

## like father, like son

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# like father, like son

by [timelessillusion](#)

## Summary

The man's voice once again broke him from his thoughts; "In my dreams I see them tortured by Fire Nation soldiers. I see my entire culture wiped from the South, our footprint upon the ice shelves gone as though we never existed, our connection with the spirits and our ancestors forgotten." He was silent for the briefest of moments, then, "You're Fire Nation, aren't you?"

Zuko rolled onto his side, facing the wall, scar pressed into the arm that cushioned his head. "Once, maybe."

"Answer me this, then; when will this war see it's end?"

Zuko, recalling the fire that had burned in Azula's sunlit gaze the day she'd caught up to him, chose not to respond.

# Chapter 1

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Zuko was eleven years old when the Royal Palace received word of Lu Ten's death. He could remember the morning clearly; he'd been playing hide and seek with Azula in the gardens, searching for her through the beds of fire lilies, her giggles giving her away somewhere ahead of him. As he pushed through a tight thicket of cherry trees, her laughter abruptly died. Concerned, Zuko emerged from the greenery with wide eyes, staring at his mother and Azula's small form just in front of the turtle duck pond. Ursa, ever the picture of grace, had delivered the news in a low voice, a tattered piece of parchment clenched in her trembling hands.

It was only a few months later when his grandfather passed in his sleep and Uncle was declared unfit to rule, leaving only Ozai to take up the mantle of Fire Lord. The red dawn filled with the smoke of Azulon's burning funeral pyre and the chanting of the Fire Sages. It was only one week later when Zuko found himself on the steps of the Fire Sages' temple once again, an executioner stepping up behind Ursa's kneeling form, a gleaming panabas in hand.

When he'd tried to turn away, his father's fingers had dug into his shoulder in warning as he whispered, *You will watch your treasonous mother burn, Prince Zuko, and you will learn what happens to those who disappoint me. This is the mercy she deserves.* So Zuko had watched the scene unfurl, utterly numb, Azula just beside him, eyes glued to the form of their mother. Neither of them made a sound as her body fell to the ground, unmoving. Zuko closed his eyes when her corpse was set alight.

*She killed grandfather,* Azula whispered hours later, curled next to him in the vast expanse of his bed, small and tucked against his side. It had been years since she'd last snuck into his room but that night neither of them wanted to be alone. *She was a traitor.*

Zuko hadn't responded, hating the way their father had hooked his claws into her, how he'd never done anything to stop it, disgusted by the fear that curled up his chest and wrapped around his heart as he watched the still form of his sister next to him. He was a coward as well as a failure, he was beginning to realize, and there was no changing it.

He was twelve when Uncle Iroh finally returned to the Caldera. Zuko hadn't seen him since before the Siege of Ba Sing Se, when Lu Ten had still been alive and Uncle's eyes hadn't lost their spark. Zuko had convinced himself that he would be angry when Iroh returned but found as soon as he saw Uncle's familiar warm smile his resolve crumbled. He ran across the stone courtyard, leaping into Uncle's arms, not caring if it was unseemly or inappropriate, tears spilling freely down his cheeks as relief and happiness ripped quiet sobs from his chest.

Uncle stayed for nearly a year, a majority of his time spent in the gardens or disappearing into the city for days on end. He was different, which was to be expected, Zuko told himself. He'd seen the body of his only son hung from the walls of Ba Sing Se and had lost his birthright all

in the same year. Still, it stung each time Uncle turned from him, not quite fast enough to hide the pain that flashed across his face when he sometimes looked at Zuko.

Zuko continued to study and train ruthlessly, though he made very little progress in his firebending lessons, seeing the burning form of his mother every time he threw fists of fire at wooden dummies or kicked flames in the faces of his instructors.

Instead, he found release in a dual pair of dao Uncle gifted him, the steel light and practically singing as he moved, extensions of his entire being. His lessons came to a halt after only a few months, his father backhanding Zuko hard enough to send him to the floor for daring to use a form of weaponry other than Agni's gift. He returned to firebending, returned to seeing his mother's blackened body every time he summoned his chi.

Azula watched it all, his failures at firebending, the way their father spoke down to him, the way Uncle softened around him yet never had the same love for her. Without his notice, something in her hardened. Her forms were always perfect, her mind and reflexes sharp, her diligence the only thing that could draw a proud, private smile from their father's unfeeling face. Though he didn't want it to, resentment began to chip a hole in Zuko's heart.

It was only a few weeks after Zuko's thirteenth birthday when Uncle let him accompany him into Ozai's war room, something Zuko had thought his father would be proud of. He thought if Ozai saw him taking initiative and actively engaging in battle plans he might see how much Zuko had improved, that he might be proud of how much he loved their country. He thought he might get one of those private smiles.

He was wrong, in more ways than one.



Zuko awoke to the swaying of a ship and rolled just in time to vomit the contents of his stomach into a metal bucket, landing harshly on his hands and knees as he fell from what felt like a cot. He cried out as the jolting movement sent pain lancing across his face, his eye, his —

He scrambled from the floor to the cloudy mirror against the far wall, shaking fingers tearing at bandages he didn't recognize, tears forming in his eyes as he pulled them from his face, nearly gagging on the scent of poultices and damaged flesh, growing more and more panicked as he pulled the dressings away, finally catching sight of—

He whirled away from the mirror, vomiting again into the bucket, his whole body trembling as he ran one hand up and over his freshly shorn head. His stomach churned as memories rushed back to him of the Agni Kai, of cool marble beneath his palms and knees, tears wet on his cheeks as he stared up in terror at his father. He didn't remember anything past Ozai reaching out, one hand cupping the side of his face, a cruel mockery of tenderness, just before the worst pain Zuko had ever felt ripped a scream from his chest.

He was shaken from his memories as a heavy steel door opened and a Fire Nation soldier regarded him coldly. "Dress yourself, we reach port in half an hour."



“Where...where are we going?” Zuko asked, mouth tasting foul, beginning to realize he’d lost all sight in his left eye.

The look in the man’s gaze was akin to pity. It made something in Zuko’s gut harden. “The Fire Lord decreed your banishment three days ago. General Iroh paid us a hefty sum to transport you to the Earth Kingdom.”

“My uncle—is he...where is he?”

The soldier’s face twisted with disgust. “General Iroh remains loyal to the Fire Nation. He was smart not to tarnish what little of his reputation remains.”

Zuko closed his eyes as the soldier left, a lump forming in his throat that he couldn’t force down.



He heard surprisingly little about himself in the Earth Kingdom. He wasn’t sure what he expected but it took only a few weeks of being on his own before he realized that no one knew what he looked like. At least, what he looked like after the Agni Kai.

There was gossip, of course, idle chatter about the disowned Fire Nation heir, musings about what the young man could’ve done that was so horrible even Fire Lord Ozai had enough of him.

“Perhaps he was a usurper,” he heard one evening in a small, nameless town on the outskirts of the colonies. He stilled where he was hunched over his bowl of broth, spoon paused halfway to his mouth. “Like father, like son and all that.”

“What nonsense! I heard he tried to poison the princess.”

“As if that’s any more likely. I think he must’ve died in some sort of accident and the Fire Lord simply wishes not to air his dirty laundry for all us peasants to fawn over,” another voice added. “Perhaps the boy was too soft.”

Zuko, appetite vanished, lifted the bowl to his lips and swallowed the remainder of his pitiful meal, knowing he would need the strength later even as his stomach cramped. He shoved back his stool and shouldered the bag he’d stolen from a merchant along the road, keeping his hood pulled low as he made his way out of town. He could feel gazes following him as he left and a small, paranoid part of himself thought they must know who he is, but the other part, the slightly more rational one, felt their utter disgust at the scarring that twisted over the left side of his face, and knew the true reason for their stares.

Head lowered, Zuko pushed on, not entirely sure where he was heading.



It didn’t take long for his money to run out and his stomach to tighten in hunger. He loathed himself for it but learned to find easy pickings, whether it be a poor family far from any sort

of civilization or a lone merchant with a cart full of goods headed to Ba Sing Se.

He picked up a dagger somewhere along the way, preferring the heavy metal in his hand over fire, still unable to bend without seeing Ursa's blackened corpse. His training returned easily to him, even though it had been meant for bigger blades, the first time he'd been cornered in a shadowy alley, his bloodied knife buried to the hilt in his attacker's chest. His first kill, and somehow he knew it wouldn't be his last.

He saw more of the Earth Kingdom in a few weeks—or maybe a few months, he wasn't entirely sure—than he ever saw as crown prince, finding himself in awe of towering trees with leaves of crimson, marshlands and swamps teeming with strange creatures he'd never seen before, even mountains full of valleys and rivers that rivaled those of the Fire Nation. The Earth Kingdom was beautiful and vast, he was learning, as well as deadly. It seemed every new village he came across sported soldiers either belonging to the Earth King or his father. He tried to avoid them all, but that meant straying far from any smooth roads or towns with markets ripe for picking.

He kept an eye on the wanted boards, certain that one day he would look up and find his own face staring back at him. He avoided the colonies, afraid someone might recognize his golden eye or the hand-shaped burn scar that he'd never be free of.

He walked and walked, utterly alone, wondering what became of Azula, of Uncle, of the servants who had helped raise him. He was certain if Uncle had been killed he would've heard about it; the Dragon of the West had many enemies, and plenty of people within the Earth Kingdom would've toasted to his demise.

He didn't ask himself why Uncle stayed in the Fire Nation. He knew from months of pained smiles and stilted conversation what Uncle thought of him.

He caught sleep where he could find it, in caves and tree boughs, once in a barn during a particularly awful storm, curled amongst the sleeping moo-sows.

In his dreams, he saw his mother, standing silent in the back of his memories, her face terrible and sad. He saw Lu Ten, his broken body swinging from the walls of the Impenetrable City. He saw Uncle, turning from him, sending him away, responsible for the pain and loneliness Zuko had found in the Earth Kingdom. He saw the man he'd murdered, felt the weight of his body go slack before he'd collapsed, blood on his lips, eyes sightless. Most often, he saw Azula. Sometimes she chased him, her blue flames licking at his flesh, her smile so much like their father's it turned his stomach. Other times, he saw her at Ozai's mercy with scars that matched his own, heard her laughter change pitch into screams of agony, and all he could do was listen.

On the nights his dreams proved too much, he packed his meager belongings and continued walking.



He was still thirteen when he ran into the Rough Rhinos.

The town was aflame, smoke and ash billowing into the sky, nearly blocking out the sun entirely. People were screaming all around as their homes burned and the Rhinos wreaked havoc. Zuko had heard of them but he'd only ever considered them with a passing sort of unease. The sort of wavering caution that was for scary stories he didn't quite believe and savagery he'd never seen firsthand.

It was different seeing their cruelty in the flesh.

Zuko pulled a small child out from beneath a burning pile of timber, the girl's wails sending his bad ear ringing painfully. He shoved her into a woman's arms, whirling as a komodo rhino went charging passed, its rider laughing as people scattered, stopping only meters away from where Zuko stood, shaking.

The rider paused, a triple chained bolas hung at his side and a slow smile spread across his soot-smeared face as he appraised Zuko wordlessly. Glancing around, Zuko's heart nearly stopped when he saw a twin pair of dao on the form of a fallen Earth Kingdom soldier. He scrambled to pick them up, palms so slick with sweat he nearly dropped them.

The man laughed, hefting his bloody, weighted chains. "Do you even know what you're doing with those, boy?"

The lessons he'd received in childhood weren't quite lost on him but the fear took over and Zuko turned, afraid that if he risked glancing back he'd find the man had given pursuit. All around him, the village burned, the ramshackle wooden houses catching fire as easily as tinder. The horribly familiar smell of burning flesh filled his nostrils and he nearly gagged as he continued to stumble from the town. He ignored the screams of those trapped within their homes, running and running and running until his legs all but gave out beneath him.

He collapsed next to a stream, breath pulled from his lungs in painful gasps. He dropped the dao, feeling sick at the sight of them, hating himself for running, for being relieved he'd made it out alive when so many hadn't.

Laying on his back beside the stream, tears and smoke in his eyes, Zuko wished he'd received the same mercy as his mother.



Time was escaping him. He no longer knew how long he'd traveled, only that his hair had reached his shoulders and his sight had slightly improved in his left eye. It wasn't much, only a bit of light through the usual darkness, but it gave him hope.

He was in yet another small, insignificant town outside of Gaipan when he found himself in the middle of a Fire Nation camp. He'd seen their fire and his stomach had rumbled at the smell of roasting meat, thinking he'd found a few travelers he could easily overpower and steal from.

He'd been sorely mistaken, and captured moments before he'd realized his mistake.

Sitting with his hands and feet bound, Zuko stared a hole into the earth beside the fire, ignoring the men that moved around him. His pulse was in his ears, loud and drowning out nearly everything else. His dao were gone, taken the moment he'd been discovered, and so was the dagger he'd stolen so many months ago. The horrible, irrational part of himself thought they might recognize him and return him to the Fire Nation. He knew if they saw his good eye there would be no denying his royal blood.

"How'd you get that scar, boy?" One soldier asked, words slightly slurred from too much sake.

Zuko remained silent, panic stealing all rational thought. He couldn't go back to the Palace, his father would surely kill him if he set foot within the Fire Nation—

"I said—" the soldier's boot collided with his jaw, knocking Zuko flat and causing him to bite through his own tongue. He grunted in pain, blood filling his mouth, doing his damndest to keep his face away from the light of the fire even as the soldier stood over him, growing emboldened. "How'd you get that scar?"

Even though he was terrified, fury rose in the depths of his chest and before he had thought better of it, he spit, narrowly missing the soldier's shoe. "Fuck you."

The man's nostrils flared as he delivered another swift kick, this time to Zuko's ribs. He gasped, determined not to show how badly the pain was affecting him. The soldier knelt, grabbing a fistful of his hair and yanking him upright. Zuko squeezed his eyes shut, trying not to groan as the man snarled in his bad ear, "You're lucky we don't deliver you to one of the mining camps, boy. They'd work you until you'd collapse and let your body rot so far down below the earth only the worms would miss you."

Zuko shuddered, bracing himself for a blow that never fell. His eyes snapped open just in time to see the soldier fall, an arrow protruding from his throat. Immediately, the camp erupted into chaos, Fire Nation soldiers getting into defensive stances as small, darkly clad figures darted from the trees in a quick, silent onslaught. More arrows flew through the air, felling unsuspecting soldiers, and Zuko dragged himself to the body of the soldier who'd kicked him, feeling the corpse for a blade. He found a knife and quickly cut through his bindings before shoving himself to his feet and running for the wagon that housed his stolen dao.

The dark figures were quick, dropping men like flies, and before he knew it, the fight was over. Zuko stood panting next to the fire, his ribs aching, staring around at the carnage in confusion as one of the attackers announced loudly, "Great work, everyone. We've secured another victory against the Fire Nation tonight. Find what you can, take care of the wounded, and make sure there are no survivors."

Zuko's stomach went cold as the boy turned to him. He didn't look much older than Zuko himself but the way his voice rang out with authority reminded him painstakingly of the generals and battle-hardened men he'd grown up with. This boy was a warrior, and he'd just taken out a dozen of Zuko's brethren.

The boy wielded a set of hooked swords, which remained poised in his hands as the pair regarded each other. “Jet,” the boy said simply, looking Zuko over in a slow, deliberate way that had the hair on the back of Zuko’s neck standing up.

He straightened, staring the other boy in the eye, sure he was facing some kind of test. He ground out, voice rough from disuse, “Lee.”

There was a slight edge to Jet’s voice as he commented, “I didn’t think the Fire Nation recruited so young.”

Zuko fixed him with a hard glare. “I’m not one of them.” *Not entirely a lie*, he thought, glancing at the bodies of the Fire Nation soldiers all around them, *but certainly safer*.

Jet raised a wild eyebrow. “You any good with those?” He jerked his chin to the dao on Zuko’s back.

Zuko tilted his head. “Good enough.”

“Interesting scar you got there, Lee,” Jet said, mouth set in a crooked smile. Behind him, a large boy slid his knife between the ribs of a pleading Fire Nation soldier, holding it there until the man stilled. “From a firebender, I’d wager.”

Zuko said nothing.

Jet’s face softened a bit. “Everyone here...” he gestured vaguely with his swords but Zuko surmised what he meant. “We know what it’s like. To have been hurt by the Fire Nation. You could join us, if you want.”

Glancing at the carnage just over Jet’s shoulder, at the bodies littering the forest floor and the children picking amongst the corpses like buzzard-wasps, Zuko swallowed. He’d been on his own for Agni only knew how long, but would joining a group of rebels really be any better? Especially ones that seemed to favor his countrymen?

But looking at Jet, hearing the laughter and easy talk that arose from the children behind him, Zuko decided he’d had enough of being alone.



The Freedom Fighters, or so they called themselves, weren’t hard to fall in with. Only a few of them were older than Jet, who Zuko discovered was the same age as him after they’d told him the year. Somewhere, amongst the running and the blood and the countless sleepless nights, Zuko had turned fourteen.

Zuko had stared in amazement the first time he’d seen the treetop houses where the Freedom Fighters took up camp. “You built all of this?” he’d asked breathlessly.

Jet regarded him from the corner of his eye. “With help.”

Jet wasn’t exactly kind but he was a good leader and an easy companion. He didn’t push conversation when Zuko grew uncomfortable and never once did he ask why Zuko was by

himself, or why he'd been captured by Fire Nation soldiers. He also didn't seem to even suspect Zuko's true identity, which was an immense relief.

His first night with the rebels, Zuko had been lying awake, staring up at the rickety wooden roof of the hut Jet had given him, when screams had him bolting upright. He was on his feet immediately, bursting onto the wooden catwalk outside, dao drawn, finding a few of the other boys sticking their heads out blearily from their own huts. The initial screaming had died into loud, breathless sobs coming from somewhere on Zuko's left.

He nearly stepped forward to investigate when Jet slid down a rope from a platform above, grunting, "Back to sleep everyone. It's only Mino."

He pushed into the hut the cries were drifting from, and all around him, the other boys withdrew. Utterly bewildered, Zuko retreated to his bed, dao propped against the wall, eyes eventually drifting shut to the sound of Jet's voice consoling the young boy.

Zuko had been with the rebels for about a week when Jet first asked him to spar. He'd been hesitant before he'd begrudgingly agreed, shouldering his dao and gliding down the rope pulleys to the forest floor.

Jet didn't ask how much he could handle or what he was okay with—he simply came at Zuko with a surprising amount of ferocity that instantly had him throwing up his blades. They fought viciously, a relief and welcome outlet for them both, the clang of steel on steel ringing through the dense forest and clearing something from Zuko's soul.

They only stopped when they were both too out of breath to continue, with Jet holding up a hand and panting out, "Okay, okay. I yield." He dropped to the leaf-covered ground, laying flat on his back, chest rising and falling as he panted, "Where did you learn to fight like that?"

Zuko slowly joined him, his muscles singing and sweat plastering his hair to his face. "I had...an instructor when I was younger." Again, not really a lie.

Jet threw a handful of leaves at him half-heartedly, that crooked grin alighting his flushed face. "Rich kid, huh?"

Zuko shoved his arm, heat rising to his cheeks that he blamed on the stagnant air. "Shut up. You?"

"I taught myself."

Zuko closed his eyes, not wanting to think about a much younger Jet learning what kind of world they lived in. He was content to let the conversation drop but Jet spoke without prompt, his voice somber as he admitted, "Fire Nation attacked my village when I was eight. They killed my parents and everyone else who didn't escape, even dragged a girl I'd known my entire life into the street and—" He took a shuddering breath and Zuko's chest ached for him. "They killed her too when they were done with her. I'd never felt so fucking powerless." He turned his head and their eyes met. "She wasn't much older than me, Lee."

“I’m sorry, Jet.”

Jet swallowed thickly, turning to stare up at the canopy again, long lashes casting shadows across his cheeks. “I can’t let that happen to any of my kids, Lee. Because they...they’re my family now, and none of them deserve what they’ve been through. And as long as I’m able to fight the Fire Nation and do my part in ending this war, I’m going to.”

Zuko wanted to tell him he was still a kid himself but knew the words would be lost. Instead, he swallowed around the lump in his throat and pushed himself to his feet, guilt gnawing at his insides as they made the trek back to camp, thoughts consumed with flames and destruction, of soldiers occupying lands that were not their own, all on his father’s orders. He didn’t sleep that night.



Winter came early to their corner of the world, with frost covering the ground each morning, ice cracking on the rope pulleys, and stealing the warmth from Zuko’s fingertips. It wasn’t his first winter outside of the Royal Palace but that didn’t mean he’d grown accustomed to it.

Pipsqueak clambered up the stairs to Jet’s hut one chilly morning, throwing the curtain back. “Fire Nation headed this way. What’s the plan?”

Both Zuko and Jet looked up from the supplies list they’d been drafting. Jet grinned, dirty and crooked.

It was supposed to be simple; they would drop from the trees in maneuvers they’d run a hundred times. Longshot would take out the soldiers at the back of the caravan from a distance, Pipsqueak creating a distraction in the front, as Jet, Zuko, and three other boys attacked from the sides. It was a good plan, one that had worked a dozen times before. They just hadn’t accounted for one of the wagons to be filled with soldiers instead of goods.

Flames came blasting through the tarps, a wave of armored men spilling out of the back of the wagon, their fists met with arrows. Zuko launched himself from the bushes, swinging his dao and relishing the complete rush that came with battle. He didn’t have time to feel guilty as his blades carved a bloody path through the men that stood between him and a full belly. They were foot soldiers who served a man they’d likely never meet, pieces in the pai sho game Zuko’s family had been playing for nearly a century. They were nameless and their katas were stances Zuko knew well, their footwork predictable and familiar.

“Lee!”

Zuko whirled, searching for Jet amongst the smoke and uproar.

He found the other boy’s hardened figure, saw him point with one sword towards the direction the soldiers had been coming from. Zuko took off, dodging plumes of flame as he gave chase.

The escaped soldier didn’t make it far; Zuko flung his dagger through the air and it caught the man in the shoulder, sending him to the ground. He rolled, narrowly avoiding Zuko’s dao,

blood staining the earth black. His steeled boot kicked dirt and fire in a blazing arch and Zuko shouted as it singed his forearms, the force of the blast knocking his swords from his hands. The soldier was back on his feet in an instant, fists coming together and Zuko threw his arms up reflexively. The flames the soldier hurled at him split down the middle but Zuko still wasn't quick enough to block the next blast. He reeled backward as the man punched fire straight into his face—suddenly, he was half a world away, a large hand blocking his vision, pain the only thing he knew—

Zuko cried out, blindly thrusting one open palm forward, sending a blast right back at the soldier, who had only a hair's breadth of a second to look stunned before the flames hit him square in the chest, once again knocking him to the ground. Panting, Zuko cast about for his dao, shaking with adrenaline and fear, feeling as though he would be sick.

He plucked his blades from the dirt, hands trembling so badly he could hardly keep his grip on them. When he straightened, ice settled in his gut.

Jet, hooked swords hanging at his sides, stared with an open mouth at the fallen soldier behind him.

“Jet, I—”

“Get out of here, Lee,” Jet whispered, gaze snapping up to Zuko's, dangerous and unfamiliar. “And don't ever come back.”

“Let me explain—”

*“I said get out of here!”* Jet shouted. Zuko stumbled back, heart in his throat and eyes stinging. The other boy spat, “I'll let you go just this once but if I *ever* see your face again, I can't promise I won't kill you.”

Breath snatched from his chest, Zuko stared at him for a moment longer, seeing his father in the curled snarl on Jet's face. Willing away his tears, Zuko nodded mutely, strapping his dao to his back.

He didn't return to camp before he left, unable to face the many questions he knew the other boys would have.

Alone again for the first time in months, Zuko bent his head and kept going.

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Hours later, after both boys were long gone, half his life bled away into the dirt, a fallen soldier summoned the last of his strength and opened his eyes.

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Zuko had stopped in a dusty town in the middle of the Si Wong Desert when he saw the first wanted sign.



His gaze slipped across the yellowed parchment at first, thinking nothing of the poster that stared down at him, before his heart dropped somewhere between his feet and the waterskin he'd been filling fell from his numb fingertips.

Unthinkingly, his fingers came up to trace his scar, flitting around his eye, his cheekbone, the ruined shell of his ear; *Agni above, is that really what I look like?* He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen his own reflection.

Sickened, Zuko snatched the poster from the wall, hands shaking as he capped his waterskin.

He stole an ostrich horse and ran, thinking of nothing but what might be following him.

## Chapter End Notes

Hello everyone, this is my first attempt at writing for ATLA so please be kind! I hope you enjoyed this first chapter, kudos and comments are much appreciated!

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Notes

TW for brief suicidal ideation and the usual violence

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The fight was over before it even began, really.

Lit orange by the setting sun, the dust-filled air was hard to see through, drawing tears from Zuko's eyes as the wind whipped around him. He had managed to stumble a few yards into a thick expanse of twisted, dead trees that might've once been an oasis before his strength fled him. The spindle-fingered branches of the dead forest cut through the weak sunlight, casting long, jumbled shadows across the sand. It was fitting, Zuko thought, that a place so desolate and forgotten would be where he finally met his end.

He closed his eyes, a mix of fury and fear forming a lump in his throat. *Will Azula even take my body back to the Caldera? Or will she leave me here for the desert scavengers?*

Exhaustion threatened to swallow him but he gritted his teeth and forced himself to remain upright, even as his legs shook with the effort. He didn't trust that if he were to sit down he could bring himself to his feet again.

The sound of modified tundra tanks reached him once more, loud enough he could hear it even in his bad ear, this time joined by the snapping groans of the dead forest as they plowed their way closer. He straightened, dagger in hand, knowing he was out of options. His ostrich horse laid alone a few miles back, its body soon to be consumed by the desert, just another skeleton to be buried. Turning the blade over in his hands, Zuko's gaze flitted to the collection of veins at his wrist, thinking not for the first time that if he were braver he might spare himself from whatever punishment awaited him in the Fire Nation. Slamming his head back against the hollow tree with an angry shout, he took a series of slow, measured breaths, torn.

He was suddenly thrown forward as the trees behind him exploded, wood flying everywhere and kicking up even more sand as the tundra tanks knocked them flat. Zuko rolled out of the way, heart rate spiking, narrowly avoiding being crushed by wheels that were twice the width of his torso. He scrambled to his feet, sand and splinters in his mouth, a newfound burst of energy forcing him onward as there came a distinct metal clang behind him, followed by shouting.

The dry air popped and crackled, lifting the hair on his arms, a moment before the lightning Azula conjured pierced him in the back. He went down, ears ringing and barely even able to draw breath in order to scream, curled tightly in on himself as his body spasmed uncontrollably.

A foot pushed him onto his back and Azula's laughter drifted down from somewhere above; "Oh, Zuzu, you *really* don't look so good."

He forced his eyes open, nose filled with the scent of burnt hair and ozone.

His sister crouched, bringing her face close to his. Behind her, a dozen Imperial Firebenders waited, their stances broad and fists lifted. Up close, Zuko could see that her face had lost a bit of its childhood roundness, though her cheeks were still full and flushed from the heat. She looked healthy, her skin smooth and in no way mirroring his own, as he'd so often dreamt. He didn't know whether to be relieved or cry.

"Father is rather displeased with you, Zuzu," she murmured, and he flinched as she brought a hand up to his face. Her manicured nails grazed his cheek, flitted around his sightless eye, traced over his ruined ear, and followed the scar to where it disappeared into his hair. He glared at her as she took him in, part of him wondering if this was the first time she'd seen their father's handiwork. She withdrew, voice oddly tight as she said, "His suspicions about you being alive turned out to be true—we received reports of a firebender with a unique scar targeting our troops in the Earth Kingdom. He wanted to come after you himself but I insisted I should be the one to bring you home." She dropped her voice, low enough for only him to hear, "You should've been more careful, dum-dum."

Zuko dared to reach towards her, grinding out, "Zula..."

He might have imagined it but something like remorse flashed across her face, though it was gone in the blink of an eye. She stood before he could touch her. "You really leave me no choice, brother. Father will be angry but..." She snapped her fingers at the Imperial Firebenders, hands on her hips as they moved forward to lift him from the sand. "When isn't he?"

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"You're certain?"

"It says it right here, plain as Agni's light. You want to go against a direct order?"

"We were *given* direct orders, this isn't—"

"And now we're being given a new one. The Royal Family can sort their shit out when the Princess arrives back at the capital. For now, we carry out her demand, understand?"

Zuko, curled against the wall of the cell he'd been unceremoniously dumped into, opened his eyes just enough to take in the two Imperial Firebenders meant to be watching him. The ship they were on lurched and he groaned, back aching where his sister had shot him full of lightning.

Feeling ill, he squeezed his eyes shut, stomach in knots from more than just seasickness.

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When he realized where he was being delivered, Zuko wished all the more that he had killed himself.

The walls of the Boiling Rock rose from the surrounding mountains like a cavernous, steaming mouth. The dormant volcano was half the size of the ones on the main island but that didn't mean much. Zuko halted where he stood on the airship landing, heart in his throat and legs nearly giving out beneath him as he watched the haze rise up, up, up, so high it was impossible to identify where the steam ended and the clouds began. He distantly heard one of his guards curse, then he was being shoved forward.

The Imperial Firebenders escorted him as far as the receiving platform for the gondolas that crossed over the boiling lake, the wide metal elevator that took them steadily upward rising with an anxiety-inducing sort of slowness. The air grew steadily hotter the further up the mountainside they rose, cloying humidity stealing all energy from Zuko's tired body, so thin and damp it felt as though it clogged his lungs. At the lip of the prison, the Firebenders who had pledged their lives to his family handed a rolled parchment to the waiting guards, deep crimson flashing briefly as the scroll passed from hand to hand; the Fire Nation Royal Crest. Zuko remained mute through the whole ordeal, shuffling forward when prompted in small, humiliated steps. His wrists and ankles were weighed with heavy shackles, both secured to a chain around his waist that prevented any extended movement.

His new guards marched him through too many halls and down too many stairs for Zuko to keep track of where they were—all he knew was that it grew impossibly hotter the further they descended. Prisoners dressed in red shuffled passed, escorted by officers bearing kanabos. Their conversation was lost on Zuko, who felt numb as he was ushered down more flights of stairs. His guards eventually stopped in an empty white-tiled room, the ceiling lined with pipes and the humidity nearly insufferable. Numerous smaller pipes branched from the ones along the center ceiling, running down the walls to faucet heads secured to the tiled walls. There were no stalls, no semblance of privacy. Heart hammering, Zuko stared at what he assumed was the prison showers as one guard unfastened his shackles from the metal belt. "Undress yourself."

Zuko blinked. "What?"

"You heard me."

Zuko glanced between the two men, then the empty, tiled room. "And if I don't?"

One guard shook out his arm, a long trailing whip of fire flaring from his grip. "Don't make this more difficult than it has to be, kid. You reek."

Zuko couldn't help but curl his lip. Mind made up, he stepped into a defensive kata, choking down bile as a brief image of his mother flashed in his mind; the fire whip cracked towards him before he could even attempt to firebend, catching him around the ankle. In a heartbeat, his leg was wrenched out from under him, a shout escaping him as his head cracked against the tiled floor.

Shaking off the jarring burst of pain, Zuko bared his teeth and launched himself at the closest guard's leg, pulling him to the ground and bringing his heavy shackles down on the man's

head, ignoring his screams, far too panicked to even care. The other guard cursed and Zuko was distantly aware of him shouting, could feel the flaming whip leaving searing scores down his back and shoulders, but he'd been fighting for too long; he knew pain, knew how to fight through it, and he was not about to let himself be seen so weakened—

He shouted as two new guards burst into the room, one tackling him bodily. Thrashing in the woman's grip, he tried in vain to buck her off, legs pinned by the weight of the other guard who'd come to help.

In the end, they had to cut off the rags he'd been wearing for the better part of a year, securing his shackles to the wall as they turned on the faucets, releasing a torrent of scalding water that left his skin red and angry. Blood and dirt swirled down the shower drain, darkening the tile. The flood was so hot it quickly grew uncomfortable, steam filling the room as Zuko continued to struggle in his chains, nearly biting through his own lip to avoid crying out as the wound from Azula and whip scorches stung under the onslaught. The guard who'd gifted them to him stood at the ready, a look of complete hatred in his dark gaze making Zuko wish he'd lash out—he was on his feet this time, even if his hands were useless.

He thought someone dressed him but he couldn't have been sure. The pain at the back of his skull was growing steadily worse, and he could feel himself starting to lose consciousness. The guards hauled him from the showers, carrying him to an elevator (*finally no more fucking stairs*, he had enough energy to think) that took them even further down. At some point, he became certain they passed underground. A part of him went cold, and he would only realize later it was his chi, struggling to rekindle in Agni's absence.

His body met hard stone and it was all he could do to drag himself to the corner of his new cell. Even though pain flared up his spine as the contact, he kept his back tucked in the juncture of two falls, facing the direction he thought the door was in, unable to see in the complete and stifling dark.

All too soon, the pain won out and there was only blackness.



Sickness quickly overtook him in the dark.

There was no lamp in his cell, not even in the hallway beyond. Every once in a while, if his good ear happened to be facing the door, he thought he might've heard footsteps or the conversation of passing guards, but he quickly came to realize how little he could trust his own fever-ridden mind.

*Look at you*, a voice sneered, and Zuko felt cold sweat roll down his neck, convinced that if he were to open his eyes, his father would be standing in front of him. *Pathetic*.

*He's not here*, Zuko told himself. *He's not here, **he's not here**.*

*Quiet, Zuzu*, Azula crooned, somewhere unseen. *You don't want to end up like Mother.*

Zuko swallowed, a flood of mixed emotions rising in his chest at the thought of his sister. *Why here?* he asked, not entirely certain he didn't say it aloud. *You should've killed me.*

*This is the mercy you deserve, Zuzu.*

He slept more in that cell than he had since his banishment, fever stealing time from him yet again. The darkness didn't help, for it was a constant, never-ending presence. He shook on the clammy, hot floor, the cell's humidity and his rising temperature dampening his clothes with sweat.

He rolled over, unsure if when he next opened his eyes, he would truly be awake or simply dreaming.



The guards returned for him not long after his fever broke and the voices quieted.

Zuko awoke once again to the pitch black, stomach growling, footsteps this time he was certain weren't simply a figment of his imagination rapidly approaching. Sure enough, there came the sound of a lock turning, and then the cell door was opening. Four guards had come to retrieve him—they hauled him upright, so tall his feet dragged along the ground as they opted to carry him back to the elevator that would take them to the surface.

Zuko had no idea where in the prison he ended up, having no sense of where anything was located. He was not immediately taken to rot in another cell; the officers pushed through a set of heavy doors into a long, sterile smelling room with row after row of beds. Many of the beds were empty, though several housed both men and women in varying states of well-being. His guards deposited him onto a flat, springy mattress in a generally secluded area of the infirmary.

“If I ask you to remove your shirt, are you going to try and bash my head in too? Or have you figured out how things work around here?” A black-haired woman emerged from behind a curtained-off section nearby, a large satchel in her hand. She deposited it on the table at the end of the bed, unrolling worn leather to reveal a mix of vials, jars, and bandages. She faced Zuko, one hand on her hip. “Do as you're told and things will be a lot less unpleasant for you, I promise.”

Zuko shot her a glare, then thought better of it, staring instead at the floor as he peeled his sweaty, blood-stained shirt off, trying not to wince as it stuck to the wounds on his back. The woman made a displeased sound as she stepped behind him, cold fingers prodding at the back of his skull, at every place the fire whip had struck him.

“Agni above,” she exhaled, sounding slightly taken aback, and Zuko stiffened as her hands got a little too close to where Azula's lightning had struck him. “I know no one here did *that*.”

“That would've been the Crown Princess,” a new voice added, and Zuko noted the way his escort guards immediately seemed to straighten, and how the woman's hands went still

against his shoulder blades. “An entirely necessary use of force for our banished prince, if I understand the terms of your arrest properly.”

Zuko had to turn his head to get a good look at the man standing at the end of his bed. He wasn't all that intimidating, physically, but the way he held himself bespoke years of formal military training, and there was something cruel in the set of his mouth. He slid his gaze away, deciding the floor would be a safer thing to stare at.

“You see, Prince Zuko,” the man moved until he stood right in front of him and Zuko had no choice but to look up. “Our rules are simple; complete the tasks assigned to you, do your time without causing us any problems, and you might just find that we can be quite hospitable.” He smirked and Zuko clenched his fists where they rested atop his knees as the man's gaze flicked to the scorch marks that licked up his shoulders. “We don't take kindly to upstarts here, as you seem to have already discovered.”

The woman tending to his back continued working briskly. He could've imagined it but Zuko thought he might've felt a slight tremor in her touch.

“No one gets special treatment in my prison, so don't expect your accommodations to be up to par with what you received at the Capital.” Zuko nearly laughed. He was probably safer within the walls of the Boiling Rock than he ever had been at the Royal Palace. The man must've seen the twitch of his lips, for his mouth turned down into an ugly frown. He stared at Zuko a moment longer, gaze lingering a little too long to be comfortable, before he nodded to the guards that had brought him in, each of whom formed a flame symbol with their hands, as the man said, “As you were, gentlemen. Kyo.”

The woman dipped her head respectfully and silence fell over the infirmary as the man walked away. As she applied some sort of sticky poultice to his new burns, Kyo said under her voice, “Warden Akumo is not a man you want to get on the bad side of.”

Zuko didn't acknowledge her.

After Kyo had dressed all of his wounds, the guards wordlessly escorted Zuko through the prison to a new cell, this time fully lit and far above the ground. A metal shelf roughly big enough for a body to stretch out upon were on both sides of the cell and nothing else.

“Dinner is in an hour,” one of the guards told him through the slit in the door. “You'll get work assignments in the morning.”

Alone in his new cell, Zuko traced the bandages that curled over his shoulder, the skin beneath them still sore to the touch. Sitting on the very edge of the slab that was meant to be his bed, he dug his fingers into the burns, tears welling in his eyes, the pain at very least familiar.

Kind of a short update but I'm hoping to have more time soon since the semester is ending in about a week. Thank you to everyone who left such kind comments on the first chapter, they really mean the world <3 This is 100% un-beta'd so mistakes are on me!

I hope everyone is staying safe!



# Chapter 3

## Chapter Notes

Hey everyone, sorry for the long wait! Thank you all for your patience and continued support! To make up for it I've got a bit of a longer chapter :)

TW for the usual violence and very brief, non-graphic attempted sexual assault

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The morning horn blast woke Zuko from a deep, dreamless sleep. He blinked into awareness, feeling no more refreshed than when he'd laid down the night before. Biting back a groan, he slung his legs over the edge of his bed, muscles tight and back already aching. His cellmate, a gruff older man named Ichiro cursed, one arm over his face as he stole a few more moments off his feet. Their work assignments had them both in the boiler rooms for the better part of the morning, then the second story block in the afternoon; there'd likely be no reprieve until sundown.

Zuko stood just as their door slid open, rubbing sleep from his eyes and moving stiffly towards the hallway beyond, he and the other men from his cell block were ushered forward with muttered grumblings and stifled curses—the guards were rarely lenient and even less so in the mornings when Agni's rays had yet to even breach the surrounding caldera's walls. Their fists struck hard but their kanabos struck harder, and it was not something Zuko wanted to be on the receiving end of when the day had hardly begun. The prison halls quickly filled with the clamor of heavy boots on metal, officers giving orders, the sounds of a hundred men being driven downward like animals through a chute.

They marched in lines two men wide down, down, down, the movement chasing a bit of the stiffness from Zuko's legs. He was careful to keep his head lowered and eyes on the ground in front of him. While the guards tended to be the most vengeful, his fellow inmates were just as likely to pick a fight. Beside him, Ichiro shared no such reservations. He glared at a nearby female officer with open hatred. "What bullshit do you think the Warden will have for us today?"

Han, the man in front of Zuko, an Earth Kingdom general who'd only arrived at their cell division a few months prior, chuckled humorlessly. Zuko tried to look in the opposite direction as subtly as he could; Han's empty left eye socket was a little too unsettling, a little too familiar. "More propaganda, I'd wager. Not like he shares any *real* news."

"Doubt we even get breakfast for our troubles," Han's cellmate Guang spit, narrowly missing an officer's boot. Zuko ducked his head instinctively, releasing his breath only after they'd passed the guard without anything more than a glare. At the mention of food, Zuko's stomach grumbled, and he clutched his belly in discomfort. For all of the Boiling Rock's monotony,

food had rarely been a question when he'd first arrived. Only in the last few months had they seen smaller portions at mealtimes, and in the last few weeks, they had begun to go from rites directly into their work assignments.

His thoughts were torn away from self-pity as they finally emerged into the vast stone courtyard where they received morning rites each day. The female prisoners were already gathered on the opposite side of the courtyard, their numbers half that of the men. All of the prisoners were organized into long, neat rows, facing the east, where Agni's rays were only just beginning to break over the volcano's rocky lip. They were so deep within the craterous pit that Zuko had to tilt his head almost all the way back in order to see the top ring of the caldera, but the broad circular expanse of sky was too thick with steam to fully appreciate the time in the sun. Regardless, Zuko closed his eyes as the Warden recited the morning rites, his deep, grating voice ringing with authority over the prison yard. If he concentrated hard enough, Zuko could almost ignore the man's droning, nearly fooling himself into thinking he was on a riverbank somewhere, the sun bearing down on him warmly, the humidity soothing instead of stagnant. He imagined the heat seeping into him, rekindling his chi and chasing the chill from his bones, almost managing to drive away—

An elbow to his ribs broke him from his thoughts and Zuko shot a murderous look at Ichiro. The older man cut his gaze towards the guards that were only a few paces away. Zuko's stomach sunk and he straightened, training his gaze on the Warden and resolving to keep it there. Isao, the officer who favored fire whips and harbored a strong, personal dislike for Zuko was watching him intently, his gaze searing into the side of his head. He clenched his fists, anger stirring in his chest, hotter than any imagined warmth from Agni's light. Isao had added more than a few scars to Zuko's back since his arrest, and Zuko longed to return the favor.

Finished, the Warden dismissed them all without any sort of announcements; that was another thing Zuko had noticed. Whereas the morning rites had almost always been accompanied by news of advancements in the war, big or small, more often than not in the last few months they were dismissed to their duties without further delay.

He might've taken it as a sign that things weren't going well for the Fire Nation outside the prison's walls but Zuko had long stopped caring about the world's affairs. The world hadn't exactly done much for him, had it?

The officers and guards assigned to his cellblock gave a few sharp commands and groans rose from the men around him. Again, there'd be no meal until noon, and that was if they were lucky. Zuko glanced at Ichiro, finding his own mutinous thoughts reflected back at him in the man's scowl. A lot of his cellmate's previous life was a mystery to him, but they shared at least a few sentiments.

"Fucking typical," Han grunted under his breath, thick arms bulging as he clenched his fists.

Isao's head snapped towards them, dark eyes narrowed. "Something you wanted to say, Han?"

Han only grunted, fists still clenched at his sides. Zuko's fingers itched, wishing he could knock the arrogant grin off the officer's face. Orders were shouted and the inmates shuffled

into their respective workgroups; Ichiro and Zuko joined the rest of the firebenders from their cell division, Han and Guang disappearing within the throng of nonbenders.

Isao stood at the head of their line, looking rather bored. “Boiler room today, gents. You know the drill.”

They did, in fact, know the drill. They followed Isao’s imposing form, a dozen other officers of various ranks scattered around them, conversation dull as they traversed back inside to the elevators that would take them below ground. Zuko shivered as they passed under the earth’s surface, certain he wasn’t the only one feeling Agni’s loss. Despite the sudden chill between his ribs, the air within the small metal box steadily grew warmer the further they descended. Zuko liked to think he had grown accustomed to the uncomfortable heat of the prison over the years but stepping into the boiler room was always a horrid surprise, something he found you could only prepare yourself so much for.

A blast of hot air met them as the doors opened, draining and instantly drawing sweat along Zuko’s hairline. The men shuffled out, going to their assigned stations, taking over for the inmates who worked the room throughout the night. Zuko begrudgingly moved towards the far end of the boiler room, where the furnace that powered water pumps for the entire prison required constant care. He could feel the heat from the pipes even a meter away, skin prickling and nearly itching with discomfort. He accepted the shovel from the other firebender, whose skin was red and blotchy, his bare chest sweaty, the handle hot where Zuko gripped it.

The grating squeal of metal wheels under duress assaulted his bad ear and Zuko turned, irritable. Ichiro offered him a one-shouldered shrug, the collar of his uniform already damp with sweat as he pushed a heavy, overfull coal cart. Gritting his teeth, Zuko turned back to the boiler door, having to use his entire body weight in order to get the circular metal latch to budge. The mechanism was so hot he could barely stand to touch it but he ignored the discomfort and pushed with all his might. The metal gave with a shriek, and the heat that met him was nearly enough to knock him off his feet. Inside, the coals burned a bright, fiery red, the surrounding air rippling with intensity.

He had only just started shoveling coal into the furnace when Isao’s condescending voice called from behind, “Enjoy your morning, gents. See you at noon.” He turned for the elevator, the lower-ranking guards assigned to monitor them all just as furious to see him leave. His smirk was the last thing Zuko saw before the elevator doors closed, smug and ugly.



Despite their last meal having been the previous evening, Zuko’s unit was sent from their morning assignments directly to their next tasks. Trying to ignore the awful ache in his belly, he rinsed gratefully beneath the freestanding hose in the courtyard, the water marginally cooler than the room he had just spent the entire morning in. His arms and legs shook from exhaustion, his back aching after shoveling coal into the furnace’s sateless maw for hours on end. He’d managed not to scorch himself too badly, which was a relief, but he still felt weak and unsteady on his feet, his empty stomach doing little to help.

“Alright there?”

Zuko blinked at Ichiro in confusion, then immediately scowled and nodded. The man's amber gaze flicked over him in a way he didn't like, the skepticism there instantly putting Zuko on edge. He straightened in an effort to make himself look taller. "Fine."

Ichiro didn't look convinced.

The afternoon assignments took them to the kitchens, where they and the other firebenders in their cell division were armed with cleaning supplies and mops. The elevator stopped with a groan and Zuko and the other men filed out, their guard, a younger private named Kento, whistled a jaunty tune, spinning his kanabo on its leather strap. "As you all know, you're here till last bell. Do what you're meant to and you won't find yourselves back in the boiler room until tomorrow, alright?"

The work wasn't hard, not compared to what they suffered through during the morning shifts. Today Zuko had the mop, and it was an easy, mindless routine of moving his arms back and forth, back and forth, over the concrete floors. He purposefully avoided his cellmate as he worked, not needing any more of the man's pity.

On that particular afternoon, a division of female prisoners were already in the kitchens, preparing the evening's meal. The smell of baking bread, rice, roasting meat, and vegetables made Zuko's stomach cramp even more; the guards ate better than the inmates, that much was painfully apparent, as Zuko knew the only thing he had to look forward to that afternoon was a bowl of bland congee. He humored the idea of stealing a pear or something small, but figured the beating he'd earn for it likely wasn't worth the trouble. He busied himself with mopping, growing more and more irritated as he had to keep going over areas where people's dirty boots left trails through his previously clean floors. Still, he mused humorlessly, mopping was almost fun compared to the boiler room.

With nearly double the usual amount of people in the kitchens, the noise was nearly insufferable. The head correctional cook shouted various commands at anyone who had the misfortune to be nearby, plates and dishes clattered with use, and numerous conversations carried on throughout as the inmates were able to enjoy the prison's more menial tasks. Zuko couldn't stand it all, so he purposefully moved with his mop towards the back of the kitchens, past the sink where Ichiro flashed a handsome grin at a woman scrubbing pots, and out of many of the guards' lines of vision.

He had been leaning against a crate of chili peppers, picking coal dirt from beneath his fingernails when he paused, certain he'd heard something on his left. The only thing near him was a wall of empty vegetable crates stacked nearly to the ceiling and a storeroom which he knew housed bags of rice and other grain. Turning more fully to investigate, Zuko quickly realized yes, he most certainly *had* heard something. He left the mop leaning against the crates, approaching the store closet with slow, careful footsteps. Light peeked through the crack below the door and Zuko found himself hesitating.

Hand above the doorknob, he caught the tail end of a distinctly male voice saying, "—some respect, you ungrateful Earth Kingdom swine. Not everyone—"

Heart thudding loudly in his ears, Zuko threw the door open, gut twisting as he realized what he was seeing.

A male guard, one he vaguely recognized and thought might've been named Seiji, blinked at him in surprise. His face immediately hardened, arms flexing as he adjusted his grip on the young woman pinned beneath him. She was facedown on a long table that cut through the center of the store closet, bent nearly in half as the guard's weight kept her immobile, both arms pulled behind her in one of the man's fists. Zuko pointedly did not look at her as he stammered, "Er, sorry. I—"

"Get the fuck out of here," the guard snapped. "Unless you want to spend the rest of this month underground."

Zuko barely suppressed a shiver at the threat—he'd spent the duration of more than a few punishments below ground in the cells where he'd once fought through a fever, so long ago—he had no desire to return to their pitch-black solitude, where time simultaneously slid away and dragged on endlessly. He was halfway out the door when a small noise came from behind and he made the mistake of looking back; the girl squirmed beneath the hand on the back of her neck, a dark bruise already curled over her jaw, blood streaming steadily from both nostrils and a cut just above her browline. She was staring at him with large, frightened eyes, blue and pleading.

Mentally cursing himself, Zuko stepped into a broad kata and summoned his chi.



The cooler, Zuko had decided, was his least favorite part about the Boiling Rock.

His first and only experience in the cooling tanks had come during his first month at the prison when he'd still been adamant about fighting the guards and his fellow prisoners at every turn. Another inmate, one whose name he'd never discovered but whose face he doubted he'd ever forget, had cornered him with a sly smile and a foul proposition. Zuko had blasted fire at him without even thinking, and before he'd realized his mistake, he'd found himself being thrown into a frosted, four-foot by four-foot freezer, where his teeth had chattered so hard he'd been afraid they'd shatter, and it felt as though his blood turned sluggish and icy in his veins.

The cooler was just as unpleasant as he remembered, and even after months of silently wishing for a reprieve from the prison's eternal heat, he found himself shaking after only minutes, desperate for the end.

When the guards finally came for him, he was curled in the corner furthest from the door, knees pulled to his chest and fists tucked into his armpits. Isao and Seiji hauled him upright, undeterred by his lack of limb coordination as he struggled to keep his feet under himself. He had enough of his wits to be concerned that *they* were the ones who had come to fetch him. They all but carried him back to his cell, his numb feet dragging uselessly behind him, realizing the two men were in the midst of conversation but unable to focus long enough to listen properly.

They dumped Zuko without an ounce of grace onto the floor of his cell and fear crawled up his sternum as Isao slid the heavy door shut, his tall, broad form leaving very little room in

the cramped space beside Seiji. He was vaguely aware of Ichiro on his bed, an open book on his lap, but he didn't dare look over at him.

Seiji crouched and held one flame-lit finger near his face, the sudden warmth almost painful against his frozen cheek. "You ever find yourself in the position to interrupt me again, do yourself a favor and walk the other way, kid."

Zuko felt a surge of rage and disgust, and knowing what it would get him, spit in his face.

When they were through with him, Isao and Seiji left in a seemingly much better mood, their heavy footsteps trailing down the hall outside. Zuko waited until he could no longer hear their smug, satisfied voices before pushing himself up on shaking arms, the residual chill from the cooler numbing the worst of the pain. He knew he'd be sorry when the frost eventually subsided but at that moment all he wanted was his bed.

Ichiro's voice came from the opposite side of the cell, disappointed and far too sympathetic for Zuko's liking. "You could save yourself a lot of pain if you didn't fall for all their traps."

Wiping at the blood that was streaming steadily into his eyes, Zuko gingerly curled onto his side, grunting, "Piss off."

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"I never got the chance to thank you."

Zuko flinched, jerking to face the voice on his left. He immediately regretted this decision, finding the girl from the kitchens just beside him. Grip tightening around the shaft of the broom handle he was working with, Zuko grunted, "It was nothing."

"It wasn't though," the girl insisted, brushing a strand of reddish-brown hair behind one ear. Zuko noted the bruise on her jaw was beginning to yellow around the edges. "That guard would've...It *wasn't* nothing, okay? I really owe you."

He shot her a glare, very aware that the officer meant to be watching them would be circling their way again soon. "Just drop it, alright? I'm supposed to be sweeping."

The girl's lips twitched, her gaze flicking to the broom in his hands, and his stomach dipped in disgust as he noticed the white of her right eye was entirely bloodshot, likely from being struck. "Is that what you were doing?"

Heat rising to his face, Zuko turned away from her, longing for the days strangers opted not to speak to him.

The girl made an amused sound and before he knew it, she had taken the broom from him, speaking softly as she moved. "If you use it like this, it'll work a lot better and cut your work down by half, I promise."

Zuko snatched it back from her, saying with no small amount of irritation, "Don't you have your own chores to do?"

The girl smirked. “Yeah, but I wanted to make sure I thanked you. You can call me Suki, by the way.” Her gaze flicked over the bruises Isao and Seiji had given him. “I’m really sorry.”

Zuko turned his back to her, growling, “Some advice, Suki—don’t try to make friends here. Just do whatever the guards say and you’ll be fine.”

Suki’s smile slipped a bit, hurt flashing across her face before it was replaced with anger. “Easy for you to say. I would rather take my own life before doing the kind of shit they ask of me.”

A pang went through his chest as he realized what he’d said. “Fuck, I didn’t—”

“Coming over here was a mistake,” Suki said, already turning away. “Sorry I even bothered.”

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The guards were on edge.

Many of them had been acting strange all morning and Zuko knew without a doubt something was wrong when alarms began to go off midway into the morning shift.

He straightened from the coal cart, back and shoulders screaming, sweat pouring into his eyes. The elevator doors opened at the front of the room and Isao stepped out, expression murderous. He marched straight to the group of younger guards that had been assigned to them, all of whom straightened as he approached, sharing panicked looks. Isao said something Zuko didn’t catch, then whirled around, fury in the harsh lines of his face.

“Everyone here should’ve been back in their cells an hour ago!” He pointed to the elevator. “In!” When the prisoners stared at him, he flexed his hand and cracked his flaming whip, sending sparks through the air. “*Now!*”

On the way to the surface, Zuko edged closer to Ichiro, anything to distance himself from Isao’s temper. The officer stood behind them just beside Kento, the force of his anger bleeding throughout the cramped elevator and causing anxiety to curl within Zuko’s chest.

His work unit was herded back through the prison by the now cowed looking guards in the direction of their cell block with no time to rinse away the coal dust and sweat. Zuko found himself sharing a concerned look with Ichiro as they were joined by the contingent of nonbenders that also resided in their cell division, their own unit delayed. Somewhere along the way, a chill settled in his chest, one he normally associated with the solitary cells underground. He couldn’t dwell on it, not with all of the surrounding chaos as the inmates were hurried along. Ichiro’s scowl deepened as the guards banged their kanabos against the walls and rails to usher them through the prison faster, their shouts ringing loudly throughout the metal halls.

“Watch where you point that thing, you Fire Nation piece of—”

Guang’s angry voice abruptly changed into a shout as a guard slammed his studded kanabo into the man’s shoulder. The blow was enough to knock him into a nearby inmate, who

stumbled and shoved Guang in retaliation. Han, towering over the surrounding men, forced his way through the mass and slammed his head into the guard's, who promptly collapsed into a crumpled heap. Han wasted no time; he twirled the kanabo once then swung the weapon at the man who had shoved Guang with enough force that the other prisoner's head snapped back with a sickening crack. His body hit the floor beside the guard's, unmoving.

"Now let's be rational, Han," Isao said, calm voice overpowering the bewildered mutterings of the surrounding prisoners and ear-ringing blare of the alarms. Despite his unusually steady voice, sweat beaded at Isao's forehead, his dark gaze nervous. Kento and four of the privates from the boiler room stood just in front of him, and Zuko was certain they would blast Han into ash at the slightest provocation. "Put the weapon down and we won't—"

Han gave an ugly snarl, bringing the kanabo up in a quick, deadly arch, catching Kento's extended hand. The young guard screamed, hand clutched to his chest, and the other officers stepped forward, thrusting open palms out—

And nothing happened.

Zuko stared in mute shock, too stunned to move. Han laughed, a deep belly laugh Zuko had never heard before, then he and half a dozen inmates were surging towards the guards. Ichiro's large hand came down on Zuko's shoulder, hauling him backward but Zuko thrashed in his grip, wrenching himself towards the fight, unable to pry his eyes from the catastrophe in front of them.

Three of their nonbender inmates had somehow lifted one of the guards onto their shoulders, the young man's shouts drowned by the roar of the surrounding crowd. Before Zuko even realized their intent, they had tossed the guard over the side of the landing; clangs arose as his tumbling body struck numerous metal rails, then a resounding, final thud and there was silence.

Cheers erupted from the prisoners that weren't attacking the remaining guards, who Zuko noted with displeasure were holding their ground. They had given up attempting to bend, wielding their kanabos with all the deadly accuracy they had been trained for. Isao stood in the midst of it all, blood streaking his face, sweat plastering his hair to his forehead. There was still a wild, frantic look in his eyes and Zuko couldn't help but laugh, a dark, hateful part of himself relishing the officer's fear.

Below, heavy, clattering footsteps mixed with shouting arose from the stairwell as a dozen more officers rushed to break the fight apart, swarming up the stairs, swords and kanabos drawn. A female guard was the first over the top of the landing, and Zuko barely whirled in time to avoid being slashed across the chest, narrowly missing the end of her blade. He ducked behind her, kicking the back of her knees and causing her legs to buckle. In an instant, he'd stolen her sword. He hadn't touched a weapon in years and quickly found his arms shaking with the effort of keeping the blade aloft.

Across the landing, Han was still wreaking havoc against the flood of guards, using the stolen kanabo as though he'd fought with one his entire life. Guang, back on his feet, was standing shoulder to shoulder with him, a whip in his hands.



Isao's shouting drew Zuko's attention to where the fight had first broken out—the officer had his back to a corner, facing off against several nonbenders with nothing more than his fists, twenty raging prisoners between him and his allies. Zuko surged towards him, hatred pounding in his ears. He had nearly made it when Ichiro was suddenly in front of him, amber gaze furious. In less than a heartbeat, the older man had struck him hard enough for blood to bloom in his mouth as his teeth snapped together painfully. Flat on the ground and more than a little disoriented, he looked up in time to see Ichiro rise with Zuko's stolen sword in his hand, bracing himself as the fresh guards finally overpowered the remaining prisoners at the top of the stairs.

Zuko gasped as a wall of fire erupted from the advancing guards; Ichiro deflected most of the blast but the nonbenders closest to them weren't so lucky—their screams sent his left ear ringing painfully, and the surrounding guards were quick to take the distraction and bend a tight ring of fire around the inmates still on their feet.

Zuko felt like screaming as all around him, inmates began to kneel one by one, hands flat against the floor. With fires raging throughout the cramped space, they were quickly subdued, even more officers and guards swarming the landing, clamping heavy manacles and chains onto the inmates who could firebend, hauling away any of them who still clung to stolen weapons.

Isao's blood-smeared face appeared above Zuko, the officer's boot flying out and making contact with the side of his head. Pushed onto his stomach, a hand on his neck forced his face into the cold floor and a knee planted in the small of his back kept him flat on the ground. Isao's snarl came just next to his good ear, loud enough for Zuko to hear above the alarms and surrounding screams. "Bend at me, I fucking dare you. You'll find yourself just like the old man."

He grabbed a fistful of Zuko's hair, wrenching his head up. Zuko couldn't quite bite back a gasp as he caught sight of Ichiro, his left forearm a mess of charred flesh, blood on his lips as awful, wheezing gasps were pulled from his lungs with every inhale. He hung between the bodies of two officers, seemingly unable to stand without their support.

Isao hauled Zuko to his feet, who was fighting back tears. Isao must have seen them—he gave a startled laugh, sounding tired and oddly shocked. "Agni, above. Don't make this more difficult than it has to be, kid."



Eight casualties, the warden informed them the following morning. Three inmates and five guards, and therefore, five days none of the men in Zuko's cell block would see food.

Zuko didn't have much energy to protest. The warden's dark gaze dragged over them all, a deep-rooted sort of hatred in the way he regarded them. Those directly responsible were serving punishments well deserved, the man added, and Zuko flinched.

He didn't see Ichiro in the days after the incident, or even Han or Guang. His cell remained oddly empty, his cellmate's usual snores absent and making the dark silence feel all the more foreboding. Zuko went through his usual routines, keeping to himself and growing all the

more hungry as the days slid by agonizingly slow. Something had shifted, in those few minutes where no one had been able to firebend. The guards were harsher, quicker to violence. There was no more conversation between inmates as they passed through the halls or down the stairs. Isao didn't bother him but Zuko didn't trust for a moment that he had been forgotten—it was only a matter of time before the officer found a reason to seek him out.

It made Zuko sick to think that Ichiro was somewhere in the prison suffering all because of his own stupidity.

When he returned to his cell one evening, he found a body in the bed opposite his own.

It definitely wasn't Ichiro, he decided, gaze tracing over the sleeping stranger. He wasn't another prisoner from Zuko's cell block, nor anyone he recognized from the yard or common areas. *Someone new*, he decided, eyeing the stranger's unfamiliar form. The man's body still held the bulk of hard-earned muscle, his skin a deep brown not yet sallowed by too much time spent beneath synthetic lighting, his hair longer than Ichiro's, with less gray, and so brown it was nearly black.

Cautious, Zuko settled onto his bed, kicking his shoes off, purposefully letting them drop to the floor. The man did not stir, his deep, slow breathing the only thing telling Zuko he was truly asleep.

Still, Zuko knew appearances could be deceiving. He reclined until his back met the wall, drawing his legs up to his chest and wrapping his arms around his knees. Glaring at the man's sleeping form, inexplicably angry that this stranger was here and not someone he had been starting to consider a friend, Zuko leaned his head back and decided to wait.

## Chapter End Notes

As you might've guessed, this chapter puts the timeline just after the Day of Black Sun. At this point, Zuko has been at the Boiling Rock since he was 14 and he's now 16, just like in canon. So we're all caught up! And now Suki's here (as well as a not-so-mysterious stranger), yay!

Once again, thank you to everyone who has been so supportive, I love you all!

# Chapter 4

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Though he hadn't meant to, Zuko must have fallen asleep. He awoke with a start as muffled, almost inaudible sounds of distress arose from the opposite side of the cell. He immediately straightened, trying to ignore his aching neck and blearily rubbing sleep from his eyes. Across from him, the stranger was twitching in Ichiro's bed, muttering things he couldn't quite understand, his breathing growing erratic.

He jumped as the man bolted upright with a shout, prison-issued shirt damp with sweat. Staying very still where he was slouched against the wall, Zuko watched warily as the man shoved his hands through his hair, breath shuddering as he fought to calm down. He did a double-take when he finally noticed he wasn't alone, quickly scrambling to his feet with a startled inhale and Zuko froze, bracing himself.

The man stopped, chest rising and falling rapidly. He was tall, much taller than Zuko, with a broad, muscle-bound frame that was far more intimidating when standing upright. His feet were braced in a wide defensive stance, one he had slipped into without thought. A warrior then, Zuko thought, gripping the edge of his bed with pale knuckles—he wasn't entirely sure he'd be able to hold his own if the stranger advanced but he'd damn well try.

"I..." the man trailed off with a confused frown, a deep furrow forming between his brows. After a handful of seconds, he held his empty palms up, slowly backing away and lowering himself to sit on Ichiro's bed. "I didn't mean to startle you." He exhaled slowly as they regarded each other, shoving a hand through his hair—there was a flash of blue as he did so, perhaps beads. Zuko flushed as the man's gaze flitted about his face, no doubt taking in his most prominent scar. He scowled, heat creeping up his neck as something like disgust settled over the man's expression. "Spirits, you—"

Whatever the man had been about to say was drowned by the sudden blast of morning horns. A second later, the door to their cell was rolling open on its iron track, and Zuko scrambled to put his boots back on. He quickly shoved himself to his feet and disappeared into the flood of other inmates in the hall, far too eager to put some distance between himself and the stranger in his cell, all the while telling himself he wasn't running.



Strangely enough, and not even by Zuko's own doing, he did not see his new cellmate in the days that followed. When he returned to his cell the evening of their first encounter, he found himself alone but flippantly wrote it off, far too exhausted to really care. It wasn't unusual for work units to run into the night, depending on their task. He fell into a restless sleep, all too aware of Ichiro's absence. When the morning horns sounded, the stranger had not returned.

He didn't worry about it, not at first. *Maybe the idiot already got himself thrown into solitary,* he thought humorlessly, staring at the empty bed. *Or the cooler, even.* Another thought

occurred to him, one much darker. He wondered if that were the case if he might expect Ichiro's return.

Zuko didn't waste too much energy worrying about the stranger—if he was dead, so be it. There was nothing Zuko could do, and so he threw himself into whatever work was given to him, grateful for the routine.

A break from the monotony came in the form of Suki, and Zuko's insides twisted with a mix of guilt and embarrassment at the sight of her. He immediately turned away, hoping she hadn't spotted him. They were in the courtyard during one of their allotted breaks, a time where male and female prisoners mingled under strict supervision from the patrolling guards high above them. Suki was leaning against the wall directly under one of the guard stations, alone and out of sight from anyone above.

Watching her from the corner of his good eye, he noted the way she stiffened every time another inmate passed, eyes suspicious and darting about, taking in everything and missing nothing. He remembered being in her shoes, being so terrified of every other prisoner for months, never knowing if or when it was safe enough to drop your guard, how exhausting that quickly became. He couldn't imagine what this Earth Kingdom girl was feeling, with no bending or weapons, surrounded by enemies in a foreign nation.

Well, he supposed he did, in a way. Steeling himself, Zuko took a deep breath and made his way over to the girl.

Her blue gaze snapped to him at once as he crossed the courtyard, unhurried and giving her time to leave if she wanted. He suspected she'd known where he was all along. She didn't run, only straightened when he approached, lifting her chin and squaring her shoulders as if expecting an attack.

Zuko said nothing, settling against the wall next to her, crossing his arms and trying to ignore the jagged brick digging into his shoulders. He could feel her staring at him, surely trying to decide his motive, but he simply remained quiet and watched the other prisoners milling about the yard.



Again, sleep had nearly found him when commotion outside his cell arose, and a moment later the iron door was sliding open, light spilling in from the hallway beyond. Zuko was immediately on his feet though he quickly shrunk back as three guards grappled with the struggling form of his new cellmate, dumping the large man onto the floor with as much care as they would a moo-sow carcass.

A shadow moved across the threshold. "Keep in mind what we discussed. I'll give you a few days to mull things over," Zuko felt all the breath leave his lungs as the Warden stepped through the door frame, hands clasped behind his back as he regarded the man on the floor. "Perhaps your memory will have improved."

His gaze slid to Zuko, who was still standing, feet rooted to the floor. The corner of Warden Akumo's lips twisted into a smile as his gaze flicked over him, and Zuko felt his face grow

heated at the scrutiny. “Zuko here could probably share a thing or two about resistance, and how little traction it will gain you within these walls.” He finally looked away and Zuko nearly sank to his knees in relief. “Enjoy the reprieve.”

With that he was gone, and a moment later the door was sliding shut, leaving the cell in relative darkness. The only light came from a weak bulb in the center of the ceiling and a rectangular slit on their door though the bulb would soon be extinguished for the night. Zuko remained frozen in place, staring at the stranger on the ground. The man dragged himself up, hissing through his teeth with every pained breath. Unease flooded him as he watched the man struggle to rise but he didn’t dare try to help. The flesh Zuko could see didn’t appear too damaged but the stranger moved slowly, carrying himself as though anything else was an impossibility.

Zuko didn’t move until the man was seated on Ichiro’s bed, hand pressed against his side, face twisted in discomfort. Seating himself onto his own bed, knees drawn up, Zuko forced down his nerves and asked, “Where did they take you?”

The man’s blue eyes lifted, wary. “I’m...not entirely sure. I think it was somewhere far below the prison. Somewhere dark.”

Solitary then, Zuko decided. And a nonbender, if he hadn’t seen the coolers. He found himself glancing at the beads in the man’s hair, something so small but unmistakable. “You’re Water Tribe?”

“I am,” the man’s expression tightened, looking troubled, so Zuko let it drop, not wishing to provoke him. After a few more moments of what he felt was an increasingly awkward silence, the man said, “The Warden called you ‘Zuko’. Is that—that’s your name, then?”

Zuko nodded mutely, throat suddenly tight.

“That’s a Fire Nation name.” When Zuko continued to say nothing, unsure what sort of reaction that warranted, the man sighed, looking him over again, more slowly this time. After a long, tense silence, he seemed to realize Zuko wasn’t going to respond so he tried something else. “How long have you been here?”

Zuko lifted his shoulders in a shrug, slightly unnerved. “I don’t know.”

“And...how old are you, Zuko?”

There was something about the look on the water tribesman’s face that made Zuko want to squirm, to hide, but there was nowhere to go in their cell. He shrugged again. He hadn’t given much thought to his age in a while. He wasn’t just being flip, he truly didn’t know how long he’d been at the Boiling Rock. He’d tried to keep track of the days when he’d first arrived but he’d quickly given that up—not knowing was almost better, it allowed for the weeks to slide by and muddle together into an indiscernible mess that was easier to accept. But the man was still staring at him expectantly so he muttered, “Fifteen, maybe.”

The man’s eyes widened a fraction and Zuko immediately regretted opening his mouth. Pity, damning and utterly useless, stared back at him and it set his insides boiling. He lifted his

chin, daring the water tribesman to say anything more. “What?”

They lapsed into silence, the man looking away finally, and Zuko thought, *Good*. Entirely over whatever piss poor conversation that had been amounting to, he reclined against the wall, exhausted and aching from the day but unwilling to turn his back on the man just yet. Despite his exhaustion, anger seethed like a storm in his chest, hot and familiar. If he tried hard enough, he thought he might be able to summon his chi and bend more than a pathetic wisp of flame. He might need to.

He shuddered involuntarily, hoping it had gone unnoticed. He wanted sleep and to never have to think about the man sitting across from him again, because it meant thinking about the one who wasn't.

Unfortunately, his cellmate didn't seem to get the message.

After a few minutes of quiet, the man leaned his head against the wall, gaze tracking across the lines of the bolted ceiling. “I have a son about your age.” Zuko stiffened, a chill settling in his stomach, very different from the one he felt each day passing below the earth's surface. A dozen memories came to mind, each worse than the last, of a childhood he hadn't quite managed to leave behind. “A daughter too, though perhaps a few years younger.”

Closing his eyes, Zuko inhaled slowly through his nose, a tightening fist of nerves blooming somewhere between his ribs, quelling the anger and replacing it with something else.

“Spirits, how they used to argue,” he chuckled, wistfulness cracking his voice. “I had been separated from them for many years until recently. I thought by leaving them in the South I would be saving them, that by doing my part to end this war of your countrymen that I was keeping them safe.” He shifted, a pained noise escaping him. “How foolish I was to ever think that. They are so much more involved in this war than I ever wanted them to be.”

