragged piece of parchment. "There's an apothecary not too far away," he said, pointing to the spot on the map. "I could get medicine."

Katara shook her head. "No way. You could get caught going out all alone." And they all knew from the fierce look in her blue eyes that she was thinking about her and Aang's capture at the hands of the pirates.

Luckily, her brother was in agreement. "You can't go off by yourself, Aang…. None of us can with Iroh trying to hunt us down. He could be anywhere by now. You and I will just have to go together." Zuko stood behind the other boy to read the map over his shoulder. Then he glanced up at Katara and caught her doubtful expression. "It's not too far off. Look at the map: The apothecary's just on the top of the next mountain. If Aang and I go now we can make it back before sundown."

"But what if—" Whatever Katara was about to say was cut off by a round of harsh coughing.

The boys jumped away, arms over their noses against her germs. By the time she caught her breath, she was breathless and her nose was running.

"Appa can stay behind and keep watch. You can Sokka can rest in the meantime. His tail makes a really comfy bed." Aang patted the great flat tail and the bison groaned his agreement in the background.

Katara still looked dubious, but then her face contorted strangely and she sneezed three times in a row − painfully. "Okay, fine. Fine."
The two boys set off, following a curved dirt path from the height of the ruined temples where they had camped for the night down to a well-traveled looking road. Aang had intended to fly just ahead on his airglider – the gusts of wind were promising a wild ride today – but the ominous grey clouds rolling just over the horizon made him think twice. With a sigh he snapped the orange sails shut and walked, instead.

Aang soon found that going on a journey with Zuko, when he was intent on something, was boring. Zuko on mission-mode was deadly-serious. He didn’t crack sarcastic jokes, like Sokka. And while Katara was usually brimming with helpful encouragement, Zuko just granted, gave one word comments, and complained about making better time.

Aang knew that getting the medicine was serious, but… well, did Zuko have to be so serious about it?

"Let me know if you start to feel sick too," said Zuko, about an hour into their journey, after checking the map and the position of the sun yet again. "I don’t want you to start that coughing. You’ll slow us both down."

Aang had been kicking a stone along the path in boredom. He glanced up and made a face. Then, he got an idea.

"Slow us down, huh?" He leapt forward, grabbing the map from Zuko’s hands. Then, with rush of air he was off, the butt of his airstaff whacking playfully upside the grumpy firebender’s head.

Grinning deviously, Aang called over his shoulder, "Let's see who the slow one is!"

"Hey!" Zuko yelped, but Aang was already speeding down the path, a trail of dust in his wake, the echo of a happy laugh still in the air. "Hey!" Zuko called again, breaking into a run. "Wait up!"

Zuko was fast, but Aang’s airbending gave him true speed. He led the older boy on a merry chase a fair way down the road, slowing only when the forest thinned and gave way to a grassy meadow. Finally, Zuko came into view, loping towards him in an easy jog, his scarred features pinched as if he really was trying to look annoyed, but was feeling sorta sheepish instead.

Aang greeted him with a cheery smile, waving the rolled map. "Looking for something?"

"Give me that!"

Grinning, Aang handed him his map. "Wanna race again? This time I can give you a head start-"

With a quick, well-calculated move, Zuko reached past the map and grabbed the young monk’s head under his arm. "Where’s that airbender speed now?" he teased, rubbing his knuckles over Aang’s bald scalp for emphasis.

"Ahh! No fair!" Aang tried to lurch back, Zuko was too well practiced from wrestling Sokka to let him go that easily. He twisted to the side, making the other boy step with him to keep his balance.

And at that moment there was a thwipping sound. A little puff of dust rose up from where Aang’s
foot had been, a second before.

Both froze, glancing at each other in mutual surprise before looking back at the ground. The stormy winds cleared away the dust to reveal an arrow sticking right up from the earth – its red feathers neatly fletched at the end.

Then they looked up.

So many other arrows had been loosed, and in so high an arc, that for a moment they looked like a cloud of angry beetle-bees against the slate-gray afternoon. All were straight above them and coming down fast.

Zuko froze, mouth half opened in surprise. His grip on the other boy loosened.

Aang was first to recover and wheeled out of Zuko's grasp to strike a hard-horse stance and join his fists to together, knuckle to knuckle. He generated a sphere of wind which expanded outward, whipping around them. The arrows were caught and scattered away.

"Run!" Aang yelled.

They cut across the grassy meadow, aiming to the safety of the forest on the other side. Zuko spared a glance back. Furtive men looking like oddly shaped shadows were dropping from the trees behind him. He saw one knock an arrow. Zuko reached out and grabbed Aang by a narrow shoulder, pulling him aside. The arrow whizzed by so close he felt the wind on his arm.

More arrows followed; thwipping by and knocking loudly into the dirt beside them and into the thick trunks of the trees as they ducked back into the forest.

The two didn't dare slow, only dodged around the trunks, zig-zagging to try to lose the archers.

For a second, Zuko was certain they’d left them behind… then another hail of arrows came, making them duck for cover once more, this time behind a scattering of large boulders.

Aang pointed up. "They're in the trees again!"

"How?!" Zuko glanced around, searching for cover, for more archers, for any advantage. Then he spied a withered old trunk dead ahead. Half the bark was grey and dried from old age, and coiled around the healthy surfaces: It was perfect.

Zuko broke cover and charged for it, head down, half-expecting a shaft in his back at every step. Aang yelled something, but he couldn't hear what he said… then he was at the tree. Without slowing, Zuko slammed his palms into the rough bark, pulling everything he had from his center and pushing it outward.

The dried wood exploded into fire, which raced up the length of the trunk. Half the tree was already dead and the windstorm winds in the high branches took care of the rest. By the time Zuko staggered away, peering up, the crown was aflame and the trees next to it were catching.

High above, he could hear shouts of alarm from the archers.

Aang caught Zuko's sleeve, pulling him once again into a run. The huge fireblast had left Zuko winded, but Aang was stronger than his thin frame suggested and a rush of air at their backs helped propel them both forward.

The fire was spreading; with the wind as an aid, it leapt from tree to tree. The furtive archers were
soon occupied by getting away. Chasing rain of arrows at the boy's heels lessened.

Aang and Zuko hit a steep down-slope, but didn't stop, just skittered down the best that they could, nearly falling a dozen times as the loose topsoil crumbled and gave way under their boots. Aang did end up losing his balance at the end, tumbling head over heels with a yelp and landing flat on his back into a bog at the bottom.

He was up in a moment, waist deep in the water and already shaking with cold – the ravine was in a permanent shadow, and the edges of the bog were crusted with ice.

"My foot's stuck in the mud!" he yelled, reaching down to pull behind his own knee, tongue poking out of the side of his mouth with the strain.

Zuko sloshed in to help him out. He had barely reached him before he was jerked back as if grabbed by an invisible hand. His right shoulder struck a wide log and his arm stuck there, as if glued – No, pinned.

No less than six arrows stuck the outline of his arm, each catching a bit of loose fabric in his sleeves without striking the flesh. He growled and tried to lurch free, but the arrows had bit in deep; sticking him to the log better than tying him there.

He caught a glimpse of moment to his right; more hidden archers moving silently in the bushes. Their faces wore the tattoos of masters.

Zuko slashed with his free arm, summoning a thin crescent of fire which spun uselessly out to them. More thwips and hard knocking sounds, and suddenly his other arm was just as hopelessly pinned.

"Aang! Help!"

"Hold on!" With a final tug which almost sent him falling back in the water, Aang unstuck his boot and splashed over. He arched his arm and raised a wave of water which became an instant ice-shield. Immediately, arrows began to rain down at the ice, striking the same spot over and over and raising thick cracks through the length of it. Aang only had a moment to spare. He swept his airstaff down, snapping the arrow shafts short around Zuko’s arms.

Zuko yanked forward and with the sound of tearing cloth he was free again.

"Swim for it!" Both boys took a deep breath and ducked under just as the ice-shield fragmented around them.

The water was cold that the mud below felt brittle, half frozen. It was dark, almost black with churned mud and rotting leaves. Zuko couldn't see more than a handspan ahead. Distantly, he felt Aang’s hand on his belt, trusting him to lead the way.

He felt about blindly; the log was raised from the bottom and he wiggled under it to the other side. He then pushed away from the log and swam with strong breast strokes, counting on the brackish water to hide their escape.

Only when his lungs were burning and his throat working involuntarily did he rise to the surface for a hasty gulp of air, Aang right beside him. Then he was under again, trying to put as much distance as possible between them and the archers. But he couldn't stay down as long this time – the cold stole away his breath just as much as firebending.

Ahead, a wall of water reeds seemed to rise in every direction, caging them both in. Zuko surfaced
and found himself surrounded by thick willow-cattails and some sort of green reed. Aang broke the surface with a gasp, his face painfully reddened with cold.

Behind them – but at a distance now by the log – they heard shouted orders and annoyed voices. Zuko could also scent smoke in the hazy air. He grinned. The fire he’d started in the tree must have really taken off. The more smoke and chaos to hide them, the better.

"Oh, I know these!" Aang whispered. He broke off a water reed and tilted it up, showing Zuko the hollow tube. "We can breathe through these as long as we stay shallow. They're great for sneaking up on swamp scorpion-geese."

It was easier said than done. This end of the bog was choked with vegetation and they had to be careful not to brush past the stalks too quickly, for risk of making them shiver and alert their searchers.

Zuko just hoped this water was too cold for elbow leeches.

They could still hear people searching, and once or twice caught a flash of a red uniform – Fire Nation soldiers had joined the archers. But the bog was large, and in the smoke and confusion it was impossible for the soldiers to ring in the entire area. Eventually the boys made it to an empty bank where they quickly scuttled up, hiding themselves again in the dry brush.

Poor Aang was shivering with cold even after he used an airbending move to dry them both out. But there was nothing for it. Zuko couldn't teach him the warming breath of fire on the fly, and they had to get away from the area as fast as possible. He couldn't see the forest fire, or how widely it had spread, but the smoke was thickening, and itching at his throat. The air was heavy, too, with the promise of rain.

Aang glanced at the mountain – the apothecary, still so far off in the distance, and with the Fire Nation soldiers between them. He sighed. "I guess getting the medicine is out."

Zuko shook his head, frustrated. Stupid Fire Nation. Why couldn't they just leave them alone? "We'll have to go back to Katara and Sokka," he said, shouldering the now dripping pack and turning his back to the mountain. "Those Yu-Yan archers are tough. I don't want to have to cross them again."

Aang sighed, turning to follow. Then, "The Yu-who?"

"Yu-Yan archers," he repeated, distracted by stepping over a downed branch.

"You mean, you know them?"

That stopped Zuko mid-stride. He had caught a glimpse of one of the archers, just for a moment as they had first been chasing them across the meadow, and he recognized them immediately. The facial tattoos were a dead giveaway. Had Hakoda told him about them? Zuko's light gold eyes flicked back and forth, shuffling through countless nights and stories by the fire. He couldn't remember, but the unpleasant shiver up and down his spine told him his knowledge hadn't come from any Water Tribe story.

"They're legendary," Zuko said, simply, not noticing how flat his voice had become. "It's said their precision is so fine they can shoot the eye out of a raven from two-hundred feet away. In the dark."

Aang whistled in appreciation and he glanced at one of Zuko's sleeves which had a new set of holes for their trouble. But he said no more, starting down the pathway again, the airstaff balanced over one shoulder.
Zuko glanced behind them again, back towards the direction of the bog. After a long pause, he followed, his expression troubled.

OoOoO

They took the quickest way back to the temple ruins, staying away from the visible road and cutting right through the forest up the steep slope. Zuko paused to look back at the crest of the hill. A cloud of fluffy grey smoke was still steadily rising from the forest beyond. The Fire Nation archers and soldiers wouldn't stick around that area for long if they were smart. It wouldn't be hard to find this place.

Their time was short, at best.

Katara and Sokka lay bundled in their sleeping bags, resting on the wide expanse of Appa's flank. Both stirred when they came in, but only Katara was coherent enough to wonder what was going on.

"You're back?" she asked, her eyes dazed and unfocused. "Did you get medicine?"

Zuko looked anywhere but at her. "No. We need to go, now."

"What?" She sat up, alarmed. "Zuko, Sokka's in no condition to travel!"

"The Fire Nation knew we're around here. We ran into some trouble, I'll explain it later, but we don't have much time."

"Zuko, look at him." Katara pointed to her eldest brother. Sokka was oblivious to them all, curled up on his side and shivering. "He can't go running off anywhere. We have to hide."

Zuko cast another glance outside. The smoke was still rising far off in the distance, but he could see no movement in the foliage. They weren't here. Yet. Somehow, he knew deep in his heart that there wasn't any good hiding. Not from the Yu-Yan. Not from Iroh. "Then we'll just have to cover him in as many blankets as possible and keep him warm. We have to put distance between us and this place."

Katara looked like she wanted to argue, but Aang jumped in with his wide, earnest expression. "You didn't see the crazy Fire Nation archers they had after us. They pinned Zuko to a tree just with their arrows!"

"They…what?"

"I'm fine." Zuko shot Aang a narrow-eyed glare. He didn't have to tell his sister about that.

"We're fine, but we can't just hide from these guys. Our only choice is to run… Sokka's strong. He can handle it."

This, at least, seemed to convince her. Aang walked to Appa's head to coax the bison into rising and
saddling up. Zuko went over to shake Sokka awake and lead him – stumbling and mumbling incoherently – to Appa's saddle. Katara tried to help, gathering their bag and pots and pans, but her wet coughs racked her until she was doubled over.

It took both Zuko and Aang - bullying and cajoling, separately – to convince her to let them handle it and just climb up to the saddle. They took care of the rest of the packing, and with a yip-yip from Aang, they were in the sky.

OoOoO

From Prince Iroh's elevated position upon a small rise of a hill, he could see clear evidence of a fight. It was said that where there was smoke there was fire, and no doubt, a firebender.

And now the growing fire was hampering both the Yu-Yan and Iroh's own crew. He frowned up at the billow of smoke, noting the direction and the growing wind-speed.

"Clever boy."

The oncoming storm would surely damper the flames, but until then the confusion was stalling his men. A properly trained prince of fire would be expected to press his advantage, use the smoke to take out one or more of the archers, perhaps use them as hostages. But with the boy's bizarre upbringing the last few years, the brainwashing that must have occurred…

… he would divert away, like a stream bending around a log.

Iroh brought his collapsible telescope once again to his eye, peering to the south, against the blowing wind. He was lucky. Even with the aid of the scope, the temple ruins were far away and the giant sky bison's white and brown fur made for effective camouflage in the clouds. Iroh only caught a glimpse of it rising into the sky, no doubt with its passengers aboard.

If Iroh were a lesser man, or younger and still hot-blooded, he would have turned and ordered his men to engage the small portable catapults, and fire on the beast. He resisted the urge, but only just, letting out a long controlled breath. The strong winds would put off their aim, anyway, and it was pointless to waste the flammable tar. As it was, Iroh only let the scope down, hand diving into his pocket to clutch at his favorite lotus tile, and considered his next step.

Momo chirped from his perch on his shoulder.

The prince reached up, coxing the lemur onto his outstretched arm. "I wonder," he said, considering his little friend. Then he turned, pointing Momo towards the direction of the bison. "Would you be so good as to follow them? And come back to me when they have landed?"

He didn't know how much the creature understood. Iroh talked to him constantly for companionship, delighting in the way Momo seemed to answer with a purr or a tilt of his head. He didn't truly think the lemur understood him. Not really. Maybe he was just getting old.

But Momo only chirped again, happily, and launched into the sky. He made a wide circle over Iroh's encampment, as if to memorize the position and then set off unerringly in the same direction the bison had gone.

Iroh watched, tugging on his beard in thought, until both lemur and bison were specks in the sky.
Then he turned, ordering his men to call off the search for now, and to begin preparing for dinner. He had no intention of traveling again tonight, not with another storm due, and not until Momo had returned.

OoOoO

Night had fallen, dark and cold, and they were still in the sky. Zuko sat between Katara and Sokka, listening to their raspy breathing and staring out to the dark endless landscape. There hadn't been any sign of pursuit from the Fire Nation, so far. Aang had been sure to angle Appa so the smoke from the forest fire best obscured his white bulk as they left. But they couldn't just land anywhere to rest. They needed help. Sokka and Katara were getting worse.

His sibling's high fevers had brought on intense thirst, and Zuko had run out of water to give to them hours ago. When Katara wasn't asking for water she was shivering next to Sokka, even piled under all the furs.

Sokka's skin felt terribly hot and dry to the touch. He mumbled nonsense as if he were caught in a waking dream. He hadn't said anything sane in hours.

Zuko clenched his fists over the side of the basket, staring out into the empty air. All these weeks of traveling, and they were still so far from the North Pole. The Northern Water Tribe had to have some sort of medicine for their illness, but Zuko doubted Aang would let him force-fly Appa straight there. And even if he did, Sokka and Katara couldn't be exposed to that type of cold. Not right now.

His brother and sister. His family - the only family he had ever known – he was failing them... he felt like was going to lose them.

But on the heels of that thought came a glimmer of light to the south. Zuko squinted his good eye, leaning forward as if to close the distance. It was more than one light; perhaps signaling the edge of a village. Turning south meant heading in the wrong direction, but he would take it. He turned towards Appa's head, cupping his hands around his mouth to carry his voice above the wind. "Aang! There's a village that way!"

"Okay!" Aang called, and with an encouraging command, the sky bison turned.

Aang urged Appa to fly in fast and low just above the treetops as they drew closer. They made it to the village in less than an hour. The clouds were really rolling in now, thick even in the night sky, but Aang risked a quick fly-over on his glider to check for Fire Nation troops. He returned a short time later, grinning.

"I flew over twice," he said, landing easily by Appa's side and snapping the glider shut. "No sign Fire Nation, and it looks like everyone is hiding out from the rain. We can walk Appa right in."

Zuko frowned at that; Appa would to attract a lot of attention. But Sokka's breathing had become more raspy and Katara's face had gone grey as she coughed miserably. He didn’t think she could
stand. Zuko knew he could carry Sokka a short way if he had too, but he doubted Aang's skinny arms could lift Katara. Finally, he nodded.

Luckily the cobbled streets were wide in most places – usually ringed on both sides with a series of merchant's carts. And if Appa sucked in his sides, he could still squeeze by without much damage between the narrowest buildings.

Zuko and Aang walked on either side of the bison, leading him along as if he was a pack-ostrich horse rather than a ten-ton bison. But Aang was right; most of the town was shut in from the storm. The few people still outside gawked, but were far too intimidated to come near.

They found a large building proclaiming itself to be a hospital at the end of the second street.

Zuko sighed, squinting his eyes to peer in the gathering dark. "Well, they look open. I'll go knock, you stay here with them." He glanced over as he spoke, and his gaze lingered on the other boy's very distinctive arrow tattoo. "Can you… cover that up somehow?" Zuko gestured to his own forehead. "If these guys are with the Fire Nation I don't want them to know you're the Avatar."

Aang paused for a second in thought, then grinned and pulled the back of his shirt up until the collar was over his forehead. It made him look like a ridiculous hunchback. "How's this?"

"Better." Not that his own scars were any less distinctive. Zuko reached up and pulled his hair free of the half-wolftail he usually kept it in and pushed one loose piece in front of the left side of his face. Well, it was better than nothing.

He didn't really know what to expect when he knocked at the door; maybe deep down he imagined a healer much like Kuthruk back home. Someone who was competent, but brusque and who always smelled like the spicy herbs and medicines he kept in his hut.

He hadn't expected the attending healer at the door to be a girl about his age, or to be pretty with dark hair and soft green eyes.

"…Can I help you?" she asked after a long moment. Belatedly, he realized he had been staring.

Zuko blinked, reorienting himself. "My brother and sister are sick. They're coughing, and they have high fevers. Can you help?"

She gave him a curious look, eyes focusing on his blue tunic – perhaps she had not seen a Water Tribesman before—and nodded, stepping from the doorway. She paused only briefly at the sight of Appa, a hand flying to her mouth in surprise. But Sokka coughed wetly from his spot in the saddle, and the healer-girl moved forward before Zuko could give her a nudge. One practiced leap and she was up in the saddle, not a spare glance for Aang and his silly disguise.

"We need to get them both inside before it starts raining," the healer said, after a quick examination. She bent by Katara. "Can you walk at all?"

Katara winced and sat up. "I think so… maybe…" Her voice was a croak and she clutched her tender throat.

Aang knelt by her side, looking earnestly up at the healer. "Will they be okay?"

She only sighed. "This almost looks like it could be Fire Fever, although they're a little old for it…"

"Fire Fever?" Zuko had climbed up to join them. "What's that? How bad is it?"
"Oh!" Aang brightened. "I had Fire Fever once when I—" He stopped, swallowing his next few words. It had been when he visited the Fire Nation, over a hundred years ago. "But I thought you could only get it in the jungle?"

The girl knelt by Sokka now and had taken his arm out of the sleeping bag, examining the underside of it for spots. "Most people catch it nowadays from Fire Nation soldiers when they invade their villages." She glanced up from Sokka to Zuko, who had become suddenly very tense and very quiet. "If you haven't gotten it before, you will soon. It's very contagious."

"I don't know if I've had it before," Zuko said, quietly, crossing his arms.

This was an unusual enough answer, but the girl only nodded. "I've never seen clothing like that. Where did you say you were from?"

"I didn't."

Luckily, Aang stepped in to smooth over Zuko's rude response. "I'm Aang," he said with a smile. His shirt had slipped from his head, his tattoos clearly visible. The healer girl glanced at him without any recognition on her face. She didn't seem to know what his blue arrow meant.

"That's Zuko," Aang continued. "Over there is Katara and Sokka—"

"No, I'm Sokka," Sokka said, raising his head up briefly in indignation before letting it fall again with a stream of incoherent mutters.

"That's what I said. They're from the South Pole," Aang finished.

"Oh, so you're Water Tribe!" The healer girl's eyes lit up. She turned to regard Zuko again, her smile so friendly and honest that he felt an odd fluttery feeling in his stomach. "I'm Song," she said. "Another storm will be coming in soon. Here, help me get these two inside."

OoOoO

With Aang supporting a staggering Katara and with Zuko and Song carrying Sokka between them, they managed to get the two sick teenagers inside the hospital and tucked into some sterile looking cots.

Aang immediately became Song's unofficial helper, speeding back and forth from the supply room with requested herbs and clean towels. Song ground dried twigs, leaves, and berries in a small mortar and mixed them with broths to help go down sore throats. For his part, Zuko sat by Katara's side and kept out of the way as best he could.

Whatever was in Song's medicine had quieted Sokka's rambling and Katara's coughing, and soon both were dozing peacefully.

Zuko's mind was in other places.
Fire Fever. Brought in from the Fire Nation. A sick, oily sensation roiled around in his stomach. He remembered all sorts of stupid things about the Fire Nation; the names of the islands, the national holidays…. But apparently nothing of their local plagues. What if he had brought that sort of thing over himself and infected the whole tribe long ago? Had anyone fallen ill after he first arrived? He racked his memories, thinking back, but couldn't recall anyone falling sick around that time. Surely, Auya would have said something – it would have made a good excuse to kick him out of her tent.

A cool hand laid on his forehead and Zuko jerked up to see Song standing before him, still smiling softly, a glass of vivid green liquid in her hand. "You seem a little warm," she said, to his surprised look. "How do you feel? Do you have a sore throat?"

He brushed her hand away. "I run hot." Side effect of being a firebender, although he knew he couldn't tell her that. Gran-Gran used to complain he felt like he was running a fever all the time, although he was never ill outside the winter solstice. "I feel fine."

"Hm." She gave him a steady look, and he saw her glance at the scar on the left side of his face – he had pulled back his hair normally some time ago – although she didn't say anything about it. "I'll still feel better if you drink this. Go on, it's full of vitamins and herbs to help keep illness away."

He took the glass from her, only because Aang had a similar cup in his hand. It fizzed oddly down his throat, although the aftertaste reminded him faintly of ice-melon. Not unpleasant.

"The night-healers will be in shortly. They'll help me keep an eye on them." Song said turned to Aang. "We have a stable. Your… animal should be able to squeeze in and get out of the rain, just as long as he doesn't mind the smell of ostrich-horse."

Aang nodded, wiping the last of the green drink from his upper lip. "Appa would like that. He hates being out in the rain." As if on cue, they heard a distant drumbeat of droplets upon the high vaulted rooftop. Something distant appeared in Aang's eyes, but before Zuko could focus on it, he had turned away with a quiet, "I do too."

"But they'll be okay, right?" Zuko insisted, with a glance to his siblings again. Sokka gave an unconscious grunt, as if in answer, then started snoring.

"Yes." Song's soft hand found his wrist, squeezing it for a moment in reassurance. She knelt by him, and her gaze was a little too soft and understanding. "I'll want to keep them for a few days at least. Sokka, especially, but with some medicine and some rest, they'll be up again in no time."

There wasn't any deception in her eyes. Not that he could see, at least. A tight knot relaxed in his chest. Zuko hadn't realized how worried and anxious he had been, until now. His hands were curled into unconscious fists – knuckles white. He unclenched them with effort.

Katara and Sokka were going to be okay.

Song graced him with another smile and rose, directing Aang to a distant cupboard where she kept a supply of blankets. "You're lucky that it's been quiet at the hospital today. There's a spare room down the hall. You and Aang can bunk there for the night. I'll watch over these two, and wake you if there's any change."
The air around Zuko was hot and thick, scented with unfamiliar flowers and something ashy, like soot.

Zuko frowned and glanced around, but the corridor was dark as pitch behind him. The only light came from ahead. He walked to it almost as if drawn in, compelled, feeling as if his legs weren’t moving at all. Then, he turned the corner, and stared.

His sister sat with her knees tucked neatly under herself in the middle of large empty room beyond, her back to him.

Zuko took a tentative step forward. "Katara? What's going on? What are you doing here?"

She didn’t answer, save for a low chuckle – a sound that felt wrong and put every hair on Zuko's body on end. Katara shifted, but didn’t turn, only raised her hand; Zuko’s pearl-hilted knife was clenched in her fingers.

He felt his own face pinch as a wave of jealousy rolled through him like a fire. "That's my knife!" he yelped. "Give it back!"

"Oh yeah? Who's going to make me? You?" Now she turned – she was standing before him in a flick as quick as thought, a malicious smile on her face.

But it wasn’t her face at all. Katara had never worn that expression, twisted in smug greed and hate. And her eyes… her eyes weren’t blue.

They were amber.

"You’re dead, Zuko,” his sister said.

OoOoO

Zuko woke up gasping, covered in sweat, the air so hot around him he felt he couldn't breathe – he struggled for a moment or two, kicking away the foreign fabric that passed as bedding in this part of the world. Somehow he had got tied up in the blankets and had overheated.

A dream. It had been just a dream. A variation of the same stupid dream he had been having – well, ever since he could remember, really.

It still took awhile to calm down and for the tremors to leave his muscles. He had to reoriented himself slowly, by stages, forcing himself to breathe evenly and taking in everything around him. He was back at the hospital, having not wanted to leave Katara and Sokka alone overnight. He'd taken
an empty exam room and a spare cot.

Aang was gone.

The young monk had gone to sleep in a cot next to his own and that was now empty. The blankets were neatly folded and put back into place at the foot of the bed. Wherever Aang was, he didn't intend to come back tonight.

Zuko hesitated, scrubbing his sleep-puffy face with his hands. He could feel with a sixth sense he couldn't name that the sun wouldn't be up for hours. But getting back to sleep with Aang missing was out of the question. He pushed the rest of the blankets back — the weaves were rough and caught at his skin — but paused when a glint of silver caught his attention from the corner of his bad eye. His pearl-hilted knife lay by the side of the cot, right where he had left it.

He picked it up and unsheathed it, examining the blade and its deep-set inscriptions in the low light. *Never Give Up Without A Fight.* He hadn't really had time to think very much about the thing — so much had happened since Iroh had gifted it to him at the Fire Temple. But that dream had been so strange… it was more than just Katara playing with the knife. She had *stolen* it, and he had been angry at her for it. Upset at the loss. This knife was important to him.

*Why?*

Zuko was familiar with weapons. He had plenty of spears — from the first clumsy one he had made when he was new to the Tribe to the sleek ornamental one Dad had given him as a summer-solstice day present a few months before he left. He also had his boomerang, although he didn't like to depend on it as much as Sokka. And the whale-bone machete was useful.

But this knife... was different. Had it been anything else, he wouldn't have bothered to keep it around. It had too weak of a handle to be much use in fighting. The blade was etched too nicely to make it practical for skinning or cutting. But for some reason, this knife still felt important to him. He felt... *safe* with it.

Zuko sighed to himself and returned the knife back to its sheath. He was wool-gathering, as Gran-Gran would say. Better find out what had driven Aang from his bed in the dead middle of the night.

The hospital was empty except for Sokka and Katara who were still fast asleep in their hospital beds, and the night watch healer who had dozed off in his chair, his chin on his chest. Zuko cast them a long glance — they all seemed to be resting easily — and then stepped outside to the low porch that preceded the hospital steps. It was raining again. The night was pitch black, and rivets of water were spilling down from the roof.

Over the sound of the wind and the distant thunder, he could clearly hear Appa lowing a groan. There was a simple barn just down the path from the hospital. Taking a chance, Zuko sprinted towards it, ducking his head against the rain. He stepped in the open door, lighting a low in his hands in absence of any other light.

He found the young monk inside. Aang had ignored the bales of hay towards the stables and instead sat on the bare wood boards with his knees drawn up to his chest, staring blankly out at the inky night. From the downcast hunch of his shoulders, Zuko could guess what was going on: This wasn't the first time he had found his friend up early.

He walked up to stand beside him without greeting, turning to look out as well into the night air.

"Hi Zuko." Aang gave him a glance and his voice was as cheerful as he would in midday... and as
though he didn't have reddened cheeks – irritated and puffy from scrubbing tears away.

"Hey Aang," Zuko let him keep his dignity by pretending not to notice he’d caught him crying, only asking, "Do you want to talk about it?"

For a moment Aang looked as if he had been struck. The cheerful face fell, until he collected himself and with a quick shake of his head, looked away. "The thunder just… It's hard to sleep I guess. I'm sorry if I woke you."

"Yeah, well," Zuko laced his fingers and stretched high – both shoulders giving a satisfied crack. "It wasn't you. I just had a bad dream."

The other boy gave a sudden start. "Oh?"

Unbidden, an image of the amber-eyed girl, laughing, flashed in front of his eyes. "Yeah, and I don't like talking about it," he snapped and saw Aang cringe. Zuko sighed. That wasn't fair to Aang… None of his bad dreams were his fault. So, after a moment's pause he sat down, crossed his legs, and tried again. "I only have one memory of before I came to the Water Tribe, and I dream about it… a lot. They're never good dreams." He shivered despite himself.

"Why? What happened?"

Zuko shrugged. "I don't know. It's… it's just always about this girl. I don't even really know who she is." His own words felt flat, jumbled and far removed from the terror that gripped him during the nightmares. Zuko sighed, shrugging again, feeling stupid. But Aang wasn't saying anything, letting him go on. "It's just a stupid dream about an old memory. It doesn't mean anything."

"It happened a long time ago." There was bitterness in Aang’s voice, and the way he spoke was almost as though in agreement, sharing the same thought.

"Yeah, but when I dream…" He closed his eyes. "I'm there."

They were silent for a long time.

"Zuko?"

"Hmm?"

"If you ever, you know, ever do want to talk about it…" Aang gave him a sidelong glance, hedging in case of another flare-up of temper. "Then, well, I'm your friend."

"Yeah Aang, I know. Me too."

A fork of lightening cracked across the sky making daylight around them for a second or two before the rain beat down harder than it ever had before. Zuko stared at it, more impressed than afraid: Thunderstorms were a rare treat because the air was too frozen them to form in the South Pole.

But Aang wasn't enjoying the storm. His lips were pressed together – so tight that they were nearly white at the edges, as if he was trying to keep the words in. He couldn't for very long, and he blurted out in an expelled breath, "I ran away."

"What?" Zuko looked down at him and then out to the night, not understanding. "When? Just now, tonight?"

The other boy gave a quick shake, dipping his head into the encircle of his own arms. "No. Not
tonight…” Whatever courage he had seemed to have fled from him. In a moment he was up, distracted, muttering an excuse, "It doesn't matter."

"Well, it seems like it matters to you."

The thunder rolled again and Aang bit his lip, walking back towards Appa. He rested a hand against the bison's horn and pushed a piece of hair out of Appa's eyes. At first, it seemed he wasn't going to answer at all. Then, "I did something really bad, Zuko." His voice was small and he looked every one of his twelve years. "I keep dreaming about it, and… and I know that… what I did… I'll never be able to take it back."

Zuko's throat felt dry. He stood up, suddenly wishing Katara were well enough to be here with them. She had a gentle way of getting someone to open up. He didn't. "What happened? What did you do?"

Aang looked at him, and just for a moment – although it could have been just a reflection of lightning outside – his grey eyes seemed to take on an unearthly glow. Then it was gone and his friend was back, looking not scary. Just sad.

"I ran away," he said again, and his fingers tightened in Appa's fur. "When the monks… after they told me who I was."

"Oh. So, you didn't always know you were the Avatar?"

He shook his head. "The monks said they weren't supposed to tell me until I was sixteen. I didn't know what to think. I was always good at airbending, but I was always just… just me. Just Aang." He put a hand to his chest in emphasis. "Then after that, my friends started treating me different."

It must have been like finding out I was a firebender… or when Prince Iroh... Zuko's shoved that bitter thought away before he could finish it. But right on the heels of that, came another. If Katara and Sokka had suddenly treated me differently… I don't know what I would have done.

They hadn't, though. They loved him. They were family.

"So you ran away," Zuko repeated, kinder this time.

Aang's nodded. His eyes fixed to the ground by Appa's toes. "Some of the elders were worried. They thought I needed more training. They—They were going to take me away from my guardian, Monk Gyatso. He was the only one who never treated me different." He shook his head, fists curling tighter in Appa's fur. "I just wanted to get away for awhile. I'd been to the Fire Nation, and the Earth Kingdom, and I've always heard about the awesome penguin sledding in the South Pole… It was only supposed to be for a little bit, just so I could get away. Then, I got caught in a storm." Aang looked up then to meet Zuko's gaze. His cheeks were wet again with tears. "I wasn't even there when the Fire Nation attacked my people."

The last piece had fallen into place. No wonder Aang hadn't been able to sleep. "There was nothing you could have done for your people," he said, hoarsely, stepping forward.

Aang stiffened. His eyes were bright again and this time the glow definitely didn't have anything to do with the lightning outside. "You don't know that! I ran away! Monk Gyatso must have been so worried. I wasn't there for them when they needed me most, and… and they all died!"

The fire in Zuko's hand came alive at his words, flaring up almost to the ceiling.

"Whoa!" Zuko yelped, jumping back, but it wasn't his fire anymore. "Watch it!"
Immediately the unearthly light died behind Aang's eyes. He turned away, whispering, "Sorry," and the flame shrank, once again under Zuko's control.

The firebender transferred the flame to his left hand and wrung out the other. He hadn't been burned, although it had been a near thing. The skin on his palm tingled with lingering heat and power. "Don't worry about it," he said, and then paused. "Look," he added, after another moment, "You couldn't have done anything about the Fire Nation."

"You don't know that," Aang repeated, miserably.

"Yes I do." He stepped forward again, closing the distance between them, his golden eyes glittering in the firelight. "Fire Lord Sozin threw everything he had at the Air Temples, and he had the power of the comet behind him. He had been building up his forces for months, years ahead of time. You wouldn't have had a chance if you stayed. No one did."

"I thought you said you don't remember—"

"I don't," Zuko snapped, testily. That wasn't the point. "Nothing specific, but I know the basics, Aang. If you stayed in the temple, he would have found and killed you for sure. Then he would have just gone to the Water Tribes and done the same thing to us before the new Avatar grew up."

Aang was staring at him now – Zuko had been speaking earnestly, even passionately. Realizing this, he reined himself in with effort. "Look," he said, quietly, intensely. "Fire Lord Sozin couldn't count on a fully realized Avatar not appearing again, and that slowed his plans. He had to dedicate the last years of his life to finding you. As bad as things are now, Aang… it could have been a lot worse. But now you're here and you know about the comet. This time, you can stop the Fire Nation."

"How?" His voice was almost a whisper, broken. "I'm just one kid… I'm the only airbender left. What if I fail everyone again?"

"I don't know. We…" Zuko hesitated. "You just keep going. You don't ever give up because it's hard. You can do this, Aang." He stepped forward putting a hand on his shoulder. "I believe in you."

"Even though I ran away?"

He sighed. "Well… I guess we all have things we wish we could take back." Zuko gave a low, unamused huff of a laugh. "I probably toasted puppies for fun or something, when I was a kid." It was a cringe-worthy joke, full of hidden insecurity. He quickly went on. "You're not going to fail. You're already on your way to learning Water and Fire. Katara, Sokka and I… We're here for you and we're going to help you."

Aang bit his lip, but some of the clouds were gone from his expression. "I guess that means I have to practice harder at firebending, huh?"

Zuko just grinned in reply – the expression stretched the scar across his neck. "Learning to bend water is the first step. After Katara and Sokka are better we'll head straight for the North Pole. No more stops, no more distractions."

Despite his sorrow, Aang pulled a face. "That doesn't sound like very much fun." But he must have caught the glint of determination in his friend's eyes because he hastily added, "But you're right. After this, it's North Pole or bust."

The thunder rolled once more, almost as if in agreement.

And up in the rafters, unseen except as a glimpse of grey fur in the shadows, a lemur spread his
membrane wings and took flight, fully rested and ready to brave the storm to get back to his friend.
Prince Iroh was pulled from sleep by a particular sensation – cold drips of water were splashing over his face. He winced and opened his eyes to see the figure of a long-eared creature sitting on his chest. The lemur was soaked to the skin, but gave a purr upon his wakening, licking rain droplets off of one paw.

"Ah," said Iroh, reaching up a drowsy hand to pet heavily between Momo's ears. "You have returned to me at last, my friend. What have you found?"

He did not truly expect an answer, although he got one. Momo gave a smug chirp and alighted to the flap of Iroh's short tent. Then he looked back over his shoulder and chirped again.

Iroh pushed back his blankets and rose to follow, still in long dressing gown and night-hat. Without any hesitation at all, Momo flew once more into the driving night rain. Iroh quickened his pace, stopping only when it became certain that the lemur was indeed leading him to a particular direction.

He held up his arm and Momo landed upon it, receiving a dried sugar-plum for his efforts.

Iroh backtracked to the camp and strode to one of the officer's tents. "Lieutenant Izhar!"

"...Sir?" Iroh's first Lieutenant peeked his head out of his tent – a much smaller one by comparison than the prince's - and gaped stupidly at his commanding officer's state of dress.

"Tell the men to break camp. We have our course for the Avatar. South-southwest."

"Now, sir? I mean, uh, yes sir. Right away, sir."

But Iroh had already returned to his tent.
He emerged some minutes later just as the call was going up among the crew to rise for the early day. This time, he was dressed informally, in a traveling cloak dyed Earth Kingdom green and pants of nondescript brown.

"I will go on ahead," Iroh told his officers, once they assembled. "And will leave markings behind to follow."

And before any of his astonished men could reply, he flipped something up in the air that looked like a lotus tile, caught it, and disappeared into the forest with the lemur on his shoulder.

The Dragon of the West was on the hunt.

OoOoO

The worst of the storm rolled through during the night. By the time morning broke everything was pleasantly dripping wet and grey with tendrils of mist floating up from the ground between Song's barn and the hospital.

Aang and Zuko spent the rest of the night hunkered out of the rain in the barn - Appa's great bulk generated enough heat to keep warm, and his wide tail made for a comfy mattress.

Talking things out seemed to lighten Aang's mood. By the time the cat-birds started singing in the rain-soaked, dripping trees outside, the little monk had found the lone ostrich-horse in the stable.

Zuko stayed well away from the thing, preferring to catch an early morning nap on Appa's tail. He didn't like hostile looks the ostrich-horse gave him, or the way it bent its head to sharpen its beak against the top of the low wooden stall whenever he approached. Aang, predictably, just giggled and hunted around the barn until he found a sack of millet-seed. Soon the ostrich-horse was pecking gently out of the flat of Aang's hand. The Avatar had made another new friend.

The open doorway darkened as someone stepped in it, momentarily blocking the sunlight. Song stood there, hands on her hips. "Oh, there you are! I see you met Ushi." Her mouth curved in a wane smile as she watched Aang. "You should really watch your fingers. She's been known to give a nip or two."

"Nooo, she's a great old bird, aren't you Ushi?" Aang reached up to give a good scratch to the feathers behind the ostrich-horse's ears. Ushi closed her eyes and leaned into the touch.

Zuko made a groggy noise of his own. He had only been able to lightly doze as the sun was rising. Hearing the healer, he staggered to his feet. "How are they?"

Now Song smiled – a true smile that lit up her face and washed away puffy morning fatigue. "The medicine is helping a great deal. Your sister should be out of bed in a few days. And Sokka," Song paused, although she was too polite to roll her eyes. "Well, he's on the mend, too."
"He's still talking to people who aren't there?" Aang guessed, with a grin.

"He kept me up half the night... but delirium is common with fire fever," she added, seeing Zuko's concerned look. "At least he's interesting. He kept calling me 'Lu Ten'."

"Who?" Zuko asked.

The healer shrugged. "His temperature is down, although the fever hasn't broken. You can ask him if you like, but don't expect a straight answer."

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As it turned out, Sokka was fast asleep again; dead to the world thanks to medicine, and snoring wide mouthed thanks to his stuffy nose.

Katara was awake and sat up in bed at the boy's approach. Her cheeks were still darkened with fever blush, but her coughing wasn't so painful anymore.

"I hate this," she murmured lowly to Zuko, after Aang had turned aside to ask more questions to Song about Ushi and riding ostrich-horses in general. Katara's fingers twitched on top of her blankets as if nervous for something to do. "I feel so useless laying here all day like this."

Zuko nodded. "I know. I felt the same way every winter solstice." When he became a burden to his tribe instead of a provider. He reached out, grabbing her tanned hand to still her fingers. "And you're right. You're no good to anyone like this." Which wasn't necessarily how he wanted it to come out at all. Katara shot him a look, her blue eyes narrowed dangerously, and he quickly amended, "So your job now is to rest and get yourself better."

"Hrumph."

"Well..." He paused, looking to the ceiling in thought. "I do have a pair of pants that need mending. And I don't think Sokka has washed his socks in a week."

Katara hit him with her pillow – she was too weak to strike him hard, and her giggles brought on another coughing fit. She sobered by the time she caught her breath, eyes traveling to Aang who was – by the looks of his exaggerated hand gestures – telling Song of his encounter with the Unagi. "Hey, is Aang... okay? He seems a little down."

Zuko glanced over, wondering how she could tell. The little monk was smiling brightly, chattering happily. But that didn't mean he had forgotten the terrible expression on his friend's face just last night. "I ran away..." He didn't know how Katara knew. No doubt Sokka would attribute it to some freaky woman-thing. Zuko saw it as a Katara-thing.

"He's been thinking a lot about his people," he hedged, unwilling to spill all of Aang's secrets. If Aang wanted Katara to know, he would tell her himself. "We talked about it, last night."
"You talked?"

Katara's voice was incredulous and Zuko cringed a little, remembering Aang's glowing eyes – his moment of lost control. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"No offense, Zuko, but you're not exactly the 'Let's drink snow-rose tea and have a chat' kind of guy."

"We talked," he repeated, glancing away. Well there had been some yelling.

But Katara smiled. "I think it's kind of sweet." He couldn't quite tell if she was teasing or being serious.

Before he could comment, she was taken again by another round of coughing so fierce and lasting so long she was nearly clawing for air by the end of it. Alerted by the noise, Song turned away from Aang, a steaming mug of medicine appearing in her hand as if by magic. "Drink this," she said, coming by Katara's side. "And I want you to lie back down. You two can visit more later on if you like."

"We can't stay?" Aang asked.

Song turned and gave him a reassuring smile. "She's still recovering, and resting up is really the best medicine."

Behind her, Katara made a face over her mug.

The healer girl took a few minutes to make sure her latest dose of medicine had its desired effect. The same elixir that soothed the coughing caused drowsiness, and soon Katara and Sokka were sleeping again, their faces relaxed as if the sickness had retreated all together.

Song soon ushered them out and slid the paper door shut behind them. "I'll tell you what," she said, looking at Zuko and Aang. "It's been raining so much the last few weeks, Ushi hasn't gotten any exercise at all. Could you two give me a hand with her?"

"Oh, uh…" Zuko was certain he didn't want to be within pecking distance of the bird, but Aang was already nodding enthusiastically.

"Sure! What do you need?"

Song pretended to consider this for a moment, playing the young boy along. "Well, she really seemed to like you, Aang. Maybe she'd let you ride her."

"Yeah, I bet she would. I like her too!"

Seeing the other boy's face light up in excitement, Zuko didn't have the heart to say no - especially when Song looked at him casually, just out of the corner of his eye, a slight brush reddening at her cheeks.

Song paused briefly to let another healer know where she was going before leading Zuko and Aang back to the stable – Aang bouncing at her side and chattering stories of all his animal experiences, especially those he'd ridden.

"You have to be really quick to catch a ferret-hound," he said, with authority. "That's the hard part, but after you're on them, they'll let you ride them. Well – not the female ferret-hounds, because of the spines. Katara took me penguin sledding once. You've been penguin sledding, right Zuko?"
Zuko blinked. It took him a second to realize that he had been pulled into the conversation. "Uh right," he said. "Lots of times."

Song giggled, although he was mostly sure he hadn't said anything funny. "It sounds like you two are real world-travelers."

Aang nodded. "I traveled all the time with my guardian. We've been everywhere—".

"Well, uh, not everywhere everywhere." Zuko interrupted, quickly. No one had mentioned to the healer yet that Aang was the Avatar. It wasn't that he liked the lie, but Zuko hadn't wanted to leave any sort of trail for Iroh to follow. "Like, uh… well, we haven't been to the Fire Nation or anything like that."

"Ohhh, right." Aang grinned up at Song who by now was looking a little puzzled. "I meant the other parts of the world. The ones that aren't Fire Nation."

Zuko barely resisted the urge to smack his palm against his forehead.

But if Song noticed their odd behavior, she didn't comment on it. "I was a baby when my parents settled into his valley." She cast a longing glance to the distant mountains – slightly smoky in the hazy after-storm morning. "It's all I've ever known." They were coming to the stables now and Song reached out a long fingered hand to brush across the tops of the thick wooden railings as she passed. "My mother started the hospital, back when this village was small. I learned everything I know from her."

"What about your father?" Zuko asked.

"He was taken away by the Fire Nation," she said, softly. "A long time ago."

"Oh." he said, lamely, sort of wishing he could just beat his head against the nearest wall. He never knew what to say to people. "I'm sorry."

She shook her head, waving away his apology, and Zuko couldn't help but notice how the high sunlight seemed to gleam in her dark hair. He was staring again. Realizing this, he quickly looked away.

Appa let out a low moaning bellow upon scenting them. Aang quickly rushed forward to greet his big furry buddy, giving him a good rub around his horns even though they had been separated for a whole hour.

Zuko was left to help Song lead Ushi out of her own stall – he was right, the ostrich-horse still inexplicably hated him, pawing long ruts into the earth with her taloned feet at his approach, and he had to duck fast to avoid a vicious snap from her sharp beak.

"Ushi, behave!" Song chided and then led the foul-tempered beast outside to saddle. Zuko could feel its beady gaze on him until it turned out of sight.

But as much as the ostrich-horse resented the sight of Zuko, she seemed to have an equal love for the young monk. She sat calmly while Aang helped Song saddle her, bending down to sniff at his bald head. Zuko swore he saw Aang slip her another treat of millet-seed, but he was standing far away on the outside of the wooden arena so it was hard to tell.

Soon, it was obvious that Aang hadn't been exaggerating – he was a natural with animals and with riding them in particular. Song had to cinch up the stirrups twice to accommodate Aang’s shorter legs, but then he was off, cantering the ostrich-horse round and round the small sectioned off arena –
Ushi snorting and tossing her head like a young excited hen-filly.

Song walked over and joined Zuko outside the fence, leaning her elbows across the railings, a bare centimeter between them. Either one of the teens could have bridged the gap – a brush of elbows or shoulders, but both were determinately looking ahead. The small gap might as well have been a mile.

Zuko glanced out of the corner of his eye once or twice, noting how the sun reflected off her brown, burnished hair. Song finally seemed to have noticed him looking. A soft sort of look appeared on her face, and their eyes met. She was staring a little, too. "You know..." she said, turning fully to him. "You really don't look anything like your brother and sister."

"What? Oh... yeah." Zuko scratched the back of his neck, aware of how – aside from Aang – they were alone in this little corner of the village. Together. Suddenly, he felt extremely conscious of his scars, and her gaze. "I was adopted when I was little. We all grew up together and Aang... well, he joined us later."

"That must have been nice." She flashed him a smile. "I never had any siblings."

"Well, we fight sometimes, but we always make it up. They're the only family I know." He shrugged. "Thank you for healing them."

"Fire Fever isn't that uncommon. I'm surprised you and Aang haven't fallen ill if you never had it before." She hesitated very slightly, almost so quickly that Zuko didn't catch it. "It comes from Fire Nation soldiers – you don't need to say anything. I'm not asking, but... well, you should know that people won't judge you."

He stared at her for a blank moment, until her eyes flickered to the left side of his face. Then he understood. "Oh."

"It's okay," she said quickly. Then she bent, hitching up the hem of her skirt a few inches to show her leg. Pale pink ribbons ran up and down the limb, the flesh looking as hard and unyielding as the skin that slitted his left eye. He wondered how she managed not to walk with a limp. "They've hurt me too."

Zuko swallowed, looking away. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." She let the hem fall and reached out to touch his arm, gaining his attention again. "I guess what I'm trying to say is that most people here are refugees, too. We've all been hurt by the Fire Nation. Some of them keep their scars on the inside." She quirked a little smile at him. "Ours are just a little more visible."

He felt odd, as if suddenly aware of the weight of the lie on his chest. He had told Aang not to let anyone know he was the Avatar, and Sokka must not have mentioned it in his fever ramblings. Song naturally assumed that they were refugees, that they – he was running, and not a prince of the enemy.

I'm not a Prince, he told himself sternly. I don't care what Iroh says. I'm Hakoda's second son. I'm Water Tribe.

And he knew he should be feeling angry at the Fire Nation for Song's burned leg. Not guilty.

Song spoke again, seeing his distress and perhaps misreading it. "This place, this village is all about making a fresh start. Your bother's going to be better soon, and I know old Tu-Zen is looking for strong hands to plow the field, if you're looking for work..."

He shook his head. "Thank you, but we have to continue on as soon as Katara and Sokka are
"Oh," Song said, softly. She lifted her chin and bit her lip. Zuko followed her gaze to the distant canyons, guarding the sheltered valley. But she didn't speak again, and Zuko felt the invisible gulf widen between them once more.

He cleared his throat, feeling that some explanation was owed – although he didn't know why. He just suddenly wished that the disappointment would fade in her pretty green eyes. "We're going north," he said, after a moment. "We're traveling to the North Pole. Katara's a waterbender and... well, it's the best place for her to learn." This, he felt was much less dangerous than telling her that Aang was the Avatar.

Zuko was looking again out to the paddock and didn't see Song's eyes widen for a moment, or notice her sharp intake of breath.

Aang rode by then, showing off by nearly standing up straight in his saddle and looping Ushi around again before pulling her to a stop by the railing. "You're right, Song. Ushi is a lot of fun! Do either of you want to take a turn?"

Zuko had backed away a step to keep himself out of the ostrich-horse's reach, and quickly shook his head. "No thanks."

By this time, Song had regained her composure and managed a tight grin at them both. "No, I'm fine, but you two haven't eaten today, have you? My mom said she was making duck-beef stew for supper. Why don't you come over?"

Aang gave a regretful little shrug. "I'd love to, but I'm a vegetarian. Besides, I should go make sure Appa finds a good place to graze. Zuko should go," he added, and actually leaned over in the saddle to dig an elbow in the other boy's shoulder.

The firebender scowled at him, wondering what was wrong with Aang all of a sudden... until he realized that Song was still looking at him expectantly, a slight smile curving at her lips. His own stomach flip-flopped, but in a mostly good way.

"Sure," he said and tentatively returned her smile.

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**OoOoO**

Riding an ostrich-horse wasn't as exciting as, say, a giant mongoose-snake, but Ushi was a fast bird, full of energy and sensitive to his commands. But anything was less fun when there wasn't an audience to show off for and Aang quickly grew bored of circling her around and around the paddock.

He cast a sly glance over his shoulder – Zuko and Song were both out of sight by now, and no one
else was around to watch. Still, he made his movements discrete, figuring that if he missed his mark the first time… well, maybe then his plan wasn't meant to be.

But Aang was a twelve year old airbending master, the youngest since Avatar Yeng-Chan. Of course he didn't miss.

A strong breeze whipped from around his palms and struck at the latch holding nearest gate. The hinges groaned, but another suspiciously strong gust of wind did the rest of the work, knocking it open.

Whistling innocently, Aang led Ushi out the paddock.

Aang soon spotted a long twisty track just outside the village which led into the forest beyond. He flicked the reigns, clucking under his tongue. The mare tossed her head and snorted once in good spirit; she was just as eager to run as he was.

The path they were on was well-used, with packed earth cut on each side by deep wagon ruts. Aang grinned and urged Ushi faster and faster until he could feel the wind over his bare scalp. It wasn't as exhilarating as flying – Aang would rather be above the trees than on the ground any day – but when Ushi switched into a full gallop he gave a whoop that echoed all the way to the canyon walls ahead.

He heard another voice in answer, coming up from somewhere above in the trees, something that sounded very familiar.

Aang reigned the ostrich-horse to a stop, circling her to get a look around. The branches above were winter-bare, but it still took a few minutes to locate the flash of white and brown.

His jaw dropped. A lemur? Here? He'd only see them in the Air Temples before. Keeping his eyes fixed on the creature, he stretched out an arm. "Hey boy, come on down. I won't hurt you."

There was the sound of flapping wings and the lemur alighted to his forearm. Aang reached into his pocket under his orange overcoat where he usually kept a few nuts to eat. "What are you doing all the way out here-" he started to ask, but then stopped.

Each lemur's coat was as different as a person's face, and he had seen these handsome markings of brown and white before. What was more, the lemur wore a thin red collar around its neck. It lay half hidden in his thick fur, the front tagged with a stylized emblem with a three-pointed flame.

This was Prince Iroh's lemur.

"What are you doing here?" Aang repeated, dumbstruck.

The lemur didn't have an answer. It reared up, little hands scrabbling at Aang's fist, looking for the treat he smelled there. Aang let him have it and set the little guy on a nearby branch while he ate. Then, after a few moment's thought, dismounted Ushi and tied her reins there as well.

He bent a gust of air under him, and with a leap, he twisted his way up to the high canopy above. The trees in this forest were tall, the branches thin and brittle the higher he went. Aang leapt from tree-to-tree, seeking the highest vantage point, balancing lightly as he was taught.

From there he could see the whole valley – from Song's village on one end to the high canyons guarding it all on the other. And off to the distance he saw a line of red-uniformed soldiers descending from the canyon. It looked like a thin river of lava coming down the switchback trail.

"Oh no…"
Aang didn't hesitate. He leapt again across the branches, making his way to the canyon. His only thought was that he had to stop them. He couldn't let this village go up in flames because of him. Not like Kyoshi Island. Not like the Air Temples. Not again.

He was aware, vaguely, of the lemur following along right behind him, chittering as if he were engaged in a game of chase.

Finally, Aang came to the clearing and the mouth of the trail. It was a well-fortified entrance, beginning in a single cleft in a rock just wide enough for a wagon to be pushed through. Two stone pillars at least thirty feet tall guarded each side, their faces littered with centuries worth of graffiti from passing travelers. The area was empty, the soldiers hadn't made it down yet.

If he could block that opening, he could stall the Fire Nation… maybe…

Aang ran to the closest of the two pillars and put his hands on it, giving an experimental push. He had seen a lot of earthbending when he had visited his friend Bumi a hundred years ago. There was a lot of… shoving, and some kicking into the ground.

Aang shut his eyes, focusing on his hands – seeking the earthbending he knew had to be within him, somewhere.

"Come on rocks!" he said, with nothing happened. Aang backed up, took another deep breath and then rushed forward, throwing his shoulder into it. "Bend!"

Nothing.

He could hear some of the troops now; the faint call of voices, the low grinding of wagon wheels against stone.

Earthbending wasn't going to work. Aang stood back, took a deep breath, and blew it out again in a gale force winds that smacked against the side of the pillar, scattering dust and pebbles in every direction.

But the stone pillars had been there for centuries, through real gale-force storms. They would not break now for the power of a mere airbender.

Momo flew up to the flat-top of the pillar and looked back down at the boy, ears tilted quizzically.

Aang's face fell. "I can't do it," he whispered, sagging down to rest his palms on his knees. Maybe if he knew just a little bit of earthbending… but he didn't. He wasn't even sure he could find enough water around to do anything useful, and his airbending just wasn't strong enough to move all those rocks.

He had run out of time.

The lemur looked out toward the canyon, now trilling out a greeting. Reluctantly, Aang turned and leapt again for the trees, disappearing a moment before a Fire Nation scout rounded the last bend and came into view.

Aang found Ushi clipping contentedly at some of the high grasses where he had tied her. He mounted quickly, no longer smiling, and started her in a gallop back to the town. All the fun was out of the ride… he had to warn everyone in time.
Song's small, three room house sat nearly adjacent to the main hospital, separated only by a strip of land planted with early blooming flowers. Like most Earth Kingdom homes in this village, it was built of packed and smoothed earth with square utilitarian sort of windows cut like dark slits out of the mound. Zuko had mistaken it for a supply building earlier.

The inside was sparse, but comfortable. Strips of brightly colored fabric hung where Zuko was used to seeing furs in the tents back home. The tiny windows let in a surprising amount of light, and cheery candles took care of the rest. The home had a pleasant smell as well – decades of home cooking had left their mark - the smells of spices sunk into the walls, making the small space seem welcoming, almost maternal.

Song's mother walked from the kitchen to greet them, wiping her hands on a blue flower apron. It was apparent Song took after her mother, the older woman being perhaps more plump and lined with age. "I see you brought a guest a well." She smiled at Zuko. "Song, would you show your young man to the table?"

The kitchen was set off the main room of the house. Zuko followed the woman, ducking slightly under a low archway.

… And the entire world seemed to stutter to a halt.

It was not possible. It could not be possible.

Prince Iroh sat at the table. He wore a green traveling cloak, still dusty from the road. The royal topknot had been taken down, his long silver hair tied back in a simple queue. He sat there like a simple Earth Kingdom traveler, a cup of tea in his hands, looking up at the newcomers with an expression of polite interest. Zuko was the only one who saw the flash of hard triumph in his eyes.

Zuko froze mid-step, too surprised for horror or fear. He heard, distantly, Song's mother make cheerful introductions.

"This is Li. He is a tea merchant come up all the way from Gaoling. He gave me such a good deal on white dragon tea, I had to invite him to dinner."

"It was my pleasure," Iroh said, inclining his head to the woman. "It's rare that I meet another enthusiast."

"My mom is always experimenting with different flavors of tea." Song said, in an aside. Then she seemed to realize, suddenly, how tense and pale he seemed. "Zuko? Are you alright?"

"NO!" Zuko wanted to shout. "You don't know who that is! Get out of here! Run!"

But behind them all, unseen by the two women, a small flame-fed lamp flared – the fire high and bright yellow. It licked at the nearby curtains before guttering back down. A message, or perhaps, a warning.
And once again Zuko felt a strange rush of power thicken the air in the room. He had felt it before—twice in the presence of Iroh, and he knew with a sixth sense he could not name that every lit candle, every lamp, and even the small cooking fire was under Iroh's control.

"Yes," Zuko said, and his voice came out in a rasp. "Yes, I'm fine."

Song gave him a long, measured look, and then directed him towards the table, sitting him opposite Iroh.

Her mother bustled over and set a bowl of soup in front of her guests, along with a mug of spicy-scented tea for Zuko and a refill for Iroh. Zuko stared at the rich looking soup and felt his stomach roil with a sick, oily sensation. How did Iroh track them? Did he know where Sokka and Katara were? Were they already captured? Why was Iroh doing this?

Song's mother sat herself down at the head of the table, already clucking her tongue in mock anxiety over the state of her meal. "This is an old family recipe, passed down from my mother's mother who served the Earth King himself!"

She wouldn't stop staring at Zuko until he took a bite. Zuko did, reluctantly, feeling the strangeness of the situation. If Song and her mother were not here… but that was Iroh's plan, wasn't it? The two women were unknowing hostages. The soup seemed to turn into ash in his mouth, but he forced himself to swallow anyway and mumble, "It's good."

"Oh, I'm so relieved," the woman tittered. "I've never cooked for anyone from the Water Tribe before."

"Excuse me," Iroh said, wiping his mouth politely. "But I would not guess by your coloring you were of the Water Tribe. The dark hair and golden eyes—"

"I'm adopted," Zuko snarled and glared at the man. Iroh matched his gaze steadily, although corners of his eyes crinkled slightly in a hidden smile. He seemed to be enjoying himself.

And Song was looking at Zuko oddly again, probably wondering why he was being so rude. He flushed, half in anger and half in embarrassment and broke his stare-off with Iroh, returning sullenly to his soup.

A heavy, awkward silence fell over the table, broken only when Song's mother cleared her throat and turned to Iroh. "We don't often get merchants in our village in the winter months. I hope you didn't find the roads difficult."

"Oh, I have been traveling for some time." Iroh said, "One does get used to it, in my trade. But that is not the only reason I have come here. I am in search of my nephew… he has been lost for a long time."

Zuko visibly twitched, but said nothing.

"How horrible," Song murmured. "Is he fighting in the war?"

He spared her a wane smile. "From what I've heard, no, at least, not directly. My fear is that he may be drawn in soon, and there will be little I can do to help."

"There's not many strong boys left around here who haven't gone to war." Song's mother said, and then looked towards Zuko. "Although, I'm happy to hear the Water Tribe are on the move again. The Earth Kingdom has been taking the blunt of every attack in the last thirty years."
"My dad and the rest of his men have been helping the Earth Kingdom fight the war," said Zuko, a bit stiffly. Then added, almost out of spite, "He's fought many battles against the Fire Nation, and taught me and my brother how to fight, too."

"You are lucky to have been under the tutelage of such a great man." Iroh's reply was bland, dancing on the knife's edge of sarcasm.

Zuko bristled, but Song spoke up before he could. "If he's not gone off to war, why did he leave his family, Li? Your nephew, I mean."

Iroh sighed, leaning back in his chair. "I am not entirely certain, as I was not there at the time. He is smart, but stubborn. He does not realize how much he is needed at home, how much his family misses him. His mother, especially."

"… His mother?" Zuko asked, and the words slipped out without almost on accident. And although he didn't know it, he sounded very young right then.

"A woman gentle in spirit and of uncompromising beauty. His absence has nearly destroyed her."

So what? One part of Zuko said, a nasty biting little voice that sounded a lot like Sokka at his most sarcastic. She's Fire Nation. She's probably done a ton of evil stuff. I can't feel sorry for her.

Then why did he feel so suddenly sick inside? He felt strange. The room had taken on a slightly skewed angle and he kept hearing the words echoing again and again in his mind. His absence has nearly destroyed her… His absence has nearly destroyed her…

He didn't hear Song mother's murmured regret over this news, or Song's next question.

"I believe he has been… influenced by his friends," Iroh said. "They have led him to do things he would not normally do. It is a sad case. The boy I know would never dishonor his family or himself in this strange fashion. But I am certain that if I can convince him to return—"

Zuko wanted to scream at him, wanted to tell him to shut up, to stop playing games and just go away. He didn't want to hear any of this… But another part of him listened with rapt attention – like a man starving, only to be shown a large juicy steak. He was rooted to the spot, staring blankly at his untouched food. Part of him recoiled at Iroh's words… the rest kept him rooted to the spot, unable to turn away.

"Maybe this nephew of yours doesn't want to go back." Zuko said, quickly. "Maybe he's made his decision, and doesn't want anything to do with you."

Iroh simply sipped his tea, pretending to consider Zuko's words. "I wish to give him one last chance, to see that he has been turned falsely against his family, that he has been lied to—"

"Lied—?!” He snapped his jaw shut against the rest of his outraged yell. He was aware, peripherally, of Song staring at him again.

Zuko glared down at his soup, his clenched fists in his lap.

Song's mother, however, seemed to have figured it out… or at least part of it. She glanced from Zuko to Iroh and back again, taking in their similar coloring, and the way they both folded their napkins into perfect triangles, set on the left side of their plates.

"You must care about your nephew very much," she offered, gently.
Iroh nodded. "I have made it my personal mission to see him come home, and return to those who truly care for him."

"If something ever happened to my daughter…" The woman, reached across the table to lay her hand over Song's. "I would be heartbroken without her. I feel for this woman, Li, and your nephew. I really do."

"Shut up," Zuko hissed, breaking the game at last. He stared down at his plate, hurting, and not really knowing why. "You don't know what you're talking about. You… you don't-"

"Zuko," Iroh said, and Zuko looked up. "I cannot imagine how it has been for you… What you have been put through, and what you must have been forced to do to survive. But those people care only for the boy they have made you. Not for who you truly are."

He said nothing. His throat felt tight, and he shook his head, denying Iroh's words. But they battered against him, they hit over at a tender weak spot he didn't even know he had, until now.

No. He had a people, a father. He was Water Tribe.

"No." It came out as a whisper, pitiful against Iroh's words. It would have been easier if the other man was angry… But Iroh just looked sad.

"You are the first-born son of Ozai and Ursa."

"No. I—I'm Hakoda's son."

For the first time, Iroh showed anger. His fist came down upon the table, making all the silverware jump. "What do you think happened? You say you were somehow found on a Fire Nation ship. How is that possible, my nephew? Your people love your father and your mother. Who would betray them to kidnap their son? And then conveniently fall into the hands of the Water Tribe? Surely, you must realize how this sounds?"

"No!" Zuko turned to Song and her mother, as if seeking their support. They were staring at the two of them, mute in horror and dawning realization. "This isn't—" He stopped and glared back at Iroh. "You're twisting the facts."

"I'm merely repeating your own words, nephew. You told me yourself the first thing you remembered was waking up on a Water Tribe ship."

"They saved my life—"

"Is that what you truly believe, Zuko? Or is that what they forced you to believe?"

"No… No… That's not how it was, Uncle!" Too late, did he realize what he had said.

Iroh heard it too. "Prince Zuko," he said, kindly, with great understanding. "I'm begging you one last time… Abandon this foolhardy mission. Return home with me, and see the truth for yourself."

Song gave a gasp. Her hand flew up to her mouth. "Prince?" And her and Zuko's eyes met and Zuko clearly saw the fear in them.

Zuko shot up from the table as if the seat had burned him. Song's shock and horror acted like spark to tinder. His own rage, shame at himself, for what he was, flared up in the pit of his belly, boiling upward like liquid nausea.
A ring of fire burst from between his own fingers. Song and her mother screamed, diving to the side and Iroh was on his feet as well, the table upending between them.

"NO." Zuko snarled, and his face was distorted with inner pain and the fire light dancing in his hands.

As much as the monster Zuko seemed to become, Iroh remained calm – and sad. His face seemed to have more lines to it, his hair that much more silver. "I have done all I can, Nephew. I have put my own mission at risk for you, delayed capturing the Avatar and securing Fire Nation victory for you in the hopes that you come to your senses. This ends today. You either return in honor, Prince Zuko, or you return in chains."

Zuko was aware of the candles, the lamps, even the stove flaring up once more under Iroh's power. His own fire seemed very small, the flame very cool in comparison. He didn’t care. He wasn’t giving up without a fight.

“I’ll fight you!” Zuko yelled. "I challenge you to… to an Agni Kai!"

"I do not accept." Iroh said, flatly. He stepped forward, perhaps to say more, but Zuko struck out. He thrust out his hand, palm up and the flame shot at Iroh like a thin jet of water.

Iroh dissipated it into a wisp of smoke with an easy sweep of his hand. Then he yanked the table cloth out from table before him and threw over his nephew.

It was a simple, shockingly effective trick. Zuko made to knock it away, but the thin cloth billowed over his head anyway and fowled his arms, for just a second. And that moment of distraction was all Iroh needed. He was around the remains of the table in an instant. He jabbed out a clawed hand, striking Zuko a finger length above his belly-button – the exact in a pressure point just above the sea of chi – where a firebender drew his power.

Something deep within Zuko seized up. His legs gave out under him and he collapsed bonelessly to the floor as if an invisible puppet master had cut the strings on his body. He couldn't get up, couldn't see - the ridiculous table-cloth was still over his head, pillowing his world in white. He could barely even move. An aching coldness had anchored itself in his center, like a block of ice in his gut, seeping outward his limbs. Iroh had done something to his chi.

He could breathe, but he couldn't spark a flame to warm himself… he couldn't firebend.

Song was screaming. Zuko heard the sound of a shattering plate and Iroh's grunt of impact.

"Leave him alone you monster!"

"Stand aside, young lady. This does not concern you."

Zuko sucked in half a breath, just enough to banish the dancing black dots in front of his eyes. But no matter what he did he felt half-frozen inside. Almost as cold and weak as he felt during the winter solstices back home. He shouldn't have been able to move at all.

But he had learned long time ago, on that first dark winter, to exist without using his inner fire.

Slowly, painfully he reached upward and tugged the cloth away. He was staring level at Song's boots. She stood between him and Iroh, protecting Zuko, with another plate in her hand. Her expression was thunderous.

It took every ounce of effort in him to will his body to move past the weakness in his limbs. Every
muscle felt limp, weak and lethargic. Somehow he got his feet under him and, bracing himself against one leg of the upended table, forced himself up on his feet again, as wobbly as a newborn lion-elk.

And for the first time, he registered blank shock on Prince Iroh's face. That faded almost instantly, to become hard again. Iroh stepped forward –

There was a whistle of wind, a sudden change in air pressure that made everyone's ears pop. The front door slammed open on its hinges, and Aang rushed in, speaking so fast his words were a blur. "Zuko! A-whole-bunch-of-Fire-Nation-troops-are-coming-down-from-the-canyon. I've warned the-mayor, but—" He skidded to a stop, noticing Iroh, pin-wheeling his arms widely behind him, his mouth and eyes almost comically wide.

"Aang, run!" Zuko yelled, but Iroh had already struck out, unleashing an efficient bolt of fire.

Aang nearly bent double backwards in order to avoid the fire – it shot past him and lit the far wall aflame. His returning gust of air hit hard. Zuko and Song were only glanced by it, and both fell over again. Iroh somehow held firm, ducking his head against the wind.

He did not count on an attack from behind. Song's mother charged in from the kitchen, a rolling pin in one hand. Iroh turned, but she was already in mid-swing and the rolling pin connected over the top of the man's head with a loud crack.

Iroh fell to the ground and lay very still.

But the flames from his single shot at Aang had caught upon some of the paper window-shades and flared upward. The wind caused it to leap to the ceiling where it caught, crackling like dry tinder.

Aang turned to Zuko, who was struggling to sit up again. "What are you waiting for? Put the fire out!"

"I can't." He reached an unsteady hand towards the blaze, but he felt disconnected from the fire. The ice was a dark rot in his gut. "Iroh did something to my chi. I can't bend!"

The smoke was thickening now, pouring down from the ceiling. A beam cracked and fell between the kitchen and the front door, and the flames raged like something alive. The fire had caught along the roof – there was no putting it out now.

"We need to get out of here," Zuko said.

"On it." Aang twisted in place and blew out a man-sized chunk out of the nearby wall. Orange light spilled in from the setting sun like a beacon of safety. The young monk bent down, helping Song's mother along to the new exit. The poor woman was weeping and shaking her hands. Shock from Iroh's attack, her own actions, and the spreading fire had overwhelmed her.

Zuko felt a hand close around his arm, hauling him to his feet. Song. She wore a hard, determined expression – the friendly healer girl was gone.

Aang helped the older woman out of the gap and then turned. "Wait, we can't leave yet. What about Iroh?"

For one moment Zuko considered replying, "What about Iroh?" But some part – he suspected the Water Tribe part – made him hold his tongue. You didn't just leave a man behind, even if you didn't like him. Maybe even if he was your enemy and had chased you more than halfway across the world. "I'll get him. Make sure Katara and Sokka are all right. I'll meet you with Appa."
Aang hesitated, clearly torn, and Zuko opened his mouth to snap at him to go, but Song spoke first. "It's okay. I'll be with him."

*He doesn't trust me?* But Zuko forced that thought away. That couldn't have been it. Ice still ran through his veins and he was slightly hunched around his stomach, shivering visibly. The heat from the growing fire tightened the skin on his face, but did nothing for the strange cold in his core.

The fire had spread rapidly along the rafters, creating a ceiling of writhing orange and red – beautiful to a firebender's eyes.

Zuko ducked down where the air was still breathable. He felt one of Song's hands clench the back of his tunic.

"Iroh!" Zuko yelled, but his voice was raspy with smoke and lost in the dull roar of the fire and the crackle of the wood.

He crawled forward – the smoke was soon so thick he didn't find the man until he was nearly on top of him. Iroh was still unconscious, and Zuko couldn't tell if he breathed, although Song put a hand to the pulse point of his neck and nodded.

"Iroh!" Zuko grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him – Iroh's head flopped limply to the side. "Wake up you fat, lazy—" he broke off, coughing. The smoke had gotten to him and he felt light headed…

There was a loud crack of wood and one of the thick beams fell down from the ceiling somewhere off to the side with a crash that shook the floor. It broke Zuko's daze. He came back to reality to see Song tugging on Iroh's arm; she meant to drag him out of here if he couldn't get up on his own.

Iroh… weighed a lot. Weak, frozen inside, dizzy from smoke inhalation, Zuko would have never been able to do it without Song's help. She shoved him along when he faltered, one hand pulling Iroh and the other had nails digging into his arm. Without her he would have surely given into the urge to rest, to close his eyes and let the fire warm him.

As it was, he lost track of himself. There was only the effort of dragging the man, inch by inch back across the ruins of the floor, towards vague bright light that was freedom. He was surprised to find himself at the hole in the wall again. He, Song and Iroh tumbled out, soot smeared and coughing.

Zuko lay back against the cool ground for a moment, staring up at the pure blue Earth Kingdom sky – so different from the dark cobalt arctic blue back home – and heard Song's house burn down, and the distant scream of frightened people.

He had almost forgotten that the Fire Nation was raiding the village.

Iroh was stirring beside him; blinking, twisting his head to stare at the burning house and then down at himself as if surprised to find himself still alive.

Song scooted away nervously, but Zuko felt anger return to his gut. It didn't melt the ice, but it gave his limbs strength. He leaned over, grabbing Iroh's tunic and hauling him up to a sitting position. Iroh made no move to defend himself. His amber eyes were vague and slightly confused, perhaps from the blow to the head or the smoke.

"How?" the aged prince asked, simply.

Zuko didn't know what he was asking. He didn't care. Rage flared up all over again and he leaned in close. "If you ever…" he rasped. His throat was raw and dry as a bone from breathing smoke… but
oddly tight, like he was going to cry. And maybe it was sweat on his cheeks, or maybe tears. "If you…ever hurt anyone to try to get at me again… I'll kill you." It was all he could say. All that would come out.

But Iroh seemed to understand. At least, he nodded, gravely. When Zuko let him go he sat back and made no move to attack further.

And Zuko turned his back on him – the man who used to be his uncle. He got to his feet again, saw Song do the same. She slipped a supporting arm around his shoulders and together they staggered away.

OoOoO

Villagers were running back and forth in a mass of panic. Some clutched small children, some their possessions. A few good souls half heartedly grabbed buckets from a nearby well, but the flames were licking high in Song's house and wind carried embers to the hospital roof. There was no saving it.

Song made a sound of distress. Her grip tightened again on Zuko, but amazingly… she didn't drop her arm. She didn't scream accusations at him – although he expected it at any moment. Her eyes were bright with tears, but she only helped him along and didn't stop to weep.

"Song," he began, knowing that she was owed an explanation… and more of an apology than he would ever be able to give. "I—"

"Frozen frogs," she blurted, cutting him off.

"… What?"

"For your sist—for Katara and Sokka. It's an old woodland remedy, but sucking on frozen frogs can reduce the symptoms of Fire Fever."

He stared at her as if she had grown two heads. But he was very tired and decided not to press his luck. In any case, they were drawing to the other side of the hospital now. Zuko could hear Appa bellowing in the distance. He withdrew his arm from around her shoulder. The Fire Nation was coming. Song had to find her mother and leave. He had to make his escape as well.

But she reached out, gripping his wrist. "No, wait! That man – he said something about the Avatar."

He felt tempted to point out that she had, in fact, seen Aang airbend, but so much had happened so quickly. "Yes," he said. "It's Aang. That's why we're going to the North Pole. He'll be safer there."

She drew in a quick breath. "I know the stories. They say the Avatar has to learn all four elements.

"Yes," he repeated, sharper now. They didn't have time for this. "Why?"
She didn't let go. She stared at him for such a long moment he wondered if she meant to ask to come. And he didn't know what his answer would be.

"There's a group, not far from here," she said, in a rush. "My mom and I have treated their people, in secret. They're against the war, and they say they're led by a firebender. A good one."

Zuko stared at her, his good eye wide in shock. "A firebender working against the Fire Nation?"

"Yes. I... I'm not supposed to tell anyone. If they knew – but I thought you shouldn't be alone."

She reached up to touch his cheek, and for one fluttery moment, he was sure he was going to kiss her.

Then Appa bellowed again – louder – and they could hear shouted orders from deep throats and what sounded like muffled explosions. They had run out of time.

Song let go his wrist and with one last look and a smile, she was gone.

Zuko watched after her for a few moments, and then turned away. Perhaps it was his imagination, but he didn't feel so cold inside. The place where she had touched his wrist felt warm.

He staggered around the corner of the burning hospital. In the field beyond stood Appa with Sokka, Katara, and Aang already in the saddle. The bison gave a great bellow, ducking his head. He looked ready to spring into the sky.

Zuko broke into a loping jog. It was all he could manage, and Katara and Aang both had to reach down to help him into the saddle. He made an ungainly entrance, falling into the saddle, across Sokka's legs.

"Yip-Yip!" Aang called, and with a bunching of muscles and massive lurch that sent their stomachs plummeting to their toes, Appa leapt into the sky.

Katara took in his sooty, singed, exhausted appearance with an alarmed eye. "What happened to you?"

"Iroh happened," he gritted out. Grabbing the sidewall of the saddle, he hefted himself up onto his knees and cautiously lifted his shirt. His stomach was a mass of yellow and green tinged bruises, darkened to five purple points where Iroh had jabbed him. It didn't hurt, exactly, although the purple spots felt sort of numb. The icy feeling deep inside was melting away – either time had done the trick or the cold was driven out by the weak winter sun.

Sokka looked up at him and Zuko could see his blue eyes were clear and lucid, even if there was a runnel of snot coming out of one nostril. "You know," Sokka huffed, weakly, "I don't think that Prince Iroh likes us very much."

Zuko snorted, but his reply stuck in his throat when his brother's gaze sharpened, focusing over his shoulder past him. Zuko turned and saw, something white and brown glide down out of the sky and land on the horned tip of Appa's saddle. Iroh's lemur.

"Zuko, get my boomerang," Sokka said. "It's in my pack. I'll let you do the honors."

"Sokka!" Katara snapped. "That's mean!"

The lemur just cocked its head at then hopped over, coming to rest on Aang's outstretched arm. It made a purring sound deep in its throat and rubbed its little head against the monk's cheek, almost as
if in apology. Then it took off again, just as quickly as it arrived.

The kids leaned over the side of the saddle, watching it zip through the air. They were high above the village now, above even the billows of smoke still coming up over the remains of the hospital. The lemur dived downward, circled once, and came to rest upon the shoulder of a man standing on the outskirts of the village.

Iroh.

Zuko’s lips pressed into a thin line and sat back on his heels, turning away to rest his back against the side of the saddle-wall.

Katara joined him a few moments later, bumping his shoulder with hers in a friendly sort of way. "Hey," she said, softly, so that their voices didn’t carry to Aang and Sokka. "What happened back there?"

He crossed his arms and looked away. "Nothing."

"Zuko…"

"I don’t want to talk about it." He looked up at her, and his eyes were bright. "Not right now."

She gave him a long, steadying look. Then she nodded, patting his arm in a gentle, understanding sort of way. She turned back to Aang and Sokka, coughing politely into her hand. She was mending from Fire Fever, although not all the way recovered. Zuko would have to make sure Aang stopped Appa later on for her frozen frog cure.

But right now he could only stare out into the endless sky, and reply Iroh’s words back in his head.

What happened that day, nearly six years ago? Why had he been on a Fire Nation ship in the first place? Zuko's eyes darted back and forth, for the first time in a long time trying... really trying to remember anything before he had woken up on the Water Tribe ship.

As always, there was nothing.
A few days after the mad dash from Song's village, Zuko found himself in the odd position of teacher to both Aang and Katara.

His sister had soon recovered from her fever, thanks to a combination of Song's medicine and Aang's prowess at digging up frozen frogs out of muddy bogs. As soon as she was up, she was again pouring over the waterbending scroll. Zuko mentioned he had learned his version of the fire lash from it when she and Aang had been captured.
The moment the words were out of his mouth he found himself being dragged to a nearby river. Aang tagged along, hand over his mouth to stifle his giggles.

"All right, just watch what I do." Zuko lit a small blaze for himself out of a nearby dry log. With a gesture, he pulled flames from it until he had a bright flare of fire between his hands. He felt self-conscious and a little silly under Katara's direct gaze -- she was the better bender out of the both of them -- but he stepped forward into his first stance anyway, explaining as he moved. "First, I sort of stream the fire like this. Make sure it's thin and flexible. Then…” He flicked his arms in a sinuous and the ribbon copied his movements, the tip striking with a scorching hiss at the trunk of a nearby tree. The point of impact was marked with soot.

"That doesn't look so hard." Katara called up her own water from the nearby stream. With a globe of it between her palms, she stepped forward in imitation of Zuko's quick movement. But her water remained a coalesced blob and splattered on the ground when she flicked her arms out, soaking her boots.

Zuko started to laugh, but quickly covered it with cough when she shot him a narrowed eyed glare. Turning, Katara brought more water up from the stream and attempted the water whip again – snapping her arms out more forcefully this time -- the water exploded into fine mist and blew away in the light breeze.

Her shoulders slumped. "I don't understand. What am I doing wrong?"

He honestly didn't know. "Let's try it again on a dry run. You stand like this." He rooted his feet a shoulder-width apart and held out his arms. Once she stood by him and copied his stance, he took an exaggerated deep breath inward. Then, as he stepped forward, let it out. "You need to breathe and… sort of snap your arms out at the same time as you step. Try to make it all one movement, starting from your legs and moving upward through your body, your torso, arms and out again. The whip is an extension of your hand."

Katara followed his steps, glancing his way every few seconds to make sure she was doing it right. With a nod, Zuko took her though the stances again and again. But when she tried it with a globe of water it collapsed all over her outstretched fingers before it had even extended into a stream. "Argh! Why can't I get this move?"

Zuko scratched the back of his neck. "Well, it took me most of that night to figure it out. I don't think you would do it the first—"

"Crack!"

Zuko and Katara jumped at the sound of splitting wood. Aang turned towards them with a wide grin on his face. A dried dead tree-stump off to the side had been split in half with the force of his water-whip. Then, with a smooth twirl of his hands, Aang recalled the water back between his palms where it reformed into a neat globe. Not even Zuko had been able to manage that.

Katara made a sound somewhere in between an annoyed snarl and a huff. She whipped around towards her target, flicking out her arms angrily. This time, she had slightly more success; her water shot out in a stream, but twisted wide and Zuko had to throw himself to the ground to keep from getting smacked.

"Hey, watch it!"

"Sorry!" Distracted, the water exploded again into useless mist before striking her target.
Aang walked over, ever helpful. "I think you're doing it mostly right, Katara, but you have to make sure you're shifting your weight smoothly through the stances." He mimed the kata as he spoke; stepping forward with a smooth breath - only Aang's shift between his stances was so graceful, his bones seemed liquid. He ended the move with an easy flick at his wrists.

Zuko narrowed his eyes, noting Aang's easy grace and feeling a prickle of annoyance at being shown up so easily.

"That's not what the scroll says to do," he groused, and went to one of the packs and retrieved the scroll, then pointed to the little figure in question. "See, he's moving at his elbows at the end. No wait..." He peered closer again, bringing the parchment up to his nose. It had been full dark last time he had taken a good look at this scroll and he had been studying it by firelight. Sure enough, the painted figure seemed to be flicking out his wrist, a rolling movement which started at the elbows and extended down to his hands. Wordlessly, Zuko rolled up the scroll and crossed his arms, scowling at Katara and Aang as if misreading the thing had been their fault.

Aang grinned at him, but had the grace not to say anything. He turned to Katara. "I know you'll get it. Let's start from the beginning. The secret to bending is keeping everything smooth..."

He and Katara ran through the steps again, and after a few minutes Zuko came out of his sulk and joined them. By the end of the hour Katara's whip was no longer striking random places, and Zuko had almost got the trick of recalling the fire back between his palms afterwards. Neither one of them had managed to split a log in half like Aang, though.

There was a rustling from a patch of bushes to the right, a snapping of twigs, and Sokka emerged from the underbrush, fresh from his hunting expedition. The last few days of rest (and frogs) had done him some good, too, and he was well on the mend with only a stuffy nose left from the Fire Fever.

Now he wore a wide smile and had brought back with him two fish hanging from a line in one hand. On the opposite shoulder was slung a stick, heavy with a large bunch of berries. "The brave hunter has returned and he brings with him delicious food-stuff," Sokka called, triumphantly.

Aang abandoned the lesson at once – much to Zuko and Katara's annoyance – and skipped over. "What did you find?"

"Fish and grape-cherry berries."

"Huh. I don't know, Sokka." Aang frowned and poked at one of the berries. "These look more like white-jade berries and they're supposed to be poisonous."

"Poison, eh?" And before anyone could stop him, Sokka took a berry and popped it into his mouth. "No... no. I think it was the first thing."

"You idiot!" Zuko snapped. "Spit that out!"

"Aang, don't eat that," Katara added, noticing the little monk reaching for a berry himself. She then turned to her eldest brother. "Sokka, what's wrong with you? You were just sick!"

"They taste fine!" But Sokka had already spit it out anyway and went about washing his mouth out in a stream. It didn't taste very grape-cherryish; more like the tea Gran-Gran's used to make.

Aang stared glumly down at the two remaining fish. One gave a weak sort of flop, and he swallowed hard. "I can't eat those..."
"Two fish isn't enough for four people anyway," Katara said. "Our supplies should last today, but we need to find a village and get to a market soon."

Sokka spat a final mouthful of water into the river and reached for his pack where he had Aang's map carefully stowed. "I say we fly for the rest of the day and get out of this forest. There's some villages just beyond the border. We'll head north from there. No more stops, no more potty breaks, no more magic bending time by the river."

"If I have to go, I have to go." Katara said, her hands on her hips. "And we're stopping."

"Fine, but you make it short." His decision made, Sokka rolled up his map and started packing his things.

During this, Zuko had hung back, uncertain. He hadn't told them what Song had said, because he couldn't figure out a way to bring it up without making it… self-serving. Hadn't he promised Aang in the barn just the other day that he would do everything he could to help him get to the North Pole? But…

"Uh, guys. I don't think we should leave yet."

"Zuko, if you have to go, just go." Sokka waved to the nearby bushes.

He colored a little. "No, it's not that. It's just… Song told me something important when we were leaving." The rest came out very fast, and sounded not at all like what had been in his head. "She said there's a firebender who lives in this forest. She said he was good, and I was thinking, well, if he's good than maybe he could help us – that is, uh, me and… Aang…" he trailed off.

They were all staring at him, but Katara was the first to speak.

"Why didn't you tell us this before?"

"I don't know." Zuko shrugged and rubbed the back of his neck. "You two were still sick, and I thought I would see a sign of something. But I think Aang and I should meet with this guy. We could—"

Sokka made a sharp gesture, cutting him off. "No way," he said, shaking his head. "We are not going out of our way to get flamed by a firebender."

"Song seemed to trust him," Zuko said.

"Well, firebenders can't be trusted."

"Sokka!" Katara snapped.

Sokka turned to his sister, clearly exasperated. "You know what I mean." But he still seemed to realize he had made an error, "Zuko's not like a real firebender, anyway, and Aang… well, he has the master of all the elements thing going for him."

Zuko felt like showing his brother exactly how much of a real firebender he was – just in case he had forgotten. But Sokka's gaze, when he met against his, was earnest. Zuko bit the inside of his own cheeks hard. It took effort, but he let the comment pass, only saying, "What if this guy is really against the Fire Nation? What if he's different, too?"

"Or what if he's just not with them because he's even worse?" Sokka countered.
"We won't know until we look, will we?" Katara stepped over to Zuko's side, her decision very clear.

"I want to learn firebending, Sokka," Zuko said, meeting his brother's gaze squarely. "We might never get another chance like this."

"Why? You already know a lot of stuff. And you beat Zhao that one time."

His gold eyes seemed to flash. "But not Iroh," he said, lowly.

"Aang," Katara said, turning to her friend, "What do you think?"

Put between his friends, another boy might have scuffled his shoes, and looked around nervously. Aang simply bowed his head, hands lightly clasped as he took a moment to consider everyone's words before he gave his answer. "We're going to the North Pole to learn waterbending, but I still have to learn fire and earth, too. If he could teach Zuko and I firebending, wouldn't it be worth it?"

And with that, Sokka realized that he was outnumbered. "Fine." He sighed and threw his hands up in surrender. "We'll look for one day."

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They didn't have much to go on. Song had left Zuko with no directions, and the forest was large, spanning to either side of the horizon. Once Appa got in the air the task seemed even more impossible. Each tree looked like a fluffy green mushroom from up above – an unbroken vista with only a blue-green reflection of a river snaking through it.

To his credit, Sokka wasn't one to bother or complain about being outvoted. The Water Tribe valued teamwork and he was all about helping out until the others came to their senses and naturally realized he was right all along.

So Sokka didn't waste any time sulking; he took out his map again and traced their current direction with a callused finger. "Hmm… If I were a Fire Nation jerk, where would I hide?"