He didn't elaborate, only moved so his position mirrored Zuko's. He looked as exhausted as Zuko felt, with dark rings below his eyes that bespoke too many nights without proper rest. Zuko found himself wondering if that had been the Warden's doing or the nightmares. Eventually, the bulb above them went out for the night, the only light now coming from the small window in their door.

In the following silence, Zuko could no longer ignore the twinges racing up his spine. Still not entirely certain the water tribesman wouldn't attack him in his sleep, he reclined onto his back slowly, hands crossed over his stomach as he stared into the dark.

*I have a son about your age.* He shuddered again, heart in his throat just at the thought of his father. Time had stolen so much from him—the sound of his mother's voice, the shape of her smile, the way Azula's hair felt between his fingers, even the taste of lychee and ash bananas—but it hadn't quite managed to ease the flood of emotions that any thought of his father evoked.

Try as he might, he couldn't shake the memories of Ozai and all that came with them. There were too many years where every comment had been a critique, every misstep enough to warrant the back of a hand or words that would ring in his ears for days. And yet, despite the

fear, Zuko had wished so desperately for his father's favor, had tried time and time again to prove himself worthy of being the Crown Prince. Ozai's private little smiles, which had always made him seem so much less frightening, so much more human, were in surplus for Azula but never for him. Zuko felt a pang in his chest at the thought of his sister. *A daughter too.*

The man's voice once again broke him from his thoughts; "In my dreams I see them tortured by Fire Nation soldiers. I see my entire culture wiped from the South, our footprint upon the ice shelves gone as though we never existed, our connection with the spirits and our ancestors forgotten." He was silent for the briefest of moments, then, "You're Fire Nation, aren't you?"

Zuko rolled onto his side, facing the wall, scar pressed into the arm that cushioned his head. "Once, maybe."

"Answer me this, then; when will this war see it's end?"

Zuko, recalling the fire that had burned in Azula's sunlit gaze the day she'd caught up to him, chose not to respond.



The water tribesman's name was Hakoda, Zuko would soon find out, and it seemed he had no use for silence. He tried to coax conversation from Zuko more than once in the nights that followed, to no avail. Instead, he started telling stories when sleep would come to neither of them, speaking in low tones about his life before he'd left the Southern Water Tribe. Some nights, Zuko listened, finding himself lulled to sleep by the man's steady, baritone voice, and at other times he laid awake, afraid his cellmate was waiting for him to close his eyes, to drop his guard. He learned more about the water tribesman than he ever wished to—heard more stories about his children, a lost wife whom he loved deeply, the men who were loyal to him, his life before war had found his family in the South.

While he listened, he couldn't help but wonder what the man sought to gain from telling Zuko everything about himself, if it was more than a way for him to avoid his own nightmares. Any information gained by someone else was often a tool turned around and used against them so Zuko couldn't quite figure out *why* the water tribesman shared so much with him.

With very little else to distract himself with, Zuko found his thoughts turning to these questions once again as the guards marched the inmates from his cell block towards the showers. Already, the air was thick with humidity, so warm and damp it beaded along the metal walls of the hallways, running in thin rivulets to the floor. The water tribesman was behind him, silently glaring at the officers who ushered them along. Zuko wanted to tell him to keep his head down, to avoid giving them any reason to get angry, but he kept his mouth shut and his gaze focused on his shoes, telling himself some lessons were better learned firsthand.

The showers were just another unsettling part of the Boiling Rock that Zuko had pretty much learned to tune out of when the need arose. It wasn't the worst thing he'd suffered, not by far, and he'd even come to consider the hot water a relief on his tired muscles at the end of the

day. He pulled his shirt over his head numbly, shoulders protesting at the stretch. Someone inhaled sharply behind him and he shot a glare over his shoulder. Hakoda's gaze was glued to his back, mouth slightly agape. Zuko wrenched his head forward, anger growing in the pit of his stomach.

In their cell not long after, water still clinging to his hair, Zuko waited for Hakoda to speak. Silence lay thickly over the dark, the sound of the man's breathing the only thing telling him he hadn't fallen asleep.

He expected questions but they never came.

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"He's Water Tribe, you said?"

"Yeah," Zuko grunted, wiping sweat from his brow. He and Suki were in their usual spot beneath the guard station, and it was stifling even in the shade. "Won't shut up about his home and family."

"That's...kind of sad," Suki said, and Zuko shot her a glance. "He must miss them a great deal."

"Taking a trip down memory lane won't exactly help any of us, will it? It doesn't change anything."

Suki tilted her head, blue gaze tracking over the other prisoners in the yard. "Maybe not but it's probably a comfort to him. I know I spend a lot of time thinking about my village, my friends, everyone who might've gotten hurt because of me and the choices I made." She turned to him and their eyes met. "You didn't...you didn't leave behind anyone you care about?"

Zuko examined a hand, scrutinizing the coal dust that had healed into the cracks and calluses of his palms, making his skin appear perpetually filthy. Suki was only curious, he told himself, though it didn't stop the irritation that reared its ugly head deep inside. What could he say? That everyone he'd ever loved had either died or betrayed him?

"No," he finally said, not missing the way her mouth turned down in pity. He looked away, afraid he'd get too angry and say something he'd regret if he continued staring at her.

She seemed to realize she'd touched on a sensitive topic but the silence didn't last. "I got some news from the head duty officer this morning." She paused, only continuing when Zuko made a vaguely acknowledging sound. "I'm being reassigned to a new work unit. Different inmates, different chores, different guards."

Relief flooded him, loosening something he hadn't even known was knotting his insides. "When do you start?"

"Tomorrow," she said, smiling faintly, though it didn't quite reach her eyes.



“Good—that’s great,” Zuko said, hating how awkward he felt, even though he was privately grateful. “Has anyone else, er, bothered you?”

Suki shook her head, hair brushing her shoulders. “No, not since...not since the kitchens.” Then she surprised him by wrapping a hand around his wrist, eyes shining and grip firmer than he would’ve guessed. “Thank you.”

“You already thanked me.”

“I can thank you again if I want,” she grinned, and this time it was genuine. “I really owe you.”

His anger forgotten, Zuko gazed at Suki for what felt like the first time. She was young, probably younger than him, and yet she was in a place meant for prisoners of war and traitors of the worst sort. He felt like asking, *How did you get here? Why are you here?* What could this girl have possibly done to deserve such a fate?

Instead, he settled back against the wall, her hand still a warm weight on his arm. “Don’t mention it.”

Suki rolled her eyes good-naturedly. “Yeah, yeah.” She slid herself free of him even as she dropped her voice. “There’s something else I wanted to ask you.”

Zuko raised an eyebrow.

“You were there for the riot, weren’t you?”

“Uh,” he floundered a bit, surprised. It had been a few weeks since the incident that had lost him his cellmate, and he still couldn’t close his eyes without imagining how different things could’ve gone if he hadn’t been such an idiot. “Yeah, yeah I was.”

“I heard no one could bend. Is that true?”

Zuko nodded, mouth dry.

“Wow,” Suki said, leaning away slightly, a furrow between her brows. “That’s...how is that even possible?”

“I don’t know,” Zuko said, unconsciously clenching and unclenching his hands, remembering the panic, the *cold*, at discovering his chi snuffed. “It didn’t last very long. The guards, they were eventually able to bend and that’s how they got everything back under control.” He tried not to shudder, unable to block out the sight of blackened bodies on the floor, the horrible smell. It was far too reminiscent of another memory he wished so desperately to forget.

Suki swallowed. “I wonder what something like that meant for the war.”

“Probably nothing good for the Fire Nation,” he murmured bitterly.

Blue eyes shifted towards him, narrowed slightly. “That better not be sympathy I hear.”

Zuko couldn't help but laugh, short and ugly. "Agni, no." Even as he said it, he couldn't help but think of Iroh, of Azula. Despite everything, the thought of harm coming to either of them ate at him.

Whatever Suki said next was swallowed by a horn blast from the top guard's tower. Confused, Zuko stepped out from beneath their shaded hiding spot, squinting upward. The gondolas that brought prisoners and goods alike to the Boiling Rock swayed to a halt at the topmost landing, the metal cable car lurching precariously as it docked. Officers and guards swarmed about outside but there was no organization to the mass—even Zuko could hear their loud, excited chattering.

A moment later the doors to the gondola opened and he saw why.

Dressed in crimson, black, and gold armor, their helms oiled and gleaming even in the weak sun, a contingent of fresh guards filed out of the gondola, the synchronized fall of their boots ringing across the courtyard as every prisoner watched, the silence deafening. Welcoming cheers erupted from the guards who had met them, and Zuko suddenly felt ill as his gaze landed on a man stepping through the gondola door. He was swarmed by welcoming greetings, quickly disappearing, but Zuko had *seen*, and he thought he might be sick.

"Zuko?" Suki asked, voice sounding small. "What is it?"

"I—" How could he explain without destroying whatever tentative relationship he'd built with her? That he'd panicked his very first day, beating a guard in the process, a guard he hadn't seen since and presumed dead? The very same guard who had just stepped across the gondola threshold, alive and well? What would she possibly think of him? She was still staring at him, wide gaze imploring, and he ground out, "It's nothing."

Looking doubtful, Suki held a hand over her eyes, blocking out the sun as she watched the fresh guards mingle with the old. "I sure hope so."



"That officer has been watching you ever since you sat down."

Zuko didn't bother to look up at Hakoda, only continued glaring into his bowl of congee as though he might scare the meager portion into doubling before his eyes. He knew exactly who the water tribesman was referring to. "And?"

"I haven't seen him before."

"How long have you been here again?"

Hakoda made an unamused sound. "You seem to have a lot of enemies, Zuko."

Zuko dared to meet the man's gaze. "If I didn't I wouldn't be here."

The furrow was back between Hakoda's dark brows. He glanced towards the far wall of the prison cafeteria, past the long rows of seated inmates, where a group of officers appeared

deep in conversation, postures relaxed and helmets tucked beneath their arms. Isao was among them, his tall, broad figure notable even from afar. Just beside him, his hair not quite long enough to hide the scars that crisscrossed his scalp, the guard who Zuko had spent so many nights trying not to think about stood with his arms crossed, a scowl on his face as he glared across the rows of tables. Zuko quickly went back to staring into his congee, unable to forget the stomach-dropping feel of bone giving way beneath his hands, of blood, sharp and metallic in his nose, the way the man's struggles had slowly grown weaker until they—

“Zuko—”

“*What?*”

Hakoda blinked at him and Zuko felt heat crawling up his neck. He hated the way the water tribesman said his name, as though they were allies, as though Zuko deserved any sort of familiarity after what he'd done to Ichiro. Hakoda lowered his voice, gaze insistent. “You understand the danger, don't you?”

“Better than you, no doubt,” Zuko said coldly, wishing the man would simply leave him alone.

“Have you done something to him?”

He snorted. “You could say that.”

Hakoda's thumb tapped an erratic beat on the tabletop, his mouth drawn into a frown. He looked to be thinking hard. “Perhaps you could talk to one of the division officers, explain that you need prot—”

Zuko slammed his fists down with a snarl, sending his bowl clattering. “I *don't* need anyone's help! What about that is so hard for you to understand?” With a final angry shout, he rose from the table, palms itching, shoving through the seated inmates without care. Anything to put some distance between himself and the water tribesman.

Zuko silently fumed as he stormed back to his cell, anger burning in his throat like bile. He listened to the water tribesman's night-time ramblings and suddenly the man thought he had some sort of agency or control over his life? That he needed someone else to watch out for him, as though he hadn't spent only Agni knew how many years on his own? For all he knew, the stories Hakoda told were a ruse, a way to get Zuko to let his guard down.

“No,” he muttered to himself, throwing his cell door open and then closed angrily. He paced back and forth across the metal floor, the sound of his own heavy boots echoing loudly in his ears. “Not fucking likely.”

His anger towards Hakoda was a good distraction from his concerns about the returned officer, though the fear from when he'd first seen the man came flooding back the more time he had alone. Isao had been there the day Zuko had nearly—

He stopped, shoving down the urge to vomit. But Isao knew, was friends with the man even, if their joyful reunion had been anything to go by. Zuko swallowed forcefully and continued

pacing, too nervous to sit, his mind racing anxiously until the evening horn sounded, signaling the end of the day. Biting his lip, he glared at the door; Hakoda would be back soon, bringing with him more questions Zuko didn't want to answer or even think about.

Truly feeling like the coward he'd known he was since childhood, he curled onto his bed, back to Ichiro's side of the cell (for it was still Ichiro's, he kept telling himself, and nothing Hakoda did would change that). He could hear the other prisoners from his cell division returning from the cafeteria, tense silence accompanied by the sound of their footfalls where conversation once occupied, only broken by guards barking orders or the sound of a kanabo strike. He closed his eyes as the door rolled open on its track, Hakoda's familiar step entering their cell. He sensed more than heard the water tribesman hesitate, probably standing just behind him, and he braced himself, waiting. Eventually, he heard Hakoda sigh then the sounds of him settling into bed.

Hakoda did not try to pry conversation from him as he did most other nights, which Zuko told himself he was grateful for. The minutes slid by, the bulb going out above them for the night, and Zuko was left alone with the thoughts of Isao and the officer, of their hate-filled glares and all that could possibly entail.

After what felt like an eternity, he could not stand the silence any longer. If he lay there a moment more, fear threatening to consume him, he may go mad. Hating himself, Zuko whispered into the dark, "I... I used to sit by a turtle duck pond with my mother. She would read me plays— *Love Amongst the Dragons*, *Roynar and the Fifth Brigade*, even *The Spider Wasp and the Gilacorn*. There were...there were cherry tree groves and fire lilies, a willow we would always sit under. I used to...to get concerned for the turtle ducks in the winter, because they had no home except the pond, and it would always freeze over. I would beg my mother to have a structure built for them so they had somewhere warm to sleep but..." *But father would never allow it*, he didn't say, eyes burning.

There was silence from the opposite side of the dark and Zuko felt foolish. His cheeks warmed and he mentally cursed himself, wondering why he'd shared *that* of all things. Hakoda was a warrior, he wouldn't care about turtle ducks or—

"My daughter used to leave out seal jerky for the wild polar bear dogs that roamed near our village," the man said, surprising Zuko. He chuckled fondly. "She always thought they looked too skinny."

"You must miss her," Zuko murmured, thinking of what Suki had said.

"Every day without her and her brother is agony," Hakoda said softly. "You may not understand but...when I lost my wife, I also lost myself, for a long time. I wasn't there for my children, not like I should have been. I was consumed by the thought that the men who had taken so much from me still drew breath, for this war that had never touched our shores suddenly became personal in a matter of minutes. I told myself that leaving was for my children's own wellbeing, that I was doing my part to fight, but it was selfish. When I saw them only recently, I realized how much of their childhood I have missed because of that need for revenge. My boy—he was only at my waist when I left our village—he's nearly to my shoulder now. And my girl...spirits, she has grown so much. Their mother would be proud of them both."

Zuko thought of Azula, of how drastically she appeared to have changed when she'd found him in the desert. They had both become hardened in their years apart but she was a blade sharpened and ready for use. It had been startling, the sight of her at war with the little girl he hadn't seen in years—a girl he'd never see again. Even though he still didn't trust the man, he thought he understood at least part of Hakoda's pain.

Hakoda had long since fallen asleep when Zuko finally began to drift off, exhaustion pulling at his eyelids, threatening to overtake him. Dawn couldn't have been more than a few hours away and while his anxiety had mostly unclenched the fist it held around his chest, he still couldn't shake the fear of falling asleep.

He had just decided to let his eyes slide shut when there came the telltale sound of boots outside his door. Instantly on edge, Zuko bolted upright, almost nauseous as the light coming through the door slat flickered and went dark; bodies crossing by then coming to a halt. Scraping at the keyhole, then the horrible sound of the lock unclicking. A moment later, two figures slipped inside, the cell going dark again as the door slid shut.

Isao's low snarl caused Zuko's stomach to drop somewhere between his feet. "I see you're already awake. Good. You remember Hikaru, don't you? He certainly remembers you."

*Hikaru*, Zuko thought, unable to speak. Finally a name for the face.

Hikaru looked no less intimidating up close, and the beam of light from the door slat highlighted just enough of him so that it was plain to see where the hair did not cover the many, many scars Zuko had given him.

"I don't want any trouble," Zuko said, hating how small he sounded. "I didn't—"

"Didn't what?" Hikaru interrupted with a sneer. "Didn't *do* anything?" He backhanded Zuko hard enough to send him to the floor, blood on his tongue. "Because of you, I had to relearn how to speak, how to walk, how to fucking hold a spoon!" In the dark, Zuko couldn't see the blows coming, and had barely any time to brace himself as a steel-toed boot made contact with his ribs. He groaned, the edge of his bed digging into his spine.

"That's enough," Hakoda's deep voice said, and Zuko looked up in disbelief. The man was on his feet, fists clenched, a dangerous look on his face. "Would you really stoop to such dishonor? Attack a child in the middle of the night?"

"This doesn't concern you," Isao asked, shaking out his arm. A long, trailing whip of fire lit the entire cell orange, casting shadows across the men. Zuko cringed away, feeling the heat of the whip even from where he was still half-curved on the floor. "Go back to sleep, we're going to take this upstart on a little walk."

Hakoda's lip curled and Zuko felt a flicker of fear in his gut. "I will do no such thing." Faster than Zuko could have expected, the water tribesman was launching himself at Isao, completely ignoring the fire whip as it cracked towards him. Hikaru turned, hand going to his kanabo, but Zuko reached it first. He tore the heavy weapon from the officer's belt, forcing down the urge to hurl as he swung it with all his strength. He struck the back of Hikaru's head, knocking him down with one hit. He remained unmoving on the floor, hands twitching

uselessly and Zuko stumbled back, dropping the club, unable to do much more than stare even as Hakoda continued to grapple with Isao.

The water tribesman had Isao in a tight headlock, his forearm pressing against the man's jugular. Zuko looked away as the officer's struggles began to weaken then his entire body went slack. Hakoda dropped him to the floor, chest heaving as he panted.

"Is he—"

"Asleep," Hakoda said, expression still thunderous. He bent over Isao's form, patting his sides, turning him over to better access his pockets. After a moment, he rose, a keyring on his forefinger. "C'mon. If we're quick, we might just make it out of here before anyone misses these two."

Vaguely stunned, Zuko followed Hakoda in a daze, watching mutely as he locked their cell behind him, the hallway feeling empty and bare.

Hakoda ushered him along, moving quickly and determinedly. Zuko had no idea where they were going, wasn't even sure Hakoda himself knew, but moving forward felt right. They hurried down flight after flight of stairs, the numerous landings silent except for the sounds of sleeping inmates.

Zuko stopped when they reached the corridor that would take them to the courtyard. "Wait, wait. I have to—" He ran his hands through his hair with a curse. "Follow me."

"There's no time—"

Zuko didn't wait to convince Hakoda; he whirled around, taking lefts and rights with abandon, knowing every second that ticked by they risked being caught. He finally found a door he'd passed countless times, the crack below it dark. He tried the handle to no avail. "Keys," he said to Hakoda, fingers shaking. Hakoda wordlessly handed them over and Zuko began testing each one. Finally, after what felt like a century, one turned. Gasping in relief, Zuko shoved his way inside, stomach dipping at the sight of filing cabinets; row after row after row.

"Zuko, what are we doing—"

"Give me a few minutes," he snapped, racing through the archives, gaze flitting from each tiny labeled indicator to the next. He finally found the one he was looking for and tore the drawer open, riffling through the papers inside. He found Suki's file with a cry of relief, flipping through the pieces of parchment with hands that wouldn't stop shaking. Victorious, he crammed the papers back into the drawer, hurrying back the way they had come with long strides. "You don't have to come with me. I can catch up to you, you should—"

"Zuko," Hakoda said, laying a heavy hand on his shoulder. Zuko tried not to flinch. "We're leaving together. Now let's go."

Zuko nodded, throat tight. He hesitated as Hakoda locked the door behind them, another name occurring to him but it was too late—someone would begin looking for Isao and

Hikaru eventually. They had to put as much distance between themselves and the Boiling Rock as they could before that happened.

Mind on the verge of panic, Zuko led the way through the bowels of the prison to the female cell divisions. They hid below stair landings when patrolling guards passed, sweat dripping into Zuko's eyes, his heart pounding in his ears. Finally, they reached the proper cell. Hakoda looked no less worried than Zuko felt as he unlocked the door, and Zuko peeked inside, praying he was right. "Suki?"

He heard a faint gasp, then, "Zuko?"

"Come on," he whispered, hoping not to disturb Suki's cellmate. A moment later, Suki's pale face emerged into the light, eyes wide. She did a double-take at the sight of Hakoda but Zuko couldn't dwell on it. He grabbed her hand and pulled her into the hall as Hakoda locked the door. "We're getting out of here."

## Chapter End Notes

Well, four chapters in and we finally get to the conversation in the fic description :) you might be able to guess which scenes I wrote first lol. I decided to have Zuko, Hakoda, and Suki break themselves out bc in canon Zuko is the one to tell Sokka about the Boiling Rock, and since he's never met Sokka and the gang likely doesn't have anyone who knows the Fire Nation very well at this point, I opted to keep it out. I really appreciate everyone's patience with updates, as well as all of the kind words, you guys are the best!

# Chapter 5

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sunlight was just beginning to break over the lip of the caldera when they reached the gondola landing, the morning steam blazing orange beneath the rising sun. Zuko, Hakoda, and Suki spilled onto the receiving platform, out of breath and drenched in sweat. Zuko shoved his damp hair from his eyes, breathing raggedly and almost unable to believe they had made it so far. As early as it was, the prison was eerily silent. There was no movement he could see—not a soul stirred in the courtyard or even along the rows and rows of patrol parapets; only steam rolled over the high walls of the prison, a gossamer curtain that curled in the sweltering breeze. It was too still, too quiet, especially for what they were doing. Before them, just as silent as everything else, a single massive gondola car stood, its neighboring line empty.

“How does—how does it work?” Hakoda panted, glancing over his shoulder the way they’d come.

Zuko cast about, following the trail of thick cables that held the gondolas aloft to the where the line released at a massive spool bolted to the ground behind them. He’d spent hours watching the guards at this very landing, bored out of his mind in the courtyard now far below, making up stories about the people who worked above. He darted towards it, searching for something, anything, that might buy them some time. A single lever arose from the mass, black-handled and gleaming.

“When I say run, get to the gondola. We won’t have much time,” Zuko snapped, lifting his foot and giving the bar kick after kick, aware that with every passing second they might be swarmed by guards. It didn’t budge and Zuko cursed, resisting the urge to pull at his hair.

Pulling at his shoulder, Suki cried, “What are you *doing*?”

“We have to make sure no one can reverse the car or stop us! You both need to be inside before—”

His words were lost as all around them alarms began to blare. Siren shrieks lifted the hair on the back of his neck, sending his bad ear ringing painfully. He cried out, a hand clapped to the side of his head. “Go!” he shouted, pointing to the gondola. “Get inside!”

Hakoda’s expression was fierce. “We aren’t leaving you here—”

“Just trust me,” Zuko spit, gripping the lever and pushing it forward. Immediately, the gondola gave a terrible groan, lurching forward painstakingly slow. Suki cursed, grabbing Hakoda’s arm and pulling him towards it. Only when Zuko was certain they could make it in time did he crouch beside the lever, forcing down his rising nausea. Hands on the base of the bar, he summoned what he could of his chi, the metal growing hot beneath his palms. He shuddered, trying not to envision his mother or the men he had seen burned beyond hope the



day of the riot. The metal quickly began to glow red, heat emanating from where he held it as he tried to ignore the knowledge that with every passing second, guards were climbing closer, the gondola inching further away.

Zuko gritted his teeth as he concentrated, shoving down a sudden wave of dizziness. Rising unsteadily to his feet, he gripped the handle and leaned his full weight down onto the bar, bending the weakened metal as far as he could. It wasn't nearly enough, the bar could still be manipulated if someone really tried, but he was comforted slightly knowing that any attempt to reverse the gondola would be delayed at least a little.

Unsatisfied but out of time, he sprinted across the landing, heart pounding in his ears as he realized just how little time he had. The gondola was approaching the furthest end of the platform, his only chance for freedom. Behind him, the door of the receiving platform burst open, shouting guards sending blasts of flames at his back, so close he could feel the scorching heat. Suki screamed something as, without slowing, he leaped across the gap between the landing and the car, barely clearing it. He hit the ground hard, sending the whole lift swaying and jarring his elbow in the process. Fire, so hot he could feel it from where he lay on the floor, engulfed their car, furling through the open windows, heating the floors beneath his palms. Struggling to his knees, nearly blinded by smoke and heat, Zuko split the blast in half, forcing it back outside the gondola, groaning at the effort.

Suki's incredulous voice rose above the roar of flames that sailed around them. "You never said you were a *firebender*!"

Zuko swallowed, dropping his arms as the fire relented, hoping the others couldn't see how badly he was shaking. Hakoda took a step forward but he avoided looking at him, jerking away from the man's outstretched palm. He said nothing, keeping his gaze on the receding figures of the guards, not quite prepared for the disgust he was sure to find on either of Hakoda or Suki's faces.

A slim hand curled around his wrist. Suki said softly, "Not that it's a bad thing. Just a bit of a shock."

He mustered a weak smile, surprised at how relieved he felt to hear her say that. "Thank you."

Hakoda didn't try to touch him but Zuko felt his presence at his elbow as clearly as if the man had laid a hand on his shoulder. He said nothing for a long moment, so long that Zuko's chest began to feel oddly tight. He opened his mouth, then closed it as if thinking better of it. Finally, the man said, "If we make it across the lake alive, we'll need a way off the island. We're lucky to have made it this far." He held up the keys he'd stolen from Isao, closing his fingers around them, veins protruding in his large forearm as he squeezed. Zuko looked away. "Very lucky indeed."

"We'll have to worry about that when we get there," Suki said, hands on the window lip. "Can't this thing can't move any faster?"

"Probably not," Zuko leaned out the window next to her, stomach swooping as heat practically blasted him in the face, the boiling water far below nearly concealed by steam.

“All we can do now is hope we make it to the other side before they find a way to stop us.”

Even though they were steadily putting distance between themselves and the prison, the still-screaming alarms bounced off the surrounding volcano walls, making it feel as if they were still on the receiving platform. Zuko’s left ear continued to ache with every shriek and he rubbed at his temple, hoping to drive away his rising headache. A clamor from behind them drew his attention back towards the prison; the door they had stumbled through was open again, a second contingent of guards spilling onto the platform, their shouts ringing across the boiling lake in a jumbled mess. Warden Akumo stood amongst them, his face visibly red even from afar, his state of panic sparking something warm in Zuko’s chest.

That feeling died when he caught sight of what the guards carried with them.

Manhandled between four men, a massive steel saw winked in the sunlight, its teeth jagged and sharp. The guards lifted it over the cable spool, placing it with haste over the receding line.

“They’re going to cut the line!” Suki gasped in realization, knuckles turning white where she clutched the window.

Zuko whirled towards the opposite end of the car, eyeing the craggy landing that was slowly getting closer. “We can make it,” he insisted. “The cables are too thick, they’ll never be able to saw through them in time.” Suki’s large eyes found his and he thought, *Please, please let us make it*. He couldn’t stomach the thought that he had offered her freedom and given her death.

Hakoda, sounding alarmed for the first time since Zuko had met him, said, “I hope you’re right.”

The next few minutes across the lake passed in agony. The Warden’s shouts grew dimmer as they approached the opposite side of the volcano but their car grew increasingly unsteady as the guards continued to work with the saw, making the gondola lurch precariously. Every time it jolted, Zuko closed his eyes, certain he was about to meet the boiling waters below. The platform was growing steadily closer, only but a few meters from them when shouts erupted from the guards. Zuko didn’t even have time to turn; there came a massive pop, like a cannon being fired, and then one of the lines holding them aloft rippled, its frayed end flying from the receiving platform and over the lake.

Zuko cried out as the gondola car shifted and faltered, its entire right side collapsing. Suki grabbed at him, her hand clutching his sleeve as the floor fell from beneath their feet. Grappling at the heated metal, all of the air left his lungs as they crashed into the wall, dangling over the boiling lake. Hakoda hit the space next to them, his eyes large as he quickly scrambled away from the open window. Zuko carefully got to his feet, forcing himself not to look down, instead focusing on the narrow section of wall just below the gondola’s windows that they could stand on. Suki’s breathing was loud in his good ear, her face white with terror. Trying to ignore his own shaking, Zuko squeezed her hand.

*We’re going to make it*, he wanted to say, but he couldn’t bring himself to lie. Instead, he looked between her and Hakoda. “As soon as we’re close enough to the landing we have to

jump. They could cut through the other line at any moment.”

Suki, the determination he’d come to value from her nearly vanished from her wide eyes, said, “Even if we make it, we don’t have any means of travel or anywhere to go.”

“There must be a boat or a ship of some kind,” Zuko said, “Even if it’s not the ferry from the mainland, the Warden is likely to have one for personal use. We’ll find it.”

Hakoda brandished his hand as if just remembering something. “I saw another ship when I was being brought in. It was small, not made for long voyages, but I bet we can find it.”

Zuko nodded and though she didn’t look any less terrified, Suki said nothing else. It was probably hopeless, a dark, cynical part of him thought, but the idea was nice to cling to, especially as they were only inches from tilting to their death.

The car gave another jolt and Zuko’s stomach was in his throat as he nearly lost his balance. He didn’t dare turn around or even move, not wanting to encourage the unsteady car to list any further. Glancing up, he could’ve cried in relief when he saw they were almost to the landing.

Shuffling to the furthest end of the gondola, they waited in tense silence, the alarms still ringing behind them. Suki edged toward the platform first, hands flexing at her sides. Backing up as much as she could, she made a running leap, clearing the gap easily. She rolled as she hit the ground, curled in on herself tightly. Panting, her eyes grew wide as she rose, gaze focused on something behind them. “Hurry, they’ve almost managed to cut the other line!”

Unable to look for himself, Zuko took a steadying breath and hurled himself across the gap. His feet had just hit the platform when another cannon-like pop sounded. Whirling around, he gaped in horror as the cable went slack, the gondola car going with it. Hakoda leaped but he wasn’t quite fast enough—his foot slipped on the metal lip of the landing, his body hitting the ground with a terrible thud. He scrambled at the caldera’s edge, just barely managing to catch himself, fingers grasping at the slick metal. Suki darted forward, grasping his forearm, entire body straining as she struggled, nearly dragged over the edge herself by the man’s weight. “Zuko!”

Jolted from his stupor, Zuko flung himself to the ground, grabbing Hakoda’s free arm. Together, he and Suki hauled the man over the edge, both immediately collapsing once he’d cleared the lip. Zuko rolled over just as Hakoda panted out a haggard, “*Thank you.*” Sitting on his heels, the water tribesman shoved a trembling hand through his hair, glancing over the edge of the landing, looking ill. “Are you two alright?”

Still trembling, Zuko managed to echo Suki’s acknowledgment. He shoved himself up, saying almost in a daze, “We need to...we need to find a way off this island. Quickly.”

Hakoda and Suki didn’t argue, the three of them taking off at a brisk jog. The platform may have looked almost exactly the same as its sister across the lake but Zuko still had no idea where he was going. He could barely remember the day he’d been brought to the prison, had only the faintest memories of black sand and mountains, of how thin and smothering the air

had seemed. They ignored the elevator, gravity pulling them down the side of the volcano far faster as they ran. All around, lush green vegetation whipped past, the open ocean seeming impossibly far from so high up. The vast blue expanse grew closer and closer the further they descended, Zuko almost unable to believe his ears at the sound of breaking waves and sea birds.

His legs burned when they finally reached the bottom of the volcano's slopes, a cramp in his side making each breath terribly painful. Neither Suki nor Hakoda looked much better. Hands on his knees, Hakoda managed to get out, "I didn't—I didn't get a good look at the other boat but it was heading towards the eastern side of the island. We could try there."

Zuko opened his mouth to answer but a woman's voice cut through the morning air; "Over here!"

The woman, dressed in a guard's uniform, ran at them, palms extended. Zuko threw himself in front of Suki just as a wall of fire shot towards them. He blocked the blast, parting the flames with a snarl. The guard looked shocked, her mouth dropping open at the sight of him, but in an instant the surprise was replaced with determination. She held her ground as her comrades fanned around them, open palms thrust forward. His back pressed to Hakoda and Suki's, Zuko glared at the surrounding guards, all thoughts of blackened bodies shoved far, far away. *This is no time for cowardice*, he told himself, palms itching. *No time for weakness*.

There was a moment of pause, long enough for him to inhale slowly through his nose, then every guard in the clearing was blasting flames at them, a roaring inferno that sent his skin tingling with heat. Zuko moved without thinking, engulfing himself, Suki, and Hakoda in a tight ball of raw fire, losing all sight of the guards as their world turned red, the earth scorched beneath them. His ears rang as the flames died, the guards rushing them at the moment they'd been blinded.

Fighting was something he'd been doing since the day he'd first drawn breath, whether it had been for his mother's love, his father's favor, or even the right to his own existence—tearing through the guards felt no different. He lost himself in it, seeing Isao, Hikaru, the Warden, every guard or officer who'd ever abused their own power. It was as much for himself as it was for every other inmate he'd ever seen taken advantage of or beaten down. For Suki and Hakoda behind him, for Guang, Han, and Ichiro, for the scars on his back and the pain in his chest that would never abate.

When it was over and he'd had long enough to take in the scene, to realize what he'd done, he whirled away from the carnage, breath shuddering between his lips in short gasps, nausea and memories suddenly unavoidable. Suki stood beside him, soot smeared across her pale cheeks, blood on her knuckles, a stolen dagger in her free hand coated red.

She said nothing about his weakened state. "Come on," she murmured. "There will be more coming soon."

Hakoda did not speak a word to him as they ran from the smoking, silent clearing. Zuko told himself it was for the best, that maybe the water tribesman was finally seeing him for what he truly was.

Even as they put more and more distance between themselves and the caldera, Zuko could still hear the prison alarms going off with every shift of the breeze. The jungle undergrowth passed in a blur, and while it might've been his panic-addled mind desperate for something to grasp at other than fear, he couldn't help but notice how vibrant everything seemed. He'd grown so used to the stifling temperatures of the Boiling Rock that he'd nearly forgotten what it felt like to inhale and not feel dampness in his lungs. It was still hot, still humid, but it wasn't the near-insufferable heat he'd grown accustomed to. The breeze carried the faintest chill even beneath the dense forest canopy, the smell of salty brine a welcome change from sulfur. The plants and greenery all around them were ones he recognized—native Fire Nation flora he never thought he'd miss. He held out a hand as they moved, letting the vegetation pass through his fingers. Feeling overwhelmed, he barely managed to swallow around the lump in his throat.

In no time at all, they reached the easternmost shore of the island, and sure enough, a dock stretched over the water, a small nondescript ship bobbing at its side. Hakoda took the lead as they crept towards a small, single-story building beside the shore, built neatly atop black stone. The only movement visible was that of the waves but Zuko didn't believe for a moment that meant the place was abandoned.

Huddled in the bushes, Hakoda murmured, "Wait here."

Suki waited until the man was out of sight before she whispered, "Where's he from again?"

"Water Tribe," Zuko grunted, wiping at the sweat that threatened to fall into his eyes.

"More specifically," she shot him a sharp glance. "North or South?"

"South."

She frowned, staring in the direction the water tribesman had disappeared, brows drawn together. They didn't speak on it any further; a window exploded outwards as a black and red clad body tumbled out, hitting the ground with a dull thud. Leaping from their hiding place and sprinting towards the building, Zuko and Suki made it to the door just in time for Hakoda to emerge, smiling despite the blood running freely from a fresh cut above his brow. "Let's go."

Their feet were loud on the wooden deck, Zuko's heart once again beginning to pound in his ears as Hakoda leaped from the dock with ease, beginning to inspect the vessel. He made quick work of the boat, instructing Zuko and Suki on which ropes to pull and when, the orders falling from him with confidence and certainty. It didn't seem to matter that it was Fire Nation made—Hakoda knew what to do and for that Zuko was grateful.

Agni, the spirits, *someone* must have been on their side as the wind began to pick up, lifting their sail and carrying them from that horrid place. Zuko watched it get smaller and smaller, the ghost of sirens on the wind getting fainter the further the waves carried them.

"Where to?" Hakoda called, a ghost of a smile on his lips.

"Not the Fire Nation," Suki said, wiping her new dagger clean on her shirt.

“No,” Zuko agreed, even though a pang went through him. “This—” he ran his fingers along the edge of the boat, recalling the world maps he’d been forced to study when he was younger, “—probably couldn’t stand a journey as far as the Fire Nation, or the Earth Kingdom for that matter.”

Hakoda’s smile faded a little. “Quite the mind you have for geography.” When Zuko didn’t reply, he asked, “Where does that leave?”

“The Skypeaks,” Zuko said, avoiding looking at the water tribesman. “A mountain range not far north from here.”

"Somewhere so close will be the first place the Warden sends a search party after us," Hakoda said, grim.

Zuko nodded.

Silence fell over them. After a long moment, Suki asked softly, “What if they catch us?”

“It won’t come to that,” Hakoda said, sounding so certain Zuko almost believed him. He wanted to, he truly did, but he’d learned false hope didn’t get anyone very far. He knew what he would do if he ever found himself back in the Warden’s clutches. Or his father’s, for that matter. It was what he should’ve done the moment he’d been banished, when he’d awoken on that Agni-forsaken ship and discovered the only person left who might’ve cared about him hadn’t actually cared at all.

Only when the Boiling Rock was a speck on the horizon did Zuko allow himself to relax. Even from such a distance, steam rose from the caldera’s mouth, unmistakable from the surrounding mountains. He stared at it a moment longer, thinking of other mountains, another range of sleeping volcanoes, ones just as green and lush. Taking a deep breath, he turned away, facing the open water before them, reminding himself home wasn’t something worth thinking about.



Their journey on the boat was rocky, the Skypeak mountain ranges rising steadily on the horizon. Hakoda steered effortlessly, looking so at ease he was almost a different man. More than once Zuko looked up and found him halfway turned where he commanded the rudder, their journey forward but his eyes in a different place. Suki, on the other hand, did not take well to being on the water, spending much of the time hanging over the side of the prow, her thin shoulders heaving. Zuko himself felt sick with every slosh of the waves but didn’t have enough left in his stomach to even dry heave. He opted to sit beside her, judging her the least likely of his two companions to try and speak to him, one hand awkwardly holding her hair.

Night had nearly fallen by the time the Skypeaks came into full view. Ancient, towering mountains far steeper than any volcano stood proudly, their snowy tips white and dusty from a distance. The sunset, the first proper one Zuko had seen in far too long, lit the horizon orange, the cloud-filled sky alight with shades of red, purple, and pink. He stared in awe, the warmth of Agni fading as she sank below the skyline, the moon replacing her yellow face. He couldn’t remember the last time he had seen something so beautiful.

Suki was out of their boat the moment they ran aground. She leaped over the side with a joyous laugh, the water at her waist. She grinned at Zuko, the smile making her look years younger. “Come on!”

Sighing, he climbed out after her, startled by the sudden chill as he dropped into the water. It was nothing like the cooler, where the cold had sapped away all strength, stealing any ability to move or speak. He felt himself smiling, the feeling odd. Suki giggled, cupping her hands and suddenly flinging water at him. He sputtered, momentarily shocked, then returned the splash with one of his own. She shrieked, laughing as she scrambled further away from the shore. He chased her, the ocean washing away any remnants of ash and blood, the only physical reminder of their time imprisoned being the clothes and scars they wore. Distantly, Zuko was aware of Hakoda climbing from the boat, hauling it to shore, but just for a moment, he allowed himself to forget it all, to just feel the cool water on his skin, to enjoy the sounds of Suki’s laughter.

“I yield, I yield,” Suki finally panted, still smiling. Zuko, equally out of breath, couldn’t help but return her grin. They were both completely soaked from head to toe as they trudged to shore tiredly, the sky almost entirely dark when they finally emerged from the water. It reminded Zuko of family vacations at Ember Island, of Lu Ten and Azula’s laughter ringing in his ears as they played beneath Agni’s watching gaze for hours, until their skin reddened and peeled.

He was still thinking of them as Hakoda sat next to him on the sand, the boat not too far away. “We should really keep moving,” the water tribesman said, and Zuko knew he was right. “We want to be far away from these shores in the event that we’ve been followed.”

Suki sighed on his other side, washed silver in the moonlight. “Thank you, both of you. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to repay you.”

“There’s no need for that,” Zuko said softly, picking up a handful of sand and letting the soft granules sift through his fingers. “We...we saved each other.”

She nodded, patting his knee. Hakoda made a soft sound in agreement, and Zuko finally looked up at him, finding the man’s gaze stuck on where Suki’s hand lay. Face hot, Zuko stood abruptly. “We should get going,” he said, brushing sand from his hands, flustered. “Like you were saying.”

Hakoda nodded, lips twitching into a smile. Suki seemed oblivious to Zuko’s feelings of awkwardness as she started towards the treeline. “I hope we come across some kind of food soon, I’m starving. Anything would be better than that plain congee.”



They did indeed come across a village, one only a few miles from the place they had landed along the shore. Even though being discovered by the Warden was the last thing any of them wanted, they knew better than to risk their luck by venturing into the Skypeaks without supplies. The small fishing town was quite sorry, with only two docks that stretched haphazardly out into the bay, a few rickety boats nestled at their sides.

Hakoda hesitated just outside the village limits, the smattering of trees around them still providing enough cover that they could probably go unseen. “Wait, wait, we can’t all just walk in there dressed the way we are.”

Zuko ran a hand over his face, wondering why he ever thought it was a good idea to skip his dinner the previous day. On top of that, the exhaustion of having not slept a wink through the night was finally catching up to him, dragging his eyelids down and making his brain feel sluggish. The hunger was a sharp reminder that they couldn’t rest yet. “You’re right. They’ll know instantly where we’re coming from.”

Suki looked determined. “I can do it.”

Thinking of Seiji, of the first man he’d ever killed, in some dark nameless alley so long ago, Zuko felt a surge of protectiveness. “It might not be safe.”

She raised a defiant eyebrow but before she could say anything, Hakoda stood up straight, voice clear and authoritative. “I’ll go. It’s not for debate.”

Zuko and Suki remained quiet, neither quite willing to argue. They waited for what felt like forever, the bright face of the moon peering down at them, their only source of light. Finally, Hakoda’s large form hurried around the side of the closest building, a large sack slung over one shoulder.

“Hurry,” he whispered, ushering them along through the dark, his words nearly lost by the sounds of the waves. “I wasn’t spotted but I doubt these won’t be missed.”

They veered away from the beach, traveling through the scraggy underbrush without conversation. The moon was their only source of light as they ventured into the mountains, the grass and forest vegetation giving way to gravel and sprigs of tough, dry weeds. The air grew thin the further up they climbed, cool where the Boiling Rock had been suffocating. With nightfall and no trees to block the wind, the air quickly grew almost uncomfortably cold. Even with his damp clothes, Zuko didn’t necessarily mind it but Suki kept rubbing her hands together, her arms spotted with gooseflesh.

“Here,” Hakoda finally said, when the moon was at its highest. He dropped the sack of pilfered goods to the ground. Zuko sank down beside it, his aching feet grateful for the reprieve. “We can sleep here tonight and continue tomorrow. I didn’t find too much, the pickings were slim, but we’ll be able to get by for a while if we’re careful.”

Suki settled beside the bag, pulling it open and rummaging through the insides. She pulled out three thin blankets, a few salted fish, and two overripe figs. Itching for something to do, Zuko wandered around the underbrush of the surrounding area, collecting whatever dried twigs he could find. His choices were limited and he brought them back to the others wordlessly. It took nothing to get the fire started, coaxing the tiny flames to life amongst the twigs as he suppressed a shudder. It would probably die the moment he fell asleep but for now it was enough.

They ate in what Zuko felt was fairly stilted silence, the only sound crying cicadas and night animals, none of them knowing how to relate to this new dynamic.



Hakoda broke the quiet first. He offered Suki a small smile. "I don't think I ever introduced myself. My name is Hakoda."

"Suki," she said, nibbling on her fish. "Though I've heard a lot about you."

Hakoda glanced at Zuko, expression amused. "Oh?"

She nodded. "Yes, I... You're from the Southern Water Tribe, aren't you?"

The man smiled, pride in his blue gaze. "I am indeed."

Suki seemed to straighten. "Some kids came to my village, a few months before my arrest. They were traveling with the avatar—"

All of the air seemed to leave Hakoda at once. Zuko thought incredulously, *The avatar?* The water tribesman gasped softly, mouth falling open. "Did you meet them? Katara and Sokka?"

"I did," Suki grinned, looking triumphant. "I saw them again in Ba Sing Se not too long after we first met." Her smile fell. "They had lost their air bison—" *Air bison?* "—and were trying to find a way into the city. I escorted them through the Serpent's Pass but couldn't stay." She tilted her head. "Sokka always talked about his father but never gave me his name. He said he'd left to fight in the war when he and Katara were little, that he missed him terribly." Hakoda was silent, his eyes bright in the light of the fire. "You're him, aren't you? Their father?"

Lost but recognizing it wasn't his place to intrude, Zuko glanced back and forth between Suki and Hakoda, unsure what to do. Hakoda nodded, swallowing hard. "Yes."

Suki nodded. "I thought so. Katara looks just like you."

"I saw them just before my own arrest," Hakoda said, voice thick. "We..." He glanced at Zuko then quickly away. "We organized and led an attack on the Fire Nation capital during a solar eclipse. The avatar was meant to find the Fire Lord and destroy him but fate was not on our side. We barely made it out with our lives."

Zuko breathed in shallowly, feeling as though he was back on the gondola, the ground threatening to fall from beneath his feet once more.

"And they...were they okay?" Suki asked, sounding very small.

"When I last saw them, they were escaping safely on the boy's bison," Hakoda said gently, "Not many of us made it out of the city but we knew the avatar and the rest of the children needed to escape." He looked down at his hands. "They are our only hope for ending this war."

Zuko finally dared to speak. "You said...you said your children are with the avatar." Hakoda nodded and Zuko frowned, suddenly feeling indignant. "That's not possible, the avatar cycle was broken. It's nothing but a myth, a tale for children and fanatics."

"I'd heard the rumors myself, long before I reunited with my children," Hakoda said carefully. "I didn't quite believe them either but the boy truly is the avatar. An airbender, at that, all but twelve years old."

"That's not possible," Zuko said plainly, matter of fact. "The airbenders—" He cut himself off, not liking the way Suki and Hakoda were looking at him.

"It's a strange story," Suki said finally, wrapping her arms around her knees. "Something about an iceberg, Sokka wasn't making much sense. But Aang *is* the avatar, I've seen it." Hakoda hummed in agreement and Zuko stared in stunned silence at the fire.

"And," he licked his lips, mind whirling, "the day of the eclipse, you said you led an attack on the Fire Nation?"

Again, Hakoda nodded. "Firebenders lost all ability to bend, for a short window of time. It was the closest we've ever gotten to a major victory against the Fire Nation."

Chilled, Zuko barely breathed as he asked, "How far did you..."

"My men and I made it to the upper ring of the city," Hakoda said, the fire casting shadows across his lined face. He was watching Zuko with a strange look. "The avatar, my boy, and an earthbender girl went alone to find the Fire Lord but they were unsuccessful. Ozai must have known about our plans, for the entire city was abandoned."

"Did they make it to the Royal Palace?"

The line reappeared between Hakoda's brows, confusion drawing them together. "To my knowledge, our men didn't make it that far. There was a secret bunker somewhere beneath the city that the avatar infiltrated, I believe, but I was injured at some point in the fight. I couldn't say for certain."

Troubled, Zuko fell silent, hating the feeling of his companions' eyes on him. Muttering something about finding more kindling, he all but stumbled from their campsite, walking until he could no longer hear Suki and Hakoda's voices behind him, then a little further in case his hearing was playing tricks on him.

*The avatar*, he thought, still shocked. *Born from airbenders*. The air nomads had been the first casualties of Sozin's war against the world, the weakest of the other nations and the easiest to snuff out. The notion that some had survived, even if just one of them, sent a shiver down his spine. Sozin had failed, it was now painfully evident, in both his mission to wipe out the air nation and break the avatar cycle. *The avatar*, he thought again, a legend for soft-hearted fools who believed in a kinder world, now sprung to life from an iceberg? It didn't make any kind of sense. And this boy—a literal child by the sounds of it—was meant to face the Fire Lord and destroy him.

Suddenly feeling ill, Zuko fell to his knees, vomiting up the few bites he'd taken before their conversation. He heaved until tears drew at his eyes, ragged, awful sobs wracking him at the thought of a mere child meant to end his father's life. *Had father been there the day of the eclipse*, he wondered, *had Azula? Iroh?* His stricken mind conjured images of earthen

boulders falling from the sky, destroying the only home Zuko had ever known, invaders justified in their fury running rampant through the Palace halls. If their siege had been unsuccessful then surely not. Surely the young avatar would be dead.

Wiping at his mouth with the back of a hand, Zuko took a few moments to breathe and steady himself before kicking dirt over the mess he'd made. Resuming his search for firewood and trying to avoid all thoughts of children's stories, he reminded himself that, if anything, at least he was no longer trapped in the belly of a volcano.

## Chapter End Notes

Once again, apologies for the delay!!! I've been working practically full time lately so this update is not as long as I would like but this felt like a good place to leave things before we get to the gang. Also, random life update, my uni starts up again in a week so I'm not sure how much free time I'll have. Ideally, I want to update this every two weeks!! As always, your support means the world and I love you all so much <33

# Chapter 6

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Five days into their hike, they stumbled upon what appeared to be a village, though calling it such was a bit generous in Zuko's opinion.

"I had no idea people once lived in the Skypeaks," Suki commented as they picked their way through the hollowed-out, desolate little place. They had passed through a deep ravine the evening before, crossing the mountain foothills when they'd found themselves in the bottom of a canyon, its walls as smooth as the marble floors Zuko had grown up playing on. The dry riverbed was exceptionally deep, so deep that soon they had no choice but to continue forward, for rock rose up, up, up around them, long horizontal layers of creams, browns, and reds layering atop one another, guiding their way. In front of them, a few unidentifiable hollows were carved into the canyon walls, by hand it seemed, if the jagged, uneven pick marks were to be believed. They stuck from the otherwise smooth rock like an eagle-hawk amongst sea puffs.

The interiors of the little hollows were utterly bare, whatever thatched fronts that had been constructed succumbing to the elements long ago, their ceilings just high enough to stand up fully beneath. Remains of woven textiles and crumbling wood turned to dust beneath their feet, clouding the air as they moved through the tight canyon. Zuko cursed as he put his foot through a wooden basket, the material splintering away into nothing as though made of paper. He shook himself free, grunting, "This territory was once part of the Air Nation. The only reason it's remained untouched is because it's so uninhabitable. Nothing worthwhile grows, there's no easily accessible water source, the altitude is unforgiving. It's of no use to anyone."

Hakoda stopped, examining what appeared to be the collapsed remnants of a table. He brushed his fingers over the single chair still in one piece. "Someone tried to make a life here."

"Air nomad survivors, maybe," Suki guessed, gazing at the ruins sadly. "I wonder what happened to them."

Gazing at the dilapidated remains, Zuko didn't try to guess.

"We could stop here for the night," Hakoda suggested softly, arm dropping to his side. "It'll be dark soon and this is likely the only place we'll find for shelter."

Suki agreed but Zuko said nothing, the idea of sleeping where long-dead air nomads might've once taken up residence making his skin crawl. Night fell quickly, engulfing the canyon's belly in darkness. Pale moonlight filtered from above, doing little to disperse the shadows. Suki went to investigate the remains of the stone alcoves while Zuko stood next to the abandoned table for a long moment, wondering if the powdery splinters would hold a fire, if it was somehow wrong to even try. He sighed, clearing a space on the ground before stacking the furniture remains haphazardly together.

The dry kindling took to a flame easily, the sudden fire casting long shadows across the rock walls and floor. Zuko settled beside it, grateful for its warmth, the breeze that rushed through the ancient riverbed carrying the biting chill of the Skyepeaks. Across from him, Hakoda dug through what remained of their supplies.

“We have enough water for another week at most,” the man said, expression half-hidden in the dark. He didn’t *sound* angry but Zuko didn’t feel inclined to get any closer to him. “Maybe enough food for a little while longer if we’re careful.”

“We’ll make do,” Zuko replied, glancing in the direction Suki had disappeared. This was the most Hakoda had spoken to him since the start of their journey. He didn’t know what to make of it. Clearing his throat uncomfortably, he thought maybe the man hadn’t quite forgotten the smoldering clearing they’d left behind at the Boiling Rock.

Suki’s light footsteps crunched through the gravel on Zuko’s right and he shifted to make room for her beside the fire. She settled down slowly, one of their tattered blankets around her shoulders. “It’s so beautiful here.” Zuko followed her gaze skywards, the breeze toying with his hair, lifting gooseflesh along his arms. The stars were just visible through the winding canyon ceiling, a river of black studded with a million pinpoints of light. It *was* beautiful, in some distant, unobtainable way. It made him feel small.

Hakoda dropped their slowly shrinking sack to the ground. “We need a plan. We were lucky to have found this place for the night but we can’t stay here forever. We’ll need more supplies eventually.” *We can’t keep wandering*, he didn’t say, but it hung in the air regardless.

“How far is it to the coast?” Suki nudged Zuko with her elbow.

He thought about it, trying to envision the maps he’d poured over as a child. “Maybe a week’s journey on foot, if not more. If we keep going east we should find the Janyang Channel.” Azula had been the one with a mind for maps and strategy, able to recall names and distances in a heartbeat when prompted. Zuko had tried but he’d never been too good at it, earning more than a few slaps from his instructors for his stupidity. “I think it empties into the Tsering Sea but I could be wrong.”

“You’ve been right so far,” Suki said, sounding so sure in his abilities it left him feeling a little confused.

He wanted to argue but Hakoda asked suddenly, “And how far to the Western Air Temple?”

Zuko scoffed. “Why?”

“It’s not far from the Fire Nation and is probably undisturbed...after facing defeat at the Capital it seems a likely place Aang might seek refuge. It would be familiar to him.”

Zuko stared at him a moment longer, thoughts awhirl. The air temples, to his knowledge, were completely abandoned, so far removed from the minds of men that they were home to only ghosts, no longer suitable even for the spirits. It was a terrible notion, he thought, dread a cold weight in his belly, that the first place marked by the horrors wrought from Sozin’s line might be a place the avatar sought refuge.

“Maybe we try the Earth Kingdom instead,” he suggested, shifting uneasily.

“Ba Sing Se fell months ago,” Hakoda said carefully, eyeing him from across the fire. Zuko dropped his gaze in discomfort, recalling the morning Warden Akumo had shared the news of the city’s conquering. Cheers had erupted through the guards and officers, the inmates’ chores even relaxed for the day in celebration. Zuko had felt a mix of shock and elation at the pronouncement. He had believed, when he was much, much younger, that Iroh would be the one to topple the walls of the Impenetrable City, if only for the atrocities Lu Ten had suffered behind them. He had prayed for it even, long after Iroh had returned to the Caldera, because didn’t Lu Ten deserve justice? Didn’t his murderers deserve to meet their end? Now, he only felt cold, the warmth of the fire doing very little to bring life back to his numb fingertips. He was no longer sure what justice meant nor who deserved it more; his cousin or the people defending their last stronghold against invaders. “It’s been under Fire Nation occupancy since the day the princess nearly killed the avatar. She’s established forces in almost every major city from Chameleon Bay to the Mo Ce Sea, even taken great measures to dismantle what remains of the Earth King’s forces. It is perhaps the most dangerous place we could possibly seek asylum.”

Zuko’s breath caught, vision tunneling in shock. He hadn’t heard...how could she have—? He swallowed hard, mouth suddenly dry. “The princess?”

Hakoda nodded, expression grim. “Princess Azula is one of the most formidable assets the Fire Lord has. She staged a coup from the inside of Ba Sing Se, turning the Dai Li to her side. Spirits, she can’t be older than either of you and she’s managed to topple nations.”

“She’s been a scourge upon the Earth Kingdom, leaving a flaming trail of destruction everywhere she’s gone in her attempt to capture Aang,” Suki said stiffly while Zuko hunched in on himself, stomach sinking at the thought of his sister doing what the entire world had thought impossible, what Iroh had failed to do. She had always been determined, had to have been in order to survive under their father’s watchful eye. She was certainly capable, he realized, sick. “But it’s not like she’s done this all alone—she had help, plus the Dai Li was already corrupt, King Kuei a puppet of their own making. Azula was smart enough to see that and conned her way into the city. She’s as much a homicidal maniac as all the rest of her family, only far craftier.”

*All the rest of her family.* Zuko winced, a small sound escaping him before he could bite it back.

Suki mistook the look on his face. She scoffed, an ugly sound. “I don’t think I’m being too harsh. The princess attacked me and my warriors while we were on a mission. Ambushed us really. We stood our ground but we were no match, I hate to admit. *She* sent me to the Boiling Rock.”

*We have that in common,* he thought, deeply troubled. Swallowing again, he rasped in confusion, “Your warriors?”

“The Kyoshi Warriors,” she sat up a little straighter, pride shining in her eyes. “We were founded by Avatar Kyoshi herself and fight in her memory to protect our village and, more recently, the Earth Kingdom.” Deflating a little, Suki’s mouth pressed into a flat line as her

hands curled into fists where they rested in her lap. "I'd love to face her again, in a fair fight. Maybe I'd find out where she sent everyone else." Her voice trailed off, eyes stuck on the glowing embers of their fire.

Azula didn't know the meaning of a fair fight, he thought to himself, thinking of the games they'd played when they were little, her need even then to bend the rules to her own liking. He quickly shook himself from those thoughts, mind jumbled as he tried to make sense of what he was hearing. "You said she had help." He could feel Hakoda's eyes boring into him as he spoke yet he was unable to stop. He needed answers. "That she wasn't alone."

"She had two friends," Suki said, gaze far away. "One was skilled with knives, the other fought in a way I'd never seen before. She could strike you at just the right spot and suddenly you couldn't lift your arm. It was incredible and horrible. We didn't stand a chance."

*Mai, Ty Lee*, some part of his mind supplied, summoning vague memories of two little girls Azula had met in school, begrudging participants in her little games. He didn't get to dwell on it long; Suki brought her legs up, wrapping her arms about her shins as she rested her chin atop her knees. She stared into the fire, light dancing across her cheeks as she whispered, "I was so sure I was going to die at the Boiling Rock. I never thought...I never thought I'd get a chance to walk free." Their eyes met, her gaze hard. "I'm not going to waste it."

"We're not going to," Hakoda said firmly, as steady as iron. "We owe it to every one of our allies who no longer stands with us, to the generations of innocents whose lives will never be the same." He looked up briefly, taking in the stars. Zuko found himself wondering if they were constellations he recognized or if he was thinking of different stars, a different sky. When he dragged his gaze down, Zuko met it, determined not to look away. "I will see you both to the air temple, and depending on what we find there, I will either continue on with you or travel to the Earth Kingdom."

"Didn't we just establish that's not a place we want to be right now?" Zuko sneered, frustration rising in his chest.

Hakoda regarded him evenly, infuriatingly calm. "Despite the power the avatar possesses, he's still just a boy. The Fire Nation nearly succeeded in killing him once already, he is not indestructible or without weaknesses. I can't speak for whatever plans Avatar Aang may have presently but the Fire Lord will be expecting another attempt on his life no matter what. This war is far from over and we haven't seen our last fight yet. If Aang is at the air temple, you two will remain with him while I try to find us allies."

Zuko snorted dubiously. "And *you* have allies in the Earth Kingdom?"

The water tribesman's mouth twitched as though he were trying not to smile, as if he knew something Zuko didn't, which was entirely likely. "I've managed to make my way onto land at least a few times over the years, you know."

Zuko grunted something unintelligible, face heating up. He hated not knowing what everyone around him knew, hated that he couldn't simply ask them to explain without arousing too much suspicion or inciting questions of their own. "Fine," he all but spit, not sure why he was

so upset. “So we get to the air temple and then what? Just hope that the avatar happens to be there?”

“Aang is the hope so many people lost,” Suki insisted, so earnest Zuko felt a pang for ever thinking her foolish. “Even if the chances of him being at the temple are slim, we have to try.”

“Besides,” Hakoda's voice was firm, as immovable as the ocean as he glanced up, hands clasped between his knees. “The boy needs a firebending teacher.”

A ragged laugh pulled itself from between Zuko's lips and he didn't even care that suddenly both Hakoda and Suki were staring at him as though *he* were the one with ludicrous ideas. He sobered as they continued to watch him, crying, “You can't be serious!”

“Aang is by no means a master of earth or water but he has enough of a grasp on each of the other three elements for the time being. Before the invasion of the Capital he had yet to produce even the smallest of flames. There is no time for us to find someone else.” The water tribesman's gaze was measured, his tone turning far more stern than it had so far. He was speaking like a commander, not the man who had told him stories in the dark like he was some frightened child.

*Okay then*, he thought, anger rising. *Fine*. He lifted his chin, meeting the man's gaze squarely. “I can't.”

Hakoda's eyes flashed before he took a deep breath, failing to hide his frustration. “You're a skilled bender, you've clearly had training of your own. Why not?”

“I...” Ursa, Ichiro, the guards they'd met in their escape—all people of his own nation, all bystanders in a war they'd been born into, same as Zuko. Firebending was destruction, was death, and he wanted no part in passing on its practice. Hakoda should've understood. He'd lost his wife to firebenders, after all. “Firebending isn't like any of the other elements,” he said, trying not to let his voice waver. Hakoda needed him to train the avatar, he tried to remind himself, he *wouldn't* attack him, even though Zuko was about to give him a very good reason to. “It's volatile and unwieldy. If you lose control, you're as likely to burn yourself as you are everyone around you. You can't beat a fire into submission like you can the earth, you can't learn to divert it or contain it like you can water. It's an all-consuming plague my people have brought to every shore of this world and I will not be a part of that any longer.”

The fire popped in the following hush, the logs shifting and sending sparks into the night air. Zuko continued to meet Hakoda's gaze unflinchingly even as still-smoking ash floated down around them, cooling as they drifted to the earth. The man's shoulders were tight, a muscle in his jaw ticking as they glared at each other. It scared Zuko, to see that look on the water tribesman's face, reminded him far too much of someone else who'd set unreasonably high expectations for him, but he was tired of cowering.

He took a breath to speak but Suki was suddenly on her feet, blanket pulled tightly around her shoulders. She yawned, glancing rather pointedly at Zuko. “Not that this hasn't been a fun chat but I think I'm going to bed. We still have a long way to go to the air temple and we all need our rest if we want to make any sort of progress tomorrow.” She cut her eyes at him



again, body angled just right so Hakoda probably couldn't see her face. "I think this is a discussion we can continue in the morning."

Zuko said nothing, remaining rooted in place, his mind made up. Suki sighed, hesitating a moment longer before muttering goodnight in defeat and making her way to the canyon hollows. Hakoda stared at him in the long silence that followed, assessing, scrutinizing. He met it with a scowl, determined not to shrink away.

"Your footwork is impeccable, you know," the man said eventually, voice low. He seemed to have lost some of his displeasure but Zuko didn't trust it couldn't come rushing back. Hakoda had been kind so far but that didn't mean much. "I trained the young men of my tribe for years, long before I set off from my village shores. Many of them were just like you; resilient and stubborn, certain they knew better despite their lack of experience. They didn't know the value of a proper stance and how it might save your life."

Zuko remained quiet, anger humming just below his skin, sending his palms and forearms tingling.

"You've been trained, that much is clear. Your bending is a little unsteady but there is a surety in your movements, the remnants of katas and drills. You don't speak as though you're low born and you seem to have an education far beyond what a commoner might receive, yet there are gaps in what you know and don't know about the present world's affairs. Not to mention," Zuko found himself flinching as though he'd been struck. The furrow was back between Hakoda's brows, no hint of a smile on his often open face. "I found you in the gullet of a hellhole meant for prisoners of war." When Zuko remained mute, the man sighed, brushing a hand through his hair, his exhaustion evident. "I won't pry or beg for your confidence but what little you've shared doesn't paint much of a picture, Zuko. It leaves too much to the imagination and I can't travel with someone who refuses to trust me. Who *I* can't trust."

"I trust you," Zuko said sharply, surprised by how much he meant it.

Hakoda looked him over, shaking his head slowly. "I wish I could say the same, son. Normally, I might leave it well alone, say a man's business is his own, but we have passed the point of keeping up walls. I want to trust you, I do. But I can't do that if you are determined to keep yourself secluded. Secrets often help no one but our enemies."

Zuko exhaled shakily, stomach twisting itself into knots. *Son*. Hakoda didn't know what that meant, certainly wouldn't be calling him such a thing if he knew who Zuko really was. But the man was watching him still, waiting.

"I was born at the Fire Nation capital beneath the sliver of a new moon," he heard himself whisper, as though it were someone else speaking. And maybe it was—the title of prince had been stripped from him the moment he'd fallen to his knees during his Agni Kai, the moment Ozai had cupped flames against his face and seared into him a reminder of his many disappointments and failings. He hadn't been the person he was before then in a very long time. He kept talking, the words spilling from him like blood from an open wound; "My father was certain it meant I would never be a bender, for Agni had not been awake to breathe fire into my lungs, to bless me with her spark. I think that must have been the moment he

decided he hated me. He gave me so many tutors over the years but I still struggled to learn even the most basic of forms.” He shuddered, remembering too many days in the weeks after Ursa’s execution where he’d been unable to draw on his chi, too many nights he’d gone to bed hungry, his ineptitude boundless. “It was pointless.”

“You had no control over your birth,” Hakoda said, body gone rigid where he sat.

“No. But I did have control over myself. I still wasn’t good enough, wasn’t smart or fast enough, still never amounted to anything. I was an embarrassment to our family,” Zuko shoved at his burning eyes with a palm, hating himself. “An embarrassment to *him*.”

“And he sent you to the Boiling Rock?” Hakoda’s voice turned loud with indignation, his shoulders tensing and large arms bunching beneath the thin prison uniform he still wore.

“You were merely a child!”

“I was old enough to know better,” he said gruffly, perturbed by the outburst. Careful not to mention his banishment, he admitted, “I didn’t end up at the Boiling Rock for that. I was sent to the Earth Kingdom for speaking out of turn.” There was still confusion on the man’s face, his eyes nearly pleading, and Zuko realized Hakoda was probably as desperate for answers as he was. Exhaling slowly, willing the unease to ebb, he admitted, “While I was there I fell in with a group of rebels who targeted Fire Nation military shipments. The cause didn’t mean much to me but they gave me food and shelter, so I played along.” He looked at the ground as he said it, thinking of Jet’s crooked smile, the way he’d moved as they’d sparred, how careful he became when dealing with the younger boys. “We...*I* made a mistake, somewhere. It wasn’t long before I was caught.”

“Spirits,” Hakoda murmured as he shook his head, disgust lacing his words. “How old were you?”

Zuko considered it, fiddling with the fraying hem of his shirt. “Around fourteen when I was arrested, I think.”

The man cursed under his breath. Zuko shifted uncomfortably, lifting his hand to let the string drift into the fire, watching it alight and burn into nothingness. After a long moment, Hakoda said softly, “You never should have gone through that. You didn’t deserve it.”

He shrugged, brushing hair from his eyes. “Maybe I did.”

Hakoda’s eyes widen a fraction. “What?”

“Maybe I deserve it all,” he repeated, gaze on the dying embers of the fire. “I’ve *killed* people, done horrible things just to save myself, I’ve been...so, so incredibly selfish.” He’d made so many mistakes over the years, made choices that cost people their lives, their freedom, their futures. It was some sort of punishment from the spirits, this ache in his chest, retribution for the crimes of his ancestors. For being such a coward, for carrying the blood of Sozin.

Hakoda was quiet for so long Zuko had to fight the urge to get up and leave. *This is it*, he thought as the water tribesman tried to think of something to say. Hakoda had seen him when

they'd fled the prison, seen the way he'd burned through the guards, so fucking close to freedom that all caution had flown from his mind. Inhaling raggedly, Zuko tried to calm his nerves, telling himself he could take whatever judgment the water tribesman passed on him, that it wouldn't mean anything because he didn't care. He *didn't*.

When he finally spoke, Hakoda said carefully, "You and I have not been spared some of the tragedies of this life. I'm not so much a hypocrite as to look down upon you for your actions, which I won't ask you to relive unless you wish to but...I think it's easy to believe the paths we follow are ones we set ourselves upon when so often it is the choices of other people that place us there. We want to blame someone, something, for these horrible things, for the horrible choices we make in return. The Fire Lord, for continuing to wage this war of his bloodline, your own father for sending you away, perhaps." Zuko snorted but quickly sobered when he saw the look on Hakoda's face. "I think it might be a bit of both. We certainly have agency, don't get me wrong. I didn't have to leave my family in the South and yet I did. Just..." he sighed, long and aggrieved. "Our lives are determined by so much more than simply our own decisions, as much as we regret them. Unfortunately, our choices and our actions cannot be taken back. The least you can do is learn from the past and try not to let it haunt you."

"How?" Zuko whispered, thinking of Ursa, of the village in flames he had abandoned, of the lives he'd taken, of the people he had...not enjoyed killing but certainly didn't lose any sleep over. "I see them all, every time I close my eyes, every time I bend. I can't escape it."

Hakoda fixed him with a somber look, his voice nearly lost to the night breeze that whistled through the canyon. "You might not ever."

Zuko suddenly felt a rush of gratitude for such blatant honesty, as much as it felt like a screw twisting his insides. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been so open with someone, nor when someone had been so open with him in return. It made guilt pierce through him like a lance—Hakoda didn't deserve to be lied to, to believe he was helping some random inmate he'd had the misfortune of being assigned a cell with. He was helping him *because* he thought he was some mundane Fire Nation citizen, because he had no idea who Zuko's family was, what sort of path they had ravaged through history, through Hakoda's own family.

"I—" Zuko swallowed the rising lump in his throat, quickly getting to his feet. Hakoda blinked at him in surprise, head tilted slightly in confusion. "I'm going to bed," he said abruptly, hurrying from the fireside, feeling even more that he was a coward.



The following morning, Zuko woke with the dawn, even though Agni's warmth had yet to find them so deep with the canyon's channel. He gave Hakoda and Suki a little while longer, until the riverbed was filled with so much light Suki began to stir on her own. In no time at all they were prepared to leave—they had hardly anything to pack, no supplies weighing them down. Hakoda said nothing of the night before, moving with diligent efficiency as they began again for the day. Zuko ignored the black remains of their fire as they left, the smell of smoke clinging to his clothes and hair long after they'd left the odd area behind.

Eventually, the chasm walls leveled and they found themselves on the lip of a gorge, just enough loose earth permitting them to escape onto the surrounding plains. The gorge split the wide expanse of prairie before them like an open wound, her walls lined with strata in a myriad of colors only disturbed by encroaching brush that arose from the canyon bed. The mountains still towered behind them, looming like great beasts at their backs as they walked along the gorge's lip. There was no end in sight, at least not to Zuko. The Skyepeaks shrank the further they went, Agni rose to her peak above them before beginning her descent into the west, but the prairie just continued on, the gorge beside them growing deeper and wider by the mile.

Conversation was scarce as they continued east. The prairie grass was so tall it was at Zuko's waist, its long dry fronds rippling like the surface of the ocean with every gust of wind. Suki eventually fell into step on his right, Hakoda a few meters ahead, their supply bag over his shoulder. Beside him, Suki plucked at the passing stalks, tearing them from the earth with ease. "My mother used to make wreaths from the fields on our island," she recalled softly, pulling florets from a seed head. "Whatever excess was left at the end of harvest season she'd collect from all of our neighbors, sometimes spending weeks at a time on a single wreath, weaving bluestem and wild rye, even the husks of coneflowers and saddlegrass."

"What did she do with them?"

"Return them to the neighbors," she said with a fond smile, "They were nice to look at. It made her happy to share them."

Zuko smiled. "She sounds kind."

"She was," Suki said, letting the seeds fall from her fingers. "She was."

He bit his lip, wondering if it was insensitive of him to ask. "Is she..."

"Passed," she confirmed, face falling. "A few years ago now. An illness swept through our village. We lost so many good people."

"I'm sorry," he said, chest tightening for her. After a moment's hesitation, he murmured, "I lost my mother too."

"Oh," she exhaled, reaching for his hand. He let her take it, not minding the gentle squeeze as much as he once might have. "How did she..."

An image of Ursa, kneeling on steps of the Fire Sage's temple came to mind but he quickly shoved it away. "Sickness," he lied, closing his eyes against the sound of a panabas being drawn, the way her chains had scraped loudly across marble tile. Suki squeezed his hand again, a little firmer this time. They lapsed into silence, the comfortable warmth of the day nice enough to stave away any lingering thoughts of Ursa.

"Listen, there was something I've been meaning to tell you," she started and Zuko glanced at her, eyebrow raised. "Don't be angry," she said carefully, and he stopped abruptly, already knowing that meant nothing good. Suki bit at her lip, taking a deep breath as though steeling

herself. “I sort of overheard your conversation last night and I know I shouldn’t have listened, it wasn’t my place but—”

“But nothing,” Zuko said curtly, turning on his heel and marching on, stomping through the high grass. “And you’re right, it wasn’t your place.”

“Hey!” she cried, hurrying to keep pace with him. If Hakoda heard, he made no indication, only continued on ahead as though this was a path he’d taken a dozen times before. “It was intrusive, I know that and I’m sorry, but please Zuko, you talk so little about yourself! I was all of ten feet away, what was I supposed to do? Will you *stop*?”

He did, fixing her in place with a glare, chest heaving.

“I knew you were Fire Nation and probably high born but I never...” she cut herself off, jaw clenching. “I didn’t think it would’ve been your father who’d set you away. I’m sorry that happened to you.”

*It wasn’t him!* he wanted to scream. *He would rather have seen me dead than place me somewhere so out of reach.* Instead, he demanded, “Why?” fully aware he was being unreasonable but unwilling to calm down. “It’s not like it was your fault. You had nothing to do with any of it.”

“No, but it still hurts to hear what you’ve—”

“It had nothing to do with you!” he practically shouted, ignoring the stunned look on her face. “It was years ago—I can’t take any of it back, so what good does thinking about it now do anyone? Sympathy won’t find us food or water out here and it certainly won’t find us the avatar.”

Her shock quickly morphed into anger, and something inside him welcomed it, was glad for the challenge. “So after everything we’ve been through I’m somehow not allowed to feel sorry for you? To want you to heal from what’s happened in the past?”

“I don’t want your pity,” he snapped.

“It’s not pity,” she insisted, looking as fierce as she had the day he’d chosen to stand beside her in the prison courtyard, all hard edges and defiance. “You’re so wrapped up in your own guilt that you’ve never even considered maybe you’re not the only one who feels that way!” He balked, taken aback slightly, but Suki wasn’t done; “None of us here are without blood on our hands. That doesn’t mean we have to carry that weight on our own!”

He stared at her for a moment, then whirled away with a scoff. And stopped, because Hakoda was staring at him, their supply bag at his side, his expression unreadable.

“*What?*” Zuko demanded, palms and forearms itching.

Hakoda looked him over, silent. He shook his head with finality, gaze flicking from Zuko to Suki and back again. “I don’t believe a shouting match will solve our current predicament, do you?”

Zuko huffed in disgust and stormed past the man without a word, skin prickling as he fumed, heated with a mix of embarrassment and rage. Some small part of him knew he was being unfair but the other part, the one that wanted to lash out, to hurt as much as possible, wished desperately for the time when he had been utterly alone, only himself to rely on and watch out for, no threat of war or training the avatar hanging over him. Other people's emotions were terribly inconvenient, he thought, fingers flitting about his scar, the weight of Suki's eyes on him still stinging. He could've been in the Earth Kingdom by now if it weren't for her and Hakoda's combined lack of self-preservation, their foolish need to do the right thing.

He didn't know why they stuck with him, why either of them had yet to decide he was no longer worth the trouble. He'd been nothing but hotheaded and bitter long before they'd crossed the boiling lake. *You've been lying to them*, some dark part of himself whispered, *they don't know who you really are. How long do you think you'll last after they find out?* He could picture it, the horror on their faces when understanding struck, when they realized who and what he was to their cause.

That day of confrontation was inevitable, for it wasn't a question of if but when, and Zuko had no idea how Hakoda or Suki might react. They deserved to know the truth but he wasn't ready for what would most assuredly come after. Head lowered, Zuko told himself to stop being so damn sentimental. *Betrayal is inescapable*, he reminded himself, glaring across the grassland as though it was somehow responsible for his anger. When the day came, he would make it easy for them.



They slept beside the gorge that night, the mountains shrunk to nothing behind them around the time Agni fell below the horizon. The vast chasm was steeped in black and beneath the dark blanket of night, Zuko could almost deceive himself into believing it was bottomless. He didn't offer to make the fire—Hakoda muttered something Zuko couldn't make out and his ears burned slightly but he still didn't move to help.

Suki tried only once to speak to him, making some comment about how badly she missed a real bed, but Zuko didn't bother to acknowledge it.

Her expression shuttered, gaze turning hard as she said sharply, "I already apologized. Whether you forgive me or not is up to you."

There was no conversation that night, no lengthy discussion beside the fire. An uneasy silence fell over them, a suffocating net of Zuko's own making that he was heavily aware of. It was irrational and childish, he knew, to cling to the anger, but it was a comfort almost, a reminder of a time when he'd had no one else's expectations on his shoulders but his own.

He stared up into the stars long after the others fell asleep, hands clasped behind his head, feeling even more foolish. His eyes finally drifted shut around the time the moon hung at her highest point in the sky, the grassy plains awash with pale silvery light. In his dreams, Jet stood before him, the hooked ends of his dual swords pulling at his flesh. *If I ever see you again, I can't promise I won't kill you.* Ursa on the steps of the Fire Sage's Temple, her hair shorn close to her head, the palace executioner looming behind her as she screamed, *Zuko, help me!*

He tried to get up, to run to her, but a hand on his shoulder kept him in place and when he looked up, Ozai glared down at him, the golden eyes he'd inherited dark with hatred. Zuko blinked and it was Iroh, his hand sliding away, the very same eyes no longer warm or kind, unable to find the son he'd wished to see in him. *Wait, I'll do better!* Zuko cried, reaching for him. *Please, don't send me away! Uncle!*

But Iroh was gone and a voice on his left called, *A bit hypocritical of you, Zuzu, don't you think?*

He whirled, finding Azula before him, older than he'd seen her last. She tsked at him, close enough she could reach out and brush her fingers over his scar. He didn't move away, only stared at her, trying to find some semblance of the sister he remembered. Her eyes went wide as they regarded each other, something akin to hatred flashing across her face and suddenly she was digging her nails into him, just below his sightless eyes. *You left, too.*

He awoke with a start, hands on his shoulders shaking him awake. Lashing out blindly, his palms made contact with something warm and solid as he fought.

*"Hey!"*

Breathing raggedly, he blinked the last echoes of sleep from his eyes, the dream fading. Suki glared at him from a few feet away, half sprawled in the grass. The horizon was brightening, betraying the morning hours. She shoved herself up, glaring at him. "You were having another nightmare. Thought I'd wake you before they land."

"What? Who—"

His words were swallowed by a loud, inhuman roar and he was on his feet in an instant. Beside the still-burning fire, Hakoda waved his arms, back arched as he strained to look at something high in the sky.

Squinting, Zuko's mouth dropped at the sight of a large white beast slowly descending from the lilac dawn, a small bald child sitting atop its neck.

## Chapter End Notes

What we're not gonna do is mention that self-imposed deadline ever again :))

Anyways, this chapter doesn't have too much going on plot-wise but it was kind of necessary to set things up for later. Hope you're all doing well!

# Chapter 7

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Zuko stumbled backward as the huge animal dropped to the ground in front of them, flattening the surrounding grass with a combination of its massive bulk and a large gust of wind that was so strong it knocked back his hair. The beast grunted as it settled slowly onto its haunches, the small boy astride its neck grinning broadly as he waved down at them. His mouth was still agape as the boy leaped from the animal, ten feet in the air, practically floating to the ground beside the creature.

“Aang!” Suki gasped in disbelief, darting forward and throwing her arms around the child. The boy—the *avatar*; his exhausted, half-asleep mind supplied—returned Suki’s hug with gusto, lifting her off her feet as though she weighed nothing. “How are you here?”

“We saw your fire!” the boy explained as he released her. “I didn’t even realize it was you until we got closer. How are *you* here? We thought—” He stopped, gaze landing on Hakoda. He flushed and straightened a little bit, which would have been amusing if Zuko wasn’t still trying to process that this tattooed kid who barely cleared his shoulder could control *all four* elements. “What happened? How did you guys find each other?”

“It’s a long story,” Hakoda said carefully, gaze fixed on the brown saddle above the animal’s back and the three boys curiously peeking over its side. “One to be shared later, perhaps.” He swallowed hard, eyes large with concern as he turned to the avatar. “Where are—”

“*Lee!*”

Zuko’s head snapped around, heart in his throat, staring in confusion at a small boy clambering over the side of the beast’s saddle. The avatar gestured quickly and the boy’s fall was cushioned, the standard-issue Earth Kingdom helmet falling over his eyes as he ran at them, arms open. “*Lee!*” he cried again, knocking into Zuko so hard he stumbled a half step back.

Bewildered, Zuko clutched at the boy, who barely passed his hips, mind awl. “*Mino?*”

“It’s the Duke,” the boy insisted into his shirt, small shoulders hitching. “*Not Mino.*”

“You two know each other?” Suki asked, looking surprised.

“Uh...yeah, actually,” Zuko managed to get out, still so astonished stringing together a proper explanation proved impossible. “I went by Lee when I was with—” A horrible thought occurred to him and he pried the boy away, crouching in front of him, seizing his shoulders. He tried to picture Mino as he remembered him, able to spy a familiar roundness in his nose, in the way he struggled to maintain eye contact. “Min—the Duke...what happened to the other Freedom Fighters? Where’s Jet? Longshot, Pipsqueak?” He was distantly aware of the



avatar repeating *Jet?* incredulously behind him but he was more concerned for Mino, whose large brown eyes began to swell with unshed tears.

The young boy wiped at his face with a small, grubby hand, sniffing. “Our camp was raided. There were too many of them for us to take so we had to scatter. Me and Pipsqueak went together but—” His lower lip trembled and before Zuko could do anything, lurched forward and was once again clinging to his torso. Not knowing what else to do, he froze, glancing at Hakoda briefly before quickly away, face heated.

Hakoda said nothing about the boy, only turned back to the avatar, pale with worry as he whispered a strained; “Sokka and Katara?”

“Safe!” the tattooed boy blurted quickly, and both Suki and Hakoda visibly sagged in relief. “They’re safe back at the Western Air Temple. We—” He gestured vaguely towards the Duke then the large beast and presumably the other boys on its back. “—wanted to watch the sunrise.”

“Thank the spirits,” Hakoda exhaled. He swallowed, nodding almost to himself. “I—I’ll put out the fire, then we can be on our way.” None of them commented on his shaking hands as he turned to do just that.

It took a fair amount of consoling before the Duke was willing to let go of Zuko. Even after he succeeded in prying the child from his torso, the boy clung to his hand like it was a lifeline. His face heated further as realized Suki was watching them with a small bemused smile. He scowled halfheartedly, chest panging as he remembered how awful he’d been to her in the last twenty-four hours. He didn’t get long to guilt himself into an apology—the avatar approached him carefully, storm-gray eyes friendly enough but regardlessly unsettling.

“I’m Aang,” he said, still smiling warmly, thrusting out a small, arrow-adorned hand.

He stared, uneasy, thinking of nothing worse than shaking this boy’s hand. “Er, Zuko.”

The avatar’s arm dropped back to his side, head tilted inquisitively. His friendly demeanor stayed the same, but something in his eyes shifted, more on the side of cautious than defensive. “That’s a Fire Nation name.”

“Yeah,” he said gruffly, wishing the kid would turn his attention on anyone else.

Aang’s smile broadened, far too genuine for Zuko’s liking. “Pleased to meet you, Zuko.”

“Um, Aang,” Suki interjected softly, “Who did you bring with you?”

“Oh yeah—this is the Duke,” Aang said, lighting up as he gestured to the boy at Zuko’s side. “Though you two seem to know each other already. Come on, I’ll introduce you guys to everyone else.” He ushered them towards the hulking beast, which Suki smiled at as they approached, reaching out to stroke something vaguely nose-shaped. Zuko internally decided that, until proven friendly, he would not be going anywhere near the creature’s mouth. “And this is Appa,” the avatar said, with the air of someone introducing a king or dignitary, not a pet. “He’s an air bison and probably my best friend.”

“Best friend?” Zuko repeated, watching uneasily as Suki continued to pet the beast, cheeks dimpled as she murmured to it. Long white fur covered the creature, a distinct animal smell making him wonder what it might take to bathe the thing. Squinting up at its shoulder roughly two feet above his head, he nearly jumped out of his skin when a young man who couldn’t have been any older than himself leaned over the side of the saddle. “Here, let me.”

Zuko again barely contained his surprise as the earth quite literally shifted beneath his feet, lifting him, Suki, and the Duke upward, halting next to the bison’s saddle, which was quickly growing crowded. The boy Zuko assumed had earthbended nodded to him from across the saddle, a few wisps of facial hair on his upper lip. “Hey,” he greeted as they settled down, the Duke dropping resolutely at Zuko’s side. “Haru.”

The air shifted and Aang was up on the bison’s neck again, turned fully with his legs crossed to cheerfully announce, “Guys, meet Suki and Zuko. Suki is from Kyoshi Island, Sokka, Katara, and I met her not too long after we left the South Pole. Zuko…” he trailed off, looking at Zuko for elaboration, who offered nothing except a grimace he could only hope passed for a smile. The boy’s face fell slightly but he quickly recovered, gesturing. “This is Teo.”

The second boy waved, his dark brown hair wind-tousled. Zuko noted with a jolt that his legs were strapped together in what looked like some kind of brace, stretched before him and unmoving. Teo’s grin was as bright and open as Aang’s; “I see you know the Duke.”

“Yeah,” Zuko said, glancing down at the small boy, who offered a shy smile, his face nearly hidden beneath his helmet. A thrum of sudden, unbidden protectiveness gripped him as he noticed the child had gaps in his grin, little winks of white just beginning to protrude from his gums in place of proper teeth. *Agni above*, he thought in dismay, glancing around at the other individuals in the saddle, something heavy settling in his stomach.

Teo lifted an eyebrow, opening his mouth just as Hakoda hauled himself over the side of the bison’s saddle, saving Zuko from elaboration. He nodded in greeting to Haru and Teo. “Boys. It’s good to see some familiar faces.”

Teo’s smile wavered, the skin around his eyes tightening. “What happened after the eclipse? After we left on Appa?”

The Duke straightened against Zuko’s side, even his attention on the man. Hakoda looked uneasy as all gazes turned to him. His expression smoothed into something inscrutable, so subtle that Zuko thought he might have imagined it. When he spoke, his voice was steady, calm despite the troubled young faces before him. “I’m sorry but I don’t know what happened to either of your fathers or companions, as much as it pains me to say. After we were captured, I was singled out as one of the leaders of the invasion and quickly isolated before being shipped to a Fire Nation prison. I assume the same was done to our allies.”

“But you don’t know for certain? How can you be sure they weren’t—” Haru’s voice cracked and he abruptly cut himself off. Zuko wasn’t entirely sure what they were talking about, but something inside clenched with sympathy as the boy continued, “My father and I were both imprisoned by the Fire Nation once before. *That* was the punishment for bending in a rural

village. Do you think our enemies would be as forgiving when it came to an invasion of their capital city? When it was their own soil we were hurling back at them?”

Silence fell, the earthbender glaring at Hakoda with surprising animosity.

Aang glanced up from the bison’s neck, twin straps of leather in his hands. “Haru...”

Haru turned away, expression shuttered. Hakoda looked pained, firm despite his calm; “Given that I am fortunate enough to still draw breath, I hope the same can be said for our friends. I am truly sorry I could not deliver any good news.”

“It’s not your fault,” Teo added carefully, chewing his lip. “No news is good news, right?”

No one responded. Zuko found himself looking to Suki—their gazes met across the saddle, his own concern mirrored in her wide eyes. She looked away first, expression twisting with a wince. He shifted guiltily, burning with irritation and embarrassment, reminding himself this was his decision.

Aang uttered a sharp command and snapped the leather reins, then the world jolted as his bison stood, its deep rumble reverberating through Zuko’s bones. A moment later, the creature was kicking off from the ground. He held on tightly to the raised lip of the saddle, winding his arm through its braided loops and determinedly *not* looking over the edge. The grassy plains quickly receded beneath them as they rose higher and higher into the brightening sky, the gorge they’d been following splitting through the prairie like a long, black gash with no end in sight. Next to him, the Duke stood on his knees, peering at their surroundings with abandon, reaching out a small hand to run his fingers through the clouds. Zuko abruptly grabbed the back of his shirt and pulled him into his seat. Ignoring the boy’s protest, he closed his eyes and risked praying to Agni for whatever mercy she might have left.



His stomach dipped yet again as, after less than an hour of flight, the bison suddenly began to lose altitude, the child still atop its neck steering gleefully while the wind funnelled around them, roaring in Zuko’s ears. The earth rushed up at a nauseating speed, the beast dropping below the lip of the gorge and showing no sign of slowing. Water roared thousands of feet below, a river shrouded in mist which reminded him strikingly of the Boiling Rock. Teo and the Duke whooped loudly, arms above their heads as the bison hurtled downward; even Haru was grinning, his and Suki’s hair whipping wildly as the wind stole the sounds of their laughter. Zuko clung to the bison’s saddle with both hands, seemingly the only one besides Hakoda to care they could careen to deaths at any moment.

The bison continued to drop until the gorge walls to their left fell away, revealing a sprawling expanse of buildings hanging over the canyon in a way Zuko really didn’t want to think about. The massive, ancient structures were beautiful, reminding him of the steepled chandeliers that hung throughout the Royal Palace at festivals. They wove through the temple with ease, the large creature carrying them surprisingly graceful as it navigated roof spires and hanging sheets of ivy. Zuko could’ve cried in relief as they finally, finally began to descend, the bison dropping towards a broad courtyard that housed a single, towering

fountain. Scattered tents and bedrolls were spread across the stone floor but the bison didn't seem to care; he landed with a loud groan, startling a massive red hawk that shrieked and took flight.

Hakoda leaped from the bison's saddle before the beast had even completely settled—twin shouts of “*Dad!*” arose as Zuko slid after him, all too eager to be back on solid ground. He stumbled only slightly when he landed, looking up in time to see two teenagers crash into Hakoda, their combined force enough to make the man stagger. He recovered quickly, sweeping both of them into his arms. The girl, who must have been Katara, cried against his side, “How is this possible? What are you *wearing?*”

Hakoda chuckled fondly, pressing a kiss to the crown of her head. “Would you even believe me if I said your old man staged a prison break?”

Katara sputtered incredulously, the boy beside her eye's going wide as Suki landed next to Zuko. He must have been—

“Sokka!” Suki cried happily.

The pair collided with a laugh, the boy lifting Suki off her feet and spinning her in a circle as he exclaimed with a relieved, “Suki! You're okay!” He set her down, hands traveling down her arms to grasp both of her hands, a broad, crooked grin alighting his features. Hakoda tilted his head at the sight, keen gaze flicking between the pair, then abruptly to Zuko.

His faced warmed, feeling as though he were intruding, but Hakoda grinned and the moment was gone; he beckoned with his hand and Zuko begrudgingly forced his feet to move one after the other until he was close enough the man could clasp a hand onto his shoulder, practically beaming as he said, “Zuko, this is my daughter. Katara, this is Zuko. We just so happened to have been assigned the same cell at the Boiling Rock, a Fire Nation prison.”

“The Boiling Rock?” she echoed with a sniff, smiling as she wiped at her eyes. Behind them, Haru and the Duke helped Teo from the bison's saddle, their arms laden with the meager supplies they had carried. Katara was exceptionally pretty, Zuko thought, with her dark hair and blue eyes. She offered him her hand, which he shook after a moment's hesitation, Hakoda's palm heavy on his shoulder. “That doesn't sound even fun.”

Hoping his smile didn't look as pained as it felt, Zuko admitted honestly, “It wasn't.”

The air shifted next to them and then Aang was at Katara's elbow, grinning broadly at the girl as he cut in, “We found these three on plains while I took the others on a little sunrise tour. Can you believe it? What luck, huh?”

“It was certainly an incredible stroke of fate that you discovered us,” Hakoda agreed, finally releasing Zuko as he pulled Katara against his side. She looked content beneath his arm, her smile wide as she looked up at him adoringly. “The spirits meant for us to find each other.”

Aang nodded to his words, adding, “I think you're right. Zuko here already knows the Duke—and Jet.”

“Jet?” Katara’s gaze turned troubled. Hakoda glanced between them in confusion as his daughter’s attention turned to Zuko, who swallowed as he tried to think of something to say.

“Er, yeah,” he ground out, “I spent some time with the Freedom Fighters a few years ago. I wasn’t with them for very long.”

Aang and Katara shared a brief, silent look, something unspoken passing between them. Katara recovered first, expression slightly pinched as she asked, “Are you from the colonies? That name is Fire Nation, isn’t it?”

“It is. But I’m from the Capital, actually,” he shot a glance at Hakoda, not exactly sure what sort of reaction could be expected from the man’s children.

Katara’s smile fell, confusion replacing what little hospitality remained. “The Capital?”

The avatar’s eyes lit up. “Are you a firebender?” Zuko’s insides did something funny at that inevitable question. He nodded once, shortly, and Aang’s smile was nearly blinding. “I think we *were* meant to find each other.” Whatever expression was on Zuko’s face was enough to make the boy falter and an awkward beat fell over them. Aang wet his lips, asking in a rush, “Will you teach me?”

“We can talk about that later,” Hakoda interjected smoothly, and Zuko could’ve dropped to his knees in thanks. “I wouldn’t be here now if not for him, nor would your friend.” He dipped his head to Suki, who was still deep in conversation with Sokka. Her smile was tender as she watched the taller boy talking and gesticulating rapidly, his voice carrying across the stone walls and floor but not quite clear enough to make out. Zuko watched them a moment longer, wondering what it might mean to have someone who missed you.

Chest aching, he excused himself, ignoring the feel of eyes on him as he stepped away, taking in the surrounding air temple, the soaring architecture and gravity-defying arches, letting his feet carry him from the fountain. The warm greetings all around made him feel slightly untethered—familiarity and love practically exuded from Hakoda and Suki, and it was painfully obvious that they were overjoyed to have found their friends and family once again. He didn’t know what to make of it all, how he fit in to this new order, or what to think of the ache that continued growing inside, raw and vulnerable in a place behind his ribs.

“It’s weird isn’t it?” a high voice commented on his right. He whirled, finding a short, black-haired girl just beside him. Her gaze was fixed past him almost as though she was watching Hakoda and his children, but Zuko noticed with a start that her eyes were completely glazed over, her gray irises landing on nothing. Something twisted between his ribs at the realization and he had to refrain from reaching for his left eye. “Seems like this place is clinging to the edge of the world.”

“It was built by Avatar Dolma,” he said carefully, staring down at the mosaic floor, at the beautiful tiles that had likely once been vibrant. Now, they were dull, their color faded and unmaintained, their designs still visible but only just. Even though their lack of care was yet another stark reminder of his family’s blackened footprint upon the world, it felt safer. “She was born an airbender but was especially skilled with earth. She helped in the construction of all the air temples.”

“Huh,” the girl’s lips quirked into a smile. “Sounds like a lady I want to meet. Where’d you learn that?”

“Read it,” he said with an embarrassed shrug. “The Fire Sages keep records of all known avatars. Makes it easier to predict where the next one will be born.” He winced as he said it, guilt crawling in.

The girl hummed, tilting her head and angling herself towards him slightly more, as though intrigued. If he hadn’t known better, he would’ve thought she was looking at him. There was a heavy beat of silence as she regarded his general direction, then, “Maybe Aang could conjure her up one of these days and the two could have a chat. Kids getting better but he still has a lot to learn.”

Unsure what that meant but not about to question it, he murmured softly, “Zuko”, in way of introducing himself.

The girl thrust out a filthy hand, exactly the right length away for him to reach out and shake—dirt caked the beds of her torn, chipped nails, even stained the lines of her palms where her skin had healed over dirty wounds. Her bare feet, he noted, looked no better. “Toph.”

He shook it, not feeling so bad about the state of his own hands. “You didn’t want to say hi to everyone else?”

Toph shrugged, releasing him. “Parents aren’t really my thing.”

He privately agreed, finding his gaze once again drifting to where Hakoda still stood beside the fountain. Sokka had pulled Suki before him and was still speaking rapidly, and Zuko briefly wondered if the boy knew they’d already been traveling together and were acquainted only as ones who’d killed together could be. She looked a bit flustered by Sokka’s attention, a blush on her cheeks he hadn’t seen before. Hakoda listened to it all with a soft smile on his face, beaming down at the pair with such blatant affection it made Zuko’s chest clench again. He dragged his gaze away, grunting, “I should um, I should go see if they need help unloading the bison.”

He had just lifted his foot to flee when the girl said with an air of boredom, “They don’t.”

“What?”

“They don’t need help,” she repeated with such certainty he found himself squinting at her, trying to get a better look at— “I *am* blind if that’s what you’re wondering. I see through earthbending.”

He balked. “That’s...” *Impossible*, he nearly said but after a moment of thought, decided on, “Incredible. That’s incredible. Were you...”

“I was born blind,” she said easily, “Badgermoles taught me to bend by feeling vibrations through the earth. I can sense almost everything—you, everyone else here, Appa, the fountain, the edge of the temple, even through the pillars to the next floor. It gets a little fuzzy, the further away things are, but for the most part, I have no problem seeing.”

“Wow,” he remarked, genuinely in awe. He didn’t really know what else to say, his mind too busy trying to comprehend this girl who could evidently see through her feet. He had never been good at conversation to begin with anyway.

“Yeah,” the girl grinned proudly, a sharp, feral little smile that made his skin crawl inexplicably. She paused, head tilting towards the fountain. “Heads up, incoming Snoozles, on your left.”

“Snoozles? What—” He stopped, blanching as Sokka all but marched up to them, expression a mixture of determination and something faintly arrogant. He glanced back for Toph but the girl was already making a beeline for Suki next to the fountain, as confident as though she could see her plainly.

“Hey, I wanted to thank—” the boy’s words died on his tongue, losing a bit of his edge as Zuko turned towards him fully. He balked, blue eyes widening minutely before he managed to compose himself, and heat burned at Zuko’s neck. He ducked his head, a little embarrassed, feeling ever more aware of his scar, but the boy was quickly fumbling through an apology. “Sorry! That wasn’t—oh spirits, uh...Look I wanted to thank you. For helping Suki and my dad.”

Irritated and wishing strange kids would stop approaching him, Zuko grunted, “We saved each other.”

The boy flushed, voice fluctuating a few octaves, “Well...good! That’s—good. My dad said they would’ve never made it out if not for you. I, um, I can’t really explain how grateful I am they’re both here now. So thanks. I’m Sokka, by the way.”

“I know,” Zuko stared at him, not sure how to respond, growing more agitated by the second. Sokka’s eyes were distractingly blue, much darker than his sister’s, like the ocean on the precipice of a storm. He shook himself, remembering he wasn’t necessarily there to make friends. “If that’s all...”

Sokka stared at him for a moment, his clumsy demeanor stiffening as he appeared slightly taken aback. Those blue eyes ran over him once more before the other boy said shortly, “Yeah I guess it was.” Running a hand through his hair in a way that reminded Zuko distinctly of Hakoda, he said quickly, almost as an afterthought, “Uh, Zuko right?”

Zuko nodded once, itching to be alone.

“Well, er, welcome aboard then,” The boy’s face screwed up as he said it and he flushed even darker, then he turned on his heel and was marching swiftly away, shoulders drawn up tightly. Feeling even more confused, Zuko glanced towards the fountain, where Suki was watching Sokka with concern. Her eyes jumped up and their gazes met—she offered him a tight smile and again guilt thrummed through him. He knew an apology was in order, that she’d likely forgive him if he tried to make amends, but he’d made his decision. Meeting these children whom she and Hakoda were so fond of changed nothing. He turned away, trying to convince himself the hurt on her face was for the better.

After the initial reunions died, the camp returned to a bit of calm. Teo and Haru had disappeared sometime after they returned while Katara and Aang had taken it upon themselves to give Hakoda and Suki a tour, which Zuko had stiffly declined. Even the bison had found something to occupy himself with; he dropped over the side of the temple floor with a loud rumble after the avatar left, the gust of wind created by his departure sending dirt and camping supplies flying, once again startling the red hawk. Sokka exclaimed loudly in protest, shrieking, “*Appa!*” as he and the Duke rushed to gather the scattered items. Toph, unperturbed and sprawled with her feet up not far from the fountain, did not deign to move, only cackled as the pair scrambled about.

Zuko didn’t feel inclined to lend a hand himself nor to explore the temple, and therefore, there wasn’t much for him to do. He sat at the edge of the courtyard, feet hanging over open air as he watched the mist below form into clouds, mind moving just as swiftly. If anything, seeing how easily Hakoda and Suki fell back in with everyone only solidified his resolve. Maybe it wasn’t the abrupt knife of betrayal he’d been preparing for but it was a different form of separation, one a little more resolute, an abrupt reminder that he didn’t have any place in their lives outside of the hellhole in which they’d met. He should’ve expected it, really. A selfish part of him which he’d scarcely allowed to see light had hoped that nothing would change, that all his worries about what would happen when they inevitably discovered his lies would’ve been for naught. But here, in yet another place left hollowed by his ancestors, surrounded by child soldiers born from the cruelty of his own nation, that hope swiftly shriveled.

He hadn’t been on his own long before the Duke approached him, extending a yellowish pear shyly. Zuko accepted it after a moment, cradling it in his lap, not quite willing to eat despite the hunger suddenly gnawing at him. “Thanks.”

The small boy settled beside him on the ledge, crossing his legs and leaning forward, so far that his helmet tipped. Zuko watched, anxiety climbing, prepared to grab him if need be, but he only leaned back after a moment, glancing up as he asked, “Where’d you go, Lee? Why is everyone calling you Zuko?”

He floundered, closing his eyes against memories of scarlet treetops, rope pulleys coated in ice, nights sitting around a fire and another crooked smile, one more calculating than kind. He didn’t answer for a long beat, unsure the best way to answer. When he finally opened his eyes, he said softly, “You go by the Duke now, right?” The boy nodded, helmet bobbing. “I had to go by a different name too, for a while. Lee was something I had to call myself in order to stay safe. Zuko is my real name.” *That’s who I really am*, he didn’t say. Lee had been a refugee, a lost child of war like so many of the other Freedom Fighters. Zuko was something else entirely.

“But why did you leave? Are you safe now?” the Duke asked cautiously, eyes wide. “You don’t have to go by Lee anymore?”

Zuko glanced at him, chest tight. “Safer than I was, maybe.”

The Duke was quiet and Zuko wasn’t attuned enough to his habits to know what he might’ve been thinking. His voice was small when he finally repeated, “But *why* did you leave?”



“I...” He could still hear it, the fury in his voice as Jet shouted at him, the hatred. “I’m a firebender,” he admitted, watching the young boy carefully, knowing now wasn’t the time for secrets or half-truths. The Duke’s expression didn’t change, just as open and curious as ever. Zuko tore his gaze away from such earnesty, opting instead to stare down into the mist. “It wasn’t right for me to stay.”

The Duke’s fine brows drew together. “Pipsqueak was there the day you guys attacked the shipment. He said you and Jet went after a soldier but Jet returned alone. No one knew what to think. Jet would never say what happened. We...we thought you might’ve died.”

Zuko swallowed again, not sure how to give voice to what was on his tongue. The Duke had been the youngest member of the Freedom Fighters even when Zuko had known them—time had passed since then but not that much time. He didn’t know what the boy knew, or how willing he might be to share. From the way he’d teared up on the plains, Zuko suspected it was a sore topic.

“Hey...” Zuko and the Duke turned in tandem to find Sokka a few feet away, looking mildly concerned, a creature with impossibly large ears perched on his shoulders. The older boy glanced between them before finally settling on the Duke. “Toph wanted to show you something cool she found. Why don’t you take Momo?”

The Duke shot Zuko a glance. “I don’t know...”

Toph brushed dirt from her clothes as she rose to her feet beside the fountain, calling, “C’mon kid, it’ll be fun. We can even sneak up on Teo and Haru, make em think vengeful air nomad ghosts are tossing rocks at them.”

Sokka scoffed loudly, hands on his hips. “Toph, hurling rocks at people is not what we—”

The girl cracked her knuckles, her feral grin not entirely reassuring. “Relax, Snoozles, my aim isn’t half bad.”

The water tribe boy made another indignant sound as the Duke giggled, uttering a quick, “Bye, Lee—er, Zuko! See you later,” then he and Toph were off, the big-eared creature leaping from Sokka’s shoulder and swooping through the air after them.

Zuko turned back to the canyon in the small boy’s absence, closing his eyes and just enjoying the breeze on his face, still heavily aware of Sokka’s presence over his shoulder but determined to ignore it, hoping he’d catch a hint. To distract himself, he ran his thumbs over the pear he still cradled, feeling its smooth, dimpled surface with only the slightest interest, thinking about how different the temple’s humidity was compared to the Boiling Rock, how nice the change felt.

To his chagrin, no sound came of footsteps receding so he sighed irritably; “What was that all about?”

The following quiet stretched long enough for him to think he was mistaken, that he was talking to empty air, then a voice on his left startled him so badly he flinched; Sokka settled on his bad side gracelessly, oblivious to Zuko’s discomfort, throwing his legs over the temple

floor, so close he could feel the warmth of the other boy's legs where their knees brushed through the thin material of his pants. Zuko promptly scooted away, not caring if he came across as rude. The water tribe boy didn't seem to notice; he pushed the few strands of hair that had escaped from his wolf-tail out of his face, ignoring the question as he stated, "You um, you don't have to sit here by yourself, you know."

Zuko shifted so he could see him better, anger rising as he did so, not sure why the other boy's presence irked him so much. "You might've missed it but I *wasn't* by myself. Not until you all but chased off the Duke."

Sokka waved a hand. "Minutiae. Listen, I meant what I said earlier about my dad and Suki, and I know everyone else here feels the same way." His fingers tapped a rapid rhythm atop his thigh, poorly contained energy manifesting nervously. Zuko wanted to snap at him to cut it out. "The Duke is a good kid but he doesn't...He doesn't know everything."

*Spit it out—what's your point?* He wanted to snarl, hating the idea of drawing this out any further. "Okay?"

Sokka again seemed to struggle to find his words, leaving a heavy silence Zuko was keenly aware of, though he wasn't entirely sure Sokka felt it in the same way. Despite his obvious nerves, the water tribe boy was trying—and failing—at appearing as though he were at ease; he leaned back on one hand, a seemingly relaxed position, but his fingers still danced atop his leg, his right foot bouncing.

Zuko said nothing though he could feel his anxiety rising even as he told himself he didn't care if Hakoda's son was made uncomfortable by him. His cheeks warmed again and with every passing second his desire to rise, to put some distance between himself and this horribly uncomfortable exchange, increased.

He'd just started to get to his feet when Sokka finally blurted, "He's dead."

Zuko froze. "Who?"

"Jet." His stomach dropped as though he'd stepped over the side of the temple floor, wind roaring in his ears as the river below rushed up to meet him. He blinked in shock as Sokka continued hurriedly, "I overheard you and the Duke, and Aang said you'd mentioned him earlier." He didn't meet Zuko's eyes as he said it, staring into the mist below, gaze miles away. "We met the Freedom Fighters outside Gaoling on our way to the North Pole. Jet was...driven. Angry. We didn't stay with them for very long but ran into him and two other Freedom Fighters briefly in Ba Sing Se a few months later. He died fighting beside us against the Dai Li. He died protecting Aang."

"Oh," Zuko said numbly, still reeling, not sure he could find any other words even if he had to. "When?"

"A few months ago, maybe. We decided we wouldn't tell the Duke," Sokka continued, finally looking up, gaze pained. "With the invasion on the Day of Black Sun and everything that's happened since...we thought it would be cruel to spring it on him now."

“He should know,” Zuko whispered hoarsely, thinking of Jet’s voice drifting through the night-shrouded treetops, soothing the Duke’s cries. “It’s cruel to keep it from him.”

“Is it?” Sokka leaned forward, lifting one knee as he faced Zuko more fully. Zuko wanted to inch away again but he resisted, telling himself the other boy meant no harm. “Learning something so unspeakable happened to a loved one changes you, especially at that age.”

Zuko paused, thinking of the woman Hakoda still mourned, of his own mother kneeling beneath the dawn. “He should know,” he repeated. Sokka’s lips thinned into a severe line, the furrow between his brows deepening. “He’ll find out eventually.”

“He’s just a kid,” Sokka said adamantly, all previous signs of nerves gone. “He deserves to stay one a little while longer.”

Scoffing, Zuko shoved himself to his feet, ignoring the startled look on the other boy’s face, abandoning the Duke’s gift in his haste. “Maybe so but I’m not going to be the one to break it to him.”

“Promise me you won’t say anything!” Sokka cried, jumping to his feet. “Not until—”

“Until what?” Zuko demanded, turning on him. “Until you win the war? Until you find a way to reunite him with the other Freedom Fighters, *if* any of them are still alive?”

“That’s not fair,” Sokka said defensively, shoulders tense. “I don’t think it’s too much to ask to give the kid some more time to just...to just be a *kid*. To not have to worry about anyone else he might’ve lost!”

Zuko glared at him, anger thrumming through his veins, skin prickling as his chi stirred. Though he didn’t want to admit it, some part of him resonated with what Sokka was saying. In his experience ignorance had always been a curse but he had to wonder how much of his life would’ve been different had he remained in the dark, how much less invisible weight his shoulders might carry if he simply didn’t know what he knew; Lu Ten, his mother, the avatar’s resurgence—perhaps not knowing did have its merits. “Fine,” he spat in defeat, “I won’t say anything.”

“Thank you,” Sokka exhaled, closing his eyes briefly in relief, a bit of the anger melting away. “Thank you. I didn’t mean to start an argument, I just thought...I thought you should’ve known.”

Zuko scowled uncomfortably, muttering as he turned on his heel, “It’s nothing.” It certainly wasn’t nothing but the other boy finally seemed willing to let him leave so he wasn’t about to screw around and mess that up. Storming away, forearms itching, he shoved down any and all thoughts of Jet, of the sounds of metal on metal, a blanket of crimson leaves across the forest floor, of maps and plans—

*Stop*, he told himself, *Just stop*. He walked and walked, no destination in mind except away, away from the courtyard they had landed in, away from the makeshift camp and all reminders of their silly, infantile hope of defeating his father. Lichen-covered statues peered down at

him from every turn, the unseeing eyes of eternized air nomads watching him flee through their ruined, empty temple halls, utterly indifferent.

He didn't stop until he reached a dead end, finding himself in a vast, barren room strewn with cobwebs and rubble. Beams of sunlight broke through the gloom, piercing through the half-collapsed vaulting and illuminating the destruction within all too plainly. Boulders and pieces of the temple ceiling littered the floor, ivy and struggling plants set on reclaiming the space for itself creeping wherever the light touched. A single statue resided at the far side of the room, a tattooed woman seated with her eyes closed atop an altar, entirely intact save the crack splitting her carved forehead in half.

Inexplicably, all of the air left his lungs at the sight of her, something inside him twisting with grief. He fell to his knees without care for the rocks he cut them upon, breath shuddering out in long, painful gasps. A place so full of history and worship, a place once teeming with life—it didn't deserve to be half wasted away now, nearly a century after its former inhabitants had breathed their last.

Hands buried in his hair, he hunched in on himself on the floor, breath whistling through his clenched teeth with every inhale, struggling to find calm. That ache deep inside that he could never completely snuff threatened to overtake him, but no tears would come. He'd seen death and destruction created by firebenders before, he tried to remind himself—the Rough Rhinos, Isao, Warden Akumo, his father, Azula—none of them had had remorse either, none of them had ever faced the consequences for what they'd done. He forced himself to uncurl, to draw in deep breaths, as much as it made his lungs cramp in protest.

*How do they all do it?* He wondered, eyes squeezed closed, trying to rationalize how Hakoda and Suki could both still smile, despite everything they'd seen, everything that had happened to them. How did any of the children running through the air temple wake up each morning and not feel smothered by the absolute weight of what lay upon them, responsibility and duty to their nations—to the world, in Aang's case—hanging over their heads like a guillotine blade? How was it that *he* seemed to be the only one drowning?

The voice that always came to him in moments like this, the one eerily reminiscent of Azula's whispered, *Maybe if you had anyone left who cared for you you wouldn't allow yourself to be pulled under. Save yourself the pain, Zuzu, give in...*

He pushed himself up with a groan, willing his lungs to comply, not entirely coherent but knowing he was not going to lie down a moment longer. After what might've been minutes or even hours, he finally got his breathing back under control and was able to sit upright.

Gazing up sadly at the woman, thinking of Jet and the fierce, fierce devotion he had harbored for those under his care, Zuko took a few more calming breaths, imagining how differently things might've been if he'd been born anyone else. Instead he was Zuko, a banished prince with no home or family—left to wander whatever parts of the world would take him. He might've escaped the Boiling Rock but he'd somehow managed to find a group of people who were bound and determined to go after something even more terrifying; his father. Everything came down to Ozai, Zuko was beginning to realize; the avatar would face him and the world would finally know peace, or see it's last hope reduced to a pile of ash. And Zuko was somehow meant to be the one who prepared him for it.

“No,” he said aloud, fingers digging into his bloodied knees, the pain tethering him to the present. “No.” He’d told Hakoda his thoughts on it; they would simply have to find someone else. His mere presence was a smear in their lives, a happenstance that would only end badly. The avatar needed a true master, one who could teach him how to defend himself properly. *We certainly have agency*, Hakoda had told him, and Zuko closed his eyes, coming to understand he only had one way out now. Too many people around him met their end prematurely—he’d be damned if he let that happen to anyone else.



With his mind made up and feeling clearer than it had in days, Zuko found his way back to the courtyard with ease. He retraced the path he’d taken before, not sure if it was simply his hearing playing tricks on him or if there were truly voices whistling over the ancient stone. A gentle breeze played with his hair as wind tunneled through the hall, cool and dry, carrying the scent of juniper smoke. He tried not to think of air nomads running through these very same halls, death on their heels. The voices grew louder as he approached the courtyard, one in particular cutting above the others. He stopped just before the final corner, half-hidden amongst the ivy, taking it in. Everyone save Hakoda was around the fire now, scattered in a rough circle, listening as the water tribe boy ranted;

“—then Aang comes back and he’s all, *I enrolled in a Fire Nation school and I’m going back tomorrow*. Can you believe that? See, that’s what I said! Katara and I had to pretend to be his parents just to convince the headmaster not to—”

“Oh Sokka, don’t act as though you didn’t like getting to dress up—”

“—I never said I didn’t but it’s the fact that we even had to! One slip of that headband and he would’ve been literal toast! Then, after all of that, *then* he has us throw a dance party for all of those mini-imperialists because they don’t have any practices of their own anymore—well, besides genocide maybe—” Sokka stopped as he spied Zuko hanging on the outskirts of the courtyard, who cringed inwardly as the boy smiled and waved, everyone’s heads swiveling towards him. He faltered, unused to having so many eyes on him. “Good, you’re back! Listen, can you settle this argument for us?”

He tried not to groan as he reluctantly inched closer, shifting awkwardly from foot to foot. “What argument?”

“Sokka is convinced the Fire Nation has managed to stamp out any and all forms of their own culture as a way of creating order, and that they start young,” Aang said, feeding the big-eared creature in his lap one walnut at a time. It had tiny, nimble little hands it used to accept each offering greedily; it was kind of cute, he was loath to admit. “My only knowledge of their customs is over a hundred years old—everyone else’s information is a little biased.” Grumbles arose from the surrounding children but Aang didn’t seem to care. He flashed Zuko a smile, one that made him want to tear his gaze away. He’d never seen eyes that color—gray as the sky filled with smoke.

“Er,” he said eloquently, “So what’s the question?”

“Does the Fire Nation actually brainwash all of its citizens?” Teo asked tactlessly, leaning against an unnatural, raised slab of earth. “I never attended a real school in the Earth Kingdom but my dad knew what happened to the Air Nation, everyone did. It sounds like that’s not the case everywhere.”

“That’s hardly fair,” Suki started, but Sokka spoke over her, eyes narrowed. “Maybe we shouldn’t be asking him. If he *is* brainwashed, how would he even know?”

“I was never—” Zuko cut himself off with a groan, trying to avoid saying something he’d regret. He sighed, rubbing at his bad eye tiredly. “Look, yes, strict curriculums are enforced in schools. It’s government-approved and designed to avoid making the Fire Nation look bad in any way. Dispersion or consumption of foreign media is illegal, and depending on your crime, can result in fines or jail.” *Or execution*, he purposefully left out.

Aang scoffed bitterly, brushing his hands free of walnut shells as the animal on his knee chittered and scampered to Toph, who discretely slipped it something. “I heard some of what they teach in their schools. It’s almost like Ba Sing Se all over again, only worse. The Fire Lord has managed to fool an entire nation into following his way of thinking.”

“They start in the classroom, preaching nationalistic ideals and lies to the kids who grow up and fight for them,” Katara surmised, looking unsettled. “That’s horrible.” She twisted to ask Zuko, “How do you know so much about the propaganda if that’s what you grew up with?”

He tried not to squirm beneath her shrewd, piercing gaze. “I, uh, I was highborn. My education was different from most.” Which wasn’t necessarily a lie, he tried to reason. He and Azula had both attended the finest Academies in the Caldera. It was only through their private instructors at home where they had learned the world’s true history—and their place within it.

Toph looked up from where she was still subtly feeding the avatar’s pet; her gaze seemed to fix on him, which made him all the more uncomfortable. “Where’d you go to school?”

He frowned, wondering why that would be important. “The Royal Fire Academy for Boys. Why?”

She leaned back with a shrug. “Only curious.”

“Okay, so we’ve managed to check one more box on the Why-the-Fire-Nation-Sucks list,” Sokka said, then quickly glanced at Zuko. “No offense.”

He lifted one shoulder in an attempt at a shrug. “None taken.”

“If you ask me,” Toph burped loudly as she pulled the little flying creature into her lap. It squirmed but quickly gave up, sagging in her hold and resigning itself to getting its ears scratched. “The Fire Nation itself isn’t even all that bad. It’s just the person in charge who deserves a rock to the face.”

Murmurs of assent arose, and Zuko couldn’t fault them; he felt the same way. The conversation turned to the likelihood of the Fire Lord suffering a sudden heart attack or some

other spontaneous, unforeseen trauma, and what that might mean for the war effort. Something tugged at his pant leg and he glanced down, finding the Duke smiling shyly up at him. He returned the boy's smile carefully, face feeling strange as he tried. The Duke didn't seem to mind. He patted the ground beside himself, instructing, "Sit."

Zuko hesitated. Even though he desperately wanted to leave, to put as much distance between himself and all further mention of the war as he could, he very well couldn't do that with everyone's eyes on him. He settled slowly, folding his legs under himself, squeezing between the small boy and Katara.

Haru leaned over the Duke, offering Zuko a leather waterskin. "Is it true you spent some time in a Fire Nation prison?" He nodded but didn't accept the offering; Haru didn't comment on it, only stated, "I did too. It was on a ship in the middle of the ocean."

His lips twitched into a rueful smile. "Volcano."

The boy's green eyes widened, and next to him, the Duke made a small, surprised sound. "Huh. Can't say the Fire Nation isn't creative, I'll give them that."

"You said your dad was imprisoned," Zuko commented, fiddling with his shirt hem to avoid meeting the earthbender's gaze. "I'm sorry."

"Pipsqueak too," the Duke piped up, following what little pattern remained on the mosaic floors with a grubby forefinger.

"Yeah," Haru acknowledged, mouth a troubled moue. "Or at least, I assume they were. We were forced to leave behind everyone who helped us on the day of the invasion. We—" he gestured to the other kids around them, voice somber against their chatter. "We're the only ones who made it out. The eclipse only lasted minutes, you see. The chances of us actually making it all the way to the Fire Lord's front door were slim to begin with, we knew that going into it, but it was even less likely we'd make it out alive. I just didn't...I expected to stay, to suffer the consequences with them, so it's weird being here."

The Duke's finger paused. "We'll see them again."

Haru looked pained, and Zuko recalled his angry insinuations atop the bison's back. "The Fire Nation rarely executes prisoners of war," he said suddenly. "There's too much demand for strong bodies for their lives to be wasted like that. There's a chance they were sent to labor camps."

"You think they're alive?" Haru asked, eyebrows lifted.

Zuko looked away. "I don't know, but maybe."

Neither said anything more on it, the voices of the other kids making up for the silence that fell over them. He wondered idly where Hakoda had wandered off to, if he'd needed a break from the clamor. The noise wasn't entirely unwelcome but Zuko still felt unbearably exposed sitting amongst them, their easy conversation a stark reminder of just how little he had to offer them. The minutes crawled by and his mind turned again to where he might go from

there. It was for the best, he reminded himself, glancing at Suki then quickly away. Better he left before he was found out rather than after.

Katara was the one to break him from his thoughts, nudging him with her elbow. “Are you doing okay?”

He resisted the urge to move away, resorting to shooting her a sharp look out of his peripheral. “I’m fine.”

“You look as though you’ve walked into a wolf-lion’s den,” she informed him, though he couldn’t bring himself to feel insulted. Her gaze was kind, despite the mixed impressions he’d gotten from her. “Come on, I’ll show you where you’ll be sleeping.”

He followed her after a moment’s hesitation, relieved for an excuse to leave. She showed him down a series of long, wide halls he hadn’t been down before which were as equally barren as the rest of the temple. The walls were adorned with cracked depictions of flying bison, their colors faded almost entirely in some places, making his chest ache yet again. Katara stopped just outside a small room that was no bigger than his former cell had been, with only a single stone slab big enough for a sleeping mat and a few shelves embedded in the walls. High windows along the ceiling allowed in much-needed light, through which dust flitted and swirled in the air. A distinctly old smell permeated the space, conjuring sudden memories of the Royal Palace’s oldest, most secret libraries. Despite the smell, he dipped his head gratefully at Katara.

“Thanks,” he said, feeling a little unsure of himself now that they were alone. She wasn’t all that intimidating, certainly not in stature, but she’d strapped twin waterskins to her back sometime since he’d last seen her. He tried not to let that detail bother him as he moved further into his new sleeping quarters, examining the carved vine effigies along the stone bookshelves, and the very real ones that climbed over them. “I mean it.”

“No problem,” she said, her smile tight. “I know what it’s like, to miss peace and quiet. A little time alone can be nice. The others are sometimes a little...much.”

“They’re not bad,” he said, surprising himself.

“They make me feel old,” she admitted with a soft exhale, looking almost embarrassed at the admission. “I don’t always get their humor and I think...I think I overstep, sometimes, but they’re good kids. Really.”

“You’re a kid,” he reminded her, thinking of Azula, who was likely the same age as the girl before him.

Katara looked uncomfortable, carding her fingers through her hair. “I don’t always feel like one.”

Zuko’s mind turned to the Duke, to what Sokka had said about letting him be a kid for a little while longer, suddenly feeling very foolish for his reaction. “Me neither,” he confessed softly, unable to meet her gaze.



“I, um, I’m glad you’re here, Zuko,” she said in a rush, cheeks a little pink. “Family is...it’s everything to me. When we had to leave my father and the warriors of our tribe on the Day of Black Sun, it was one of the hardest things I’ve ever done. But you brought my dad back—so thank you.”

*Everyone keeps saying that*, he thought, fidgeting under her gratitude. Instead, he repeated what he’d told Sokka, and once Suki, “We saved each other.”

“Yeah. Dad said he’d never seen firebending like yours,” Katara told him, leaning against the archway, arms folded over her stomach. “That you used it to protect them, not just to fight.” When he didn’t respond, not sure if she was complimenting him or not, she added, “Aang needs a teacher like that, one whose ideals align better with his own. He—”

“I can’t teach him,” he interrupted, looking away. “You’ll have to find someone else.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, brows drawing together in confusion. “You’re the only firebender we’re ever likely to meet who doesn’t want to see Aang dead. We don’t exactly have time to find anyone else.”

“I can’t,” he repeated, turning away.

“Why not?” she demanded, and though he couldn’t see her face, her anger seeped into the small room like a snake on its belly, subtly and without his notice. “We’re talking about the fate of the world here, millions of lives are at stake. *So why not?*”

“You wouldn’t understand!” he snapped, whirling on her. He had no real control over his own bending, could only seem to summon his chi under extreme duress; that was not a master, not someone who had any business training the boy who would one day face his father.

“Defeating the Fire Lord is going to take more than the skills of an amateur,” he said hotly, “Aang needs someone with control and experience, someone who can actually—” He cut himself off, grunting, “I don’t have to explain it to you.”

“Try anyway,” the girl demanded coolly, hands on her hips. “Because I’m what’s standing between you and this door.”

“I don’t owe you an explanation,” he scoffed with a roll of his eyes, wanting to laugh at her threat. “I don’t owe you or anyone else here anything. Just because I shared a cell with your dad doesn’t mean I agreed to train the avatar. I didn’t even *want* to come here!”

Katara glared at him for a long moment, face flushed. When she spoke, her voice was icy; “I appreciate what you did for my dad, and for Suki, I really do, but you’re being incredibly selfish right now. Don’t you care that innocents are dying— *have* been dying for almost a century?”

“I do care,” Zuko snarled, anger suddenly roaring in his ears. Katara took a step back, hand flying to her waterskin, and something inside him seethed; Did she believe just because he’d been born in the Fire Nation he’d escaped this war unscathed, that he hadn’t suffered its fallout the same as her? It made him want to scream, to lash out, to see something burn. “This war has completely rotted my country away from the inside out! You’ve only ever seen

things from your own side and probably never once given thought to what it's like for the *people* of the Fire Nation. Have you ever stopped to think about the soldiers you've fought, to consider maybe they're just following orders? That they're supporting their own families in the only ways they can? ”

“*Their* families?” she cried angrily, storming across the small room until she was but a few feet from him. “What about the families of my tribe, whose loved ones were stolen from our village for decades, until there was all but one waterbender left in the entire South? What about my own family, my own mother, killed in our very home? Those soldiers might’ve been following orders but there is *always* a choice. To take a life, to decimate entire cultures, that wasn’t done on a whim *or* overnight!”

Again, some dark, hateful part of himself wanted to laugh, wanted to sneer at her blind naivety. Wars were fought by soldiers but they were waged by men like his father, men in positions of power who harbored hatred and lusted for power, men who cared nothing for those whom their orders affected—on both sides of the blade. “Not one side of this war has avoided spilling blood,” he spat instead, fists curling. “We’re all partial to our own loyalties.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Katara hissed, cheeks reddening in her fury.

“Am I?” he asked. “If the choice came down to your father or your brother’s life, you wouldn’t do whatever it took to protect them?”

“That’s different—”

“It’s really not,” her cheeks reddened even further as he cut her off, her fingers twitching again towards her waterskin as though she wished for nothing more than to knock him off his feet.

She inhaled slowly through her nose, shoulders rising and falling as she glared at him, her thumb atop the waterskin’s cap. “Either way you argue things, your inaction right now, your refusal to train Aang, damages not only the chances for survival of our people but yours too. You say you care for them but you must not care *that* much if you refuse to actually do anything to help them.”

With that, Katara whirled away, stomping from the room before he could say anything else. He closed his mouth angrily, jaw working, refusing to acknowledge the guilt that told him she was right.



He didn’t venture from his room after Katara left; he didn’t want to run into any of the others, to risk answering their questions or facing their scorn. He had a hunch the girl shared their argument with everyone else, and couldn’t quite bring himself to leave the confines of his room to prove himself correct. So instead he remained alone and out of sight while waiting for the cover of darkness, running through his options as the light from the room’s high windows steadily dimmed.

The Fire Nation was off-limits, that much was obvious. The Earth Kingdom, as broad and as vast as it was, might not fare any better, if what had been said about Azula's occupancy there was to be believed. That left the Poles and the other Air Temples, neither of which he was very keen on. *Earth Kingdom it is*, he sighed to himself, wondering how long he could slip through the world unnoticed, how long he could run until there was no place left unburdened by his father's influence.

Only the barest of light remained when Suki appeared in the door, brushing her reddish hair behind one ear as she greeted him lightly, "Hey."

He glanced up from where he lay on the ground, hands folded over his stomach, mildly surprised to see her there. "Hi."

She edged into the room without asking, seating herself on the slab that had once been a bed, the bed he couldn't bring himself to go near. He didn't want to think about who it might've once belonged to. "Dinner's ready if you're hungry."

"I'm not."

Her mouth pressed into a severe line. "Sure. Look, I'm not gonna force you to join us, but you should really get something to eat. Katara's cooking leaves a little to be desired but it's better than congee." When he didn't reply, she huffed, sliding down the side of the slab to sit beside him on the ground. "Are you still mad I eavesdropped?"

"No," he said softly. He was actually, in some childish way he could neither reasonably defend or explain, but some of that hurt died upon realizing this very well might be the last time he ever spoke to her. He was going to miss her, he suddenly thought, throat growing tight. She had been one of the few people to show him kindness since the Freedom Fighters, the first person at the Boiling Rock whom he'd allowed to know him. She was as close to a friend as he had ever had, even before his banishment. The guilt he'd been feeling about giving her a cold shoulder suddenly dialed tenfold, he sat up, wincing as she startled. "I'm sorry," he said softly. "I was being an idiot. You didn't deserve that."

"You *were* being an ass," she said, poking him in the side, lips twitching into a smile. Relief washed over him, and he nodded gratefully. She tilted her head, concerned. "Are you okay?"

"Fine," he said between clenched teeth, forcing a smile. "Fine."

Suki still didn't look convinced but she was kind enough to drop it. Instead, she said, "If you do join us, fair warning; Katara is still rather upset with you. She um, she holds onto things. No telling when that might blow over."

He sighed, clenching his fists in his hair. "I didn't mean to upset her but I can't be the one to teach Aang. You understand that, don't you?"

"No. No, I can't say I do," she admitted softly, and Zuko glanced up at her with wide eyes. She looked pained as she laid a hand on his arm, continuing, "I don't really understand any of it, Zuko, not why you had to leave the Fire Nation, or how you were placed at the Boiling Rock or why you seem so determined to punish yourself—but I can't make you tell me. I

don't *want* to make you. I want you to trust me enough that you'll tell me on your own. I told you before, you don't have to carry anything alone, and I meant it."

His breath shuddered as he exhaled. Part of him, the part that planned on fleeing, thought *Tell her, you'll never see her again anyway. What does it matter if she finds out who you are and hates you for it?* He opened his mouth, closed it again, forced himself to look at her; her blue eyes were wet, unshed tears clinging to her lashes, her grip sliding to his hand and tightening as though she might squeeze the truth from him.

"You deserve honesty, Suki," he said, voice barely above a whisper. "After everything we've been through, you deserve that much. You deserve safety and happiness, and the truth above all else but I..." He bit his lip, thinking again of Jet, of the raw hate and visceral rage in his eyes before Zuko had turned his back on him for the last time. A selfish part of him couldn't bear the thought of ever seeing that look on her face. "I can't give that to you. I'm sorry."

Suki swallowed, cheeks wet, tears leaving silvery tracks down her cheeks in the low light. "Don't be," she sniffed, swiping a thumb over the back of his hand. "Just...just promise me you'll consider teaching Aang."

He closed his eyes briefly, chest aching as he whispered, "Okay."

She made a soft, pained sound, leaning across the remaining space between them and winding her arms around his middle, holding onto him tightly. He jerked, startled, unable to remember the last time anyone had hugged him. Voice muffled against his shoulder, she said, "This is where you hug me back, stupid."

A laugh pulled itself from his lungs as he did just that, wrapping his arms around her gingerly, half afraid he'd hurt her. They sat like that for a long moment, Zuko finding the ache deep inside unknitting itself in the quiet.

Finally pulling away, Suki poked him hard in the chest. "Get some food. And if Aang tries to take you out on Appa in the morning, be nice."

He rolled his eyes, skin cool where her tears dampened his shirt, trying not to think about the following morning when he'd hopefully be miles away, and what she might say to stop him if she knew.



The waxing moon hung at its highest as Zuko crept through the temple halls, the dark, empty corridors long and haunting. He didn't try to bend for light, not wishing to draw attention to himself. The only light he had to see by came from gaping holes in the temple walls or ceilings, where beams of moonlight broke through the darkness. Finding the edge of the temple didn't prove too difficult; finding a way down though...

"Agni above," he muttered, pulling at his hair angrily. The nearest building was meters away—he had no hope of making a leap that far, nor any way to survive a thousand-foot plummet straight down.

“Quite the opposite really,” Zuko whirled, barely biting down his cry of surprise. Hakoda stood in the archway, clothes frumpled as though he’d woken suddenly, dark circles beneath his eyes. “Your Sun Spirit has retired for the night.”

“What are you doing here?” he demanded, fists clenching.

“I’d ask you the same but it’s all too apparent,” the water tribesman said, gaze hard. “What exactly do you hope to achieve by running away? What do you think you’ll find if you somehow make it back onto the plains?”

“What do you care?” he demanded, angry that his plans had been thwarted, not caring that their raised voices carried over the hanging temples, echoing off hard stone above the gorge. “We’re no longer cellmates, you’re back with your family and the avatar—what is it to you if I decide to leave?”

Hakoda straightened, chin lifting, and cold fear flickered deep inside him at the look on his face, reminded painstakingly of Ozai. The man took a few slow steps forward, lowering his voice as though Zuko were an animal he was trying not to spook. Despite the drop in tone, he couldn’t quite mask his rising frustration as he told him, “Running from your past won’t solve anything and it certainly won’t free you of your demons. If you venture out on your own right now, you will die, do you understand that? There is nothing out there on the plains, not for hundreds of miles. You’ll starve to death if the elements don’t kill you first.” Zuko glared at him, silenced by the fear in his throat. Hakoda shook his head, mouth working. “I can’t read your mind, son, and quite frankly I’m getting tired of all this. If this is about Aang —”

“So what if it is?” Zuko managed to find his voice, though he lost a bit of his fire in the face of Hakoda’s anger, feeling petulant and foolish. “I can’t teach him. *I can’t.*”

“So you’ve said, but you’ve given me no reason to understand you, to sympathize with or defend you. You must understand what that looks like—” He moved closer and Zuko immediately backed away, lifting one open palm instinctively. Hakoda froze and Zuko dropped his arm, horrified.

“Fuck, I’m sorry, I didn’t—” he tore at his hair, willing the burning beneath his skin to ebb. “I know how it looks, okay? I get it, I know I don’t deserve your patience or your help, but please, don’t ask me again, I—” he stopped, appalled as a lump formed in his throat, unbidden. Eyes burning, he turned away from the stunned look on Hakoda’s face.

He suddenly couldn’t breathe as large hands on his shoulders turned him around, full-body flinching in the taller man’s grip. He hardly dared to move as Hakoda grimaced at the reaction, releasing him quickly as though he’d been scorched. “Spirits, son—I won’t press it anymore, alright? We’ll find another firebender. Just, no more running.”

Zuko nodded mutely, throat too tight to speak. Hakoda didn’t move to touch him again, dragging a hand through his bedraggled hair as he exhaled slowly, looking ill. After a long beat of silence, he asked quietly, “Come back inside. Please.”

Again, he nodded, the words to reply stuck in his chest, the lump in his throat nearly choking him. He followed the man in a daze, too concerned about what the morning might bring to notice a pair of wide, concerned eyes watching them from the shadows.

## Chapter End Notes

Hope this longish update makes up for falling off the face of the earth. Reveals coming soon I promise, Zuko can't keep his secrets for much longer!!

fwi, minor edits being made for grammar/consistency, shouldn't impact the story at all but if you're re-reading and notice a word or two has been changed its bc i normally slam things out with minimal proofreading so

# Chapter 8

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sleep did not come to him after that.

He sat awake in the quiet morning hours, unable to hear much else besides the wind as it buffeted through the temple halls, cool as a whisper. Before he'd left, Hakoda had hesitated just outside the door, the dark circles beneath his eyes making him look a decade older, pausing to say, *Give us a chance, son. If you do anything, at least give us that.* Then, instead of leaving as Zuko had expected, he'd moved to the opposite side of the stone corridor, sliding down the tiled wall to seat himself on the dusty floor, directly within the doorway's line of sight.

Zuko had stared at him for an incredulous moment before promptly scoffing and going to sit with his back crammed into the furthest corner from the door, his knees pulled to his chest and arms folded angrily. He stole sleep in short, fleeting moments, nightmares plaguing him every time he closed his eyes. He could remain in his room no longer when he felt the first stirrings of Agni's warmth between his ribs, signaling the start of yet another day. Running his hands through his hair, he took a few slow, measured breaths. He had no desire to rise, to subjugate himself to Hakoda or the children in the courtyard. Facing them would bring more questions, more stilted, painful conversation he'd be forced to muddle through. The idea of lingering, of allowing the others to know him, of knowing *them* in return; it nearly frightened him as much as Isao and his fire whips ever had.

And then there was the matter of what he'd done—or rather, almost done—in the night.

Every time he tried to close his eyes, he saw Hakoda's face as he'd reacted without thought, barely able to prevent himself from lashing out. The shock he'd seen there, coupled with concern and that same pity the man had treated him with from the very beginning—it made Zuko's blood heat at the very thought, anger returning towards the water tribesman as much as towards himself.

Trying to shake off the growing fury and residual shame, he pushed himself up from the floor, rubbing weariness from his eyes as he stepped into the hall.

Hakoda, still seated against the opposite wall, looked wary and as bedraggled as Zuko felt as he lifted his head, regarding him with dull, exhausted eyes. "Morning."

Zuko tried not to scowl at him, clenching and unclenching his fists as he glared a hole in the floor. "About last night, I wasn't—I didn't mean to..." He trailed off, struggling to find the words. "I shouldn't have reacted like I did."

Hakoda stood slowly, wincing as he did so, a hand going to his back reflexively. The movement startled Zuko. To show such weakness, especially after the night before—Ozai would have sneered at such a display. The last of his anger having dissipated into

befuddlement, Zuko held his breath as the man considered him, the dark circles beneath his eyes prominent. His expression was as inscrutable as always, the lines of his face appearing all the more prominent after sitting watch all night. He tried not to shuffle or squirm under that gaze; he *was* sorry, and despite how willing to run he'd been only a few hours prior, he didn't want Hakoda to think otherwise. After a long beat that had his heart racing, the man sighed, offering a brief, tight smile that didn't reach his eyes. "Consider it forgotten. I'm just relieved you didn't try to run again."

He ducked his head, cheeks heating, not sure what else there was for him to say. He didn't think he had the words for how sorry he felt, how gut-wrenchingly relieved he was he'd been able to stay his own hand.

Hakoda looked him over once more before turning in the direction of the courtyard, movements still stiff as he called over his shoulder, "Come on, I'm sure we're not the only early risers here." A little baffled by his casualty, Zuko followed mutely, still tense as they made their way through the winding temple halls, the carry of voices growing louder as they approached the courtyard. The smell of something cooking made his stomach growl, and he remembered again how foolishly he'd acted the day before.

"Hakoda," he said abruptly, voice sounding incredibly loud to his own ears. He tried not to cringe away, to think of what Ozai would've done had Zuko ever dared to address him so boldly. *He isn't here, he isn't here*, he told himself as Hakoda stopped, looking vaguely surprised, and Zuko's neck heated. He ran a hand through his hair, eyes closed as he all but whispered, "I really am sorry. For everything." And he meant it. For his sulking, for nearly bending at him, for the confusion and the lies. He didn't have the words or the gall to properly explain himself but leaving things as they had the night before didn't feel right.

Hakoda's lips pressed together into a firm line, expression pained. He looked as if he wanted to reach out but, for once, didn't. Zuko found himself relieved. "You don't have anything to apologize for, son. Truly."

Throat tight, he nodded, a surge of gratitude rushing through him, eyes suddenly stinging. The man glanced away, troubled.

In the courtyard, many of the scattered sleeping bags lay still, only Katara and Aang visibly awake, their hushed voices swallowed by the gentle bubbling of the pot atop the fire and the crackle of the makeshift hearth. Not even the pigeons roosting in the stone eaves high above deigned to stir, the purpling sky beyond betraying the early hours. Zuko stepped carefully over Toph, who lay with her arms folded tightly over her chest, her feet propped in the air, snoring peacefully. The avatar was still in his sleeping bag next to the fountain, the wool pooled around his folded legs. He smiled broadly when he caught sight of them, calling in a low voice that still managed to echo off the barren stone, "Good, you two are up!"

Katara, attentively ministering to the pot at the fire, glanced up, her concentration breaking into a smile as Hakoda pulled her to his side, some of the unease leaving him as he held her close. She momentarily looked peaceful beneath his arm, then her eyes tightened a bit at the sight of Zuko, that smile slipping, and irritation curled in his gut in response. Aang didn't seem to notice; he smiled, patting the ground beside him invitingly. Zuko didn't budge. "Katara's making breakfast!"



“It smells lovely dear,” Hakoda said softly, kissing Katara’s forehead before stooping to pluck a brass kettle from the coals at their feet. She tore her gaze away from Zuko long enough to gesture wordlessly to a set of cups beside the fire, face shuttered. Seating himself slowly, Hakoda began pouring each of them a cup. “Once everyone is up, I’d like to discuss our next plan of action. Remaining in one place for very long only increases our chances of being discovered.”

Aang accepted the one offered to him, stating, “Even if I don’t start training to firebend right away, staying where it’s safe seems like the best idea.”

Hakoda handed Zuko a cup next, which he accepted without bringing to his lips. He hovered on the edge of the fountain, a bit away from their loose circle, holding the offering in his lap, the warmth against his palms soothing. The man said nothing to refute the avatar. “Perhaps it’s safe for now,” he intoned, “But there is no question that the Fire Nation is still searching for you. After our near-victory on the day of the eclipse, they’ve likely become more determined than ever to find you.”