"Next to a river?" Katara suggested, viewing the map over his shoulder. "There would be plenty of fish to eat and water to drink."

"He'd be within a day's ride of a village," Zuko blurted, with an air of authority that made his brother glance up at him. "He'll want to keep his ear to the ground – if he's against the Fire Nation he'll want to be in a place close enough where he can hear about their movements from the locals, but still stay out of the way."

Sokka stroked his chin as he poured over his map. "That does make a lot of sense," he allowed, and took a few more moments to look at the map. "There's a place north-east where there's a river and some villages nearby." And he turned to call out the direction to Aang.

The day wore slowly on. There was only an endless landscape of green below them. Even the bare
broken patches were just empty meadows with no sign of human habitation. No smoke was to be seen anywhere all the way out to the unbroken edge of the horizon, no suspiciously burned patches of wilderness that might signal a firebender was nearby.

By mid-afternoon they were still searching from the sky, but morale was low within the group. Zuko was slumped moodily in the saddle basket, arms hanging off the side. Sokka had all but given up and was bent over his map again idly tracing a path from the forest to the South Pole, and even Katara was looking dejected.

Aang was laying back on Appa's head, boredly twisting a knot of air between his fingers when something caught the corner of his eye. Flipping over on his stomach, he put a hand to bison's dark horn to steady himself and leaned over to peer down in the forest. "Did you guys see that?"

They all came alert at once and rushed to the side of the basket to scan downwards.

"See what?" Katara asked, shading her eyes.

Aang pointed nearly straight down. "There! Right there – Hey! They're chasing that guy!"

"Where?" Zuko leaned as far over the saddle as he could and shook his head in frustration. He could only see the green tops of trees with barely a gap in them. "I don't see anything."

But Aang didn't answer him. In the next moment the airbender had jumped back from the driver's seat into the saddle, and snatched his up airglider.

"Aang, what are you—" Sokka began, but Aang was gone before he could finish, leaping out into the air without so much as a backwards glance.

"Ugh, I hate it when he does that." Sokka groaned, and with a much put upon sigh, climbed over the ridge of the saddle to take Aang's place at Appa's head. Looping the reins around his hands, he called, "Hang on!" before he turned the bison sharply to follow their friend.

Aang snapped open his glider with practiced ease and took a steep dive downwards – a yellow and orange arrow speeding through the air. His grey eyes searched for the spot he had seen, just for a moment's time, the frantic pursuit.

He heard Appa give a bellow somewhere above and trusted his friends would be somewhere behind him. The wind rushed past so loud he could hear nothing else and it stung at his eyes, but he could feel the currents and layers in the air, like three dimensional pathways in the sky. He felt the almost playful tug of a likely current. Aang took it, letting it lead him to a hole in the forest canopy. He slipped through that gap – shooting past the tree trunks so fast they were all a blur.

The snapping sound of cloth caught his attention. He saw another glimpse of the fleeing man through
the trees to his right – the hem of his dirty brown robe flapping out behind him.

Aang's speed was greater. Anticipating the man's direction, he pulled ahead and twisted around to land right in his path, snapping his airglider shut. Within a few seconds the man rounded a corner and saw him – he staggered to a halt with an audible gasp.

"It's okay!" Aang said, holding out his hands in a peaceful gesture. "I just saw those soldiers chasing you, and I wanted to help."

The man stared at him for a moment; at this young boy with the distinctive arrow tattoos and the yellow and orange overcoat. Then he reached up and pushed back his hood to reveal a grizzled face and a wide-eyed expression. "You're the Avatar, aren't you?" he asked, in a thick voice. "I've been looking for you!"

"You have?"

But a shout from the forest beyond cut off the man's reply.

"Stop right there, traitor!"

Two soldiers in Fire Nation regalia stepped out from the nearby brush. Aang made to step in between them, but the robed man shook his head. "It's okay. I know how to deal with these guys."

Sure enough one of the men jumped forward, launching a blast of fire towards them. It looked to fall short, made more to intimidate rather than burn. The man in robes ran towards it. One hand fell dived into the deep pockets of his robe. Grabbing what he needed, he drew back and threw a packet of something wrapped in thin paper directly into the fireblast. The packet exploded at once, cutting right into the blast and throwing a bright bloom of fire in all directions.

The surprised soldiers were thrown back at least a dozen feet, and landed flat on their backs.

"Whoa!" Aang cried. The man turned and grabbed his arm to twist him back around.

"That'll only stop them for a moment. We gotta get out of here!"

Aang looked up the sky to catch his bearings. Nodding, he looked to the south and then pointed to a small game trail which split off from the main path and led to the side. "C'mon this way! Follow me!"

They broke into a run, hearing the sounds of cursing soldiers behind them. The forest gave way to a large clearing not too far down the path – just what Aang had been looking for. He darted to the middle of it, dragging his surprised friend along. Suddenly, the end of a rope fell from the sky as if by magic, and Appa's great bellow came from above.

"AANG!" Sokka leaned down from the bison's head. They were hovering above them, not forty feet up. "Need a lift?"

Aang grinned up at him and waved to show he heard. The man next to him was gaping at the impossibility of the giant flying bison. "Grab on!" Aang said, grabbing the rope and shoving it into his slack hands. He didn't need it for himself. One tap on the ground and his airglider unfurled again; a bent gust of air took him up to safety.

Katara and Zuko held the other end of the rope while Sokka took over driving duties. Aang landed next to them and helped take up the slack. Grunting and pulling, the three of them managed to pull up the robed man. He fell into the saddle in relief, laying there for a moment to gulp air before
"pushing the hood again off his sweaty brow.

"Thanks," he sighed. "They caught my trail awhile back. I didn't know if I could outrun 'em."

"You seemed to do pretty good," Zuko said, with a glance to the man's deeply lined pockets. He had seen how he had rushed towards the soldiers and the resulting explosion from his position up in the air. "What did you throw at them?"

"Exploding jelly packets. Just something I picked up in the army." The man gave a vague sort of smile. "Most firebenders can't take their own fire coming back at them."

Sokka had come back into the saddle from his driver's seat while he was talking. He immediately took in more details about the newcomer than the other three, including what was left unsaid. "You're a Fire Nation soldier!"

"Make that, former Fire Nation soldier," the man corrected. "I deserted the army a long time ago. Name's Chey."

"Nice to meet you, Chey. I'm Aang." Aang gestured around the saddle. "And these are my friends; Katara, Sokka and Zuko."

Chey nodded to them each in turn and his grin went a little lopsided at Zuko. "Named for the dead prince, huh? That's rotten luck." But before the startled teen could respond he turned again to Aang. "I've heard rumors about you and I had to find you myself. I serve a man… Well, he's more than a man, really. He's a legend."

"Who?" Katara asked.

"They call him Jeong Jeong the Deserter. He was the first man to leave the army and live." Chey paused for effect. "I was the second, but you don't get to be a legend for that. Anyway, he's a firebending master, and I knew he would be perfect to teach the Avatar how to firebend."

Sokka's face fell into deep skepticism, but Katara gave a little gasp and scooted closer. "That's why we're here!" she said. "Zuko and Aang both need to learn from a firebending master. Do you know where he is?"

"Sure do. It must be destiny that we found each other." Chey's eyes took a mystical wide look, and he ignored Sokka's snort of disbelief. "Jeong Jeong is a great man, and one of the best firebenders ever… No, he's a genius! He's hidden his village so well you'd never be able to find it without me."

"Oh yeah? So where is it then?" Sokka asked, crossing his arms.

Chey pointed over his shoulder. "Oh, over that way."

The others could see doubt pinching Sokka's face. Sure enough he turned to them and said, "I don't think this is a good idea. We can't just follow the Fire Nation soldier to the firebender in his hidden fire village with all of their… fire!"

"I'm a former Fire Nation soldier," Chey corrected, easily.

"Chey's right, Sokka." Katara said. "Anyway, this forest is too big to search on our own. We have to trust him."

"Oh, come on!" Sokka snapped, throwing up his arms in exasperation. "I can't be the only one who thinks this is a little too convenient."
"It's not just convenient," said Chey, again with the wide-eyed look. "It's destiny."

In truth most of the fight had been knocked out of Second Lieutenant Chuuzi, along with his wind, when the exploding jelly-blast had thrown him at least two lengths. He had landed flat on his back among a scattering of sharp, painful, rocks. He was getting too old for this. By the time he had sat up and got some wind back in his lungs, his quarry and the strange bald kid had already run off.

Only a healthy sense of revenge – carefully crafted and fueled from two decades hard service in the imperial military – had made him force himself up and drag his still slightly stunned firebending partner to his feet.

The idiot fugitive and the kid had left an easy trail to follow, but Agni's luck was not with the two soldiers this day. They arrived at the edge of the clearing just as the two made their airborne escape.

Chuuzi and his firebending officer watched with mouths slightly agape as the impossibly sized six-legged sky-bison swung his tail down and literally flew away.

"Is that…" The firebender couldn't finish, shaking his head and turning to stare at his Sergeant. "That means that strange little kid was the Avatar, doesn't it?"

Chuuzi nodded. Some part of his brain had come out of its shock and was noting the north-northwest direction the animal was taking. Their Commander's mission was to hunt down deserters in this forest, but something this important came first.

"We've got to report this to Commander Zhao at once."

They would have never found the village by themselves if not for Chey. It was well camouflaged, every hint of human activity hidden in the native foliage. It was Chey who pointed out the small depression along the winding river bank – something that could have easily been overlooked as a natural bend, but which he insisted actually served as a small harbor for their long boats; all pulled out of view of prying eyes by brush and branches.

Master Jeong Jeong's camp was well fortified, as well. Aang had no sooner set Appa to land in a large clearing when they were surrounded by fifteen men, all dressed in amour woven from thick grasses and wickedly pointed wooden spears.
"Hey guys," Chey chirped, sliding down Appa's side. "I'm back."

The leader of the group glowered at him. "What is this, Chey? Jeong Jeong told you not to seek the Avatar."

"I didn't. He found me first." Chey jerked a thumb at Aang who smiled and waved.

"Foolish!" the man snapped.

The young monk floated down from Appa's back between the angry men and their guide, ever the peacemaker. "Hi, I'm Aang! Is Jeong Jeong in?"

The lead man glared at the boy but another man at his side muttered, "I know Jeong Jeong's orders, but we cannot refuse the Avatar."

The leader seemed to agree, however reluctantly. He gave a single nod, the lines of his face deepening. "Leave that animal here and follow me."

There was a small twisting path that led from the edge of the meadow and back under some wide canopied trees. A small village stood beneath the shadows of the low branches; dried mud-huts were arranged in groups of twos and threes with roofs seeded with wild grasses, making them look like wild hills.

The lead man stopped in front of a medium sized hut, set slightly apart from the others. "You wait in there," he said, gesturing to the teens. Then he turned to Chey. "Jeong Jeong will want to see you."

"That's okay," Chey said, but the smile gone from his face. In fact, he looked downright nervous and kept glancing back at Aang and the others as he was led away.

As suspicious as the hidden resistance was, they at least were gracious hosts. Their hut was clean and simply furnished with bamboo mats so they didn't sit on the bare floor, and a small pit dug out in the middle for a cooking fire. They were given water and flattish bread and then left alone; a slight muffled sound of someone pacing outside the only indication they were being kept under guard.

Dusk fell fast and early under the trees. Cricket-frogs were chirping within half an hour outside, and soon after that there was a knock on the door. Chey entered, downcast and looking much chastened.

"Jeong Jeong won't come and see you," he said, his gaze fixed firmly on his boots.

"What?" Aang exchanged an alarmed look with Zuko. "Why not?"

Chey gave a miserable shrug. "He's very angry. He says you—the Avatar isn't ready, that you haven't mastered waterbending or earthbending yet."

"Finally!" Sokka threw the last bit of crust he was eating into the fire and stood up, brushing his tunic free of dust. "Let's hit the road."

"We're not going anywhere," Zuko snapped, with a dark glare towards his brother. "And what is this guy talking about? Aang doesn't need to know Water or Earth yet, he already knows some firebending basics."

Aang tilted his head to the side. "Wait, how does Jeong Jeong know I haven't mastered the other elements yet?"

The small campfire caught a gleam in Chey's eyes. "He saw the way you walked into camp. He
Zuko let out a snort that looked like steam. "That's ridiculous."

Aang shook his head and stood before Chey could answer. "No, we've got to talk to him." He turned to stride out, Zuko quick on his heels, but they were stopped right outside by a guard. He must have been listening at the door, or perhaps they had all been a bit too loud, because he shook his head and held up a hand.

"Only one may speak to Jeong Jeong."

Zuko and Aang glanced at each other. "I could—" Zuko started, but Aang stopped him with a shake of his head.

"No, he said he won't teach us because of me, so I have to be the one to talk to him… Maybe he doesn't know that the comet is coming? I have to tell him how important this is."

The other boy's jaw tightened, but he saw the logic in Aang's words. Besides, the young monk was a people-person and Zuko knew… well, he wasn't. He gave a stiff nod and turned away back to the little hut, leaving Aang to continue on to plead for both of them. His blood was still up and he stomped back through the low entranceway, slamming the door behind him, and glaring around at Katara and Sokka. "They'll only let one of us speak to him," he explained, before anyone could ask.

"Don't worry," Katara said, soothingly. "Aang will work it out. Trust him."

Zuko just muttered something under his breath and stalked off to a dark corner of the hut. It wasn't that he didn't trust Aang, or that he was angry at him. It was just frustrating, deeply frustrating, to be so close to finally learning some real firebending only to possibly be denied. He wanted to stand up, push past the guards and demand his right to be taught. Who did this guy think he was?

He held himself back, only by merest of self control. He had learned a long time ago that when you were ice-fishing, fish didn't bite on the hook if you were pacing back and forth. Only if you kept yourself still, and silent.

Besides, Sokka would laugh at him if he were turned away again.

Time passed slowly for them in the hut. Caught under Zuko's broody mood, the fire died down into glowing embers. Chey slunk off to his own hut with a vague excuse about catching up with old friends, and Sokka took the opportunity of a full belly and a semi-soft mat to curl up with his back to them and get some sleep.

"So," Katara said, after a long period of silence. She kept glancing to the door, too, starting to fret over Aang. What was taking so long? "What else did Song tell you about… you know, this firebender?"

Zuko shrugged. "Just that she'd treated his people before and that…" he trailed off for a moment, feeling a slight heat come to his unburned cheek. "That I shouldn't be alone. The only good firebender, I mean."

He knew he had said too much that the moment the words were out. Katara's eyes gleamed with renewed interest. "She did? Do you think you'll see her again?"

"How am I supposed to know that?" he asked, annoyed. "Do I look like a fortune teller?"
Katara rolled her eyes. *Boys.* "Well, do you *want* to see her again?"

Zuko didn't answer for a long moment. Then, "Her house and the hospital burned down." That wasn't *technically* his fault, although he wasn't sure Song would see it that way. "And she knows who-*what* I am. Iroh told them." He sighed. "Or I did. We were arguing."

Katara scooted closer, sensing more behind his words. "What happened?"

He turned his head away, scowling at a far wall and feeling awkward and aware of her keen attention on him. Katara prided herself on being in everyone's business. He shouldn't have said so much in the first place, but it was no use to hope that Sokka would conveniently wake up and interrupt them — he might be feigning sleep for all he knew. Besides, now that Katara had learned this much, she would just wait until they were alone to ask again. She'd never let it go. "The usual. Iroh tried to get me to go back with him. And he… he told me my blood parent's names: Ursa and Ozai."

"Oh. So do you remember—"

"No." He put that question to rest at once. As a matter of fact, he hadn't let himself think too much about the names — didn't want to let them become important to him. Yet they still cycled around in his head, mostly at night when he was trying to sleep. Ozai. Ursa. Ozai. Ursa. Harsh sounding syllables… like Zuko. "Iroh said she… the woman—"

"Your mother," Katara whispered, softly.

Zuko gave a half shrug. "He said that me being gone nearly destroyed her. I don't care," he said, and reached towards the glowing orange embers to twist a small ribbon of fire between his fingers. It was a nervous gesture. "I don't even know her."

Katara looked at him across the fire, solemn, her blue eyes solemn and sad. He looked away from her… He couldn't stand to see the compassion there. After a few moments, he allowed the fire in his hands to die.

"Does it make me a bad person?" he wondered.

"No." She reached over to take one of his hands between hers. Her fingers were cool to the touch. "But I think you're wrong. I think you do care, Zuko, even if you don't want to admit it."

Her words loosened a tight, unnoticed knot in his chest. Mutely, he shook his head, and she didn't press further.

Sokka gave a soft snorting snore from the other side of the room. It broke the moment and Katara drew back, turning her head to wipe discretely at the corner of her eye. Zuko pretended not to notice, busying himself with rekindling the embers back into viable flames.

"I liked her," he said, after a moment. "Song, I mean." To Katara's questioning glance. "But… I wouldn't want to hurt her again, and that's just what would happen, if I ever went back."

Katara gave him a long, steadying look. "I think you're underestimating her."

But he only shrugged again, his expression becoming closed and unhappy once more. For once, his sister didn't pursue it.
More time passed; the sound of Sokka's deep regular breathing acted like a sedative to his siblings. Katara had pulled up her own mat and curled up on it with her back to the fire. Zuko's chin rested on his chest, his eyes shut as he dozed.

Then, without any warning at all, the door to the hut slammed open on its hinges and Aang bounded in; a smile stretching from ear-to-ear. "He's gonna train us!"

Startled, Sokka shot to his feet, still half asleep and clutching his boomerang. "What happened?" he demanded, looking around with sleep muzzy eyes. "Are we captured again?"

Zuko ignored him. "You're sure?" he asked, Aang.

"Well, he wasn't at first. He was pretty angry when I told him I was taking firebending lessons… but then he got quiet for awhile and then just agreed. We're going to meet him at his hut right at dawn." Aang's grin got even wider. "We're going to get training from a **real** firebending master!"

Katara looked from Aang to Zuko and back again. "This is great! You two will learn so much."

"Yeah," Sokka deadpanned. He settled himself back down on the mat with an annoyed air. It had just hit him that they weren't going anywhere for some time. "Great."

The two boys were up early the next morning, and took the short path between their hut and Jeong Jeong's at a jog. They had been up and ready before the last of the night's stars had even completely faded into daylight. The plan was to get there early, fresh faced and ready for their firebending instructor.

They found him waiting for them instead.

Jeong Jeong's private hut was marginally bigger than the others in the village, set in a prime position on the edge of a carefully tended shallow creek. He stood on the rocky bank and watched their approach. A mushroom of wiry grey hair sat atop his head, and he was swarthy from years out in the sun. As Zuko drew closer he saw the man had scars of his own; two vertical lines drew near one eye, puckering its corner. Had the injury been any closer, he may have lost it.

The old master said nothing as they arrived, so Aang was left to do the introductions. "Master Jeong Jeong, this is Zuko. He's the one I told you about. He's taught me some about firebending already. Zuko, this is Jeong Jeong."

Zuko cupped his hands in a bow, Water Tribe style. "Thank you for agreeing to teach us."
Jeong Jeong eyed him for a moment and then gave a single nod, his expression too closed to read. Then he looked to Aang. "We will start with the basics. Horse stance!" he barked, causing the little monk to startle, before he hastily bent and positioned his feet. "Wider! Now bend your knees. Good... good."

"Um." Zuko raised his hand. "What should I—"

Jeong Jeong whipped around. "Quiet! If you cannot be here without interrupting then you may leave." He turned his back on him in clear dismissal and focused again on Aang. "Now, concentrate."

Aang looked hesitantly between his teacher and his friend. Zuko stood off to the side with his arms crossed, looking severely put out. But Jeong Jeong was still glaring down at him expectantly.

"So, what am I supposed to concentrate on?"

The old master gestured to the east where the bright gleam of the sun could just be seen though the bare winter branches. "Feel the heat of the sun. It is the greatest source of fire, yet in complete balance with nature."

Aang glanced up behind him and then back, a slight smile on his face. "Is that how I make fire?"

"No! Concentrate!"

His sharp command made Aang startle again, but he steadied himself and screwed up his face in his best 'concentration pose'. Jeong Jeong watched him for a few minutes until he was satisfied. Then he turned to Zuko, "Come!" and walked away.

Zuko followed, hands now clenched in anger at his sides. They took a stone-edged path through the trees and came to a large meadow, the brown grass cropped short by hungry beaver-deer. Jeong Jeong stopped in the middle, turning to regard him and still said nothing. It was as if he were waiting.

Zuko was quickly growing tired of playing games. "Are you going to teach me now?" he asked, snidely.

"No."

"What!!" he yelped, "Wait, why not?"

"You are undisciplined," Jeong Jeong snapped, "and arrogant."

"I'm arrogant?"

"You do not wish to learn the art of firebending. Look at you," he said, walking around Zuko in a slow circle, evaluating the boy like a badly trained ostrich-horse. "You see an opportunity, and you pushed forward with it, heedless of the consequences. You are no master, yet you attempt to teach! How can you teach what you do not know?"

Zuko's nostrils flared. "You haven't even seen—"

"I have seen enough. The way you move, the way you breathe speaks of no control."

"That's why I'm here! I —I didn't have anyone to teach me, so I taught myself. I've figured out some things, but I don't know it all."

Jeong Jeong studied him for a long moment, and Zuko met his gaze unflinchingly. The old master
was less than impressed. "Fire is the most seductive, and the most treacherous of all the elements. Playing the fool and turning your back on it will only invite danger."

"I know the risk. I'm not afraid."

"Oh? What about when your pupil's fire turns on someone else, or himself? Yes, boy," he snapped when Zuko opened his mouth to interrupt. "Do you think you are strong enough to hold the Avatar?"

Zuko almost barked out a laugh. "Aang wouldn't—He's a monk, he's not going to just run around setting things on fire." He paused, lifting his chin. "And even if he did, I would stop him."

"You are a fool."

It took everything he had not to shoot back another insult. This man is a master firebender, he told himself firmly. Letting out a long breath that was perhaps a bit hotter than it needed to be, Zuko forced his voice to come out even. "So are you going to teach me, or not?"

Jeong Jeong's eyes narrowed. He stepped forward and his tensed shoulders made Zuko flinch, as if readying himself to be smacked across the face. But the Master simply barked, "What are the three elements of fire?"

"Heat, air, and fuel," Zuko replied instantly, before he had even the chance to consider how he knew.

"It is called the divine triangle." Jeong Jeong said. "Without heat the fire cannot spark, without air the fire cannot breathe, and without fuel a fire cannot grow." He held out his hand, palm up, and lit a small nub of a flame hardly bigger than a candle-top. "This fire has heat and air. What is it using as the fuel?"

"I don't know…" Zuko's scrunched his face for a moment in thought. "More air?"

"No! This fire is fed only by my will. It is held by my control. You may put tinder to it, and it will not catch. It grows." Jeong Jeong turned then and a brilliant plume of flame arced high into the air before it retracted, once again becoming the candle-sized flame. "And it dies only to my will as a guide."

Jeong Jeong closed his fist, snuffing out his flame. Then he poked one finger to Zuko's stomach. "This point is the single most important area of chi for a firebender. Here is where the fire gets its fuel. A firebender will use his own body heat in the core as the spark."

His finger moved up, now centered in the middle of Zuko's chest. "Breath provides the air and the power to the fire. The mixing of chi, breath, and heat create flame." And once again the squat little fire appeared his palm.

"We're made to produce fire." Zuko breathed, and felt warm inside with the realization.

"Yes." But there was something bitter in the old master's tone. Before he could identify it, Jeong Jeong held out his palm once more. He seemed to be waiting for something. Guessing at what it was, Zuko moved his hand briefly over the other firebender's to collect a little of the flame into his own palm.

Once free of Jeong Jeong's control and passed into his own, the fire spread out into three cool red and orange points, nearly spilling over the sides of his palm like water – so different, he saw now, from the Master's single candle-top flame.

Jeong Jeong raised an eyebrow, his disapproval clear. "You cannot control your own fire properly,
and you expect to teach the Avatar to do the same?"

Zuko’s cheeks felt hot. He grit his teeth and dropped his hand, letting the fire run off into smoke between his fingers.

"Take your stance!"

So he was to be taught after all? Zuko let out long breath – half relief and half exasperation he crouched firmly down. Having seeing Aang do this shortly before, Zuko made sure to keep his legs far apart. Jeong Jeong didn't comment, except to tap at his feet with a stick to make sure they were both facing forward.

It might have been his imagination, but something in the burn in his thighs and calves felt… almost familiar.

Jeong Jeong reached up, plucking a falling leaf out of the air as if by magic. The tips of his fingers smoldered a small hole in the middle of the leaf leaving a slight orange ring. "Concentrate on the fire," he said, handing it to Zuko. "I want you to keep it from reaching the edge of the leaf for as long as you can."

He did, taking the leaf by the edges gingerly. The moment the control from the fire passed from Jeong Jeong to himself, the orange ring dimmed and then died.

"Your hands are as delicate as a turtle-duck and just as threatening." Another smoldering leaf was thrust between his hands. "Again."

It was going to be a long day.

OoOoO

Jeong Jeong dismissed his two students at dusk with an order to return after breakfast the next day. He firmly ignored their mulish, disappointed looks. All young students were same. Even the Avatar, as bubbly and cheerful as he was, saw the value in firebending only for the flash and awe it could inspire. He expected this to be fun. He had no idea of the burden of fire to the soul.

Jeong Jeong needed to meditate.

That night, a three-quarter moon rose overhead. The small hidden village was asleep; all cooking fires burned to embers, sentries nodding off at their posts, and late winter peepers calling out a soft mating song.

He sat alone in his hut, knelt on a simple bamboo mat. Rows of thick waxy candles breathed with him, slow, deep and even. It was the same position Aang had found him in the night before. There was little change between that night and this one, except by the slight worry creased between Jeong Jeong’s dark eyebrows and the occasional flicker of the far candle flames as his own thoughts spiraled wide.

Jeong Jeong was deeply conflicted.

He would not – could not – ignore Avatar Roku's request to teach the newest Avatar. It had been a vision sent from the spirit world itself, and Jeong Jeong knew he must heed it. But it felt wrong down
to his very core.

The Avatar must have the discipline of the three other bending elements before he attempted to master fire. It was the way of the world: Winter came before spring, and spring preceded summer. Just as a new shoot must first grow and mature before the hot season, so must the new Avatar learn the other elements. This was the natural balance, and Jeong Jeong felt he was tampering with something vital by introducing fire to him now.

The other source of his inner disquiet was less important, but needled at his spirit all the same.

There was something fundamentally off in the young prince. It wasn't his odd garb or the fact that he was here at all when he had long thought to be dead – Jeong Jeong had his own secrets and shame, he was not one to pry into another's. No, Jeong Jeong had been almost glad at the boy's natural show of arrogance, else he would not think of him as a firebender at all.

The boy did not spark fire of his own when prompted, but had pulled it from Jeong Jeong's own flame. Then his fire had sat tamed and cool like water in his hand. He had heard of such firebenders before, but one appearing in the royal line? It should not be possible.

The old master's thoughts strayed wide again, reaching far back into his own memories. The scent of red-lilac came to him, for a moment so real that he breathed in deep as if to catch the aroma of his homeland once more… had he felt this strangeness from the boy before?

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Admiral Jeong Jeong inhaled deeply. The scent of red lilac was thick in the wind. He closed his eyes, concentrating only on that sweet-spicy smell and willing it to lead him to inner stillness. He was going to need all the calm he could muster for this particular interview.

Prince Ozai walked beside him, hands clasped loosely behind his back. If he noticed the other man's breathing pattern change, he made no comment. He also, it seemed, felt no reason to conceal the reason for his summons today.

"Admiral Jeong Jeong, you are renowned in the Fire Nation for your firebending training."

Jeong Jeong tensed. "No longer, my Prince. I have vowed to take no more students."

"I don't see why," Ozai said calmly. "Every single one of your pupils has been trained into a master. Why, Zhao has recently been given a captain's commission, and he's ambitious enough to make commander within a few years."

Jeong Jeong said nothing.

The Prince remained unconcerned. "Follow me," he said, and turned on his heel to walk down a side corridor, expecting the other man to walk as passively behind as a well trained lion-dog. Perhaps, in Ozai's mind, he was.
Jeong Jeong's face remained an impassive mask as he fell into step with him once more, matching the man's even stride.

Ozai did not glance in his direction. "I know you have vowed not to take any more pupils, but this is no ordinary student."

They came to a high veranda overlooking the palace courtyard. The royal guard were training off in the middle-distance, their weapons clacking and warrior's calls echoing off the stone walls. Jeong Jeong felt his gaze drawn to the forefront.

The girl could not have been more than five or six years old – Jeong Jeong had no children of his own so he was not good with such estimations. She was training with what looked like the palace firebending masters. As the two men looked on, the girl sprang up in the air, executing a perfect twist; the side of her foot landed an exact mark against a high padded glove. The sharp whap of impact could be heard even from where they were standing. She landed in a lithe crouch and was up again before his instructors could command, completing the move with a quick fireblast downwards to mime finishing off the imaginary opponent she had knocked to the ground.

"My daughter, Azula." Ozai's voice was filled with pride.

"Remarkable," Jeong Jeong murmured.

"Her instructors tell me she is a true firebending prodigy." He paused. "If she continues at this pace, she will be capable of blue flame within a few years."

Jeong Jeong never took his eyes off the girl, did not let the slightest emotion crack the rigid mask he made of his face. His fingers, however, clenched into claws against the railing – thankfully hidden under the wide sleeves of his formal robes. "Only a few are capable of such fire in each generation. You must be… proud."

The words felt like bile in his mouth. Blue flame burned hotter, the fire within that much hungrier… the line between humanity and savagery spider-silk thin.

Jeong Jeong was certain he let none of his own thoughts show on his face, but Prince Ozai was looking at him oddly. He clearly expected more enthusiasm, more awe over his prodigy daughter.

Thankfully, Jeong Jeong was saved from further explanation by the sound of light running feet. A young boy appeared in the open doorway behind them. He was perhaps a year or two older than the princess and shared Ozai's remarkable light gold eyes.

"Father!" His face split into a grin as he raced up to the two men. "Mom an' Uncle are going to see a play at the theater tonight. Can I go, too? Mom said you have to say okay."

Ozai glowered down at the boy. "Remember your manners, Zuko."

Brought up short, the young boy executed a hastily bobbing bow, first to Ozai and then to Jeong Jeong. "Sorry Father. May I go?"

"Which play will you be seeing?"

The boy grinned again. "The one with the dragons in it!"

Love Amongst the Dragons, Jeong Jeong thought, with a bit of snide amusement. A romantic production that was all the talk of the noble class. Ozai's son enjoyed theater while his daughter bent her energies to combat.
Sure enough, a look of exasperation passed over Ozai's finely sculpted face. "You may, but," he held up a finger before his son could speak. "You are to conduct yourself with the utmost behavior for a young prince. Do you understand?"

Zuko squared his narrow shoulders, puffing out his chest with seriousness that seemed ludicrous for someone so young. "Yes Father. Thank you, Father." Another bow – more properly done this time – before he turned to race way.

Jeong Jeong watched him leave. "Your son is also a firebender?"

He was sure to watch Ozai's reaction of the corner of his eye and again he caught a flash of emotion – exasperation again, or perhaps disappointment – on the other man's face. "His skills are average." And he turned gain to the courtyard, dismissing the subject from his mind in favor for the more talented of the two children.

Down below, Azula executed another perfect series of leaps and kicks. There was no doubt about it: her skill was far beyond her age group.

"I will have only the best instructors for my daughter." Ozai said, after a moment. "I am aware you are under my brother's command for the next year. After you are finished, you are to return here and teach the princess until her skills surpass your own."

It was nothing short of an order. No one, not even a renowned master under the weight of his own vow, could refuse a prince. Jeong Jeong bowed.

Looking down at the girl as she flipped and spun; a bright series of hot sparks shooting from her fingertips, he saw his own soul's destruction.

A tiny seed of discontentment had long ago been planted in his mind, after Zhao's betrayal and during the course of his own violent campaign in the Earth Kingdom. Watching the girl now, knowing what she would become with or without his tutelage, he felt that seed spring another tiny shoot.

Jeong Jeong never returned.

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Jeong Jeong slid open his eyes. His candles had burned themselves low; the wax spilling into puddles on the packed earth. He paid them no mind. He was certain now he had not registered anything strange about the young prince at that point – he had barely acknowledged the boy at all.

Average, Ozai had said, and perhaps that was the case.

Control, he told himself firmly. He would prescribe a regiment of meditation and breathing lessons for them both.

If the Avatar did not wish to master bending the other three elements then Jeong Jeong could at least be certain to drill him in the art of restraint. He would be disciplined, he would be calm and in complete control before Jeong Jeong would let him touch live fire.
Breath control could only help the prince as well, and smooth out whatever oddness he felt from him.

Tomorrow, he would work the two together.

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OoOoO

Jeong Jeong told his pupils to meet him shortly after breakfast after that first frustrating day. So Aang and Zuko had some time to kill after they woke. Sokka announced he was going to get some well-deserved fishing time in and set off down the river with a borrowed pole and bits of stale bread to use as fish bait.

Katara, meanwhile, had been practicing on her own and wanted to show off her water whip. She had gotten better with the waterbending scroll as a guide. Her whip struck at or very close to its mark every single time.

Zuko and Aang exchanged a silent dubious glance: Katara had progressed far already while they had spent all yesterday breathing and feeling the sun.

Naturally, Aang was first to get over his jealousy. Soon he had shed his shoes and stood next to Katara in the ankle-deep water to perfect his own water whip. Not to be outdone, Zuko lit a small campfire from a nearby pit and joined them.

After awhile, the three benders stood side-by-side in the peaceful stream, setting challenges for each other on who could hit what, before deciding to find out what would happen if they all struck the same point at the same time. Two waterbenders and one firebender stepped forward in unison with the same fluid grace. The tips of the three elemental whips converged on an unlucky stone stuck halfway out of the ground. The force of the joined impact sent small chips of rock exploding in all directions.

"Wow!" Aang exclaimed, wiping his forehead free of sweat with the back of his hand. "I can't wait to do that with fire. What do you think, guys? Fire in this hand and water in the other!" He then brought his hand together in a playful clap.

Zuko smirked and turned to stream more of the campfire's flames into his hands for another round – and nearly jumped out of his skin when he caught sight of a man watching them from a nearby footbridge, not twenty feet away.

"Master Jeong Jeong!" he yelped, catching Aang and Katara's attention. His concentration shattered, the small stream of fire fell short and landed in the water with a steamy hiss.

The master's expression was... unreadable, but Zuko could feel the force of his gaze drill into him even from so far away. Why? He had not done anything wrong.

"If you are done playing," Jeong Jeong's eyebrow rose up his forehead in displeasure. "There is real practice to be done."

"Yes, master Jeong Jeong," Aang and Zuko said in unison, bowing quickly.
Katara giggled behind her hands as the boys hastily sloshed out of the stream and retrieved their shoes.

OoOoO

Zuko was sure he felt the older firebender's gaze on him several times over the next hour as Jeong Jeong shepherded them up a winding forest path. Every time he turned, however, Jeong Jeong was looking in another direction.

Jeong Jeong remained stoic and remote, walking up the sharp incline calmly with his hands clasped behind his back, without a hint of exhaustion.

Aang was more than happy to fill the silence for their teacher. He had taken his journey as a good sign and constantly elbowed Zuko, whispering in excitement about the types of moves they would probably be learning today, and how his friend Kuzon from the Fire Nation could make a bolt of fire where the head actually looked like a dragon.

The path wound its way up to a mountain of bald yellowed shale – bare of any grasses or vegetation. Aang’s grin widened at the sight and he couldn't hold back anymore.

"Are we coming up here so we don't burn anything with our fire blasts?"

Jeong Jeong didn't even look at him. "No fire yet."

"What?!" Aang whirled to Zuko, as if seeking confirmation, but he looked just as surprised. "Then why did you bring us here?"

The old man stood straight and tall, his back to them. A slight breeze tugged at his heavy robes. "Power in firebending comes from the breath. That is why you must master proper breath control." He did not so much as turn his head, but he might as well have been pointing at Zuko. "And you," now to Aang, "must learn both patience and discipline. Assume your stance…Wider!"

He left them only a short time later after vague instructions to inhale through the nose and exhale out the mouth, to widen their stances, feel the heat of the sun and once again meditate on the balance it provided.

Zuko’s mouth pinched into an unhappy line, but he stood firm on the bare hill with hands clenched strongly at his sides. The pose felt unnatural and uncomfortable to him. And as weak as the winter sun was, it was still much warmer than high summer at the South Pole. A trail of sweat dripped down his spine making his pale blue tunic stick to his back. He felt clammy and uncomfortable.

It was Aang who broke first, letting out an exhale through his mouth that was more out of frustration than meditation. "This is boring!"

Zuko remained quiet with the hope that if he said nothing, the other boy would settle back down. No such luck. Aang only sighed again, louder this time.
"He's probably going to have us up here all day long," Aang continued, more peevish. "I already know how to breathe and feel the sun."

He had a good point. This wasn't what he had hoped for firebending training at all, yet somehow... Zuko wasn't quite surprised. Letting out a long breath, Zuko cracked open his good eye. It wasn't often that he found himself being the voice of reason, and he had to think for a moment to find the right thing to say. "Look, Jeong Jeong has been a master for a long time. He knows what he's doing."

"But this is so boring! Couldn't you teach me something fun?" Aang wheedled. "Just how to make the littlest fire?"

"No."

"Ugh!" Aang broke his stance and ran a hand over his bare scalp in agitation. "I'm going to talk to Jeong Jeong."

"Aang, get back here!" Zuko reached for him, but Aang had already stepped off the sharp side of the hill. His orange overcoat billowed up around his ears as he floated gently downhill.

Zuko scowled down at the other boy, and considered marching him right back up the hill and make him take his training seriously. Only Zuko's pride held him back. He wouldn't break his stance and go hunting after Aang just to get yelled at again by Jeong Jeong – Let Aang get in trouble on his own.

So Zuko stepped back in his stance again, widened his feet, and focused on breathing. He had to believe that there was some point to this business... even if he didn't know what it was yet.

The sun blazed higher and ever hotter in the sky, and Zuko could feel the skin on the back of his neck itch with sweat. He sighed and untied his wolfstail, but he soon felt even more uncomfortable with his hair all in his eyes; his shirt nearly plastered to his back with sweat.

And Aang still hadn't returned.

"This is ridiculous," he growled, straitening up. How was anyone supposed to concentrate like this?

As much as he hated to admit it, Aang might have had a point. What was the use staying up there all day anyway when he could have been doing something useful, like perfecting his fire lash? Zuko was trying... he really was, but he was hot and cranky and somehow he didn't think that standing up here breathing all day was going to help him next time he met Iroh. The fat old prince wasn't going to be impressed by his newfound breathing techniques.

Reluctantly, he abandoned his post and trudged back down the hill.

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He half expected to run into Aang and Jeong Jeong coming back up the path, but he met no one –
had everyone forgotten about him? Maybe Jeong Jeong did intend for them to stay up there all day.

Zuko had nearly reached the hidden village again when the sound of excited voices made him stop in his tracks. He could hear Katara and Aang off in the distance. Although he was too far away to understand the words, the warning in Katara's tone caught his attention right away. He pushed through the last few bushes, and froze.

Aang stood on a dry upraised stone near the edge of the quiet meditation pond, and Katara was facing him across the small gap of water. Somehow, the young monk had managed a respectable flame in the palm of his hand. With one quick circular movement Aang split the fire into three parts, juggling his element like balls.

His flames were rough and red with ragged edges. It was clear Aang didn't have complete control.

Zuko strode out of the brush. "Aang!" he barked. "Stop!"

But Aang was caught up in his enjoyment of this new game. He didn't hear the other boy at all over his own happy laughter, and tossed the flames higher, twisting about in an airbending move.

Zuko knew what was going to happen, it seemed, before it even did. He leapt forward into a sprint, feeling the whole world slow to a crawl. He was too slow… too slow…

Aang's arms cast out, and his expression changed from delighted to alarmed as the fire rolled away from him in every direction.

The flames were wild and fast—so much faster than Zuko was. He reached out, instinctively trying to gain control of the racing fire and turn it away…

He had not been ready for Aang's raw power, the heat or the sheer force. The flames rolled past Zuko's hands.

And Katara screamed.

The world seemed to skip time for a second, and when it came back Zuko was staring dumbstruck at Katara. She knelt crumpled on the ground with her hands clutched to her chest.

Aang leapt over the small creek. "Katara! Oh no – Are you all right?"

All right? All right?! Zuko rounded on Aang. "What do you think?!” He stepped forward, so furious he didn't know if he wanted to grab the young monk and shake him, or just punch him in the face.

But Sokka managed to get to him first. Alerted by the raised voices as Zuko had been, he pelted in from nowhere, the fishing pole forgotten back in the river. Moving between the two, he viciously shoved Aang back, knocking him to the ground. "Look what you did! You burned my sister!"

"I'm sorry… I didn't mean to!" Aang looked at the two brothers looming over him, wide-eyed. "I'm sorry!"

Zuko didn't care. "Jeong Jeong told us to be careful. He told us not to mess around."

"I know—"

"Then why didn't you listen?!” His last few words were almost a shout. Aang shrank back, but Zuko wasn't impressed.

Something hot and painful burned up though his chest, boiling his blood. His fingers were claws at
his sides, and bright yellow sparks dripped off his palms to sizzle to the ground. He advanced on the other boy, shouldering Sokka out of the way. "Everything’s just fun and games to you! And… and you don’t care! There is a war going on, but you would rather fly around and play with fire like it was a new toy. Fire isn’t a game, Aang!"

Aang didn’t speak up, didn’t say anything in his own defense. He stared up at Zuko, his eyes so round and wide that Zuko could see a reflection of himself as a large dark distorted figure standing over the boy.

Zuko's mind stuttered to a halt. The breath died in his throat. He took an involuntary step back. Then another.

Aang was saying he was sorry over and over again – he probably didn't know he was saying it at this point. Zuko only knew he didn't want to hear it. He felt sick, nauseated. The ragged edges of his vision were dark, the remaining overly bright and contorted.

And in the edge of his perception he saw Katara rise, hands still clutched to her chest. She fled the meadow, weeping.

"You'd better go after her." Sokka was still glowering narrow-eyed at Aang, but shot Zuko a quick glance when he hesitated. "No offense, but you have the most experience with burns."

Zuko nodded, dumbly. "Yeah… right," he murmured.

Aang's face was awash with anguish, but Zuko couldn't quite meet his eye. He turned and strode away, slightly stiff-legged, in the way that Katara had gone.

It wasn't hard to find her. She had run to the outskirts of the village and had come to rest where a small grassy incline led to a bend in the river. She was knelt over again with her arms tucked inward to her chest, sniffling. Zuko's heart contracted – he knew how much it took to make her cry.

"How bad is it?" he asked, coming over to kneel beside her. In truth, he wasn't sure what he could do. Katara was the one who always provided first aid. She had always been the one to step in and taken care of things when Sokka got a fishhook stuck in his hand, or if he cut himself on a jagged piece of ice. Now, looking down at her, burned and crying, Zuko felt lost and unsure… and small.

Katara only shook her head and turned her face away, as if to hide her tears. "You shouldn't have been so rough with Aang…It was only an accident."

He should have objected, should have told her Aang knew better – because he did – but looking at her right then, Zuko only thought of how he couldn't stop the flames, how they had slipped right past him. He hadn't been strong enough to hold the Avatar's fire, and because of that his little sister had been burned.

"Let me see your hands," he said, roughly.

She hesitated only a moment longer. Then slowly, painfully, she uncurled her arms from her middle, uttering a strangled little cry when the raw flesh hit air; fresh tears running down her face. But she was so obviously trying to remain strong he said nothing of it.

Zuko let out a long breath. He had thought – no, he had expected her hands to look shiny and raw of flesh… like the left side of his face. Instead, a series of thin angry red lines ribboned the front and back of her hand, extending upward past her wrist and to the middle of his forearm. Blisters were already forming up along the edges of the burns, thick and yellow.
It was still bad. And he might have burn experience as Sokka said, but only as the victim. He didn't know what he could do for her at all.

"You're going to have to talk me through this," he said. "What do I need to do?"

Katara shook her head, gritting her teeth. "Bandages and… I don't know what else. Back home there's a lichen to stop infection… I don't know if it grows around here."

Bandages they had, packed away on Appa's saddle. Zuko looked around, hoping for some inspiration for the short-term, and spied the river. "Let's soak the burns. It might help with the pain."

Gently holding her elbow, he guided her to the edge of the bank. Katara grimaced again when he helped lower her hands into the cold water; and his heart twisted again in his chest. He could only stand to the side and pat her back awkwardly, feeling worse than useless.

Perhaps the simple touch helped… Katara leaned back slightly into him and closed her eyes, letting out a long breath - as if to regain her composure.

The water around her hands began to glow bright blue.

"Katara…"

His first impulse was to snatch her hands back out – there was clearly something wrong in the water. But Katara’s expression stopped him. She’d opened her eyes, her face no longer pained, but amazed. And when she lifted her arms up, the water still glowed blue for a moment or two before falling away, transparent again, and leaving new skin behind.

"What the…" Zuko reached out to touch her hand. A bare minute ago there had been red welts there, but now there was only whole tanned skin. "What did you – How did you do that?"

"I don't know. I just felt a sort of imbalance and then…" She shook her head and glanced over to him. The tears were gone, and now her face was alive with excitement and wonder. "Wait." She reached out and grabbed his arm. "Zuko, you're hurt, too!"

"What?" He looked down. One of his pale hands was red with heat rash – he hadn't been able to divert all of Aang's fire after all. It stung, but not badly. He had hardly even noticed considering everything that happened afterwards. "It's nothing."

But Katara had already turned to the river and with a gesture, steamed a globe of water into her hand. "Here, let me see." Pulling his arm across her lap, she let the water coat over her hand like a glove and placed it over the rash. It glowed bright blue under her power. He winced, but the sting melted away almost instantly to cool relief. A breath later the water dribbled away to leave whole, unmarked skin.

Their eyes met, mirrored in mutual amazement. Then her gaze flickered, ever so briefly, to the left side of his face.

"She has healing abilities."

The moment broke and Zuko and Katara turned to see Jeong Jeong striding towards them.

"You've seen someone heal like this before?" Katara asked, in awe.

He nodded, and something sad flashed over his craggy features. "It is said the great waterbenders can stitch wounds without sting-gut and mend bones in only a moment's time." He sat next to them
without invitation, staring in to the gently flowing river.

Zuko could hardly look at the old master – Jeong Jeong's words from that first argument played again in his mind, almost mocking. *Do you think you are strong enough to hold the Avatar?*

"I guess you were right," Zuko said. The bitterness burned hot in this throat. "I couldn't stop Aang’s fire."

"Fire will often burn those who are foolish enough to step in its path," the old master replied. Then he sighed. "What happened was inevitable."

"What do you mean?"

"It is the curse of fire." The trace of sadness was gone as if it had never been there. He still stared into the water, his expression as hard and chiseled as stone. "One slip, one moment of lost control, and you will destroy yourself and everyone you love."

Zuko swallowed hard and looked away, a hand going to his own chest where he felt the lingering heat of his inner-fire.

Seeing this and the horrible, uncertain look on her brother's face, Katara's inner hackles went up. "That's not fair! Zuko has never burned anyone, and what Aang did was an accident."

"Fair? The destinies care nothing for fair." Jeong Jeong dipped a hand in the cold river and lifted a palmful of it to eye-level. "Your element is cool and sustains life. You can heal, while fire… Fire rages and burns. It brings only pain and destruction. What in this is fair, that some are given the gift to heal and others only to destroy?" He paused then and shook his head, leaving the two teens stunned. After a moment, he seemed to collect himself. He looked to Zuko. "This is why I cannot teach you firebending."

The boy flinched as if he had been slapped. "Please, give me a second chance. I promise I'll work harder." The shame of begging for it washed over him like a wave, cracking his voice. The thought of failure, though, was far worse. "I'll go back and do all the breathing exercises… Whatever basics you want."

"Wait," Katara said, putting a hand on her brother's arm to still him. She looked to Jeong Jeong. "You can't train him, or you won't?"

This earned her a respectful nod. "I cannot teach him firebending." He focused on Zuko once more. "I saw you with the Avatar. A firebender would have tried to block the flame or attack its caster to dispel it. Instead, you attempted to turn it into your own and route it away. This is not the instinct of a true firebender."

Zuko bristled. "I am a firebender." And he lifted his hand palm up in demonstration, lighting his customary many pointed flame which threatened to spill over the sides of his hand like water.

Jeong Jeong raised a thin eyebrow at the boy. "I cannot teach him firebending." He focused on Zuko once more. "I saw you with the Avatar. A firebender would have tried to block the flame or attack its caster to dispel it. Instead, you attempted to turn it into your own and route it away. This is not the instinct of a true firebender."

"But…" He clenched his fist, extinguishing the fire. "Prince Iroh told me once that the way I way I bend made me weak."

"You are a dragon who has learned to swim rather than fly. It is… not natural."

"But—"
"No!" Jeong Jeong snapped. "There is nothing you can learn from me. You must train with a waterbending master."

His pronouncement struck like a blow. Katara and Zuko exchanged a long amazed look between them, but before either one could find words, Jeong Jeong spoke again.

"I have always envied the waterbenders." And there was a note of longing in his gruff voice neither had heard before. "There are stories of the ancient ones, the first firebenders who learned from the dragons. It is said their firebending was pure. They were… in complete balance with themselves and their element."

Zuko blinked. "You're saying there's more than one way to learn to firebend?"

Jeong Jeong didn't answer for a long moment. Then, "Even the greatest river can change its course to the ocean."

"So… is that a yes?" Katara asked.

A sudden bloom of fire across the river cut his answer short. Jeong Jeong was on his feet in a flash, so fast that neither Katara or Zuko saw him move. The old master blocked the flames with a solid fist, and another with a sweep of his own fire and a kick.

Watching him… Zuko thought he understood, just a little, how fundamentally different the other firebender was from himself. Jeong Jeong not reroute the fire, did not twist it to the side. He stood firm and dispelled the flames with his own.

Zuko turned his defense into an offense. Jeong Jeong's offense was his defense.

The realization was there and then pushed away in the next second. There were other things to worry about. No less than four river boats were chugging their way up the river. It was too far away to see faces, but at least ten red armed men stood attention on each deck.

Jeong Jeong turned to the two Water Tribe teens, his light brown eyes blazing with inner fire. "The Fire Nation has found this place. You must take your friends and flee. Leave now and never return!"

Katara turned to run, but Zuko hung back.

"No, I'm not leaving. We can help you!"

For the first time, readable emotion flickered in Jeong Jeong's eyes. Something that was almost… relief. "It was never my destiny to train the Avatar. He must find another master, and so must you, Prince Zuko."

Prince. Zuko gaped stupidly at the man for a moment. Jeong Jeong… knew? All along? And he said nothing?

"Go!" Jeong Jeong barked, seeing his hesitation.

There was no time to ask more questions. The boats were nearly to the shore and Katara was pulling him by the arm. Reluctantly, Zuko turned and retreated up the bank with her – back to the path that led to the village. He looked over his shoulder only once to see Jeong Jeong raise a literal curtain of fire behind them – shielding their escape from the Fire Nation boats, and possibly dooming himself.
Commander Zhao's fists clenched as he watched the two Water Tribe peasants scale up the embankment – running like the rat-fleas they were.

"After them!" he roared, pivoting to the helmsman.

This river was wide and shallow, only thigh-deep in places. Zhao was tempted to leap in and charge after them himself, but the still healing skin pulled painfully across his chest, cutting off that impulse. He would be forced to land and disembark the usual way.

An orange and yellow curtain of fire erupted from nowhere, obscuring the peasant's escape and forcing the boats to make a sharp turn to shore. Zhao turned – and nearly laughed out loud. It had been nearly a decade since he'd seen his old master… Years of travel had not been kind to the man. His face was leathered from the sun, his unbound hair now steel gray, his robes dusty and patched. Once, Jeong Jeong had been a great man. Now, he was a savage.

Again Zhao's first impulse was to leap down. Perhaps he should cut through the curtain of fire himself just to show his perpetually unpleaseable master how he had grown. Finally show him once and for all that control meant nothing in the face of raw power.

And again the sharp pain from his burns stopped Zhao, giving him a moment to think twice. So he went for plan B, signaling the compliment of river boats to converge on the narrow beach rather than splitting them up in search of the Avatar and that traitor prince.

No, this prize was a little closer to the heart.

Side-by-side, Katara and Zuko burst from the foliage back into the village. Sokka was perched back on his fishing rock, scowling down at a pool of minnows. He looked up at their approach. "Katara, you're okay?"

"I'm fine. Where's Aang?"

Her eldest brother's dark look returned and jerked a thumb towards the direction of Jeong Jeong's hut. "He's in there."

Katara nodded and jogged off, leaving Zuko to make a quick explanation. "There's a fleet of Fire Nation river boats coming up the river," he said. "Go load up Appa. We need to leave." Then, before Sokka could comment, he rushed off to join Katara.

Sure enough, Aang was back in Jeong Jeong's hut. He had taken position in the back of the small building, looking lonely and small amid a dozen lit candles. Seeing him like that, Zuko's felt an
unexpected stab of guilt… He had been harsh on the kid, unduly so, looming over and screaming at him like… like some sort of Fire Nation monster.

Aang's back was to them. He didn't turn his head, but he seemed to sense their approach all the same.

"I'm so sorry, Katara. Jeong Jeong told me I wasn't ready. Zuko tried to tell me to be careful too, and I didn't listen."

She stepped forward. "Aang, it's okay. I'm all right."

"What?" He turned, disbelieving, until she held out her hands. Even in the dim candlelight it was obvious they were unblemished. Aang's grey eyes widened. "How?"

"I'll explain later." She stepped to him, but he drew back, eyes still on her hands.

He shook his head. "No, Katara. I really hurt you. I'm never going to firebend again. I can't."

"Aang—"

"No," he said. "I mean it. Never again."

"You're the Avatar. You're going to have to learn some time." She turned to Zuko. "Say something."

But Zuko could think only of his own helplessness as Aang's fire had slipped past his fingers, Katara's scream, and how he had looked in Aang’s eyes… like he’d been about to do something unthinkable. He turned his face away.

Katara made a sound of disgust in the back of her throat for the two boys. “We’ll talk about this later. The Fire Nation is coming up the river with boats. Jeong Jeong is fighting them off, but we have to get out of here."

"What?!" This news, at least, seemed to energize him into action. Aang was up in a blink and already heading to the door. "We have to save him!"

"Hold it!" Aang was already past Katara, but Zuko was quicker. He reached out and snagged Aang by his overcoat before he could bolt outside. "He's doesn't need our help. Jeong Jeong's a great master. He knows what he's doing."

Aang looked like he wanted to argue, but Zuko's glare quailed him – or maybe he was still shaken from earlier because he finally nodded, looking down.

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They met Sokka and Appa at the edge of the village; Appa's lowing bellows echoed through the forest clearing. Somehow, the bison always knew when something was wrong – perhaps he had learned the smell of Fire Nation soldiers. In any case, he greeted Aang with a sloppy lick, and the moment everyone had settled into the saddle he flapped his wide tail and vaulted into the air.
The kids all went to the side and looked down to see what had happened – but the village was hidden from above. The only hint of its fate came from curls of smoke drifting up from under the tree-tops.

Aang groaned and flopped backwards. "I hope Jeong Jeong's okay."

"Of course he is," Zuko said, a little too sharply. But he couldn't help glancing again to the village – the smoke was thickening. When he spoke again, it was almost to himself. "They've all been evading the Fire Nation for a long time now. They will be fine."

Sokka took the moment of silence that followed to settle between them all, his favorite of Aang's old map's rolled flat. "Well that was fun, and I'm sure you guys all learned a lot," he said, sarcastically. "Can we please go to the North Pole now?"

His words were met with silence; everyone else had looked away. Aang and Zuko were not meeting each other's eyes. Finally, Sokka gave a sigh.

"Look, I was angry too, but… Katara, you turned out to be okay, right?"

She nodded as she out her unburned right arm in proof. "If Aang hadn't burned me, I might not have learned how to heal myself using water."

"You learned what!?" Sokka squawked, and it seemed for a moment he was going to say more. Maybe something about how it sure would have been nice for her to learn this earlier — like that time he got the those two fishhooks stuck in his thumb – but Zuko and Aang still weren't looking at each other, so he reined himself in with effort. "Okay, well that's a good thing then… I guess. Katara learned a skill, and you guys learned some fiery-stuff. So let's just apologize and forget all about this."

"I'm so sorry—" Aang began, but Zuko cut him off.

"I don't think I should teach you firebending."

Sokka groaned. "Buddy, I hate to tell you, but you really need to work on accepting apologies."

Zuko ignored him. Aang was looking shocked, and hurt… wearing the same exact expression he himself had when Jeong Jeong told him the same thing an hour earlier. "It's not you," he said, quickly. "I know—What you did was an accident, and it could have happened to anyone. But I should have been able to stop the fire… and I couldn't." He sighed, reaching up to rub at the bridge of his nose. "Jeong Jeong told me that he can't teach me because I'm different from the other firebenders. I've learned to swim – or something. You know how he talks."

"No." Katara shook her head. "Weren't you listening to him, Zuko? He hates what he is! He told us that he hates being a firebender." She reached out, taking her brother's hand in hers. He looked down, avoiding her eyes. "I know that you respect him as a master, but I think he's just a bitter old man. You are a good firebender, Zuko." She turned to Aang. "And you will be too."

But Aang looked less than reassured. "I don't know, Katara. Some of the things Jeong Jeong said made a lot of sense. He said I wasn't ready to work with fire, and he was right."

"I don't want to stop firebending." Zuko said. "I can't. It's a part of me, but if I teach you, Aang, it won't be the right way."

"It's okay." Aang offered a small smile for his friend. "I meant what I said, earlier. I'm never firebending again."
Zuko glanced at him, but said nothing.

Katara looked between the two boys, equally exasperated with them both. "Well," she said, shortly, "Jeong Jeong did say that Zuko should from a waterbending master, and Aang and I have to learn waterbending anyway."

The little monk brightened noticeably at that. "Yeah! Maybe we can all learn together."

"Maybe…" Zuko looked doubtful. He and Katara had learned some bending from each other, and there was no doubt now that his bending was different from Jeong Jeong's and Iroh's… but was it possible to learn firebending from a waterbending master? Would firebending that way make him weak, like Iroh said?

He thought again at his rage as he had loomed over Aang… the feeling of fire and power bubbling up, just under his skin. How could a master waterbender help him with that?

Katara just smiled at the two of them, heedless to Zuko's discomfort. She wasn't done with her argument yet. It was her nature to redirect and find another route to success. She'd already gotten them to agree on this common point… it wouldn't be so hard to get them to agree on more? Her thoughts turned inward, her fingers reaching back to touch the waterskin she'd taken to carrying with her.

She could heal now, but would what she was thinking even be possible?

She looked again at her brother, but Zuko didn't meet her gaze, too busy frowning at his own thoughts. Katara bit her bottom lip and looked away.

"Great," Sokka said, breaking the silence. "I'm glad we got that figured out. So now can we head to the North Pole?"
The Commander smiled at the end of the report, tall and gloating. "Bad enough to turn coward and deserter, but to be found aiding the traitor Prince and the Avatar?" He paused for effect, but Jeong Jeong did not react. "The Fire Lord will have your head on a pike, if he's feeling generous."

"You are a fool," Jeong Jeong said calmly, and with the same displeasure he'd shown when Zhao was his student. "You are no match for the Avatar. I have never felt such raw power… Someone such as yourself could never hope to best that boy – either of them."

The half healed scald marks under Zhao's tunic flared in pain suddenly. The Commander snarled boiling rage and before Jeong Jeong had so much as the chance to flinch, he struck his bound prisoner hard across the face.

A trickle of blood ran freely down from Jeong Jeong's nose, but when he raised his head his eyes were clear and calm. And his gaze… his gaze was of pity and knowing.

He had heard about the Agni Kai.

"Take him away!" Zhao snapped. "Secure him in the hold. The rest of you, why are you standing around? Go retrieve the Avatar—"

"Uh, sir?" His Second Lieutenant, an older man named Chuuzi, pointed skyward.

A bulk of white and brown was passing by overhead, just visible through the high gaps in the canopy. All around the men who had served Zhao in the past, tensed, awaiting for their Commander's explosion of rage. Zhao's eyes narrowed, and he turned to watch the air bison's progress away, but he remained eerily silent… and still.

"Sir?" Chuuzi ventured.

"Belay that," Zhao said, with such calm that the men tensed all over again – only this time from pure shock. "Prince Iroh has made it clear that the Avatar is his prize." And his dishonor that the brat was still free, were the rest of the words, implied but left unsaid. Zhao looked down at the Jeong Jeong and smiled again… a sly, wicked thing. "Better yet, I do believe Prince Ozai still has unfinished business with you."
The Enemy's Face

OoOoO

"It's just that for so long now, whenever I would imagine the face of the enemy, it was your face."
"My face. I see."

~ Katara and Zuko, The Crossroads of Destiny

OoOoO

The two Water Tribe boys sat with legs crossed by the fire, working in amiable silence, their breath just visible in the chill air. A few days journey north had taken them to the foot of the final mountain range separating the Earth Kingdom from the icy-boundaries of the North Pole. The mountain range was vast – it would take days to cross it. The air was thin and growing colder the higher they traveled with a rim of frost shining around nearby puddles and the tops of grass-stalks every morning. Yesterday they had been forced to land and wait out a small snow flurry.

None of this bothered the Water Tribe kids overly much – to them, these were more natural temperatures. They just unpacked their parkas, put on three fingered mittens and got on with the day.

Another week of hard riding, by Sokka's estimation, and they would be at the pole.

But they weren't moving now. Katara and Aang were off at a nearby stream to clean up for the night and practice waterbending – Sokka and Zuko could hear their sister's instructions as she used her bending to wash the cooking pots, and was teaching the young monk to do the same.

As Zuko was no longer involved in Aang's teaching, he had joined Sokka in his evening chores.

Since leaving the South Pole, Zuko had focused almost entirely on his firebending, neglecting his other weapons. His whale-bone machete was in need of oiling at the handle, and his boomerang had lost its sharp edge after being confined to a pack for weeks on end. Sokka had teased him a little for it at first, but cautiously, as if not sure how to broach the whole 'firebending' topic. Then he tossed his younger brother a whetstone and grabbed a vial of eel-elk oil and set about helping to restore his weapons to good working order.

Zuko ran the whetstone over and over the edge of his boomerang until the metal glinted in the fading light. When the boomerang was as sharp as one good sitting would make it, he grabbed a hank of grass and tested the edge. It cut like a scythe.

Sokka, who was watching the progress out of the corner of his eye as he oiled the machete, jerked
his chin over at a nearby sapling, some thirty feet away. "Think you can still hit that?"

"Think you can?" Zuko shot back, but they both knew Sokka could. He was a natural with the boomerang, and a genius at impossible angles.

But Zuko wasn't so shabby himself. He stood, sized up the target for a moment and let the boomerang fly. It whirled through the air, curving at an angle and hit – a hand span higher than he was aiming, but still managed to shave the needles off the top of the small tree. He caught it easily again on the return.

"Well I know who to go to if I need to cut any trees down," Sokka joked and tossed him the whalebone machete, the leather handle now bright and gleaming. "Two out of three?"

Zuko grinned. "You're on."

Sokka grabbed his own machete and the two boys circled each other warily. They took their warrior duties seriously, but their movements were clumsy to the eye, each feint and thrust predictable. The men hadn't been able to teach them much before they went off to war – and like Zuko and Katara's bending, they had to figure out weapon work mostly by themselves.

But sparring was fun. The exercise warmed their blood in the chill evening air, and Zuko realized with a pang of guilt he hadn't done anything like this with his brother since before Aang had arrived into their lives. It hadn't been long enough so that his muscles had grown lax, but his edge was gone.

Sokka beat him the first time – scoring his point by darting in to touch the tip of the machete to Zuko's shoulder. Zuko was able to win the second round basically by throwing everything he had at his brother until Sokka yielded. But Zuko had not realized that he had maneuvered the spar onto more gravelly rock – on the third round his boots slipped and he lurched sideways. Grinning, Sokka swatted Zuko with the side of his blade, knocking his knee out from under him. He fell, hard.

"I win." Grinning, Sokka bent to help him to his feet. Zuko clasped his hand and considered – for one moment – sparking some fire up between them, just enough to startle Sokka. He dismissed the thought at once: It wouldn't be fair.

Apparently, he didn't even firebend correctly anyway.

Katara and Aang wandered back to the main camp a short while later, clean bowls in hand and engaged in a low, intense conversation.

Sokka raised an eyebrow. "Um, is there something we should know about?"

Both looked up; Aang with a chagrined look on his face. Katara was steady and intense. She lifted her chin slightly, her gaze falling on Zuko.

"Aang and I were talking about what happened with Jeong Jeong and… and I think I might be able to heal you."

"What?" For a moment all Zuko could do was stare at her, not comprehending. Then he put a hand up to his face, over his left cheek. He wasn't thinking of his scar, though, but what lay behind it; his memories. She couldn't mean… it couldn't be possible…

He turned away.

"I healed my hands, and the burn on your arm." Katara continued, her fingers hovering over the waterskin she kept at her side. "What if your memory loss is another type of injury? What if I can
Healed, Zuko repeated in his head, almost bitter. His fingers still brushed up against his burn-scar, although the flesh was too thick and inflexible for sensation. What if the same sort of scar had formed, deep within his mind? What if Katara could somehow smooth it over… what if…

"Whoa, you think you can do what-what?" Sokka sputtered, halfway rising from his reclined position against a log. "You still smack people on accident all the time with that water-whip."

She turned to him. "I'm getting better every day."

"Zuko isn't your doll," Sokka answered, his voice hardening. "And you can't just— The answer isn't to just sprinkle magic water on him and expect him to be okay!"

Zuko was still turned away, only halfway listening, his mind reeling with the implications. Surely, he would have been taught how to firebend as a child – firebend correctly. He could learn. Relearn. And then…

Aang stepped between the squabbling siblings, his hands held out in a peace-making gesture. "Sokka, I'm sure she will be careful—"

"Of course I'll be careful! I'll be the most careful I've ever been!" she snapped. "Don't you see? Zuko needs this. He needs to know what happened to him so he can move forward."

… And then what? Zuko thought. Should he turn his back on everyone he loved, everything that he was, all that he hoped to be just for the sake of… what? A few firebending moves? At what cost? If he firebent like other firebenders, then what would become of everything that was good, all that was Water Tribe, in him?

"It doesn't matter!" Sokka shot back, in exasperation. "What makes you think it's a good idea to open old wounds like that?"

Aang may have been debating with her earlier, but in an argument against Sokka he stepped to Katara's side. "Jeong Jeong said that Zuko firebends differently, and I think I can see it too. Maybe regaining his memories will help with that."

"None of you guys get it, do you?"

Zuko hardly realized that he had spoken, so low and angry was his voice. But everyone heard all the same and turned their heads to look at him. He stood with his back still turned, fists clenched at his sides. "None of you understand," he repeated, not turning to look at them. He couldn't. "I was a Fire Nation Prince. Don't you know what that means, Katara? If I remember how I was back then, I'm going to be that person again."

No one said anything, and it occurred to Zuko that it was really the first time he admitted what he had been, and it felt odd – painful but necessary - like lancing a festering wound in his heart.

"Sometimes- Lately, I…." he paused to look away and took a deep, shuddering breath. "I look at these things, and it could be anything: A flower, those Yu-Yan archers, a piece of architecture — and I recognize it. But I don't know how or when. And… what if someday I just look at something, and it snaps and it all comes back? I'll be a different person. I'll hate you guys and I'll be just like them and—"

"Stop."
Katara had walked up and grabbed his wrist, hard, snapping him out his ramble. He turned to her and met her eyes which were full of love. "You can't do this. You are a good person, Zuko. And you're punishing yourself for something you can't know is ever going to happen."

Zuko swallowed hard, and he reached around with his free hand to rub the side of his neck. His fingers caught the long scar where it started just under his jaw on the right side. Who did this? Was he attacked? Was it an accident? Had he somehow done it to himself? "You know what the Fire Nation is like. I probably tortured captives, sat in war meetings and-

But Sokka cut him short. "I hate to burst the bubble on your ego, but you were eight-years-old. You couldn't even beat me in a fight remember?"

Zuko turned to face them then, and tilted his head, making sure to look down at his “older” brother. How old am I really? he wondered, remembering that it was his voice who had broken first, that he had in fact been taller than Sokka for years. He sighed, "What if I was just some mean kid who just got kicked out?"

"Then that's something you need to find out for yourself." The words came from an unexpected source. Aang stood leaning against his airstaff, at that moment looking many, many years older than his usual perky self. "You can't hide away from who you are just because you might not like what you see."

"That's not the type of person you are, Zuko," Katara added, softly. "You face it and move forward."

"You don't have to do this, buddy." The voice of doubt came from Sokka, of course. His older brother's face was half lit in the firelight, all trace of goofy humor gone. "It's your head. You can wait until she knows more."

Wait? With the chance to know everything, right now, hanging over him? But the alternative – No, it was too painful. Too risky. He looked at Katara, Sokka and Aang. They were family. Even Aang had become like a younger brother. How could he justify putting them at risk? They didn't know what surely must lay inside of him: A Fire Nation Prince.

Someone who stood for everything he hated.

Zuko let out a long breath he didn't realize he had been holding and shook his head, careful not to meet Katara's eyes because she could read him like a book. "No. I'm sorry… I… I just can't."

"I understand," Katara murmured, giving his hand a squeeze. "You just don't trust yourself. You never have."

"He already said no," Sokka said, but his sister ignored him.

Katara moved to stand in front of Zuko, lifting her chin to meet his gaze. "Ever since we were little you've been worried about being Fire Nation. Even when you were adopted into the tribe, and you and Sokka spent years trying to protect the women and children, it wasn't good enough was it? Then Iroh came along and told you… it must have felt horrible."

Something flickered in the depth of his gold eyes. "Like all my worst fears come to life."

"But you didn't go with him when he asked, did you? You are a good person, Zuko. Learning who you were in the past is not going to change the man you are now."

"No, you don't get it." Zuko looked like he wanted to say more, but then hesitated and turned to walk away.
She reached out, catching his wrist again to stop him. "If you can't trust yourself, then can you trust me?"

That made him hesitate. "Of course I trust you, Katara."

"Then let me do this for you. You need to know who you are and... and I promise that you aren't going to suddenly change and turn against us. I want to do this for you because I think it will help."

"You can't know that."

"Trust me," she repeated, almost a whisper. "Please."

Her words struck home. Looking at her, and the strength and love in her blue eyes, he felt his fear leave. He trusted her above all others, and he knew that she knew it too... and she was using it against him. Worst of all, he couldn't dredge up emotion enough to be angry because of it.

"Then promise me," he said, in a low tone that carried only to her. "If I remember and I become someone else... you need to take me out." She gasped, and tried to tug her hand back, but he held it and her gaze, firm. "Promise me, Katara. Before I hurt anyone. Sokka can't do it, and I can't ask that of Aang..."

The muscles along her jaw twitched, but she met his eyes levelly and nodded. "I promise," she said. "But only because I know I'll never have too."

"Thank you, Katara," he whispered.

Then he turned to Sokka and Aang and gave a single nod.

Someone let out a loud exasperated breath from Sokka's general direction and Zuko thought he heard him say, "She fights dirty..." but it was so low he wasn't quite sure.

Dusk had faded into night quickly in this northern part of the world. Katara guided her brother to a nearby log, gesturing for him to sit down.

Zuko turned towards the fire, ignoring Sokka's deep frown and the sudden rapid beat of his own heart. He heard a soft pop from his unburned ear – Katara flicking open the cap of her water skin – and within a few moments her hands, coated in cool water, pressed at his temples.

The mood had become quite solemn. Everyone was silent, waiting for something to happen; the only sound was the slight crackle of the campfire. Katara's hands floated, ever so briefly at one edge of his facial scar where it ran over the hairline. It remained unchanged. The burn may not have healed prettily, but the scar tissue was healed.

"Okay," Katara said, taking a deep breath before repeating. "Okay. Um, try to think back. Maybe I can encourage whatever is in there."

"I think you'll need a lot more water than that," Sokka muttered.

Zuko ignored him. There was only one memory that could work. The only one he really had prior to his life with the Water Tribe. He hesitated only a moment, and then made himself picture the large room, the rich red-sheeted bed, the Fire Nation insignia on the far hangings, and the girl...

"I... I think I feel something. A lot of energy," Katara's brows knit and she pressed her hands harder to his temple, willing the water to work, to heal.
The girl's face grew suddenly clearer in Zuko’s mind; her malicious smile and the sound of her high, cruel, laughter.

And suddenly he was there, in the room, clutching at his covers so hard he had to will himself to keep them from bursting into flame. The girl sat on the edge of his bed, right in front of him. He could even smell the soft fragrance of flowers coming off her skin. Something metallic, too.

"I'm only telling you for your own good," she said, the words suddenly as clear as a bell in his mind – and terrible. So terrible. They couldn't be true. They just couldn't.

“You’re a liar,” Zuko whispered.

He heard a faint, "What?" from somewhere far away out side of him, but ignored it.

But the girl only put her finger to her chin in thought and her smile widened. "I know, maybe you can find a nice Earth Kingdom family to adopt you."

The outside voice spoke again, even further away now. "Is it working? Zuko, are you remembering?"

Zuko's attention was only for the girl. He was shaking, wishing that he could just pull up the blanket and hide – or else shove her back so she'd leave him alone. "Shut up! You're lying!" he snarled.

"Katara," another voice said, far away. "Look at him. Something's wrong—"

The change happened so quickly, no one was prepared. Half of Zuko's face sagged, as if invisible strings had been cut. His eyes rolled up and he slumped, senseless, to the forest floor.

OoOoO

Commander Zhao had expected to officially report to his superiors after his ship had docked in the Great Bay of Azulon. He had just not expected the summons to come mere hours after doing so.

It was either a very good sign, or a very bad one.

In any case, Zhao did not have much of a choice. He strode along the palace corridors at a fast clip, tall and confident. Servants bowed hurriedly and scurried out of his way.

The door to the receiving chambers stood three times taller than a man. The effect was made to dwarf those about to be seen – to remind them of their Lord's power and to be awed.

Zhao was not awed. Then again, this was not the first time he had been received at the palace.

The armored guards on either side of the doors gave him crisp, if somewhat bored salutes and he was ushered in.
The Commander noticed that the everlasting Flame of Agni, the curtain of living fire which ringed around the Fire Lord on his dais, was not lit. The room was instead illuminated by several torches mounted on either side of the walls.

The reason for this was made clear at once. Only the Fire Lord himself may light the Flame, and while those in the higher circles knew Prince Ozai had always had ambitions for the throne, he was not so much of a fool as to do it while Azulon and Iroh were still alive. He may have been allowed to sit on the throne while conducting official business on behalf of his father, but the Flame may only be lit by the true Fire Lord.

Zhao came forward and sank to his knees in a full gesture of respect, hands before him with his forehead touching the floor.

By tradition, he was forced to stay like that until the prince acknowledged him – sometimes a superior would keep his men prostrated over for some minutes. Zhao himself had done it to his own lieutenants enough when he was displeased with them.

But either fortune was smiling down upon him, or Ozai just wanted to get to the point quickly. The Prince waited for only a handful of breaths before speaking.

"You have my congratulations, Commander," he said, from his high seat. "For your successful return of Jeong Jeong the Deserter."

Released at last, Zhao sat up to his knees. "Thank you, Prince Ozai. It was… a personally satisfying capture."

"Indeed." Half of Ozai's face fell in shadow, but Zhao thought he detected a hint of a thin lipped smile. Ozai, of course, knew of the personal history between Jeong Jeong and his former student. "I am interested to know, however, why you did not also pursue to Avatar? I do believe he was in the same location."

Zhao's heart tripped over a beat. He had not made mention of the Avatar in his official report, which meant Ozai had been receiving additional communications from other sources.

Which one of his lieutenants had turned spy?

But his hesitation lasted for only the barest of moments. He was too experienced an officer to let his true surprise show. "Prince Iroh made it very clear that the capture of the Avatar was his mission."

And slow smile crept across his face as he added, "I believe it is his intention to keep the matter of Prince Zuko… private."

Prince Ozai's complete non-reaction to the name told Zhao everything he needed to know, and that his guess had been correct. It seemed Ozai had kept himself very well informed of Iroh's mission.

"Speaking of that," the prince said, inclining his head into a tact nod of approval for Zhao's deduction. "I am also aware, Commander, you have recently disgraced yourself in a foolish Agni Kai."

Zhao’s momentary smugness was wiped away in an instant. His fists clenched: He had been expecting the question, in one form or another, but the memory of that day brought with it a new wash of humiliation and rage so potent he felt the fires within him leap up in response. "Then you may have heard that the boy brought an illegal weapon into the duel. He did not fight with honor. I had him – he cheated—" Zhao broke off with a shake of his head, the last few words nearly spat out in fury.
"With a bucket of water?" Again came that thin smile. "Then the boy is a waterbender?"

"No. He heated the water," Zhao admitted. "He bends… oddly."

"Explain."

"The prince fights like a coward, in defense like waterbender, with none of the power the royal family naturally has." Zhao said. "He dresses up like them, too… It was hard to tell at first what exactly he was."

The intensity of the Prince's gaze seemed to sharpen, suddenly. "Then the way I see it, Commander, you have the need to redeem yourself." Ozai's smile grew. He leaned forward, throwing his fine features fully into the light. "I have… a proposition for you."

OoOoO

Zuko was lost in darkness and pain. The burn on his face was fresh agony, what nerves were left felt like they were on fire. He thrashed about in empty air, wanting to cry out, but he had no voice.

His throat was cut.

_You were always a disappointment to me_, hissed a voice, right in his ear. _Talentless, weak… Lucky to be born at all._

And someone was pulling him along in the darkness, fingers as strong as steel. He tried to pull back – _No, no, no…_ But the grip was too strong, and no matter how much he twisted, squirmed, fought, he didn't have the strength to break free.

"Zuko…"

_No, no, no… I don't want to go anymore… Just let me go back…"

"Zuko, wake up. Please wake up…"

…the help me…

Another hand wrapped around his. This one was cool and familiar. A hand pressed to his forehead, and the pain and terror ebbed as if washed away in a spring storm.

He still couldn't move, couldn't speak. Darkness claimed him once more.

OoOoO
The next morning dawned warm and misty – normal late winter weather for the Fire Nation. There were no windows to bring relief from the heat in the inner War Room. Instead, four deaf and mute servants stood stationed on each end of the room, gently waving large scented fans; providing a gentle breeze for all those gathered.

Fire Lord Azulon presided over this morning's meeting. Grey and slightly hunched with age, he sat upon the burning throne, thin fingers steepled in front of him in thought.

"And all reports, Commander, are that Prince Iroh is in pursuit of the Avatar?"

Zhao stood and bowed to the Fire Lord before turning to the giant map inlaid upon a stone table in the middle of the room. "Yes my Lord. Prince Iroh has engaged the Avatar at these locations." Using a long-handled slider, he prodded several red tiles across the map, starting with the Southern Pole and moving his way upward across the eastern coast of the Earth Kingdom.

Several Generals began murmuring amongst themselves as one of the tiles was placed upon the Crescent Island. To have the Avatar so close to the Fire Nation, only to escape… if it were anyone else leading the mission, it would have been considered a disgrace.

Azulon studied the tiles for a few moments. "Most of these locations are near populated areas," he said, pointedly ignoring the tile closest to the Fire Nation. "Is the Avatar receiving assistance from Earth Kingdom rebels?"

"There is no doubt that he is receiving help locally from nearby villages." Zhao tried not to smile, knowing what was to come next.

"I see." Azulon flicked his fingers to the map. "General Shin-Zou, dispatch your troops to these areas and destroy the villages. Let it be known that any who provide aid to the Avatar are declared enemies of the Fire Nation, and will be punished as such."

The General nodded. "I will see to it myself, my Lord."

The minister of intelligence stood and waited to be recognized before speaking, a tightly rolled scroll clutched in his hand. "My Lord and Generals, my office has just this morning received news of very great concern: The Avatar is being assisted by three Water Tribe warriors." He paused, visibly swallowing. "One of whom is calling himself Prince Zuko."

A hastily stifled gasp went around the room, along with another burst of concerned mutters. At once, all eyes fell to Ozai.

The Prince sat at his place to Azulon’s left; his back rigid, his eyes slightly wide but his face frozen as if in complete shock.

It was, Zhao thought, a fairly convincing act.

Zhao cleared his throat in his hand. "Minister, I have seen the boy you speak of with my own eyes, and he is no prince."

"My sources tell me that not only is he a firebender, he bears a remarkable resemblance to his father," the man replied.
Zhao allowed himself a wry chuckle at this, as if he found the entire thing absurd. He knew the minister's 'sources' and the only reason he received word about the Water Tribe brat at all was because Prince Ozai himself allowed it. "You are mistaken. The boy is disfigured." He passed a hand across the left side of his face. "Perhaps to hide the fact that, clearly, there could be no real resemblance. And it is not unheard of for a firebender to be born in another part of the world when, ah, blood is mixed."

"But, the reports say that—"

"My son is dead, Minister." Ozai's voice was oddly flat, yet still managed to fill the room with quiet anger.

"The Water Tribes are desperate, Prince Ozai," Zhao said, in a conciliatory tone. "This is nothing more than a pathetic forgery."

Ozai frowned at him. "Be that as it may, these savages have still dared try to sully my only son’s memory."

Azulon had remained silent throughout this back and forth, and Zhao had been most careful only to look at him in the corner of his eye to judge his reaction. Finally, the Fire Lord held up a hand to silence the room.

"This is grave news, minister. It may be the Avatar's intention to parade this impostor across the Earth Kingdom and garner support for him, then assault the Fire Nation directly and place his own man on the throne."

Only the finest self-control allowed Zhao to hide his amusement under the careful mask of a soldier awaiting orders. It was almost laughable. None of these men truly knew what the Avatar was – a boy. A mere child. He had no more ability to plan an attack than a turtle-duck hatchling.

Ozai knew the same, but he was a genuine actor. He rose at once in protest, hand tight against the top of his cane. His voice was smooth, the trained tone of someone holding back his anger for sake of polite company. "Father, this insult cannot be allowed to continue. Zuko was your grandson. The Water Tribe must answer for this." He gestured to the map with his free hand. "The Avatar's path has taken him steadily north. It is clear he is heading to the North Pole." He turned to Azulon swiftly, then. "Allow me to raise an armada of warships. With enough firepower we can wipe out the Water Tribes last stronghold. We can kill or capture the Avatar before he becomes too powerful."

At once the flames around the throne rose up crackling with power, and a wave of dry angry heat washed over them all.

"You dare," Azulon snarled, his high reedy voice rising with each word. "You dare suggest Iroh cannot capture the Avatar without your help? It is his mission, Ozai," he said, making a slashing motion with his hand. "Not yours!"

The muscles around Ozai's jaw visibly clenched as he bowed to his father, yet his voice remained clear. "I would not," he paused so briefly it was hard to say there was any defiance in it at all, "dream of taking that honor away from my esteemed brother. I merely request to pay back the insult that has been given to my only son's memory. It is my duty and will to crush those who threaten the royal family."

"And you will do this, will you?" Azulon eyed Ozai's cane pointedly, and the stiffened knee it supported.
But Ozai’s reply was smooth. "You are quite correct, father. That is why I will send Azula in my stead. She is strong and ready to be tested in the field."

"Azula?" the Fire Lord repeated, surprised, and if Zhao were not watching closely, he may have missed it; the slight dimming of those sharp amber eyes – vague confusion where there had been only confidence before.

Ozai bent towards the older man as if imparting a quick reminder, although his voice was loud enough to be heard by all in the room. "Your granddaughter, father."

"Oh, yes, yes." Azulon pressed a slightly trembling hand to his forehead. "But she is… she cannot be older than ten?"

"Fourteen, this past summer."

Azulon was silent for a few moments, rubbing his temple. Putting his hand down at last, he made a disgruntled sound in his throat and said, "If it is your will to send her in your place, so be it. But I warn you, Ozai, we would be committing a vast amount of our resources to this. Either Princess Azula returns to the Fire Nation victorious, or she does not return at all. Do you understand me?"

His son bowed low, hand over fist. "Perfectly, father."

The Fire Lord's gaze fell on Zhao. "Commander, as you have had experience with the Avatar I am putting you as second in command behind the princess. As such, you will be promoted to Admiral of the fleet effective immediately. You will coordinate with the general in charge of logistics for the necessary men and ships."

Although he had already expected this, Zhao allowed himself a smug flash of pride and bowed to both royals before taking his place again at the table.

"Now," Azulon said, glancing around the room. He seemed more hunched than ever, clearly fatigued. "Is there any other business?"

A royal minister in charge of prisons and correction stood. "There is the matter the execution date of Jeong Jeong the Deserter. Perhaps, in light of the plans to conquer the Northern Water Tribe a public execution before armada is launched would be in order? It would strengthen public morale to see the burning of a traitor, and send a strong message to any weak-minded soldiers who were considering the same."

But to the minister's visible surprise, Azulon shook his head. "The Deserter was under Prince Iroh's command. His execution will wait until Iroh returns."

What?! Zhao nearly shouted out loud. He jerked in surprise, ready to stand up and protest. Only a warning look from Prince Ozai stayed his hand. Reluctantly, gritting his teeth to keep in what were surely unwise words, Zhao kept his seat. The Fire Lord, meanwhile, had not noticed a thing and was still speaking,

"—transfer Jeong Jeong to the Boiling Rock prison under the highest of guard."

"Yes sir," the minister said, before sitting.

Fool, Zhao thought as Fire Lord Azulon sat back, looking weary, and began to call a close to the meeting. This type of leniency was exactly the wrong type of message to send the discontented in the ranks. It was never clearer to him then now that Azulon's time had passed. The man had grown old and soft.
And seeing the swift, contemplative sidelong glance Prince Ozai gave to his father, he was not the only one who thought so.

OoOoO

Zuko awoke slowly, first aware of the buttery warmth of the sunlight on his face. He stirred slightly, feeling the lumpy give of Appa's saddle-pad under his back. Had he dozed off when they were flying? But he was so comfortable, and after a moment he relaxed again, content to drift back into sleep…

"Zuko?"

Katara's voice was soft, hardly audible over the soft rush of wind. Cool hands pressed against his forehead and his cheeks. His eyes flickered open and Katara's face floated in his vision. "Zuko?" she repeated, then broke into a quivering smile. "Can you hear me?"

"…Hmm?" He was aware suddenly, of the sun's position high over head. It was midday. But he never slept this late, and why was he under the furs? He wasn't sick. He blinked again and tried to sit up, but Katara's hands were on his shoulders, pushing him back down.

"Don't. Take it slow… You've been out for awhile."

"What happened?"

Katara hesitated and a whoop from somewhere behind them cut off her answer. Aang slid into his field of vision. "You finally woke up! Are you okay? Hey Sokka!" he turned and yelled behind him. "He's waking up!"

"Finally!" Sokka's voice came from far off, as if from the driver's seat. Then there was a moment of scuffling and he too popped into view. "Welcome back to the land of the conscious."

"How do you feel?" Katara asked.

"I'm fine." If not confused. He tried to sit up again and this time irritably batted Katara away when she made to stop him. A strange sort of lethargy clung to his arms, but it faded as he grabbed onto the wall of the bison saddle and forced himself upright to look around. They were flying, just as he guessed. A thick layer of clouds layered the entire world below them like a soft coating of snow. "What happened?"

Sokka and Aang glanced at Katara. She looked terrible, Zuko realized, for the first time. There were circles under her eyes as if she hadn't gotten sleep. Her face was puffy as if… as if she had been weeping. "What do you remember?" she asked.

… The yellow tongues of flame from the campfire… Sokka's unhappy look… the feeling of water pressed to his temples and Katara's voice asking him to think back…
Oh.

Zuko's light golden eyes darted back and forth as he shuffled through his own memories, tentatively probing backwards as if exploring a painful tooth. After a full minute his shoulders relaxed and he let out a long breath – half relieved, half-frustrated. "No," he said. "I can't remember anything."

All three tensed up and he quickly amended, "Nothing new at least. Except for you," he glanced at Sokka. "Who are you again?"

"That's it!" Sokka exploded, rounding on Katara. "Didn't I say you would scramble his brains?"

"Sokka, he wasn't serious." Katara said, in a long suffering sigh. Then she quickly looked at Zuko, biting her lower lip. "Right?"

He rolled his eyes. This was why he hardly joked. "I'm fine." He looked around. "Why are we in the air? Where are we going?"

Again Aang and Sokka looked to Katara.

"When you wouldn't wake up… I thought that maybe being in the sun could help. I asked Aang to fly Appa as high as he could—"

"Wait," he said. "How long was I out?"

"Since the night before last," Aang said. "You sorta collapsed when Katara was trying to bend your memories, and you started shaking and wouldn't wake up." He shuddered, visibly. "It was pretty scary."

Zuko certainly didn't remember that part, for which he was glad. Although now that he thought about it there were moments – they could have been dreams – where he was sure he heard Katara's voice, but was unable to reach out to her.

He shook his head, brushing away those thoughts and clenched and unclenched his right fist as if in experimentation. He felt like he had woken, refreshed, from a long sleep.

"I'm so sorry, Zuko." Katara whispered. Her cheeks were looking more blotchy by the moment, and her hands twisted around themselves. "Sokka was right. I shouldn't have tried waterbending your mind when I didn't know what I was doing. And you… I thought that I…" Her bottom lip trembled, her blue eyes shining bright with more unshed tears.

Then, abruptly she threw her arms about his neck, her grip as tight as he had ever felt, her head buried against his shoulder.

Zuko made a surprised noise, but recovered quickly, tentatively embracing her back.

"I thought I killed you," she choked. She wasn't weeping, but her whole body shook and her breath hitched unsteadily against his neck. She clung onto him as if afraid he wasn't real. The only thing Zuko could think to do was pat her on the back awkwardly.

He could easily imagine how the last couple of days must have been for her if half the things they said were true. The guilt she must have felt. He didn't quite understand what had happened, why Katara's healing hadn't worked on him, but nothing bad had come from it, really. He was whole, and if he still didn't have his early childhood memories from the Fire Nation… well. That was that.

So he held onto his sister as those hitched breaths became real tears.
"I'm fine," he said, over and over again. Repeating it like a mantra until she could accept it. Until he could, too. "I'm fine."