Katara pulled the pot from the fire, setting it atop a large flat stone to cool. She sat primly beside her father, accepting a cup of tea as she commented, “Azula chased us all the way across the Earth Kingdom. If anyone is going to be after us, it would be her.”

Zuko stared into the fire, tracing his thumb across the lip of his own cup, recalling the burn of scorching sand and dead trees.

“Well, with any luck they won’t think to search for us here,” Aang said, and a flash of irritation at the boy’s optimism snapped him from his thoughts. He shot him a glare, eyeing the back of his head as though it had done something to personally offend him. Again, the boy failed to take heed. “The temple appears to have been left entirely undisturbed since it was abandoned. That’s worked in our favor so far.”

“We shouldn’t bet our lives on the hope they *might* fail to look here,” Zuko cut in, meeting the boy’s gray eyes coldly. “This air temple is one of the few locations closest to the Fire Nation that isn’t occupied by enemy soldiers”

Katara lowered her cup, shoulders tensing. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It would be foolish for them *not* to search here!” he grunted angrily. Her dark brows drew together, eyes narrowing as they glared at each other. Furious, he gripped his cup with white knuckles, not caring how loud his voice carried as he said, “If their scouts along the Earth Kingdom coastlines never reported sightings of your bison after the eclipse, in all likelihood they’ll be able to piece together you didn’t travel far from the Fire Nation.”

“You have a point there,” Aang said amicably, gaze darting quickly between him and Katara. “But they have no way of reaching us here. We would know—”

“Know if they’re coming?” Zuko rolled his eyes. “And every time Azula almost caught you, did you know? Did you always see her coming?” He was met with silence. “Of course not. She won’t stop until she’s hemmed you in completely, until you have nowhere else to run except straight into her traps.”

“How would you know?” Katara demanded, a challenge in her low voice. She tilted her chin high in the air, her fingers twitching toward the waterskin beside her thigh. “You weren’t there for any of it. You don’t know what we went through.”

Zuko opened his mouth, not sure what was about to come out but knowing he hated that look of mistrust in her eyes with a deep-rooted fury, when Hakoda interrupted smoothly, “Zuko is right. As much of a sanctuary as this place has been, we need to keep moving.”

“Yeah,” Aang said softly, face falling as he glanced up, eyes tracing over the stone arches and effigies, the mosaic bison on the far wall, as though he may never gaze his fill. Zuko had to look away. “I understand.”

“Spirits, couldn’t you all have waited until at least after sunrise to start shouting,” He jumped as the closest sleeping bag, one at first glance he’d assumed was empty, shifted. Sokka emerged with a glower, hair sleep-tousled and loose from its wolf-tail. He rubbed at his eyes tiredly, noticed Zuko beside him, and straightened immediately, looking startled.

“No one’s shouting,” Zuko told him flatly.

“Well you definitely weren’t whispering,” the other boy stretched, glancing towards his father, furrow forming between his brows as he grew serious. “When do you want to leave, then?”

Hakoda held his gaze for a long moment, something flashing across his weathered face before it was gone in the same heartbeat. “We can discuss it later. No need to wake anyone else.”

“I *hate* running,” Aang exhaled, drawing his knees up. “Even though so much has changed, it’s been nice to see this place again.”

Katara placed a hand on his arm, gaze forlorn as she stared into the fire. Zuko gripped his cup tightly between his hands, the warmth ebbing from its stone surface fleetingly. Not far from the fire, Haru turned in his sleeping bag. They’d all be awake soon, he thought, if they weren’t already. Their day would start anew, blissfully unaware of what he had attempted in the night, their lives continuing as if nothing had happened. Because to them, nothing *had* happened. And even though he was presently sipping tea like it was just another morning, he doubted Hakoda was truly going to breeze over such a thing.

“Zuko,” Aang startled him by blurting, sounding almost shy as he shifted to face him. He froze, hating being the subject at that gray stare. “Almost everyone else has been on Appa to see the sunrise... Would you be interested in going?”

He opened his mouth, ready to spit *Absolutely not* but bit back the words before he could regret them. The avatar looked far too hopeful, his eyes wide and without the contempt Zuko was so used to seeing. There was something a little too familiar behind the hope, something that twisted a place deep within Zuko’s chest. “Er, yeah fine,” he relented, hating the way the boy’s entire face lit up with excitement. A brief excursion might serve as a much-needed distraction for them both.

“Well you’re not going alone,” Katara stated flippantly, dark blue eyes boring into Zuko as if he’d already set Aang aflame. “Are they Sokka?”

Zuko’s stomach dipped and he nearly backtracked. Sokka opened his mouth like he wished to argue but his sister’s frown deepened intently, her glare pointed. Something passed between them and his mouth snapped shut with an audible click of his teeth. Jaw clenched, he rose to his feet, pulling the smaller flying creature from the depths of his sleeping bag as he stood. Momo settled sleepily on his shoulder, long tail curling around his bicep as he marched towards the bison, calling, “Fine! But let’s not wait around too long—maybe I can get a few minutes of shut-eye on Appa.”

The air beside them swirled and then Aang was on his feet, bounding towards the bison with perhaps more excitement than was warranted. Zuko shot a look at Hakoda, halfway hoping the man might protest Aang’s idea, but he simply sipped at his steaming tea, failing to hide the brief upwards quirk of his lips.

Resigned to his fate, he inwardly groaned and followed slowly after Sokka, who was grumbling to himself under his breath, sounding as mutinous as Zuko felt.



Sokka quickly gave up his attempt to go back to sleep, much to Zuko’s private amusement. He thought it was rather fitting he didn’t have to be the only one to suffer the avatar. Even the bison seemed as unwilling to wake as the water tribe boy, ambling to its feet with a rumbling groan as Aang spoke in soft, encouraging tones before leaping onto its wide neck, Momo swooping after him to perch on his shoulder. Seated on the creature’s saddle, Zuko kept his back pressed against the braided lip, as far from the water tribe boy as he could get as the bison kicked up. The gorge walls rushed past as they soared skyward, the wind ripping at his clothes and hair.

Leaning against the opposite side of the saddle, Sokka appeared unphased by the rapid ascent. He had his arms crossed mulishly over his chest as he regarded Zuko, one long leg propped up, the other stretched across the saddle, nearly touching Zuko’s knee. A childish part of him was tempted to kick it away. Instead, he demanded sharply, “What?”

Sokka shrugged, shoulders a little too tense for casual. “Nothing. Was just thinking about how nice it will be to take a bath, whenever that may be.” He tilted his head, hair framing his face as his gaze never faltered. “Sleep okay?”

He glowered at the other boy. “No.”

Sokka looked neither surprised nor sympathetic. They breached the lip of the gorge, the temple having long since disappeared beneath them, the vast surrounding sky a brilliant, dark hue of purple in the west and quickly lighting orange in the east. The bison’s ascent leveled out, slowing to a calm, steady pace as they moved towards the horizon. “Look, I don’t know you very well, but you’re familiar with the Fire Nation Capital right? You said you were born there.”

Zuko bit his lip to contain an incredulous laugh. “Familiar enough.”

Something sparked in Sokka's dark gaze, his blue eyes suddenly alight as he leaned forward. "And the Palace? Have you ever been to the Royal Palace?" When Zuko nodded mutely, he grinned. "Any kind of secret passages or entrances we might be able to use?"

Again he wanted to laugh. "If a regular citizen were to know about any sort of secret passages, how secret would they be?"

A flush started high on Sokka's cheeks and he waved a hand flippantly. "So no, then. Er, you don't have any kind of advice? Nothing?"

Zuko stared at him, wondering why in Agni's name he had agreed to put himself in such close confinement with this kid.

Sokka met his stare for a handful of heartbeats, then returned to his slouch against the saddle, stating bluntly, "Katara told us what you said yesterday."

He tilted his head, wondering if he was as eager for a fight as his sister. "And?"

"She didn't go too far into it but said you were refusing to train Aang. She called you selfish," Sokka told him carefully, and Zuko paused, taking a breath to steady himself, knowing he was being sized up. "Which is kind of harsh since you've said all of three words to the rest of us. I wanted to hear your side of things."

He wanted to ask, *And what good would that do?* Without knowing who he was, what he'd seen, none of them would understand his reluctance. As soon as they did find out—he would likely wish he'd never left the Boiling Rock.

"When she brought it up, my dad was pretty quick to defend you," the other boy added, watching him closely. His skin burned beneath that blue gaze, a tangible and unfamiliar feeling, though not in any way that hurt. "He didn't say it but I think he likes you. Or at least, he appreciates everything you've done to help him." When he shifted uncomfortably, not sure if that was the case at all, Sokka waved a hand, adding, "Katara's just looking out for Aang. It's kind of become second nature for all of us. He might not always need it but sometimes—sometimes it's warranted."

Zuko glanced up at him sharply, whatever he'd been feeling quickly dying. Sokka didn't look away, didn't move his leg or budge a muscle. He dropped his voice, soft enough it was nearly stolen by the wind but not so quiet Zuko couldn't detect the threat behind it. "Normally, I'd trust my dad's judgement. I'd trust Suki's. But somethings gotta give here. You don't owe us your whole life story, I'm not saying that. Just...if it were me, if I was the only person capable of helping Aang get one step closer to stopping the Fire Lord, I'd do everything I could to make that possible."

"Sorry to disappoint you," Zuko growled, folding his arms stiffly over his chest. "But I—"

"Can't, yeah." Sokka cut him off, irritation flashing across his face. He drew his knee up, a blatant attempt at creating distance, and Zuko once again felt the petulant desire to kick him.

"I don't want to hurt anyone," he said forcibly, digging his fingers into the cuts on his knees, the pain a biting reminder. "*That's* what I was going to say. I've seen firebending used for the worst possible reasons imaginable. I know how easy it can be to lose control, to...slip. Aang needs a teacher with restraint and experience, not someone who's more likely to accidentally set him on fire." The anger slid from Sokka's dark eyes, replaced with an uncomfortable, begrudging sort of understanding. Zuko repeated firmly, "I *don't* want to hurt anyone."

"I get that," Sokka said softly, leaning forward again, shoulders still tense but gaze a little less guarded. "I do. I want to understand. But—"

"Look!" Aang suddenly called, startling them both. Zuko's gaze snapped to the avatar, who was pointing at the sunrise, the excited, joyful grin on his face sparking a special sort of irritation within Zuko's chest. He forced himself not to sneer, opting to humor the kid, shifting to his knees to get a better view. Despite himself, he felt his heart soar a little. Now that they were high above the vast, rolling plains, the sun breaching the horizon colored the sky in various hues of orange and reds, the folds and swoops in the clouds above them highlighted from below. The gorge was a thin trail along the earth, all but a footpath amongst the prairie grasses.

"Agni," he breathed, his frustration momentarily easy to forget.

Sokka shifted to kneel beside him, hands gripping the braided saddle lip as they took it in. "Growing up, I only knew ice and snow. Every time I think there can't possibly be anything more beautiful, I'm always surprised." Zuko kept his gaze resolutely forward even as he felt Sokka gazing at him intently. "Don't you think that's worth saving?"

"Yeah," he agreed softly, a lump in his throat slowly choking him. He swallowed it down, blinking harshly, turning to look in the direction they'd come, hoping the other boy hadn't seen his moment of weakness. The plains roiled beneath them, the purplish remnants of night quickly receding from the dawn. He closed his eyes, once again imagining the wind might carry him somewhere far, far away. "It is."

"You don't have to make your decision right now," Sokka said to his back. "But give us something to work with at the very least."

"I've made it," Zuko said, eyes still stinging. If it weren't for the lump in his throat, he might've been able to convince himself it was just the wind. "The avatar is the world's last hope. If I sent him to face the Fire Lord unprepared... I couldn't live with myself."

"That's not fair," he turned with a flinch, facing Aang's pale face guiltily. The boy stared at him from the opposite side of the saddle, expression pinched. "I'm not saying you have to teach me—not at all—but try not to undermine the master's I have trained under, or the work we put in."

"That's not what I—" he cut himself off, floundering. "That's not what I meant."

Aang stared at him for a long moment, so serious he was almost unrecognizable. After a drawn out beat, he said without breaking eye contact, "Take the reins for me, Sokka." The water tribe boy glanced between them before wordlessly moving to oblige. The airbender

seated himself across from Zuko, giving him a wide berth. “Thanks for coming this morning. I um, I thought you might like to see the sunrise.”

“It’s nice,” he acknowledged, awkwardly shifting his gaze away.

Aang smiled a little. “You mentioned you’d been imprisoned, so I didn’t think you’d have had many chances to see something like that.” Zuko tried not to wince, remembering the monotonous morning rites, the only opportunity he ever got to stand beneath Agni in her full light. When he didn’t respond, Aang easily continued, “I’m glad you liked it. But I did have another reason for asking you to come this morning...” He took a quiet deep breath, and Zuko realized for the first time the kid was nervous.

“Stop,” he heard himself say. Unsurprisingly, those gray eyes were wide, whatever confidence he’d been trying to summon quickly fading as Zuko told him, “I can’t be your teacher.”

“Why?” His face was curious, painfully open, but genuinely concerned all the same. Zuko realized with a start the boy truly didn’t care which country he hailed from—he had come from a time when being Fire Nation did not immediately equate to being the enemy. Part of him had to wonder how that innocence hadn’t been sullied since his rebirth from the ice, how the kid had witnessed the actions of his people and not realized the true nature of the world he’d awoken to.

“I just can’t,” he said sharply, crossing his arms over his stomach, trying to tell himself he didn’t care as the boy’s face fell. They lapsed into silence, Aang rearranging Momo in his lap despite the creature’s chitters of complaint, mouth drawn into a frown as though he were mulling something over. Zuko closed his eyes briefly, guilt panging in his chest. “Sorry,” he muttered. “I shouldn’t have said it like that.”

“That’s okay,” Aang said carefully, and again Zuko endured another one of his tentative, hopeful glances.

Instead of humoring the boy, he bit his lip, glancing down at his dirty, calloused hands, wondering, yet again, how long it might take for the coal dust to no longer be ingrained in his palms, how much time might be required for the blisters and burn scars to disappear, for there to be no physical trace left of his time at the Boiling Rock. He took a deep breath, saying carefully, “Look, I don’t...even if I wanted to be your firebending teacher, it wouldn’t be a good idea.”

The boy tilted his head hesitantly. “How come?”

“I didn’t mean to insult your teachers or what you’ve learned. But things are complicated. Firebending requires control,” he repeated for what felt like the hundredth time, staring into the clouds so he wouldn’t have to see the disappointment on the boy’s face. “And if you’re going to defeat...if you want to have any chance of winning this war, you need a master, or at least someone with more experience.” Just the thought of facing Ozai started a tremor in his hands. The idea of preparing anyone to face him—*especially* the avatar—sickened him more than anything. He couldn’t face that failure.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to teach me. You don’t have to. I get that it’s frightening. The only time I’ve ever tried to firebend, I ended up hurting someone I loved pretty badly. In the moment, I didn’t even realize what I was doing.” Aang stopped for so long Zuko risked glancing at him; his expression was somber, all joviality having left his small face. Not for the first time, Zuko was struck by how young he was. The boy swallowed, cheeks tinged red. “I wasn’t careful. Seeing Katara hurt, the way I felt after losing control, it got me thinking. About...about what it must have been like for my people during Sozin’s Comet.”

Zuko closed his eyes, that Agni-forsaken ache threatening to swallow him whole.

“The Air Nation had no formal military,” the boy continued, using his thumb to brush at Momo’s whiskers. The little creature chirped, eyes closed as it pressed into Aang’s hand. “We—they weren’t exactly fighters. When I first found out what happened, what the Fire Nation had done, I kept thinking *It must have been so easy for them*,” he paused, inhaling shakily. Momo made a sound of protest, wrapping his agile fingers around the boy’s hand and pulling it back to himself. Aang resumed petting him but his gaze was far away. “Traveling with Katara and Sokka, seeing the rest of the world and everything that’s happened since I went in the ice...” He inhaled again, holding it for a long moment before slowly exhaling through his nose. “I can’t fail again. I won’t.”

Zuko pretended not to see the unshed tears clinging to the boy’s lashes, opting instead to continue staring into the clouds, guilt crowding in on him. *What am I supposed to say? My great-grandfather is the one responsible for what happened to your people, for this war that has continued for nearly a century?* Generations lost to the greed of his family, nations destroyed, and the fate of the world on the back of one child.

He closed his eyes again, all attempts at reasoning with his own fear quickly crumbling. He’d always been a coward. That knowledge had been a constant even before his banishment. Every time he’d seen the growing beast within Azula and written it off, or remained frozen under the weight of his father’s hand, the smoke from Ursa’s smoldering corpse filling his nose, or when he’d run from a burning village, the screams of children on his heels—all moments he’d done nothing, all times he’d feared repercussions more than passivity. Sitting there, the wind coursing over his skin, the avatar still clutching the little flying creature like it was a comfort, it started to dawn on him that the only way to make these people see reason would be the truth.



Aang did not attempt to speak to Zuko again during their descent back through the gorge. The rugged earthen walls rushed around them, the wind and roaring water below drowning out all other noise. Zuko’s heart thrummed rapidly in his chest, anxiety curling in his gut like a twisted knife as Sokka guided Appa through the hanging temple, the large creature deftly maneuvering through the air. As they neared the courtyard, Zuko spied movement—it seemed the rest of the group had finally woken up. The fire was still going, the figures of Hakoda and the children gathered around it. No one blinked an eye as Appa landed, far too groggy to care.

Sokka leaped from the bison's neck without a word, dropping to the ground and beginning to unharness the creature with a methodical, pointed sort of silence, Zuko noted. He had to wonder how much the other boy had overheard.

He landed on the courtyard floor a bit more gracefully than he had the day prior. The avatar gave him a final tentative half-smile, Momo curled in his arms, before he started towards the fire. He made to follow the boy but halted as Sokka called, "Zuko." The water tribe boy didn't meet his gaze, his long, deft fingers working with the ease of familiarity to unfasten the bison's harness as he repeated firmly, "You don't have to make your decision right now."

Zuko nodded, that heady, unfamiliar feeling returning.

The rest of the children were circled around the fire, in varying states of wakefulness. The Duke leaned heavily against a dull-eyed Teo, his eyelids drifting shut and chin nearly touching his chest as he fought to stay awake. The other boy didn't seem to notice; he stared into the fire blankly, a steaming bowl held loosely in his lap.

"Took you three long enough," Toph griped, immediately shoving a spoonful of porridge into her mouth. "Sugar Queen insisted we wait for you all to get back before eating."

"Toph, you were still snoring all of five minutes ago. Besides," Katara sniffed, filling two more bowls and passing them to her father. "There's nothing wrong with eating as a group." Hakoda handed one to Aang then the other to Zuko. Zuko stared at the grain with apprehension, then blanched when he realized Hakoda was staring at him expectantly, one eyebrow cocked. His gaze flicked to the bowl then back up to Zuko's. *Agni*, he thought irritably, taking a bite. Though his expression didn't change, Hakoda nodded, brow smoothing as he settled next to Katara again.

"Here," Suki said, patting the empty ground next to her. He folded his legs, trying to ignore the feel of Hakoda's watchful gaze. She nudged him with her elbow, whispering, "Since you all came back alive I guess it's safe to say things went okay?"

He shrugged, anxiety making him sick as he attempted to swallow another mouthful of porridge. "Well enough."

"Good," she smiled, Sokka settling on her opposite side. "You guys didn't miss anything."

"Not true," the other boy sighed, "We missed about a half hour of sleep."

Suki rolled her eyes lightly. "Well, you were so eager to leave, you forgot to put up your stuff before you left."

Sokka's eyes widened innocently. "Did I now?"

She leaned back on one hand, feigning irritation. "Yeah. Your sister was nice enough to pack it up."

Zuko took a bite of his porridge. "Sokka doesn't cross me as the type to pick up after himself."



The other boy sputtered indignantly and Suki drove her elbow into his side, though the skin around her eyes creased as she tried not to smile. “You got that right.”

Sokka opened his mouth to shoot back a retort but was cut off as Hakoda addressed them all; “Now, I know it’s early, but since we’re all here and have had some time to wake up, I want to discuss our plans with everyone.” He placed his bowl beside himself, slipping into the role of commander with ease, back ramrod straight, whatever remnants of sleepless night-aches seemingly gone; the gathered children all paused, listening attentively without question. His tone sent a trill down Zuko’s spine, something hard and stern forcing him to recall a pair of harsh golden eyes. “I’ve mentioned this to a few of you already but to those I haven’t—We should begin considering other places to regroup. Remaining here, however safe it may appear now, is not a good idea. We leave ourselves open to discovery.”

Teo rubbed at his eyes, goggles askew atop his wild hair. “Are there villages anywhere near the mountain ranges bordering the Earth Kingdom? Maybe we could take refuge in one of them.”

“Gyrong used to be a pretty big city not far from the Mesa Lands,” Aang supplied, small face troubled. He stared into his bowl, stirring the porridge with little interest. He was quieter than he had been before their ride on Appa, more reserved. For some reason, guilt flared again inside Zuko, and the grain on his tongue suddenly felt inedible. “It was a stopping place between here and the Northern Air Temple, and supplied the air nomads with all kinds of goods. I doubt it’s still in use, though.”

“Then it might be a good place to hide,” Sokka said gently, digging into the bowl offered to him by Katara.

“It’s still rather close to the Fire Nation,” Haru commented, picking at the wooden pommel of his knife. “And not far from here at all if it’s in the Western ranges.”

“Too close for comfort then,” Hakoda leaned back, face tight with concern. “While the Earth Kingdom is doubtlessly overrun with Fire Nation after Azula’s coup, we may yet find refuge there. It’s vast enough for us to slip through the cracks in her guard.”

“Maybe. There was an island my parents and I would go to in the summer,” Haru continued softly, grip tightening around his blade, “Just off the coast of the Makapu Peninsula. It’s a pretty far distance to travel from our village but the island was always full of traders and merchants. At some point, it was a supply check for imported goods entering the mainland. It’d be easy to disappear there.”

“But probably just as easy to be recognized,” Sokka pointed out, expression grim.

“There is one place we’d probably be undisturbed,” Zuko heard himself say in a rush, summoning his courage. His heart beat a staccato tune in his chest, so loud he didn’t know how the others couldn’t hear it. He inhaled carefully, steeling himself. “Ember Island.”

“Ember Island?” Toph’s head snapped up, her now-empty bowl dropping to the ground beside her with a clatter. “That place is the biggest tourist trap in the Fire Nation, the only people who live there are retired generals and rich merchants. Used to be a pretty cool place,

‘til the pretentious bastards made it exclusively for their own people. What could we ever want with a place like that?’

Katara seemed to hear only one part of Toph’s retort. “The Fire Nation? No, no way. We aren’t going anywhere near there unless we absolutely have to.”

“My family has a summer house there,” Zuko said irritably, opting to ignore the water tribe girl, heart pounding in his ears. Toph frowned, palm pressed to the earth, and he tried not to falter under the suffocating weight of everyone’s attention. He looked to Hakoda, insisting, “It’s been sitting empty for years. No one would ever find us there.”

“How can we believe that?” Katara demanded. “How do we know it’s not a trap?”

“*Katara—*” Suki started heatedly, but the other girl cut her off. “No! Why should we trust anything he says? He’s done nothing but be argumentative and unhelpful since he arrived! Now we’re going to just take his word that this place meant for the Fire Nation upper class is safe?”

“Our house was on the far side of the island,” he said, digging his fingers into his knees, the pain once again grounding him. “Far away from public beaches and anything to do with the tourists, surrounded by a hundred miles of private land. No one would ever think to look there.”

“How can you be sure?” Aang asked, eyes large.

“It... It belonged to my mother, originally,” he said, shoving down a flood of memories; Lu Ten and Azula practicing katas on the black beaches, Iroh and Ursa collecting shells for his sandcastles, Ozai and Azulon distant, forgettable concerns under the heat of Agni’s light. He swallowed forcefully. “We would go there every summer when I was young. After she died, we never went back.”

Hakoda fixed him in place with a controlled, unreadable stare. “You’re sure it will be abandoned?”

He nodded once, refusing to look away. If he couldn’t train Aang, the least he could do was supply them somewhere safe to hide while they searched for someone else. “Certain.”

Silence fell over everyone, Hakoda still staring at him consideringly. His chest lifted with a sharp inhale, then he nodded. “Alright, then if you’re okay with going back there, that can be where you all go. Any objections?”

“You can’t be serious,” Katara cried, flying to her feet, cheeks tinged red with anger. “The Fire Nation is the last place we want to be! And, no offense Zuko, you haven’t exactly convinced me you aren’t going to sell us out or lead us into a trap the moment we land.”

“He would never do that,” Suki said sharply, glaring at the other girl. His chest warmed slightly but it didn’t stop the anxiety from coiling around his insides, engulfing his organs and creeping up his throat, stealing his voice and rendering him motionless. *Just tell them*, a part of himself screamed, *Tell them and be done with it!*

*How do you know they won't turn on you? Azula's voice crooned to him, dark and hateful. Tell them you're the son of the Fire Lord and you'll turn into a bargaining chip, brother. All you've done is keep secrets and be uncooperative. How much loyalty do you think they'll spare you once they know the truth? Does their mercy extend to banished princes? Give them an inch and they'll take a mile.*

*You're wrong*, he tried to convince himself, though his efforts did little to stop a flicker of fear from starting in his chest, setting his heart pounding faster. *They're better people than you and me.*

"Grudges aside, this might be our best bet," Suki continued, blue eyes hard. "I can't say I'm thrilled at the idea of going back to the Fire Nation but I trust Zuko. He wouldn't betray us like that."

"Maybe that's what you believe," Katara said coolly, hands on her hips. "But just yesterday he was sympathizing with the Fire Nation, ignoring the ways they've completely destroyed the South Pole, let alone the rest of the world, insisting those soldiers were just following orders! That doesn't sound like someone who wouldn't stab us in the back for his country the first chance he got."

Zuko scoffed, the anger returning, overpowering his floundering indecision. "I won't apologize for looking at this war from both sides. I *do* sympathize with my countrymen—with everyone who's been caught up in this pointless, greed-fueled vendetta of my—of the Fire Lord! That doesn't mean I don't want it to end as much as anyone else here."

Katara whirled on her father, insisting angrily, "We don't know anything about him! He might've helped you return to us, but he still refuses to train Aang, to give us any believable reasoning or argument as to why that's impossible—please Dad, we can't trust him. It doesn't feel right. How can you justify walking into the Fire Nation at the word of a stranger?"

Hakoda met her fury with level, diplomatic calm. "Katara, I gave the boy my word I would no longer insist he trains the avatar. Zuko has his reasons, and I'm going to respect that. It might cause us more trouble in the long run but I'm good for my word." Zuko's neck heated with embarrassment even though Hakoda didn't so much as glance at him; just another reminder of the terrible night they'd had, and how little control he truly had over himself. The man still didn't look at him as he addressed the rest of the children, who were sitting in pale-faced silence. "I'll leave this decision up to the rest of you. How many would choose Ember Island?"

Only Suki raised her hand. Zuko couldn't bring himself to lift his arm.

Hakoda glanced at him apologetically. "Any other ideas then?"

"What about Hijiri where we met Jeong Jeong?" Sokka suddenly said, eyes lighting up. Zuko felt a spike of recognition jolt through him at the name, mention of the infamous naval deserter who'd escaped persecution of his father's Imperial Firebenders. He wasn't sure he wanted to know how these children had run across a man like that. "Even though it was a Fire Nation village, it was in the middle of the northwestern Earth Kingdom. It would only be a few days' ride on Appa from here."

“There was plenty of surrounding forest for us to hide in, and a river too,” Aang added, still looking nervous, avoiding Zuko’s gaze adamantly. “Even though Jeong Jeong disappeared, maybe he’s returned by now. It’s worth a shot.”

Looking tired, Hakoda asked, “How many for Hijiri?” Seven hands went up. Again, Zuko didn’t bother lifting his arm. Beside him, both of Suki’s hands remained in her lap, and he shot her a small, grateful half-smile. She dipped her head to him, anger and unease at war in her blue gaze. “That settles it,” Hakoda said with finality, scrubbing a hand down his face. “You all will travel to Hijiri. I’ll go with you as far as the shores of the Emeq.”

“Why?” Sokka asked sharply, looking startled. Katara straightened too, her frown shifting into confusion.

“We won’t be able to win this war on our own,” Hakoda said steadily, though his expression grew pained as he answered his son. Zuko recalled again the stories the man had shared with him in the dark of their cell, the fondness and endearment with which he’d spoken about his children. He had no doubt the man was in pain at the prospect of leaving them again, as well as he hid it behind his stoic composure. “Even though we lost many of our allies on the Day of Black Sun, there may be hope yet. Yesterday, I sent Sokka’s hawk to a man I met on the shores of Whale Tail Island. I can’t know for certain if he’s still alive, but if the message finds him, that’ll at least be a start.”

“And what if it doesn’t find him?” Katara insisted, grabbing his arm as though she might be able to keep him at her side with force alone. “What if there’s no one left?”

Before he could reply, Sokka cut in, “I don’t like the idea of us splitting up again.” A muscle in his jaw ticked, his eyes hard. “You broke out from one of the most secure prisons in the Fire Nation—how do we know your faces aren’t plastered across the Earth Kingdom? That you won’t be arrested as soon as someone recognizes you?”

“We don’t,” Hakoda told him honestly, “Those are very possible realities.”

“Stay with us,” Katara pleaded, knuckles turning white where she clutched at her father. “If we’re going to the heart of the Fire Nation, we’re going to need all the help we can get. None of us should be travelling alone.”

Hakoda looked pained as he reached up with his free hand to pry her fingers away, though he didn’t release her. “I don’t wish to separate our family again any more than you do. But, and forgive me, a handful of children will never be able to defeat the Fire Lord alone. You’re all very capable, and even though we have the avatar, I fear it will not be enough.”

“But everyone was arrested on the day of the invasion,” Teo said in confusion, one arm wrapped around the Duke, who was stirring his cold porridge ruefully. “Who’s left to fight?”

“We may yet be surprised,” the man said with a smile that didn’t reach his eyes, a glint in his blue gaze that told Zuko he knew something the rest of them didn’t.

Before the conversation could change, Zuko summoned his nerves and started, “There’s something else I need to tell you.” Their eyes were all on him, concerned and suspicious.

Wetting his lips, trying to hide the tremor that had started in his hands, he said as levelly as he could, “I know I haven’t been very agreeable since even before we got here. I haven’t given any of you much to go on but you deserve the truth. That said, I haven’t—I haven’t been completely honest about who I am. The truth is I’m...I’m the son of Fire Lord Ozai, prince of the Fire Nation and heir to the throne.”

There wasn’t the immediate uproar he expected.

Instead, he was met with silence and wide-eyed, startled stares. Katara broke the silence first, her sudden laughter ringing across the courtyard. “What do you take us for? Heir to the throne, are you joking?”

“If you were the prince of the Fire Nation, why were you in a *Fire Nation* prison?” Sokka looked equally as dubious as he leaned around a very still Suki, eyebrows raised skeptically.

Stomach sinking, the terrible knot of apprehension unwound in his gut. He glanced from Sokka to Katara, to the Duke, and then Teo. They didn’t believe him. *They didn’t believe him.* He wanted to laugh. He wanted to cry. “I was banished.”

Toph’s near-whisper echoed, “He’s telling the truth.”

“That’s why you didn’t want to train Aang!” Katara snarled, on her feet again, shaking herself free of Hakoda’s grasp. “All that about seeing things from both sides, about loyalties and bias—was it a trick? Did you think we’d actually believe you?”

“That’s not why I can’t train him,” he spit, fists clenched, skin prickling. “I don’t expect you to understand.”

“Zuko,” Suki said softly. He forced himself to look at her, fearful of what he might find on her often open, honest face. She didn’t look horrified or appalled, or anything else he’d prepared himself for. Instead, her eyes were wide with sympathy, though no lack of confusion. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

Now, he didn’t bother trying to hide his laugh even as hurt flashed in her eyes. “Why do you think? I told you all I couldn’t train Aang—I didn’t want to add more fuel to the fire by admitting who my father is.” *By giving you anymore reason to hate me.*

Her brows drew together, mouth opened to respond, but Hakoda cut her off, and Zuko’s stomach flipped at the hard, unyielding edge to his voice; “If you really are the son of the Fire Lord, what were you doing in that prison?”

Zuko found himself floundering once again under that heavy stare, unused to seeing such a cold fire there. Hakoda’s shoulders had gone tense, his hands clasped between his knees, knuckles and veins pronounced furiously. He suddenly felt very small, whatever amount of trust he’d started to place with the man completely snuffed as he recognized the glint in his eyes. Though, he thought bitterly, what should he have expected? That Hakoda would discover who he really was and continue to welcome him with open arms? That, despite it all, he might somehow look past the truth?

He was a fool.

He opened his mouth but the chance to speak was stolen—there was suddenly something else on the morning wind, something metallic and foreign, out of place at the air temple. His heart sank somewhere between his feet when he recognized it; the low, grumbling thrum of engines, and with it, the faintest stench of burning coal.

He wasn't the only one to notice; Toph stood, both feet on the ground as she stared towards the gorge. "Somethings wr—"

Hakoda was on his feet in an instant, sprinting to the edge of the courtyard. He halted abruptly at the lip, barely stopping before he turned back around, shouting, "Run, they're below us! Get away from—"

Zuko's mouth fell open as an elongated, crimson projectile emerged from the mist, spinning end over end as it hurtled towards them. Aang darted forward, staff in hand, knocking the object out of the air with enough force to send it hurtling a hundred yards in the direction it had come from. With an explosion that shook the temple's floor and sent a flashing scorch of heat through the air, the bomb detonated, erupting in a flare of light so blinding Zuko threw an arm up to shield his eyes. Hakoda stumbled from the force of the explosion, recovering quickly as debris rained down, shards of metal and burning charcoal pelting the mosaic floors all around them.

"Get back!" he shouted, helping Teo into his chair. "Everyone away from the edge, hurry!"

Zuko blinked hard, after images of light clouding his vision. A hand on his elbow snapped him from his stupor; "Come on!" Sokka shouted, barely audible over the sounds of more bombs whistling through the air and exploding around them. They sprinted away from the fountain, their supplies and smoldering fire forgotten, the temple shaking underfoot. The avatar's bison roared, its six feet lifting from the floor as it soared away from the source of chaos, sending even more dust into the air. Lungs spasming, Zuko coughed into his elbow, flinching as Sokka clutched at his other arm again, the boy pushing him forward.

More bombs hurtled through the air after them as massive airships painted in Fire Nation red ascended from below, only their massive, broad hulls visible through the mist. The force of the closest eruptions nearly knocked Zuko off his feet, scalding heat and more shards of debris flying through the air in its wake. He stumbled into Sokka, desperately clinging to his shoulder without thought. The other boy's breathing was loud in his ear, his eyes wide as they ran, smoke and dirt so thick in the air it almost fully obscured the farthest walls of the courtyard from sight. Beside them, Suki clutched the Duke to her middle, shielding his small body with her own. Without thinking, Zuko grabbed hold of her free hand, not even caring he was probably squeezing too hard.

"Here!" Katara shouted, waving her arms from the farthest wall of the temple, the tall pillars providing much needed cover as they ducked inside. Even the high ceiling above them was struggling under the sudden onslaught—cracks splintered across the ancient stone, raining dust and chunks of pale rubble. Toph stomped her foot, raising a new slab of earth from the mosaic floors, straining to prevent the ceiling from collapsing altogether. Behind her, Haru

thrust one fist out and began to tunnel into the side of the rock, each punch forward burrowing deeper.

“I can’t keep this up forever!” shouted Toph, sweat plastering her bangs to her forehead, her arms already shaking with exertion. “The entire temple is going to fall if we don’t stop them!”

There came a high whistle as yet another bomb flew through the air, this time heading straight toward them. Teo pointed over their heads, eyes wide behind his goggles as he shouted, “*Watch out!*”

Before anyone could move, Aang ran forward, staff twirling over his head, air suctioning towards him as he moved, the slatted walls locking into place, sealing them inside. Again, the entire temple shook as the bomb erupted, more cracks fracturing across the floors and ceiling as dust spit down on them.

“Aang, we have to go, come on!” Katara shouted, water forming sleeves up her arms. Haru had disappeared inside the rockface, Teo and the Duke hurrying after him. “That wall won’t hold forever, we can’t stay here.”

Aang’s grip tightened on his staff, knuckles pale against the dark wood. He whirled on her, stating fiercely, “They’re after *me*.”

“You’re not giving yourself up, it’s out of the question,” Sokka cut in, brushing hair from his eyes. Zuko tore his gaze away, chest tightening as Hakoda placed a hand on the avatar’s shoulder.

“I know running feels like cowardice but it may very well save our lives,” he said, and Zuko didn’t miss the tears that welled in the boy’s eyes. “You’ve done all you can. We’ll meet them again when our odds are a little more even.”

“We only ever run,” Aang cried angrily, flinching as another explosion rocked the temple, blowing dust from their new walls.

“Your fight is with the Firelord,” Hakoda reminded him, both hands on the boy’s shoulders now. Aang’s lower lip trembled and he ducked his head. “We have to go.”

“Appa won’t go underground,” the boy whispered, fingers pressed to his eyes.

“You can’t possibly fly him out now,” Hakoda tried to reason gently, glancing over Aang to the massive white beast that was pacing nervously, its breathing labored. “You’d be blown out of the sky as soon as you took off.”

“Then we’ll cause a distraction,” someone said, and it took Zuko a moment to realize it was him. Everyone’s attention swiveled towards him and he swallowed, forcing himself to hold Hakoda’s gaze. “You can still find your allies. We’ll go to Ember Island. We won’t be found there, I swear.”

Hakoda’s face twisted. “Now hang on—”

He was cut off as another blast met the walls of their hiding place. Anxiety curled up Zuko's chest as the cracks spread, daylight breaking through. Almost immediately, another explosion sent the rock blowing inwards. He ducked to the ground, arms over his head as rubble rained down, nose and mouth filling with dust. He heard the others screaming, saw Toph roll to avoid being squashed beneath a hunk of ceiling the size of Appa. Her concentration broken, the support pillars quickly began to give way, even more rubble crashing down around them.

Zuko flinched when Hakoda was suddenly beside him, shouting above the noise, "Don't even think about going out there!"

"Send a hawk if you make it out alive," Zuko snapped, pushing himself to his feet, ignoring the man's further shouting. Beyond the temple, one of the airships hovered just above the courtyard. A figure stood at the rail of the ship, her inky black hair snapping in the wind.

They recognized each other in the same breath.

Azula's grin fell and her mouth dropped open, clearly stunned as Zuko balked, distantly aware someone was pulling at him. He thought it might have been Suki. Dazed, he thought, *Agni, she looks like mother.*

Azula recovered first, her astonishment quickly morphing into anger, her enraged voice ringing with clarity over the now-destroyed courtyard; "Siding with our enemies, Zuzu? Your treason truly knows no bounds."

All rational thought fled his mind, his feet carrying him forward despite the screams behind him. He tore himself from Suki's grip as rage, hot and unbridled, roared in his chest, his vision tunneling to his sister's form atop the airship catwalk. He could think of nothing except the day she'd caught him, the lightning she'd pierced him with, her detached, cold voice as she told him, *You really leave me no choice.*

"Azula!" he roared, leaping over the rubble that separated them, sprinting toward the edge of the temple. She glowered down at him, haughty even as he shouted, "It was you, wasn't it?"

She rolled her eyes. "You've never been the most articulate but really brother, you can't expect me to—"

"You sent me to the Boiling Rock, not father!"

"How long did it take you to piece that one together?" she gloated, blue flames sparking where she gripped the metal railing. "He wanted to take your head from your shoulders just like he did mother's!"

Zuko roared, thrusting his palm forward, blood singing as fire bloomed forth, the blast just barely missing Azula. She screamed something indiscernible, her answering blue flames swallowing his own. Before he knew it, she had leaped from the airship and was all but a few feet from him. She straightened from her crouch, their eyes nearly level.

"Why there of all places?" he demanded, chest rising and falling rapidly, "Why not kill me?"



Her sudden snarl reminded him again of their mother—her nose curled in the same way Ursa’s had when she’d grown angry, an expression he hadn’t realized he’d forgotten. “You forget yourself, Zuzu. Leaving you to rot was a mercy I won’t make the mistake of extending again!”

Her next blast was so strong he could barely deflect it, panting as he stood his ground, eyes burning in the ash-clouded air. “Did father tell you to kill me? Or did he ask to do it himself?”

Azula laughed, a sound that was as high and piercing as it had been in their childhood. She shook her head, hands braced defensively, her smirk almost unconcerned. “As you might remember, he has no qualms about getting his hands dirty. What do *you* think?”

“You lied to him,” he spat, blood prickling in his veins. “I wonder if he knows, even now.” Azula smirked, that same damnable smirk she’d always worn when she knew something he didn’t. Fury surged inside him to know that, even after so much time, she hadn’t changed at all. “What do you think he’ll do when he finds out?”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” she said, no trace of the girl who’d once played hide and seek with him in her cruel smile. “I’m a little more honest than you give me credit for.” She thrust her palm forward and he rolled to avoid the blast, the ground where he’d been standing only seconds before left blackened. “Father would’ve had my head as well as yours if I’d lied to him—he knew exactly where you were. He thought it a *fitting* place for you.”

Gritting his teeth, he spit out, “You’re wrong!”

Azula cocked her head, smirk splitting into a fierce, triumphant grin. “I’ll admit, it took some convincing.” Then she was lunging forward, the sweep of her arm sending rippling blooms of fire directly at his left. Crying out, he brought his palms together, breaking the blast down the middle, heat engulfing him. Despite his anger, he could feel his chi weakening—it was a muscle waned from disuse, atrophied during his years at the Boiling Rock. He stood panting in the aftermath of her fury, smoke curling off his arms and shoulders, eyes stinging from the onslaught. Azula’s lip curled at the sight of him unscathed. “There’s nothing to be done for you anymore, I’m afraid. Siding with the avatar is unforgivable.”

Her next blast knocked him off his feet—his back met hard stone and the air was knocked from his lungs. He gaped, struggling to draw breath, scrambling to his feet even as his lungs failed to comply. Panting, he blinked smoke from his eyes, struggling to find her amongst the clouded air. Her voice came to him from his left; “Send mother my regards.”

He cried out as pain erupted across his upper torso, blue flames swallowing him completely, the force of them knocking him back even further—his stomach rose to his throat as he suddenly found himself weightless, the gorge walls rushing around him, the wind tearing at his clothes as he free-fell, the stench of smoke stinging his nose.

“Zuko!” he heard someone shout, a flash of something huge and white appearing in his peripheral. He groaned as he slammed into something hard, his body aching from the force, then Sokka was leaning over him, white-faced with fear. “Spirits, Katara, help him!”

Strong hands pushed him onto his back and he felt his eyesight struggling to focus, vision blurred with the speed of the gorge walls passing and the disorienting flashes of sky high above. His shoulder was stinging, that much he was aware of. It was stinging and the smell of burning flesh was so strong it was like he could taste it, and his chest was definitely stinging too, though he couldn't discern much else. He could barely focus on anything besides the pain and the sudden overwhelming nausea that made him want to hurl. Above it all, he thought he heard Katara snarling, "Sokka, get out of the way—"

There came the clamor of voices, then Suki was whispering, "You're alright, it's okay, we're safe now—*please*, Katara!"

"Spirits, what do you take me for?" Something cool smoothed over his upper torso, spreading across his chest and left shoulder, almost instantly removing the burn. The nausea faded a bit, though he still couldn't forget the smell.

Breathing raggedly, he was finally able to focus long enough to realize he was on the bison's saddle. Suki was beside him, pale with worry, lips pressed into a thin, panicked line. Across from them, Sokka had an arm around Toph's shoulders, his expression strained with concern as he clutched the girl to his side. Katara leaned over him, hands flattened over his chest, cheeks alight with the faintest blue glow. "What in Agni's name—"

"Lay still," she told him harshly, one hand going to his shoulder. He hissed, the cool water stinging against his hot skin. Suki reached for his hand, grasping it tightly between both of her own. "You should be okay," Katara said without meeting his gaze. "I got to it early enough. Probably won't even leave a mark."

"What a relief," he smirked, though sobered when he saw the looks on everyone's faces.

Sokka ran a hand through his hair, fingers trembling. "You really weren't joking. Azula called you brother."

Zuko glanced at him sharply, pulling at the tattered remains of his prison shirt as Katara allowed him to sit upright. "Why would I joke about that?"

Sokka shook his head mutely, still looking stunned. Toph said, "I told you he was telling the truth."

Aang peeked over the furthest side of the saddle from where he steered Appa, soot smeared across one cheek. "You guys doing okay?"

"Better now," Zuko nodded to Katara, who still wouldn't look at him. She scowled and moved to sit beside Aang on the bison's neck. Wincing, Zuko called to the avatar, "I know we agreed on Hijiri but I told Hakoda to meet us at Ember Island. We'll be safe there, I swear it."

"*Not* this again—" Katara started but Aang asked without turning around, "Are you sure?"

"Yes." Zuko held his breath, unable to tell what the boy was thinking with his back turned.

“Alright.”

“*Aang*—”

“Katara, it’s closer than the Earth Kingdom. Besides, I’m willing to trust Zuko.”

Relief washed over him and he collapsed against the saddle’s lip, too exhausted to care that his leg brushed against Sokka’s. Feeling as though he had to defend himself, he repeated, “It’s abandoned. No one has been there in years.”

Suki squeezed his ankle. “I believe you.”

Zuko looked to Sokka, chest tight and still fighting the faintest bit of nausea. The other boy regarded him in silence, a bit of color having returned to his face. “Fine,” he said, tearing his blue gaze away. “Fine. Ember Island it is.”

## Chapter End Notes

hey yall! sorry if this chapter feels a little rushed but I didn't want to delay it any longer. this fic is not abandoned, no matter how long it might take me to update. love you all!

# Chapter 9

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Ember Island, nestled at the northernmost peak of the Ikema Isles, appeared no different than many of the islands that made up the Fire Nation archipelagos. Like most of the country, she sported the mountainous raised spines of long-dormant volcanoes, spines that rose for miles into the air before cresting into sharp, jagged peaks. Lush rainforests coated her valleys and hillsides in greenery, so dense one would never find her rich black earth unless they went looking for it.

Laying eyes on that familiar green made something deep within Zuko's chest twist.

When he was younger, his family had taken a series of ferries and private charter ships to reach their summer home. It had once seemed so vast and wild to him, back when his mother's cautionary tales of firedrakes and jungle crawlers, or frogs with poisonous, beautiful skin had kept him clinging to her skirts. Even as a child, he'd known not to venture too far from the black beaches of their home or the rolling sand dunes that had so often been thick with wild grasses and strand wheat.

Now, flying low over those very same dunes, every bay or rocky outcropping he recognized reminding him of a simpler time, he rubbed at his aching chest and shoulder. Seeing his sister at the temple, as cold and ruthless as the day she'd cornered him in the desert, solidified that roiling mass of anger and guilt deep inside, a stark reminder that she'd embraced their father's cruelty. He'd recognized that fury and hatred from their childhood, now dialed tenfold and given direction. A horrible, unsurprising outcome, he supposed. It seemed Ozai finally had the heir he'd always wanted.

Their summer home was far from the tourist ports and private villas of Maizuru where Zuko had spent so many endless dinners listening to greedy, self-serving men try to flatter their way into his family's favor. Atop the avatar's bison, he could see across the dunes for miles, even able to spy where they bled into the mountains and the Kikena Cliffs, for the first time appreciating the sheer enormity of his mother's estate. The black coastline passed slowly beneath them, the waves beating against the shore with endless, rhythmic determination. Zuko felt at once soothed and a jolt of *I shouldn't be here*.

"This is incredible," Suki breathed, peering in rapt amazement over the side of the saddle. Her voice cut through the heavy silence, one not even the wind could distract from. It seemed no one was up for conversation after the temple. Zuko couldn't blame them. "The water's almost as blue as back home."

"We'll have to take you further South when this is all over," Sokka's smile didn't reach his eyes, his loose hair wind tousled. Zuko risked glancing at the others, seeing unease mirrored in each of their faces. Guilt wormed its way through his belly. "*That's* some blue water."

“At least this water you can appreciate without potentially freezing to death,” Katara sighed. She must have noticed Zuko rubbing his wounds; he jumped as she scooted closer to him, her blue gaze firmly on his newest burns as she checked him over once again, ignoring his hiss of pain at her prodding, clinical touch. Already, the heat had faded from his skin, the place where Azula had struck him pink and tender as though several weeks old, instead of hours. “I miss the cold but spirits, it could be unforgiving.”

Suki stared over the water. “I’d love to see it one day.”

Toph cracked her neck, her arms and legs crossed as her gaze fell somewhere over Appa’s tail. “Don’t know what you’re all so worked up about. Give me a nice patch of dirt and I’m happy.”

“There’s dirt on the island too,” Zuko muttered, relaxing a little as Katara finally left him alone, satisfied for the time being. The waterbender didn’t go far—he didn’t miss how she sat between him and Aang, face marred by worry. He nearly rolled his eyes. “Not to mention, plenty of rocks.”

Toph smirked, and Zuko wasn’t sure why it lifted the hairs on his arms. “That sounds pretty agreeable.”

“I can’t believe we’re doing this,” Katara muttered, resting her chin on her knees. Silence fell again over the rest of the children, and Zuko noted how none of them looked at him. Even Aang, still atop Appa’s neck, didn’t turn, though his thin shoulders tensed. Katara picked irritably at the binds on her forearms, unwrapping then rewrapping the material over and over again. “I mean, if anything, Azula’s attack only further proves we shouldn’t be hiding out at the Fire Lord’s home.”

“I told you, it was my mother’s,” Zuko said, trying not to sound as defensive as he felt. He wasn’t sure he could handle another fight but that didn’t mean he was going to allow the girl to go unchallenged. “Ozai stayed away.”

Again, he was met with silence. Suki looked as though she wished to speak, her lips parted slightly, but ultimately seemed to decide against it. She turned once more to the ocean, gripping the saddle with white knuckles. He felt as though he needed to defend himself. The silence of the others laid on him heavily, more said in their not-so-discreet glances than aloud. He’d never understand what passed between them when they looked at each other, that much he knew. He swallowed thickly, embarrassment and unease making his chest feel tight. There was no way they hadn’t heard what’d passed between him and Azula; that knowledge was terrifying enough on its own.

This time, it was Aang who broke the silence; “Is that it?”

Zuko winced as he hauled himself upright, the remnants of his shirt nearly snatched by the wind as he twisted to peer over the saddle’s lip. Far below, in the familiar crescent of a small bay, a house arose from the beachside. Craggy black rock shielded her every side, sheltering the grounds from the prying eyes of anyone who might approach from the land, wrapping around the towering mansion like claws from the earth. Red and gold eaves jutted high into the air, reminiscent of dragon spines in the way they curved sharply towards the clouds. The

smooth, unvarnished wood had certainly seen better days, and the once well-tended paths and gardens had become overgrown after years of disuse. It was a little less grand than he remembered but familiar all the same.

“Yeah,” he breathed, surprised by the sudden lump in his throat. He forced it down, blinking harshly. “Yeah, that’s it.”

Aang wordlessly steered Appa to the ground. The great beast landed with a chest-rattling groan, settling slowly. Zuko immediately leaped from its saddle, his feet landing in loose black sand. The beach looked frozen in time—the only thing that told him he hadn’t stepped back into a memory was the fallen remains of his mother’s pagoda, the crumpled wood and scattered beach chairs looking their age.

He stepped towards it without thought, his feet carrying him to the fallen structure on their own. The elegant wooden timbers lay half-buried beneath the sand, pock-marked with the burrows of termites, having collapsed only Angi-knows how long ago. Perhaps they’d known the woman for whom they’d been carved would never return to lay eyes on their beauty once more. Whatever had pushed it into the wreck it now lay as—the termites, a storm, merely time—for some reason, the sight of it brought with it a wave of grief.

Throat tight, he ignored the others, moving through the overgrown beach grasses along a path his feet remembered well. In a daze, Zuko found himself below the summer house, skin chilled in its shade. It towered above him, its windows dark and lifeless, creaking wood and the distant roar of the waves the only sound greeting him. He stared at it for a long moment, something wistful and nostalgic squeezing his heart. His eyes stung as he forced himself forward, taking one step after another, up the stone steps until he reached the portico, the beach at his back. The bison and the rest of the children were investigating the sand dunes, far more hesitant to journey to the house. Their distance was a relief.

The grand wooden door carved by the best carpenters in the Fire Nation felt soft beneath his fingers, its red paint flaking away at his touch. Impatient, he pushed it open as much as the rusted hinges would allow, met by the musty, dank smell of a place that had seen too much moisture and not enough sunlight. His eyes struggled to adjust in the dark. It was just as he recalled—the furniture he’d once climbed on lay still, pale with dust, the table where they’d shared countless meals dormant and bare, everything where it had last resided, put away for guests who never returned. He moved through the house like a ghost, certain his feet were touching the ground but unable to recall the steps he’d taken as he found himself in his parents’ bedroom.

Like the rest of the mansion, the bedroom had seen neither light nor care in years. Expensive velvet linens lay as dusty and disregarded as everything else, a show of wealth now forgotten. Zuko had always thought his parents’ bed was massive, its steep sides unclimbable and off-limits; looking at it now, all he could see was the dip on one side, the moth-eaten holes, and how drastically the wine-colored bedclothes had faded.

He didn’t venture very far into the room, only gazed at it for a few more heartbeats before closing the door and making his way to the stairs that would carry him to the second floor. He and Azula had once slept a few doors down from the master bedroom. They had begged and begged to be given free rein of the house’s top story, where they felt they’d be far from the

servants' prying eyes and their mother's keen ears. It had felt like such a victory the day Ursa had finally relented, Iroh's booming laughter at their giddy cheers ringing throughout the house. Lu Ten had helped carry their mattresses up the winding stairs since neither wished to wait a moment longer.

It had been exciting and fun, a taste of freedom in a time when they'd had so little of it.

What little they'd had, he supposed, continuing to walk slowly through the dusty remains of his childhood, they'd used to make the wrong choices.

He paused at the landing, faced with the grand wooden steps he'd traveled a hundred times, halted by an abrupt rush of emotion. Faces stared down at him, portraits of the side of his family that had never even stepped foot in this house sun-faded and yellowed by time, filling the walls mockingly, a reminder of how much of her own past Ursa had been forced to leave behind. The knick in the paint halfway up where Azula had once tripped him, the rail worn smooth by the run of hands over more than just his lifetime, the step at the top that creaked in the middle; details he'd forgotten until face to face with them.

Overwhelmed, Zuko turned on his heel, all but running back through the house, shoving through the patio doors until he was on a wide deck, sucking in great gulps of salty air. Beyond, he caught sight of the others trailing through the dunes, picking their way closer reluctantly. He exhaled forcefully, pinching the bridge of his nose in a meager attempt at staving off something he didn't want to name.

"You okay?" He jerked upright, forcing his expression to smooth as Suki came slowly up the wooden stairs, sand clinging to her boots. Her gaze ran over the massive house, then back to him, and it took everything in him not to snarl. "This place could house my entire village."

He shoved down his petulant reaction, trying to stop the tremor in his hands. "I'm fine."

Her gaze flicked back to the house. "Are you sure this was a good idea?"

"No," he admitted, more sharply than he intended, opting to glare at the others, who were coming steadily closer. He could feel his anxiety rising, and with it, the ugly face of his anger. "But it's done. Azula won't look for us here."

"Okay," she said softly, taking a few more steps until she was beside him at the banister, the warm breeze buffeting her hair. She followed his gaze. "They'll come around."

He snorted. "Katara won't."

"She will."

"*How* can you know that?"

"Trust me on this one."

Something in him relented at the self-certain tone of her voice. He picked at the peeling wood, needing to keep his hands busy. "You don't have to keep me company. I know how much you missed the others."

Suki smiled faintly, though there was sadness behind it. “I know what it’s like to be alone. You saved me from that. You saved me from worse. The least I can do is return the favor.”

“Agni,” he exhaled shakily, “You know, you make it kind of hard to stay mad.”

Her smile dropped. “I um, I wanted to apologize.”

“For what?”

“On the plains,” she started, “I said some pretty harsh things about your family.”

He stared resolutely outward, watching the grass ripple, the sand caps dissolve with the breeze. “You didn’t know.”

“That doesn’t make it right.”

“It’s okay,” he insisted without looking at her, though he hadn’t felt that way then, and wasn’t sure he felt that way now. “You were right about them. They’re everything you said they are and more.”

Suki made a pained noise. “Zuko—”

“Look, I’m not normally one to complain but this place—” Sokka chose that moment to saunter up the stairs, tracking even more sand across the stained wood, Toph and Katara at his side. “—has seen better days.”

Annoyance prickling once more beneath his skin, Zuko shot him a glare. “No one’s been here for a while.”

The other boy stood with his hands on his hips, head craned back to better scrutinize the house’s many jutting windows and eaves. “Seems weird that Ozai would just turn a blind eye to this place.”

“I told you,” Zuko said, more than a little irritable. “He stayed away.”

“These might be the nicest digs we’ve ever stayed in,” Aang said brightly, following the water tribe boy up the stairs, staff against one shoulder and lemur on the other as he squinted up. Sokka made a face that implied he disagreed. “Though the North Pole was pretty snazzy.”

“Don’t forget our stint in Ba Sing Se,” Toph added, one hand in the crook of Sokka’s arm. She whisked away the sand they’d brought with them with a brush of her hand.

Beside her, Katara raised a brow. “I thought you hated Ba Sing Se.” Zuko noted she had yet to remove her waterskins.

“Oh, believe me, I did,” the earthbender’s lips quirked, “But they sure knew how to pick a room service spread.”

“Well don’t count on any room service here,” Zuko muttered, irked by their easy conversation. “There should be a cellar stocked with provisions below the house but the food



has probably gone bad by now.”

“If that’s a bust, fishing ought to be pretty good this far from any ports,” Sokka commented, glancing eagerly towards the bay.

Suki looked thoughtful. “What about a town or village? There has to be one nearby.”

Zuko considered it, the name nearly escaping him. “Mairzuru is far too big for us to risk. It attracts way too many tourists and noblemen. Iruma is probably our safest bet. It isn’t far from the front gates. We used to travel there by ostrich-horse carriage.”

Katara made an exasperated sound, shouldering her pack. “So we see what sort of goods might not have reached the end of their shelf life, then—what? We set up in the Fire Lord’s house and wait for a miracle? Aang still can’t firebend. We just lost the only allies we have left. We don’t have any idea what our next move will be—”

“Katara,” Sokka cut off his sister smoothly, slinging his free arm around her shoulders. She shoved him away angrily but he didn’t seem fazed. He made a placating gesture, his voice turning light but firm. “Since when do I do anything without a plan? We can’t get very far without supplies. That’s our priority right now. We can check the cellar first and make up our minds from there.”

The girl shook her head, lip curled. “Whatever.” She suddenly turned her glare to Zuko, who immediately bristled. She brandished a hand. “After you.”

He momentarily balked, glancing at each of the others’ faces before realizing none of them wanted to be the first to step inside. He scoffed. “*Agni*, don’t feel like you need an invitation.” They followed hesitantly behind, and he couldn’t escape the feeling that allowing these strangers inside was somehow wrong.

He retraced his steps through the house’s broad rooms and lengthy halls, the weight of their silence once again eating at him, though perhaps it was worse now that they were taking in the interior of his mother’s home. He wondered what it looked like to them. He could feel their unease and concern, though he hoped the severity of disrepair before them added a bit of credit to his claims. Again, he didn’t venture to the second floor, just waved a bereft hand in its direction, perhaps overstating things with a dull, “Upstairs.”

The others shambled along behind him, mute in their observation. Whatever they thought about the place they kept to themselves.

The access door to the cellar lay behind the house. Zuko led them through a set of double doors to a wide terrace that extended the length of the mansion, overlooking a massive white courtyard. The pale flagstones stretched all the way to the black cliffs that rose around the estate protectively, a stark contrast in color. In the center of it all, a single fountain resided, her tiered basins empty and filled with leaf decay. To their left, a towering colonnade extended to the cliff face, its red-painted wooden pillars flaking and cracked with age, vines and weeds growing determinedly wherever they could find a roothold.

Toph came to an abrupt halt as soon as her feet touched the flagstones. “Geez Zuko, how big is this place?”

He gave a noncommittal grunt, veering left to a dense thicket of crimson bougainvilleas that meandered between the house and colonnade. The bushes’ delicate blooms drifted lazily through the air, leaving a ruby carpet across the white stones. They had thrived despite years of neglect, unkempt and wild as they’d been allowed to grow where they pleased, now so thick Zuko expected them to obscure the heavy metal door against the foot of the house. Strangely, no roots or crawling brambles obscured the hatch, its circular metal frame completely and easily accessible. He stared at it dumbly.

“Is that it?” Sokka’s elbow pressed into his own, so close Zuko could feel the light material of his shirt. For some reason, it bothered him. “Is that the door?”

“Yeah,” he crouched, trying to shake off the irritation. He ran his fingers along the seam where the door met the hatch lip, the metal rough and blackened. “But we’ve got a problem. It’s been welded shut.”

He startled as the earthbender nudged him aside. “Not to worry,” she said with a wry smile. “Allow me.” Her brow creased in concentration, she thrust both fists out, turning her palms over and over, forearms flexing as she strained. Zuko opened his mouth, wondering what in Agni’s name she thought she was going to accomplish, then stared, stunned, as the metal crumpled as though made of foil. Toph shifted her arms up and the door swung open, the hinges screeching in protest, rust flakes dusted across the now-visible steps like specks of dried blood.

“How did you...” he trailed off, the knowledge that this child could bend metal thoroughly stumping him. Had he been locked away so long the Earth Kingdom had somehow managed to create an entirely new bending style? What else had he missed while he’d been shoveling coal?

The small girl grinned, and once again the hair lifted on the back of his neck. “You’re not the only one with secrets, Sparky.”

“Sparky?” he echoed, but the girl only smirked, flashing the barest hint of teeth before she pushed past him to march down the stairs. Despite the dark, she didn’t slow, her steps confident and well-placed, one hand on the stone wall keeping her steady.

Zuko glanced at Sokka. “*Sparky?*”

The other boy made a *what can you do* face. “Be glad it’s not Snoozles or Schedule Master.”

“Or Twinkle Toes,” Aang added, though he was smiling.

He turned to Suki, eyebrow raised. “Did you get a nickname?”

She looked sullen. “*No.*”

“I’m still deciding,” Toph’s voice came from the dark. “Are you princesses coming or not?”

Sokka, looking much less enthused than the earthbender, braved the stairs next, hand sliding down the wrought iron rail as he descended. Aang followed, then Katara and Suki, until Zuko was the only one left at the landing. He took a deep breath before stepping down. The further they descended, the more he was reminded of the solitary cells beneath the Boiling Rock—the cellar carried the same bone-deep chill, the same cloying moisture that filled his lungs like mold. He took a deep breath, willing his chi to life in his palm. The weak flame sputtered into existence, licking against his fingers like warm little brushstrokes. Emboldened, he expanded it, until the light spread further, casting a warm glow against the cool tunnel walls.

The others paused on the stairs, expressions of surprise turned towards him. He scowled. “Don’t get your hopes up. This is about all I can do when I’m not trying to knock my sister off a cliff.”

Katara didn’t look impressed. “That’s not going to be much help.”

“There should be oil lamps at the bottom of the stairs,” he said gruffly, an embarrassed flush creeping up his neck. “We’ll use those.”

The waterbender shook her head but continued the descent nonetheless. Sure enough, they found lamps at the bottom of the stairs, their glass panes completely obscured by dust. Sokka wiped them clean using the hem of his shirt, wordlessly passing them to Zuko, who lit the only two that would hold a flame. He returned the first one to Sokka, then the other to Katara, who eyed it as though it had teeth. After a moment of indecision, she wordlessly accepted the offering.

Aang paused at the first corner they turned, the waterbender beside him, her lantern held aloft. “Wow,” he breathed, craning his head back. “These are incredible.”

Zuko had to agree; on the wall facing them, a story took place. “It tells the play of the twin sun spirits.”

“Twins?” Katara echoed, dark eyes tracing over the hall-length carvings.

“*The Lives of Agni and Ignis*,” he said, pushing past her and the avatar, the flame in his hand highlighting more of the story as he moved slowly down the corridor. “The oldest recorded play in the Fire Nation. No one knows who wrote it, and the original copy is in such poor condition there’s really not a whole lot to go off of. In the most popular version, there were two suns that protected and provided over this earth, the physical forms of Ignis and Agni. Dark spirits roamed the lands, preying on those who worshipped them, wreaking havoc where darkness lingered. To save their people, Ignis sacrificed his life, leaving his sister Agni alone to provide warmth and light to the world. He placed a piece of himself within the creatures that would protect humans in his stead, creatures with their own power of fire.”

“The dragons,” Aang surmised, and Zuko nodded. “It’s just a play, though.”

“Neat story,” Sokka said primly, turning from the wall, face accentuated by the flickering light of his lantern. “How about that food store?”

Zuko resisted the urge to scowl. “I’ve only been down here a few times,” he said, uncertain as to why he hated the quiet all of a sudden, painfully aware the flames in his palm cast a smaller glow than the lanterns. Toph had disappeared into the shadows, having no need for the hindrance that was the lamps. “It was technically off-limits for me and—” He caught himself before he could say her name. “It was off-limits.”

“It’s a little creepy, not gonna lie,” Aang said, sounding more than a little wary. He was right behind Zuko, nearly clipping his heels with every other step. Despite his nerves, he almost laughed. Who would’ve known, the avatar was afraid of the dark. “I thought you said this was a cellar.”

“It is. Kind of.”

“Kind of?” Sokka's retort came from behind, echoing through the corridor loudly. “It’s like an entire level of your house sunk into the ground.”

Zuko pressed on, the mural disappearing as their lights moved away. The hallway they followed led through the entirety of the right-wing of the cellar, with rooms branching from it on their left and right. He wasn’t even sure what lay in all of them. The food storeroom was one of the closest to the cellar hatch, as the most frequented. Inside, freestanding stone shelves extended all the way to the back wall, huge jars of preserves gathering dust on their ledges.

Sokka darted to the closest one, holding up the first jar he could get his hands on. He squinted at it then glanced up, victorious “Looks like fish of some kind.”

“These can’t possibly still be good,” Katara said, nose curled as Sokka painstakingly attempted to pry the lid off his jar.

Zuko shrugged his good shoulder. “It’s something, at least.”

“We should stick with the dried goods,” Katara insisted, lifting the jar from Sokka’s hands and returning it to its shelf. He made a face at her back. “There’s no telling what’s been festering in these.”

“Katara’s probably right,” Aang agreed, using his staff to poke at a burlap sack on the far side of the room. “But look—plenty of grain!”

“We need substance, Aang, *meat!* Real food!” Sokka glanced at the jars again though Zuko noted he didn’t reach for another. Perhaps the opaque, cloudy liquid had dampened the other boy’s appetite almost as much as it had his own.

“Uh, we should definitely try the town,” Suki said, wiping at the dust on a particularly large jar. It looked nearly impossible to carry, and something misshapen floated inside. Her nose scrunched in distaste. “I think we better find Toph.”

“Let’s take some bags of that grain with us,” Sokka said, finally turning his attention somewhere other than the less-than-questionable preserves. He kicked one of the sacks with his foot. Zuko half expected the old burlap to spill across the stone floor. “No offense Zuko

but Aang is right, this place is more than a little creepy. I don't want to make any more trips than necessary down here."

"You can say that again," Aang agreed, broadening his stance and doing something complicated with his hands. In a heartbeat, a portion of the stone floor lifted up, and the avatar maneuvered it until it was closer to the stacks of grain. "Here. We'll be able to carry more this way."

Sokka pulled the avatar into a one-armed hug, kissing the top of his bald head despite the boy's cry of protest. "Aang, I don't care what Toph says, you're an earthbender if I've ever seen one."

Zuko moved forward to help them start stacking the grain but Katara stepped smoothly into his path, enough vitriol in her blue eyes to spark wet kindling. "Ah, ah, no. No heavy lifting when you're injured, unless you want to risk tearing your wounds open again."

He sneered. "I'm surprised you don't let me just so my recovery takes longer. Less of a threat that way."

She smiled faintly, and Zuko couldn't tell if there was malice behind it or not. "I'll keep that in mind for next time."

With Suki and Katara's help, Sokka and Aang amassed a generous pile they had no chance of eating their way through no matter how long they spent on the island. With a groan, Aang pushed the slab forward punch by punch, the grating of stone-on-stone echoing loudly throughout the cellar.

"Where's Toph when we need her?" he panted, sweat shining at his temples. The slab moved foot after foot until they reached the base of the stairs, a blue square of the sky above them.

"Oh, c'mon Twinkle Toes, you think I didn't notice all your moaning and groaning?" Zuko flinched as the earthbender appeared on his left, but he wasn't the only one surprised. Sokka yelped loudly, jumping nearly a foot off the ground. Toph looked quite satisfied with herself. "I figured you had things under control." Zuko flinched again as the girl punched him in the arm, leaving the area stinging. "Found something you might want to see."

The girl was moving away after that, with as little warning for her departure as she'd given for her arrival. He glanced at Suki, who shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine."

"What are we waiting for—" Sokka's voice died as Katara snatched at his shirt, saying quickly, "We'll help Aang get all of this up to the house. If there's anything other than dust down here, Toph can handle it."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Zuko muttered, ignoring Sokka's disappointed groan as he turned to hurry after the earthbender, trying to will his chi into something stronger. The fire in his palm remained pathetically small, doing very little to highlight his way. "Slow down, not all of us are part badgermole." Toph's high laughter rang from somewhere in front of him. He squinted, his good eye failing him in such low lighting.

The high coil of the small girl's black hair came back into sight and Zuko breathed a sigh of relief. She led him deeper into the cellar, passing longer and longer stretches of wall, with very few doors. Several of those doors were already open, whatever lay inside Toph having evidently deemed less than noteworthy. "This really is a maze," she said, excitement at the edge of her voice. "Each room is different. I can't make out everything in them—I mainly just see shapes, nothing concrete—but there's so much down here. It's incredible."

"The servants were the only ones who ever came down here," Zuko said, skin chilled. "The property belonged to my mom before it ever belonged to Ozai. She didn't even waste her time with it."

"Azula said..." the girl's voice trailed off, lacking her usual bravado. "Nevermind."

He didn't feel the anger he was so used to. Just a dull sort of dread at addressing the inevitable. "You can ask."

"She said... That your mom..." he still couldn't see her face but her shoulders drew up, voice hesitant. "Was that true?"

*Which part?* He nearly asked. *The part where my mom was beheaded or that my dad wanted to do the same to me?* "It happened a long time ago," he muttered, even though a pang went through him. "I've moved past it."

Toph went quiet again, her footsteps slowing. She stopped him at a dead-end, a metal door blocking their path. "I didn't go in. Thought you'd want to see it for yourself first."