So I know what you're thinking: If Katara could help bring back some of Jet's memories in Lake Laogai, why not now? All I can say is that there totally are reasons, and they will be explained in future chapters.

Speaking of future chapters, we'll be hitting the North Pole next! That'll be fun... right?
Another winter arrives to the South Pole, and as usual, Hakoda’s tent is the warmest place in town.
Katara and Sokka are pretty much in their undies, sweating as they sleep, but they don’t care: they want to stay around for their brother Zuko.

OoOoO

Just because you're destined to save the world, don't expect any special treatment.

~ Pakku, The Waterbending Master

OoOoO

One of the strangest things about the whole journey was how the other side of the world looked exactly like home.

Zuko heaved a sigh, arms and chin resting on the wall of Appa's saddle. A sea of deep cobalt blue stretched to the horizon and beyond – scattered with white icebergs so bright they could make spots dance in front of his eyes if he stared for too long.

And it all looked so familiar it nearly hurt.

He felt more than saw Katara as she joined him at his side. When they had first crossed into the arctic circle she had been bright-eyed with excitement. Now, after two empty days of searching, she was as tired and discouraged as the rest of them.

"It's strange," she muttered, following Zuko's gaze. "It feels like all we have to do is turn south and Gran-Gran will be there, waiting for us with a big pot of sea-prunes."

"And with about a hundred chores for us to do," Zuko added.

The corner of her lip twitched upward. "Yeah."

Katara glanced at him then, in that sneaky, trying-to-be-subtle way that she and Sokka had when they were watching him, but trying not to look like they were doing it – just out of the corner of their eye.

"I'm fine," Zuko said, before she could ask. And she had been asking – they all had, since he had collapsed that day, nearly a week back.

"I wasn't going to ask."

"No, but you were looking at me."

"Oh, so I can't look at you now?" she asked, eyebrow arched.

"Not like that! I'm not going to just—" Zuko snapped, clenching his hands into fists. "I'm not weak, Katara."

She was silent for a long minute before speaking, "No, I don't think you're weak. You're one of the
strongest people I know, Zuko." Katara looked away again, out to the deep blue sea. "That's why I worry."

He opened his mouth, about to ask what exactly she meant by that, but at that moment Appa gave a low groan, the muscles along his back shuddering. Suddenly the vast blue sea seemed to be a lot closer than it was before. Aang was calling for a break, bringing the giant bison to land along a wide iceberg. By the time Zuko turned to his sister again, she had crawled away to the other side of the saddle, hanging on for dear life as Appa's dive steepened.

Appa's saddle was padded in places and there were the wooden walls to help keep everyone from falling to their deaths from midair, but it was dangerous to move around too much in flight. The gang dismounted nearly the moment Appa's feet touched solid ice, grateful to be able to walk around and stretch.

Sokka unrolled his trusty map once again, pouring over it now that it wasn't in danger of being whipped away by the strong arctic winds.

"This doesn't make any sense," Sokka sighed, after some intense studying. "We've flown over five bays already and… nothing. No hunters, no buildings or smoke…. If I wanted to see this much snow I would have just stayed home."

Zuko shrugged and bent over to touch his toes, feeling a not completely unpleasant burn up his calves. "Maybe you're reading your map wrong."

His brother scowled at him before rolling up the map. "Or maybe the Fire Nation hit the Northern Water Tribe harder than they hit us."

"Don't say that!" Katara said, clearly shocked by the suggestion.

"Why not?" Sokka turned to gesture at the completely empty landscape. "Take a good look around. There's nothing out here."

"They're here," Katara insisted. Then, lower. "They have to be."

Appa, meanwhile, was snuffling along the edge of the iceberg, his long tongue lapping up some loose ice-chips. Aang frowned as he laid a hand on one of his flanks. "Guys, Appa's getting really hungry and there's nothing for him to eat out here."

No one said anything. A chill wind blew by, tossing around Katara's hair loopies. She crossed her arms and said nothing, turning again out to sea as if expecting to find the Northern Water Tribe just by pure determination.

After a full minute of silence, Sokka once again turned to his map. "There should be an island chain about half a day's ride south-east—"

Katara whipped back around. "So that's it?" she demanded. "We've come all this way just to give up now when we just got here?"

"Appa's the one who's been carrying us all this way," Aang said, "but I can't ask him to keep carrying us around like this on empty stomachs. It's not fair."

Katara's eyes softened slightly and she sighed, "I know Aang, it's just…" Again, she looked out over the sea. "We're so close. I can feel it."

And no sooner had she said that then the iceberg they were standing on bucked suddenly upward, as
if half of it was rolling under a giant rouge wave. Appa roared and everyone else screamed and quickly grabbed for anything remotely stable. Aang wasn't quick enough and pitched over into Sokka, knocking him rolling end-over-end until he was able to grab onto an upthrust of ice and stop them both from going over the edge.

Sokka gasped, "It's a giant razor-toothed leopard seal!" scuttling away from the edge as fast as he could and dragging Aang along with him.

"Oh great!" Zuko groaned. He had a dark hatred for those things, having been knocked off an iceberg when he was twelve. It was how razor-toothed leopard seals hunted; knocking their prey into the water and then tearing them apart at their leisure. Only Zuko's firebending and quick thinking from Bato had saved his life.

The iceberg pitched once more to the other side before landing back into the water with a teeth-snapping crash which sent up spray in all directions.

The two Water Tribe boys scrambled to their feet; Sokka unholstering his boomerang and Zuko sinking down into a low stance, hands far apart and ready to call his fire.

Something tugged at the very edge of Katara's perception. Like seeing a flash of a shadow on the edge of her vision… only, it was not seen, but felt. She turned, instinctively to the right and let out a gasp. "No, wait! It's not a leopard seal. Look!"

She pointed, and sure enough there was movement out to sea – just on the boarders of the field of icebergs. Brown shapes – a small fleet of three long flat boarded boats with at least ten blue garbed figures standing on them apiece. "They're waterbenders!" Katara exclaimed, her voice rising in excitement. "We've found the Northern Water Tribe!"

"What?" Zuko lowered his hands, the spark dying between his palms before it had a chance to truly kindle. He exchanged a dubious look with Sokka who had not stood down. "Then what are they doing?"

"Maybe they just don't know we're on their side," Aang said, and with a gust of chilled air he leapt up to Appa's back. He waved his arms widely over his head, calling out, "Ohoy there! Are you from the Northern Water Tribe?"

There was no response from the boats except to glide effortlessly closer, fast even against the current without aid of sail or paddle. There was a predatory movement to the small fleet, with two of the boats to each side and slightly behind the leader – coming in fast like an arrow.

"Uh guys," Sokka took a step back, despite himself. "I don't think they're too happy to see us."

An unseen signal passed between the men on the ships and suddenly half of the men – those with thinner, dark blue parkas and without spears, stepped forward in the same graceful movement, their arms arching upwards.

And with a crackling, tortured sound of ice snapping and breaking, the iceberg dipped with a sudden sharpness that threw them all onto their knees again. As if all of the water under their sheet of ice had been pulled away… then moved. The displaced water rose on all sides of them, towering over the kids and Appa all in a tsunami of blue.

Zuko heard Katara scream something, but what words they might have been was lost in the next moment. The waves had crested… Time seemed to slow down.

Zuko closed his eyes and took a deep breath.
The waves crashed down upon them all with a force that was stunning. The cold didn't even register at first. Zuko was simply flattened face down onto the ice by the weight of the water, the world around him a churning confusion of blue and white. And then he was ripped to the side, tumbling along like a grain of sand caught up in the force of the tide. His hand hit something hard, but he couldn't hold on – there was a sensation of falling…

The churning calmed all at once and then Zuko was looking up at the bright impression of the sun, filtered through at least ten feet of sea-water. He must have been washed off the iceberg and into the sea.

He kicked towards the surface, his limbs heavy and weighed down by his parka and boots. He had been too stunned to feel the cold before, but now it ate into his skin, prickling like a thousand needles. He couldn't warm up… Needed air for his inner fire… Air….

Zuko kicked and thrashed, reaching up – but the bright disk of sunlight came no closer and he was at his nearly at his limit, the muscles in his throat spasming…

And a few feet away, half hidden in the murky blue-black water, he saw the form of another figure flailing for the surface just as he was… and getting nowhere. They were all being kept underwater on purpose, being bent into a current and slowly drowned…

Spots were dancing in front of his eyes – bright random flashes of red and gold, like the purest fire he had ever seen. Zuko didn't remember opening his mouth, hardly felt the cold seep of water down his throat and into his lungs. He felt a tremendous crushing pain, like his chest was going to collapse, but it was far, far away.

He was so tired…

Everything in the next few minutes seemed to happen to him from a distance, as if it were happening to some other person: Something hooked upon the back of his collar, hauling him upwards. He was barely aware of landing, boneless, upon some hard surface. Someone grabbed his chin roughly and forced his mouth open. There was a ripping, tearing sort of pressure deep down inside his chest; something forcing itself back up his throat. What felt like all the muscle in his chest spasmed involuntarily – then he was coughing up water – what felt like gallons and gallons of it.

"Are you g-g-guys insane?"

Zuko was too dazed at first to recognize the voice as Sokka's. It didn't sound like him; the voice was too rough, oddly stuttered. But as Zuko coughed his lungs clear and dragged in painful breath after breath, the black spots faded from before his eyes.

They were on board one of the flat boats. His brother was only a few feet away, soaked to the skin with half of his wolf-tail undone and plastered loosely along his neck. Sokka was shivering visibly in the frozen air; ice crystals already forming along the sleeves of his parka.

Aang was on all fours beside Zuko, coughing just as hard with his lips almost the same color as his blue airbender tattoos.

Out of all of them, Katara looked the best – no coughing, she had probably used some of her waterbending to keep from breathing in the sea, and the water from freezing on her skin. She surged up to her feet and all of the loose droplets of water on the boat locked instantly to ice.

"What is WRONG with you? You could have killed all of us!"

"Quiet, girl," One man snapped. He was older than the rest of the men on the boat, his thick brown
hair parted into locks with blue and purple beads attached to each end, including the tip of his beard. It gave him an odd, wild appearance. His cold blue eyes swept over them all before settling on Zuko. He made a quick gesture and someone grabbed Zuko's collar again, hauling him onto his knees. The man's eyes narrowed as he took him in — pale skin, dark hair, and slanted gold eyes. "Just as I thought. Fire Nation scouts."

And at those words it seemed as if the entire compliment of the boat bristled with knives and sharp spears, all pointed towards them. Zuko felt the cold steel blade of the man who was holding him, pressed to his neck. He hardly cared. Reaction to the insult brought a rush of fire to his belly, heat to his veins, and suddenly he was no longer cold at all. "I'm not Fire Nation," he growled.

"No!" Katara jerked against the man who gripped her arms, as if to stand between her brother and the leader. "We're from the Southern Water Tribe. We've come to find a Waterbending master. Zuko's—"

"Our half b-brother," Sokka said, cutting her off. No one held a knife to his neck, probably because he was trembling like a leaf from cold. A threat to no one.

Zuko opened his mouth to agree, then shut it again. Wait, half brother?

But despite his drenched, shivering appearance there was gleam in Sokka's eyes, and the barest hint of a warning. He had a plan.

And that knowledge was enough to allow Zuko to come up with one of his own. Slowly, very mindful of the blade pressing just under his adam's apple, he reached out and gripped Aang's wrist, hard, to get his attention. Out of all of them, Aang was the worst off: An airbender cut off from air. He was still coughing, and shivering so hard from the cold it looked like a fit. But he was also the Avatar, and maybe the only one able to save them if whatever Sokka had in mind went bad.

The man stared blankly at Katara for a few moments before his gaze slid to Sokka. "You lead this group?"

Sokka drew himself up as much as he could, teeth chattering. "Y-yeah."

"Who sent you? What are your orders?"

"I already told you!" Katara snapped. No one paid her a bit of attention. It was as if she hadn't spoken at all.

Meanwhile, Aang was glancing at Zuko from the corner of his eye. Seeing that he had his attention, the firebender shut his eyes and breathed slowly, a loud inhale and exhale. He let Aang feel the heat of his palm, in emphasis.

Aang's reaction was immediate. He shook his head, trying to draw back, and Zuko saw the fear in his eyes — he had sworn no more firebending! But Zuko held onto his wrist, so tight that it must have been painful: a warning and a command. Aang gulped audibly, but turned away and Zuko thought he saw him take a proper breath. Warming himself with the fire within.

"—Like sh-she said, we're from the Southern W-w-water Tribe," Sokka was saying, between shivers. "Z-z-zuko looks a little Fire Nation-y, cause… Well, you know, w-with all the raids…"

The men stared at Sokka, and then turned to Zuko. And Zuko didn't have to fake a scowl, or a blush of humiliation. Sokka had better have a good reason for this…

"B-besides, it's not him you have to worry about." Sokka paused, clearly savoring the moment. "We
also brought the Avatar."

On cue, a gust of icy wind surged up from nowhere, knocking two water warriors over. A very less frozen-looking Aang jumped up, completing what had to be a perfect back flip over the heads of the startled men and landed on the other side of the ship. His cheeks were still ruddy with cold, but his grey eyes were clear as he smiled at them all. "I'm Aang!" he said, then pointed out to sea where Appa was still waiting for them, standing on the ice-berg. The wave had not been strong enough to knock a beast of that size down. "And that's Appa. He's my sky bison."

The men gaped at him.

"See?" Katara challenged. "Fire Nation spies wouldn't be traveling with an airbender, would they?"

The leader stared at the boy. "An airbender?" he repeated, then looked at Appa again before returning his gaze to Aang. "The… Avatar?"

Aang nodded. "That's me."

"So, as you can see we r-r-really need to find the Northern Water T-tribe so he can learn w-waterbending and start saving the world. Please." Sokka added after a moment's thought, grinning through chattering teeth.

Reparations were ordered at once: The freezing seawater was hastily bent from their clothes from a red-faced waterbender, blankets were offered and accepted, and Aang and the Water Tribe siblings were returned to the iceberg to be reunited with Appa. The men, especially the leader, were generally much nicer… although no real apologies were given.

"The Fire Nation has stepped up raiding parties in the last two months," the leader who introduced himself as Reeker said. "They attack with small ships, but they're well armed. If you ask me, they're poking at our boarders, testing for weak-spots. When I saw an unauthorized group this far out to sea, I assumed…" he trailed off.

"That you would just drown people and ask questions later?" Zuko growled.

One of the waterbenders stepped forward, ducking his head. "The Avatar and his companions were never in any true danger," he said, with a glance to Aang who was still digging water out of an ear. "Our waterbenders are highly skilled. The finest in the world."

Katara visibly brightened.
Despite his new found reverence for the Avatar, Reeker was wary of Appa and ordered Aang to have his bison swim the rest of the way, instead of fly. Aang, Sokka, Zuko and Katara piled onto the great bison's back while the Water Tribe boats led the way – now an honor guard instead of a capture-force.

Unconsciously, the Water Tribe siblings had been looking for something like their own village; a collection of huts and small dwellings carved in the ice. Perhaps something more populated, at least more than the thirty-odd families who still lived in the South Pole.

What they got instead was a fortress.

Reeker's force led them to what looked almost like a smooth ice-shield standing hundreds of feet out of the water, with what looked like a Water Tribe insignia carved at the front. It wasn't until the tiny figures at the top moved – too small to look like people at first, they were so high up – that the gang truly realized they had arrived at last.

The men on the boats flagged the guards with two high spouts of water, and suddenly the large wall cracked neatly down the middle: A doorway big enough for Appa to swim right through.

Zuko's head didn't seem like it could turn fast enough to catch everything around him. Men on all sides were scuttling back and forth, calling out orders. The water behind the shield wall entered into a series of locks that were filled and opened on Reeker's command. He couldn't imagine how anyone – Fire Nation or no – would ever be able to sneak in.

"They're waterbenders!" Katara's head was swiveling too and she clutched at Zuko's arm with bruising strength. "They're all waterbenders!" Her eyes were more alive in delight than he had seen for… quite some time. After all, how many years had she wanted to see a bender like herself? Watching her, and the delight on her face, Zuko flashed to one of his earliest memories; an eight year old version of Katara holding a globe of water in the palm of her hand.

"You're a bender too. You can teach me…"

The city seemed to have waterways in place of roads and ice sidewalks for foot traffic. Reeker guided them through twisting canals into what looked to be a residential area. And suddenly people were everywhere, stopping to point at Appa, gathering on ice-arches as they passed under – even hanging out the windows of tall towers to wave. So many, many, more than in the south…

… And just like that, the bubble of Zuko's amazement burst.

He might have made a sound, or else his expression changed. Sokka gave him a nudge as Katara went to Aang to join him in laughing and pointing at the sights.

"What is it?"

"Look at this place. They have all this," Zuko said, in an undertone, "while we had to send the last of our men to war."

Sokka looked at him in shock for a moment, and it occurred to Zuko that it hadn't crossed his brother's mind to be – what, jealous? No, angry at their sister tribe's wealth.
"Maybe they don't know," Sokka said, although he sounded a bit doubtful. "We are on the other side of the world. It's not like it's the next iceberg over."

_I wonder how hard they tried to find out_, Zuko thought, but did not say because at that moment Sokka's eyes widened and he elbowed Zuko, standing up in the saddle. "Look at… her."

A small stately canoe was passing them by on the wide canal, pushed along by a waterbender in the back. A girl sat by the prow and some of Zuko's indignant anger drained away as he glimpsed her. She was… wow. They didn't make them like that in the South. Or… ever. White hair, a soft face, and pretty blue eyes…

Both boys watched her go, unknowingly sharing the same dopy grins.

"I think she looked at me," Sokka sighed.

"Yeah," Zuko agreed, not listening.

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**OoOoO**

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Reeker brought them to a place where Appa could be stabled and fed before finally leading them to a large building in the middle of the residential district. The high building was constructed completely of thick ice walls and significantly larger than those around it. Zuko assumed they were being led into the Chief's dwelling until they stepped inside and saw it was empty. This was merely some sort of guest house.

"Word of your arrival is being passed to Chief Arnook as we speak," the warrior said. "Until he sends for you, you are to stay here."

"But when can we see a waterbending m—" Katara began, but Sokka cut her off.

"So when do you think Arnook will want to meet with us?"

"Not before tonight," Reeker answered, with a narrow-eyed look at Katara. "Our Chief is a busy man and he is preparing for his daughter's upcoming birthday feast."

Katara opened her mouth to speak, but again Sokka cut her off.

"Great! Well, I think we're okay here." He yawned, stretching his arms high above his head. "I don't know about you guys, but I'm pooped. You know, with all of that traveling and almost drowning and all…"

His siblings and Aang stared at him as if he had lost his mind, but Reeker only nodded. "I will send for someone with word," he said, and with another respectful nod to Aang, walked out.

The door had just shut before Katara whirled on her eldest brother. "Okay, what was that about?"
Sokka didn't answer at first, only turned to consider Zuko for a moment. He didn't look happy.

Zuko stiffened. "What?"

His brother let out a long breath. "I don't think you should tell anyone around here that you're a firebender."

"What?"

"Sokka!" Katara said, on the heels of Zuko's exclamation. "Jeong Jeong said he needs to learn his type of firebending from a waterbender."

"So wait, is this part of the reason why you said Zuko was your half-brother?" Aang asked.

Sokka reddened slightly at that, but he nodded. "Look, these guys almost killed us just because we were in the wrong place at the wrong time, and also because Zuko looks… like he does. I just get the feeling they're the 'Stab first, ask questions later' type."

"I'm not giving up learning how to bend just because of your feelings!" Zuko snapped.

Katara stepped to Zuko's side, glaring at Sokka. "Darn right you're not. We haven't come all this way to give up now!"

Sokka made a frustrated noise. "It won't be for nothing! You and Aang can still learn how to waterbend, and Zuko… It's not fair, alright? I know." He turned to his brother. "Just think about it. What happens if you show them you can firebend? It's not that far of a leap for someone to think 'Oh, you know the Fire Nation has that one prince also named Zuko who's supposed to be the same age…'"

Zuko's face darkened. "If they do, I can handle it."

"How?"

"I'll figure something out!"

"Okay guys," Aang said, stepping between them. "Maybe we should just compromise here. Zuko… maybe it wouldn't hurt just to wait and see."

"Aang, you don't believe him?" Katara asked, shocked. "Sokka's just being paranoid."

"Hey!"

"… No, I don't think that he is," Aang said, after a long moment. He stood between them all, the steady rock in turbid waters. He sighed. "Sometimes, I can't believe how much has changed in the last 100 years, but there's still a lot that stayed the same. Monk Gyatso told me once that the Northern Water Tribes were more about tradition than the South." He looked to Zuko. "I think if they guessed that you were—you used to be Fire Nation, they wouldn't take it very well."

"Even our tribe didn't at first," Sokka added. "Remember, Katara? It took awhile for anyone to warm up to him and even then he had to practically save my life and get through the first winter before people saw him as Tribe."

Katara crossed her arms and looked away. Her angry silence spoke volumes.

"This is stupid!" Zuko burst out, throwing his arms up in the air. And although there were no sparks, the temperature in the room became noticeably warmer. "We don't know what they know about the
Fire Nation. And even if they did—It shouldn't matter. I'm not like them!"

"Zuko—"

"No, Sokka!" he snapped, so fiercely that his elder brother took a step back. Zuko scowled at his reaction, but seemed to retreat into himself, crossing his arms and muttering "I'm so sick of this," before walking away.

"Where are you going?" Sokka demanded.

"Out!"

"Hey, you can't—" He took a step after him, but Katara grabbed his shoulder, stopping him.

The door slammed shut after Zuko.

Sokka tugged his arm back and muttered, "I hope you're happy. You know he's going to just set something on fire and get us kicked out, don't you?"

"I hope you're happy," she countered, hands on her hips. "How did you expect for him to react?"

He thought for a moment then sighed, shoulders slumping. "A lot like this, actually."

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Zuko didn't know where he was going, and didn't care if anyone saw him leave. Reeker's orders were to stay put, but he had to get out of there, had to put some distance between himself and everyone else before he blew up – or worse, broke down.

It was all too much. Unfair, in a way he couldn't help but see as cruel. As quickly walked away – a half jog that made his breath steam out in the frozen air – all of the disappointments and fears of the recent past came back ten-fold, bouncing around and around in his mind.

The relentless pursuit of the Fire Nation Prince who said he was his uncle, and his claim at Song's house: What do you think happened that day? You say you were found on a Fire Nation ship, but how is that possible, my nephew? With your face being one of the most recognizable in the Fire Nation? Your people love your father and your mother. Who would betray them to kidnap their son? And then conveniently fall into the hands of the Water Tribe? Surely, you must realize how this sounds?

The rejection of the one master who had been willing to teach him: A firebender would have tried to block the flame or else attack its caster to dispel it. Instead, you attempted to turn it into your own and route it away. Your instinct is to turn your defense into an offense. This is not the mindset of a true firebender.

Failure to bring back his memories: You collapsed when Katara was trying to bend your memories,
and you started shaking and wouldn't wake up… It was pretty scary.

And now, this.

Zuko came to a stop only when he reached the edge of the nearby water-way street. The canal stretched to the east and west and he could see a bridge for pedestrians out of the corner of his good eye.

But the frantic energy had left him and he simply stood there, glaring into the deep blue water as people walked past him from behind and traveled on boat in front; all going about their daily business – heedless of him.

Zuko let out a long breath and his right hand clenched into a fist. He could feel the heat there, bubbling up again in his core and he knew that it would only take a spark of flame to show everyone what he was… to blow Sokka's paranoia into a million pieces.

He hated lying. Partially because he was no good at it, but mostly because he preferred to confront a problem directly and deal with the fallout from there. Sokka could spin a tale around and around itself into a big complicated knot and fix the problem from the backside. Zuko… he knew he wasn't nearly as clever.

It was all so stupid. Wasn't he traveling with Aang, who was supposed to save the world? Wasn't he Chief Hakoda's son? Surely these people had to see him differently. He was a firebender, but he was also Water Tribe…

… And, apparently, a prince of the Fire Nation.

The spot on his neck still stung slightly, where the Water Tribe warrior had held a knife to his flesh.

It wouldn't be the first time his throat had been cut.

Maybe—

"Oh, so this was where you had run off to."

The melodious voice cut his thoughts short. Zuko jerked in surprise and then turned – the girl with the flowing white hair stood next to him, smiling.

She laughed at the look on his face. "I was sent by my father to give the Avatar a message and I saw you leave."

"Oh," he said, blankly, knowing he had been standing on the edge of the canal for some minutes and wondered how long she had watched him. Then something clicked. "Your father?"

She beamed at him then, her teeth as white as her hair. "My father is Chief Arnook. I'm Princess Yue," she said, and he noticed how she bowed – only the slightest dip with her hands clasped: The bow of a royal to a lower-ranked subject.

After an awkward beat, Zuko returned the bow, deeper than her own – he was not a prince. He wasn't. "I'm Zuko, second son to Chief Hakoda."

"Oh so you're the—" Yue didn't finish her sentence, but her eyes were on his face. "I'm sorry, but I've never met anyone from the south. Are you all so pale?"

"No," he answered, looking away.
He felt her step closer. "Is everything alright? Are your rooms adequate? If there's anything wrong —"

"They're fine." More than fine, the quarters were huge, but he knew better than to admit that out loud so he simply shrugged. "A sky bison isn't all that big and after a few months people start to get on your nerves. Even family." Which was part of the truth, now that he thought about it. "I just needed space. They were all—"

"Worried?" Yue guessed and smiled again when he glanced at her in surprise. "I was there for Reeker's report," she said. "My father plans to issue a formal apology tonight."

Good, Zuko thought uncharitably. His throat was still raw from swallowing seawater and then heaving it pulled back out again. He could have drowned – well, drowned permanently.

The Princess was still looking up at him, all helpful expectation. There was something… soft about her. And nice. Reeker and his men had half drowned Zuko and his family just on the strength of suspicion. Yet Yue had seen him run off from assigned quarters and had only followed him to see if anything was wrong.

Could he… come right out and ask?

"So, should I be worried?" Zuko blurted, and then winced because, as usual, his words sounded much nicer in his head than out. "I mean, Reeker attacked us because he thought we might be Fire Nation spies, but also… well, the way I look didn't help."

Yue's eyes widened. She had pretty eyes, he noticed – a shade or two lighter than Katara, or maybe the vivid blue was brought out by the whiteness of her hair of her hair.

"I'm sorry," Yue said again, bowing. "If he knew you were with the Avatar… And he passed the message along about your background. To have your mother—" She hesitated. "That must have been very difficult."

Zuko scowled, resenting the fact he had to play around Sokka's lie. "I don't want your sympathy," he said, and again it came out sharper than he intended, judging by her involuntary flinch. Well, he'd had a bad day. "I just need to know if I should watch my back, because of… my parentage."

Yue was quiet for a long minute, and to his surprise he saw she was really considering her answer.

"The last major attack by the Fire Nation was eighty-five years ago," she said. "But there are almost always small battleships patrolling in our waters to attack our hunters. Sometimes they've been able to capture and brutalize our women, too."

Shame for the lie made Zuko's temper flare. He was going to kill Sokka when he got back. "I'm sorry," he said, "but that's not what I was asking—"

Yue held up a hand to silence him. "Sometimes they came back pregnant, afterwards."

Zuko stared at her, feeling as if he had been clubbed upside the head. There were – there had been half Fire Nation half Water Tribe children. Here? Children who might look a little like him? Maybe had the same issues, done the same things… Children who looked Fire Nation, but with hearts of the Water Tribe?

Something inside of him clenched, hard, in his chest and he had to look away. All of the anger and frustration left over from his argument with Sokka had been sucked away, and this new ache had replaced it.
Loneliness.

He hadn't realized – maybe hadn't ever admitted to himself how... lonely it was, sometimes. To have a Water Tribe heart, but to wear the face of the enemy.

He'd turned away from her, but perhaps not quick enough because he felt her hand on his shoulder. Zuko swallowed hard and asked, "Have any of them survived the polar winters?"

"A few," she said, then added significantly. "Not the firebenders."

Zuko closed his eyes, resisting the urge to curse. Either she had guessed his true question, or he simply wasn't as good at this as he thought. Probably the latter.

Well, in for a snowfall, in for a blizzard…

"And what if one turned out to be a firebender? What if he survived?"

He had turned slightly as he asked this and so caught Yue wince again, the skin around her mouth tightened.

"I think it would make things… very hard for him." Her voice was quiet, almost a whisper, and her hand had drawn away from his shoulder. "My father may overlook it, if the family was influential or if he was…. already in their debt for a misunderstanding." She put deliberate emphasis on the last part, although her expression was soft with sympathy. "But he would probably tell his daughter to tell the firebender to keep it to himself, even if he did have powerful allies. Most people would not understand."

"… I see."

It was all he could find to say and after an awkward moment, Zuko looked away to stare once more at the deep canal as if it were the most interesting thing in the world. Maybe if he were alone, he would find something to hit. Or go cry. But he was in an unfamiliar city, surrounded by strangers, and literally as far away from home as he could get. He had neither one of those options.

And it didn't look like he was going to be firebending any time soon, either.

"I guess I should get back," he muttered, finally.

"I'll go with you." She offered another smile at him. "I'm supposed to invite you all to a feast in the Avatar's honor." Yue paused. "And don't worry, I won't say a word about… our talk."

"Thanks." But he didn't mean it, really, and he wasn't sure if it was his imagination or not that she kept a careful foot between them on the way back to their quarters.

… Or when, later that night at the feast in Aang's honor he noticed how Yue sat between her father and Sokka – looking tolerantly amused as the other boy tried his best to flirt with her.

Zuko picked at the food and tried not to notice when Aang was called away to talk to his and Katara's future waterbending master.

OoOoO
Princess Azula stood upon the deck of the flagship of the fleet – her ship. Her perfectly manicured nails tapping impatiently upon the smooth rail.

Behind her, men were rushing back and forth in a flurry of activity; yelling commands, prodding reluctant komodo-rhinos into the hold, securing crates of supplies, checking armor.

Ahead of her to the east was the fast, endless sea. Out there beyond the curve of the horizon lay the Earth Kingdom. And somewhere north of all of that, lay her destiny.

Azula was not worried, was not concerned. She had been a fine student of history: Her teachers had praised her in her excellent grasp of the underlying layers of politics as they had for everything else. This would hardly be the first time one sibling had to remove the other to clear the way for the throne.

Besides, she had already made her peace a long time ago. She had seen to it that her brother had his chance. He had not taken it, and so now he was dead. It was up to her to remove this… impostor.

Azula heard footsteps behind her. "What is your report, General?" she asked, not bothering to turn around.

The man hesitated a moment in surprise before snapping to attention. "The ships are being readied on schedule," he said. "All men and supplies will be ready in three days, and armada will be ready for launch in four."

"Why the delay? We should launch immediately once everything is made ready."

Another pause. "It is the full-moon, highness. The tides will be running high at that point and they will not allow us to leave the bay safely."

Azula took a long, cleansing breath, still staring out to the endless sea. Then she turned, regarding the man. The sooner she asserted her authority, the better. "The tides?" she repeated, in an innocent tone. "I'm sorry, but I do not know much about the tides. Do they command this ship?"

Perhaps the man wasn't as much of an idiot as he seemed. He swallowed, visibly.

Azula smiled.
The Northern Water Tribe: Part 2

OoOoO

I didn't travel across the entire world so you could tell me no!

~ Katara, The Waterbending Master

OoOoO

Every able bodied non-bending boy in the Northern Water Tribe was instructed in warrior skills. This was a time of war and young visitors from other tribes were no exception. So, at the first light of dawn, the Avatar and the three Southern Water Tribe teens woke and began to ready themselves for a new day of training: Aang and Katara were to attend their very first waterbending class. Meanwhile, Sokka and Zuko were to report to the instructor in charge of training the Northern Water tribe's warriors.

Zuko had been too keyed up to sleep very well the night before and awoke groggy, with dark circles under his eyes. He gave only monosyllabic answers, and couldn't bring himself to look at Katara directly the entire morning… He knew if he did, he would only see pity in her eyes.

It was only by the time he and Sokka were well on their way across the city – following directions by helpful villagers – and the northern arctic sun rose above the horizon, that he started to feel a little more awake, and a tad guilty for his bad mood. It wasn't anyone's fault he couldn't learn bending, after all.

Well, maybe Sokka's fault, Zuko thought uncharitably, watching his brother easily win over a young woman who was carrying a basketful of fish. She flashed Sokka a bright smile and pointed the way to the training grounds.

Zuko shook his head, and made himself brush the thought away. No, he had to be fair: it wasn't Sokka's fault either. Not really. His older brother was maybe a touch paranoid

, but he was also smarter than people gave him credit for. Besides, even Princess Yue had agreed.

It would be best if no one knew him as a firebender. As much as it ate at him, he'd just have to accept it.
Zuko grit his teeth and shook his head again. This felt like giving up, and he hated it. He hated it a lot.

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OoOoO

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Their first hour of warrior training found the two brothers standing shoulder-to-shoulder, ringed by the rest of the warrior-students. Their trainer, a bear of a man who introduced himself as Pulukar, paced around them both in a slow circle, eyeing each boy as if he were a particularly skinny arctic-yak for sale.

Finally, satisfied, Pulukar came to a halt and stood before them.

"Well then, you two look ready and willing. Which one of you is Chief Hakoda's blood-son?"

Sokka raised his hand. "I am."

"Then you'll go first. Grab a practice spear. You'll face me in this ring." The man paused and his lip quirked in a sardonic smile. "And we'll all see for ourselves how our sister tribe trains its men."

There was a scattered laughing and a little friendly rib-jabbing from the students around them. Swallowing nervously, Sokka grabbed a blunt-ended wooden spear, while Zuko obediently stepped out of the way. He glared around at the other boys, but was ignored.

Pulukar took up his own practice-spear. He didn't give Sokka a moment to prepare, and launched immediately into attack the moment he stepped back into the ring.

Caught off guard, Sokka gave a yelp of surprise. He ducked out of the way of the spear-point on pure instinct, backing up a few frantic steps and nearly into the wall of boys behind him. Sokka stopped short before he ran right into them – perhaps alerted by a new round of laughter and hooted calls from the students. He shot one startled look at Zuko over his shoulder, meeting in his eyes for a moment before he turned his attention back to the ring.

It had all happened in the space of a few seconds. Pulukar closed the gap between them in a flash, but this time Sokka was ready. He brought his spear up to clash and deflect the instructor's.

Pulukar grunted and slid his spear point at a sharp angle, using the momentum to stab at Sokka again, and again Sokka was able to deflect the blow – if only barely.

"What is he doing?" Zuko hissed. He took a half step forward, but a hand on his shoulder stopped him.

"Don't worry, Newbie," said a voice beside him. It belonged to a tall boy, a few years older than Zuko, with a thin nose and squared jaw. "Master Pulukar knows what he's doing."

Zuko almost, almost knocked the other boy's hand away. He could feel the flame of a lit torch not too far away, ready for him to use. The fire licked up eagerly at his command, and he narrowed his
eyes as –

Another roar from the boys broke Zuko's concentration. He glanced just in time to see Sokka finally get a good jab in of his own. The point of the spear came at Pulukar straight on and the older man had actually had to slap it away hurriedly with the flat of his own practice weapon.

The training master backed up and Sokka pressed forward.

But now, with the initial surprise gone and his eyes clear, Zuko saw this for what it really was: just a spar. The training master was clearly testing Sokka, his own blue eyes flat and devoid of malice; only curiosity as he came at Sokka again with another quick attack – this time from another angle. He was methodical, Zuko saw, prodding at Sokka's defenses over and over again. His angle of attacks were hardly repeated. He was testing him.

Zuko glanced down at his own bare palms. He had torn off his mittens in preparation to firebend without even realizing what he was doing, and faint wisps of steam were curling up from his hands. Hurriedly, he pulled the mittens back on and then shoved his hands into the folds of his parka.

What had he been about to do?

His face burned, and he knew it had only been luck that everyone's eyes had been focused on the ring. Taking a quick breath, he held it and forced the fire back down to a dim coal inside his belly. Today he was a warrior, not a firebender.

After the initial attack, Sokka managed to hold his ground against the master. For each step back he took he repaid it with a flurry of somewhat flaily thrusts – more often than not regaining his footing. By the time Pulukar stepped back, though, Sokka was panting. The old warrior didn't even look winded.

"Good!" Pulukar said, with a sharp nod. "You're obviously not afraid of improvisation. We'll have to work on your footwork, boy, but you have a solid start. Now you," and he crocked a finger at Zuko. "Your turn."

Zuko took up his own wooden spear and marched into the ring, not taking his eyes off the instructor for one moment. He didn't want to be caught off guard as Sokka had. Pulukar regarded the teen. His eyes narrowed only briefly before he struck.

The man was fast – faster than Zuko could have ever believed, and it took all of his skill to drive him away. He was kept on the defensive for the most part; never finding the opportunity to strike back as Sokka had, and by the time the training master called for a halt what felt like an eternity later, he had several bruises forming where the tip of the blunt-ended spear had struck his left side.

"Good," Pulukar said again. "How well can you see out of that eye, son?"

Zuko planted the butt of his spear in the snow and leaned on it, trying to catch his breath. He didn't have to ask which eye the man was referring too. Everyone always looked to the burn scars first. "Well enough."

Zuko grunted and stepped forward to take Zuko's chin up in one hand. "Follow my finger with your eyes only," he said as he slowly moved it from right to left. Zuko swallowed and did so, and after a few moments Pulukar nodded again. "It seems you do have some sight out of this left eye, but any enemy worth his salt won't know that for sure. We will focus on attacks coming from your left, so you will meet them with a surprise of your own, eh?" The master smiled – something wolfish – and Zuko grinned back, deciding he liked him, despite the surprise attack and the bruises.
"Yes sir."

Pulukar turned and barked to the rest of the gathered boys, "All of you grab up your spears and form up into two lines. These two Southern boys showed up most of you and we're going to be drilling until I'm satisfied we're all on the same level!"

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OoOoO

The Warrior training class let out in the late afternoon, leaving both Sokka and Zuko exhausted, a little footsore, but satisfied. Sokka excelled in nearly every avenue of training that Pulukar had to offer, from fighting to fishing, until even some of the oldest boys were taking note. Zuko, too, had done well although he always seemed to be a step behind Sokka in everything.

It was hard – harder than he ever thought it would be – to simply refrain from firebending. Until now, Zuko had not realized how much he used it, how much it was simply a part of his life. Everything from calling up internal flame against particularly cold gusts of wind, to trying his best to clamp down on his temper while sparing. His hands tended to heat up when he was fighting, local cooking fires and torches flared up unexpectedly to high emotions, and he caught several very telling wisps of steam when he was pitted in one-on-one matches against a couple other warriors. Controlling all of that took concentration and focus away from sparing.

He faltered, and made stupid mistakes he shouldn't.

As they walked away from the training grounds, Sokka flashed him a sideways grin and without any warning at all, threw an arm around his neck and roughed his knuckles over the top of Zuko's head. Zuko yelped and pushed him away – a little more roughly than he had meant too - snapping, "What was that for?"

Sokka shrugged, unrepentant and grinning. "You're worrying too much. Just relax, no one noticed anything."

"How did you—" Zuko broke off his words with a shake of his head and went back to fixing his wolftail. "You saw the steam."

"Well yeah," Sokka said, as if it were obvious. "And the way all of the fires went a little crazy when someone showed you up. I'm your older brother, remember? I'm supposed to notice those things, but no one else saw."

"Not yet," Zuko grumbled, and kicked at a loose piece of ice. It skittered down the walkway and plopped into one of the canals. Seeing the splash reminded him suddenly of Katara, and for the first time in hours he remembered that she and Aang would busy waterbending today.

His mood darkened further.

They were crossing over the bridge of one of the main canals when Sokka paused, shielded his eyes
from the glare of the setting sun, and stared down the length of the waterway. "You know… we don't have to go home right away."

"Why?" Zuko grumbled, arms crossed over his chest. There was nothing convenient to kick his feelings out along the bridge, so he settled for glaring at people who were walking by, instead.

"'Cause I think that's Yue's canal-boat, coming down the stream."

Zuko glanced quickly down the canal then to his brother. Sokka was still gazing out, with a hint of a smile on his face. Zuko looked away and cleared his throat. "Um, you know she's a Princess, right?"

"Yeah," Sokka said absently, as if he hadn't heard at all.

So Zuko tried again. "She's a Princess," he said, a bit louder, maybe hoping it'll get through Sokka's head. "She'll have duties. Suitors. Official functions."

"Well Dad always said that the hardest hunts yielded the sweetest meats."

Zuko resisted the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose. "That's not what I meant. Look, Sokka I don't think — I don't think she's your type, he wanted to say. A proper princess is well educated and ruthless. She marries only the one who would best bring honor to her family, and bring her strong bending children. She—"

… But that wasn't Yue at all, was it?

Swallowing hard, Zuko tried another path. "I don't think it'll end up well."

Sokka shrugged, but not once did his eyes come away from the slowly advancing canal-boat. "Who says I want to date her? Maybe I just want to get to know her?"

Sure. And maybe spotted seal-pigs would grow wings and fly over the full-moon.

"She's pretty," Sokka continued, and there was a wistful note in his voice.

Zuko glanced him again, and realized with a slightly sinking feeling that Sokka wasn't going to drop this. He was right – Yue was more than pretty, she was probably one of the most beautiful girl's Zuko had ever set eyes on.

And Zuko remembered, too, another pretty face – this one caked with stylistic makeup, and a hard, challenging smile. He hadn't thought of Suki in months. It already felt like a lifetime ago since they'd been to Kyoshi Island.

He wondered if he had that same look on his face when she kissed him as Sokka did now.

He let out a breath. "Okay."

"Okay what?" Sokka asked, and let out a startled "Hey!" when he turned to see Zuko walking away. "Where are you going?"

Now it was Zuko's turn to turn and flash him a grin. He didn't answer, just continued on, and by the time he was off the bridge and rounding the corner he heard Sokka calling out distantly to catch Princess Yue's attention.

Of course, it only occurred to Zuko once Sokka and Yue were well out of sight that he didn't exactly know his way back to the house.
Zuko sighed, crossed his arms again, and leaned against the side of a frost-coated building. It wasn't as if he at all anxious to get home, anyway. Not with Katara and Aang probably back already and still excited from their day.

He knew he was sulking, but couldn't bring himself to care. Maybe he could go find where Appa was stabled and pay him some visit – maybe warm his feed just the way the air bison liked it. It would only take a little firebending to heat up some mash, and if he was very careful—

Zuko pushed off from the wall and started walking purposefully to the direction he thought might be right, but he had hardly rounded the next corner when someone crashed into him, hard, and sent him sprawling backwards on his rear-end.

"Oof!" said the other person, "Why don't you watch where you're going, you big jerk—Zuko?"

He blinked. Katara was standing over him – she had not managed to fall at all, despite his greater weight – and was looking abashed, holding out her hand to help him up. He stiffly ignored it in favor of pulling together his own dignity and standing on his own. He looked around. "Where's Aang?"

Katara's face blanked for a moment, then her lips pressed together in a thin, angry line. "He's back, learning waterbending with everyone else."

"Then why—"

"Sifu fussy-pants kicked me out!" she snapped, before he had time to ask. "He said there was a 'misunderstanding' and that this tribe doesn't let women waterbend."

Zuko went very still, and to his later shame the first thing he felt was… relief. Relief and vindication so fierce it felt almost like a new-kindled flame in his chest. He wasn't the only one to be denied learning how to bend properly.

Then he focused on Katara's fierce expression – how bright her eyes were with tears she wasn't allowing to fall, her pinched lips, and the frustration and hurt… and he felt ashamed of himself.

"I—" he started to say, but again Katara cut him off.

"All of the girls here learn healing instead of fighting, did you know that? They don't teach them proper waterbending at all, other than to wash clothes and do housework duties!"

"Katara—"

But she was on a roll now. "They expect us to just sit by on the sidelines while all of the men do the fighting. It's ridiculous!" Katara brought both arms down in emphasis and with a thundering crack the ice-sidewalk under them split into two jagged pieces.

Zuko jumped to the side, safely out of the way. He looked at his sister, half-afraid to see her to burst into tears, but she was just staring at the jagged, broken ice, shoulders slumped. "I'm sorry," she muttered.

"No," he said, sharply, causing her to look up at him. "You're right. Katara, this place is… it's stupid! I saw female soldiers on Prince Iroh's ship. Even the Fire Nation allows their women to fight if they want to... " he broke off, shaking his head. "We don't have to stay here. There might be other villages in the North – there has to be more than one person to teach you waterbending!"

"I know," she said, softly. "But... what if there isn't? The comet is coming, Zuko. Everyone says Pakku is the best waterbending master there is, and he practically said he wouldn't teach Aang unless
I left." She locked eyes with him. "And as much as I want this… Aang more important right now."

He grit his teeth and glanced away. She was right, although he didn't like it at all. "So what are you going to do?"

Katara sighed. "Pakku said there's a woman named Yugoda who teaches healing to the girls," she said carefully, as if trying to convince herself of the idea. "I was looking for her hut when I – uh, ran into you."

He winced and reached up to rub at the edge of his burn scar before he caught himself. The last time Katara had used waterbending healing on him it was to bend his memories back. He had been knocked unconscious for two days. "Maybe learning proper healing wouldn't hurt?"

Katara seemed to be caught between embarrassment and annoyance. Then she sighed again, rolled her eyes, and, after a swift glance to see if anyone was watching, bent a little canal water into the crack she'd made to reseal it. "It can wait until tomorrow," she muttered, and tucked her arm around his. "Let's go home."

OoOoO

Dinner was a joyless affair that night. Zuko and Katara were both in morose moods, and it wasn't long before Aang trudged in, unusually downcast. Apparently Master Pakku had been less than impressed with his new student.

"He keeps saying I'm moving the water, but I'm not feeling the 'push and pull'. What does that even mean?"

The only one who had a good day was Sokka. He practically skipped through the door, all grins, and flopped down on the scattered soft-hide pillows and blankets in the middle of the room, announcing that he and Yue had agreed to an, "Activity" of some sort tomorrow night. Zuko thought about asking what sort of activity Sokka meant, but then glanced at Aang and Katara and thought twice about it.

Finally, Sokka noticed their moods. "What's wrong?"

"Master Poophead won't teach Katara because she's a girl," Aang answered.

"Oh." Sokka paused, considering. Then, "Why don't you just teach her, Aang?"

There was a beat while Katara, Zuko and Aang all stared at each other. A grin grew over Katara's face. "Why didn't I think of that?" She sat up and faced Aang. "You learn waterbending during the day and at night you can teach me and Zuko whatever moves you learned from Master Pakku!"

Zuko's heart tripped a beat and came back, racing. "Do you think that will work?"

"I don't see why not. Jeong Jeong said you needed to learn from a waterbending master. And this
Aang, Katara and Zuko crept out an hour after night fell in order to let the busy streets empty. Katara led the way – she was almost walking so fast in her excitement that poor Aang had to nearly jog to keep up.

There was a gap in the close buildings, a square promenade with a large watery pool carved into the ice to allow the canal boats an easy docking and turnabout. Katara marched to it at once, barely glancing up to the empty bridges above. "This is a good place," she announced. "Lots of room to practice. Let's get started."

Aang grinned and knelt down to bend some water into a blue globe between his hands. "Okay, Master Pakku said this move was all about sinking and floating…"

Something caught Zuko's attention. It was pure luck – he had been concentrating on the tiny flame incased in a nearby street lamp and had been considering pulling the fire from that source rather than generating the flame himself. The moment Aang started speaking, however, the flame flickered – as if it had been disrupted by a small current of air.

Zuko's hand snapped out, catching one of Aang's wrists and the globe of water fell with a splash, soaking their boots.

"Wait," Zuko squinted up to one of the bridges. It seemed the moment he focused, whatever it had been – stopped moving. Was that a shadow he saw, hovering between building and bridge? Or a person?

Katara put her hands on her hips. "What are you doing, Zuko? This is my only chance to—"

The distant flame flickered again. Whatever it was up there had shifted again. Only slightly – enough to disturb the air.

"I think we should visit Appa," Zuko said, louder, over Katara's voice. He caught her gaze, held it and then looked up. She followed, frowning, but Aang seemed to have caught the mood as well.

"... I guess," he said, still unsure.

They moved away reluctantly, Zuko doing his very best not to glance repeatedly over his shoulder. He only spoke again when they had moved near a well-lit canal, several streets away. "I think someone was spying on us."

Katara blinked. "Why would anyone do that?"

"Why do you think?"
Her mouth opened, then closed again as she thought it over. Then she scowled. "That is so rude! I can't believe they don't trust us."

"Weeelll," Aang said, hesitant. "I am teaching you behind Pakku's back."

"That's not the point!" Although Katara never elaborated on what the point actually was. She remained in a foul mood the rest of the walk, and once they reached Appa's enclosed private stable, she viciously flung ice at the closing doors, sealing them closed. "There," she said, satisfied.

The stables were less than ideal: Appa had his own building, slightly set apart from nervous arctic-yaks and yapping polar-dogs. But it was small comparatively small, just large enough for the sky bison to be able to turn around and rest in a bed of dried sea-hay. Zuko, especially had to be careful not to set any of it on fire. But with the doors iced shut, unless someone melted their way in using waterbending, there was no way they could be observed.

"Okay Aang," Katara said, walking over to Appa's water-trough. She made a motion with her hands and withdrew a globe of water. Zuko reluctantly conjured a bit of his own fire, reluctantly deciding it would be too risky to pull from any other source with all the flammables lying around.

"You were saying something about sinking and floating?"

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Momo gave a chirp of warning seconds before a polite knock sounded on Price Iroh's door. Iroh glanced up from his charts and then to his little companion. "It is still early for the cook to bring our supper," he murmured before calling out, "Enter."

The door opened and his First Lieutenant, Izhar entered. "Ensign Yow in communications received this scroll via message hawk ten minutes ago, my Prince," he said and placed a sealed scroll upon his desk.

The Prince's eyebrows lifted at the insignia stamped upon it – the royal mark – before he broke the seal and read the message. His expression darkened.

"I see. Please return and order the crew to cut the engines and run up a signal flag."

The Lieutenant bowed again – and Iroh wondered at passive, incurious expression on his face – and left.

Once the door had shut Iroh gave a sigh and reached for his tea, finding it cold. He glanced down at his work; the most up-to-date charts he could purchase of the Northern Water Tribe's stronghold, and sat back in his chair, contemplating.

Sensing his mood, Momo gave another chirp and hopped lightly to his shoulder, tail winding around Iroh's neck. Iroh reached up and pet him, almost absently.
"Only a fool would accuse my brother of being less than ambitious," Iroh said to himself, to the lemur… or perhaps to no one at all. He glanced towards the port hole and the sparkling cobalt arctic sea out beyond. "But this is a most inconvenient time to make his move."

Less than an hour later, alarm claxons sounded. Prince Iroh sensed more than heard the a sudden flurry of activity from his crew. The sun was setting now; throwing the sky into brilliant orange and the sea a steely gray, and his eyes were not sharp as they used to be but as he glanced out his porthole he made count of at least thirty ships along the horizon – and there were probably more lined up beyond that.

It was an armada, and if the message-scroll was accurate, one headed by a fourteen-year-old and a recently disgraced commander.

Iroh narrowed his eyes in thought. Perhaps some of his stock of spiced-chamomile tea, then. Best to calm the mind and soothe the mind.

He did not come up on deck to be on hand to greet the flagship. Even in his best years as Dragon of The West, he had little use for formalities.

Besides, while he was still first in line for the throne, his niece would have to come to greet him.

She arrived shortly after the cook delivered Iroh's fresh pot of tea. His first reaction as Azula was bowed in by Lieutenant Izhar was surprise, followed by sadness.

Azula had grown into a lady every inch as lovely as her mother. But her eyes… those were of a dark amber, calculating and merciless. It was like seeing Ozai stare out through Ursa's face.

Although that in itself was nothing new.

"Princess Azula," Iroh greeted, not rising. "It is an unexpected pleasure to receive a visit from family in this part of the world. Please, sit."

Her eyes narrowed ever so slightly, but it was just for a moment and he was certain that if he'd not been watching carefully, it would have been missed. She sat, forgoing the tea.

"It couldn't be that much of a surprise, Uncle. Surely, you received the message-hawk."

"Yes, and it brought to me word of your mission." Iroh glanced meaningfully out his porthole and to the rest of the fleet. "So, you intend to take the Northern Water Tribe by force."

"By force or by persuasion." She shrugged and laced her fingers together; Iroh noted the slight bit of black at the tips. Residual soot perhaps? Surely, Ozai had not taught her lightening at this age?

Azula continued, "The Fire Lord has ordered me himself to bring in the Avatar and the traitor soiling my brother's name."

And that, for Iroh, was the crux of the problem. Foolish boy, he thought, heart sinking. If only Zuko had listened to reason and come with him…

"Your brother," Iroh corrected gently, not allowing any of his inner disquiet to show outwardly. "I've seen him with my own eyes and there is no mistake. "Your brother lives, my niece. He is lost, hurt and very confused… but he lives."

A small, humorless small curved her lips. "Whoever he is, my orders are to arrest him for treason."
Yes, Iroh thought, sadly. This was the day he knew had been coming. He had known it from the moment Prince Zuko joined with the Avatar when he escaped his ship.

He sipped at his tea for a moment, thinking, before setting down the cup. "Then I will join you, as your official consultant."

"There is no need for that, Uncle," Azula answered coolly. "This is my mission. I have everything under control."

She had not so much as reached for her own teacup, but Iroh laid his fingers along the edge anyway, rewarming the liquid. "That was not a request," he said, voice gentle. "Do not mistake me for an old fool, Azula, or think Fire Lord Azulon will accept any failure in your assignment. I am offering my assistance."

Her chin lifted – there was no fear in her eyes, only that same poised calculation. "Very well."

Iroh allowed himself a smile before reaching to unroll the charts of the North Pole– older ones, this time. Not the newer, more current ones he had purchased. "Then let us begin."

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At that same moment, several hundred miles to the north, Zuko let out a horse bark of laughter as Aang's sinking and floating moves went a little wild, and he splashed himself with water.

Zuko's own fire, on the other hand, hovered passively six inches under his spread hands, in exactly the same shape and height as Katara's water globe. They shared a look, and read each other's expression in their eyes.

They had traveled literally across the world, faced too many obstacles to count, and finally, finally they were learning.
"The greatest illusion of this world is the illusion of separation. Things you think are separate and different are actually one and the same. We are all one people, but we live as if divided."

— Guru Pathik, "The Guru"
The men holding him stopped.

"There is a staircase two paces ahead," one man said. "We will guide you down—"

Had the hood had been taken off, Zuko would have snorted fire in frustration. "Let me go!" he demanded, sounding petulant even to his own ears.

Blindly kicking back, he aimed for the knee of the soldier to the right. The man sidestepped him, easily. His grip didn't waiver.

"One way or another, you're going down to the brig level, Prince Zuko," said the soldier. "If you fight us, you may end up falling and break your neck."

Gritting his teeth, Zuko seethed. But there was truth in the man's voice. They didn't move until he gave a grudging nod.

There were actually two levels of staircases, which put him on the lowest level of the ship. Zuko was walked down an echoing hallway. A metal door clanked open, and before Zuko could react, the manacles were twisted open, the hood ripped off, and he was shoved inside a dark cell.

He spun around, but the door slammed behind him and the lock was engaged.

Zuko kicked it anyway. It didn't move an inch.

He was now trapped now in a Fire Nation cell while a battle for the freedom of the Northern Water Tribe raged overhead. "You cowards! Let me out!" he yelled, pounding at the door. Through the small grate, he saw the guards turn and walk away.

Swearing, Zuko turned to the far outer wall. "Help!" he yelled to the outside. "Can anyone hear me? I'm in here! Help!"

His voice echoed through empty hallways. Down this deep, he could hear nothing from the outside except water sloshing against the hull and the quiet tinging of Fire Nation machinery. He was probably below the water line.

None of the soldiers stayed behind to guard his cell. They had returned to help fight the battle.

Zuko turned back to the door, drew fire from the torches he could feel lit on the other end of the hall and fire whipped where the hinges would be. Nothing worked. Maybe it was because he was underwater, or exhaustion, or a side-effect of Azula's lightning, but his fire felt cooler and less effective than usual.

Giving up on the door, Zuko paced around and around, knowing he was acting like a caged polar-dog, but there wasn't anything for it. His cell was completely empty, bereft of bed or a window except for a small grate in his door. There was an empty bucket to piss in. He kicked it, but it didn't help his frustration. Then his foot and his stomach burned.

Unbidden, flashes of last night kept intruding on his thoughts. How Azula twitched as she lay in the snow, the flash of hatred in Arnook’s eyes as he turned on Zuko, Katara screaming Aang’s name…

It had all gone wrong so fast…
72 Hours Ago...

Crossing his arms, Zuko stared doubtfully down into the round hole cut into thick ice. The water underneath was so dark it looked black. "You're kidding," he said flatly. "I'm not doing this."

"What's the matter, South Pole? You scared?" Hahn sneered. He was one of the oldest warriors in Zuko and Sokka's warrior training class. Tall and handsome, he was the best of them with the whale-bone club, but Zuko also thought his head was full of sand.

"We're not scared!" Sokka's voice rose a half-octave and broke. "You call this an initiation? We did stuff like this in the South Pole all the time. For fun!"

Zuko winced at the obvious lie. What's he doing? He looked again at the deep, deadly cold water. "Are there even air pockets down there?"

"Sure," said one of Hahn's friends. "But no one actually uses them."

"Don't worry, Kuuzo," Hahn said, getting his name wrong as usual. "Turtle-seals don't bite. I came back with three eggs."

Zuko's raised his eyebrow. Turtle-seal eggs were each as big as a man's head. You couldn't swim back with three. Hahn was making this up.

"Fine," Sokka said. "Whatever you can do, I can do better." Then, to Zuko's surprise, he stripped off his mittens and started to shed his heavy fur parka.

Hahn turned to his friends. "Looks like we got one brave initiate!"

All eyes fell on Zuko.

He grit his teeth, but he wasn't going to be seen as a coward, and he definitely wasn't leaving Sokka to do stupid 'initiation' alone. "Fine," he echoed and shed parka, mittens, and after a moment, his seal-skin boots. They'd only drag him down, and his feet were going to be cold anyway.

Zuko tried to catch Sokka's eyes, but his brother was focused on the hole in the ice, his jaw clenched so hard the tendons were standing out. The last time Zuko had seen him like this as when Iroh's ship had about to crash into their village.

"The turtle-seal's cavern is to the east, and the entrance is about fifteen feet down," Sokka said, repeating instructions they'd been given earlier. "There are air pockets under the ice if we get in trouble."

"I'm not worried." Not about himself, anyway. He had his breath of fire to keep him warm.

Sokka turned and caught Hahn's eye. "And we're coming back with four eggs."

With that, Sokka dove in.

Zuko took a deep breath and dove after.
A full minute and a half later, lungs spasming, Zuko's head broke water in the turtle-seal cavern.

He gasped in a breath of shockingly warm air, so heavy with manure and fish he could actually taste it. "Ugh!" He coughed, choked and considered ducking his head back under water and taking his chances.

Sokka, ahead of him, was already pulling himself out of the water onto a crusty ledge. He turned to lend a hand to Zuko, but was shivering hard, his face pale.

Zuko shook his head and hauled himself out under his own power. Breathing deep, he called fire. A tiny flame escaped his lips, making heat bloom in his blood. He kept a tight rein on it, though. There might be methane in this stinky cavern.

"That's ch-cheating!" Sokka gasped. His dusky skin had gone pale, lips so white they were edging to blue.

Zuko rolled his eyes. Heating his palms, he chaffed Sokka's arms and shoulders. "This was such a stupid idea."

"Y-yeah," Sokka agreed, through chattering teeth. The combo of moist (rotten) warm air and Zuko's firebending warmth helped. Color came back into his cheeks. Then he looked around and swore.

"What?" Zuko turned, worried something was coming at them in the dark.

Turtle-seals were passive creatures, too busy barking at each other to pay two boys any mind. Their meat tasted rank, no one bothered to hunt them, so they didn't have fear of humans. But as Zuko looked around, he realized he didn't see any nesting females.

"It's not even egg season! Those son's of—How'd you get talked into this?" he demanded, turning to his brother.

Sokka only turned and kicked a bunch of dried seaweed.

That cooled Zuko right down. Usually he was the hot tempered one. Sokka always had a plan. He thought things out, and wasn't easily tricked. "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing!" Sokka snapped. Then his shoulders drooped. "I just... I can't Hahn him beat me. I thought maybe if I showed I was better than him..."

"What?" He was completely lost, now.

"Hahn is betrothed to Yue."

"Princess Yue? With that idiot?"

"I know, right?" Sokka suddenly exploded. "And I don't even think he likes her. He never talks
about her. And Yue's so kind and pretty, and... she's way too good for that jerk."

Zuko did a long blink. Then things fell into place. "Wait, that's what you've been up to when Katara, Aang, and I are practicing bending?" He'd been trying to get the story out of Sokka for the last three weeks, since he was always absent while they practiced Pakku's lessons in secret. Now that he knew, Zuko was equally torn between laughter and admiration. And yes, a tiny hint of jealousy. Yue was one of the most beautiful girls he'd ever seen. "You're telling me you've been... dating the Northern Water Tribe princess?" And she was so far out of Sokka's league, it was really impressive.

"We're not dating," Sokka said, voice pitching up in agitation. "We're hanging out. As friends."

"Friends who kiss?" Zuko asked, not able to resist digging in the knife.

Sokka scowled and threw his hands in the air. "Just once! But—She—I made her a fish carving, but I don't think she liked it very much—look, it doesn't matter. She's betrothed to that idiot. They didn't even give her a choice in the matter. He's from a good family. Chief Arnook would never allow me to see her again if he knew…" He stopped. How I feel about her, hung in the air unsaid. Sokka looked nearly deflated now. "It doesn't matter. I'm just a Southern peasant."

"No you're not," Zuko said, surprised.

"Huh?"

"You're Hakoda's oldest son. Sokka, you're going to be Chief of the whole Southern Tribe when Dad steps down. If we did royal titles, you would be a Prince."

"But..." Sokka looked slightly pole-axed. "But that's not the same. We don't do that hoity-toity stuff at home."

"They do here, though." Zuko punched him lightly on the shoulder. "Also, you're friends with The Avatar. That kind of influence matters in royal court."

Sokka gave him a sideways look, and Zuko realized what he'd said. He scratched the back of his neck, embarrassed. He hated it when the Fire Nation knowledge butted in. "Uh, I'm just saying. It makes sense."

"Thanks... I think." Sokka sighed. "I hate that I let those idiots got the best of me." He looked around, then uttered an 'ah-ha!' and dove for a small outcropping. He straightened up with an egg in his arms.

It wasn't an egg laid out of season. It was clearly infertile, pushed away from the rest of the turtle-seal colony and left to rot. The chances it was rotten were really high. Zuko wasn't going anywhere near that.

"What are you planning?" Zuko asked.

Sokka's grin was devilish, and the spark was back in his blue eyes. "Giving Hahn that egg, of course."
"And so, I learned Hahn doesn't like getting egg on his face... Ow, that's cold, Katara!" Sokka complained, flinching back as his sister pressed a glowing globe of water to his split lip.

"Oh, hold still you big baby," she said. "At least now I know why you two both smell like turtle-seal manure."

Aang's gray eyes were wide. "So you're both kicked out of warrior training?"

"Suspended for two days. Hahn, too," Zuko confirmed. The injustice stung, but it did give him time for more discreet bending practice, which was what he'd rather be doing anyway. Plus, seeing Hahn's bellow of rage and his black eye after he and Sokka started scuffling had been totally worth it.

Katara sent him a sharp look. "You were fighting, too? Zuko!"

Now Zuko did scowl. "No, but our warrior training master said families in the Northern Water Tribe sink and float together. So, I have to share in Sokka's punishment."

Sokka visibly relaxed as Katara's water glowed and the cut on his lip sealed. "I've heard they have a jerky eating contest every spring. When I win, they'll have to split the winnings. Am I right?"

"Yeah." Zuko rolled his eyes. "Sure."

Katara was silent. Zuko thought she was concentrating on her waterbending, but after a moment she sighed and retracted the water from Sokka's healed lip. 'I miss home,' she said softly.

The simple, sad way she said it made Zuko feel like had been punched in the gut. Home. The South Pole. Where rules made sense. Where he didn't have to hide the fact that he was a firebender behind some monstrous lie. Where there were no princes and princesses of a water tribe, where he could just... be himself.

He wasn't the only one who had gone quiet. Sokka, too, looked down pensively.

Zuko could guess their thoughts: A girl like Yue would be free to date whoever she wanted in the South. Katara wouldn't be forced to learn waterbending in secret, not stuck to healing and the best way to wash a husband's clothes.

They'd worked so hard to get here, and the North Pole wasn't anything like they'd imagined.

Aang looked around at all of them, distressed. "Hey Katara, you'll never believe what I learned in bending class today," he said, a bit too upbeat. "Water spout! You'll love it."

"Yeah?" she visibly forced a smile and with an easy wave of her hand, retracted the water back into the pouch by her side. "Well, I'm done with Sokka." Then quieter, almost resentfully, "Yugoda says I have a real gift for healing."
"I got it! I got it!" Katara cried, arms frantically looping over her head. The water under her feet stabilized and rose into a short column, raising her a foot off the ground. "I—"

In her excitement, she swung her arms too wide. The column wobbled and fell apart, dumping her into a puddle.

Trying not to laugh, Zuko reached to help her back onto her feet. "Are you sure?"

Aang gave a sheepish smile. "That happened to me about ten times this morning. Master Pakku gave me extra drills."

Once she was standing, Katara made a brushing motion and the water that had soaked into her tunic pooled back into her hand. Far from disappointed, she looked energized. Waterbending had washed her dour mood from earlier away. "I was so close, this time."

Zuko wished he could say the same.

"You're way ahead of me," he admitted. It wasn't much of a surprise. Katara had always been the better bender. And now they were getting into more advance waterbending forms, some moves weren't syncing up with his element. No way could he stand on a fire tornado, for example. And his attempt at a fire octopus had been… interesting.

Katara gave him a sympathetic smile. "Aang's quicker than me."

"Even though he doesn't pay attention," Zuko muttered, casting a glance at the Avatar who was busy scratching Appa behind the years, his arms buried the elbow in bison fur.

The stables had continued to be a good practicing spot—Katara sealed the door, and the animals didn't mind as long as Zuko didn't let his flames get close.

And he had improved, a lot. Just... not as much as Katara. His fire whips had grown long and graceful with deadly accuracy, and he was working on a cresting wave-like wall of fire that was impressive. Jeong-Jeong had said he was a dragon who had learned to swim, but Zuko still felt he was missing something vitally important.

If only he could attend the bending classes, too. Not get everything second-hand…

Katara's gaze softened. "Well, that's Aang for you."

He started, realizing he'd been lost in his own thoughts. And why was his sister looking all misty-eyed at Aang?

Zuko scowled. "If I had half the talent he did—"

"Avatar Zuko?" she teased. "That would be scary."

Zuko's reply was interrupted by a long fog-horn like noise coming from outside. They'd been at the Northern Water Tribe for over three weeks, but never heard anything like it.
With a puff of air, Aang jumped from Appa's to join them. "What's that sound?"

Zuko shrugged. "No idea. Katara, could you de-ice the door? I want to see what's going on."

Once the large door to the stables was unfrozen, Zuko stuck his head out. The evenings were usually pretty quiet, but the strange noise had attracted people outside their homes. Water Tribe men and women milled around. Some pointed to the sky.

A strange sort of snow was falling. Zuko stuck out his mitten and blinked as he caught a flake. "Huh. Black snow." Had a volcano erupted nearby?

"Black snow?" Instantly, Katara was at his side. She paled. "This is soot. I've seen this before."

"What? When?"

She looked at him. "The day the Fire Nation... the day my mom died."

Eyes widening, Zuko scrambled out to the street and up the nearest staircase.

Aang, already ahead of him, had simply wind-walked his way up. "Here!" he called, waving from the nearest roof.

Katara called a gout of water that iced into a ramp she easily climbed. Zuko would have yelled at her for being so obvious with her obviously non-healing waterbending, but every eye was to the sky.

With no air or water (and he wasn't firebending out in the open), he was the last to the roof-top.

There, visible on the darkening horizon were dozens of points of light out to sea. Fires burning from the smokestacks of battleships.

The Fire Nation had brought an armada.

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Iroh closed his eyes for a moment, savoring the rich spice of Dragon–berry tea on his tongue. Hideously expensive, even for him, but revitalizing to the soul.

The impatient tap–tap of fingernails broke his reverie. With an inward sigh, he turned his attention to the meeting at hand.

"When one is hunting a tiger–seal, one is advised to exercise patience," he said, opening his eyes.

Princess Azula sat across the low table. She didn't quite roll her eyes. "I have no need for your wisdom, Uncle."

*You do, my niece. In your mind, you grown, but you are merely fourteen-years-old,* he thought.
Ozai would have been the one to propose this scheme. His ambition was notable, especially when there were necks other than his own on the line.

Iroh thought he knew why Azulon had approved the armada, too. There were disquieting rumors about the girl's firebending prowess — and equal hints of instability. Iroh's honored father would be wise to keep her away from the capital. Perhaps in other circumstances, a battle would do her well. The blood of those who aligned with fire ran hot, and real battle had a way of smoothing rough edges.

But here and now, Azula's presence was worrisome. So worrisome, in fact, Iroh had sent Momo away for the afternoon. Small animals and pets had a way of disappearing around the Royal gardens over the last few years.

Iroh said his cup aside. He decided to be blunt. "We are two nights away from the full moon. Do you intend to attack the water tribe when they are at their peak of power?"

Azula flicked a wrist, dismissively. "I'm not worried. We outnumber them in manpower and war machines."

Iroh frowned. Arrogance wasn't an unknown trait in the Royal Family. But Azula had always been too clever to be so open about it. She was hiding something. "And you have named Zhao as your second in command?"

"That was on my father's orders, actually. Zhao has had some dealing with the water barbarians before, and thought this would be a good opportunity for him to… Redeem himself."

"He is no doubt ambitious, though I'm concerned he thinks only of his own honor," Iroh said carefully. "Not your success."

The girl's lips twisted into the mockery of a smile. "I'm aware of his faults, Uncle."

Iroh waited a beat, but Azula did not say more. At the end of the day, this was her command to lose or fail. Her orders to strike against the Northern Water Tribe had come down from the Fire Lord himself, so Iroh could only push to a point.

"What, exactly, is your plan of engagement?" he pressed.

She shrugged again. "Lead in with a strong assault. Our catapults and fireballs will weaken their defenses, then pull back for the night. Let the barbarians think we are concerned about their full moon."

"And then?"

Her smile was beautiful and too mature for such a childlike face. "We will sail into their harbor strike again in the middle of the night. Admiral Zhao will personally lead a task force into the city. If we kill their Chieftain and capture the Avatar, the Water Tribe will have no choice but to surrender."

It was mostly as Iroh had thought — and feared. Attacking at night during the full moon would spend many Fire Nation lives. On paper, an assault to distract the main force of Water Tribe warriors so a second contingent could slip in was a good one. In reality, it meant the fire pyres would burn high with men and women who did not have to die.

"You don't approve, uncle?" she asked lightly.
"I think there are more bloodless ways to achieve victory, even if they do take longer. But this is your command. I am merely here to act as consult." He eyed her, "With one exception."

There was a glint in her amber eyes. She didn't pretend ignorance. "The impostor?"

"Your brother," Iroh corrected. "There is every chance Zhao may encounter him. You will order him to capture Zuko alive."

She laughed as if Iroh had made a funny joke. "My brother is dead, Uncle. It's sad, yes, because he was so young, but I was there that night. Earth Kingdom rebels broke in and my father fought them off, but not before they took Zuko."

"The body was found a week later," Iroh said, tamping down on a surge of inner frustration. He had been grieved from the death of Lu Ten, and traveling back to the Fire Nation when this had happened. At the time, it felt like a double-blow as if the spirits themselves were punishing him for abandoning his journey with them. It never occurred to Iroh to question any of it.

"That's right. But let's say a miracle has occurred and this really is dear Zuzu, risen from the dead." Azula cocked her head and smiled. "Then that would mean he has allied himself against his own people. The penalty for treason is death."

"So is the penalty for attempted murder of a member of the Royal Family," Iroh said, sipping at his tea. "Make no mistake, Niece. It is my wish that the boy will be formally presented for questioning before the Royal court. If he is not Prince Zuko, the Fire Sages will know. If he is," Iroh let a bit of steel into his voice, "Your mother and I will have questions that will need answering."

Because he was most assuredly Zuko. Scarred by his upbringing, yes, but Iroh was certain there was still time to undo the damage that had been done. And whoever had done this to him — Earth Kingdom, Water Tribe, or a mole from within: Iroh would see them pay.

Iroh eyed his niece. "I hope I have made myself clear."

Azula's jaw tightened for just a moment. She was not dealing with her slightly eccentric uncle, but the Dragon of the West. "You have."

He nodded. "Then, I wish you success in the upcoming campaign, Azula. Please come to me if you require any tactical advice."

They both knew she wouldn't.

The Princess rose, bowed to go and had almost made it to the door before Iroh said, "One last thing, if you please."

She turned. "Yes?"

"How many royal firebending instructors are currently aboard your ship?"

And there it was again. That disquieting flash behind her amber eyes. "Four."

"There were six when you left the Fire Nation."

"Why," she said in mock surprise, "I think you're right, Uncle."

His niece's false smile chilled Iroh to the marrow.
A council of war was convened. Back in the Southern Water Tribe, such important meetings were held in the tribe’s communal round house. Here, in the North, they used a stone and ice hall that was so large it could have fit most of the South’s family dwellings.

News of the Fire Nation's arrival spread quickly. Soon, the hall was packed with male heads of each house. It was standing room only, and late comers were forced to listen from outside the open doors.

Looking around, Zuko realized the only females in attendance were Prince Yue, Katara, and Yogoda who led the waterbending healers.

_What a waste_, he thought. Yes, there were women's duties in the Southern Water Tribe (he remembered him and Sokka kicked out of the tent by Gran Gran a few times so she could discuss ‘feminine arts’), and the brothers took over most of the hunting duty, but the Northerners were far more strict about who did what.

How many female waterbenders would be stuck healing behind the scenes, when they had the power—if not the knowledge—to help repel Fire Nation forces? It wasn't like the Fire Nation would spare them any more for being female. Men and women burned the same.

His thoughts were interrupted when Chief Arnook stood before the assembly. Looking set and grave, he was clothed in regal furs and held a decorative spear of office.

Zuko had seen that look on Hakoda's face, too. One who knew he was in charge of who lived and who died, and was about to deliver bad news indeed. It was a look that aged him.

The crowd hushed and Arnook spoke, "The day we have feared for so long has arrived: The Fire Nation is on our doorstep. It is with great sadness I call my family here before me, knowing well that some of these faces are about to vanish from our tribe, but they will never vanish from our hearts." He paused to let that sink in, "Now, as we approach the battle for our existence, I call upon the great spirits." He turned, raising his hands to the sky. "Spirit of the Ocean! Spirit of the Moon! Be with us!" Lowering his arms, he again addressed the crowd. "I'm going to need volunteers for a dangerous mission."

Instantly, Sokka stepped forward. Hahn, who stood below with a man who looked enough like him to be his own his father, did too. Zuko shot his brother a surprised look, but stepped forward as well. No way was he letting Sokka go on a dangerous mission alone.

"What are you two doing?" Katara hissed by his side.

"Volunteering," Zuko said, grimly. "What's it look like?" He just hoped this wouldn't involve any turtle-seals.

But Arnook turned a disapproving frown on the both of them. "You two are under suspension. You, too, Hahn. Future son-in-law, or not."
"What?" Hahn barked.

Zuko couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Chief Arnook, this is war!"

"We've fought the Fire Nation before!" Sokka added.

The Chief eyed them. Was it Zuko's imagination, or did Arnook's eyes linger on his scars? "We need level-headed men for this special mission. Not those in currently in disgrace."

Disgrace. Dishonor.

Zuko felt like he'd been punched in the solar-plexus, leaving him winded. He barely heard Sokka give another objection. But the Chief would not hear more of it, and moved onto the other volunteers.

Katara crossed her arms, looking torn between indignation and relief. "I can't believe you two."

Pulling himself together by force, Zuko muttered, "Don't tell me you plan to stay back like a good little healer."

His sister's cheeks darkened into an angry flush. She looked down, her hands balling into fists.

The men who were chosen were marked with lines of red warpaint on their foreheads. Meanwhile, the assembly was breaking up—men hurrying to prepare their families and themselves for the upcoming battle.

Sokka was doing some sort of intense eye communication with Princess Yue that involved shaking heads and raised eyebrows, then the Princess looking away and biting her lower lip.

Seriously, how had Zuko not realized what was going on before?

"I'm going to help Aang," Katara said at last. Her voice was low and fierce. "I don't care what stuck up Master Pakku says."

Zuko smirked. "Good. Me too." I'll show them disgrace.

The torches in the hall flared a bit brighter and his palms felt warm with reflected heat. It would be nice to firebend in the open again.

He didn't know who was leading the oncoming armada: Iroh, Zhao, or another Fire Nation stooge, but he looked forward to showing them what the Water Tribe was made of.

Present

Hours passed in the ship's brig with only the slosh of water against the hull as Zuko's company. Eventually, he felt the sun rise.

He hoped the Northern Water Tribe had managed to turn back the tide of battle last night. In the daylight, the firebenders would be that much stronger.

(What if the Northern Water Tribe rallied and sank the ship, with him in it?)
Sitting cross-legged on the cold floor, Zuko knocked a rhythm against the hull. If his sister or another waterbender were listening, maybe they'd be able to pinpoint where he was.

But… Katara had to heal Aang, first. And Sokka had to get Yue away to safety. Chances are, they weren't anywhere near close enough to hear him. Zuko knew that, but he couldn't sit around and do nothing.

They'd come back for him.

If he didn't find a way to break himself out, first.
Betrayed: Part 2

ANOTHER BROTHER
WHAT IF?

IT'S WEIRD HOW ONE EVENT EFFECTS THE WHOLE

JUST A MERE ACT CAN HAVE SUCH CONSEQUENCES ON THE FUTURE

HOW IS IT THAT SUCH A SMALL THING CAN BE THAT

OTHER PEOPLE SHRUG OFF DESTINY AS A SILLY SUPERSTITION AND SAY IT'S CHOICE

SOME WOULD SAY IT WAS DESTINY THAT IT WAS MEANT TO HAPPEN

THAT ONLY WE CAN CHOOSE ARE FUTURE AND WHAT WE BECOME

SOME BELIEVE THAT THE POWERS ARE OTHERP
OMG I have waited so long to post a link to this comic b/c it was a little spoilery for the previous chapters, but Vanghool drew this multipage comic, and I love it to bits. Check it out!

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OoOoO

“Is it your own destiny, or is it a destiny someone else has tried to force on you?”

~ Iroh, Lake Laogai

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Present

Zuko’s legs burned from walking around and round his tiny cell. Finally exhausted, he sat in a corner, his back against the wall, and tapped a rhythm against the hull.

*Someone has to be listening,* he told himself and licked dry, chapped lips. The last time he’d had a drink of water had been at the Spirit Oasis. He’d done a lot of fighting since then, not to mention being half-fried by lightning.

Eventually, Zuko dozed off, and didn't wake until the sun had sunk below the horizon again. Fire Nation soldiers must have come aboard while he slept. He heard the pounding of their heavy boots on the deck above him and caught occasional muffled murmurs through the bulkhead.

None of the voices seemed alarmed or scared, like they’d been forced into a retreat. These were sailors making the ship ready and doing chores.

No one came down to the brig level.
Zuko had been in the cell, alone, for an entire day and night. His mouth was dry with thirst and a pounding headache started up behind his good eye.

Forcing himself back to his feet, he yelled through the small grate set in the door, but no one came down.

Fear crept in. Had everyone forgotten about him? What's happening out there?

There were no answers, and he passed another night alone and in the dark.

The sounds of heavy tread down the hall woke Zuko the next morning. He felt like a piece of parched paper, dry and crackling. He knew with an instinctive dread that calling fire when he was this dehydrated was a very bad idea.

Struggling to his feet, he fought a wave of vertigo that made the room feel like it was spinning.

The door opened, and the flicking torchlight framed Prince Iroh.

“You!” Zuko would have spat if he had any water to spare.

In one hand, Iroh held folded fabric, complete with a pair of black polished boots on top. A tea-pot in the other.

Zuko’s focus snapped to the tea-pot. He took a step towards it before he caught himself.

"Good morning, Nephew," Iroh said. "I have brought clean clothing. After you change, we may have breakfast tea together."

Zuko wanted the whole pot and more with a desperation that was almost animal, but his pride held him back. Even folded, he saw the clothes Iroh carried were red. "I'm not wearing that." His voice came out in a dry rasp.

"Are you certain?" Iroh asked. "It is your choice."

"Those are Fire Nation clothes."

"And you are a Fire Nation prince."

Zuko snarled and lunged forward to snatch the teapot, but thirst and exhaustion had made him slow. Iroh easily backed away. The door to his cell slammed shut with a resounding clang.

"Iroh!" Zuko yelled, pounding on the door. "You can’t do this! Let me out of here!"

The Fire Nation Prince looked at him from behind the grate. "I will return at lunch, Nephew."

He left, ignoring Zuko's raging on the other side.
The Fire Nation’s attack began at dawn.

The vast armada of ships did not come into harbor and engage the Northern Water Tribe warriors directly, like in an honorable battle. Instead, they stayed far out of range of spear to hurl boulders covered in flaming pitch and oil. This was devastating for the ice-built homes and infrastructure.

One of the first strikes was lucky enough to hit the main canal. It took ten trained waterbending men to reseal the hole and divert the water before there was major flooding.

Aang, on top of Appa, dove and harassed the Fire Navy from above.

Despite the siege, there wasn’t a lot for the non-bending Water Tribe warriors to do. With no hand-to-hand fighting to be done, the warriors mostly busied themselves with keeping order with the women and children.

Despite his “suspension”, Sokka was given the task of guarding Yue, personally. (Zuko suspected Yue had something to do with the request, from the way Sokka’s face had lit up when a messenger delivered the news.)

“Be careful,” Sokka warned as he left their dwelling, clasping Zuko’s arm in a warrior grip and giving his sister a brief hug. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“We won’t.” Katara’s voice was a touch too sweet. Even Zuko gave her a quick look.

Sokka must have picked up on it, too. “And don’t do anything Aang would do!” he warned, grinned, and ducked out. His mind was clearly on showing his bravery in front of the Princess.

Zuko waited until Sokka well away before he turned to Katara. He crossed his arms. “You’re planning something.”

“Planning on being useful!” Turning, she was dug though their packs until she came up with Sokka’s biggest parka. As Zuko watched, eyebrow raised, she put it on and stuffed it with extra clothes to hide her feminine outline. With her hood drawn up to conceal her hair... well, she looked like a large boy, from afar.

He knew she was deadly serious when she actually took off her necklace and hid it in an inner pocket.

Katara gave him an arch look. "Well? Are you coming, or not?"

Zuko grinned, feral. This as dangerous and stupid, and probably going to be the best fun he’d had since coming to the North Pole.

As a warrior, he was stuck waiting for the Fire Nation to disembark to start the fight. But the enemy was hurling flaming rocks at the city. As a firebender, there was much he could do.
And he missed bending with his sister. Long hours practicing new moves in secret wasn’t the same.

This... this was simple bending, done at its best just like when they were back home.

There were teams of waterbenders rushing around to contain the damage the fireballs were making, but not enough. No one looked twice at a little extra help, if they stayed out of the way.

Katara and Zuko would find a felled flaming ball. Working together, Zuko drew away the the heat from the burning pitch—he kept his movements smooth and flowy. Hopefully, if anyone was watching it would look like a waterbenders move. Once the fire was out, Katara would step in and patch the damage with a coating of ice and snow.

They had to be careful — Zuko especially — that no one looked too closely at how they were bending. But they had been working together so long that their combined movements were fluid and quick. The city was in chaos, and if anyone saw them working together, they didn’t connect the dots that one of them was a firebender, and the other a girl dressed as a boy.

The Fire Nation seemed to have an endless supply of ammunition. By the afternoon Katara looked pale and drawn.

No way around it: Katara had the tougher job. Zuko only had to douse the fire and cool the tar and oil. Katara was tasked with rebuilding ice infrastructure before entire homes collapsed.

Standing back to watch her work, Zuko realized how far his sister had come in such a short time. Her water ribbons sunk and floated, rippling through the air without a hint of instability or waver. The ice that grew from a wave of her hand was thick and without cracks or flaws.

*She's really good,* he realized all over again, as she smoothly braced a melted sagging wall with an ice column.

The Northern Water Tribe were idiots for not teaching her. She was doing as much as a team of their male waterbenders.

A voice called out behind him, and turned sharp as a water-ship. "Ah, there you are Zuko. Where’s —What do you think you're doing, young lady?"

Erp. Both siblings turned, and Zuko had to fight the spark of flame that instinctively collected in his palms at the surprise.

Master Pakku and Chief Arnook stood behind them. Thankfully, their disapproving gazes were for Katara. They hadn’t noticed his tiny flash of flame. If they’d come up on him a couple minutes earlier while he was dousing the tar… they would have seen everything.

"I—I—" Katara stammered, taken by surprise. Then her blue eyes flashed. She stood straighter and pushed down her hood. "I'm helping!"

Arnook frowned. "You’re a waterbender, aren’t you? Why aren't you with the healers?"

"Doing what?" Zuko demanded, stepping next to her. They wanted Katara behind, knitting mittens or whatever the women did here. It made smoke want to come out of his ears. "The Fire Nation hasn't dropped anchor. There's no one to heal, yet."

Pakku turned to Arnook. "I knew it. I told you that I suspected they were up to something. That boy —the Avatar must have been teaching her in secret."
"So?" Katara demanded. "I want to fight!"

Arnook acted as if Katara hadn't spoken. "You're likely right, Master Pakku, but we will have to address this later." He fixed Katara with a stern look. "Young lady, you are putting yourself in needless danger. You bring shame to your house—"

Zuko had to fight down the fire that wanted to flare up inside him. "Are you blind? She just fixed this house. Look at it!" He gestured to her ice column. "I don’t see anyone else—"

"Cool down, boy." Pakku made a smooth rising gesture. Suddenly, Zuko found himself locked up to his waist in ice. Searing cold flashed through him—the fire deep inside flickered for a brief second. He gasped in a shallow, unfocused breath—No, he couldn’t heat his blood with a breath of fire. Pakku would know—

Splash!

A perfectly formed water-whip struck the master so hard he staggered back a step.

"Don’t! Touch! My! Brother!" Katara shouted, hurling globes of water that shifted into snowballs. Her stance perfectly rooted, she gestured in a wave form. The ice receded from Zuko's skin, melting to water to splash away.

The master waterbender had regained his balance, overcoming his surprise. He drew himself up and water sloshed from the nearby canal to his command.

Zuko's legs felt numb from lingering cold as he staggered to Katara's side. There wasn't handy flame to draw from nearby, but he'd generate his own if he had to…

"Enough!" Arnook stepped between them all, his face a blaze of anger. "Pakku, Katara, stand down. I will not have my waterbenders fight each other when there is an enemy in our harbor!"

With an irritated gesture, Pakku let the water recede back into the canal. "Chief Arnook, her behavior is outrageous. I would have expected better from a so-called friend of the Avatar."

"The Avatar was why we were here," Arnook reminded him, grimly. He looked hard at Zuko. "The Fire Nation has pulled back and the Avatar and his bison have left the field."

"He's probably exhausted, fighting and flying all day!" Katara's gaze focused, pointedly at Pakku. "Aang isn’t using his power to run around and tell other people what to do. He’s fighting for us."

Zuko had to bite back a laugh. His sister could be a real sea-witch when she was angry.

Pakku bristled, affronted.

Arnook cut a look across the master and sighed. "Be that as it may—"

A low moaning bison sound echoed through the air. They turned as Appa swooped down from the sky as if he had been called. Aang was on his head, Yue and Sokka riding in the saddle. Apparently, Aang had stopped to pick them up before he made his report to Arnook.

Sokka, though, must have read their body language and realized something was going on. "What's wrong?" He jumped from the bison the moment he landed.

In answer, Pakku strode up to them, tall and with injured pride. "Avatar Aang, you have not yet begun to master water at the level of a sea sponge, yet you dare to teach others? And a woman?"
"Um," Aang looked from Pakku to Katara. She was so visibly angry the water from the canal behind her was trembling.

Pakku glanced over his shoulder at the canal, sniffed at her lack of control, then continued to Aang. "Your arrogance is an insult to me and everything I have worked to attain. As of now, you are no longer my student."

And with that, he strode away.

"Oh, that is it," Katara raised her hand, and a threatening stream of water wrapped around her fingers.

Zuko caught her wrist. "No!" he hissed. "Not when his back is turned."

She shot him a surprised look, but the water fell from her fingers to the icy road.

Arnook looked like he was getting a migraine. "Avatar Aang, I'm certain we can fix this with apologies… later." A pointed look at Katara, who bristled. "As of now, what is your report?"

Aang sagged, visibly worn out. "I took out a few ships, but there are too many of them. Yue thinks I might be able to talk to the spirits in an oasis, and… ask them for help, maybe?"

For help, maybe? Zuko resisted the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose. He had to talk to Aang about projecting confidence. It was what was expected in a leader.

Arnook, thankfully, took it in stride. "Hmm. Perhaps. We don't have much to lose if you try. I suspect the Fire Nation will renew their assault in the morning, once the sun is shining again. Yes." He nodded decisively. "Yue, take him to the Oasis. As for you two." He turned to regard Sokka and Zuko with a baleful eye. "Get your sister under control."

Katara sputtered, and this time Zuko really couldn't help his own outrage: Steam rose from his wet clothing. Luckily, Arnook had turned away. He was the the leader of a tribe under siege had had many more important issues to handle.

Yue dismounted, hands tucked into her fur muff. Her beautiful face was angry.

"Uh, Yue, I can explain," Sokka said.

She pushed past him to walk to Zuko.

"Don't bother," Zuko said, tired and fed up the Northern Water Tribe’s ‘traditions’. "She knows I'm a firebender."

"Yes, I do. And I've seen that look on waterbender faces. You were one second from using your element on my father," Yue said curtly. "Don't."

"Yue," Sokka said. "Sure, he gets a little steamed sometimes, but—"

She silenced him with a look that would have made Gran-Gran proud.

"Sokka, you've told me things are different in the South, but I think I'm starting to realize how different. Katara," Yue turned to the other girl. Her expression softened. "You should have come to me, first. There are… gatherings where women who want to learn martial waterbending practice together, out of view."

“But that's wrong!" Katara said. “We shouldn’t be forced to practice in secret. There’s nothing
wrong with waterbending.”

Yue’s face was compassionate. “It must be very different in your tribe. Here, a woman seen fighting is shameful. It means her father and her brothers cannot protect her. When you bend like that in the open, you tell others that Sokka and Zuko are weak.”

Katara raised her chin. “They're not, and I don't care what your tribe thinks.”

"You should care. If someone were to wonder why you were acting out, looked closer and found what Zuko—” Yue’s voice lowered as if they might be overheard. "If they found what he is, right when the Fire Nation was attacking us, my father would drop him in an ice-water pit and have Pakku seal the top. Sokka, too, for hiding him.”

Zuko took in a sharp breath, both at the horrific imagery and the calm way she threatened it. Frankly, a small part of him was impressed: he didn’t think the demure girl had it in her.

Sokka didn’t either, judging by the way his eyes widened. “Yue—”

But the Princess wasn’t done yet. “Then you would be alone, Katara. And here, a woman without a family is a woman without home, prospects, or safety.” She eyed the other girl. “Do you understand?”

"What does that mean?” Aang asked.

Zuko look at Katara, and the way Sokka went still meant that he got it, too. The idea of falling into ice-water, his only way out blocked, with Sokka drowning beside him… Katara alone in a place where women were vulnerable when they were unguarded… it made him want to burn something.

No wonder people like Gran-Gran had moved to the South. These Northerners could have their grand cities and canals and ice wall. He’d take the simple village on the ice with Sokka’s watch-tower any day.

"It doesn’t mean anything," Zuko said sharply to Aang. Then he looked at Yue. "Because even if Sokka and I— Well. Katara would always have Aang to stand with her." Zuko added, "And she’s a fighting waterbender. She has herself.”

“You’re darn right,” Sokka said.

Katara flushed and looked down, pleased. But there was a firm certainty in her stance, too. Something that told Zuko if he ever did find himself in a mess like Yue described, she’d be right there to bend him and his brother out.

Aang looked a little sick. It was clear he hadn’t picked up on all the implications, but he wasn’t stupid. “I didn’t visit the Northern Water Tribe a hundred years ago, but I think Monk Gyatso would have mentioned that you guys were so strict.”

“My father says war brings out the best and the worst of men.” Yue sighed. “I don’t know how things were in the past, but my older Aunties and Uncles have said isolation hasn’t been good for our tribe. We used to trade with our bothers and sisters to the South. Fur, timber… ideas. For too long we’ve had only ourselves. I hope you can change that, Avatar.”

A set and determined look crossed Aang’s face. He nodded once. “Count on it. So, where’d you say that Spirit Oasis was?”

Yue turned to lead the way. Zuko quietly stepped to Sokka’s side and gave him a friendly nudge. “I
didn’t know your girlfriend could be that scary.”

“Yeah.” Sokka looked a little punch-drunk. “Isn’t she great?”

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Warm, moist air brushed across Zuko's face as he walked into the Oasis Temple.

"Grass!" Aang rushed by him, falling and rolling gleefully onto the small hill like a man starved.

"Wow, what is this place?" Katara breathed.

Yue smiled. "The most spiritual place in the North Pole."

"Yeah, I can feel that." Aang sat up and took a deep breath. The lines of exhaustion were gone from his face, just like he hadn't spent the entire day fighting onboard Appa.

Cautiously, Zuko stepped forward and took note of the tranquil pool set in the middle of the gentle grassy hills. It was like a piece of the Earth Kingdom, transported to the North Pole.

Sokka elbowed him and muttered low, "Looks like a great place to catch fish dinner."

Two fat, juicy white and black koi fish circled each other near one edge of the pond. Zuko smirked and stepped closer to look.

His reflection flickered in the still waters. The boy who scowled up at him was shaved to the scalp, except for a proud Phoenix tail in the back. His scar on his face was a touch smaller, the slash across his neck gone. He wore Fire Nation armor and glared back at Zuko with flashing anger in his pale gold eyes.

Zuko yelped back, so surprised he threw sparks in the air.

"What, do the koi fish have teeth or something?" Sokka asked, looking down curiously. He didn’t seem to notice anything strange.

Instantly, Katara was at his side. "What? What's wrong?"

"I..." Zuko looked again to the pond, but the reflection was... him. Just him. Blue parka was beads woven into a long piece of hair by the unburned side of his face. Water Tribe to the core. "I thought I saw... never mind."

Yue looked concerned. "They say some sages see visions in the pool."
That was definitely not a vision, and he was the furthest thing from a sage you could get. "I didn't see anything."

Katara touched his shoulder. “If you saw something that could help Aang—”

“I didn’t! Just drop it, all right?” Jerking away from her, he walked off to the low grassy hill to sit, arms crossed.

He felt more than saw Sokka, Katara and Yue exchange a glance. Zuko ignored them. He'd been thinking of the Fire Nation all day. His eyes had to be playing tricks because he was tired and… The Fire Nation version of him in the pool meant nothing. Nothing.

Eventually, Aang settled down and began meditating by the edge of the pool. Sokka made noises about going to get something to eat.

Katara joined Zuko, sitting by his side, Yue on the other. Maybe it was all the the spirit world mojo in the room, but he couldn't stay annoyed for long. Letting out a long sigh, he slumped back, picking at a blade of grass.

"Do you think Aang can do it?" Yue asked quietly. She sat upright and proper, ever the Princess. "Speak to the Moon and Ocean spirits?"

"Yes," Katara said. "He calmed down the spirit of the Hai Bei forest."

"The Avatar is the bridge between our world and the spirit world," Zuko said. "If anyone can do it, Aang can."

“Is there anything we can do to help?” Yue asked.

At that point, Aang dropped his hands from his mediative pose and yelled over his shoulder. "How about some quiet! Come on, guys. I can hear every word you’re saying!"

Katara choked back a giggle. Zuko grinned, humor back, and Yue looked politely abashed.

A few minutes later, Aang's arrow tattoos turned a brilliant glowing blue.

Iroh gazed out his porthole window at the stunning landscape beyond. Night had fallen and the full moon was starting to rise, making the snow and ice cliffs surrounding the northern water tribe glow nearly bright as day. It was a magnificent sight. These people opposed the Fire Nation, and were therefore were his enemy. But Iroh could and did respect strength in the opposite element.

Azula's forces had battered them through the day, and they had held up well. This would be a long siege.
That was, if Zhao's secret strike force was not successful.

Much like the Fire Nation, the Northern Water Tribe was ruled by the head of his bloodline. If he were captured, or otherwise put out of commission… There would be chaos in his people. Even more if the Avatar was somehow taken.

Iroh was reflecting on these thoughts when his white and brown lemur swooped through the window, chittering in agitation. Spotting Iroh, Momo alighted to his shoulder and wrapped his tail securely around Iroh's neck.

"Whatever is the matter, my friend?" Iroh murmured, reaching to lay a calming hand on the lemur's back. He had hardly seen him so upset: There were no singe marks on his fur. Surely, no one had dared use him for target practice—

Momo shifted, still making high squeaks of alarm, and pulled at the top of Iroh's topknot. Then he leapt to the open porthole window and tittered again.

Frowning, Iroh retrieved his spyglass and used it to gaze out the window.

For a long moment, he saw nothing. Firebender eyes were not so keen in the dark. Then, he spotted movement between the harbor and the sheer white cliffs.

"Ah, that must be Zhao's team," he said. "I wish them best of luck. Striking at the heart of the Water Tribe at the height of the full moon…" He trailed off, noting that Momo was still highly agitated.

Something else was amiss.

It was undignified for a man of fire to shiver, but he could not deny the cold feeling that crawled up his spine. Turning from the window, Iroh strode out of his quarters and down the hallway to the bridge.

"Lieutenant, have there been any communications from the Princess?"

Izhar shot him a surprised look. "No, sir. Not since her strike force disembarked."

That cold feeling — that foreboding, grew stronger. Iroh knew his men were competent. They would have eyes on the harbor at all times. Surely, Azula wouldn’t… "Was the Princess out there as part of the task force?"

"Y-yes?" Izhar looked confused. "Shouldn't she be? This is her Command…"

He trailed off at the look on Iroh's face. No doubt, it was thunderous.

In their discussion over tea, Azula had led him Iroh believe Zhao was the one who would head the strike team. Therefore, Iroh had specifically given orders for Zhao to capture Zuko alive. Not Azula. It hadn't been a lie, exactly, but his niece had managed to mislead him into giving her orders she might be able to get around.

There was no fool like an old fool, he thought. Aloud he said, “Lieutenant Izhar, gather the my Command crew and have them meet me out on the forward deck at once."

"Sir?"

Iroh turned, eying the scuttle-boat used to transport men to shore. "Azula is about to make a grave mistake. We must stop her."
After a solid hour watching Aang's motionless body, Sokka volunteered to go out and get them something to eat. He returned with sea-plum stew, bowls of rice, and news.

"Arnook’s got men covering the tunnel leading to the Oasis, so be prepare to be questioned if you want a potty break," he said between bites. "The Fire Nation is still parked out in the harbor, but a big blizzard has blown in. That’ll cool them down."

Katara perked up. "A blizzard? It's not usually blizzard season."

Sokka's hunters grin could have fit on a tiger seal. "That's right. Maybe Aang is getting something done over there."

All eyes fell briefly to the motionless, glowing body.

Zuko shrugged, not buying it. "He's trying to talk to the spirit of the Ocean and the Moon. Not to… blizzard spirits."

“They don’t have blizzard spirits, Zuko.” Katara looked at Yue. “Do they?”

The Princess chuckled, a mittened hand politely covering her mouth. "We have a sacred forest two miles north. They say all the Water Tribe spirits live there. Maybe even blizzard spirits, too. Don’t you have anything like that in the South?"

"Nope." Sokka stretched out on the warm grass, fed and sated. "Just ice and tundra… And more ice."

“There used to be a forest near to the village,” Zuko said to his brother. “Remember, Dad took us there that one time we fell through the ice?"

“Ugh, because those rabbit-squirrels made the ice rotten?"

Yue giggled again as if Sokka had made a joke. Zuko guessed it was a little funny, with time and distance to dull how terrified he’d been for Sokka. And that had been the day Zuko discovered he was a firebender, which wasn't all bad.

Sokka, unperturbed, started telling Yue of other landmarks around their tiny village, the South’s ice-dodging rituals, hunting blue Wolf-whales, and gathering sea berries. How they tasted sweet and salty at the same time.

Zuko laid back on the grass, feeling drowsy and pleasantly exhausted. Firebending all day was hard, and the sun was down, which meant his energy was low.

"Do you hear that?" Katara asked suddenly. She stood and walked to the tunnel entrance that led into the oasis.

Sokka broke off his monologue. "Hear what?"
A distant crackling boom sounded down the tunnel.

Instantly, they were all on their feet — except for Aang. Sokka, gripping his boomerang, Katara with a globe of water between her fingers, and Zuko standing ready with his palms hot.

An orange blast of fire shot out of the tunnel, badly aimed. Zuko had seen that sort of uncontrolled blast before. It was wild, undirected, and only bad luck had it heading towards Aang.

Zuko jumped in front of the Avatar, and with a downward sweep of his arms, directed the force of the blast away. The redirected fire flew across the pond to sizzle on the other side. In the water’s reflection, the orange flame looked blue.

"Fire Nation’s here! They’re trying to get Aang!" Sokka yelled.

And he was in the spirit world, which meant he couldn’t lift a hand to help. Great.

“I got it!” With an upward pull of her hands, Katara pulled water from the pool and raised a thick wall of ice before the tunnel to seal them in. Just in time. Another burst of fire bloomed, bright, against the other side. They hard muffled shouts and the clang of steel against whalebone clubs.

"My father's warriors are guarding the tunnel," Yue said. She looked grim, but calm. "They'll protect us with their lives."

"That's exactly what I'm afraid of," Zuko grumbled. “There is a lot of fire in that tunnel.” He could feel with a sense he couldn't name, and some of it was insanely hot.

Something stirred in the back of his mind. Something about that hot fire felt… familiar, somehow. Was it Prince Iroh? He didn’t seem like the fighting type.

Sokka had a grim look on his face as he turned to Yue. "Aang’s away from his body, but I think we can move him. Is there a back way out of here?"

"Out of the Oasis? Yes, but the path leads to the wilderness… To that spirit forest I was talking about." She must have read the look on his face because she put a hand on his arm. "Sokka, we can't go out there. You don’t know the land, and even experienced hunters lose their way and freeze in blizzards like this."

"Zuko won't freeze."

Everyone stared at him. Even Katara turned from guarding her ice wall.

"What? Are you crazy?" Zuko demanded. "Those are firebenders. If they break through, you're going to need fire to defeat them."

"And you can't bend in front of Arnook’s men!" Sokka threw his arms in the air, frustrated. "We all know they’re after the Avatar. You have to take Aang and go."

"I’m not leaving you—"

A burst of orange flame struck squarely against Katara's ice wall. Cracks appeared, and were filled in by her hasty bending. Arnook’s men in the tunnels were losing ground.

"Zuko, he's right," Katara said as she melted snow gathered at the edge of the grassy hill and bent it as useful ice to add to the wall. "Aang is in the spirit world, and he can’t defend himself. Sokka, Yue, and I will be fine."
"You don't know that!" Zuko protested. And that hot, hot fire was getting closer. He could feel it, and he knew in a deep, visceral part of his soul that it was deadly dangerous. He was not leaving his siblings alone.

Then Yue stepped in front of him. Perhaps it was a trick of the flames against Katara's ice wall, but the light made her blue eyes look as if they were alight with power. Something not too far off from Aang’s glowing tattoos.

"Right now, the Avatar is the only hope we have to stop the Fire Nation. You must protect him," she said. “Go."

The force of her command pulled Zuko’s objections apart like they were as insubstantial as smoke. He found himself halfway to Aang before he realized what he was doing, and once he was there he was committed.

Aang was a small kid, but he was all dead weight. Zuko lifted him onto his back, tucking his legs under his elbows and throwing Aang’s limp arms over his shoulders. Not only could Zuko move faster, but heating himself through his breath of fire would keep both of them warm.

The exit at the back of the Spirit Oasis was small and and hidden from immediate view. He didn't let himself look back at his family as he ducked through and out.

OoOoO

Sokka watched Zuko quickly gather Aang leave without more objection, and tried not to let his jaw hit the floor.

“How did you do that?” he asked, once Zuko was safely through the back exit and out of earshot. “I mean, he’s my brother but he’s a firebender, and talking him out of a fight is like trying to calm a rampaging Moose-Lion. You should have seen the time he challenged a Fire Navy Admiral to a duel.” Sokka realized he was babbling as bad as Aang. He forcefully pulled himself back on track and demanded again, “How did you do that?”

Yue turned to him, serene and beautiful with the light of the full moon reflected in her eyes.

Wait. Sokka blinked. There was a ceiling overhead, and a raging storm above that. How was he seeing the moon?

Then, she sagged, shaking her head as if to clear it. The light was gone, and it was just… Yue again. She looked ruefully to the tranquil little pool.

“I owe the Moon Spirit my life. Sometimes, she chooses to speak through me.”

There was definitely a story there, but they didn’t have time. Another blast, more powerful than the others, struck Katara’s ice wall. She cried out in alarm, raising a freezing wave to shore it up.
An explosion of hot blue seared a hole through nearly a foot of ice, and missed Katara by inches.

A lithe figure darted through the opening, moving so fast Sokka couldn’t get a fix on her long enough to throw his boomerang. He pushed Yue down as a bolt of fire—it was blue, he had no idea fire even did that—exploded to the side of them, knocking them both down.

Through the hole in the wall, the sounds of Arnook’s men fighting—dying—was loud and painfully clear.

The firebender strode forward, tiny sparks crackling along sharp pointed fingernails. She was… a girl. No older than Katara, maybe even a little younger. Every move was made with deadly intent and precision.

“Where is the Avatar and the traitor?”

Sokka threw his boomerang at her, blade-side out. “Katara! Seal the ice wall!” he yelled, then made a sound that was definitely not a squeak of surprise as the girl easily ducked under the boomerang, and with a kick, swept Sokka’s legs out from under him.

Sokka fell onto his back, the girl on top of him. And suddenly, the edge of a dagger made of blue flame was an inch from his right eye.

Huh. I think I figured out how Zuko got his scars.

“Sokka!” Katara yelled, but if she moved from reinforcing the ice-wall it would go down and they would be in even more trouble.

The girl smiled. “I have it on good authority,” the fire dagger moved a touch closer, and Sokka felt sweat bloom across his forehead from the heat, “the Avatar is here. You have three seconds before you lose the first eye. Then I’ll work on your second.”

Sokka looked up into her amber gaze and said nothing.

The girl smiled.

BONK.

She lurched forward as Sokka’s boomerang sailed back. It hit her on an armored plated shoulder, throwing sparks. Sokka jerked away as the fire-dagger swept past where his eyes would have been—a stroke meant to blind. He punched and caught her in the side of the jaw.

“How dare you! Barbarian!” she growled, readjusting her shoulder plating as she stood. “I’ll make sure you burn for this—” Then she paused, and Sokka caught the moment her gaze focused on a slight disturbance in the grass. Zuko’s heavy footsteps as he carried Aang out the back exit.

In desperation, Sokka scooped up his fallen boomerang, but she struck it the air almost as soon as it left his hand. Then she was darting out the back.

“No, don’t!” Yue grabbed his arm as he moved to follow. “The blizzard! Sokka, you’ll freeze!”

“She’s after Aang and Zuko!” And who was that girl, anyway.

From her spot guarding the ice wall, Katara looked pale. It was more than just fright. She had been
tossing up wave after freezing wave to plug the hole and hold the firebenders back, but red and orange glowed dully on the other side. They were trying to burn through. They were going to burn through, probably soon, and when they did…

Well. There would be more than just one crazy blue-fire girl on Aang’s and Zuko’s trail.

Yue gripped Sokka’s arm. “The spirits know my people. If your brother makes it to the forest, they’ll be safe. They spirits know my people. They’ve always sheltered the Water Tribe when we were in need. And Aang’s the Avatar. They have to help. That terrible girl won’t even be able to find the forest, if they don’t want.”

Katara glanced at Sokka in time to catch the anguished look on his face.

“Zuko’s Water Tribe, Sokka,” she said firmly.

“Sure, but do the spirits know that?”

“What do you mean?” Yue asked. “What’s wrong?”

“Well… the thing is,” Sokka said, picking up the whalebone club in one hand, the boomerang in the other. Decision made, he stood by his sister’s side, ready for when the thinning ice wall fell. “Zuko’s adopted.”

OoOoO

The blowing snow drove into Zuko's eyes and the patches of skin that weren't covered by his parka. He worried about Aang was doing with his bald head, but there hadn't been time to grab a spare coat. Aang did wear a version of his monk outfit that was thicker than usual. It would have to do.

As he trudged forward in knee deep snow, Zuko focused on his breathing. He fed his inner flame on the inhale, and with every exhale pushed the fire back out as body heat.

Though the snow was deep, the ground beneath was firm enough to tell him he was walking across an ice sheet. Yue had said the forest would be two miles north. That was a trek in a blizzard, but he was sure he could do it.

Only… he was certain he’d gone at least that far, but there wasn’t a tree to be seen.

Gritting his teeth against the howling wind, Zuko trudged on.

If he could make it, find Aang shelter, he could back return the way he came. He didn't fear Arnook’s men. He'd fight with a whalebone club or his knife if he had to. It wasn’t right to just leave Sokka and Katara back there. He—
There was no warning.

Blue fire exploded a foot away where he stood. The concussion blast so strong it sent Zuko flying. He twisted, instinctively letting his body hit ground first. Aang fell beside him, limp. His glowing tattoos didn’t wavier.

Zuko scrambled to his feet, rooting himself in his favorite, must fluid stance. One palm up, the other faced down. Ready to divert anything that came his way.

A shadow moved in the howling night air, just beyond his rage of vision.

"Who are you?" Zuko had to yell to be heard over the storm. "Come out and face me, coward!"

The shadow solidified, resolved into a person. Zuko stared into a pair of horribly familiar amber eyes, and felt as if he'd fallen into ice water.

It was her.

The girl who had visited his nightmares for over six years. The one who's words he could never hear, but had him wake in a cold sweat, mouth dry, his heart pounding.

She was older now, and wore thick fire Nation armor with the insignia of the royal family. Raven black hair, lovely heart-shaped face, and cruel smile.

"Hello, Zuzu." She stepped closer, confident and deadly. "It's been a long time."

"I... Azula?" the name came to his lips, pulled from a dark place.

She smiled and it was like feeling an ice-spider skitter down his back. "Oh, so you do remember me. Uncle's letter claimed your brains were addled by living with peasants." She paused, and her gaze lingered on the left side of his face. "I have to say, Water Tribe colors don't go with your... complexion."

He stiffened. "You're my sister." He didn’t remember her. Not really. It was like a memory of a memory. Something dark and distant that screamed.

His sister. Like Katara.

"Or maybe your brain is cooked after all." Azula let out a weary sigh as if she were dealing with an idiot and she had to use small words. "Yes, Zuzu. I'm your sister, and you're in league with the Water Tribe, which makes you a traitor. Give me the Avatar and I'll put in a good word with Grandpa. Maybe he'll spare you the execution."

The fraction of a memory burned through him. A warning of something he'd known long ago: Azula always lies.

Zuko backed a step, and knew it was a mistake at once. The girl’s eyes lit with a predator’s hunger, sensing weakness. She moved forward.

"Mom has grieved for you all these years, Zuzu. She’d drag me to visit your grave every birthday and the day of the dead."

Clearly, she expected the words to hurt. They didn't. Zuko had no memories of his Fire Nation mother. She or the man who had been his father meant nothing to him.

But Azula had been in his bedroom that night… speaking horrible things to him. He’d dreamed of it
often enough. Zuko lowered his hands, dropping the implicit threat.

“What happened that night?”

“What night?” she asked, false innocence as she stepped closer. “Oh, you mean the night the Earth Kingdom stole you from your bed? I tried warning you, Zuzu—”

“You’re lying!” He’d been found on a Fire Nation ship, throat cut and with a burn across his face. Whatever had happened, the Earth Kingdom had nothing to do with it.

She cocked her head. “Am I? Are you sure? Or is that something you’ve been telling yourself?” The expression on her face might have been pity. “Turn the Avatar over to me, Zuko. You can finally come home.”

Home.

The word tugged at his mind in a way nothing else she said had. For a bare moment, Zuko felt the brush of warm air on his face and smelled orange-cherry blossoms. The distant quack of turtle-ducks…

He mentally jerked away from the half-memory as if he’d been burned. When he reached for it again, it was gone.

Straightening, Zuko retook his bending stance, one palm up, the other down, wrists loose and ready. "My name is Zuko, second son to Chief Hakoda of the Southern Water Tribe!" His words came out as a defiant snarl. "If you want the Avatar, you'll have to go through me."

"Oh well." Azula shrugged. "I tried."

Then, so quick he had no time even to inhale, she struck.

A blast of hot blue fire shot for straight Zuko's heart. He diverted the first strike at the last second and felt the heat sear the loose rein-yak hairs sewn into his mittens.

He caught Azula’s second bolt into his influence with a graceful twist of his wrists. The fire arced around his back in a ribbon, changing from blue to a cooler gold and he shot it back at her.

Azula batted it away with her own flame, contemptuously.

"What was that?" she demanded, contemptuous laughter in her voice. "Six years and you've actually grown weaker."

Advancing, she blasted him again. An arc of flame that knocked him onto his back. He rolled to his feet and scrambled to keep between her and Aang. "No!"

"Oh please."

She kicked a bolt of fire. This time, Zuko raised a wall of his own, taking her flame and absorbing it, feeding it. The wall curved up like a wave and crashed back into the snow, sizzling and popping like frothing water sunk into the sand. It hadn't even reached the toes of Azula’s pointed boots before it sizzled out.

Azula raised one eyebrow.

Zuko grinned, feral as a tiger-seal. "Let me guess. They don't have ice shelves in the Fire Nation?"
It took a moment for her to get it: Zuko hadn't let his flame fizzle out, he'd sunk it under to melt the foundation below.

Ice cracked under Azula's feet. Her eyes widened and she leapt, but it was too late. Ice snapped and collapsed into a deep rift.

But one hand, fingernails sharpened into points, gripped the bare edge. Azula hadn't fallen completely into the gorge, and if she managed to pull herself up….

Zuko hauled Aang and across his back. Then he ran.

---

Katara's ice wall fell with a crash, and fire nation goons poured in — all black and red armor and hands aflame with fire. There had to be more than a dozen of them, and only three to defend the Oasis.

Sokka did his best to stay in front of Yue, his whalebone club in one hand and boomerang flying. Katara's water whip snapped out, striking hands and faces. Pushed to the far wall, Sokka and Katara stood back to back, and Sokka had one moment to think that his baby sister had come a long way in a couple short months.

But the numbers were overwhelming and within moments, they were surrounded. Sokka spared a glance to the exit out the back. Now would be a great time for Aang to show up, or for the Ocean and Moon spirits to do… Whatever they did.

Admiral Zhao stepped in front of the firebenders, an arrogant smile on his face. "Well, well, well. Why am I not surprised to see you two, again?" He turned, raising his hand to signal his men to let loose their flame—

Suddenly, a voice yelled out, roughened by age and command. "Cease-fire!"

All eyes—Fire Nation and Water Tribe — turned to the main tunnel. Prince Iroh strode in with at least twenty more of his own firebenders at his back.

Sokka's heart dropped. "Just what we needed…" Out of the corner of his eye, Sokka saw Katara gather more water between her hands. She wasn't going down without a fight, and neither would he.

"You know who that is?" Yue asked Sokka in an undertone.

Sokka didn't have time to answer, because Zhao stepped toward the Prince. "What is the meaning of this, Prince Iroh? Why are you here?"

Iroh gave Zhao and unreadable look. Unlike the other firebenders, he didn't wear armor. Just a winter tunic and a golden sash of rank. His hands were tucked into his wide sleeves, crossed over his
great belly. "Zhao, where is Princess Azula?"

Sokka raised his hand as if he were in class. "Wait, you mean that crazy girl with the blue fire? Seriously, how many princesses and princes do you guys have?"

"Sokka…" Yue said in warning, but Iroh's gaze shifted to him.

"I believe she intends to kill my nephew and the Avatar," Iroh said. "Where are they?"

The ribbon of water between Katara’s hands wavered dangerously. "Of course she does. She's Fire Nation. Who is she?"

There was something unreadable in Iroh's Amber eyes. On another man, Sokka would've thought it was sadness. "Zuko's younger sister, of course."

Yue gasped, one hand covering her mouth. "Sokka, is he telling the truth?"

Oh, monkey feathers, Sokka thought. He glanced back at her. "It’s… kind of a long story."

Her mouth firmed, and Sokka knew he was in trouble. He knew he would have to come clean that Zuko wasn’t his half-brother by blood at some point, but that was still a long cry from, ‘He’s adopted and the grandson of the Fire Lord’.

"Sir!" Zhao protested. He gestured in frustration to Sokka, Katara, and Yue. "What are you doing? We have them surrounded. This is chief Arnook's daughter, sir! If we capture her—"

"I am negotiating a temporary cease-fire, Admiral," Iroh said. "When our forces take the city, we will do it honorably. Not by threatening the life of their Cheif’s daughter." The men at his back drew closer in solidarity and even the firebenders around Zhao were exchanging glances. "And," Iroh continued, "I wish to save the life of my nephew."

Yue drew herself up. Regal and commanding. "And the Avatar?"

Iroh stepped up to her, unafraid and just as regal. Royalty speaking to royalty. "The Avatar is the enemy of the Fire Nation. However, while the cease-fire is in effect, I will not attempt to capture him."

"No, you want to take Zuko!" Katara snapped.

He looked at her as if she were being a child. "Azula is a firebending prodigy. She is lethal."

Yeah, Sokka had seen that. She’d kicked his butt without even trying.

Yue had a stubborn look on her face. "Your relation or not, Zuko is Water Tribe and we will not hand him over to the Fire Nation. What are your terms of the cease-fire?"

"As long as Prince Zuko is safe, my men and I will not attack your people. Once I have Princess Azula in hand, I will order my firebenders to withdraw for the night, and resume the siege at dawn."

"How about you just take your men and go away completely?" Katara said.

Prince Iroh smiled very slightly. "That, I can never agree to. Not even for Zuko."

Sokka turned to her. "Yue—"

But she held up a hand, silencing him. "And what guarantee do I have that you will keep your word?"
You have brought your men to a sacred temple to fight."

In reply, Iroh held out his hands together, wrists up. "You may take me as your hostage."

OoOoO

The blizzard was letting up, which was the last thing Zuko needed. The spirit forest was nowhere in sight—he might have gotten turned around somewhere—and he was running out of time.

Aang’s weight on his back dragged down on him. Zuko had picked up a lot of ways to move quickly in a snowy landscape over the years, but Aang was getting heavy and Azula was no doubt on his heels.

There was a rise not too far away where snow had piled up to form a deeper bank. Kneeling, Zuko thrust flaming fists into it and poured in heat to melt a hollow big enough to hide a boy. Then he shed his parka, ignoring the cold—he’d be able to move and bend better without a heavy coat—bundled Aang in it, and shoved him inside.

“Whatever you're up to in the spirit world, I hope you're almost done,” he said. “I don’t know how long I can hold her off.”

Then he turned away and backtracked a whale-wolf’s length, and cut a more obvious trail for the Fire Nation girl to follow.

But it wasn’t in his nature to run from danger. Once he'd gotten a good distance away from Aang’s hidden spot, Zuko turned and waited.

Azula, just as he thought, wasn't too far behind.

And she was mad. Falling snowflakes sizzled off her uniform as she strode to him. Her hair had fallen out of its perfect twist somewhere in the gorge, and two of her pointed nails were broken from scrambling up the edge.

“What’s the matter? Don’t like the ice around here?” Zuko called. “You should try the polar winter.”

Her eyes gleamed. "You know, I enjoyed being an only child. Goodbye, Zuzu."

Then her fingers traced an circling arc into the air.

What is she doing? Zuko thought, confused. He'd never seen a bending move like that before.

Dazzling white sparks flew off her fingers as she completed the arc and brought her hands together.

Lightning!

There wasn’t time to dodge or think. All Zuko could do was catch.

Sizzling fire burned through his right hand, sizing muscles up his arm. So much power—too much.
The world flashed white hot, like he were trying to hold a piece of the sun.

Then, as clearly as if she were standing next to him, Zuko heard a memory of Katara’s voice. High and young, as he’d struggled to stay alive during his first polar winter.

“A Fire Nation boy would die ’cause there's no sun, but you're not Fire Nation anymore. Everyone says you're water Tribe now. And Water Tribe boys don't die ’cause of the sun. They just adapt.”

Adapt. Like how Katara redirected water. Don’t face the danger head on. Let it flow around him.

No time to think. He pulled that terrible energy down, redirected it into his center in the large area of chi in his stomach, away from vital organs. In. Around. And out.

Messy and burning—he hadn’t had time to redirect all that terrible force on the fly—the lightning crackled down his opposite arm and out his hand, which was twisted into ice-spider claws by muscle convolutions…

Straight back at the Fire Nation princess. It caught her dead on and blasted her backwards.

Zuko collapsed to the snow, twitching.

Iroh had spent years of his life traveling the globe, and had been part of many strange situations. But sitting aboard the Avatar’s air bison, a willing hostage with his hands bound in woven rope, was one of the oddest.

Momo had attached himself to Iroh’s shoulder the moment the bison took to the air. Iroh didn’t question how his little friend had found him, but he was grateful for the little spot of warmth pressed to his neck. The blizzard, which had been fierce enough to endanger the ships out to sea, was blowing over, gone as quickly as it arrived.

The Water Tribe Boy—Sokka was it?—eyed Momo with the look of a hunter.

Iroh gazed steadily back at the boy. He would do his part to keep the ceasefire intact, but if Sokka thought Momo was going to be a meal, Iroh would show him how quickly hemp rope burned.

The air bison underneath them made a low groaning sound. On the other side of the wide saddle, the Water Tribe girl looked down at field of snow with a worried expression.

"The storm is clearing over, but I can't see anything. Do you think they made it to the forest?"

"No tracks," Sokka agreed.

"If Azula is on their trail, look for flashes of fire,” Iroh said. “Or lightning."

OoOoO
Katara turned to him. “Lightning? Firebenders can do that?”

Iroh disliked sharing Fire Nation secrets, but it was important these children knew exactly what they were up against. "Some of our greatest Masters can, yes." He met her gaze square on. "And make no mistake: Azula is a master."

Princess Yue spoke. "You mean to tell me you train your women to fight? To become masters?"

Iroh couldn't help it. He chuckled. "My young lady, have you ever tried to stop a Fire Nation woman from doing exactly what she wants? They are fierce warriors, and proud to serve. Did you not notice some of the soldiers you were fighting were women?"

From the surprised glances shared around the saddle, they did not. Then again, Fire Nation armor was bulky and the helmets concealed faces.

Suddenly, there was a flash of light out in the distance. It was too high in the sky to be fire, or even lightning. For a moment, Iroh thought it might be a spirit. He was not far off.

"That's Aang!" Katara called.

Only then did Iroh realize the wisp of light was the Avatar’s spirit traveling quickly from the Oasis to the ice fields. His own astral projection, drawn to his body like a magnet.

With the reigns in hand, Sokka turned the air bison in that direction. The animal put on speed, perhaps wanting to reunite with his companion.

They landed just as the young airbender burst out from what looked like a shallow snow cave. "Hey guys!" Then he looked uncertainly around and spotted Iroh. "Uh, what's going on? Why are we out here? Where’s Zuko?"

Sokka had jumped down and grabbed up a blue parka that had been acting as insulation for the snow cave. "Leading a girl who shoots blue fire away from you." He pointed to a line of shallow tracks, already have covered in snow. "It looks like he went this way—"

Suddenly, the sound that Iroh had feared rolled through the air: Building thunder, and with it the crackle-snap of splitting yin and yang.

On his shoulder, Momo gave a trilling cry.

"We must hurry," Iroh said. But deep in his bones, he feared he was already too late.

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Zuko heard his name being called. Blearily, he opened his eyes to see Katara leaning over him,
running a glowing globe of water up his right arm. Everywhere the water touched brought cool relief.

“Katara?” He focused past her to the white wall of fur that was Appa. Somewhere in the background, he heard Aang’s laughing voice, too. He must be back from the spirit world.

“Oh thank goodness,” she gasped. The globe of water moved from his shoulder down to his stomach, following the path he’d used to channel the lightning. “What did you do? The flow of your chi is all tangled up, but at least you’re not burned like…”

He didn’t need her to finish.

“Azula?” he asked, and would have sat up if Katara didn’t push him back down. She was still focusing on healing his stomach. “I threw her lightning… threw it back at her,” he gasped, half realizing it himself. “Where is she? Is she—”

“She will live, if barely,” said a third, terribly familiar voice. “And will perhaps be wiser, with new humility.”

Zuko jerked around, ignoring Katara’s complaint. Prince Iroh sat on the snow a few feet away, looking bemused. That stupid lemur of his regarded Zuko with his head cocked to the side.

“What are you doing here?” Zuko demanded.

“Stay. Put.” With strength he didn’t know she had, Katara pushed him back down to finish running her healing down his left arm.

“I came to stop an assassination,” Iroh said. “I suspected Azula had learned the art of cold fire, and thought she would use it. But I did not imagine you would turn it back.” He paused, considering. “I was not even aware that was possible. Well done.”

Zuko looked away, uncomfortable with the frank assessment in Iroh’s gaze. Sokka and Aang were loading a tied bundle into Appa’s saddle, with Princess Yue overseeing. Even from this distance, Zuko recognized Azula’s armor and the still smoking hole burned into it.

“I didn’t… I wasn’t trying to hit her, but all that energy wanted to find the fastest way to the ground.” And in a flat field of snow, she’d been the tallest thing standing.

Katara quickly finished her healing. “There, all done. It feels like you channeled it all through your belly. The lining in your stomach’s probably going to be irritated. You shouldn’t eat for a day or so, if you can help it. How do you feel?”

Zuko stood to answer her question. His middle still burned unpleasantly, and his fingers felt twitchy like there was lingering energy dancing under his skin, but he could move. And he wanted answers.

He turned to Iroh. “What are you doing here?” he asked again.

Iroh held up his hands, which were bound at the wrists with a length of Sokka’s best rope. “I have negotiated a temporary cease-fire with that young woman over there.”

“You what—SOKKA!” Zuko yelled, then pointed at Iroh when his brother looked. “You know he can burn right through that rope anytime he wants, right?”

“Well, it’s not like I had chains laying around!” Sokka called back, and grunted as he heaved Azula’s unconscious body up the saddle. There weren’t any visible burns on the girl that Zuko could
see, but lightning didn’t usually sear on the outside.

“Zuko.” Katara gave him a look like he were the one being rude. “Iroh gave us his his word—he wanted to keep you safe from…” She looked a little sick. “From your sister.”

“She’s not my sister. And I’m fine, so that means he can go back to attacking us again!”

Her mouth parted and she edged away from Iroh, some of the snow around her feet melting into useful water.

Iroh only smiled in a calm way that Zuko didn’t trust for a second. “I will behave,” Iroh said. “But, even if you deny it, Azula is your sister.”

“She tried to kill me,” Zuko snapped.

“She is your sister,” Iroh repeated. “That does not make her a nice person.”

Katara looked pained on Zuko’s behalf. “Then why—” she started.

Suddenly, the moon shining over the now-clear night sky turned blood-red.

Aang visibly cringed, holding the side of his head.

Yue wavered in place, and it was only Sokka’s quick grab that kept her from falling.

“The Moon Spirit is in trouble,” Aang gasped. With a leap, he alighted to Appa’s head and grabbed his reigns. “We have to get to her!”

Zuko looked up at the sky, wondering how in the world they were supposed to go to the moon, but Aang clearly had an idea. He and Katara jumped to the bison’s saddle. Then he turned, remembering Iroh. Scowling down at the man, he said, “I don’t trust you. You’re not coming with us.”

The Prince gave him a hard look. “The Fire Nation needs the moon, too. We all depend on the balance and the tides, Nephew.”

“Zuko, we have to hurry!” Aang pleaded. “She’s in trouble.”

This felt like a mistake, but helping the Moon Spirit was bigger than war between nations. He’d have to keep a close eye on Iroh.

“Fine,” Zuko growled, and reached down to help Iroh up the saddle.

Aang grabbed the reins. “Appa! Yip-yip!”

______________________________

OoOoO
As Appa raced over the tundra back to the Oasis, Aang told them what had happened in the Spirit World.

Had the story come from anyone else, Zuko would've thought it was too impossible, too amazing to be true. But then again, that's what life was like with the Avatar.

If he had any doubts that Aang might be exaggerating, the grim look on Prince Iroh's face said otherwise.

"That was quite the risk you took," Iroh said. He sat next to Princess Azula, shielding her unconscious body from the brunt of the wind. With the moon blood-red in the sky, Katara couldn’t heal her. Up close, the smoky hole in her armor over her right ribs looked really nasty. Zuko felt a little bad about that. A little. "The legends say that Koh the face stealer has brought down several of your past lives."

Aang looked uncharacteristically grim. "He… might have said something about that. Yeah."

Zuko resisted the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose. How close had Aang come to returning back without a face? “And the Moon and Ocean Spirits are actually those koi fish in the Oasis pond?"

“Those tasty looking Koi fish? Sokka added.

Katara whapped him on the shoulder. "Sokka! Those are the great spirits. Have some respect."

Iroh looked thoughtful. “It is odd they would choose such vulnerable forms."

…Which was exactly what Zuko had been about to say. He glared over at the old man, not liking that they were thinking along the same lines.

Princess Yue groaned under her breath and hunched forward. She looked like she was in pain as she glanced up at the moon. "Please hurry… She’s in terrible danger."

Sokka put his arm around her again.

No one noticed Azula stir slightly in the back.

OoOoO

They burst into the Spirit Oasis, Aang leading the way, just as Admiral Zhao held up a bag with a flopping fish-like shape and it. He was making some sort of grand speech—Zuko wasn't paying attention to it. His gaze took in the rest of the room.

Half the Fire Nation men knelt on their knees in surrender—some were knocked out cold—while other Fire Nation soldiers stood behind them with their fists cocked and ready. It looked like there had been a mutiny within their own ranks. Judging by the insignia on their uniforms, Zhao’s men had overpowered Iroh’s.
But Arnook’s warriors must have rallied, too. The ranks of Fire Nation soldiers still standing took a
defensive position with their backs against the Oasis pool, protecting Zhao and the fish he held. The
Water Tribe warriors stood just out of immediate fire blast range, about eight feet or so, spear points
down and ready. Zuko saw Arnook and Hahn among them.

"Zhao!" Prince Iroh barked, striding up to the man. The ropes around his wrist were gone—burned
away the moment they ceased to be convenient. "Put that fish down at once. We are in a cease-fire."

In the Fire Nation, General ranked the same as Admiral, but Iroh was a Prince. He should have been
obeyed immediately.

Instead, Zhao turned arrogant eyes toward him. "Do you not see what is happening, Iroh? I have
their precious Moon Spirit at my mercy! Without it, their waterbenders will be powerless." He held
the flopping bag up, one fist cocked and ready to strike fire.

"Whatever you do to that fish I'll unleash on you ten-fold. Let her go, now!" Iroh yelled. And until
that moment, Zuko realized he had never seen the man truly angry. He was a little scary.

Aang stepped forward. One hand held his air glider, the other open with palm turned up, pleading.
"The Fire Nation needs the moon just as much has a Water Tribe."

"He’s right!" Chief Arnook called. "Let her go, and fight us like a man. This is a human matter!"

Snarling, Zhao turned to the Water Tribe men. "You will bow to me before this is over. Don’t you
see? I am a legend, now!" The light from the blood-red moon played across his face, deepening
shadows and making him look demented. "The Fire Nation will tell stories about the great Zhao who
darkened the moon. They will call me, Zhao the Conqueror, Zhao the Moon Slayer, Zhao the
Invincible!"

Zuko exchanged a look with Katara. She motioned with a flick of her fingers at the Water Tribe
men, and then secondly at the firebenders who stood by the pool.

He and Katara had been practicing bending together pretty much since Zuko had been adopted into
the tribe. He knew exactly what she was planning.

Nodding very slightly, he side-stepped carefully around the still-ranting Zhao to move closer to the
Water Tribe men. Meanwhile, Katara stood by the firebenders, and the really helpful source of water
that they stood next to.

This room was about to erupt in violence, and they would be ready.

Sure enough, Zhao paused to snarl at Arnook. "Your waterbenders are useless! Your civilization is
over! Fire is a truest and strongest element! You will bow! You will see—"

Then Zhao’s eyes fell on Zuko. The sudden flash of hatred on his face was just as intense as it had
been after Zhao lost their Agni Kai. "You!"

"Me," Zuko confirmed, sliding in front of the Water Tribe warriors. Now, with Iroh on one side,
Katara and Sokka on the other, and Zuko opposite, Zhao was surrounded on all sides.

The moment stretched, singular and crystalline with tension.

When it broke, it came from a source no one expected.

A wave of water erupted from the spirit pool, triggered by Yue’s upraised hands. She stood, tall,
beautiful and proud, the light from the moon—the only spot of blue visible—shining in her eyes. She wasn’t a waterbender. She was something more.

The wave engulfed Zhao and crashed down on him with the force that sent the Admiral to his knees.

The bag slipped from Zhao’s grip and the wriggling fish was washed back into the water. Suddenly, moonlight returned back to the world, and Katara’s own water flowed into her hands under her command again.

Standing to his feet, Zhao gave a roar and wild, uncontrolled fire erupted from him.

With a sweep of his arms, Zuko diverted Zhao’s flames to the side where it hissed harmlessly to the grass.

He only realized his mistake a moment after.

"He’s a firebender, too! He’s one of them!" Hahn yelled, jumping back.

"Father, no!" Yue screamed.

Zuko was already turning, with that hair-raising feeling of knowing he was too late. Standing behind him, rage and betrayal twisting his face, Chief Arnook had raised his club and was bringing it down, edge-point first. Zuko saw come at him as if in slow motion. *He must think I’m a spy, that I let Zhao’s men in.*

A compacted bolt of fire, perfectly aimed, sizzled over Zuko's right shoulder and hit Arnook with the full force of a master firebender. It went straight through Arnook's heart.

The swing went wide, missing Zuko by a hair's breath.

Arnook fell.

“No, stop! Cease-fire!” Aang yelled, anguished. “Stop fighting!”

But the firebenders—both factions, were blasting at each other, with Iroh’s men gaining the advantage led by their Prince. With one contemptuous leg sweep, Iroh knocked Admiral Zhao flat on his back.

Zuko stared down at the Chief, who lay unmoving. He was dead… Iroh had killed him…

The Water Tribe warriors roared a challenge and surged forward towards the invaders. Sokka stood in front of Yue, who looked gray from fatigue and shock, protecting her. Katara’s whip flashed out, saving a Water Tribe warrior from a firebender’s blast.

Unfreezing from his shock, Zuko took a step to help her. But Hahn, roaring with rage, tackled Zuko from behind. They fell to the grass. Hahn was heavier, but his punches were sloppy from rage.

“You killed him! You killed him!” Hahn screamed, pummeling into Zuko.

No, *Iroh* had killed him. “Idiot! I’m on your side!” Rolling to his back, Zuko threw sparks in Hahn’s face.

Hahn lurched away slapping at his clothes, even though Zuko hadn’t made them hot enough to do more than sting.

Iroh was yelling orders, and the advancing Water Tribe’s charge was stopped as they were met with
Standing, Zuko braced himself to fight with the Tribe.

Katara’s shrill yell pierced the air. "LOOK OUT!"

Zuko whirled in time to see a staggering figure at the back of the Oasis. Azula. They’d left her safe and sound with Appa, but she must have woken up and burned the ropes to get free…

Listing to one side, her hair down, and her head cocked at a strange angle, she didn’t look all the way sane. But Zuko couldn’t focus on that. She was circling her arms in a familiar way.

Oh spirits, not again...

Zuko braced himself. Lightning flashed from the girl…

…and struck Aang, hard enough to throw the boy back, smoking, into the Spirit Oasis.

Azula collapsed, at the end of her strength.

Katara screamed and rushed into the spirit pool.

“Aang!” Zuko wanted to help her, but the Oasis was full of screaming, fighting men. Zuko ducked a boomerang aimed for his own head, and rerouted a blast of fire that had been aimed at the warriors. "I'm on your side!" he yelled again at the Water Tribe warriors, but it didn't seem to matter.

A beefy man in blue rushed him, club raised. Hastily, Zuko backed and found himself crashing into a trio of firebenders who were fighting more of Arnook’s men. Diverting one of their fire blasts into his own, he arced it at the beefy warrior’s club, breaking it in two.

“Traitor!” the beefy man screamed, and would have come at Zuko with his bare hands, but one of Iroh’s firebenders stepped in his way.

He caught out of the corner of his eye as Katara raised Aang out of the pond with a fluid tornado of water. She’d mastered the move at last. Aang was terribly limp, his eyes closed.

Sokka was on the opposite bank, pushing Yue along to safety. His brother’s eyes searched for Zuko, but he was looking in the wrong direction.

“Here! I’m over here!” Zuko yelled, but more firebenders converged on Sokka. Sokka fought them with whalebone club and boomerang, retreating, and giving time for Katara, Yue, and Aang to escape out the back entrance. They were running for their lives.

Zuko struggled to push through knots of fighting warriors to get to them. He was on the other side of the pond, but in all the chaos it might as well have been a mile.

Suddenly from behind, heavy fabric fell over Zuko's head. A bag? He yelled in surprise, twisted with fire sparking in his palms, but his arms were caught and locked behind. The hands holding him fast were firebender hot.

"No!” Zuko yelled, panicked as he realized what this meant. “Katara! Sokka!” His voice sounded muffled to his own ears, and was nothing compared to the roar of screaming, dying warriors and firebenders all around him.

He was pushed down and felt manacles close over his wrists.
Iroh yelled out an order, and then there was a fresh wave roar as new firebender voices joined the chaos. Back-up had arrived, and the Water Tribe warriors were scattered, leaderless without Arnook.

The firebender holding him pulled Zuko roughly to his feet and pushed him to walk. Blind, bound, he had no choice.

He was captured.

By the time dawn broke the night, the Northern Water Tribe had surrendered. Iroh oversaw the transfer himself—and collected the Northern Water Tribe Chief’s ceremonial spear, supposedly passed down through ten generations of men. It would be sent on to the Fire Nation as a war prize.

After the fighting ceased, the survivors counted and the injured attended to, the real dirty work began: Administration.

Later that same evening, a knock came at Iroh’s cabin door. Taking a deep breath to center his chi, Iroh glanced again at the two rolled and sealed scrolls on his desk—one scroll advising Fire Lord Azulon of treason within the royal family, the other scroll offering a second chance at redemption.

“Come in,” Iroh said.

Fire Sage Lin Yun entered his quarters and bowed deeply. "The Princess is resting comfortably, sir. These barbarian water healers do have… some skill."

Iroh had not liked to put his niece's life in the hands of those who he had just conquered, but he had seen kindness in the healer Yogoda's eyes. And there hadn't been much of a choice. “Will she make a full recovery?"

"In time. Had the lightning blast been more focused, it would have damaged her heart."

Iroh suspected that Zuko had not managed to redirect the entire bolt of energy, having taken some of the impact himself, and had probably not been aiming to kill. “Azula is fortunate."

"Indeed," Lin Yun agreed with a reverent bow. "The Princess had been born under a most propitious rising sun, at the very height of summer. She has always been favored by Agni."

"I've been told," Iroh said mildly. By Ozai, dozens of times. "Tell me, I thought the minimum age to learn cold-fire was sixteen. When one separates Yin and Yang, do they also not separate those energies within themselves?"

"Yes, however the imbalance is restored once the energy is released." Lin Yun did not have a
pleasant smile. The gums had receded from his teeth, giving him a skeletal appearance. "The Princess is a prodigy. There are but a small handful in century who can produce blue flame. Prince Ozai thought she was ready for lightning two years ago. He was right: She mastered it quickly."

A twelve-year-old separating her own energies, Iroh thought, disheartened. He’d known several masters of cold-fire, and it seemed those who used it often were... odd. Eccentric, at best. Detached from all compassion at worst.

The Fire Sages swore the technique was safe, but... well, that was the reason Iroh had never used lightning except in very rare circumstances. To separate the energies in your mind... it was unnatural.

But now was not the time to discuss firebending philosophy. Iroh’s hand rested between the two scrolls—one of life and one of death. "And what did you find of your interrogation of Zhao?"

Lin Yun was a perceptive man. He noticed Iroh’s darkening mood and got straight to the point. "Zhao insists the Princess knew nothing of his plans to kill the Moon Spirit. He was... quite adamant that killing it was his honor, alone."

Honor. Killing the Moon would have doomed the Fire Nation within months. Entire islands depended on the fruits of the tides as surely as the Water Tribe. How had Zhao not seen that? A Navy man, himself? The Ocean and Moon were two halves of the same coin.

But if Azula had truly not known what Zhao was up to, then she was not guilty of treason against the Fire Nation.

With immense relief, Iroh took up the scroll that would have advised Fire Lord Azulon of his granddaughter’s treachery, and her subsequent execution at Iroh’s hand. It burst into flame in his fingers, and scattered to ashes. Never to be read.

Azula was many things: Ambitious, callous, and possibly sadistic, but she was his niece and only fourteen-years-old. If Iroh could save her, he would.

Iroh spoke in the formal tone of court. “Record these as my official words as Azulon’s heir and second in line to the crown.” The Fire Sage quickly brought out pen and quill. Once he was ready, Iroh continued, “Zhao was under Azula's direct command when he committed his treason. Under most circumstances, Azula would share the blame for his actions. However, I have chosen to be lenient due to her young age the the... stress of her first command.” Iroh paused. “However, Azula also willfully subverted my direct orders and attempted to assassinate her brother, a higher ranked member of the Royal Family. This is also treason.” Iroh paused a second time to give the words weight. "Again, I have chosen to be lenient. Therefore, the matter between Princess Azula and Prince Zuko will be in the records as an Agni Kai."

"Ah," Lin Yun said, with a bow of his head. It was a piece of polite fiction, but claiming her actions as an honor duel would keep Azula's head safely on her shoulders. "Then, I suppose... the record will show she lost the, erm, Agni Kai?"

"She came off the worst. She won't be happy about it," Iroh agreed. “I do it to spare her life.”

Lin Yun inhaled sharply through his nose as he followed that line of thought. "But if she lost the Agni Kai during the battle, her victory over the Northern Water Tribe—"

"—Officially goes to Prince Zuko.” And Iroh would well imagine Zuko would not be happy about that. Well, what was done was done.
"And may I ask... what are your plans for the Prince?" Lin Yun asked carefully, after he’d stowed the quill and paper away.

"He must be brought to the Royal Court, and officially welcomed by Azulon." Iroh said. And there were important questions to be answered about what really happened that night over six years ago. "But not immediately. Zuko has... suffered from his stay with the Water Tribe. I intend bring him home only after he has recovered." After the next eclipse, if Iroh had any say in it.

"I could imagine. The ice and those horrid dark polar winters..." Lin Yun visibly repressed a shudder.

*Only one of several tortures Zuko endured,* Iroh thought and felt his anger flare up as flame in the fireplace nearby. He controlled it by telling himself that his nephew was safe, and while he may not be happy right now (no growing firebender would be pleased by enforced fasting to return his chi to balance after channeling lightning through the stomach) Zuko was, again, among his people.

Yes, Zuko was confused in his loyalties, but he had lived through his ordeal against all odds. And now, he had several honorable duels recorded in his name, as well as a major victory for the Fire Nation. He would appreciate them, in time.

"And regarding the Avatar?" Lin Yun asked.

In reply, Iroh handed the Fire Sage the scroll he had not burned. "My orders for the Princess. Written and copied so she cannot misinterpret them. She will stay in the North Pole under the care of the healers, and will cement our hold. After she is well, she may have whatever supplies she needs to aid her on her journey."

Iroh’s quest to capture the Avatar had now become hers.

Still smarting over this setback, Azula would be more determined than ever to prove herself to the Fire Lord. Honestly, Iroh almost felt sorry for the young Avatar.

Looking pleased, the Fire Sage bowed again, scroll in hand to deliver to Azula, and left.

Iroh sat back, wishing he had the foresight to brew some calming tea. He had done what he could for Azula, reducing her borderline treason into minor errors that could be overlooked, in time. Fire Lord Azulon's orders had been for the girl to take the Northern Water Tribe, and she had come close enough to failure that her life might be in danger. But if she could stay away from the Capital for a time, let tempers cool, then return with the captured Avatar... she would be welcomed back home with honor.

He had done what he could for his niece. Now he had to focus on his nephew.
The next few hours, waiting for lunch-time, made Zuko feel almost mad with thirst. *They have to be pumping dry air into my cell*, he thought. There was not so much as a drip of condensation on the walls. Hunger was a secondary concern. Every cell in him screamed for something to drink.

When Iroh opened the door a few hours later, he again had the tea-pot and the folded Fire Nation clothing.

Mulishly, Zuko took the clothing.

The Fire Nation clothes were a soft, slippery fabric. Silk. Russet red deep-cut shirt, with dark pants and a tunic belted by a golden sash. Even the boots had pointed toes. He hated the outfit, but it did smell better than his blue clothing he'd been wearing for days running, and had fought and sweated in.

For the first time since he was captured, Zuko hoped Katara, Sokka and Aang weren't about to rescue him soon. He didn't want them to see him like this. Garbed like a Fire Nation man.

Iroh had turned to give him a little privacy. Once Zuko was changed, he looked him up and down and nodded in approval. "Take your hair out of that warrior queue."

Zuko stared. "That wasn't part of the bargain," he rasped.

Iroh hesitated. "You may keep the beads."

He had already gone this far. Reaching up with a snarl, Zuko tugged the tie out of his warrior's wolf-tail. His dark hair fell, shaggy and loose almost down to his shoulders. Now, the only thing Water Tribe about him were the two blue beads plated into a piece of hair on the unburned side of his face.

Finally, *finally* Iroh nodded and took a seat the floor to pour the tea in a ridiculously tiny teacup.

"Please, sit, Prince Zuko."

Zuko practically fell into a sitting position and snatched the cup from Iroh's hands. The drink wasn't exactly tea— but it was lukewarm which felt great going down his parched throat, and flavored with a hint of something fruity. That was all he registered as he gulped it down. Within moments, the cup was drained.

"More?" Iroh asked, gently.

Zuko eyed him, wondering what other humiliation he'd have to endure. But the tiny cup had only wet his throat. Nodding, he handed it back and was surprised when Iroh filled it again and returned it.

This time, he made himself sip slower. No need to make himself sick.

Iroh stopped him after the forth cup.

"That is enough, for now. Your stomach has no doubt recovered from the irritation it received channeling lightning."

He waited, and Zuko realized this was a question. So, he nodded again. If by 'recovered' Iroh meant he was still kinda thirsty and now ragingly hungry, then yes. He was recovered.
"Then tonight, you will dine with me in my quarters upstairs," Iroh said, packing away the teapot and the cups.

"I don’t know what game you’re playing, but I’m not staying for dinner," Zuko snapped. “My family and Aang are going to break me out of here.”

Iroh didn’t even blink. "By all reports, the Avatar and his companions are more than a hundred miles South from our current position, and fleeing."

His words struck like a drum.

They left me behind?

No. They’d only do that if they’d had no other choice. Zuko knew this deep in his heart, but it did... hurt. It was one thing to flee and regroup, another to give him up to the Fire Nation completely.

They must think I’m dead, he realized. If rumors were to be believed, it wouldn’t even be the first time. It was like a running joke by now.

Iroh continued, "Your sister, Princess Azula—"

"She's not—" Zuko started.

Iroh raised his voice, "—is recovering. Until she is fit to return to service, she will remain at the Northern Water Tribe, under care of their healers. I thought you should know."

Conflicted, Zuko said nothing. The Fire Nation girl was terrifying, literally a nightmare come to life, but... he hadn’t wanted her to die. “She’s staying here? Then... What happened to the Northern Water Tribe?”

“Surrendered, and now officially placed under the Fire Lord’s rule.”

Zuko closed his eyes, grieved. He’d suspected they’d lost, but hearing it was a different matter. Now, the only thing standing between the Fire Nation and world domination was the Earth Kingdom and the Southern Water Tribe.

And Aang. He had to believe in the Avatar.

He opened his eyes and regarded Iroh with open distaste. “You killed Arnook. We had a cease-fire and you betrayed your word.”

“I gave my honored promise that I would protect you,” Iroh said. “And I did.”

It was the truth, and it was bitter. In a room full of enemy soldiers, Chief Arnook had turned and tried to kill him on the strength of nothing more than being a firebender. He must have thought I was a Fire Nation spy.

“Arnook didn’t know I was a firebender,” Zuko said. But defending a man who had turned on him tasted like ash in his mouth. Arnook had meant to kill, the edge-point of his whalebone club aimed at Zuko’s throat.

“He would have ended your life, Zuko. Someone who he had seen as an ally moments before.” Iroh rose easily to his feet for a man so heavy. “Let that be your final lesson you learn of the Water Tribe.”

Then, before Zuko could reply, Iroh punched a blast of flame. Zuko’s Water Tribe clothes, which
he’d piled in the corner, were set ablaze.

“Hey!” Zuko scrambled back in surprise. With a quelling push of his hands, he brought the fire down, but the damage was done. His Water Tribe tunic, pants, and seal-skin moccasins were ruined. He was stuck in Fire Nation silks.

"Until this evening, Nephew," Iroh said calmly. He turned and shut the door, locking Zuko back into darkness.

OoOoO

Sokka's hands ached from gripping Appa's reins, but he didn't unclench them. The pain gave him something to focus on.

He was exhausted, sick to his soul. He, Katara, Yue, and Aang had escaped out of the Northern Water Tribe by the skin of their teeth — the tip of Appa's flat tail was a little singed from a too-close flaming bolder as they’d charged through the armada.

And as they fled, Sokka had seen red Fire Nation banners being unfurled to drape across the ice fortresses.

Zuko was still back there. Probably a Fire Nation prisoner by now, if the Northern Water Tribe hadn’t gotten to him first. And Sokka had been the one to make the call to leave him behind.

After she’d seen to Aang, Katara had yelled at Sokka, that they needed to go back. When Sokka refused she’d screamed ugly, true things: Sokka had chosen his girlfriend over his little brother.

She was right. He hated it—hated himself for it, but kept Appa’s head pointed south.

*You'll have to choose between the safety of your family and what is right*, Lu Ten had once told him in the spirit world.

Sokka didn’t know if this was the moment he’d been talking about, or not. All he knew was that Arnook was dead, Aang was down, and he couldn’t let the Fire Nation take Yue, too.

Appa made a low groan. Sokka didn't know if it was because he was tired from flying all night, or the bison was picking up on his mood. Maybe he was worried about Aang.

It had been touch and go for awhile there. Sokka was pretty sure that Aang hadn't even been *breathing* until Katara pressed glowing water over the gaping lightning burn on the center of his back. She’d pulled him through—thank the Ocean and Moon for those healing lessons she’d hated so much, and that after Aang was struck he’d landed in special fishy Spirit Water. Now, Aang lay bundled up in all the blankets in Appa's saddle protected against the wind. But he hadn't stirred, hadn't opened his eyes.

Katara had held him and wept. Sokka had hardly ever seen her like this. Not since Mom had died.
And now… Katara wasn’t speaking to him. Sokka had taken himself to Appa’s head. That had been almost a half-day ago.

Appa groaned again.

"It's okay, big guy." Uncurling his aching fingers at last, Sokka patted the top of his head. "Katara's with Aang right now, and as soon as we reach land we'll get you something tasty to eat. You like seaweed, right? The big bull kelp?"

Appa made a low rumbling noise, sounding pleased.

"Yeah," Sokka agreed and stared out to sea. According to what Sokka remembered of the maps, they could make it to the northern tip of the Earth Kingdom in one straight shot if the wind was with them. Journeying north, they'd taken a few days to do it, but now...

**Now, we're running for our lives.**

He felt Appa's weight shift slightly as Yue joined him at Appa's head. She sat next to him, one hand steadying herself on a horn.

And Sokka was the worst kind of coward in both the North and South because he couldn't directly look at her. She had to be so angry... she had to hate him even more than his sister did right now.

"How are you?" Yue asked quietly.

Sokka inhaled a quick, surprised breath, undone by just the sound of her voice. "I'm good. Great. I'm..." Aang was more injured than he'd ever seen anyone be and live to tell the tale. The Northern Water Tribe had fallen, if his little brother was **lucky** he was in the hands of people who had maimed him, and... "I'm good," Sokka finished, voice breaking.

Yue rested a hand on his arm. Sokka took a shaky breath, eyes burning, and gazed out to the blue, blue sea.

It took a few minutes to wrestle himself back from the edge. He was a warrior, and he wasn't going to blubber all over poor Appa's head.

"I'm sorry about your father," he got out, at last.

This was the part where she was going to yell at him, too, and Sokka was going to face it like a man. He turned his gaze to see Yue looked down and bite her lip. Her eyes were red from grief—she'd been crying, and he didn't blame her. Katara had, too. And Sokka... well, after Aang started breathing again, it had been a little bit of a snot-fest in Appa's saddle. That's all he was saying.

"He died as a warrior… A daughter can’t ask for more," Yue said stiffly and so formal it had to be recited from Northern Water Tribe traditions. Then Yue let out a shaky breath. "I'm just...I'm so scared for my people, Sokka. They depended on my father to keep them safe. What are we doing to do, now?"

Pushing her own grief aside to care for her people. That was Yue all over. "In my tribe, my father's second in command, Bato would take over. He'd lead the men, and my Gran-Gran would advise the women." Sokka rubbed at the side of his nose with a mitten. They'd traveled a long way south overnight, and his hands were almost uncomfortably warm. Soon, he wouldn't even need his parka.

"Beyond that... Katara says water adapts. My tribe's been attacked a whole bunch of times through the war, and we're still there." Like clinging onto a melting iceberg, but hey. They had survived.
She was quiet. "I'm also sorry about your brother."

He closed his eyes as a new wave of grief welled up in his throat. "He's smart and he's tough..." And he was in the hands of monsters. That girl, Zuko's Fire Nation sister, had probably been the one that had given Zuko screaming night terrors all these years, and Sokka had left him behind with people like her... "He'll make it out." And if he didn't, Sokka was going into the Fire Nation himself to rescue him, once Aang was standing on his own feet. It wasn't like Sokka had any bending to give himself away.

"I mean, I'm sorry that my father—" Yue stopped, inhaled quickly. "If I only told him about Zuko’s situation before—" She paused and sighed. “Well, he still might have reacted badly. My father and I weren’t on great speaking terms, after Hahn… but he might not have not have…” She didn’t finish. Tried to kill Zuko, mentally Sokka finished for her. And that was a whole other ball of worms, because if Iroh hadn't struck the Chief down, Arnook would have killed Zuko. Flat out.

“This is so messed up,” Sokka said, voice rough. “We’re on the side of the Avatar… I thought that meant we’d win a little more than this."

Silently, Yue leaned into him, new tears leaking down her cheeks.

She doesn’t hate me, he thought with growing amazement. Something warm kindled in his chest and cautiously, Sokka wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. She rested her head on his shoulder, and what do you know, Sokka's hands didn't ache anymore from clenching.

They stayed like that for awhile, with the endless blue sea sparkling in front of them, Katara curled next to Aang in the back.

With only the two of them, the saddle looked empty.

Suddenly, something caught Sokka’s eyes. He straightened. "Sails!"

"Is it the Fire Nation?" Yue asked, alarmed.

"No, they use coal-ships, not the wind." Sokka squinted, picking out the tall wooden ships so different from the sleek, low catamarans that the North used. These ships with the thick hulls and tall masts were built to cross vast seas, their blue sails billowing in the sun. He knew those sails. "It's the Southern Water Tribe!" He turned and called to the back. “Katara! Dad’s down there! Those are his ships!”

A touch on the reigns and Appa instantly dived, perhaps sensing he was about to get a rest at last.

Only when Sokka heard the alarm bells being rung from the decks below did he remember, oh yeah, no one had seen an air bison before, and his father expected them to be safe and snug in the South Pole.

I haven’t seen Dad for two years, he thought with a flash of anxiety. But it was too late, now. Appa was angling to land. He told me to keep my family safe, and I failed.

Despite that, Hakoda’s open surprise as Appa touched down in the water beside the ship brought a tired smile to Sokka’s face.

“Sokka?” Standing on forward deck, carrying his whale-toothed spear, his father was just as he remembered. Well, maybe a little shocked as his gaze swept over the bison. “Katara? What…?”
“Dad.” Gripping one of Appa’s horns, Sokka stood and wasn’t prepared for how weak his knees felt, the burn in his muscles. He was tired. It had been a long, bad couple days. It all came out in a rush. “Our friend Aang’s hurt—he’s the Avatar, and this is his bison. Oh, this is Princess Yue, from the Northern Water Tribe,” he added as Yue made a deep bow. “Aang needs a healer.”

“Of course.” There was something in his father’s eyes Sokka was too exhausted to read. Hakoda turned to Bato, “Lower the gang plank—”

But Katara stood up, and with a graceful wave, froze a pathway of ice between Appa and the ship. The men murmured in appreciation—Katara had really improved her waterbending since they’d been gone.

A couple of the men jumped down to help transfer Aang, limp and unconscious, to the deck. Katara gave her father a grateful hug, but quickly peeled away to speak with healer Kuthruk. Meanwhile, Yue looked about the ship with wide eyes, taking in the rough looking warriors who stood around in loose clusters without rank or household insignia.

Sokka half-expected his dad to hug him, too. But Hakoda turned from Katara and gripped Sokka’s arm hard by the elbow in greeting. A warrior’s grip, man-to-man.

With a start, Sokka realized he was tall enough to look his father in the eye.

“You all look like you were run over by a herd of moose-caribou,” Hakoda said. And now Sokka recognized the look on his face: deep concern. Hakoda had done a swift head-count and come up one short. “What’s happened, son? Where’s your brother?”

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A few hours later, a Fire Nation officer with a golden Lieutenant’s rope on his shoulder opened the cell door.

Zuko regarded him grimly, tensed and ready for a fight.

But there were no manacles in the Lieutenant’s hands. He looked completely unarmed—well, as unarmed as a firebender got.

"This way, sir," the Lieutenant said and stood aside.

Cautiously, Zuko stepped out into the hall, wondering where the trap was. How far would he make it if he ran? There were probably guards stationed around every corner.

"This way, my Prince," the Lieutenant said and walked ahead of him, his back to Zuko as if... as if he had nothing to be afraid of.
Zuko followed, unsure, and feeling stupid and exposed in the thin Fire Nation red silks.

He was led up two levels until, blinking, he came up on the metal deck.

The sky above was a brilliant cobalt blue, reflecting the endless ocean around the ship. Not a cloud in the sky. The blizzard had long passed. Zuko turned and felt his mouth part in surprise. The shores of the Northern Water Tribe was no where to be seen. No other ships. Just water in every direction. The air was noticeably warmer, too.

The Lieutenant cleared his throat and gestured to the quarters up on the top. “If you follow me, Prince Iroh is expecting you.”

There was nowhere to run, and Zuko’s growling stomach made his decision for him. He followed.

Iroh’s quarters shared the same hallway as the bridge, but placed aft. If there were an emergency, he could be at the helm within moments. The room was decorated richly, with instruments hung up on the walls, the Fire Nation flag dominated the same side as a game pedestal.

And spread along the low table was a veritable feast, plates piled high among the many lit candles. The white and brown lemur, Iroh’s pet, was already helping itself. Its stomach was bulged with food.

“Thank you, Lieutenant Izhar,” Iroh said, hands folded in his pockets. “That will be all. Zuko, please have a seat.”

He was starving, and there was a full pitcher of water with slices of ripe-cut fruit drifting among ice. Zuko sat before the table, poured a tall glass, and dug in. The rolls weren’t familiar at first glance, but spice, hot and flavorful exploded on his tongue. He couldn’t have stopped himself if he wanted. He was ravenous and reached for a seaweed wrapped roll that looked particularly tempting.

“Prince Zuko,” Iroh had sat on the other side of the table, “we do not eat Water Tribe style here.” Then, Iroh made a movement that Zuko only caught out of the corner of his bad eye.

Zuko couldn’t help it. He flinched back, knowing the trap he’d been expecting had been sprung.

But Iroh was only holding pair of chopsticks out to him.

Embarrassed, Zuko took them. He hated the look of pity in Iroh’s eyes.

“Know this, Nephew. You are a prince of the finest bloodline, descended from the Master Fire Sage, who learned the secrets of fire from the Lion Turtle, himself. No one here will raise a hand to you, except perhaps if you force them to defend themselves. Here, with your true people, you will never be abused.”

Some of Zuko’s seething anger burst forward, now that the edge of his hunger was gone. “I wasn’t abused in the Water Tribe!”

“No? How often did they strike you?”

“They never…” But he couldn’t finish without lying. As a boy, Zuko had been disciplined, sure. Gran-Gran sometimes whapped him over the head or gave him a swat on the butt. The men could be rough, too, especially when he had been aboard the ship, but it was just their way. “It wasn’t like that.”

“Wasn’t it?” Iroh pressed “How did you end up with those scars?”
“I don’t know!” he snapped, frustrated.

His own words seemed to echo between them: He had woken up on a Water Tribe ship like this, injured and without memory.

Scowling, Zuko used the stupid chopsticks. They were three-sided, not the four-sided square cut that the Water Tribe used for very special occasions. The three-sided chopsticks fit so easily in his fingers it didn’t occur to him until a few minutes later to wonder exactly how he knew how to hold them just-so.

He pushed the thought away and focused on filling his belly. He wanted to find fault in every bite, but couldn’t. Every bite was balanced between spicy and sweet, smoky and acidic.

“Where are you taking me?” Zuko asked, after a few minutes.

“Home, of course.”

He bit back on, “the Southern Water Tribe?” because his plate was still half full.

Iroh continued, “Your foolish game is done. You must return to your proper place among your family, and you must be healed.”

Zuko snorted at that, even knowing it was terrible table manners. Come to think of it, his posture as he’d sat at the table was nearly perfect. As if, by using the chopsticks Fire Nation style he had unlocked something that straightened his spine and made him keep his elbows tucked neatly to his sides.

*Prissy*, Sokka would have called it. He’d be right.

Deliberately, Zuko turned the burned side of his face toward Iroh. The thick line which slashed diagonally across his throat was equally visible in the V-cut Fire Nation tunic. Zuko put as much contempt in his voice as possible. “You’re going to try to *heal* me?”

Iroh set the chopsticks across his plate, sadness in his eyes. “I speak of the damage done to your soul, Nephew.”

This was too much. He wasn’t close to being full, but the price to sit at the table and eat the delicious food was too high. Zuko tucked his legs under and stood. “I’m ready to return to my cell.”

Again, he knew in the way that he knew all about the facts and figures of the Fire Nation, that to rise before a ranking officer had dismissed you was to offer offense.

Iroh paid the breech of etiquette no mind. He simply picked up his chopsticks again and took one of the rolls spiced with red sea-fire fish eggs. Those had crackled on the surface of Zuko’s tongue like fireworks. He wished he’d had eaten another.

Iroh chewed, then spoke. “You are a prince of the Fire Nation, third in line to the throne. A cell in the brig does not befit your station.”

“Third in line—?!” His tongue felt locked to the top of his mouth. He stared at Iroh. Didn’t he have any children of his own?

Yes. Lu Ten, but he was… he was *gone*.

It wasn’t a memory, but Zuko felt his stomach clench with a tiny grip of grief.
Iroh took no notice of his stunned silence. “The officers and crew aboard have been informed of your unusual circumstances, that you were brought up in duress in an enemy nation, and how you thrived against all odds. They will show you respect and will not offer you harm. You may ask them any question about the Fire Nation, and they will answer honestly.”

“But… But I’m your prisoner!”

“No, you are my nephew, and their future Fire Lord.”

_Fire Lord?_ He bit back a bark of laughter. All of his life that he could remember, he expected to be Sokka’s second in command, as Bato was to Hakoda. They’d oversee maybe a couple hundred men. Sokka’s future wife would lead the women.

Him? Sitting on the throne? Ruling the Fire Nation?

“That’s absurd,” Zuko snapped. “I can’t be… If you make me Fire Lord, then the moment I can, I’ll stop this war—“

“Nephew, the war will have been won far before you ascend the throne. I have some years in me yet. My father, your grandfather, Azulon, is in his ninth decade and is still powerful and wily enough to rule. My hope is by that time, you will have regained the balance in your mind.” He nodded to the door in a dismissal. “Your room is across the hall. Good night, Prince Zuko.”
Imperial Guard Yuu made sure to keep his steps slow and even, in deference to Prince Ozai who walked beside him. The Prince’s cane made a sharp tap on the hallway’s stone floor at every other step. Under his expansive robes, Ozai’s left knee was bound with tight fabric to keep the leg straight so that it may support his weight.

No one with any sense spoke of the Prince’s disability within the Fire Palace. Yuu never allowed his eyes to even flick to Ozai’s leg. Ozai had killed for less, before.

Together, guard and prince made their slow, stately way down the stone corridor which led to the antechamber, and, eventually the Fire Lord himself.

Ozai broke the silence when they were halfway down the hall, well out of earshot of other guards. "How is Fire Lord Azulon fairing today?"

"He is.. In exceptionally rare form," Yuu said. It was part of the code that had been established between the guards and Prince Ozai. ‘In rare form’ meant that Fire Lord Azulon was having one of his increasingly uncommon lucid days.

There was a pause. "I see," Ozai said at last. He did not seem disquieted, although Yuu knew that the summons to the Fire Lord's chamber had caught Ozai unawares.

As Fire Lord Azulon declined in mental capability, Prince Ozai took over more and more of his duties. Prince Iroh was not around to help—or curb his younger brother’s ambitions. Now, it was an unspoken fact that Ozai all but ran the country.

Yuu had wondered more than once what the fallout would be if Azulon ever realized this. Perhaps this would be the day he found out.

"The Fire Lord did not share the reason for the summons today, my Prince," Yuu said, after an anxious moment.

Ozai did not even turn his head to look at him. Only raised an eyebrow. "Of course not, or else you would have told me right away. Isn’t that right?"

Thinking of his young daughter, confined to her sickbed with the only healers able to help manage her illness directly under Ozai’s pay, Yuu bowed his head. Yes, he disliked Ozai—he feared him even more, but the Prince had bought Yuu’s absolute loyalty.

Together, they came to the large stone and steel double doors that separated the hallway from the antechamber. Beyond, lay the Fire Lord’s receiving room.

Yuu exchanged salutes with another guard, Rykyto. Within moments, Ozai was officially announced and called in. It seemed Azulon did not want to make his son wait.

As Imperial guards, Yuu and Rykyto accompanied Ozai and stood on either end of the large receiving room.
Fire Lord Azulon, gray and spindly with age, sat at the head of his throne. The flames around him rose and crackled with not a hint of lost control. It seemed today he was both lucid and feeling powerful.

There was no expression on Ozai's face as he strode slowly to the foot of the raised dais. Setting the cane aside, he knelt — stiffly for the left leg was obviously giving him trouble— his forehead touching the lacquered floor in supplication.

Azulon let the Prince stay like that for quite some time.

Finally, after what felt to Yuu like in agony of waiting—and what must have been an agony to Ozai, considering he was putting weight on the bed knee—Ozai was bid to rise.

The only indication Ozai had been in any pain was a sheen of fine sweat over his brow. "I am here as summoned, Father. How may I serve?"

Azulon snorted, and the fires crackling around the dais did not lower an inch. The Fire Lord was in a fine mood today.

"You may serve your Fire Lord by listening to the message I have received from the North pole." Azulon indicated a rolled scroll which rested by his right hand. "A letter from your esteemed brother."

Finally, a reaction from Ozai, though one had to be looking very hard to catch it. The skin over his right eye twitched, just slightly. "I was not aware Iroh had gone to the North."

"In pursuit of the avatar, yes." Azulon did not reach for the scroll. It was apparent he had already read the contents. "The Northern Water Tribe is now under control of our forces."

A slow, satisfied smile twisted Ozai's lips. "That is excellent news—"

"Not, thanks to the efforts of Azula."

Ozai's smile slipped. "I don't understand."

Now Azulon was the one who was smiling. "According to Prince Iroh, the girl got herself involved in a foolish Agni Kai. One, which she lost. Meanwhile her own Commander committed the highest treason and almost led our forces to ruin. Iroh was forced to step in and secure the victory."

It was clear that Ozai had not known any of this, though Yuu knew that his network of spies and messengers was impressive. It seemed that Prince Iroh had a few tricks up his sleeve to get a scroll through before Ozai could intercept it.

"I don't understand," Ozai said again, a note of concern coloring his voice. "Did my brother not use Azula's armada to conquer the Water Tribe? How is this not her victory?" He grew visibly angry. "Why did Iroh engage her in an Agni Kai?"

"You assume that Prince Iroh would sully himself by challenging a fourteen-year-old girl? His own niece?" Azulon snapped, and Ozai actually flinched. The anger of the father had long ago taught the son to fear. "No, Ozai. Azula did not lose an Agni Kai against Iroh. She lost against Prince Zuko."

Only years of hard-won discipline kept Yuu from reacting. Prince Zuko? But… that boy had been dead for, what, over five years now. Or more. How was this possible?

Ozai must have thought so too, because he snarled. "That Water Tribe impostor is not my son!"
"Surely, no mere impostor could best a Royal Princess of the blood." Azulon sat back in his high throne, a self-satisfied look across his face. "Iroh claims it is no mistake. He is bringing the boy to the Royal court, where the Fire Sages will easily be able to tell the truth of his parentage. What will they discover, Ozai?"

Ozai said nothing, his fists curled at his sides.

Azulon openly smirked. “I am old, but no fool. I remember clearly how you sought to use Lu Ten’s death for your own purposes. I remember, Prince Ozai, how I instructed you to dispose of one child and let the stronger be Iroh’s heir. That was to be your punishment. Now, I see you could not do even that—"

Ozai exploded. "I should be heir!"

"You are weak, second born son." Azulon made the phrase sound like a curse.

"Iroh wants nothing of the crown." Ozai swept his hand around the room to indicate the palace, perhaps the entire Fire Nation. "He has spent the last few years sailing around on a pleasure cruise while I ran the kingdom. He would rather drink tea and play Pai Sho, then manage troops. He failed at Ba Sing Se. Now he seeks to take Azula's victory from her—"

"Enough!" Azulon barked. The flames around the dais rose up.

"I am your loyal son!" Ozai insisted. It sounded almost like a plea.

"You are a cripple and second born, not chosen by the gods. And you have disobeyed me for the last time,” Azulon vowed. “Until the paternity of Prince Zuko can be established, you will be held in the Capital Prison. Guards!” Azulon motioned for Yuu and Rykyto. "Secure the Prince."

Yuu didn't move. His legs locked where he stood.

A smile twisted Ozai's lips. "That's where you are wrong, Father. I have been working diligently for the sake of the Fire Nation, taking over administrative duties that you and Iroh have neglected, including hand selecting the Imperial guards." He paused. "These men are loyal to me."

Yuu didn't know what Ozai had on Rykyto — it was different for all the high-ranking guards. Some could be bought with women, the promise of wiping away massive gambling debts, political positions in the family… Whatever it was, Rykyto made no move, either.

"What is this?” Azulon's voice rose again, a querulous tone that made him sound, briefly, like the old man he really was. "Treason! Seize him!" he yelled again, pointing to Ozai with desperation.

Ozai stood to his full height and swept a casual glance at Yuu and Rykyto.

"Leave," Ozai said.

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Yuu and Rykyto stood outside the stone door. Neither could meet the other’s eye. No sound came from the room behind them—the stone and steel doors were too thick—but they both knew what was happening inside.

*I have betrayed my Fire Lord and my Nation,* Yuu thought, heart contracting. *But my daughter’s life is in the balance. I would do it all again.*

After some minutes, Ozai stepped out. There was only one expression on his face: Satisfaction, long coming.

Ozai turned to Rykyto. "The Fire Lord has collapsed. Send for the healers at once."

Rykyto visibly swallowed, nodded, and pelted down the hall. They all knew the healers would be too late.

Prince—no, *Fire Lord* Ozai then turned to Yuu. “I have read your records. You have naval experience.”

"I do," he paused. "Majesty."

Ozai smiled. "Then, I have a job for you."
ZUKO.

I KNOW THINGS RIGHT NOW ARE DIFFICULT.

THE TRUTH IS NEVER AN EASY THING TO ACCEPT BUT PLEASE.

JUST HEAR ME OUT.

THIS LIFE OF A WATER TRIBE BOY YOU THINK YOU LEAD, IS A LIE.

A FORGERY.

WITH ITS ONLY PURPOSE TO BE USED AS A TOOL OF WAR.

BUT YOU ARE NO TOOL.

YOU ARE THE PRINCE OF THE FIRE NATION, A CHILD OF NOBLE BLOODLINE. IN
Sokka sat, legs crossed, in the great room of his father's largest ship. Furs from a dozen different animals were hung up on the walls beside swaths of fabric in Water Tribe blue. If there had been a fire in the middle, and the crisp smell of ice in the air, he could almost make himself believe he was in the roundhouse back home.

Princess Yue sat at his side, as perfectly composed as if she took part in meetings in front of the entire Tribe every day. Then again, maybe she did. The Northern Water Tribe was all about their official hoity-toity functions. The Southern... not so much.

Shifting slightly, Yue reached her hand out and her pinky finger brushed against Sokka's. She offered a calm smile when he glanced at her. It made his racing heart want to do back-flips in his chest.

"You're going to do fine," she said.

He swallowed past a dry throat. "I know. Who said I was nervous? I'm not nervous." Though his traitorous voice cracked in the middle. He'd seen his father do this sort of thing a dozen times back home... but tonight it was going to be him Speaking to the Tribe, telling the story of their journey with Aang.

Tonight, his father sat with the rest of the men in the audience. He would be hearing most of Sokka's story for the first time along with them: it was how things were done.
Katara should be Speaking, too. Unlike some tribes, the South didn’t prohibit women from addressing crowds. But she’d been stubborn about wanting to stick with Aang and help heal his wounds.

She was probably still angry with Sokka. By the end of the night, she might not be the only one.

Finally, the last of the men trickled in and took their seats. Hakoda stood. "Men," he said and his voice took on the formal tone-- a drone of a Chief who was Speaking, "Tonight Sokka, my eldest son, Speaks before us of the journey he has taken with his siblings and the Avatar. Listen to him as you would me, and judge his words for as they are and not as you would like them to be."

The traditional words spoken, Hakoda nodded to Sokka and sat among the audience again.

Sokka drew in a deep breath. "Okay," he said, and his voice wavered only a little. "I guess..." Yue brushed his hand again, and Sokka's back straightened. He looked out over the assembled men and let his eyes unfocus a little so that they blurred all together into brown oval heads and blue eyes. He let his mind wander back to that day he, Katara, and Zuko took their canoe out to the ice-fields to fish. It felt like a lifetime ago, and Sokka found his lips up ticking at the corners, remembering how Katara had run at Aang’s iceberg with a whalebone club in hand. "My story starts the day we met Aang. My brother, sister, and I took the canoe out fishing..."

He Spoke for a long time.

Unconsciously, his voice fell into a rhythm, a retelling that was not quite song but that had a rhythmic quality to it. He was aware of the men's reactions—chuckles at the moments of levity, of Aang’s airbender antics, gasps and hard looks between each other as Sokka Spoke of what Avatar Roku had told Aang at Crescent Island, of Zuko learning who his birth parents were, the many times they escaped the Fire Nation by the skin of their teeth.

Sokka kept some things to himself—little failures that would have embarrassed others, like how Aang had burned Katara (and the really scary, firebendery, way Zuko had gone after him for it), Sokka’s own adventure in the spirit world, and what his spirit guide, Lu Ten, told him. The exact reasons the pirates went after Katara for their stolen waterbending scroll. If there were gaps in logic here and there, no one called him out on it, and Sokka was a good enough storyteller to smooth over rough spots.

By the time Sokka got to the North Pole, his throat was parched and his voice was rough. But he felt like he were no longer in the cabin: he was seeing the Northern Water Tribe’s capital city for the first time again, describing the wealth and splendor of their sister tribe to a room full of men who'd lived on the bare ice-fields their entire life.

Then Sokka Spoke about how Katara had been denied waterbending lessons because she was a woman, then the Fire Nation’s approaching armada and their attack… and all that had happened at the Spirit Oasis: Chief Arnook's fall to Prince Iroh. How Azula shot Aang with actual lightning.

For the first time in hours, Sokka faltered. "The Oasis temple was packed with warriors and soldiers, all fighting. I knew Zuko had to be in the middle there, somewhere, but I couldn't see him, and Aang was down—he wasn't breathing. More firebenders were pouring in from the main entrance. We had a clear path to the back exit and... and I made the call to retreat." He looked at his father, who had gone a few shades paler, and swallowed hard. "We got aboard Appa. I took the reigns and charged the Fire Nation’s armada—we barely made it through. As we left, we saw the Fire Nation throwing red banners over the ice walls. They had taken the city."

A low groan went up from some of the men. Sokka looked down, his hand which was holding Yue's
—when had she taken it?—tightened hard.

She squeezed back. Her eyes were closed, biting her bottom lip, remembering.

“Katara got Aang breathing again—I guess her healing lessons paid off,” Sokka added. “We were headed South, aiming for the Earth Kingdom… it was only luck we found you. And… well, here we are.”

Sensing the end of Sokka’s Speaking, Hakoda stood—a little stiff due to the long time he’d spent sitting and listening.

"Thank you, Sokka," he said. "You've done yourself and your Tribe proud."

Sokka should have felt buoyed by that, but his mind was still filled with his failure at the Spirit Oasis, and the words struck hollow. He hadn't felt less proud in his life.

A grizzled warrior, Tatum indicated he wished to speak. Hakoda approved him with a nod.

“I’m sad to hear about our brothers and sisters to the North, and the fall of their great city,” Tatum said to the crowd. “But I believe we should offer them the same help they have given us through the war: Nothing. For generations the North has hidden behind their ice walls while we have suffered Fire Nation attacks. Now they send their Chief’s daughter for our aid?” He sliced his hand through the air in dismissal, and sat down.

Sokka stiffened and opened his mouth to speak, but to his surprise Yue got there first.

“You misheard,” she said calmly. “I escaped the fall of my city with Sokka, Katara, and the Avatar, but I have not yet requested your aid.”

Tatum opened his mouth to reply, but Hakoda quelled him with a look. “The North and the South used to be as close as blood-kin, but by their choice became distant neighbors over the last one-hundred years. Even then, we still are of the same people, Tatum.” He glanced at Yue. “Though, I’m not happy with how your Tribe treated Katara and Zuko.”

“And the Avatar,” Bato added in a low growl. “Sokka, you spoke of this… Master Pakkun? You said he cast the Avatar off as his student?”

“Well… Yeah,” Sokka admitted. “But we were in the middle of the siege, so it wasn’t like there was time for waterbending lessons, anyway.” He decided to Speak plainly. “Pakkun was a grumpy old man who wanted to embarrass Katara and make her apologize. It wasn’t about Aang.”

“But of course, they were happy for the Avatar’s help in fighting. An untrained twelve-year-old, now without a Waterbending master to oversee him—” Bato broke off with a shake of his head. “It is not how things should be done.”

Sokka had not thought about it from that angle—there hadn’t been time—but he couldn’t disagree.

"How do those fire barbarians expect to hold the city through the winter?" another warrior demanded. "Without the sun, the firebenders will drop like yak-flies."

The eyes of the Tribe turned to Sokka. He was, he realized, now the resident authority on the Fire Nation, seeing as he was traveling with the Avatar.

And it wasn’t like Zuko was there…
Pushing that thought aside, Sokka put his hand to his chin, considering. "Not all Fire Nation soldiers are firebenders," he said after a moment. "But... I don't think it matters. The Fire Nation will only need to hold the North Pole for a few months."

"Why is that?" Hakoda asked.

"Sozin's Comet’s coming at the end of the summer," Sokka said grimly. "The last time, the Fire Nation destroyed the Air Temples in one day. Who knows what they'll do this time?"