She did the same motion she'd done with the cellar hatch, this time creating a split down the middle of the door just big enough for them to step through. Heart thudding rapidly in his chest, it took Zuko a moment to recognize what he was looking at.

"What is it?" Toph asked curiously from the doorway, hands clasped behind her back.

"Costumes," he breathed. Headpieces stared down from the walls, intricately carved wooden masks painted in every color imaginable with bulging eyes, curved, monstrous teeth, and curling horns. There were prop swords and skillfully painted shields, even well-worn, moth-eaten shoes. Shelves lined the far wall, thick tomes covering their every surface, displaced with mismatched stacked scrolls and sheaths of parchment. Despite the beauty, everything in the room looked as though once it had hit the floor, it hadn't moved in decades. There were crates standing half-empty, books stacked carelessly atop one another on the floor, hangerless garments strewn about, boxes stacked haphazardly against the furthest wall.

Whoever had placed these things here had been in a hurry.

"I think..." he wet his lips, willing himself to move further into the room. "I think this all belonged to my mom."

"Didn't you just say this was her house?"

“Once,” he said, staring sadly at a large, towering headdress designed to look like a ruby-scaled dragon. “When she married the Fire Lord, she was forced to start over. No contact with her family, no ties to her personal life, all so that she could embrace her role as Fire Lady properly. Her possessions became his, by Fire Nation law. Everything that’s in the house now, her house, is whatever *he* put there, what he decided to replace her life with. This must’ve been where she hid her possessions.”

“That’s terrible,” Toph said softly.

“Yeah,” he breathed, “She... she loved the theatre.” His fire cast a thin circle of light as he moved through the mess, illuminating the spines of dozens of books lining the wall. Two shelves were filled with smaller knickknacks and boxes; a jade coral-urchin, a diadem set with what looked like emeralds, a pai sho board, even a carved figurine of Agni; all were coated in a hefty layer of dust. Zuko paused with a frown.

“You said you didn’t come in.”

“I didn’t,” Toph cocked her head. “Why?”

“There was something here, on this shelf.” There was a clean square of wood in front of him, as though an object which had sat there for many years was recently moved. He ran his fingers over the square, leaving a trail through the dust that was finer than on the surrounding shelf. “But there’s dust where it sat like it was moved a while ago and more dust settled in its place.”

“Huh,” the girl said, sounding unsure. “Does anything else look disturbed?”

Zuko circled the room but couldn’t see any other signs of items that had been moved. “No. No, it looks...” It pained him to see the remnants of his mother’s life hastily stored beneath the ground, beneath what had once been *her* family home and not merely an extension of her prison. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have accused you of anything.”

“No skin off my back,” Toph shrugged, though she still looked concerned. “I swear, I didn’t come in before I got you. I could tell there was something different about this room. I wanted you to be here when I opened it up.”

For some reason, he trusted her. “I believe you.”

Toph tilted her head again, and after a beat, said, “We should get back to the others. Before Sokka starts to think something ate us.”

Zuko said nothing, though he found himself glancing again at the dragon headpiece. Toph silently fled from the room and once he’d followed, she moved to seal the door shut but Zuko found he couldn’t bear to see it closed off. “Wait—there, there might be something in these books about the Fire Nation,” he said in a rush, which was silly because they were all undoubtedly about the Fire Nation. “Something useful.” He finished lamely, and he was glad she couldn’t see the embarrassment on his cheeks.

“Hey, if sorting through a bunch of dusty scrolls gets you excited, have at it, Sparky,” Toph shrugged breezily, though she didn’t hesitate to turn and begin making her way back in the direction they’d come. “Snoozles will be grateful to have someone to nerd out with. Or,” she flashed him a small grin over her shoulder. “He might hate it. If he thinks he’s not useful, he gets kind of cranky. And we already have one resident grouch.”

“Katara?”

Toph laughed so hard Zuko swore the tunnel shook. “Sure, Sparky, sure.”



They found the others in the courtyard beneath the shade of the colonnade, the children scattered across the stone steps. It seemed they’d split the grain into two piles, with one significantly larger than the other. As they approached, Suki cut the smallest incision into the top of the sack in front of her, then made a face.

“This one too,” she said, her disappointment evident. “More weevils.”

“Spirits,” Sokka cursed, dragging the sack from the slab. He tossed it easily onto the steadily growing, larger pile, wiping at his brow. “Most of these are no good,” he explained when he caught sight of the look on Zuko’s face. “Bugs got to ‘em, they’re almost all powder now. We can’t eat it.”

“Not all of it’s bad,” Aang said from where he was tucked in the shade beneath the largest basin of the fountain, cheeks flushed and yellow robe dark with sweat. “Some bags of rice are still good, and there are even a few sacks of wheat.”

Suki cut into the final bag then sighed deeply. “This one’s bad too. I hate to sound like a broken record, but I think the town is going to be our best bet to restock.”

Zuko leaned against the fountain, wincing as the muscles in his upper torso screamed in protest. “If we do make a trip to Iruma, we shouldn’t all go at once.”

Katara glanced between him and Aang sharply, looking uneasy by their proximity. “We should stick *together*.”

“Two or three kids on their own will draw a lot less attention than six.”

“Does that mean you’re volunteering?”

“Agni, no.”

“So you’ll stay behind at your fancy family home while the rest of us risk our safety?”

“He’s got a point, Katara,” Sokka cut in, brushing powdery grain dust from his tunic. “Two of us should go for now, just to scope things out. In the meantime, the rest of us will see what else we can find here.”



Katara shook her head, shoulders tense. “I don’t like splitting up any more than we have already.”

“You and I can go,” Suki suggested, pocketing her knife. “We know better than anyone else the best produce to buy and what sort of supplies we’ll actually use. Plus, we’re probably the least conspicuous.”

Aang raised his head. “What, you mean my arrow’s too flashy?”

Katara’s fierce frown relented, a soft look in her eyes for the avatar. Zuko felt almost embarrassed to have noticed it. “Alright. But if we’re not back before sundown, you should leave immediately. We can’t guarantee we won’t be caught, or that someone won’t figure out where we’re hiding.”

“Sure, sure,” Sokka said with a wave of his hand, despite Aang’s indignant outcry. “Just bring back some meat.”

“We’ll take Appa under cloud-cover as close as we can, then walk the rest of the way,” Katara rolled her eyes.

“Good luck!” Aang called, gray eyes large as the two girls headed toward the house. Suki caught Zuko’s gaze, flashing him a bright, brief smile. He nodded to her once, trying and failing to convince himself the tightness in his chest was unwarranted.

“Don’t look so worried, Sparky,” Toph said, as though she could sense his concern. Again, he jumped, her voice coming from his left. “They can take care of themselves.”

Sokka watched the door close on the house, hands on his hips. “How far is that village, Zuko?”

He considered it. “A couple of miles from the front gates. Why?”

“Just thinking.” He stared a moment longer, all traces of humor gone, then turned promptly, nudging Aang with his foot, saying a bit too eagerly, “C’mon, we need to get this mess out of here before we attract mice.”

Aang sat up on one hand with an offended cry, “We *just* brought it up here! Toph—”

Toph stomped one foot and raised a slab of earth from the courtyard, then sat on it, arms and legs folded. “You need all the practice you can get, Twinkle Toes. Besides, it looks like you’ve done a fine job all on your own.”

Aang slowly got to his feet, grumbling to himself. “What happened to teamwork...”

Sokka grinned, then turned to clap a hand on Zuko’s shoulder. He stiffened, glaring at the boy until his hand dropped back to his side. Something like hurt flashed in his eyes before he threw up a grin to cover it but Zuko had seen. Now that he’d noticed the mask, it was easy to spy the cracks in it. “Where shall we dump these, Your Majesty? Anywhere in particular?”

Zuko edged away from him, face heating. “It doesn’t matter. Somewhere in the dunes.”

“To the dunes!” Sokka pointed dramatically, and Aang rolled his eyes, broadening his stance. With a grumble, the slab lifted from the ground, moving inch by laborious inch once more. Zuko stared after them for a moment, wondering why he’d never noticed the other boy’s falter before, or if it had been there the entire time.

“Katara’s not all bad, you know,” Toph said as soon as the two boys were out of earshot, her eyes closed where she lounged in the sun. Zuko glanced down at her dubiously, torn from his thoughts. “She just worries a lot.”

He sat gingerly beneath the colonnade, leaning back on his elbows to stare up at the spider web-swarmed rafters, wincing as his wounds stretched. “She reminds me of my sister.” Toph was silent and it took Zuko a moment to realize how that must have sounded. “Stubborn,” he added quickly. “She’s stubborn. That’s what I…” he trailed off, not even sure what he’d meant to say.

“I grew up as an only child,” Toph said, uncrossing her legs to slide down onto the ground, looking perfectly at home in the dirt. “Didn’t really have any friends till this crowd got me kidnapped and I decided to run away from home. It was rough at first, don’t get me wrong. Katara definitely knows how to push people’s buttons. But,” she smiled, teeth flashing, “I throw a few rocks at her, she tries to get a hit in, we eventually call it quits. Snoozles lectures us about getting along, Aang plays middleman—things always work themselves out.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“It’s a lot of work is what I’m trying to say,” Toph said. “And judging by that show at the air temple, you know a thing or two about fighting with your siblings. So yeah, sometimes I really wish I could bury her under a landslide, but Katara keeps us all together. She cares a lot and she’s seen a lot, so she doesn’t take kindly to outsiders, especially when she thinks they aren’t pulling their weight.”

He frowned. “I offered this place, didn’t I?”

“True enough. Just…give her some time. Or give her something to work with.”

Her words were eerily similar to something Sokka had told him. “Like *what?*”

“I don’t know, Sparky, what have you got to offer?”

He didn’t feel as insulted by that question as he maybe should’ve been. “I can fight.”

“We can all fight.”

He huffed. “My firebending is shit, so that’s out of the question.”

Toph hummed. “Think about it. Maybe meet her halfway.”

Zuko nearly laughed. “Yeah, *that’s* likely to happen. She seems to think I’m going to sell everyone out to the Fire Nation the first chance I get.”

“Are you?”

*“What?”* he cried, sitting upright despite the protest of his shoulder. “No! My father would kill me if he could, why would I ever want to go back to that?”

Toph made a placating gesture. “I believe you, Sparky, I do, even though that’s probably not a great idea. The only person who’s ever been able to lie to me was your sister.”

That took a moment to sink in. “What do you...what does that mean?”

The girl lifted one foot in the air. “I don’t just see through earthbending. I can sense a lot about a person just through the earth. Normally, you can catch people in a lie through their tells. Everyone’s got one. A gesture or a change in the way they act, or maybe something they say just doesn’t quite add up. Sometimes, people are really good at hiding it, they can convince you they’re telling the truth just from that superficial shit. But a tell everyone has that they don’t even know about—their breathing, their heart rate—they can’t hide that from me.”

“But Azula could.”

She nodded. “I don’t know how. But yeah.”

Zuko thought about it. Growing up, he’d never been able to lie to Ozai. He’d seen through every pitiful attempt as though he were peering through a gossamer curtain. But Azula had fooled him time and time again, skirting out of punishments or placing the blame on him instead. He’d written it off as favoritism but maybe it had been something else. “She’s always been a good liar.”

“You don’t seem to have gotten that talent,” Toph smirked. “You’re pretty easy to read, Sparky.”

He swallowed, not liking that idea. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She huffed as though he were a very small child. “For starters, I can tell you don’t like being approached on your left side. I noticed it at the temple first. You flinch or jump or your pulse skyrockets almost every single time.” She didn’t say any more, just let her words trail off, as though waiting for an explanation. Zuko squirmed, conscious of what she’d told him about sensing his heartbeat.

“Yeah, I uh... I can’t see or hear very well on that side,” he muttered, feeling as though he’d just confessed to some terrible secret. He knew what he looked like, there was no getting around that. At the Boiling Rock, when he’d been on the run, even the first time Hakoda had laid eyes on him—the reaction was always the same. Horror. Disgust. Pity. The knowledge that Toph couldn’t see him or his scar had been a relief. She didn’t treat him any differently, didn’t cringe away at the sight of him, didn’t find a reason to leave the room when he entered so she wouldn’t have to face her own discomfort.

For some reason, admitting that to her aloud felt as though he’d handed her a blade, one small and discrete, but a weapon all the same.

“Huh,” was all she said. “Born?”

“No.” He closed his eyes against the image of Ozai reaching towards him, the feel of his large hand cradling his face, his palm and fingers rough with callouses. His father rarely touched him. He had never needed to. The action had been so painstakingly tender Zuko should’ve known it wasn’t real. It had turned to agony in an instant.

“Consider it noted. No more surprises.”

Zuko nodded, throat tight.

They lapsed into silence, the breeze warm and salty, not quite hot enough to be uncomfortable. It was nice, in the shade, he decided, trying to focus on something else. It made reality easy to forget. He could almost pretend he was back here on vacation, not hiding as though a hunted animal.

“This isn’t my first trip to Ember Island, you know,” Toph said casually. Zuko waited, allowing his eyes to slip closed, attempting to keep his breathing slow. A logical part of himself knew this girl wouldn’t attack him unprovoked, but he found it difficult to relax nonetheless. “I was six, almost seven. My dad brokers trade deals for some pretty powerful merchants in our home region. He brought me and my mom along on that particular trip. I’d never been outside my property’s walls, let alone the Earth Kingdom’s borders before, so I was really excited.

“It went about as well as a bull-pig in a china shop, of course. The ship we took was wooden, and I spent the majority of the trip hanging over the side praying the sea-spray would be enough to drown me. When we got to the island, we stayed on the east side of Maizuru, along the River Imelza. I remember the house was wood too and nearly panicked because I couldn’t see anything. At least at home, the floors were stone and I was never far from the paths of the gardens. My parents didn’t care since they’d never taken the time to understand what my earthbending truly is.

“We were at a nobleman’s house for some dinner party, where again, I couldn’t see. I remember my mother leading me onto the pergola, where the wood of the house ran into stone. I never really paid attention at those kinds of events. My parents always told me right before we entered, ‘*Now Toph, you must remember—good girls are seen and not heard.*’ Guess they didn’t want me to embarrass them or something.”

It sounded all too similar to what his nursemaids had once told Azula and her friends, not long before the old bat’s rooms were set alight. “That’s horrible.”

Toph shrugged though she couldn’t quite hide the old hurt on her face. “Eh. Either way, we were at a party, I was too relieved to have my bending back to really pay attention to what was going on, but I remember something caught my ear. My dad and his heart rate. Someone had asked him how I was doing, had said, *Isn’t that girl of yours a bender?* His heart had spiked and his breathing turned erratic. I thought he was sick. But he admitted I could, that I was receiving lessons from the very best tutors in the Earth Kingdom, and how proud he was of me, how impressed he was given my ‘*limitations*’.” Her lip curled. “His heart seemed like it was going to beat right out of his chest. I realized then what I was hearing.”

*Parents aren't really my thing.* “Do you hate them?” The words were out of his mouth before he could stop them, before he could think about whether his own feelings were clouding his judgment.

“I thought I did,” she admitted softly. “Maybe things would be easier that way.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, thinking about his own parents. He couldn't hate Ursa, not for the life of him, but Ozai—Ozai he wished he could hate, for as much as he tried, he couldn't bring himself to. He knew he should have. Maybe it spoke to how twisted and wrong he was deep inside that he couldn't.

He didn't want to think about that. “Why are you telling me all this?”

The girl smiled, face tilted towards the sun. “I think I like you, Sparky. Something tells me you won't go around blabbing.”

He shifted uneasily then winced, hand going to his shoulder. “I don't... It takes a lot. For me to trust someone.” He winced again, unrelated to the pain, but Toph didn't seem to mind his ineloquence.

“That's fair. Can't say I won't hurl a rock at you if you're being a shithead but I'll at least do it where you'll see it coming, how 'bout that?”

Despite himself, he smiled. “Fair.”



The sun had long since peaked in the sky and began its slow descent towards the ocean once more before Sokka and Aang returned, the avatar red-faced and sweating. He collapsed in the shade not far from where Toph and Zuko were still sprawled, who immediately sat upright, unable to help the sharp tone of his voice.

“Where did you two go? The dunes are everywhere, that shouldn't have taken so long!”

Beside the fountain, Sokka wiped at his brow with the hem of his tunic. Zuko looked away quickly, annoyance curling through him. “We thought we'd check out the surrounding area, make sure there weren't any signs of people coming or going.”

“And?” Toph encouraged dryly.

“Nothing,” Despite his evident exhaustion, Sokka looked smug. “It really is abandoned.” He sat down with a sigh beside Zuko's foot, leaning back on one elbow against the top step. Zuko didn't feel quite as inclined to kick him as he normally did. The water tribe boy glanced up at him, blue eyes keen. “How long has it been since your family was here last?”

On second thought, maybe he did. “Er, I don't remember.” Toph cocked an eyebrow and he felt his cheeks warm. “I don't want to talk about it.”

“Snootles, you're as paranoid as your sister is hotheaded,” the earthbender slid in smoothly, picking at her ear. “I'd be the first to know if anyone was within a hundred yards of us,

don't you think I'd say something?"

Sokka made an indignant sound. "We can never be too careful! If we let our guard down, we risk what happened at the air temple all over again—" He cut off abruptly, jerking his head away as though he hadn't meant to say that, his shoulders rising towards his ears.

"You can talk about it," Zuko insisted, sitting fully upright. "It's not like it didn't happen."

Sokka didn't move, though his shoulders tensed a bit further. "Look guys—" Aang started, brows pinched. He still sounded tired though it didn't stop him from saying as placatingly as he could, "We're all exhausted right now. After the temple, then the flight here—it's been a long day. We can talk about this more when we've had some rest."

There was a beat of silence, then Toph got to her feet wordlessly, moving easily towards the house.

Aang sighed. "Where are you going?"

"Hate to say it but you three are driving me to the beach."

Sokka tilted his head. "That doesn't sound so bad."

Zuko wanted to argue against it but the other two boys were on their feet too quickly for him to protest. With a beleaguered sigh, he followed, wondering why they didn't find something better to do. They picked their way slowly to the beach, the sun beating down on their backs. Ahead of him, Toph was explaining to Aang how she intended to sharpen her sandbending, which Zuko made no comment on. The style wasn't unheard of—after what he'd seen her do with metal, he couldn't say he was surprised.

The dunes rose on their every side, forcing them close, the trail between them little more than whatever natural gulley had been carved by the wind. Crawling vines held them in place, their tiny white blooms no bigger than a gold piece. Sokka was just beside him, gaze focused pointedly on where they were walking, a muscle in his jaw bouncing. No one was looking, which meant the mask was gone, his expression troubled. Zuko very nearly asked what was wrong, then quickly decided against it. He could hazard a guess. In the silence that swamped them, his skin prickled at the proximity of the others—part of him hated how open all of these kids were together, how easily they fit amongst one another, their lack of personal boundaries abundant. It had been easier to ignore on the bison, when he'd at least had the pain of Azula's fire to distract him. They didn't seem to share his reserve, and he was growing increasingly aware of each brush of Sokka's hand or elbow.

Aang whooped when they finally reached the beach; he was free of his robes in no time, leaving the garments scattered across the black sand carelessly. He ran for the water, Sokka on his heels, shedding clothes. Zuko stared at the water, how the waves frothed against the shore, nerves rising. In the distance, a flash of silver betrayed a fish jumping.

Toph stopped, one arm free of her tunic. "Aren't you coming?"

"Maybe in a bit," he said, keeping his eyes on the water.

She shrugged. "Suit yourself."

She left him at that, joining the other two, wading in up to her knees. Zuko leaned against the nearest rocky outcrop, removing his boots one by one then set to the task of cuffing his prison-issued pants, the sound of the others' laughter filling the air in a way the beach hadn't seen in years. He tore his gaze away, chest tight, setting his boots atop the rocks high enough to ensure they wouldn't be washed away. The black sand was warm beneath his feet, his footprints swallowed by the waves the further he walked.

He found himself before his mother's fallen pagoda once again. Sand lifted from the crumbled ruins with every puff of the breeze, half the timbers and splintered boards swallowed by the surrounding beach, speckled with sun-faded barnacles and moss. He gazed at it sadly, that tightness in his throat returning.

Was he wrong to have brought them all here, he wondered. What if Azula actually decided to come looking for them? He couldn't fathom what part of her might think to search the island, her heart more hardened than even his. He didn't think she shared his fondness for the beach, nor their family's estate. It meant something else to her, even if he didn't like to think about it.

With a deep inhale, he forced himself to head back in the direction he'd come, in no time at all right back near the others. He felt restless, like a part of him was still itching for his sister to descend from the clouds and shoot lightning at him. The idea of staying still, of giving her time to catch up to them, sent an uneasy trill down his spine.

"Zuko!" the avatar called from the water, breaking him from his thoughts. "Come on, the water's great!"

He dug one foot in the sand, rubbing at his shoulder. "I don't know."

Toph, still up to her knees, had both hands on her hips. "C'mon, Sparky, relax a little."

He huffed. "I *am* relaxed."

"Really? Because it feels like you're going to bite our heads off every time someone tries to talk to you," Sokka's smile was tentative, with no heat behind his words. Zuko held his gaze for a moment, wondering how much to believe in that smile.

He looked away first. "I'm going back to the house."

Aang and Sokka shared a sharp glance, then Sokka was suddenly surging through the water, his words nearly tripping over themselves as he said quickly, "Yeah, yeah, I should probably head in too. See what's left in the house." Toph booed and Aang pasted on a wobbly, worried smile that Zuko saw straight through.

Frowning, he stated, "I can do that. Stay if you want."

Sokka jogged up the thin stretch of shoreline, pushing wet hair out of his face. He clapped Zuko on the arm, and again, he wondered how much he could believe. "And leave you all the

fun?”

He shook his head, ignoring Aang’s abrupt shout as Toph hurled a handful of wet sand at him. *They must think I’m blind*, he thought, mind churning. He didn’t even bother putting his boots back on, simply snatched them from their resting place before storming back through the dunes.

“Zuko, Zuko hold on—” Sokka called, scooping his clothes from the sand. “So, I was wondering—is there a study or something in the house? We could start there. Or, actually, is there an armory? Seems like there’d be an armory, right? How could the Fire Lord *not* have an armory—”

“We don’t have to do this.”

“Huh? Don’t you want to know if there’s an armory?”

“There *is* an armory, but that’s beside the point!”

Sokka stumbled over a clump of grass. “Well, I say we start there. That way—”

“That way you can keep an eye on me?” He cried, hurt and angry. “Is that why none of you will leave me alone?”

Sokka floundered, mouth falling open. Zuko scoffed in disgust, weaving between the dunes furiously. Was he that untrustworthy? He knew he didn’t have much to offer them, some long-festering wound inside preventing him from opening up, but still—

*Stop, stop, stop*, he told himself, forcing down that damned lump in his throat for what felt like the fifth time that day.

“Zuko, it’s not what you think—”

He kept on barreling forward, shaking his head. “Just *what* am I thinking?”

“Okay,” the other boy relented, sounding ashamed. “Okay, it might be what you think. We didn’t...but you have to understand, it’s—it’s weird, being here. Being here with you.”

“Trust me, I get it,” Zuko snapped, flying up the steps of the back trellis and into the house, not caring that he was tracking sand everywhere. “Every part of me has been screaming it was wrong to bring you all here—enemies of my country in my own home.” *People who want my family dead, who will likely see it done*. “I can’t believe I thought—” he broke off, biting his tongue.

Sokka hurried into his line of sight, gripping his forearm. Zuko shoved him so hard he nearly stumbled. The other boy stared at him, incredulous for a moment, then seemed to take a steadying breath. “Look, after last night, some of us agreed—”

“Last night?” he repeated sharply, pausing. “What are you talking about?”



A red flush crept its way up Sokka's chest, curling up his throat as he twisted his shirt in his hands. Zuko realized for the first time he had yet to put it back on. "I was still awake when I saw my dad get up. He seemed concerned so I...I followed him."

Zuko's stomach sank.

A hard look replaced the guilt in Sokka's eyes. "I saw you two. I saw you nearly bend at him."

"I didn't though," he said breathlessly.

"I know, I know," the other boy said quickly. "I know that. And I've had some time to think about it, to... calm down. I could see how torn up you were. I only told a few of the others but—"

"Who?" he demanded, face heating.

"Aang," Sokka admitted, looking as though it brought him no pleasure. "Katara. Toph. That's it, I swear. We didn't want to worry anyone else."

Zuko shook his head. "I *knew* something was up. I can't believe I actually let myself—" He broke off, that lump in his throat choking him. He cast about, looking for some way out of this conversation, some sort of reprieve. He found himself moving towards the back courtyard again, for its high walls and shaded calm.

"Look, I'm sorry, I know it was shitty," Sokka called, once again on his heels, speaking to his back. Zuko knew he was running, was very much aware he was fleeing, *again*, but he didn't want to hear any more about how little they thought of him. "You have every right to be angry but we do too. You could've really hurt my dad, what was I supposed to think—"

"Maybe you could've trusted me!" Zuko spat, hands shaking and forearms beginning to prickle.

An incredulous laugh tore itself from Sokka's throat. "Buddy, twenty-four hours ago no one was sure whether or not you were even on our side, let alone if you could be trusted not to literally burn us in our sleep. And—" Zuko shot him a glare over his shoulder, breathing ragged. "From the looks of things, you weren't planning on coming back."

He tore at his hair. "I'm still here, aren't I? Agni, you all keep begging me to cooperate—I've been *trying!*" They were back in the courtyard, his chest tight with anxiety and hurt and anger, his blood hot. His chi burned at his palms, the sort of itch only pain would satisfy. Whether someone else's or his own, it didn't matter. He shoved the instinct down, clenched fists shaking, sickened by his own thoughts.

Sokka shook his head, snapping, "I asked if you'd ever been to the Royal Palace."

"*What?*"

"On Appa, before the attack. I asked if you'd been to the palace. You didn't really answer."

Zuko remembered the conversation well. He scowled. “I didn’t lie. Not really.”

“But you didn’t—” Sokka huffed sharply, a muscle in his jaw bouncing. “You could’ve told me the truth. *That* would’ve been the time to try.”

Another pang went through him, guilt this time, and the knowledge that Sokka was right. “I didn’t know what you would’ve done. What any of you would’ve done.” *If things had gone my way, I’d be halfway across the world right now.*

“Did my dad know?”

“No.”

Sokka was suddenly moving towards him once more, holding his glare. He didn’t stop until they were all but a foot from each other, shoulders rising and falling rapidly. Zuko lifted his chin, refusing to back down, trying not to feel caged by the high cliff walls all around. Maybe it *had* been a mistake to come here. He expected something harsh, something vengeful he fully deserved. Instead, his earnesty worse than Isao’s whips, Sokka said, “You don’t have to hide anymore. You brought us here when you could’ve sold us out. You fell off a cliff to buy us time escaping Azula.” He exhaled shakily, the flush worsening on his neck. “I love my sister and I respect her judgment, but sometimes she’s wrong. I’m sorry I didn’t realize that sooner. My dad trusted you. So do I. Maybe it’s time we all gave you a chance.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Zuko heard himself ask, unable to accept what he was hearing.

Sokka cocked his head. “What do you mean?”

“How am I supposed to believe that? You *just* proved none of you even trust me to be by myself!” he cried. “Everyone keeps lecturing me about opening up but you’ve barely given me a fucking chance.”

He had the gall to look hurt. “I’m sorry. It was wrong. But I want—I want to do better.”

Zuko sneered, crowding into the other boy’s personal space until there were but inches between them, grinding out slowly, “I don’t believe you.”

Sokka didn’t flinch away. “I told you earlier something had to give. I meant you when I said it. But I’m willing to give first if you’ll let me.”

Heat spread between his ribs in an instant at the reminder of that particular thread of conversation. “For Agni’s sake, is that what this is all about, *again*? Why don’t you all stop trying so hard to get me to open up, I know how much Aang needs a firebending teacher, okay? You’ve made that more than clear.”

Sokka ran a hand over his face, groaning, “Zuko, that’s not *at all* what I—”

“No,” he said forcefully, skin prickling. “I get what you’re trying to do. I get the *concern* and the *gratitude*. But I’ve spent the last few years of my life rotting in a prison my family put me in—I know when people want something from me. I know all they’ll try to get it.”

“Is that right?” Sokka asked coolly, all traces of warmth gone. Some twisted part of Zuko reveled in it, to see this side of him, the side that wasn’t constantly trying to corral the others or play mediator. It was another glimpse behind the mask. “You want to know what I think?” Despite his own intrigue, he said nothing, skin practically humming with how close the other boy was. He didn’t know what he’d do if Sokka touched him again. He didn’t want to know. His chi was a livewire, waiting for the spark that would set it off. “I think you’re scared. You’re scared of letting any of us get close to you, so you’ve already decided you’re not going to let anyone in. My dad, Suki—they both trust you and want the best for you but you refuse to see it. And yes, the rest of us were wrong for not having given you a chance, I’ll admit to that. But maybe you should learn to recognize when someone’s on your damn side.”

A shadow passed over the flagstones, momentarily blocking the heat of the sun. A second later, Appa dropped down from the sky, sending dirt and leaves flying. Sokka jumped away and Zuko cursed under his breath, running a hand through his hair angrily as Suki waved down from the saddle, cheeks flushed, oblivious to the tension that still hung over the courtyard. “Good news, Sokka, Iruma has a thriving meat market!”

Sokka threw on a smile, and Zuko could have blackened a glacier. “Thank the spirits.”

Katara climbed from the bison’s head to its saddle, dropping packages to the yard below. “Where’re Aang and Toph?”

“The beach,” her brother answered shortly, not quite able to hide his annoyance. Katara’s hands hesitated over the burlap sack in front of her but she quickly recovered. “Here—” she tossed it into Sokka’s waiting arms. “Careful with that.”

He hefted the bag onto his shoulder, looking as uneasy as Zuko felt. “Yeah, yeah.” He glanced sideways at him, gaze hard enough to split rocks. “Where do you want these?”

He shrugged flippantly, hating that the mask was back up. “Wherever.”

Sokka stared at him for a long moment, expression unreadable, before minutely shaking his head and disappearing inside. For some reason, it sent a sharp spike of guilt through him, though it was quickly swallowed by anger. *Enough*, he told himself. *Who cares what the idiot thinks of you?*

“Heads up,” Suki called, and a moment later was tossing him a smaller parcel. “For you,” she explained with a grin. “I think it’s high time these prison clothes go, huh?”

He gripped the paper between his hands, his chi settling, the burn in his veins fading. “You didn’t have to.”

She shrugged. “I don’t want to hear any complaints if it doesn’t fit, we had a pretty limited selection.”

“If you mean that poor farmer’s clothesline, then yeah, pickings were pretty slim,” Katara smirked, arms laden with packages. “Here,” she tossed another to Zuko, who winced as he caught it, surprised by the weight. He was surprised to see the concern on her face as she tilted her head. “Shoulder still bothering you?”

“No,” he muttered stubbornly, shifting the packages in his arms. The absolute *last* thing he needed was a conversation with the waterbender turning into another argument.

Katara wordlessly slid down Appa’s tail, gracefully landing on both feet. She huffed, blowing a strand of hair from her face. Suki followed suit, arms full. She examined him scrutinizingly, for so long Zuko started to squirm. “Let’s put these up, then you’re coming with me.” With that, she turned on her heel and marched towards the house, dark hair swinging over her shoulder.

He glanced at Suki but she shook her head. “I’m with her on this one.”

Begrudgingly, he followed them inside. Sokka had disappeared, and Zuko told himself he didn’t care. He was glad for an excuse not to see the other boy. His anger had wilted some but Sokka’s words rang in his ears. *Am I wrong?* He wondered, ignoring Suki and Katara’s idle conversation. He’d been clinging to his own resolve for what felt like so long, he didn’t know what he would do if that crumbled. He wasn’t sure what parts of him would be left without it.

Katara found the in-house larder, pushing its heavy door open with her hip. It resembled the store cellar with its high, long shelves, and endless rails atop the ceiling for hanging and drying goods. She and Suki set to the task of setting items on shelves, which he didn’t quite understand since they’d likely eat their way through their newfound supplies in no time.

He unwrapped Suki’s gift while they worked, finding the soft, faded material of a stranger’s haori. Shrugging out of the shreds of his ruined shirt, Katara’s stern voice halted him in his tracks. “Zuko. Let me see your shoulder.”

His feet were frozen to the floor, and after seeing his indecision, Katara moved first; her face carefully blank, she closed the distance between them, uncorking one of her pouches. Water flowed gently from the lip, enveloping her hands almost as if her skin itself were crawling. On the bison, he’d been far too delirious with pain to fully appreciate her healing abilities; he found his nerves rising as she pressed both hands to the bloom of freshly healed skin on his left shoulder. He sucked in a breath as once again a dim blue glow emanated from her hands. “*Agni—*”

“I’m a healer,” she said shortly as though that were explanation enough. He tried to force himself to relax, to remain pliant, but a strong, pervasive itch began beneath his skin where she worked. As she moved away, the sensation faded, leaving much-needed relief. She was right—it probably wouldn’t even scar. He stilled as she traced a forefinger across the older, darker scars that curled over his shoulders. Voice tight, she asked, “How’d you get these?”

He hesitated, unsure what sort of answer would prompt fewer questions. Before he could make up his mind, Suki exhaled sharply, fists planted on her hips. “Who was it, the guards? Noriyo? Terumi?”

Again, he hesitated. The defensive, spiteful part of himself was still annoyed and wished to clam up, to snap at them until they left him alone. He felt so incredibly weary after Sokka, he feared he had little patience for any more questions. But keeping that anger going was draining. After too many sleepless nights and the lingering exhaustion of his fight with Azula, he was tired of it. He was tired of everything. “No one you would’ve known,” he

muttered carefully, tensing beneath Katara's cold hands, wary of the glow that washed over them both. At least, he hoped not. To his knowledge, Isao only ever worked the men's side of the prison, which was likely for the best. "It was before you got there." Not exactly true, but so many of those particular scars had come at different times, therefore it was a small lie in comparison to others he'd told.

"*Before*—" her voice shook, and he was surprised to see her eyes swell. "But after the kitchens, they—I *know* they did—"

"Suki," he stated insistently, "It's okay."

"It's not," she said forcefully, and Zuko didn't miss how Katara had yet to say anything else, her mouth pressed into a harsh line as she returned to her work, the glow returning. Gooseflesh rose over his skin as she shifted, flattening her hands where his sister's flames had struck mere hours ago. "It's not okay, and you shouldn't keep pretending it is." She scoffed, snatching up the bundle closest to her. "I'm going to change."

Zuko stared over Katara's head, watching her leave, guilt once again rising.

"I might be able to help with the scarring, you know," the waterbender said, so quiet Zuko almost missed it. She glanced at his face then quickly away. "Some of it, at the very least."

"Don't worry about it," he muttered, uneasy by the thought of anyone staring at his mutilated back for any longer than necessary.

She held his gaze for a long beat, something at war in her eyes. He looked away first, sleep once again pulling at him. She finally stepped back, taking the water with her. Her mouth opened then closed, her chest rising and falling with an anxious breath. Finally, she settled on, "I'll let you get changed." Then she was gone, and Zuko was alone once more, the haori in his hands threadbare and worn, his heart a mess.



Night enveloped the estate all too soon. Agni slunk slowly towards the horizon, leaving the empty house to grow darker and darker by the minute. Outside, the embers of the fire they'd built to cook their dinner cooled, the scent of roasted eelfish still thick in the air. No one felt like risking their hides against an onslaught of mosquitos by sleeping beneath the stars, even if it might've been cooler than in the stuffy, stagnant mansion. Zuko was once again in the larder, rummaging through the lower shelves searching for candles, the chatter of the others at his back. He'd lit a fire in the hearth of the main sitting area, and they were currently amassing a pile of pillows before it. He still wasn't sure how to feel about them here, with their lively, naive conversation filling the place he'd once loved.

Supper had been a tense affair. Toph and Aang had kept the majority of the conversation going, with the rest of them shuffling around each other mutely, avoiding one another's gazes. Zuko felt particularly out of place, knowing he was the cause of most of it. Despite the tension, he'd nearly nodded off into his bowl, barely able to keep his eyes open. As it was, he dug through the pantry until he found the box he'd been searching for. He rose, victorious,

then immediately startled as he found Sokka behind him, leaning against the doorframe with his arms crossed tightly over his chest. He scowled. “Some warning, maybe?”

Sokka glanced him over. “Thought you might need some help.”

He deflated slightly, raising an eyebrow. “Help lighting candles?”

It might’ve been the lighting but he could’ve sworn the other boy’s cheeks darkened. Sokka made to turn away. “*Spirits, nevermind—*”

“Here,” he thrust the box out, stomach suddenly turning with nerves. He probably should’ve still been angry at the others’ blatant mistrust and hypocrisy but he knew he was in the wrong as much as they were. His guilty conscience couldn’t shield him from that. Sokka edged forward and accepted it slowly. Zuko promptly pushed past him, not wishing to stay still. “Should be enough to last us a few nights at least, if we’re careful.”

“Better than nothing,” Sokka muttered, plucking a large three-wicked candle from the box as they returned to the kitchen. He set it on the counter, leaning away as Zuko reached around him to touch his fingertips to it. The wicks lit one after another, fending off just the smallest corner of darkness. They moved in silence, the quiet chatter of the other kids making up for it. Katara eyed them pointedly from her spot on one of the chaises, Toph in front of her on the smooth tiled floor with Momo in her lap once again, smirking impishly as Aang and Suki debated the practicalities of a pillow fort.

“It’s not going to stay up,” Suki insisted, one hand on her hip. “Besides, not all of us will even fit in there, it would be better if we just spread all of the cushions out flat.”

Aang scrunched his nose. “That kind of defeats the purpose of, you know, a *fort*.”

Suki sighed, rubbing at her brow. “Aang...”

“What about upstairs? Are there more bedrooms?” Katara asked, addressing Zuko directly for the first time in hours. Even at dinner, she’d merely shoved a bowl into his hands without preamble, then was gone before he could even thank her. He nodded reluctantly, shifting his weight awkwardly. Katara tilted her head. “Can we go grab some more cushions?”

Part of him demanded to know why they couldn’t all just sleep on their own but he knew, deep down, the reason. In the initial months after his banishment, he would’ve given anything to have someone else to guard his back as he slept, to ensure he wouldn’t be killed the moment he was no longer able to keep his eyes open. “Sure,” he stated flatly, uncomfortable with their eyes on him. Aang lit up, flying up the stairs immediately like all he’d been waiting for was permission, Katara following more slowly with a soft exhale of laughter. Suki hung back, the weight of her stare lingering on him. Like Katara, she’d avoided his gaze the entire evening, her mouth flattening into a tight line every time he drew near. Now, she remained quiet again, simply turning to follow Aang up the stairs.

Nerves climbing, Zuko went back to lighting the candles Sokka was still carefully laying out. The water tribe boy wasn’t normally quiet. It didn’t sit right with him, especially knowing he

was to blame. Swallowing his pride, he admitted stiffly, “I shouldn’t have reacted the way I did earlier.”

“I probably would’ve done the same,” the other boy said, not annoyed or flippant as Zuko expected. He set a few tea candles atop the fireplace mantle, gaze tracking Zuko’s fingertips as he lit them one by one. “Now, don’t get angry—”

He rolled his eyes. “Great start.”

Sokka rummaged through his box, barrelling on. “But how come you can bend like that? Or like you did in the cellar, or even when you were going at it against Azula? You say your bending is terrible but it doesn’t seem like it to me.”

Zuko kept his eyes on the task at hand as he thought about his answer. “Bending is a muscle like any other in your body, but it’s one that’s connected to your emotions, your chi, your overall state of being. Lighting these candles, or those lanterns, that’s nothing.” He paused. “Bending is... Bending in my country has always been a weapon. That’s why so many of our soldiers are rarely armed—they don’t require anything else to defend themselves. For so long, I drew on pain and anger to bend. But that became polluted once I saw what fire could really do to a person. Without that spark, it’s difficult to do much more than this.” He pressed his fingertips to another wick, smoke curling from the wax as the flame caught. “Seeing Azula brought back the resentment and rage I’ve always drawn on. I—I wanted to hurt her.” It had been as natural as drawing breath, and that terrified him.

Sokka withdrew a tall, skinny candlestick and held it out for him. Zuko lit it easily, the flame bright in the other boy’s eyes. “That’s why you said Aang needs someone with control. Restraint.”

He nodded. “Aang is going to face my father at some point. I stand by what I said about him needing a master if he’s going to have even a chance against him.”

Sokka shook his head, though he didn’t look angry or defensive. He stretched to place his candle into a sconce mounted on the wall. “I’m not trying to start anything, but you’re wrong. Every day we spend not training him, even if it’s the bare minimum or most basic katas, is a day wasted. There’s got to be *something* you could teach him.”

Zuko inhaled slowly, willing his hands not to tremble. He knew Sokka was probably right. He knew it was wrong to keep Aang in the dark, especially when they had no hope of finding another firebender. That knowledge was becoming harder and harder to ignore, but he couldn’t help the lingering fear, the inkling in the back of his mind that told him to try would be to fail, that whatever knowledge he could pass on still wouldn’t be enough to save the boy from death, or worse. But maybe that was the point of trying, he thought, to fail again and again until you reach something better.

He tried not to shudder. “I’ll think about it.”

It was as though he’d already agreed; a smile spread across Sokka’s face, crinkling the skin at his eyes and chasing away the worry he wore like a second skin. “Good. That’s good!” He started to turn away, then abruptly stopped, still grinning. “Thank you.”

“I’m not promising anything. Just that I’ll think about it.”

“I know,” Sokka said, lifting a hand like he wanted to reach for him, then thought better of it. Zuko had to wonder if these kids found it physically impossible to keep their distance from each other. “I um, I appreciate it.”

He grunted something unintelligible in response, startling as Aang flitted down the stairs. “Er, Zuko—there’s something you should come look at.”

“What do you mean?” he demanded, not sure why the kid annoyed him so much.

Toph waved one of Momo’s arms. “You guys have fun. Just let me know if it’s got teeth, yeah?”

Sokka snorted as they followed Aang up the stairs, the paintings on all sides watching them eerily. The small boy sounded nervous as he said cryptically, “It’s kind of weird—or maybe not, I don’t know, could be nothing—though with us it’s never nothing—but Katara thought you’d want to see it.”

They reached the landing, the upper sitting room spread before them. Like the rest of the house, it was as Zuko remembered with its dark, overstuffed furniture and landscape paintings adorning the walls. Aang veered left, taking them down a hall Zuko was well familiar with. His stomach churned as the boy pushed open the first door on their right, entering what had once been his bedroom.

The room bore little evidence of having once belonged to a child. With the same moody, dark crimson walls as the rest of the house, a standing dresser, and a four-poster bed that was far smaller than he remembered, it looked as untouched as everything else. Katara stood before the bed, hands on her hips as she stared down at something. A long, narrow box laid atop the bedclothes, its smooth, unstained wood coated in a hefty layer of dust, except where smudges betrayed recent movement.

“This was on top. Does it mean anything to you?” she asked, holding her hand out. Sokka sucked in a sharp, startled breath. In her palm rested a small, round pai sho tile, its edges chipped and its painted face peeling. He plucked it gingerly from her palm, holding it up to get a better look at it. Despite its weathering, its design was still evident. He frowned, more than confused. “A lotus?”

The others sagged in visible disappointment. “This isn’t the first time we’ve come across one of these tiles,” Aang said, “We hoped you might know something.”

“No,” he said, slipping the chip into his pocket as he reached for the box, fingers trembling. Its bronze clasp lifted easily, and his heart nearly stopped at the sight of what lay inside.

“Swords?” Sokka cocked his head.

“Dao,” Zuko whispered, pulling the blades from their cushioned nest. They weren’t the same as the ones he’d grown up with, not exactly, for those had been built for the limited strength



and reach of a boy. Like the first, they were just light enough, the grip fitting perfectly against the mold of his hands, their well-oiled, double-edged blades gleaming even in the low light.

“Were these yours?” Katara asked softly.

“Someone gave me a similar pair when I was younger,” he said, chest twisting at the thought of Iroh. Where was the man now? How had the Dragon of the West fared in the years since they’d last seen each other? *Probably drinking tea somewhere while this war wages on*, he thought bitterly, placing the blades into their case gingerly. “But I don’t recognize these either.”

“Maybe they belong to Azula,” Suki suggested.

“No.” Zuko shook his head adamantly. “She never needed to learn how to use them. I think they were... I think these were meant for me, somehow.” He stilled, a chill settling over him. “Someone’s been here.”

“*What—*”

“Didn’t I *tell* you two to search the grounds?”

“*We did!*”

“I *knew* we shouldn’t have come here.”

“Katara, that’s not—”

“Hang on, hang on!” Suki cried, throwing both hands up. Immediately, everyone froze. She fixed Zuko in place with a cold look. “Just what makes you say that?”

“These—” he gestured to the dao, “Were never here. They wouldn’t have been a gift for anyone else in this house, either. Then in the cellar, Toph showed me a room full of my mother’s heirlooms. There were clear signs items in there had been disturbed, that things were missing.”

“What kind of thief would leave a gift? Especially one as expensive as these?” Sokka questioned, though Zuko had no answer for him.

He shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“It must have something to do with the lotus tile,” Aang said, eyes bright, all former exhaustion vanished in the face of their discovery. “It was sitting right on top of the box when we came in.”

“Strange,” Zuko muttered. He couldn’t recall any sort of relevance of a lotus tile growing up, though that didn’t mean much. He’d never had the patience for pai sho, nor the mind for strategy the game required. That had been perhaps the only thing Iroh shared with Azula.

Katara rubbed tiredly at her temples as though attempting to ward off a headache. “That’s exactly what I was afraid of. How do we know this thief won’t be back? Or—”

Sokka smoothly interrupted his sister. “We’ve been here, what, half a day? The world hasn’t caved in yet, so let’s take that as a good sign. This thing has obviously been here for a while, with all the dust. We all need some sleep. This might make more sense in the morning.”

Aang deflated, glancing forlornly at the box. “Yeah, you’re probably right.”

Sokka pulled him under his arm, grinning. “I’m always right, haven’t you figured that out by now?”

Zuko snorted at the same time Aang huffed a laugh. “Uh, sure, Sokka, keep telling yourself that.”

Sokka gasped in mock offense. “You wound me, avatar! When have I steered you wrong? Actually—don’t answer that.”

Zuko eyed them irritably. Before he could open his mouth and shovel even more dirt on top of his grave, Suki cut in, “So—pillows? Toph’s gonna get ornery the longer we leave her alone down there.”

The boys sobered, and they all began gathering as much of the bedding as their arms could carry. Zuko lifted the dao case from the bed to ease their access, placing it gingerly atop his old desk. He stared at it for a long moment, thoughts churning. They were meant for him, that much he was certain of. He pulled the pai sho tile from his pocket, running his thumb over its once-gleaming face. The lotus winked up at him, silent and unhelpful. *What does it mean?*

## Chapter End Notes

as always apologies for the delay! again, not abandoned, just a procrastinator

# Chapter 10

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*“Again!”*

Toph’s hard voice cracked throughout the clearing, as unyielding as ever. She made an imposing figure across from Aang, despite her stature. A change fell over her the moment Aang braced himself beneath the heat of the midday, his feet shoulder-width apart, open palms facing the clouds. Gone was the girl who’d been cracking jokes and building crude sandcastles just a few hours prior. Now, a tense air hung over the glade, one Zuko felt like a heavy wool blanket. Aang’s mouth was set in a flat, determined grimace, his sight obscured by the pillowcase Katara fastened into a blindfold. The earthbender stood a few meters from him, hands clasped behind her back, examining the boy’s every move, seeing far more than was apparent to the rest of them. The transformation was not lost on Zuko; he dropped his basket of earthen pots to the ground, unaffected by the sound of their fragile clanking. He had not brought them out here to merely witness the sun.

Toph’s shoulders lifted in a subtle inhale then she was sliding one foot forward in tandem with her opposite arm. In a fraction of a second, a clay pot lifted from another basket at her feet, then, following the forceful thrust of her fist, hurtled through the air straight at Aang’s head.

He sidestepped the pottery deftly, dust rising as his bare feet tracked swiftly across the dirt. Toph’s lips pulled down in displeasure, continuing to wordlessly hurl pottery at his left and right with growing speed, never once giving him a moment to breathe. Aang held his own deflecting the attacks though Zuko suspected that was not the result Toph wanted; with every sidestep, every duck, the onslaught grew faster and more forceful, each pot getting closer and closer to hitting its mark. It was entrancing—an artful, dangerous dance he couldn’t tear his eyes from. Toph’s movements were reflexive, instinctual, and it was plain to see how they weren’t quite second nature to the avatar. Avoid and evade, that’s what airbending boiled down to.

The earth did neither.

The basket at Zuko’s feet trembled in warning half a second before the pottery he’d gathered was pulled from its depths. Unable to deflect its momentum, Aang threw his arms up in front of his face, the clay exploding before it could strike him. He tore the blindfold away. *“What was that?”*

“We’ve been over this a million times, Twinkle Toes,” Toph snapped, fists planted on her hips. “Dancing around, saving your energy—it’s got its uses but at some point, you’re gonna have to land a hit whether you want to or not.”

Aang’s shoulders rose even higher, his cheeks mottled with anger. “We agreed on our usual drill sets—”

“Yeah,” Toph cut him off flatly, patience worn thin. Zuko shared a worried glance with Suki. While he remained mulishly standing, determined to keep this detour short, she was perched on a flat boulder, Sokka and Katara to her left. Neither of the siblings seemed all too concerned about the growing dispute, more preoccupied with the faded map spread between them, held in place by a weathered brass telescope and Sokka’s boomerang. “We did. But do you think an attacking soldier is gonna give you a choice? Gonna agree to *warm up* to the real thing?”

Aang brandished a tattooed hand. “We’re *not* in a real fight right now—”

“Good thing, too. If we had been, you’d be toast.”

Their argument quickly dissolved into flying clods of earth and shards of broken pottery. Zuko winced as a piece of clay half the size of Momo sailed past Toph’s ear.

“Aren’t you going to do something?” He snapped at Sokka and Katara, who looked up as though it was the first time they’d noticed anything was amiss.

Sokka glanced briefly in the direction he pointed, then bent back over the map, running his hands over the tattered leather to smooth it flat. “We’ll see who draws blood first. My money’s on Toph. Aang won’t go that far.”

“*Sokka.*” Katara shoved his shoulder. She shook her head and he at least looked a bit cowed, though not by much. “They usually work this sort of thing out on their own.”

“It doesn’t seem...” Suki trailed off wryly, head cocked as she watched Aang attempt to land a blow. Toph dodged each movement as though choreographed but the airbender’s growing frustration was evident in the way his movements were losing finesse, his actions harsh and swift. Suki winced as yet another projectile narrowly missed Toph’s cheek. “Safe.”

Zuko recalled his conversation with Toph beneath the colonnade, her certainty, and fondness. “Agni,” he cursed, snatching up his now-empty basket. He’d already wasted enough time as it was. “I can’t watch this. You three have fun.”

Sokka’s head snapped up. “Uh, hold on—any more luck?”

He exhaled slowly through his nose, itching to be moving. “No. It’s such a mess down there, it’s hard to tell what’s been moved and what hasn’t.” He’d spent most of his time the last two days pouring over the rooms beneath the house, deciding for himself what was of interest and what wasn’t. He had no desire to watch while Toph and Katara trained the avatar, feeling the weight of his own idleness like an ever-tightening snare. “The map?”

The other boy shook his head, shoulders slumped. “A bust, really. Nothing we didn’t already know.”

“Well,” Katara amended with a grimace, “Not entirely. It did confirm Aang’s hunch about an underground river beneath the Royal Palace. That’s *something*.”

Zuko hummed, twisting the basket handle in his grip. Chest tight, already knowing the answer, he asked without looking at any of them, “And...Hakoda?”

“Nothing,” Katara replied grimly, glancing past him towards the open ocean. Beside her, Sokka ran his fingers over their telescope, expression unreadable. Zuko didn’t have to guess what he was thinking. They’d all been thinking it ever since they’d split from the others, the smoke from Fire Nation bombs still thick in their lungs. “No sign of any hawks or sea ravens. Nothing at all.”

Suki exhaled slowly, rubbing her thumb across her opposite palm as though it might stave off the worst of her nerves. “It’s only been a few days since the temple. We can’t know for certain where he and the others might’ve ended up. It’s entirely possible they just...they haven’t found a raven or any way to get word to us yet.”

“Let’s hope that’s the case,” Sokka muttered, though the deep furrow between his brows and the worried pull of his mouth betrayed his nerves.

The sounds of Toph and Aang’s continued scuffle and the distant roar of waves on rocks drowned the somber quiet. Anxious to return to the peace of the storerooms, Zuko muttered quickly, “I’ll bring up anything else I find that might be useful.”

He started to turn on his heel but froze when Sokka quickly leaped up, twirling his boomerang between nimble fingers. The water tribe boy stretched his arms above his head, flashing a smile that faltered in his eyes. “Want company?”

Again, Zuko hesitated. A reflexive part of himself wanted to snap, to say something harsh and cutting. Suki and Katara were suddenly both hunched over the map, their backs muffling whatever conversation was so important. Sokka watched him intently, fingers still playing with his favored weapon, his smile growing less and less certain. Chest tightening, Zuko felt a small stab of annoyance. It wouldn’t be right for anyone other than himself to search through his mother’s possessions, he thought, chi sparking at the very idea. He’d seen exactly how clumsy the other boy could be.

He stupidly glanced up, meeting Sokka’s gaze. Those Agni-damned blue eyes were hopeful, save a growing inkling of doubt, one that made the tentative smile slide right off Sokka’s face. Zuko realized with a jolt he was tired of seeing that there. He was tired of the back and forth. *Something’s got to give.* Sokka had already taken the first step when no one else would. Maybe it was time he returned the favor. “Uh, sure. That would be...yeah. Sure.”

Sokka’s eyebrows shot up in surprise, a genuine grin replacing his growing disappointment. “Great! Great—er, here—” He crossed the small space in three strides then plucked the basket from Zuko’s hands, slinging it over his shoulder. Whether they realized it or not, Zuko didn’t miss the way Suki and Katara glanced at each other. He didn’t get long to dwell on that; Sokka continued to grin crookedly, even as he started the trek back to the mansion. He started down the cliffside without a second thought, calling over his shoulder, “Did I ever tell you about that time me and Momo tripped on cactus juice in the Si Wong Desert?”

Zuko followed with vastly less enthusiasm. “You drugged your lemur?”

“Not *on purpose*. We’d just lost Appa—”

“How do you lose a ten-ton flying bison?”

“—also was not on purpose! But that’s beside the point and definitely getting off-topic. *The cactus juice*—”

Still on the fence about whether or not Sokka’s presence was a welcome distraction or a poorly-considered, self-inflicted curse, Zuko did his best to follow along with the other boy’s jumbled method of storytelling. Their winding path took them from the craggy cliff that overlooked the bay back down to the dunes, where they did their best to avoid the creeping vines and waist-high grasses. Zuko circled around to the back of the house, passing the grand entrance and swooping balconies, nodding and humming when it felt appropriate to indicate he was still listening—and he was. Even though he tended to be overly long-winded, Sokka had a way of telling stories that made Zuko feel like he’d been there right alongside the others. He found himself stifling a smile at the other boy’s antics as he described his vivid hallucinations in the desert, then somehow veered into a story about a time when he’d been trapped in the spirit world.

Zuko pushed beneath one of the many bougainvilleas that covered the property, its boughs thick with overgrown foliage and brilliant, deep-crimson blooms. At their feet lay the now-open maw of the cellar, the entirety of the door still crumpled and pushed towards the sides as though made of tin. Zuko was still in awe of Toph’s metalbending—he wasn’t sure he’d ever be able to wrap his mind around such a marvel. Still prattling behind him, Sokka brandished an affronted hand; “—and there were *no* bathrooms! None! I’ve seen three-hut villages with better guest accommodations—” He paused, abruptly veering off again to a different topic entirely, so quickly Zuko felt like he was getting whiplash trying to keep up. “So, what have you found down here so far?”

He shrugged, then winced as a twinge ran through his left shoulder. Katara’s efforts had helped tremendously but with any wrong move, he still felt a jolt of pain. Breathing slowly through his nose in an effort to push past it, he lit their lamps at the bottom of the stairs, handing one to the other boy before following the path he was coming to know well.

“Not a whole lot if I’m being honest. A bunch of personal heirlooms but also a lot of junk.” He felt guilty calling it that but there was no better word for some of the items he’d uncovered. “I’ve just been trying to clean things up, re-organize a bit.” His face heated, unsure what Sokka might think of him. He’d wanted to stay busy and out of the others’ way—he’d certainly found a way to accomplish that. “I went through most of the smaller rooms this morning, grabbing what I could for Toph. Now I’m mainly working on my mom’s old storeroom.” He’d agreed to grab whatever earthen materials he could for Toph and Aang to use for their drills, so long as they belonged to Ozai and not his mother. Toph’s face had lit up with dark, merciless glee at the offer.

Sokka hummed in acknowledgment, his lantern bobbing and casting strange refractions across the corridor. “Cool, cool. A little spring cleaning.” He was close behind Zuko, the glow of their lanterns reminding him strikingly of the night they’d placed candles around the house. He couldn’t shake the feeling of Sokka’s side against his own, the soft, unguarded

look in his eyes. He picked up his pace a little, eager to put some distance between himself and the other boy, horrified by his own thoughts.

He was so distracted he flinched when Sokka remarked wryly, "That map you brought up earlier was pretty cool. A couple of decades out of date but it was at least interesting to see how much the Fire Nation has expanded in the last twenty years."

"Interesting isn't the word I'd use," he muttered, every twist and turn of the corridor bringing them closer to his mother's storeroom.

"Good or bad, that kind of knowledge hasn't been very widespread outside the Fire Nation," Sokka said, raising his lantern higher, eyeing every doorway they passed. If he was curious to know what lay behind any of them, he didn't voice it. Zuko almost wished he did.

They turned the final corner, the other metal door Toph had made short work of crumpled before them. Zuko breezed past it but Sokka paused beneath the frame, dropping the basket, running his fingers over the warped metal. "It's kinda scary what that kid can do."

Again, Zuko did not answer, simply hummed in vague acknowledgment, setting his lantern atop the nearest overturned crate and getting back to work. He didn't dare throw anything away from this room but he made certain to take his time going through each box he found, quietly wondering what significance every item within held, pained that he could only guess.

Wordlessly, Sokka took in the room, staring in awe of the costumes and headpieces that adorned the walls. Zuko pointedly ignored him, choosing to focus on what was in front of him, though now that they were alone his mind drifted easily to thoughts of Sokka pressing beside him, the odd thrum he'd felt during their argument on the dunes when Zuko had wanted...something to happen but couldn't have said what.

*Enough of that*, he shook himself, glancing guiltily at Sokka as though the other boy might've overheard his thoughts.

Sokka wandered to the shelves that lined the far wall, pulling a small crate from the lowest level and gingerly opening it. They lapsed into silence for a long while, each of them lost in their task. This didn't last long of course. After reaching the bottom of just one box, the water tribe boy asked without warning, "So, er, are you looking for anything...in particular?"

Zuko hoped his sigh didn't sound too annoyed. "I don't know. Not really. Just...anything that might be useful."

Sokka went quiet for a few more minutes, pawing through the next closest crate. Zuko turned his attention back to the scrolls he'd been skimming through, taking care to gently unfurl each one, glancing over its contents before setting them aside in the slowly-filling box beside him. So far, there truly had been nothing of major interest inside the storeroom. It was crammed full of trinkets and knickknacks, pieces he couldn't fathom any reason for keeping sequestered away. His mother's old costumes and jewelry were surely valuable in some circles but would not provide any use for the problem at hand. Sitting on his knees surrounded by boxes, his nose full of dust, Zuko wished desperately that Ursa was there

beside him explaining the meaning behind each and every item she'd chosen to hide away, no matter how useless they seemed.

It felt strange to have Sokka in the storeroom with him, someone who had no ties to Ursa, no qualms about whether or not what they were doing was invasive. His curiosity was plain, eager while still reverent, seeming to sense Zuko's anxiety about allowing him in. Zuko kept a close eye on the other boy as they worked, sorting through his mother's past as though she were a stranger, trying to detach himself from the process like they had any business at all rifling through her belongings.

The organizing had kept his hands and his mind occupied for the last few days, and blessedly out from beneath the feet of the others. As much as he was learning to tolerate them, he still preferred to be on his own. For the most part, they allowed him to keep his distance. Katara and Toph were still working Aang for long hours during the day, running through drills and testing the limits of the boy's abilities. Zuko wasn't sure how much more there was for the kid to learn but he also didn't want to think too hard about that question. Suki spent most of her time with the others, and Zuko could tell she was beyond happy to be reunited with them. She smiled more in their few days on the island than he'd ever seen from her in the past.

What he hadn't counted on was Sokka's insistency about keep him company. It grated on him at first, when every time he turned around he found the other boy not far behind, looking antsy and as though there was a question that was slowly killing him. Thinking it was part of their original mission to keep an eye on him, he'd been set on giving the other boy the silent treatment. It still sent an ache through his chest at the thought of them planning behind his back, purposefully keeping him out of the loop. He tried to put it behind him but the doubt was never far from recall.

Sokka was an oddity. When he wasn't busy pouring over whatever maps Zuko could find for him, he spent most of his time rambling about anything and nothing, gesticulating wildly, garnering laughs from the others. Zuko would deny it if anyone asked but he privately thought the other boy was pretty amusing. And he could flip a switch, Zuko'd noticed—he'd be cracking jokes one minute, making horrible puns and trying too hard then turn cool and collected in a matter of heartbeats. There was a side to him he didn't like the others to see, for whatever reason. Now that he knew to look for it, the transformation was easy to pick out. He'd catch the other boy staring towards the horizon or up at the night sky, shoulders hunched inwards. He initially wrote it off as disappointment about not hearing from Hakoda but he had to wonder if there was something more to it. Sokka tried his damndest to keep up a mask, and a poor one at that.

Across the room, Sokka held up a wooden prop sword with a jeweled hilt. "Now *this* —this is pretty cool. Where'd your mom get all this stuff anyway?"

"Her parents owned a theatre house," Zuko answered without looking up; he'd discovered a moth-eaten deed to a piece of land close to Ember Island's harbor, building permits, playbills, water-stained, annotated scripts. In life, Ursa rarely mentioned her family. The fact that she'd never shared even such small pieces of her history stung, especially now as he found himself surrounded by the remnants of it. "Somewhere on this island actually. She grew up here."



Sokka held the sword at arms-length, peering down the blade as though it were made of steel. “Her parents never came to check on this place?”

Zuko bit his lip, sitting back on his heels. “This land and everything on it became the property of Ozai once he and my mother were married. I doubt he would’ve let her family come visit.”

Sokka shook his head, unease plain on his face. Zuko couldn’t have agreed more. “Did you spend much time here?”

Zuko felt like demanding, *What’s it to you?* He stamped that instinct down, locked it away in the same space he reserved for Ozai and Azula. He didn’t answer until he was sure he wouldn’t sound cross. He kept his hands moving as he spoke, trying to convince himself that if he were focused on something else, the memories he tried so hard to suppress wouldn’t swallow him. “I used to. We’d spend every summer here when I was younger, sometimes even making other trips during the year if we had the time. Me, Azula, my cousin, my uncle Iroh, my mom; we’d all spend a week or so at a time here without Ozai or my grandfather. It was...it was nice.” He briefly closed his eyes, taking a slow, steadying breath through his nose. “But uh... after my mom died, we didn’t come back. No one did. Ozai never cared much for Ember Island.”

Sokka lowered the sword, placing it where it belonged on the prop rack against the wall, fingertips lingering on the pommel. “I hate to ask but... was Azula always...” His voice trailed off, expression sheepish. Zuko watched him find his words with interest, always intrigued when he let his guard down. “So...ruthless?”

“Not really,” Zuko shrugged, though he wasn’t entirely sure how true that was. He couldn’t pinpoint the exact moment Azula had become unrecognizable to him, only that it had happened without his notice and certainly long before his banishment. “She was determined to succeed, even when we were little. We both knew what it meant to carry the blood of Sozin, what sort of...expectations came with it. I guess once she realized what it took to stay in our father’s favor, she didn’t want to let go of that.” He could still remember the nights she’d sneak into his room, slipping beneath his blankets to curl against his side, sometimes choking down tears, sometimes utterly, horribly silent. Holding her in the dark, her breathing evening out until she calmed enough to fall asleep—it felt like the one thing he could do right, like he could ward off anything. At least, until dawn broke over the Caldera.

“Hmm,” Sokka mused, considering that information. “What *is* your dad like?”

Zuko dropped the piece of parchment he’d been half-heartedly examining. He picked it back up with trembling fingers. “He didn’t tuck me in every night and read me bedtime stories if that’s what you’re getting at.”

Sokka ducked his head, cheeks red. “Sorry. Let me know if I’m asking too many questions.”

“No it’s...you’re alright,” Zuko exhaled forcefully through his nose, trying to remind himself Sokka was *nice*. And despite the confusion and anger of their first few days knowing each other, he seemed to genuinely care about everyone around him. *He’s only curious*, he told himself. *There’s no harm in that*. “I just, I don’t want to talk about him right now.”

“Okay,” he said easily, looking all too eager to get back to a topic that would keep him in Zuko’s good graces. Zuko felt a pang at that realization, hating how defensive he could be, how it made everyone walk on eggshells around him. *I’m going to do better. Then, they’ll see I’m more than just the Fire Lord’s son.* He wanted that, he’d come to realize. He wanted their acceptance, their easy companionship. He wanted to know what it felt like.

Sokka circled the room, hands on his hips, examining the wall of shelves in front of him as though the items collecting dust might somehow deliver a solution to all their problems. He paused, plucking up the carved figurine of Agni, clearing the dust away with his thumb.

“What about your uncle?”

“Iroh?” Zuko blinked in confusion, taken off-guard. “What about him?”

Sokka crossed the room wordlessly, settling on his knees on the floor beside him. The stacks of boxes and crates left little space to share, and the outside of their thighs pressed together as Sokka made himself comfortable. Zuko was acutely aware of the point of contact, finding it hard to focus on anything else. Sokka didn’t seem to have such reservations or be aware of the dilemma Zuko found himself in—he leaned in unbearably close, offering the figurine. The carving had certainly seen better days and was in desperate need of a new coat of paint. Sokka watched him cradle it, eyes contemplative. “We met him, you know. Iroh”

All previous thoughts fled his mind. Heart spiking, he croaked, “You—what?”

“We ran into him a few times actually,” Sokka elaborated, thumb tapping atop his knee. Zuko had the briefest image of himself shaking the other boy, prying the answers from him quicker, but he was frozen to the floor. “The first time was in Agna Qel’a. We’d traveled there so Aang and Katara could learn waterbending from a true master. It wasn’t long before the Fire Nation realized where we were, and they laid siege against the city. It was a pretty bad fight. An entire armada of Fire Navy ships was tearing down the city walls but the Northerners were holding their own for a while.” Sokka’s face darkened, eyes falling to his lap. “That is until a Fire Nation general killed the physical form of the moon spirit. It was terrifying. The world went dark. All of the waterbenders lost their abilities. Your uncle actually helped us....restore the moon spirit. Then he let us go, he didn’t even care the Fire Nation wanted Aang.”

Sokka swallowed thickly, briefly closing his eyes, something Zuko couldn’t decipher eating at him. “The next time we saw him, we were on the run from Azula. She and her minions had been after us for a while, and she essentially had Aang cornered. Your uncle showed up, tried to talk her down. She didn’t like that much and shot lightning at him. Got him pretty good, too.” Zuko went rigid and Sokka’s eyes grew big at whatever expression was on his face. “He was alright, though! Katara was able to heal the worst of his injuries. We went our separate ways but somehow ran into him *again* in Ba Sing Se. We’d been waiting on an audience with the Earth King but it was all a total sham. The Dai Li had their own motivations and were slowing us down, making us wait. It wasn’t long before your sister caught up again and turned them to her side. With them behind her, she took control of the entire city like it was nothing.”

Zuko sat in mute confusion. Suki and Hakoda had breached the topic of Azula’s coup before but it felt different hearing the account from Sokka. Figures it would be her to accomplish

overnight what the Dragon of the West couldn't do in nearly half a year.

Sokka continued without looking up, brow creased and thumb still tapping erratically. Zuko wished to reach out, to do something, though he had no idea what. "The Dai Li followed her every command. They captured Katara and locked her in the old catacombs beneath the city. I wasn't there with Aang and Katara for their fight against your sister but...that was when she nearly killed Aang. Shot him with lightning. Katara only managed to save him using water from the North Pole's spirit oasis."

Zuko exhaled slowly, trying to digest this information. There was so much he didn't understand, he was certain he wasn't getting the full picture, but he couldn't even be all that concerned about the Earth Kingdom's failed monarchy or the ease at which Azula had assumed control. "And... Iroh?"

Sokka finally looked up, blue gaze somber. "He's the only reason Aang and Katara made it out of there. He fought off the Dai Li so they could escape."

Zuko clenched his fists atop his knees to hide their shaking, the sharp juts of Agni's carving digging into his palm. "Do you know if he made it out?"

"No," Sokka said softly, guilt falling over his features. "I don't. I'm sorry. The last Katara saw, he was immobilized by the Dai Li."

"Agni," Zuko murmured, unable to suppress the twinge of grief in his chest. He swallowed hard, unwelcome tears stinging his eyes. Embarrassed, he made to turn away, dropping the carving. Sokka reached out to halt him, hesitantly at first, gripping his shoulder loosely. Zuko reacted without thought, hand flying up to Sokka's wrist, fighting not to push him away. They stared at each other for a moment, each of them frozen, unsure what the other would do. Brows knitted together, hard gaze determined, Sokka moved first—tugging him in closer, winding his arms around Zuko gingerly.

"It's alright," he murmured, holding on tight, evidently not caring that Zuko returned the hug with as much gusto as a piece of driftwood. Zuko squeezed his eyes closed, releasing the other boy's wrist, hands coming up behind Sokka to clench in the fabric of his tunic. "Do you think he's dead?" He heard himself ask, throat horribly thick. He didn't know why he was asking Sokka of all people, who hadn't even been there, who had no true understanding of the depths of his family's twisted, insidious cruelty. "Do you think she killed him?"

"I don't know," he replied, chin on his shoulder. "I don't know."

Zuko closed his eyes, something snapping deep in his chest. He'd rarely allowed himself to think of Iroh in the years since his banishment, since he'd woken up on that ship, face bandaged and alone. He hadn't realized what the possibility of the man's death would mean to him, even after so many years of trying to convince himself he didn't care, that he'd never needed his uncle. He swallowed the lump in his throat, willed away his tears, something breaking in him though he was determined not to cry for the one responsible for everything that'd happened after his Agni Kai.

Zuko thought he'd known the man. Iroh—the Dragon of the West—the disgraced, displaced Heir—a man of so, so many failings. Someone who had shown him kindness all his life yet not when he'd needed it most.

And yet, despite it all, Iroh had fought for Aang and the others. Whether or not Zuko had ever truly known him, he'd given Aang the chance to fight another day.