Another disquieted murmur swept the crowd.

"What about the Avatar? What does he think?" someone called out.

Hakoda held up his hand. "I do not ask one man to Speak another's opinion for him. We will ask the Avatar to Speak to the Tribe when he is well, and then he will tell us his plans."

Sokka winced. Aang and ‘plans’ didn’t go together. "Aang needs to learn all four elements. He's... pretty good with water, and I think Zuko started to teach him the basics of fire." Before they met Jeong-Jeong, at least. "But I'm not a judge on bendy-magic. I'm just the meat and boomerang guy."

That got a low chuckle from the crowd.

A warrior in the back stood to speak. "Perhaps, if Zuko lives, he can help retake the Northern city."

"If they'll accept his help," healer Kurthruk muttered with a scowl. "No offense, Yue, but I do not approve of your father's actions toward Zuko, either. The boy is Water Tribe, and should have been welcomed without suspicion."

Yue's face remained impassive, but her blue eyes narrowed. "I agree Zuko should have been given the respect of his rank—as a Chief’s second son. But, you forget, Zuko is also a Fire Nation prince."

That brought a new round of muttering. It was clear from the faces of the men they were still having trouble swallowing that bit of news.

Sokka turned to her, not quite believing what he was hearing. "Yue, what are you saying? Zuko wouldn't turn on us."

"No, of course not." She shook her head. Her voice, practiced and trained to command, echoed easily through the room. "But he has one foot standing in each world. If the Fire Nation can bend his will to them, they will hold him up as an example of so-called unity."

Hakoda rubbed a hand quickly across his forehead, looking like he was getting a headache. "We don't have Princes and Princesses here, Yue. We're simple folk, we lead simpler lives. Sokka will take my place when he proves his worth as a warrior, which is is well on his way to doing. But he is not royalty."

For the first time all night, Sokka smiled. “I’m good, Dad.”

Hakoda looked at him and asked the question Sokka had been dreading all night. “Do you believe there’s a chance Zuko is alive?"

The smile died. "I think..." He couldn't quite look at Yue. "If he's with Iroh, he's alive." Unsaid, but clear in the room was that was only if the Northern Water Tribe hadn’t gotten to Zuko, first.

"And really he's one of those Fire Nation royals? Our Zuko?" someone demanded.
Sokka took a breath and let it out. "Yeah." Then he grinned, remembering how many times Zuko was outraged whenever someone had called him a Prince. "Zuko was sort of pissed about it."

The murmurs grew and Hakoda held up his hand. "That is a separate conversation, for a later time. What Zuko was born into in the past does not matter. He is Water Tribe. He has proved it with his heart and actions for years, and he is my son. We, as a people, have raised him to be the man who stands with the Avatar and his Tribe." He closed his eyes, looking pained. "Even then, I cannot risk my remaining warriors or my ships to give him or the North aid. It takes all five of our ships just to hold Chameleon Bay."

Sokka looked down. If anyone could pull a squirrel-rabbit out of thin air, it would be his Dad. But five Southern Water Tribe ships could not tackle an entire Fire Nation armada.

"Perhaps," Bato said, "with the Avatar's help… if he defeats the Fire Lord… Then, we could sail to the North’s aid…?"

"Yes," Hakoda said, with an air of grim finality. "Until then, Sokka, what needs to be done?"

Needs to be done. Like gathering a run of silverfish for the winter, or shoring up family tents against storms. Like they were speaking of chores and not the fate of the world.

"Aang needs help. He hasn't fully mastered Water, and he still needs to learn Earth and Fire." And now they were down one firebender. Sokka straightened. "He needs to defeat the Fire Lord before the comet comes."

"Then that," Hakoda said, "is what we will help him do."

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Zuko slammed into his own room and shut the door. Then he locked it.

He, a prisoner, was allowed to lock his door.

His room was as large as his family’s tent back at the South Pole. Steel walls decorated in reds and oranges that were pleasing to the eye, with a stone pit sunk in the middle for a fire. It was a room meant for a firebender, and offered a windowed view out to the bow of the ship.

There was a simple bed with lightweight rich red sheets, and a nightstand and mirror. Set on the nightstand was Zuko’s pearl-hilted knife.
Crossing the room, Zuko scooped it up. His captors had taken it from him, and he hadn’t expected to see it again. As usual, once it was in his hand he felt a bit calmer. Safer, with a weapon of his own.

Drawing the curtains shut, he sparked a fire and paced around and around, agitated.

He’d heard of the phrase ‘kill them with kindness’ and he had no doubt that was what Iroh was doing: Giving him a room, a knife, and the illusion of welcome. Well, Zuko wasn’t going to allow it to happen. He had a Water Tribe warrior’s heart and would not be turned. He’d wait until the guards changed watch. He’d sneak to a lifeboat in the dead of the night and…

Take it where?

There was no sight of land in any direction. The ocean was vast, and Zuko had just been given a hard lesson on dehydration. Dad’s tales of men being caught alone out in sea were horrific enough to make him pause. There was a reason why he and Sokka never went beyond the ice flow fields in their canoe.

He glanced toward the bridge. They would have navigational equipment there. He could… he could defeat the officers there (they were sure to be highly ranked, possibly firebenders with a lot more training than he had) and… lock them out somehow. (A bridge door wouldn’t have locks), take control of the ship… (Using equipment he’d never seen before, with the whole ship’s crew beating down the door.)

“Sure, Iroh is really going to allow that,” he muttered sarcastically, hand clenching into a fist. Despite all his tea and perceived kindness, the Fire Nation Prince was a powerhouse. Much stronger than Zuko.

He went to the curtains and twitched them aside. The stars sparkled down overhead.

Sokka would have a plan by now, he was sure of it. Maybe even two plans, for when the first went sideways. Katara would have something inspiring to say to make him feel better. And Aang… well, he’d probably airbend something to float around the room. Lighten things up a little while they waited for the right time to break out.

Zuko glanced out to the sky which was crusted with stars, but so very empty.

Why hadn’t they come for him, yet?

Sighing, he ran his hand back through his loose hair. Long and unbound, it was annoying. He hadn’t been provided a tie to keep it back—Iroh didn’t want him to wear his hair Water Tribe style, in a wolftail.

Zuko eyed the small mirror on the nightstand, then the knife. Fire Nation nobles, he knew, wore their hair long and bound back in a topknot. Iroh would probably want him to do the same. He would probably insist on it soon.

Standing in front of the mirror, Zuko took a hank of his dark hair, and, using the dagger, cut it short to his scalp. The first cut was the hardest. After that, it was easier. It didn’t take long, and by the time he was done his short cut hair was a little shaggy. He shortened the long piece in front and rewove in the two blue beads.

The sharp features of his face were more prominent, and exposed the ragged parts of the burn-scar where it extended into his hairline. But the short-haired boy looking back at him was not a Fire Nation noble. That was good enough for him.
There was no way to keep time in his quarters, but once Zuko judged a few hours had passed, he unlocked the door and peeked outside. The hallway was empty. Iroh had not even posted a guard.

_This is a trap_, he thought but he wasn't going to look a gift ice-yak in the mouth.

He slipped out of his room and crept into the hall, ducking into the shadows of an open supply room when he heard approaching footsteps. But it was only a fire nation helmsman returning to the bridge, a steaming cup of tea in hand.

_Dog watch shift_, he thought absently, without wondering how he knew that.

He moved once the helmsman had passed, every sense on alert. He wished Sokka was there to watch his back, or Katara, or even Aang even though he was too loud and distractible to sneak around properly. Traveling down the hallway of the enemies ship, Zuko had never felt more alone.

He shoved the rising loneliness and homesickness aside, and focused on not being seen. It was easy. This time of night, most of the soldiers were asleep. And discipline seemed… lax.

There was an open balcony leading to the lifeboats on the second deck. The metal raft hung by a set of sturdy chains and was covered by a dust coverlet. Zuko hesitated, seeing the black water churn against the hull of the ship. Then he reached out, grabbed a thick chain, and shimmied down.

He saw how it was possible to release the chain moorings of the life raft once he was safely inside.

_Do it quick_, he told himself and didn't allow himself to look down at the turning, frothy sea. In the lifeboat he heard the roar of the water only six feet down as it sloshed against the broad middle plating of the ship.

His fingers touched on the pull ring. The impulsive part of him wanted to yank the ring away. He would crash with the lifeboat into sea and then…

… Where would he go?

Unwillingly, the questions that had plagued him earlier rose up again. The stars overhead were unfamiliar — they were different in the northern hemisphere than the south he’d grown up in. He had no idea where he was going to go. Depending on the current, he could drift for days. Weeks. Even months. Dad had told him stories about men who went to sea, got lost, and thirsted to death.

Zuko had just had a hard lesson about the dangers of dehydration. And he was still somewhat hungry from his half-meal earlier.

Pulling back the coverlet, he checked the supplies. There was enough for perhaps three days. Hardtack bread, and a couple jugs of water. Not enough.
He growled under his breath. Part of him — he suspected the impulsive firebender part that Katara always teased him about — wanted him to pull the ring. He'd figure the rest out, somehow. The rest of him — the part that had grown up hearing dad's stories and watching Sokka make plan after plan — knew that was a really bad idea.

So, I'll just make a plan. It can't be that hard.

He needed food and water and he needed to know where he was going. He would have to find a way to smuggle maps and supplies into the lifeboat. He would also need to build himself up again. It was only a few hours past dark, and Zuko felt exhaustion drag at him: The results of stress in battle and getting blasted by lightning and going a few days without food and water. Any of it. All of it.

Gritting his teeth, Zuko dropped his hand from the ring, returned the dust coverlet back to his former position, and then scaled the chain back up to the deck of the ship.

The burn in the muscles of his arms and the slight tremor he felt in his legs told him he had made the right call.

It was late at night. Zuko trudged back to his quarters and made sure to lock the door.

He did not notice Prince Iroh's watchful, amber eyes from the window of his quarters.

A soft knocking at his door the next morning startled Zuko. He had been awake at dawn, but had not come out of his room. There had been a ship-wide breakfast call, but he had ignored both it and his newly rumbling belly.

“What?” he asked wearily.

“Prince Zuko, I am Fire Sage Lin Yun,” said the voice on the other side. May I speak with you?”

Zuko almost told him to go away – he had no love for Fire Sages after what happened at Crescent Island, after they turned on Aang—but the query caught him off guard. The man was asking to come in. Again, it was as if someone was giving him a choice.

Cautiously, he unlocked the door and opened it.

The man on the other side was a decade younger than Iroh, wearing red Fire Sage robes, with a thin beard that went down to his chest. He bowed low, upraised palm over fist. “My prince.”

“Don’t bow to me,” Zuko snapped. “And don’t call me a prince.”

Lin Yun straightened smoothly, not concerned or put off. “Prince Iroh thought you may have questions for me.”
Zuko folded his arms over his chest. “What, like why you and the other Fire Sage’s turned on the Avatar?”

Lin Yun raised a single eyebrow as if Zuko were being impertinent. “My brothers and I are, of course, the living repositories of the art of firebending.”

*Oh.* Zuko stared for a moment, but his curiosity was piqued. He nodded and stepped back.

Lin Yun glanced around the room, and nodded in approval at both the fire in the pit and the wide windows with open curtains so Zuko could watch the deck (and the sky for a flying bison). “It is good to let in the sunlight. As firebenders, the sun both strengthens and rejuvenates the spirit.”

“My spirit is fine,” he said, annoyed.

“Hmm.” The corner of the Fire Sage’s mouth twitched up. Then he held out his hand and kindled a flame in his palm. “May I?”

Zuko eyed him. “May you what?”

“You are a firebender, are you not? Try to take the flame from my hand.”

What was this man playing at? Increasingly suspicious, but not seeing where the catch was, Zuko stepped closer and passed his hand over Lin Yun’s to gather the flame. It resisted him, and for the space of a second he felt… a tug of war, of sorts between himself and Lin Yun. Then the flame was in Zuko’s hand—cool and red, puddling in the cup of his palm like water.

The Fire Sage stared at him for a moment, then bowed again. Low and deep. “My Prince.”

“I told you to knock that off,” Zuko said, wondering if he should just throw him out. “What’s this about?”

Lin Yun straightened again. “As I said, Fire Sages are the authority on Firebending. We are… exceptionally sensitive to the stirrings of fire in the blood. In the moment you made my fire as yours, I sensed your chi and the bloodline behind it.” Zuko couldn’t quite read the expression on his face, but it looked close to awe. “You are indeed the son of Ozai and Ursa, Great-Grandson to Fire Lord Sozin himself.”

It wasn’t a trap. It had been a *test.* The fire in his hands brightened in Zuko’s reflected anger.

“Leave!” Zuko snapped, flicking his fire away. “Get out of here.”

The Fire Sage paused. He obviously expected a different reaction. Perhaps he thought he had paid Zuko a great compliment. Then his hand closed, snuffing out his own flame. He bowed again. “As my Prince commands.” With another deep bow, he left the room, shutting the door gently behind him.

Breathing harshly, Zuko stared after him.

*He’s under my command,* he realized with a shock. *I commanded him to leave, and he just… he did.*

It was one thing to hear from Iroh that the men would treat him with respect. Another to see it.

*They’re insane,* Zuko thought. *I’m Water Tribe. I’m their enemy. Can’t they see that?*

But he wore red and orange silks. He had the face of their dead prince… a Fire Nation noble who
was third in line to the throne.

Iroh said he could ask them questions and he was free to tour the ship. Zuko thought it was past time he tested that for himself.

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**OoOoO**

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The ship’s mess hall was hopping with activity. A delicious rich and meaty fragrance wafted in, drawing Zuko like a magnet.

The loud conversation, scraping of cutlery and laughter briefly lulled as he walked in, but quickly picked up again. Though it was lower, with some surprised whispering and glances his way.

Scowling, Zuko looked at no one as he picked up a tray and a bowl of hot fish-flake stew from the serving counter.

The Water Tribe would sip broth from the bowl, then pick out the leftover vegetables or meat by hand or using wrapped seaweed. The Fire Nation used spoons for the broth and chopsticks for the meat. Zuko took both utensils without thinking.

Finding an empty seat, he sat at a table. He could practically feel the eyes of the others on him.

He scowled around. “What?”

A soldier only a year or so older than him actually cheeped in fear. He wore the bronze rank knots of an ensign. “Nothing, Prince Zuko.” He blinked at him through large glasses.

Grimacing at the mention of his rank, Zuko returned focus on the food. The fish flake stew was… delicious. It annoyed him, in a perverse way. The Fire Nation had no right to season everything so spicy and hot. So… *good.*

Around him, people laughed and gossiped. The table he sat at was silent and uncomfortable. Tense.

Zuko was thinking about leaving when someone blurted, “Is it true you defeated Admiral Zhao in Agni-Kai?”

The voice was high and… female? Zuko glanced up in surprise. “Uh, yeah.”

The girl who sat across from him was, again, a year or two older and a little too plain to be pretty. She wasn’t even focusing on his scars. At least, no more than usual, but she actually blushed when he met her gaze.

She’s an ensign, too. *The Fire Nation don’t keep their women from fighting.*

“And… and Princess Azula?” she asked tentatively.
Zuko blinked. “How did you hear that?”

“Everyone’s talking about it,” the one with the glasses said, so quickly it was as if he’d barely been holding the words in until now. “I was stationed on the Bonfire, her flagship, on the journey over. I watched her defeat six Royal Instructors at once.”

The boy sitting next to Glasses sneered at that. “I thought Princess Azula arrived with four instructors.”

“She did! Well… she sent two of them off the deck in training, on the journey over.”

Zuko stared. “Azula knocked two of her own men off the deck, and she… left them? Out at sea?”

Glasses looked down. Zuko felt a little ill all over again. *Fire Nation*, he thought with disgust. Except… Glasses, the woman and the sneering boy had equally sick looks on their faces. No, not just sick. They seemed frightened.

They’re worried they’ve insulted me by speaking about it, Zuko realized. He wasn’t good with people. Not the way Sokka was. He wasn’t charming, or inspiring. But at least this much was clear to him. *They’re wondering how much I’m like Azula.*

“What Azula did was wrong. You don’t leave men behind.” Not in the Water Tribe, at least. In the Fire Nation? Who knew? “People aren’t expendable. Someone should have gone back for them, or she shouldn’t have knocked them off in the water while *sparring* to begin with.” He looked down at his stew and grabbed up a meaty cube with his chopsticks. “When she and I fought… I had the advantage of terrain.”

“I bet,” the sneering boy said. The girl elbowed him, but Zuko shrugged. He was Water Tribe. He had lived on the ice, and he was not ashamed of it.

*But they think I’m their Prince. Can I use that? Can I command them like I did with the Fire Sage?*

“Do you have a library aboard? A place where you keep… navigation charts? Star maps?” Zuko asked abruptly.

Glasses stiffened. “Of course, Prince Zuko. My department is in charge of logistics and navigational readings.”

Zuko hesitated, wondering if he could order this guy the same way he had done the Fire Sage. It felt wrong. “What’s your name?”

“Eito.”

“I’m Hana,” the girl chirped.

“Renzin,” said the swearing boy.

Zuko nodded, committing their names to memory. “Well, Eito… could you show me to the library?”

Was it really going to be this easy? Armed with star charts, he had a much better time figuring out where he was on the ocean. From there, he could navigate the lifeboat back to land.

“Of course, sir. Right away!” Eito practically leapt up from the table.

“Not now!” Zuko exclaimed, surprised. Eito’s lunch wasn’t even finished, and Zuko hadn’t had a full meal in ages. If he was going to escape, he had to build himself back up, first. “Finish your food.
Please,” he added after an awkward moment. Spirits, he was no good at ordering people.

Eito reluctantly sat back down and the other two chuckled nervously.

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Eito was more excited than Sokka on a shopping trip. There were rolls upon rolls stored in the library. Zuko unrolled a page and frowned down at it. The northern hemisphere stars were different than the ones he had learned in the south.

However, the Fire Nation had extensive maps with more constellations marked than the Water Tribe taught. Come to think of it, he never remembered seeing a Water Tribe constellation chart. Cleaned hide was hard to come by, paper far too valuable to waste. Everything he had learned about navigating by stars had been taught to him on night camping trips, or verbally through stories.

*These maps are really detailed,* he thought, noticing the fine paper and how the ink didn’t bleed through. There wasn’t a hint of yellow to indicate age.

Eito hung behind him. It was making Zuko twitch. He hoped that Iroh wouldn’t punish the guy when Zuko escaped.

“Don’t you have… something else you should be doing?” Zuko asked.

“This actually is my post, sir. I tend to the message hawks, see?” He gestured to the nearby birds, who sat patiently in their tresses and hoods.

“Oh. Uh,” Zuko rolled up the scrolls and wondered how far he could push this. “I’ll just be… taking these then?”

“Of course. And if I might add, Prince Zuko, try this one and this one. Oh, and this scroll is great reading, too, if you’re interested in astronomy.”

So, loaded down with priceless maps and scrolls, all freely given, Zuko made his way back to his room.

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OoOoO
The next morning, Zuko woke with the sun as usual, though he wasn’t happy about it. He had been up late last night pouring over the charts, then, during the dog watch shift, moving supplies from the other lifeboats to his own.

The star chart scrolls were incredibly detailed, though it wasn’t sure he was reading it right. From what he could tell, they were sailing along the outer edges of the Eastern Current, which was insane. No one with sense messed with the Eastern Current—some of Hakoda's most chilling ghost stories had been of Water Tribe ships dragged into the heart of the Great Current. Also, it placed the ship nowhere near the Fire Nation. Not unless they intended to take the current all the way south and then tack across the sea of Azulon and turn north at Whale Tail island.

No. A journey like that would take months. Why would Iroh sail them out to the middle of nowhere? He had to be reading the charts wrong.

Zuko was just reaching for them again, thinking he may as well take another crack at it in the light of a new day, when he heard noise outside his room.

Curious, he twitched the red curtains aside. The view from his high room led down to the bow. It seemed the entire ship was assembled in orderly ranks. All stood at strict attention, facing towards the ship flag. At the head stood Iroh’s second in Command. He held up an oil painting of a regal, but spindly gray haired man.

Fire Lord Azulon, Zuko realized with a shock.

“Stand for the Fire Nation Oath!” the Lieutenant barked, though everyone was already at strict attention. This seemed to be a morning ritual.

Then, in one voice, the crowd started to speak. “My life, I give to my country. With my hands, I fight for Fire Lord Azulon and our forefathers before him. With my mind, I seek ways to better my country, and with my feet may our March of Civilization continue.”

At the last line of the oath, the Lieutenant lowered the painting, took up a clipboard, and started announcing duty assignments for the day.

Zuko quickly shut his curtains.

He knew those words. He didn’t remember saying them, but he knew them like someone who had recited them over and over a long, long time ago.

It hit him, suddenly, in a way it never had before: This could have been his life.

Well, as a prince he probably wouldn’t be living on a battleship. But he would have gotten up every day, spoken the Fire Nation Oath, and done whatever assigned duties he had to help on the wrong side of the war.

Maybe he’d even be helping Iroh hunt down the Avatar.

With a grimace, Zuko turned away from the window.

“I have to get out of here.”
“Prince Zuko.”

Zuko stopped dead in his tracks, then turned, hiding the small bag of rice he’d managed to swipe from the kitchen behind his back. Tonight, he planned to add it to the supply pile in his lifeboat. If they were indeed in the Eastern sea, he would need all the food and water he could get.

Hana, Eiko and Renin stood at attention before him. All bowed in the Fire Nation style.


They straightened. Then Hana stepped forward, eyes bright. “My squad has booked the bow deck for sparring this afternoon. If it’s not too forward, Prince Zuko, would you like to join us?”

He froze. “Sparring…?”

“If you’re not afraid to test yourself against three ensigns, of course,” Renzin added with perfect fake politeness. He grinned chillingly when Zuko looked his way.

The ever-present fire in the pit of his belly rose up in response. It was the similar to the inner flame he felt when Zhao had challenged him — but Renzin was no Zhao. There wasn’t malice in his gaze, but there was expectation.

They were both firebenders. It was only natural and right to see whose flame burned hotter. Zuko felt this in a way that went deeper than instinct.

Besides, he was not going to let some Fire Nation boy show him up, if he could help it.

“Yeah,” Zuko found himself saying. He had better things to do, but no way was he going to allow this type of challenge to go unanswered. “I’ll meet you out there.”

Once he figured out a place to stash the stolen rice, first.

Lieutenant Izhar found Iroh overlooking the deck, where several young fire benders were sparring.

“At first, I thought you were insane,” the Lieutenant said, easy and comfortable speaking openly to
his commanding officer, “for bringing on such a young crew. But now… I think I see your reasons.”

Out on the deck, Prince Zuko was faced off against another firebender. A noble-born ensign named Renzin. The ensign was shooting rings around the prince, no doubt trying to impress him.

Zuko turned every attack that came close against him in an irritatingly waterbending fashion.

Iroh smiled and sipped his tea. “Prince Zuko was born to rule, but even as a child, he never was allowed to be among his people. I argued with Ozai and Ursa about this, but they had their reasons. But if he is to rule them, Zuko must know them.”

“Right now, he sees and treats them as peers.”

Iroh shrugged. “Command will come. And if he makes loyalties and alliances out of future officers of his military, who am I to stop him?”

Out on the deck, Zuko’s fire-whip caught the ensign by the ankle. Renzin went down, yelling in surprise. Around them, spectators whooped and clapped.

The match had gone to the prince.

Grinning, Zuko came over and, clasping Renzin’s forearm, hauled the ensign up. It was a distinctly Water Tribe clasp, but the ensign didn’t seem to notice, or care. They were both grinning with adrenaline and pleasure of a good match.

Iroh sipped his tea, pleased. “Right now, Zuko must remember what it is like to be a firebender.”

"I heard you did a great job Speaking our story for us," Katara said, which was by far the most she’d said to Sokka in days.

She was turned away from her eldest brother, running a globe of glowing water down the column of Aang's spine. The middle of his back was raw with new-healed flesh. Same for out the bottom of his foot where the lightning had escaped.

It looked better than it had when it first happened, but Sokka didn't notice any difference when Katara tried healing it now. It was scar tissue, same as Zuko's. Ugly, but healed.

“That was Yue's doing, mostly. She saved the day," Sokka said with false modesty. Inwardly, he was pleased Katara had heard he did well. There was a good chance one day he would take his father’s place, and Speaking before the tribe would be a common thing. "I wish you could have been there. We’re not like those jerks at the Southern Northern tribe. Women are allowed to Speak here, you know.”
She shrugged as if she didn’t care. "I had to take care of Aang."

Sokka paused. "How's he doing?"

"He... he hasn't woken up yet." His sister finally looked at him, her blue eyes brilliant with unshed tears. "I took the stupid healing classes, but I was so angry... I wish I could have gone back and paid more attention."

"Hey, no." Sokka wasn't a hugging type of guy, but he manfully put his own discomfort to the side and slid his arms around her. "This is amazing. No one else can do what you can. Yue said you're doing a better job healing than she could."

Katara sniffed, nodded and let go.

"He's not, um, going to sleep for another hundred years, is he?" Sokka asked. "We kind of need him now."

"He was in ice that time, Sokka," she said with such familiar annoyance that he grinned. Yup, she wasn't as mad at him as before.

Katara bit her lip and glanced at him. "What did Dad and the others say about... about Zuko?"

Sokka's heart sank. He let out a long breath. "We don't have the ships or the people to retake the north. At least, not until we win the war. Zuko’s going to have to get himself out, or... or just hang on. Until we can rescue him, I mean."

He wasn't going to mention the third option: That Zuko was already dead.

Katara turned away again, and Sokka got the bad feeling that silent tears were slipping down her cheeks. There was no anger or disbelief from her, though. Katara was smart. Even though she could be hotheaded as the best of them, she had seen their father's small fleet and had done the same math.

"We left him behind," she said.

"You didn't. It was my call. I... I'm sorry, Katara," Sokka said lamely.

Her hands clenched into fists. "I am too."

*I'm so sorry, but I had to get you and Aang out*, he wanted to say, but part of being a man was taking his knocks. She seemed to be over the worst of the anger, and he had his own guilt to live with.

After the war though, the North better watch out. He was coming for his brother.

Before Sokka could voice any of this, a low call from a giant snail-fish horn sounded from outside. It was a call for general assembly out on the deck.

Katara wiped her face and turned. She and Sokka exchanged a look.

"Come on," Sokka said, grabbing her arm. "Aang will be fine here for a minute."

When they got topside, they found most of the men gathered at the rails. Sokka looked for, and found Yue, who was staring out with her own tears running down her cheeks.

*Another girl crying? Am I supposed to hug her, too?* Sokka wondered. Not that he minded in this case...
"Yue, what's going on?" Katara asked.

The princess pointed.

Far out to sea tiny dots of ships were scattered along the horizon. Sokka felt a jolt of horror—the Fire Nation?!—before he realized, no the ships were too small. They were boats.

Or… small canoes?

"It's the Northern Water tribe," Yue breathed. "Some of my people have escaped."

OoOoO

As the ragged Northern Water Tribe flotilla drew closer, Sokka saw how much of a sorry state they were in. Gone were the sleek vessels which had seemed to cut through the water like glass. These looked like hand-hewn canoes, rafts of hastily strung together floating debris, and quickly patched sailboats. Families, women and children, and badly injured men.

These were the boats that were small enough to escape past the Fire Nation armada without being noticed.

Hakoda's vessel was in front, and so the first to draw up to the largest of the vessels.

"That's Palukar," Sokka said, recognizing the proud bear of a man in front. He now wore a haggard expression and had one arm bound in a sling.

“Aang’s waterbending master?” Hakoda asked sharply.

“No, that was Pakku. Palukar was a weapons instructor for the warriors."

Hakoda nodded. "Do you recognize any of the warriors as waterbenders, son?"

Sokka took a swift look around. "No, but I’m sure some of the women they have with them are. Not that they'd allow them to bend outside of healing and doing laundry."

"That changes now," Hakoda said grimly.

"What do you man, Dad?"

His father grinned at him with teeth, and then turned to hail the sad looking sailboat. "Hello, the boat!"

"Hello the ship!" Palukar called back, raising his hand in traditional greeting. Sokka couldn't help remembering how the Northern Water Tribe had literally drowned them when they'd first arrived.

“I am Palukar, first born son of the Arctic-Dog house. Our city has fallen, and we heard there was a
Southern force guarding Chameleon Bay. We've come seeking sanctuary from Chief Hakoda of the Southern Water Tribe."

Hakoda nodded to Bato to lower the gangplank down. "I am Hakoda. Come up and talk."

Once aboard, Palukar was surprised and pleased to see Sokka. He gave Katara a nod, too, and bowed deeply to Yue. "I am glad to see you well. Your father—"

"I know," Yue said sadly. "What of the others in the council?"

"Dead or captured, or left behind in that city which is the same thing. We are leaderless."

"Yue is Arnook's daughter," Katara said pointedly. "Isn't she? Why can't she be your Chief?"

It was as if she hadn't spoken. Palukar turned to Hakoda. "It's hard for me to count on the run, but I estimate three-hundred survivors. Out of those, we have eighty fighting men."

"Palukar." Hakoda's tone was like ice. "My daughter asked you a question."

Palukar blinked, visibly reordering his thoughts. Then slowly, he turned to Katara. "Princess Yue is honored as Arnook's only child, but of course she cannot be Chief."

Katara put her hands on her hips. "Well, now that you have no Chief, I hope you realize how stupid that rule is."

Yue spoke up, her voice serene. "I was engaged to Hahn of the ice-Yak house. Do you know if he lives?"

Palukar shook his head, looking pained. "I don't, Princess. I'm sorry. Once the city was taken, it was all I could do to organize this evacuation."

"It doesn't matter," she said calmly. "Because I am not marrying him any longer. Our engagement is broken."

"What?" he blinked. "Who gave you permission to do this?"

"I don't need anyone's permission. It is my life." And with that she took off the beautiful necklace. Sokka found himself gaping as she reached over the rail and dropped it into the cold waters. It sank to the sea floor, gone in an instant.

Palukar clenched his fists, and then shook his head. He looked like a man at the end of his rope, facing down too many problems to have to be able to shoulder one more. He turned from the princess to Sokka's dad.

"Chief Hakoda, the people here... We have nowhere to go. We beg the sanctuary of our sister Tribe."

"As it happens," Hakoda said, "We have extra stores on board, and space for your women, children, and other noncombatants in our village at the South Pole. It isn't fancy like your city, but since the Fire Nation took the last of our waterbenders, they have rarely troubled our waters." He paused and favored Palukar with a hard look. "Whoever pledges their loyalty to me as Chief will have a place in my Tribe."

Sokka, Bato, and every other Southern warrior gaped.

Palukar nodded as if he expected this. He fell onto his knees and looked up at Hakoda, his
whalebone spear laying across the open palm of his good hand. “You have my loyalty, Chief Hakoda. Save our people and you will have the strength of my spear until we depart this world.”

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**OoOoO**

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Zuko stood at the bow of the ship, watching the churning wake of the propellers below. The sun was setting, orange and bright, along the horizon. It was a firebender’s sunset — the sky was alight with flame.

And empty of both cloud and airbison.

*Where are you?* he thought for what must have been the thousandth time over the last few weeks. He’d give almost anything to know if Katara, Sokka, and Aang were okay.

Zuko and Azula had survived lightning, and Aang was a firebender, too. Sorta. He had to have survived. But… what if he hadn’t?

Zuko learned that the Fire Nation had a extensive news network, all carried by message hawk. Eito himself had told him at the mess hall on his forth day of being on the ship.

After that, Zuko made a habit of visiting Eito’s library to scan the message hawk reports every day. It was all dry stuff: troop and ship movements in towns in the Earth Kingdom he’d never heard of. Spotting the Avatar would be big news. There was nothing.

The Avatar’s death would be even bigger news. The fact that Zuko had heard nothing was a good sign, but frustrating.

Zuko clenched his fists. Once he got off this ship, he had to know where to go. He’d bet a good piece of seal blubber jerky that Aang, Sokka, and Katara were hiding from the Fire Nation somewhere in the Earth Kingdom.

Too bad it was the biggest continent in the world.

A cough behind him interrupted his woolgathering. Zuko turned to see Iroh standing nearby, his hands tucked into his sleeves.

“What do you want?” Zuko grumbled.

“It is too fine of an evening to spend sulking, Nephew,” Iroh said placidly.

“I’m not sulking.” He was worrying. Big difference.

Iroh paused. “I saw you practicing your firebending out on the deck this morning.”

Zuko shrugged. He’d been going stir crazy from pouring over charts and maps. Getting out to stretch his muscles felt good — although practicing the katas he and Katara had developed together had
made him achingly homesick. He wanted ice under his shoes and his sister’s rippling water at his side.

Sparring with the other firebenders had helped. It was a lot of fun, too. In fact, it had turned into the highlight of his days. He felt himself growing stronger after the hit his body took with the enforced fasting.

To Zuko’s surprise and pleasure, he won the spars a good deal of the time. He didn’t think the others were pulling their punches because he was a prince. At least, he hoped not.

But it was as clear as the sun in the sky that his firebending techniques were different. Zuko had tried attending a training session this morning, led by one of the junior commander’s. The fast punches, kicks, and strikes felt unnatural. When he copied their movements, his flame came out cool and weak.

That worried him, too.

*I’m not like the other firebenders. That’s a good thing, but… but…*

Jeong Jeong told him he should learn firebending from a waterbending master, but that had been a disaster. Besides, toward the end he was unable to convert the high level katas Katara was learning with Aang into fire. He would never be able to ride a fire tornado, for example. Some things just didn’t translate across elements.

“Someone told me,” Zuko wasn’t going to rat out Jeong-Jeong, “that I was a dragon who learned to swim.”

He sensed an odd sort of tension from Iroh at that, though when Zuko glanced over he couldn’t read anything on the older man’s face. “The sages teach us that fire comes from the breath, and is sparked by our passion and rage, but you don’t feel that when you bend, do you?”


Iroh stepped to his side. Together, they looked out to sea. “There is but one way to firebend, officially. We use katas fine-tuned for generations. Proven, powerful methods that spark the most heat from every flame.” Iroh hesitated, “But that doesn’t mean there haven’t been other forms, in the past.”

Zuko flicked a glance at him. “What other forms?”

“Forms officially not sanctioned by the Fire Lord. It would be unseemly for a royal of the blood to be seen practicing them.”

Zuko rolled his eyes. “Iroh, we’re on your ship hundreds of miles from land. No one is going to message hawk the Fire Lord.”

There was a glint in the man’s amber eyes. “Why, I think you may be right Nephew.”

Oh, Appa turds. Zuko knew he was playing right into Iroh’s hands, but was unable to resist asking, “What do you want?”

“A bargain.”

Zuko stiffened. He was powerfully interested in learning a new fire bending technique from a master—because Iroh was no doubt a master—but if Iroh wanted information on the Water Tribe or Zuko
to betray his people, he could shove his ancient firebending forms where the sun didn’t shine.

“I will teach you these forbidden forms when the sun is at its peak and the officers and crew are busy at their duties,” Iroh said. “And afterward you will have lunch with me and play Pai Sho.”

“Pai Sho? The… game?” He’d seen the board in Iroh’s quarters, empty of pieces.

“Indeed.” His voice quavered with an old man’s edge that Zuko knew was false. “It gets lonely being up in my room, with no one else to set my wits against…”

Zuko rubbed at his forehead with the side of his thumb. There was something going on here, but he was no good at looking underneath people’s motivations for plots. Sokka was the guy for that.

But to finally learn real firebending…even if it wasn’t official…

*I can use the lifeboat to get off this ship, but not until I know where I’m going. And if I can learn useful firebending before then…*

“Fine,” Zuko said. “Firebending first, then Pai Sho. Happy?”

“Exceedingly.” Iroh crossed his hands over his stomach and gazed back out to sea. The stars were coming out. “It is truly a fine night.”
Fire Lord Iroh
GreenAppleFreak was awesome enough to draw Water Tribe Zuko in Fire Nation clothing. Felt very apt for this chapter. :)
Sokka gazed over the wide, rocky beach of Chameleon Bay. Once desolate and bare, it was now covered with blue fabric tents. Water Tribe children played in the waves, delighted by the unexpected warm waters—well, warm compared to their former arctic home. There wasn’t a patch of snow in sight.

Women washed clothes or cooked, either by hand or by using bending. There were few men to be seen. Most of the able-bodied warriors were running drills on one of the ships in Hakoda’s fleet. The Northerners weren’t used to the deep-bodied southern ships, and all hands were needed to make ready for upcoming battles.

A spot of white drew Sokka’s attention from further down on the beach. Grinning, Sokka waved at Yue from down the beach. She spotted him and headed over to him.

At Hakoda’s request, Yue had put the word out to the female waterbenders that their skills were welcome if any of them were willing to fight onboard his ships. Sokka hoped she’d come back with good news.

They could use a little good news.

“How did it go? What did they say?” he asked, extending a hand down to help pull her up beside him on the large boulder he was perched on.

Yue smiled at him, though her clear blue eyes were strained. “Old habits are hard to break. Some of them know combat forms—there were underground classes held among the women, but those were mostly for self-defense, and…” She sighed. “Most are still worried about what their families will think.”
“Did you tell them that they’ll have a place of honor on the flagship? Dad won’t put up with any nonsense from the men. He runs a tight ship.”

She nodded. “I did, and a couple are intrigued, but I think it would be better if your sister spoke to them personally. She has actually used her waterbending to fight. She knows what it’s like.”

“Yeah,” he sighed. “Good luck dragging her away from Aang.” He still hadn’t woken up and everyone knew that wasn’t a good sign.

Yue blinked, surprised. “Actually, I saw her talking with your father down the beach a few minutes ago.” She hesitated. “It looked like… an intense conversation.”

Out of habit, Sokka glanced at the waves to see if there were any large swells building. Nothing. Well, then it couldn’t be that bad, though he had noticed that Katara had been snappish to their father... even rude, sometimes. Hopefully, they were hashing out whatever’s wrong between them.

Yue kneaded her hands in her lap. “There’s something else, Sokka.”

He glanced at her. “What is it?”

“The men and women who are going to resettle in the south are going to need all the help they can get. Your father said your grandmother will welcome them, but we all know there will be some adjustment. Our ways are different.” She took a breath as if bracing herself. “I’m going with them.”

He felt as if he had been punched in the gut. “But I thought...” They’d never spoken their feelings out loud, but...

She turned to him, tears glistening in her beautiful eyes. “No matter what else happens, I am still my father’s daughter, and my people need someone to Speak for them. I’m sorry. I... I know what this means, that we’ll be apart... and I can’t ask you to abandon your journey with Aang. I’ll understand if... if you want to move on.”

Yue always managed to do funny things to Sokka’s body. Right now he had the odd sensation of his throat tightening in grief while his heart fluttered with hope.

Inspiration struck. He looked around the rocky beach and with an “aha!” Jumped down to pick one up. It was an even light gray stone, weathered into a smooth oval by the winds and waters with a perfect seam of white quartz down the middle.

“Here,” he said, handing it over.

She blinked. “What’s this?”

“I know you just broke up with Hahn, and you’re probably not ready for a commitment, and...” He trailed off, rubbing the back of his neck. “I don’t have time to carve anything on it to make it prettier.” He had to do better than the fish, next time. “But keep this. And... think of me?”

Her eyes were really watery now. Oh man, he had screwed up so bad he made her cry.

Then Yue leaned over and they were kissing, and the entire world seemed to fall away from them. The war, the loss of the Northerner’s city. Aang, Zuko... it was all very distant.

“I’ll think of you every day,” Yue promised against his lips.

Then they were kissing again and there was only him and Yue and this perfect moment.
… At least, until a throat cleared behind him.

“Um, I don’t want to interrupt, but… where are we?”

At that familiar voice, Sokka broke off and whipped around.

A slight figure stood not ten feet away, leaning on an air staff for balance, looking tired, warn, utterly bemused, with more than a little dark growth on his head.

It was Aang.

OoOoO

Zuko had been tricked.

He scowled, crossing his arms over his chest. “You said you were going to teach me firebending, not dancing.”

Iroh didn’t pause in… whatever he was doing. The flow of the katas were jerky as if to a beat, the strikes open-handed, the punches awkward… and was that an exaggerated shrug while standing on one leg?

He finished the stupid-looking dance with clenched fists held out while bending his arms and torso to the side in a weird half-crescent shape.

Straightening, Iroh graced to Zuko with a smile. “There is no shame in dancing, Nephew. When I was your age, I danced with many lovely women—”

“Stop.” Zuko resisted the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose. “I don’t want to hear about your ancient love life.”

Still smiling, the old prince stroked his beard. “Ah, but when you get to the Fire Palace, you will be the subject of many attentions.”

Zuko was going to be escaping this ship as soon as they were safely out of the Great Eastern Current, but Iroh didn’t need to know that. So he settled for another glare. “We were talking about firebending, Iroh.”

Iroh hid his hands in his sleeve. “As I said, these are ancient forms from a time where the Fire Nation was not as… proud.”

“How is this—” He mimed Iroh’s last ridiculous stance with the fists over his head and off to the side, “—supposed to help me win in a fight?”

“Firebending is with us in peacetime as well as war. The Dancing Dragon is not an expression of battle… it as an expression of life.”

Zuko opened his mouth to say something caustic, then shut it, thinking. He had used his fire bending
to boil water, to keep himself warm, to heat his family’s tent, and to start any number of cooking fires. Yes, firebending wasn’t always about defeating an opponent. It was a tool. It was part of him, like his heartbeat was a part of him.

Though he never had to dance to do any of it.

“Take the first position,” Iroh said. “We will work through the first three moves today, without fire.”

“This better teach me really good firebending,” Zuko grumbled before he copied Iroh’s moments; standing on one leg and shrugging out his arms to the side.

OoOoO

Of course, after Iroh taught him “firebending” Zuko had to accompany him up to his cabin for lunch and Pai Sho. That was their agreement.

This being Iroh’s ship, lunch was excellent. Pai Sho, on the other hand, was awful.

It was a tile game played on a board which held the place of honor in the middle of Iroh’s quarters. Each category of tile—Fire, Water, Earth, and Air—moved differently. The wheel and flower tiles also had their own sets of rules. Out of these, the White Lotus was the weakest unless it was set in the middle space where it became almost unbeatable. There were endless permutations of attack and defense, and Iroh explained that Pai Sho masters could see lines of force on a board.

Zuko barely cared. He hated the stupid game and moved his tiles forward with gritted teeth. No matter what he did, Iroh matched him move-for-move as if to subtly remind him who was in charge here. Zuko lost every time… which made him hate resent the game more.

“An unusual strategy,” Iroh commented. “You have built a strong defense, Prince Zuko, but the air tile is not suitable for such an attack.” To demonstrate, he took one of Zuko’s air tiles with an earth tile that Zuko hadn’t even realized was within striking distance. (Earth had the power to borrow underneath a defensive line of other tiles.)

Zuko felt like upending the board. Or maybe just setting fire to it.

“This game is ridiculous!” he huffed.

As usual, Iroh was unmoved by Zuko’s irritation. “Pai Sho teaches you to think strategically, which you will need as Fire Lord.”

“I’m not going to be Fire Lord,” Zuko snapped, pushing forward a jasmine tile without a plan. He just wanted this game to end, even if he had to suicide all his tiles to do it.

Iroh was unperturbed. “It is your birthright, whether you wish to accept it or not.”

Zuko glared across the board. “Have your own kids, then. You like to… go dancing.”
“I am much too old to start another family, and there is no telling if a future child will have the temperament to lead. Princess Azula, for example.” Iroh’s smile was a small, crooked thing. “You are my heir, Zuko. There can be no one else.”

Azula.

Zuko bit back a shudder. His own fractured memories of her aside, he’d had heard more horror stories about her from Hana and Eiko. Apparently, none of the Princess’s servants lasted long. For various reasons.

But that didn’t change the fact Zuko did not want to be Iroh’s heir. They’d had this argument before, and Zuko went back to it, instinctively using his defense as offense. “Fine. If you make me Fire Lord, I’ll just undo everything the Fire Nation has done over the last one-hundred years. That will be my strategy.” He shoved a fire tile in the corner of the board, out of the way of the main play.

“That is absurd.” Iroh leaned back in his chair to regard Zuko. “But if you insist, Nephew, let us follow this thought experiment: How would you, as Fire Lord, end the war?”

“What do you mean?” Zuko asked, looking up, startled. “I’d pull the troops out of the Earth Kingdom and Water Tribe waters, and stop all hostilities. I’d make it my first order,” he added out of spite.

“A most decisive first order.” Iroh’s said mildly. “What of the Fire Nation factories set up to build machines for war, and the entire villages that support them? Will you shut them down?”

“Yes!”

“And when your people are out of work along with the troops you have now conveniently ordered back from the field, do you then imagine there will be enough food to go around?” For the first time that day, Iroh’s voice hardened. “When famine sweeps the land, when you are looking at the bloated stomachs of your subjects, or Agni forbid, dead children, what will you then do as Fire Lord? Will you see your people through the crisis you created? Or would have already abandoned a nation of your own to run back to the Water Tribe?”

“I…” Zuko looked away from Iroh’s eyes. “I don’t know, but Iroh… people are getting killed by the war right now. I have to stop it.”

“I see,” Iroh said. Then, unexpectedly, he changed topics. “What do you think of the Fire Nation Oath? You must have seen the crew reciting it in the mornings.”

“I think it’s stupid,” he grumbled.

“This is the Fire Nation Oath, Nephew. Every morning they rise and pledge the efforts of their day to the welfare of their country. In return, the Fire Lord’s most sacred duty is to protect them.” He paused. “Did you know your friend Eiko left home to serve in the navy at only fourteen-years-old?”

“He’s not my friend,” Zuko said and felt a twinge in his heart that told him he might be lying.

“Ah, so you spend hours in the library discussing star charts with him because he’s not your friend.”

Zuko shut his eyes, feeling like he had fallen into in a verbal game of Pai Sho. Iroh had him boxed in at every corner.
Iroh continued. “The standard age for conscription is sixteen. Ensign Eiko joined the service several years early because his nation could use his sharp mind. Ensign Hana has a sick mother at home, and could have deferred but she felt it was her duty to serve. As for Ensign Renzin… he is from a prominent noble family with many prospects at his fingertips. He was rich enough to defer and could have lived a life of idleness and luxury, but he chose to enlist in the war. Not as an officer, but as a commoner where his firebending could do the most good.”

Zuko shook his head. He didn’t want to hear this. He didn’t want to understand the people who were his enemy. “This war is evil and wrong. It needs to be stopped, Iroh.”

“Well tell me how, Prince Zuko.” Iroh held up a hand as if to forestall him. “Without destroying the Fire Nation in the process.”

With a sinking feeling, Zuko realized he didn’t have an answer. He’d always assumed ending the war was as easy as stopping the Fire Nation. He had never given one second’s thought to the aftermath. He didn’t think Katara, Sokka, or Aang had ever thought about it, either.

They never imagined the Fire Nation economy depended on war, and what would happen once that stopped.

“I… I don’t know,” Zuko admitted.

Sitting back, Iroh gestured to the Pai Sho board. “Then, let us play. I find Pai Sho is excellent for clarifying the mind.”

Zuko stared at the board and made a few moves without really paying much attention. His thoughts were elsewhere.

“Retraining,” he blurted. “Reparation.”

“Excuse me?” Iroh asked.

“You asked about the factories, before. Well… the Fire Nation has destroyed large amounts of the Earth Kingdom’s infrastructure. The cities, the roads, and bridges,” Zuko said, feeling out the words as he spoke. The seed of the idea that had just taken root in his mind. “You could change the output of the factories and… and retrain the workers. Instead of ships and war machines, the Fire Nation could build… technology. Rebuilding projects.”

“Such a change would take time and a large amount of the palace coffers.”

Zuko shrugged. “I’m sure the Fire Lord has coins to spare.”

Iroh sipped his tea without comment. “The Earth Kingdom would reject any offer to rebuild. They would see it as an economic invasion instead of a military one.”

“The Southern Water Tribe would want to rebuild,” Zuko said, firmly. “The Fire Nation destroyed the southern cities, and good metal lasts through the summer thaws, when ice melts and wood rots.” The poles of his family’s tent were braced with metal, scavenged from the abandoned Fire Nation ship a few miles from the village. They were a valued possession.

“The Water Tribes both hate and distrust us,” Iroh said.

“They’d listen to me if I’m Fire Lord.” He realized what he said a moment too late. Snapping his mouth shut, Zuko stared down at the Pai Sho board. The game was not half-finished, yet he felt he had already lost.
Iroh folded his hands in his sleeves. “That… is not an unreasonable suggestion.”

He glanced up, shocked. “Then you’ll agree to stop the war?”

Iroh shook his head in answer and moved a fire tile forward into Zuko’s territory. “This is only a thought experiment, Zuko. But… the idea to restructure the factories has merit. However, there are truths about the war you have not yet realized.” His gaze went briefly distant, but before Zuko could ask he said, “To shift the Fire Nation from a nation of war to one of peace would be the work of a lifetime.”

For the first time, Zuko found himself grinning at Iroh. “I’m not afraid of work,” he said, and moved one of his water tiles to counter.

OoOoO

It annoyed Zuko that Iroh knew he spent so much time in the library, but it wasn’t like he had kept it a secret. After breakfast, he spent most mornings there.

Ensign Eiko reminded him a bit of Sokka. They had the same quick intelligence, the same love of old maps. But where his brother had a warrior’s heart thanks to living under constant threat of invasion from the Fire Nation and having to hunt to feed the tribe, Eiko was… shy and soft spoken. Shockingly so, for a firebender.

Plus, Eiko let Zuko take whatever scrolls from the library he wanted, and never questioned why Zuko constantly monitored on incoming and outgoing communications. Secretly, Zuko was desperate for any news of the Avatar or his siblings.

The message hawks turned up nothing, but his study of Fire Nation maps and sea charts… that paid off big time.

“What’s the ‘Day of Black Sun?’” Zuko asked, coming across a strange chart he had never seen before, tugged in between maps of ocean currents. He turned it around, trying to figure out if he had the orientation on the scroll correct. Why was the Fire Nation ministering the position of sun and moon?

Eiko looked up from his own reading. “You mean, the eclipse?”

“Eclipse?” Zuko repeated. It wasn’t a memory exactly, but a bone-deep sense of cold flooded through him as if his body knew something his mind didn’t.

“Haven’t you ever seen—oh.” Eiko looked briefly embarrassed as if worried he had been about to say something rude to Zuko by reminding him he grew up at the South Pole. He hastened to add, “It’s when the moon moves in front of the sun. It’s spectacular, really. Terrifying, but spectacular.”

“Terrifying? Why?”

Eiko looked surprised. “Because we can’t bend while the sun is blocked, of course.”
Zuko rocked back. “What?”

But the other boy only nodded, not misunderstanding why he was shocked, and came around the table to point at the chart. “This is the formula the Sages use to track the movement of the major celestial bodies. You can see we have every full solar eclipse tracked out decades in advance.” He pushed up his glasses. “The next one, mid-summer, is particularly unique because the Capitol City falls right in the middle of the umbra—the moon’s shadow.”

“That next Day of Black Sun comes before the comet?” Zuko realized as he stared at the dates. His unburned eye went wide and he glanced at Eiko. “Teach me how to read this.” It was the first order he intentionally gave. Luckily, Eiko was happy to comply.

When Zuko left the library later on, he had the precious eclipse chart tucked under one arm. His mind was abuzz.

Now he thought he knew why Iroh’s ship was sailing in an endless loop of the Great Eastern Current. Iroh meant to keep Zuko out here where he couldn’t escape… and where he would be safely out of the way during the Day of Black Sun.

Zuko didn’t know if he would be as affected by eclipses as other firebenders—thanks to sunless winters, he was used to surviving without. There was every chance he would still be able to bend, which would give him time to cause havoc in the Fire Nation… or escape.

No wonder Iroh wanted to keep him at sea.

Only Zuko didn’t plan on setting foot in the Fire Nation at all. He was going to find a way to get off this ship on his own.

And once he did, he would tell the whole world how vulnerable the Fire Nation was during the next eclipse.

That night, Zuko hid the scroll in the lifeboat along with his stolen supplies… and ignored the unexpected twinge in his conscience.

“It’s nerves, he told himself. Not guilt.

OoOoO

Katara found Aang sitting tucked up against Appa’s warm flank with his hands looped around his knees.

She joined him, glad to see him up and about. He had been growing steadily stronger since waking up a few days ago. The lightning had been bad, but there didn’t seem to be any lingering damage.

“We’re leaving tomorrow,” she said, “after the Northern Water Tribe launches their ships.”
He nodded, looking out to see, but didn’t say anything. She didn’t ever remember him being this quiet. It was unnerving.

Cautiously, Katara decided to probe. “I guess the plan is to find you an earthbending teacher, next.”

It worked. He flinched. “Yeah, then after that, another firebending teacher,” Aang said, uncharacteristically snappish. Then a look of horror stole over his face. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

Katara looked away. It felt as if Aang had poked a bruise on her heart—one that had been there since the Northern Water Tribe fell. “It’s fine. I know what you meant.”

His gray eyes seemed luminous in his head. “I just can’t believe Zuko’s still back at the North Pole. Isn’t there a way we can go back for him?”

“We don’t know if still he’s there for sure.” Every time she thought of her brother back in that terrible city, alone and possibly hurt, Katara experienced that same soul-deep swooping fear she’d first felt when she came across a Fire Nation man threatening her mother in her family’s tent. She felt tears form in her eyes and she blinked them away. “I’m afraid for him. For what he’s going through now….”

“Exactly, so what are we waiting for? Let’s go rescue him!”

She took a deep breath, closing her eyes. “But we can’t. Aang, we barely got out. We don’t know for sure he’s at the North Pole or in the Fire Nation right now, or…” She couldn’t say it. Arnook had tried to kill her brother, and Yue had once spoken of the northern men sealing people under the ice…

“Katara… I’m sorry, don’t cry.”

She shook her head and with an effort of waterbending, held the tears back. Wow, she didn’t even realize she could do that before. “I’m not.” She tried to smile, but it came out shaky.

Sokka came up then. He had that stupid, slightly pole-axed look which told him he’d been spending time with Yue.

“Hey Team Avatar, are you ready to leave tomorrow… What’s wrong?”

Katara looked away. “It’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing. We were talking about Zuko.” Aang turned to Sokka, clutching his head in his hands. “I’m the Avatar. If I can’t save my friend, how am I supposed to save the world? We left him behind!”

Sokka sighed and flopped down next to them, using an overturned bucket as a seat, hand’s loose between his knees. “No, buddy. You were zapped by lightning, remember? I made the call to leave him behind.”

“But I’m fine now!” Aang said, jumping to his feet with a gust of wind as if to prove it.

“And the North Pole has been taken over by Fire Nation troops,” Katara said.

Aang turned on her, shocked. “I can’t believe you of all people are okay with this.”

“I’m not. I hate it!” she snapped and lost control of her tentative grasp on waterbending. Hot tears ran down her face. “The Fire Nation took away my mother, and they might have… have…” She couldn’t say it and turned away, bitter. “I’ll never forgive them.”
Sokka spoke up. “If Zuko’s with the Fire Nation, he’s safe.

“What do you mean?” Aang asked.

Sokka looked like he was about to say something, then broke off, shaking his head. “It’s just a feeling.”

Aang glanced at Katara who narrowed her eyes. Sokka wasn’t looking at any of them. He’d taken out his boomerang and was pretending to examine at the blade for flaws.

“Sokka,” Katara said sharply. “What aren’t you telling us?”

He let out a long sigh. “Okay, fine. There’s something I’ve… sorta been keeping to myself.” He hesitated. “Remember back at the Hei Bai forest when I got kidnapped by that monster?”

“He wasn’t a monster,” Aang said automatically. “Just really angry spirit. He’s nice once you get to know him.”

“You went into the spirit world,” Katara said, pulling the conversation back on track.

“Yeah, I told you guys I didn’t remember any of it, but that wasn’t the truth. I just didn’t want to talk about it.”

Aang’s eyes went wide. “Okay…?”

Sokka held up his hands in a shrug. “When I was there, I met someone who said he was my spiritual guide, and he told me someday I would have to make a hard choice. He didn’t tell me about what would happen at the North Pole, exactly,” he added quickly, “Just that I would have to choose between the safety of my family and… and doing the right thing.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Katara said. “Keeping your family safe is the right thing.”

“Is it?” Sokka asked, standing. “Okay, what if we stayed and got Zuko out, but Aang was captured? Or… or it took too long to heal him. Then, poof! There goes the one hope the world has left. That’s not right.”

Katara looked down. Sokka had just said what she couldn’t. And deep down, a part of her knew he was correct.

Aang looked stricken. “This is my fault.”

“You’re the Avatar, and this is war. Everyone knows that. Zuko knows that, too.” Sokka took another deep breath. “And Iroh… really cares for Zuko. I saw that in the spirit world, too.”

“Iroh?” Katara scoffed. “Sokka, he chased us all around the world.”

“I didn’t say he wasn’t messed up. He’s still Fire Nation! But he’ll keep Zuko safe if he can.”

Katara regarded her brother for a silent moment. She didn’t like the fact he had been keeping secrets from them all. Not about something this big.

Would it have changed anything if I knew ahead of time? she wondered, and had to admit… probably not.

“Did your ‘spirit guide’ tell you anything else?”
“No, but he was Fire Nation so I wasn’t sure if I should believe him.”

“Fire Nation?” Katara repeated, surprised out of her anger.

“I know, right? I thought you were supposed to get your own ancestors.” Sokka sighed dramatically. “So unfair.”

Both turned to Aang, who shrugged. “Mine is Roku, and he’s my past life.” Then Aang turned away, downcast. “I still don’t like this,” he muttered. Katara had rarely seen him honestly upset. His expression reminded her of storm clouds.

“I don’t either.” Katara said. She forced herself to say the next words, and to keep them upbeat, even though they tasted bitter. “But the best way we can help Zuko now is by stopping the Fire Nation. And the best way to do that is to find you an earthbending teacher.”

“I guess.” Aang didn’t sound very enthusiastic. Katara put her hand on his shoulder. He dredged up a smile for her. “It will be fun to learn how to bend rocks.”

“So you're going to learn how to throw big rocks at the Fire Lord?” Sokka mused. “I am all about that.”

OoOoO

Zuko was seriously regretting his choices. Not that he had many, stuck on this ship in the Great Eastern Current, but…

“When,” he grit out, and he thought he was doing well with his temper until he looked down to see smoke rising from his clenched fists, “are you going to allow me to work with fire with these supposed firebending forms?”

They had been practicing for days and Iroh had not moved on from that goofy dance, choosing instead to drill Zuko in breathing basic techniques and how one should exhale and inhale (from the sea of chi in the stomach, not from the lungs) while shifting in and out of each Dancing Dragon form.

And of course, they practiced each movement cold, without a hint of a spark allowed.

The prince regarded him with that mild, yet steel-strong look in his amber eyes. “When I am satisfied with your progress, Nephew. You copy the moves, but I fear you do not feel them.”

“What does that supposed to mean?” Zuko snapped. The smoke between his fingers had become a shower of sparks which sizzled to the deck.

Iroh looked pointedly at the sparks, and Zuko clenched his teeth. With a great effort of will (and yes, the stupid, stupid breathing techniques) he reigned the firebending back.
Iroh glanced up to the sun, which had begun to sink in the afternoon. “Perhaps it is time for a break. Let us refresh our spirits with tea.”

Iroh’s lessons were difficult and frustrating and riddled with obscure sayings, and Zuko was sick of tea and Pai Sho, but the conversation… that was one small spot he felt he was making progress.

As Zuko was getting his own tiles handed back to him in Pai Sho, he would discuss with the old prince about how to go about ending the war. Iroh still called it a thought experiment, and would raise ten objections to every new idea Zuko brought up… but Zuko thought he was wearing him down.

“Fine,” Zuko said. “I have a few new ideas about managing taxes after the war,” he said. That had been a point Iroh had raised yesterday. Reparation and reconstruction of the other nations would cost money, and not all of it could come from the Fire Lord’s own coffers.

Zuko’s plan of attack today was to talk about raising a basic tariff on goods coming into the Fire Nation from the Earth Kingdom. If merchants wanted to sell to the newly peaceful country who would be hungry for good they’d gotten used to in the Earth Kingdom, they would have to pay for the luxury. Those funds could be funneled back to their countries in the form of rebuilding.

This was a different kind of sparring. One that, to his surprise, he found interesting. The great map that dominated Iroh’s quarters now had pieces of paper, tacked notes along different points, including ancient trade routes before the war. The foundation of Zuko’s plans hinged on reestablish those. The Fire Nation had its own wealth—a large part of the citizenry used to be made up of craftsmen. Bringing art, joy, and passion back to the Fire Nation would be good for the entire world.

Zuko did not want to be Fire Lord, but he knew that if he kept this up, he had a chance at convincing Iroh that ending the war was better for the Fire Nation than continuing.

At least, it helped pass the time.

Once Zuko stepped into Iroh’s quarters, following the prince, he heard a rush of feathers at the window. A message hawk had landed in an open porthole instead of the communications tower.

It had the royal crest on its hood.

“A message from the palace?” Iroh said and crossed the room to remove the scroll from the tube.

He read it and staggered in place.

“Iroh!” In a moment, Zuko was at his side, a hand under the older man’s arm to keep him up. “What is it?”

The prince did not reply, but he had gone bone white. Zuko led him to the nearest chair. By the time he sat, Iroh seemed to have recovered himself.

“Thank you, Nephew.”

“Do you want me to call for a healer?”

Iroh shook his head and looked down at the scroll. “Your grandfather, Fire Lord Azulon, is dead.”
Zuko had seen funerals of the Water Tribe. One of the first things he remembered after he came to the tribe was watching the men lay Nunka to rest.

Fire Nation funerals were conducted differently. As the official announcement was made, the flags are lowered at half mast and the crew was dismissed from non-essential duties.

Zuko, too, was dismissed for the day so that Iroh could speak to his senior bridge crew.

Loud, bright firecrackers were set off on the hour in order to chase the old Fire Lord’s spirit from this world into the next. Fire Sage Lin Yun took a position at the very bow of the ship and burned thick incense which rolled over the rest of the deck in waves.

As Zuko walked through the ship he saw honest tears in many eyes for a man they’ve never met in person before.

He didn’t know how he felt. A little stunned, maybe. Worried about the future and what this meant for the Water Tribe, but personally….? Fire Lord Azulon was an enemy of his people, and now that enemy was gone. He only felt sorry for Iroh for losing a father.

*Does that make me a bad person?* he wondered, shying away from an officer who walked by, suspiciously red-eyed.

Eiko and Hana came up to him, quiet and somber. Even Renzin looked upset.

“I’m sorry about your grandfather,” Hana said. From the tears in her eyes, she meant it.

“Don’t. It… it’s fine.” Zuko looked away, feeling awkward in the face of their honest grief. “We weren’t close.”

Renzin dared to clap a hand on his shoulder and leaned in close. “I felt the same way when my great uncle died,” he said in a quiet undertone. “My mom was a mess, and most of my worry was for her, you know?”

Zuko thought of Iroh’s reaction and suppressed a new surge of worry for him. The few times he had seen Iroh around the ship since he’d received the news he had that stupid lemur parched on his shoulders, petting it as if for comfort.

Should Zuko go and offer condolences for losing his father? Would Iroh know they were hollow?

It was easy to forget, sometimes, he was Iroh’s prisoner here.

“Yeah,” Zuko said. “I know what you mean.”

Renzin straightened and glanced around nervously as if remembering he was being too familiar with his prince. “But if you ever need to… uh, fire blast something…” He awkwardly said. “I brought fireworks up from the hold.”
“Yes,” Zuko said at once, relieved. Blowing something up suited his mood perfectly right now.

Renzin had actually managed to snag several boxes of extra fireworks which were supposed to be saved for the high holidays. The aft deck was clear of cloying incense. They all took turns setting the fuses alight and launched the fireworks into the sky. Even in the daylight, the fireworks exploded in shades of cherry red, brilliant orange, hot white and bright blue. It was loud and chaotic and…fun.

Renzin, being a complete show-off, grew tired of lighting the fuses the normal way and tried to set one especially large firework ablaze with a pulse of his own fire. He missed and the thing exploded all over the deck, sending a shower of hot sparks everywhere.

All four being firebenders, they were unburned by the blast, but had to rush around, cursing and laughing, putting out spot-fires all over the deck.

“Oh! Oh!” Hana yelped, practically dancing in place and pointing. “A hot spark fell in one of the firework boxes.”

Zuko exchanged horrified glances with Eiko and Renzin.

“Douse it, then!” Zuko yelled.

“I-I can’t!”

The half-full box of fireworks was primed to explode at any second. Hana was trying to put it out with firebending, but was giggling in a mix of hysteria and adrenaline. She had a really contagious laugh, which was terrible for breath control.

So, half-laughing along with her, half-swearin, all four helped kick the box over the deck into the sea. It exploded right before it hit the water.

“Impressive,” Eiko muttered as flaming rockets and stars shot from the sea and blossomed overhead.

Hana punched Renzin on the shoulder. “You idiot showoff!” But she was grinning.

“What?” he asked. “I meant to do that!”

“You meant to almost blow us all to Agni?” Zuko asked, needling the other boy.

Before Renzin could reply, a sharp voice called out, “What is going on, here?”

They turned with identical looks of guilt.

Fire Sage Lin Yun stood on the deck, looking like a sour, withered old apple.

“We were, uh…” Renzin started.

“We’re honoring my grandfather,” Zuko blurted, inwardly cringing when the skeletal man’s attention turned his way. He was such a bad liar. “Um, to, lead his spirit…”

“Chase his spirit,” Eiko corrected from the side of his mouth.

Zuko nodded. “Yes, chase his spirit to the spirit world. And I figured, the more fireworks the better… because, um, he’s Fire Lord… and he needs a lot?”

Behind him, out to sea, a late firing rocket sizzled and splashed down.
Sage Lin Yun raised an eyebrow. “I see,” he said after a long, pointed moment. Then, to everyone’s surprise, he then bowed. “Prince Zuko.” Straightening, he nodded curtly to the others. “Ensigns, carry on.”

All breathed a sigh of relief as he left.

“Ohhh, that man gives me the creeps,” Hana said and then looked guiltily at Zuko as if afraid she’d spoken out of turn.

Zuko shrugged, remembering how the creepy man had come into his room the first day on the ship. “You’re not the only one.”

“Ha! I thought we were going to get kitchen clean-up duty for sure,” Renzin crowed. “It’s damn useful, hanging out with a prince.”

For the first time he could remember, he didn’t feel like correcting someone about his status. “Gee, thanks Renzin,” he muttered sarcastically.

Eiko was frowning at the other boxes Renzin had brought up. “What do we do with the rest of these?”

“Set them off, of course. With dignity,” Hana added with a significant look at Renzin.

Renzin made a face at her.

Zuko had no memories of his grandfather, and no love for him considering the destruction and pain he had wrought on the world, but watching the bright and colorful explosions, Zuko sent up a quick thought hoping that wherever the man was now, he was at least at peace.

__________________

In the evening, the crew gathered at the bow of the ship. Iroh stood at the front, garbed in dress robes that made him look both stately and powerful.

Spotting Zuko, Lieutenant Izhar gestured for him to stand in the front of the crew on Iroh’s left side. The other officers ranged beyond them.

Zuko glanced out of the corner of his eye at Iroh. His expression was closed off, impossible to read.

*I should say something,* he thought again, though he wasn’t sure what. His own feelings about Azulon were… mixed, to stay the least.

In the end, he kept silent.

Fire Sage Lin Yun led the service, speaking of Azulon’s life, his many accomplishments.
The war he waged on the world. The lives he destroyed, Zuko added quietly in his mind.

At the end, Lieutenant Izhar stepped up and called out, “Fire Lord Azulon is dead. Long live Fire Lord Iroh!”

“Long live Fire Lord Iroh!” the crew echoed back in one voice.

It was a good thing Zuko wasn’t the type to go weak at the knees in shock. Instead, he stood there, rooted to the ground.

Iroh is Fire Lord.

It was one thing to know, in a distant sort of way, that his uncle was next in line to the throne. It was quite another to see the crew on the ship now chanting his name.

... And that means I am the Crown prince.

The fiercely proud Water Tribe part of him wanted to gnash his teeth. They can call me whatever they want, I’m not Fire Nation.

But a smaller, subversive thought crept in: But if I was Crown Prince, I could make a real difference. I could help stop the war.

Iroh, who had been silent to this point, raised a hand. An instant hush fell over the crowd.

“Thank you,” he said, “But it is inappropriate for me to claim the title until my coronation. Tomorrow, at Agni’s first light, we will sail directly to the Fire Nation.” Now, for the first time since receiving the message hawk, his eyes landed on Zuko. “We are going home.”

Home.

Zuko glanced from him to the empty, starlit sky. This would be a great time for a bison to show up.

No such luck.

He was not going to the Fire Palace. As soon as he was certain they were finally out of the Eastern Current, he was making his escape.

OoOoO

A clear cold sun sparkled off of dozens of small blue-sailed ships as the Northern Water Tribe refugees sailed out of Chameleon bay and began their journey to the South Pole. As long as they avoided the Great Eastern Current — and any Water Tribe man worth his salt could do that — the ships should easily be able to make the voyage.

All of the female waterbenders had agreed to accompany the little flotilla south for safety and
security, but several had already declared they would return to help with the war, no matter what their families said.

The new life and blood would be great for the Southern Tribe. Gran-Gran Kanna was going to have a field day organizing new hands. The South Pole was plentiful enough to provide for all as their main problem over the last couple years had been finding enough hands to help with the harvests.

Most of the Northern men, of course, stayed aboard one of Hakoda’s five ships. Their help was needed in the war.

All good things, but Sokka’s heart felt heavy as stone as he watched the last of the ships, Yue on them, tack out to the horizon. He raised his hand in a final wave and thought he saw her do the same before her ship receded out of view.

With a loud sigh, he turned around to see Katara watching him. She had one eyebrow raised, a smirk on her face.

“So,” she said, “when you go back home, will you be bringing an engagement necklace, or…”

Sokka felt blood rush to his face. “No! I mean, maybe but not now. Besides, I already gave her a rock.”

“A… rock.”

“It was really romantic!” he said but at that moment it felt really lame.

“You guys ready to go?” Aang asked from aboard Appa. He was much more cheerful in the light of a new day—or, at least pretending to be—with an adventure in the Earth Kingdom on the horizon.

“Not without saying goodbye, I hope,” Hakoda said as he joined them, grinning broadly.

“Where exactly in the Earth Kingdom are we going?” Katara asked.

“That’s a good question. We need to find Aang an earthbending teacher.” Sokka pulled out a map he always kept within easy reach and spread it out on the deck before them. “There’s no earthbending schools or anything marked out.”

“Monk Gyatso said Ba Sing Se had a university,” Aang said.

Sokka’s eyes darted to the circular representation. The circular area marked out as Ba Sing Se was huge, almost a quarter of the Earth Kingdom. “It says that the walls are almost impenetrable.”

“Too bad it’s not called Na Sing Se,” Hakoda commented.

Katara rolled her eyes. “We probably don’t want to advertise where we are. The Fire Nation has to be looking, so we should avoid large cities.”

“That rules out Omashu and Gaoling,” Sokka said.

Then (mostly because Hakoda was watching and probably expecting him to lead) he pointed to a small cluster of towns close to Ba Sing Se, but not too close. “We’ll aim for these towns here, near the dry plains. We’ll have to fly over a swampy part, but Appa’s up to it.”
Aang brightened. “Ohh, that brings us close to the Si Wong Desert. We could make a stop at the Misty Palms Oasis. It’s a great vacation spot…” He quailed under Hakoda’s raised eyebrow. “Or… not.” He scratched the back of his head sheepishly. “Save the vacation for after we stop the Fire Lord. Got it.”

“Dusty, anonymous Earth Kingdom town it is,” Sokka declared in satisfaction, rolling up his map.

He stood up and realized that this was it. This was really goodbye. Katara was already hugging their father—whatever beef she had with him, they’d seemed to have worked out between them.

Then it was Sokka’s turn. Again, Hakoda clasped forearms with his oldest son, man to man.

“Keep your sister and the Avatar safe. Send word if you can.”

“I will,” Sokka said.

It was a promise.

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The day after Fire Lord Azulon’s memorial service, Zuko was heading from his room to the library. By his estimation, they were smack in the middle of the Eastern Current, but two more day’s journey at the current speed would see them out of it. He wanted to check his star readings against a newer chart.

Suddenly, the low tone of a gong rang through the ship. All around Zuko, the crew stopped to listen. It took him a moment to realize that the gong was in fact an alarm, not too different from the type of alarm that the Water Tribe used.

Instantly, without having to be told, crew members to different positions around the ship. They all knew what this was, without having to be told.

Zuko’s heart picked up pace. Had someone spotted Appa? His head whipped back and forth, scanning the empty blue skies. Not a cloud to be seen. No sign of a sky bison, either.

Zuko caught movement on the top deck—Iroh’s red and black robes flashed by as he crossed the bridge. Well, Zuko would just have to find out what was going on, himself.

Taking the stairs two at a time, he arrived at the top deck to see Iroh in discussion with two of his top lieutenants.

Iroh turned to him.

"I was just about to send for you, Nephew." His face was devoid of smiles. Looking at him now, Zuko realized it had been quite some time seen this particular brand of hardness behind Iroh's amber eyes.

"What's going on?" Zuko asked.

In reply, Iroh handed him a spyglass. The men of the Water Tribe had something very much like it,
though their spyglasses were aged from well before the war, and despite good care had scratches on the lens. Iroh’s was brand new without so much as a smudge. Only the best for the Fire Nation.

Zuko put the spyglass to his good eye and pointed it to the direction were the lieutenants were staring.

Could it be Aang and his siblings after all? No, the lieutenant’s attention was to the horizon, not to the sky. Zuko gazed out, then adjusted the focus when he realized it was blurrier than it should be.

Three Fire Nation ships came into view.

They were destroyers, all three larger than the ship he was on now.

His heart dropped. For a bare moment, he had hoped… Maybe it would be the Water Tribe. Someone to save him.

Zuko scowled and lowered the spyglass. "Friends of yours?” he asked, looking to Iroh.

But Iroh’s hard gaze did not change. The lieutenants were staring out, blank faced, as well.

Zuko caught one of them mutter, “Has to be a delegation to escort the new Fire Lord to the capitol harbor.”

"Look at the flags,” Iroh said to Zuko. “What do you see?”

Zuko raised the spyglass again. The flags?

"That's… The Fire Lord's flag,” he said, surprised that he recognized it on the oncoming destroyers; the three-point flame against a field of red.

Lowering the spyglass, he turned to stare at Iroh's own flag—the crown prince’s flag of a single point flame with against an orange banner.

Zuko looked at Iroh. "How can those ships be sailing under the Fire Lord’s flag? Azulon is dead.”

"So he is,” Iroh said. There was a weighty pause as he tucked his hands in his wide sleeves. "It seems these ships were dispatched to meet us, and are not aware of the current situation. I'm afraid things are about to become complicated, politically, within the royal court.”

"I don't understand —” Zuko started.

"It is time for you to leave." Zuko stared at Iroh, unsure he had heard that correctly. "What?"

"Take the lifeboat with the supplies that you think I don't know about." Iroh smile was a calm, small thing. "And go."

"What?" Zuko repeated, feeling stupid, like he had lost a step somewhere. “Wait—”

"Have you grown to enjoy the Fire Nation so much in such a short amount of time?"

"No! It’s just—“ It hurt to say the next few words. He hated admitting to failure. “We’re in the middle of the Great Eastern Current. I’ll have no chance of escaping it in a lifeboat.”

Iroh gave him a long, steady look that was full of meaning Zuko couldn't quite decipher. "Are you
Water Tribe, or not?"

The words were the slap in the face that he needed. Iroh was giving him and out. *Telling* him to leave. Why was he hesitating? Had he been turned against his own tribe that quickly?

But this whole situation smelled like week-old seal blubber. Something wasn’t right.

For the hundredth, for the thousand time, Zuko wished that Sokka were there with him. He had plans within plans. Zuko only had his instincts, and on this ship… he wasn’t quite sure he should trust himself anymore.

*I should leave before he changes his mind,* he thought. So, with a tight nod, Zuko turned to go, and was stopped by Iroh’s voice.

"Just a moment, Nephew."

He turned reluctantly back with that old familiar feeling of expecting the trap to be sprung. But Iroh had only lifted his arm; the one with the white and brown lemur on his shoulder. "Take Momo with you."

"Your pet?" Zuko eyed the thing warily. Had Iroh trained the animal to report back to him, somehow?

Iroh smile was a touch soft. “I imagine my next few weeks will be busy. I won't have time to take care of him."

Zuko cast another glance out to sea. The ships were growing pinpricks of dark among the horizon. He had some minutes left, but not long.

“Fine, I’ll take care of him.”

At an unseen signal, the lemur jumped from Iroh's shoulder to his own.

Zuko didn't know why he did what he did next. Only that this was a goodbye, and it felt right.

"Thank you… Uncle," he said, using the term for the first time with purpose. Then, he bowed Fire Nation style with one hand upraised to shape the flame over his clenched fist.

With the lemur on his shoulder, Zuko quickly turned and left for his quarters where he had stashed more scrolls and an extra bags of supplies.

OoOoO

Prince Iroh waited until his nephew was out of sight and well down the hall before he turned to his lieutenants. "Load the trebuchets," he said. "And prepare the crew for battle."
Most of the crew were so busy attending to their stations during the alarm bell that Zuko only got glances as he headed down to the life raft, his bag of supplies and maps on one shoulder, Iroh’s lemur clutching to his other.

The crew saw him as their prince, and no one questioned him.

He *hated* the part of him that felt guilty, as if he was doing something wrong. He would have escaped weeks ago if not for the Eastern Current—he *should* have tried harder to make his escape earlier—and the last thing he wanted was to stick around with even more Fire Nation ships bearing down on them all.

*What if my blood father is on one of those ships?*

The thought made him pause for a bare second. An indefinable, treacherous feeling of wonder tinged with confusion and... pure, undiluted terror.

Shuddering, he forced it away.

He’d taken this path through the lower decks many times, while subtly transferring supplies to the lifeboat he’d been preparing. It took no time at all to get there now.

Someone on deck finally took notice. Zuko thought he heard a shout of alarm, but adrenaline buzzed in his veins. He ignored it and jumped.

He hit the lifeboat, flipped back the coverlet with a toe of one pointy boot, and then finally reached down and pulled the pin from the mooring chain.

Momo shrieked in his ear as the lifeboat fell—it was only six feet or so—and hit the waves with a *sploosh* that knocked Zuko off his feet.

In a moment he was up again, using one of the ores to push the boat away from the hull of the ship. The waves were high and there was every danger he could crash against it again.

There were a few hair-raising moments when the vast battleship seemed to suck the lifeboat back in, but the ship was coming about to port and soon the bulk of had passed by. Then the lifeboat rocked as he hit the enormous wake powered by the coal ship’s propellers.

If there were any more alarmed shouts from the ship, Zuko was too far away to hear them.

He’d never gotten the chance to go ice dodging, but he, Sokka, and Katara had powered canoes and small skiffs in the summer around the waters of the village. When he was out of view of the ships, he would raise the lifeboat’s sail and, using the stars as a guide, plot the closest course to the Earth Kingdom.

Though how he was going to escape the pull of the Great Eastern Current, he had no idea.
The Fire Nation coal-powered ships were the fastest thing on the sea (even Zuko had to grudgingly admit it). Iroh's ship chugged away, and the current pulled his boat the other direction. The only thing Zuko could do was watch.

The three destroyers drew closer to Iroh's ship. Zuko hoped their little confab would take awhile. He had learned some of how the Fire Lord ran his government during those long hours of Pai Sho. The Fire Sages were in charge of the spiritual instruction of the element of fire and officiated important functions—including installing the new Fire Lord. Perhaps some eager high Sage wished to coronate Iroh as Fire Lord right there, or make sure he had a proper escort out of enemy waters and safe into Fire Nation territory.

Whatever. The more time they took, the more chance Zuko had at a clean escape.

Zuko’s tiny lifeboat drifted further away. He watched as the three destroyers drew closer, telling himself he was doing the right thing while a heavy sense of dread grew in his heart.

Then, suddenly a line of fire—a tar covered bolder—rose from the lead destroyer, heading right for Iroh’s battle cruiser.

Zuko sat up straight. "What—?"

It struck Iroh's ship dead on, and only moment's later, Iroh's had returned fire with a flaming boulder of their own. But the three enemy ships were reloading and firing off volley after volley.

They were trying to sink Iroh’s ship.

The sea swells increased, and with the distance Zuko had to stand to watch what was going on. Still, he missed the fatal shot. His lifeboat dipped in between two waves, and Iroh’s ship was trailing smoke…

When his boat rose on the next swell, Iroh’s ship had cracked in two.

Momo gave a low, mournful cry in Zuko's ear.

"No," Zuko said, then louder, yelling against the uncaring sea-salt wind. "No!"

Eito, Hana, and Renzin…

And Iroh... he had known what was coming.

Zuko wanted to scream, he wanted to blast fire, vent his despair into the sky.

The Great Eastern Current was sweeping him away. Even if he had the wind—he didn't—he couldn't open sail and tack back to that position. There was nothing he could do.

And Iroh… Iroh had just saved Zuko’s life, likely at the cost of his own. Someone had to stay as bait.

His heart had guessed the truth, but his mind had not wanted to acknowledge it… because to stay with Iroh would have been a betrayal to his tribe.

These other ships had been flying the Fire Lord's flag, which they could only do if they were under the Fire Lord’s direct command. Azulon was dead, which meant someone else of the royal line—it could only be Prince Ozai, Zuko's blood father—had taken the crown and assassinated Iroh.

Had Ozai known Zuko was supposed to be on that ship, too?
Of course he had.

Zuko sank down, his head falling into his hands.
Another great one by GreenAppleFreak. This is called 'Swimming Dragon Style'. I think you will all find it fitting for this chapter...
“All this time, I thought firebending was destruction. Since I hurt Katara, I've been too afraid and hesitant. But now I know what it really is ... it's energy, and life.”

~ Aang, The Firebending Masters

Previously:

Outside, a winter blizzard howled, driving stinging snow and wind against the walls of the reinforced ice and animal tent. Inside, a fire crackled and the air was warm and full of the smell of Gran-Gran’s cooking.

Zuko tried not to shiver as he inched closer to the fire. It was his second polar winter with the tribe; a few weeks into the months-long darkness. He hadn’t lost his firebending yet, but without the sun, his inner flame felt weaker and he grew tired and cold more easily. The solstice was coming.

But he was Water Tribe. He would change along with the seasons.

Right now, he was worried about none of that. Feeling full from dinner, he sat with baited breath along with Katara and Sokka.

Hakoda sat across the fire from them, legs crossed traditional style, with his palms resting on his knees. The pose of a Chief who was about to Speak.

This always meant a good story was coming.

“It is said,” Hakoda began to his children, “the Great Eastern Current is the running pulse of the ocean. Picture a wide circle, stretching from our home all the way up to the North Pole. One side skirts the length of the great Earth Kingdom. The other, out to the Western sea.” He drew a large circle in the air. “The Great Current is wider than the largest river you can imagine, so treacherous it can move your boat without you realizing it, until you look up one day to find you have been swept in the wrong direction.”

“It is said,” Hakoda continued, “that the middle of this current, the heart, is a dead zone where waters do not move, and winds do not blow. There are ghost ships that have drifted for centuries, and they are populated by bones and the ghosts of those who could not escape.”

Hakoda fell silent, then, inviting questions.

Sokka, of course, was the one to speak up. “But I heard you say our ships use the Great Current all the time.”

“Unless there is a great emergency we sail the outer edges, only,” Hakoda corrected patiently. “The
swift waters allow us to move from North to South and back again, faster than we could at full sail. Our large ships may cross the northern and southern boundaries, if the captain is wise, and his crew is strong, but never through the heart. And never alone.

“No one can great through the heart?” Katara asked. “Not even waterbenders?”

Hakoda smiled at his daughter. “It is said that only a true Water Tribesman can cross through the heart of the Great Current and out again. In in ancient times, well before the war, when a chief died with no one to take his place, men would cross the Great Current to prove they were favored by the spirits. Perhaps one in one-hundred would make it, and that man would always become one of the Great Chiefs.”

Katara shivered and pressed against Zuko, clearly disturbed about how many skeletons must be drifting around in the heart of the current.

“Who was the last to cross through the heart?” Zuko asked, wondering if Hakoda himself had done it. Surely, he was one of the greats...

His father smiled. “It is said to have been Avatar Kuruk.” He closed his eyes briefly, recalling the tale. “His spouse was taken from him by the spirits for his transgressions. Afterwards, the skies around the world wept for weeks and Kuruk was in such despair that even the power to bend had left him. He set out alone in a canoe to cross the Great Eastern Current. Many believed he did not plan on returning to this world. In fact, he was gone for an entire year and one day. It is said he had many adventures, battled monsters bigger than the length of our own ships, and learned truths mortals are not allowed to know. When he appeared on the other side, his body was so thin you could see every bone, and his beard grew down to his chest. As Avatar Kuruk stepped on soil on the other side of the current, his bending returned to him.”

“What about his wife?” Katara asked.

Hakoda shook his head and said nothing.

She looked down.

“I’m gonna cross it, when I get older,” Sokka said boldly.

“Perhaps you will,” Hakoda agreed. “But it is said that the Great Eastern Current is angrier than ever. The Fire Nation cross it in their coal ships without respect—though never through the heart. They lose many men through accidents, and they do not know why. They do not know the Great Current’s secrets, and they suffer for it.”

Good, Zuko thought. Everyone knew you had to respect the sea. Fire could nip and burn you like an angry lion-dog puppy if you didn’t respect it. The ocean… the ocean would drag you down.

OoOoO

Now

OoOoO
On his third day stuck in the Great Current, Zuko found himself talking to the lemur.

“You could do something to help. Go catch a fish or something.”

Momo cocked his head and churred at him from his perch at the front of the lifeboat.

“Useless,” Zuko muttered. “You know, if we were in the South Pole, I’d hunt you.”

Momo tilted his head in the exact opposite direction, winning an unwilling smile from Zuko, before he remembered he was supposed to be fighting for his life. He frowned again.

“Whatever,” he grumbled, and went back to rowing. The wind tended to die down mid-day, which meant hours of rowing unless he wanted to risk losing all his momentum.

The Great Eastern current ran in a circle from north to south. From his readings on the star map, Iroh’s ship had gone down on the Eastern half of the loop—the one closest to the Earth Kingdom. He had been lucky. If Zuko could just keep going that way, if the Great Current wasn’t too strong here, he might have a chance.

That’s what he told himself, at least.

He had waited until three hours after the battlecruisers had disappeared back over the horizon before he raised sail on his own lifeboat. Then, he used every trick he knew from fishing along the ice floes, trying to tack with every breath of wind. He angled the boat to cut across the pull of the current instead of battling against, like he would a strong rip-tide.

When the wind died, he rowed. Endlessly on and on. Until the muscles in his arms screamed and his back cramped up and he literally couldn’t move. Then he simply waited for the pain to fade and started working at it again.

All this, and he wasn’t sure if he made any progress at all. In the choppy waves, it was difficult to get a precise reading from the stars.

Food wasn’t an issue yet, not even when Momo seemed to eat as much as he did. Zuko had packed well. Water, though… he had maybe a week’s worth, at best.

It had taken Avatar Kuruk one year and one day to sail across the Great Eastern Current.

He would have to do better.

Gritting his teeth, Zuko rowed.
He woke the next day, not by the rays of the sun, but by something scraping against the side of his boat. Zuko sat up, dislodging the lemur which had started sleeping on his chest for warmth.

“Do you hear that?” he asked, looking around. The sun had not yet risen, showing an brighter smudge along the horizon, and the moon was not out. The only light came from the stars. They reflected against the water and bounced back up, making it look like he was surrounded by diamonds.

Momo chirped and flitted to the rear of the boat. Clutching the side, the animal bent and chittered at something in the water.

Cautiously, Zuko approached.

Something dark bobbed along the surface, nudging rhythmically against the side of his lifeboat. Frowning, Zuko kindled fire in his palm and bent to look.

It was a footlocker. The type he’d seen the crew on Iroh’s ship use to store their uniforms and personal belongings.

Zuko’s heart clenched and he stood. What he saw next made him want to sit down again, and bury his head in his hands. A small, childish part of him wished he were still asleep… he wished that he had a few hours more rest before he had to deal with this…

Dark pieces of wood, overturned buckets, footlockers, and other wreckage littered the water all around him. Left over debris from Iroh’s sunken ship. No doubt there were bodies there, too.

And the water was as still and smooth as glass. Zuko dipped his hand in and saw it ripple out as if he were in the middle of a pond instead of the sea.

His father’s voice came back to him from a long ago story.

*It is said that the middle of this current, the heart, is a dead zone where waters do not move, and winds do not blow…*  
Zuko grabbed his maps and compared them to the stars above. It told him what he already knew.

All his hard work had not mattered. The Great Current had pulled him into the heart, anyway.

“No,” Zuko said, looking from his map to Momo. “No, it’s not over yet.”

Tossing the star map to the side, he grabbed up the ores and started rowing.

The sun rose and there wasn’t a hint of a breeze to help him. Zuko rowed until his arms shook, until late afternoon when he simply couldn’t lift them anymore.

The sea was achingly beautiful. And dead still.

The stars came out again and told him what he already knew: He hadn’t moved an inch.

The sun rose the next day. Zuko watched it, sitting the edge of the boat, his legs dangling in the water. Occasional debris would bob by through some trick of the waters that held his own boat still. He watched it all, dully. An exhausted kind of acceptance weighed him down.

“You should fly away, Momo,” he said. “If you get up high enough, you might catch the wind. And even if you fall, it would be better than… than staying with me.”
He had a few days left on his water supply.

Soon, his little lifeboat would be one of the many ghost ships said to circle the heart. Populated by his own bones.

No one would ever know what happened to him.

*I’m going to die. Like Eiko, Hana, and Renzin… like my Uncle. He sent me away and I failed.*

There was so much he had left undone. So much he wanted to know, and wanted to do. The Water Tribe would never learn about the upcoming eclipse. He’d just have to trust that Aang would be able to stop the Fire Lord some other way…

.. And that he wouldn’t accidentally destroy the Fire Nation while doing it.

Sensing his mood, Momo crooned and crawled into his lap.

Zuko bowed his head, wrapped his arms around the lemur and brought him close. He never would have been caught dead hugging an animal for comfort if there was anyone to see. But there wasn’t.