Alive or dead, he'd made his choice.

He allowed Sokka to hold him for a long time, until the contact became too much to bear. It was too much all at once. He needed to stay busy, to keep his hands moving so he didn't have time to think about Iroh. Or anything else, for that matter.

He gingerly pulled away, unwilling to meet Sokka's gaze, feeling painfully seen as it was.

"Hey," Sokka grabbed his hand, held it close to his chest. "You've got me now. And Suki, and Toph, and Aang. Spirits, even Katara. Whatever happens, that's not going to change."

Zuko laughed raggedly, rubbing at his bad eye. "Yeah, sure."

"I'm serious," Sokka insisted, gripping him tighter when he tried to pull away. "I know we didn't get off on the best foot but you're one of us now. That means something."

*What exactly does it mean?* He had so many questions. But with Sokka staring at him so intently and his hand still held hostage, he couldn't find his voice. Pulling away, he went back to the pile of scrolls he'd been working through, grabbing one at random. He didn't want to think anymore. Not about Iroh or the avatar or anything else. He almost wished he was back in the Boiling Rock, life monotonous and routine, with only himself to worry about.

"Tell me something," he said, not wanting Sokka to start asking questions again. "Anything. Something no one else knows." He couldn't have said what prompted him to ask it or better yet why he found himself holding his breath as he waited for an answer.

Sokka was quiet for so long Zuko began to worry he'd never reply. Finally, leaning against the wall with one leg propped up, the other stretched before him, he stated abruptly, "I dream about the moon."

*Well, I did ask.* "The moon?"

"Yeah," Sokka didn't sound embarrassed, which, okay. "I met this girl at the North Pole. She was funny, clever, smarter than me by a mile. A princess too, if you can believe it, not to mention one of the most beautiful girls I've ever seen. She didn't care that I was low-born. She liked me for me. She went out of her way to talk to me, even though if anyone figured us out, we both would've been in trouble." He broke off, voice thick. Zuko unfurled a scroll, examined its pale, scrawling contents, placed it to the side. "She died. During the Siege. She gave her life to bring back the moon spirit. She saved us— *all* of us. So yeah. I dream about her sometimes."

He thought of the nights he'd caught Sokka alone outside, staring up at the night sky. "I'm sorry. She must've meant a lot to you."

"She did."

"What's something else?" Again, he wasn't even sure it was his place to pry, but the mask was gone and no one else was around to interfere.

"Is this payback for asking about your dad?" Zuko shot him a glance then relaxed when he caught a glimpse of the wry half-smile on Sokka's face.

"No," he replied honestly, shifting as he reached for another box of scrolls. "I just... I'm curious."

"Something else..." Sokka trailed off, then snapped his fingers. "I make some mean jerky."

Zuko snorted. "I've tried your jerky."

"Changed your life, right?"

He laughed. "*Sure*. But I said something no one else knows."

"Hey, no one appreciates my skills, gotta remind 'em from time to time, keep myself relevant." Sokka chuckled but Zuko got the distinct impression he was buying himself time, sliding just a bit of the mask in place to protect himself.

*Something's got to give.* "Well, if you're just gonna talk about meat, I'll go." Sokka grinned, making a *be my guest* gesture. Zuko turned back to the scrolls, a bit of feeling returning to his chest. "When I was really young, my family would go out along the palace parapets and watch the Caldera's annual Fire Festival. The parade would run by the walls that surround the Royal Palace, so we got a pretty good look at the whole procession. I used to think the performers dressed like dragons and firedrakes were totally real. I'd even ask my mom what the ringmaster would feed them."

Sokka booed good-naturedly. "Boring. Give me something deep."

Zuko flipped him a choice finger. He chewed his lip as he thought about it, not sure what part of himself he was willing to part with. An idea struck him. Steeling himself, he said, "The last time I ever saw the first person I liked, they threatened to kill me."

"That's rough. Did she mean it?"

"Yeah. He did."

Zuko waited with bated breath, rolling another useless scroll back together and placing it aside. Behind him, all Sokka replied with was a careful, "Prick."

He hummed under his breath, not wishing to speak ill of the dead. "Your turn."

“Hmm,” Sokka mused, “Oh— *and do not tell the others about this* —I may or may not have eaten all of our rations one time, more like two times if I’m being real—and blamed it on Momo.”



Sometime that same afternoon, Zuko was seated at the main dining table with Suki, a growing stack of peeled corn and chopped vegetables between them. They’d discovered a wild patch not far from the house, and had overzealously collected whatever they could carry. Zuko was regretting it now, elbows deep in potato skins.

“How are you doing?” Suki asked, making short work of the pile in front of her, her knife moving with skilled practice.

He glanced down in embarrassment. “Butchering them, I’m afraid.”

Suki laughed, flicking the end of a carrot at him. “I meant *you*. You seemed kind of...off when we first got here. How are you holding up?”

He kept his eyes on the knife in his hand. “Fine, I guess. It was hard at first, being back, but staying busy keeps my mind off things. So, yeah. I’m good.”

He could feel Suki eyeing him, the tight set of her mouth betraying her disbelief. “It was kind of you to offer this place. You certainly didn’t have to.”

“It’s the least I could’ve done,” he said and he meant it fully. Doing meaningless tasks each day while the others worked with the avatar... the guilt was starting to hit him hard. “How about you?”

She smiled, a bit of the unease sliding away. “Probably the best I’ve been in a long time if I’m being honest. Ever since I first met Aang at Kyoshi Island I’ve felt this... *need* to take action, to serve my country like Avatar Kyoshi would have wanted. Helping the refugees in Ba Sing Se was one thing, don’t get me wrong, but I really feel like I can make a difference here, even though I’m not a bender. Even if it’s just this, I’m happy to help.”

He glanced at her sharply. “Suki, I’ve seen you take down grown men more than twice your size. Bender or not, you’re a part of this team.”

Her smile turned shy. “Thanks, that really does mean a lot.” Zuko suddenly felt a flash of gratitude that he’d chosen to stand with her in the courtyard seemingly so long ago. “What’s the first thing you’re doing after we’ve won this war?”

“That’s awfully optimistic,” he stalled. “How do you know we’ll win?”

Suki kicked him under the table. “Humor me.”

He exhaled, mind churning. “I really don’t know what I’ll do.” Her face fell, her disappointment evident, and Zuko asked, “Can I tell you something?”

“Of course.”

“I’ve never told anyone this.” He finished one potato and picked up the next, the knife a comforting weight against his palm. “But I thought I was going to die at the Boiling Rock. For so long, all I knew was the same four metal walls. No one had ever escaped. No one outside was looking for me. I’d given up. I figured Isao or one of the other inmates would kill me someday. So yeah, if we make it out at the end of all this, I don’t know what I’ll be doing.” He bit his lip, thinking about his resolve to open up more. “But I’m glad that I at least got to meet you.”

“You can’t just say that out of nowhere,” Suki huffed, blinking rapidly, though she was smiling. “I’m glad I got to meet you too. Truly.”

Surprised by the tears stinging in his own eyes, Zuko said quickly, “What are you gonna do, then? After we win.”

“I’ve got it all planned out,” she said, flourishing her knife. “First, I’m paying your lovely sister a visit to find out what she did with the rest of my warriors. Then after she spills everything, I’m going to get them back. Each and every one. And only after we’re all together again will I even think about going back to our island.”

“And after that?”

“After that...” she sighed. “Probably lay out on the beach for a few days, then see about rebuilding the world.”

“Sounds like a good plan.”

“Yeah,” she agreed, glancing at him mischievously. “You’re a free man now, you know. What’s one thing you’ve always wanted to do but haven’t?”

He considered it. “I’ve always wanted to see the North Pole. Or the South, even. I’ve never been to either.”

“There you go,” she beamed. “Something to look forward to. This looks like enough, right?”

He scoffed. “Suki, there’s no way we’re eating all of this.”

“Never doubt Sokka’s appetite,” she winked, pushing away from the table and beginning to scoop all of their spoils into a massive wooden bowl. He had no idea what her intentions were for all it but he was content to help where he could. “That boy is a bottomless pit.”

“He’s definitely something,” Zuko muttered, beginning to clear away the scraps.

“I’ve got this,” she said breezily, hoisting the bowl into the kitchen. “I’ll be honest, I hate it when I have to share the kitchen. Makes me stabby. Why don’t you go make sure Toph isn’t using Sokka as target practice?”

Zuko chuckled as he finished clearing the table. “Yeah, yeah. Say no more.”

He made his way from the house back to the sprawling white courtyard, easily spotting the familiar outline of Sokka’s shoulders by the center fountain. The water tribe boy was alone

beneath the colonnade, oiling his sword, none of the others in sight. Zuko watched him work, intrigued by the slow, reverent way he handled the blade. It brought to mind a dozen memories of training at the Royal Palace, his past instructors, Agni, even how Iroh used to give him pointers.

*Swordcraft is not so different from bending, the old man said one afternoon, sipping from his favorite teacup. Zuko had been sprawled in exhaustion across the training square's tiles, irritation rising. He'd been petulant that afternoon, snapping at his instructor when he'd struggled to pick up on the day's footwork lessons. It's not just an extension of yourself but an outlet. Relinquish whatever you've been holding in but respect the art or you may very well hurt yourself in the process. The sword is not just a tool, but your friend.*

An idea struck him. Maybe not a good one, considering his shoulder still ached with certain movements, but Suki had already all but banished him from the kitchen so he figured he should stay busy somehow.

Mind made up, he turned on his heel, flying up the steps back inside. He made his way from one side of the mansion to the other, until he finally found the room he sought. The rusted handle turned with a groan and he had to slam his good shoulder into the door to get it to budge. Inside, weapons lined each of the walls and a large wooden armoire sat at the very back. Bolas and kanobos, broadswords and spears, even a full suit of Imperial armor—all remained as untouched as the rest of the house. He bypassed the weapons, going straight to the armoire. He'd snuck in a few times when he was small, mesmerized by the lines of sharpened blades. Pulling the doors open, he was greeted by the scent of treated wood that had been left undisturbed for too long. He surveyed what lay inside before grabbing what he wanted, using his hip to close the door.

Suki eyed him as he crossed back through the house, one eyebrow raised. "Should I be concerned?"

He smirked. "Only if we aren't back by dark."

She sighed but didn't stop him. Zuko crossed back outside quickly, arms laden. Sokka was right where he'd left him, carefully at work. "Hey," he said, nudging the other boy with his foot. He glanced up, startled. His eyes got even bigger when he saw what Zuko was carrying. "Come on, let's go. I need a change of scenery."

Sokka straightened, lowering the soiled rag he'd been using meticulously. "What about your shoulder?"

"That's what your sister is here for!" Zuko called over his shoulder, not bothering to see if Sokka followed him.

He led the water tribe boy from the grand courtyard past the grove of bougainvilleas, following yet another white marble path that was almost entirely obscured by weeds. The craggy black rock that surrounded the majority of Ursa's property rose high above them, shielding the house and colonnade on the other side. The short scrub that covered most of the grounds gave way to true jungle, with massive trees and creeping underbrush making their trail nearly impossible to follow. They had to skirt the worst of the black cliffs, traveling



uphill to a flat, white marble clearing that had, at one point in time, hosted plays. The perfectly square white slab was surrounded on all sides by raised marble bleachers four rows high where guests could sit and watch. It was meant to house a proper audience, with enough room for dozens of spectators. It hadn't been used for its purpose in Zuko's lifetime.

Panting slightly, Sokka turned in a slow circle, taking it all in. "Jeez, Zuko, anywhere else you've been sleeping on this whole time?"

He smirked, laying out the wooden practice swords he'd brought with him. "Maybe, maybe not. Can't show all my cards at once."

Sokka set down the very real sword he'd been oiling, propping it reverently against the stone steps. "Fair enough. But for real, what are we doing here?"

"I don't see my bending improving any time soon," Zuko admitted bluntly, unable to stop the embarrassed flush that crept up his neck. "I can't contribute on that account. But now that I have those dao...that's something I can *do*. Something I'm good at. Just... severely out of practice."

"You know, we appreciate having you as you are," Sokka said carefully, beginning to undo the wraps on his forearms. "You don't necessarily have to contribute anything."

Zuko very much doubted that. "I'd feel better if I could help in some way. Especially since I'm not... you know."

Sokka huffed, plucking up one of the wooden swords and giving it an experimental swing. "I meant what I said earlier. You've got all of us behind you, no matter what."

"Sure," Zuko said, not wanting to talk about it anymore. He wanted to lose himself for a bit, not ruminate on his lack of team spirit. He retrieved his own practice sword, levying the weight of it against his palm. It was far lighter than his real dao, than any real sword, but it would serve its purpose.

Sokka's eyes narrowed. "You don't believe me, do you?"

"It's not that," Zuko said, not sure how to put into words the ache that lingered in his chest. He supposed he *didn't* fully trust them but there was more to it. "I just... there's some shit I need to work through."

"That's okay," Sokka said and Zuko was grateful he didn't press the topic. "We'll get through it together. I guess that's what this is for?" He hefted the practice sword. Zuko nodded, feeling almost as bare as he had down in the storeroom. "Cool. Well, I'm just as competitive as Toph and an even worse loser so don't expect me to hold back."

There was a beat, then Sokka was rushing him. Zuko raised his sword. If he'd thought his bending was rusty, his sword skills were even worse. Sokka was clearly trained, his movements quick and reflexive. His style was strange, which threw Zuko off even more. In school and at the Royal Palace, he'd studied the fighting styles of each of the four nations. There was value in knowing your opponents' strategy—that knowledge alone might very well

save your life on the battlefield. The way Sokka handled his blade was a mix of fighting styles. He mainly recognized Southern Water Tribe but there was a surprising blend of Earth Kingdom and Fire Nation.

Zuko quickly shed his surprise, adapting as best he could. What he'd learned as a boy returned the longer they went at it, his muscles loosening and the placement of his feet becoming second nature once more. Sokka gave as good as he got which Zuko appreciated. He returned the ferocity as much as he could, pushing exactly where Sokka pushed, not willing to give an inch.

With a sharp twist of his wrist, Sokka had the blade flying from Zuko's grasp. It clattered loudly to the marble floor. "This what you had in mind?" He teased, wiping sweat from his brow.

Zuko huffed a breathless laugh as he went to retrieve his sword. "Getting my ass handed to me? Not quite."

"Happens to the best of us," Sokka twirled his blade, a flush high on his cheeks. Zuko looked away.

They clashed again, the sharp crack of wood on wood splitting across the clearing. It reverberated off the cut marble, sounding all the more thunderous with every strike. The air felt stagnant and hot beneath the thick canopy of trees, little breeze allowed through to dispel the heat. Zuko found he didn't mind—his blood was singing, running through his veins in a blazing rush. It reminded him of his chi, the power of Agni in all her fury. Sokka didn't slow, only came at him just like he'd asked.

Zuko pushed, body straining as he attempted to block Sokka's cut from the left. With a harsh shove, he sent the other boy stumbling back. He pressed his advantage, darting forward and kicking Sokka's legs out from under him in a single sweep.

Sokka hit the ground with a thud, landing flat on his back. He threw his arms out, sword dropping from his grasp. "*Spirits.*"

"Sorry," Zuko said breathlessly, offering his hand.

The other boy waved him off, panting, "That was dirty. Did you—learn that in prison?"

"They weren't exactly handing out weapons," Zuko huffed, wincing as he seated himself on one of the steps.

"Get into any fights?"

"What do you think?"

"Win any?"

"Sure. Lost plenty, too."

“Spirits, I can’t imagine how you got by in there for so long,” Sokka said softly, more to himself than anything. Zuko eyed him warily from his perch, still breathing heavily through his nose. Maybe he was just too tired but he didn’t have it in him to feel rage at someone’s pity like he used to. “You’re strong, Zuko. And I don’t just mean with your sword. I never would’ve survived something like that.”

“Some days I feel like I didn’t,” he admitted, picking at the callouses on his palms, the ones still tinged with soot.

Sokka sat up, eyes somber. “I’m sorry. You didn’t deserve to be sentenced there.”

“How can you know that?” Zuko asked before he could think better of it. “You hardly know anything about me.”

“I know you’re brave,” Sokka said, sounding so certain Zuko had to look away. “You care about your family, despite what they’ve put you through. You’ve got morals and you stick to them, spirits-be-damned anyone else’s opinion. You saved Suki from the Boiling Rock. You saved my dad. You saved all of us at the air temple even though we barely knew you. You’re a good person, Zuko.”

“Agni,” Zuko glanced at the treetops, eyes stinging. “I’ll let you knock me on my ass as many times as you want if it means you won’t say that kind of shit again.”

Sokka didn’t look amused. “I wish you believed me.”

“Yeah well...” Zuko stood abruptly, taking his sword with him. “Catch your breath, yet?”

Sokka stared at him a moment longer, then rose to his feet.

The clearing was soon filled with the sounds of their sparring yet again, the harsh crack of wooden swords sending Zuko’s ears ringing. He lost himself in the dance, recalling Iroh’s words and pouring everything out. Sokka held his ground, taking it all, returning the ferocity like it was nothing. Sparring was different than a true fight, thank Agni—in Zuko’s experience, a real fight almost always ended with someone losing their life. Sparring meant discovering the boundaries of a partner, pushing them until they nearly broke but never taking that final leap. It required trust; an acknowledgment of sorts. It was a back-and-forth game he hadn’t always had the luxury of playing. Something tentative and unspoken hung over them. He knew for everything he kept hidden inside, there was plenty Sokka was unwilling to share—he wasn’t going to pry or push where he had no business. But here, with his muscles loosening and his blood singing, sweat in his eyes, here they could both be honest.



By the time they returned to the house, dusk had begun to signal the end of yet another day on the island. The setting sun painted the sky’s canvas full of pinks, oranges, and blues as night drew closer, with dark clouds blazoned red settling over the mountains in the north. A soft breeze came from the ocean, bringing with it the scent of brine. Their practice swords hefted over his shoulder once again as he and Sokka finally reemerged from the jungle path,

Zuko felt lighter than he had in a long time. His arms, back, and legs were sore in a way that felt rewarding, a far cry from how worn he'd felt at the end of each day at the Boiling Rock.

If he felt anywhere near the same, Sokka didn't let on. "—so I ended up chasing after Hasuk, because duh, he stole my fishing line, and then—"

"There you two are," Katara called, waving from the colonnade. Momo was curled on her left shoulder, his long tail winding its way around her arm. Zuko forced a grimace, hoping he didn't look too disingenuous. "Come on, we need to talk."

"Talk? Was there a letter?" Sokka questioned, then his expression dropped. "Or did—did something happen?"

"No, nothing like that," Katara stroked Momo's tail, face troubled. "No letter, either, which..." She huffed a worried sigh. "Aang wants to talk to everyone after dinner."

"He couldn't talk to us now?" Zuko grumbled, thinking longingly of the chaise he'd claimed as his own in front of the fire.

Katara shot him a sidelong, evaluating glance, her gaze flicking to the practice swords in displeasure. "How's the shoulder?"

He shrugged. "Fine."

"He's lying," Toph crowed, sticking her head out from the house's back door. "Quit beating around the bush, some of us are starving."

Katara's mouth thinned into a displeased line. "Put those up then come find me, okay?" She waited until Zuko grumbled a *fine* before turning on her heel, Momo leaping into the air to swoop inside on her heels.

Zuko made to follow but once again was halted in his tracks as Sokka grabbed his wrist. *Agni, what now?* The other boy's face was worried, blue gaze serious. "You'd tell me if you weren't okay, right?"

"Probably not."

"Zuko."

"Bad joke. But uh, yeah." Surprisingly, he meant it.

"Did I hurt your shoulder?"

"I hurt it but it's fine. Nothing serious."

"It is serious if you're in pain," Sokka insisted, fingers warm where they still clutched at him.

Zuko pulled away, heading inside, getting that tight, sick feeling again in his chest. He ignored Sokka in his haste, rushing up the stairs and past the living area where Aang, Toph,

and Suki were gathered. He thought they might've said something to him but he couldn't have been sure—he hurried past, turning down the long hall that would eventually take him to the armory. It was just as he'd left it only a few hours prior—he placed the wooden swords back in the armoire, not sure if he regretted the afternoon or not.

Eyes closed, he didn't move until that nauseated feeling disappeared. He exhaled shakily, smoothing down the front of his haori, fingers trembling. *Weak, weak, weak*, he berated himself, pinching the bridge of his nose. *Enough*.

He lingered in the armory for as long as he dared, not wanting to risk the others coming to find him. When he finally reemerged back in the living area, nothing seemed to be amiss. Sokka was on the couch with the others, though his sister had disappeared—no doubt waiting for Zuko. He took a deep breath, steeling himself beneath the threshold.

Toph's head turned towards him. Like dominos, the attention of the others followed suit, each of their gazes a mix of concern. Zuko noted Sokka kept his head down, picking idly at his bowl. "Alright, Sparky?"

"Not the worst."

Her lips twitched and she turned back to her own bowl, evidently satisfied with that response. "Foods still hot. There's a bowl for you."

"Katara might actually murder me if I ignored her," he grumbled, purposefully leaving out the *again*. He didn't look at any of them as he made his way to the larder, stomach grumbling as he passed the kitchen. A hot meal and sleep would have to wait, unfortunately. Inside the tiny closet, the water tribe girl hugged her arms around her stomach, her gaze fixed on the shelves in front of her but her mind appeared far away. She glanced up at his knock on the earthen doorframe, eyes tired.

"Sparring? Really?"

He lifted his good shoulder in a shrug. "I need practice if I want to use those dao we found."

"I wish you'd talked to me first," she said, stroking the length of her deep brown hair. He'd noticed she did that any time she felt small—guilt curled through his gut at the realization he might've contributed to that. Despite whatever nerves were eating at her, she still sounded firm as she told him, "Your body needs time to heal, Zuko. I don't mind helping that process along but I don't want you—or anyone else—thinking that my healing abilities are to be taken advantage of."

He undid the wrap of his haori, sliding his arms free of it, trying to hide his wince. "Sorry. That wasn't my intention."

"It's okay. Just *please* try to take it easy." She uncorked her waterskin, pulling its contents free with a smooth, languid gesture. She stepped into his space without preamble, her touch as clinical as ever, flattening her palms over the barely-there pink of his healed wounds. Whatever was left of the injury lay deep within the tissue and muscle—she was right no doubt, that time was the best remedy. But that was something they didn't necessarily have.

“Are you really planning on using the dao?”

He stared over her head, trying to keep his breathing even as he examined the cracks in the far wall. “Yeah. I used to be pretty decent with them.”

“I thought firebenders didn’t need weapons.” She didn’t sound accusatory or cross, merely as though she was stating a fact.

“They don’t. I...I’ve struggled with my bending for a long time. I started with the dao when I was young.”

Katara hesitated before moving behind him. He stiffened despite the careful, firm circles she made with her hands. Though he’d never seen the extent of the scarring on his back with his own eyes, it didn’t take much imagination to picture the crisscrossed lines of raised tissue from Isao and the other guards’ many, many grievances. He knew that wasn’t what she was back there for but his heart rate increased all the same. *She’s not going to try anything*, he told himself, breathing carefully through his nose, keeping his gaze fixed on the wall. *She wouldn’t. She won’t.*

“How old were you when you started?”

*Agni.* Did she have to speak to him? He swallowed hard, trying to find his voice. “Twelve? That sounds—yeah, twelve.”

“Did you enjoy it?”

“I guess so.”

“You guess so?”

“I mean *yeah*, it was better than bending and something I was actually good at.”

Katara moved her hands closer to his spine, sounding thoughtful as she asked, “They sound pretty personal to you. How long did you use them for?”

“Training with them at the Palace stopped when my father found out what I was doing but I picked up a pair in the Earth Kingdom. I don’t...I don’t know how long I was out there before I was sent to the Boiling Rock.”

Katara was quiet for a long time, only the sound of the others’ conversation in the next room and the gentle hush of her bending water to ease the quiet. Zuko hoped she’d asked her fill of questions, though if her father and brother were anything to go by, he was likely wrong. Unsurprisingly, her voice barely more than a whisper, she breathed, “*Why* did Azula send you there? There of all places?” Maybe it was best that she was behind him, that she didn’t have to look him in the eye. He wouldn’t blame her if that were the case.

“I don’t know,” he said honestly, muscles unwinding beneath her touch. “I think, in her own twisted way, she believed it was merciful. That she was...sparing me somehow.” *She probably was*, he didn’t say. He couldn’t imagine what their father would’ve done if he’d ever gotten his hands on him.

Again, Katara hesitated, opening her mouth and then closing it just as quickly. Whatever internal struggle she faced evidently wasn't enough to completely quell her desire for answers. "She said your father wanted you beheaded. Like your mother." She moved slowly back in front of him, something guarded and terribly sad hiding in her eyes.

He nodded stiffly, not trusting his voice.

"I'm sorry for your loss."

Surprise jolted through him. He swallowed thickly. "Thank you."

"I lost my mom too, you know," she said, returning her palms to the muscle that bound the meat of his shoulder, her fingers splayed across his collarbones, her cheeks alight with her bending's blue glow. "I was eight, Sokka ten. Fire Nation searching for waterbenders raided our village. Ash from their coal engines rained from the sky and we—we thought it was *snow*. My father and the elders of our tribe knew better. They didn't hesitate to defend our home but I was frozen. It was only when I saw the firebenders coming, the snow steaming beneath their iron shoes, that it hit me what was happening.

"I wasn't—I wasn't fast enough. They had already swarmed the village by the time I reached our hut. Inside there was—" She broke off, and he wanted to tell her to stop, that she didn't need to live it again, but part of him recognized maybe she was sharing her story for her own sake as much as his. "There was a man already there. He was standing over my mom. I can still picture his eyes; brown as the pelt of a sea lion cub. I remember looking at my mother, not knowing it was going to be the last time I saw her alive. She told me to find my dad, so I listened. But by the time I found him in all the chaos, it was too late. She was already dead."

Zuko had no words that would comfort her. He knew firsthand that no amount of strangers' empty sympathy would ease the ache at the core of her very being. He stared over her head again, idly following the trail of a crack in the plaster. "My mother murdered my grandfather. It was a draught without taste or smell, something no one was able to detect. My father—after he deposed my uncle and crowned himself Fire Lord—declared her an enemy of the state. She was executed like a common criminal, her body burned and her ashes scattered to the wind without proper rites."

"Spirits," Katara exhaled, hand pressed just over his heart, tears in her eyes. She started to say something, then cut herself off. After a beat, she asked hesitantly, "Was that before or after you were banished?"

"Before."

Her gaze searched his face, deep blue eyes imploring and full of unshed tears. "*Why* were you banished, Zuko?"

He inhaled slowly, remembering the day perfectly. The smell of juniper smoke and kizami, the rumble of voices all around him, his own excitement, Iroh's encouraging hand at his back. How quickly it had all turned sour. "I spoke out of turn during a war meeting."

A high, strangled sound escaped the girl. "Is that all?"

He shrugged, then winced. Katara frowned, moving her hands once again. He barrelled on, feeling oddly detached from the words spilling forth; “Because I’d disrespected my superiors, I had to fight in an Agni Kai, a fire duel. But I didn’t realize it would be... It was my father’s war room. His council, his advisors, and his strategy. Speaking out of turn against his plans... It was —*is*— the height of disrespect.”

Her face fell. “You don’t mean...”

He nodded without looking at her, eyes still on the plaster. “When I saw it was him I had to duel, I begged for mercy.” Had the crack always been there? Or was it just another sign of the disrepair this place had fallen into in the years since his family’s absence? He supposed he’d never spent much time in this room anyway. He lifted a hand, tracing the scar tissue that enveloped his face. “Afterwards, I was banished for my cowardice.”

Katara’s gaze followed the trail of his fingertips. “I wish I could do something.”

He dropped his hand back to his lap, resigned. “I’ll never be free of it. I’ve accepted that.” And that much was true—after only Agni knew of how long people turned away nearly as quickly as they laid eyes on him, he’d accepted the permanence of his scar. The truth of it.

They were so close he could hear the click of her throat as she swallowed thickly, her head dipping as she blinked away tears. “Spirits, Zuko. I’m so sorry for how I treated you,” she cried, voice trembling. “I wasn’t—I only cared about what you could do to help Aang, and when you refused I... Well, it was easier to be angry than to question why you might’ve felt that way. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“I’m sorry too. I could’ve...I’ve said things I regret, made assumptions when I shouldn’t have.” He exhaled slowly. “I’m sorry for a lot of things.”

Katara wiped at her eyes, her shoulders hitching. “You didn’t deserve the way I treated you.” She turned away, drawing her bending water with her, returning it to her waterskin. Voice oddly thick, she whispered, “I can’t undo that.”

Against his better instincts, he gingerly set one hand on her shoulder. She didn’t tense like he’d expected nor did he get a face full of ice, so he took that as a win. Beneath the red Fire Nation garb she begrudgingly donned each day, she felt thin. “Look I don’t... I’m not saying I’ll always agree with you or see eye to eye or whatever but I really don’t want to argue anymore. We’ve established we’re both in the wrong. Can we call it a truce?”

Katara sniffled, failing to hide her tears. “The fact that we’d even have to call one—”

“Katara. Let it go. I’ll do the same.”

She turned to him then, eyes red and cheeks damp. “Okay. I’ll do better.”

Relief flooded him, though a small part of his mind registered it might’ve just been the result of her healing abilities. “Er, okay then.”



Though she still looked miserable, Katara put on a watery smirk. “Please take it easy. No offense but I really don’t want to have any more healing sessions.”

“The feeling’s mutual,” he smiled, rolling his shoulders carefully, surprised by the lack of pain, still not quite able to wrap his mind around the idea of her powers. “Can...can all waterbenders do...that?”

She straightened a little, wiping at her eyes again. “No, very few of my people possess healing abilities. I didn’t even know it was something I could do until recently.”

Zuko hummed, following her from the storeroom, the crackling of the hearth and quiet conversation of the others greeting them again. They were still gathered in the main living area, spread amongst the piled cushions and blankets for another night. Aang and Toph were seated across from each other at the low table, Toph’s thumbs and index fingers shaped into Ls in front of her while Aang took great care to bend a pebble between them. Toph’s grin grew wider and wider as she thwarted his every effort with a dip of her head. Sokka lounged on one of the sofas just behind Toph, arm slung across the back, watching the pair as Suki poured tea into the porcelain set Zuko had used as a child—one of Ozai’s heirlooms, funnily enough.

Not wishing to sour the evening with any thoughts of his father, Zuko slid one arm and then the other through the sleeves of his haori, hesitantly drawing on the garment, half expecting pain to lance through him once again. When it never came, he smiled, chest surprisingly light though he didn’t think it had anything to do with Katara’s healing abilities. He glanced up, carefully fastening the faded sash around his waist. Sokka’s gaze wracked over him before their eyes finally met. They regarded each other for half a beat, the water tribe boy’s expression unreadable, then he was flashing that damned grin again. “Back in one piece?”

Still moving gingerly, Zuko settled next to him on the chaise, allowing the familiar, overstuffed cushions to swallow him. The other boy handed him a steaming bowl, which he accepted gratefully. “As I’ll ever be.”

“Zuko’s probably the best patient I’ve had,” Katara dropped onto the opposing sofa behind Aang, smirking at her brother. “Something tells me he wouldn’t squirm like an eel-snake over a splinter in his palm.”

Sokka spluttered something indiscernible as Suki chuckled, perched beside Katara, setting the teapot back on its serving tray. “*Sokka* being dramatic? I think you’ve got him confused with somebody else.”

“Hey now,” Sokka defended himself half-heartedly, “It was two inches long, let’s not forget that.”

“Do I even want to know where you found a splinter that big?” Zuko questioned, not realizing how hungry he’d been.

“Well, we were—”

“Please, no,” Toph dropped her head to the table, black hair spilling across the varnished wood. “Twinkle Toes, I hate to be the one to bring it up, but what’s our next move? It’s been nice not having Azula breathing down our necks but we can’t hide here forever. We also can’t wait on a raven that may or may not show up.”

Aang straightened, rolling the pebble between his agile fingers. “I kind of wanted to hear—”

Four voices chorused; “*Aang.*” Sokka sat back against the cushions, looking miffed.

Aang turned the pebble over and over, chewing his lip. He looked his age, sitting there trying to figure out what he was going to say. Zuko felt a pang of sympathy, though he remained quiet.

Katara sipped at her tea. “We should wait a few more days. A raven could be on its way right now.”

Toph tilted her head. “We can’t know that.”

“We also don’t know there isn’t one. The others deserve some time to find my father’s allies. And even if they can’t find them, *this* is where they’re expecting us to be waiting.”

“I get that, Sugar Queen, I do, but we thought we were safe at the air temple, *and* in Ba Sing Se, and half a dozen times before *that*. I just can’t shake this feeling that it’s only a matter of time before Azula catches up to us again.”

Zuko stiffened in anticipation, just wanting to eat his dinner and go to sleep, certain another argument was on the horizon. But the water tribe girl only paused, a deep furrow between her brows. “That’s a fair concern.” She glanced up, their eyes meeting. “Any other ideas for places Azula wouldn’t think to look for us?”

Zuko opened his mouth to retort that if he could’ve taken them somewhere else, he would have; Aang beat him to it; “Hang on, hang on. I’m tired of running. The Day of Black Sun was one of the best opportunities we’ve had against the Fire Lord—having to flee and hide at the air temple, then here... I’m not doing that again.” Aang shook his head, gray eyes stormy. “I won’t. I’ve failed this world too many times before. I’m not going to let anyone else die for me while I sit here like a coward.”

There was a long beat as they all processed that. Finally, Sokka broke the silence, voice as steady and certain as his father’s. “Alright. No more running.” He met the gazes of each of the other children, who nodded in turn. He looked to Zuko last, who felt something warm and unfamiliar curl in his gut. He held Sokka’s gaze, nodding in agreement.

Sokka squeezed Aang’s shoulder. “We’re behind you. What do you want to do?”

Aang swallowed, shifting to fold one leg under himself. “First, I want to give Hakoda a chance to send a raven. If we can meet with him again, maybe he can help us find a firebending instructor. After that, I want to go back to the Fire Nation capital. Just us, no one else. No armies, no siege. If it’s just the six of us, we have a higher chance of sneaking in unnoticed. From there...” He exhaled shakily. “I’ll do whatever I have to do.”

“Are you sure you’re ready for that?” Katara asked carefully.

“Hold on,” Zuko said, “The last time you all stormed the capital, you had the advantage of the eclipse.”

“Yeah.”

“So why go when you won’t have that sort of upper hand?”

“This war won’t be over until I face the Fire Lord,” Aang said, though he didn’t meet Zuko’s gaze.

Zuko ran a hand over his face. “What, do you want to go there *now*? When are we talking about?”

“After summer’s end.”

“What difference do a few weeks make?”

Aang shifted uneasily. “There’s a comet coming at the end of the summer. If I were to face the Fire Lord during the comet—”

“Hold on.” Zuko set down his bowl perhaps unnecessarily hard. “A comet. *Sozin’s Comet*?” He looked at each of the others in turn, anxiety rising. When Aang nodded grimly, he said, “Correct me if I’m wrong, but Sozin’s Comet gives firebenders unmatched bending abilities. You could use that power *against* my father.”

Aang looked away. “It goes both ways. Ozai would be unstoppable with all of that power. I would have no chance against him.”

“When exactly is the comet coming?”

Sokka kicked his legs up on the table. “Roku didn’t exactly give us a date and time. He’s helpful like that. Ten days, at the most.”

“Agni above,” Zuko exhaled, running a hand through his hair. “Is that why you were all pushing me so hard to train Aang? Because of this deadline?”

“Partially,” Aang admitted, looking abashed. “We also have no way of knowing if another friendly firebender will cross our path again. But that doesn’t matter anymore, I’ve already made up my mind. We’re going to wait.”

“My *father* isn’t going to wait,” Zuko snapped, not caring how harsh it came out. “He’s going to take full advantage of that comet, mark my words.”

Sokka held his hands up in surrender. “You’re probably right. But it doesn’t change the facts. Aang just isn’t ready. He’ll face the Fire Lord another day.”

“I don’t think you understand,” Zuko insisted, running a hand through his hair. “This is— *Agni!*”

Katara at least looked sympathetic; “Zuko, it’s alright. Whatever happens on the day of the comet, we will deal with the fallout. It won’t be worth facing the Fire Lord early if it just gets Aang killed.”

“I’m not ready,” Aang said, fear plain on his face. “I need more time to master firebending.”

“Quite frankly, your earthbending could still use some work too,” Toph added, head bowed.

“So you all knew Aang was going to wait?” Zuko demanded. “Is that why we’ve been holed up here so long?”

“Honestly,” Sokka started, “If Aang tries to fight the Fire Lord right now, he’s gonna lose. No offense.” Aang glanced away, cheeks tinged in shame.

Katara reached for the boy’s shoulders, rubbing them soothingly. “The whole point of fighting the Fire Lord before the comet was to stop the Fire Nation from winning the war. But they pretty much won the war when they took Ba Sing Se. It can’t get any worse.”

“You don’t get it,” Zuko insisted, stomach in knots. “The last time this comet came, my great-grandfather annihilated the Air Nomads. Ozai is no idiot. He knows exactly what he’ll be able to accomplish this time around with that same power. *Mark my words*, he will use this comet to its full advantage and wipe out every remaining stronghold he can. The opportunity to go down in history as the Fire Lord who finally accomplished Sozin’s Dream?” He shook his head again, sick. “I know you’re scared, and I know you’re not ready to save the world, but if you don’t face the Fire Lord before the comet comes, there won’t be a world to save anymore.”

Aang staggered up from the table, stumbling over the legs of Suki and Katara in his haste. “This is bad. This is really, really bad.”

Katara rose after him, insisting, “We can’t know what the Fire Lord has planned but you don’t have to do this alone. We’ll figure something out.”

“I can’t put that on you guys.”

“It’s not up for discussion,” Sokka said, “Whatever happens, we’ll face it together.”

“Aang—” Zuko’s words hung in his throat, a dozen memories springing to mind. He swallowed the nausea, the fear, pushed it all down—he’d been sitting idle long enough. “Be up at dawn.”

“Why?”

“You’re learning firebending.”

zuko honey you've got a big storm comin'

life update, i am two months away from finishing undergrad and grad school early app deadlines are Closing and i should've found a big-girl job months ago, thanks for the patience, hope yall enjoy (someone requested to add this to an unfinished collection and suddenly my writers block was cured out of spite so thank you to them)

# Chapter 11

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Zuko woke well before dawn. In fact, he hardly slept at all. A cold weight settled in his bones as soon as he'd laid down and the others slowly went quiet, until he was all alone with his thoughts.

It wasn't so much of a chill, more of a feeling of dread. But now dawn was creeping in through the windows and there was no use pretending he might get some sleep. Beneath him, the chaise was soft if a little narrow as he stared at the cobwebs that had taken up residence among the ceilings' high wooden rafters. Across the room, the dying embers in the fireplace cast a hazy glow across the slumbering forms of sleeping children. Suki was curled on the sofa opposite him, her brow furrowed and shoulders drawn up tight. At some point in the night hours, while sleep vacated him, he'd wondered what sort of dreams plagued her, what sort of dreams plagued each of his companions. He could only guess, but it filled the time. Katara lay at the opposite end, her and Suki's feet tangled in a sea of blankets spread between them. Toph and Aang were sprawled across the floor, Toph looking remarkably serene with her feet propped in the air over Aang's back.

If he didn't allow himself to linger on the sleeping lump he knew to be Sokka, that was his business.

Unable to lay still any longer, he rose as slowly as possible, not wishing to disturb anyone. He picked his way across the room, wincing as he nearly stepped on Momo's long, checkered tail. The lemur chittered at him in protest, his tail snaking back beneath the blanket.

"Sorry," he murmured, creeping outside without further incident. Standing at the deck's rail, he exhaled slowly, briefly closing his eyes. Orange was barely starting to tinge the horizon, breaking through the blacks and purples of the night sky. A heavy salt breeze blew in from the ocean side, barely staving off the night's stagnant humidity. He focused on his breathing, hunching over till his forehead rest atop his hands on the rail.

Nerves had done their damndest to gnaw a hole in his belly throughout the night, slipping into the flashes of dreams he managed to steal. He wasn't sure what he was dreading more; what the day promised, rather what *he'd* promised—or the lingering thoughts of Iroh he couldn't shake. The older man's weathered face haunted him every time he closed his eyes; Iroh at the mercy of Azula's gleeful vindiction, or at Ozai's feet, prostrate on the floor of their ancestral throne room. Would he have begged for his life? Probably not. Though Ozai had succeeded in stealing Iroh's throne from under him, he'd never captured any sort of reverence from his older brother besides what court geniality required. That much had been evident to Zuko even as a child. Broken hierarchy aside, there was still no doubt which brother was more deserving of its crown.

It wasn't fair, he thought for the millionth time, straightening up to watch more of the sky turn colors. What world would they live in had Iroh taken the throne all those years ago as he

was meant to? He was a gentler man than Ozai for certain though it would be a contest to determine which brother's hands bore the most blood. *Maybe capture is what he deserves*, he thought selfishly, imagining Iroh in a cell not dissimilar to the ones at the Boiling Rock. Guilt flashed through him a second later, nostalgic and weak.

Would it be better, for Iroh's suffering to have ended? Part of Zuko raged at the thought, the man's long life being cut short before Zuko could demand from him, *Why?*

His fists tightened atop the railing, Agni's spark warming his chest as rays of light crested over the horizon.

Behind him came the soft sound of the balcony door opening, then Aang's sleepy voice called through a yawn, "Morning." Zuko remained mulishly where he was as the bald child joined him at the rail. Aang slouched over the wood, leaning his cheek on one blue-arrowed arm. "Don't get me wrong, it makes sense why firebenders get up so early but it also kinda sucks."

Zuko counted to ten before opening his mouth. "How much experience do you have with firebending?"

"Not a lot," the boy said, glancing up at him with large, grey eyes. "Not long after we left the South Pole, we met a firebender who was willing to teach me named Jeong Jeong. He was mainly focused on control but...well, we didn't have very long together. Only a few days."

"Good."

"Good?"

"Yeah. You ready?"

Aang straightened from his slouch. "Uh, yeah sure—"

Zuko pushed away from the rail, crossing the broad wooden deck to the stairs that wrapped around the house and descended to the courtyard. "Look I'm not... my bending isn't the best. Never has been. It's not ideal obviously but I can teach you the basics. Don't expect anything fancy."

"Understood," Aang, right on his heels, brandished a hand. "Thanks again for doing this."

"Whatever. You should've told me about the comet sooner."

"Probably," the airbender admitted with another yawn, "But to be fair, none of us really wanted to broach the topic of invading your home country. Kind of a conversation killer."

"It's not like you haven't done it before."

"Well...this will be different."

"How so? The end goal's the same isn't it?" *My dad's life. A new world order.*

“We took a risk that didn’t pay off on the Day of Black Sun and that’s something I’ll never forgive myself for. I made mistakes, wasted time when I knew what we went there for. I can admit my shame for that day,” Aang said. “I didn’t want to face the Fire Lord again without knowing I can defeat him for sure. Even if that meant waiting ‘til after the comet arrives.”

Zuko didn’t endorse that with a comment, pushing through the bougainvilleas and crossing the edge of the wide, white-stoned courtyard. He knew a thing or two about shame. Aang fell silent as Zuko stood across from him in front of the empty fountain, finally stopping and regarding him. He bounced on the balls of his feet, clearly anxious. Save for the tattoos and lack of hair, Aang looked like any other twelve-year-old. A bit stringy even with the wiry muscle he’d built up, cheeks still rounded with youth, a determined spark in his eyes that had yet to be snuffed out—maybe *because* of the tattoos and lack of hair it was easy to see him as older, different. Knowing he was the avatar certainly didn’t help. But looking past it all— It floored Zuko how young he was. He didn’t even try to consider what must be going through the kid’s mind—he had enough of his own shit to handle.

Shaking off those thoughts, Zuko folded his arms over his chest, stating, “Show me what you can do, avatar.”

Aang bit his lip, eyeing him carefully. Again, Zuko was struck by a million conflicting emotions. The boy stepped into a kata that was reminiscent of something Zuko had learned in basics—he thrust a flat palm out, producing a spout of red-yellow flames that barely warmed Zuko’s cheek.

Looking abashed, Aang quickly added, “I do better with fire that’s already started.”

“Here,” Zuko stoked a small spark to life in his palm, passing it to Aang. He accepted it gingerly, worrying his lower lip as he cradled the fire between his hands. It immediately shrank in his grasp. “It’s not going to hurt you.”

“Its not me I’m worried about.”

“If you lose control, of course there will be collateral. Let *it* control *you* and you’ll lose yourself in the destruction.”

Aang closed his eyes, the flame dwindling to barely more than what a candle’s wick might contain. “I *don’t* want to hurt anyone. Not again.”

Zuko belatedly recalled Aang’s confession about harming Katara. His annoyance deflated slightly. Slightly. “Remember what that felt like and don’t ever forget it. When you forget consequence, you’re most likely to lose control.” He hoped he didn’t sound nearly as hypocritical as he felt. “What’re you gonna do with that now that you’ve got it?”

Aang worried his lower lip, staring at what he held like it might bite him. “Jeong Jeong mainly taught me breath control. How the steadiness of your breathing is connected to fire, to your own self-discipline. He... He stressed how alive firebending is, how a rock won’t throw itself without a bender but fire will spread on its own. I know I should learn since I don’t stand a chance against the Fire Lord without firebending but...” He dropped his hands and the flame disappeared in a whirl of smoke. “I’m terrified of what I’ll do. Of who I’ll hurt.”



That much Zuko could understand. He ran a hand through his hair, suggesting for his own sake as much as Aang's, "Why don't we go through some katas together? Get the movements down before trying the real thing."

Aang swallowed, then squared his shoulders. "Okay. Okay, let's do it."

The rest of their morning devolved into Zuko walking through whatever basic forms he could remember. "—your fist should be tucked against your ribs, then pushed out as you extend your arm—" Aang was a good sport, doing exactly what Zuko instructed without protest. If he had anything to say about Zuko's lack of preparation, he kept it to himself. Part of him hoped the avatar was realizing he'd been honest when he'd told him things would be rough. They moved side by side, their motions growing more fluid as the sun trekked through the sky. Every once in a while, one of the others would step out onto the grand terrace looking over the courtyard but they all eventually turned back inside. Zuko appreciated the distance.

"This kind of reminds me of waterbending," Aang said at one point, watching Zuko's movements carefully. "It's redirecting an opponent's momentum instead of dodging or blocking."

"Firebending wasn't always as forceful as it is now," Zuko said, surprised with how comfortable he felt moving through the old katas. There was something grounding about the repetition, a feeling of recall in his very bones that his mind had forgotten. "What the majority of benders are taught at the academies are strictly offensive katas." His mind conjured up a long-forgotten memory of Iroh, irate as he ranted about the *unrefined* teachings his niece and nephew were learning.

"Maybe one day we can try to learn what firebending used to be like," Aang said, an excited smile breaking through his mask of concentration. "Find a master of the old ways. Before the war."

Zuko smirked. "Good luck finding one."

"It'll be an adventure," Aang grinned, dutifully copying the moves he demonstrated next. "We'd start in the Fire Nation, of course. Maybe at the Fire Temples, see if they've got any kind of old scrolls. Yeah. Could definitely be fun."

"Lift your right arm higher before you take the next step. You want to use your energy to extend your breath through your limbs." He nodded when the other boy corrected himself. "I think we're gonna have more important issues to tackle if we somehow win."

Aang sighed, though he was smiling. "Let a guy dream, Sparky."



"No, no, no. Keep your feet under you. If your opponent breaks your footing and you stumble—you're done. Remember, your legs and your stance are your root. Without it, you may as well lay down and call it a day."

"Lay down? I could just—"

*“Keep your feet under you.”*



Around midday, Katara and Toph found them, bringing snacks and hallowed watermelons full of fresh water.

Aang's face lit up and he darted to Katara's side, accepting her offering gratefully. She smiled, something soft and affectionate in her gaze. Zuko wondered if she knew how she looked. “How's it going? Any progress?”

Aang tipped his watermelon higher without a word. Zuko shrugged, the waterbender's gaze flicking to him instead. “Just going through some basics for now.”

“Twinkle Toes is a slow learner, Sparky so don't take it personally if he's dragging his feet,” Toph poked Aang in the ribs, causing the other boy to choke.

“Aang's doing fine,” Zuko muttered, accepting the watermelon Katara extended to him. She dipped her head to him, no doubt watching for any sign of a wince. “Thanks.”

“Fine?” Toph arched a brow, a fist planting itself on the crook of her hip.

“Fine,” Aang echoed with a grin, looking forced even to Zuko.

Frowning deeply, Toph opened her mouth but was smoothly interrupted by Katara, who grabbed her elbow and steered her back toward the house. “We were just checking in. Let us know if you need to borrow Sokka for target practice!”



Agni trekked through the sky relentlessly, the heat of her rays seeping into the flagstones and surrounding cliffs, warming the air and only adding to the island's humidity. Zuko resolved to bear it but Aang had abandoned his tunic hours prior, sweat beaded along his forehead. When he'd first cast aside the faded cloth, Zuko'd noticed with a start the gnarled mass of pink scar tissue at the center of his spine, interrupting the blue of airbender tattoos. Even fully healed it was gruesome. But Aang didn't mention it, didn't even seem pained by the old injury, so Zuko said nothing. They continued in the courtyard, the minutes sliding into hours. Above them, Agni kept on. The sun spirit did not care for their deadline; she was on her own schedule, one they could not prolong or deny. Zuko's feeling of unease only grew as she began to sink toward the horizon in the west.

Aang felt it too. “Zuko... I hate to ask—”

“Straighten your back. Now, this next one isn't as complicated as some of the katas we've already gone through, but it's an important, very basic form to remember that may very well save your life.”

“We should at least try using firebending.”



Around mid-afternoon, Aang threw himself down on the flagstones, a blue-arrowed arm tossed over his face. “Zuko, we’ve been at this *literally* all day.” He patted the ground with his other hand. “Come on, join me.” Zuko hesitated so long that Aang said heatlessly, “Your avatar says so.”

“Playing the avatar card, huh?” Zuko slowly settled on the ground, stretching his arms up and linking his fingers beneath his head as he stared up at the clouds. His back ached as he laid out, though his muscles weren’t nearly as tired as he’d anticipated. It’d felt good to work out the soreness from the previous day’s sparring. As fine as he felt physically, there was still the persistent, niggling fear of the approaching comet in the back of his mind.

Aang shrugged, half smiling. “It worked, didn’t it?” Zuko closed his eyes, amusement chasing away a bit of the worry between his ribs. The sounds of the island were soothing—so soothing he could’ve fallen asleep right there on the flagstones. Aang’s voice broke through the calm; “Can I ask you something?”

He tried not to sigh too loudly. “What?”

“I want us to be honest with each other,” Aang said, rolling onto his side, head propped on one hand. “I think we have a chance of being friends. Real friends, not just... firebending teacher and avatar.”

“So...what’s your question?”

“I guess I’m just...I’m wondering how the son of the Fire Lord, someone who comes from a long line of firebenders, is so...reluctant to firebend. And you don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to, I’m not expecting—”

Zuko ran a hand over his face. “No, you deserve to know. And uh, I want...I want us to be friends too.” He exhaled slowly after the admission, unable to ignore the weight of Aang’s expectant, hopeful gaze. “Truth is, I’ve *never* excelled at bending. It just hasn’t come easily to me. I’ve had to work twice as hard to learn what my sister could pick up on in a single session. Azula’s always been gifted—the exact sort of prodigy my father wanted in an heir.” He shook his head, running a hand over his face. “I’ve seen firsthand how firebending can hurt people. *I’ve* hurt people. I don’t know, it just...it’s even harder now, after everything.”

“You know, at the Air Temple, you were pretty incredible against Azula. Maybe your bending comes from rage.”

“Maybe,” he allowed, thinking of every single time he’d nearly lost his temper, his chi simmering just below the surface, itching for release. “But even if you’re right, I don’t want to rely on hate and anger anymore. I have to find a way to bend without fear or necessity. There’s gotta be another way.”

“Zuko, can I say something?”

He kept his breathing even, watching the clouds shift across the blue canvas of the sky. He wasn't irritated—yet—and was determined not to lash out. "Sure, Aang."

"I may know what your problem is."

Zuko risked looking over, eyebrow raised. "Do you now?"

Aang nodded, hauling himself upright on the flagstones. "You seem to have some serious mental blocks holding you back. Do you know anything about chakras?"

"I mean...I've heard of them but what do they have to do with bending?" *Agni above, he sounds like Iroh.*

"It's like the monks used to tell me; sometimes the shadows of the past can still be felt in the present. Chakras are points of energy in our bodies that all flow and interconnect. Leaving things unresolved, holding onto the past, all of that can affect your bending just as much as breathing or self-discipline if your chakras become closed off. For a long time, I wasn't able to enter the avatar state because of my own blocked chakras. I had fear and guilt weighing me down, preventing me from reaching inner balance."

"This might be the first time you've actually *sounded* like the avatar," Zuko muttered, not sure how much of this to buy. But Aang's face was earnest. He groaned. "So what, am supposed to meditate and think about my *feelings*?"

Aang lifted a shoulder. "Well, yeah. It helped me a lot. I think it could do you some good too."

"Agni," Zuko cursed, pinching the bridge of his nose. He counted to ten. "Just what do you think we'll accomplish?"

"Unblocking whatever is holding you back *will* help with your bending," Aang insisted. "Just like it helped me to get into the avatar state."

Zuko stared at him for a moment longer, wondering how on earth he'd managed to place himself in this predicament. Well, scratch that. He knew. "Fine. Do I sit?" He did just that at the boy's nod, folding his legs under him as they faced each other. He squirmed, feeling a little silly.

Aang gave him a small smile, probably relieved he hadn't stormed off, though Zuko wasn't entirely against that option just yet. "I want to be sure you understand hard subjects will come up, like fear. Guilt. Shame. It requires honesty with yourself."

He didn't like the sound of that one bit. As much as he was tempted to refuse, to order Aang to his feet and begin running through drills, he could at least recognize what they had been doing throughout the day led to very little progress. Maybe it was a stepping stone but they wouldn't get very far at all if Aang could not fully learn to bend fire. He swallowed hard, nerves eating at him. "Okay."

Aang straightened, squaring his shoulders and assuming a meditation stance Zuko copied. He couldn't remember the last time he'd tried meditation. Maybe he never had. "Okay. Close your eyes. Back straight. Focus on keeping your breathing even. Good." He inhaled deeply, holding it for a long beat before releasing slowly through his nose. Zuko followed suit, trying his damndest to push all worries that they were wasting time to the back of his mind. They sat for what felt like forever, simply breathing. Any time Zuko felt himself getting antsy or the desire to get up and leave, he reminded himself Aang was trying to help him. He focused on the air in his lungs, the rhythm of inhale-exhale, the sounds of the island around them, his heartbeat slowly evening out.

Finally, Aang's voice broke through the calm. "The first chakra is the earth chakra. It deals with survival and is blocked by fear. What are you most afraid of?"

He cocked his head. "Heights."

"Take this seriously," Aang said sharply, not snapping but close enough to it that his self-satisfied smirk slid right off his face. "Be honest with yourself. It won't do you any good to keep deflecting. Let your fears become clear to you."

Geez, Zuko thought. "Fine." He closed his eyes again, thinking. *What are you most afraid of?* Not exactly a tough question. Ozai flashed in his mind, his large hand pinning Zuko in place. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't get away, forced to *look*. That same fear bled into his banishment even with an ocean separating them, accompanied with the newfound terror that someone was on his heels, that he'd be recognized and condemned wherever he set foot. In the desert, his sister crouched over him, a complete stranger. Then, of course, the Boiling Rock. Isao, the Warden, the occasional inmate pushing their luck—being pinned facedown, a boot on the back of his neck, immobile, helpless, the threat of the cooler worse than whatever was coming next. Zuko felt his heart rate climbing, that ill-feeling of anxiety curling through his chest and turning his stomach.

Aang's voice came again, a ripple of calm; "You're concerned about survival. Each of these things made you fear for your life but you must surrender them. Let them flow."

"How?" His relationship with Ozai had been steeped in fear before he'd even learned to speak. His destiny had always been forfeit, his life no longer his from the moment he'd been born, subject to his father's watchful eye for any step, any toe, out of the Crown's will for Sozin's line. Everything that had happened after his banishment—he wasn't sure he'd ever be able to forget.

"Fear holds you back and won't let you live in the present," Aang said, and Zuko swallowed hard. "As you breathe out, let go of those fears and worries—don't let them hold you back any longer. Life is here, now."

Zuko breathed in slowly, holding it before exhaling again. "What if there's...what if there's always some part of me that will be afraid of them?"

"For this to work, you must—at the very least—be *willing* to abandon these things. To completely remove yourself from fear, or any of the chakras, would be to not care at all.

That's not what this process is. Some fear is healthy. But to let it forever control how you live your life—you deserve better than that."

Heart in his throat, Zuko exhaled again, this time willing everything away—and not just to the back of his mind where he usually condemned it all, he willed it to leave him. To set himself free. Aang was right, of course—it was his choice, to allow Ozai, Azula, all of it, to continue to control him. Everything stemmed from them, he realized. He breathed out, something unknotting and releasing in his chest. He felt—lighter. The ball of anxiety and nerves lessened, something tentative sparking in its place.

He opened his eyes, finding Aang watching him carefully. "How do you feel?"

"Better, I think. How do I...How will we know it even worked?"

"You'll know," the other boy smiled, so confident Zuko craved to believe him. "Up for the next one?" At Zuko's nod, Aang closed his eyes again, sitting up straight. "The next chakra deals with pleasure and is blocked by guilt. Picture what burdens you—all that you blame yourself for."

Zuko focused on his breathing, trying to keep his heart from pounding out of his chest. Azula unsurprisingly was the first thing that came to mind. *My little sister*; he thought, eyes stinging. He should've protected her, should've tried harder to get through to her when they were young. Maybe she would have turned out differently. The village he'd fled from as a frightened, naive child. He could still hear the villager's screams, could smell the sickly-sweet scent of burning flesh, acrid smoke thick in his lungs, in his mouth, burning his eyes. Ichiro, a quiet man he hadn't even known that well, whom he'd treated miserably because he was too damn proud. A man who, despite it all, put himself on the line for Zuko. He doubted he'd ever forget seeing him hanging between two guards, practically lifeless.

"Can you picture it?"

He nodded.

"Accept that these things happened. Your remorse is genuine—you want to be a different person. Self-punishment for these things does not benefit you. Actively work towards bettering yourself and learn from your past."

"Aang...people died because of me."

"Did you mean for them to die?"

Bodies flashed in his mind; villagers, Fire Nation soldiers in a crimson forest, inmates guilty and innocent alike, the first man he'd ever killed; "Some of them."

Aang's face was free of judgement. "Acknowledge their deaths. Understand the reality of the part you played."

"Trust me, I won't ever forget what I've done."

“Good,” he said. “By feeling that guilt, that pain, think of how much you’ve changed. How you’ve grown. Try to forgive yourself but mainly, accept what you did.”

“People’s lives won’t ever be the same,” Zuko slouched out of his stance. “Even the ones I didn’t kill...I could’ve—should have—done something to save them.”

“This chakra gave me trouble too,” Aang said, dropping his hands to his lap. “Every time I lost control in the avatar state, people died. Men and women with lives, families, their futures stolen from them. Taking a life goes against everything I learned from the monks. That sort of action stays with you forever. I don’t think we’ll ever be free from that.”

“How do you live with it?”

Aang stared at him for a long moment, evaluating. Zuko took it, not caring enough to throw up his defenses. After their day of cooking beneath the sun, running through whatever katas he could remember, he didn’t have the energy. Whatever Aang saw, he didn’t give any indication; “For a long time, I tried not to think about it. I neglected my avatar duties and didn’t take them seriously because I was clinging to being a kid for as long as I could. But all of that running didn’t—and won’t—ever change my destiny. Every person who fought and died while I was...” He sighed deeply, rubbing tiredly at one eye. “Forgiveness. That’s how I get through it. I can’t change what I did but I know I won’t ever make those same mistakes again. All I can do now is work towards forgiving myself to find peace.”

Zuko took that in, trying to reconcile it with the pain in his chest. “Some of them...I *know* were outside my control.” *He* hadn’t set that village aflame, much as he felt responsible for the people he’d left behind. “I probably would have died too, if I’d stayed.” Aang nodded encouragingly though he had no way of knowing what Zuko was talking about. “The first life I took. That was...” He could still see the man clearly—though that probably wasn’t the right word for it, since it’d been nearly pitch black. He remembered the confusion when his throat wasn’t immediately slit, the sickening jolt of realization, the sudden overwhelming panic. It had been a short struggle. He hadn’t even realized he’d been followed until his head cracked against the nearest wall, sending his senses spinning, then wandering hands were the only thing holding him upright, his dazed attempt to fight useless until his fingers found a blade. Driving that dagger home had been easy—the easiest thing he’d ever done. It was only afterwards when the full reality of what he’d done hit him.

He tore his gaze away from the airbender, feeling as though his soul lay bare between them. “What I did was self-defense. I didn’t have a choice. I know that. As for Azula—” He broke off, throat suddenly tight. “I can still make things right. I will make things right.”

Aang smiled, eyes damp. “As long as you’re trying, I think you’ll feel better.”

He slowly inhaled, held, then released just as slowly. Again, something inside uncoiled, a tense knot carefully unknitting itself. “I will.”

“Good. Do you want to keep going?”

“Yes,” Zuko insisted, blinking away the tears. He inhaled deeply, nodding. “Let’s do it.”

“Alright,” Aang said, resuming his stance. “This chakra is the fire chakra. It’s blocked by our biggest disappointments in ourselves. It deals with power and what shames us.”

Shame, Zuko’s thoughts echoed. That he certainly had enough of. Every time someone had needed his help and he’d run—his own temper, his choice to lash out anytime someone got too close. He’d done it time and time again. Ichiro, who’d put up with his moods and irritability the longest, until Zuko’s actions ensured he’d never have to again. Agni, every time he’d said something harsh to Suki, Sokka, Katara, all of them, and meant for it to hurt, wanting them to feel even a fraction of what he felt in every waking moment. Hakoda—he’d nearly firebended at Hakoda and there would never be a part of him that didn’t regret it.

“Can you picture it?”

Zuko nodded.

“Recognize the wrong in your actions. Look inward to the root of the problem.”

“I *know* where it comes from.” Aang tilted his head and Zuko spoke before he could think better of it; “Me. There’s something wrong with me.”

“Do you really believe that?” He nodded. “Why?”

“I push everyone away,” he said, the admission stinging. But it was the truth. He’d known that for a while now, after seeing how easily the others interacted, how his own actions, conscious or otherwise, always left him craving that damn solitude and then hating it once he had it. “I’m cruel. I don’t let anyone in because then they’d...”

“They’d what?”

“They would see the real me. And they’d leave anyway.”

Aang inhaled slowly, choosing his words carefully. “It sounds like you can see the issue clearly and that’s good. Once you see it you can start working to understand what’s going on inside you to cause this problem.”

“I—” Zuko dropped his head, staring down at his hands. “It’s followed me my whole life. I don’t know if I can...separate myself enough from it to see where it started.”

“Zuko, no one is born ashamed. Shame is taught. It taints us when we learn what the world considers acceptable or unacceptable. The people around us shape us into who we are, tell us what values are supposedly the right ones. It can be hard to see your way through that when it’s all you’ve known. And it may not mean much since we haven’t known each other for very long but...I *know* you’re a good person. You might be angry at times but that comes from what you’ve been through. You have to understand that.”

“The anger is what’s kept me going. It’s kept me alive.”

“It hurts you as much as everyone around you,” Aang said gently and for the umpteenth time that afternoon, his eyes stung. “You deserve a full life. Shame makes that impossible. Find something or someone new to keep you going.”



Zuko fought to meet his gaze, blinking hard. “I don’t know if I can.”

“It’s kind of like the fear chakra—acknowledge what you did. Learn from your mistakes. Actively works towards releasing that shame and what causes you to lash out. As long as you’re trying and making amends, as long as you want to do better—you’ll start to find peace.”

He closed his eyes, focusing again on his breathing, the warmth of the air in his lungs, the gentle sounds of the jungle and island all around them. He thought he’d been making some progress during their time on the island—building bridges instead of burning them. “I know what I need to work on, what I need to... How I need to be better.” Again, a feeling of release washed through him, lightened the press of anxiety against his ribs. He wasn’t sure if he imagined it or not but it felt encouraging. Like someone had turned on the light in a dark tunnel. Like the embrace of a friend.

After several minutes, Aang asked; “You ready for the next one?”

“Yeah.”

“This chakra is in the heart and is blocked by grief. Lay all of your grief out in front of you.”

A lump formed in his throat, that pain far too quick to rise to the surface. Ozai was the first face that sprang to mind, a man he could never again comfortably call father. Lu Ten, Jet—faces that were gone forever, two people he’d never embrace or hear laugh again. Ursa, her body blackened on the steps of the Fire Sages temple, the stench of burnt flesh in his nose even after so long. The unrecognizable form of her corpse tainted every happy memory, the knowledge of what Ozai condemned her to that Zuko was powerless to prevent. Another life, stolen. Another face he’d never see again. Iroh was the last, the least certain. He may not have been dead but he’d betrayed Zuko. Betrayed his trust. That left its own hole in his heart.

Zuko felt untethered, something detached inside. His voice didn’t waver; “I can see them.”

“Let that pain flow away. Love is all around us, in new beginnings and friendships. Let it replace what you lost.”

“I don’t want to forget.”

“It’s not forgetting,” Aang said. “It’s remembering the love you used to have but still keeping your heart open. Don’t let what you’ve been through cloud your mind or prevent you from finding love again. Let that pain flow away.”

He forced Ozai and Iroh to the back of his mind. What he’d mistaken for their love wasn’t what mattered, not anymore. Instead, Lu Ten’s laughter rang in his ears, Jet’s sharp smile flashed as crooked as ever, his mother’s imitations of the turtle-ducks embarrassing in that way all children were embarrassed by their mothers. Tears ran down his face, the bad memories all but smoke. *Let that pain flow away.* Suki’s grin as she’d splashed him with water after their escape hit him like a wave. Sitting around the fire with all of them; Aang, Katara, Toph, Sokka, Agni even Momo and Appa. Suki’s loyal understanding, Aang’s

relentless, insufferable optimism, Toph's elbow in his side, Katara's muttered *Take it easy*, the strength of Sokka's arms around him.

The tears didn't stop when he opened his eyes. Aang scooted closer to him. "Can I—?"

Zuko closed the distance, embracing the smaller boy. Aang burrowed into his side, feeling so, so small. After a long beat, the avatar said, "This one was really difficult for me but I think it's probably what I gained the most from. When I came out of the ice, almost everyone I'd ever known was dead. My entire culture was gone with the genocide of the Air Nomads, but I realized their love never left me. It took the shape of new love."

"Katara and Sokka."

"Yeah," Aang smiled tearfully.

"I think I...I get that. My mom, my cousin—" He nodded, throat too tight to speak, knowing he probably didn't make much sense. "*Agni*."

Aang leaned away, wiping at his eyes. "Told you this would be tough. You okay?"

"Yeah," Zuko exhaled shakily, rubbing at his eyes. "Fu—Er, how many more of these?"

"Well, technically three but I wanted to say—after this next one, we should try your firebending."

"Why?"

Aang shrugged. "I have a hunch." He clapped his hands, rubbing them together. "Last one—got it in you?" At Zuko's nod, he resumed his stance, methodically breathing once again. "This chakra is the sound chakra. It deals with truth and is blocked by lies."

"Lies?"

"The lies we tell ourselves, mainly. We can't deny who we are. For me that's my destiny as the avatar. I can't run from that. Is there...a part of you you've ignored? Or denied?"

"I..." He thought about it carefully. "I lied to all of you when we first met. About who I am. I wasn't even honest with Hakoda or Suki at the Boiling Rock. They found out at the same time you did. For a long time that was something I had to keep secret to protect myself."

"You *are* the Fire Lord's son," Aang said carefully, watching his reaction. "That's a pretty big one."

Zuko looked away, cheeks heating with shame. "Most of that came from survival. But if I'm being honest, I've never wanted the crown. I'm the Heir, the firstborn son, but I've never felt like it. Like I never deserved it. After my banishment, I finally saw what my family has done to this world. All of it, everything we've talked about, it all had an impact on me, on my firebending."

"Zuko, at the end of this... What will you do?"

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I have to stop your father. Your sister... She can’t be the next Fire Lord either. The crown is yours by blood and custom. So...what will you do?”

Zuko stared down at his hands. “It’s not something I’ve thought about.”

“It should go to you. You’d be a good Fire Lord.”

“I’m just as much of a killer as all the rest of them.”

Aang sighed. “But you believe in ending this war. You believe in peace. You’re a good person.”

“Aang... I’d have to think about it.”

“That could be part of your problem though,” the boy pointed out. “Not facing that part of yourself.”

“Look I’ll do whatever I can to help you get ready for the comet,” Zuko said, anxiety returning. “But I’m not making any promises for afterward.”

“Okay...” Aang looked down at his lap, twisting his fingers. He opened his mouth to say something, then appeared to think better of it. Finally, he said, “You know, I’m feeling pretty tired. Let’s pick this up tomorrow?”

“But—”

“We don’t need to work ourselves to exhaustion before the comet comes. We can pick up where we left in the morning?”

Zuko shot him a half-hearted glare, then deflated. “You’re right. Alright.”

Aang grinned, rising from his cross-legged position with a swirl of wind. He bounded over like he hadn’t just been putting him through the emotional wringer, winding his arm through Zuko’s and hauling him upright. He squeezed Zuko’s arm, steering him towards the house. “Unlike Sokka, I’m always right, Sifu Hotman.”

He groaned. “That’s worse than Sparky.”

Aang’s smirk was sly. “It fits.”

“What’s that supposed—” He had one foot on the landing before something small, warm, and furry knocked him square in the chest. All the air left him as the avatar’s lemur chattered, tiny hands and feet grabbing onto whatever parts of him it could manage. Momo kept up the chattering, bat-like wings flapping frantically before he settled atop Zuko’s shoulder. Zuko, frozen, glanced worriedly at Aang. “Uh—”

“He likes you!” Aang beamed. He held the door open, ushering Zuko inside. Immediately the smell of roasting meat met them, rich in the once stagnant air of the mansion. Zuko blinked,

eyes adjusting and stomach grumbling, trying not to jostle the lemur.

Katara looked up from the book propped on her lap, alone in front of the fire. “How was it?”

Aang swept over to her, quite literally leaping over the chaise’s high back to seat himself in front of her. “Good! Really good.” He opened his mouth, probably to ramble, then stopped himself. “Where is everyone?”

“At the beach,” Katara sighed, “Suki and Sokka spent most of today sparring so they wanted to relax a little.” She glanced towards Zuko, who was still afraid to move with the lemur on his shoulder. “Could you go fetch them? Dinner will be ready soon.”