He was utterly alone.

It was said that a true Water Tribesman was able to cross the heart of the Eastern Current, but he could not.

Now, he was going to die there.

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**OoOoO**

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“Aang!” Katara called, looking around the swamp. The thick vegetation seemed to swallow all sound. How in the world had she gotten separated from them so quickly? The boys couldn’t be far… Right? “Sokka?”

She walked forward, paused, then turned back. Maybe she should stay in place and not go wandering off.

It had all happened so quickly. The creepy swamp had drawn Aang down as if it were calling to him. Then, just when they were about to leave, a tornado had come out of nowhere—and since when did Aang, an airbending master, get bested by wind?—and they had been tossed off Appa’s back and separated from one another.

*This is ridiculous,* Katara thought, peering around again. The others couldn’t have fallen far from her.

“Sokka? Aang? Where are you?” she called.
“Katara?”

The voice that called back wasn’t Sokka or Aang, but it was familiar all the same. Breath catching, Katara peered around and saw a spot of blue between two moldy looking trees. The same shade as Zuko’s favorite parka.

“Zuko?” One hand shot up, curling around her necklace’s pendant in an unconscious motion. “Is… is that you?”

“Katara? I’m here!” Zuko’s voice sounded as frightened as she was, coming from everywhere and nowhere at once.

Forgetting her earlier decision to stay put, she darted forward. “Zuko! Where are you?”

“Katara, I’m not going to be able to come home. I’m sorry… I’m sorry…”

“No!” she yelled. Water droplets leapt from the soggy ground into her hands like reverse-rainfall. “Hold on! I’m coming!”

She rushed forward and the scrap of blue resolved itself. With a gasp, Katara realized the blue wasn’t from her brother’s jacket at all. No, it was part of a long tunic, and the person wearing it was…

It couldn’t be possible…

She had been wrong before. It wasn’t Zuko. Instead, a Water Tribe woman stood there, tall and lovely, her back to Katara.

“M-mom?” she quavered.

The person in blue didn’t react.

“Mom, it’s me! It’s Katara!” She stepped closer, but stumbled to a halt as the image resolved again.

It wasn’t her mother, or her brother. It was simply a mossy log, half cast in shadow.

Because they’re dead, came the thought. Mom and Zuko are both dead and gone. The Fire Nation took them away from me...

Katara fell to her knees, weeping.

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OoOoO

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“Stupid swamp,” Sokka muttered, slashing at the hanging mossy vines with the sharp edge of his whalebone machete. He was bruised from head to foot from falling off Appa, and both elbows stung thanks to an infestation of elbow-leeches.

“Katara!” he called. “Aang!”

Nothing.
He thought he heard a crackle of brush, a twig snapping behind him. He whipped around, but saw nothing but mucky swampland and thick fronds.

“Ookay…” he muttered, spooked. Then he turned back…

… Only to find himself standing deep within a forest of bamboo.

“Hey,” he said suspiciously, squinting around in the filtered sunlight. “I’ve been here before…”

“Hello Sokka,” said a voice right behind him.

Sokka may or may not have made an unmanly sound between a yelp and a squeak of fear. He twisted around again, and this time there definitely was someone there. Someone he recognized.

“You!” he yelled, flailing his machete at the man dressed in Fire Nation clothing. “What are you doing here—Oh. Am I in the Spirit World again?”

Lu Ten wagged his hand back and forth in approximation. “Not technically. The mystical properties of this swamp thin the separation between the real world and the spirit world. I can talk to you here, but I’m not really here.”

“Because that makes sense!” Sokka griped, then his brain kicked into gear. He was talking to his spiritual guide who probably knew all sorts of magical things. “Do you know how to get out of the swamp—No wait!” He almost smacked his forehead. “Where are Katara and Aang? Are they okay?”

Lu Ten smirked. “Yes, I know how to get out of here, and yes the others are fine. Walk with me.”

Through the mud? Sokka wanted to say, but in the way of the Spirit World, he now stood on firm soil. Okay then.

“So, you’re going to guide me out of here?” he asked, squinting.

“Among other things,” Lu Ten said calmly, turning away.

Sokka hurried to follow. “Then, can you tell me… is Zuko still alive?” He hadn’t let himself talk like that in front of Katara and Aang, but he knew that there was a good chance his brother hadn’t gotten out of the North Pole at all.

To his intense relief, Lu Ten smiled. “You were right. Prince Iroh protected him as best he could.”

Sokka sagged in relief. The gambit had worked. Then his natural suspicion raised its head.

“That’s great to hear,” —if it’s true— “but… Look, how do I know I can trust you? You’re Fire Nation, and don’t think I didn’t notice you’re wearing fancy armor. You died in the war, right?”

Lu Ten looked briefly sad. “When I was alive, I thought I was fighting for the good of the world. You wouldn’t understand, but it’s possible to be enlightened even when you’re dead. Now I know there’s hope.”

“You mean, Aang?”

“Among other things.” Lu Ten looked steadily at Sokka. “I’m here to guide you, Sokka, not hurt you. If you trust nothing else, know that I’m the side of the Avatar. Can you believe that?”

Sokka started to speak, stopped. Then held up a finger, dropped it, and sighed. “Fine. You might
have been right about the North Pole.” He gave a long suffering sigh. He was the meat and sarcasm
guy—why was he the one who kept having to deal with spirits? Wasn’t that Aang’s job? “Since
we’re here, what kind of wisdom do you have for me this time, oh spiritual guide?”

“A question, first: What are your plans now?”

“You’re supposed to be my guide. Don’t you know?”

“Have the Avatar learn earthbending and then toss large rocks at the Fire Lord?” Lu Ten raised an
eyebrow. “It’s a decent start, I guess.”

“Hey, it’s not that simple, but… Okay, yes. We’re looking for an earthbending teacher for Aang.”

Lu Ten spread his hands. “Then, my wisdom is this: The teacher you seek will be in Ba Sing Se.”
He smiled slightly. “And so will Zuko.”

Sokka jerked in place. “What? How… How did he get to Ba Sing Se?”

“He’s not there now, but I suspect he will be, later.”

“That means he escaped from the Fire Nation!” Sokka punched the air in victory, then stopped. “So,
why don’t you look happy?”

In fact, Lu Ten looked downright grave.

“The Avatar’s best chance by far to restore balance to the world is only if he meets his earthbending
master, who will be in Ba Sing Se.” If anything, Lu Ten’s troubled look deepened. “But Sokka…
you should know that once you pass beyond the stone walls, there is a very good chance you will
not leave alive.”


Lu Ten shook his head.

Sokka considered his guide’s words for a moment, swallowing fear down. “And… Katara and
Aang?”

“I’m not their spiritual guide, but I believe they’ll be in far less danger than you.”

*I’ll be in less danger than the Avatar?* Sokka thought. *What, by the ocean and moon, is in Ba Sing
Se?*

“Okay,” Sokka said. “I’ll do it.”

He had the pleasure of seeing Lu Ten look taken aback. “I expected you to be… more hesitant.”

“Look, you wouldn’t be telling about where to find my brother, and Aang’s earthbending master, if it
weren’t important. Plus you said there’s only a ‘very good chance’ I’ll die. That’s not one hundred
percent. That’s just, what? Seventy percent?”

Lu ten gave him a look.

“Eighty?” Sokka squeaked.

His guide shook his head. “Water Tribe,” he muttered with a laugh. “And I was always told the Fire
Nation were crazy.” He looked past Sokka at the forest of bamboo. “Our time is coming to a close,
Sokka. I’ve told you what I can. The exit is that way. Good luck.”

“Wait, how else hap—” He stopped. Between one blink and the next, the bamboo had faded away, replaced by mucky green swamp.

He was standing thigh-deep in muck. And… he had picked up another elbow leech.

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“Hello?” Aang called out to the swamp. “Katara? Sokka?… Guys?”

No answer.

Then, there was the sound of a light laugh.

Aang turned in place. Nearby, on a high branch of a tree, a pretty girl with dark hair and garbed in a white dress covered her mouth and giggled at him.

“Who are you?” Aang wondered.

Instead of answering, she turned and disappeared.

“Wait!” Aang gave chase, but every time he caught a glimpse of the girl in the white dress, she stayed just out of reach. Then, at last he came to a low hill.

The girl was there, and there was a winged pig beating its wings gently above. And beside her...

Aang’s mouth dropped open. “Zuko? What are you doing here?”

Zuko’s hair was much shorter than before, cut an inch from his skull, though he kept his water tribe beads. He wore emerald robes with the Earth Kingdom symbol stamped in gold on the chest.

Aang stepped forward. “I can’t believe it. Katara and Sokka are going to be so glad! I thought we left you behind!”

Zuko raised his hand in a wave. The tiny girl giggled again, and then she punched Zuko in the shoulder, hard. He winced, but grinned ruefully.

Something was wrong here.

“I don’t understand…” Aang stepped forward, but as he did the flying pig turned and flapped away. The girl and Zuko turned to follow.

“No, wait!” Aang cried, leaping after them with a gust of wind. He landed on the top of the hill and looked around.

They were gone.

He heard a crash nearby, and Aang whipped towards it. “Come back!” He ran through a path in the
vines…and nearly crashed headlong into Katara.

Less than a breath later, Sokka came running up to them. “I’ve been looking all over for you two!”

“Well I’ve been looking for you,” Katara snapped. Her skin on her face was blotchy, like she had been crying.

“I’ve been chasing—” Aang started to say, but stopped as something huge and green rose out of the water.

It was a monster made of vines, and it was heading right towards them.

Zuko sat cross-legged, watching the endless glass sea.

That morning, he had woken with the scent of a decaying swamp in his nose.

“Katara?”

For a moment he thought… no, it had been a dream. A dream where he heard his sister—he’d called out to her, but couldn’t find her anywhere.

*I’ll never see her again.*

That thought hurt. He should have stayed on Iroh’s ship and gone down fighting. Even if he went down as a Fire Nation man, it would have been better than this slow wait, full of regrets.

*No,* he thought, suddenly. *I can’t die like this.* What was he going to do, sit and wait for the end? He rubbed his face, then stood.

He didn’t know what he could do, but he had to do *something.*

The sun was high in the sky and its energy gave him a sense of purpose—though there was nothing to do other than row until his arms gave out. Not a good plan, but it was all he had. He glanced at the ores and winced. His muscles were sore from rowing so it would be a good idea to stretch.

Those stretches moved into the simple katas he and Katara had worked out over the years. Then the moves he’d learned from Aang thanks to Pakku’s lessons. Then, when those were done, he transitioned into the opening forms of the Dancing Dragon.

He practiced these cold, like Iroh had taught him, without a hint of a flame. In his mind, he could hear the man instruct him how to breathe through each movement, how to smoothly transition from one to the next.

He finished the set. Then, firming his mouth, Zuko did them again. This time he let flame come from his fingers. The fire was weak, coolly red, and felt awkward, like all of the Fire Nation’s katas did to him.
Zuko stopped long enough to clear away a larger area on the small boat, and began the Dancing Dragon again. And again. And again.

Every time, he increased his pace. He loosened his limbs and moved the way his spirit told him was correct. Smooth and graceful, without the harsh stops and starts. Soon, he flowed from one form to the next, and the fire spilled out from his fingers and feet, twisting into ribbons in the sky.

His heels drummed a beat in time with his heart as he lost himself in the motions. The forms became more rapid, wilder. He thought of the man who had been his uncle, the enemy ensigns who had been his friends. Unbidden, images flickered before his eyes: Iroh’s stupid Pai Sho games played over gallons of good tea, Zuko laughing with Eiko, Hana and Renzin while shooting off fireworks, Iroh telling him to go… his ship cracking in half, both ends sliding into the ocean.

His face was wet with tears, but he danced on, pouring his grief into the Dancing Dragon.

Momo shrieked, but Zuko barely heard him. He’d reached the last form and, stopping, raised both fists over his head and shot fire high into the sky in a final salute.

Some instinct made him turn.

… And he found himself staring into the eyes of a dragon.

She had raised her head out of the ocean. Blue and sea-green, water streamed down her neck and scales, which were dotted here and there with living barnacles. Tendrils drooped along either side of her face like seaweed. She had to be as large as the biggest Fire Nation battlecruiser—her head alone dwarfed his little lifeboat.

And she stared down at Zuko as if she were waiting for something.

Momo shrieked again and flew in panicked figure-eights before zipping to Zuko’s shoulder, wrapping his tail tight around his neck.

Zuko gaped at the dragon. The dragon stared steadily back.

“I…” He wasn’t sure why he did what he did, only that she had appeared while he had been firebending, and instinct told him if he didn’t show respect, and soon, he was going to be eaten.

… He was probably going to be eaten anyway.

He kindled fire in his palms, which puddled in his cupped hands like water. Then he sank to his knees, holding it above his head in supplication.

The dragon snorted a cold sea-spray breath at him.

Then one of her tendrils lifted to brush the side of Zuko’s face. It felt like a caress. He closed his eyes.

A mix of emotion and images washed through his mind, along with open curiosity and the sense of a question.

If he could have put it all into words it might have been: *Why have you summoned me, fledgling?*

Summoned? He hadn’t…

Iroh had called the firebending set the Dancing Dragon. He had made Zuko practice it without flame…
And the one time he Zuko had ran the set with fire, he had apparently summoned a dragon.

… Did you know exactly what you were teaching me, Uncle? he wondered.

The dragon was awaiting his answer.

If Zuko were speaking out loud, he might have tried to explain the situation: That he was stranded, stuck in the heart of the Eastern Current. But the dragon communicated in a way beyond words, and grief and a longing to see familiar faces was prominent in his mind.

His thoughts flashed to images of bending with Katara, hunting for dinner with Sokka, laughing with Aang, his father sailing away with the rest of his men to war, debating Iroh about Fire Nation taxes, a single firework exploding in air, his breath streaming out in a crisp cold morning in the South Pole… His family… he would never see his family again.

I want to go home.

Then why don’t you? The dragon replied, without words. Zuko saw an image of himself, the colors distorted with dragon’s eyes, holding up fire. You have the inner flame. Use it.

Zuko shook his head, not understanding. Then, without knowing why, his own memories flashed through his head. Pulled forward, he suspected, by the dragon.

His frustration at his own bending, Jeong-jeong’s rejection, his inability to stop Aang’s fire before it burned Katara, happy quiet moments while he worked with his own flames, Iroh telling him bending like a waterbender made him weak, redirecting Azula’s lightning, failing again and again at the blocky Fire Nation sets, watching Katara succeed at the advanced waterbending moves—those which could not translate into fire.

The dragon snorted again, and a gentle sense of amusement filtered down through the link.

We are alike, young firebender of the sea.

She showed him images of her own: Hatching dragonets tumbling out of splintered shells. They fought and played and challenged each other to be first into the air. A few, however, embraced the salt seas which surrounded their island homes. Their wings powered them through the waters, not the sky. They ate of the fruits of the oceans, the rivers, and the lakes: fish, the tiger-seals, the wolf-whales. They were dragons of the sea just as their siblings were dragons of the air. The inner fire was what connected them all.

The tendril lifted away and Zuko wavered where he stood, aching with a sense of deep loss at the cut connection.

Then the dragon breathed.

Momo screamed and darted to the other side of the lifeboat.

Zuko stood still as living fire encircled him. It was a multi-layered flame from white to magenta, and blue more pure than the deepest oceans, and too many other colors to name. It was beyond fire. It was pure energy, warm and giving.

It was life. The same life that was inside him—inside all living things. But Zuko was a firebender. He could access that life energy as long as he had breath in his body.

“I understand,” he said.
The flame ended and the dragon backed away to avoid swamping the lifeboat. With a flick of her sea-wings, she flipped in the water, showing a back glittering with jeweled scales, and sank deep under the depths. Gone with a final ripple.

She was a dragon who swam.

Zuko turned to Momo, who had fled to the top of the mast. The words spilled out in a rush, nonsensical, but to him it was the truest thing in the world. “Momo, I can do this. I have had the power inside me—I’ve always had the ability. Fire is life—and life can be expressed through fire.” He stared at his hands, shocked with his revelation. “I don’t bend like a waterbender, I bend like me, and that doesn’t make me weak. Dragons can live in water, too. Do you know what this means?”

He turned and with a whipping motion summoned a ribbon of flame. It shot out, golden as the sun and longer than he’d ever managed before, cracking sizzling over the water like hot oil on a pan.

“I know how to get us out of the current!”

OoOoO

Sokka swallowed past the taste of giant swamp pillbug (actually, it wasn’t too bad) that the swamp benders had provided from their barbecue and said, “I think we should head to Ba Sing Se next.”

“Uh, isn’t that all the way across the continent?” Aang asked, munching on his okra-corn and fried grits.

“Yup,” Sokka said. “Not impossible with Appa, but tricky.”

Katara put her own pillbug aside. “I thought we were avoiding big cities.”

“Yeah well, after the creepy swamp I’m starting to like the sound of cities.” He looked around the swampbender’s camp, the half-dressed country-folk who were ‘tuning up’ jugs and spoons for a concert, and made a face.

Katara’s mood turned introspective. The visions of what she had seen when she was lost in the swamp hadn’t left her. And unlike some boys, she thought it was healthy to talk about it.

To her surprise, Aang was the first to speak up. “About that the swamp… did you guys see anything weird?”

“Other than the plant monster?” Sokka asked.

“It wasn’t a monster. He was just bending the water in the plants,” Katara said.

“Then, nope.”

“Well, for a minute I thought I saw someone in the swamp.” Katara swallowed and looked at Sokka.
“It was Mom, and I could have sworn I heard Zuko, too.”

“Oh.” Sokka glanced aside. “Look, we were tired and hungry and there was probably swamp gas —”

“Hold it right there,” Her eyes narrowed at her brother. “I know that look.” It was the same too casual nothing-to-see-here look he had when the Hei Bai released him from the spirit world. Now she knew what that meant. “You saw something too, didn’t you?”

“No!” His voice broke obviously on the word and he winced. “Um… Maybe?”

She put her hands on her hips. “Spill. What did you see?”

“All right. Fine. I saw my spirit guide guy again, and he’s the one who told me we need to go to Ba Sing Se. He said Aang’s earthbending master is there. Zuko, too.” He added, and spoke over Katara’s gasp. “But now I’m thinking since you saw Mom that maybe… maybe I was hallucinating. How would Zuko even get to Ba Sing Se?” He forced a laugh that came out a little too high.

Katara and Aang exchanged a look.

“I don’t know, Sokka.” Aang said. “I thought I saw Zuko, too… only he was dressed in Earth Kingdom clothes, and he was standing next to a pretty girl.”

Katara’s dusky skin went a few shades darker. “A… girl?”

He nodded. “It was crazy! There was a flying pig over her head, and she laughed and punched Zuko.”

“Well, I don’t like the sound of this girl,” Katara sniffed. Then she grew serious and looked at Aang. “I saw Mom and she’s… gone. Do you think these mean anything? You’re the bridge to the spirit world.”

“Two of us saw him,” Aang replied after a moment’s thought. I think it means he’s alive, and if Sokka thinks we should go to Ba Sing Se…”

“Yeah,” Sokka said quietly but firmly. “I do.”

“Then we should.” Aang brightened. “And I can finally learn earthbending there!”

“All right!” In the fire light, Sokka’s grin looked… odd. “Ba Sing Se, here we come.” That said, he slapped his knees and stood up. “I’m hungry. Who else is hungry? Ohh, is that more pillbug?” And he walked off.

Aang and Katara exchanged another long look.

“I think he breathed in too much swamp gas,” Aang said.

Katara giggled.

OoOoO
Zuko meditated as the sun went down, instinctively knowing that he would need to cleanse his chi for what was to come. That night, he ate and drank his fill and gave the lemur the last of the dried fruit. Rationing what remained didn't matter now.

He was either going to succeed tomorrow, or he and Momo were going to die. It was as simple as that.

He was awakened by sunrise the next morning. He stood, stretched, and drink a large helping of water. The last water barrel was nearly dry.

"Okay," he told Momo. "Here goes nothing."

Using the ores, he pointed the little lifeboat’s nose to the east. That was the direction of the Earth Kingdom. Then, he sat in the rear of the vessel, braced his legs against a seat, and extended his arms, open hands upright.

Fire poured out from his palms, golden streams running through the red. Eyes, half-lidded, he focused on his breathing to keep it deep and even.

He poured himself into the fire. Making it hotter. Making it push.

The flame took on a cone shape, wide at his hands and tipped at the end with a flaming core of gold in the middle.

The boat started to move. Slowly at first, but more rapidly as he picked up momentum.

The lemur flew to the mast, and, chirping, did his part to push with wings flapping wildly.

Soon, Zuko’s lifeboat was zipping across the still ocean waters faster than he had managed before — even with a good wind in his sails.

He did not let exhilaration distract him. He kept his breaths even. In through his nose, pulled deep into his stomach, and then smoothly out again. Consistent, so the fire was always fed.

Midmorning, his boat hit choppy waters, and the wind picked up: He slowed to keep control of the boat but did not dare stop. If he did, he would only get sucked back into the heart of the current.

The day wore on. His arms ached, and his throat felt raspy, his stomach muscles sore from deep breathing.

He firmly ignored discomfort and fixed the image of his family in his mind. If he stopped, he would never see them again.

Overhead, the sun beat down on his head and back. He imagined taking in that boundless energy, and using himself as a conduit for the fire. For a few hours, his flame strengthened.

Eventually, Even Momo came down and settled on the bottom of the craft to curl up and fall asleep by his feet.

Afternoon wore on. The sun darted to dip to the other half of the sky, and still Zuko did not stop. He started to feel lightheaded and strangely insubstantial, as if he were burning up parts of himself.
Still, he kept the flame burning.

The sun was starting to set, and his energy flagged with it. His breathing had been ragged for hours, and the moment he lost his concentration, the fire sputtered. Shaking his head, he resumed. Every muscle, sinew, bone screamed for a rest. He felt like a husk of a person—empty except for the breath he pulled through his lungs and pushed out again as fire in his hands.

The flame burned on. He would not stop until either he reached land or his body gave out on him.

Fire was life, and he was going burn up every scrap of it if he had to.

Then Momo was shrieking in his ear, and it took a few long seconds for him to come out of his daze.

The flame died at last.

It didn’t matter because there was a dark line of land in the distance… and in front of that, the triangular sails of ships, just visible in the last light of day.

He knew those sails

I’m hallucinating, he thought, but when he blinked and shook his head, the ships were still there.

“Help!” His voice came out in a rasp, barely audible to himself. “I’m out here…”

He pulled himself up to stand but found his legs shaking so hard he had to hold the mast for balance. His heat beat a wild rhythm. That was the Water Tribe out there. Those were Hakoda’s ships.

Aiming upward, he pulled from deep—deeper than he had before, a last gasp of air from a drowning man—and sent a spiraling stream of gold fire into the sky.

Please see it… Please…

Then slowly, the lead vessel came about, the bow pointed in his direction.

“Here! I’m here!” He raised one hand, waiving.

Momo trilled, picking up his mood, and came to perch on his shoulder.

The ships drew closer. Zuko stood there, trembling with fatigue, but drinking in the sight of his tribe. The light was bad by now, but he could have sworn a lot of the men were wearing darker, purple coats of the Northern Water Tribe.

It didn’t occur to him that he was on a Fire Nation lifeboat, in Fire Nation clothing, until he saw spears bristling on the deck.

One familiar face came into view. “State your business, firebender.”

“Master Pulukar?” Confusion had him literally wavering on his feet. What was his old Northern weapon’s master doing on a Southern ship?

“How?”

Several men were shoved aside and then Hakoda was there, peering down at him with an expression of shock. “Weapons down!” he barked at the men. Then, “Zuko? How…? Where in the world did you come from?”
He was told later he was deathly pale and trembling like an old oak leaf, but his eyes… some said at that moment it looked like he carried a glint of the sun itself in his eyes.

Zuko bared his teeth in a smile. “From the heart of the Great Eastern Current.”
Azula stood on the edge of the calm Spirit Oasis pool and watched the black and white koi fish circle one another in an endless dance. Pointless, but beautiful. She had little use for meditation, having long ago mastered perfect control of her inner fire. Still, standing here and watching the fish was... soothing.

It calmed the lingering fire which danced under her skin along the spider-like, ugly scars which now were hidden under her tunic; extending from her chest to the base of her throat. A lightning bolt an inch away from her heart.

“Princess?”

A barbarian child stood not far away, holding a message scroll in her trembling hands. The children of the conquered Northern Water Tribe were allowed to earn extra food rations for their families by taking subservient positions — runners, messengers, couriers.

Better to keep the children close in case any of the adults got the bright idea to attack their betters.

The message the child handed over was stamped with the royal seal. Azula uncapped it, eyes flicking to the signature at the bottom.

*Fire Lord Ozai*

“Congratulations, father,” she murmured, though she was not surprised. She had received notice of grandfather’s death and father’s ascension from a letter from mother two weeks prior.

Ursa’s letter, of course, had been filled with lies: False platitudes describing how worried she had been for her daughter during the North Pole siege, news of her injury, and meaningless requests for
Azula to write back.

Azula had ignored it. Her mother thought of her as a monster. Writing to her daughter was a part of her expected duties. Nothing more.

The fact that Azula had not heard official word from her father was… telling of his displeasure.

(His disappointment ate at her in the middle of the night. She woke up, heart thundering with half-formed nightmares of her father standing over her bed in the same way she had seen when she snuck into Zuko’s room that final night…)

*I am his loyal daughter,* she thought for the thousandth time. *I have subjugated the Northern Water Tribe, brought the city under the Fire Nation's heel in his name…* … Except that in the official record books, the victory had gone to her brother.

*Damn* her uncle.

A circle of blue fire lit the snow under her feet, causing the barbarian child to squeak and flee.

Azula ignored it, standing before the tranquil pool to breathe. When she got herself back under control she read the rest of Ozai’s letter.

It was impersonal, orders dictated to a scribe. That her father had not penned it himself was also telling. He was upset with her. Before Azula had left the Fire Nation, he had told her she had to earn her place as his heir, and so far… she had failed.

The orders themselves were clear: Find the Avatar and bring him alive.

*Alive,* she thought in distaste. That would be trickier than transporting his body. From all reports, he was already a master of air and was progressing with water. She would have to devise a way to subdue him. A metal box, certainly, and additional chi blocking to be safe.

But Azula was her father’s daughter. She knew simply finding and returning the Avatar would not be enough. Not anymore. Ozai demanded perfection, and until now she had never failed.

*I haven’t failed!* A part of her raged, separated in her mind like the energies of the lightning she wielded.

It was a single stroke of bad luck which had ruined *everything,* and it wasn’t fair. She had Zuko dead to rights… What he had done was impossible. How had he managed to create his own lightning while being struck himself?

Could he wield lightning better than her? Was he a better firebender?

*No.*

With an effort of will, Azula stuffed that shrieking, seething part of herself back in a corner of her own mind. She was in control. She was perfect.

*A monster,* whispered her mother’s voice from the shadows.

With the ease of long practice, Azula ignored her and turned her attention back to her father’s orders.

No, simply bringing in the Avatar would not be enough. Fire Lord Sozin had all but obliterated the Air Nomads. It was up to her, his true great-grandchild to take the next step.
Water came after Air, did it not?

With the fall of their capital city, the Northern Water Tribe was safely under Fire Nation control. When the time came for the three remaining elements to be reduced to two, the Northern Tribe would be helpless. It was time to destroy what was left of the Southern Tribe. Who needed winter, anyway?

She would start with their future.

Thanks to the results of her own interrogations, Azula had learned the two brats following the Avatar were in fact the son and daughter of the Southern Water Tribe chieftain. They would be… useful. The fact that they had sponsored Zuko was icing on the cake.

Her plan firmly fixed in her mind, Azula let the orders flutter to the soft grass. Her fingers traced a wide circle in the air, separating the energies within herself.

They came together with a crash. Pure white lightning arced out across the Oasis, almost but not quite brushing the pool with the ocean and moon spirits swimming within.

A hair’s breadth from annihilation, but for her perfect control.

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OoOoO

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“Take it easy. You’ve been asleep for two days,” Healer Kuthruk told Zuko as he helped him sit up after a final examination. Then he smiled fondly. “Still, you’re better off than the last time we pulled you out a lifeboat.”

Zuko rolled his eyes at the healer. He had been awake for most of the afternoon and received visitors from his father and most of the southern warriors. He’d already heard several versions of that joke. “Bato said the exact same thing.”

The healer barked a laugh. “That snowdog stole the joke from me!” There was sprinkles of gray in his beard that hadn’t been there when he left for war two years ago. “The Chief wants to see you, once you’re up. I think your chi is mostly recovered, but no firebending for another few days. Eat your fill. Drink water only—do not let Tatum give you any of that ale he’s been brewing.” He clapped him on the shoulder. “It’s good to see you again, boy.”

“It’s good to be back.”

Zuko stood, testing his weight on his legs. The last two days he had been weak as a tiger-seal kitten. Now he felt a little like he had just gotten over a lingering sickness. Somewhat shaky, but otherwise glad to be over it.

His inner fire, however, burned brighter than he’d ever felt before. He wasn’t sure if it was the result of what the sea-dragon showed him, or nearly burning himself out from crossing the Great Current.
That wasn’t something Kuthruk could help him with, though.

He shook his head. “I can’t believe I missed Sokka, Katara and Aang by two weeks…”

Kuthruk nodded. “When they arrived, the Avatar was gravely injured. To be honest, I did not expect him to wake. If it weren’t for your sister…” He trailed off and shook his head. “They missed you, and they were sad and worried—we all were. Sokka Spoke well of you, before the tribe.”

Zuko looked down. It was a deep shame he’d never admit, but when he first heard that Aang and his siblings had found the tribe, only to leave directly for the Earth Kingdom after Aang was healed—his feelings had been mixed.

All those times on Iroh’s ship when he’d spent staring up at the sky, searching for Appa, he thought must be hiding in the Earth Kingdom. Making a plan. It never occurred to him that no one had planned to search at all.

*They left me behind.*

Then Zuko learned how close to death Aang had been. If it hadn’t been for Katara’s healing ability, they would have… *lost* him. Their friend. The one hope the world had left.

Of course they’d taken shelter with Hakoda’s ships. Fate had allowed Zuko do to the same. How could he feel resentful for that? And for all anyone knew, Zuko was still in the North Pole. It was best they hadn’t tried a rescue attempt… really.

Aang had to learn all four elements before the comet returned. Everything out was secondary. Zuko *knew* that. He really did. He told himself he would have done the same.

Despite his best efforts, his feelings must have shown on his face. Kuthruk patted him heavily on the shoulder.

“Cook’s made seastar stew. Let’s see if you can keep anything down.”

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**OoOoO**

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It was a beautiful day for flying. Katara sat at the edge of the wide bison saddle, her face in the wind. Above and all around them, the sky was blue and dotted by fluffy white clouds. There was not a hint of chill in the air. Right now she was as warm as she was sitting by a fire at home.

They were flying on a straight path to Ba Sing Se. With any luck, she and Sokka would reunite with her wayward brother and Aang would find his earthbending master. Right now, life was good.

From his place on Appa’s head, Aang grinned back at her, bright-eyed and excited as if he were reflecting her thoughts. Katara glanced the other direction and saw Sokka leaning his back against the saddle-pad. He had an ink brush out and blank page.
He was writing a letter, Katara realized in delight. One guess as to who.

With a devious grin, she flopped down next to him. “Tell Yue I said hi.”

He hadn’t noticed her approach at all, and actually squeaked, flailing and turning the paper up to hide the characters from her view. “Katara!”

Her grin widened. Honestly, she was happy for Sokka. She was. But she would be remiss in her duties as a younger sister if she didn’t rib him a little. “Are you sending her your loooove?” She fluttered her eyelashes.

His face went red, then pale, then red again. He obviously realized he was being totally transparent because he sagged. “I know I can’t send it—not like any messenger will ever get to the South Pole, but it makes me feel closer to her.”

Oh jeez, who would have ever guessed her oaf of an eldest brother would be such a romantic. Abandoning her teasing, Katara said, “I’m sure she’ll love reading it with you, when this is all over.”

He chuckled self continuously, rubbing the back of his neck.

Aw, Yue really was good for him. Katara let him be and moved back to the other end of the saddle to give him a little privacy.

OoOoO

As soon as his nosy sister was safely on the other side of the saddle, Sokka returned to the paper.

Writing this felt like a bad omen, but what if Lu Ten was right? What if something happened to him in Ba Sing Se, and Sokka had said nothing?

He would always have the last word, if he could help it.

Letting out a breath, he put his brush to the scroll.

*Dear Katara and Aang. If you’re reading this, I guess that means I’m dead….*

OoOoO
Zuko was finally discharged from the healer’s room a few hours later. The healer’s cabin had seemed huge when he was a boy, but it barely fit the two of them as an adult. He was glad to be allowed out on the deck.

Kuthruk said no firebending for a few days. Maybe that was wise, to let his chi settle. He didn’t plan on waving around the fact he was a firebender to the new Northern men, anyway.

Around him, the smells of wood, resin and salted fish were like home. He was dressed in Water Tribe colors again. It felt good.

At the same time, he saw with new eyes how the timber had been hastily patched in places. There were scorch marks here and there along the walls. At one time or another, Hakoda’s ship had been boarded by the enemy. The last two years had been hard ones for the men.

Momo found him the moment he stepped onto the deck, zipping to his shoulder and chittering something in his ear Zuko guessed he was supposed to understand. Absently, Zuko reached up to pet his white and brown back. The lemur smelled like sea-prunes. He must have been raiding the stores.

His father was on the foredeck, speaking with Bato.

For a second—just a brief moment, Zuko remembered how he would often see Iroh standing and speaking to his officers in a similar way.

He banished it from his mind the next moment. Sea Captains were sea captains, and there were only so many places to talk outside on a ship.

Seeing Zuko, Hakoda finished up his conversation. Bato departed, and Hakoda waved Zuko over.

“How are you feeling?” Hakoda asked.

“Kuthruk says I’m good for light duty,” he said, then asked the question that had been eating at him since he woke up. “Will I be Speaking in front of the tribe tonight?”

Hakoda nodded. “Your brother already told us of your journey with the Avatar, though we will want to know of your time on the ship.”

He could do that. Zuko knew didn’t have Sokka’s talent for storytelling. He was too analytical, too straight to the point (Just like a firebender to go through obstacles rather than around them.) His stories to the toddlers were always pretty terrible.

Hakoda watched him with an odd, almost hesitant expression. “There are things you’re allowed to leave out. If those monsters… if they hurt you…”

“No,” Zuko said, a little too sharp. He repeated again, “No.” He didn’t miss how Hakoda’s shoulders relaxed a little. Not that he could blame him. The evidence for what the Fire Nation was capable of was written all over his face. “Iroh was… kind. The others were—” I think they were my friends. “I was treated well. Iroh was trying to show me the best of what the Fire Nation could be.”

“That makes sense. When you want to truly tame a polar bear dog, you don’t do it with a whip. You do it with food and warmth of a house.”

He knew that, he really did. But… “Their own Fire Lord killed a shipload of his own people just because Iroh and I were aboard. Who does that?”

Zuko scowled. “You don’t understand. Every morning those people got up and recite an oath to the painting of the Fire Lord. They’re conscripted at eighteen and spend a minimum of four years of their lives into the service. And they don’t mind. They don’t complain. Most don’t even know why exactly they’re at war, and they love and trust their country so much that they willingly leave their families and go to serve, anyway. And the Fire Lord… he just—” Zuko slashed his hand through the air, and it trailed smoke. “I know they’re enemies to the world and my tribe, but some of them were.…” Good people, he couldn’t say. “And Ozai snuffed them out.”

“You grieve for them,” Hakoda said.

Zuko looked sharply at him. Then he nodded. He wouldn’t lie. “I know I shouldn’t.”

Hakoda let out a long sigh. “I think it would be easier if you didn’t, but then you wouldn’t be the person you are, Zuko. You care about people.”

He did? That wasn’t something he thought about himself. The grief he’d felt onboard the lifeboat rose up and threatened to swamp him again. “They shouldn’t have died like that,” he said, voice rough. Quickly, he cleared his throat and covered the moment with a light joke. “When Aang defeats the Fire Lord, I’ll be sure to personally let Ozai know.”

Hakoda chuckled. “I’m honestly looking forward to that day.” He met Zuko’s eyes. “And who is Ozai to you?”

“Nobody.”

“Zuko.”

He looked down. “They say he’s my blood father, but I don’t remember him.”

“Ah.” Hakoda looked briefly sad. “If you did… It’s not a betrayal to your Tribe to know your own history, son.”

Zuko couldn’t find any words to say, Ozai means nothing to me, because he did mean something, even if that something wasn’t good.

“I had often thought,” Hakoda said at length, “That your sire must have been on that Fire Nation ship we captured, and that he or someone else had stashed you in the lifeboat to keep you safe from us. It would make sense, except for your injuries.”

“Maybe it does,” he said with a twinge old frustration. “Iroh told me the that the royal family believes Earth Kingdom rebels kidnapped me. Maybe… someone tried to hide who I was?”

“Healer Kuthruk said the burns and cut across your neck were days old when we found you.”

Zuko sighed and shook his head. “Katara tried healing my memories with her waterbending one time, and… it didn’t work.” To say the least. “I just don’t know what happened, back then.”

Hakoda nodded once. “What are your plans, now?” he asked, changing the subject. “When I left you and your siblings, you were children. But now you’re nearly grown. I can’t drop you in the care of your grandmother anymore.” He flashed a grin, which Zuko returned. Hakoda continued, “You can stay here, if you wish. I know Bato would like to have you on his ship, and train you to the duties. In time, you could earn a ship of your own.”

It was a generous offer. Among Hakoda’s fleet, he could lose himself as an anonymous Water Tribe warrior. Someday, he might earn the captaincy of his own ship. The fighting would be clean—kill or
be killed. No worries about who was Fire Lord. He would be an asset to his people. The Fire Nation fought with fire, which he could throw back at them. He knew Fire Nation battleships by now, too, inside and out.

His life would not be easy — they were in war, and there was no guarantee of survival or happiness — but it would be a lot simpler.

He should have at least been tempted. He wasn’t.

“My destiny is to help the Avatar,” Zuko said. “I’ve learned some things—Weaknesses of the Fire Nation. I’ll tell you all when I Speak to the tribe, but Aang needs to know, too. If we plan it right, it can change everything. And…” he looked at his hands and thought of all the sea-dragon had shown him. “Aang needs a firebending teacher. I think it’s supposed to be me.”

Hakoda nodded then stepped forward, taking Zuko’s arm in a warrior’s clasp. “I know you’ve gone through hard times, but you’re conducting yourself as warrior should. I’m proud.”

A feeling of warmth suffused through him. “Thanks, Dad.”

OoOoO

Renzin wasn’t surprised when he was separated from the rest of the crew in the brig-level cells and taken to an isolated room at the top deck. He’d known something like this was coming. Eiko had called it a prisoner’s dilemma’s gambit. Hana had called it a hard sell.

Either way, Renzin was a from an old noble family. His father was one of the top admirals in the Fire Nation. He knew sooner or later he would be forced to make a hard choice between loyalty to his family and the good of his nation.

He expected to be visited by Captain Yuu—the man who had plucked Iroh’s drowning crew out of the waters after sinking their ship. Or maybe a friend of Renzin’s father. Anyone, but who actually appeared.

“Ruon-Jian?” Surprise had Renzin step out of his military ‘at ease’ pose. He rushed to his younger brother. “What in Agni are you doing here?” The last he’d heard, Ruon-Jian and his dilettante best friend, Chan, had been planning to become a ‘professional surfers’ on Ember Island. Their mother had been in hysterics.

His brother smiled that carefree smile of his. They were not twins, but were close enough in age and looks that people assumed they were. Only eleven months apart. Their father worked fast.

Forgetting decorum, they hugged, pounding each other on the back. His brother smelled like the incense the servants burned when doing laundry. It brought a lump of homesickness of Renzin’s throat.

“I never thought I’d be the one breaking you out of jail,” Ruon-Jian said, pulling back to look Renzin in the face. He was smiling, but his honey-colored eyes were worried. “That was quite the stunt you
pulled. Impersonating a member of the royal family is treason.”

Renzin’s joy at seeing his brother dimmed. He stepped back. “I had to do it. You… wouldn’t understand.”

As Captain’s Yuu’s men were fishing the crew of the ship they’d sank out of the drink, they had been demanding Prince Zuko’s whereabouts. It was funny, in hindsight. Even though the Prince was recognizable enough, no one from the enemy ship seemed to have a clear description of him.

So, in a burst of inspiration, Renzin had told them that he was Zuko. It was to give the Prince some cover, to let him hide among the crew. Hana and Eiko had backed him up.

He didn’t expect Yuu’s crew to stop searching the waters once ‘the traitor prince’ located. The real Prince Zuko’s body had never been found. He’d been lost at sea—a hard way to go, for a firebender.

Renzin’s ruse actually lasted a few days, and it hadn’t been too bad. He had been treated like a high value prisoner, been locked in his own room, and allowed to visit his “Uncle Iroh” until Captain Yuu brought in a Fire Sage to verify “Zuko’s” bloodline. The jig was up, and Renzin had been tossed back in the brig with the rest of Prince Iroh’s crew.

“Yeah, well you put dad in hot water with the rest of the Admiralty,” Ruon-Jian said with a roll of his eyes. “But he pulled some strings. You’ll be discharged and expected to make a public apology to the Fire Lord himself—”

“Iroh, you mean?”

Ruon-Jian stopped, then half smiled as if not sure Renzin was making a joke.

Renzin was not joking. “Ozai attacked us, Ruon. He just usurped the crown from the rightful Fire Lord. Doesn’t father care?”

“Shh!” Ruon-Jian looked around as if anyone could be listening in this room. “No one is supposed to speak like that.”

“So? Iroh’s ship sank itself?”

“The official line is you were caught in a storm. It’s very tragic.” Glancing around again, Ruon-Jian sipped forward, his voice lowered. “Look, it doesn’t matter what happened. Prince Iroh is… no good to anyone. The physicians say he isn’t going to wake up.”

And that was the crux of it.

The second day after their ship sunk, Lieutenant Izhar was allowed to visit Iroh, see his condition, and report it to the rest of his former crew. The physicians said water must have gotten into his lungs. He breathed, but he did not wake. As ‘Zuko’, Renzin had been allowed similar visits. (And oh Agni, had that been awkward, sitting by his bedside and calling the comatose man ‘uncle’. Iroh had not twitched an eye. When Renzin had been thrown back in the brig with the rest of the crew, he had to report the sad news to his friends.

Iroh could not be Fire Lord if he was not fit to serve.

But Renzin would be scorched if he bowed to the man who had done it.

“Iroh would have made a great Fire Lord,” he said stubbornly.
Ruon-Jian jumped as if Renzin had burned him. “Jeez, Renzin, would you pipe down—”

“No!” he snapped, his inner flame leaping up with the injustice of it all. “Ozai stole the crown. I served on Iroh and Princess Azula’s ship. I know which one I would rather have as Fire Lord. She’s —” Lowering his voice, he stepped forward. Despite his brashness, he knew these were treasonous words. “She’s less fit than Iroh is right now. There’s something broken in her, Ruon.”

“Who cares?” Ruon-Jian rolled his eyes. “How often do you actually see the Fire Lord? Like, once every Summer Solstice festival, right? What does it matter who is in charge?”

He felt his jaw set. “It matters to me.”

“Look, father’s done all the work. This time tomorrow, you could be out of here and free. All you have to do is apologize and say a pretty little speech.”

“A what?”

“Fire Lord Ozai wants you to testify that Iroh’s incompetent handling got his ship destroyed in the Eastern Current.”

It wasn’t the first time Renzin wanted to punch his stupid brother in his stupid face, but they weren’t kids anymore. He couldn’t lash out. Instead, he turned away, clenching his fists. “Is that all? Dishonor myself by providing false testimony?”

“It’s not dishonor if your Fire Lord orders it.” Ruon-Jian pressed forward. “Do you know how many strings father pulled to give you this chance?”

Renzin couldn’t look his brother in the eye.

He hadn’t needed to enlist in the Fire Navy. He could have stayed home, lived the pampered life of a noble’s first born son, and hung out with Chen and the other guys like his brother… but he had been so proud to serve his nation. So proud that his first post had been on the ship which would be carrying Princess Azula to the North Pole.

He never expected the journey to be a waking nightmare. The air had been so full of anxiety and paranoia, he could cut it with a knife. The corridors were rife with officers backstabbing one another to be in Azula’s favor, and mortal fear from those who had fallen under her notice… And those poor souls, the Princess’s own Firebending instructors, who’d she literally knocked off the deck and left at sea. He remembered them bobbing in the ship’s wake, desperately calling out as the ship sailed north without them.

The journey under Iroh’s command had been nothing like that. The crew was competent, relaxed, even happy to go about their duties. Casual cruelty as nonexistent. Officers could speak their minds without fear of execution by lightning, which was a big plus.

Prince Zuko had been another surprise. He had been as different from his sister as possible. Sure his face was royally messed up, but he didn’t act like he’d been tortured for years by the Water Tribe.

He just seemed… normal. Renzin thought more than once that if he had met Zuko as a normal man in, say, a tavern in Caldera island, he would have considered Zuko a friend. Renzin had forgotten he was a prince, sometimes. Like Iroh, Zuko treated the crew like valued people, not disposable tools.

Not to mention he had a mean fire lash, and didn’t mind getting knocked on his ass while sparring.

If Agni truly smiled upon the Fire Nation, he should have placed Iroh as Fire Lord and Zuko as Crown Prince. Not Ozai and Azula.
Renzin swallowed. “Tell dad I appreciate his efforts, but my place is with my crew. I’m not lying for Ozai.”

Ruon-Jian stared. “If you do this, they’ll send you to the Boiling Rock.”

His heart skipped a beat, but what did he expect? A private white-collar jailhouse on Ember Island? “Okay.”

“Okay? That’s all you have to say for yourself? Okay? What did they do to you in the military?”

Renzin squared his shoulders. “I learned duty.”

OoOoO

The others were waiting for him as Renzin was led back to his cell below deck. Captain Yuu’s ship had been stopped at Azulon Harbor for three days now—he was grateful he hadn’t been allowed near enough windows to look out. He didn’t want his last view of the Fire Nation to be as a prisoner.

“Well?” Hana asked.

Renzin smiled half-heartedly at her. There wasn’t a lot of privacy in the brig. Right now, the cells up and down the hall were deathly quiet. The rest of the crew was listening, no doubt.

“I talked myself into a one-way ticket to the Boiling Rock with the rest of you.” He made his voice sound light, as if he was not inwardly shaking in fear.

“It was either going to be imprisonment or execution,” Eiko said. “They wouldn’t want us to talk about what happened.”

Lieutenant Izhar’s voice piped up from down the hall. “Did they let slip any change with Prince Iroh, Ensign?”

“No, sir,” Renzin called back.

The man audibly sighed. They’d all been hoping for a miracle.

Hana looked around and lowered her voice. “You don’t suppose Prince Iroh will be sent to the Boiling Rock, too?”

“No,” Izar replied. Apparently, Hana hadn’t lowered her voice enough. “Ozai will want him on display until he is satisfied his seat on the throne is secured. I’d bet money Ozai will keep Prince Iroh at the Capitol Prison… at least until he can arrange an ‘accident’.”

Renzin couldn’t help but notice Izar said ‘Ozai’ not Fire Lord Ozai. He grinned.

Hana punched his shoulder. “What are you smiling about, flame-brain?”
He shrugged. “Eh, I’ll be glad to be out of this ship and somewhere nice and relaxing.”

“You think prison is relaxing?”

“Sure,” he lied. “I hear Boiling Rock is great this time of the year. A real vacation spot.”

He and Hana grinned at each other.

Eiko looked down. His glasses had been lost at sea—not that there was any scrolls for him to read in the brig—but it made him look even younger than before. “I never thought I’d be in prison.”

“We will be fine,” Renzin said. “We’ll stick together.”

Besides, he’d rather be safely behind bars than anywhere near the islands whenever Azula came into power.

OoOoO

Later that evening, Zuko spoke in the greatroom of the ship. He didn’t mind all the eyes upon him—for the first time he suspected maybe it was a holdover for when he had been trained as a Fire Nation prince.

He started from the Siege of the North Pole. Many of the Northern men were in attendance, and they deserved to know the truth of what had happened at the Spirit Oasis, even if it put all in a bad light.

As he thought, he wasn’t a riveting speaker, like Hakoda, but his story was serviceable. He did not allow himself to falter as he explained how he defeated Azula in combat, how Zhao had threatened the moon spirit, the events which led to Chief Arnook turning his blade on him, and how Iroh had killed him for it.

At these words, his old weapon’s master, Palukar stood. It was a great breach of disrespect for anyone but the Chief to interrupt before the Speaker had invited questions. “How do you feel about that, boy?” Palukar asked. “Your blood uncle killed Chief Arnook on your behalf.”

A shocked silence fell over the room.

Palukar had chosen his phrasing well. Blood Uncle. That meant he knew of Zuko’s heritage. They all did.

Hakoda rose, hand on his belt knife. “Palukar! You go too far. Sit down and honor the Speaker’s words, or leave.”

“No,” Zuko shook his head sharply. “I’ll allow his question.” The expected response was to ignore the interruption, but the fire blazing in him wanted to meet this challenge with an attack of his own. Turning from his dad, Zuko looked straight at Palukar.

“How did it feel to have my enemy save me from my ally? I’m sad Arnook’s life was taken. I’m frustrated he didn’t trust me even though I obeyed the rules of his tribe, and had the Avatar vouch for
me. Mostly, I’m angry and shamed that Arnook attacked a guest to his tribe, and that Iroh was the one to save me. That’s how I feel.”

Palukar stared at him for several seconds. Then his gaze flicked to Hakoda before he nodded once and retook his seat.

Zuko let out a breath. The interruption had broken his flow, and found it hard to fall back into the mode of storytelling. For the first time, the stares of his tribe held weight.

He let his gaze flick to the fire in the center of the room. He breathed and the flames breathed with him.

Centered, he spoke of his capture, of being locked in the cell without food or water to allow his lightning injury to heal… until Iroh saw fit to give him a room of his own and treat him like an unwilling prince. From there, he gave a brief outline of his weeks on Iroh’s ship, then Azulon’s death, the appearance of the battlecruisers, and finally, the Great Eastern Current.

He faltered a little at the appearance of the dragon. Learning the secret of fire had been a deeply spiritual moment, one someone from the Water Tribe would not understand. No one could, who didn’t have fire.

Luckily, Hakoda seemed to sense this. Using a Chief’s authority, he broke protocol to interrupt his story. “There are legends of monsters in the Eastern Current, even bigger than the one you described. You were lucky you weren’t eaten.”

“I think she would have eaten me, if I weren’t a firebender,” Zuko admitted. The brief interruption allowed him to regain his momentum. “There was no wind and the sea… it looked smooth, but the current was too strong to row out of. She gave me the idea of using my fire to power my boat across the water. I knew it was the only way to escape.”

“You were only a few miles from land when we found you,” Hakoda said. “You would have made it across.”

He nodded. “It was either that, or die trying.” And although he didn’t know it, the firelight on his uneven face made him look fierce.

The hard part of telling the story of his journey was over. Now for the rest. For this, questions would be encouraged.

Zuko took a breath, hands rested loosely on his crossed legs, and went back to the beginning. This time, he spoke of things that would help his tribe in the war: How the Fire Nation used a series of messenger hawks and relay stations that were so swift, orders could be passed around the world in days. He told them details of the ship he was on—its speed and strength. And, of course, of the eclipse.

“They call it the Day of Black Sun,” he said, rolling out the charts he had saved from Iroh’s ship with care. “It’s regular occurrence, but it doesn’t always hit the Fire Nation, and sometimes the eclipse is only partial. This next one will be a full blockage of the sun — and while the sun is behind the moon, firebenders will lose their ability to bend.”

There was a sharp intake of breath all around.

“For how long?” Bato asked, eyebrows raised.

“Just under ten minutes. I know that’s short.”
“Short? That’s a blink of time in a battle.”

“Not if you’re in the right spot to do damage,” Zuko said.

Hakoda put his hand to his chin. “If the Avatar was in the Capital City—”

“Exactly.” Zuko knew his grin was wolfish, and mirrored around by the men.

Tatum leaned forward to squint down at the map. “What is this script here?”

“It’s… High Fire Nation.” He would not blush for knowing it. He would not. “The Fire Sages use the old style to record official records. Anyway, this is a legend to decipher the eclipse chart so you can determine when and where the next will hit. I can recopy it into standard script.”

The grizzled warrior grunted and peered closer. “You’re saying can predict more than just this eclipse? Future eclipses, too? The Avatar is legend, but Aang is a slip of a boy.”

“It will, but we can’t count on other eclipses helping us out. They happen only a few times a decade, and we can’t afford to wait for another one,” Zuko said and took a breath. “Sozin’s comet will give every firebender the power of one-hundred, and it’s going to last longer than eight minutes.” For a moment, he wondered what that would be like. Then dismissed it.

“Your brother Spoke of the comet, but we never considered how long the effects would be,” Hakoda said. “How long will it last?”

“All day, from sun-up to sun-down.”

Another murmur swept the room.

“Copy out a chart for our ships,” Hakoda said. “We’ll send one to Yue in the south. I’m hoping to get more waterbender support from her soon.” He looked at Zuko. “Go back and walk us through the capabilities of the battleships. Where do they store the weapons? Where exactly are the engines located down below?”

Grateful to be guided back to technicals, Zuko shut his eyes and pictured a layout of Iroh’s ship.

He Spoke for a long time.

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OoOoO

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Using Sokka’a maps (and teaming up with Katara to convince Aang that, no they really, really couldn’t take a vacation at the Misty Palms Oasis) they made great time by cutting across the northern tip of the Si Wong Desert.

Apparently, the hot sands heated up the air into something Aang called a ‘thermal’. It allowed Appa to lift up and up—higher into the sky than he ever had before.

Sokka and Katara peered over the side of the saddle at what looked like the whole world stretched
out before them. They had grown used to seeing from great heights, but never like this before. From horizon to horizon, all was green and brown with occasional sparkling blue rivers and lakes—flowers dotting the countryside in early spring.

“We’re almost to the top of the thermal!” Aang called back from Appa’s head. “Hang on!”

Appa made a low sound of anticipation. Then he tilted his great head down and dived.

It was like penguin sledding, as if Appa were sliding down an impossibly large hill.

Sokka and Katara yelled out, holding the saddle. The only thing Sokka could hear was the screaming wind and Aang’s happy laughter.

Airbenders.

“There it is!” Aang called, a few hours later.

Katara squinted. “That white thing?” she asked, pointing to the white strip at the horizon. “That’s Ba Sing Se!”

“That’s just the wall. It surrounds the whole city, you’ll see.”

“You’ve been here before?”

“No, Monk Gyatso said the people of Ba Sing Se don’t live the way the monk’s teach.”

“What does that mean?” Sokka asked, but either Aang didn’t hear him, or his attention was drawn away by the oncoming wall.

As they drew closer, it became clear how high the walls were—several times the height of the ice shield wall in the North Pole. It was so long, Sokka couldn’t even see where it curved into a ring.

Lu Ten’s voice returned to him. You should know that once you pass beyond the stone walls, there is a very good chance you will not leave alive…

Sokka’s mouth went dry. “They’re just walls,” he muttered. “Nothing dangerous about walls.”

But he let out a breath he wasn’t aware he had been holding as they crossed over to top.

Okay. That wasn’t so bad. And, hey, he was still alive!

Then Aang angled Appa downward.

“What are you doing?” Sokka demanded.

“Checking in, of course! I remember Monk Gyatso said it’s only polite. They don’t like sky bison in the walls.”

There were a series of barracks actually built along the inside edge of the walls. They were long buildings, but the walls dwarfed them so much they looked like caterpillars clinging along the underside of a leaf.

Soldiers stopped drilling and stared as Aang landed.

“Ahoy there!” Aang stood and waved from Appa’s head. “I’m the Avatar. Do any of you know where I can find an earthbending teacher?”
Sokka and Katara exchanged a look.

Well, that was one way to announce themselves.

OoOoO

Hours later, word was sent along, and a representative from the Earth Kingdom palace was sent to greet them.

“Hello, my name is Joo Dee,” she said with a huge smile. “I am a representative from the palace. The Earth King is so pleased to have the Avatar and his friends as guests, he has offered you a house to stay in within the upper ring.”

“Thanks,” Aang chirped. “Is it big enough to fit Appa?”

Most people did a double take at the animal, but Joo Dee’s already unnaturally large smile widened further. “Ba Sing Se has expansive gardens.”

It wasn’t an answer, but Aang seemed to treat it like one. “Great!” he chimed again.

Sokka stepped forward. “Aang is looking for an earthbending teacher.”

“Ba Sing Se has the best universities in the world.” Joo Dee beamed.

“They teach earthbending at your universities?” Katara asked.

“Oh no, but we study many subjects. Ba Sing Se has the best universities in the world,” Joo Dee repeated in the exact same inflection was before.

“That’s… nice,” Aang dug something out of his ear, then offered a bright smile. “I haven’t been to school in a hundred years!”

Joo Dee had no reaction to that. Just beamed around at them. Conversation died.

They all exchanged a look. Sokka stepped forward. “Maybe we should just speak to the person in charge. Could you take us to the Earth King?”

“One does not simply pop in on the Earth King! You must make an appointment,” Joo Dee said cheerfully.

“And how long will that take?”

“At least one month.”

Sokka felt his jaw drop.

“Excuse us.” Katara pulled the boys aside, out of hearing range. “Are you guys sure about this?”

Aang shrugged, not nearly as concerned as he should have been in Sokka’s opinion. “Zuko is
supposed to be in there, and my earthbending teacher, right?”

“Yeah, if we want to trust the word of a swamp hallucination!”

“Sokka, this was your plan,” Katara said.

“I know! I know!” Sokka sighed, grumbling, “I’m starting to think this was a bad idea.”

“What do you think, Aang?” Katara asked.

“Well…” Aang looked back and forth between them, clearly looking for a way to please both without any conflict. “Staying in a house sounds good, and I’ve never seen Ba Sing Se before… So maybe…?”

Times like this, Sokka really missed Zuko. He was short tempered, but decisive. Sokka let out a breath. They were here, and he was passed the walls. He was committed. Plus, if Zuko was somewhere in the city, how hard could finding him be? “Fine.” He turned to Joo Dee, who was watching them with the same fixed smile on her face. “Where is this house exactly?”

OoOoO

An hour of flying later, with Joo Dee grinning creepily in the back, Sokka got his first view of the outer ring.

Buildings were horizon to horizon, most several stories high. There More than he could count. It went on and on, and according to Joe Dee, this was only the first of three rings.

“I never thought…” Katara couldn’t finish. She stared out, equally stunned.

Sokka’s heart, meanwhile, had sunk straight down to his seal-hide boots. “This… might take awhile.”

OoOoO

Hakoda was in his private room, studying one of Zuko’s odd Fire Nation maps which marked out the positions of message relay stations. Those would be prime targets for attack. He was charting out the closet three when there was a knock on his cabin door.
“Come in,” he said.

Bato ducked through the door, gave his best friend a grin, and shut it behind him. “You should know, I offered Zuko the extra cot in my cabin tonight.”

Hakoda frowned. He expected Zuko to sleep in the hold with the rest of the men. “Is there a problem?”

“I mostly wanted to avoid a problem,” Bato admitted. “We all heard of how your boys Spoke of the Northern Tribe. And after the disrespect Zuko was shown when he was Speaking, I thought it would be best not to invite trouble.”

He nodded. It made sense, but he had known Bato all his life. There was more his friend wasn’t telling him. Yet.

“In your opinion, how are the Northerners fitting in?” Hakoda asked.

Bato shrugged. “Some have promise. They can all sail, for the most part, but the ones from their ‘upper houses’ tend to be lazy and don’t want to do chores they see as below their station.” He flashed a wolfish grin. “They’re learning our ways.”

“They’d better. At least four of the women waterbenders will be joining us, once they get the refugees settled in the south.”

Bato was quiet for a moment. “This is a major change of tradition for them, and we water folk never enjoy that, but honestly Chief… I think you might have the sway to pull it off.”

Hakoda raised his eyebrows.

Bato shrugged, and Hakoda knew they had finally come to the meat of the matter.

“I heard the Northern men talking—Gossiping like arctic hens, more like. Apparently, Chief Arnook fathered no son, and the one he had chosen to marry his daughter was from a high house… and a known idiot.”

“He wanted a stupid boy for a son-in-law? That’s… short sighted.” Idiot fathers often sired idiot sons, not to mention Arnook’s own daughter would be miserable.

“Politics,” Bato said in distaste. “It was thought the Northern Council would be able to control the boy—take over for him, more likely than not—but many weren’t happy.” He straightened, looking at Hakoda directly. “You’re only a Southern Water Chieftain, but Sokka is an intelligent, blooded warrior who’s helping the Avatar himself, and the men have seen how he and Yue regard each other.”

“They approve of the match?” Not that it mattered. In the south, the business of a union was between those two people alone, but community support didn’t hurt.

“Yes. And…” Bato stiffened as if bracing himself for a gale. “Zuko has proved his loyalty, Spoken true, and crossed the Great Current. Now, the Northerners see you as both far-seeing and clever for stealing a second son for yourself out of the Fire Lord’s own house.”

Hakoda jerked so hard in surprise he bashed his knee on the bottom of his desk.

“Yes,” Bato agreed, wryly. “I nearly choked on my stew when I overheard that over dinner. Zuko’s Speaking tonight cemented it. He did almost as well as Sokka, and now some of the Northerners
think you’re one of the greats for catching and taming a Fire Nation prince for our tribe.”

Hakoda stood, one hand falling to his bladed boomerang. “Who has been saying this?” he asked, voice dangerous.

“Easy, Hakoda. Those of us who were there when we first found Zuko are already working on setting them straight. I just thought you should know.”

Hakoda turned and spat to the side.

Now he knew the real reason Bato had seen fit to separate Zuko from the men tonight. “I’m glad Zuko’s sleeping in your cabin, and won’t be overhearing that. You know what Prince Iroh tried to do to him.”

Bato nodded. “I read between the lines. Does Zuko realize it, too?”

“Yes, he’s aware. It’s clear they originally tried to control him with violence when he was a child,” he gestured to his own left side of his face, “and this time, with warmth and sugar.” He thought of Zuko’s confession of grief out on the deck. He wouldn’t tell Bato—that had been a private conversation between son and father—but it had made him feel both proud and sympathetic. Zuko had stood loyal to his tribe, but it had come at a cost. Prisoners of war should not be made to question their allegiance to their own people. Such mind games were cruel. “What else are the Northerners saying about him?”

“That’s the worst of it. He did you proud today.”

Hakoda wasn’t mollified. His eyes narrowed. “Do I want to know what they say of Katara?”

“They don’t talk of her.” Bato’s sarcasm was cutting. “She’s ‘only a woman’.”

“A woman who taught herself waterbending despite their wishes, who’s competent enough to heal the Avatar….” He shook his head, disgusted. “I hope by the time this war is over, we will have knocked some sense into their heads. I’ll allow no more of these arranged marriages, either.” He snorted, and with reluctance retook his seat. “I’m starting to realize why my mother left the North.”

“You have three good kids,” Bato said. “Focus on that. As I said, we’ll take care of the rumor mill.”

Yes, Hakoda knew he was very lucky in regard to his children.

His eldest son was poised to become a chief of his own. Sokka Spoke well, led well and yes, seemed to already have an understanding with a woman who had the respect of the newcomers to his tribe. He would be a strong chieftain. One of the greats.

Katara, who looked so much like Kya it made his heart ache, was a strong waterbender and healer. She was a teacher to the Avatar himself. It was possible there was a beginning of an understanding between those two as well, though they were a bit young for it. Even if nothing panned out, a close friendship with the Avatar was a gift to the tribe.

Then there was Zuko, who had already become an asset to the tribe who raised him. The maps he brought would save lives, his inside knowledge of their enemy would save more. Navigating through the Eastern Current alone had been a feat the tribe would Speak of for years. Only a true Water Tribesman could do that, even if he had used bending. It was entirely possible he could become a Chief of a secondary village someday, assuming he could find a wife willing to risk baring firebending children.
“As a father, I couldn’t be more proud,” Hakoda said honestly. “But as a Chief… I’m worried. The North has fallen, and the Fire Nation pushes forward every year. The Earth Kingdom are too fragmented to help beyond their boarders. We now stand on a knife’s edge between success and failure.”

“We have the Avatar, and now we have hope of this eclipse. It’s more than we had a year ago.”

“True.” Though it was cold comfort. The Avatar was so young and this eclipse so short. It was looking more like a last ditch effort to turn the tide of the war rather than a critical strike.

Hakoda glanced back to the odd Fire Nation chart and moved it aside for his personal maps, the ones inked out on stretched hide. “Tell the men to adjust the rigging to come about directly to starboard. We’re to head back to the nearest port tonight.” He gestured to the map. “This one, if at all possible. It’s wide enough to land in first thing in the morning.”

Bato came over to look “You sure? The mouth of that river leads directly to Gaoling. There’s been a lot of Fire Nation activity there.”

He snorted. “Zuko has shown he’s wily enough to handle it. I’ve talked with him and he intends to rejoin his siblings and the Avatar.” He glanced at his friend and spoke honestly. “And I want him off this ship before the Northerners drip poison in his ear.”

“Understood,” Bato said grimly.

OoOoO

A tentative clearing of a throat brought Azula’s attention away from her contemplation of the ocean. Her ship had finally left the last of the spirits blasted ice-free waters of the North Pole.

Azula never held store in the Fire Sages claims of the sun’s healing powers, but it was pleasant to stand out in the warm deck.

“This had better be important,” she said, not turning around.

“It’s regarding your standing orders, Princess.”

Azula turned. Her lieutenant hastily bowed, making the message hawk perched on his arm flutter its wings to keep its balance.

Straightening, the man handed over a tightly rolled scroll. The seal had been broken, of course. Azula was far too important to receive the many pointless Fire Nation dispatches.

She unrolled it and read the message. “So, another sighting of the Avatar’s bison has him traveling straight northeast.”

“Yes, Princess. Their destination appears to be Ba Sing Se.” He looked highly uneasy. “If I may beg
a question, Princess… if the Avatar does try to hide there, will the Fire Nation attempt another siege?"

That question was impertinent enough to get him banished off her ship and straight into the sea. Azula eyed the officer for a long moment, silent. She enjoyed watching him sweat.

“How like a man to default to blunt force, first. I suppose you would like to see me fail like my Uncle?”

“No, Princess!” He dropped to a full kowtow. The hawk screeched in protest (or self-preservation) and fluttered away.

Well, this one learned quickly from the failure of the other officers. Azula decided to let him live. For now.

“No, we will not need a siege to retrieve the Avatar,” she said. “We will need… precision.” Electricity danced along her fingers. Mai would be easy enough to locate. Ty Lee… possibly more difficult. But they would be fools to ignore direct orders from the Crown Princess.

As a child, Azula chose her companions carefully for strength, skills, and ability to follow directions. She’d then spent years reinforcing her will over them. They would come to her call. They were not fools. “Bring me the master of hawks. I have messages to send.”

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Zuko stood on deck as the ship came into port. It was early morning with the sun just a glimmer along the horizon. But of course, he was awake.

He wasn’t a fool. He knew why Bato let him sleep in his cabin that night. Relations between the Northern and Southern warriors were strained, and it would be best if the Northerners didn’t have a handy firebender to take their anger out on.

It seemed even when he was with his own people, his Fire Nation blood caused problems.

The port they were pulling into was muti-use, with ships of different shapes and sizes along weathered along the docks. As Hakoda’s ship pulled in, they passed fishermen in smaller boats going out to sea for the day’s catch. A tug soon followed.

Zuko stepped up to help catch the lines thrown by the tug’s small crew along with Water Tribe men serving out the last bit of dog watch.

One of the men on the tug had warm amber-colored eyes. He and Zuko’s gazes locked for a frozen second—a moment of mutual recognition flashed between them—and the man dipped his head in a slight nod. Then the moment was over, the lines tied off, and the tug began hauling Hakoda’s ship around water hazards and safely in.

Zuko stepped back. This port had clearly had Fire Nation visitors, and some of their crew had relations with the locals. Or the amber-eyed man had lived in the colonies, and come into to the Earth Kingdom for work.
There was a wait while the ship pulled in. Stepping back, Zuko found himself thinking.

Iroh had said the Fire Lord was the father of the people. Did that extend to half-Fire Nation folk, too? People who had left the colonies? Or did the Fire Lord’s responsibility to his people stop at the border? Was it in the blood, or was it marked by the land?

*If things were different... and I had been Crown Prince for real, would that make me someday responsible for that tug-boat man, too?*

Before, Zuko would have jerked his mind away from that sort of thought, like touching a hot coal. Now… he let himself wonder what Iroh would have said if he’d asked during a Pai Sho game.

Eh. He’d probably spout an obscure metaphor involving tea.

Zuko was still smiling at that thought when Hakoda joined him on the deck.

“Good, you’re awake. I thought it would be better for you to get a start on your journey sooner rather than later.”

Zuko nodded. “I’m packed and ready to go when we make land.” It stung to have to leave his tribe so soon, but it was also for the best. Katara, Sokka, and Aang had a two-week head start. Thanks to Appa, they were capable of moving faster, too. He had his work cut out for them.

Hakoda squinted. “Something on your mind, son?”

“No… I…” He shook his head and glanced out to the little port town. He felt strange about sharing his thoughts this morning, so he focused on another matter which had weighed on his mind. “I’ve just been thinking, recently. After Aang stops the Fire Lord... it won’t really be the end, will it?”

Hakoda nodded approvingly. “You’re right. The refugees from the Northern Tribe are to start rebuilding in the South, but it will probably be generations until we have any fine cities again.”

“The whole world will have to rebuild,” Zuko said. “Our work will be just beginning.”

“You have been thinking about this,” Hakoda’s voice was full of deep satisfaction. “Yes, it will. But by the spirits, it will be good to be home again.”

“Yes,” Zuko agreed, ignoring the unease stirring in his heart. “It will be.”

Once the Fire Lord was stopped, the Water Tribe would return home, and of course Zuko would be expected to, as well. There would be more than enough work—*good* work to do. Rebuilding everything the Fire Nation had taken from them. There would be no reason for him to travel from the South Pole again, if he wanted.

*Is that what I really want?*

That was a thought too heady and dangerous to consider. Of *course* it was what he wanted. The South Pole was home. His tribe was there. It was where he belonged.

Though he might take vacations to the Earth Kingdom during the dark winter.

Luckily, Hakoda was all business and unrolled a map, which changed the subject. They spent the next few minutes discussing where Sokka had said he planned to find an earthbending teacher, where they were likely to stop along the way, and how best for Zuko to get there without a flying bison.
The town Sokka had marked out was just north of the Si Wong Desert. It would be a long journey on foot, though knowing Aang, there would be a lot of pit stops along the way. He might catch up to them by then.

“They’re likely to stay on the move, unless they managed to find an Earthbending master for Aang,” Hakoda said.

Zuko nodded and rolled up the map. Neither one had to say he was facing a daunting journey. “Well, I have one thing going for me: A sky bison isn’t easy to hide. People are going to take note of a ten-ton flying animal. I’ll be able to follow rumors and gossip.”

“News travels faster than an arctic elephant herd,” Hakoda agreed. “We will be at Chameleon Bay for the next month. If you can’t find them, or run into trouble return. You’ll always have a place here with the warriors.”

Zuko grinned. It was good to know he would be welcomed back, no matter what. “I will.”

The ship had pulled up to the dock, and the gang-plank was being lowered. It was time.

His father clasped him in a strong grip, man-to-man. “Get going, son. May the spirits of the Ocean and Moon watch your journey.”

At that moment Zuko felt many things: Pride because his father was sending him off on a mission as he would a grown warrior, wistful sadness for leaving so soon, excitement for the chance at meeting up with Aang and his siblings again. And finally… a lingering sense of grief. Seeing Iroh’s ship sink with all aboard hadn’t left him. He wasn’t sure it ever would.

Ahead, was a road that would take him to the interior of the Earth Kingdom. His first stop would be Gaoling. There was a friend there he wanted to meet, and find out if she’d heard any rumors about the Avatar’s whereabouts.

Hopefully she wouldn’t hit him with rocks, this time.
Interlude: The Spirit World

Note: Readers, please forgive me. I usually try to keep things as reasonably close to canon as possible—at least for an AU—but today I am... canon-bending a bit.

Anyway, if you won’t mind, I’m anxious for your thoughts.

OoOoO

"Oh, I've been here for many years. I had always enjoyed the company of the spirits, so when my work was done in the material world, I chose to leave my body behind and come to the Spirit World!"

~ Iroh, A New Spiritual Age

OoOoO

Iroh woke in a land of mist.

He could not feel the position of the sun, though it shined down in a diffused light all around him. This, and his last memory of water rushing into the bridge on his sinking ship told him he was in the spirit world.

"Have I died?" he wondered.

But he did not think so. The afterlife and the spirit world were two separate places.

After Lu Ten fell in Ba Sing Se, Iroh had embarked on a journey within the spirit world, seeking answers he was not ready for. Then, when news of his nephew’s murder by Earth Kingdom soldiers reached him, he had abandoned his quest in order to be with his remaining family.

But the spirit world was not a place one ever forgot.

The sound of children’s bright laughter caught Iroh’s attention. The mist thinned.

Out, across a pond, two boys were laughing and sparring with wooden swords. Iroh’s breath caught. He had seen this moment with his own eyes before: His own son, Lu Ten, teaching beginning swordplay to his young nephew.

Iroh remembered interrupting their play to inform Lu Ten of the Fire Lord’s orders to take Ba Sing Se.
Zuko had begged to come along, but he had been only a child…

What wouldn’t Iroh have given to return to this point and do things differently. It would have been difficult to keep Lu Ten from the war, but not impossible. He should have taken Zuko with him as well, kept him safely under his wing. Azulon would have granted Iroh that wish, if he told him it was for training. Perhaps he should have defied his father and fled with the boys away from the corruption of the Royal Palace. They could have lived for years in peace and obscurity until Sozin’s folly caught up with the world…

“You cannot alter the past.”

The voice had come from behind him. And that was familiar to Iroh, too.

Reluctantly, Iroh turned to the speaker. As he did, he let go of the wish to change what he could not. The sound of the children’s laughter faded back into the mist.

The man who stood before Iroh wore rich yellow robes in a style not seen for one hundred years. He had the airbending tattoos of a master and the old, sad eyes of a friend.

“Gyatso.” Iroh bowed.

Learning his spiritual guide was an Air Nomad monk had come as quite a shock the first time Iroh had ventured into the spirit world. It had seemed to be a cruel irony of the fates. Now, Iroh had grown used to the idea.

“I know this is not the afterlife,” Iroh said, “Yet, I cannot possibly be alive.”

“Are you certain?” Gyatso asked. “Would your brother not want proof against those who question his legitimacy?”

Iroh paused. “Ah. Yes.” It did make a certain amount of sense. Ozai would need solid proof of Iroh’s body or inadequacy to secure his own throne. The idea bothered Iroh, but he knew of his younger brother’s ambitions well. “Then my body is alive, but my spirit is here.” He paused. “And… Zuko? Did he escape cleanly?”

“I am your spiritual guide, not his.”

Not a yes, but not a no, either. Iroh briefly closed his eyes. “Then, for the sake of my nation, I will have hope.”

Gyatso raised his eyebrows. “You believe that much in him?”

“Yes. His instincts are strong, and his heart is good. Suffering has not diminished that.” He regarded the monk. “Why am I here, Gyatso?”

His guide sat at a table which had not been there before. “Sit, drink. I have brewed jasmine tea.”

“Ah, my favorite.” Iroh sat and accepted his teacup with relish. The flavor was more subtle, richer than he had ever had in real life. He had never pried the technique from Gyatso. Perhaps it was an airbending trick.

“You speak highly of your nephew,” Gyatso said.

Iroh sighed, lowering his cup. “He has the makings of an excellent Fire Lord.”

“Yet, you indulged him with his ideas for ending the war.”
“Prince Zuko is years behind on his education. Letting him believe peace was possible was… a valuable exercise to teach him how our government operates, how the Fire Lord delegates to his ministers, and how to compassionately impose his will on his subjects.”

The truth was: Zuko’s energy and enthusiasm had been a breath of fresh air. Iroh had forgotten what it was like to be young and full of idealism. He was also unprepared for how much he wished his nephew’s plans could come to fruition.

_How I wish this could happen_, he had found himself thinking again and again as they spoke during their Pai Sho games. _Oh nephew, I wish there could be peace._

Gyatso raised his eyebrows. “And yet, you kept much from him.”

“Yes,” Iroh admitted. “I saw how the truth of the war affected Lu Ten, how it cost him his innocence. I would have liked Zuko to keep his… for as long as he could. He has already been through much.”

“And what truth is that?” Gyatso asked mildly.

Iroh sipped his tea. He had zero doubts his spirit guide already knew. Why did he wish him to speak the ugliness of it aloud, in this beautiful, peaceful place? What would he gain?

“One that few have guessed at and fewer know for certain,” Iroh said. “Members of the royal family.” Himself, his father, and Ozai. Perhaps Ursa, too, though spirits knew his brother did not speak candidly to his own wife. “A few high Fire Sages, of course. Perhaps the Earth King, as well, seeing how he shuts himself up within his walls and hordes his resources.”

Gyatso waited with the infinite patience of a spiritual master.

“It is rather… ugly,” Iroh said, with a glance toward Gyatso’s beads and robes.

“All the more reason to pull it into the light. Such truths should not be allowed to fester in shadows.”

_Well_, Iroh thought with irony, _if you insist._ “The truth is this: When Fire Lord Sozin killed the Air Nomads, he broke a vital part of the world.” And stained his family’s honor perhaps beyond redemption, but that was neither here nor there.

“What is done is done,” Gyatso said as if it didn’t matter. Perhaps it didn’t, to the dead.

“It did not have to be this way,” Iroh snapped with a flare of long-checked anger. “Sozin wished to kill the Air Nomad avatar to give himself at least sixteen years before anyone could stop expansion of the Fire Nation. It was a **vile**, evil act, but… so be it.” He cut his hand across the air. “If only Sozin had stopped there instead of committing mass genocide…”

Something flashed in Gyatso’s eyes. Anger, which was then banked. “We would have protected Avatar Aang with our lives.”

“You **did** protect him with your lives, and now future generations will pay dearly for your mistake,” Iroh said.

“I seem to recall one man staying behind on his ship while he set his nephew free,” Gyatso replied.

“It is not the same.”

“Isn’t it?”
“No, Gyatso. If I die—if my whole crew dies—there will still be other firebenders. There will still be those who can provide a connection with the element of fire. There will still be summer.”

Gyatso tilted his head, conceding the point.

Now he was speaking of it aloud, Iroh found he could not stop until the whole terrible truth was laid bare. Gyatso was right: Such things should not be kept in the shadows. They festered.

“Your people were nomads, spread wide over the world. The scrolls say you were legendary tricksters, and lovers. There were crass jokes of children who did not favor their father actually being sired of an Air Nomad.” He paused at Gyatso’s knowing smile, then continued, “Even if Sozin managed to kill all of the Air Nomads at their temples and those traveling between them in one day—and it’s doubtful—there should have still been pregnancies remaining the world over. Yet no more airbenders have been born in one-hundred years. There is only one conclusion.” Iroh took a breath. “The elemental cycle is hanging by a thread. It may already be too broken to fix.”

“Yes,” Gyatso said. “It appears so.”

“And even if young Aang lives long enough to father children…”

“It would be doubtful if any would be capable of connecting to air. Not impossible,” Gyatso said, “But difficult. Air was more than just bending. It as freedom in the heart which lived in the people. One boy cannot recover an entire lost culture.”

Iroh was unsurprised. “Then the only question,” Iroh said, “is when the last airbender dies—when the elemental cycle is truly sundered—will the remaining benders lose their connection to their elements at once, or gradually with no more capable of bending being born?”

“The latter, I think,” Gyatso said. “There will simply be no more benders born at all.”

“Like the airbenders.” Iroh nodded sharply. He had come to the same conclusion long ago. It was said that the gifts of the ancient Lion Turtles could be given and taken away. The ability to bend was recycled through the world thanks in large part to the balance of the elements, which was represented by the Avatar. An unending cycle. Without that… “Then by that time, the world must be united under one banner. Three elemental nations, three seasons, is as imbalanced as a cart missing a wheel. Two, or better yet, one? There is a chance humanity can survive and unite without tearing ourselves apart… before the true war arrives.” He gusted a sigh. “That poor boy will be the last airbender as well as the last Avatar.”

Again, Gyatso inclined his head.

It was a bitter pill, but one Iroh had swallowed long before. Knowledge of the oncoming destruction of the world changed a man. He suspected some of his younger brother’s unending thirst for ambition and control was because of it.

_Damn you, Sozin._ It was a traitorous thought, but one not new to him. Those who were cursed with the knowledge called it Sozin’s Folly for a reason.

Within a hundred years there would be no more children born to Fire, Earth, or Water.

Worse, that meant there would be no benevolent bridge between the spirits and the material world. The separation which the legendary Avatar Wan placed between the two worlds would rapidly break down.

Iroh did not speak this aloud, but perhaps his thoughts held weight in the spirit world because Gyatso
said, “The most ancient of scrolls do describe a time before the Avatar, when spirits and humanity existed in the same world. It is possible some may survive.”

“Yes. Small populations, living isolated and sheltered on the backs of Lion Turtles,” Iroh said. He had read similar scrolls several times through his life. First with wonder. Later on, with horror as he came to realize what a life like that truly meant. “To gather food meant venturing into the realm of the spirits. Many did not return, or were… mutilated and changed by the spirits for sport. And this was at a time when spirits were only dismissive, not angry at humanity. Now…”

Now, the spirits, rightfully enraged at the unbalance of the material world, would flood in to punish humanity. It had started happening already, if the rumors of the Hei Bai forest were to be believed. That was but a taste. And the future generations of the world would have to learn to live with all this without an Avatar or bending to aid them.

Avatars were notoriously long lived, and Aang was… very young. Chances were high that Iroh would not live to see this disaster unfold. Zuko may not either. His children would, though.

It was debatable what Zuko’s grandchildren would inherit, if anything at all.

Iroh had lived with this knowledge of the slow-motion catastrophe for decades, had done terrible, heinous things because of it. Without the ancient places of power—old forests, spiritual pools—the spirits would have less power to draw from when they returned.

Because in order to save anything left of the world, the Fire Nation must first tame it.

This was why there could never be peace.

“…Now all we can do is prepare for the next war: One where the future of humanity is at stake.” Iroh closed his eyes, grieved for the future. For what the world would become…. A cataclysm started because of one man’s unending ambition.

In his darkest moments, he thought that perhaps it was justice for the murdered Air Nomads.

“The future is still unwritten, my friend. Come,” Gyatso said setting down his tea. It had gone as cold as Iroh felt inside. “I have something to show you.”

“What would that be?” he asked, exhausted by their conversation. “Perhaps I only wish for a rest.”

Hadrn’t he earned a rest? A lifetime of fighting for a cause he would not wish on his worst enemy had rewarded him with a dead wife and son, his crown stolen, and an assassination at the orders of his own brother.

His only hope for the future of the Fire Nation was Zuko, and Iroh was well aware he may have sentenced him to a slow, ugly end upon the Great Eastern Current.

*Nephew, how many times have I failed to keep you safe?*

Gyatso’s gaze was compassionate. “It is time, Fire Lord Iroh, you finished your spiritual quest.” He regarded him with solemn eyes and held out his hand. “It is time you learned the whole truth.”

“The… truth?”

“Yes. If you are brave enough to accept it.”

Iroh regarded Gyatso’s outstretched hand for a long moment. Then, he took it.
“Please,” the Earth Kingdom peasant fell to his knees into the dirt, hands raised in supplication. “My daughter is all I have left. Don’t hurt her. I’ll do anything.”

Smiling, Azula pat the head of the little girl. In her other hand, she held blue fire.

The girl stood, stiff as a board, her breathing shallow and her terrified eyes locked on her father.

Beside them, Ty Lee cocked her head. “It’s going to be okay,” she said to the girl. “Azula won’t hurt you as long as your father does what she wants.”

Her words were not, perhaps, as comforting as she intended.

“Then tell me,” Azula began, unhurried and drawing this out. It was so delightful to see peasants beg for their simple little lives. Something shivery and pleasant curled at the base of her spine, and she felt strong. Her mother’s voice was silenced. “Earth Kingdom refugees are fleeing to Ba Sing Se by the droves. Yet, you and your daughter are the only two we’ve seen running away. Why would that be?”

The man swallowed. “The whole city is a lie,” he rasped. “The war refugees… they don’t know they’re heading into a trap.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Earth King welcomes people in—with hundreds a day. You can’t build that many new homes, or provide jobs for them all!” His voice rose, and he stopped, swallowed. “Most of the new ones are collected as they arrive and shipped out to farms or work camps, or the walls if they’re earthbenders. It’s up to Dai Li—the King’s Cultural Authority, to control the rest. They run the city, not the Earth King.”

She was growing tired of his rambling, but before she could snap at him to get to the point, he continued.

“My wife was a beautiful woman. One Dai Li agent… he…” For the first time the man tore his gaze from his daughter and glanced at Azula, “desired her. He arrested her on false charges, and then bended her mind to his will.”

Azula glanced to her companions. They were watching with equal horror and confusion. “Bended her… mind? There’s no such thing.” She moved the flame closer.

“Wait!” he cried. “Yes! My cousin found her later—she now calls herself by a different name. She believes she’s the agent’s wife.”

“Maybe she was looking for an excuse to get away from you,” Mai sighed, idly twisting a knife through her fingers. “Love is boring.”
“She doesn’t know me,” he insisted. “She doesn’t know her only daughter anymore, and she lived for our girl.”

Now, this sounded promising. “How sure are you these Dai Li did this?” Azula asked. “Would you bet your daughter’s life on it?”

“Daddy,” the girl whimpered.

Then, there was the sound of crashing through the nearby bushes. The man whipped around yelling, “Help! Help us!”

Before Azula could impress upon him how foolish that was, the foliage parted. Three young women close to Azula’s age stepped out. They were dressed from head to toe in green robed uniforms. Thick warpaint covered their faces, in the style of Avatar Kyoshi herself.

They visibly gaped, startled at the scene they’d stumbled upon. Then golden war fans snapped out.

“What’s going on here?” the leader demanded aggressively.

“Well, well.” Turning to face them, Azula shoved the little girl into the arms of her father. Ultimately, hurting her would only upset Ty Lee, and make Azula’s hold on the other girl difficult. It had been enough work convincing her to leave the circus. Besides… these mini-Kyoshi’s were much more interesting. Azula saw possibilities in their paint and uniforms. “Looks like our day just got more interesting. Mai, Ty Lee. Take them.”

Instantly, Mai and Ty Lee fell to either side to flank Azula. Their fighting styles were both opposite and complimentary.

Behind them, the peasant scooped up his girl and ran for his life. Perhaps he wasn’t as dumb as he looked.

The Kyoshi leader held up her golden war fan. By her professional stance, she knew how to use it. “You’re trespassing on Earth Kingdom land. By the authority given to the Kyoshi Warriors by the port of Serpent’s Pass, we are placing you under arrest.”

“Fool.” One snap of her wrists and blue fire lit anew in each hand. Azula advanced, smiling. “Don’t you know that fans just make flames stronger?”

OoOoO

“How long,” Iroh asked, days, or perhaps weeks later. It was impossible to tell the passage of time in the spirit world, when day and night appeared and disappeared at a whim, “is it safe to be away from my body?”
As always, Gyatso was serene. He traveled alongside his friend, riding on the head of a ghostly air bison—a beast easily twice the size of Avatar Aang’s. “Your body will be there when you are ready to return.”

“Yes,” Iroh said testily, “But I fear for the shape it will be in. Muscles atrophy.”

“It has not been as long as you fear. Time… has different meanings within the spirit world. For some of us, we have been here for the space of an eye-blink of time. For others, centuries. It is all the same.”

Iroh pondered Gyatso’s wisdom for some time—through at least two risings of the ‘sun’ and four of the ‘moon’. At last, he decided to trust in his spiritual guide.

“Ah,” Gyatso said, stopping. “I believe we have arrived.”

They stood upon a flat, grassy plain. Instead of blue, the sky was a perfect shade of cherry orange, dotted with clouds. Only, the clouds were moving suspiciously fast.

No, those were not clouds…

Iroh squinted. “They cannot be sky bison…” He glanced up at Gyatso’s amused gaze. “But how? We cannot bend in the spirit world.”

“Humans cannot, but animals have a deeper, purer connection to the elements,” Gyatso said and gestured with the point of his airstaff. “What do you see, Iroh?”

In the way of the spirit world, Iroh found himself suddenly gazing upon a sharply pointed mountain which rose out of the plain. Entire orchards were planted around it. Homes complete with peeked roofs dotted the sharp slopes, lintels and flowers grew in a riot of color around pathways, gardens, and twined through open air balconies.

And everywhere he looked were Air Nomads. Monks, nuns, and novices laughing, cooking, sitting for instruction from elders, and going about their daily lives without the horror of the Fire Nation sweeping down upon them.

Iroh stared for seconds/minutes/hours before he wrenched himself away. His throat felt thick. “You have brought me all this way to show me a graveyard. The spirits of the murdered Air Nomads.”

Gyatso’s hand rested in comfort on his shoulder. “No, Iroh. I have brought you to the survivors.”

And Iroh saw with eyes that did not want to believe that these Air Nomads were much more solid than the long dead Gyatso who stood beside him. More real and substantial even than himself, whose body lay waiting for him in the material world.

These were people who were living entirely within the spirit world.

Iroh sank to his knees. He never knew that the simple feeling of hope could hurt so much.

“How…?”

“That is a long story. Come, let them tell it to you.”

As if Gyatso’s words were a cue, several monks stopped their gardening, set their tools aside, and walked forward to greet Iroh like an old friend.
Betrothed

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
Swimming Dragon Style 2 by GreenAppleFreak:

“You are a dragon who has learned to swim rather than fly. I have never seen the like. It is… not natural.”

OoOoO

“People see me and think I’m weak. They want to take care of me, but I can take care of myself, by myself.”

“You sound like my nephew, always thinking you need to do things on your own, without anyone’s support.”

~ Toph and Iroh, The Chase

OoOoO

The last time Zuko had stepped foot in Gaoling, it had been full night. Now, as he walked the streets several months later and in broad daylight, he saw how things had changed.

What had once been a vibrant town had emptied out. Half the shops were boarded up, and what few people were around walked by quickly with hooded features and furtive movements. They were scared.

It probably had something to do with the Fire Nation troops patrolling through the streets as if they owned it.

Zuko watched his step and tried not to stand out… at least no more so than usual. Luckily, one of the first purchases he had made upon leaving Hakoda’s ship had been Earth Kingdom clothing: A simple green shirt and pants, and a lighter green over-robe with yellow stitching on the cuffs. That had been Bato’s idea. Since he was on his own and couldn’t fly away with Aang and Appa anymore, it was wise to fit in.

As he walked, head down and trying not to be interesting, he noticed there was something… off about these Fire Nation troops.

They were dressed in non-regulation uniforms; clothing messy, wrinkled, and sporting additional ordainments and flair. They didn’t have half the discipline Iroh’s crew had shown, either.

Zuko watched as a group crowded around a fountain in the town’s square, laughing and drinking in the open. When they were done, they tossed empty bottles into the water and went on their way.
It wasn’t until a pack of them came riding down the street astride fire rhinoceroses that it hit him.

“This isn’t good, Momo,” he told the lemur, who was perched on his shoulder. “I think these are the Rough Rhinos regiment.”

The lemur blinked and reached down to dig in Zuko’s robe pocket for a treat.

Zuko sighed. “I don’t know how I know, but…”

He stopped. 1) No really, how did he know about the Rough Rhinos? 2) Why was he talking to the lemur like a person again?

Grimacing, Zuko pinched the bridge of his nose. He knew the answer to both.

1) His long-dead Fire Nation knowledge was rearing its ugly head again. 2) Momo was a good listener.

“The Rough Rhinos are a specialized unit, meant to subdue pockets of resistance,” he muttered… mostly to himself, and partially to Momo.

But… Gaoling was not resisting. It was enduring, like the Earth Kingdom was apt to do. Why were the Rough Rhinos still hanging around?

The smart thing would be to put distance between himself and this town, but…

_I have to check to see if Toph is all right._

The girl had helped him out when he’d been in a tight spot. That bag of food she’d given to him had fed himself, his siblings, and Aang for days when Sokka had been too injured to help hunt. It would be wrong to move on without at least seeing if she was okay.

Head down, Zuko walked through the tense streets, doing his best to look like the rest of the townspeople. His scars were noticeable, but in a war with the Fire Nation lots of people had scars.

The Rough Rhinos either found him too uninteresting to bother with, or they were too busy drinking and laughing to care.

He passed a knot of them leading their giant rhinoceroses out of what had once been the Earth Rumble stadium, according to the scorched, lopsided sign over the top. By the looks of it, the Fire Nation had converted the stadium into stables. The smell of rhino dung was terrible.

He winced, remembering Toph’s proud boasting:

_“I’m the reigning Earth Rumble Champion, you know. I get to beat up on these tough, muscled guys and show them who’s really boss. It’s great. They call me the Blind Bandit…”_

Finally, after some hunting around, Zuko came to the gates of the great Bei Fong estate. He hadn’t noticed it before, but there was a stone-crafted flying boar above the main garden entrance. There was also another pack of rhinoceroses tied to a post nearby. Not good.

Zuko turned and slipped off the main road to walk along the bordering walls surrounding the gate. He had scaled them once before, and had no trouble doing the same again.

Up and over: His boots hit soft grass on the other side. He crouched and looked around. The gardens grounds were just as lush and well kept as he remembered, with tastefully planted trees and topiaries. The scent of orchards and ripe fruit had Momo squealing in delight and flitting to the nearest apple-
strawberry bush.

“Toph?” Zuko hissed, looking around.

No answer. She could easily be inside the great house. If he could find her bedroom, he could knock on a window. Or just wait until she strolled through the gardens—

“You! Halt right there!”

He stiffened and turned. That was not Toph’s voice. Sure enough, a beefy looking guard dressed in green rushed toward him.

Zuko cursed and whirled around, leaping back to the wall. However, before he could get two steps, he was knocked off his feet by a flying stone. Zuko landed on his back, dazed.

The world swam out of focus for a second. When it came back, he found the guard standing over him with a look of satisfaction on his face.

OoOoO

"Hey guys!" Aang chirped as he walked through the double doors of their huge Ba Sing Se house. "Guess what I did?"

Katara perked up. "You learned earthbending?"

The little monk paused in his step, a momentarily guilty look flashing across his face. A second later, it was gone. "Nope. Better!" Then he held up a stack of papers. "I got missing person posters for Zuko!"

"You what?" Sokka said, setting down the whetstone he’d been using to sharpen his boomerang. "Aang, you were supposed to come straight home from your earthbending lesson. What about the buddy system? Never go off alone, remember? And the buddy system doesn't work if you go off by yourself without a buddy!"

Katara rolled her eyes. They had been in Ba Sing Se for a week, and she was getting really sick and tired of Sokka's paranoia. Also, she'd noticed that Sokka seemed exempt from his own 'buddy system' rules. So annoying. She wished Zuko were here to help poke holes in Sokka's ego. Katara tried, but there was only so much a younger sister could do.

With that in mind, she set down her mending and walked over to Aang to take a poster.

Sure enough, Zuko's likeness grinned up at her in a way the live one hardly ever did. The drawing was uncanny, but... "Um, the scar's on the wrong side..."

Aang deflated for all of two seconds before perking up again. "I'll just have more printed tomorrow. The printer apprentice was really nice."
“It’s a good idea, but how much did this cost?” Sokka asked suspiciously as he came over, too.

"Heh... about that..." Aang had a way of fidgeting that was both endearing and sort of made Katara want to strangle him. Why did he always have to dodge around the point? "I couldn't get any of the stone practice blocks to move, so the master at the International House of Earthbending sort of... told me not to come back. And he kept the fees for the lesson.” He shrugged and forced a bright smile.

"Oh, Aang..." Katara murmured.

"So I thought, since I wasn’t earthbending, why don’t I look for Zuko some more? Ba Sing Se is huge."

Aang had a point there. It was a long shot that her lost brother would be here at all. (Sokka still muttered darkly about 'swamp gas' every time Katara tried to bring up his vision). They were running up against dead ends and getting frustrated.

Katara turned to Sokka. "Missing person posters have to have a better chance at working than what we've been doing. We've been going out every day for a solid week, and no one's seen anything.” In fact, a lot of people refused to talk to them, point blank. It was eerie.

Sokka rubbed at his chin. He still looked annoyed that Aang had gone off by himself, but was mollified. "Can't hurt, I guess. You should have let me draw the picture, though. I'm a great artist."

"You are?" Aang asked.

"He really isn't," Katara said. “These posters are a good start, but Aang... what about your earthbending?"

"There are tons of training dojos around here," Sokka said, answering for him. "Just try another. How hard can earthbending be?" He blinked, then grinned. "Ha. Hard, like a rock is hard, get it?"

Katara rolled her eyes again. "We got it, thanks."

Aang nodded. "I'm going to try Rock-A-Bye Earth Academy tomorrow. I think I have enough left..." He pulled two sad looking coins out of his pocket.

Katara exchanged a look with Sokka. The house they'd been given was huge, and meals were delivered three times a day, including a vegetarian portion for Aang. But the Earth King's generosity didn't include pocket money, and they were running low.

One of them was probably going to have to get a job, soon. As the eldest, that meant Sokka, which made Katara feel bad. Annoying as his 'buddy system' and 'Ba Sing Se Stranger Danger' rants had become, he worked hard to protect them all. She wished she could do something to help.

As if the universe were listening to her thought, there was a scraping sound of paper against the stone floor, followed by a discreet knock on the door. Curious, Katara walked over. Someone had shoved a single flier under the door. It was an advertisement. She read it and grinned.

"Sokka, look at this!" She turned the flier over and held it out so the boys could read. "There's a sword training class being held tomorrow for non-benders. It's in the lower ring, and the first class is free! You can go and put up missing-person posters on your way."

"Sword training, huh?" He walked over and eyed it with consideration. "Well, I am pretty good with a spear and my boomerang..."
And it would get him off his annoying 'buddy system' kick, since Katara was absolutely not going along to a stupid sword training class.

Aang bent and air scooter and rode it up to them--the main living area of the house was so large, it made his goofing around easy. "Sword training? That's so cool. Maybe after you learn, you can show me so I can use some moves with an air sword."

"What's an air sword?" Katara asked.

"It's a sword made of air." He made a wild slashing motion with one arm. "It’s one of the bending forms that weren’t really taught anymore because the monks practiced pacifism, but I always thought it sounded really, really fun."

"I guess it couldn't hurt..." Sokka said.

His fake hesitance was fooling no one. Katara knew he totally wanted to learn swordsmanship.

Smiling triumphantly, she grabbed the posters from Aang. "Let's get started putting these up tonight."

"Fine," Sokka said. "But we stick together. Remember the buddy system!"

OoOoO

The guard hauled Zuko up to his feet and pulled his arms behind his back. Thick, stone cuffs were slapped on his wrists.

He went quietly, forcing the ever-present fire in his belly to bank low. He fully expected the guard to throw him back on his rear outside the gates. Or worst case, a jail cell. But as long as no one figured out he was a firebender, he could blast free in the night.

Instead, he was marched into the great house, itself.

Zuko had only seen it briefly, and that had been at night. He knew it was a grand estate, but was struck anew by the richness of the house. The walls and flooring were made of exquisite marble, edged in rare metals. There were no plants—all the visible artwork was made of stone. Even the fabric hangings glittered with a dusting of sparkly minerals. This was an Earth Kingdom home to the core.

The head of the house sat at a long table, eating a luxurious meal with his wife. A swarthy, hulk of a man wearing the rank knots of a Fire Nation army colonel sat in the place of honor to his right. Though he was attending dinner as a guest, his uniform was stained and wrinkled.

"Lord Bei Fong." The guard stopped Zuko five feet from the table. "We found another thief in the gardens, sir."

Lord Bei Fong? As far as Zuko was aware, only the Fire Nation used the titles of Lord and Lady. However, Zuko couldn't let the insult stand. "I didn't steal anything!"
"Oh? Spying then?" the guard drawled.

Eh... sort of. "No!"

Lord Bei Fong wiped his mouth with his napkin and turned to his guest. "This is unacceptable, Colonel Mongke. You claim the Fire Nation would bring peace and order to Gaoling. How do you account for this rise in crime?"

Oh. So that was why Zuko had been brought to the house. He was being used as an example.

Colonel Mongke eyed Zuko with a slight frown, as if he was trying and failing to place him. The ever-present hot fire in Zuko’s veins made him want to stare this other firebender down, but a voice of reason that sounded suspiciously like Sokka told him he could not afford to be interesting. It itched at his soul, but Zuko forced himself to look away first.

"Gutter trash," Mongke grunted after a moment. "They can be found in every city, Lao. If you're so tired of thieves hopping your walls, start making them regret it."

Lao’s wife made a distressed little noise. “Is this the time and place to talk of such disturbing things?”

"Mom? Dad? What's going on? Why do I hear different voices?" asked a tremulous voice.

All gazes in the room were drawn to the girl who stood in the doorway.

Zuko's breath caught. He had forgotten how tiny Toph was. Today, the effect was highlighted by the soft white dress she wore, and the way her dark hair pinned up in a perfect bun. She minced carefully forward on bare feet, one hand out as if she was afraid of losing her balance. Hastily, a servant rushed forward to lead her closer to the table.

Why was she acting this way? She was a brilliant, dangerous earthbender. And she had no problem running with Zuko through the house the last time.

All stood from the table to acknowledge her appearance, but Mongke went a step further. Rising from his seat, he walked around the table and knelt, taking Toph’s tiny hand in his. "How lovely it is to see you, this morning, Lady Bei Fong. Your parents told me you were not feeling well."

Toph stared out at a point over his shoulder. "I heard raised voices... I was so worried..." she said breathlessly.

"It is nothing, daughter," Lao said. “Just a common thief, but you were in no danger. Our guards caught him at once."

“I’m not a thief,” Zuko snapped again and was rewarded by the guard twisting his arm up his back until he gasped in pain. Well, even Toph hadn’t believed him the first time, either.

Toph’s mother rose and gestured to the servant leading her daughter. “Return Toph back to her room. I don't want her to fall ill again."

Zuko watched, helpless, as Toph was led away. He wanted to yell out to her and let her know that he was there, but that would accomplish nothing other than making her parents wonder how they knew each other.

Best she was kept in the dark.

A hand landed heavily on his shoulder, snapping Zuko’s attention away from the girl. Colonel
Mongke had strode over to squint closely at him. This close, Mongke smelled like stale sweat. The Colonel leered. “Looks like you’ve already been on the wrong end of a firebender, haven’t you, boy?” He held up one hand and a pale yellow flame flickered to life in his palm. He clearly expected Zuko to be shy of fire.

Zuko stared at him, derision on his face. He knew he should act meek, but he couldn't. It simply wasn't built in him. "Is that a challenge?"

Mongke tossed his head back and brayed a laugh, showing blackened back teeth. Then he turned to Lao. "Give this brat over to me, Lord Bei Fong. My men could use the target practice."

Toph's mother turned a delicate shade of green. "Lao… really. Is that necessary?"

"This is war, Poppy." But Lao looked as if he found Mongke’s suggestion distasteful, as well.

“Yes, this is war,” Zuko said, turning to him. “So, why are you hosting a Fire Nation Colonel at your table? Don’t you have any shame, Lord Bei Fong?”

Interestingly enough, the guard holding him did not twist his arm up for those words. Apparently, Zuko had struck a nerve.

Lao, however, was not shamed. He flicked his fingers dismissively in Zuko’s direction. “Do what you want with the thief, Colonel. I don’t want to see him within my walls again."

"Oh, you won't." Mongke turned and yelled down the hall with a booming voice. "Vachir, Kahchi, load the prisoner up. We got new cannon fodder."

“Bei Fong! I’ll make sure you regret this!” Zuko yelled, though he and everyone else in the room knew it was an empty threat.

Mongke’s men easily dragged him away.

OoOoO

Sokka was glad he hadn’t insisted on the buddy system today. The lower ring was not somewhere he wanted to bring Katara. Beggars lined the streets—hollow-eyed kids and mothers with dark rings under their eyes all holding out their hands for a bit of coin. The last of Sokka’s pocket money was gone within ten minutes.

He’d put up the missing person posters, but didn’t have much hope. The ones they’d tacked up yesterday had been gone from the upper ring by morning. After class, Sokka planned to have a word with Joo Dee.

They were never going to find Zuko here, at this rate.

… Though it would be fun to show his brother some cool sword-moves, when they did find him.
Maybe it would help convince Zuko to forgive him for abandoning him in the North Pole.

Holding the flyer to the sword training lesson in one hand, Sokka knocked on the door of the dojo with the other.

“Coming!” yelled a bright bubbly voice. A moment later the door swung open to reveal a girl about Sokka’s age. She wore a familiar dark green uniform, thick white warrior face-paint, and sported a long, thin braid down her back.

“Hi!” she said as Sokka gaped at her in surprise. “You must be here for the sword training lesson!”

“Yeah, but… You’re a Kyoshi Warrior?” he blurted, shocked.

She smiled. “Sure I am!”

“I am, too. Or… I was…” Sokka scratched the back of his neck as the girl grinned at him. “What are you doing away from Kyoshi Island?” He tried to glance around her into the dojo, only to have his way blocked when she moved along with him. “Is Suki with you?”

“We’re helping the Earth King fight the war, silly.” She cocked her head. “Ohh. You’re cute. She didn’t say you’d be cute.”

He blinked. “Uh, I am. Wait, Suki… talked about me?” He remembered the fierce Kyoshi Warrior fondly, but never got the impression she liked him for more than a punching bag. It didn’t help that she’d mistrusted Zuko for being a firebender… and then Zhao had come along, chasing Aang, and burned their village.

On second thought, maybe Suki would just want to hit him again.

The girl’s smile grew larger. “Why don’t you come inside, cutie?”

Finally, Sokka was able to look around her, but he couldn’t see the rest of the class, or Suki. He hoped this ponytail girl wasn’t the teacher. Not that girls couldn’t wield weapons—his time with the Kyoshi Warriors beat that lesson into his head—but he was hoping for someone more… mature.

He hesitated.

“Come on. You’re just in time for the first class. This way!” the girl chirped, and Sokka found himself being dragged into the dojo before he could figure out why uneasy alarm bells were going off in the back of his mind.

The door clicked shut after them.

“The flyer said practice swords were supplied,” Sokka was saying as he followed her. “I don’t have my own yet…”

He trailed off as he rounded the corner. The next room was lit by lamps. Standing ominously to either side were three men in emerald green robes and large hats. They sure didn’t look like students.

There were two more girls in Kyoshi Warrior getup as well. One was tall and thin with raven black hair. … And standing next to her was the girl Sokka had last seen at the North Pole. Her face was also painted with Kyoshi-style makeup, but Sokka would know her anywhere.

She was no Kyoshi Warrior.
“Thank you, Ty Lee,” the Fire Princess said. “Sokka, isn’t it?”

“Nope, not me. Wrong Water Tribe guy. I’m just gonna—” He turned to run, but the upbeat girl with the braid slid between him and the exit. She jabbed him three times.

Sokka’s arms fell like limp noodles to his sides. He could feel them, but he couldn’t twitch a finger.

“What the—” He twisted, arms swinging wildly, but the girl danced behind him and hit him, mid-spine. It was like a full-body shockwave that left every muscle unresponsive.

Sokka fell, heavily, to the ground. He couldn’t so much as move his head—could only watch as Princess Azula stepped over to rest one pointed boot on his chest.

“I do know you,” she said. “You’re the one in league with the Avatar, aren’t you? You and I are going to have so much fun.”

A snap of her fingers and the men in emerald robes stepped forward to haul Sokka up.

OoOoO

Once he was outside the Bei Fong estate, Zuko’s cuffs were shifted from locked behind his back to in front, and he was passed from Colonel Mongke to his two officers.

One of the new men had the facial tattoos of a former Yu-Yan archer and also stared at Zuko as if he were familiar, but couldn’t place where. Zuko looked away.

“What’s this, then?” the archer asked Mongke. “Fresh meat?”

“He’s a little young for you, eh Colonel?” The other officer took Zuko’s chin, forcing his eyes up. Zuko glared at him. “Ohh, look at this one. He’s a fighter. Should provide some entertainment.”

“Canon fodder for the front lines, you mean.” The archer laughed. “The stupid Earth Army doesn’t realize when it’s crushing their own people.”

Zuko went cold.

“Enough talk,” Mongke said. “Let’s get moving. I want to make camp by nightfall.”

Zuko was hauled up like a sack of potato-yams and tossed lengthwise across the fire rhinoceros. The animal’s shoulders jostled against his stomach with every step. It was an uncomfortable ride, to say the least.

The moment they were past the borders of the town and, presumably, headed toward the army’s encampment, Zuko was more than ready to escape. Preferably while sending some pain his captor’s
way.

Ignoring the officer’s rude (and sometimes obscene talk) he and kept his head down, and breathed carefully. A flame pinched between his fingers, he started to heat the chain links between his handcuffs. It wasn’t easy. Metal grew hot quickly, and he had to concentrate on keeping the heat away from his skin while focusing on the links.

The chains parted as they came to the edge of the forest.

No time to lose. Manacles falling away from his wrists, he slapped fire-heated hands on the rhinoceros’s hide. The animal roared in surprise and lurched, half rising, throwing Zuko and the Fire Nation officer to the side. Zuko had the advantage of being prepared. He tumbled to the ground, rolling.

“What in Agni?” the archer yelled, bringing his own mount up short.

“The brat’s getting away!” another yelled.

“No, you don’t!” That came from Colonel Mongke. With a fierce strike, he blasted a gout of fire.

Zuko was ready. His wrists loose in his favorite starting position, he pulled Mongke’s fire around his shoulders and back again, rerouting the flame to make it his own.

He didn’t intend to yank the flame completely from Mongke’s control, down to the spark, leaving the other man’s hands bare of fire. The man gasped, hunching slightly as if Zuko had stolen the breath from him.

_How, by all the spirits, did I just do that?_ Zuko thought, but he had no time to figure it out. He finished his own move clumsily, changing targets at the last second from Mongke, who was still gasping, to the archer who was knocking a flaming arrow on his bow. Zuko’s flames fell short, to splash before the archer like glittering water.

Surprise was enough to send the archer’s shot wild.

Zuko didn’t wait to see if he’d be lucky twice. He turned and bolted straight for the forest.

Behind him, the Rough Rhinos shouted and gave chase.

Fire rhinoceroses were slow to get up to speed, but once they did, they could easily outpace him. Zuko zig-zagged between the trees, trying to put as much foliage between himself and the archer as possible. If he could find a place to hide…

One second he was running flat out, and the next the solid earth sank out from under him. With a yelp, he fell into a shaft that had opened out of nowhere.

The sky disappeared as the earth snapped shut above him. Then, strong, slim hands slapped over his mouth.

“Shh!” hissed a familiar voice in his ear.

Zuko stilled.

Even underground, he could hear the rhinoceroses charging, sounding like oncoming thunder through the earth. They slowed, then stopped. The aggravated voices above were muffled.

“Where did he go?”
“That way! There’s a path through those trees. You go left and flank him.”

Then more thundering, growing quieter, as the rhinoceroses galloped away.

The hands dropped and Zuko’s shoulders sagged. “Thanks, Toph.”

“That’s two you owe me now, Sparky,” the girl said. Then her voice turned harder. “I knew it! You were firebending up there. I thought you said you were Water Tribe. What’s the deal?”

Zuko winced and tried to stand up, only to hit his head on unforgiving stone. She’d sunk him into a tunnel, but the ceiling wasn’t high enough for him to straighten completely.

Well, there was no point in pretending he wasn’t a firebender now, and he was not going to be stuck bumping around underground with no light. He lit a puddle of flame in the palm of his hand.

Toph had changed out of the delicate dress. She now wore a jaunty green and tan outfit similar to the one he’d seen last time. Gone was the obedient little girl. This was the mini-mayhem who had effortlessly knocked him on his butt and then sent him on his way with a bag of food.

“It’s… a long story,” Zuko said.

Toph balled a fist threateningly. “Make it short, then.”

“I’m adopted,” he said flatly.

She cocked her head as if listening for the ring of truth in his voice. “Huh. Fair enough.” Then she reached behind herself. “Here, you forgot something at my house.” She tossed it over, and in the next moment, Zuko was juggling the flame in one hand, and a lemur encased almost entirely in rock in the other. Only Momo’s head and tail stuck out of the stone.

“Momo!” Zuko peered closer. The lemur’s eyes were half open, but he looked dazed and was… drooling. “What did you do to him?”

Toph snorted. “Nothing. I found him eating fermented strawberry-apples from the gardens.”

It took a second to process that. “Are you saying he’s drunk?”

Momo burped.

Suddenly, Toph twisted her head, an ear skyward. “They’re doubling back. Come on.” Her hands snapped out, fingers facing up in a guard position. Then she pushed, and the rock wall beside them crumbled away like tissue paper.

Bemused, holding Momo under one arm, Zuko followed.

Within a short distance, the low tunnel opened into a large cave system. It wasn’t much for looks—all dirt and gray rock without any interesting stalactites to liven it up—but the ceiling was so high the light from Zuko’s flame couldn’t reach it.

“You made this?” he asked in amazement.

“No, my friends, the badger-moles did.” Toph wrinkled her nose. “But the Fire Nation’s scared them away. They make too much noise, and badger moles don’t like the smell of smoke.” She must have decided that they’d gone far enough because she stopped and turned to Zuko. “Why didn’t you ever come back?”
“Because…” Because you told me not to. He snapped his teeth shut against the words. Last time, he’d noticed how crushingly lonely Toph had seemed, and with a sinking feeling, he wondered how many nights she’d ‘watched’ for him, wondering if he was going to sneak into her family’s garden again. “We had to move on. We—my sister, brother, and my friend—we were headed to the North Pole. Then…. a lot happened there.”

They’d had such high hopes for the Northern Water Tribe, and everything had gone so wrong…

Toph’s blank eyes stared at him. “So, let me guess: You’ve come back to grab another bite to eat?”

“No,” he said, affronted. “When I saw the Fire Nation in your city, I wanted to check to see if you were okay.” He scowled. “But you are, so it doesn’t matter.” He had just wasted time and picked up a few new bruises. Why was he so bad at trying to be helpful?

“How’s your sick brother?” Toph asked.

“Sick…?” Oh, right. Last time he was in the area, Sokka had been suffering from the aftereffects of a concussion. “Fine. I think. I don’t know.” He shook his head, frustrated with himself, with this whole wasted trip. “We got separated at the North Pole. I’m looking for them.”

If Zuko had been hoping for sympathy, he had come to the wrong place. “You think your life is hard?” Toph demanded. “I was this close from winning the Earth Rumble Championship. Then the stupid Fire Nation decided to take over, and instead of staying to fight, the sissies packed up and went to the new stadium in Ba Sing Se.” She exhaled loudly.

“Yeah,” Zuko said, thinking of the fallen Northern Water Tribe, Iroh’s sinking ship, his sister and brother who-knows-where. “That sounds terrible.” He looked around. “Does this place have an out?” One of the side tunnels looked likely. He stepped in that direction.

“Not so fast. I said that you owed me, and I’ve come to collect.” Toph made a gesture and Zuko’s boot sunk to the ankle in stone.

“Hey!” He pulled, but his foot was locked tight.

“Stop being a baby.” Then Toph reached in her pocket and withdrew a message scroll. “You know how to read?”

“Do I… of course I know how to read!” he snapped.

“Well, goody for you,” she said so caustically that it occurred to him for the first time that she couldn’t. Before he could think what to say, Toph stepped forward and thrust the scroll in his hands. “What’s this?”

Zuko blinked, then examined the outside of the scroll for marks. The wax seal was still intact, and what he saw made his blood run cold. “This… this has the seal of one of the highest war ministers in the Fire Nation.” Iroh had received occasional notes on the war from this man, penned personally from his hand. He looked at Toph. “Please tell me you stole this from the Rough Rhinos.”

“I got it from my dad’s office.” For the first time, Toph looked uncertain. “It’s bad enough the Earth Rumble shut down, but ever since the Fire Nation moved into town, my parents have been getting really chummy with Mongke and his friends. Every time I ask them what’s going on, they lie.”

“How can you tell?”

She stomped a foot. “I just know. They’re my parents. Can’t you tell when your parents lie to you?”
“My dad isn’t the type,” he said.

“Can you read it or not?”

Setting Momo down, Zuko broke the seal and opened the scroll to read by firelight.

His good eye widened. He had expected some sort of treaty or contract. Lao Bei Fong seemed like a businessman, and Zuko had gotten the dark suspicion he was buying peace from the Fire Nation.

He was wrong.

“It’s, um, a betrothal contract,” he said.

“What?” Toph’s shriek would have startled scorpion-bats from the ceiling, if there were any.

Zuko read on. It got worse.

“Between you and… uh, Colonel Mongke.”

“Him?! I can’t believe this! No, wait. Yes, I can. Poor little blind thing,” her voice rose into a falsetto. “Can’t hope to take care of herself without a husband. Let’s just hitch her to someone, and we won’t have to worry about her any more.” Toph turned, and with a stomp, a rock column rose from the floor. Then she punched. Hard. Her fist went straight through as if she were striking the heart of the stone. The column disintegrated into tiny pieces of rubble. Zuko winced.

It wasn’t enough. A boulder fully three times the size of Toph rose from the floor. She kicked it and struck the other side of the tunnel with a crash loud enough to make Zuko’s ears ring.

Toph was scary when she was angry.

Facing away from him, Toph’s shoulders were tight. Her hands in tight fists. “So when’s the wedding?”

Hastily, Zuko skimmed past the lengthy terms. There was a lot of land swaps and promises outlined in detail. He wasn’t sure who was coming out better, but the contract seemed to touch on a lot of the Bei Fong business holdings. “I don’t see an exact date… Oh.”

She turned back to him. “Oh, what?”

He felt color flood to his face. “They set it for a time after—When you, uh… become a woman.”

“What does that supposed to mean?”

Zuko cringed. “Toph… don’t make me say it.”

“Say what?”

“You know…” He looked everywhere but at her, then desperately at his foot still locked up to the ankle in stone. Now he knew why trapped animals sometimes chewed off their own limbs. “When… that time when the special sea-lily garden within every young girl… um, blooms?”

She stared at him with a blank face.

Pure horror swelled up within him. “Don’t tell me your parents never explained…”

She finally broke, shaking her head, and letting out a sad, hiccuping laugh.
“You were messing with me!” he accused.

Toph flapped her hand at him. “No Sparky, I haven’t been visited by my aunt Waterbender yet.”

She was back to calling him Sparky. He decided to take that as a sign his bones weren’t about to be crushed to powder.

Zuko glanced down at the betrothal contract again. There was a lot of legalese, but to his surprise he found he could follow most of it. “It looks like they’re basically buying peace from the Fire Nation for their businesses, using you as collateral. There’s a lot of conditions about your wellness and safety,” he added, trying to soften the blow.

“Of course there is. I’m the only kid my parents managed to have. They freak out if I stub my toe!” She kicked a rock with her bare foot without even flinching, for emphasis.

Zuko lowered the scroll. “You don’t have to do this. I could…” Could what? March in, tell Lao Bei Fong, ‘Hi! Former Crown Prince Zuko here! Please don’t sell off your daughter like an ostrich-horse’. That would work out well.

Luckily, Toph spoke before he had to think of something.

“If you think I’m sticking around to let them marry me off, you’re crazy,” she said. “I pretty much decided I’m going to have to go to Ba Sing Se and defend my Earth Rumble title sometime, but now… now I think it can’t wait.”

“You’re just going to runaway from your home?”

“Why not? You did. It sounds like fun.”

“It wasn’t like that!” he said hotly. Then he let out a breath, pinching the bridge of his nose. “You shouldn’t go alone. It’s dangerous out there.”

“I don’t need anyone,” Toph said, maneuvering flawlessly around sharp rocks to march up to him. “I’m the greatest earthbender in the world, and don’t you forget it.” She poked his chest. “You’re the one who needs help. You’ve been caught twice today, Mister Water Tribe firebender. Once by me, once by my loser guards.”

He let out a breath that steamed in the tunnel air, but… she wasn’t wrong. He knew the glaciers, ice, and tundra in the poles, but he was far from home, now. Any earthbender had an advantage over him on land. It was one of the reasons why the Fire Nation had yet to conquer the Earth Kingdom in one-hundred years of war.

“Wait,” he said, his brain catching up. “You said you’re going to Ba Sing Se?” His green robes had a lot of pockets, and he pulled out the map Hakoda had given him—the one which had marked out Sokka’s projected path. Kneeling, he laid it out flat. The boundaries of Ba Sing Se were laid out in circles, which covered a good portion of the continent. Nearby, however… “I’m headed for these towns here,” he said, pointing.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?”

He glanced up. She waved her hands in front of her blank eyes.

“Oh. Sorry.” Shaking his head, he looked back at the map. “Last I heard, my brother, sister and friend were supposed to be heading for some villages just north of the Si Wong Desert.”
“So?”

“That’s not far from Ba Sing Se. Maybe a week’s travel on foot. My friend, Aang… Once we meet up, he could give you a lift the rest of the way.” Literally.

Toph considered him for a moment, head cocked as if listening for something he couldn’t hear. “So basically, you point the way, and I’ll be your bodyguard?”

He grit his teeth. “I don’t need a bodyguard. I can defend myself.”

She just stared at him. Or at least, in his direction. Her silence spoke volumes.

“Fine,” he admitted, ego bruised. “I’ll be the eyes, you be the muscle. Deal?”

In answer, Toph scooped up dirt, dusted her hands in it, and stuck one out. “Deal, but we shake Earth Kingdom style. Dust to dust.”

Bemused, he dusted his own hand and clasped it with hers. She freed his foot and, after a moment, the lemur.

“Thanks.” He draped Momo, who was almost boneless, over his shoulders. “But you should at least tell your parents you’re leaving. They won’t be happy, but they’ll be frantic if you just disappeared into thin air.”

She snorted. “Yeah, sure. They’ll probably send the guards after me, otherwise. C’mon, Sparky. Let’s make this quick.”

OoOoO

Okay, I’ll admit it, Sokka thought. My spirit guide guy might have been right about the dangers in Ba Sing Se.

On the plus side, he hadn’t been killed, yet. On the way negative side, he’d been thrown into a cart like a sack of meal, taken for a long ride to… somewhere dark and ominous, and then was dragged down to a long cold hallway that smelled like mildew.

Sokka was just getting feeling back into his legs when the men hefted him into a tiny, dark room and strapped him upright in a chair.

Not good. Not good at all.

He knew he should have stuck to the buddy-system.

“You can do whatever you want.” He was pleased his voice came out strong and steady. Sure, his insides felt like liquifying from fear, but at least he didn’t sound like it. “I’m not telling you where Aang is.”

Standing before him, Azula smirked. “The Avatar and the peasant waterbender are staying at a house on 112 Onyx Lane in the upper ring.”
Sokka couldn’t help it. His jaw dropped.

She smiled. “I can ask the Dai Li here to arrest the Avatar any time I want. He’s definitely broken enough Ba Sing Se rules to warrant it. Putting up unauthorized posters? That was the last straw. But we both know that isn’t what this is about.” She leaned forward, so close he could smell the scent on her skin, feminine and flowery. Her voice was lowered so the robed guys, who were fiddling with something on the other side of the room, couldn’t hear. “My uncle believed the Southern Water Tribe kidnapped my brother in order to turn him against his people.”

“That’s a lie,” Sokka snarled.

She cocked her head. “You know, what? I actually believe you.” She shrugged. “Doesn’t make it a bad idea, though. You’re Chief Hakoda’s son, aren’t you? The only Chief the Water Tribes have left.”

Pure horror crawled up his spine. “I’ll never turn against—”

“Oh, but you will. The best part is, you won’t even realize it’s happening.”

One of the Dai Li stepped up. “We’re ready, miss.”

Leaning back, Azula gestured to them to start. Within a moment, blocks of stone crawled around Sokka’s mouth, muffling his protests.

Azula watched him with a predator’s gaze as lanterns began to turn around the room.

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Sneaking back onto the Bei Fong estate was a lot easier with Toph by Zuko’s side. She simply opened up a doorway within the outer marble wall, walked through, and closed it again after her.

“How do you even know that?” Zuko muttered, but he didn’t see a guard in sight. He kept on Toph’s heels, holding tight to Momo so he didn’t go after the strawberry-apple bushes again. However, the lemur seemed to have eaten his fill and snoozed across Zuko’s shoulder, burping occasionally.

Toph got them into the house the same way, by opening a hole in the exterior wall, and pausing with uncanny ability as a servant walked by. She stopped him just before they entered the great hall.

“Stay here. I should be the one to talk to them.”

Zuko nodded and stepped behind a column. From this angle, he could just see through the partially
open doorway. Toph’s parents were taking tea at a fancy table and chatting over some scrolls.

“You got this, Toph,” he said.

She nodded and turned back to the great room. Zuko saw her breathe in and out once. “I got this,” she repeated, like a mantra. “I’m the Blind Bandit. I can do anything.”

She pushed the door wide open.

“Toph!” Her mother spotted her first, and she sounded horrified. “What in the world are you wearing?”

Toph strode forward. Not the tiny, mincing steps of a lady. She was confident, her head up high. “Mom, Dad, I know about your plan to marry me off.”

“Toph!” her mother exclaimed, as if her daughter had just uttered a swear word.

“What? It’s true!”

Lao’s teacup made a sharp sound as he set it down on the table. “Which one of your servants told you? Was it Serai?”

“I figured it out for myself. I’m blind, not stupid!”

“Toph,” her mother began again. She looked at her husband, bit her lip, and turned back to her daughter. “Sweetheart. Marriage has always been in your future.”

“Yeah, sure. But to someone in the Fire Nation? Colonel Mongke? He’s… gross!”

“He comes from an old family, and his duties will keep him away from the home most of the time…”

“I can’t believe this!” Toph stomped the ground. “The best thing you can say about my future husband is that he won’t be around?”

“You will be well taken care of. He comes highly regarded—”

“By who? The Fire Lord?” She sneered. “Well, you can call it off. It’s not happening.”

“Toph!” And now her mother sounded angry. “Don’t be absurd.”

“I won’t marry him!”

Until then, Lao had seemed content to let his wife handle this, but Toph’s declaration seemed to be a bridge too far. “Someone will have to take care of you, daughter. We will not live forever.”

“I can take care of myself. That’s what I came to tell you. I…” For the first time, she faltered. Her chin dipped, though her voice remained steady. “I’m an Earth Rumble Champion.”

“You’re… what?” Lao stared at Toph, dumfounded.

*Show him*, Zuko silently urged. *Show them how well you can earthbend.*

“That is absurd,” Toph’s mother said. “Is this a joke, daughter?”

“No, Mom. I beat the Boulder and Hippo in the arena, and… and they call me the Blind Bandit.”

Although Toph couldn’t see, she seemed to shrink under her parent’s hard stares. Then, finding her
“Enough of this!” Lao stood from the table. “I do not know what has gotten into you, daughter, but you cannot go to Ba Sing Se. It is out of the question. You are blind and helpless.”

“I’m not helpless, dad! I like to fight, and I’m really, really good at it.”

Her mother took on a softer tone. “Toph, all women must be married.”

“Not me. I’m not going to marry Mongke, or anyone, and you can’t make me!” Now, finally, she stomped her foot and the floor shook.

Toph’s mother covered her mouth with one hand, but her father’s expression firmed. “Toph, your parents know what is best for you.”

“But, Dad—”

“Enough. You will return to your room. We will discuss this later.”

He picked up a bell meant to summon the servants to escort her out, because he didn’t trust her to make her way in her own house.

Anger boiled in Zuko’s stomach. How could they be so… so blind? He acted without thinking.

Stepping out from the column, he rushed forward through the doors. With one pull, the candle flames on the table became his. He whipped the fire downward, a line of red and gold which crackled in a barrier between Toph and her parents.

“Not one step closer,” Zuko growled. He grabbed Toph’s arm in one hand, and kindled flame in the other. Then he smiled dangerously at her parents. “I told you I’d make you regret handing me over to Mongke.”

Toph’s mouth formed a perfect O of surprise. Then it firmed. She could have knocked Zuko into next week with a single gesture. Instead she stood there, the docile little girl her parents expected her to be.

“But… but… What is this?” Lao sputtered. He moved, one hand outstretched toward his daughter as if to snatch her away from the firebender.

Zuko brought the flame in his hand closer to Toph, meaningfully. Lao’s eyes flicked from it to Zuko’s ruined face and back again, and his hand dropped.

“Lao!” Toph’s mother clutched at her cheeks. “Do something!” She turned to Zuko, pleading.

“Release her at once, you monster!”

“I don’t think so,” Zuko said, voice silky with threat. “Toph isn’t going to be sold to the Fire Nation, Lord Bei Fong. She’s coming with me.”

“I don’t know who you are, but you are making a grave mistake.” Lao Bei Fong was a prim man—Zuko doubted he had been in combat a day in his life—but he was a smart businessman, and ruthless in his own way. He saw that Zuko was a firebender, and jumped to the wrong conclusions. “She has been promised in a union which has been blessed by Fire Lord Ozai, himself.”

Zuko went very still. Something old and very dark swam within his mind, prodding at forgotten
memories. “Then when Ozai demands an explanation on why this treaty fell through, send him a message for me: Tell him Zuko says hello.”

He pulled Toph out through the double doors and away.

OoOoO

“What was that?”

As soon as Zuko and Toph were safe beyond the walls of the estate, Toph turned and made one single lightning-fast jab to Zuko’s solar plexus.

All the breath in Zuko’s lungs whooshed out. He doubled over, wheezing. If he couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t bend. He’d effectively been hobbled.

Toph watched him suffer, arms crossed over her chest.

Okay, so he might have deserved that. “Couldn’t let them… do that to you…” He gasped, holding his gut. “Not… right.”

“Well, that’s just great. Now they think I’m a weak little hostage!”

“Yeah, a hostage… of the… Fire Nation. That’ll make them think twice about… working with dealbreakers… in the future.” Bracing himself against a tree trunk, Zuko straightened, finally able to pull in a full breath. “If you don’t like it, go back… and tell them you whooped my butt.”

Bluff called, Toph’s arms dropped. “They’d never believe me. All they see is a helpless little girl. If I go back, I’ll be married off by next week.” Then, turning, she poked a finger against his chest. He tried and failed not to flinch. “And don’t think I didn’t notice your little speech. ‘Prince Zuko says hello’?”

“Hey, I didn’t call myself a prince!”

She stomped a foot. Rock rumbled dangerously. “Don’t play dumb, Sparky. I had history tutors. Everyone knows the tale of dead little Prince Zuko.”

“What?”

“The Fire Nation blames the Earth Kingdom for it!”

Oh, Appa turds. Iroh had told him that, too, hadn’t he? And Toph was part of the noble merchant class. Of course she’d be in the know.

She poked him again. “Are you that Zuko or not? And you’d better tell the truth!”

“I was,” he admitted, “but that was a long time ago. The Water Tribe took me in and raised me.”

Her finger dropped and a wide smirk grew on her face. “So, you just stuck it to your old man back
“…I guess.”

“Sweet.”

He shook his head. He didn’t want to talk about Ozai. There was no relationship there, but Toph… she still had her parents, even as wrong-headed as they were. “Look, Toph. I could write a letter for you or something to send to your mother and father. Maybe if they see your words on a page, they’ll understand—”

“No, they won’t,” she said flatly. “They’d never believe I could take care of myself until I show up with the championship belt in my hand. I’ll rub it right in their faces.” She turned, dismissing his offer to help, and started walking down a pathway that led back to the forest. “Are you coming or not?”

Zuko sighed and hurried to catch up. For better or worse it looked like he had a traveling partner. “Fine, but we’re finding my family before we go to Ba Sing Se.” He cast a glance down at her and added, “You’d better not slow me down.”

He avoided the sudden rock-a-lanche sent his way by the skin of his teeth.

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“How did your earthbending lesson go?” Katara asked, the second Aang walked in.

He winced, shoulders hunching. “Well, I was kicked out of Rock-a-Bye Earth Academy, so…”

“Aang! Why?”

“They had the older students throwing rocks at the younger ones to get them to stand their ground. I told them I wouldn’t do it, and the master got really angry.” He shrugged as if it didn’t matter. “I got the money back, though. Since I didn’t actually learn anything…”

She rubbed at a spot right above her eyebrow. “It’s not about the money Aang.” Except that they were running really, really low.

He sagged.

Gran-Gran used to say that negativity was catching, so Katara forced some cheer into her voice. “Well, we’re right in the heart of the biggest city in the Earth Kingdom. We’re bound to find someone who will teach you. There are earthbenders everywhere.”

“I know there are earthbenders everywhere, Katara… but none of them feel right.”

She sympathized, she really did. Then again, mean fussy-pants Pakku in the North Pole had hated
her guts and she still would have learned everything she could from him, had she ever been given the chance.

“Aang, I know it’s hard, but the Avatar has to master all four elements—”

“I know!” He grabbed his bald head. “And I have to do it faster than any of them has ever done before.”

She could hear the stress in his voice, and her heart went out to him. Once again, she wished Zuko were here. He was pretty good at getting Aang out of his funk, or at least threatening him into staying still and concentrating on a lesson.

“Do you want to practice waterbending?” she suggested. “You’ve gotten pretty good at that. There’s that nice koi pond in the backyard—”

She paused as the front door opened. Sokka strode in.

Katara brightened. “How was sword training?”

He grinned, his expression happier than she’d seen from him since Yue left for the South Pole. “Really good. The master was so impressed, they want me to train there three times a week!”

“Sokka, that’s great!” She was glad someone had come home with good news. Maybe things were finally looking up.

Chapter End Notes

And with that, the AO3 version of Another Brother has officially caught up with the FF.net version! Woo!

Also, I do believe I have posted all the Another Brother fan art that is out there. If there's something else, please do let me know!

Thanks for putting up with the flood of emails as I updated today.
The Cost of War

Chapter Notes

I realized Katara never got her waterbending combat-level up in the North Pole. That needs to be fixed. Also, I had to slow things down for some characterization (Toph, mostly.) We’ll get back to our regular scheduled plot (AND EPIC REUNION!) soon.

Also, Vanghool's fan comic, Goodnight Zuko, is all done! Thanks Vanghool! I totally recommend you all give it a look. :D

OoOoO

The only way to regain my honor is to find the Avatar. So I will.

- Zuko, the Western Air Temple

OoOoO

Zuko kept his hand firmly on Momo’s back to hold him steady. Together, they peered through a vail of bushes, tracking the oncoming Fire Nation supply wagon. Right on schedule.

Shifting, Zuko glanced around. Toph was on the other side of the road, though she was so well hidden he couldn’t see her. Unlike him, she didn’t need a direct line of sight to track the wagon’s progress.

Momo made a soft chuffing sound, his large ears flicking back and forth. Zuko wasn’t sure how much the creature understood of their plan, but he seemed to be eager to start. Especially when all their bellies were empty and the Fire Nation wagons which used this road to carry food and supplies to the army was full.

A single pebble bounced noisily down a nearby hill. That was Toph’s signal.

“Okay,” Zuko murmured, “You’re up, Momo.” Letting go of his hold, he flicked his arm upward, sending the lemur into the air.
Then he hunkered down to wait. If the lemur misunderstood, or got into trouble, he would back him up with fire.

He shouldn’t have worried. Momo flew straight toward the line of ostrich-horses which pulled the wagon, screeching like he was sick or possessed. No burden beast liked to be startled from above or have wings flap in their faces. The ostrich-horses cawed and stamped, halting in place. The two Fire Nation infantry men atop the seatboard started to yell. One cracked his whip over the beast’s backs.

The moment the wagon wheels stopped, Toph moved in, softening the soil under the back wheels. With a creak of wood, the whole cart sank into the suddenly soft earth before the ground hardened again, trapping it.

By now the two infantrymen had stopped yelling at the ostrich horses and were now bickering with each other, pointing at the wheels and completely distracted. They thought they had somehow driven into quicksand.

Zuko’s turn. Standing from his crouch, Zuko took a running leap, using the top of a wheel and the sill of a window to bounce upward.

Fire sparked between his hand and a blazing gold ribbon snapped between the two men. Startled, they ducked away. Luckily, neither one seemed to be a firebender.

The older of the two leaped aside and reached for the sword on his belt. The moment his feet hit the earth, though, he was lost.

Toph stepped out of her hiding place. With a strong gesture and a stomp, the two soldiers found themselves buried up to their necks in dirt.

Zuko straightened out of his stance and smirked. It wasn’t anything like hunting with Sokka, and he suspected Katara and Aang would have called it banditry. Toph had called it a good idea. Zuko had agreed, but a guilty twist in his heart had him insisting that the soldiers would be only embarrassed, not injured.

Sure enough, Buried up to the chest, they weren’t hurt. They were mad. They wiggled and yelled curses that both Toph and Zuko ignored.

“Good work,” Zuko said, turning to the little earthbender.

“I thought Fire Nation goons were supposed to be tough.” Toph sounded somewhat disappointed.

“We took them by surprise, but this is a busy trade route. There will be more wagons on the way soon. Let’s get what we can and get out.” Zuko moved to the back of the wagon. It was locked, but Toph solved that with one strike of stone twice her weight. She was pretty scary.

Once the remains of the door were cleared away, they found the wagon stuffed with sacks of grain and dried fruit. Strings of dried, smoked meat hung off the walls. The spicy scent that wafted out told him it was probably destined for the colonies. The scent reminded him, vividly, of the galley on Iroh’s ship.

“Jackpot!” Toph crowed and snatched a bag of figs.

Zuko grabbed one of the dried sausage links and bit in. A snap of the skin and flavor exploded across his tongue, smokey and spicy.

Momo chattered and Zuko grabbed an apple to hand over to him. “Thanks, Momo. Couldn’t have
done it without you."

“Less chattering. More looting,” Toph said and heaved a sack over her shoulders. Zuko looked down, mildly surprised at her strength. She wasn’t using earthbending: Just pure stubbornness.

Still, she wouldn’t be able to carry a weight like that far. That gave him an idea. He turned and walked back to the front of the wagon.

“Where are you going?” Toph called.

Although she couldn’t see it, he smirked. “Think they’ll miss an ostrich horse or two?”

Toph’s answering smile could have fit on a shark.

Zuko walked up the line of ostrich-horses, looking for the youngest and most healthy. One of the older hens clicked her beak menacingly at him as he passed. He glanced up, then did a double-take. He’d seen that pattern of feathers before, and he definitely recognized the bad temper.

“Ushi?”

This was Song’s old hen. What was she doing here, pulling a Fire Nation cart—

Oh no.

He turned on his heel and strode back to the trapped Fire Nation men. “Where did that old ostrich horse come from?”

“Um.” The younger one squinted up at Zuko as if wondering if it was a trick question. “The stables?”

“No!” Zuko snapped. “She belonged to an Earth Kingdom girl. She… she was a healer…”

“Cute little town, right at the base of a sharp ridge, right?” The older of the two leered up at Zuko. “I know it. We burned it to the ground. One of Fire Lord Azulon’s last orders.”

Zuko stared at him. “Why?”

His smile was pure malice. “Rumor was, they had harbored the Avatar. Had to be taught a lesson, didn’t they.”

It was dishonorable to hit a bound man, so Zuko turned away.

Fire rose up within him, too hot, too much to take all at once. It felt like he was burning from the inside out.

With a yell, he punched the nearest thing—a tree. White-hot flame exploded from between his knuckles into the bark. Red licks of fire swept up from under the bark, consuming the wood.

For the first time, he thought he understood why most firebenders used rage to fuel their bending. If this was the type of bending Jeong-Jeong had talked about, he could see why he feared it. The flames were a manifestation of his rage and they burned.

“Sparky?”

Toph’s voice brought him back to earth. She stood nearby, solid as stone. The ostrich-horses were cawing in fear and pulling at their tresses, and the two Fire Nation men were yelling, too. The fire
Zuko had started was crawling up the tree. In seconds it would catch the crown, and from there the wind could easily spread it through the forest.

“I’m okay,” he told her. He didn’t feel okay, but he had to get control of himself.

He let out a breath, and then another, forcing the dark sucking anger and guilt away. Then, with a pushing motion, he doused the fire—forcing the flames smaller and cooler, the temperature gradients in his mind like the shades of colors in dragons fire—until the fire extinguished itself with a puff of smoke.

He stepped back to check his work: The tree was left blackened and burned, and would probably fall over in the next wind storm, but the fire was out.

The Fire Nation soldiers fell quiet and watched with wide eyes. A small part of him wondered about that. What was so strange about putting out a fire?

“You don’t seem okay.” Toph paused. “Want me to unbury the mean ugly one, so you can smack him around a little?”

Zuko barked a surprised laugh. “No, I… I’m good. The girl—my friend’s village didn’t deserve it.”

And it’s our fault, he didn’t say, because he hadn’t found a way to tell Toph that he and his siblings had been traveling with the Avatar. Plus, he didn’t want these goons overhearing.

Toph tilted her head toward the wagon. “Let’s get our grub and get out of here.”

“Wait.” Zuko stepped back to the ostrich-horses and pulled his pearl hilted knife where he kept it in his boot. Then, avoiding Ushi’s sharp beak, he started cutting at the straps. “We’re taking her, too.”

A half-hour later, Zuko and Toph walked away. Zuko leading the reins of an ostrich horse who had bags of rice, beans, dried meat and fruit, and a full sack of feed-grain across her back.

OoOoO

Toph waited until they were well down the road to ask. “So what was that about?”

The thought of the Fire Nation sweeping down on Song’s little village made horror and grief clutch at his heart. The piece of sausage he’d managed to choke down burned in his stomach. Or maybe that was the ever-present fire. It was so much more intense than before he had met the dragon.

“She was a friend,” Zuko choked out. “And she…” He couldn’t finish. Song had already lost her home because of Iroh, and Zuko. Then Fire Lord Azulon’s order had destroyed what little was left.

“Yeah, I got that,” Toph said snappishly. “What was all the stuff about the Avatar?”

Oh, monkey feathers.
“My siblings and I were… are traveling with him. His name is Aang.” He hadn’t meant to keep it a secret, but with the whole ‘prince’ thing, it hadn’t come up. Zuko didn’t like talking about his past.

Toph tilted her head. “The real Avatar? Not one of those fakes?”

“Yes, the real one.” He paused. “Wait, there are fakes?”

“All over. Haven’t you seen them? My dad said frauds would scam money from idiots with promises that they’d bless their dry wells for sweet-water, or heal livestock.”

“Avatars can’t do that!” he said, outraged. “Aang can bend all four elements. He’s not… magic.”

She shrugged. “People were willing to pay for it.”

“Yeah, well, Aang’s real.”

She swung to him jabbing one finger into his chest. “Don’t you think you could have mentioned that before?”

He threw one hand in the air, frustrated. “I know I should have, but… sometimes my life sounds like a bad joke! The Avatar, a former fire prince, and a waterbender walk into a bar…”

“Your jokes suck, Sparky,” Toph said bluntly. “But I would have believed you.”

That brought him up short. “Really?”

“Of course,” she said lightly. “I can feel your heartbeat. I know when you’re lying.”

Zuko stopped in surprise. Toph walked on, casually whistling.

“You can what?”

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OoOoO

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Katara reached into her coin purse and found it empty. She dug around for a few moments in increasing panic, first thinking that she must have put the coins somewhere else, then worried that she’d been the victim of a pickpocket. But from what she’d seen of thieves (and there were a lot of petty criminals even in Ba Sing Se’s upper rings) they generally cut the entire coin purse from someone’s belt before running. She knew she had tied her’s tight. So where…?

“Ahem.” The merchant held out her hand expectantly.

With a sinking feeling, Katara handed back the basket of fruit she had been about to purchase. “I’m sorry. I must have forgotten my money at home.”
The merchant’s dismissive look made her feel lower than dirt. “And what will I do with this bruised fruit?”

“It isn’t bruised! I barely touched it!”

The merchant turned away with a sniff, and Katara felt her cheeks burning.

Turning, she rushed home from the market square to the upper ring residential district. Sokka should be home this time of the day, unless he was attending another sword training practice. Maybe he knew where the coins went.

To her surprise, Aang was home early, too. Both boys were in the back garden—Sokka, sharpening his boomerang, and Aang brushing out Appa.

“Hey Katara,” Aang chirped with a sunny smile.

Sokka glanced up. “Will lunch be soon?” he asked hopefully.

She pushed down a twinge of annoyance. Why was it they only ate when she made the meals? “It might be a while,” she said shortly and then turned to Aang. “Aren’t you supposed to be in earthbending class?”

Aang’s smile turned into a grimace.

Katara knew what that meant. “You were kicked out of another one?”

She’d lost the exact count of how many earthbending instruction schools Aang had been thrown out of, but it had to be approaching double digits.

“Well… Sifu Bonn said I couldn’t be a earthbending student if I couldn’t… Um, show that I can earthbend.” He trailed off and shrugged, digging in one ear. “I guess that makes sense?”

“You can’t earthbend… at all?” He had picked up waterbending with annoying speed, and he’d been working at his earthbending for weeks now.

Aang shrugged again, ruefully. “Rock is a lot harder to move than water. Water wants to flow. Rock really, really wants to stay put. Or maybe I’m not asking it right?”

Years of ingrained habit had Katara glancing at Sokka. This would be the perfect time for him to make a rock and hard pun, lightening the mood… but he stayed silent. He had been quiet a lot, lately.

She turned back to Aang. What he needed, she knew, was gentle encouragement. “You’ll get this, Aang. You just have to keep working at it.” Then she let out her own sigh. “To be truthful, I had a bad day, too. I lost the coins I was going to use to buy lunch.” The Earth King’s administration had given them this house, and a small allowance of food but it wasn’t enough without tightly watching a budget. They could survive off the meals but Aang’s lessons cost money and it left no room for treats.

“Oh, the ones in the coin purse? Those were yours?” Aang said. “I had to use those to pay for the lesson.”

She stared. “The one you just got expelled from? Didn’t they give you a refund?”

Another shrug. “Sifu Bonn said no refunds were allowed.”
“Aang! That was the last of our money.” She turned to Sokka. “Do you have any spare coins?”

He shook his head.

Katara looked around, and then sighed and put her hands on her hips. “Well, we’ve got no more money. I guess that means we’ll have to get jobs.”

“Can’t,” Sokka said. “I have sword training practice, remember? Why can’t Aang get a job?”

“Because he is learning earthbending.” Or, he is supposed to be, she silently corrected. “That is more important.”

Sokka suddenly stood, sheathing his boomerang back in his holster. “Real nice, Katara,” he snarled. He was angry at her. Not just snippy, or sarcastic. Angry. And she wasn’t quite sure why. “Look, I know when you’re not looking for Zuko, you’re at your sword-training class, but we need you to contribute here. This is a serious situation.”

“Oh, sure!” Sokka snapped. “So when we dropped everything so Aang and Zuko could get trained by Jeong-Jeong, and when you went out every night to practice waterbending in the North Pole, that wasn’t serious? That wasn’t important? You spent all day training in the North Pole—”

“They never trained me in combat!” she protested.

“You spent all day learning how to heal using your waterbending and all night bending with Aang and Zuko. But now I’m trying to improve myself for once…”

“It’s not… it’s not the same.” But the sick, angry feeling in her gut told her it might be.

Sokka retort was as sharp as the finest blade. “Why? Because I’m not a bender?”

“N-no!”

“Guys…” Aang tried to step in between them, but both siblings ignored him. “Maybe we should cool off for a bit. You both have great points.”

“No, she doesn’t, Aang!” Sokka pointed a finger at her, an extremely rude gesture. “I’m trying to improve myself for once, and she can’t take it.”

“Fine!” Katara snapped. “Maybe I’ll get a job myself, then.”

“Fine!” Sokka yelled back. “Maybe you should!”

That brought Katara up short. The Southern Water Tribe wasn’t anywhere near as rigid as the North, but as the eldest male… Sokka was sort of expected to provide. It was an unwritten law. A truth of her tribe so ingrained that it didn’t even need to be said.

Abruptly, she was angry with herself again. Why did it have to be that way? It didn’t.

“Fine!” she said again, and turned to storm out. “I’ll get a great job and… and you’ll be sorry!” Not the best comeback ever, but it was important to her that she got the last word. She made sure to slam the door on her way out, too. So there.

A moment later, the door flew back open and Aang ran after her like a seal-pup scuttling after its mother. “Katara, wait up!”
Ooooh. She did not need this right now. She cared for Aang. She really did. But right now she needed to be angry, and he wouldn’t understand.

“Go back home, Aang.”

“But I want to help!”

She rounded on him. “If you want to help, then buckle down and learn earthbending. That is your job!”

She saw a flash of his eyes, wide with hurt, before she turned away.

She was only halfway down the block before she regretted being so harsh. Katara squeezed her eyes shut against tears and ran forward, blindly, just wanting to get away.

She hated Ba Sing Se. Hated that it had swallowed up the promise of finding Zuko, had halted Aang’s bending progress cold, and was turning Sokka into some dumb teenage boy who only wanted to go out at night and play with his sword.

She hated that it was making her into the type of person who took out her anger on her brother and friend.

She needed water. Immersing herself always made her feel better.

Katara turned left without quite knowing why and kept going. She didn’t know how she knew, but there was a lot of water in this direction.

She was going the opposite way of the Earth King’s palace, but the houses grew even grander. Multi-storied, they towered over her like the tallest of glaciers at home. All of the windows faced the direction she was going—due east.

Then she came to the end of the road and saw why.

Down the hill was a short shoreline and an enormous lake, which stretched so far she couldn’t see to the opposite bank. If not for her water-sense, she would have thought it was the sea.

With a cry that was half a sob, she hopped over a low fence and ran full out for the shore. The water raised up as if welcoming her with open arms. She dived in, clothes and all, but that was nothing to a waterbender.

She needed to get away… away… away… away.

With fluid twists of her arms, she bade the current to take her far, far out. The city receded behind her. When the tall buildings were dots along the horizon, she slowed and stopped, floating on her back with her arms outstretched and letting the water take her weight.

Zuko had talked sometimes of meditating by a fire, and she supposed this was her version of that. She let her mind go gloriously blank. The only sound was the soft lapping of water over her ears.

She might have actually fallen asleep because the next thing she was aware of was an alarmed shout. “Here! She’s over here! Child, can you hear me?”

Katara opened her eyes and jerked in shock. A long flat boat had drawn up close—Actually, it was more of a raft than a boat—, weighed heavily down with fish. No less than five women stood on the end, peering at her in concern.
Before Katara could think of what to say, one of the women gestured. The water gathered up beneath Katara and lifted her up to deposit her gently aboard the vessel.

Her jaw dropped. “You’re a waterbender?”

The eldest of the women walked up. She was not as dark as Katara, but her blue eyes were startlingly familiar, and when she spoke it was very much like the drawl of the swamp benders… though the vowels were more rounded, somehow softer.

“By all the spirits, child. What were you doing all the way out here?”

“Oh no, I—I’m fine.” She had left the anger behind in the water, and now she felt a little silly. “I was just—well. I was in no danger. I’m a waterbender too. See?”

With a gesture, she pulled a globe of water from the lake in between her palms.

A younger woman put her hand to her heart. “Oh, thank goodness. Sister Kay thought you were one of those poor unfortunate souls trying to escape the Dai Li.”

Katara didn’t know what she meant, but filed that away for later. She was too excited. “I didn’t know there were waterbenders in Ba Sing Se!”

“A fair few of us, I expect,” the oldest said. “Where in the world did you come from?”

“From the South Pole,” she said. “I’m Katara.” She bowed.

They bowed as well and introduced themselves. The older one was called Mayvai, and the rest of the women were her nieces and daughters.

“You look chilled right through,” the one named Kay said. “We were about to break for lunch. Why don’t you sit with us a spell, and we’ll have ourselves a nice chat.”

OoOoO

With supplies on hand and a foul-tempered ostrich-horse to carry them, Zuko and Toph made good time across the hot, scrubby plains. The villages they were heading for were marked with a dot and a dash—barely visible in fading ink.

Zuko thought it was appropriate once they came into view. It wasn’t so much of a village as a collection of houses and further flung pig—chicken ranches.

It was dusty and barren with ramshackle buildings on either side of what passed for a town square. The wind blew hollowly through open windows and an actual tumbleweed brushed past, making Ushi snort in distaste.
There was no sign of a sky bison anywhere.

“This is the place,” Zuko said doubtfully, pulling out the map again. “But I don’t see anyone anywhere.”

“Hmm.” Toph kicked a dirt clod across the road. “What do your friends look like?”

“Well, Appa is a sky bison. You’d be able to see him from miles off. Aang—” Zuko stopped and scowled down at her.

“You’re too easy, Sparky.” Toph grinned and then pointed ahead. “I think there are people in that building there. I wanna get off the road. The sun is baking my feet.”

Zuko didn’t mind the sun, but his throat felt parched fro the dry air. He tied up Ushi to the stables, next to a water trough she could drink out of, and followed Toph inside.

The general store was just as dusty and neglected as the rest of the town. Half the shelves were bare and the merchant behind the counter stared at them with the faint air of surprise.

“Don’t get many new faces around here.” The merchant looked from the blind girl to the scarred boy with the lemur on his shoulder, and back again. “Especially faces like yours.”

Zuko narrowed his good eye and had an answer hot on his lips. Toph stepped forward, mashing down on his foot as he did so.

She walked right up to the counter and didn’t seem to notice the fact that the top of it was above her eye level. “That’s because we’re traders, and right now we’re trading information.” She slapped down a piece of Earth Kingdom paper that Zuko had occasionally seen in place of good and proper coin. “Got any?”

The merchant's demeanor softened slightly. “Depends, little miss. What kind of information do you need?”

“The Avatar,” Zuko said roughly. “Has he passed through here?”

The merchant visibly hesitated and then with reluctance sighed and pushed the cash back to Toph’s hand. “Sorry kid, no one has seen the Avatar for over a hundred years.”

Zuko wasn’t going to be deterred that easily. “An airbender, then? He has a flying sky-bison. He’s huge… and he’s traveling with two Water Tribe teens. They’d be wearing blue.”

Again the merchant shook his head. “I don’t know who sold you this tale, but you two had best go back to wherever you ran away from.” He fixed Zuko with an appraising look. “Especially you. You look old enough to be pulled into the draft.”

“It’s not a tale. My brother told my father they were headed this way—” Zuko stared, but then another voice piped up from the back.

“You could ask my dad. He knows everyone in town.”

Zuko turned. A young, gap-toothed Earth Kingdom boy grinned up at him, then at Momo.

“What kind of animal is that?” the kid asked.

Momo chirped a hello.
“Li is our resident trouble-maker,” the merchant said dryly, “But he’s not wrong about his Pa.” Then he glanced out the window and his frown deepened. “Gow and his men are coming. I’d skedaddle if I were you—they’ve been at the saloon and they don’t often take kindly to new folk. ‘Specially ones who look like they can fight.” Again, his eyes flicked to Zuko.

“Come on!” Li cheerfully grabbed Zuko’s hand and led him out the back. “That’s your ostrich-horse, right? I’ll show you the way to our farm.”

OoOoO

Li’s family had a small pig-chicken ranch not far from the edge of town. His parents, Gansu and Sela, were tired, hard-working folk and didn’t look too surprised that their outgoing boy had brought people back with him.

Gansu rubbed at his chin. “No, I can’t say I’ve heard anything about any Avatar,” he said in reply to Zuko’s immediate question.

Zuko slumped.

“But I can make some inquiries on your behalf,” Gansu continued. “I could talk to Gow and his men—they’re the local militia and they see more than us townsfolk.”

_Those soldiers at the saloon? What a waste of time._

Zuko was just wondering if it would take long to get to the next village when Gansu’s wife came out of the house. “You children look parched. Why, the girl doesn’t even have shoes. You’re staying for dinner, at least?”

“No—“ Zuko started.

“Yes,” Toph said. “Thanks.”

Zuko turned. “We really should keep moving,” he said pointedly.

She didn’t bother to keep her voice down. “No way. I’m getting a decent hot meal for once. You overcook everything.”

Zuko sighed, but Toph wasn’t wrong. He didn’t appreciate Katara’s cooking until he had to make his own food. “We don’t have coin to pay you,” he told Sela because Toph should save whatever money she had for Ba Sing Se, “But I could help around the ranch in exchange.”

OoOoO
Below deck, Katara was served the strangest lunch ever: Fried fish with some really overcooked plants that everyone simply called ‘greens’. The drink was supposed to be tea, but was cold and sweet. She drank it anyway, to be polite.

“I can’t believe there are waterbenders here,” she said again.

“Child, wherever you find a large amount of water, there will be waterbenders not far away,” Mayvai said, “But to answer your question, my grandmother’s mother came from the foggy swamp.”

“I’ve been there!” she exclaimed.

They chatted back and forth about Hue, Dao and the others… which eventually led to how Katara’s life was different in the South Pole, which eventually led to how waterbenders were trained (or not trained) in the North Pole. And Katara… sort of spilled her guts all about stupid sexist Master Pakku.

Mayvai sighed. “Bless that man’s heart.”

“He doesn’t deserve it,” Katara said, stabbing at her greens.

The women exchanged an amused glance.

“So you weren’t trained in combat at all?” Kay’s sister, Beulah, asked.

“Women aren’t allowed. They think it’s shameful to their house.” Katara blinked. “Wait… do you know combat waterbending?”

“Nothing so formal as that.” One of the younger women pulled water from her glass and formed it around her hand. With a flick, ten sharp needles of ice embedded themselves deep in the wall. “But we can defend ourselves a treat.”

That was another thing about these women. They had used waterbending for… everything. One had dried Katara her off with a push-down gesture, leaving her clothing as dry as if she’d been in the sun for hours. They bent the tea into her cup and the greens onto her plate.

“Could you show me how to do that?” Katara asked, shy.

“Of course, but,” she sighed. “There is work to be done. Do you mind lending a hand, Katara?”

“I’d be happy to help.”

So that’s how Katara spent the rest of the day fishing. The women had no need to use nets. Two would pull upward from deep within the lake and bring globes of water and fish. They would hold it in the air while the others bent the water away, layer by layer, to reveal the wiggling fish. Then when the globe as small as it could be, they let the entire thing splash onto the deck where they drained the rest of the water away, leaving only the catch.

To Katara’s chagrin, her control of the water was not fine enough for all but the last stage. She was, however, a deft hand at gutting and filleting fish. She’d spent weeks out of every year doing nothing but that, in the South Pole harvest seasons.

As they worked, the women sang. Katara picked up on the melody soon enough. Soon, the entire
deck was weighed down the catch. The women sat together, cutting and gutting, tipping out the fish parts back in the water the feed the remaining population, their legs kicking idly in the water.

The sun was touching the water to the west when Mayvai declared their work to be done.

“Where should we drop you off?” she asked Katara.

“If you point me to the direction of the upper ring, I can take myself,” she said.

“If you insist child.” Mayvai paused. “Why don’t you come back tomorrow? Our port is on the east side of the lake, near the middle ring. We could use another pair of hands. The pay isn’t great, but it’s something.”

Katara grinned. Looked like she found a job after all—and by using her own talents! “I will! Thank you.” She bowed again, froze the water below into an ice block and stepped aboard.

To her, ice was the most natural thing in the world, but by the surprised murmurs from the others, it was an unexpected bending move.

Keeping her proud grin under check, Katara pushed the ice block away. Then, with a stroke through the air, she bent the water to carry her back home.

It wasn’t until she touched shore on the other side that she realized she had felt with those women something she hadn’t had since leaving the South Pole: Her tribe.

OoOoO

Zuko was sent up a ladder to help Gansu patch up a new roof. Sela cast one look at Toph’s blind eyes, pulled a doubtful face, but then took her inside so she could help prepare the meal.

That was sure to be interesting. Zuko was glad to be out of the way. He doubted Toph had ever cooked a thing in her life.

Not that Zuko was a lot better. The Water Tribe saved precious wood for their ships. He had worked on the repair and upkeep of the hulls before the men left for war, but building a roof was new.

He said as much, and overhearing, Li came up the ladder to pepper him with questions.

“Is it cold in the North Pole?”

“I came from the South Pole,” Zuko mumbled, a nail held between his teeth as he lined up a hammer on another.

“Is it cold there?”

“Yes.”
That set the kid off. “How do you keep your pig-chickens from freezing? We had a cold-snap here and it killed all the chicks and one of the sows. I bet it’s really different there. How did you get those scars?”

Zuko dropped the nail he’d been trying to tap in, and it rolled off the edge of the roof.

“Li,” Gansu said sharply. “A man’s business is his own.”

Zuko ducked his head and worked on tapping the next nail in straight. He couldn’t drive it all the way in with one hit like Gansu, but he at least made sure his work was neat.

Li wouldn’t be put off that easily. “But did you get that way from fighting the Fire Nation?”

Gansu sent Zuko an apologetic look.

Before Zuko could work up a reply, Li continued, “Maybe you ran into my brother out there! His name is Sen Su, and he’s in the Earth Kingdom army. Hey, do you think—”

Suddenly, the front door to the house flew open and Toph stomped out.

“That is stupid!” she yelled. There was something wrong with her hands that Zuko was a little far too far away to see—was that blood running down her fingers?

Toph took no heed of her injuries. She stomped up to the pig-chicken hutch. The fence was in dire need of needing repair, with several of the posts leaning in different directions. Zuko had noticed its sorry state, but assumed patching the roof was more important.

With a snarl, Toph swung one clenched fist straight forward. A rock wall erupted from the ground where the fence once stood. The farm animals squealed in alarm, but Toph was quick, efficient, and skillful. Within moments her improvised fence surrounded the hutch, stronger and taller than the wire and posts had been, with only the gate left to be mended.


Gansu turned to Zuko. “That tiny slip of girl is an earthbender?”

“That was awesome!” Li crowed.

“Um,” Zuko said. He bowed quickly. “Excuse me.” The roof was only one story high—he had fallen further before. He slid off the edge and jumped down.

Unlike him, there was no real need for Toph to keep her bending a secret, but it still was going to attract unwanted questions.

He hurried to her. “What are you doing?” he hissed.

Everyone was staring at Toph—even Sela had come from the open front door and was staring out, mouth open in shock.

“I’m being useful,” Toph sniffed. “Cutting vegetables was a waste of time.”

And now he could definitely see blood running down her fingers. She had nicked herself and lost her temper.

Zuko pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to stave off a headache. “It’s polite to ask before you… you make structural changes to people’s property.” Not like Toph did anything by half…
Li charged up. Zuko might as well have been one of the old fence posts, for all the attention the boy gave to him now. He beamed at Toph, stars in his eyes. “Wow! I’d never seen anything like that. You’re better than Gow and his soldiers! What else can you do?”

“Beat up people who annoy me,” she said with a wicked grin.

Li’s father followed sooner after, though more cautiously. One large hand twisted in his shirt. “If it’s not too much trouble—a large stone fell in our main well months ago. It’s blocking the water, but it’s too deep to reach. Do you think…?” But he looked at Zuko, not Toph.

Remembering how the Northern Water Tribe would do the same—act like a woman wasn’t there—Zuko turned pointedly to Toph.

“What do you think?”

“Sure.” She either didn’t notice or didn’t care that she had been talked over. “Moving stones is easy.”

Sela came forward tentatively with a white roll of bandages in her hand. Zuko let out a breath. He was not used to playing peacemaker. That had always been Katara’s job, but he could at least try. What would she do if she were here? “Let’s wrap up that hand before you fix their well,” he said. “I’ll finish helping with dinner.”

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Toph had managed to make a huge mess in the kitchen before she had stormed off. Some of the vegetables she’d cut had been minced to nothing, others were left as big chunks. There were also deep gouges in the counter where she’d dug the knife in. Seeing those, Zuko figured she’d gotten off lucky with the little cuts on her fingers.

Sela seemed hassled by the late start preparing the family meal and looked doubtful that a boy could help.

The people of earth, Zuko thought absently, are both stubborn and traditional. It helps them endure hardships.

He wasn’t sure where that thought came from… only it seemed like something he had learned, very long ago.

“You know your way around a kitchen, then?” Sela asked with forced casualness. “Li mentioned you were Water Tribe. They must do things differently there.”

In the Southern Tribe, maybe. “My Gran-Gran gave my brother and I vegetable chopping duty when we annoyed her,” he said, trying to even out the very uneven vegetables before he added it to the large soup kettle. Sela had just put it over the fire. When Sela was turned, he gave the fire a little
nudge to get the broth to simmer. “Winters were long, and, uh, after a few months it was easy to get on her nerves. So we did a lot of chopping.”

Sela chuckled, even though Zuko was pretty sure he hadn’t made a joke. A few minutes later, she looked over his work and gave a reluctant nod.

By the time Toph returned, triumphant, with Gansu and Li in tow, the soup was done.

Sela ladled out portions and they all sat around a table to eat. Unlike the Fire Nation and Water Tribes, the chairs were well off the ground. Toph, of course, was right at home and Zuko followed her lead.

After they’d dug in, Zuko took the opportunity to ask again if anyone had heard or seen of any other Water Tribe teenagers in the area. (Or maybe a ten-ton flying bison? Who could miss that?)

“We’ve seen no other strangers around here,” Gansu said stoutly. “Not many new folk come by this area. And I think I would have heard of someone claiming to be an Avatar.”

“Two of them would have been Water Tribe,” Zuko pressed.

“Look like you?” Gansu asked.

Zuko hesitated. “They have darker skin and blue eyes.”

“Blue eyes? That sounds pretty.” Sela said wistfully. “I’ve never seen anything like that before.”

Zuko frowned. Where could Katara and Sokka be?

“Maybe you all could stay here,” Li chirped, legs swinging back and forth and as poked at his vegetables. “Dad always hires farmhands to help with the summer harvests.”

Toph shot that down with her usual amount of grace. “Can’t. I’m headed to Ba Sing Se to fight in the earth rumble. I’ll send you an autograph when I’m champion.”

Sela’s lips pressed together and she eyed Zuko in disapproval. Even seeing Toph’s earthbending skills they had a hard time imagining her fighting. Zuko had the feeling that they’d be told a thing or two if they weren’t her guests.

“Seems like all the young people are leaving,” Gansu added into the suddenly awkward air.

“Like my brother,” Li added sadly. “He was supposed to get leave to come from the army last year, but they haven’t let him. He must be really busy.”

Zuko glanced up and saw the grief on Sela’s face.

He remembered when the Rough Rhinos has bragged about earthbenders being tricked into accidentally crushing their own captured troops…

Conversation died at the table. They ate their meal in silence.
Sela and Gatsu didn’t have anything as extravagant as an extra room for he and Toph to sleep in, but the straw in the barn was clean, though a little scratchy.

Zuko stayed up as long as the light was with him, looking again over the maps that Hakoda had given him.

Where could Katara, Sokka, and Aang be?

Maybe they found an earthbending teacher for Aang somewhere else. The continent was huge. What if they had decided to cross the great Si Wong desert? But why?

*Because Aang found a new, fun animal to ride,* he thought and sighed, rolling over on his back.

Toph lay nearby. Normally she pitched her own stone tent, but tonight she had joined him on the other side of the straw mound.

“You awake, Sparky?” she asked.

“Hmm?” He had thought she was asleep, but her eyes were open, gazing sightlessly up at the rafters.

“Li’s brother… He’s probably not coming back, is he?”

Zuko closed his eyes. “I don’t think he is.”

“And when Li grows up…”

“He’ll probably have to join the army, too. Yeah.”

So far Toph hadn’t asked many questions about the war. She seemed to be focused solely on winning the next earth rumble championship. Maybe this was the first time a part of the war had actually touched her.

“But Li’s not a bender,” she said.

“Doesn’t matter. The men in my tribe… none of them are benders and they all chose to go to war.” He let out a sigh and admitted, “There’s nothing left of the South Pole. Just a village with the women and the children who are all younger than Li. It’s like that all over…” Like Song’s village… “I don’t think the world can take much more of the war.”

Toph was silent for a few minutes. Then, “Well that sucks.”

He huffed a laugh. “Yup.”

More silence. Then, “Zuko?”

She hardly used his name. He turned to her. “Yeah?”

“The reason their well filled in with rocks is because it’s too shallow. It’s almost gone dry. If I had more time here, I think I can dig their well deeper. I can’t do anything about the water—that’s waterbending stuff—but I can feel where it is.”

“Really?”
She shrugged. “The minerals are different when they touch water for a long period of time.”

“Huh.” He never thought about that. To him, rock was rock was rock. But now that he thought about it, he supposed that there must be as many different types of rocks as temperature gradients in flame.

Zuko laced his hands under his head as he considered. He had no idea where Aang and his siblings were. Worse, he didn’t know where else to start looking. Besides, they hadn’t shown up now, but they might still be heading this way.

“We could stay for a few days if you want. It would give me time to help Gansu finish the roof. Maybe ask more townspeople if they’ve seen anything. Someone has to have seen something…” He trailed off with a yawn.

Toph’s reply was a long snore. She’d fallen asleep.

Despite the day’s disappointment, Zuko found himself smiling.

What could a more few days at this ranch hurt?

OoOoO

The clang of metal and rumble of rock echoed through the dimly lit cavern.

From her uncomfortable seat on a stone pillar, Azula watched the Water Tribesman spar against two of Long Feng’s Dai Li. Sokka was shirtless, his torso showing a sheen of sweat and mottled bruises from where he hadn’t been quick enough to dodge flying rocks. His long practice blade flashed in the sickly green light as he cut stones out of the air and advanced, grimly, showing good footwork.

One earthbender threw a stone glove, its fingers extended. It met with the quick dart of Sokka’s sword and fell into pieces.

“Impressive,” Long Feng said, where he stood by Azula’s side. “I agreed it was wise to avoid the Avatar’s suspicion by actually having the boy learn the blade, but I did not realize he had this much raw talent.”

Azula made a show of inspecting her nails. She did enjoy the spectacle, but she would not be caught drooling over the shirtless barbarian like Ty Lee. No matter how good he looked. “That is to be expected. He was, of course, trained by Kyoshi Warriors.”

And that had been an awkward lie to get around when Sokka had blurted it out in his initial interrogation. Azula had been up to the challenge—she had already spun a tale of being loyal to the Earth King and was worried the appearance of Avatar Aang would upset the status quo. Anyone who had read history knew past Avatars had taken the crown from unworthy Earth Kings before.

This minister of cultural authority had lapped up Azula’s lies and insinuations against Avatar Aang like a starving peasant. He had loved the idea of singling out one of the Avatar’s companions to keep
an eye on him.

He had no idea that mindbending Sokka fit neatly into Azula’s own plans.

Across the cavern, Sokka had battled his way past a hail of rock and stone and was engaging the Dai Li directly, forcing them to duck and weave with their own blades.

“It is a shame the boy is not an earthbender,” Long Feng continued. “As it is, once the Avatar is under our control, we still may have use for him.”

Sokka’s *use* would be as a royal hostage to ensure the Southern Water Tribe’s cooperation. Later, he would be the puppet-Chief the Fire Nation needed. But Long Feng did not need to know that.

“What use would that be?” Mai asked, voice dour. She sat, sharpening her knives though Azula had noted she, too, watched the display.

All three girls wore robes of jade green, though without makeup today. They had been going without the Kyoshi garb more often, getting the Dai Li used to the idea of seeing them as they truly were.

It would make things a little easier to accept her in red and gold.

Long Feng glanced at her. “There is a specialized mindbending technique we use for the Earth King’s own bodyguards.”

Azula had seen those guards before. A group of handsome, though dead-eyed swordsmen who stood in silent watch at the four corners of any room the Earth King occupied.

“What technique is that?” Azula asked, not because she wanted to know, but because Long Feng was leading the conversation that way.

Sure enough, his mouth twitched. “A total erasure of thought, personality, and freewill.”

A beat. All three girls stared at him. Even Ty Lee had torn her eyes from the sparring. “Like… the Joo Dee’s?” she asked softly.

“The Joo Dee’s are given a personality that is meant to be pleasant and helpful. No, this is a death of the subject’s personality. A total smoothing away of any freewill into a creature of complete obedience.” Long Feng’s smile could have fit on a snake and was aimed solely at Azula. “There is no coming back from it.”

Ah. This was not about Sokka at all. He was subtly threatening *Azula*, should she ever step out of line.

*You have no idea what you are dealing with, little man.*

Azula dropped her gaze as if cowed. She had enough practice doing that as a child when her mother could still tell her what to do.

“If it would please the Earth King, of course,” she murmured.

“Of course,” Long Feng repeated, then stood and clapped his hands once.

Instantly the two Dai Li and one Water Tribe teen stopped and turned toward him.

“That is enough sparring for tonight. Thank you.”
Hands in his sleeves, Long Feng walked out to Sokka. “Sokka, the Earth King has invited you to Lake Laogai. You may walk deep into the halls, a place of walls and secrets.”

Sokka’s breath caught and what little expression on his face vanished as he sank further into the hypnotic trance his mindbending sessions had imposed on him.

“I am honored to receive his secrets,” Sokka intoned.

“Go from his place and return to your assigned house. Once you reach the street level you will remember no details of the last three hours, and think that you spent a pleasant night sword training. Return back to the dojo tomorrow night, or sooner if you have something unusual to report. Your master is proud of you, Sokka. He has given you this sword as a mark of favor.”

Sokka nodded and grabbed up his blue tunic—it neatly covered his bruising and the cuts he received from flying chips of rock—and walked out.

Long Feng jerked his chin in his direction. Rising, Azula, Ty Lee, and Mai followed at a safe distance.

They had gone through this routine enough times that Azula could pinpoint the moment Sokka’s mindbending trance lifted. As soon as he hit the street, his posture relaxed from ridged attention to a sloppy peasant stroll. Blinking, he looked down at the sword he carried and grinned.

Then he casually resheathed it back in his belt and walked down the street, not a care in the world, unknowing that he had just played spy, reported on the Avatar’s every foolish activity, and was trained by his enemies.

“He’s so lucky,” Ty Lee sighed. “I wish my worries were so easy to leave behind.”

“You want to be mindbended into obedience?” Azula asked, eyebrow raised.

“No, but his aura is so happy. From gray and blank to bright blue again. Just like that. He thinks he just spent a long evening training with his master. It’s nice.”

Azula rolled her eyes. “Ignorance is not bliss.”

“You do realize,” Mai drawled, “Long Feng was threatening you with mindbending back there.”

Azula flicked her fingers. “He has no idea who he is dealing with.”

The other girl pressed her point. “What are we waiting for? We have the Avatar, we have the last Water Chief’s heir. Let’s take them both, kill the spare waterbender, and leave this annoying city.”

“And if we wait a little longer, we will also have the Earth King,” she said. “Long Feng will overstep himself. Men like that always do, and the moment he slips, we will be ready.”

No one would dare call her a failure now.
Zuko and Toph Alone

Chapter Notes

Notes: I know people are anxious about what’s happening in Ba Sing Se, but I wanted to keep this in the spirit of a true Zuko (and Toph) Alone chapter. We’ll return to mindbending shenanigans in the next chapter. Promise!

"I know it's hard for you to see me this way, but the obedient little helpless blind girl that you think I am just isn't me. I love fighting. I love being an earthbender. And I'm really, really good at it."

~ Toph, The Blind Bandit

OoOoO

Zuko opened his eyes a couple of hours before dawn. He lay in place for a moment, pieces of straw digging into his back, not understanding what had woken him. Then he glanced over. The spot where Toph had up curled on the straw mound near him was empty. Momo, however, snoozed on without care.

He waited for a few moments and then rose and walked to barn’s open door. Li and Toph stood not far away on the edge of a lily-sunflower field. The night air was cold and still, which easily carried their voices.

“All right,” Toph said to the boy. “Show me your strongest stance.”

Li planted his feet and raised his fists like he was entering a boxing match.

“Weak.” Toph jabbed two fingers into the meat of his shoulder hard enough to make the boy take a surprised step back. “You wanna fight like an earthbender, you gotta stand firmer than that. Center your weight down low. Arms in.” She balled her fists and tucked them against her ribs, feet set solid as stone.

Li tentatively pushed her shoulder and she didn’t budge an inch. Then the boy spotted Zuko and grinned, waving him over. “Did we wake you up?” he called cheerfully, not a concern in the world.

The answer was obviously yes, so instead Zuko walked up and asked his own question, “What are you two doing?”

Li grinned, showing a gap between his two front teeth. “Toph is teaching me earthbending.”

“I’m teaching Twiggy here how to fight like an earthbender,” Toph corrected, not budging an inch
from her low stance. “Might be good for you to learn, too, Sparky.”

Li turned to her. “Why do you call him Sparky?”

“Same reason I call you Twiggy,” Toph said. “Now get those twiggy arms tucked in.”

The kid did what he was told, but was as cheerfully irrepressible as ever. “But do you think maybe I can learn to earthbend? My great uncle Su Wong didn’t start bending until he was twelve. I bet I’m like him.”

Zuko shook his head. Bending did not work that way, but didn’t see a point in stomping on the kid’s dreams. “Non-benders can be dangerous, too.”

Li turned to him, eyes wide. “Really?”

“Really. My elder brother’s one of the most dangerous people that I know because he outthinks his enemies.” He caught himself at the last second. It would not be good for Li to find out he was a firebender. “And I’m not too bad, either.”

Zuko eyed the way Toph stood, practically sunk into the dirt. He wasn’t sure how much he would learn from her. His bending style required a lot of movement. But Li was looking between them with shining eyes, and what could it hurt?

So, he sunk down, copying Toph’s low stance, and immediately felt the strain in his calves and thighs. “Like this?”

“Eh,” she said, unimpressed. “It’s more of a mindset. If you want to fight an earthbender, you have to out-stubborn your opponent. When they push you,” she rose suddenly and pushed Zuko hard with the flat of both hands. Taken by surprise, his root broke completely and he fell back on his butt. Li started to laugh, but then got the same treatment and fell as well. Toph stood over them, grinning. “You gotta be stronger. Only then can you push back.”

*Note to self: Never get in a shoving match with an earthbender*, Zuko thought wryly. There was a sharp rock digging into his rear end and he didn’t think it was a coincidence.

Toph helped them back up and then gave Li a few more pointers on where to set his feet to improve his balance.

“How do I knock someone out?” Li asked.

“The first step is to keep from getting knocked out, yourself,” she said stolidly.

He shifted from foot to foot. “But what if Gow and his men put another boulder through the roof?”

Zuko straightened. “Who did what, now?”

Li nodded, looking sad. “Gow runs the militia. He and his men are supposed to protect the town, but when they drink, they get mean. A few weeks ago Gow came over and started showing off with his new hammers, that’s how we got that hole in the roof.” He scowled. “If my brother, Sen Su, were here, he would have stopped Gow, but Dad was out working the field. Dad said we were lucky—Gow could have been the whole house.”

And now they had a roof to patch up.

“Those were the same guys that the merchant was worried about?” Toph asked.
Li nodded. “They keep the Fire Nation away, but Dad says that gives them big ideas.”

“And the whole town just puts up with that?” Zuko demanded, outraged. “Why doesn’t anyone go out, find those guys, and teach them a lesson they won’t forget?”

That earned a disbelieving stare from Li.

Toph snorted. “Maybe that’s how things are done in the Water Tribes, but in the Earth Kingdom you gotta stand your ground on your own land.”

No, Zuko realized with a chill. That wasn’t how this problem would have been done in the Water Tribe. Back in the South Pole, the tribe would have gathered, aired the grievance, and acted as one unit to discipline who was causing disharmony in the community.

In the Fire Nation… whichever parent was the fiercest fighter—Sela or Gansu—would have been expected to go out, find the problem, and eliminate it before they could strike again.

Out of the two, the Fire Nation solution felt the most right. Did that make it wrong, though? He wasn’t sure, and that worried him.

They were right in the middle of the Earth Kingdom continent, though. So perhaps this problem should be fixed the Earth Kingdom way. “Then you have to find a way to stand your ground, next time,” he said, thinking about his pearl hilted knife and the message etched on the blade: *Never give up without a fight.*

Zuko reached to his side and pulled his boomerang from its holster. Hakoda had given it to him a few weeks ago. His first had been taken from him on Iroh’s ship.

Looking at it, he realized he hadn’t touched it since then. Even what little hunting he’d had to do had been accomplished with snares. The edge of the bladed side had become dull in the holster. Good for a beginner.

He bent knelt to Li’s eye level and handed it over. “Every boy should have a weapon of his own,” he said, remembering when Hakoda had told him the same thing, all those years ago when he’d woken up after being found on the Fire Nation ship.

“What is it?” Li’s eyes were round.

“This is a boomerang. We use them to hunt and defend ourselves in the South Pole.”