He nodded, unsure what to do about the lemur on his shoulder, but was saved when Aang called the small creature’s name. Immediately, Momo leaped into the air, swooping towards the boy with grace. Relieved, Zuko did as he was asked, leaving the pair in front of the hearth. Maybe she wanted to talk to Aang with him out of earshot, maybe by asking him to do something on his own for once she was following through on her promise—Zuko put it behind him, appreciating the time alone as he made his way slowly to the beach.

The chakras weren’t far from his mind as he made his way through the dunes, Aang’s words still ringing in his ears. And the thing was, he did feel better. The pressure on his chest, the ache he’d carried for years—it had lightened, if only slightly. It was a feeling he’d grown so familiar with it had ceased to ever leave him, like a tree growing around a boulder, till he’d forgotten what it’d felt like to be free of it. A cynical part of him thought it was too good to be true.

Toph noticed him first as he neared the expanse of black beach. She waved from his left, the sand around her looked thoroughly plowed. “Sparky! Check this out.” He smiled, dutifully marching to her side. She elbowed him in greeting, broadening her stance and thrusting both open hands out. With a look of concentration, she lifted her arms, and in front of them, the sand took shape—a city spread before him, circular, with high walls forming rings within the larger perimeter. Railways, viaducts, streets, houses, and even the tiniest figurines of people, carts, and stalls lined the minuscule avenues.

He leaned over to appreciate it better, hands braced on his knees. “Wow,” he exhaled, taking in the detail she’d crafted in even the Royal Palace and surrounding gardens. “Ba Sing Se?”

She nodded, smirking proudly, arms folded over her chest. “Yup. Been working on my sandbending.”

“This is incredible, Toph,” Suki whistled, damp hair curling around her face. She winked at Zuko in greeting, one hand held up to shade her eyes. “How’d it go today?”

He huffed, running a hand through his hair. “Aang’s definitely the avatar for a reason.” He pointedly kept his eyes on the sand as Sokka ran up to them, examining the replica of Ba Sing Se curiously. “It wasn’t great but...we’ve got a few days. Hopefully, it’ll go better tomorrow.”

“It will,” Suki said. Her smile didn’t falter but her gaze turned uncertain. “You’re both at least trying. That’s all you can do.”

Toph thrust out an arm and then forced her open palm down, facing the earth. Immediately the sand structure went flat, all detail and careful artistry returning smooth. “‘Wasn’t great’ as in what, Sparky?”

“We mainly worked without bending,” he admitted, cheeks heating. “Aang is uh, helping me with chakras?” Toph and Sokka nodded like that made sense though Suki’s brows drew up in confusion. “He says it’ll help,” Zuko added. “We’re going to try firebending for real after that.”

“Aang typically knows what he’s talking about when it comes to all that spirit-world, wishy washy avatar type stuff,” Sokka slung an arm Zuko’s shoulder, poking him in the chest in what he probably thought was an assuring manner. It just made Zuko’s neck feel hot. “If he says it’ll work, it’ll work.”

“Sokka you’re the *biggest* skeptic here,” Suki said dubiously.

Sokka shrugged, damp hair brushing Zuko’s shoulders. “Even a man of science has gotta admit he’s wrong from time to time.”

“How big of you,” Toph rolled her eyes.

“Er, I was—dinner’s ready,” Zuko stated eloquently, focus quickly scattering. “Katara sent me.”

Suki’s lips twitched but she quickly wiped the grin from her face. “Let’s not keep her waiting then.”



Sometime after dark when the dishes had been cleared away and everyone gathered around the fire for a game of pai sho, Sokka slipped outside without a word to anyone. Zuko remained rooted in his spot at the low table beside Toph for roughly ten minutes, listening with rising agitation as Suki and Aang went back and forth over how the game’s rules had or hadn’t changed in the last one hundred years, unable to take in a single word. He stood abruptly, excusing himself—it was debatable if Suki and Aang even noticed, but Katara’s keen eyes followed him out the door. The night air was hardly any cooler than it was during the day but at least there was a gentle breeze buffeting in from the mountains, accompanied by the sounds of jungle creatures enjoying the cover of darkness.

The trellis overlooking the courtyard was empty. The low moonlight provided very little to see by but Zuko was just able to make out Sokka’s shape in front of the fountain. He steeled himself and squared his shoulders as he approached, purposefully kicking a rock as he got closer so he didn’t startle the other boy. Sokka turned in surprise, one knee pulled up to his chest. “Oh.”

Zuko jammed his hands in his pockets, half wondering what he was even doing. “You alright?”

“Yeah,” Sokka said, twisting his hands. He was always moving—fiddling with the wraps on his arms, the hem of his shirt, bouncing on the balls of his feet, like a leaf at risk of blowing away in the wind. Though, Zuko had to mentally amend, between the two of them Sokka wasn’t necessarily the flight risk.

He gingerly made himself comfortable, finally starting to feel the strain from the day as he eased down. He didn’t sit next to Sokka, opting instead for the ground, leaning back against the solid, cold base of the fountain, the other boy’s left shin brushing his elbow. Without looking at him, he asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Sokka insisted, fiddling with the wrap on his right forearm. “It’s nothing.”

“Not if it’s bothering you.”

Sokka went still, hands dropped to his lap. Zuko leaned his head back, staring up at the sky above the black cliff walls, crossing his legs at the ankle. Maybe he’d come back here some day, if they somehow made it through whatever the comet would bring. Peace was hard to come by and he didn’t figure he’d find much of it in the Caldera when everything was said and done. Despite it’s loneliness, the estate was peaceful. Safe.

“Where do you think Azula went, after the air temple?”

Zuko shifted, picking at his callouses, the ones still black with coal dust. They were finally starting to fade. “Back to the Fire Nation, I’d wager. Or further along the Skyspeaks if she was still looking for us.”

“If my dad and the others had tunneled through to the plains... There wouldn’t have been anywhere to hide out there. Too open.”

“What are you getting at?”

“It’s been too long,” Sokka insisted. “We should’ve heard from them by now. My dad would’ve made it his first priority to get word to us. *Why* haven’t we gotten anything?”

“We have no way of knowing what happened,” he said, glancing up and meeting the other boy’s gaze. Sokka’s face was twisted with worry, all traces of the mask he usually wore gone. “You can’t torture yourself by guessing.”

“But what if she found them?” he asked, knee bouncing. Zuko realized he’d probably been thinking about this for a while—maybe since they’d fled the air temple. “What if they’re all sitting in a cell somewhere in the Fire Nation right now, or—or *dead*, and we’re waiting on something that will never come?”

“We saw them getting away, we can’t know if they were followed—”

“*Would* she have killed them? I mean, Haru, Teo, the Duke—they’re just kids. Especially the Duke. She wouldn’t have, right? She wouldn’t stoop that low. But my dad—spirits—she’d

probably—”

“Sokka.” He cut the other boy off, turning in order to grip his knee with one hand and his right hand with the other. “Stop. You can’t do this to yourself. You just can’t.”

Sokka’s brows were drawn together, tears in his eyes. He whispered, “What if they’re dead? What if splitting up sent them to their graves?”

“*Sokka*,” he repeated, squeezing his hand, willing himself to find the right words. “Look we both know Azula could have caught up to them and killed them. But... a long time ago, she could’ve killed me and she didn’t. She chose to lock me up instead. So, either is possible, I guess is what I’m trying to say. But it’s *also* just as likely they got away.” He didn’t mention that Azula’s decision to send him to the Boiling Rock probably had everything to do with their shared blood, not necessarily the goodness of her heart. Sokka didn’t need to hear that.

Sokka shook his head, thumb swiping over the back of Zuko’s wrist. “You’re kind of awful at this.”

He tried a smile. “I could lie to you.”

“No, I meant— Sorry, I shouldn’t have even said anything,” Sokka wiped at his face and Zuko felt a spike of embarrassment. “You’re probably right, they’re fine. It’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing. You care about them. You’re worried. That’s only natural.”

“Yeah but...” Sokka sighed. “That’s not me. I’m the maps and plans guy. The schedule guy. I’m supposed to keep us on track.”

*It is you*, Zuko wanted to say. *The you you think we don’t see*. “It’s okay to worry. You don’t have to be...the Schedule Master all the time.” He cringed as he said it but Sokka’s lips twitched upwards. The smile was gone almost as quickly as it appeared.

“Yeah but if I’m not, who is? Where will that leave me? Besides that, meat and sarcasm are about my only skills.”

“That’s not true,” Zuko said, digging his fingers into Sokka’s knee. “The others look to you. They trust you for a reason.”

Sokka shook his head silently, something at war on his face. Self-doubt, now that Zuko was close enough to see it. A sense of disbelief. He suddenly asked in a rush, “Do *you* trust me?”

Taken aback, Zuko blinked then replied honestly, “I do now.”

Sokka’s gaze flicked over him rapidly, like he was looking for something. After a beat, he wet his lips, saying, “Good.” He glanced down and Zuko realized he had yet to let go.

“Sorry.” He drew away, glad it was dark enough to hide the heat in his cheeks. Sokka started to say something but Zuko didn’t want to hear it; “You don’t have to always put on a brave face. Not for me, at least. You’re more than just the schedule guy, okay? ”

This time, it was Sokka who reached for him. He gripped Zuko's shoulder, his smile soft. "Don't go getting ahead of yourself there, Sparky, I know where I'm most useful." Zuko groaned, dropping his head back in disgust. Sokka chuckled, asking, "How'd it go with Aang today? With the chakras?"

He didn't miss the blatant change in topic. He humored the other boy, shoving his hair away from his face as he sighed, "Rough. Really rough. But... Aang seems to think it'll help with my bending."

"Is it? Helping?"

"Maybe a little. I don't know. Even if the chakra stuff is all bullshit, it's probably bullshit I need to face. Tomorrow we'll try bending."

Again, Sokka started fiddling with the wraps on his arms. Zuko watched him for a long beat, mind churning as he thought once again of the chakras, of everything Aang had said. Sokka hummed softly, "I hope it helps. In some way."

Zuko clenched his jaw, leaning his head back and staring up at the starry sky. "Yeah. Me too."



The next morning, Zuko and Aang were back in the white courtyard as Agni crested over the horizon. Maybe it was the exhaustion finally having caught up to him from the last few days, maybe he'd finally reached a point where he felt safe enough for his mind to slow, or even a combination of the two—Zuko'd been out like a light the moment his head hit the pillow until Aang was nudging him awake. Whatever the case, he felt rested, more rested than he had in a long, long time.

"Well, avatar, what do you think? Ready for the real thing?"

Aang raised an eyebrow. "Are *you*?"

Zuko huffed, nerves gnawing at his insides. "Guess we'll see." He squared his shoulders, stepping into a very basic kata. He cleared his mind, despite flashes of his mother's corpse that threatened just behind his eyes. *Let that pain go.* He thrust his open palm out, exhaling with the movement, praying to Agni—and fire bloomed, bright and hot, flaring across the courtyard.

Aang whooped, leaping into the air, clapping his hands. "Yes!"

Exhilarated, Zuko continued punching blasts of fire into the courtyard, each stronger and brighter than the last. There was still the slightest feeling of unease, a tight reminder in his ribs, but this time it was joined by the rush of his chi being put to use, a torrent that had been begging for release finally set free.

He grinned, almost in disbelief. "I can't believe it worked."



Aang threw himself onto Zuko, laughing. “That was amazing! What were you thinking, just then?”

“I was—” He ran his hands through his hair, his fingers shaking with adrenaline. “For so many years, I thought firebending was destruction. I only ever really used it when I felt afraid or angry—it was a tool for survival. My only *purpose* was survival. But now, now I have a new drive. I have to help you defeat my father and restore balance to the world.”

Aang grinned. “I think you were meant to be my firebending teacher. After I hurt Katara, I was too afraid and timid. But...firebending is life. It’s energy. It’s all about how you use it. I needed someone who would use firebending for peace.”

Zuko hugged him back, suddenly immensely grateful. Tears stung his eyes. “Thank you, Aang. Thank you.”

The other boy grinned. “I’m but a humble monk.”

He laughed. “*Sure.*”



They quickly put what they’d learned to practice. Aang was still hesitant at first but as they worked, Zuko could see right before his eyes as he started to improve. He had the ability, just not the confidence. That changed the longer they moved through the katas and drills from the previous day, as Zuko shouted a litany of encouragement anytime he completed a set without error. It was clear the boy responded well to positive reinforcement.

By mid-afternoon, they’d both abandoned their tunics, for the exertion of their bending and the relentless beat of Agni’s rays only added to the swampy air. Zuko might’ve once felt embarrassed or ashamed but he was putting that behind him, he resolved. It was a small step, a small piece of bravery, but a step all the same.

Aang’s eyes flickered over Zuko’s back, his mouth dropping open. “That one looks like mine.” He turned, pointing over his shoulder to the large scar Zuko’d noted the day before.

“Oh,” He’d never seen the full extent of the lightning scar Azula’d gifted him—it was almost disorienting to see it on someone else, a mirror of his own. “A little gift from my sister.”

“You’re kidding—she gave me mine, too.”

Inexplicably, Zuko laughed. “Sorry, sorry it’s just—of course she did. She must be a bad shot if we’re both still standing here.”

Aang quirked a smile. “Her aim was pretty spot on when she got me”



“Walk through this set without me,” Zuko instructed, reclining against the fountain. As soon as he said it, Aang’s eyes went wide. “You can do it. You’re a talented kid.”

He distantly heard the door of the manse opening but had no intention of moving. He nodded to the other boy. He knew Aang had it in him. He just needed to believe that for himself. In front of him, Aang took a deep breath before he started. Brows furrowed in concentration, clearly still trying to remember which foot to put in front of him, Zuko felt appreciative that he was trying so hard. As he moved, fire bloomed with every strike, stronger than it had been even hours prior. He was gaining his confidence, that much was clear. It wouldn't be enough against Ozai but it was a start.

*"Spirits."*

Zuko turned, smiling as he caught sight of Sokka standing at the start of the colonnade, one foot still on the white marble steps. The boy's eyes snapped up to his own, then he was rushing forward. Zuko stumbled back, wondering what he'd done but Sokka stopped all but a foot from him, hands flexing. "Who—Where did you get those?"

"Oh—it's nothing," he looked away, unsure how to react, the old words falling easily from his lips. "Really."

"Zuko." Sokka insisted, expression serious.

He ran a hand through his hair, not quite understanding Sokka's concern. Wasn't like he could've done anything. "One from my lovely sister, the rest from some guards at the Boiling Rock. Not uncommon. Discipline by force, and all that."

Sokka looked vaguely ill.

"They're old," he insisted.

"I want names," Sokka said, anger replacing the shock. "After we've won."

"Now who's getting ahead of himself?" Zuko meant it as a joke but Sokka's expression turned thunderous. He whirled on his heel, storming from the courtyard, shoulders drawn up around his ears.

Zuko watched him leave for a moment, chest tight, before he sighed and turned back to Aang. He found the airbender already watching him, eyes wide. He looked startled by Zuko's attention on him, straightening as he stammered, "Er, what next?"

"We're done," he said, "Good job today. Really. You've improved a lot. You were great."

Aang brightened, smiling shyly. "Thanks. You were too. I'm glad we've been making progress."

Zuko rolled his eyes. "Don't get all soft on me, avatar."

The other boy grinned, taking off towards the mansion. Zuko wondered how he even had the energy to be running like that. He stood in the empty courtyard for another long moment, his thoughts running laps around each other. *Fuck it.* With a groan, he took off in the direction Sokka had disappeared.

In his anger, Sokka left a path through the jungle that was easy to follow. Stomped down grass, snapped fronds, the occasional footprint in the dirt—Zuko realized quickly where he was headed. In the theatre pavilion, Sokka was pacing back and forth, clearly still agitated. He whirled when he realized he'd been followed, anger marring his face. Zuko halted dead in his tracks. "What?"

"You don't care, do you?"

"What are you talking about—"

"You just—you write everything off, you don't seem to give a damn about yourself—" Sokka tore at his hair, shaking his head. "How can you act like those—those scars are okay? How?"

Zuko stared at him for a beat. "If I didn't, then I'd drown."

Sokka's gaze softened. "I just wish...I'm sorry that—" He broke off, turning away, shoulders heaving.

Zuko approached him carefully, not sure what in Agni's name he was doing. "I shouldn't have said what I said. I'm sorry. I'm trying. ...I'm trying to accept things about myself. Things I've done. Things that have happened. That joke wasn't, it wasn't a good idea. I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize," Sokka croaked, voice thick. "Just don't do it again."

Zuko took a deep breath. He reached out, fingers making contact with Sokka's shoulder. The other boy went rigid and Zuko nearly withdrew. Nerves ate at him but he shoved them down. *Building bridges*, he reminded himself, heart racing. *Not burning them*. Gingerly, deliberately, he turned Sokka bodily, then wrapped his arms around him before he had any time to think it through. Sokka seemed as surprised as he was; he froze and for a moment Zuko thought he'd made a mistake. He made to draw away then Sokka was returning the hug, throwing his arms around Zuko and burrowing his face into his neck.

"*Don't* do it again."

"I won't. I won't."



"I have a surprise for everyone!"

Zuko glanced up at Katara's shout, spoon paused halfway to his mouth. They were all spread out beneath the colonnade, plates of steaming rice, wild carrots, and silverfish in their laps.

Toph's head shot up. "I knew it! You did have a secret thing with Haru!"

"Uh—no." Katara made a face, then held up the scroll she clutched. "I was looking for cooking pots in the attic and I found this." She unfurled the yellowed parchment with a flourish, grinning. "Look at baby Zuko! Isn't he cute?"

The others laughed but Zuko didn't even crack a smile. Katara sighed. "Oh lighten up, I'm just teasing."

"That's not me. That's my father."

They all grimaced. Suki said hesitantly, "But he looks so cute and innocent."

Zuko scoffed. "Well that sweet little kid grew up to be a monster. And the worst father in the history of fathers."

Aang looked down, picking at his food. "He's still a human being."

"You're going to defend him?" Anger, hot and unbridled suddenly flared up inside Zuko, the harshest he'd felt it since seeing Azula at the air temple.

The airbender set aside his food, gaze still on the ground. He shook his head adamantly as he said, "No, no, I agree with you. Fire Lord Ozai is a horrible person and the world would probably be better off without him, but there's gotta be another way."

"Like what?"

"I don't know but taking his life doesn't feel right."

"Doesn't *feel* right?"

"Aang, we always knew it would come to this," Toph said. "The Fire Lord just can't be allowed to live."

Aang was on his feet now, pacing, his agitation rising. "This goes against everything I learned from the monks. I can't just go around killing people I don't like."

Sokka shoveled the last of his dinner into his mouth, shrugging. "Sure you can, you're the avatar. If it's in the name of keeping balance, I'm pretty sure the universe will forgive you."

Aang whirled on him, shouting, "This isn't a joke, Sokka! None of you understand the position I'm in!"

"Aang, we do understand. It's just—"

"Just what, Katara? What?"

"We're trying to help!"

"When you figure out a way for me to defeat the Fire Lord without taking his life, I'd love to hear it!"

Toph crossed her arms tightly over her chest, frowning deeply. "The fate of the *world* is at risk. I think I can say we all understand the value of human life. But sometimes we have make decisions we don't necessarily like."

“I *know* that. But—” He let out an angry shout. “The Fire Nation has taken *everything* from me. Ozai has helped build a world that my people will never see. And now—now I’m supposed to kill him, just one more way he’s destroying our beliefs, our way of life. *None* of you understand that. You can’t. The decision to take his life as if it means nothing, going against everything the monks taught me—that choice can’t be one more thing he gets to take away.”

“Aang...” Katara reached for him but the boy was already running from the courtyard, shaking his head.

“Let him go,” Zuko said, offering the rest of his dinner to Momo. His appetite had suddenly vanished. “He needs some time.”

“I get the hesitation,” Suki said as Katara sat down, still staring after Aang. “But...really, what other choice does he have? Even if we somehow win and the man is put behind bars, there’s always the risk of an uprising. The Fire Nation would never back down easily if he were still alive. They would still fight for him.”

Silence fell over them, the mood ruined. Zuko found himself looking to Sokka. The other boy stared down at his plate, worrying his lip. Zuko knew what it meant to take a life. He knew the mark it left. He didn’t know if any of the others besides Suki shared that knowledge. It wasn’t exactly something he wished on anyone.

But Suki was right—what choice did Aang have?



No one felt like staying up late after that conversation. They each fell asleep in front of the fire just like they had the last few nights. But something had changed. The stark reminder of what they had set out to do hung heavily over everyone. Aang returned long after dark, slipping inside quietly and curling into a ball away from the others, Momo nuzzled against his chest. Across from him, Suki’s worried gaze found his. He shook his head.

Ozai dead. The concept was foreign. His father had always been an indomitable presence in his life, untouchable. Zuko had no idea what the world would be like without him but he knew it would be better than the state of things now. It would have to be.



Like usual, he was the first one awake. Figuring he had some time before the others woke up, he eyed the dunes, the cliffs, and the bay beyond them. It was peaceful in the morning, with only his thoughts and the distant sounds of the ocean to keep him company. There was no incessant chatter or talk about killing the Fire Lord. Zuko thought he could’ve basked in that quiet for the rest of his life.

Eager for something to do, he crept outside, taking off through the dunes, following the barely-there, winding path that would take him back to the cliff Aang, Toph, and Katara had been occupying the better part of their stay. Though it held no candle to the view from the Kikena Cliffs, these rocks jutted out over the bay, their rocky outcrops making the perfect

secluded place for the others to train. Zuko had no intention of training though. He sat gingerly at the cliff's edge, legs dangling over the water far, far below.

He'd already been there long at all when a voice behind him called, "Hey."

Zuko jumped, twisting to see over his shoulder. It was only Aang, looking bedraggled and exhausted. He joined Zuko, peering over the edge despite his evident exhaustion. Zuko had a striking moment of concern then remembered this kid could quite literally fly if he wanted to.

"How are you doing?"

Aang shrugged, leaning back his hands. "Not great. Sorry I lost my temper last night."

"It's okay. It might not be my place but... For what it's worth, my father *is* a horrible person. He has no regard for human life. All he cares about is expanding his empire. Conquering the rest of the world like Sozin wanted, it's a trophy to him. An accomplishment in the history of his reign that no one else in our family could boast about. He wants that title and he's pretty damn close to getting it. Even if he were imprisoned, someone like that is extremely dangerous. This world would be better off without him."

Aang sounded very small as he whispered; "I know."

Zuko said nothing else. There was nothing to be said. When the comet came, Aang would have to make a choice, one that would either liberate the world or send it further into chaos.

Silence stretched between them, each stuck in their own thoughts.

Aang stared toward the horizon, then straightened abruptly, one hand shielding his eyes from the sun. "Hang on, do you see that?"

Zuko rubbed tiredly at his scar, sighing. "Nope."

"I think—" Aang scrambled up, scattering rocks and sending dirt over the cliff. He extended his right hand and with a gust of wind, his staff flew into his palm. "Be right back."

"*Aang!*" Zuko lurched to his feet as the boy dove over the side of the cliff. He careened towards the ocean surface for a handful of heartbeats, then the mechanisms on his glider snapped open. Immediately Aang started gaining altitude, soaring higher and higher until Zuko was squinting again, trying to keep track of him against the broad expanse of sky. The boy met something in midflight, tucking it close to his chest, his glider lurching to one side before he could correct it. Zuko's heart leaped and he gnawed at his lip even as the boy's glider leveled out again.

A handful of irritating minutes passed then the avatar flitted back down to earth. Zuko shielded his face with an arm, pelted with dirt and grass.

"Zuko, look! It's a hawk!"

Stunned, he stared in disbelief at the rumpled, cagey-looking bird hugged against Aang's side. The hawk couldn't have been any larger than Momo. Its amber eyes were blown wide

with fear, tawny feathers wind-tussled from the flight and struggling in Aang's grip. Aang carefully lowered his staff to the ground, then smoothed his hand down the frightened animal's back, speaking to it softly. Encircled around its delicate left leg, a thin leather strap free of markings held a metal canister no larger than Zuko's forefinger.

He reached for it without hesitation, heart pumping in his ears. The metal was thin and unpolished, bereft of any identifying markers. Its lid unscrewed easily, sealed with something sticky to prevent moisture from seeping inside. His hands trembled as he made quick work of the brass fastening. Inside, a slim scroll of pale parchment lay innocently. He dumped the contents free, unfurling the paper gingerly.

*Fair skies. Suying.*

Zuko turned the paper over, demanding, "That's it? What's Suying?"

Aang held out a hand and Zuko shoved the note at him. The other boy peered at the note as though he would somehow be able to pry some secret meaning from its entirely lackluster depths. Zuko glared towards the horizon, palms burning. What good was a note if it told them nothing?

"I don't know what this means," Aang admitted, worriedly chewing his lip. "Maybe one of the others will."

The entire trek back to the house, Zuko's mind churned as he tried to remember if he'd ever heard of Suying. "Is it code?"

Aang scratched his head, the bird still tucked under his arm. "Maybe the first part is. But Suying? I really don't know. It's gotta be a village or settlement or something."

"Agni," Zuko muttered, storming angrily through the grass. He stomped up the stairs of the trellis, not bothering to brush off any sand from his boots. The sound of him throwing open the doors had Suki bolting upright on the chaise, her eyes wide. When she realized it was only him, she slouched, rubbing a tired hand over her face.

"Zuko, the sun is hardly even up—what's wrong?"

"This." He jerked a thumb towards Aang, who held up the parchment meekly.

"What're you—oh spirits," Katara lurched from the mess of blankets, stumbling over her brother as she scrambled to them. She clutched the tiny piece of parchment, brows knitted together as she read its contents, Sokka getting up more slowly behind her, though he looked no less anxious.

"Well, what's the word?" Toph yawned, stretching.

"Fair skies. Suying." Katara stated and silence crept over them. Toph tilted her head, messy hair falling over her face. "*That's it?*"

"Yeah," the water tribe girl nodded. "Fair skies... Whenever he remembered to write to us, Dad used to say that in his letters when things were going well for him and our tribesmen."

But Suying...”

“Suying,” Sokka repeated, “Why does that sound familiar?”

“I’ve never heard of it,” Zuko said, arms crossed. “Anyone else?”

Toph and Suki shook their heads. Another spike of annoyance shot through Zuko. *Damnit, Hakoda*. Coded messages were useless if no one could figure out their damn meaning.

“It sounds familiar, though,” Sokka insisted, grabbing his satchel. He upended its contents all over the low table, pawing through the pieces of parchment till he dug out a map. Swiping an arm across the tabletop, he knocked everything clear to find a flat surface. He scoured the map for a tense handful of seconds then said, “Look.” They all crowded in closer, Zuko settling next to him, Katara on his left. “This is where we met that bounty hunter June in the Earth Kingdom—here is where we found our dad’s friend Bato. That was all within ten miles of each other. This beach—” He tapped the parchment and the painted coastline of the western Earth Kingdom. “—I think *this* is Suying.”

“I don’t remember hearing anything like that...” Aang said hesitantly, still gnawing at his lip. “We’ve been to a *lot* of places. Are you sure?”

“No,” Sokka admitted, thumb tapping against his knee. “No, I’m really not. But I think it’s something Bato had mentioned.”

“This is a long way to travel on a hunch,” Suki remarked, tracing from where Sokka’d indicated all the way to their location on Ember Island. Zuko’s stomach sank. They’d have to cross the open ocean or fly along the Earth Kingdom coast. “No matter how you look at it, that’s going to be a few days ride.”

“Well...” Sokka slouched back against the cushions, gesturing flippantly at the map. “That’s the best I got. Anyone else?”

“Are we even sure this is *from* Hakoda?” Toph asked.

Katara placed the piece of parchment flat on the tabletop. “This is definitely Dad’s handwriting. That mean’s he’s alive. He and the others must have made it out. If they went as far as the Earth Kingdom, that could explain why it’s taken him so long to reach us.”

“Why would he go to the Earth Kingdom though?” Toph picked at her ear. “It’s gotta be overrun with Fire Nation since Azula’s coup. Especially on the coastlines.”

That hung over them all heavily.

“Do we risk it?” Zuko asked. “That’s a lot of supplies, a lot of miles. Is it worth it?”

“He said he had allies,” Katara traced her finger over the spot Sokka’d indicated, wistful. “If he found them, that’s more help than we have right now. What do you think, Aang?”

They all looked at the avatar. He inhaled slowly, staring at the map instead of meeting anyone’s eyes, nimble fingers still stroking over the messenger hawk’s tawny feathers. Zuko



had to wonder if the soothing motion was for the bird or himself at this point. Finally, the boy looked up, brows still furrowed and mouth downturned in worry. “We have the supplies. We can make it. I say we go.”



It took them only a few hours to pack their belongings onto Appa’s saddle. When it was all said and done, they had about a week’s worth of provisions to get them through the trip and for whatever awaited them in the Earth Kingdom. Zuko stood at Appa’s shoulder, arms folded as Sokka fed the bison slices of melon. He stared out towards the ocean, the house where the others lingered at his back.

“Do you think this is a good idea?”

Sokka stroked Appa’s cheek, extending another slice once the big guy finished chewing. He didn’t look but what part of his face Zuko could see was somber. “No.”

He stared at him for a moment, something caught in his throat. “Sokka...”

“Oi, Sparky,” Toph called a moment before her bony elbow drove into his right side. “Say we get to the Earth Kingdom without any issues. What’re the odds your darling sister finds us when we get there?”

“Pretty high,” he rubbed at his ribs, annoyance flaring. “We’ll have to make damn sure we aren’t spotted by any watchmen along the coast. Once we make it to the inland it’ll be easier to hide.”

“Toph can you give me a hand?” Suki asked, a large basket on her hip. The earthbender nodded. “Yeah, you guys ready?”

Zuko squared his shoulders, glancing again at Sokka. Appa had already eaten the last of the melon, so there really was nothing more for them to wait on. Katara and Aang reached their little group last, bringing with them an air of worry that had not diminished since the messenger hawk arrived.

Toph wordlessly stomped a foot, lifting them into the air on a slab that allowed easy access to Appa’s saddle. Momo swept in last, chittering as he landed on Katara’s shoulder. Zuko settled in the back, leaning against their supplies. Sokka ended up to his right, his boney knee pressed to Zuko’s shin. Zuko didn’t mind it—he found himself staring towards the mansion as everyone settled, conversation null. It was just a house, he told himself, just a collection of timber and stone, a placeholder in his childhood memories. It had been sitting empty for years. It wasn’t going to blow away in the wind the second they left.

He couldn’t quite force down the lump that formed in his throat as Appa kicked off from the ground, rising into the air steadily, the mansion growing smaller the further he flew. He startled when he felt Sokka grip his hand, squeezing hard. Zuko stared at him, eyes probably wide.

“It’ll be okay.” He didn’t look all that convinced as he said it, but he smiled all the same. “I know it.”

Not sure if he believed him, Zuko wordlessly squeezed his hand back.

## Chapter End Notes

if anyones interested, i have a new ~adult~ zukka fic you can find [here](#) :)

# Chapter 12

## Chapter Notes

Content warning: suicidal thoughts briefly mentioned

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

They opted to take their chances flying over the ocean rather than skirting the northern coastline of the Earth Kingdom, spending two nights on the open water. Katara made an ice shelf when Appa needed a rest, both she and Aang alternating between bending them towards land and catching up on sleep so they didn't lose too much time.

When Aang wasn't steering Appa or curled amongst their belongings, Zuko had him working through drills. Nothing that would spook the bison or be too visible if a ship were to pass below them, mainly pushing the limits of his endurance. Aang held flames in his palms for nearly two hours before his concentration broke, much to his annoyance. He *wanted* to improve—it was a damn shame their time was quickly running out.

For the most part, their flight was dreadfully boring. Save for the passing of a fleet of Fire Nation ships headed west, they were alone on the water. It was a very strange feeling.

On the third day, the continent of the Earth Kingdom came into view slowly. From the air, the coastline was a jagged, unending shelf rising from the water, making it easily visible even with miles still between them. Waves beat against cliffs giving way to vast, dense forests of towering, deep green pines, hills growing into mountains that obscured any further view inland. As they neared, flying lower and lower, Katara manipulated a cover of clouds while her brother steered the bison. Aang, laying on his stomach on Appa's head, held his hands over both eyes, trying to peer through the misty blanket Katara maintained. "Anything?"

Next to him, Suki held Sokka's brass telescope up to one eye. "I can't see any watchtowers or guard posts. Not even jetties or docks for ships...no boats anchored. Looks pretty empty—but that doesn't mean there aren't people hiding in the forest."

"Great, so be ready for an ambush, got it," Toph grunted. She was hugging the lip of the bison's saddle, one arm woven through the leather strappings, the other firmly clutching Zuko's ankle. He was back in his spot leaning against their belongings, trying to avoid getting under Katara's feet. The waterbender stood in the middle of the saddle, stepping through katas. She sighed at Toph's remark, her movements fluid and graceful. "We always knew that was a possibility."

"It would just be nice if people weren't *always* trying to blow us out of the sky, you know? Every once in a while—that's exciting, but *every* time we go somewhere?" She scoffed. "Predictable."

“Where’s the fun in that?” Zuko smirked. Toph grinned but they both quickly sobered at Katara’s sharp, annoyed, “*Spirits.*”

They began losing altitude, taking the cloud cover with them. Sokka landed Appa on a relatively smooth expanse of land covered with waist-high grasses that rippled with every rush of the breeze. As soon as the great bison settled onto his haunches, Toph was over the side of the saddle; she knelt, pressing her flat hand against the earth.

“There’s someone hiding just inside the treeline,” she said, black bangs shrouding her face. They were all instantly on edge. Zuko unsheathed his dao, grateful more than ever for the fog. “They’re coming closer.”

“Are they alone?” Sokka demanded, knuckles white where he clutched the reins, poised to give the command that would send Appa back into the air. The bison shifted nervously, sending them all swaying, sensing their anxiety.

“It’s just one person,” Toph said with certainty. “There’s nothing and no one else out here as far as I can see. They’re moving fast.”

“What’re we doing?” Suki asked, dagger in hand.

“Just our usual warm welcome, right?” Toph straightened with another grin. “Leave it to me, ladies.” She stomped her right foot and brought her closed fists together. A millisecond later, a male voice shouted in surprise. She took off running without a word, plunging through the mist and quickly disappearing.

“*Agni!*” Zuko leaped over the side of Appa’s saddle, hitting the ground hard. He took off in the direction Toph disappeared, following the trail of flattened grass she’d left in her wake, distantly aware of the others behind him. The mist began to fade, Katara having evidently joined the chase, revealing more of the glade they’d landed in. At first glance, the empty valley was beautiful, serene almost—it gave no indication of what might’ve been laying in wait. Towering pine trees bled down the hillsides, growing sparse as they neared the valley basin. The river Zuko’d spotted from above lay to their right, a cleft that emptied into the gulf behind them. There wasn’t any time to appreciate it, though. A roar like the sound of a landslide erupted up ahead, then the dull twang of a bow unloading, and Toph’s shrill scream cut through the air.

Ice jolted through him. He’d never heard that sound before—not from her.

“*Toph!*” He broke into a dead sprint, heart hammering. He had just reached the edge of the forest when a pine tree suddenly crashed to the ground on his left, narrowly missing him, lifted upwards by earth-clodded roots. Then another, and another; trees pulled themselves from the earth on his left and right. Something whistled over his shoulder from above; another arrow.

“They’re in the trees!” Toph shouted somewhere he couldn’t pinpoint, and then more and more pines started uprooting themselves, bodies falling with them.

Zuko himself nearly fell as the earth beneath his feet gave way; he cried out, throwing himself sideways to avoid being lifted skyward. The slab he'd been standing on not even moments before hurtled through the air, plowing through the vegetation before exploding. Bits of it flew into his eyes, his mouth, his nose—he couldn't see where his attacker was coming from or determine if it was merely Toph trying to fend off another earthbender. Agni, he couldn't even tell how many attackers there were. The outlines of people he didn't recognize darted in and out of view, ducking behind trees, raising slabs of earth that then flew through the air. Shouting came from behind, Katara's voice rising in anger, Suki's pained scream, then Aang's. Another boulder flew straight at his head and he dropped flat to the ground—it blasted against the tree only steps behind him, sending splinters and bark flying.

The tree, now missing a substantial part of its trunk, careened downward with a groan, and he rolled to avoid being crushed, showered with bark and pine needles as the massive thing flattened itself with its own weight. Panting, he sprang to his feet just to be bodily slammed back to the ground. The back of his head struck the compact earth, sending stars dancing across his vision. He lay there momentarily dazed, his dao knocked out of his grip, then a man dropped onto him, a large gleaming knife drawn, arching for his throat. The stifling press of another body kick-started something in him. It didn't matter that he could hardly breathe, he thrust his fist up, straight into the man's face, fire blooming. The attacker screamed, his hair catching alight as easily as straw, and his blade dropped in his haste.

Zuko rose unsteadily to his feet, a dull ache pounding through his skull with every beat of his heart. He delivered a single, quick kick to the man's sternum that knocked him flat on his back. The attacker didn't get up; he could only moan, cradling his face, his hair melted away to the scalp, singed and smoking. The man's right cheek was blackened, the skin blistered beyond repair. Zuko had the briefest stomach-dropping moment of recognition, of realization, but he couldn't dwell on it. Someone had spotted his moment of hesitation; a projectile piece of earth struck him in the shoulder, flung hard enough that it sent him stumbling to his hands and knees.

*"Zuko!"*

He whirled, searching for Sokka, finding him just long enough for their gazes to lock, then the earth ripped itself in two beneath him. He scrambled for purchase as the earthen slabs turned to gravel, making it impossible to get a sturdy grip, swallowing him up, the pressure growing stronger and stronger until it was all he could do to wheeze for air. Then hands were wrapped around his forearm, pulling so hard his shoulder was nearly torn from its socket. Zuko cried out, the earthbender refusing to let go, but Sokka was determined—he dug his heels into the earth that was starting to swallow him too, leaning the full of weight of his body backward. Finally, the earth gave way and Zuko fell forwards onto shaking arms. Sokka hauled him up, pupils blown wide with either fear or adrenaline. Agni, maybe both.

"Come on!" He shouted, and Zuko was too dazed to argue. Sokka didn't let go, only dragged him through the exploding forest until they reached Suki, who was half crouched behind a mess of felled trees. Blood streamed from a cut somewhere in her hair, running down her face and into her eyes. It looked ghastly and Zuko reached for her numbly. She squeezed him back, her dagger still clutched firmly in one hand.

“Where are the others?” he shouted, boulders flying over their heads, knocking into each other in midair, felling more trees; unmanned cannon fire with no direction.

“Fuck if I know,” Suki snarled, and with a sick lurch he noticed the arrow protruding from her upper calf. “We’ve got to get out of here, there’s no way to tell how many of them—”

She was cut off as yet another slab of earth ripped itself from the ground behind them, lifting up and into the air, then dropping down again—all in less than a heartbeat—flattening them. Blackness swallowed everything and Zuko panted, inhaling soil. He couldn’t see them but he could hear both Sokka and Suki, crying out as they were crushed, awful sounds he never wanted to hear again, the air squeezed out of them by a rock weighing as much as Appa, pushed down with even more force by a bender intent on their deaths.

The last thing he was aware of before it all faded was Sokka’s hand still clutched in his own, a tether in the dark.



Consciousness came back to him slowly. He peeled his eyes open, blinking hard to clear his vision. The first thing he was aware of was the awful dryness in his mouth—almost like someone had stuffed cotton against his tongue and left it there. He hauled himself upright, still not fully able to see, only aware he was laying on something soft, the air cool, the sounds of voices and birdsong coming from somewhere unseen.

Voices... voices. He rubbed at his eyes, vision swimming. The room settled and he noticed Katara, Toph, Aang, and Suki seated around a lit brazier, heads bent in conversation.

Katara saw him first; “You’re awake! Here.” She brought him a cup, pressing it to his lips without preamble, and he tipped the cup back, realizing fully how parched he’d been. When the cup was empty, Katara took it back, twisting it in her hands, watching him carefully. “How do you feel?”

“Where’s... Where’s Sokka?” He asked. He glanced behind her to Suki. “Suki, are you—?”

“We’re okay,” she said, though Zuko wasn’t convinced. How could they be?

“Yeah,” Katara echoed. “Everyone’s okay. Well, for the most part.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Suki was shot through the leg with an arrow,” she said, still twisting the cup anxiously. “Toph got one in the shoulder. Everyone was pretty banged up but I’ve been using my healing abilities, so we’ll pull through.”

“Where are we? What happened to the attackers?”

Katara gripped his forearm. “We’re in a camp—a White Lotus camp. It’s a secret society. They’re on our side. They’ve got some rebels with them who were on guard when we arrived, they didn’t realize who we are. But it’s okay now.”

“Is it?” He demanded, getting to his feet. Besides an all-over ache that seemed to worsen with each step, he *did* feel fine, even though the shoulder Sokka had yanked on still throbbed. Even his head— Sokka. Where was Sokka? “After all that—”

“Calm down, Sparky, you took a pretty good hit to the head,” Toph called, sipping at a cup of tea. “Don’t get yourself all worked up, you’ll send Sugar Queen into another spiral.”

“Taking care of you—of *everyone* —is me in a spiral?”

“Yes, when you’re mothering us all to—”

Zuko rubbed at his temples, that dull ache from before returning. “*Where* are we, exactly?”

“It’s a camp—It belongs to the Order of the White Lotus. Turns out we’ve actually met a few of their members before. Their camp was barely five miles upriver from where we landed,” Aang explained, and the two girls shut their mouths though neither looked as if they were through. “It’s...it’s a mix of Order members, refugees, and rebels.”

“Okay...” He staggered, his exhaustion catching up to him. Katara helped him down next to Toph, carefully pressing her hands to the tender, lump on the back of his head. He couldn’t even argue; a blue glow emanated from her hands as she ran them over his flesh. “So how long was I out?”

“Maybe two hours,” Suki said. “Really, not long at all.”

He ran a shaking hand over his face. “Last thing I remember is us being crushed. What happened after that?”

“I knocked out the earthbender who was attacking you three,” Toph said. “Got you guys out but all of you were in rough shape at that point. *Then* you’ll never guess who showed up.”

His stomach tightened. “Who?”

“A... A friend of my family’s,” Katara said, hesitating just long enough for Zuko’s defenses to slam up. “Bato. He’s been staying with the White Lotus as a refugee. He was fishing along the river and saw Appa land, then heard all of the commotion. He ran in and convinced the earthbenders we’re all on the same side.”

“Well that’s lucky,” he grunted, not exactly buying it, pain receding as she worked.

“After that, we loaded the injured on Appa and came to this encampment,” Aang said, brows creased. “Some of the White Lotus members took us straight here. They took our weapons and won’t let us leave.”

“What do you mean they won’t let us leave?”

“Like Sokka had to sneak out to find Bato, they won’t let us leave,” Toph said, irritated.

“They separated us as soon as we landed. Bato was in trouble, from how the earthbenders were acting. I think they wanted to kill us for...” She hesitated. “For the guy you burned. Bato wouldn’t let them.”

“Is he...?”

“Oh, he’s alive,” Katara promised, finally lowering her hands. “I made sure of that.”

“Thank you,” Zuko murmured, sick at the thought of someone else’s blood on his hands. “I wish I’d known...”

“They attacked us first,” Toph snapped. “They didn’t really leave us any choice but to defend ourselves. It’s not your fault, Zuko.”

“Now that you’re up, we should go find Sokka. See who’s in charge here,” Suki said, picking at the bandages around her calf. “Find out why they’re treating us like prisoners.”

“We keep it civil,” Aang insisted, nudging Toph. “*Okay?*”

“Yeah, yeah Twinkle Toes, civil. You got it.”

Civil or not, they ventured from the tent cautiously. Zuko expected guards, expected an angry mob; instead, he was met with rows and rows of tents, all of them in varying sizes and shapes, their uniformity giving the camp a militaristic feel. Worn dirt paths snaked through the entirety of the camp, branching like tree limbs this way and that. They’d barely made it five steps outside their tent when, for the second time that day, something knocked into Zuko, nearly taking him off his feet.

“Zuko!” Sokka cried, voice rising in a strained laugh. “You’re okay! You’re okay. Thank the spirits.”

“Yeah,” He grunted, though he felt decidedly less fine with Sokka squeezing him so tightly. But that was on the back burner. Sokka. Sokka was alright. He didn’t even look injured. Distracted, Zuko didn’t really have time to take in the tall, broad-shouldered man standing just behind Sokka before Katara was barreling past them, throwing her arms around him, crying, “*Thank you.*”

“You know this guy?” Zuko demanded, glaring at the stranger. Sokka released him, nodding. “Yeah, yes—this is Bato. He’s a—a friend.”

Toph seemed to be on edge just as much as Zuko felt, though he quickly realized for different reasons; “What happened after the Day of Black Sun? Because you were definitely arrested with the rest of our allies. What’re you doing here?”

Bato’s smile was placating, Katara still tucked under one arm. “It’s good to see you’re all alright. And you’re right to be concerned, Toph, I was arrested. We all were. Everyone who didn’t escape on the avatar’s bison—no one was spared. I ended up in a labor camp outside the colonies with some of my tribesmen. Our freedom was hard won.”

“How many of our allies went to your camp?” Aang asked, shoulders drawn up around his ears. He didn’t sound like he was looking forward to an answer. “How did you escape?”

“Those questions are...more complicated,” Bato sighed. “We were kept divided after our arrest outside the Caldera, with benders and nonbenders in separate prisons. Most of us Water



Tribesmen were sent to labor camps, save for Hakoda. I take it he went somewhere far less savory.” Bato’s gaze met his and Zuko realized he knew exactly who he was. He stiffened, knuckles going white, his chi starting to burn just under his skin. “As nonbenders, they shipped us out of the Fire Nation in wagons but I saw metal containers large enough for a herd of buffalo-yaks heading east. From all of the shouting, it wasn’t hard to guess who was in there.

“My tribesmen and I ended up mining coal for the Fire Nation. It was grueling work with harsh conditions. We lost Lukoha to infection. Then, our camp was ambushed, the Fire Nation guards clearly the targets, which rallied those of us still strong enough to fight. At the end of it all, we were presented with a choice; join our rescuers or leave. Most of us joined.”

“So you’ve been with them since?” Toph surmised.

Bato nodded. “The White Lotus has had this base camp established for several months. It’s a...headquarters, of sorts. They have satellite encampments across the country. They actually had plans to relocate until recently. We convinced them to stay put since Hakoda figured you’d be coming here. Your father—Well it really might be better if he explained for himself —”

Katara’s eyes were large, hopeful. “You’ve seen Dad?”

He nodded. “Yes. Yes, he’s been vague but he said he knew where to send a message. You must have received it.”

“He’s here?” Sokka cried. “Where?”

“The circumstances of your arrival have not gone over well with many of the men here,” Bato said uneasily. “Even with the influence of the White Lotus. Hakoda is...trying to dissuade the worst of them.”

“Then we need to speak with whoever is in charge,” Katara said with certainty. “We’ll—”

“There will be time for all of that,” Bato insisted gently. “Discussion can come later. Right now, rest. Regain your—”

Sokka spoke over him and Bato’s eyes momentarily flitted shut; a common occurrence, if Zuko had to guess. “Why is the Order gathering war prisoners? Are they planning a larger attack against the Fire Nation? What—”

“They have been doing what they can to help those who need it,” Bato forced a smile, the lines on his angular face pronounced. He was handsome when he smiled if a little beaten down. “For that, I am certainly grateful.”

“Have you found anyone else? Anyone who helped us on the Day of Black Sun?” Aang asked.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “No, our camp was targeted because of its importance for the Fire Nation’s war efforts. Only a handful of our warriors survived. We agreed staying

with these people was our smartest choice for the time being. It was entirely a coincidence that Hakoda would also find us.”

“How *did* he find you?” Zuko asked coldly.

Bato met his gaze. As warm as he might’ve seemed, Zuko knew that if he was a warrior like Hakoda, he had every reason to be on edge. “He can tell you himself.”

“Our dad was traveling with some kids,” Sokka said, a worried look creeping back onto his face. “Did they arrive with him?”

“Like I said,” the smile slipped a little and something in Zuko’s chest tightened. “He can tell you himself.”

Zuko was about to open his mouth and argue when a shout interrupted them: “*You!*”

He jerked around, anger rising as he caught sight of a man barreling towards them. A large, burly man with greying black hair and scars crisscrossing his forearms; he stomped with one foot then the other, moving through a kata in the blink of an eye. The earth rumbled, massive boulders pulling themselves free to lift in the air above their heads, showering them with debris and blocking the sun. “You’re the firebender who nearly killed Kizoh. State your business, all of you!”

Bato stepped forward, effectively blocking the man’s path, lifting his hands placatingly, empty palms facing the bender. “At ease, Guohua. I vouch for these children. They—”

The earthbender scoffed, the massive boulders hardly moving. “You’ll vouch for them? Is that supposed to mean something, Southerner? Get out of the way.”

“Please, we’re friends,” Aang stepped forward. “I’m the avatar. I need to speak to—”

Guohua laughed, a deep belly laugh that sent the boulders above them knocking together. Zuko tensed and Toph braced herself, not intervening but on the edge. More people surrounded them, coming from the same direction as the earthbender, some curious, some angry. The large man in front of them spat, “The avatar? Spirits, you must be a fool. That won’t get you special treatment around here, boy. *State your business.*”

“We’re looking for Hakoda,” Katara spat, voice rising in anger. “We need to speak with him.”

Guohua chuckled, the boulders once again trembling precariously. “I’m sure you do, sweetheart. Now, I won’t ask again—state your business or my concentration might just slip.”

“Lower them, Guohua,” Bato insisted, a blatant warning in his hard glare, empty palms still facing the sky. “Their business is none of yours.”

“I’ll decide that for myself,” the man insisted, not even breaking a sweat despite the boulders he held over their heads having to weigh as much as Appa. “Especially since one of my men is half dead. Now—”

“Guohua, enough!” Zuko’s heart leaped into his throat at that voice. Hakoda pushed through the crowd of men, looking tired and angry but altogether unharmed. “Let them be.”

Guohua opened his mouth, face contorting; Toph grunted, “*For fucks sake.*” A moment later, the boulders were crashing to the ground just behind Guohua, whose expression turned comically stunned. “Two can play that game, pal.”

“*Why you—*”

“*Enough,*” Hakoda repeated, shouldering his way in front of Guohua. He was not a slight man by any definition but the earthbender was twice as wide as him, his arms and torso bound with muscle. Hakoda didn’t seem to care: Without looking away, he said in that low, unyielding voice of his, “These children are under my protection. I swear by the spirits, any harm that befalls them will be returned tenfold. Do you understand?” Guohua nodded but Hakoda crowded closer, glaring up at him. “Do you?”

The earthbender sneered. “I understand.”

“Good.” Hakoda finally turned to them. Relief softened his thunderous expression, the sun breaking through storm clouds. Katara wasted no time—she threw herself at her father, winding her arms around him as though she was afraid to let go. Sokka did not follow suit. He remained rigidly braced between Bato and their little group, uncertainty plaguing him.

The world seemed to narrow once Zuko’s gaze met Hakoda’s, whose head snapped up like a hunting dog scenting blood. The man’s eyes tightened when they fell on him, the furrow between his brows almost as deep as the lines scored into his face from the force of his frown. The large man immediately started towards him and that tiny hopeful part of himself immediately shriveled.

Someone, Sokka, he realized belatedly, called in startled confusion, “Dad?” then, when the man didn’t stop, didn’t even waver, squared his shoulders ever so slightly, fists clenched at his side. “*Dad, wait—*”

Hakoda ignored him, a large hand on his son’s shoulder pushing him to the side. In an instant, several things happened at once; on Zuko’s left, Toph stepped into a broad stance, hands lifted in warning, attention fixed directly on the man before them. Suki, expression fierce, quickly stepped in front of him, her small form staunchly rooted in front of his own. Even Katara, less certain than the others, placed a hand on her waterskin, glancing between her father, Sokka, and Zuko with wide, worried eyes.

Only then did Hakoda falter. He stared at the children in surprise, chest rising and falling rapidly. Zuko took a slow, bracing inhale through his nose and sidestepped his friends, meeting Hakoda’s gaze head-on as he said, “It’s okay.”

Hakoda stared at him for a moment longer, expression entirely unreadable. Then without warning, he was reaching out, hand looming closer. Zuko closed his eyes, only to find himself being hauled forward, crushed against Hakoda’s chest. The man hugged him fiercely, saying hoarsely, “*Zuko.*”

He remained frozen, mind momentarily blank. Then some feeling came back to his limbs and he gingerly return the embrace, his throat tight.

Hakoda's whisper was for only him to hear; "Listen to me very carefully. Do not breathe a word of who you are to anyone here. Not all of these men are to be trusted." He drew away, holding Zuko at arm's length. "I hold no ill will towards you, alright?" Floundering, Zuko recalled their last conversation in a rush but couldn't find any words. Hakoda peered at him as though sensing he might run, the grip on his shoulders firm as if through sheer force of will he might keep Zuko in place. "Whatever happens, I'm with you. I swear it."

"What are you—"

"Not right now," he murmured, turning back to the others, keeping one arm around Zuko's shoulders. "Come on, I'm sure you're all exhausted. The Order should have some spare tents." He clasped his forearms with Bato, nodding. Something unspoken passed between them. Bato abruptly turned on his heel, pushing through the crowd of haggard onlookers that had gathered, clearing their way to the heart of the camp. "It's alright," he ushered with his free hand to the bewildered children, keeping them ahead of him as they begrudgingly followed Bato. "Everything is alright."

Zuko heavily suspected it *wasn't*.

"Dad, who are these people?" Katara asked, hand still on her waterskin. Zuko internally echoed the question, though he didn't trust his voice.

"Not right now, dear," he said, giving hard glares to the men they passed. Quite the crowd had gathered. No one tried to intervene but the weight of their gazes felt as though Guohua had went through with his intention to crush them. The more Zuko looked at their passing faces, the more he was reminded of the people he'd met in the Earth Kingdom so long ago. They had the same unabashed, hungry stares, their eyes devoid of sympathy, their suspicion plain. Many of them had awful, visible wounds, others' eyes sunken and cheeks hollowed from starvation. These people had seen horrors, Zuko was certain, and it'd left them hardened. Cold. Whether soldiers, laborers, or civilians, it made no difference. War had brutalized them all.

Bato and Hakoda led them through the camp in tense silence, following yet another well-worn dirt path between the maze of tents. More men emerged as they passed, notably few women amongst them. Zuko felt his anxiety climbing the further they walked, thinking of the Boiling Rock, thinking of what these people would do if they figured out who he was. Maybe Guohua really would crush him. It probably wouldn't take much to incite their wrath. He'd already harmed one of them. What more excuse did they need? What held them back?

Bato finally stopped in front of a rather large, unassuming tent, its canvas walls plain and entirely unremarkable. Only a lantern out front displaced it from the others, a simple oil lamp that held no flame. Bato entered without a word but Hakoda blocked their way before any of the children could follow. "Hold on. When he comes back, Zuko and I will go in. The rest of you will stay out here with Bato." That, of course, didn't go over well.

Protests immediately erupted and Hakoda pinched the bridge of his nose like he was trying to fend off a headache. He held up a hand and their voices died. Before he could say anything, Zuko demanded, “Why me?”

“Yeah, no,” Sokka added, hands on his hips, stepping up beside Zuko. “Sorry Dad, but we’re sticking together. All of us.”

Hakoda glanced between them, the circles under his eyes dark as bruises. “I understand the concern, I do. But trust me, everything will be fine.”

“No,” Aang cut in, gaze hard. “If anyone is going to be separated, it should be me. I’ll do the talking.”

Hakoda patted the boy on the shoulder. “You’ll have your time, young avatar, I promise.”

Bato chose that moment to reemerge, ducking through the tent with an older man a step behind him. Sokka’s mouth dropped open again. “*Master Pakku?*”

“Hello, Sokka,” the old man greeted him. His shoulder-length white hair was braided away from his face, his eyes two flinty chips of ice. He wore long blue robes with pale lotus designs embroidered subtly into the fabric. Zuko’s mind went to the tile they’d found on Ember Island, the connection sliding into place. “Katara, Aang, it’s good to see you all.”

“What are *you* doing here?” A confused smile erupted across Katara’s face. “What happened to finding Gran Gran?”

“All in good time, Katara,” Bato interrupted, cutting his gaze to Hakoda. He dipped his head pointedly at the other man. “He’ll see you. Better now, with tensions as they are, rather than later. Everyone else—” He held his arms out to the kids, starting to usher them in the opposite direction. “Let’s see about getting you something to eat.”

Arguments arose but between Pakku and Bato, the other kids were quickly herded away.

Sokka was the only one who lingered, glancing uncertainly toward the others before looking to Zuko. His chest warmed. “I’ll be okay.”

Sokka stared at him a moment longer, fear plain in his eyes before he rounded on his dad. “I don’t like this.”

“Don’t worry, son. It’ll be alright. I promise.”

Not looking convinced, Sokka trailed after the others, glancing over his shoulder as he went.

Zuko tore his gaze away. “Hakoda, what’s going on?”

“Before you say anything Zuko, I want you to know I would never place you in harm’s way. You must understand that. The men here—If they knew who you are, it would go poorly. They’re already hungry for blood. You need protection. You need to be inconspicuous.”

“Okay?”

Hakoda ran a hand through his hair, taking a deep breath. He looked—He looked nervous. Zuko's anxiety suddenly spiked higher, the constricting, hard-to-breathe feeling returning in his chest. "Who's in there? Why do they want to meet me alone?"

Hakoda's gaze was pained. "You need to see for yourself. I'll be with you the whole time. If you wish." He clapped Zuko on the shoulder then went marching towards the tent, holding it open for him.

Zuko stared at him for a moment, torn. Finally, he inhaled deeply before stepping inside. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust. The tent was deceptively larger on the inside, with simple canvas floors—it was painfully clear it was meant for planning. It reminded him of his father's war room. Tables filled the tent, their surfaces covered with candles, scraps of parchments, and maps. A particularly large one held a map of the entire Earth Kingdom, dotted with figurines and flagged markers, chairs crowded around all four sides. Near the back of the tent, another table rested, this one low to the ground with thin cushions spread around it. A man sat alone at this table, the shape of him vaguely familiar, the floral scent of his still-steaming tea strong in the air.

He lifted his head and it took a few moments for the earth to fall out from under Zuko's feet.

It'd been so long, he didn't immediately register who it was in front of him. But no, he looked the same as the last day Zuko'd seen him—he looked entirely different. Just another face he'd nearly forgotten. There was more gray, a longer beard, more lines to bare his years. He looked surprisingly fit. Healthy. Probably the healthiest Zuko'd ever seen.

Iroh stood fluidly, no shakiness betraying his age or fragility. "Zuko. I—"

"You're not real," he whispered, unable to tear his eyes away. "You're not fucking real." He'd never left the Boiling Rock, had he? He was still there. All of this—everything since Hakoda tumbled into his cell, or Agni maybe even before then—he was delirious, trapped below the volcano in solitary, far from Agni's warmth, his poisoned mind playing tricks on him again. Yes, they must've taken him there after the riot. He'd imagined it all; their escape, fighting Azula, meeting Suki, Katara, Toph, Aang, *Sokka*—

"I assure you this is real, nephew," Iroh said, voice just as gravelly and warm as he remembered. The man smiled and gestured to the cushions. "Please, sit. Have some tea. Is jasmine still your favorite?"

"Tea? Just what do you... Do you think I've been drinking tea since you sent me away? *Uncle?*"

Iroh's face shuttered, hurt flashing in his eyes. "No. I suppose you probably haven't. Though please, nephew, sit and we can—"

*"Stop calling me that!"*

"Alright," Iroh exhaled, slowly sitting back down. He gestured again to the cushions across from him. "Sit. We have much to discuss. Hakoda can stay too if he wishes."

Zuko looked to Hakoda, who held his gaze, a question there. The man appeared to be trying very hard to keep his expression neutral though he was failing. Displeasure colored his face, mirroring the rage howling in Zuko's chest.

Zuko turned back to Iroh, storming across the tent to throw himself down on the pillows. If this *wasn't* real, his mind was playing one hell of a fucking trick on him. "He stays. But not for me."

"Of course." Iroh dipped his head to Hakoda then went about pouring two cups of fresh tea. The water tribesman remained close to the exit, arms crossed tightly over his chest. Zuko didn't move. He had no intention whatsoever of touching anything Iroh had to offer. When he'd finished, Iroh clasped his hands in his lap, something like awe on his face. "You've become a man, Zuko. How you've grown."

"What am I supposed to say to that?"

Iroh sighed sadly, looking him over intensely as though he couldn't get his fill. "Oh, my boy, I'm so sorry. It's not what you should say. *I* owe you an explanation. More than that, I owe you an apology a hundred times over."

"That won't change what you did."

"No." His voice turned thick and Zuko felt a pang of disgust. What did Iroh have to be so upset about? He'd made his choice. "No it won't, nor can I change anything that came after. I will spend the rest of my life regretting my decisions. I am so, so incredibly sorry."

"Why did you do it?"

Iroh briefly closed his eyes, breath shuddering in his chest. He regained a bit of his composure, though his voice was still thick; "That requires me to go back some so please—bear with me." He stared at Zuko expectantly, who remained mute. Tears welled in the old man's eyes before he blinked them away, shaking himself. "I first began to question my loyalty to our country during my siege against Ba Sing Se. You may not have known this, perhaps you were simply too young at the time, but when your cousin was captured by Earth Kingdom forces, I begged Firelord Azulon for reinforcements. A bargaining chip. Anything the Earth Kingdom might consider a fair trade. He never once gave a response, even as our enemy kept sending...pieces of my son to taunt me. That was my first inkling of what failure meant in our family.

"I wasn't in my right mind for a very long time after Lu Ten's death. Ozai took the throne and I was lost in my grief. I was nearly consumed by our family's war, by what my own father had demanded then denied. It wasn't long after I returned from the war front that I met a member of the White Lotus who showed me the path to inner balance. I realized I could help make a difference in creating peace for the world. I worked long and hard to nurture the Order in the Capital City, for what better place is there to spark rebellion than within the enemy's heart?

"When your banishment was proclaimed after your Agni Kai, a crossroad appeared; continue my work and ensure the White Lotus established a foothold in the Caldera or journey with

you in your punishment. I was a coward—I told myself the Earth Kingdom has always been more lenient towards travelers on their own. So before your father could decide on where to exile you, I paid for a ship. I thought you would be safest there, even if you were alone.”

Zuko dug his fingers into his knees, old wounds itching as the skin pulled. “So you chose this—this White Lotus Order over me? Your own blood?”

Tears slipped down Iroh’s weathered cheeks. “I thought I was working towards a better world, that I could somehow repent for the war I helped perpetrate for so many years. Ultimately, my attempts in the Caldera failed—I came to realize how vastly, truly wrong I was. I never, never should have let you go out into the world alone. I am so incredibly sorry, nephew.”

“*Don’t* call me that,” Zuko snarled hotly, blood thrumming in his veins, “You’re not my family, not in any way that matters. Do you even know what you’re apologizing for? Do you?” Iroh started to speak but Zuko cut him off; “I went into that war room trusting you and when I defended our troops, you said *nothing!* Then during my Agni Kai, again, you did nothing. Father taught me a lesson and you just watched. Then you send me across the world and what, hoped that everything would turn out okay? That I’d be drinking tea?” He scoffed, disgusted. “I can’t tell you how many times I thought about killing myself. How close I came to actually doing it. None of what happened—” His voice broke and he cursed himself for being so weak, for the lump in his throat he couldn’t swallow. “*None* of it would have happened if it you had just—” He broke off again, the tears threatening to swallow him whole. He fought through it, forcing out, “Did you ever look for me?”

“Of course, Zuko,” Iroh exhaled, aghast. “I searched for more than a year with no luck. I left a pair of dao for you at Ember Island, hoping if you ever sought refuge there, they’d help you. In my search, I’d broken into a log tower at Whale Tail Island where I met Hakoda. We sought something different but recognized an enemy of the Fire Nation in each other. I eventually ran out of leads—I had no way of knowing whether or not you were still alive. When I got news the avatar had resurfaced, I returned to the Order to finish what I started, praying you were somewhere in the world far from the war front.”

“Well, you were right on that,” Zuko snapped, watching Iroh’s face closely, repulsed by the sorrow there. “I get it, though. You felt guilty so you tried to make things right but you couldn’t, so when Aang was discovered, you found something else to keep you busy. Something to distract yourself from having to think about what you’d done.”

“Zuko—”

“Do you want to know where I was? Did Hakoda tell you?” He didn’t wait for a response, only barreled onwards, chest torn open, heart bleeding and raw on the table between them. “Azula chased me into the desert. *She* sent me to the Boiling Rock because Ozai wanted me *dead*. I was there for—fuck, I don’t even know how long! The other prisoners, the guards, the Warden—” He stopped himself, a confession to every haunted night, every beating, the Warden’s gloating, taking the worst the guards had to offer; all of it was on the tip of his tongue, but if he gave it voice, he would never be able to pick himself up off the floor. Instead, he cried, “How could you have just sent me away with—with nothing?” Iroh closed his eyes. “*You* were the one who was supposed to care. You were the only one I had left.”



With that, he pushed away from the table, storming from the tent, unable to stand the look on the old man's face for another second. Iroh did not call for him but even if he had, Zuko wouldn't have stopped. He ran from the tent, not sure where he was going, having no sense of direction in the endless sea of canvas. Somehow, he ended up at the edge of the forest, the camp at his back, the lush green grass giving way to pine needles beneath his boots. He collapsed against a tree with a ragged sob, clutching at the bark, tearing his fingers raw as he tried to hold himself upright.

Maybe Iroh was telling the truth, maybe he had truly looked for him when he'd come to his senses, maybe he did feel sorry for what he'd done—but it didn't matter, because at the end of it all, he'd made a choice, a choice Zuko'd suffered for. He'd tried so hard not to think of the man as the uncle from his childhood—to keep them separate in his mind was easier, was avoiding lifting the lid on a box he'd never be able to fully cram shut once the horrors inside were set loose—but after quite literally coming to face to face with him, he couldn't deny it any longer.

The box was open. Sinking to his knees, Zuko cried so hard his eyesight blurred, ugly gasping sobs that stole his breath and left an ache between his lungs pulled from deep in his chest. The crunch of pine needles came from behind him; "Zuko..."

"Leave me alone," he choked out. *"Please."*

"Is that really what you want?"

Zuko couldn't speak. He shook his head, hunching in on himself till his forehead nearly touched the ground. Hakoda's warm hand touched on his shoulder, stroking soothingly down his back as the man kept up a litany of, "It's alright. You're alright."

He didn't feel alright. He felt like shit.

At least Iroh hadn't followed him. A small mercy, given everything else.

Eventually, the gaping hole in his chest that'd torn open at some point in his conversation with Iroh abated. When he'd cried every tear he had, he wiped at his face with a grass-stained hand, feeling wrecked. At some point, Hakoda settled down next to him, never once lifting his hand from Zuko's shoulder. Embarrassed, he shifted around to sit next to the older man, hating that he'd made such a mess of himself.

He stared unseeingly at the sea of tents, his pulse slowing, the tears drying. Hakoda sat with him all the while.

"Should I forgive him?"

"I have my opinion."

*"Should I forgive him?"*

"That's up to you."

He wiped at his face again. "I don't want to."

“Forgiveness is a choice— *your* choice. Not an obligation.” Hakoda stared at his shoes—boots that matched Zuko’s. “In the years after I lost Kya, every time I pictured the enemy, it was a face accompanied by flames and ash, one only capable of destruction.” Zuko pressed his palms against his eyes, startling when Hakoda knocked his shoulder to his own. The man had a half-smile on his face, mischievous and warm. “Now I find myself in the company of not only one but *two* former heir-apparents to the Fire Nation throne. Forgiveness is never a decision to be made lightly but I’ve found it heals more than it harms.”

Zuko let out a long breath. “He sent me away. *Alone*. To just...find my way in the Earth Kingdom. My father might want me dead but Iroh practically signed my death sentence.”

“You’re still here, son,” Hakoda said insistently, so genuine it caused tears to sting his eyes again. “You’re *alive*. You kept fighting. Despite your family, despite it all. You’re here.”

Zuko inhaled sharply, held it until he was sure he wasn’t going to cry.

Hakoda gingerly lifted an arm and wrapped it around Zuko’s shoulders, pulling him against his side. He allowed it. After a beat, he summoned his courage. “Why didn’t you tell me you knew him?”

The older man exhaled carefully. “Even though I earned enough of his trust for him to share his doings with the Order, he didn’t give me his true name when we first met. He was going by Hong Mushi at the time. It wasn’t until after the air temple when I was trying to find him again that I came to know who he really is.”

He said nothing, staring out through the pines. *Figures*. “What did... Did you tell him anything?”

“About the Boiling Rock? Only that we were cellmates and of our escape. I felt any details would be yours to share. I did mention our encounter with Azula.” He shook his head, almost to himself. “I wish I’d known what he’d done.”

Zuko nodded numbly, not even sure how he felt about Iroh having that information. Everything since they’d landed Appa had been a frightening blur—he didn’t really have it in him to try and analyze that particular vein of thought any further.

“Was it truly your father who...” Hakoda glanced at Zuko’s scar. He nodded. Though a muscle in his jaw jumped, Hakoda didn’t say a word, only squeezed him tighter.

They sat beneath the pines for a long time, watching people mill about the camp and the clouds trek their way across the sky. Inexplicably, Zuko said, “Thank you.” Two words were hardly sufficient to express everything he felt but the older man seemed to get the message.

Hakoda smiled, eyes crinkling. “Besides it being a boiling shit hole, I’m glad prison brought us together, Zuko.”

Zuko laughed raggedly. “Yeah. Me too.”



When they finally returned to the camp, Zuko bypassed Iroh's tent.

Hakoda didn't question this, only led the way to another tent, this one quite a bit larger than the rest. It was taller than the surrounding tents too, circular in shape, and inside, a long, low brazier's glowing coals did little to warm the space, though it wasn't needed. Lanterns hung throughout the interior, providing a warm yellow glow. Seated on either side of the brazier, Aang and the others had been provided plates and drinking goblets, though their food appeared mainly untouched. The air smelled heavily of cooked meat, and Zuko's stomach grumbled.

Toph noticed him first—her head whipped up a beat after he stepped inside. “You alright, Sparky?”

“Yeah,” he said haltingly, forcing his attention to her. The others were watching him closely too, concern etched onto their faces. Looking at all of them, he was hit with an intense, almost overwhelming feeling of gratitude, a feeling of belonging he'd missed dearly. After seeing Iroh, it was a relief to be back around people he knew he could trust. He sat between Suki and the small earthbender at her encouraging gesture, then balked when he saw who was sitting directly across from him. “*Piandao?*”

He'd been too busy ogling the tent that he hadn't even noticed the dark-haired swordmaster. Even though it'd been several years, Piandao's smile was warm as ever. “Hello, Zuko. How wonderful it is to see you again.”

Across the fire, Sokka raised a curious eyebrow. “You two know each other?”

Zuko nodded, feeling slightly stunned. “Yeah, he was my swordmaster for a few months when I was younger. Back when I was first learning to use my dao.” He made the flame sigil with his hands, dipping his head in respect. “Not that I'm not happy to see you but...what are you doing here?”