“Wow, really?”

“Give it a try, Twiggy.” With a stomp, Toph brought up a stone pillar. It was roughly human shaped with a dirt-clod head on top.

Zuko spent the next few minutes showing Li how to stand, throw, and most importantly, catch the boomerang safely. Li was every bit as terrible as he had been when starting out, but he’d get good with enough practice.

Then Toph ran them both through a couple basic earthbending stances, and how to explode out of them with force when the time was exactly right. As the sun rose into the dawn of a new hot day, Zuko came to the conclusion that Toph’s style was not good for his brand of offense, but might be useful standing his ground in the face of oncoming flames. He would work on it.

Before long, Sela called Li in for breakfast. The kid cheered, stomach audibly growling, and hugged
both Zuko and Toph before trotting off to the house. His boomerang hung off his belt.

Toph turned her head in his direction to ‘watch’ him go. “Is that what like having a brother is like?”

“They’re usually more annoying,” Zuko said, with a swift pang of homesickness. He missed his siblings. Roughhousing and hunting with Sokka, bending and just... talking with Katara. She could always sort out the tangle of his thoughts. He even missed Aang, the kid with too much responsibility on his flighty head who'd become almost like a brother too.

Toph snorted and slugged him in the shoulder. “C’mon, I wanna eat.”

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Despite the short night’s rest, Zuko didn’t feel tired or bogged down the next day.

Spring was well on its way. The overhead sun felt good and beamed down with an intensity he was used to feeling only during the long South Pole summer days.

He helped Gansu on the roof repair. He was passable at nailing the shingles in, but spreading the tar was a lot easier. While the bucket was between his warmed hands, it maintained the perfect temperature and viscosity.

Momo awoke later that morning and spent the day flitting from Zuko's shoulder to Toph's, chirping and shamelessly begging for treats from the both of them.

Gansu, too, split his time between the roof and assisting Toph with the well. She had successfully managed to clear the rocks and bend the earth deeper at the main well, and was now taking a look at the family’s small backup well. Having two sources of water would be a vast improvement to this family’s life. It was a shame no other earthbender could have come out sooner, but... they were needed in the war.

From his vantage point on the roof, Zuko searched the sky, as he always did, for any signs of a sky bison. There was nothing. Not even a cloud in the sky.

But he was the first to spot a drift of dust rising up from the distant road. Several people were riding toward the ranch, and coming on fast.

Zuko stood, watching it, and when he was certain the riders were coming their way he called out, “Gansu!”

The man had been retrieving more wood to use as shingles. He stopped and glanced up. Zuko pointed in the rider’s direction before shimmying down the ladder to join him.

“It’s the militia,” Gansu said, squinting. “What could they want?”
“Trouble,” Zuko replied, remembering Li’s story from this morning. It would be a dumb idea to reveal himself as a Firebender to people who had already suffered so greatly from the Fire Nation, but if Gow and his men tried putting another hole in the roof he’d nearly patched up, he was going to pay.

Toph walked up to them. She said nothing, but her body language shifted slightly in his direction: Her equivalent of glancing at someone.

He tilted his head to the side and backed one step. It put a little space between himself and Gansu in case he needed to call fire.

Toph quirked a smile and did the same to Gansu’s other side.

The man didn’t know it, but he had back-up to spare.

The oncoming militia passed the front fence and spurred their ostrich-horses to a full gallop before stopping obnoxiously close in front of Gansu. Their leader, Gow presumably, was the largest.

“What do you want, Gow?” Gansu asked coldly.

Gow leered down at him. “Just thought someone ought to tell you, your son’s battalion got captured.” With a mean grin, he turned to the men following him. “You boys hear what the Fire Nation did to their last group of Earth Kingdom prisoners?”

One called up from the back. “Dressed them up in Fire Nation uniforms and put them on the frontline, unarmed.” He hawked and then spat. “Then they just watched.”

Zuko’s stomach swooped in horror. Gansu surged forward. “You watch your mouth, Gow!”

“Just passing the news along, Gansu. You watch your boy.” He eyed him. “And your pretty wife.”

Then with a laugh he wheeled his ostrich-horse around. Then he and his men rode away.

The moment they were out of sight, Gansu turned to comfort his wife and son.

“What’s going to happen to my brother?” Li demanded.

Zuko shut his eyes, pained. He heard Toph’s soft footfalls as she stepped over. “Gow was telling the truth,” she said lowly.

“Yeah, Colonel Mongke mentioned something like that, too. I don’t see why these nobodies would get the news,” he added with a dismissive glance towards the retreating cloud of dust.

Gansu detached himself from his wife to walk back up to Zuko and Toph.

“I’m heading out today to the front lines to get my boy.” He paused, glancing at Zuko. “I would feel a lot better if the ranch had additional hands to help Sela out while I’m gone.”

Zuko’s stomach sank. No doubt Sela would need help if Gow and his men felt like making more trouble.

He glanced at Toph, who’s mouth pressed in a thin line. It might take Gansu weeks just to get to the front lines. Meanwhile, Toph wanted to join the Earth Rumble at Ba Sing Se, and Zuko had to find Katara, Sokka, and Aang.

Plus, there was another problem.
“It’s not a good idea for us to stay in one place for a long time,” Zuko started, but wasn’t sure how to explain… everything.

Gansu’s green eyes sharpened. “You’re runaways?”

“My parents thought I was ready for marriage,” Toph said in her blunt fashion. “I disagreed.”

He frowned and glanced at Zuko for some reason. “She is a little young for that.”

“Not for a Fire Nation Colonel,” Toph said.

Zuko winced, but it was the truth. “The Fire Nation will be searching for us.”

“And whoever my parents can hire, too,” Toph added cheerfully.

“I see. So that’s why you’re seeking the Avatar. He has the power to make or break agreements.”

Gansu nodded as if this made sense, even though that was not what Zuko had told him at all. Then the man sighed and cast a look back over his shoulder toward his wife and young son, lowering his voice. “Best not let Sela know your situation. She has enough worries.”

That much he could do. Zuko nodded. “We can stay through tomorrow. That will give me enough time to finish the roof.”

“I’ll have a look around the ranch, too.” Toph seemed to sink into the dirt a little. “I can tell it’s been a while since a proper earthbender has send to this property.”

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OoOoO

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True to the nature of an Earth Kingdom man, once Gansu had made his decision, he stuck with it. He was gone within the hour.

Sela and Li watched ride off from the front porch of their tiny house—Li clinging onto his mother for support.

The sight reminded Zuko of when Hakoda had left the South Pole with the rest of the Water Tribe men. Hopefully, Gansu would return soon, and with more than just an urn of ashes for his journey.

No, he reminded himself. Cremation was a Fire Nation custom. The people of the Earth probably buried their dead, in the same way the Water Tribe gave theirs back to the sea.

He hoped Gansu was able to bring back his son, and not just a trinket to remember him by.

Sighing, he turned away and scaled the ladder to return to his work. He finished his patch on the roof shortly before midday. It wasn’t the neatest work, but he thought it should hold until Gansu returned.
Toph was busy walking the property “talking rock” as she called it, so when Sela asked if she could borrow Ushi to haul supplies in from the town, Zuko offered to go with her. Li, naturally, tagged along.

The atmosphere in the small village was strained. There were more people about than the last time he’d been there, but they mostly stuck to the shadows under awnings. The only real sound came from the saloon where several ostrich-horses had been tied to the standing posts. Rough, too-loud laughter drifted out the swinging doors, along with the crash of furniture.

Li tugged on his arm and pointed. “That’s Gow’s men.”

Zuko had been taught by Gran-Gran that it was rude to point, but those men deserved rudeness. Idly, he took note of the small flames feeding the overhead oil lamps, ever burning even in the heat of the day. They were damped down, but he could draw from them in a pinch. Or better yet, from the sun burning overhead.

He, Sela, and Li weren’t bothered as they made their way to the general store. Sela was no fool and did her shopping quickly. She purchased enough feed and grain to last the little family until Gansu got back.

Zuko was helping the general store clerk pile a few bags on Ushi’s back when a voice drawled out behind them.

“Didn’t expect to see you all here, Sela. Shouldn’t you be grieving?”

Zuko turned and saw Gow and his men had come out of the saloon, leering openly at Sela.

She glanced down. “We’re just shopping, Gow. Leave us alone.”

Gow grinned. “I can see that. Where’s Gansu?”

“My dad’s bringing my brother home!” Li declared, pushing forward to stand between the man and his mother.

“Is that so?” Gow asked. “And left you all alone?”

Li puffed out his skinny chest. “I can protect the ranch.” And he reached for the boomerang in his belt.

This was a recipe for trouble. Stepping away from Ushi, Zuko moved to stand before the boy. “Stay away from them.”

“Or what?” one of the soldiers asked.

Zuko’s good eye narrowed so that it matched the bad. “Or I’ll have something to say about it.” It would be a bad idea to firebend, but he would do what had to be done.

“Ohh.” Still grinning, Gow turned to his men. “Looks like we have a real fighter here, boys.” Then, back to Zuko, “Why aren’t you in the front lines? Already seen too much of the war?” He lifted one of his stone hammers. “Or maybe you haven’t seen enough?”

Sela gripped Zuko’s arm. “Let’s go.”

“I don’t think so,” Gow said silkily. “Sela, your ranch is behind on your taxes.”

“No we are not. Gansu paid—”
“Well he’s not around to ask, is he? We’ll take those feed bags, the ostrich-horse too.”

Zuko stiffened. They were not taking Ushi.

Quick as an arctic coyote, Li darted around him to challenge the man directly. “Those aren’t yours! You can’t take whatever you want.”

“Sounds to me that you’re getting too big for your britches. Maybe it’s time you saw a little war action, too.” With that, the beefy earthbender reached for Li.

Zuko would have called fire except that Li was standing right by his side. He hesitated, and instead grabbed for one of the spears one of the soldiers held, spinning it in hand in a move he’d learned at the North Pole.

But in doing so, he took his eyes off the earthbender. That was a mistake. He heard the scrape of a tough-soled foot against rock, there was a bonk, a flash of white light, and then darkness.

OoOoO

Toph spent that afternoon walking the property while Momo flitted overhead, landing on the ground to munch up scorp-crickets. She paid him little mind. Earth held a memory longer than any man, and she could tell it had been at least a couple of generations since a proper earthbender had seen to this place.

It wasn’t bad soil. The top layer was a little sandy and baked to a fine crust that made it difficult for any plants to break through. There were enough earthworms and ants that the ground must have been worth something, though.

Fighting was a lot of fun, and Toph was good at it, but it was meditative to stroll around and commune with the earth to see what it had to tell her.

As she walked, she pushed interfering rocks down and the more nutrient-rich layers up. Different materials within the earth had different magnetic pulls upon one another. That’s mainly how Toph could tell iron from, say, silica. She made sure to stir these around, too. Even earth shouldn’t stay bound in one place for too long.

Toph’s concentration was broken by the approach of rapid feet. Sela. And judging by her pounding heart, she was either really scared or really angry. Momo called out a chittering greeting to her.

Toph stopped and turned toward the approaching woman, absently digging the heel of one foot into the ground to cast out. Nope. The boys weren’t with her.

That figured. Trouble followed Sparky like flies to an ostrich-horse.

“What happened?” Toph demanded.
By the sounds of her ragged breaths, Sela was crying, almost on the edge of hysterics. “Gow and his men demanded our food. Zuko tried to stop him, but there were too many. They… They grabbed Li, too. Gow says he’s old enough for the Earth Kingdom army now.” She heaved a sob.

Toph found herself speechless. It was one thing for Zuko to be caught by her parents’ guards (her father only hired the best) but this tiny town’s militia? She didn’t know a lot about firebending, but he was good enough to have scared the pants off those wagon supply soldiers the other day.

Ah, but he couldn’t firebend in front of Li and his mother, could he? That was an annoying handicap.

Sela heaved a sob. “I don’t know what to do! No one in the town can stop Gow. He’s too strong.”

“Not for me,” Toph said.

The woman shook her head. “I know we just met, and I’m asking much, but could you please watch the ranch? I will ride out to Wang Su village to the east. One of the men might be able to do something.”

Toph felt her jaw drop. Hello! She was right here! “You don’t need to go anywhere. I’ll get Li back for you.”

A pause. It was almost as if Sela wasn’t sure she heard her correctly. “I can’t ask you to do that. Gow is a veteran earthbender and he has three trained men with him.”

“So what? I’ve defeated more in the Earth Rumble ring.”

Sela put a hand on her shoulder. “I know you care about your brother, but he would not want to see you get hurt.”

It took a moment to realize Sela was talking about Zuko. Toph’s annoyance flashed into affront. No one had ever told her she looked Water Tribe.

“He’s not my brother, and I won’t get hurt.” She knocked Sela’s hand away. “Where are they?”

“I can’t—”

She stomped and earth shook with the impact. “What direction!”

Sela didn’t say it, but her body twitched back the way she had come. Straight due east.

Turning, Toph strode in that direction. She felt the woman pause and trot after her, reluctance in every line of her body.

Toph didn’t care. She knew Sela’s type: It didn’t matter that Toph had fixed their wells or fence. Toph was blind and couldn’t cook or sew like a proper woman. She saw Toph as nothing but a helpless little girl.

Along the way, Sela tried to talk to her several times, but Toph cracked her knuckles and ignored her.

It had been too long since she’d been in a good fight, and from the distant vibrations she picked up from the down, she was about to have an audience.

Perfect.
Toph grinned, showing teeth. She’d show Sela. She’d show everyone in this stupid town that Toph Bei Fong was not someone to be pitied.

OoOoO

Zuko heard Gow step up behind him, started to turn, heard a brief flash of pain and a bright flash of light, and then…

… and then…

And then he was pelting down the palace corridor as fast as his legs would carry him. The tiny, fluffy body cupped oh-so-carefully in his hands was too still and too cold.

He didn’t know what happened, Pip had been fine before he left for firebending training this morning, chirping for bits of rice left over from Zuko’s breakfast. Now he was ice cold with his little neck was at the wrong angle.

He spotted his mother in the garden strolling along with her usual attendants. “Mom!” he cried. “Mom help! It’s Pip!”

She turned and knew he was too old to be crying, but as she bent to receive him he pressed his face against her rich, red robes, sniffing.

“Zuko? What’s—Is that a turtle-duck?”

“I’m sorry!” The confession came out in a rush. “He had a bad foot, and he couldn’t keep up with the others, so I was feeding him in… in my room. I told the servants not to tell, and Pip was doing so good but when I checked on him…” He held up the little broken body, the head lolling to the side.

“Oh, Zuko.” Her arms tightened about his shoulders, bringing the scent of cherry-lilac. He manfully tried to sniff back his tears. “Honey, he is a wild animal. Sometimes these things happen.”

“But he was fine this morning!” He drew back, wiping his face with his free hand. He couldn’t bring himself to look in her eyes. “Can’t I bring him to Agni’s pool? Please? Please? Agni could fix him. I know he would.”

“That pool is only for the royal family, dum-dum,” said a dismissive voice. Zuko stiffened and turned. He hadn’t noticed that Azula had been there, walking along with their mother. She rolled her eyes. “And Agni doesn’t care about stupid turtle-ducks.”

“Azula,” said Mother. “Can’t you see your brother is upset?”

“Sorry, Zuko.” But when his mother wasn’t looking, she mouthed ‘cry baby’.

Zuko’s hands felt hot with anger, but that made the tiny body only felt colder. “I could… Can’t I just ask? I’m a prince. Agni would listen to me.”
His mother let out a regretful sigh and bent to hug him again, once again sweeping him in her arms with the scent of cherry-lilac. “I’m afraid your sister is right. A turtle-duck is such a little life and the great spirit has all of our troops and the war to look after.”

“But… But…”

He looked down Pip. He wasn’t supposed to have pets, it was undignified, but Zuko had thought if he rescued him, it would be different. Maybe Pip could be like a…a friend, maybe.

Not only that, the palace was supposed to be safe. There weren’t even any pigmy pumas stalking about after that time Azula set one on fire. The whole pride had been scared away. Plus, a pigmy puma couldn’t get into his rooms, anyway. Only his servants and family were allowed…

Zuko felt a chill. He looked up past his mother’s shoulder.

Azula smiled back at him.

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OoOoO

Zuko woke with a gasp. “‘zula, what did you do?” he tried to say, but his voice felt mushy and his head ached.

He knew with the sixth sense of a firebender that the sun was directly overhead, shining down at full strength. Somehow, he was sitting upright. He shifted, glancing around, and found that his hands were bound against his back

Understanding hit in a flash, pushing away the dream—the memory? An actual memory of his Fire Nation childhood and his mother—to the side, and burning away the confusion.

He was tied to a post in the middle of the town square. Villagers stood at either side of the street and anxiously peered out from windows and from under building awnings. All were too scared and intimidated to help.

Meanwhile, Gow and his three militia strutted around like they were making a point.

They were making a point: Don’t question us, or this will happen to you and your children.

“Zuko?” Li’s voice came from behind. The ropes tightened as the boy moved. “You’re awake?” He sounded scared.

Zuko twisted and found that Li was sitting with his back to the other side of the pole. They were tied with the same length of rope, so every time the boy shifted, he felt it. Inwardly, he cursed himself and
hoped that Sela was able to get away. “I’m awake,” he confirmed grimly. “What happened?”

Li’s voice was high-pitched and filled with fear. “Gow’s telling everyone you’re a deserter from the earth army and that I’m old enough to join, too. He’s going to take us to the front lines.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Zuko said.

“I tried cutting the ropes with the side of the boomerang but it’s not sharp enough. Gow told me if he catches me again, he’ll hit us with the hammer!”

A flash of the memory hit him, his mother’s arms folding around him. She couldn’t take away his grief, but for a second… for a second he had still believed it was going to be okay.

Zuko took a deep breath. “Li,” he said steadily, cutting through the boy’s rambling. “Listen to me. No one is going to take you away from your mother. I promise.”

His fingers felt the rough, dry weave of the rope. Firebending himself free would be risky, but if he was careful…

Li suddenly twisted—the kid was completely incapable of sitting still—which caused Zuko’s ropes to pull tight. “There she is!” he called, loud enough to get the attention of the watchers. “I knew she’d come!”

Zuko raised his head. Out, across the village square, a tiny figure strode into view. It was Toph.

He grinned.

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OoOoO

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Toph strode into the town square and stomped once to get the lay of the land.

Ahead stood Gow and his three men. Best she could tell, he was the only earthbender out of the group. They stood smack in the middle of the square, blocking her from where Zuko and Li were tied up. Li’s fluttering heartbeat was excited and hopeful. Zuko’s was an angry thrumming, but cautiously optimistic. Honestly, he should have more faith in her.

More importantly, to either side were more than three dozen different heartbeats. Toph hadn’t had this big of an audience since the Earth Rumble before the Fire Nation moved in.

She grinned, big and broad.

“Who’s this?” Gow called out, laughter in his voice. “You here to beg for your friends back, little girl?”

“Nope,” she called back. “I’m here to slap that smile off your face, kick your soldiers into next week, and then free my friends.”
There were hushed murmurs from the watching townsfolk, quickly hushed. Apparently people didn’t talk back to Gow that often.

“Is… is she blind?” one of the soldier’s asked his friends. They traded shrugs.

Gow made a show of looking around. He was strangely reluctant. Not from fear, but from annoyance. Toph knew why: They treated their girls like precious objects here—something to be protected. No one wanted to be the one seen beating up on a girl. “This is ridiculous. There are consequences for interfering with official militia business. Go home before you get hurt.”

Toph stood as firm as stone. “What’s the matter, Gow? I thought you liked beating up little kids.”

She could practically hear Zuko’s affronted huff at that. Too bad. Maybe next time, he wouldn’t let losers like this get the drop on him.

“You’re going to regret saying that,” Gow growled and strode forward.

Toph’s grin grew wicked. She widened her stance, hands snapping up into guard positions in front of her face. The earth beneath her toes trembled at the ready.

At Gow’s signal, two of the guardsmen rushed forward. Several of the townsfolk screamed in dismay, but Toph tuned them out as she would any rumble audience.

The man to the right held a pike, the other came at her barehanded. Toph waited until they were close enough to fully commit into a lunge. Then, at the exact right moment she slid the earth under their feet. The ooph as they ran into each other was immensely satisfying.

There was a shocked silence. Then the audience screamed their approval.

It was music to Toph’s ears.

The two men picked themselves painfully up. She could have sunk them to their necks in a second or launched them out of the town square completely. Instead, she let them limp a few steps back. They’d try something in a few moments, and she’d make fools of them again. That’s how it went.

She could practically feel the heat of Gow’s glare. Still grinning, Toph crooked her finger and made a ‘come forward’ gesture.

Swinging his hammers menacingly, he obliged her. His feet were as bare as hers and the earth bowed under his weight. Unlike her, he used stone hammers to beat the earth to his will. Amateur.

One hammer came down, raising knocking a chunky boulder into the air that the other hammer sent flying straight at Toph.

A sharp wedge of rock erupted before Toph at her command, cleaving the oncoming boulder in two. Then, with a flick she sent it shooting forward.

Gow dived out of the way.

Toph was about to follow it up with a dull spike, maybe to his rump, maybe to some other painful tender point, but all three soldiers took that moment to charge her again.

She stood in place, hands and feet moving in a precise dance as she shot rocks out, as the men tripped on toeholds that hadn’t been there before, and the very earth buckled under them.

Gow hadn’t yet closed in, preferring to strike rocks at her which she batted away with contempt. He
would, though. His temper was fraying. She could feel it in his rapid breathing and escalating heart rate. He knew he was being humiliated. Only a matter of time before he snapped.

Meanwhile, the audience screamed their approval. And this… this was what Toph was born to do.

A sharp word from Zuko and a quick patter of feet drew her attention briefly from the fight. Li was free and darting across the square to join to his mother.

Gow saw Li, too, and turned just as the three soldiers she’d been toying with came for her again. She dodged the pike—too close, she’d make him pay for that—and to her horror felt Gow’s dual hammers slice the ground.

The boulder wasn’t headed toward Toph. It was headed straight for Li.

And she couldn’t block it and deal with the soldiers at the same time.

OoOoO

What was Toph doing? But Zuko knew. She was putting on a show. She’d let one of Gow’s three goons get close, only for the earth to shift suddenly under their feet and make them miss their mark, or for them to trip hilariously into one another.

Gow was getting mad, striking the earth with his hammer with less and less precision.

Meanwhile, the crowd ate it up, hooting and cheering. “Give him a left! A left!” Whatever that was meant to mean.

Even Li yelled encouragement, and only yelped in surprise when rock chips from boulder shrapnel blew in his direction.

Zuko was pissed.

It would take one sloppily thrown boulder, one errant rock spike to hurt Li. Or worse, for Gow to remember he had hostages who couldn’t fight back.

Sela watched anxiously from the side, hand pressed to her mouth. She clearly wanted to run over to her boy, but was too afraid of drawing Gow’s attention.

Zuko had enough of this.

“Li,” he said. Then repeated himself twice until he got the boy’s attention. “I almost got the knots undone,” he lied. “Pull the rope tight.”

“Okay!” No need to look. He could hear the boy’s grin.

Somehow, someway, he was going to have to introduce him to Aang.
“The second you’re free, run to your mother. Got it? Straight over to her.”

“I will. I promise!”

He sounded way too happy, clearly not understanding that it would take one badly aimed rock to
 crush them flat. “On three. One… Two…” he took a deep breath and grabbed the rope. “Pull!”

Li bent forward, pulling the rope that bound their wrists tight—and more importantly, inching away
 from Zuko’s suddenly burning hot hands. There would be some smoke, but he hoped that everyone
 was too involved in the fight to notice.

The strands of rope parted and came free. Li whooped, leaping to his feet.

Zuko did as well, barking out, “Run!”

Li was a good kid. He did exactly what he promised, pelting across the square to his mother’s open
 arms.

Unfortunately, Gow turned at exactly the wrong time to see him. His three men were busy charging
 Toph, taking her attention.

It only took a second for Gow to turn and bring both hammers down in a slice. A boulder the size of
 a man’s head chipped off the earth and flew, unerringly, toward Li.

Zuko didn’t think. He stepped forward in a form from the dancing dragon, with both palms up. A
 single dart of flame shot out, and as he poured will and effort into it, the flame compacted into a tiny
 white flare—more hot and energetic than he had ever bent before. It whistled through the air and
 struck the oncoming boulder like an arrow.

The explosion blasted the rock into a shower of dust which rained down on the watchers.

“He’s a firebender!” Gow yelled and raised his great hammers for another blow.

Zuko was already running forward. He was a firebender, however oddly he bent, and firebenders did
 not wait and endure like the people of earth. They attacked.

A thick wreath of golden flame lit between his hands. He brought it up, and then down, crashing the
 fire like a vengeful wave in front of him.

Gow had his hammers over his head, which unbalanced him. He tried to back up. Too slow. The
 terrible wave washed over his bare feet. He screamed, dropping the hammers and falling back onto
 his hands, which burned too.

With a crunch of rock, three narrow columns of stone simultaneously shot Gow’s goons in three
 separate directions. The men landed twenty feet away, groaning, the fight knocked out of them.

Paying them no heed, Toph walked up to Zuko who stood over the whimpering Gow.

“What happened?”

“I burned him.” This wasn’t the first man he’d intentionally burned—Zhao took that honor—but
 Zuko didn’t like it. He also didn’t allow himself to look away from what he had done. The fire had
 been cool, but it had still been fire. The red, peeling skin on Gow’s hands and feet looked like a
 massive sunburn. It would be weeks until he could walk normally again, or use his hands. “He tried
to strike Li.”
Toph’s expression darkened, and with a corkscrew twist of a clawed hand, Gow was sunk into the ground, his head, red hands, and burned tootsies sticking out.

“Stop your whining, dirt for brains,” Toph told Gow. “You got what you deserved.”

Zuko rounded on her. “What were you thinking, playing around with them like that?”

Toph looked surprised, but as usual didn’t give an inch. “I can fight and put on a good show at the same time.”

“Show?” he snapped. “This wasn’t an Earth Rumble brawl! Those men were serious.”

“I… I know that.”

“Li’s life was on the line. If I hadn’t been fast enough—”

Toph clenched her fists. “I know.”

“You could have flattened all of them within seconds,” he said. “But no, you were too busy making it look good!”

Her jaw dropped open. For once, she seemed at a loss for words. “I—“

Zuko caught the motion towards her out of the corner of his bad eye. He turned, striking out with a hasty sheet of fire. A half-rotten tomato-pear flopped to the ground, still smoking.

It hadn’t been aimed at him. The person who threw it had been aiming at Toph.

“Traitor!” one of the villagers screamed out. “Fire Nation sympathizer!”

Zuko’s stomach sank to his shoes. The cheering was over. Now, the faces staring at them from either side of the road were sullen and angry. Not good.

The old man who had been yelling at Toph to ‘give him a left’ stepped forward. He had a pitchfork in one hand. “Those were our soldiers! Who’s going to protect us now?”

“But… But they were bullying the town!” Toph’s voice was high with distress and confusion. “They tried to take Li from his mother!” She stomped in frustration, and the ground rumbled.

The villagers drew back—not awed. Afraid.

Then the old man piped up again. “The firebender took our strongest man out. Now the Fire Nation will come down on us all. Mark my words, this was the plan all along.”

“That girl is helping him!” another yelled.

“It was a set-up!”

“She’s not one of us!”

One woman started to boo, then it was taken up by the man standing next to her. Within seconds the whole crowd was jeering and yelling curses. Sela remained silent, but stared at them with anger. Peeking out behind her, Li looked on with tears in his eyes.

Neither of them came to their defense. If they did, the whole town would fall on their heads.
“Come on,” Zuko said roughly. Ushi was nearby, relieved of the foodstuff thanks to Gow’s men, but
unhurt, still saddled, and tied placidly to a post. They had to get out of there.

He took three steps before he realized Toph wasn’t following. She stood there, taking the town’s
abuse with her fists clenched and her head bowed. Zuko wasn’t sure if she was crying because her
hair hid her face, but he suspected she was.

“Toph,” he said quieter, “There’s nothing you can do. Let’s go.”

She let out a breath, nodded once, and followed.

She let him boost her onto Ushi’s back. He jumped up behind, and Momo settled himself high on the
ostrich-horse’s neck. Some of the braver villagers moved forward as if to chase them out, but stayed
out of Zuko’s firing range.

He could feel the townspeople’s glares on the back of his neck as they rode away.

OoOoO

They rode in sullen silence. Zuko wasn’t sure what he should say to Toph to make her feel better,
and he didn’t trust his temper right then to try.

The town had been… bad there at the end. Though despite all that had happened he now had an
actual memory of his mother…

… His mother.

Her calming voice, the scent of cherry-lilacs as her arms had swept around him. Why hadn’t he
looked up at her face? He had been so focused on his own grief over the turtle-duck hatchling…

(A hatchling he was sure Azula had killed. What was wrong with that girl?)

How many times had he wondered about his Fire Nation parents? He’d always thought they must be
evil, hateful people simply because they were Fire Nation. He’d come to realize on Iroh’s ship that
there could be decent Fire people too, but his parents were royals. They were everything wrong with
the world. They were responsible for the war.

My mother loved me. Or… she acted like she did. She was kind in a way that mothers should be and
Fire Nation shouldn’t, and… and…

He resisted the urge to touch the left side of his face.

Did she know?

“All right!” Toph said abruptly, shattering his thoughts. “I screwed up! Are you happy, now?”
“No.” Zuko shook his head to refocus himself. He would worry about what the memory meant later.

He opened his mouth to speak, but Toph barreled on “I wanted to humiliate Gow. You weren’t there. Sela acted like I was useless!” Her hands clenched and her voice took on a mocking falsetto. “Poor little blind girl. She pitied me and… and earthbending is the one thing I can do better than everyone else.” She lowered her head. “I wanted to show everyone how amazing I was.”

He inhaled a long breath, then let out it, forcing his lingering irritation to the side. Li was safe. That was the important thing. Sure, the townspeople hated them but it wasn’t like they would ever be back. Plus, could he blame them? They were small-minded, hurting, and trapped in a dying town. He could sympathize. If a pair of strangers had ridden into the Southern Water Tribe the way he and Toph had…

… Actually, now he thought about it, his and Sokka’s reaction to Aang hadn’t been too far off.

No, he thought abruptly. That had been a different situation. He and his brother weren’t perfect, but in the end they set their egos aside for the sake of what was right and for the community. That was a part of being tribe.

He had to do the same thing, now. For Toph. It was the right thing to do.

“I wish you could have seen the looks on those people’s faces during the fight,” he admitted. “You were amazing.”

She didn’t answer for a long moment and when she did her voice was small. “Really?”

“Toph, you did what no one in that stupid town had the courage to do. You stood up to Gow and his men. You put them all to shame.”

“Yeah?” She straightened in the saddle and then ducked her head again. “You really think so?”

Suspicious, he glanced at her and saw she was hiding a smile.

“Stop fishing for compliments. You know how good you are,” he replied testily, and her smile broadened. “That was part of why they were so angry. Other than… me.”

Her smile dimmed. “Your firebending saved Li. It wasn’t fair.”

“I’m used to it,” he grumbled.

“… And Li?”

Seeing the hurt and fear in his eyes had gone straight to his heart. Zuko sighed. “He’s a kid. He picks up what the adults tell him. The important thing is that he’s safe.”

She nodded, but she looked sad. “Guess we’re banned from that town forever, huh?”

“Yeah? So what?” he said abruptly. “I’m one of Chief Hakoda’s sons, I’ve crossed the heart of the Great Eastern Current, and I’m a personal friend to the Avatar. I don’t need those random nobodies to like me.”

She chuckled, taking him up. “And I’m Toph Bei Fong. I’m twelve years old and already the greatest earthbender in the world. If anyone has a problem with that, they can go chew on a rock.”

He grinned back, now on a roll. “In fact—“
A flash of white caught his attention out of the corner of his eye—so different from red-brown dirt and sage green.

Dropping the reins, he dismounted and snatched it from the ground. It was a long tuft of white hair which had gotten tangled in the branches of a sage bush.

“What is it?” Toph asked.

He turned, feeling it between his fingers, thick and soft, and so familiar he felt an ache of homesickness. The skies were blue, cloudless and empty, and the shed fur was dirty as if it had been rolling along the ground for some time, but… He felt his heart speed up. “This is air bison fur! It has to be Appa’s! Do you know what this means?”

“Um, sounds like something was shedding…?”

“Aang, Katara, and Sokka were here!” He laughed and before he could think of it he lifted Toph off Ushi’s back, spinning her around. She actually squeaked in surprise, which would have been hilarious if his heart weren’t bursting with relief. Grinning, he set her down. “Or… or they were near here! We’re on the right track.”

She cocked her head and pointed directly to the side. “Wind’s coming from that direction—about five degrees north-north east,” she said with the same perfect confidence he had if someone asked him how long until sunrise, or how Katara knew if a stream was safe to drink from. Trust an earthbender to always know where she was.

North-east…“Hold on.” He grabbed for the map which was in Ushi’s saddle pack, then laid it out. He had to do a little guesswork, but the destination was pretty clear. The great circular walls took up nearly a quarter of this part of the continent.

Toph must have felt his heart rate spike because she asked, “What is it?”

“That direction leads straight to Ba Sing Se.”
"Maybe you've forgotten why we need to start over. Maybe you've forgotten about how the Fire Nation left us all homeless. How they wiped out all the people we loved..."

~ Jet, City of Walls and Secrets

OoOoO

“So,” Toph said. “What’s with the brooding?”

Zuko gave a start of surprise and then glanced sidelong down at her. Over the last two days since leaving the town, they’d pushed hard to get to Ba Sing Se. No ostrich-horse could be ridden all day, and Ushi was old. Currently, they were giving her a break by walking along with her.

“I was not brooding,” Zuko said. “I was thinking.” Actually, he was going over yet again the memory of the dead turtle-duck hatchling, his mother, and Azula.

“Sure.” Toph kicked a stone with her bare toes without flinching. “Don’t tell me you’re still sad about that town of Fuddie-Duddies...”

In the interest of not being tripped by a suddenly appearing stone, Zuko didn’t point out that Toph had been the one who had been most upset about that town. “No. I was... It’s stupid. Doesn’t matter,” he muttered, looking away.

She didn’t look at him, but he felt her attention. “Maybe it does.”

“Maybe it doesn’t,” he shot back, and kicked his own rock. He wore shoes, of course, and it didn’t sail nearly as far as hers had. Zuko scowled at it. Then he sighed and shook his head. The words came out quick, before he could stop himself.

“When Gow knocked me out, I dreamed—I remembered my mother. My Fire Nation mother,” he clarified. “I don’t have any memories of her, or anything, I guess, before the Water Tribe rescued me when I was a kid.”

Toph blinked. “Your history keeps getting weirder and weirder, Sparky.”

Even though he was still in a bad mood, he quirked a smile. “Remind me to tell you about the time I met a sea dragon.”

“Pah. I ran away and lived with badger-moles for a solid week. My mom was in hysterics.” She paused. “So, what was she like? Your mom?”

“She...” He trailed off, remembering again his mother’s warm arms around him, the sound of her voice. Why hadn’t he looked at her face? “She smelled like fire-lilacs.”
“Huh.” Toph tilted her head, considering. “Nice.”

To her, it probably was. Looks weren’t important to a blind girl.

“Yeah.” He looked down and added darkly, “And I think my sister killed my pet turtle-duck.”

“That would be Princess Azula, right?”

He glanced sharply at her. “How do you know her name?”

“Hello, I keep telling people: I’m blind, not deaf. It’s kind of important to know what’s happening in royal court of the country who’s trying to take yours over.”

“Oh.” He winced. “Sorry. News doesn’t often come to the Southern Water Tribe. I didn’t even know her name until recently.”

“You don’t remember her at all?” she asked.

“A couple things. Nothing good.” Zuko scowled remembering the dreams that had plagued him for years. Something about that bedroom—that conversation was important. He knew it. “I met her once in the North Pole. We fought.”

“Who won?”

“I did.”

“Sweet.”

He shrugged. “The Northern Water Tribe still fell, in the end.”

Toph was silent for a few more steps. Then, “You want to tell me what happened?”

Zuko thought back to everything: Katara not being allowed to learn combat waterbending, the Fire Nation siege, Aang going out alone on Appa to stop too many ships, then all the events in the temple, how Yue had commanded him to take Aang… the spirit forest that should have sheltered the Water Tribe, but which he couldn’t find. Azula. Arnook. Iroh. How the lightning had felt running through his veins—he didn’t like to think about it, but for a brief second he had been certain he was about to die. And then he’d thought so again, not even a few hours later, as Arnook turned on him.

“The Fire Nation laid a siege. My blood uncle, Iroh, killed Chief Arnook.”

Toph waited a beat. “And?”

Zuko knew what she was asking, but didn’t feel like going into details. His feelings about Arnook were mixed, to say the least. “And after the North Pole fell. My father, Chief Hakoda, took in the Northern refugees who were able to escape. Bato told me it tripled the ranks of fighting men, at least.”

He had added that last bit to throw her off. He did not expect Toph’s startled reaction, stopping in place, her blank eyes growing wide. “You’re telling me the two Water Tribes have merged?”

“Well… sort of. Yeah.”

Toph promptly turned and punched his shoulder, hard.

“Ow!” He rubbed at his arm. “What was that for?”
“We’ve been traveling together all this time and you never told me this before? Are you kidding?”

“What’s the big deal?”

“The big deal? Don’t you know your history?”

“Toph,” he snapped. “What are you talking about?”

Her toes scrunched in the loose, dry soil as if trying to get a better read on him. Then she cocked her head. “Huh. I guess you don’t.”

“Toph—”

She held up her hand and he obediently fell silent.

“I told you I had tutors growing up, right? One of them was really into history. He just loved to go on.” She made her fingers into a talking mouth, then dropped it. “And… No offense, Sparky, but in the past—way back before the war—when the Avatar was weak, or not keeping an eye on things… or the North and South Poles weren’t busy squabbling with each other, the Water Tribes were death on the ocean.”

He wasn’t sure if he should be offended at that or not. “So?”

“So if I’m hearing this right, your adopted dad is the most powerful Chief in centuries.” She grinned the grin of the Blind Bandit entering a battle. “The Fire Nation is going to be screwed. Everyone knows the colonies help feed the home islands. Maybe they’ll give the Earth Kingdom a break for a while. And…” Then, unexpectedly, she paled.

“What?”

She shook her head. “Nothing.” Turning, she absently kicked another rock. It sailed further than Zuko was capable of throwing.

“Toph.”

“I had a thought. You’re not going to like it.”

“Toph.”

“Fine, it’s your delicate feelings.” She blew out a breath that ruffled her long bangs. “How sure are you that the Water Tribe just happened to rescue you?”

His voice came out flat. “What.”

“It turns out you’re the prince of the Fire Nation. Mighty convenient that you’d get adopted by the head Water mucky-muck who happens to be smart enough to seize the opportunity to combine the tribes under him.” She shrugged. “That’s all I’m saying.”

Zuko sputtered, outraged. A thousand denials came to his lips, choking each other out. The only thing that came out was, “You think the Water Tribe did this to me?”

“Did what?”

“Ugh!” Right, he had completely forgotten. Irritated, he knelt and took one of her hands and pressed it to the left side of his face. She flinched back, more out of surprise than anything else. Then her mouth parted, and before he knew it her tiny hands ran up and down his cheek, up to the thick flesh
that narrowed that eye and to what was left of his ear on that side. Her other hand brushed the whole side of his face, surprisingly gentle, to compare the two.

“It’s a burn. And then there’s this.” He took her wrist more gently this time and guided her hand to the other side, the thick line of a scar that slashed diagonally down his neck.

Her hands dropped. “A lot of people have tried to kill you, huh?”

“Yeah, and none have succeeded.”

It was a stupid answer. He knew it was the second it was out of his mouth. Thankfully, Toph didn’t comment on it. She turned back to walk in silence, but what she said played around and around in his head.

Hakoda was a good man. Zuko wouldn’t want anyone else to lead a combined Water Tribe. And if his people could use that to become death on the seas… even better. They could wear the Fire Nation down, stop them from sending more troops to the Earth Kingdom, capture supplies running back and forth from the colonies to the islands and back again.

It could mean major naval battles, but the Water Tribe were masters of the seas. They could make a big difference in the war.

And it would surely mean death on both sides.

Once again, that tiny persistent voice rose up. It seemed like it became louder each time.

*But if I were Fire Lord, I could stop the war today.*

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OoOoO

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It was a fine spring day. The sun was warm and the sky over Ba Sing Se so achingly blue in a way that made Aang want to climb on Appa’s head and ride in loop-de-loops. Free and happy in the sky.

But he was stuck here on the boring ground. Earthbending. Or at least, he should be.

Aang gusted a sigh that stirred up dust in a circle three feet around him. His limbs felt as heavy as rocks, and he could swear there was actual gravel rolling around in his stomach.

He sat morosely outside the small earthbending school. This one was located in the middle ring… nearly at lower ring wall. It didn’t have a distinguished reputation like the ones in the upper ring, but
it was the best he could do. All the good schools had already kicked him out.

Classes had begun an hour ago, but as much as he tried to talk himself into it, Aang could not make his heavy feet move him inside.

By now enough time had passed that the earthbending teacher probably wouldn’t take a late-arriving student, at least not today. Earth was sort of inflexible like that.

Aang could go back to the house in the upper ring, but then Katara would wonder why he still had his money meant for the classes.

Mastering air had come, well, as easily as breathing. He was a monk. He was literally born for it. Water was different, but still a lot of fun to swim in and create ice and snow whenever he wanted. And there were so many things to do with snow! From snowballs to pretty icicles to tiny little flakes he whip into storms with his airbending—combining the two was awesome!

There was nothing fun about earthbending. As much as Aang tried and tried, and concentrated and looked for the right angle to work at earth… he couldn’t shift as much as a pebble. None of the teachers seemed to like him, either. And the other earthbending students just wanted to chuck rocks at each other, which hurt. Plus, he was the Avatar, so everyone expected him to learn earthbending easy, but every time he failed people looked so disappointed like he’d personally let them down and …

Aang knew he had to learn all of the elements before the comet came. The whole world was counting on him, Roku said. Time was running out. It was spring already and if he couldn’t bend Earth, how was he supposed to learn fire—and how could he learn fire anyway with Zuko still missing, and… and…

It was too much.

Aang didn’t make a conscious decision. The wind did it for him. He was running away, down one dusty street and then another, past stalls and wears and people who wore green and brown, like the element he could not bend.

He found himself, unexpectedly, in front of an archway. Ba Sing Se Zoo was stenciled on top.

Instantly, his spirits lifted.

A zoo? That sounded like fun!

Aang looked at the money in his pocket meant to be used for earthbending class, swallowed his guilt, and stepped forward to buy a ticket.

OoOoO
“No ostrich-horses allowed,” the ferry intake clerk repeated stubbornly.

Zuko blew out an aggravated breath through his nose. It tasted slightly of smoke. “Ushi can stay in the hold. She’s well trained and I promise on my honor I will be with her the entire time. She won’t cause any trouble.”

“Kid,” the clerk looked and then sighed, the distant veneer of customer service falling away. “Look around you. I see the Bei Fong stamp on your passports, but this is not a pleasure cruise. Within an hour this ferry will be filled past safety regulations with refugees. We can’t afford the space or the weight.”

“But—”

“The only way that ostrich-horse is getting on is through the galley. As meat,” she clarified in case Zuko didn’t understand.

Toph touched his wrist in a silent signal to drop it. Zuko snarled something and then stomped out of the line—the one he and Toph had been waiting an hour just to get to the head of.

According to his maps, the only way into Ba Sing Se from this direction was through serpent’s pass. Luckily, a ferry ran the length of the great canyon, though at a price that made Zuko swallow hard. Water Tribe coins did not trade well here. He’d had to use the last of them to get tickets. Toph’s family seal she’d thought to carry with her got them the passports.

The problem was… Ushi.

As if sensing his thoughts, the ostrich horse snapped at Momo’s tail. The lemur screeched back, wrapping himself firmly around Zuko’s neck as if for safety, but the mean-tempered hen had taken a chunk out of Zuko more than once. He tried to calm her and got bristled feathers in reply.

“Why do you like that ostrich horse?” Toph asked bluntly. “She hates you.”

He rubbed his forehead. “She belonged to a friend of mine and… I have an obligation to make sure she’s taken care of.”

“Hmm.” She turned in place, head canting to the side. She looked like she was feeling out for something with her earthbending. Her ears were practically twitching. Suddenly, she made a quarter turn to the left. “Follow me, Sparky.”

Across the building, a man and heavily pregnant woman sat with their backs to the wall. The woman was weeping and her husband held her hand, looking worried.

Zuko was vaguely alarmed, and hoped nothing was wrong with the unborn baby. He was not a healer.

Toph, though, marched right up to them. “What’s wrong?” she demanded with all of the arrogance of a noble who got answers to any question she asked.

The man looked up in surprise and said nothing.

The woman wiped at her eyes and sniffed. “Someone stole our bags. Our money, or tickets, our passports are gone.”

“I’m sorry,” Zuko said, feeling for them but not understanding why they were there. Would Toph’s fancy Bei Fong seal cover for them, too?
“Now the only way to get to Ba Sing Se is to travel the pass on foot,” the man continued, “but I don’t know if Ying can make it in her condition.”

“Can you ride?” Toph asked.

All three stared at her, then the man looked at Ushi. “That’s generous, but we don’t have any coin to spare,” he said cautiously. “All that we had was taken with our bags.”

Zuko swallowed hard. He knew half the reason he wanted to keep Ushi around was misplaced guilt over what had happened to Song’s village. He hadn’t known the girl well, but he thought she might approve of this. “The only payment I ask is that you take good care of her. Ushi belonged to a friend of mine, but we can’t take her with us. She’s old and… well, cranky, but you’ll move faster with her to help.”

The husband and wife looked at each other. Then the husband stood and bowed low to them both in thanks.

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The thrill of visiting the zoo quickly faded. Monk Gyatso often said that Aang was a master of seeing what he wanted to see (even before he became a real airbending master), but Aang wasn’t blind to the tiny cages and enclosures. Or the miserable animals locked within.

Aang was good at the bird’s eye view, he’d flown over this area a few times both on his glider and on Appa. The zoo was surrounded by the encroaching city. It needed to be moved out of the middle ring into the country-side.

If he were an earthbender, he would do just that. Knock down the existing walls, herd the animals with friendly blasts of air and… fix this.

If he was an earthbender, he wouldn’t be ditching class to go to the zoo in the first place. If he was an earthbender, he would be that much closer to defeating the Fire Lord. If, if, if…

More depressed than ever, Aang trudged out of the zoo.

Sorry little guys, he thought. I’ll come back when I’ve got earthbending figured out. I promise.

It was mid-afternoon by the time he turned his heavy feet back home. If he was really lucky, Katara wouldn’t notice that he was a little early (and not as dusty as he should be, had he actually been earthbending all day.)

It turned out, he didn’t need luck. He walked in on Katara and Sokka in mid-argument.

They’d been doing that a lot more recently.
“I don’t see what the big deal is,” Sokka was saying. “I’ve eaten fish all my life, Katara. We lived in the South Pole. So what if I skip out on a fish dinner now?”

Katara faced her brother, her fists firmly planted on her hips in a stance that would make an earthbender proud, eyes narrowed. “It’s not just fish, it’s a fish bake— it’s how they do things, here. Mayvai invited all of us, and I thought it would be nice,” somehow the word dripped poison from her lips, “if we brought some traditional Southern Water Tribe food to share.”

Sokka flapped a hand at her. “Well, bake away then, woman. I’m not stopping you.”

She grit her teeth. “They want to meet you and Aang—”


Both siblings turned toward Aang. Sokka looked a little blank, but Katara offered him a warm smile, showing that she, at least, wasn’t angry at him.

“My employer’s family is having a fish bake. I told them you’re a vegetarian—then I had to explain what a vegetarian was—but they would love for you to come. It’ll be the evening after next.”

He perked up. “A party? Sounds fun!”

She flashed him a grateful smile and then turned expectantly to Sokka.

“Can’t,” Sokka shrugged. “I have sword practice.”

“Why can’t you skip one class?”

“Why couldn’t you skip one waterbending lesson?” he shot back.

“I never got to have a real waterbending lesson, but maybe I would have skipped one if I needed to,” Katara said, which was the biggest lie Aang had ever heard from her. Katara was dedicated to bending as Aang was to breathing. Maybe she realized she didn’t have a point because she continued, “Sokka, this is important to me.”

“And sword training is important to me,” he shot back. “She’s counting on me to show up.”

That stopped Katara stopped. “She?”

“She, who?” Sokka said.

“You just said ‘she’.”

“No, I didn’t.”

Katara turned. “Aang?”

“Uh.” Aang was pretty sure he’d heard Sokka say ‘she’, too, but from the stubborn set in Sokka’s jaw and the indignant way Katara was puffing herself up… yeah, he wasn’t a firebender yet, but he knew better than to feed those flames. “Uh… I didn’t hear?”

Katara looked narrow-eyed at her brother. “Sokka, are you seeing a girl at your sword training class?”

“What?” he yelped. “No!”
He sounded pretty believable to Aang, but Katara clearly didn’t think so. “You are just… UGH! I can’t believe you! What about Yue?”

Now he looked puzzled. “What about Yue?”

“I thought you two were… you were writing love letters. I thought you had an understanding.”

“I never wrote…” Sokka blinked, shook his head in the same way Appa did when he was dislodging a pesky fly. It looked… wrong on him, somehow. Sokka was water-whip sharp. But just for an instant he looked foggy and confused. Then in the next, the weird expression was gone.

“There’s no girl!” he snapped at his sister, voice breaking in outrage as he failed his hands around in emphasis. “And even if there was—there isn’t!—it would be my business. Not for nosy little sisters!”

Katara’s hands were firmly planted on her hips again. “What business is so important that you won’t even see any of our people?”

“They’re not our people. They’re not our tribe, they’re just other waterbenders—You know what?” he said abruptly, stamping towards the door. “Maybe I’ll just go to my sword training class early today.”

“Fine!” Katara yelled after him. “Say hello to your girlfriend for me!”

“I would if I had one! But I don’t! So there!” That said, Sokka slammed the door on his way out.

Katara and Aang looked at each other.

“Should I… go after him?” Aang asked.

She shook her head and Aang let out a breath of relief. It seemed ever since they got into the city, Sokka had become moodier then Zuko had been. But at least Zuko would feel better after throwing around some fire.

With a graceful flick, Katara brought a globe of water into her hand and then flicked it out again. Five sharp icy knives embedded themselves into the wooden column on the opposite side of the room with loud thunks. She’d changed, too. Her waterbending had gotten a lot… sharper since she started working on the fishing boat.

Abruptly, she turned to Aang. “That was weird, right? Sokka was being way too defensive.”

Aang didn’t know about that, but… “I haven’t heard him make a joke in forever.”

She growled low under her breath. “I can’t believe he’d let Yue moon over him while he’s… he’s training his sword with someone else.”

Aang blinked. “The monks always told me that love should be freely given…” Then he quailed under Katara’s intense glare. “But keeping secrets from people you love is bad, I would never… uh… I’m just going to check on Appa, bye!”

And he quickly made his own escape.
The ferry launched in the late afternoon. To say that the deck was crowded was a major understatement. Zuko realized that the clerk at the dock had not been exaggerating: No way Ushi could fit.

He and Toph found a spot by the rail. They had no trouble getting a spot—one look at Toph’s green-tinged face and people quickly made room for her.

“Are you okay?” He patted her awkwardly on the back as she hung like a limp towel over the rail, occasionally gagging and spitting into the water below. She hadn’t thrown up yet, but it looked to be only a matter of time.

“I hate the ocean,” she groaned. “I can barely see a thing out here.” She stopped, gulped something down, and somehow became even limper. “Ugh, all the rolling…”

They were not on the ocean. Not even remotely, but Zuko was wise enough not to correct her. “You can… barely see?” he asked instead.

In answer, she clenched her fists and tiny bits of gravel—unnoticed to his eye, carried in on the bottom of people’s shoes and left there by deckhands uninterested in sweeping—rose up for a good three feet around them.

Zuko grunted, impressed despite himself. He had never thought of earthbending as a versatile art until he met Toph.

“When people got seasick in the tribe,” he began, “my dad said to look to the horizon, but…”

“Doesn’t do much for me.” Toph straightened. With a gesture, the bits of gravel leapt into her hand as if called. She balled her fist, smashing the mass into a lumpy looking rock which she kneaded like a lump of bread. It seemed to help, and within a few minutes color had returned into her cheeks.

She wasn’t hungry at all when one of the deckhands came around to ladle out bowls of soup. After one whiff, Zuko wasn’t either.

Scowling, he threw his portion into the wide river where, hopefully, it wouldn’t poison too many fish. “This is ridiculous. They were supposed to provide dinner, not stomach aches!” He looked around at the families and other downtrodden people who were grimacing, but doing their best to make do with the food. His scowl deepened.

“Skimming off the top is a long-honored merchant tradition.” Toph agreed. She happily tossed hers overboard as well, bowl and all.

Her amusement ticked him off. “They’re taking advantage of homeless refugees! Where is their honor?”

“There isn’t any honor among thieves,” said a voice close by. “And from what I heard, that’s what the captain and his crew are: Thieves.”

Zuko turned to see a boy his age standing nearby. He had a mop of Earth Kingdom brown hair, muddy green eyes, and a pair of hooked swords strapped to his belt.
Toph shifted around, her bare feet sliding across the smooth wooden deck. Zuko knew she’d have his back, though there wasn’t much for her to fling except gravel.

The other teen took a wheat stalk out of his mouth with a lazy smile. “Name’s Jet.” He jerked his head to indicate two others nearby, a boy and a girl who wore equally patched clothing. “And these are my Freedom Fighters, Longshot and Smellerbee.”

_Don’t tell me your parents gave you those names_, Zuko thought.

“I’m Zuko, and she’s Toph.”

“What do you know about the food, Mister Freedom Fighter?” Toph asked bluntly.

Jet’s lazy smile deepened somehow, but his eyes stayed on Zuko. “I’ve heard that the Captain and his men eat like kings while all the refugees have to live on scraps.” A pause. “Doesn’t seem fair, does it?”

There was something about Jet that seemed to both draw Zuko in and repel him at the same time. By now he was used to the instinctive flare of his inner fire whenever he was challenged by another firebender. Jet, he sensed, didn’t have a spark of fire within him. Yet he was so clearly a leader that something visceral inside Zuko wanted to fight him anyway—just to see who would win.

Bad idea on very flammable ship full of refugees.

He shrugged a reply. Toph, too, remained stonily silent. After a beat, Jet went on.

“You want to help us “liberate” some decent food?” A smirk. “For the good of the hungry refugees, of course.”

Decent food? It was tempting. Zuko glanced back at Toph who punched one balled fist into her open hand. With a nod, Zuko turned to Jet. “We’re in.”

“Um,” said Smellerbee, gesturing to Toph. “No offense but we need fighters.”

Uh-oh. Zuko took a step to the side. Toph raised one bare foot and stomped, hard. Every piece of gravel and speck of dirt larger than the tiniest mote raised several feet in the air, creating an instant cloud upon the deck. People shrieked in surprise. Mothers covered babies, and people who had just been starting to hold their noses and tuck into the rotten soup suddenly found their food even more spoiled than before. Probably for the best.

Toph held the moment for the silent count of three and then with downward push, everything fell back into place. Instantly. Calmly. Without one misblown clod of dirt. She had perfect control.

“My name is Toph Bei Fong,” she said. “And I am the greatest Earthbender in the world.”

Jet was so smooth that he did not hesitate for one second. “Welcome aboard, Toph. We would _love_ to have you with us.”

_OoOoO_
By mutual agreement, they decided to wait until after night fell to act. Sitting down on the deck, they all got to talking. Well, all but Longshot. The boy didn’t speak much.

Jet’s storytelling could have made any Water Tribesmen proud. He talked of days living with other children in tree-hut houses, living by their wits, and avoiding Fire Nation patrols.

“I never realized how good we had it,” he added with a glance around. “Some of these refugees look like they’ve been through some lean times.” His gaze fell to Zuko and Toph. “You two look like you made it out okay, though.”

“We’re not refugees,” Toph said. “I’m heading to Ba Sing Se to be an Earth Rumble champion.” She jerked a thumb at Zuko. “He’s from the Water Tribe, trying to find his family.”

“Last I heard they were headed towards the city.” Zuko added. “Makes sense.” He scanned the crowd on the overfull ferry; the exhausted men and women and hungry, fussy kids. “Everyone else seems to be going there.”

He hoped he was making the right decision. If he didn’t find Katara, Sokka, and Aang soon, he would have to head back and meet up with his father’s fleet to plan out an attack during the eclipse without them.

“Family, huh?” Jet said, leaning back on the railing. He gave Zuko an easy grin, the stalk of wheat in his mouth switching from one side to the other. “They fight as good as you?”

Zuko looked at him in surprise.

Jet shrugged. “I know your type. You’re a fighter, like us.” And his gaze flicked, meaningfully, to Zuko’s scars.

Again, his inner fire flared up as if an instinctual part of him recognized a challenge. Forcefully, Zuko pushed it back down. He made himself shrug and look away.

“Us?” Toph asked, doubt heavy in her voice.

Jet’s shrug was casual. “I know your type. You’re a fighter, like us.” And his gaze flicked, meaningfully, to Zuko’s scars.

Again, his inner fire flared up as if an instinctual part of him recognized a challenge. Forcefully, Zuko pushed it back down. He made himself shrug and look away.

“Us?” Toph asked, doubt heavy in her voice.

Jet’s shrug was casual. “We weren’t just living carefree in the forest. The whole gang of us Freedom Fighters did what we could to stop the Fire Nation.”

Zuko caught the past tense. “What happened?”

“What always happens,” Smellerbee said, voice bitter. “We had a plan to wipe the Fire Nation out of our valley once and for all, but some of the kids got cold feet—”

“Not their fault,” Jet said smoothly. “They were young. They didn’t understand the realities of war.” He grinned at Zuko, the type of smile that seemed to include him in his circle of friends, somehow, as if he were saying, *But you understand, don’t you?*

Yes, he did.

Smellerbee growled. “The Fire Nation got wind of it—I still don’t know who the snitch was, but if I ever find out….” She drew her knife out of a holster.

“Easy, Smellerbee,” Jet said.

The girl shook her head, but put the knife away. “They sent a whole division to burn us out of the
homes we’d made in the forest. A whole army just for some kids. If it weren’t for Jet…” She shook her head again.

Longshot said nothing, but put his arm around her shoulders.

_Who attacked you?_ Zuko wanted to ask. _Which division? What was their banner?_ Then he caught himself, pushing down the flare of guilt. He couldn’t do anything about what had happened. Those weren’t _his_ people who had attacked Jet’s Freedom Fighters… and burned little kids out of their forest home. Oh, spirits…

“Where was this?” he asked, roughly.

“Near Gaipan.”

“… I’m sorry,” Zuko said, even as he tucked away the name of the town name in his heart, just in case he… Well, if he was ever in a _position_ to do something about it. As stupid and impossible as it seemed.

Silence fell for a moment. Then Jet cleared his throat. “So we’re starting fresh. Ba Sing Se is supposed to be the land of opportunity. They say if you’re smart and hard working you can make something of yourself here. And,” he added, “it would be nice to make some friends along the way.” He smiled again at Zuko.

Despite his better judgement, Zuko smiled back.

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_OoOoO_

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Toph pulled him aside while Jet, Smellerbee, and Longshot went over to scope out the layout of the decks. “Something’s wrong.”

“What is it?”

She grimaced. “My feet can’t see a thing on all this wood, but there was something in their voices I didn’t like when they were talking about the Fire Nation chasing them out of their homes. About… the other kids.”

He glanced covertly back to Jet and his two Freedom Fighters. “Are they lying?”

Toph shrugged. “I’d know for sure if any of them were sitting on a good rock, but right now I’m as good as blind.”

“You?”

She punched him hard in the shoulder. It wasn’t a friendly punch, either.

Rubbing his arm, he considered her words. You didn’t have to like the man you hunted with, but there did have to be some level of trust.
Jet and his friends seemed all right, but they weren’t Tribe.

Neither was Toph, though, and he hadn’t let that stop him from trusting her.

On the heels of that, he realized Toph had brought the information to him, but was letting him make the call, like Bato did to Hakoda. Did that make him chief of this expedition? Or would that be Jet?

And why did that make him uneasy?

“I want to eat food that’s not rotten,” he said because who knows what they would find in Ba Sing Se? He had no money left, and he doubted he’d be allowed to hunt for food near the city. “This may be the best chance for a solid meal we’ll have until I can find my family. How about I’ll watch your back, and you watch mine?”

She grinned and punched him hard in the shoulder. Much friendlier this time. “You got it, Sparky.”

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**OoOoO**

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Sokka whistled an old tribal tune as he walked down the streets of Ba Sing Se. The lower rings could be kind of a dangerous place, but Sokka was turning into a dangerous guy himself.

After a couple weeks of intensive sword training, he could see muscle developing on his once-skinny arms. He could run longer, felt himself move differently. His steps were lighter.

Sure, it was hard work, but aside from waiting for Aang to learn earthbending and keeping an eye out for Zuko, there was nothing much to be done in Ba Sing Se.

His master’s dojo was in a poorer section of the lower rings. Sokka didn’t bother to wonder why such a prestigious person would be there. He didn’t question the fact he couldn’t actually picture his master’s face, and didn’t know their name. Those thoughts were smoothed away.

He knocked on the door and was surprised, as he always was, when a familiar face showed up.

The last time he’d seen her, that girl had been in the North Pole… No wait. She… had she been here before?

He recoiled, reaching for the sword. Azula got there first.

*She’s faster than me every time,* he remembered with dawning horror. *I have to warn Kat—*

“Sokka, the Earth King has invited you to Lake Laogai.”

Fear drained out of him like someone had pulled a plug. His pupils widened as the turbulent waters of his mind stilled.

“I am honored to accept his invitation,” Sokka intoned.
Azula stepped aside and Sokka walked in.

The door shut behind him.

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Zuko, Toph, and the Freedom Fighters moved as night fell.

Sneaking into the kitchen galley was shockingly easy. Because of the inherent fire danger, the ferry didn’t have many oil lamps lit. That made for deeply shadowed hallways. Only guards patrolled the decks.

The hardest part was guiding Toph. She could use gravel and bits of dust and rock to judge the general position of things, but not enough to “see” by.

But she dead set against staying in place and insisted she could pull her own weight in the heist.

Zuko knew better than to underestimate her. Besides, if they were caught, at least she’d have an alibi about getting lost on the ship. Who would second-guess a blind girl?

“Ten steps,” Zuko murmured, taking her elbow. “Straight up the stairs.”

“Got it,” she replied, focused and grim. Having a mission did wonders for her seasickness.

With a little patience and luck, they crept up the stairs to the officer’s deck, past a sleepy guard, and to the galley located up top.

Longshot and Toph guarded the door. Zuko, Smellerbee, and Jet went around collecting hanging roast snake-fowl, bowls of cooked rice, and sacks of dried pea-beans and fruit.

They loaded it by the door for easy transport out. Jet grinned brightly at Zuko. “This food’s going to help all the people on this ship. You’re a natural Freedom Fighter.” He slung an arm companionably around Zuko’s shoulder.

Zuko found himself puffing out his chest in pride. “I guess I am.”

Maybe, after Aang mastered all the elements and ended the war, he could do stuff like this more often. He missed the South Pole, but there was no need for him to stay during the dark winters. Maybe he could come up north. Help people with Jet’s Freedom Fighters.

He could give something back for the sins of his blood ancestors.

Toph, who stood by the door, her sharp ears at the ready, suddenly turned her head with a hissed, “What’s that?”

Instantly, everyone froze. Zuko found himself mentally reaching out for the two oil lamps on either side of the room.
“What is it?” Jet asked, dropping his arm from Zuko’s shoulders and reaching for a sword. “I didn’t hear anything.”

Longshot raised his eyebrow and shook his head.

“I don’t hear anything either,” Smellerbee added. She was bent low and ready with her knife in one hand.

“It’s not what I hear. It’s what I smell.” Toph pointed. “And it’s coming from that way.”

Her outstretched finger indicated a door on the other side of the room, past a row of hanging banana-onions. Jet and Zuko exchanged a look and Jet stalked over to test the knob. Not locked. He pushed it open.

A wave of boiling hot air and the scent of rot washed over them all. Zuko’s stomach flipped so abruptly he was in danger of losing what little lunch he’d had.

“What is that?” Smellerbee demanded, backing a step in shock.

Jet was made of sterner stuff. He continued walking right in, despite the eye-watering smell. His indignant voice drifted out.

“What are they doing to our food?”

Swallowing bile down, Zuko followed. He found he had no more explanation than Jet.

There were four large stone pots set up in the middle of the room, all the contents under boil from a fire pit. Inside was a gray sludge, a disgusting mix of all of the food from the first room. It was as if someone had chopped up all the good food, bones, offal, bread, and everything else, dumped it in the pots and then set it to boil.

Longshot, Smellerbee, and Toph all came through. No one had any explanation.

“They’re ruining all the food!” Smellerbee’s lip curled in disgust. “On purpose!”

“But why?” Zuko asked.

“It’s obvious, isn’t it?” Jet growled. “The captain is in league with the Fire Nation.”

Taken aback, Zuko turned to him. “What?”

The other boy’s expression darkened. “He and his men eat only the best and spoil the rest purpose. Don’t you see? They’re trying to make Earth Kingdom refugees weak and sick before they are out of reach of the Fire Nation forever.”

That was one of the most nonsensical theories Zuko had ever heard, and that included Sokka’s delirious babbling that time he got sick with fire fever.

“That’s ridiculous,” Zuko said. “It isn’t even how the Fire Nation fight.”

Longshot turned his head, looking pointedly back the way they came.

“Longshot’s right,” Jet said. “We need to get out of here. But,” he added, “not before we get rid of this.” His voice rose with a bite of command. “I say we dump it all over the side and into the water.”

“Fine by me,” Zuko said.
Before they took two steps, Toph held out her arms, barring their way.

“I’m on it.” Then she stepped forward. With a sharp kick, the four huge stone pots crashed through the far wall, timber splintering in all directions, where they fell into the river below.

“That was... loud,” Zuko said.

“Violent, but effective,” she replied in satisfaction.

Jet regarded Toph with a new, considering gaze. There was something in his eyes, like he’d realized Toph’s earthbending wasn’t a parlor trick—it had real power—that made Zuko want to step between them. Shield her from him.

Then a horrified voice cried out. “By the spirits! What have you kids done?”

They all turned to see several men in uniform, one wearing a captain’s hat, staring in horror at the destroyed room. Jet thrust his chin out belligerently and stepped forward, swords at the ready.

“Me and my Freedom Fighters are putting things to right. You’re trying to poison those people down there!”

“Poison? You little idiots!” a deckhand cried. “Those pots weren’t for people. Those were for the serpents!”

“The what?” Toph barked.

The Captain didn’t have time for explanations. He turned to one of the shipmen. “Order the engine room to stoke the engines to full. We must put as much space between us and this spot as possible.”

“Wait,” still brandishing his swords, Jet stepped forward. He cut an intimidating figure—or he would have if the men weren’t practically shaking in their boots. “What’s going on?”

Two of the men broke off and ran down the hall to pass along the captain’s orders. The captain hustled out after them, presumably to the bridge. Only one stayed behind and he was staring, eyes wide at the destruction of the room. He was the one who spoke.

“We fling the buoys out behind us.” He pointed to a line of them against the wall, unnoticed. The wax plug at the top melts in water after about an hour—Keeps the monster busy and away from the ship so we can pass through. But you just dumped it all out here, right where we are. Do you know what you’ve done?”

On the heels of his words a low haunting note, deeper than a roar, but filled with menace, rang through the ship. It wasn’t loud, but it was big.

The serpent smelled the food and had expecting dinner.

"Do you have lifeboats?" Zuko rasped.

Then the deck under their feet shuddered as if something very large had bumped up against it.

The deckhand shook his head, his face bloodless. “Not enough for even half the passengers. But in this river? Trust me, they're safer aboard this ship—”

That was when the first crack of snapping wood shot through the ship.

And that was when the screaming from the decks blow started.
Through the hole in the wall, Zuko saw a blue-green coil wrap around the hull of the ship, coiling over the deck like a snake tightening around prey. People hurriedly backed away. A flash of an arrow-shaped head was followed by another loop.

The ship shuddered and the engines died. The coil tightened, wood splintered, and the world shattered apart.

The cabin twisted on its side, throwing everyone against a wall that used to be a floor. Longshot's elbow jabbed into Zuko, and then they both crashed into Jet. Zuko caught one glance at Toph's wide eyes before a wall of night dark water rushed in.

No light. No way to bend. Some instinct made him grab Toph's collar in one fist and push off from the floor/wall. The only light came from the hole Toph had made with the stone pots. Zuko aimed for it.

Thankfully the surface was only a few feet up. He broke through, gasping air to the sounds of screaming passengers and hooting serpent roars.

Toph flailed next to him. "I can't swim!" She slapped the water uselessly, sinking under.

He hastily grabbed her and hauled her back up. “Toph, stop! I have you!”

People who were drowning could easily drag someone down, but Toph was too controlled for panic. She listened. Stopped fighting and clung to Zuko—though not tight enough to keep him from swimming.

“I hate the ocean,” she sputtered. “I can’t see a thing!”

Be thankful this isn’t the ocean. “On your back. You'll float," Zuko gasped, and helped maneuver her on her back, arms out.

Jet, Smellerbee, and Longshot popped up nearby.

The water was pitch black and filled with shouts and panicked splashing from other refugees. Zuko twisted around and was barely able to make out the darker smudge of the sharp ridges that cut into either side of the pass. “There!” he yelled, gesturing sharply to get the Freedom fighter's attention. “The shore is that way!”

Nodding, Jet raised his voice. He wasn’t paddling for two, and the practiced command in his voice made even people on the verge of panic listen. “Head for the shore! It’s not far. That way!”

His order was taken up by others, and shortly after the splashing had purpose as refugees started heading to safety.

With a final cracking, splintering sound, the last of the ferry sank under the surface. The serpent roared—a sound that was both heard out of the water and was felt within.

It’s discovered it can’t eat the wooden hull, Zuko realized. And it’s really angry about it.

He and Jet exchanged a look. He saw at once that the other teen had come to the same conclusion.

Zuko shoved Toph at Smellerbee. “Get her to shore.”

“No, wait! Where are you going?” Toph reached blindly for him, but he ducked away.

“What are you doing?” Smellerbee asked, but grabbed the other girl.
Jet answered for the both of them. “We have about a minute before that monster realizes all the
snacks are up here on the surface.”

“We’re going to distract it,” Zuko added fiercely.

“No! I can help!” Toph yelled but they all heard the high panic in her voice. Smellerbee traded looks
with Longshot and then they started paddling toward shore, Toph yelling and raging between them.

Zuko and Jet turned towards the spot where the ferry had been. More and more people were passing
them by, swimming towards land. They were quickly being left behind.

“Here.” Jet passed him one of his hook swords, handle first.

Zuko accepted it with a grim nod, his heart thudding. He had no idea how to use a sword, much less
a unique one like this. His experience with weapons was with a boomerang, a whalebone club and
what spear-work he’d learned in the North Pole. Somehow, though, it seemed to feel right in his
hand.

*I've held a sword like this before*, he thought—he knew.

In his mind’s eye he caught a flash of a stern man. He wore his hair in a Fire Nation nobleman’s
knot, but his skin was Water Tribe dark. He also had unexpectedly kind eyes.

“These are dual swords. Two halves of a single weapon. Don’t think of them as separate. They are
two parts of the same whole…”

The serpent roared again and Zuko forcefully shoved the fragment of memory away. He didn’t have
time to chase it down.

The water rippled in a V as something very large moved just under the surface. It was heading
towards the fleeing refugees.

“Hey!” Jet yelled, slapping the surface with one hand. “Hey, there’s free lunch right here! Come and
get it!”

Zuko flashed a quick grin at him and moved a few feet away to do the same. “Hey, fish-face! Ugly!
Over here!”

The V turned, attracted more by their splashing than their words. It seemed to hesitate for a second,
then made it’s decision. It charged, throwing up a spray of water in its wake.

“We got its attention,” Jet said. “Now what?”

“We take it down,” Zuko replied grimly.

Jet flashed him a smile that bordered on *this* side of crazy. This was a guy who enjoyed a good
battle. Zuko knew that feeling, and realized he had missed it. It was close to hunting some of the
dangerous animals in the South Pole with Sokka. It had been too long since he had a hunting partner.

He couldn’t dodge like he could on land, but he had a few tricks up his sleeves.

The roaring serpent aimed for a spot between them. Zuko waited until it was fully committed to the
charge, then he plunged his hands under and breathed out sharply.

He couldn’t firebend underwater, but he’d spent years molding heat against ice walls in huts in
tandem with Katara to help strengthen and shape them. This wasn’t so different. The only difficult
part was focusing the heat away, so that he didn’t boil the skin off his own hands.

The serpent’s sensitive whiskers brushed the edge of his jet of hot water. It flinched, the roar rising up an octave to become a scream. At the same time, Jet slashed with his sword, hooking just under the scales, and ripping two away.

The serpent reared and Zuko got a good look at it for the first time. Its head was dragon-like, with a sharper, pointed nose and whiskers that looked more like barbs. Its eyes were yellow and stared straight ahead, dead and emotionless, like a fish. It roared again, lifting higher up into the air than he thought possible, swinging its blue-green head back and forth. A few scales by its mouth were blistered with heat. The cut Jet had made trickled blue-black blood into the water. But compared to a creature that size, the injuries were nothing.

Zuko realized with a sinking feeling that it had only been surprised.

Then, collecting itself, the serpent parted its jaws. It dived down, teeth aimed to close over Jet.

The other boy yelled, slashing his sword, but he was small and some of those teeth were as long as his arm.

Zuko didn’t think—Story of his life—He only acted. He slashed out with a compact bolt of fire, like an icicle he’d once seen Katara throw, deadly and precise.

It hit one of those yellow fish eyes a second before the jaws closed.

Again the serpent screamed, rearing back up, lips peeled back to expose all its teeth and wow... there were more than three rows. It glared fishy yellow eyes at him.

He didn’t think the serpent was intelligent enough for thought or commutation, not like a dragon. But he did suspect it could hate.

Then, abruptly, something larger—another blue-green body—struck the serpent. Even larger jaws closed around its neck. A new roar filled the air, so loud Zuko clapped his hands over his ears. It didn’t help—it sounded like the anger was bouncing around inside his skull.

A dragon?

No, he realized with shock he felt all the way to his toes. It was another serpent. A larger serpent.

Then he remembered the trickle of blood dripping down from the first serpent’s neck and into the water.

They smell blood. They’re attracted to it, like wolf-sharks.

That meant the one that had crushed the ferry wasn’t the only one in this river. Not even the biggest one. Suddenly the ripples in the dark water took on a very ominous meaning.

Jet was yelling something, but Zuko couldn’t hear over the roars of the beasts. They were fighting. Coiling over and over and snapping at each other’s faces.

“Swim!” Zuko shoved the hilt of the sword in his belt and turned towards shore.

Jet seemed to agree. They both headed back to shore as fast as they could swim.

Zuko expected to feel teeth close around him, or something drag him down from below, but the serpents must have been busy with the fight, or the remains of what had been in the ferry.
He just hoped they were fighting over food-stuff and supplies… and not bodies.

The land sloped up sharply right at the shore. Luckily, by this time most of the rest of the refugees had made it. Only the slowest were dragging themselves up—the ones injured from the war, sick or very old. He and Jet were the last out.

Letting out a relieved breath, Zuko stood. The weight of Jet’s sword pulled on his belt. Unhooking it, he turned and held it out.

It was the only thing that kept him from being slashed open to the bone.

Jet’s hooksword struck Zuko’s with enough force to knock it out of his hand. It spun away and landed in water with a splash.

Zuko jumped back, arms up to avoid a second slash by a hair.

“This was your plan all along, wasn’t it?” Jet screamed, advancing on him.

“What are you doing?” Zuko yelped, backing frantically.

“Jet!” Smellerbee splashed up in the knee-high water, putting herself by her leader’s side. “What’s wrong? What happened?”

The crazy look was back in Jet’s eyes, and it was a lot less fun when it was turned on him. He pointed his hooked sword at Zuko. “He’s a Fire Nation spy!”

Oh, monkeyfeathers. He thought that Jet had been distracted, and it had only been one bolt of fire. Nothing flashy. But apparently it had been enough.

“Jet.” Smellerbee gripped his arm. “We can’t do this again.”

She looked pointedly to the groups of shivering, shocked survivors huddled on the shore. So far it seemed people were too stunned and tired to put together why the boat had sank, but that could change.

Again? Zuko wondered. What had happened at Gaipan?

“You don’t understand.” Jet shoved Smellerbee off and bent to grab his dropped hook sword. “I saw him fireb—”

The ground suddenly rose around him, trapping him to the waist. Toph stepped up, Momo on her shoulder. Her hair dripped out of its large bun, but her mouth was set in a thin line. “Maybe you should shut up before I shut you up.”

Jet, of course, did the exact opposite. Thrashing against the rock restraint, he yelled, “He’s Fire Nation! This girl is a collaborator. They were trying to sink the ship! This is their fault!”

Some people looked at them skeptically. Others looked interested, but they were too disorganized, cold, shocked to do anything.

“Come on,” Zuko said tightly to Toph. He jerked his chin towards the forest. “Let’s get out of here.”

He and Toph quickly walked away. No one followed.

Jet howled after them… he sounded completely unhinged.
“I knew I didn’t like that guy,” Toph grumbled once they were well out of ear shot.

“Yeah.” Zuko crunched his foot down on a stick much harder than it needed to make it break with a satisfying snap. He would have rather burned something, but that might have brought the wrong kind of attention.

His fire always brought the wrong attention.

“I’m sick of this,” he growled. “I was trying to save that idiot’s life!”

“Sparky.” Toph paused as if bracing herself. “Did everyone make it out of the water okay?”

That doused the fire in him more effectively than a bucket of cold water. Yes, it was terrible that—once again—being a firebender had turned an ally into an enemy, but there were many people out there having a worse night.

Zuko thought of how quickly the ferry sank, how many serpents were probably in the water, and how long it took for the first to attack him and Jet directly. He wouldn’t bet good furs that it had only been feasting on food supplies.

He also knew that Toph would know if he lied.

“I didn’t see anyone left in the water.”

Her face hardened, and but she didn’t ask for clarification.

There was a long, long pause. Then she spoke. “No one on shore was yelling that people were missing. No one was asking around for missing people.”

That was something. Her tone was tentative—for Toph. Less brash than usual, almost a question. He let out a long breath and then nodded. There was nothing he could do. “Then I think everyone got out okay.”

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The cliffs on either side of Serpent’s pass were steep, but that was nothing to an earthbender. Eventually, the landscape leveled out. Zuko’s energy was naturally low in the small hours of the night. He pretty much followed Toph’s footsteps and concentrated on placing one foot in front of the other.

So he had to sidestep to avoid running right into her when she stopped dead.

“Hey, watch it!”
She didn’t move. “Don’t tell me you don’t see that.”

“See what?” Automatically, he widened his stance, looking around for any attackers. Surely no one had followed him from the shore. Or did she sense bandits? Fire Nation troops?

“That.” She pointed.

“Um, Toph. That’s a tree.” They were in the middle of a forest, actually. Had been for the past hour, though the oncoming dawn had lightened the sky over the treetops.

“Ugh. I’m supposed to be the blind one, here. Not that. That!” She moved her hand straight up.

Zuko followed her gaze, not understanding. Then he blinked. That… wasn’t the direction of the sun, but the sky in the treetops was light as if dawn had just broken through.

He stepped to the side, peering through a larger opening in the canopy. Then he got it. His jaw dropped.

What he mistook for a piece of the sky was sheer rock. Granite or marble or something so light that it blended perfectly into the early morning sky. Sheer and perfect and so tall that if he craned his head he couldn’t even see the top.

A wall that went on and on and on.

Toph must have felt his reaction. She grinned. “Yeah, it’s pretty awesome. You should try feeling it with your feet.”

OoOoO

The wall was clearly built to keep the Fire Nation (and everyone else) out. For Toph, it was no challenge at all. Striding up she let out a low whistle and laid the palm of her hand almost reverently on the stone surface. Up close the stone glinted with sparkling minerals. He wondered what she “saw” with her special type of sight.

“The wall goes just as deep as it is tall,” she said, awed.

His eyebrow rows rose and he took another look.

Before he could ask if that would be a problem, she laced her fingers, cracked her knuckles, and bent them a doorway wide enough for them to walk through.

*The impenetrable walls of Ba Sing Se…*

The thought floated in and out of his head. Where had he heard that phrase before?

He was getting these flashes, or echos of memories, or whatever more and more often. Was that a good thing or a bad thing?
Toph said that the walls were manned along the top, but Zuko had to take her word for it. He assumed that the guards manning the watchtowers were keeping watch for armies, not two lone travelers. Still, they stuck close to the wall’s shadows (easy to do. A wall that tall cast shadows so long and deep it was like stepping into twilight).

After a mile, they came to an official entrance cut into the thick wall. It was easy to slip in with the flow of refugees.

Zuko glanced around, but no familiar faces stood out from the crowd around them. These weren’t the same refugees as the ferry. From the dusty, footsore look of them, they’d all come on foot.

*So many people,* he thought. Plus, this was only one entrance among many along the wall. Ba Sing Se was the biggest city in the world, but how could they fit everyone? How large was the actual city?

The line snaked forward to what someone had called a monorail system. Several pairs of earthbenders stood next to a sort of metal carriage which straddled a railing—at least ten of the carriages were linked together in a line.

He and Toph boarded. Once the group boarded, the earthbenders started to move. The monorail picked up speed, and as impossible as it seemed, soon they were moving quicker than Appa could fly.

Zuko stared out the window as farms and field rolled into outlying homes, and then denser city. So much city. The homes went on and on and on.

Then, unmistakably, something else—just as large and as impressive as the wall—loomed up. His jaw dropped.

Toph must have felt his reaction. “What is it?”

“We’re passing by the Earth Rumble arena.” He glanced at her. “Can you see it?”

Her toes flexed against the steel floor. “No.”

Her voice was flat and Zuko sensed she was too proud to ask what it looked like.

“It’s huge—must be three or four times the size of the one in Gaoling. From here I can see a huge, flat area in the middle—I think it’s for battling, an announcer’s box, and the stands go way up. It’s almost as tall as this monorail. I can’t imagine how many people can fit inside.” He paused. “They’re all going to watch you fight.”

“They’re all going to watch me *win.*” She sighed contentedly and leaned against him, closing her eyes. “I can’t wait.”

“You okay?”
“The ocean was cold. You’re warm.”

They’d left Serpent’s Pass hours ago, and they’d been walking since then. Toph was tired, but would never admit to weakness.

Zuko smiled and fell silent. Between the sway of the monorail and the click-clack of the wheels against the rail, it was nice to sit and watch the landscape pass by. It took a few minutes before he realized Toph had fallen asleep, propped up against him.

He let her rest.

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OoOoO

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The monorail coasted to a stop as the evening sky shaded into nightfall. Zuko looked out the window and realized he had no idea where in the city he was.

This seemed to be a residential district. A sheer wall of apartments rose up into the sky, families living clustered so close together that one neighbor could reach out and steal dinner from another…and judging by the bickering, some actually had.

The crowd left the station like a river in motion. Caught up in it, he and Toph descended into chaos. Officials in green uniform herded some refugees towards points of interest, while merchants barked out prices of food and drink to exhausted travelers. Zuko saw still others trying to get the attention of healthy men and women, offering unspecified employment. They didn’t seem to be interested in collecting teenagers, but he gave them a wide berth anyway.

The nap had refreshed Toph. Her head turned this way and that, ears perked to catch everything. She stabbed one callused heel into the hard-packed dirt. “This way!” she said in satisfaction, making a quarter turn and walking straight to a woman who was passing out flyers.

“Come one, come all! Ba Sing Se’s very own Earth Rumble starts tonight!” the woman called out in a brisk, but practiced tone. “Here you are, missy!” She shoved one in Toph’s face.

Toph batted it away. “Paper doesn’t much for me. When’s the rumble starting?”

“Eighth bell. That’s about in an hour,” she said, to their confused looks.

“Where?” Zuko asked.

She beamed and turned the flyer over to show a rudimentary map drawn on the back. It seemed to be the largest and widest ring of Ba Sing Se—marked the ‘lower’ ring. The Earth Rumble arena sat like a big round growth on the edge, near the east side.

The woman beamed. “Down this street to the main drag, then follow the signs. You can’t miss it!”

Zuko opened his mouth to ask if she’d heard anything about the Avatar coming to the city… but
Toph was already striding down the busy street like she owned it. Trying to convince her to wait was roughly like trying to stop an avalanche rock-a-lanche in motion.

Rolling his eyes, Zuko followed.

Sure enough, there was a merrily painted gold and green sign pointing the way to the Earth Rumble. Toph couldn’t see it, but she read his body language well enough that he didn’t need to tell her to turn.

As he walked, a sensation of unease prickled the back of Zuko neck. He felt like he was being watched. There was a literal crowd of people at his back and at his front. Strangers brushed his shoulders as they passed. He felt fingers catch in his pockets, but they were already empty. When he turned, the would-be pickpockets had already melted into the crowd.

Once he swore he saw a shadow jumping from one roof to the other in the fading light, but when he looked, he saw only shadows.

“Come on, slow poke!” Toph yelled over her shoulder. She’d somehow gotten a few lengths ahead of him. He hurried to catch up.

Toph turned a corner and stopped. The busy evening streets had become clogged with an immovable crowd. The reason why was soon made clear: A cabbage cart had overturned, blocking the street completely. Cabbages had rolled this way and that as the merchant wailed. Some tried to help clean up while others just wanted to push past.

With a frustrated growl, Toph turned and headed towards a mostly deserted alleyway.

“Would you wait up?” Zuko asked, exasperated. “She said you had an hour!”

“Nope, I gotta get there before they close registration for new competitors.”

Using the innate sense of direction of an earthbender, she turned another corner into the darkness. There were no people in this alleyway. It smelled like garbage and other, fouler, things.

Suddenly, something went ‘twang’, Toph gave a yelp and abruptly she flipped up backwards and hung in mid-air—suspended by a rope around her ankle.

A *snare*, Zuko realized. He’d used similar ones in the South Pole, but who would set up something like this in the city? Didn’t matter. At least he knew the proper way to cut her down.

“Toph! Hold on!” He rushed forward.

“Stop right there.”

Someone dropped from a low roof to the alleyway, between him and Toph. His hook swords were already unsheathed.

It was Jet.

“What do you want?” Zuko growled.

“Who is that?” Toph demanded, thrashing uselessly in the air. “Is that Jet?”

Momo gave a shrill cry of alarm as two more figures emerged from the mouth of the alleyway. Longshot, who had an arrow knocked on his bow, pointed directly at Toph. Smellerbee stood beside him, her knife was drawn, her eyes locked on Zuko.
“Jet and his two little followers,” Zuko confirmed. Once glance down the deserted alleyway confirmed the worst—no one around to help, and nothing he could use as a weapon. They’d been neatly cut off and led into a trap. He suddenly didn’t think that overturned cabbage cart had been an accident. He looked back at Jet, judging him to be the most dangerous out of the three. “How long have you been following us?”

“We saw you two on the monorail,” Jet said. “Thought you could sneak into Ba Sing Se like the decent folk?”

Zuko clenched his fists. “We’re not here to cause trouble.”

“Sure you’re not,” he said, voice low and silky. “And that wasn’t fire you were egging that monster on with?”

Zuko stared. He was insane.

“Enough jibber-jabbing. Let me down and fight me like a man!” Toph yelled. She was trying to curl up to grab at the rope around her ankle, but couldn’t quite reach. She fell back and the momentum set her swinging.

Jet smirked. “Don’t think so, earthbender. You can just stay up there, where you can’t cause trouble. I’ll call the city guard soon as I’ve dealt with your friend, here. I don’t think they appreciate Fire Nation collaborators.”

In answer, Toph snorted back an impressive ball of phlegm and spit right at him. Jet danced out of the way.

Seeing his distraction, Zuko lunged at him, aiming to grab one of the swords. But Smellerbee, as close and alert as Jet’s shadow, did too.

“Jet, look out!” She darted forward, and Zuko had to leap to the side to avoid her slash.

“Don’t, Bee!” Jet snapped. “He’s mine. I’m going to make him pay for what happened to the ferry.”

With a nod, she stepped back.

“You’re insane!” Zuko yelled. “The serpent was an accident—You were there, Jet! I was trying to save your life!”

“Save my life?” he roared. “All you people know how to do is kill!”

Desperate, he tried another tactic. “Toph has nothing to do with this. I’ll turn myself in—say whatever you want me to say.” And hope that the Ba Sing Se officials would be smart and willing to contact Aang and his siblings to verify his story—if they were there at all. “Let her go, Jet.”

Jet met his gaze. That slightly unhinged look was back in his eyes. He looked a little like the serpent right before it struck. And Zuko knew that there would be no talking him out of this. Zuko was about to fight to the death, barehanded against a swordsman. All he had was his fire.

Lots of people have tried to kill me, and none have succeeded, he thought. He only had to look in the mirror to know that much.

Jet grinned around his wheat stalk and raised his swords. “Why don’t you come and make me?”

Fire was life, but surrounded by enemies, Zuko felt his own inner flame grow hotter than ever—
almost incandescent. He could feel with a sixth sense he could almost see, every cookfire and lantern for a block around burn along with him.

Yes, fire was life, but it could easily turn into death.

Jet must have seen the decision in his eyes. His grip tightened on his swords. “That’s right, Fire Nation. Show me what you’re really made of.”

Since leaving the South Pole, he had been in more fights than he could count, but had only deliberately burned two people — Zhao and Gow. Now, he knew, he was about to do it again. Zuko took in a deep controlled breath, like Iroh taught him, preparing to loose fire.

“Zuko! Go low!” barked a familiar voice.

For a split second, Zuko wasn’t standing in a filthy alleyway in a crowded city. He was on snowy tundra along with his brother on the hunt. His body reacted before his mind could catch up.

Zuko dropped flat to the ground. There was a whistle of steel cutting air over his head. Then the clash of metal on metal.

Someone in Water Tribe blue had leaped between them and was cutting across Jet’s two hook swords with a blade of his own.

It was Sokka.

Works inspired by this one: [The Last Sunbeam Lightly Falls from the Finished Sabbath](#) by whatthedubbs

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