“I was just explaining to everyone, I met your Uncle some years ago in the Fire Nation not long after the Siege of Ba Sing Se. I was a member of the Order at that point and recognized a kindred spirit. He became one of our most valuable members.” Piandao gestured to Pakku. “A few months ago, not long after I met the rest of you, a message was sent from our Grand Lotus, one that called us for a higher purpose. Our Order was to convene and do our part to end this war, for good. That message came from your Uncle, Zuko.”

Zuko stiffened, staring into the fire. “Can somebody explain this Order everyone keeps mentioning?”

“The Order of the White Lotus,” Pakku said proudly, straightening. “Piandao, Iroh, myself; we're all part of the same ancient secret society, a group that transcends the divisions of the four nations.”

Sokka's head whipped around. “Wait, so—Does that mean your uncle is here? Is that who you were talking to?”

He nodded, painfully aware of the eyes of his friends on him. Sokka opened his mouth but his father smoothly intervened; "Iroh is a busy man. We'll have much to discuss with him later. For now, it is a blessing to be back amongst friends." He settled next to Bato, who clapped a hand on his knee, offering him a goblet. "To the end of this war."

They echoed his sentiments, raising their glasses. Zuko did not join them.

"Dad, what happened after the air temple? Where's the Duke? Haru, Teo?" Katara asked, picking at her food. "Are they..."

"They're fine, my love," Hakoda reassured her. "Haru dug far enough into the cliffs that we were safe from Azula's bombings but without Appa, we had to find our own way back to civilization. It took us a few days but we eventually ran across a settlement in the western Earth Kingdom. The innkeeper there was a friend of the Order, thank the spirits, and let us stay once I told him of my alliance with the Grand Lotus. He informed us of the Order's latest movements; that there were contingents of their members all across the country liberating fighters for their cause.

"From there we were directed to the nearest White Lotus camp, where Bumi of Omashu was soon to lead a raid of this very nature. Haru, Teo, and the Duke wanted to stay to help Bumi and the others, to continue liberating these work camps in hopes of finding their loved ones. I carried on following Bumi's directions until I found this encampment." He shook his head. "I had to make due on getting you all a message, but knowing I had the chance to find Iroh... I held off on sending anything until I laid my own eyes on him."

"You could've given a little more detail in your message, Dad," Sokka said irritably and something inside Zuko tensed. He glanced at Hakoda, watching him carefully. "It was kinda sparse."

"Yeah we literally came here on a hunch," Katara added, shooting her father a sideways glance. "Sokka was the one who was convinced Bato had mentioned Suying."

Hakoda at least looked slightly embarrassed.

"Your father's never been the best at mincing his words. I *told* him that message needed work," Bato grinned, leaning his shoulder into the other man's. Hakoda smiled fondly up at him as the children around them laughed.

"Bato, you said you were in one of these camps too right?" Toph tilted her head, attention fixed on the man. "*Was* it the Order that helped you escape?"

Bato lifted one shoulder and for the first time, Zuko noticed the scar that enveloped the majority of his right arm. The dark, raised skin reminded him of his own. "A bit of the Order, of a bit of the war prisoners they'd already freed. Truth be said, I did not learn of the Order's full orchestrations until your father arrived. Only then did I meet any of the White Lotus members."

"The White Lotus is a fairly...exclusive organization, though not by our own doing," Pakku added. "We are a society that values the arts and philosophy, looking beyond the borders of

our nations, choosing to recognize what we can offer each other as one. We realize that mindset is not for everybody. One thing we *can* do is offer people an opportunity; the opportunity to use their freedom to help us stop this war or the freedom to return to their own lives. We do not seek recognition, only justice.”

Piandao nodded. “We grow in number with every camp we set free.”

“That’s amazing,” Aang smiled. “You’re saving people.”

“We’re giving them back their right to choose,” Piandao said. “No man or woman should live to toil their life away under a country that cares nothing for them.”

“These people don’t seem... I don’t know, they seem pretty callous,” Suki said, placing her uneaten plate to the side. “They didn’t ask any questions before they ambushed us. That Guohua acted like he would’ve been fine killing us all.”

“A lot of these people have had their families and their lives stolen from them,” Pakku said carefully. “They’re angry. Guohua was a captain in the Earth King’s palace guard. When the Fire Nation princess led her coup, many of the King’s loyalists were slaughtered by the Dai Li. The benders were targeted first due to the danger they posed. Guohua was one of the few who escaped.”

“That doesn’t give him the right to threaten a bunch of kids,” Toph scowled. “Not that we couldn’t have handled him.”

“You’re right, it’s no excuse,” Piandao agreed. “Not all men remember honor or decency in the aftermath of tragedy. We have a common goal. That is all that ties us together. To many of these warriors.”

“Are they all war prisoners?” Suki asked, looking concerned.

Pakku shook his head. Zuko noted the uncomfortable glance between Hakoda and Bato. “No. In fact, we have quite a few volunteers. Some found us on their own, others are...true prisoners who either escaped on their own or were freed by other rebels. Some are sellswords, men who will fight under any banner for the right price. It’s a mixed bag, what we have here. But we all have the same enemy.”

“They’re here to help,” Aang said resolutely. “That’s what matters.”

Toph tilted her head. “I don’t know, Twinkle Toes—I think I’d like to know if the guy fighting next to me is gonna stab me in the back for some extra coin or just some unlucky schmuck who got roped into mining coal for the rest of his life.”

“As long as they’re with us against the Fire Nation, I don’t really care why they’re here,” Sokka shrugged. “We can’t exactly be picky right now.”

“These men are hungry,” Bato said gravely. “They want to see the Fire Lord destroyed for what he’s done to them, to their country. They’re not alone in that feeling.”

Zuko and Hakoda's eyes met. Hakoda held his gaze for a beat then it slid away. "It's best not to mingle too much. They might be here to fight with us but we don't truly know them. We can't know their intentions outside of that."

Piandao sighed. "Be wary, children, I'll agree with Hakoda on that, but do not close yourself off to new connections. These people *are* here to fight with us. Until they give us a reason not to, we can call them our allies."

"And they're all just *so* happy to follow Iroh?" Zuko demanded, glancing between the two Order members. "Of all people?"

Piandao's expression went carefully neutral. Zuko noted how Pakku's shoulders tensed, his frown deepening. Seems he'd touched a nerve. "They know the Order is on their side. The knowledge that they are being led by the Dragon of the West would turn them from us."

Toph laughed. "So you're lying to them, *great*."

"Not lying," Pakku cut in swiftly, an air of belligerence to his words. "We are honest in our mission to end this war and free those wrongfully imprisoned. Iroh might be a changed man but many here would not take such knowledge to heart. It is for the best that the orders come from Piandao and myself, for now."

"Then you're his puppets," Zuko surmised, anger swift to rear its ugly head. "He hasn't changed. He'll never change. You're both blind if you don't see that."

The tent fell silent.

"We often choose to see in someone else whatever we wish to see, whatever suits us best," Pakku said, staring him down. "We are all blind in some fashion or another."

"Maybe," Zuko met his stare head-on. "But you can't trust *him*."

Pakku opened his mouth, his glare fierce, but Piandao stood, clearing his throat. "We'll let you all get reacquainted. Someone will show you to your tents this evening. Feel free to make use of our camp. You are not prisoners—we are happy to have you here." He swiftly departed the tent, Pakku just behind him, though he looked less than pleased as he ducked back outside.

"Excuse us for a moment, kids," Hakoda said as soon as they were alone, rising to his feet, a hand on Bato's shoulder. They crossed to the far side of the tent, their heads bent close in conversation. Zuko paused, watching them for a moment, mind churning.

Aang's whisper drew his attention back to the others. "What do we think? Should we stay?"

"I mean... I don't see why not." Katara said softly, worrying a long strand of hair. "Maybe some of the people here aren't exactly trustworthy but we've at least got Dad and Bato. Plus the Order. We should be safe with them."

"I don't know about that," Sokka made a *hold-up* gesture. "The Order isn't even being honest with these people about who's really in charge. Who knows what else they're hiding."

“Pakku and Piandao wouldn’t betray us,” Aang said. “And I like to think Iroh wouldn’t either. He’s helped us out a few times before. Why would he betray us now? Besides, I’m the avatar—between that and all of us, we can take whatever they throw at us.”

“Twinkle Toes, they didn’t give a monkey-rat’s ass that you’re the avatar,” Toph said. “Who’s to say they won’t attack us in our sleep? We’ve got our own mission to worry about. We should restock, rest up for the night, then carry on with what we’ve gotta do.”

“The comet is less than a week away,” Suki considered. “We need to find out where Ozai is going to be and make sure we’re there in time. Maybe the Order will know.”

“Oh yeah I’m sure they’ve got a direct inside source to the Fire Lord’s every move,” Toph rolled her eyes. “Bet he can’t take a royal shit without them knowing.”

Suki crossed her arms, annoyed. “If the Fire Lord is going to utilize the full force of the comet, is he really going to do that from his backyard? No, he’s not. It’s worth looking into.”

“Why aren’t you saying anything?” Katara asked. Everyone looked at Zuko.

He scowled. “It’s nothing.”

“Is it your uncle?” Sokka asked carefully, gaze soft.

“No,” he said sharply, then regretted it instantly. “Sorry. I just don’t know how to feel about him being in charge here.”

“Iroh’s always been kind to us when we’ve run into him,” Aang said, stroking his fingers down Momo’s back. “He really did save us at Agna Qel’a, then again in Ba Sing Se. I think —”

“He sent me away,” Zuko said in a rush. “After I was banished. He sent me to the Earth Kingdom with nothing. It’s not like he *had* to come with me or anything but... maybe things would’ve gone differently if he’d been there. He chose to prioritize his work with the White Lotus instead. He just told me as much. I can’t forgive him for that.”

“Oh,” Suki exhaled, grabbing his hand. “I’m so sorry.”

He shook her off as gently as he could. “I’m not convinced he’s a changed man or whatever those two were insisting. For Agni’s sake, he was the face of this war for *decades*. He would’ve brought down Ba Sing Se a long time ago if his son hadn’t been killed.”

Katara sat back on her heels. “Did your uncle mention anything about the comet?”

Zuko glared at the coals. “It didn’t come up.”

“We should find out what they know,” Aang said. “They’ve got to be planning more than just raids on the day of the comet.” He looked to Zuko. “I’m sorry your uncle wasn’t there for you. What do you think? We can leave if you want.”

Zuko leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “A selfish part of me wants to leave. But I also think it’s worth finding out what the Order knows. Suki’s right; if my father is going to utilize the comet, which he definitely will, he won’t be doing that from the Fire Nation. Whatever plans he’s made, if it involves any kind of military force, that means months of preparation and planning, months of moving supplies and soldiers. That sort of thing would be hard to miss. Maybe they *will* know something.”

“Alright,” Sokka said, “Then Aang, next chance you get, ask to speak with Iroh. See if we can come with you. Then we’ll find out what’s going on.”

Aang nodded, gray eyes determined. “Okay.



While Piandao might’ve insisted they weren’t prisoners, it certainly didn’t feel like it. Any time one of them so much as ducked their head out of the tent, men in long robes of blue and white appeared, never approaching, never interacting, merely watching. Any attempts to engage one of them in conversation, or demand to speak with Iroh were quickly shut down. *The Grand Lotus will speak with you soon.* Zuko quietly seethed, riled at their subjugation, their permission to be seen only when it suited Iroh. The only bonus was that their weapons were returned without contest. Not long after dusk fell, a short man wearing long robes of blue and white ducked through the entrance of their tent, the lotus emblems embroidered into his robes winking in the firelight. He cleared his throat, dipping his head in greeting. “I’ll show you to where you’ll be sleeping.”

They followed, Bato and Hakoda on their heels. It still felt strange, taking the winding paths through the maze of tents, relying on some stranger to show them the way. If Zuko had to find his way anywhere or retrace his path, he would’ve been completely lost. The fact they had yet to go anywhere without an escort did not escape him. Maybe the extra security was only for their protection but it didn’t make much of a difference to him. He didn’t like it.

The man stopped them in a rather secluded area not far from the treeline. There were three tents set up, all of them the same pale canvas as the others. In front, a brazier was already lit, fresh logs barely starting to catch a flame. A rough semi-circle of stumps surrounded the pit. The man gestured in front of him. “Some of our men did not come back from the latest raid. Their belongings have been removed so you do not need to worry about that. Make yourselves at home.”

“Geez,” Toph muttered as soon as the Order member had left. “Here’s where some dead guys used to sleep, sweet dreams!”

“Boys in one tent, girls in the other,” Hakoda said. When grumbles arose, he fixed them all with a stern look, one that shut them all up. Zuko felt the urge to point out that they’d been sleeping in one room for the past several days, and the others long before that, but one glance at Hakoda told him it would be a losing argument.

The girls disappeared into the tent closest to the fire, so Zuko begrudgingly trudged behind Aang and Sokka to inspect the other tent. Inside was sparse—three bedrolls had been placed



by the entrance and other than the support pole that propped up the middle, that was about it on the inside.

“Cozy,” Sokka commented sarcastically, glancing around at their new quarters.

Aang grabbed one of the bedrolls and unfurled it eagerly. “*Look*— it’s got a little pillow sewn in!”

Sokka immediately became intrigued. “Ooh, that’s actually—”

“Agni,” Zuko muttered, turning on his heel and leaving as quickly as he could. Outside, he found Bato and Hakoda by the fire.

As he approached, he caught the tail end of Bato saying, “—wake me in a few hours, alright? I mean it, Hakoda.” The tall man waited for Hakoda’s nod before he stood, dipping his head to Zuko as he passed and slipped inside the third tent.

Zuko sat himself across the fire, asking carefully, “Everything okay?”

Hakoda had started weaving something out of long blades of grass, his nimble fingers moving with skilled expertise. He shook his head without looking up. “It’s not for you to worry about.”

“If you’re sitting watch, then yeah, it kind of is. *You’re* worried,” Zuko pointed out. Hakoda’s weaving paused, then resumed again. “About what though?”

“I don’t trust these people,” Hakoda admitted softly, his gaze flicking briefly to the tent Katara, Suki, and Toph had claimed. “It’s better to err on the side of caution. The sooner we can leave, the better.”

Sick understanding dawned on him, and he felt foolish for not having that same foresight. “Where are the rest of your men? The ones who escaped with Bato?”

“A few are in the med tent,” Hakoda said gravely. “Only a handful were sent to the same labor camp as him, and even less made it out alive. The rest are...hopefully still out there. Somewhere.”

It must have weighed on him, knowing the men he’d led for years were out there in the world, either suffering or dead, far from their homes.

“When this is over, we’ll find them,” Zuko said. He wasn’t sure why he said it—there would no doubt be more pressing matters if they somehow managed to overthrow the Fire Lord. Someone would have to take the throne, after all, and a horrible feeling in his chest told him exactly who it would be. “I’ll make sure of it.”

Hakoda glanced up at him, something bemused on his face. “That’s very kind of you. Been thinking about the aftermath, then?”

Zuko nodded. “Yeah. My dad can’t be allowed to stay in power. Azula...” He trailed off. His little sister. What would he do with her? Would the rest of the world’s leaders even allow her

to live, after everything she'd done? After all she'd helped their father accomplish? He would make certain no one harmed her. "Azula is no better than him. It has to be me."

"Are you ready for that?"

"No. Not at all." He picked at his callouses again, needing an excuse to keep his gaze averted.

Hakoda continued working on his weaving. "You're far too young for that. You have a life to live, a life that's been stolen from you. Being the Fire Lord is not a light mantle to carry, not for anyone."

He smirked. "I guess we'll worry about that when we get there."

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Sleeping in the tents the Order provided was cramped, to say the least. Sokka and Zuko slept parallel, pressed against opposing walls which was about as far as the tent would allow, Aang's feet between their shoulders, his head by the tent entrance. Zuko pointedly kept his back to the other two boys, glaring a hole through the canvas wall only a few inches from his face as the avatar tossed and turned behind him throughout the night.

In the morning, he felt rather than saw Agni's approaching presence. He humored the idea of letting Aang sleep, then decided against it. Time was running out. With a groan, he sat upright, jostling the boy.

"Come on," he said. Aang blinked groggily, Momo curled against his chest. Even the lemur lifted his head, eyes squinted in disdain at being woken up. "Let's go."

Aang opened his mouth as if he felt like arguing, then after a moment, evidently thought better of it. He nodded, following Zuko from the tent slowly, Momo slinking back into his sleeping bag. Sokka kept on snoring.

Outside, Bato sat alone facing the remains of their fire, dark circles under his eyes. "Morning."

Aang tilted his head in confusion at the sight of him but only muttered a half-hearted greeting as they passed.

They found Appa, climbing atop the yawning sky bison who seemed just as annoyed as Momo to have had his sleep disturbed. But he dutifully rose into the still-dark sky at Zuko's command, lowing softly.

"Where are we going?" Aang asked, leaning on one hand as he stared over the side of the saddle.

"Away," Zuko answered shortly. "The warriors here don't need to know what we're doing."

"Okay," the avatar said softly, reaching one hand down to stroke Appa's shoulder. "If you say so."

Zuko only directed Appa towards the ground when he felt they'd flown a sufficient distance from the camp, a distance no one would be keen taking on foot. The pines rose up around them, the clearing he'd spotted from above surrounded by boulders covered in lichen and moss, as if a landslide had displaced them some time ago. Appa curled up under the trees as soon as Aang and Zuko leaped from his saddle, the undersides of the massive pines just barely high enough to scrape his back. He didn't seem to mind.

Zuko ditched his haori, not wanting it to get filthy. Aang eyed him, asking carefully, "You alright?"

He didn't answer.

By midmorning, both were drenched in sweat, the trunks of the surrounding trees blackened and the pine needles under their feet scorched away into ash. Even the boulders' faces had turned black, the moss and lichen burned away into nothing. Appa had given up on them with the very first blasts, lowing in annoyance and taking off to find somewhere safer to nap. As the morning passed, Zuko felt a budding sense of pride in their progress. He could almost forget what awaited them at camp.

They trained for the better part of the morning, until they were both shaking from exertion and their hunger had grown enough it was no longer easy to ignore. Aang used his whistle to call Appa back, and as they waited, the avatar said, "You know, if something's bothering you, you can tell me. I won't judge, whatever it is."

Zuko knew that was true. Aang was probably the only person in the world who never judge. Well, maybe not the only person. He twisted his haori in his hands. "My uncle. I just...I wasn't expecting to see him yesterday. It threw me off. But I'll get over it."

"I'll try and speak with him today," Aang said, the bison finally swooping down into the now-ruined clearing. Debris billowed up around them, clinging to their sweaty skin, as Appa landed. "If you want to join me, you can. Might be easier together."

Zuko rubbed ash from his eyes, his fingers coming away black. "Maybe. But first we need to clean up."

They didn't travel too far on Appa, just clearing the trees until they found the river again. Whatever miracles Katara's healing abilities had done on their wounds from the day prior felt obsolete after their morning, and the cool rushing water was a welcome relief. Zuko could've stayed in up to his neck all day long if his stomach hadn't been growling. They carried on, the camp coming back into view all too quickly.

Back at the base camp, they found the others scattered around the remains of their fire. Well, everyone plus two men in white and blue. Zuko balked when he realized Iroh was with them.

Aang dipped his head in respect to the older man, grinning. "It's good to see you again."

Iroh smiled brightly. "Your timing is perfect, young avatar! Please, sit. I'm sorry I could not see you yesterday. There is much to discuss."

Aang plopped down beside Katara and Piandao without complaint but Zuko found himself hesitating. He circled the brazier slowly, unable to tear his gaze away. It was so strange to be standing in such proximity to this man, when he'd missed him for so long. After a beat, he sat between Hakoda and Toph, fingers digging into his knees. He felt eyes on him; he thought it might've been Sokka trying to catch his gaze, but he didn't dare look over at him. He stared only at Iroh. "You wanted to speak with us?"

"Yes, I wanted to apologize for how poorly things went yesterday," Iroh said, and now that Zuko wasn't blinded by shock and grief, he was able to appreciate the physical transformation Iroh had undertaken. He was a small man but he'd clearly committed to some sort of regimen that had made him shed all softness. "I didn't want to leave things how they were. You deserve the truth. And, young avatar, I'm sure you have plenty of questions of your own. Anything any of you wish to ask, I will answer to the best of my knowledge."

Zuko lifted an eyebrow dubiously. "Yeah?"

Iroh nodded. "Yes."

"Okay," Zuko thought about it. The gazes of his friends flicked to him cautiously, like they were waiting for his reaction to take their queue. He forced himself to *think*, to be rational. He still had questions, Agni did he have questions, but he felt off-kilter, like a wagon with a misshaped wheel. He stuck with what was easy; "What's the Order's plan for the comet?"

Iroh stared at him, the question clearly not what he'd expected. He sipped at his tea, because of course he'd brought tea, a warm, earthy-smelling concoction that tickled the back of Zuko's mind, summoning memories of afternoons in the sun, time spent on Ember Island, days when the Capital had felt like home and not a prison. "We're going to reclaim Ba Sing Se. Undermining the foothold my brother has in this country is just the first step to uprooting him completely. He cannot contain the Earth Kingdom without the capital. It is too broad, too vast. That is why Ba Sing Se has always been crucial to the Fire Nation's progress. Without it, he'll be no closer to winning this war than he was a year ago."

"Are you going to be moving on the Fire Nation Capital at all?" Aang asked.

"No, it is much too great of a distance for us to reasonably travel before the comet arrives. It is better to expend our strength where it will make the most meaningful impact."

Irritation sparked in Zuko. "Why are you lying to these people? Why not go out and there and let them know exactly whose in charge?"

"You know as well as I what that would lead to."

Zuko glared at him. "Why not go straight for Ozai during the comet? *You* could probably take him down."

"Fire Lord Ozai will have surrounded himself with his Imperial Guard," Iroh said evenly. "Even with the full force of the White Lotus and the power of the comet, we would be cannon fodder. Besides, if I were the one to stop Ozai, history would see it as just another

instance of brother fighting brother, a blood feud for the throne. Only the avatar, the pinnacle of peace, can restore balance.”

“And what of *his* plans for the comet? What have you heard?”

Iroh sipped his tea again. “With the return of the avatar and the unsuccessful attempt on the Caldera during the eclipse, all sources of intel within the Fire Nation have died. Information is the highest currency in war, for it weilds power far greater than any comet in the right hands. Ozai and his advisors know this. All borders are manned to the nines, any hawks or ravens are shot down, regardless of who they belong to. The skies are empty. The island nation lets nothing in or out.”

“So you know nothing,” Zuko surmised, stomach seizing with dread.

“Not quite,” Piandao interjected, “While the Fire Nation itself might be on a complete lockdown, it is harder for their forces to hide what they’re doing here in the Earth Kingdom. For months, our spies across the country have been reporting the movement of massive numbers of Fire Nation military, emissaries, even citizens from the colonies heading west to the coast. There, they have been loading onto ships traveling across the ocean back to their homeland. They’re fleeing and in droves. It is no doubt in preparation for what’s to come on the day of the comet.”

“If they’re evacuating their troops, what could they possibly have planned for the comet? There would be no one here...” Katara’s voice trailed off, confusion heavy on all of them.

“We don’t know,” Iroh said. “But whatever it is, it won’t be good. That’s why it is imperative we reclaim Ba Sing Se. With the Impenetrable City, we have a fighting chance of holding the Earth Kingdom.”

Toph tilted her head. “How exactly do you plan on doing that?”

“Our Order has benders from every nation, even nonbenders. With the warriors we’ve recruited to our aide, seizing the city should be of no concern. Not an easy task, but not impossible. Most of our allies will be fighting in the name of taking back their homes and livelihoods—they will be all the more ruthless.”

Zuko toyed with the hem of his haori as the old man sipped his tea. “Everyone—” He gestured around their circle, “—expects you to be honest.” He fixed Iroh in place with a cold glare. “Are you being honest right now?”

Again, the thinly-veiled accusation seemed to personally offend Iroh. He had the gall to look aghast, though it was tinged with just the right amount of remorse that Zuko almost believed it. “Yes.”

“It’s funny, it’s not like you’ve ever lied to *me*, I’ll give you that. You never lied. In fact, sending me away alone confirmed exactly what I knew about you.” Iroh’s mouth dropped, clearly surprised by what Zuko said, hurt plain on his face. Once, he never would’ve spoken any of this aloud with these people present but he’d come to rely on them, to find strength in their presence. “You loved Lu Ten more than anything. His death nearly killed you. And you

were too broken to help me. But—you've always been honest, in your own way. Apparently my friends trust you. So. Why can't *I* trust you?" Iroh watched him, taking it, shame painfully evident in his golden gaze. Good. "What happened after the catacombs? No one knew whether you were alive or dead."

"I was captured by Dai Li," Iroh said carefully, voice painfully, forcefully level. "Azula was overjoyed by her accomplishment in Ba Sing Se. She had me shipped back to the Caldera, where the Fire Lord decided I'd rot in prison for the rest of my days. Death would be too easy, after all. Too much of a mercy for all of the trouble I'd caused him. But prison gave me all the time in the world to go through a metamorphosis, of sorts. I strengthened my body, meditated for weeks. When the eclipse came, I used the guards' panic over the coming siege to escape. After that, I sought out Piandao, one of the most loyal of our numbers in the Fire Nation. From there, we sent out the call for the Order to gather."

How peculiar it was, that for everything they'd done, neither of their siblings had been able to kill them. "Now you're here. Plotting against our country."

"Plotting to save our country, Zuko. There is a difference."

"Is there? After everything our family has done, how can we ever rebuild the world to what it was? There's only one person alive who knows what this world looked like before the war. We've changed the lives of entire generations. Mindsets—hearts—don't change over night."

"That's why *we* must make things right," Iroh insisted. "Only we can right the wrongs of our forefathers. Anyone else...power might consume them. We've come to know better. The same cannot be said for all of our countrymen. With the help of the avatar, we will show them a better way."

"Maybe," Zuko said. As much as the idea of being Fire Lord terrified him, he knew Iroh was right. He stared at the old man for a moment, heart constricting as he took a moment to *look* at him. The years had worn them both down. It probably showed on him too, even if he didn't know it. But Iroh — he was greyer than ever, even with as healthy as he seemed. Sorrow rushed through him at the lost years; only Agni knew how much time they really had left. Then, almost just as quickly, it turned to anger.

"Was it something I did?"

"What do you mean?"

"When I woke up on that ship, I didn't even know I'd been banished. I had to hear it from the escorts. So, your decision to send me away alone—was it something I did?"

Iroh shook his head. "No, nephew, it had nothing to do with you and everything to do with my own cowardice."

There it was again. "I told you not to call me that."

"Apologies," Iroh dipped his head. "I've dreamed of finding you again, Zuko. I understand you may not be ready for me to come back into your life, and that is fine. I will respect your

wishes. But I do have something for you.” He turned, grabbing something from a simple burlap sack at his feet. Zuko stared at the box he pulled from its depths, confused. It was nothing special, just plain, unfinished wood with a simple brass clasp on the front. Iroh lifted the lid and his confusion grew. “This belonged to your great-grandfather.”

A bronze and gold headpiece lay nestled in the confines of the box, cushioned amongst red velvet. It was similar to the ceremonial pieces worn by the Fire Nation royal family for special occasions but this—this was different. The design was notably old-fashioned, dated. It reminded him of the Royal Gallery’s many, many portraits. “Sozin?”

Iroh watched him, saying softly. “Sozin was your father’s grandfather. But your mother’s grandfather was Avatar Roku. This crown belonged to him. It’s supposed to be worn by the crown prince.”

Zuko’s gaze flicked up in alarm. “*What?*”

“It is true that Sozin is the blood-given father of your father’s father, but the same is true of Avatar Roku and your mother, the Lady Ursa. That is the very reason Azulon sought her hand in marriage for Ozai. Both Roku and Sozin, two sides of the same bloody, tumultuous coin, are forever bound in blood by you, Zuko.”

“Oh spirits, does that make us related?” Aang whispered but Zuko barrelled on, demanding, “You can keep it. Why are you telling me this? Why now? What does any of this have to do with anything?”

“You should know the truth of your ancestry, your very nature. What happened generations ago can be resolved now, but only if we do what we can to set ourselves on the right path of destiny.” He set the crown back in its box, fingers lingering on the clasp, regret thick in his voice. “This war, the state of the world as it is, it should not be your responsibility to fix, nor any of your friends. You are *all* far too young. My generation, that of your father’s, we should’ve known better. I’m so sorry I did not come to realize that sooner.”

Zuko stared at him, shocked into silence. Aang, though, seemed to regain a bit of his composure. “You’re doing your part now and that’s what matters. If I hadn’t run from my destiny a century ago, maybe none of this would be happening. But we can’t go back. All any of us can do is work towards a better tomorrow. I think it *is* fate that we’re all here together, now. Of all the choices each of us has made, all the paths taken or untaken, we’re here together.”

Hakoda nodded. “Together is how we’ll win.”

Iroh straightened, looking around at each of them, the ghost of a smile on his lips. Zuko thought of how, if he were younger, that smile would’ve meant the world to him. “How fortunate we are, to be amongst friends and family at the end of all things.” He lifted his cup in a toast, the others joining.

Part of Zuko wanted to scoff but he realized how childish that would be. He glanced up, finally meeting Sokka’s gaze. The other boy offered a crooked half-smile, his eyes uncertain,

questioning. Zuko dipped his head once and a look of relief spread over Sokka's face, his shoulders relaxing, the smile turning true.

His issues with Iroh aside, he was grateful to have these people. Whatever may come, whatever uncertainty lay ahead, he was sure of at least one thing.



That night, Zuko found himself alone in the tent with Sokka. Aang was outside, talking with Katara and Suki. Their day had been utterly uneventful, save Iroh, Piandao, and Pakku calling them all to their main planning tent around midafternoon to go over methods of attack against Ba Sing Se. Zuko had been surprised to hear how much the other kids knew about the city—it sounded like they'd spent a considerable amount of time there. Most of it had been lost on him; he'd spent the afternoon trying to avoid Iroh, talks about destiny, or anything even slightly related to his heritage. He couldn't help but think of that royal headpiece, and how Iroh continued to keep it with him. He quickly shut down those thoughts, not wanting to give reason where none was deserved.

"I didn't get to ask earlier but how are you doing?" Zuko stroked Momo's ears, avoiding looking at Sokka directly. Yesterday seemed so far away but he remembered the fear as the earth closed in around them, the feeling of Sokka's hand in his own, the only thing to keep him sane as the life was squeezed from them. "After yesterday."

Sokka shrugged, stretched out on his sleeping bag, fingers laced under his head, legs crossed at the ankle. "Well I didn't realize how much being crushed alive could hurt but luckily my sister is a miracle worker. We'd probably be bedridden if not for her."

He smiled. "Yeah. Then who'd fight the Fire Lord?"

"Definitely not your Uncle," Sokka smirked. "But like, has Ozai ever even been in a real fight? How much fieldwork is the Fire Lord actually doing? It's kind of a desk job, isn't it?"

"No, he could kick some ass if he had to," Zuko said, even though he realized he couldn't recall ever actually seeing his father in a sparring match or training, though that wasn't saying much; it wasn't like they'd ever spent much quality time together. Ozai *was* trained of course, so was every member of the Royal Family. Personal guards and Imperial Firebenders could only do so much against assassins.

Sokka grinned, propping himself up on one elbow. "What if we're doing all this prepping and planning, and Ozai can't even throw a punch?"

Zuko smiled, humoring the idea. "He's had pretty much every victory in his reign handed to him, and on top of it of all he gets taken out by a twelve-year-old vegetarian pacifist? That would just be the perfect ending to his page in the history books."

Sokka chuckled, grinning up at him, then seemed to somber.

Self-conscious, he asked, "What?"



When Sokka shook his head, Zuko kicked him. “Ow! You know, I think I liked you better when you avoided all of us like we had firepox.”

Zuko took three seconds to place Momo safely out of harm's way then launched himself across the tent. They grappled, the small space not allowing much room for either party to get the upper hand. Sokka, having already been at the disadvantage, relented pretty quickly, laughing as he cried, “I was kidding!”

Zuko gave him some room to sit up but he still elbowed the other boy hard in the ribs for good measure. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing, just another member of the Royal Family pushing their—” Sokka broke off into another laugh at the mutinous look on Zuko’s face. “Kidding! Just kidding.”

“You’re doing that thing again.”

“What thing?”

“Brushing serious stuff off, turning the conversation into a joke,” Zuko said without blame, watching the way Sokka struggled to keep up a smile. “You do it when you feel cornered, or like the others might pick up on it.”

“Is that so bad?”

“It is if you’re gonna keep things to yourself.”

Sokka shifted with a sigh, long legs folded under him. Zuko waited. Finally, the other boy admitted, “I’m just... I’m worried we’re not doing enough. That even with the Order’s help, with the numbers they’ve gathered, something will go wrong. Something *always* seems to go wrong.”

“I think we’re as prepared as we can be,” he said honestly.

“That’s what we all thought on the day of the eclipse,” Sokka briefly closed his eyes. Zuko examined him, feeling slightly greedy as he did so; he’d never noticed the barely-there freckles dusting Sokka’s cheeks and nose, never appreciated the fullness of his lips. Maybe it was selfish of him, but he couldn’t help but think again of time and how quickly it moved, how easy it was to lose someone, how moments could turn to years in the blink of an eye. “And we were so, so wrong. Azula’d known about our plans for months. What opportunity we did have, I blew it for all of us. She knew right where to hit me—and I fell for it.”

That was the first time he’d heard *that* particular admission. Instead of prying, he settled on, “Azula’s good at finding people’s weaknesses.”

Sokka exhaled. “But what if we’re wrong? What if— *something* goes wrong?”

“Then we try again,” Zuko insisted, reaching out to grip Sokka’s hand. The other boy stared at him, eyes wide, far too serious and worried someone their age had any right to be. It made Zuko angry, the knowledge that whatever awaited them on the day of comet hung so heavily

on not only Sokka, but all of their friends. Iroh was right—the burden should’ve never fallen to them, his generation *should* have known better. But here they were. “That’s what we do.”

Sokka stared at him for a long moment, so long Zuko felt slightly embarrassed by the heat of his gaze, finding himself glancing down at the slightest part of his lips. Sokka seemed to catch himself. He leaned away, clearing his throat. “Well, how are *you* after yesterday? It can’t be easy, seeing your uncle again.”

Zuko released his hand, telling himself he only imagined the disappointed look in Sokka’s eyes. “Not great. If we’re being honest.”

“That was some...crazy news, about Avatar Roku,” Sokka swallowed, a flush on his cheeks. “You really didn’t know?”

“No. No, I... My mother never spoke about her family and Ozai definitely never mentioned it, which is weird because that seems like the sort of thing he’d want to brag about. Maybe he was embarrassed to be overshadowed by her ancestry or something, I don’t know.”

Sokka smiled. “Yeah, he seems like the kind of guy to get bent out of shape about that sort of thing.” He chewed his lip, asking hesitantly, “And...your uncle?”

“What about him?”

“I mean, is everything okay with you two?”

Zuko snorted. “Agni, no. But he’s made it pretty clear where his priorities lie; defeating Ozai and helping the avatar restore balance.”

“Seems like he’s trying to make amends.”

“I don’t need him to,” Zuko insisted. “I haven’t needed anyone in a long time. I can take care of myself now.”

“And you’ve done a great job,” Sokka agreed, “You have. It doesn’t have to be just you, though. Let me help. Please.”

“Why would you want to?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

Zuko opened his mouth but didn’t get to dispute that—Aang ducked through the tent, then halted dead in his tracks.

“Oh,” He glanced between them, eyes wide, clearly sensing he’d interrupted something. “Should I come back?”

Zuko returned to his side of the tent without looking at Sokka, saying, “No. We all need to get some sleep. We’ve got another early morning tomorrow, avatar.”

Aang climbed into his sleeping bag with a yawn, Momo sneaking in next to him. “Yeah, yeah Sifu Hotman. Everything okay?”

Zuko pointedly rolled over so he was facing the canvas wall. Sokka muttered something that resembled a yes but he said nothing. Aang sighed. “Whatever. Goodnight, guys.”

Silence fell over them, then after a handful of heartbeats, Aang started, “Are you two sure—”

There came the muffled smack of Sokka slapping Aang through the padded sleeping bag. “*Goodnight*, Aang.”

Zuko closed his eyes, unable to help but smile.

## Chapter End Notes

sigh, ive made my peace with the unfinished collection, its only been what two years since i started this thing? yall are honestly TROOPERS for putting up with me

## Chapter 13

Zuko crept from his sleeping bag in the silent early hours of the morning, restless. He paused at the door, gazing at Sokka's sleeping form. He eyed the other boy for a long moment, appreciating the spill of his dark hair, the softness of his face in slumber. He looked so young. No mask, no act, no plans. Just Sokka.

Shaking off those thoughts, he crept from the tent, once again finding Bato outside, a fresh log on the fire just starting to catch. Zuko bypassed him without a word, wandering along the outskirts of the encampment, following the sounds of flowing water till he came across a river-worn log the length of Appa lodged in the bank. He climbed atop it, only the moon to light his clambering, the dark wood smooth beneath his palms, almost slick, the bark long since weathered away. In the dark, with only the sounds of the river, the slumbering camp, and the forest beyond to keep him company, keeping his mind off the comet was difficult.

Today would be their last full day together.

He had not been sitting there for very long when a voice behind him stated, "Fate has quite the sense of humor."

Zuko inhaled slowly through his nose as Iroh made his way down the river bank, lantern glowing warmly. The old man wore plain green robes that were nearly black in the dark, appearing as ordinary as any traveler. Well, as ordinary as any traveler wandering the woods in the dark with a cup of tea could be. "What do you mean?"

"Ten years ago, I was on this very shore plotting a siege against the nearest Earth Kingdom installment. Now, I am here to liberate this country's capital. May I sit?"

Zuko seriously debated telling him no, or getting up and leaving. But he'd been here first, hadn't he? "Fate feels more like being poked with a stick while somebody's laughing." He sighed and did his best to make some room. "How'd you find me out here?"

Iroh settled on the log beside him, giving him ample space, careful not to spill his tea. "I'm an early riser these days. I've found morning meditation to be a very steadying start to each day. It clears the head, allows time for contemplation. Being here, in such a pristine place, is a gift. Allows the mind to broaden and unveils reflections most would not wish to sit with." He pulled one leg up over the other, adding with a wink, "Bato informed me."

Zuko tried not to roll his eyes. He was *not* going to miss the babysitting.

"Fate's humor appears double-edged." Zuko raised an eyebrow. Iroh sighed, looking him over for the millionth time. Was he even aware he was doing it? Again, remorse fell over his face, though this time, he did not look away. "Ten years ago, I was in this very valley with my son. Now, I am here with you."

"Funny," Zuko said flatly.

“Purposeful,” Iroh sipped his tea. “The man I was ten years ago is but a shadow of who I am now. I would not go back to that life for all the treasure in the world.”

“What if you could get Lu Ten back?”

Iroh seemed startled by the question. “No.” He recovered, shaking his head adamantly. “Destiny threw a stone at Ba Sing Se. The ripples of her design shape us all, for better or worse.”

“So you think Lu Ten was destined to die in Ba Sing Se?”

“I think...” Iroh paused, gathering his words. “We often need a cataclysm to shake us from the lives we lead, from the paths we sometimes heedlessly wander. Whether destiny or otherwise, his death jolted me from a stupor. It tore the wool from my eyes and allowed me to see the truth of our family’s reign.”

Zuko pondered what had placed him here, both by his hand and those of others. Wondered how the ripples of now would impact the future path of his life.

“I...I thought *you* were dead.” He admitted, surprised how saying the words aloud put a lump in his throat. A desperate, cornered feeling welled inside, looming just over his shoulder, something he realized was out of sight but never fully left him. “I was terrified that you might’ve been killed. I couldn’t stand it if you were dead too.” He risked glancing up, finding Iroh had tears in his eyes. “I’m glad you’re alive, Uncle.”

“Oh, Zuko. I’m so—”

“No more apologies,” he said abruptly before his mind caught up to his lips. “I want to move forward. With the comet coming, I don’t want there to be any regrets between us if the worst happens. Mistakes were made and while I’m not ready to forgive you right now, I don’t want to lose you either. I want us to be a family again, someday. I’m willing to try if you are.”

“Yes,” Iroh nodded. “I’d like that. I’d like that very much.”

Zuko glanced up at the coloring sky, realizing what time it was. He rose, brushing the seat of his pants as he apologized, “Sorry, I have to go. Still trying to get some firebending practice in with Aang while we can.”

“May I join you?”

He paused. “Yeah. That would be great.”

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Aang was thrilled to see him with Iroh. He was less than thrilled when he learned that, once again, they were leaving for training.

They returned to the blackened clearing, ash filling the air as Appa kicked off from the ground, not eager to stick around and see how their lessons went. They showed Iroh what they’d been working on, both more than a little nervous in the presence of a firebending

master. Zuko pushed Aang more than he had before, getting closer than perhaps was necessary with some strikes. But it was now or never.

Iroh gave tips where they were needed and had a suggestion that even Zuko did not see coming; “Excellent work, you two. Your hard work is paying off. But there is one thing you both need to know if you are going to have any chance of taking down Azula and my brother. You’ll need to know how to redirect lightning.”



Aang was unusually quiet at the river as they cleaned up. Iroh had gone ahead of them but given firm instructions to meet at his war tent. He hadn’t said why, only promised food in apologies for having them up so early.

Zuko splashed the smaller boy. “What’s wrong? And don’t say nothing.”

Aang stood up to his waist a few feet away, the river coursing swiftly around him. He cupped water in his hands, letting it trickle through his fingers. “Before Azula nearly killed me with lightning in Ba Sing Se, I had no idea it was a firebending specialty. Practicing today with your uncle, I guess it hit me that soon I’m going to be facing that again. That I might really lose my life. For good.”

“But now you know how to redirect it,” Zuko tried to reason. “You can defend yourself this time.”

“It’s still scary.”

“It is.”

Toph met them at the edge of the camp, looking like she’d happily toss a boulder at their heads if it meant crawling back into her tent. “Hasn’t your Uncle ever heard of beauty sleep?”

Zuko pitched his voice higher in confusion. “Beauty what?”

Aang slung an arm around the earthbender’s shoulders as they made their way to the main war tent, far too comfortable with sticking his hand through the bars of a hungry rhino-lion’s cage. “Gotta be a foreign concept to firebenders. Haven’t met a single one who’ll sleep in.”

“You’re full of shit, Sparky, and so is your uncle.”

He grinned. “Pot meet kettle.”

“Do you want rocks in your congee? Cuz it sounds like you want rocks in your congee.”

“Only if they’re your rocks, Toph.”

“He wants rocks in his congee, Twinkle Toes, can you believe it?”

“Nah you can’t do that, he’s got such nice teeth. Can’t have the Fire Lord looking like Bumi.”

“Who’s Bumi?”

Toph laughed. “Wouldn’t *that* be a sight—”

“Zuko, hasn’t your uncle ever heard of beauty sleep?” They halted in their tracks and Zuko grinned as Sokka, Katara, and Suki met them, looking just as rumpled as Toph. Sokka in particular, looked worse for wear. Toph jammed her elbow into Zuko’s ribs as if the question somehow ratified her point. “How are we supposed to defeat the Fire Lord if we don’t get some sleep?”

Katara yawned. “You’d sleep through the comet if you could, Sokka.”

“*Yeah*, if we didn’t have important, world-ending business to take care of!”

“Can’t we get some food before the world-ending talk?” Suki asked, rubbing her eyes.

They all agreed, shuffling along through the camp until they came to Iroh’s war tent, Toph in the lead. Even though he was still rubbing at his side, Zuko was all the more grateful for her sense of direction as they passed tent after tent after tent. Inside, the many tables had been rearranged into a large U-shape so that everyone could face one another. As promised, an array of food had been laid out. Zuko was certain the others would’ve fallen on it like rabid dogs if there hadn’t been a swarm of old men in white and blue robes filling the tent. In fact, there were more than just White Lotus members present. He bristled as he spotted Guohua and a few familiar faces from the attack in the woods.

Before he could make a fool of himself, Sokka pressed behind him, one hand around his bicep, the other pulling at his waist as he steered him towards the food table. At the sharp, questioning look Zuko cast over his shoulder, the other boy said brightly, “Breakfast first. Then you can think about if you actually want to set those pricks on fire or not.”

“And if I still want to?”

Sokka smirked. “Then I’ll make sure we’re alone.”

Zuko wrenched himself free of Sokka’s grip, grabbing at random from the table spread. Suki caught his gaze over the congee. He huffed, pushing through the crowded tent until he found Hakoda and Bato.

Hakoda smiled and opened his mouth in greeting but Zuko blurted out; “We made up. Kind of. Me and Iroh.”

Hakoda’s brows lifted towards his hairline. Beside him, Bato paused picking over his breakfast, looking equally intrigued. “Kind of?”

“It’s a start.”

“That’s great,” Hakoda sipped his tea, gaze tracking Iroh as he wove through the crowded tent, greeting his men and exchanging pleasantries. “Don’t let it be the end.”

“Why are there so many people in here?” Zuko asked irritably, jostled as somebody pushed passed him to find a seat. He didn’t like the packed atmosphere, and he liked the presence of Guohua and his men even less. If earthbender noticed him, he gave no indication, which was likely for the best. It was too small a space for much of a fight.

Bato leaned forward, face lined with exhaustion. “Master Pakku received a messenger hawk in the early hours of the morning from our scouts along the southwestern coast. He’s been tightlipped about the contents but he said it was imperative that we all be here this morning.”

Zuko was jostled yet again and turned to snap but wound up deflating quickly as Sokka dropped to the floor beside him, plate piled high. On the boy’s other side, the other children crowded along the shared table with all the tact of a couple of bullhounds in a pottery shop. There wasn’t quite enough room for them all to sit side by side so Suki and Toph ended up behind Zuko and Sokka.

Toph leaned forward and whispered, “Better keep an eye on your congee, Sparky. Would hate for you to lose a tooth.”

He winked at her before remembering. “You would do that to a blind guy?”

“You’re not blind, shithead, not really. Eat your rocks.”

Around them, the White Lotus members began to take their seats, interspaced by men in tattered remnants of Earth Kingdom military garb. Zuko tapped Toph’s ankle. “You know who should keep an eye on their congee?”

Her answering grin was sly.

Sokka looked up from his plate at that, mouth partially full. Zuko shrugged. “Technically, I’m not lightning anyone on fire.”

Sokka swallowed forcefully. “I didn’t say I disapprove.”

Katara leaned around her brother, glaring at them. Sokka immediately straightened and Zuko slid his gaze away. He heard her mutter to Toph, “There better not be any rocks, anywhere—or any lightning anyone on fire! We don’t need a fight breaking out.”

“Relax, Sugar Queen, enjoy your breakfast.”

“*Toph—*”

At the head of the U-shape, Piandao took his seat beside Pakku. Immediately, the tent went silent. “Thank you all for being here so early this morning. I will not mince words or waste your time—we have received unsettling news. Master Pakku?”

To his left, Pakku nodded. “Our scouts have intercepted a highly confidential letter meant for the Pohuai Stronghold, where the last of the Fire Nation’s forces remain. In it were instructions of changes in command, and new titles to be respected. It appears Fire Lord Ozai has taken it upon himself to renounce his ancestral throne. He has crowned himself the Phoenix King, and his dominion will span more than he is owed.”



The food on Zuko's tongue turned to ash. He forced himself to swallow, glancing at Iroh as Pakku continued; the old man's lips were pressed together in a thin line, his expression carefully neutral. "We were right to theorize the Fire Nation is planning a large-scale invasion on the day of the Comet. Now we know that invasion will be helmed by the Fire Lord—Phoenix King, if we humor him—himself. Their forces are already on their way."

Guohua set his goblet down with enough force to rattle the surrounding plates. "Then we need to reclaim Ba Sing Se *now*. Every day that we sit here, twiddling our thumbs, pouring over maps, pontificating over tea, is more time for the enemy to close ranks. The Earth Kingdom will not fall due to the idleness of old men."

More than one member of the White Lotus visibly bristled. Pakku stared down his nose at Guohua. "It could be argued that without old men, you would not even be a contender in this fight, Captain."

"Respectfully, Master Pakku, we all know what must be done if we wish to hold this country. Given what's coming, we ought to take back Ba Sing Se and reestablish our foothold there before the Fire Nation has any hopes of utilizing the comet's power against us."

"They will use the comet against us no matter what," a man with spikey brown hair piped up from his seat across from Guohua. He had narrow shoulders, a slight build, and was dressed in worn, dark leather that covered him from neck to wrist. The little bit of skin that was visible bore dozens of scars. "But I agree, better we are already within the walls when the comet arrives and are prepared for the enemy's advances. Lest we fancy ourselves rats scratching at the larder door when it is already too late."

"Rats we are not," Piandao said. "That is why we will spend the rest of today breaking camp, and leave before first light tomorrow. The avatar—" Multiple heads swivelled towards Aang, who sat up straighter, "—will meet the Fire Nation at the coast. It will be imperative to slow the Fire Lord's advance. The rest of us will march on Ba Sing Se. While swarms of Fire Nation soldiers have evacuated the Earth Kingdom, taking back the capital city will be no easy feat."

"Hold on—" Gouhua brandished a hand. "Are we seriously allowing a group of children to be the first thing our adversaries meet at the coast? We ought to divide our forces. We have men to spare."

"We can hold the coast," Aang said. "I know we may not look like much, but I swear on my duty as the avatar, we won't let you down."

Gouhua scoffed. "If the avatar title bore any merit, we wouldn't be here today. Perhaps your people would be alive rather than a myth, boy, if you had done your duty in the first place. Now, we have the men to spare, we should—"

Aang was on his feet faster than Zuko could blink, his fists clenched at his sides. "The weight of their deaths will weigh on my shoulders until I've joined them in the afterlife. While I may not have a home to return to, that doesn't mean I'll let anyone else suffer the same fate. Believe me, I know what loss is. I know the pain and anger you all feel. When I say I won't fail you again, I mean it."

Silence hung over the tent. A muscle in Guohua's jaw jumped but he said nothing else, only glared at the avatar. Zuko smirked down at his plate.

Piandao dipped his head to Aang, "Thank you, Avatar. As with all of us, we know you will do everything in your power when the time comes. As I was saying, the avatar and his friends will intercept the Fire Nation's forces along the coast. The rest of us will march on Ba Sing Se."

The conversation delved into the details of their plans, most of which Zuko chose to zone out, thoughts turning to what may await them at the coastline. How would his father choose to attack? By land? Airship? Surely he would not waste precious time having his men march across the country. By air, then. He couldn't quite puzzle out what that sort of attack would look like. Most airships were only equipped to drop bombs. Maybe that would be Ozai's method—bomb the country to ruin and save the strength of his men until they'd reached Ba Sing Se. What could they do against an onslaught of explosives?

He was broken from this disturbing train of thought by Sokka nudging him. The other boy's brows were drawn together in concern. "Where'd you go? Just now."

"Nowhere," Zuko said, forcing a smile. Sokka did not look convinced but didn't push the topic further.

After several agonizing hours later, during which Zuko and the other children were primarily ignored, Piandao dismissed them all to start breaking camp. Guohua stomped from the tent without so much as glancing their way, his men close behind. The man with the scars stopped to speak with Iroh, dark eyes flitting around the tent like he didn't trust any of them even for a moment. As soon as the pair parted, Zuko hurried to Iroh's side.

"Did you know? About the Phoenix King bullshit?"

Iroh looked mildly appalled. "Language, Zuko. But no—I knew Pakku had received an urgent letter this morning but he had not yet disclosed its contents. It's quite disturbing."

"What do you think he means to do with the Fire Nation if he's going to rule the world?"

"I think you know as well as I."

He'd been fearing it, but knowing that Iroh thought the same sent a chill down his spine. "Azula can't be the Fire Lord. She'll destroy everything and everyone."

Iroh nodded, hesitating as members of the White Lotus filed passed with words of parting. He wrapped an arm around Zuko's shoulders and herded him back to the others. They all straightened in his presence, instantly snapping to attention. Hakoda, his gaze notably less reverent, eyed the old man speculatively.

"I didn't want to suggest this in front of everyone without conferring with you all first," Iroh said, looking at each of the children in turn. "But my brother will not be leaving the Fire Nation defenseless. For all his display of power, he will never cede the throne to anyone other than his blood. Legacy is too important to him. I fear he plans to crown Azula Fire Lord, now

that he fancies himself the Phoenix King, if he hasn't already. She has always been his most loyal, vicious dog.”

“Spirits,” Katara breathed. “We can’t let that happen.”

Iroh nodded. “It brings me no joy to suggest this, but with the majority of the Fire Nation’s forces set on invading the Earth Kingdom, now would be the perfect opportunity to strike her down.”

“I’ll do it,” Zuko said instantly. “It should be me.” Not that he didn’t trust his friends to get the job done, but if anyone were to die attempting to take her down, it would be him. And if she were to meet the same fate, he wanted it to be by his hand. No one else would touch her.

“Zuko—” Sokka started, mouth parted, eyes wide.

“I’ll go with you,” Katara said, surprising him, gaze unyielding. “You shouldn’t go alone. The rest of you can go with Aang.”

He dipped his head. “Thank you, Katara.”

Iroh nodded, still looking pale. “As soon as we have taken Ba Sing Se, I will send forces to aide you both. It will be no easy feat, taking down Azula.”

“We don’t have any other choice,” Zuko said. “We won’t get this opportunity for another hundred years. We can’t waste it.” He could feel Sokka’s eyes burning into him but he couldn’t look the other boy in the eye. Not right now.



The day passed swiftly. There was much to be done—no matter in which direction any of them would debark, they all faced another few days of travel. Before Zuko knew it, dusk arrived yet again.

A bonfire three times the size of Appa had been started by the northern edge of the camp, courtesy of Guohua’s men, where many of the Earth Kingdom fighters and sellswords had gathered for the evening. Lively music carried over the camp, raucous singing, and laughter echoing through the valley. Sokka itched to be a part of it, had even begged Zuko and the others to go with him, but Hakoda had swiftly shut that down.

Men on the precipice of a battle with minds clouded by drink often led to nothing good.

While the majority might’ve been celebrating, Zuko certainly didn’t feel like it. Maybe it was just his own nerves, but he’d noticed a somberness over their little corner of the world. Katara and Sokka were huddled over their allotted food store, courtesy of the White Lotus, divvying up their goods, their heads bent close in conversation. Zuko would’ve been lying if he’d said he hadn’t been avoiding Sokka all day, purposefully sticking close to the others any time the other boy approached. Maybe it was wrong of him. It certainly felt wrong. But he couldn’t bear a goodbye.

He eyed Sokka for a few moments, tracing the line of his shoulders, his arms, his long legs, the fit of his tunic, heart doing something funny in his chest. He tore his gaze away, uneasy with his own thoughts. Hakoda and Bato were a few steps away from the brother and sister, sharpening their blades, listening with smiles as Toph regaled them with stories of the Earth Rumble. Aang and Momo had disappeared but Zuko didn't worry too much about that—the poor kid had been dragged into meeting after meeting with the White Lotus long after the rest of them had been dismissed. He felt like disappearing himself.

Zuko's single bag was packed, his dao neatly in their sheath. In the morning, all they would need to do would be to take down the tent and return it to the White Lotus. He dropped his things at the considerably smaller pile consisting of his and Katara's belongings, then went to sit with Suki, who was a little apart from the others, her brows creased as she organized her pack.

“Are you ready for tomorrow?”

She hardly glanced up, shoulders drawn tight. “No.

He looked towards the horizon where the sun was sinking, thinking of what else lay waiting for them in the west. “Me neither.”

He was content to sit there in silence, to merely appreciate her presence until they had to go their separate ways, but she asked without looking up, “What do you think will happen if we fail? You probably know Ozai better than anyone here, save your Uncle.”

Zuko closed his eyes. He knew exactly what would happen. He'd seen it in nightmares a dozen times over. “I don't know what his plans are for the world but as for us... He won't kill us. Not right away, not after all the trouble we've given him. He'll probably...” He trailed off, not sure how much of an answer she truly wanted. Suki stared at him curiously, unafraid. No, it wasn't like her to be afraid. But she should be.

“There'd be no point in starting his hunt for the avatar again so he'll keep Aang alive. Ozai will find a way to make sure he can't enter the avatar state.” Zuko's stomach turned at the idea of what Ozai and his Fire Sages might do with the avatar as a captive. Would they strike at the lifecoil of his chi, give a debilitating injury to ensure Aang could never call on the full power of his bending again? Was such a thing even possible? Maybe Ozai would break his spine at the neck, keep him paralyzed. Alive but immobile. Would that be enough?

“He will kill Iroh and exterminate the White Lotus. He'll scorch the earth hunting down our allies. He'll probably give us to Azula to play with, or to his men. There are...prison cells designed to keep benders powerless. I doubt he'd put us back at the Boiling Rock—he'll want us where he can reach us.” He stared at his hands where the coal dust was still ingrained in his palms. “Toph he'll kill. But he'll make damn sure the rest of us are alive and suffering long after his ashes have gone cold.”

Suki was silent for a long beat. “I need to ask something of you, something I don't trust with any of the others.” She chewed her lip, fists curled atop her knees, her gaze hard. “If we're captured, make sure I'm dead. Please.”

He nodded. "I will."

"Promise me, Zuko."

"I swear it."

She stared at him for a long moment, fierce as ever. Again, he was struck with a wave of gratitude that they'd found each other, even if it had been in the bowels of hell. Satisfied with his answer, she nodded and went back to her organizing. He picked at his palms, listening to the beat of drums, the upbeat call of a tsungi, and the distant sound of laughter, wondering if it would be the last time he heard music.

If the time came, he would make sure none of them suffered. He wouldn't make that mistake ever again.

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Hakoda dropped down beside him after dinner, a lovely fish soup Bato had conjured up. Zuko scraped his bowl, raising a brow at the older man.

"Wanted to wish you luck since there probably won't be the opportunity tomorrow," he said. "How are you feeling?"

Zuko exhaled shakily. "Like I might throw up."

"That's entirely normal."

"Do you think..." He swallowed hard, fear catching up to him. As prepared as he'd felt just the night before while talking with Sokka, anxiety was spreading its sickly roots throughout his chest and stomach. "Do we have a chance?"

Hakoda stared across the campsite, hesitating a little too long for Zuko's liking. He followed the man's gaze to Katara and Bato, side by side cleaning dishes. "I don't know. Fire Lord Ozai is closer to accomplishing Sozin's Dream than any before him. The Earth Kingdom has all but fallen, the Water Tribes have never been more divided. It seems as though it should be hopeless."

"But?"

Hakoda smiled, that same warm smile Zuko had come to appreciate. In that smile, the dangers and horrors of the world were held at bay. "Something tells me our avatar will not fail again."

"I hope you're right. I don't know what I'm more afraid of—the day of the comet, or what might come after."

"If we're being optimistic, it'll be a time of regrowth," Hakoda said. "Rebirth, even, for the whole world. There may be a rare few who were alive before the last comet but for the rest of the world that has only ever known war, we will finally meet peace."

Zuko pictured his father dead, his sister too. Then it would only be himself and Iroh to carry on Sozin's polluted line. Maybe that's what peace would cost.

The thought of ascending the throne did something awful to his insides.

"Can we stay in touch, after the war?" *If there is an after*, he didn't say.

"I'd be offended if we didn't, Zuko," Hakoda knocked his shoulder with his own. "You won't be getting rid of me that easily, son."

Zuko smiled though the warmth in his chest dimmed a little at the thought of sitting the throne in his father's stead, the expectations and future of an entire country on his shoulders. He knew what that would mean—duty before all. Love, family, all of it would become second to the throne. His life would no longer be his own, for if he neglected his country, it might slide back into the hands of his father's supporters.

And he could not ask his new friends to stay in the Fire Nation—they all had their own homes to return to, their own obligations to fulfill.

Whatever loneliness he'd felt in exile would not compare.

"I'm proud of you, Zuko, I want you to know that. Letting ourselves be seen when we're most vulnerable can be incredibly difficult," Hakoda said, interrupting his spiraling thoughts. "It feels like a betrayal to yourself, to the days when you were strong. But letting people in doesn't make you weak. Other people are all we have in this world. If you isolate yourself, make yourself unknowable, that is the truest form of self-betrayal." He shifted, fingers tracing the beads in his hair. "After my Kya's death...I never thought I'd be able to let anyone else in. She knew me at my deepest, loved me at my worst, my best, brought my children into this world..." He swallowed, hands clasping together. "But time moves on, much as we might wish it wouldn't, and eventually I learned that to be known again wouldn't kill me."

Zuko stared into the fire. "I don't know if I can do that." Maybe he'd allowed these people to know parts of him the last few weeks, but did any of them truly *know* him? Could they really trust him, even? Could he trust himself, not to run the moment things got difficult?

"You've come so far, Zuko," Hakoda insisted, earnest as ever. "When we first met, you'd hardly meet my eyes, nor give me the time of day. I knew I irritated you but I'd hoped you might warm to me if you knew I wasn't a threat. When we met the others and you tried to run, I feared you might never open up. But seeing you here now, with Sokka, Suki, and all the rest, it's easy to see how loved you are. I'm proud of you and all the progress you've made, and the progress I know you'll continue working towards. Remember that, no matter what comes in the next few days."

Zuko pinched the bridge of his nose. "Hakoda—"

"Just know I'm proud of you. It's not a goodbye, not by any means."

"Better not be." He shot the man a sidelong glance. "Thank you. I don't know that I'd—I don't think I'd be here without you."

Hakoda inexplicably wrapped both arms around him and pulled him close, pressing a kiss to the crown of his head. Zuko stiffened for a moment, shocked, then wrapped his arms around the man in return, a lump in his throat. When Hakoda released him, he was still smiling. “Fate is on our side, I’m certain of it. Get some rest, okay?”

Zuko nodded, watching Hakoda make his way back to Bato and Katara. He settled next to Bato, not interrupting but sliding into place.

To be known, to be loved, was a choice. Nothing about the events that had transpired since their escape from the Boiling Rock had been easy but it had brought him here. And he wouldn’t trade that for the world.

Before he could talk himself down, he rose to his feet and carried his bowl to the washbin Katara had set up, where he crouched and methodically scrubbed it clean. His hands moved in careful circles, the soap suds creeping their way up his forearms with every dip in the tub but he was on autopilot. When he’d finished, he laid the bowl out to dry with the rest of the dishes.

Katara paused in her conversation with Bato when he asked, “Where’s Sokka?”

She pointed him toward the river with a laugh. “Getting a little too close to the party, probably.”

Sokka was indeed at the riverbank, though he was nowhere near the drunken, lively festivities. The far-off glow of the bonfire illuminated the tops of the pines, shining intermittently between the trunks of the densely packed forest. Sokka sat below a crest in the bank, partially hidden beneath a copse of trees. His knees were drawn up, arms around his shins, as he stared out over the swiftly coursing river and valley beyond. Overhead, the barely-there light of the moon coupled with the distant glow of the fire provided just enough light to see by.

“Hey.”

Sokka offered a weak smile. “Hey.”

“Want some company?”

“Not really. But you can stay.”

“Surprised you’re not at the bonfire.”

“Didn’t feel like...all that.” Sokka laid his head on his arms, watching Zuko settle next to him. “How’s your head?”

“Fine—totally fine. Would be a different story without your sister around.” He leaned back on his elbows against the rise of the bank, legs crossed at the ankles. “What are you doing out here?”

“Nothing, really. Just thinking.” Sokka turned to stare at the river again, chewing his lip. “I know I should try to sleep but...” He trailed off. “It’s like, my mind keeps running through

every worst-possible scenario of how things might go when the comet arrives.”

“You can’t do that to yourself.”

“It’s hard not to. I don’t like being separated from everyone. Seems like every single time we split up, something goes wrong. And I *know* my dad is fully capable of taking care of himself but being on totally different sides of the continent while we try to stop the end of the world? I don’t like it.

“We can’t waste the comet,” Zuko tried to reason. “Things probably won’t go exactly to plan—they never do—but we have to trust one another.”

Sokka shook his head. “I trust what I see in front of me, what I can touch and feel, things that are logical. Blind faith in the unknown never got me anywhere.”

Zuko took that in. “It’s okay to lean on others, Sokka. You taught me that.”

Sokka buried his face in his hands, his words muffled. “I just—It feels like things are slipping out of my hands.”

“How?”

“Here, and on the Day of Black Sun...being surrounded by these competent people who have seen it all, done it all, I feel like a dumb kid. And now we’re supposed to just take their word and follow their orders—I *know* their plans will probably work but it just—it feels wrong, somehow.”

“Like everything is out of control?”

“Yeah. I know it’s paranoid of me, and probably shows how much of a control freak I am but it’s hard to put my faith in these people, after everything that’s happened. This war has gone on for so long...it almost seems like we’ll never win, we’ll never outsmart the Fire Lord, or overpower him. I guess I’m just afraid of how things will go during the comet.”

“I’m scared, too. Now that Katara and I are going after Azula...” He exhaled heavily. “I’m terrified of what might happen.”

“Are you going to kill her?”

“Not if I don’t have to. I don’t want to hurt her at all but I’m afraid she’ll leave us no choice.” He chewed the inside of his cheek. “It’s easier to ignore when I’m busy but when it’s just me, it’s all I can think about.”

“That why you’ve been avoiding me since the meeting this morning? Trying to stay busy?”

Zuko stared over the river. “Maybe.”

“I’m offended—I can be a damn good distraction,” Sokka smirked, then sombered. “I’d much rather you say goodbye than ignore me.”



“I’d rather not say goodbye at all, I think.”

“Zuko...” The softness with which his name was spoken made Zuko turn his head in surprise. He found Sokka already looking at him, the heat of his gaze surprising.

“What?” he breathed, heart hammering between his ribs.

Sokka didn’t waste a moment. He closed the gap between them, pressing his lips to Zuko’s, one hand behind his neck drawing him closer. Zuko followed easily, pushing himself fully upright, eyes slipping shut, fist tangled in Sokka’s tunic. It wasn’t very graceful at first as they both tried to fit against each other, their lips awkward and chapped. Zuko felt oddly hypervigilant of every move he made but Sokka didn’t seem to notice or care. The other boy pressed against him like he couldn’t get enough, each of them holding onto the other, afraid to let go. Zuko turned fully into the kiss, sliding his free hand into Sokka’s loose hair, fingers tangled in the dark tresses.

Sokka startled him by breaking away, lips slightly parted. Their foreheads pressed together, the air between them warm as he asked breathlessly, “Is this okay?”

Zuko scoffed, pulling him back in, the press of their lips feverish. In a few days, they both could be dead. After the morning, they might never see one another again. He shoved aside all thoughts of his father, his sister, the comet, pushed down the fear and threat of memories, keeping himself rooted in what mattered. Sokka was warm and solid and *real* against him.

He felt a flash of annoyance as yet again, Sokka broke away. “Hang on, I mean it. Is this okay? Be honest.”

“Yes,” Zuko insisted, pressing his lips to Sokka’s cheek. “I promise.”

“Just checking,” Sokka smiled softly, leaning forward to press a brief kiss to his lips, then his jaw, then his throat, maneuvering himself between Zuko’s knees. “Let me know if it’s too much.”

“You’re never too much,” Zuko promised, eyes sliding closed, content to have Sokka like this until sunrise. He corrected himself with a smirk; “*Except* when you are.”

Sokka laughed, sliding his hands down and then up beneath Zuko’s tunic, cool where they traced over bare skin, lips pressed to the junction of where Zuko’s throat met his shoulder. Zuko fit one hand along his jaw, tilting his head up to recapture his lips, leaning forward into Sokka’s touch. There was no room left between them now and his skin thrummed like a livewire again, a different kind of spark than he normally attributed to his chi. It was familiar and dangerous, a delicious sort of aching heat he couldn’t get enough of. He’d known fear and hunger before but never quite like this.

Sokka seemed to feel the same. He pushed Zuko back, one hand cradling his head as he hit the grass, the other bracketed over his shoulder, long legs braced over his hips, knees on either side of him. He would’ve felt caged in different circumstances but now—he welcomed it. A hand on Sokka’s left bicep kept him grounded as he slid the other beneath his tunic, up his back, feeling the bunch of lean muscle there, dipping his fingers into each notch of his

spine, keeping him right where he wanted him. Leaning down, Sokka kissed him softly, less fervor in his touch. They were flush against each other now, so close Zuko could feel the beat of Sokka's heart against his ribs as though it were his own. He couldn't even bring himself to care that anyone who stepped over the riverbank behind them would get an eyeful—Sokka left him little room to think rationally, let alone be worried they might be caught.

After both too long and not long enough, Sokka pulled away to stare down at him, cheeks flushed and lips reddened. He pressed his forehead to Zuko's again, fingers clutching at his arms tightly. "We should get some sleep."

"I'm willing to die sleep-deprived," he joked, brushing back the hair that had escaped from his wolftail.

"Don't say that," Sokka said, sitting up abruptly, weight resting atop his thighs, an edge to his voice that made Zuko pause. His eyes were large with worry, and Zuko was suddenly angry that the threat of what they had to accomplish in only a few hours overshadowed whatever this was. "Don't say that. Please. Don't even joke about it."

"I won't." He leaned forward, pulling Sokka closer, winding his arms around the other boy's middle, pressing his lips to his cheek, holding him close, feeling him slowly relax, though the tension didn't fully leave him. They sat like that for a long while, tangled in each other, neither willing to let go first. "I'm sorry."

"Promise that you will come back."

He closed his eyes, hoping he wasn't about to lie. "I promise. I promise."



In the morning, dawn would break the same as it did every other morning. Zuko lay there for a long time, watching Sokka sleep, brushing a few errant hairs from his face. Their peace would be broken by Katara barging into the tent, sending the two boys bolting upright, weapons drawn, confused. *Where's Aang?* She would demand, face bright with anger and worry. Neither would have an answer.

Their search spanned the entire campsite and a large portion of the forest, but there would be no sign of the avatar, nor his lemur. Sharing worried glances, they'd all agree to keep this to themselves—no use causing alarm amongst the rest of their makeshift army, not when tensions were high enough as it were.

*Spirit world, avatar-journey stuff*, Sokka would suggest, sounding as though he was trying to convince himself as much as everyone else, and while no one quite bought that explanation, they didn't have any more time to lose.

After too many goodbyes for Zuko's liking, he climbed onto Appa's saddle for perhaps the last time, dread weighing him down. Iroh, Hakoda, and Bato stood off to one side, watching them depart. At Appa's head, Katara held the reins, eyes red-rimmed, brows drawn in anger. Below, Sokka, Suki, and Toph mounted an eelhound and Zuko was struck again with the

realization that some of them might not make it back. As possible as it was that he might be on his way to kill his sister, they could all be going to their deaths, none the wiser.

Zuko knew deeply what it meant to be alone. And now, looking at each of their faces, he realized how true Hakoda's words were. He'd forgotten what it felt like to be safe, to feel loved, to know that those around him felt the same. And they did love him—no matter how he'd acted at first. They'd allowed him that chance. Staring at them, a lump forming in his throat, he resolved that nothing would keep him from seeing them again.

The hole left in Aang's absence could've swallowed the sun. It seemed impossible without him. Insurmountable.

But they'd try anyway.

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